

On Convergence in Gender Languages— An Empirical Study

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Abstract:

Studies on language differences in two genders have yielded impressive results showing the disparities in a variety of aspects. However, with the development of feminist social movements and liberalization for people to identify themselves, language boundaries between men and women start to minimize. This paper, by collecting and analyzing data from a questionnaire which investigates gender language differences and similarities in four aspects, confirmed that convergence in gender languages exists among participants and mainly in two aspects, calling for more study on gender language convergence rather solely on differences to better understand relationship between language and gender.

Key Words: Language convergence; language differences; gender

1. Introduction

Scholars across the world have been involved in studying gender language differences since the publishing of Denmark linguist Otto Jespersen (1922)'s book *Language: It's Nature, Development and Origin* in which he explored language disparities in different genders. Following this, other renowned linguists including Labov (1972) and Zimmerman & West (1975) also drove the study on sexism in language. Later, Nelly Furman's *Women and Language in Literature and Society* (1980) outlined stereotypes and prejudices against females in English. In 1995, Holmes's *Women, Men and Politeness* and other works expounded on linguistic features of gender languages. In China, Sun Rujian (1997), Dang Tingyun (2009) and Meng Ying (2011) constitute pioneers on the study of China's gender language difference and convergence.

According to Wang Na and Wang Xianzhi (2013), there are over 600 papers in China focusing on gender language difference, whereas only 7 on convergence of gender language. To this end, it is of great significance to carry out the study on China's situation. Given that gender languages differ from each other, they also share similarities. Consequently, traditional dualistic view on gender language is a generalization of features. Taking this into account, this paper proposed the hypothesis that gender language convergence exists in today's society. To verify this, a survey with information acquired from 102 informants (51 female and 51 male) was carried out in an effort to unveil the situation.

1.1 Sex and gender

These two norms are frequently misused for many reasons. It is not until 18th century that they were clearly defined and distinguished from each other. For example, in the revised edition of *Women, Men and Language* (1993), Coate substituted the term sex with the term gender, showing that scholars had adopted and realized the different concepts of sex and gender. In addition, sex and gender were equated as LGBTQ (lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender and queer) was not common at the time; thus, sex and gender often coincide with each other. In China, sex and gender are translated the same as "Xingbie" through which we couldn't detect any difference, misleading people to believe they are same.

To be concise, sex identifies with one's biological features while gender social construction shaped by factors like society, culture, and psychology. West and Zimmerman (1987) stated that sex is a biological category, which is unchangeable and determined by genetic codes: the presence of XX chromosomes for females and XY for chromosome pattern for male, while gender is not something we are born with, or something we have, but something we do. Knowing the difference between sex and gender is helpful in later research as the survey is conducted to learn language differences of different genders rather than of sex.

1.2 Convergence of gender languages in four aspects

Convergence in gender languages can be reflected in various levels such as lexical expressions and conversational level. In these two levels, emotional words, topic nomination, turn-taking, tag questions represent detailed aspects to research on. Limited by the form of questionnaire, this study will center around vocabulary choices including following four aspects:

1.2.1 Intensifiers

Intensifier refers to adverbs that add a high degree of intensity to words it modify but have no contribution to the propositional meaning of a clause. It is used to strengthen intonation and emotion. Words like *really*, *pretty*, *quite*, *so*, *absolutely*, *extremely* are some examples of intensifiers. According to Lakoff and other scholars, females tend to use more intensifiers than males. Digging the rationale behind this phenomenon, it is not difficult to tell, by applying intensifiers, women want to catch more attention from others, revealing their lack of confidence and subordinate role to men. Today, it seemed unclear if this is still the case as women's place in society has been lifted in past years.

1.2.2 Hedges

Hedges are employed to avoid giving a direct or exact answer or promise, showing speakers' uncertainty and tentativeness. Expressions like *I think*, *you know*, *sort of*, *kind of*, *It seems*, *maybe*, *perhaps*, *well*, *I guess* are some examples of hedges. In previous studies, hedges are found more often used by women rather than men. Women's use of hedges is viewed as a sign of their weakness and inferior position to men (Lakoff, 1973). Compared with men's dominance in a conversation, women seem to be less confident in their speech. However, with the uprising of female's position in all walks of life and male's participation in some typical female industries, this conclusion remains a question.

1.2.3 Swear words

Swear words stand as socially taboo words or phrases used in swearing or cursing. They are usually profane or obscene. Most English swear words are four-letter words such as *fuck*, *damn*, and *hell*. It has been a convention that it is acceptable for males to articulate these words but not for females. The primary reason for the unfair judgment can be traced back to society's different expectations toward men and women. Women are raised and cultivated not to speak any swear words because a lady should be polite, affiliative and linguistically correct. As a result, women speak less swear words than men. In today's life, women are emancipated to air their voices with fewer constraints,

therefore they may use swear words as much as men do. Also, men may use less swear words than before as they attend coed school and enjoy same education environment with women.

1.2.4 Interjections

Interjection can be any member of a class of words expressing emotion or remark after an abrupt action such as *Oh My God/ Goddess! Ugh! Oh Dear! Dear me! Oh no!*. Similar with intensifiers, interjections are common in female speech. In Sun Weiqi (2015)'s study on linguistic gender difference—Based on the Corpus of Lines of *Friends*, she found male accounts for only 25.9 % of using the phrase *Oh My God* while female 74.1%.

1.3 Social constructionist gender theory

Different from theories that embrace dualism and regard gender language as binary opposition, this theory looks at gender language from the perspective of social impact on construction of gender language, incorporating a set of social identities into the study. It posits social constructions of identities are different in different times and places, and it is necessary to “look locally” in order to interpret the construction of gender and its effects on language use (Meng, 2011). This theory lays out the foundation of the survey in the paper as the participants of the questionnaire mainly live in the same region.

2. Empirical study on gender language convergence

To verify the existence of gender language convergence, an electronic questionnaire (See Appendix) was distributed and spread via social media, namely QQ and WeChat. Most participants are college students and a few working employees.

2.1 Design of the questionnaire

The questionnaire contains ten questions: first two are information of participant's gender and status (if students, which year); the third and fourth questions, in the form of multiple choice, investigate participants' use of intensifiers; the fifth and sixth questions, devised to learn about participants' use of hedges, are ranking questions, inviting them to rank the possible answers'; next two questions give students two choices to see their tendency of using swear words; question 9 and 10 are multiple choices, asking if participants use many interjections and their view on vocabulary differences in different genders respectively.

2.2 Data collected

By the end of the survey, 102 participants, 51 males and 51 females submitted their questionnaire. Their status is as shown in Figure 1.

2.3 Data analysis

In this part, answers to questions featuring four aspects of gender language differences will be analyzed.

2.3.1 Analysis of use of intensifiers

By answering which expression they will use when feeling exhausted and what will they probably say to compliment natural landscape, participants choose between “I’m very tired” and “I’m tired”, “It’s so beautiful here!” and “It’s beautiful here!”, to find out possible chances of different genders using intensifiers. As is suggested in the table, 30 out of 51 (60.78%) male participants picked the choice with intensifier for Question 3, while that of female stands higher at 45 out of 51 (88.24%). For Question 4, there is only a slight difference in male and female participants’ choice regarding intensifier as most of them (86.27% and 88.24% respectively) choose the answer with intensifier. From their answer, it can be told, most males tend to include intensifiers in their speech, and sometimes they use them as often as females do.

In Table 1 are figures of different options male and female participants chose in Question 3 and 4.

2.3.2 Analysis of use of hedges

To learn about use of hedges by people of different genders, two similar ranking questions, Question 5 and 6, are integrated to see how participants will rank the answers with and without hedges. Question 5 asks about what they will say if they want to show people a newly-opened café is good and Question 6 a mobile phone is good. The bar charts in Table 2 show their answers. The two tables below demonstrate their ranking of the answers.

Before further interpretation of the bar charts, it is necessary to know how these figures are calculated. The figures above each bar is this option’s scored composite average which is calculated in following method: scored composite average = $(\sum \text{frequency} \times \text{weight value}) / \text{total number of people filling in this question}$. Weight value of the first option is the number of the total options in this question, and the that of the second option is the number minus 1 from the first weight value, the rest in the same manner. For instance, in Question 5, the weight value of first option is 3, that of the second option is 2, the third 1. Frequency constitutes the times this option is chosen in this place, for example, if the first option is chosen to rank in the first place twice, then its frequency is 2. To conclude, the higher the scored composite average is, the closer it is to the first place in the ranking.

Based on this calculation method, it is apparent that male and female’s rankings of the options in Question 5 and 6 are consistent with each other. Their preferences in using

hedges are the same. For example, in Question 5, the option that wins the first place is the one with hedges, that wins the second place doesn't have hedges, and that in the last place has hedges. This applies to both men and women, However, there is a slightly more female choosing options with hedges. Take Question 6 as an example, in first two options with hedges, there are more females ranking them as their top choices (3.14 compared with male's 3.06; 2.84 compared with male's 2.73); in last option without hedges, there are less female giving it high rank (1.61 compared with men's 2.06).

To sum up, male and female participants share similar trends in using hedges as males use as much as hedges as females do, and females use expressions without hedges just like males do.

2.3.3 Analysis of use of swear words

Questions 7 and 8 give participants two options: one is swearing word, the other not, to see which one they will say when they curse others. The result is as shown in Table 3. From the table, it is apparent that for Question 7, 74.51% of males and 60.78% of females suggest they will employ swear words to express their feelings. Same with Question 7, Question 8 has 74.51% of male participants claim they will use swear words, but only 49.02% female participants will use them. Conclusion drawn from the data in this respect, female participants are probably less inclined to use swear words than male do.

2.3.4 Analysis of use of interjections

Question 9, also a multiple choice, inquires do participants think they use many injection words in daily life. Three options are provided as many, few, and medium. The pie charts in Figure 2 display male and female participants' answers respectively. Comparing the two charts, we can see that 61% of female participants believe they use interjections very often while only 29% of males hold the same view. Also, male participants who deem themselves only use interjections sometimes are as twice as that of female participants. Overall, female participants use more interjections than male. There's not clear evidence suggesting convergence in terms of use of interjections.

In the last question, Question 10, participants are asked are how is it different in gender languages, especially on vocabulary level. Their answers are as follows: From the graph, we can tell most students (65.69%) see males and females are in about the similar level of convergence regarding their vocabulary use. Only 22% of them deem there are tremendous differences in gender languages, and the rest of them (13%) believes there is little difference. In other words, participants don't view languages between different genders drastically distinct from each other.

2.4 Survey result

Underpinned by the data collected from the questionnaire, analysis above reveals that there's convergence in language in first two fields (intensifiers and hedges) but not in the last two (swear words and interjections) between two genders. Females don't use swear words like males do, and they use interjections a lot more than males do. The improving equality between male and female, same education system and similar social environment explain the language convergence between male and female. In terms of disparity in swear words and interjections, it is probably caused by men and women's biological features and different family cultivation.

One thing to note is that this survey also has some imperfections. Firstly, the participants are not sufficiently diverse considering their age, status, and field of job or study. Three quarters of them being college students, aging from 18 to 24, even if from different grades, may fail to represent other people's language choice in different ages and working fields. Secondly, participants' answers may lack validity as conclusion comes not from their speech like recording or interview but their answers to their speech behavior. In this case, the answers might be subjective.

3. Conclusion

Based on gender language differences in intensifiers, hedges, swear words and interjections, as well as social constructionist gender theory and data collected from questionnaires, this paper finds that there is obvious convergence in use of intensifiers and hedges, while little is detected in swear words and interjections between two gender languages. The reasons of such a result comes from factors such as social expectation, family education and gender status. Knowledge on the similarities between male and female languages will generate insights for further study on gender language in syntactical and pragmatic aspects to minimize misunderstandings.

Tables and Figures

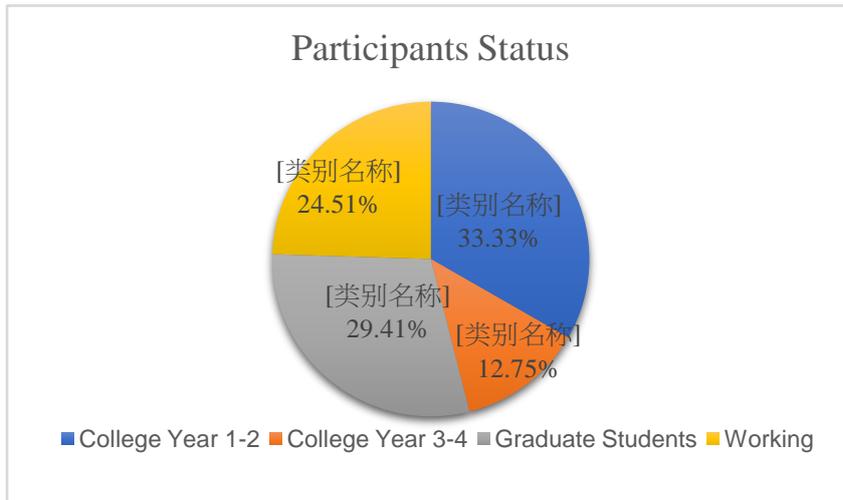
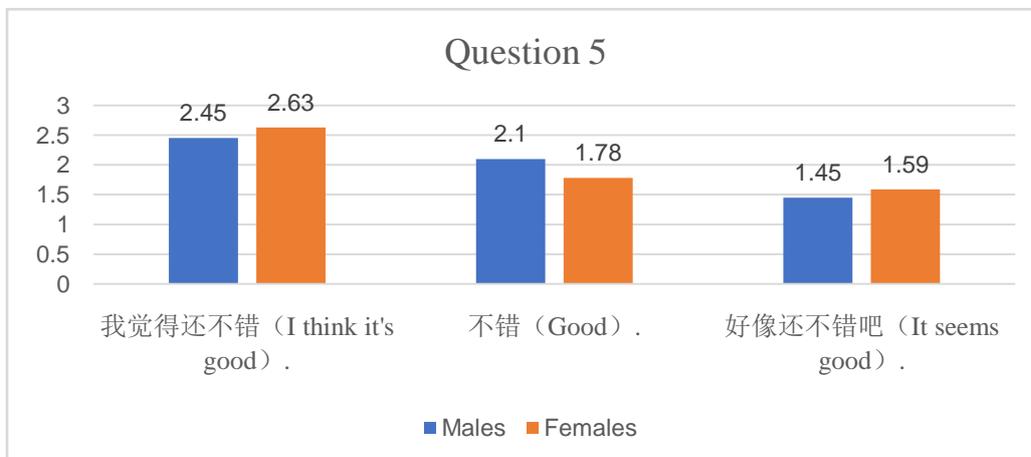


Figure 1 Participant status

Questions	Options	Frequency		Percentages	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Question 3	I'm <u>very</u> tired.	31	45	60.78%	88.24%
	I'm tired.	20	6	39.22%	11.76%
Question 4	这的风景真美啊 (It's <u>so</u> beautiful here)!	44	45	86.27%	88.24%
	这风景美丽 (It's beautiful here)!	7	6	13.73%	11.76%

Table 1 Question 3 & 4 and answers



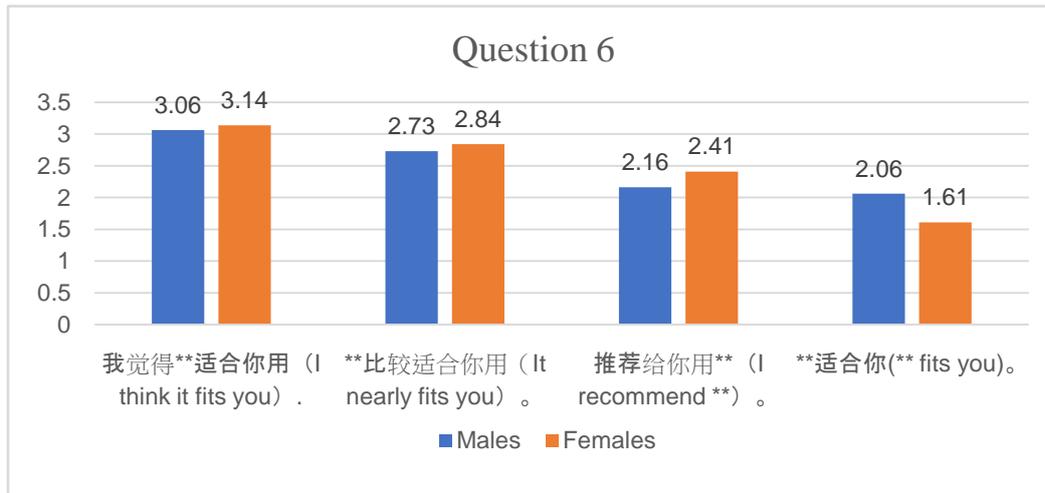


Table 2 Question 5& 6 and answers

Questions	Options	Frequency		Percentages	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
Question 7	他妈的 (similar with fuck) !	38	31	74.51%	60.78%
	真恶心/真缺德 (It's so bad of him/ her)。	13	20	25.49%	39.22%
Question 8	我靠 (Damn)!	38	25	74.51%	49.02%
	我去 (Oops)!	13	26	25.49%	50.98%

Table 3 Question 7& 8 and answers

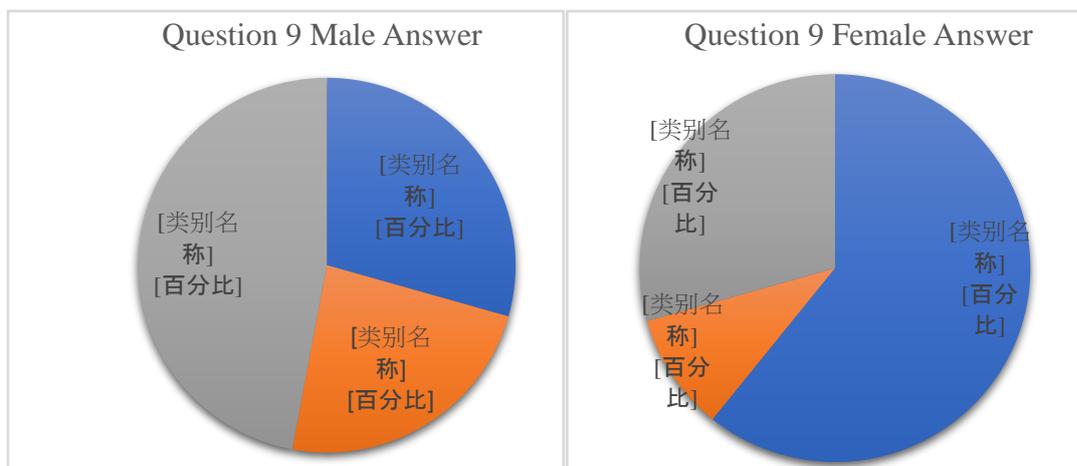


Figure 2 Question 9 & 10 and answers

Questions	Options	Frequency	Percentages
Question 10	多 (Very different)	22	21.57%
	少 (About the same)	13	12.57%
	一般 (Half half)	67	65.69%

Table 5 Question 10 and answers

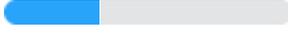
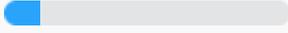
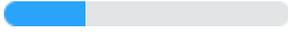
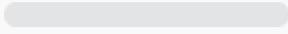
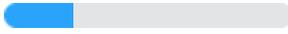
Appendix: Questionnaire

On Convergence in Gender Language

Q1 Your gender : [\[multiple choice\]](#)

Option	Number	Percentage
Male	51	 50%
Female	51	 50%
Total	102	

Q2 Your current work/study status : [\[multiple choice\]](#)

Option	Number	Percentage
1 st -2 nd year, college	34	 33.33%
3 rd -4 th year, college	13	 12.75%
Graduate student	30	 29.41%
Phd	0	 0%
At work	25	 24.51%
Total	102	

Q3 How would you express “you are tired.”? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
I’m very tired.	76	 74.51%
I’m tired.	26	 25.49%
Total	102	

Q4 What would you say to compliment natural landscape ? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
It’s so beautiful !	89	 87.25%
It’s beautiful !	13	 12.75%
Total	102	

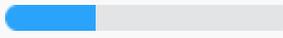
Q5 What would you say to show “the new restaurant is good ? [rank orders]

Option	Average score
I think it’s good.	2.54
Good.	1.94
It seems good.	1.52

Q6 How would you recommend a new phone to your friend ? [rank orders]

Option	Average score
I think it fits you.	3.1
It probably fits you.	2.78
I recommend it.	2.28
It fits you.	1.83

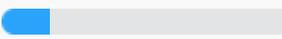
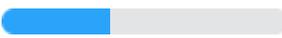
Q7 What words would you use when you are extremely irritated ? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
Fuck!	69	 67.65%
It's so bad of him/her!	33	 32.35%
Total	102	

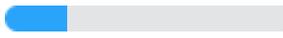
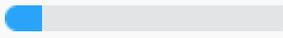
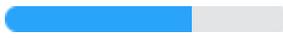
Q8 Which one would you say if you met something unfair? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
Damn!	63	 61.76%
Opps!	39	 38.24%
Total	102	

Q9 Do you think you use injection words very often such as "Oh My God/Goodness" ? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
Very often	46	 45.1%
Sometimes	17	 16.67%
So so	39	 38.24%
Total	102	

Q10 How different do you think male and female are in terms of using vocabularies? [multiple choice]

Option	Number	Percentage
Very different	22	 21.57%
About the same	13	 12.75%
Half half	67	 65.69%
Total	102	

This questionnaire can be retrieved from <https://www.wjx.cn/jq/22991102.aspx>

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