

# GENDER DIFFERENTIATIONS IN CHINESE VOCABULARY AND PRAGMATICS

---

Pan YUYAN

[panyuyan423@163.com](mailto:panyuyan423@163.com)

Ștefan cel Mare University of Suceava, Romania

***Abstract:** Language is the carrier of culture, and culture is the connotation of language. Any national language bears the profound cultural connotation of that nation. The cultural value of language is most clearly recorded in words, and most obviously reflected in the vocabulary system and pragmatic practice of language. This paper makes a concrete analysis of the gender differentiations in Chinese vocabulary and pragmatics and the different characteristics of men and women when they use language. Meanwhile, this paper also clarifies gender differences in language and exploring the social causes of such differences, laying the foundation for better promoting communication and understanding between men and women.*

***Keywords:** gender differentiations, Chinese vocabulary, Chinese pragmatics, possible reasons.*

## 1. Introduction

Language is the product of human society, which carries abundant social and cultural information and reflects the development and evolution of human society. With the increasing social status of women in China, communication between the two genders is becoming more and more important. However, due to historical and cultural reasons, the differences between the languages of two genders' need to be resolved urgently. Gender differences in language are one of the most important issues in sociolinguistics, which refer to the differences between men and women when they use the same language or dialect. These differences are objective facts that universally exists in human language society, is one of the common manifestations of language social variants, and are also important issues in sociolinguistic research (Dai, 2004).

The study of gender differences in language rose in the early 1970s. Since the 1980s, the study of the speaker's gender factor, together with the class and age factors in language use, has formed a tripartite pattern, which has gradually become a focus of sociolinguistic research and aroused widespread concern in the academic community (Yang,

2004). In the last century, the Danish linguist Otto Jespersen put forward the characteristics of feminine language in his book *Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin* (Jespersen, 2013). In 1973, Robin Lakoff's article "Language and the Status of Women" was published, which had a great impact on the field of sociolinguistics (Lakoff, 1973). In 1999 the topic of "gender and language" was discussed by many linguists in the 44<sup>th</sup> international linguistic conference held in New York. In the works of linguists such as Fasold (2000), Wardhaugh (2021) and Coulmas (1998) the theme of "language and genders" had also been analyzed. Among them, what is more persuasive is that "gender differences themselves contain extremely rich social and cultural content, and research materials are more intuitive than other topics (such as language and social class), so research in this direction is still in the ascendant, and some people even think that a special gender linguistics should be established to study this issue." (Zhao, 2005)

The research in this field in China started relatively late, starting in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the past 40 years, it has experienced a development process from macro to micro, from static to dynamic, from phenomenon listing to theory sublimation, from theory introduction to specific application (Zhao, 2008). On the basis of previous studies, this paper analyzes the specific differentiates in Chinese vocabulary and pragmatics in male and female languages and their causes, and puts forward relevant countermeasures, with a view to reducing misunderstanding caused by gender differentiates in language and promoting harmonious coexistence between the genders.

## 2. Gender Differentiation in Chinese Vocabulary

As the carrier of Chinese language, Chinese characters, on the one hand, reflect the wisdom of ancient ancestors, on the other hand, reflects the idea of gender differentiations in Chinese traditional culture. Any language phenomenon will be reflected in the vocabulary as language building materials, and the gender differentiations between men and women are also very obvious in the vocabulary composition.

The concept of gender differentiation in Chinese characters is represented in the female characters. Through the analysis of feminine characters, we can see the image of women reflected in Chinese characters. The feminine character is a combination of "女" (female) and other Chinese parts of characters. Some feminine characters are commendatory in meaning, but they reflect gender differences in forms. For example, the word "妇人" (married woman) has no commendatory or derogatory comments on its meaning. However, in the form of oracle bone inscriptions, the left part of "妇" is "女" (female) and the right part is "帚" (broom), which means sweeping, indicating that women should do housework. This is the typical example for the gender differentiations between men and women.

Sun also discussed the gender differentiations in Chinese characters from the aspect of social psychology, and believed that the component character "女" of Chinese characters represented discrimination against women (Sun, 1996). For instance, "娼" (prostitute), "奸" (rape), "婬" (whore), "妖" (demon), "奴" (slave), "妒" (jealous), "婪" (greedy) and other words with obvious derogatory meanings put women in an extremely low position and moral standard. These words are commonly used and fully reveal the tragic situation of Chinese women who were oppressed and trampled in the ancient traditional society.

What's more, the order of some Chinese words also reflects the different social status of men and women. In the use of social language, when people talk about words related to men and women, their word order mostly follows the principle of men first and

women later. In Chinese, there are “男女” (men and women), “夫妻” (husband and wife), “子女” (son and daughter), “父母” (father and mother), “兄妹” (brother and sister), “夫唱妇随” (men talk, women follow), “男尊女卑” (men being superior to women), “男欢女爱” (men play, women love in relationship) and so on (Peng, 2007). Masculine words are always in front of feminine words, and many of the meanings they contain are derogatory to women.

Last but not least, idioms, allusions and proverbs and are colloquial expressions concentrate people’s observation of life experience or generalization of social phenomena, in which gender discrimination is also vividly reflected. For example, “嫁出去的女儿，泼出去的水” (A married daughter is like the spilled water), “嫁鸡随鸡，嫁狗随狗” (if you marry a chicken or a dog, you will follow them), “女人头发长见识短” (if you have long hair, you will have short knowledge) and so on (Qian, 2003). It shows that the social, moral and cultural requirements and norms for men and women are different. Because in the old times men were important roles that were recognized and respected by the society, while women were inferior citizens who were discriminated against and belittled by the society. As a specific symbol of cultural heritage, characters are difficult to change in a short time, and Chinese characters referring gender differentiations are still in use (Bai, 2020). In daily life, the use of Chinese characters with gender differentiations should be reduced as far as possible without causing language communication barriers.

### **3. Gender Differentiation in pragmatics**

Under different scenes and contexts, the verbal communication behaviors of men and women are also different, each forming a certain speech expression style, which is embodied in the following aspects. Cao found that women use modal particle “吗” (ma), “呢” (ne), “吧” (ba), “啊” (a) more frequently than men in interrogative sentences and imperative sentences in male and female discourse materials with basically equal length of words through quantitative analysis of the use frequency of modal particles (Cao, 1987). Dai observed the differences between men and women in speech acts in Chinese language from the aspects of greeting, invitation, apology, etc. For example, feminine greetings often use complete and regular sentences and expressions, while the masculine greetings are quite casual. Men rarely send invitations. Once they invite, they are often more specific and detailed, while women usually give invitations that are not specific. They usually express their good intentions rather than some kind of commitment. Apart from this, most men think that apology is bad for face, so they seldom use apology strategies, while women regard apology as a positive polite behavior and are willing to accept it (Dai, 2004).

On the research of gender differences in apology speech acts, Pan draws a similar conclusion that women are more likely to apologize to others than men. Women are more likely to apply the strategy of expressing apology directly and use formal and appropriate apology words. However, men’s choice of apology strategies is influenced by social factors and social power. Women prefer to use adverbs of degree, such as “真” (true) and “很” (very) (Pan, 2004).

Feng by investigating the gender pragmatic characteristics of Chinese compliments and responses, believes that women generally attach importance to the emotional (communicative) function of using compliments, preferring to regard praise as a positive and polite speech act. While men attach importance to the evaluation (information) function of praise, and are more inclined to regard praise as a face threatening behavior (Feng, 2003). Ding also made a comparative study on the expression of the request speech act of men and women according to the survey results of the questionnaires. Her main conclusion is that

women are generally more tactful and polite than men in the expression of request language, and the request sequence of women is significantly longer than that of men (Ding, 2002).

This shows the differences between men and women in terms of language expression style. Usually, men speak more directly, pay attention to explaining things, and use less delicate rhetorical methods. Women, on the other hand, are better at expressing their emotions and feelings, focusing on describing the impression and association of an event, and often neglecting the description of the event itself, especially the numbers.

#### **4. Possible Reasons for Gender Differentiation in Chinese**

Gender differences and language are related to social culture. Gender differences in language have their important social roots. First of all, in the process of the formation of human society, in the process of people engaged in productive labor, human beings have a gender division of labor. Due to physical fact that generally men are stronger than women, men are more responsible for hunting and production. Women are responsible for procreation and housekeeping. The influence of women in social activities is less than that of men. With the development of society, the role played by women is more and more reflected in the difference of their social status, that is, men play an important role in society because they are engaged in what people always think is important. And women only occupy a secondary position in society because they are engaged in what people think is secondary. This primary and secondary status is more obvious in the male dominated society in old days. Language, as a social tool, serves the rulers. The ruler can use it to reflect his own interests and will. Thus, in the early language, there has been such a feature reflecting the different status of men and women.

Secondly, language users, influenced by traditional ideas, have gender discrimination in the use of language. Traditionally, as a man, he has a natural tendency to become a man. People expect him to be strong, dominant, aggressive, competitive, rational, responsible and a leader. And as a woman, she is supposed to behave like a woman with all the gentle, quiet, passive, romantic, dependent, educated, loyal, and considerate characteristics and becomes a good follower. Therefore, when people use language to describe men and women, the words and expressions used are certainly different. Moreover, both men and women are more or less affected by this social norm when using language. Finally, this difference is also due to the influence of external factors in children's language acquisition. For example, parents' rewards and punishments for children's language behaviors, the use of school textbooks and languages, etc. which instill an idea that conforms to social norms in children.

#### **5. Conclusions**

Language is a mirror image of culture. A society without gender differences will never create words that discriminate against women. Therefore, it is not language but language users, society and culture that discriminate women. The feudal ethics of China for thousands of years, as well as the Confucian and Mencius doctrines and the philosophy of Cheng and Zhu, have deeply influenced the moral concepts of the Chinese people, leaving a deep cultural imprint on the language. The gender differentiations in Chinese words and pragmatics still exist in the contemporary society. Of course, with the progress of society, when the status of men and women has reached real equality, these linguistic discrimination and unfairness will gradually withdraw from history.

**REFERENCES**

- BAI, Yangming, and SHENGNAN, Huang, (2020), “Gender Differences in Word Formation in English and Chinese”, in *Overseas English*, Vol. 7, pp. 240-241.
- CAO, Zhiyun, (1987), “Gender Differences in the Use of Modal Particles”, in *Linguistic Research*, No. 3, pp. 44-45.
- COULMAS, Florian, (1998), *The handbook of sociolinguistics*, Blackwell Publishing.
- DAI, Qingxia, (2004), *Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, Beijing, Commercial Press.
- DING, Feng, (2002), “Gender Differences in Chinese Request Speech Act”, in *Journal of Xi’an Foreign Languages University*, No. 1, pp. 46-50.
- FASOLD, Ralph, (2000), *The Sociolinguistics of Language*, Beijing, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- FENG, Jianghong, (2003), “A Gender Pragmatic Comparison between English and Chinese Compliments and Their Responses”, in *Foreign Languages Research*, No. 2, pp. 18-24.
- JESPERSEN, Otto, (2013), *Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin*, Routledge.
- LAKOFF, Robin, (1973), “Language and woman’s place”, in *Language in Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 45-79.
- PAN, Xiaoyan, (2004), “A Study of Gender Differences in Chinese Apology Speech Acts”, in *Journal of Southwest Jiaotong University*, No. 1, pp. 89-92.
- PENG, Changliu, (2007), “Gender Variation of Language in Language”, in *Journal of Hubei Institute of Education*, Vol. 24, NO. 4, pp. 30-31.
- QIAN, Jin, (2003), “Analysis of in Gender Difference in Chinese Idiom”, in *Language and Translation (Chinese)*, No. 2, pp. 54-57.
- SUN, Rujian, (1996), “Review and Prospect of Gender Language Research”, in *Journal of Yunmeng*, No. 2, pp. 44-50.
- WARDHAUGH, Ronald, and FULLER, Janet M., (2021), *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*, John Wiley & Sons.
- YANG, Yonglin, (2004), *Sociolinguistic Studies: Function, Appellation and Gender*, Shanghai, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- ZHAO, Ronghui, (2005), *Sociolinguistics*, Shanghai, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- ZHAO, Xuede, (2008), “An Overview of Studies on Gender Differentiation in Chinese”, in *Collection of Women’s Studies*, No. 6, pp. 77-81.