Rethinking Gender Stereotype in Conflict Talk

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Keywords: Conflict Talk, Gender Stereotype, Conversation Analysis

Abstract. Gender stereotype has major influence on related academic studies; however, more and more researchers provide empirical evidences to refute the clear gender differences in real communication (Holmes, 2008). Therefore it is necessary to rethink the role of gender stereotype when examine cross-gender communication. This paper examines the typical traits of gender stereotype in the context of cross-gender conflict talk, and they are swear words, intensifiers and interruption. It is a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis, using 63 scenes of cross-gender conflict talks from American TV series The Newsroom. The results show that the influence of gender stereotype should be downplayed, and the dichotomy method may not be appropriate for research. A non-biased attitude is emphasized in order to treat the gender issue objectively. This research combines the analysis of linguistic devices with turn-taking mechanism, and it may provide a new angle for future research.

Introduction

Conflict talk is an intricate linguistic phenomenon. Even though it has been thoroughly studied from different angles, the gender stereotype in conflict talk is a comparatively new aspect. By far most of the cross-gender academic studies have been based on the basic folk linguistic premises that men and women are essentially different, and in regard to cross-gender communication, those differences are displayed from the way they talk, especially face-to-face interaction. The rigid concept of gender groups has thus formed and widely promoted. It is so broadly accepted that the gender differences become the focus. However, at present more and more researchers doubt about the validity of gender stereotype, and they show the empirical evidences to refute the clear gender differences in real communication (Schegloff, 1997, cited in Holmes, 2008; Song, 1998; Stubbe et al., 2000; Mullany, 2007, cited in Sung, 2008; Holmes, 2008; Drew, 2010, cited in Toerien, 2013). Describing how men and women behave in interaction is important to judge whether the gender stereotype really exists in real life communication. Many research (Lakoff, 1975; Georgakopoulou, 2001; Scott, 2002; Ran, 2010; Liu, 2012; Han, 2013) verifies the fact that certain linguistic devices play an important role in conflict talk. They could index the disagreement and they also have other communicative functions. Those three devices also be mentioned in the concepts of gender stereotype, hence it is viable to make further analysis.

Cross-gender Conflict Talk and Gender Stereotype

The research about cross-gender conflict talk covers different ages from preschool children to adults at work. It mainly probes into male and female behavior in conflict talk. It also explores how gender behavior conduces to conflict. The issues of interruption and overlap are discussed.

Tannen (1992) suggests that conversation is a ritual in which women tend to take other’s feeling into consideration, while men always try to keep the one-up position. Men consider the conversation as a ritual fight which develops through verbal opposition, while women naturally
accept the one-down position. It is excited for male to argue about ideas. But for females, the talk itself is seen as the main activity of doing friendship. Those divergences may contribute to conflict. Sheldon (1997) uses dichotomy method to study preschool children. She insists that girls also do competitive and oppositional talks, but the ways they are done vary across cultures and contexts. She believes that the gender behavior is performative, therefore it is necessary to downplay the conception of gender difference.

When it comes to the gender differences about interruption in conversation, which can be a trigger of conflict, a common acknowledgement is that men interrupt women (West & Zimmerman, 1975; Woods, 1988; Tannen, 1992). Coates (1997) finds the lack of overlap and interruption in casual all-male conversations. Myklebust (2014) observes that the amount of overlap in same-sex conversation is greater with women than with men.

Gómez (2000) studies the conflict talk in talk show and reveals the fact that women adopt the typical interactional patterns of male speakers. For example, (a) constantly interrupt men’s speech; (b) challenge or dispute men’s utterances; (c) control the topic and challenge men’s attempts to do so; and (d) make direct declarations of facts or opinions, even if they may be face-threatening to men. Those behaviors imply that women adapt to the male-dominated discourse in public sphere. Therefore, she argues that the context may have greater influence than gender identity.

Sung (2013) analyzes the conflict talk in gendered discourse. He argues that woman professionals at work distance themselves from traditional gender stereotype in order to achieve empowerment within the group. When they are engaged in the conflict talk, which is stereotypically coded as masculine activity, the confrontational and aggressive stances are often chosen. The findings show that the dichotomy of gender stereotype doesn’t make sense in work place.

In conclusion, the study of cross-gender conflict talk has attracted researchers’ attention. Some researchers advocate to downplay the notion of gender difference, and to put emphasis on other factors, such as context, institutional role, and cultural background (Sheldon, 1997; Gómez, 2000; Sung, 2013).

Stereotyping someone means interpreting one’s act, characteristics and so on in the light of a set of common-sense attributions, and they are applied to whole community (Cameron, 1988). Some gender stereotypes are widely spread in the society and culture, such as: women don’t swear, men don’t gossip; men are logical, women are emotional; men talk about cars and sports, while women are always played as the chatterboxes, never stopping nags and so on. In gender stereotype, female’s verbal behavior is perceived in feminine ways, which include stating their own views indirectly, exhibiting support for men, and always behaving cooperatively. Nevertheless, men would talk independently, aggressively, bravely and confidently. Below is the table of widely cited traits of feminine and masculine stereotype (Holmes, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male/masculine</th>
<th>Female/feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>direct</td>
<td>indirect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>confrontational</td>
<td>conciliatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competitive</td>
<td>facilitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>autonomous</td>
<td>collaborative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dominates (public talking time)</td>
<td>minor contribution (in public)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aggressive interruptions</td>
<td>supportive feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>task/ outcome-oriented</td>
<td>person/process-oriented</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender stereotype could be either positive or negative. It is positive in that it may help comprehend people from another culture or group. It is also could be negative in that people may make judgments from rigid ideas.

Song (1998) explicitly concludes that former research may overgeneralize and exaggerate the differences of gender behavior. Early research in the field of language and gender is highly speculative and as a result, it tends to reproduce sexist stereotypes which form the status of male
dominance and female subordination. Stubbe et al. (2000) admits the importance of gender in communication; however, it is still important to notice the tendency of oversimplifying and stereotyping gender differences in language use. The conclusion is that one-to-one relationship between gender and the use of linguistic feature doesn’t exist. Mullany (cited in Sung, 2008) reaches the similar findings that both male and female managers break stereotypically gendered expectations in order to perform their professional identities. It disproves the clear gender differences of language use in workplace.

Several researchers, such as Schegloff, James and Clarke, doubt about the conclusion that interruption as demonstration of male taking control (Holmes, 2008). The series study (Zimmerman & West, 1975; West, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1983; Fishman, 1983; cited in Holes, 2008) contrasts with the CA methodology. Drew (2010) clearly points out that some simultaneous talks and overlaps are mistaken as interruption (cited in Toerien, 2013).

In conclusion, gender stereotype has influenced many related studies and it still has impact on people’s perception and recognition. Nevertheless, from above research (Song, 1998; Stubbe et al., 2000; Mullany, 2007; Holmes, 2008; Drew, 2010), a key element of discussion is that the dichotomous model of gender should be cautiously considered, and “gender lines are anything but clear-cut in workplace communication” (Holmes 2006: 24).

**Research Design**

Because of the rarity of natural conflict talks, this paper uses the cross-gender conversations from American TV series The Newsroom. The main characters in this TV series all work in journalism. They have a good mastery of words and sentences. The cross-gender conflict scenes are selected from all three seasons with the guidance of the rubrics. According to former research (Gómez, 2000; Scott, 2002; Zhao, 2004), five basic norms are proposed to make the analysis more reliable. First, the conflict talk should be serious, and the playful type is excluded. Second, it should have at least three turns. Third, at least one disagreement occurs in the conflict talk, which may center on objects, rights, beliefs or factual claims. Four, the conflict talks happen in home or other private places aren’t taken into consideration. Last, it ends with either clear settlement, physical movement of the participants away from the scene, or a shift to a new topic or activity.

With regard to the research process, first the author watched the whole three seasons of The Newsroom, and she abstracted the conflict scenes based on the rubrics listed above. To ensure the integrity the author made a double check. Then, the language was transcribed according to Tannen’s transcription conventions. Next she counted the numbers of studied features and wrote them down. With all the collected data, she made elaborate analysis and listed some of the typical conversations. At last, she drew conclusions based on the analysis.

This paper will settle the following questions:

1. What are the gender differences and similarities in cross-gender conflict talk regarding the use of swear words, question intonation and interruption?
2. What’s the role of gender stereotype in cross-gender conflict talk?

**Discussions of the Findings**

Andersson and Hirsch (1985) conclude four types of swear words according to their functions, which are expletives, abusive, humorous and auxiliary. There are 93 swear words altogether in the data, with the male occupying 40%, female 60%. Women use more swear words than men. This outcome contradicts some traditional views and the gender stereotype that women don’t swear (Lakoff, 1975; Holmes, 2008; Toerien, 2013). As for the use of different types of swear words in workplace when conflict happens, men are more likely to use expletives to vent their feelings, and they are not directed to others. For example, “Hell!” “Shit!” “God damn it!” Women apply more abusive swear words than men. Sentences like “Are you a moron?” is used by woman in the data. It may come from the reason that it is too rude for men to use the abusive swear words in front of
women. Women use more auxiliary type than men, like “He's plainly fucking with you.” Since this type is not directed towards others, women could show their emotions and at the same time do not escalate the conflict.

Swearing doesn’t mean that speakers lack self-control, nor is it a meaningless verbal behavior. On the contrary, different kinds of swear words need to be explained in the specific situations. Swearing isn’t always harmful, and most of the time it could reveal the communicative intention of the users. The results also indicate that women use abusive swear words as a way to accuse the male interlocutors and achieve status denied to them.

Lakoff (1975) sets forth that women’s question intonation in statements makes them sound more polite; however, the data of the Newsroom shows that there are more than one function concerning this usage, such as showing uncertainty, challenging viewpoint, gathering information and making a point rhetorically (Quirk et al., 1985; Cameron, 1988; Scott, 2002). It also illustrates that they are not limited to women. There are 61 sentences that have question intonations in the data, 47.5% of them belonging to men and 52.4% to women. Although women use them more than men, the difference is not that obvious. The finding doesn’t conform to Lakoff’s statement (1975) that female use question intonation to show politeness. In workplace, modern women use question intonation to challenge viewpoint since it is more tactful than pointing out directly. Men use question intonation to gather information so as to use fact to speak.

Interruption has always been seen as the violation of the turn-taking rules, and also a rude behavior (Sacks et al., 1974). Both male and female use this method to claim their turns. The traditional belief is that men tend to interrupt women to take control the turns (West & Zimmerman, 1975; Woods, 1988; Tannen, 1992); however, the data shows contrarily. Female occupies 59%, while male 41% of interruptions. The results contradict with several former studies (West & Zimmerman, 1975; Woods, 1988; Tannen, 1992), but conform to the empirical ones (James & Clarke, 1993; Schegloff, 1997; Gómez, 2000).

Two kinds of interruptions are found in the data; one has potentially positive function towards the process of conversation. The categories of agreement, assistance and clarification all could be counted as cooperative interruption; however, the other one has disruptive function, which includes the forms of showing disagreement, taking floors, changing topic or summarizing previous information (Tannen, 1992).

In conclusion, when conflict talk occurs in workplace, women may not assimilate with the stereotype but respond in a way opposite to that predicted by stereotype. In workplace involving conflict talks, the concept of gender stereotype is challenged. There is no one-to-one relationship between gender and the use of a particular linguistic device or the turn-taking mechanism.

Implications and Conclusion

This paper verifies several former propositions about gender stereotype with empirical data. The typical traits of gender stereotype in conflict talk have been analyzed, which are swear words, question intonation and interruptions. They not only index the conflict talk, but also reveal communicative functions. Interlocutors use them to achieve certain goals or express their emotions, such as anger, doubt, dissatisfaction or even resent. They could soften or strengthen disagreement. The gender differences on the use of linguistic devices are not obvious, and other factors such as context, social roles may have more influence. The conflict talks have a particular turn-design, partially violating the turn-taking rules to make the conversation progress. Violating the rules has certain communicative functions. The process of conflict talks is accomplished locally on a turn-by-turn basis. Conflict talk is characteristics of high degree of interruption.

This research aims to query some conclusions made by former researchers (Lakoff, 1975; West & Zimmerman, 1975; Woods, 1988; Tannen, 1992) and at the same time confirm some of those (Gómez, 2000; Holmes, 2008; Sung, 2013; Toerien, 2013). By analyzing the data which provides the empirical evidence, it is found that the differences between male and female are not very obvious. Both male and female involve in the conflict talk by going against the masculine or feminine traits. In workplace involving conflict talk, the concept of gender stereotype is refuted.
There is no one-to-one relationship between gender and language use, specifically the linguistic devices and the turn-taking mechanism. In certain situations, people may not assimilate with the stereotype but respond in a way opposite to it (Holmes, 2008).

Several reasons could explain the phenomenon. First, the female characters in the Newsroom are all strong and independent, and some of them are in higher positions. In some sense, they could apply the linguistic devices to distance themselves away from the traditional gender stereotype. Second, workplace is a public area. When people are involved in conflict with others, out of many reasons, they may not talk the way as usual. Both male and female professionals may offset stereotypical expectations in the oppositional process. Third, the term “gender stereotype” is a cultural representation which incorporates the ideological images, and it isn’t equal to the actual behaviors in real situations.

The findings of this research expand the area of conflict talk and gender language. The results show that the gender stereotype oversimplifies the gender differences, and in conflict situations happened in workplace the counter-stereotypical language may be used by both male and female. On this basis this paper proposes to downplay the impact of stereotype and do gender study with other methods, except the dichotomy. Secondly, a non-biased attitude is emphasized in order to treat the gender issue objectively. Third, the importance of communicative functions of linguistic devices is stressed in this study, which has been overlooked in domestic studies. Last, this research combines the analysis of linguistic devices with turn-taking mechanism, which is quite rare.

Acknowledgement

This paper was reframed based on the first author’s unpublished MA thesis. Thanks for the help of Dr. Yao Xiaodong from School of Foreign Languages in Beijing Forestry University.

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