

Teens and Slang: A Gender Perspective

Nasim Ghanbari *

English Language and Literature Department, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Persian Gulf University,
Bushehr, Iran

Abstract

On the one hand, use and spread of slang as an important part of the mode of communication has been mostly associated with teenagers' language who by passing the accepted linguistic norms seek proving themselves. Moreover, origination of slang is said to be one of the properties of teenagers at the turn of the century. On the other hand, although language of genders has been studied by several scholars, it gets more interesting when it is paired with this "entertaining word play", which due to its very nature-being coarse and direct-has mostly been attributed to males. Females, however, are getting inventive and trying to come up with some slang of their own and it seems that for teenage girls' slangs are evolving at an even faster clip. Are there really any differences between male and female teenagers in their use of the slang words? If there are, what kind of difference may be found in societies which are perceived to be male dominant? Being concern of the present study, the researchers used both empirical and ethnographic elements of research to find relationships, if any, between use of slang words and the gender of Iranian teenagers, in a society which is perceived to be mostly male-dominant. Two high schools were therefore randomly chosen and six male and six female high schoolers who aged between 16 and 17 and came from upper middle-class families were randomly selected and interviewed using sociolinguistic interview protocols. Preliminary results, based on Chi-Square tests, revealed significant differences between the linguistic behavior of Iranian male and female teenagers. Females were interestingly found to be both more direct and more creative in their use of slang words. Our findings shed doubt on the generally accepted view of scholars on the linguistic (and social) dominance of males in modern Iranian society.

Keywords: Slang, Gender, Teenagers Language

INTRODUCTION

A complicated phenomenon like language is influenced by lots of factors, among which social factors could be considered as major ones. Different geographical distribution, age distribution and value systems have a huge impact on the way people use a language to express their personal thoughts, feelings, and in general their identity.

Gender and language studies to date have evolved from frameworks largely designed and imposed by men, to a feminist perspective aimed at exposing sexism in language and

further to studies that consider paradigms of dominance and difference in language from a variety of perspectives. Gender studies, feminist studies and sociolinguistic studies all currently lack consensus as to reasons for variance in women's and men's language and therefore further research is needed. There are common beliefs in the field as to the differences in the languages of women and men, like women talk more than men, men talk more than women, women are less assertive and direct, women break the rules of turn-taking less than men do, women use more standard forms than men, etc.

Linguistically, one of the easily affected age groups is the teenagers of every society who like to change the fixed and old patterns of their mother tongue through using slang which is believed to convey their feeling much better than terms used in standard language. The following research study investigates the extent to which gender can be identified as a determining factor in language variance. As finding the differences in slang use between the teenagers of two speech communities i.e. male and female, who come from the same socio- economical class, e.g. upper- middle class would be an interesting topic to investigate.

The study combines empirical and ethnographic elements of research and data analysis with the aim of balancing objective and subjective observation. Findings will be considered in terms of implications for the theory of gender diversity and suggestions for further research will also be made.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teens and Slang

As the conventional definition for the slang states it is very informal language usage that often serves to promote a feeling of group solidarity. It is not usually acceptable in formal speech or writing and includes expressions that may be impolite or taboo in conventional communication.

Slang is pervasive in its influence, and is passed on through popular culture via newspapers, magazines, pop music, television, the Internet, and other media. Slang usage can range from the alteration of a conventional word (for example, answering a question with 'yeah' instead of 'yes') to the formation of a new expression (for example, 'Whassup?' for 'What are you doing?'). However, because slang is often vivid and suggestive, and associated with contentious attitudes and topics, many people find it disturbing or offensive. Forms of slang develop among particular groups (for example soldiers, teenagers, and criminals), and are often extended into more general use because social conditions make them fashionable or people have grown accustomed to using them. Some types of slang are highly transient; others may last across generations and gain currency in the standard language.

Variation by age can be observed in ongoing change in apparent time in features such as *as far as* and *be all/like*, and the fact that *a*-prefixing and the use of *hern*, *ourn*, and similar forms are more common among older speakers betrays their status as retentions from an earlier period. Recently, linguists have demonstrated that adolescence is a life stage in

which the linguistic marking of social identity is at a peak. The extensive use of slang by teenagers, about which we say more below, is a part of this phenomenon.

As our dictionary entry indicates, slang occurs chiefly in casual, playful speech and is typically made up of short-lived coinages and figures of speech that are deliberately used in place of standard terms for the sake of added raciness, humor, irreverence, or other effect. To this we might add that the creation and use of slang are commonest among adolescents and teenagers, and that some words that enter the vocabulary as slang pass into more general usage and endure for decades, if not centuries, as has occurred with *bad*, *cool*, *dig*, and *dude*. If it is surprising to learn that some of these words go back to the early 20th century and even to the 19th century (as do *bad* and *dude*), it is equally surprising to learn that a seemingly modern, computer-age slang word like *geek* originated in the 19th- and early-20th-century world of the circus, where it originally referred to a performer who engaged in bizarre acts such as biting the head off a live chicken.

Slang and Linguistic Variation

Some slang words illustrate very general principles of linguistic variation and change. For instance, *igg*, from *ignore*, illustrates the tendency to reduce or shorten words in informal speech. Although the incidence is higher as one goes down the social ladder, virtually all Americans reduce *past* and *hand* to *pas'* and *han'* in casual or excited speech, at least some of the time, and they can similarly drop the initial unstressed syllable in *(a)bout*. Unlike more broadly accepted slang reductions (such as *mike* for *microphone*), which typically retain their most strongly stressed syllable, *igg* involves the retention of an initial unstressed syllable and the loss of a stressed syllable. Some of the newer slang reductions like *za* (from *pizza*) and *rents* (from *parents*) have an even more startling, in-your-face quality. Their effect derives from the fact that they involve the loss of an initial *stressed* syllable (*PIZZa*, *PArents*) and the replacement of the original reduced vowel (ə) in the remaining syllable by full vowels (ä, ě). In this respect they defy convention, much as the recently popular greeting among African Americans *What up?* defied the rule by which the copula in collocations using *what is*, *that is*, and *it is*, is usually contracted (as in *wha's up*, *tha's ok*, *i's me*) but not deleted in African American Vernacular English. As the note at *za* reminds us, however, today's startling slang neologism can become tomorrow's conventional standard usage, for *phone*, *bus*, and *wig* were originally derived.

Gender Studies

Gender variation and the social construction of male and female identity have been the focus of intense research in recent years on such topics as male/female differences in interruptions, tag questions (e.g., *you know?*), and the amount of talk and silence; but such aspects of conversational interaction or discourse do not lend themselves readily to dictionary coverage.

Initial quantitative sociolinguistic studies or variation studies investigated the use of variants such as pronunciation or grammar structure (Labov, 1972) according to the influences of factors such as class, education and sex. With the evolution of feminist sociolinguistics, assertions such as women produce language closer to the standard form

than men were challenged as being biased and reinforcing over-simplistic stereotypical generalizations.

The issue of how sexism and bias is inherent in language was addressed by Robin Lakoff (1975) who was innovative in steering gender research away from a previous focus on grammar and phonetics towards a syntactic, stylistic and semantic focus. She suggested that women reinforced their own subordinate status through e.g. hedges and tag questions. Her work however has since been challenged as lacking empirical validity, being based on intuition and as Jane Holmes (1992) points out, hedges may not only express uncertainty, but also have other functions.

In an effort to look beyond assumptions of male-norm linguistic behavior, women researchers in the more recent past have turned to questioning rather than reinforcing gender stereotypes. Single-sex as opposed to mixed-sex studies has investigated areas such as topic control (Coates and Cameron, 1988) and interruptions (Zimmerman and West, 1975). The problems of isolating language behavior attributable to the influence of gender are reflected in the numerous approaches to defining gender and analyzing its power to construct language. Deborah Tannen, the popular proponent of differences in men and women's language, in the 1990 best seller *You Just Don't Understand* looks to the functions of linguistic devices.

The diversity models indicate that the word man was significantly more strong, dominant, popular, aggressive and active, while the word woman was perceived as significantly more sensitive, nurturing, and thin. Comparison of the connotations of female slang versus male slang revealed that female words were taken as more nurturing, sensitive, and submissive. In contrast, male slang words were seen as more child-like, independent, athletic, and strong. In addition, men were not generally more knowledgeable about gender-related slang, reporting more frequently use of slang terms for both men and women. The extent of one's social network—the strength and diversity of one's ties to friends and workmates, for example—has also been shown to be a salient factor in variation.

METHOD

Participants

Given the fact that the middle-class form the majority in any society and also they are vulnerable to linguistic changes from both high and low strata of the community, the researcher chose Geesha area in district 2, in west of Tehran, as our desired speech community. In order to narrow down our speech community, one male and one female high school which were on Nazerian Ghomi and Arash Mehr streets, respectively were randomly chosen. Participants were chosen among upper middle-class students who aged 16-17 years old. 12 teenage students were selected for participating in the present study.

Instruments

The main instrument to elicit data in the present study was a kind of questionnaire consisted of several questions of interest for teenage students such as sports, fast foods,

friendship, etc. Having this questionnaire as a guide, researcher interviewed student participants and then data was recorded on some cassettes for later analysis.

Procedure

In order to get enough information about Geesha, different sources of information including Iran Statistics Center, local education department, online resources, and some local sources such as house agencies, old-established stores and people of the neighborhood were drawn upon. Having selected the speech community, the researcher visited two schools. After observing different parts of the schools, the researcher selected break times and school yards as the best time and place to conduct verbal interaction with the students. Then students were divided in to two male and female groups and in order to get more natural data, they were interviewed within the group. Actually, they were interviewed while discussing different topics of interest in a discussion group. Finally, 60 minutes of each group's interview was transcribed and the number of slang terms for each group was counted and compared to that of the other group.

RESULTS

Considering the definition of slang as the informal single words, compound words or simple phrases, idioms or complete sentences which are direct and mostly spoken, the researcher explored the data.

As it was expected, teenagers' speech was found to be full of slang and a simple counting of slang in a determined time span (one hour) displayed the superiority of females in their use of slang. Their share was 138 versus 115 instances of slang usage among males. In the second phase, the researcher tried to seek patterns involved in the data. For this reason, we considered the aforementioned definition of slang as the criterion. Based on this criterion slang are simple or compound words, phrases or sentences. Then this was considered as the first category to explore the data. The second feature of slang is the directness or straightforward nature of them. A preliminary exploration of the data, this feature was clearly observed. Both male and female interviewees had used these kinds of slang.

The third feature which came out of the data was the male creativity in using novel slang in any single turn of the interview. Males used various slang in their utterances while females usually overemphasized one or two slang terms. These three features were investigated in the data and the following results which are a simple frequency count were obtained: Considering the total number of slang terms used by females, 95 of them were considered as straightforward and "more direct". Also 43 were considered as ordinary ones. These numbers for males were 34 tough slang terms and 81 non-direct and ordinary ones.

The next feature was labeled as word-level slang versus non-word-level ones. In the data both of these were observed. Females used 66 instances of non-word-level slang terms and 72 instances of word-level slang including both single words and compound words. For males it was 60 for non-word level and 55 for word-level slang. The last feature was computed in this way: the number of repeated slang in the interview data of both was

computed and compared with each other. This number for females was 42 while for the males it was 23. Results are shown in the table below.

Table 1. Gender of the interviewees and three categories of slang usage

	Directness		Structure		Variety	
	direct	non-direct	word-level	non-word-level	repeated	non-repeated
Male	34	81	55	60	23	92
Female	95	43	72	66	42	96

These results were considered as the mere frequency which needed to be statistically significant. For this aim, statistical test of Chi-Square was selected.

Table 2. Results of Chi-Square test for directness of slang usage

	Df	Asymp. Sig (2-sided)	Exact Sig (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1	.059	
Continuity correction	1	.81	
Likelihood Ratio	1	.56	
Fisher's Exact Test			.062

Words used today to refer to men and women. The most commonly occurring words and additionally “woman” and “man”, two construct the phase II questionnaire. Using this test, it was found that two of the features-directness and variety of slang usage among both genders were significant and the other one which was the structure of the slang terms were found to have no difference across the two genders.

Table 3. Results of Chi-Square test for variety of slang usage

	Df	Asymp. Sig (2-sided)	Exact Sig (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	1	.53	
Continuity correction	1	.81	
Likelihood Ratio	1	.57	
Fisher's Exact Test			.060

DISCUSSION

Slang or colloquial words form a major part of each society's communication in TV, radio, newspaper, magazines and informal spoken conversations. Slang develops and changes to fit the times and popular culture. The present study investigated this issue among male and female teenagers. As mentioned in the results section, it was found that females used more slang terms than males. Any verbal behavior is undoubtedly affected by different physiological, psychological, sociopolitical factors. Gender as the social identity of the male and female was found to be very influential in the present study.

As went in the previous sections, female interviewees used more tough and straight slang terms, while these slang terms originally are linked with masculine style of speech due to

the tough and coarse nature of it. Such a finding shows that female prefer to defy the accepted linguistic, social boundaries to exert its so-called superiority to its long-dominant counterpart in the Iranian society. Normally, masculine style of speech seeks solidarity through harsh, non-standard, direct, low type of speech which can be found in slang. Interestingly, this fact is denied in the other feature where females were much more successful than males in using novel slang terms mostly with negative connotations in any turn of speech. Another linguistic feature of the slang which relates to its structure was found to be insignificant. It can be related to the controversial status of the definition of the slang. As it was mentioned before, slang appears in different guises: simple words, compound words, phrases or sentences or even idiomatic expressions. Also, words are often shortened and played with in many ways.

On the whole, females used more tough and novel slang than males. Before going to the details, it should be emphasized that in the realm of humanities and especially in the sociolinguistic studies, finding an appropriate and exhaustive account of the phenomenon under investigation is no easy task as we do not have comprehensive control over all the probably involved variables. However, some explanations here seem potent enough to justify this observed unequal amount of slang usage among two genders.

First of all, regarding the significant role of social environment in any sociolinguistic study, it could easily be claimed that the combination of gender, age and specific social context causes the female teenagers to use slang as a manifestation of their "specific being" in a society which has long been male-oriented. Female teens by using this type of *entertaining word play* try to show themselves capable-though here linguistically- of exploiting hidden concepts in this style of speech which has long been associated with males in Iranian community.

The second explanation which is not far from the first is the effect of mass media, peer groups and personal style of participants which is closely affected by their biological age as they are passing a critical period from childhood to adulthood. According to Maslow, when people develop an identity, it makes them different in their own way. People develop the self-esteem they need from being accepted in their own social groups. In developing a somewhat different dialect, that identity that Maslow preaches is helped along its development. Slang is one thing that could help a person develop his/her own identity. Although it was observed that among the participants there were differences in terms of slang usage, all of them equally used them in their speech.

The present study should be looked upon as a preliminary step toward a more sophisticated and focused study that investigates the probable factors involved in the slang usage of teenagers. One more point worth mentioning here is that in the case of generalities in which gender is involved, no pre-set hypothesis should be considered as general and complete. In fact, a new approach which is equipped with the scientific precision should be used and the researcher should not go to the extremes.

REFERENCES

- Bing, J. & Bergvall, V. (1998). The question of questions: Beyond binary thinking. In J. Coates, (ed.) *Language and Gender: A reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, Malden Masc.
- Cameon, D. (1995). *Verbal Hygiene*. Routledge: London and New York
- Cameron, D., McAlinden F., & O'Leary. K. (1998). Lakoff in context: the social and linguistic functions of tag questions. In Coates, J. & Cameron D.(eds.), *Women and Their speech communities*. Longman: London and New York.
- Coates, J. (1996). *Women talk: Conversation between women friends*. Blackwell: Oxford and Cambridge Masc.
- Coates, J.(ed.). (1998). *Language and Gender: A Reader*. Blackwell: Oxford, Malden Masc.
- Coates, J. & Cameron D. (eds) (1998). *Women and their speech communities*. Longman: London and New York.
- Holmes, J. (1992). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. Longman: London and New York.
- James, D. & Clarke S. (1993). Women, Men and Interruptions: A Critical Review. In D. Tannen(ed). *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. Oxford University Press: New York and Oxford.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the Inner City*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and a woman's Place*. Harper and Rowe: New York.
- Mills, S.(1995). *Language and Gender Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Longman: London and New York.
- Milroy, L. (1980). *Language and Social Networks*. Basil Blackwell: Oxford.
- Tannen, D.(ed.)(1993). *Gender and Conversational Interaction*. Oxford University Press:New York and Oxford.
- Tannen, D.(1990).*You Just Don't Understand it*. Quill, Harper Collins: New York
- Tannen, D.(1986).*That's Not What I Meant!*. Virago Press: London.
- Thomas, B. (1989). Differences of sex and sects: linguistic variation and social networkism in a Welsh mining village. In J. Coates & D. Cameron (eds.).*Women and their speech communities*. Longman: London and New York.
- Thorne, B. & Henley, N.(eds)(1975). *Language and sex: Differences and Dominance*. Rowely, Masc.: Newbury House.
- West, C. & Zimmerman, D. (1983). Small insults: a study of interruptions in cross-sex conversations between unacquainted persons. In Thorne, Barrie, et. al. (eds.) *Language, Gender and Society*. Newbury House: Rowley, Masc.
- Zimmerman, D. & West C. (1975). Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation. In Thorne et.al.(eds.), *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance*. Rowley, Masc: Newbury House.