

The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology: Division of Humanities/Centre for Language Education

HUMA 1000: Cultures and Values: **Cover sheet for final draft of term essay**

Full name	
Student ID	
Writing workshop section number	
Writing workshop instructor	
Essay Question (copy and paste from the document on the LMES site)	Linguistically, are men really from Mars and women from Venus?

Declaration: The attached essay represents my own work. I have read and understood the University's policies on academic honesty and I confirm that the attached work conforms to these policies.

Please type your name:

Response to feedback: note here the comments from your instructor you have responded to (you can copy these from your feedback sheet).

- I introduced the idea of a stereotype in the opening sentence of body paragraph 2 and changed the rhetorical question into a statement.
- I rephrased the last sentence of body paragraph 3 to make it sound more formal
- I removed my counter argument from the conclusion and incorporated it into the first body paragraph

Linguistically, are men really from Mars and women from Venus?

One of the defining features of humanity is our ability to use language. It is a tool so dynamic it can inspire people to die for their country or be used as a powerful expression of love. Despite this, it is still widely debated whether there are communication differences between the two genders, with some going as far as to say that “men are from Mars and women are from Venus.” This would suggest that men and women are polar opposites when it comes to language. However even though there might be some differences, they are definitely not this extreme. What tends to be mistaken for clear gender differences can sometimes be explained by the power status of individuals, or are blatant stereotypes proclaiming that women are the talkative sex and men are simply poor communicators.

It seems almost impossible to evaluate gender norms without looking through a lens of “gender polarization” (Bern, 1993), forcing us to assume that men’s and women’s behaviour is dichotomous. This influences the oversimplification that men and women talk differently due to their sex and fails to take into consideration external factors such as power dynamics. An example of a hierarchal environment where the status of individuals greatly effects communication is the workplace – and one aspect of discourse commonly studied is interruption. A meta-analysis of gender differences in interruption included literature from 1965 to 1991 (Clarke et al, 1993). They found that there was no significant difference in amount of interruptions between genders, regardless of cross-sex or same-sex interactions and noted that differences did occur between employee and boss. The results revealing that gender did not play a role in the outcome suggests that men and women’s linguistic behaviour greatly overlaps when the status of the individuals are considered. This overlap was consolidated by Lena Gavrusova (1995) when she examined recordings of small talk in the workplace. One recording was between two males who were discussing the quality of their computers and another between two females who were discussing clothing. The researcher found that the framing of the conversation was always controlled by the higher status individual. Using the work place as an example, we can appreciate that a powerful factor that influences communication is not mainly the gender of the individuals, but indeed the hierarchical relationship between the two.

A common stereotype regarding women is that they like to gossip, talk, and verbally externalise their emotions. This is perpetuated by the idea that women talk more than men, but the accuracy of this claim is questionable. A meta-analysis of 73 studies of children concluded that girls did in fact speak more than boys, however the difference was so small it was negligible (Leaper et al, 2004). Interestingly, this difference was only observed when the child was talking to a parent, and no difference was recorded when they were speaking amongst friends. The same researcher then conducted a second met-analysis to see if this was a trend amongst adults as well. This time the results showed that men where the ones who talked more, although the difference was again statistically negligible (Leaper et al, 2007). One piece of soundbite science that contributed majorly to this stereotype, was a claim from the popular science book “The Female Brain”, which detailed that women on average use 20,000 words a day and men only used 7,000 words a day. This is contradicted by a study that recorded the conversations of people within a 17-hour period which found that the women on average uttered 16,215 words and the men uttered 15,669 words (Hammond, 2013). Unfortunately, the idea that “women talk more” is often seen as a more acceptable way of saying “women talk too much”. However, this belief is challenged by various scientific studies revealing that verbal usage between the sexes are almost identical.

Not only has the literal amount that women speak been generalised, but their linguistic ability has been too. It is common for people to believe that women are more verbally skilled. Although this may seem like a positive stereotype, it re-enforces the idea that women are better at jobs reliant on

communication and people skills (teacher, nurse, caretaker), and worse at jobs that rely on logic and reasoning (lawyer, scientist, banking). This categorisation of jobs is over-simplistic as, for example, a nurse with good interpersonal skills but little logic is just as troubling as a highly logical lawyer with little communication skills (Cameron, 2007). Many jobs simply need multifaceted individuals, therefore it is not surprising that scientific literature has found large similarities between the sexes when it comes to linguistic ability. A meta-analysis from 165 studies (1,418,899 participants) conducted on verbal ability revealed a slight female advantage, but the deviation was so small the researchers deemed it meaningless (Hyde, 1988). Another meta-analysis of 25 studies that aimed to examine the difference in communication behaviours and methodologies between male and female managers, found minimal difference even in a workplace environment (Anderson et al, 1991). Furthermore, Amanda Holstrom examined functional communication skills and communication values within same-sex and cross-sex friendships and concluded that sex was only a slight influencing factor and not as significant as previously believed (Holstrom, 2009). Evidently, there is a large amount of research suggesting that both men and women are capable communicators, falsifying the myth men are less verbally qualified.

The idea that men and women communicate completely differently has seemingly become a truism, nonetheless research suggests that we are linguistically more alike than we may think. In the workplace, the language we use is greatly dictated by our position and the hierarchical nature of workplace relationships. For example, the individual with the most power tends to speak more and controls the conversation, regardless of gender. Furthermore, stereotypes such as “women talk more” and “men are bad communicators” are confronted by vast bodies of work suggesting that men and women do indeed speak comparatively both in quantity and quality. Linguistically comparing men to Mars and women to Venus suggests clear and extensive differences between the two; however the true beauty of language is that anyone can master it, whether you’re a man or a woman.

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