

Estudio exploratorio de las diferencias en la elección de palabras según el género en un programa de televisión popular panameño

Exploratory Study of gendered-linked differences in word choice in a popular Panamanian talk show

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Abstract

Differences between men's and women's word choices have always motivated sociolinguistic studies that correlate these variations to the gender roles or stereotypes that generate social judgments about people's expressions. This exploratory study examined gendered-linked differences in word choices when discussing daily life issues. The data was collected using a descriptive statistics table that compiled all the euphemisms, diminutives, descriptive adjectives, and politeness markers used by four conductors (two men and two women) of a popular Panamanian TV show in six discussion forums. The information was later analyzed for response patterns, similarities, and differences within and across the two groups. Our findings indicate remarkable gendered-linked differences in the use of these words, evidence of word choice variation across genders. We conclude that these variations are part of daily life communication and illustrate the effect of social behaviors and ideologies on the use of language.

Key terms: sociolinguistics, stereotype, role, género.

Resumen

Las diferencias entre la elección de palabras de hombres y mujeres siempre han motivado estudios sociolingüísticos que correlacionan estas variaciones con los roles o estereotipos de género que generan juicios sociales sobre la expresión de las personas. El propósito de este estudio exploratorio fue examinar las diferencias relacionadas con el género en la elección de palabras cuando se habla de temas de la vida cotidiana. Los datos se recopilieron mediante una tabla de estadística descriptiva donde se registraron todos los

eufemismos, diminutivos, adjetivos descriptivos y marcadores de cortesía utilizados por cuatro presentadores (dos hombres y dos mujeres) de un popular programa de televisión panameño en seis foros de discusión diferentes. Posteriormente se analizó la información en busca de patrones de respuesta; similitudes y diferencias, dentro y entre los dos grupos. Nuestros hallazgos indican notables diferencias en el uso de estas palabras, lo que evidencia una variación significativa en su uso entre ambos géneros. Concluimos que estas variaciones son parte de la comunicación de la vida diaria e ilustran el efecto de los comportamientos e ideologías sociales en el uso del lenguaje.

Palabras clave: sociolingüística, estereotipo, rol, género.

Introduction

Variations in the use of language between men and women have motivated numerous sociolinguist studies that try to establish connections between gender differences and linguistic behavior. Some people attribute these differences to the dominance of one gender over the other. In contrast, others advocate for two different gender subcultures that generate variations in language use. This topic can generate debate about gender bias in language since it represents a tool to promote gender inequality. However, this exploratory sociolinguist study examines gendered-linked differences in lexical choices due to gender roles and stereotypes. These choices shape our daily speech and create expectations and social judgments about communication. (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 315).

Literature on this topic is exquisite and extensive. Although many linguists argue that language itself is not gendered-biased, it is essential to remember that it is embedded in culture and society. According to Holmer and Meyerhoff (2003), "There is a constant interaction between language and society" (p. 112). Therefore, language mirrors social attitudes and realities that influence people's linguistic behavior (Journal of Language and Linguistics, 2006, p. 87). In addition, gender constitutes a critical component that brings order to every society in different ways (Wardhaugh, 2006). Douglas and Sutton (2003) indicate that "the popular portrayal of women and men as language users has stressed their fundamental differences". In other words, the social perception of gender differences creates different expectations of male and female speech. In this sense, and from a social-cognitive perspective, language is also the "medium to express gender identity and a reflection of it." Similarly, gender identity determines the listeners' judgment about speakers (Douglas & Sutton, 2003, pp. 450-489).

Gender Stereotypes and Language Production

Stereotypes are part of society, and they determine a great deal of speakers' thoughts and attitudes toward other people and things around them. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights defines gender stereotypes as "a generalized view or preconception about attributes or characteristics, or the roles that are or ought to be possessed by, or performed by, women and men" ("Gender Stereotyping," n.d.).

According to Hentschel et al. (2019), these stereotypes are part of men's and women's mindsets and determine how they see each other regarding their characteristics (introduction, para. 3). Menegatti and Rubini (2017) assert that gender stereotypes are rooted in the different social roles assigned to each gender which vary across cultures (The Origin of Gender Bias in Language: Gender Stereotypes, para. 1). In the same line of thoughts, Wardhaugh (2006) attributes male and female's speech variants to the

different roles they play in their society which are usually learned since childhood and preserved through generations. He also claims that both genders learn to behave differently according to these roles, which is also reflected in our linguistic choices when interacting. He adds that these female and male speech variants may imply *dominance* of one gender over another instead of just differences resulting from different social experiences (Wardhaugh, 2006, p. 327).

As an illustration of these differences, Kruse et al. (1998) noticed how even in media texts "men are placed more frequently in the role of logical subject and are described as more active, whereas women are placed more frequently in helpless or victim roles and are depicted as more passive and emotional" (as cited in Menegatti and Rubini, 2017, Research on the Content of Gender Stereotypes in Language Use, para. 2). These observations on the differences between men and women across cultures, gave birth to a list of sociolinguistic universal tendencies which comprises their speech differences in terms of patterns of language use, affective functions of interaction, solidarity markers versus power and status indicators, and flexibility (Holmes, 1998, as cited in Wardhaugh, 2006). These tendencies are deeply embedded in the culture of different speech communities, evidenced in the lexical choices of their speakers in different conversational contexts who unconsciously adopt attitudes toward each other that perpetuate gender differences in their language. However, it is essential to acknowledge that some of these ideas have changed due to our fast-evolving society, which seems more open to accepting that men's and women's roles are interchangeable.

Also, Pavlidou (2011) mentions how gender roles shape the linguistic perception and behavior of people who commonly label others' speech as *feminine* or *masculine* according to their familiarity with speech models for men and women usually provided by gender stereotypes. As an illustration, Weatherall (2005) also points out how "Women's speech is believed to be grating and trivial, therefore easy to ignore" (p. 6). The common sexist beliefs in a society have a direct impact on speakers' word choice.

These considerations have generated interesting studies on gender stereotypes and word choice. Wardhaugh (2006) summarizes interesting findings of morphological and lexical gender-biased studies in the English language. According to his report, women are more likely to use highly descriptive adjectives such as adorable, lovely, divine, and exquisite, which are uncommon in men's speech. In addition, women have a more extensive repertoire of words describing pleasant experiences; some include fantastic, so good, so fun, and others.

Another striking difference is that women tend to use fewer expletives than men do due to unequal social judgments that consider this type of language inappropriate for female speech. Similarly, women used more polite markers, solidarity markers, and affective functions than men. Women's word choice seems to care a lot more about being kind, respectful, and keeping good relationships with others. Similar studies have also shown how women tend to use more diminutives and euphemisms than men do. According to Menegatti and Rubini (2017), these differences in male and female speech show that "stereotypical beliefs about men and women are embedded in the lexicon of many languages" (Research on the Content of Gender Stereotypes in Language Use, para. 2). These choices reflect even unconscious gendered-biased behavior and thoughts which, according to feminists, usually put women in a disadvantageous position since they favor men due to the unequal social judgments they portray.

As stated earlier, this exploratory study is not intended to spark sexist debates on gender inequality or discrimination through language. Instead, given the evidence of similar

studies in English, our goal was to analyze gendered-linked differences in the word choice of Panamanian TV show hosts for talking about specific topics in Spanish. These variations were analyzed based on politeness markers, adjectives, euphemisms, and diminutives. This article aims to report findings that describe the relationship between gender and language from a sociolinguistic perspective to establish connections, if any, between common gender stereotypes and male and female speech. The research question that guides this study is: How does speakers' word choice vary according to gender when talking about daily life issues?

This article presents key findings from an analysis of the research data. The outcomes of this study are interesting, with a taste of casual, everyday language that motivates reflection on how we communicate. The discussion section provides valuable insights into interpreting these findings, which can motivate further research on similar matters. Finally, the conclusions summarize variants in word choice found in both genders and their sociolinguistic implications for a better comprehension of people's linguistic choices, the relationship between language and society, and other features of language that usually go unnoticed in daily life speech.

Significance

This research project allows the analysis of sociolinguistic aspects of the language related to gender and its effect on the lexical choices of men and women. Given the existing literature on similar studies in the English language, this topic generates interest and awakens the curiosity of professors and students. These aspects also deserve to be explored in our language to generate new arguments based on evidence from the Panamanian context. Furthermore, this type of study makes it possible to understand the interaction between language and society better.

This study will be a reference for further research in this important branch of linguistics for professors and students. It may be an option for senior students interested in writing a thesis about sociolinguistic matters. Additionally, considering that research represents one of the pillars of higher education, the present research promotes the development of subsequent studies to generate new knowledge to explore other areas of knowledge.

Method and Materials

This study is an exploratory quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative since it used a descriptive statistics table to record the information required for the analysis, which generated numerical information that allowed a better understanding of the comparative results that are the object of study. Likewise, it is qualitative since it allows the analysis and description of data generated from observation and requires a verbal interpretation of the information. This exploratory case study seeks to obtain information about a sociolinguistic topic by comparing the word choice of presenters of a specific television program according to gender. First, the existing literature of similar studies in the English language was reviewed, allowing us to understand better the research background that frames our project's study topic. In addition, it helped to find authors and theories that support and validate the research by establishing connections between similar studies in English and the present study in Spanish.

The data collection process involved several steps to register the word choices of every speaker in a descriptive statistics table. This record instrument contained all the

categories of words to be analyzed. The chart has two sections: one for women and another for men. After designing the recording instrument, six clips were randomly chosen from the channel's website that produces and broadcasts the talk show. It is vital to mention that only the forum segment, conducted by the same presenters, was analyzed as it generates considerable interaction among them rather than the entire program.

One selection criterion for the TV show was the informal language register used by the presenters, which primarily reflects how Panamanians express themselves in a casual context. Another criterion for selection is that the presenters share the same occupation, academic level, and social status, which helps avoid any bias in the conclusions. Another reason is that the program is very varied and interactive, allowing ample opportunities to produce various lexical forms, specifically those that are the object of analysis of this research project.

After that, careful observation, listening, and labeling of the words and expressions produced by every speaker was required. This process demanded constant pausing, playing, and replaying of chunks of the clip to avoid missing words and expressions according to the different categories. All the adjectives, euphemisms, diminutives, and politeness indicators used by each presenter in six different discussion forums were registered to establish connections between gender and word choice.

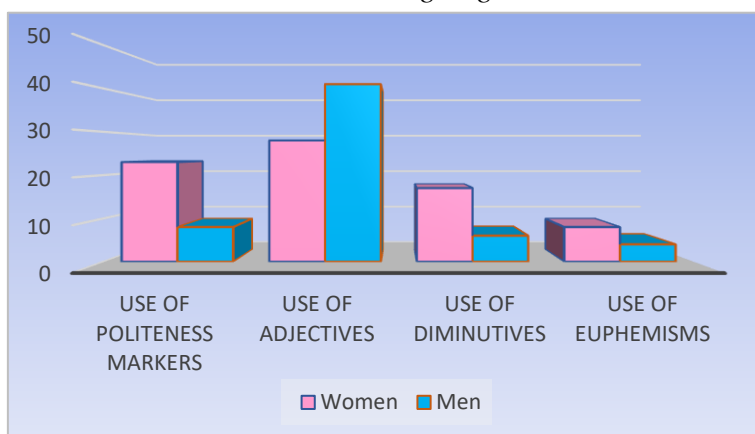
Later, the speakers' word choices for each category were counted and tabulated. These answers were analyzed for common or uncommon response patterns, similarities, and differences within and across the two groups using the categories of words mentioned above. An illustrative graphic was designed to understand better the data analysis, which produced exciting findings that will be presented in the following section.

Results and Discussion

This section analyzes the data collected by observing six discussions among four popular talk show TV hosts. It is necessary to remember that this study aimed to find variations in adjectives, diminutives, politeness markers, and euphemisms between men and women. The results are graphically presented below.

Figure 1.

Word choice variation according to gender.



Source: data obtained from TVNPass.com videos.

Use of politeness markers

As mentioned earlier, previous English studies on politeness markers among men and women have reported that females are more likely to use expressions to show courtesy than males. Similarly, our data analysis indicates a remarkable difference in the number of polite markers used by each group in the six forums, evidencing women's tendency to appear more polite and considerate when talking than men. Even though these results align with our expectations, there are three critical observations on repetitive patterns of use of these expressions during the interaction, which can draw lines for further studies. First, one of the most common expressions among women was "con permiso, "permiso por favor," which were frequently used for interrupting men who tended to take longer when speaking. In contrast, men usually interrupted women's intervention without using any polite expression or even without letting them conclude. In other words, for most of the discussion, men tended to interrupt women abruptly and dominate most of the speaking time, while women seemed to struggle to express their opinions. This behavior may lead to thinking that they had to use more polite expressions to get the chance to contribute their ideas to the conversation.

Another striking feature of this category is that unlike men's use of politeness markers, which kept neutral and straightforward, women tended to attach the expression "mi amor" to words such as *gracias* and *Bienvenido* for addressing people. These choices made their speech sound softer, more friendly, and even more intimate than men's speech, which is compatible with the emotional or feminine pattern of word choice usually expected from women, as reported by literature on previous studies. Third, it was also remarkable that women's repertoire of polite expressions was more expansive than men's, whose most common word in the different forums was *gracias*.

Women's use of politeness markers is more frequent and more prominent in quantity and variety. It seems impossible to come up with some plausible explanations for these noticeable differences without making connections to typical patterns of behavior in both genders, which are closely related to the social expectations for both groups in terms of language use for daily interaction. In other words, women tend to be more polite and good-mannered than men, who are more likely to dominate conversations by interrupting or using a more neutral, direct kind of speaking, which significantly limits courtesy expressions. In contrast, women seemed more concerned about sounding cordial or respectful when addressing people, interrupting others, or asking for a turn to speak. This choice resulted in significant discrepancies in polite speech patterns in the six discussions analyzed. More profound studies can examine differences in politeness markers used among men and women and the reasons for these variations.

Use of Adjectives

Previous comparative studies on men's and women's word choice in English have reported women's remarkable preference for descriptive adjectives, which makes their speech more colorful and vivid as they portray feelings and thoughts that are socially considered inherent to the emotional manifestation of femininity. Contrary to this premise, the graph of our results evidences a higher frequency of using adjectives in men's speech, which led to interesting observations that generated valuable reflections. First, even when men doubled the number of adjectives used by women, it was remarkable that women tended to choose theirs more carefully, which made their expressions more sophisticated and formal when describing people or situations. Some

of the adjectives this group used include *maquiavélico*, *incisivo*, *polémico*, *ameno*, *sensitivo*, and others with equal semantic weight. A low incidence of highly descriptive adjectives like those reported by some studies was also noticed. The reason may be because it was not just a casual, informal conversation but a forum discussion on specific topics.

Contrary to women, men's choice of adjectives was way more straightforward and more informal. Even when they used more descriptive words, the two most common were *bueno* and *malo*. In addition, they included words that can be considered slang, such as *máxima* and *tóxica*. Another interesting observation concerns the connotation of the adjectives they chose. Unlike women, men repeatedly used adjectives that, besides being informal, may sound quite offensive since they are commonly employed to denote negative traits or people's behavior in society. These words include *regalada*, *hambrienta*, *cochino*, *abusadora*, *metidas*, *vulgar*, and others, which can sound like inappropriate language registered for a TV show. Consequently, when it comes to using adjectives, men are more relaxed and spontaneous than women are.

Use of Diminutives

Results for the use of diminutives and euphemisms were like those reported by studies in English. Women used a more significant number of diminutive suffixes throughout their participation in the discussions studied, making their speech more intimate and friendly. They used them to interact within the discussion group and talk to people who called for comments and opinions. The words *llamadita* and *corazoncito* were prevalent in the six different discussions. Another remarkable feature is that women even tended to change the correct diminutives from *pobrecito* to *poechito*, which may be considered a very informal and colloquial word choice. However, because of the context in which it was used, this word was mainly used as a solidarity marker to show empathy for some of the situations shared by the audience.

Unlike women, the use of diminutives was limited and different in men's speech. First, a minimal number of diminutive nouns and adjectives were registered for this group after carefully examining six different videos. Besides this, it is vital to mention that the contextualization of diminutives also seemed to be different. They used diminutives in different situations and for different purposes. Many denoted sarcasm rather than solidarity or intimacy, not just for the context but also for the stress and patterns of these utterances. Some of the words in this short list include *enamorado*, which refers to why some men behave too generously and make wrong decisions with women from their point of view.

Consequently, even when men use diminutives in their speech, their reasons and context differ entirely from women's, making their speech sound different. The reasons for this variation were beyond the scope of this analysis, which just focused on examining variations. However, the literature on this topic suggests that gender stereotypes may judge the use of diminutives in men as unmasculine, weak, or even immature, which connects gender ideologies to word choice. Further studies could examine gendered-linked beliefs about the use of diminutive forms among Panamanians.

Use of Euphemisms

As indicated in the figure, euphemisms were less frequent than the other words in this study. However, women registered a higher number of euphemisms than men did. Most were expressions describing people's feelings or behavior that may look incorrect or inappropriate in society. Some of them include: *corazón de hielo*, *llevar la fiesta en paz*, *andar en trampa*, etc. On the other hand, men registered a low number of euphemisms, but the ones they used were quite like those used by females. As stated earlier, men seemed more spontaneous and relaxed in the six discussions studied without much concern about some of the words they used. There was a tendency to sound informal and relaxed in how they spoke, whereas women seemed to care a lot more about sounding formal. The reasons may be due to several factors, yet this clearly illustrates a difference in their word choice and communication.

From a sociolinguist perspective, these differences are attributable to the correlation between gender differences and verbal communication. Women are usually more sensitive, polite, or formal due to a history of an unprivileged position about men. This conditions their expression to avoid social judgments that may question or mark how they speak as unfeminine or inappropriate. On the contrary, and perhaps due to a more privileged position in society, men usually appear careless about their linguistic choices since, unlike women, their informal expressions may appear masculine.

The language used in a TV show is usually formal and standard. However, conditions may vary, considering the type of show or program. In this case, the talk show elected for the study is relatively informal, which enables a more friendly and informal way of speaking. However, many differences between male and female speech were identified even when that is the case.

Conclusion

There is valuable evidence of variants in word choice between men and women. These variants are more evident in politeness markers, diminutives, and descriptive adjectives than in euphemisms, where women scored higher. There is a minimal difference in euphemisms, yet women also indicated more frequent use of these words. Men's choices vary depending on the seriousness of the topic, while women's speech stays the same regardless of the situation.

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