Gender Differences in Conversational Hedging

Introduction

The study of gender differences in conversation is a wide field concerned with a number of different conversational variables. As a fairly fledgling linguistic field, conclusive studies are slowly emerging from a vast array of specious observations and cultural myths. Cultural intuition would seem to dictate a more dominant conversational role for men and a more submissive conversational role for women. However, research establishing this assumption is far from conclusive.

Studies have shown that men interrupt and overlap women in conversation more frequently than women and that women spend more conversational time remaining silent (Zimmerman and West 1996). Men have also been observed carrying topics they have introduced into a conversation with simple statements and minimal effort; whereas women often use questions and attention beginnings (such as “Hey!” or “And another thing...”) to carry topics they have introduced (Fishman 1978). Researchers have also discovered that men engage in more body movement during conversation (Bente 1998). All of the aforementioned studies provide evidence that men are more dominant in conversations. By interrupting, carrying topics without exertion and gesturing more openly men display prominence in conversation.

However, other studies have questioned the association between conversational dominance and gender with different results. One study has shown that the type of relationship a couple is in determines who possesses conversational dominance more so than gender (Burggraf 1987). Another shows that power and hierarchy override maleness in determining conversational aggressiveness (Kollock, Blumstein and Schwartz 1985). The gender of the listener may also be more important than the gender of the speaker in determining how aggressive the speaker is (Dixon 1997).

In all, the research in this area has begun to make the important discriminations between gender, hierarchy and social context but has yet to produce clear and authoritative data on which factors are most important in determining conversational dominance. Further research is needed to determine how large a role gender plays and to what extent gender may be mitigated by other factors in establishing dominance.

This study seeks to examine one indicator of conversational dominance: in a two-person mixed gender conversation the more submissive speaker will typically use more conversational hedges. A hedge is way of qualifying or lessening the impact of a statement or speech act. For instance, a person trying to soften her advice about what color a friend should paint her living room might say, “All I know is neutrals are in vogue right now” or “A bold color might make this room feel a bit too loud.” The insertion of the italicized phrases makes the statement less authoritative and therefore more submissive. Often a hedge can be simply transforming a statement into another form, such as a tag question. For instance, the woman in the above situation might say, “Aren’t neutrals in vogue right now?” thereby disguising her advice in another, less intrusive conversational form.

This study will seek to examine which partner employs more hedges in a marriage relationship and whether gender or relationship type (equal, patriarchal or matriarchal as determined by a pre-survey) is a more reliable predictor of conversational dominance. It is hypothesized that relationship type will emerge as the more important factor in determining which spouse produces more hedges.

Method

Members of married couples, upon entering the study, would be asked to separately complete a brief survey about the type of relationship they have as a couple. Questions would include, “Who typically has the final word in decisions, you or your spouse?” or “Who do you feel has more control over the scheduling in your home, you or your spouse?” These surveys would be analyzed for each couple to determine if the couple’s relationship type was equal (no clear division of power), patriarchal (the husband has more power) or matriarchal (the wife has more power). Only 10 couples of each type
will continue to the next portion of the experiment.

Following the completion of the survey, the married couple would be interviewed by a researcher. The couple would be asked to discuss the most recent major purchase (appliance, automobile, etc.) they made that they disagreed on. When the couple mutually agrees which purchase to discuss, the researcher will ask each partner to convince the other that they were “right” about the purchase. The ensuing conversation between husband and wife will be tape recorded and the number of hedges per partner will be tallied in later analysis.

Participants

30 married couples from the student body of Brigham Young University would be asked to participate in this study. 30 couples is a feasible number of couples to procure but not so small that the results would not be significant. As couples will predominantly be traditional LDS couples, they are expected to be mostly patriarchal or equal. It will therefore be important to find matriarchal couples through the introductory survey. It will also be important to take into account that the results could certainly not be generalized to a universal population as the participants will be predominantly white, middle-class Christians.

Test Items

A chart will be produced containing the total number of hedges employed by husbands and wives across each relationship type. The completed chart would look like the following with actual number values in the cells.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th># of hedges</th>
<th>Patriarchal</th>
<th>Equal</th>
<th>Matriarchal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Husbands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data could then be used to make a data list that could be entered into Goldvarb for analysis using logistic regression. An entry for one person would include the following items: gender (F or M), relationship type (P for patriarchal, E for equal or M for matriarchal), number of hedges made by the wife (#) and number of hedges made by the husband (#). As the data is not dealing with any form of correlation (biological sexes are mutually exclusive categories not points on a spectrum), the ideal test must instead examine the distribution of a variable. As the study also deals with determining which of two independent variables (gender and relationship type) has greater impact, a logistic regression would provide the most sophisticated breakdown of the impact of each variable. The logistic regression analysis will show whether the impact of each variable was significant or not.

Results and Conclusions

The results of the logistic regression will show the effects of gender and relationship type on the distribution of conversational hedges and also determine the significance of those effects. The variable that would be selected for the analysis would be the number of hedges made by the wife. After the best stepping up and stepping down runs are isolated, the included variables will be noted. If no indication of gender (F or M) or relationship type (P, E or M) appears than the distribution occurred solely by chance. However, if these factors show up they will have attached significance values. A value greater than 0.5 will indicate statistical significance and the closer the value is to 1.0 the more significant that variable becomes.
Several outcomes are possible in this study. If, as some research indicates, women do indeed hedge more than men one would expect to see F appear with a significance value above .50 and M appear with a much lower significance value. However, independent of this outcome, relationship type may appear with even higher significance value. If, as hypothesized, relationship type has more of an impact on the distribution of hedges than gender does, one would expect to see P, E or M appear with a significance value above .50 and also above the significance value of F and M. For instance, if P has a significance value of .8 and F has a significance value of .6 the hypothesis is still confirmed. In this case, it would show that a patriarchal relationship has more of an impact on the number of hedges made by the wife than being female.

If the hypothesis were confirmed, it would provide evidence in keeping with the studies by Burggraf, Dixon and others that factors other than gender are more important in predicting conversational dominance. More research along this line would lead to a more in-depth exploration of social hierarchy and relationship type rather than focusing strictly on biological sex as a determiner of conversational roles. On the other hand, if the hypothesis were rejected, it would provide still more evidence that biological sex, regardless of situation or power structure, is still an influential determiner of conversational roles.

**Bibliography**


