

# GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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**Abstract:** *This paper mainly investigates the differences between men and women in English language from the aspects of pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and communications. This paper also analyses the possible physiological, social, cultural and economic reasons for the gender differences in English. It is believed that the different roles played by men and women in society affect their speech styles and result in the gender differences in language.*

**Keywords:** *gender differences, English language, pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax, communication, reasons.*

## 1. Introduction

Gender difference is the oldest form of human language difference. As a social difference of language, it has always been a problem of interest to people. Since the 1960s, with the rise of the Western feminist movement and the rapid development of sociolinguistic research, the relationship between language and gender has attracted more and more linguists' attention, and has been discussed more profoundly and systematically. Speakers will produce language varieties due to gender differences. Lakoff once made a language survey, which shows that women are more careful than men when speaking, use less vulgar language than men, and tend to use the standardized language form of the upper class, etc. The survey marks the beginning of the study of gender differences in English (Lakoff, 1973). At the same time, with the increasing status of women in society, especially the vigorous rise of the Western feminist movement, language varieties have become another focus of language research.

According to the traditional linguistic view of gender difference research theory in English, the main reason for gender difference in language is that women are different from men in both physiological characteristics and psychological state. In the mid-1950s, Parsons and Bales (1955) put forward two concepts specifically used to distinguish gender functional characteristics of social groups, namely "instrumental function" and "emotional function"

(Collins, Waters & Waters, 1979). Since then, for a period of time most of the studies on gender differences in language have been carried out around this functional distinction theory.

From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, sociolinguistic research and the Western feminist movement interacted and flourished. In this situation, people gradually realize that women's English, as a special stylistic phenomenon, is not purely a physical and psychological performance of the speaker, but it contains more profound and complex historical and social reasons. A large number of literatures show that a series of speech features in so-called women's English are not simply transferred by the speaker's gender. However, it is determined by the speaker's social class, psychological awareness, scene and other comprehensive factors. Inspired by this theory of multiple related factors, the study of gender differences in sociolinguistic language shows a thriving scene of theories. Many new and distinctive theories and theories reveal various related factors between language and society from different aspects, greatly enriching the study of gender differences in English language.

Based on the former theories and studies on gender differences in English, this paper will discuss the performances of gender differences in English from the perspectives of phonetics, vocabulary, syntax and communication. Meanwhile, the causes for these gender differences will also be analyzed in this paper to draw some conclusions.

## **2. Gender Differences in English Pronunciation**

The sociolinguist Trugill proved that women's pronunciation is more standard than men's when their age and education level are similar. Women are more likely to accept phonetic rules than men, for example, they are more likely to pronounce the alphabet /t/ and /r/ respectively. As Trugill clarifies that in order to make up for other daily losses, women spend more time on the correct use of language, while men pronounce more freely than others, and subconsciously take pride in it, because they can prove themselves in other aspects, such as careers (Trudgill, 2000).

In terms of intonation, generally speaking, women tend to use rising tones and are more expressive in the change of intonation, while men tend to use falling tones and rarely change. Social, religious, political, and cultural differences determine male and female prestige, wealth, and power, making their pitches different (Wahyuningsih, 2018). Firstly, women tend to use rising tones. For example:

A: When are we going to take a trip?  
B: Oh, tomorrow?

B does mean that they are going to take a trip tomorrow, if A does not have any problem and agrees. In fact, B is the only person who knows the answer and can give it, but she still uses a rising tone, indicating that women are hesitant and consider other people's opinions.

Secondly, women use more hedges such as "I believe" "I think", "I am afraid" etc. to avoid direct attitudes. Men are more willing to show masculinity when speaking, so their tone is more confident and firmer, while women show their tenderness and elegance, so their tone is obedient and uncertain. It is generally believed that men's own physiological characteristics determine that they are more likely to have a mild and thick bass, which gives a sense of solemnity and preciseness and is more suitable for formal occasions, while women's voices are less serious and less suitable for formal occasions.

Thirdly, in fact, women use more polite expressions, and they like to adjust the tone, the speed and volume of voice, thus showing a sense of meekness and consideration. For

instance, women are more likely to use phrases such as “It’s so kind of you”, “It will be very generous of you if...”, “Do you think we might have...” and so on. However, the male pronunciation is relatively rough and vague. In this regard, female language should be better than male, their language is more expressive, while male voice tone is relatively monotonous.

### **3. Gender Differences in English Vocabulary**

Many languages in the world can reflect the differences between masculine and feminine usages in morphological structure. This difference is not obvious in English. However, some suffixes in English which represent the feminine meaning are placed after the masculine words to form the corresponding words that represent women. For example, actress, poetess, hostess, princess, waitress, heroine, fiancée, etc. are feminine words with suffixes added at the end of the masculine words. The other way for the formation of feminine words is to add female marker words to form compound words. For instance, the words “female doctor”, “female driver”, “policewoman” and “businesswoman” are formed by adding “female” and “woman” to represent the feminine meaning. The formation of the feminine words reflects a kind of subordination. This conveys a message that women are subordinate to men. In history, social status such as doctors, lawyers, politicians, etc., belonged to men. While nurses, secretaries and nannies were mostly women (Han & Zhang, 2010). Now there are more and more women in high social positions. However, whenever a famous woman is mentioned on any occasion, the word “female” is always added in front of her occupation to indicate her gender, which does not exist for men.

Apart from this, men and women usually have their own preferences and habits in this regard. Generally speaking, women have more varied vocabulary than men. Women use adjectives more frequently than men. For example, women also use sentences such as “You are such a great friend!”, “What a lovely day it is!” and so on. Men would rather use relatively plain words such as “good, very, complete, totally” to enhance the effect. Women often use some empty and exaggerated adjectives, such as “glorious, gorgeous, amazing, wonderful” and so on. The reason why women like these adjectives is that they can express subtle emotions, but few men have such psychological characteristics. Compared with men, women have more color words and use more standard words, such as blue-green, sky blue, beige, lavender, turquoise, etc., but most men do not use these words.

### **4. Gender Differences in English Syntax**

As for the use of sentence styles, women often use disjunctive questions. For example, when going shopping, the woman wants to confirm her preference to the things she will use the sentence “This is beautiful, isn’t it?” or “This is beautiful, don’t you think so?”. The use of tag questions can make the speaker’s talking more polite and modest, but also shows a lack of confidence and hesitation. Instead, men like to use declarative sentences and ellipsis questions to express the same opinion. Different genders use imperative sentences differently. It is mainly used to put forward requirements, requests and express commands. In general, men tend to use direct commands. For example, they would say “Close the door!” or “Bring it here!” However, under the same circumstances, women usually adopt the suggested way, saying, “Please close the door!” or “Can you bring it here by the way?”.

Linguists also found that men use more non-standard grammatical patterns, while women usually pay attention to grammatical rules. For example, the double negative sentence is an informal expression in English, which is usually wrongly used by the lower class and uneducated people in western countries. For example, when they want to express

“I don’t want anything”, they always say “I don’t want none”. However, when they should say “You didn’t do anything”, they say “You didn’t do nothing”. Many studies show that men and women also have great differences in using this non-standard form.

### **5. Gender Differences in English Communication**

The gender differences in English communication firstly reflected in addresses, which refers to the fact that Western women give up their original surnames and use their husbands’ surnames after marriage. “Mr./Mrs.” is equivalent to publicly announcing their marital status to others, while the word “Mr.” will not reveal their marital status. Secondly, men and women have different styles of expression in different situations. In most public occasions, men are always positive and occupy the center of the topic. They control the choice of topics and attract each other’s attention through intelligent expression to establish and improve their own status, while women often stay in the position of listeners (Kang, 2015). In some private occasions, women express themselves more actively than men. They chat casually at home and don’t want to make other judgments. However, men always keep silent at home and have few topics. Besides, women often express their willingness to cooperate on an equal footing and hope that everyone has a chance to speak. In addition, they respect consensus, and hope to establish and maintain friendly relations based on their exchanges. While men show their strong competition, they tend to be self-centered and control the other party’s speaking opportunities and theme choices.

Apart from this, in communication women are more willing to express strong emotions. When talking, they are prone to open their hearts to the friends, so as in the family relationship to reveal their inner feelings. On the contrary, male speech lacks strong emotional color. Men rarely express their true feelings so as not to be regarded as lacking masculinity. What’s more, female discourse is more elegant than male discourse. Women are required to speak in a gentle way, and the use of bad words is prohibited. Therefore, women express their anger and blame more indirectly and implicitly than men to maintain a good conversation atmosphere.

### **6. Some Possible Reasons**

#### ➤ Physiological differences

Differences in language organs make differences in speech. Woman’s left brain, which is the main function of language center, is more active than men, which leads to women being more competent than men in language. The different hormone secretion cycles between men and women may lead to the more sensitivity and variability of woman in English language.

#### ➤ Historical and cultural reasons

In Western culture, men are the masters of society, women are in a subordinate and dominant position, and the view that men are the center can be traced back to *Genesis in the Bible*. In Genesis, God made Adam out of clay and created Eve out of Adam’s rib. It can be seen that Eve is an accessory of Adam. Therefore, women in the world should also be attached to men. It can be seen that the concept of “male centrism” and “men are superior to women” has already deeply affected people.

#### ➤ Economic and social status reasons

Gender differences in language is due to the different status of men and women in social life. In other words, women’s economic status was not as good as that of men in the

past. With the development of society, although women have awakened, some women go out of their homes to participate in social work, but women are still discriminated against, which is reflected in the high unemployment rate of women, women with equal pay for equal work and women with difficult employment. Up to now, although some women have obtained higher positions in some departments, there is still a gap between the treatment they have received and that of men. What's worse is that some of the husbands do not allow their wives to go out to work, so many girls have become social roles such as sexual partners, reproductive tools and family nannies.

## 7. Conclusions

As an international language, English has not escaped from the gender differences. There is no contradiction between male and female speech. Gender differences in language include the particularity of male and female in pronunciation, word use, syntax, and communication style, etc. This is because there are also social, cultural and psychological factors between men and women in gender differences. Although in recent years, experts and scholars in many western countries have made efforts to eliminate gender discrimination in the English language, as the characteristics of female language have been formed for a long time, it is unrealistic to eliminate them in a short period of time. Thus, understanding language variations in gender differences not only helps us understand and express the language, but also helps us clear up the language communication barriers.

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