

A Sociolinguistic Study of Language and Gender in *How I Met Your Mother*

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Abstract

Since language has increasingly used as an effective tool for human communication, it is inevitably featured by gender. There are certain differences between female and male in physiology and psychology, but for a long while, the language differences between female and male have been rarely known. Until the rise of the American women's Liberation Movement in the last century, concerning language and gender studies have become a heated issue in sociolinguistics and pragmatics gradually. So, in this paper, the author selected 22 episodes of the first season of the American drama *How I Met Your Mother* and arranges the conversations among them. Then the author analyzed the language differences of female and male from three aspects: adjectives, hedges, interrogative sentences. The results showed that there is obvious difference across the three accepts between female and male. The author hopes that this study can provide empirical help for the study of language differences between female and male.

Keywords

Male, female, adjectives, hedges, interrogative

1. Introduction

As a branch of macro-linguistics, sociolinguistics has come into being since the 1960s in America. Since then, it has involved many significant research topics, among which is language and gender. As Wardhaugh (2000) states, "A major topic in sociolinguistics is the connection, if any, between the structures, vocabularies, and ways of using particular languages and the social roles of the men and women who speak these languages" (P. 309). Early linguistics emphasizes the structural and semiotic nature of language. However, with the development of society and the expansion of research fields, sociolinguistics has emerged as a discipline to study the social phenomena of language. It takes the linguistic elements into consideration in the social environment. The study of gender differences in English has been carried out since then and has become one of the issues widely concerned in sociolinguistics (H. Kang & J. Xu, 2009). And a large number of scholars at home and abroad have contributed a lot to its study, such as Lakoff, Trudgill, Zimmerman, West, Thorne, Henley and Bolinger abroad and Chen Jianmin, Du Wenli, Yang Yonglin, Zhao Ronghui, and so on (as cited in Li. J, 2014, pp. 52-57).

Language variation has always been the main content of sociolinguistic research. There are many social factors that cause language change and gender is one of the important factors. Generally speaking, most of the studies on language and gender focus on the following three aspects: gender differences in language; sexism in language; causes for gender differences. Few of them are conducted in specific contexts. So this study selects 22 episodes of the first season of the American drama *How I Met Your Mother* and analyzes the language differences of different genders from adjectives, hedges, interrogative sentences, exclamatory sentences and topics.

How I Met Your Mother is a comedy about Ted's search for true love. It is not only a humorous sitcom, but also full of many life philosophies and practical factors. The drama contains a lot of cross gender conversations, and the plot tends to daily life. It is a good material to study the language differences between different genders, which can serve as a typical and representative data source of language and gender study.

2. Literature Review

Since the proposed research is intended to analyze language and gender in *How I Met Your Mother* from the perspective of sociolinguistics, it is necessary to have a brief review of studies on language and gender and *How I Met Your Mother* respectively.

The earliest research about language and gender can be traced back to as early as ancient Greek. At that time, many dramas witnessed gender differences in language. However, it was not until the early 20th century that language and gender attracted anthropologists' and linguists' attention. Though there is a trend to study language and gender, it has not become an independent linguistic topic until the 1960s, when the second feminist movement rose in the United States and Canada. In the 1770s, such well-known linguists as Lakoff, Trudgill, Zimmerman, West, Thorne and Henley (as cited in Li, J., 2014, pp. 52-57) made a great contribution to the study by exploring the social roots of gender differences in language. In 1975, Lakoff (as cited in Ruola, Z., 2009, p. 34) said in *Language and Women's Place* that women's marginalization and powerlessness are reflected in the way men talk to women and the way women are talked about. After the publication of this book, many researchers began to pay attention to this new field: language and gender. Different from previous studies which focused on female language defects, the following studies belong to the observed differences in social status between men and women. These authors evaluate and analyze these differences more objectively and accurately in order to avoid discrimination against women. In the early 1980s, other linguists thought of gender differences in language as a kind of sexism. Of these books and articles, *Man Made Language of Spender* in 1980, *Language and the Sexes of Anshen's* in 1983, *Grammar and Gender of Baron* in 1986 are only a few of the most important (as cited in X. L. Gu, 2013, p. 18).

Linguists in the 1990s explored this subject mainly on the basis of the 1980s. They focused on the language forms of different genders. M. R. Key (as cited in Li Yani, 2011, pp. 78-79) not only examines the characteristics of women's language, but also explores the language phenomenon of discrimination against men in English. It is not easy for American female scholars to provide a relatively fair description without prejudice. In 1995, Janet Holmes (as cited in X. J. Wei, 2014, pp. 4-5) published *Women, Men and Politics*. Using the principles and methods of sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and pragmatics, this book explores the differences between men and women in the use of polite language.

Besides that, translation of theories, theory summaries and book comments, like Yang Yonglin (1991)'s and Zhao Ronghui (1999)'s summaries of the studies abroad (pp. 1-2, p.4) have been conducted by scholars. Studies of sexism by Du Wenli (1993) and Chen Jianmin (1999) are of significance in this regard (p.15). Next is gender differences in language. Most analysis materials are English. They show gender differences in phonological, lexical and syntactical levels. The last is gender differences in communication. Bai Jiehong (2000) discusses the language used by men and women from the perspectives of sociolinguistics, pragmatics and semantics (p.54). Such study is a hot issue which ranges from conversational structures and strategies to conversational styles.

3. Research Methodology

The methods used in the proposed research can be classified as a case study with the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The author summarizes the researches of language and gender by collecting and analyzing the conversation of the first season of the American drama *How I Met Your Mother*, the author finds out the differences between men and women in the use of adjectives, hedges, interrogative sentences.

By watching the play and its scripts, the author manually counted the number of adjectives, hedges and interrogative sentences used by female and male in each episode and conducted correlation analysis and *t-test* to explore language differences. In the selection of corpus, since the play mainly focuses on the dialogues between the protagonists, the author only selects the dialogues between the opposite sex of the protagonists in each episode, and removes the dialogues between the protagonists and supporting actors, so as to increase the objectivity of the research results.

4. Analysis

4.1 The Amount of Adjectives

The author counted the number of adjectives used by female and male in the 22 episodes of the first season in *How I Met Your Mother* and conduct correlation analysis and *t-test*.

Table 1. The Amount of Adjectives

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	Total
Female	21	19	5	13	8	9	10	13	13	8	15	12	20	7	10	14	12	9	14	12	13	8	265
Male	9	6	4	15	5	8	11	6	12	5	9	6	13	8	11	12	6	3	10	12	8	4	183

Table 1 shows the number of adjectives in cross gender conversations of each episode in *How I Met Your Mother*. The number of adjectives used by female was 265, while that of men was 183. Female use adjectives more frequently and female and male are quite different in this index. We can say that there is obvious difference between the number of adjectives of female and that of male.

In Table 2, the correlation of amount of male and female was 0.444 with the p -value is 0.038 (<0.05). It illustrates that the correlation of this pair is relatively good and that the data credibility of t -test in Table 6 is relatively high. In Table 6, p -value of adjectives amount is 0.002 (<0.05), so it shows that there is obvious difference between the number of adjectives of female and that of male.

Table 2. Results of Correlation Analysis

	Correlation	P-value
Female	0.444252	0.0383
Male		

Table 3. Results of T-Test

Variable	Count	T-test	P-Value
Female	22	3.276881	0.0021
Male	22		

4.2 The Amount of Hedges

The author counted the number of hedges used by female and male in the 22 episodes of the first season in *How I Met Your Mother* and conduct correlation analysis and t -test.

Table 4. The Amount of Hedges

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	Total
Female	5	9	2	1	0	4	1	1	0	1	3	6	2	0	2	5	7	1	3	0	2	4	59
Male	5	5	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	0	1	4	0	0	1	3	4	0	0	0	1	1	29

Table 4 shows the number of hedges in cross gender conversations of each episode in *How I Met Your Mother*. The number of hedges used by female was 59, while that of men was 29. Female use hedges more frequently and female and male are different in this index. It shows that there is obvious difference between the number of hedges of female and that of male.

In Table 5, the correlation of amount of male and female was 0.892 with the p -value is 0.000 (<0.05). It illustrates that the correlation of this pair is relatively good and that the data credibility of t -test in Table 9 is relatively high. In Table 6, p -value of hedges amount is 0.040 (<0.05), so it shows that there is obvious difference between the number of hedges of female and that of male.

Table 5. Results of Correlation Analysis

	Correlation	P-value
Female	0.892328	0.0000
Male		

Table 6. Results of T-Test

Variable	Count	T-test	P-Value
Female	22	3.276881	0.0021
Male	22		

4.3 The Amount of Interrogative Sentences

The author counted the number of interrogative sentences used by female and male in the 22 episodes of the first season in *How I Met Your Mother* and conduct correlation analysis and *t-test*.

Table 7. The Amount of Interrogative Sentences

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Female	17	11	9	32	7	25	25	20	24	18	15	10
Male	13	9	5	17	1	15	23	11	31	17	16	8
	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	Total	
Female	17	11	9	32	7	25	25	20	24	18	381	
Male	13	9	5	17	1	15	23	11	31	17	313	

Table 7 shows the number of interrogative sentences in cross gender conversations of each episode in *How I Met Your Mother*. The number of interrogative sentences used by female was 381, while that of men was 313. Female use interrogative sentences more frequently and female and male are quite different in this index.

In Table 8, the correlation of amount of male and female was 0.674 with the *p*-value is 0.001 (<0.05). It illustrates that the correlation of this pair is relatively good and that the data credibility of *t-test* in Table 9 is relatively high. In Table 9, *p*-value of interrogative sentences amount is 0.113 (>0.05). It shows that there isn't obvious difference between the number of hedges of female and that of male.

Table 8. Results of Correlation Analysis

	Correlation	P-value
Female Male	0.673839	0.0006

Table 9. Results of T-Test

Variable	Count	T-test	P-Value
Female	22	1.619619	0.1128
Male	22		

5. Conclusion

Through the above statistics and analysis of the first season of *How I Met Your Mother*, we can draw five findings. First, female use adjectives more frequently than male in conversation. Second, female tend to use hedges when they express their opinions. Third, female use interrogative sentences more frequently than male. Finally, most topics of cross gender conversation are about love, marriage, sex, work, study and science. Maybe it's because the theme of the TV series tends to love.

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