

Gender Differences in Conversational Styles: Can this engender Miscommunication in Algerian Talks?

Amina BABOU

Department of English, University of Hassiba Benbouali

Algeria

Abstract: We intend in this research paper to direct a spot line on women and men in canvassing the phenomenon of miscommunication through sociolinguistic lens. The questionnaire in this paper is a number of questions which serve as a direct method of gathering what the significant social actors (men and women in this investigation) think about the misunderstanding that may plague their conversational interactions. The questionnaire is employed to scrutinize if assertiveness and the intention to take control of the conversation do not sit very lightly on women in Chlef (West of Algeria), as this is captured through our rapt listening to the recordings. The respondents' answers are used either to underpin the hypotheses that read for the different cultures of women and men and the social power prescribed to men, or they can serve to reject those explanations propounded to understand male/female miscommunication in the community under study, Chlef.

Key words: Men- Women- Miscommunication- The Conversation- The Social Power – Conversational Styles.

1. Introduction

Male/female miscommunication has been interpreted in a number of ways, most notably as an innocent by-product of different socialization patterns and different gender cultures. It would be worthwhile to point out that this intention to embark upon this topic is not random, but rather an intentional endeavour to canvass the actual reasons behind this misunderstanding from a sociolinguistic stance. The intimate relation between gender and language cannot be treated as a *sui-generis* in the abstract. It requires to be grounded in real life conditioning and experiences so that it can be deconstructed analytically.

2. Male/Female Miscommunication (An overview of the literature):

2.2 The Two Cultures Theory (The Difference Model): This theory resides in the notion that men and women belong to two different cultures as if they are coming from two different worlds (Tannen, 1990). Maltz and Borker (1982) attempt to scrutinize the different roles of male and female speakers in informal cross-sex conversation in American English and to dig out the main reasons behind male/female miscommunication. Before knocking the door of adult communication, they argue that boys and girls learn to do different things during play. Girls learn to create and sustain relationships with others on an equal basis, for the sake of avoiding the criticism which may be directed to them by others, and to show sensitivity with their playmates. On the other side, boys engaging in play learn to be dominant with much assertiveness of themselves. Study after study, Maltz & Borker (1982) assert that girls and boys grow up in different sociolinguistic cultures, and that the rules they are expected to use as tools to cater to the communicative goal are very different in these cultures. The differences of the conversational styles of women and men can be summarized as follows:

2.2.1 Minimal Responses:

One of the most significant conversational rules that lead to misinterpretation is the different use of minimal responses. (A minimal response is something like “Uh-“or”mm-hmm”, accompanied with response to another’s talk.). Women tend use minimal responses as indicating consensus with what is being said (Maltz & Borker, 1982). Most of the time, a man receiving minimal responses, is likely to think that the woman is agreeing with him whilst she may merely be indicating that she is listening and encouraging him to continue. A lack of minimal responses; by man could be, however, irritably interpreted by women as an averred signal that he is not listening.

2.2.2 The Meaning of Questions;

The meaning of questions plays a potent role, either in supporting or disrupting the conversations. Whereas women use questions for conversational maintenance and showing solidarity, men tend to use them as requests for information. By this token, women display a greater tendency to ask questions.

2.2.3 The Linking of One’s Utterance to the Previous Utterance:

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The linking of one utterance to the previous one is explicitly adopted by women, but for men no such rule seems to be suitable, or they even explicitly ignore it. In this respect, women show a tendency to make utterances that demand or encourage responses from their fellow speakers.

2.2.4 Topic Flow and Shift:

More interestingly, women show affinity with an inchmeal progression and expansion of topics they are talking about. In women's conversations topic shifts are gradual. They are usually irritated by the men's tendency to make an abrupt topic shift.

2.2.5 Problem Sharing and Advice Giving:

It is believed that women show the tendency to discuss and share their problems to reassure one another and listen mutually. Men, however, interpret the introduction of a problem as a request for providing a solution, and they seem to act as experts and yield advice rather than showing the sympathy or, in other words, the kind of sympathy women wish.

2.3 Social Power:

Commenting on the renowned work of Tannen (1986 & 1990), for instance, Cameron (1992) avows that misunderstanding arises, not because of linguistic gender differences, but because of variations in power. When the man says to his wife "Is there any Ketchup? The message is virtually "Bring it to me". If the daughter, however, asks the same question, it is much more likely that the mother will respond by merely informing her that it is in the cupboard. (Edwards, 2009: 139).

Men deliberate use of "aggressiveness" against an interlocutor in organizing the conversational flow may be interpreted as a prerogative of power as well (Maltz & Borker, 1982). As for the term "aggressiveness", we think that it is too strong. To put it mildly, it seems that the word "arrogance" might be more reasonable to be used concerning language usage. In loci of inequality, the one of lesser power brave not exhibit aggressiveness to the other, specifically unilaterally.

•Aim of the Study:

Wishing to unearth the scientific explanation of male/female miscommunication, we have tried to examine gender performances and women's agency (Their creative use of language and the choices available to them) in the Algerian social culture with a tremendous belief that they need to be examined in relation to some factors such as the larger power structures that constitute Algerian culture, Islam, multilingualism and social organization. That is to say, what we attempt is to direct a limelight on how the social variables (level of education, job opportunity, language skills) interact in a dialectic way with contextual variables (interlocutor, topic, and purpose of conversation) and how they extremely influence the system of perceiving the world conceptually, beliefs, values, and ways of meaning for Algerian men and women. It is in this interaction of these factors which influence generic gender perception, gender subversion and language use reveal that the social and individual differences of Chelifian women and men can be understood solely within the social cultural context of the community under study.

4. Objectives of the questionnaire: It should be stressed that the ultimate objective of the questionnaire is to identify if male/female miscommunication in Chlef is the echo of the different conversational styles women and men exhibit during their engagement in oral conversations. And, withal, much attention is directed to establish whether the difference theory of male/female miscommunication has a room in the lab of the Algerian society (particularly in Chlef).

5. The respondents:

Concerning the number of respondents, we purposefully directed much care on making a balance between the number of females and males. In other words, this examination involves 60 males and 60 females ranging from 20 years to 65 years old. More importantly, it is imperative to note that our study encountered four age groups:

- Group 1: 20 – 25 (32 respondents).
- Group 2: 26-35 (13 respondents).
- Group 3: 36-45 (41 respondents).
- Group 4: 45-65 (34 respondents).

The respondents have, as it should be noted, miscellaneous occupations, viz. Teachers, doctors, lawyers, university students, some traders, and housewives.

6. Data Analysis:

Question 1: Do you think that women and men have two different conversational styles?

-The results of the first question reveal that both women and men in Chlef seem to corroborate the view that women and men have two different linguistic styles. Some studies assume that differences between male and female speech have an intimate relation with cultural differences, rather than inequalities in social status (Holmes, 1992; Maltz and Borker, 1982; Tannen 1982, 1990, 1993, 1994). Interestingly, females (95%) exhibit greater tendency to believe that there is a particular disparity between their linguistic behaviours and that of males.

Question 2: Those differences are the result of what?

- a: The culture learnt in childhood.
- b: Male's social power.
- c: They arise according to change in time and situation.

-As for this question, a great number of the respondents in Chlef support the "difference theory" propounded by some researchers. Male respondents (60%) tend, in this examination, to present a great consensus on the "two cultures theory"; they believe that women and men learn from their early years of childhood how to behave linguistically in a different way from the other. Tannen (1993) suggests that males' style of speaking stemmed from men's desire for independence and autonomy; so their conversation sends the message: "we are not the same, we are different".

Female respondents exhibit higher percentage concerning male social power which may create some different facets in conversational styles. Unlike male respondents, females seem to vehemently support the line of thought which focuses on differences in social power adhering to what West and Zimmerman (1977) postulate. They claim that men's dominance in conversation parallels their dominance and sway in society. In one word, men enjoy power in society as well as in conversation.

A striking fact about the third choice of the second question is that 63.33% of females prefer to interpret conversational differences as a flexible change to cope with the new situations which mutate through time.

Question 3: Do you think that those differences cause male/female problems of communication?

The statistics, between our hands, demonstrate that although women and men in Chlef mainly differ in determining the source of the difference in speech styles, they grossly share a generic consensus on the fact that the difference in the conversational rules may exacerbate male/female miscommunication. 70% of males and 85% of females extremely interpret male/female miscommunication as the echo of the different conversational styles which come from different subcultures and have different conceptions of friendly conversation.

Question 4: Who interrupts more in the conversation?

Studies of interruptions reveal that women and men adopt different manners in interrupting. In their examination of conversations from both private residences and public places, Zimmerman and West (1975) find that the great majority of all interruptions that occurred in male – female conversations were men interrupting women.

Overall, popular stereotypes usually see that men interrupt more than women. This popular opinion stems, in sober fact, from the notion that men gain the lion's share of societal and conversational power than women and that interruptions are, by default, a strategy to seize control of conversations.

Interestingly, if we look at the results of the fourth question about the attitudes towards male/female interruptions in Chlef, it should be obvious that women tend to tremendously interrupt as it is attested by both women and men. The results of question (4) carries a factual tone about the fact that it is prevalent in present time, that women in Algeria (particularly in

Chlef) are more likely to hinder or obstruct the continuity of the conversation by either questions, interjections or even comments, and this can be lucidly gleaned from our recordings of male/female conversations. By this token, 70% of females appear to interrupt in cross-sex conversations as it reported by our recordings in the community of Chlef. Although there is no intention to mean that men do not interrupt in conversations, there is growing consensus that women are, for the most part, more prone to the feeling of the necessity to interrupt males. Above all, the interruptions we intend to mean are those brusque and unexpected interjections which may plague the conversational flow, such as unnecessary questions/comments and abrupt topic shifts.

Question 5: "Who use more minimal responses in the conversation?" is grouped with question 6: "What do you intend to mean by the use of minimal responses?"

a: Continue, I am listening.

b: I agree, I follow you.

c: I don't want to speak more than that.

d: Speak, but I am not listening to you.

-In this examination, the minimal responses I intend to refer to are "mm", "ih", "hih" and "aha", and as it should be noted, "ih" and "hih" are CSA equivalents of "yes".

The analysis of the data confirmed only a few earlier studies. By this token, a great majority of both male and female respondents don't reveal uneven attitudes about the use of minimal responses. In one word, both the sexes see that the use of such responses is more peculiar to women, of course in the community of Chlef. Our findings, regarding the functions of the usage of minimal responses, reveal that meaning of such responses denote neither "Continue, I'm listening" nor "I agree, I follow you" which is assumed to be men's interpretation.

40% of Male respondents of this examination blatantly agree to perceive the use of minimal responses as a ploy to tell other interlocutors that they cannot go ahead in holding the conversation or they intend to send the message "Speak, but I am not listening" to the other speakers. As expected, the overwhelming majority of our male respondents tend to use minimal responses as a kind of a hoot or contempt, whilst 60% of men tend to use those responses to convey their reluctance to duck or evade the conversation. In both cases, the findings clearly disagree with the rule which reads that men adopt minimal responses in an attempt to express consensus about what is being said by the other speaker.

A striking fact here is that the answer "continue, I'm listening" which has not been selected by no male respondent, 80% of female respondents show, however, that their attempt to interject minimal responses while listening to others is to exhibit more interest and support, as it is reported by Fishman (1978). Meanwhile, 20% percent of those respondents aim at pointing out that women do not always use such response as cooperative linguistic device to boost the communication between them and the other interlocutors, but they sometimes strive to deviate from this general level and tend to express their unwillingness to speak.

Question 7: What is verbal aggressiveness?

A: Negative and disruptive.

B: A classical strategy in organizing conversational flow.

As a matter of fact, gender popular stereotypes customarily suggest that men would show greater aggressiveness, assertiveness, sway, and competitiveness. More importantly, the crux of question (7) mainly lies in dissecting what verbal aggressiveness means to each sex. In this line of thought, Henley & Kramarae (1991) point that women seem to interpret verbal aggressiveness as personally directed, negative and disruptive. Meanwhile men simply seem to see it as a classical organization for conducting a conversation (ibid).

Algerian (Chelifian) women scored highest on the denotation of verbal aggressiveness as provoking turmoil, and this does not mean that male respondents dissent this notion; 85% of

male informants tend to confute what American men are supposed to think. The analysis of the results report that most of the male respondents tend to moderate what popular stereotypes say; they are likely to belie the idea which reads that men perceive that their overt use of aggressiveness (arrogance as we prefer to label it), against an interlocutor in organizing conversational flow, as a prerogative of power and a classical strategy to build the oral conversation.

Question 8: Who usually attempt to challenge the word of their partner?

55% of male speakers demonstrate that not only men who tend to challenge the speech of others; women share this tendency as well. Apart from that, 85% of female respondents seem to endorse male's perspective. It is statistically shown that women seem to deny the line of thought which reads that men are more likely to challenge or dispute their partner's utterances (Hirschman, 1973).

It is not surprising that both sexes are likely to challenge the speech of others, but what is of particular interest in this question is who are perceived to be quicker to challenge others. Obviously, female speakers are rated higher on contending the words of the other participants of the conversation. Stereotypically, women are expected to exhibit the virtues of silence and good housekeeping. Among males, the will to dominate others was acceptable and indeed admired; the same will in women was condemned as a grotesque.

Notwithstanding, statistics of this examination report that women clearly perceive their tendency to challenge the word of others more than it is claimed by men. A very significant point that should be marked here is that results of answer (8) tend to mean that women are not likely to assail the other sex; what we can objectively discern from this statistic is that they are attempting to get rid of the subordinate and underprivileged perspective of their status. Albeit we do not belie what Sadiqi (2003) states about the fact that woman's chances of engaging in powerful types of discourse in and outside the family is very small, if not non-existent, we do not squarely agree with this line of thought. It is true that the power structure inside the family and society are heavily male-biased, but this does not mean that women are not capable of benefiting from the opportunity to express their thoughts and succeed in attracting attention to them.

7. Results Discussion:

It is an insight worth attending to even now, the findings of the questionnaire do illuminate that there exists a notable disparity between the findings on the arena of male/female miscommunication in America and what we can infer, here, in this current study. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the difference of conversational rules that is propounded as reasons for miscommunication is patently different from those found in America. By way of explanation, the analysis of the questionnaire shows that women interrupt more than men as it has been expected from the 75% of females' interruptions in the recordings of male/female conversations.

Further, the meaning of minimal responses is a fairly moot point that may engender male/female miscommunication. Whilst men interpret the use of minimal responses as a message to eschew from the conversation and a signal of phlegm and insouciance, the overwhelming majority of our female respondents tend to perceive them as a kind of supportive speech which does encourage the speaker. For this very reason, men are customarily irritated by females' use

of minimal responses since they tend to restrict their expectations to only what they think and not what the other speaker really intends to mean. And, of course, this can be applied on women as well since they ignore that what they strive to mean is not the same expectation by other men, in some cases. It is true that the meaning of minimal responses for both women and men may hamper the proper understanding between them, but the data we report totally reject what Maltz and Borker (1982) claim on their examination of women's use of minimal responses. For Chelifian men, positive minimal responses never denote "I agree I follow you"; and this can be attested in male's complaint when women use those responses.

One of the most striking findings, reported mainly in most part of this dissertation, is that women are much more likely to display the assertive style via answering spontaneously, phonate with a conversational tone while looking at the other interlocutor.

In addition to finding out that the current research paper does confute some claims propounded in the arena of miscommunication on American women and men, the difference in the scrutiny of western country and a Muslim community is glaringly conspicuous; this can be attested in the autonomy afforded by the Islamic society to women whilst dictating some moral codes that should be duplicated for the sake of maintaining the agency of each sex. At a more profound level, women in Chlef are not necessarily transgressed if they make interruptions or display linguistic ploys for self-assertion and linguistic empowerment. Empowerment is a process whereby women can establish their control over various assets and which helps them to develop their self confidence.

Not only the disparity in women and men's conversational styles-which has been detected in this study-, the persistent tendency of each sex to sustain its viewpoints may engender further problems of communication as well. Put in a different way, women and men often misunderstand how to tell the other interlocutor "I am a man" or "I am a woman". The man is reluctant to relinquish his natural right of symbolizing the sway provided to him by society. Similarly, women refuse to submit to the cultural beliefs of their powerlessness and passivity in which our society is still uploaded with this kind of stereotypes.

8. Conclusion:

On the basis of the findings, Western models of gender feminism cannot be applied to the Algerian socio-cultural context without prior recognition and understanding of the workings of the latter. Both the historical intimacy and the overall cultural environments in which Western models evolved are, undoubtedly, different from the ones of non-Western models. Both the historical intimacy and the overall cultural environments in which Western models evolved are, undoubtedly, different from the ones of non-Western models. Western feminism models drew its root from particular theoretical and political sources to nourish a powerful and original critique of patriarchy. In a similar vein, Western models of feminism need to take into account and interact with models of feminism that emanate from non-other Western socio-cultural contexts, as will be elucidated in the subsequent part of the investigation.

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