

Gender Differences in the Use of Intensifiers in Persian

Abbas Eslami Rasekh

Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

Fateme Saeb (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Foreign Languages, University of Isfahan, Isfahan, Iran

E-mail address: f.saeb1384@gmail.com

Received: 13-12- 2014

Accepted: 17-02- 2015

Advance Access Published: February 2015

Published: 01-07- 2015

doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.4p.200

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.4p.200>

Abstract

Men and women use different linguistic forms though they might come from the same homogeneous speech community. This study is an attempt to investigate the differential usage of intensifiers in male and female speech in Persian. About four hours of naturally-occurring spontaneous conversations between male and female participants were recorded, transcribed and examined for the use of intensifiers. Frequency counts and the Chi-square test were used to analyze the data. The results indicated that women used intensifiers significantly more than men. The findings were seen to support the previous findings in this regard. They also furthered our understanding of gendered speech in Persian.

Keywords: intensifiers, female speech, gender differences, Persian

1. Introduction

“The male is not as the female.” (Holy Quran, Al-i-Imran, 36) God has created men and women as different humans. The two genders are different in many respects, physiologically, psychologically and socially, to name but a few. They have different ways of adapting themselves to the world. According to Conner (2000): “males and females deal with problems with similar goals but with diverse considerations.” Women tend to take account of multiple sources of information simultaneously and see elements as interconnected. Men are inclined to concentrate on one problem at a time. Women are able to recall memories of strong emotional components. In men, certain experiences which are related to competition or physical activities are more easily recalled (Conner, 2000).

Men and women are also linguistically different. Gender differences in the use of linguistic forms exist in any speech community with varying degrees of intensity. Wardhaugh (2006) describes the Carib Indians as having two different languages for males and females. This situation is the result of a war in which Carib-speaking men massacred the local Arawak-speaking men and mated with their women. Their descendants now speak two languages as boys learn Carib from their fathers and girls learn Arawak from their mothers. A less extreme example is the working-class women in Newcastle who often pronounce the [ɹ] variant for the suffix ‘ing’, while men prefer to use [ɹ̥] variant (Meyerhoff, 2006).

Researchers have long been interested in describing gender differences in language use (Parsons, 1913; Stopes, 1908; Turner, Dindia & Pearson, 1995). In the early 1970s, female language received more serious attention from the linguists, psychologists and sociologists. “Female register” was also coined to refer to the diversities rooted in gender differences in the phenomenon of language (Pan, 2011). Nowadays in any introductory book on sociolinguistics one can expect to find a chapter on language and gender as it is a subfield of sociolinguistics, which deals with gender differentiation evident, among others, in pronunciation (Hariri, 2012; Jiang, 2011; Pan, 2011), vocabulary and grammar (Dubois & Crouch, 1975; Nemati & Bayer, 2007). Regarding male and female differences in vocabulary, one appealing area of study has been the different use of intensifiers by men and women (Ghafar Samar & Alibakhshi, 2007; Jeon & Choe, 2009; Sharp, 2012; Subon, 2013; Turner et al., 1995; Xiao & Tao, 2007). Intensifiers are words such as *very*, *so*, *really*, *totally*, etc. which semantically function to strengthen or increase the force of what they modify.

Male and female differences in some linguistic areas have been identified and the issue has been settled. However, research results in many areas are not yet conclusive and consistent, gender differences in the use of intensifiers being one of them. These differences have continued to be the subject of “much debate and little consensus” (Cassell & Traversky, 2005, p. 6). Hence, the need is felt to pursue research in this field in order to get conclusive results and to increase the body of current knowledge about gendered speech. Furthermore, to the best knowledge of the researcher, there have been very few studies concerning men and women’s use of intensifiers in Iran (Ghafar Samar & Alibakhshi, 2007; Nemati & Bayer, 2007). Research studies in this area have been mainly done about the English language and in western cultures and may not necessarily represent the gender differences in the use of Persian intensifiers in Iranian culture. In view of this, the purpose of this study was to identify points of difference in use of intensifiers in the speech of males and females in Iranian context. Lakoff’s (1975) ideas regarding gender differences in the use of linguistic

features are taken into account in conducting the study. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research question: Is there a significant difference between males and females in the use of Persian intensifiers?

2. Literature Review

Robin Lakoff (1975), a pioneer in language and gender, in her vastly cited book *Language and woman's place* proposed that gender differences in communication are due to the different positions that men and women occupy in society. In Lakoff's view, men speak in an assertive way because they enjoy the superior position in the social ranking. Women, on the other hand, speak in a more tentative and polite manner since the subordinate role is theirs. She claimed that the tentativeness and powerless nature of female language is demonstrated in heavy use of intensifying adverbs. Though long before Lakoff, some scholars (Stoffel, 1901; Jespersen, 1922; cited in Romero, 2012) had started attributing the use of intensifiers to female language, it was Lakoff (1975) who instigated the hot debate on gender differences in linguistic features.

Since their publication, Lakoff's (1975) views on women's language have been the subject of much criticism. Dubois and Crouch (1975), for example, disapproved of her research method as being introspective, asystematic, uncontrolled, and unverifiable observation. They suggested that she had drawn conclusions based upon a notably skewed, non-random sample of participants. Likewise, Mizokami (2001:144) described Lakoff's notions as "folklinguistic stereotypes". Lakoff's (1975) ideas have also been the target of criticism from feminists camp for suggesting that women's talk is abnormal and that in order to be taken seriously, they must try to adjust their speech to the norm, that is, men's way of speaking. However, Lakoff intended to draw attention to the male dominance in society instead of female deficiency. The theory has been since known as the *Deficit approach* as a result of this confusion (Mustonen, 2010).

Criticism was not the only reaction to Lakoff's views. Many researchers set out to investigate if she was right. While some of the findings of these research attempts confirmed Lakoff's views (Sharp, 2012; Turner et al., 1995; Kuha, 2005; Mustonen, 2010), others have been inconsistent with them (Fahy, 2002; Nemati & Bayer, 2007; Xiao & Tao, 2007). The conflicting results have been due to a large part to the fact that different datasets were used and different intensifiers were studied.

Bradac, Mulac, and Thompson (1995, cited in Kuha, 2005) studied the use of intensifiers in 58 male and 58 female students. Men's average use was 0.8 intensifiers per 100 words, whereas women produced 1.1 intensifiers per 100 words on average. The difference was statistically significant. In this study, a number of intensifiers, such as "really" and "so", were more preferred by women rather than men.

In another study, Turner et al. (1995) examined the assumption of gender differences in eleven verbal behaviors believed to discriminate females from males. The verbal behaviors under study included the use of intensifiers among other behaviors. In this study women were reported to have a greater use of justifiers, intensifiers, and agreement compared to men.

Following the same line of research, Ghafar Samar and Alibakhshi (2007) explored gender-related differences in the use of linguistic strategies in natural communications in Persian. They analyzed male-male, male-female, and female-female communications with respect to the participants' linguistic strategies (interruptions, intensifiers, amount of speech, topic raising). Their results revealed that there is a significant difference between males and females in the use of linguistic strategies in male-male and female-female communications, with females using more intensifiers.

In a more recent study, Sharp (2012) investigated the use of intensifiers *so* and *really* by males and females in a television show. The results indicated that the female characters' use of intensifiers was significantly more than the male characters. Her findings suggested that the intensifiers *so* and *really* are possibly a characteristic of female speech in modern television programming.

In contrast to Lakoff's (1975) views and the aforementioned studies, Fahy (2002) investigated the difference between males' and females' use of linguistic qualifiers and intensifiers in a computer conference transcript. His study showed a tendency for women to use more qualifiers, conditional and parenthetical statements, while men's contributions mainly had fewer qualifiers and more intensifiers.

In another study, Nemati and Bayer (2007) explored the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions by men and women in English and Persian. To collect the appropriate data they studied 6 English and 8 Persian film-scripts. They used frequencies and Chi-squares to compare the data. The results showed no significant difference between the groups on the use of intensifiers, hedges and tag questions.

Also, Xiao and Tao (2007) explored dissimilarities in the use of intensifiers respecting a number of sociolinguistic variables. They examined 33 intensifiers across discourse mode and register, gender, age, education level, and audience gender and age. The results showed no significant difference between male and female speakers in terms of their use of intensifiers. Interestingly however, women in their study used intensifiers significantly more frequently than men in writing. Obviously, their findings yielded mixed results for the views that associate intensifiers with the female language.

Finally, it would be beneficial to mention the results of a meta-analysis of studies testing gender differences in tentative speech conducted in 2011. Leaper and Robnett (2011) selected a sample of 29 studies with a total sample of 3,502 participants. Results of the meta-analysis revealed a statistically significant but small effect size ($d \frac{1}{4} .23$), suggesting that women were somewhat more likely than men to use tentative speech (expressions of uncertainty, tag questions,

hedges and intensifiers). In spite of that, they found a large overlap between women and men in their uses of tentative speech. "Many men used tentative speech with equal or even greater frequency than women. Furthermore, there was a small gender difference in some situations, whereas there was a negligible difference in other contexts. Our meta-analysis supports the view that women and men are more similar than different" (Leaper & Robnett, 2011, p.139).

Overall, the research findings reviewed here are indicative of a persisting inconsistency in the results regarding the link between intensifier use and female language. This fact necessitates the pursuance of research in this area. Therefore, the present study sought to determine whether the use of intensifiers in Persian speakers might be determined by their gender.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Twenty-two people agreed that their voices be recorded and used as the data in this study. There were thirteen females and nine males. They were the available sample to the researchers. Their age ranged between 20 and 30 years and their level of education included high-school certificate to university student. The participants were all native speakers of Persian.

3.2 Data collection Procedures

The transcript of 20 face-to-face conversations were examined for the use of Persian intensifiers. These conversation transcripts were obtained through the following techniques.

Recording: People having a conversation were approached and were asked for their permission for their voices to be recorded. To assure the participants of the confidentiality of the gathered data, it was briefly explained to them that the recording was for some research purposes.

Unstructured interviews: People were interviewed on various topics of interest. The objective was eliciting the natural flow of spontaneous speech on the part of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded and the participants' permission for recording their voices were obtained beforehand. To ensure the utmost degree of naturalness and spontaneity, topics relevant to the activities in which the participants were engaged were chosen. For example, interview with students on the campus was about the term papers which were due for the current term.

The above mentioned methods were chosen for the purpose of observing, studying and understanding the natural phenomenon to ensure for the credibility of the results. Some studies in this area have relied on film scripts (Nemati and Bayer, 2007; Sharp, 2012; Cholifah, Heriyanto & Citraresmana, 2013) or dialogues in novels (Funderburke, 2012; Ariffin, Husin & Musahar, 2004) for their data. Though dialogues in a film or novel can closely represent the linguistic behavior in natural contexts, it may not necessarily portray the intricacies inherent in spontaneous communication.

Three hours and fifty minutes of speech were recorded which yielded 1200 utterances (600 female and 600 male) in total. Utterance was regarded as the unit of speech since there were numerous cases of incomplete sentences or clusters of sentences delivered without some pauses in between to mark their being separate sentences. Nemati and Bayer (2007) define 'utterance' as the "whole linguistic production of each person, in a conversation, in each turn, be it a single sound, a word, phrase, sentence, or even a series of sentences" (p.192).

The use of the Farsi equivalents for the following words were counted as instances of intensifiers: *very* [keili], *so* [anghadr], *so much* [anghadr ziyad], *completely* [kamelan], *totally* [kollan], *especially* [khususan], *always* [hamisheh], *never* [hargez], *all* [hame], *only* [faghat], *precisely* [daghighan], *surely* [motmaenan], *certainly* [hatman], *at all* [aslan], *nothing* [hich chiz] and *really* [vaghean]. Examples of sentences in which these intensifiers were used by male and female participants are extracted from the data and presented in table 1 below:

Table 1. Examples of intensifier use from the gathered data

Intensifier	Sample sentence
<i>Very</i>	"Sadegh's drawings are very nice."
<i>So</i>	"The new flowers have made the campus so beautiful!"
<i>So much</i>	"You do so much online shopping, Samaneh!"
<i>Completely</i>	"It's completely obvious that he has graduated from Auckland University."
<i>Totally</i>	"Tablets have been totally changed into some sort of toy for children."
<i>Specially</i>	"I like working for students, specially the BA students, they're younger."
<i>Always</i>	"He was always working on statistics and things like that."
<i>Never</i>	"You'll never do such a thing."
<i>All</i>	"All this week I was busy with these meetings."
<i>Only</i>	"The university students' motivation is only obtaining a degree."
<i>Precisely</i>	"He looks precisely like Rezazadeh."
<i>Surely</i>	"Ph.D. students are surely more familiar with the university rules and regulations."
<i>Certainly</i>	"If you say so, it'll certainly work."
<i>At all</i>	"They didn't present it well. I didn't like it at all."
<i>Nothing</i>	"The problem is, their website has nothing special."
<i>Really</i>	"The school condition is really dreadful."

3.3 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, frequency counts and Chi-square statistical procedures were used. Frequency counts were employed to show the frequency of intensifiers found in the utterances produced by males and females. Also, as the data were nominal, Chi-square test for independence was used to determine whether there is a significant difference between male and female speech regarding the use of intensifiers.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the general results of the study indicating that the frequency of intensifiers in female speech was higher than the frequency in male speech.

Table 2. Frequencies of intensifier use in male and female speech

	Number of intensifiers	Number of utterances	Percentage of intensifier use
Female	135	600	22.5%
Male	96	600	16.7%

To find out whether the difference between males and females in their use of intensifiers is significant, a Chi-square test for independence was run. The results indicated a significant association between gender and the use of intensifiers, $\chi^2(1, n=1200) = 6.11, p = .01, \phi = -.07$. This means that females in this study made significantly greater use of intensifiers in their speech. However, the phi coefficient yielded a small effect size (-.07). In line with the results of Sharp (2012), Turner et al. (1995), Kuha (2005), Mustonen (2010) and Ghafar Samar and Alibakhshi (2007), the results of this study confirmed Lakoff's (1975) views concerning women's use of intensifiers. However, they were inconsistent with Fahy (2002), Nemati and Bayer (2007), and Xiao and Tao's (2007) findings.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Any society prescribes different roles and positions for men and women. Different expectations, consequently, are made from each gender with respect to how they behave and how they talk. Lakoff (1975) holds that because women are often denied access to power in the society, they use different linguistic devices to assert and protect their social position, use of intensifiers being one of them. Women in this study were found to use intensifiers more than men. Keeping in mind their less powerful status in social interactions, women might resort to using intensifiers to give more emphasis to their talk, impress their interlocutors and enhance the likelihood of being accepted and confirmed.

According to Wardhaugh (2006) "women are expected to use talk to a greater extent than men to serve the function of establishing and maintaining personal relationships. They are expected to talk about personal feelings and other socio-emotional matters relevant to interpersonal relationships to a greater extent than men . . . what is particularly important in female friendships is the sharing of intimate feelings through talk, whereas in male friendships the sharing of activities is more important" (p. 325). Getting the attention of their listeners through using more intensifiers might be a linguistic strategy for women to help establish and maintain personal relationships. Also, since women are more emotionally-oriented in their behavior and in their speech and do not try to hide their feelings and emotions, using intensifiers might be an attempt on their part to express their strong feelings and attitudes toward different topics. This might also show their greater sensitivity to linguistic forms.

A word of caution might be in order here: the results of the present study might not be generalizable to other males and females in other speech communities and other cultures as the participants were a small group of men and women. Hence, replication studies with larger samples would be desirable to give more generalizable results. Despite this limitation, this study contributed to furthering our understanding of the variations in the use of intensifiers by men and women in Persian. As for the practical implications, the results might be applicable in educational contexts. Language teachers can benefit from the knowledge about gender differences in their students' production of utterances. Results from studies like the present one may help them to see the variation as mere differences and not as a drawback for either of the two genders. Further, an understanding of gender differences in speech can help even the lay men and women to learn more about each other and have more effective and successful cross-gender communications.

References

- Ariffin, K., Husin, M. & Musahar, R. (2004). Female Speech Style: Does it Change over Time? *Grading Business and Management Journal* 8, 47-61.
- Cassell, J. & Tversky, D. (2005). The Language of Online Intercultural Community Formation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 10, 67-83. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00239.x <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2005.tb00239.x>
- Cholifah, Y. W., Heriyanto, & Citraresmana, E. (2013). Strong Expletives, Empty Adjectives and Tag Questions Usage as a Gender Marker in a Serial Film "F.R.I.E.N.D.S". *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World* 4, 403-417.

- Conner, M. G. (2000). Understanding the Differences between Men and Women. Online Essay Retrieved October 15, 2014 from: <http://www.oregoncounseling.org/ArticlesPapers/Documents/DifferencesMenWomen.htm>
- Dubois, B. L., & Crouch, I. (1975). The question of tag question in women's speech: They don't really use more of them, do they? *Language in Society* 4, 289-294. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500006680>
- Fahy, P. J. (2002). Use of linguistic qualifiers and intensifiers in a computer conference. *The American Journal of Distance Education* 16, 5-22. http://dx.doi.org/10.1207/S15389286AJDE1601_2
- Funderburke, S. (2012). Operating the Silencer: Muted Group Theory in 'The Great Gatsby'. MA Thesis. Liberty University. G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Ghafar Samar, R. & Alibakhshi, G. (2007). The Gender Linked Differences in the Use of Linguistic Strategies in Face-to-face Communication. *Linguistics Journal* 2, 59-71.
- Hariri, M. (2012). A Review of Literature: A Gender-based Study of Pronunciation Accuracy. *Research Journal of Applied Sciences, Engineering and Technology* 4, 4861-4864.
- Jeon, J. & Choe, J. (2009). *A Key Word Analysis of English Intensifying Adverbs in Male and Female Speech in ICE-GB*. 23rd Pacific Asia Conference on Language, Information and Computation, 210-219.
- Jiang, H. (2011). *Gender Concern in English Intonation: A Study of High Rising Terminal Employed by Females (Monograph)*. Chengdu: Sichuan University Press.
- Kuha, M. (2005). Investigating the Spread of "so" as an Intensifier: Social and Structural Factors. *Texas Linguistic Forum* 48, 217-227.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and women's place*. New York, NY: Harper and Row.
- Leaper, C. & Robnett, R. (2011). Women Are More Likely Than Men To Use Tentative Language, Aren't They? A Meta-Analysis Testing For Gender Differences and Moderators. *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 35, 129-142. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0361684310392728>.
- Meyerhoff, M. (2011). *Introducing Sociolinguistics*. Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Mizokami, Y. (2001). Does 'women's language' really exist? A critical assessment of sex difference research in sociolinguistics. *Multicultural Studies* 1, 141-59.
- Mustonen, M. (2010). I mean like Sheila's friends are quite sort of glam and Sheila's very glamorous – A multivariable corpus study on intensifiers in British English. MA Thesis. University of Eastern Finland.
- Nemati, A., & Bayer, J.M. (2007). Gender Differences in the Use of Linguistic Forms in the Speech of Men and Women: A Comparative Study of Persian and English. *Language in India* 7, 185-201.
- Pan, Q. (2011). On the Features of Female Language in English. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 1, 10-18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4304/tpls.1.8.1015-1018>
- Parsons, E. C. (1913). *The old-fashioned woman: Primitive fancies about the sex*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
- Romero, S. (2012). This is so cool! - A Comparative Corpus Study on Intensifiers in British and American English. MA Thesis. University of Tampere.
- Sharp, G. (2012). That is so feminine! An investigation of intensifiers as characteristics of female speech through the use of so and really in modern television programming. *Griffith Working Papers in Pragmatics and Intercultural Communication* 5, 14-20.
- Stopes, C. C. (1908). The sphere of "man": In relation to that of "woman" in the Constitution. London: T. Fisher Unwin.
- Subon, F. (2013). Gender Differences in the Use of Linguistic Forms in the Speech of Men and Women in the Malaysian Context. *Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 13, 67-79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.9790/0837-1336779>
- Turner, L., Dindia, K. & Pearson, J. (1995). An Investigation of Female/Male Verbal Behaviors in Same-Sex and Mixed-Sex Conversations. *Communication reports* 8, 86-96. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08934219509367614>
- Wardhaugh, R. (2006). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Xiao, R. & Tao, H. (2007). A corpus-based sociolinguistic study of amplifiers in British English. *Sociolinguistic Studies* 1, 241-273. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1558/sols.v1i2.241>