

Language and Gender: Investigation of Iranian Male/Female Conceptualization of Social Concepts

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Abstract. Since the middle of the 1970s, attempts have been made to know more about gender differences from divergent perspectives. In line with this tendency, the recent decades have also seen a bunch of research on the nature and existence of differences between behavioral patterns of men and women. With respect to the fundamental role of culture on males and females' behaviors, this study aimed at investigation of the gender differences in Iranian context in terms of their conceptualizations of four social concepts of education, friendship, leisure, and assets. In so doing, a questionnaire was developed and distributed among 126 male and female participants. Although, the general statistical analysis indicated for the significant effect of gender on a large dimension of the participants' performances, certain aspects were found not to be gender sensitive. Lowering distinction between men's and women's behavior in these aspects can, thus, be reminiscent of a move from separation toward role integration in societies.

Keywords: gender; linguistic difference; culture, behavioral pattern

1. Introduction

Sociolinguistic study of gender has flourished as an important issue since 1975. The first wave of such studies evolved by appearance of three books: "male/female language (Mary Ritchie Key), language and women's place (Robin Lakoff), and language and sex (Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley)" (McKey & Hornberger, 2006, p. 218). The differences between two sexes is so widespread that covers almost all aspects of their behaviors and are attributable to different dimensions, like social, physical, cognitive, and linguistic.

The so-called social differences between men and women can be studied under two general theories: "dominance theory" and "difference theory". The founding mother of "dominance theory", Lakoff, attributes differences of males and females to inequality of power between them. According to Lakoff, in a male dominated society, women are obliged to exhibit qualities of weakness and are subordinate toward men. In this view men's dominance is the cause of their superiority in society and women's subordination to men. According to "difference theory", the fact that men and women live in different cultural worlds, leads them to different ways of speaking. This theory is sometimes called "dual-culture theory". In short, in this theory, there is a claim that although men and women live in the same environment, their relations with society are different due to the fact that different rules govern the behavior of two subcultures, men and women. In fact, it emphasizes that social and physical separation from their childhood causes different languages and beliefs in males and females.

One important domain in investigation of gender differences is linguistic variation. In an attempt to exhibit the differences between males and females, Wadhaugh (2005) distinguished different areas of diversity. He points out that males and females are different in the intonation of their voice, vocabulary choice, paralinguistic system, and the use of gestures. He also mentions that females most of the time talk about issues like food, drink, life, and books while males hold forth on such topics as business, sports, political issues, and taxes.

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To exhibit cognitive differences, Burman, Bitan, and Booth (2008) postulated some differences between males and females in their brain system. They pointed out that "bilateral activation in the inferior frontal and superior temporal gyri and activation in the left fusiform gyrus of girls was greater than that of boys. Activation in the left inferior frontal and fusiform regions of girls was also correlated with linguistic accuracy regardless of stimulus modality, whereas correlation with performance accuracy in boys depended on the modality of word presentation. This pattern suggests that girls rely on a supramodal language network, whereas boys process visual and auditory words differently." (p. 1349).

Having been motivated by the dominance theory and because of vitality of culture in gender differences, this article was intended to investigate male/female differences in four social aspects of friendship, education, asset, and leisure in the Iranian context.

2. Statement of the problem

All aspects of language and society are important in sociolinguistic study of language, among which is the difference between the language of men and women in communication. Many reasons may account for the differences in the language performance of both sexes. Different expected social roles, social discrimination, subservience of females to males, and cultural differences are among the possible explanations. These factors cause differences not only in language but also in their beliefs and social roles.

Culture is another important factor. This is why the so-called social roles differ in different cultures between genders. Study of the significance of culture, as a factor in differentiating males and females, in Iranian context was the major intent of the present research. Accordingly, attempt was made to examine the degree to which males and females differ in their consideration of four social concepts of friendship, economical issues, education, and free time in Iranian culture. The selected concepts were chosen due to the fact that they are both global and everyday topics to which males and females may react differently. To this end, the following research question was examined:

Do males and females differ in their beliefs about friendship, reasons for pursuing education, economical issues and spending free time?

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

A convenient sample of 126 respondents with different levels of education, cultural background, and career participated in the study. Among the participants 52 were females and the remaining were males. Though, a comprehensive triangulation was not performed, the diversity of backgrounds provided insights into a heterogeneous group of subjects who represent the body of participants in the city of Ilam where the study was conducted.

3.2. Instrument

Data were collected through a researcher-made questionnaire specifically intended to discover gender differences in the afore-mentioned dimensions. It consists of fifteen items and was developed following a pilot study. The items in the questionnaire were organized so that items 1-7 refer to friendship, 8-10 to education, 11-14 to assets, and 15 to free time.

3.3. Data collection and Analysis Procedure

Collecting the relevant data has been done in August 2010 in Ilam. To account for the comprehensibility of the items and the questionnaire, prior to the collection of the quantitative data, it was piloted on a similar group of participants. Following the first set of data collection, fifteen items of the questionnaire were designed, fourteen likert form and the one remaining item as an open-ended question. Afterwards, the final forms were distributed among 126 respondents with different levels of education, cultural background, and career. To analyze the data, frequency counts and Chi-square statistical procedures were run using SPSS 16.

4. Results

This section presents findings derived from the analysis of quantitative data on males and females' differences in their beliefs about friendship, reasons for pursuing education, economical issues, and spending their free time. The obtained results for all research questions posed in the study along with Chi-square test results are presented in the following sections.

4.1. Gender and Friendship

As mentioned earlier, Table 1-7 were to address the differences between genders in their treatment of friendship. As the data indicates, female participants maintained that they like to spend more time with their friends, choose their best friends among their spouse or family, consider moral equality as important factor in selecting their friends, talk more about their future plans with their friends, like to be called with their first or nickname in family and friend environments and with last name by their co-workers, and rely less to their friends. On the other hand, male respondents asserted that they spend little time with their friends, choose their best friends among their wives and family members, like their counterparts regard moral equality as important factor in their friendship, talk more about social and political issues and rely more to their friends. Besides, they like to be addressed by their first name with their friends and family members and by their last names or titles by their colleagues. It deserves notice that, from among seven items related to friendship, there are relative similarities between males and females in three items: standards for choosing their friends, the people among whom they choose their friends and the percentage of their readiness to consult with their friends. Interestingly, although females like to spend more time with their friends, they trust their friends less than males.

Table 1. how many hours do you like to spend with your friends daily?

	male	female	male	female
a)less than two hours	38	14	Chi-square	
b)between 2-4 hours	26	32		
c)between 4-6 hours	6	3	.000	.000
d)more than six hours	4	3		

Table 2. From whom do you choose your best friends?

	male	female	male	female
a)strangers	14	17	Chi-square	
b)spouse	28	18		
c)family	14	3	.000	.000
d)co-workers	18	14		

Table 3. What is the most important factor in selecting your friends?

	male	female	male	female
a)thinking contiguity	64	44	Chi-square	
b)prissy appearance	2	1		
c)age contiguity	2	1	.000	.000
d)having good spirit	4	6		
e)having financial similarity	0	0		
f)being equal in education	2	0		

Table 4. How much do you trust in your friends?

	male	female	male	female
a)between 10-30 percent	6	6	Chi-square	
b)between 30-50 percent	18	18		
c)between 50-70 percent	32	12	.000	.09
d)more than 70 percent	18	16		

Table 5. what is the topic of conversation between your friends?

	male	female	male	female
a)opposite sex	2	6	Chi-square	
b)gossiping	0	7		
c)future plans	20	21	.000	.000
d)fashion and make up	0	1		
e)political and social issues	30	6		
f)job related issues	22	10		

Table 6. How do you like to be called in the following environments?

	Males	Females
a) Friendly environment	first or last name	first name or nick name
b) Family environment	first name	first name or nick name
c) Work environment	last name or some title	last name

Table 7. How much do you consult with your friends?

	male	female	male	female
a)between 10-30 percent	8	10	Chi-square	
b)between 30-50 percent	30	23		
c)between 50-70 percent	22	13	.002	.000
d)more than 70 percent	14	6		

4.2. Gender and Education

Data collected from three items devoted to this issue represent that there was slight difference between two sexes. Both males and females considered choosing an appropriate job, changing their social status, and increasing their literacy as the main reasons for pursuing higher education. Moreover, engineering was reported as their favorite field of study. Results for three items related to education along with Chi-square test results are presented in the following tables:

Table 8. what is you aim at pursuing your education?

	Male	female	male	female
a)financial independence	8	8	Chi-square	
b)challenging others	0	0		
c)knowledge increase	20	8	.000	.000
d)change in social status	46	36		

Table 9. Why do you like to go to university?

	Male	female	male	female
a)increase in social status	50	31	Chi-square	
b)love of education	8	2		
c)entering to a new world	6	10	.000	.000
d)finding a good spouse	0	0		
e)having good job future	10	9		
f)being normal in society	0	0		

Table 10. what is your favorite field of study?

	Male	female	male	female
a)medicine	10	8	Chi-square	
b)art	0	7		

c)humanities	20	7	.000	.01
d)engineering	38	18		
e)basic science	4	6		
f)agriculture	2	4		

4.3. Gender and Asset

The third issue in the study dealt with males and females' belief of their assets. Unlike the previous part, male and female respondents appeared different in all items related to this part. Male participants maintained that they prefer to be self-employed, invest their money, and go to travel and their important criteria for their cars were safety and security. Conversely, females' options show that they prefer working for government and spending their money for their family. Besides elegance and appearance were their important criteria for their favorite cars.

Table 11. How do you like to gain money?

	Male	female	male	female
a)marriage	0	0	Chi-square	
b)working for government	8	21		
c)being self-employed	54	13	.000	.028
d)business	12	10		

Table 12. What do you do if you win money?

	Male	female	male	female
a)buying house	16	12	Chi-square	
b)buying cars	2	2		
c)investment	30	8	.000	.000
d)going to travel	2	2		
e)spending for family	20	25		
f)saving	4	3		

Table 13. How do you like to spend your money?

	Male	female	male	female
a)clothes, jewelry	4	8	Chi-square	
b)saving	2	5		
c)family	20	17	.001	.004
d) investment	22	10		
e)traveling	22	11		
f)buying car	4	1		

Table 14. What is the main reason in choosing your car?

	Male	female	male	female
a)being prestigious	2	5	Chi-square	
b)safety	62	20		
c)being small	6	5	.000	.000
d)appearance	4	22		

5.4. Gender and Free Time

As far as response to the item related to spending free time is considered, difference in male and female preference is obvious. While male participants stated that they prefer to be with their family, do exercise, and be with friends as their top priorities, females reported that they like to exercise and do family affairs, be with friends and go shopping.

Table 15. How do you like to spend your free time?

	Male	female	male	female
a)exercising	26	18	Chi-square	
b)family affairs	30	10		
c)being with friends	12	10		
d)shopping	0	7		
e)sleeping	0	0	.015	.04
f)reading newspaper and watching TV	6	7		

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the major purpose was to find out whether males and females conceptualize friendship, education, assets, and leisure differently. Evidently, there were some similarities and differences and the results appeared to be relatively in contrast to the commonsensical view and the assumption that males and females are completely different from each other. Though different in some aspects, some similarities were observed as well. In other words, although the effect of gender on some aspects of the research was identified, it didn't percolate into all aspects. Their belief about pursuing education, the factors in choosing their friends, the people among whom they choose their friends, and the extent they consult with their friends were among common issues in both males' and females' view. These similarities can be ascribed to the fact that, in modern world, traditional idea of difference between sexes has been modified. In fact, modernity helps move from segregation to integrity. One reason of this move is that today women have similar access to educational opportunities and are, somehow, able to fulfill the same roles as men do.

However, despite the contiguity, there were some differences. Chief among the differences was topics of the conversation between males and females. Males were mostly concerned with social and political issues in their conversations, while females preferred talking about their future plans. Another striking point of departure was that although women liked to spend more time with their friends, the degree to which they trusted their friends was less. The most salient aspects of distinction were in spending money and free time. While males preferred either investment or spending for travel purposes, females liked spending for their family. Another important point of departure was their viewpoints for choosing their favorite cars. While males regarded safety and firmness as primary criterion, females paid more attention to elegance and appearance. As for free time activities, unlike the common assumptions, males liked to spend their spare time with their family, while females preferred sports, fun with friends and shopping.

It is worth mentioning that the findings of this study need to be interpreted in the light of a number of limitations. One limitation pertains to the number of participants and the other one to restriction of the generalizability of the findings to other situations and participants. The results should, therefore, be regarded with caution. Furthermore, it is recommended to examine differences between males and females with a larger amount of participants and with notice to participants' marital status and recruiting participants from different cities.

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