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Learning to Do Gender

ANNA CUENI

Linguistics 150
Introduction to Sociolinguistics

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Introduction

A child with just the ability...to produce any sentence whatsoever...would be likely to be institutionalized, even more so if not only sentences, but also speech or silence was random, unpredictable....We have then to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, and in what manner. (Hymes 1972)

Current research in a variety of disciplines takes the perspective that gender identity is performed, flexible, and context-bound, rather than a reflex of inherent and invariant sociobiological categories. As the Hymes quote above indicates, children must acquire the sociolinguistic competence to appropriately enact gender. This paper explores to what extent 3- to 5-year-old children have developed this aspect of communicative competence.

Background

Previous work has demonstrated that even very young children modulate their language in role-playing situations in order to construct distinctive identities (see Clark 2003 for a summary of research in this area). In a study conducted at the same nursery school which will be used as an experimental setting here, Andersen (1990) asked preschool-aged children to enact scenarios using puppets: a familial scene involving a mother, father, and a child; a scene at the doctor's office with a doctor, a nurse, and a patient; and a scene at school involving a teacher, an English-speaking student, and a foreign student. In playing these different roles, children manipulated prosodic, phonological, syntactic, and discourse variables, some of which are presented in Table 1.

A similar study, focusing on preschool-age children in the Tokyo area, was conducted by Nakamura (2001) and shows specifically that children are sensitive to different gender roles. Examining tape recordings of children at play in same-sex pairs, Nakamura found that young girls and boys had substantial awareness of 'masculine' and 'feminine' language and used it in different ways depending on the context of interaction. As Japanese children spend most of their time with female caretakers prior to entering nursery school, male children rely on input from their male peers to begin using masculine language, while relying more heavily on gender-neutral language when interacting with caretakers. Female children, on the other hand, use primarily gender-neutral language in interactions both with playmates and adults. Strikingly, most gender differences examined by Nakamura were neutralized when context was controlled. For example, while girls were less likely to engage in rough-and-tumble
Table 1: Sociolinguistic markers employed by children in role-playing tasks (Andersen 1990)

play than boys, the speech of boys and girls during rough-and-tumble play was not substantially different along most dimensions.  

The scope of the current study

Andersen’s and Nakamura’s results point to a conception of gender that is contextually-grounded from the very beginning and raise a number of interesting questions, which this paper will attempt to answer:

- Do children construct identities for themselves using the same linguistic variables they manipulate in overtly role-playing situations? To what extent do children gender their own language?

- Is the same effect of context-neutralization that Nakamura found for Japanese children also evident for American children?

- Might there be differences between children’s behavior in different kinds of speech acts? Are narratives gendered the same way as conversational speech?

To explore these questions, I will analyze data collected from American children in relatively gender-neutral, non-role-playing settings, and comprising causal conversation as well as more one-sided narrations.

Participant-observation at Bing Nursery School

The data come from participant-observation conducted at Bing Nursery School on the Stanford University campus. The class I observed included around twenty children between the ages of three and five and had approximately equal numbers of boys and

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1 A few gender distinctions remained robust within contexts, such as use of the appropriate first person pronoun.
girls. The investigator (me), a 21-year-old female, visited the class on a weekly or biweekly basis and established rapport with most of the children in the class prior to collecting the data. With the exception of snack-time and story-time, play at Bing is generally relatively unstructured, with children moving from activity to activity around the school and playground area as they please.

Two kinds of data were collected. First, stationary recordings of children’s natural play were made at the craft table. There, a variety of simple materials and tools, including paper, scissors, tape, pipe cleaners, hole punches, and bits of colored cellophane are made available to the children. Teachers provide no instructions on what the children are to do, and children embark on a number of representational and non-representational projects on their own initiative. This location was chosen because unlike other areas of the nursery school, such as the toy house/kitchen area, no overt role-playing activities are suggested by the context. Furthermore, the craft table attracts approximately equal numbers of boys and girls, making it a context which is not obviously slanted toward one gender role or the other. These recordings include a number of different children, and the set of participants changes as children migrate from activity to activity.

For six children captured in the stationary recordings, additional data were collected. First, these children were observed at play from a distance (to determine whether they chose same or differently gendered partners, played alone or with other children, etc.). The investigator also spent a morning following two children in this group from activity to activity, recording their speech in different circumstances. In all the recordings, the investigator participates in, but does not direct the ongoing activities and conversations, instead following the children’s lead. The recordings include interactions between children and other children as well as interactions between children and the investigator.

The general analytical approach to the data follows Cameron (2001), in examining how a particular linguistic strategy functions in a particular context rather than assigning gender to certain discourse strategies a priori. Due to the importance of context, a basically qualitative analysis will be presented, supplemented where appropriate with quantitative data.

Gender in children’s narratives

In the course of the recordings, several spontaneously produced narratives were gathered. Most narratives were prompted by a cue in the context: for instance, a child

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2Art was also among the most gender-neutral activities in terms of frequency of play among a large set examined by Nakamura (2001).

3Labov’s definition of a narrative as two or more temporally-linked clauses, as presented in Mesthrie et al. (2000), was used as the criterion for identifying and isolating narratives.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Topic of narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Boys   | having a birthday party and getting presents  
        | a monkey that was eating a lot of food at the zoo  
        | a tv show about superheroes  
        | building a rope that reached all the way to the sky |
| Girls  | getting picked up from nursery school by grandma  
        | when an older sister’s pet guinea pig got sick  
        | playing with a best friend  
        | having a birthday party |

Table 2: Representative topics of boys’ and girls’ spontaneous narratives

drawing a guinea pig used this as a taking-off point for a narrative about an illness  
her sister’s pet guinea pig had suffered. In all, 15 narratives from girls and 11 from  
boys were collected. All 15 of the girls’ narratives were directed primarily at the in-  
vestigator, although other children sometimes provided feedback; the same was true  
for all but one of the boys’ narratives, which was aimed at a (male) peer.

In her study of how New Zealand men and women gender themselves in narratives, Holmes (1997) identifies several content-based differences in male and female narratives. She writes that “...women focus on relationships and people, affirm the importance of their family roles, family connections, and friendships. The men focus on work and sport, events, activities and things, and affirm the importance of being in control, even when they don’t achieve it.” (286). Strikingly, the children’s narratives collected for this project exhibit many of the same characteristics observed by Holmes. Table 2 gives examples of the topics of children’s narratives by gender. While there are some commonalities (children of both genders discussed their birthdays), there are some interesting divergences in the foci of the narratives. Girls tend to mention social activities and interactions; boys focus on achievements (building a rope that reaches to the sky) or things that they have seen that are interesting or humorous (a monkey eating a lot of food, a television show with a particularly riveting story line).

As with the New Zealand women studied by Holmes, girls were much more likely to  
emphasize familial and other relationships in their narratives. In fact, 14 of 15 of the  
girls’ narratives made mention of at least one other person besides the narrator; for  
the boys, the proportion was a smaller 7 of 11. Furthermore, the girls were more likely  
to mention family members or friends, while some of the ‘other people’ in the boys’  
narratives were cartoon or television characters. A particularly striking illustration of  
the difference in emphasis between boys’ and girls’ narratives comes from: two stories  
about birthdays. A little girl who had just had a birthday opens by reporting that fact  
to the investigator. Prompted “Was it fun?,” she assents and proceeds to tell about  
people coming to her house, getting a puzzle from her friend, and doing the
whole puzzle with her mother. While the last portion of the narrative catalogues an achievement, she highlights the cooperative aspects of it by closing with a description of a joint activity between her mother and herself. Following this narrative, a boy also states that he had a birthday party, and provides a list of four gifts he received. Unlike the girl, he does not mention the guests that came to his house, the source of any gifts, or interactions with people in utilizing those gifts afterwards. Instead, he chooses to highlight the act of receiving presents, with obvious pride in this "accomplishment".

A difference between the male and female narratives can be seen in the temporal distance between the activity and its narration. Of the 11 boys' narratives, 4 discussed events that had taken place in the immediate past; for example, a narration of an activity a child had just completed in another part of the nursery school. An additional 3 dealt with imaginary events that the narrative also located in the immediate past (for example, a boy describing how he had constructed a rope that reached all the way to the sky and climbed up to the top, when the rope in question was a few pieces of cellophane taped together). By contrast, fully 2/3 of the girls' narratives reported events that had taken place outside the context of that day at nursery school. This difference sets the stage for girls to emphasize primary figures in their lives, such as parents and siblings, who are not present in the nursery school environment; while boys focus on real or unreal accomplishments that are made more significant by their proximity to the present.

Finally, the children's narratives also differed along gender lines in the presence of an explicit evaluative component. The male narrative Holmes discusses in detail includes the clause, "But the whole point about this is I solved the technology problem" (289), where the narrator explicitly draws attention to the conclusion he wants his listener to take away; in this case, his mastery over technology. By contrast, Holmes' female storytellers are less likely to make the purpose of a story overt. A similar divergence was apparent in the children's narrations. None of the girls included an explicit evaluation of the importance of the narrative; instead, the description of the action was expected to stand on its own. In three of the male stories, however, such a component was clearly present. For example, the boy who told of constructing a big rope and climbing it ended with the sentence, "I'm a really good climber." This clause adds nothing to the progression of the action that has been described, but instead seems to serve a summary function by making it clear what message the story is meant to encapsulate.

Like the adult narratives studied by Holmes, then, children's narratives seem to be stratified along gender lines both in terms of the content that is emphasized and in terms of the form used to convey the message. While girls focus their narratives on interactions with other people, boys are more likely to talk about their own accomplishments or events they have observed. Similarly, boys are more likely to emphasize

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4Three others contained less clear-cut, but still possible, cases of an evaluative component.
the point of the story with an explicit evaluative clause, while girls use more indirect means of conveying the fundamental message of a story. The next section examines whether similar gender differences are also present in children's conversational interactions.

Gender in children’s conversations

Mesthrie et al. (2000) discuss a number of supposed differences between men's and women's language in Western societies. Women's speech is stereotypically held to be more polite, more indirect, or more tentative. In mixed-gender interaction, men are seen as more likely to interrupt and more likely to take turns, while women are associated with conversational support strategies such as the use of back-channeling and minimal responses.

Because they have not yet fully acquired many discourse strategies, assessing these factors within the context of preschoolers' conversation presents a number of challenges. I chose to examine the following factors: use of imperatives versus more indirect request types, use of the politeness words "please" and "thank you," and use of the hedges "maybe" and "I think." While other factors may play a role, none were particularly salient to me in analyzing the transcripts of conversations.

Table 3 shows the frequencies of these features in a half hour of speech among children recorded at the craft table, comprising speech from 5 male children and 6 female children. The bulk of the speech revolves around the negotiation of how to share supplies. Because there are more female turns than male turns, the fraction per 10 utterances is indicated rather than a raw value (while the investigator makes occasional comments, these utterances are excluded from the analysis).

The results show no clear effect of gendering, with male and female totals very close in all categories except for that of hedges. The difference in the hedge category, however, is primarily due to one female child who began nearly every utterance with "I think maybe"; which was not characteristic behavior of the other girls. If data from this girl is thrown out, the frequency of hedges for females is .04, essentially equivalent to the number for males. Interestingly, males actually use slightly fewer imperatives, more indirect requests, and more politeness words, but the differences between male

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5For example, none of the children in my recordings used back-channeling or minimal responses in any way. Nor did the children engage in any explicit conversations about gender, as in the conversations analyzed by Cameron (2001).

6In particular, this is true of interruptions. Most interruptions struck me as being not intentionally intrusive, but rather a result of difficulty in turn-taking, a skill these children appear not to have fully acquired. However, I noticed no significant differences in the amount of male and female interruptions.

7For the present purposes, an utterance is a complete sentence or a complete turn that is not made up of complete sentences.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>Frequency in male speech</th>
<th>Frequency in female speech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>imperatives</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>indirect requests</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>2.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politeness words</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hedges</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Stereotypically gendered features in boys’ and girls’ speech

and female speech are very small. While the sample set here is relatively small, then, it provides no clear evidence that children are actively doing gender in their interactions with each other, at least not using the same parameters discussed in the research on adult conversations.

An asymmetry in acquisition?

The results above suggest an asymmetry in the acquisition of gendered language depending on the speech act being performed: while I found no major differences between children’s interactional styles, male and female children’s narratives diverged in both form and content. In order to verify this hypothesis, I asked a panel of 8 adults between the ages of 18 and 32 to listen to selections of the recordings and determine the gender of the speaker.

Each adult was played one male and one female narrative, as well two approximately two minute sequences of children interacting. The order of narratives and conversation was rotated for each subject; within each section, the recordings were also rotated. Due to background noise on some portions of the tapes, listeners were provided with transcripts that accompanied the recordings. On request, adults were also allowed a second listening of any recording immediately after hearing it. After the recording of the each narrative, adult listeners noted the presumed gender of the speaker and indicated on a scale of 1-5 how certain they were in their determination. After hearing the interaction pieces, adults made the same two judgments for one speaker in the conversation. Although each adult was played recordings of one child of each gender in each interactional style, adults were warned that they might hear all male children, all female children, or some mix of the two.

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Note that children may not have yet fully understood what all of these linguistic features mean, including their potential gender values. Although they used more indirect requests and politeness words, male children were not more accommodating in general, as demonstrated most strikingly by the little boy who repeatedly said, “Please let me have that. I would really like to have that,” while jumping on top of another boy and pulling his hair in an attempt to secure the desired object. The correlation between politeness words and actually being polite, then, is not present to the same degree that one might expect for adults.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender and style</th>
<th>Fraction of accurate responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male, interaction</td>
<td>3/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, interaction</td>
<td>5/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male, narrative</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female, narrative</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Accuracy of adults’ determination of children’s gender in narratives and interaction

Although choice of topic appears to be gender-dependent, as discussed above, the male and female narratives were selected to be relatively close in topic. Both dealt with animals: the male narrative was about seeing monkeys at the zoo, and the female narrative was about a pet guinea pig. The interaction pieces involved basically gender-neutral topics: negotiation of how to share a single tape dispenser, and discussion of what colors a child was going to use next. The results of the listening experiment are shown in Table 4.

The results show that adults were better at identifying children’s gender for narrative recordings than for recordings of conversations. When combined with the results in the previous section, which show that male and female children are more different in narrative construction than in interactional style, this suggests that children have come closer to the adult gendered styles when telling stories than when conversing with one another. This conclusion is further supported by the adults’ ratings of their certainty that their determination of a speaker’s gender was correct. For the narratives, adults gave a mean certainty rating of 3.8 out of 5, with a score of 5 indicating complete certainty. The mean certainty rating for the interactions, on the other hand, was 2.3 out of 5.\textsuperscript{9} This asymmetry further suggests that children are overtly gendering their language according to the adult model more obviously in narrative than in discourse.

Discussion

Why might girls and boys show more gendered languages in narratives than in conversation? One key difference between the children’s narratives and conversation was the intended audience of each speech act. Narratives were nearly exclusively aimed at the adult researcher rather than at other children, and while other children might listen, they provided none of the feedback or backchanneling that would be expected of an adult audience. However, children did engage with one another in conversation. If the use of narratives is associated with adult-child interaction, then, a reason that children may exhibit more gendering when story-telling might be that they are engaging in a

\textsuperscript{9}Two adults provided decimal point values rather than points on the integer scale.
kind of convergence, what Bell (1984) has referred to as responsive audience design. Much of the gendering of young children – their clothing, their personal appearance, their names, what toys they are bought, and so forth – is done for them by adults, and they may be trying to emulate appropriate gender conventions in order to gain adult approval. Among their peers, they may experience less pressure to conform to these particular roles, and consequently no need to use gendered language when engaging in audience design. A comparison of adult-child speech between preschoolers and their parents and between preschoolers and their peers could shed light on the validity of this hypothesis.

Although the data set is small, adults’ assessments of children’s language also suggest an asymmetry between boys and girls, since they more accurately identified females than males in both narrative and interactional modes of speech. There are a number of possible explanations for this fact. Girls may simply be outstripping boys in their acquisition of gendered language, tending to use more feminine language while boys remain gender-neutral. On the other hand, the likelihood that most of the children are cared for predominantly by females might also play a role, with masculine tendencies in boys’ speech watered down by their increased exposure to more feminine speech. Finally, this result could be an artifact of the demographics of the children at this particular nursery school, who tend to have educated or upper-middle class parents. Mesthrie et al. (2000) summarize research showing that middle class modes of speech are associated with feminine modes of speech, while working class speech is more likely to be viewed as masculine. The greater discriminability of female modes of speech for these children, then, may be due to an effect of class. A parallel study conducted in a nursery school where children of working-class parents predominate is one direction for future research.

Due to the small scope of this study, a number of other future research projects would be helpful in solidifying and extending the results. It would be helpful to study more children, to allow for potential effects of age to be controlled. In particular, I was unable to assess differences in lengths of turns and narratives simply because the children vary significantly in their mean length of utterance independently of gender or mode of speech. Additionally, given the difficulty of observing young children without being drawn into a participatory or supervisory role, an expanded study could control for the gender of the experimenter by using a male experimenter in some cases and a female in others, checking for any differences this caused.

Bibliography


