

Gender Similarities and Differences in Language

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Abstract

In this review, gender-related variations in language are examined. It is argued that language both reflects and maintains gender divisions in society. English and other languages have inherent gender biases (e.g., grammatical gender, generic use of masculine forms, gendered titles, family surnames). In addition, average gender differences are indicated in children's and adults' uses of language. These occur in talkativeness, conversation topic preferences, turn-taking and interruption, and the coordination of affiliative and assertive functions in speech acts. However, when statistically significant average gender differences are indicated, the magnitude of the difference is usually negligible or small on most measures. Furthermore, the magnitude and direction of gender differences in the use of language are moderated by contextual variables (e.g., partner familiarity, gender composition, activity).

Key Words: human sex differences, sex roles, sexism, language, speech, conversation, communication, social interaction, aggression, intimacy

Research on gender-related variations in language has been conducted in psychology (e.g., Aries, 1996), linguistics (e.g., Tannen, 1994), communications (e.g., Dindia & Canary, 2006), sociology (e.g., West & Zimmerman, 1991), anthropology (e.g., Maltz & Borker, 1982), and feminist studies (e.g., Crawford, 1995), among other fields. Several edited volumes (e.g., Dindia & Canary, 2006; Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003) and textbooks (e.g., Coates, 2004; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Wood, 2013) on the topic have been published. In addition, best-selling books, magazine articles, and television programs have addressed the general public's curiosity about presumed gender differences in language and communication (e.g., Gray, 1992; Tannen, 1990). As reviewed here, empirical research calls into question some of the common assumptions that many laypersons may have about the incidence and magnitude of gender differences in language.

Narrowing the Scope of the Present Review

Research on language and gender has accelerated in the past three decades. In 1975, Thorne and Henley were able to compile an annotated bibliography of nearly all known studies on the topic. This would be a nearly impossible task today. A PsycInfo search (conducted September 15, 2013) using "subject = (gender OR human sex differences) AND subject = (language OR conversation OR speech)" returned 3,414 results. Given the limited length of the present review of gender similarities and differences in language, it will necessarily be selective and incomplete.

To narrow the scope of the material reviewed, a few decisions were made. First, when possible, evidence based on observations of people's conversation was favored over those based on self-report measures. Self-reports of language style and other social behaviors can be suspect due either to inaccurate self-views or to concerns with self-presentation (e.g., Rock, 1981).

Second, the review is based on studies employing quantitative methods. Ethnographic and other qualitative approaches are helpful during the discovery phase of research. These methods can highlight some of the ways that gender-related variations in language may depend on particular contexts or vary across individuals' sociocultural backgrounds (e.g., Goodwin, 2002; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001; Thorne, 1993; also see Holmes & Meyerhoff [2003] for reviews). Although qualitative methods can provide a rich picture of interactive context, they are correspondingly limited because they do not indicate the reliability (statistical significance) of the observed patterns and the degree to which different factors might be related.

Finally, when relevant meta-analyses were available, they were used to summarize average gender similarities and differences for particular aspects of language. Meta-analysis has the advantage of providing an aggregate summary of statistical significance and average effect size for a gender difference across studies. This method also has the benefit of testing various moderators that may predict if and when particular differences are most likely. At the same time, meta-analysis is limited to detecting patterns only among those studies that have been conducted on a topic.

When evaluating findings from studies comparing females and males, both the effect size and the statistical significance should be considered. Even when a statistically significant gender difference in behavior occurs, there is often much overlap between females and males (Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Hyde, 2005). The magnitude of difference between two groups is known as the *effect size*. One metric is Cohen's *d*, which reflects the difference between group means in standard deviation (*SD*) units. It also reflects the amount of overlap in the distributions of the two groups' scores. According to Cohen's (1988) guidelines, differences are considered *large* when the effect size $d = .8$ or greater (less than 53 percent overlap), *medium* when $d = .5$ (66 percent overlap), or *small* when $d = .2$ (85 percent overlap). An effect size below .2 is therefore seen as negligible (i.e., trivial). The effect sizes associated with various average gender differences will be regularly indicated throughout this review. The reader is advised to keep in mind these guidelines for interpreting their magnitude.

Organization of the Review

The rest of the review is divided into the following sections. First, gender biases in English and

other languages are reviewed. Second, the evidence for gender similarities and differences in people's use of language in conversation is examined. Finally, some conclusions and ideas for future directions are offered.

Gender Biases in Languages

Feminist scholars, sociolinguists, and psychologists have highlighted ways that English and other languages can be construed as sexist or gender-biased (see Graddol & Swann, 1989; Henley, 1989; Leaper & Bigler, 2004; Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczensy, 2007, for reviews). Forms of gender bias in language reviewed below include the regular marking of gender in words, the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns, gendered titles, family surnames, and essentialist language.

Marking Gender in Languages

There are three variations in the ways that gender is marked in languages across the world (Stahlberg et al., 2007). First, in *gendered languages*, nouns and pronouns are gendered (e.g., Spanish, Russian, Hebrew, Hindi). Because each noun is gendered, there are no gender-neutral terms that can be used to refer to persons. When referring to both females and males, the masculine form is commonly used. For example, to refer generally to "adults" in Spanish, the likely word would be "adultos" (masculine form) rather than "adultas" (feminine form). Second, in *natural gender languages*, only pronouns are gendered (e.g., English, Swedish). For example, in English, singular third-person pronouns (he/his and she/her) are gendered but not the nouns. Finally, in *genderless languages*, gender is not grammatically marked in either nouns or pronouns (e.g., Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish, Mandarin); however, genderless languages do have words that can be used to distinguish gender (e.g., words for female and male). For example, in Turkish, the third-person singular pronoun "o" is used to refer to either a female or a male. But the words for "woman" and "man" in Turkish are "kadin" and "adam," respectively.

Overcoming gender bias in language may be more challenging in languages with grammatical gender, such as Spanish. Each noun is marked as feminine or masculine. Accordingly, virtually every sentence reifies the importance of gender distinctions in people's minds. Increasing the salience of gender, in turn, may increase the likelihood that people use gender to categorize and stereotype others (Bigler & Liben, 2007). By extension, one might expect that languages with a grammatical gender

may be more likely than English (and other natural gender languages) to elicit gender-biased views (see Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). To test this hypothesis, Wasserman and Weseley (2009) randomly assigned high school students to complete a measure of gender attitudes written in either English or a language with a grammatical gender (Spanish or French). Students were more likely to endorse gender-stereotypical attitudes after completing the survey in Spanish or French than in English. Thus, there is tentative evidence that the manner gender is marked in a language may have some influence on individuals' gender-related thinking.

Optional Marking of People's Gender

As previously explained, in natural gender languages such as English, it is possible to use gender-neutral nouns to index people (e.g., "student," "parent," "person"). This means that, to some extent, a choice is made whether to linguistically mark other people's gender in a statement. There are some contexts when it is clearly pertinent to do so in the conversation. For example, a speaker would likely distinguish between females and males when discussing certain physical or medical topics that affect the sexes differently. However, there are many times when speakers unnecessarily mark people's gender in conversation. For example, many teachers commonly welcome their students with expressions such as "Good morning, girls and boys" (as opposed to "Good morning, students"). In this situation, the gender of the persons is not pertinent. (Why is it necessary for a teacher to separately greet the girls and the boys?) By way of contrast, it would seem strange if the teacher greeted children by their race, eye color, or handedness (Leaper & Bigler, 2004). The linguistic practice of unnecessarily addressing people by their gender both reflects and reinforces the organization of social life along gender lines. That is, the repeated use of gender labels in discourse increases the salience of gender in children's (and adults') daily lives—and thereby increases the likelihood of gender stereotyping (Bigler & Liben, 2007).

Generic Use of Masculine Nouns and Pronouns

As noted above, one form of linguistic gender bias in English and many other languages is the generic use of masculine nouns and pronouns. Examples in English include terms such as "man-kind" or "chairman," as well as the use of "he" to

refer generally to all persons (e.g., "When a student studies for an exam, he is likely to do well"). In many languages with grammatical gender, the masculine form is used to refer to both genders. For example, in Spanish, reference to "the children" would commonly be made using "los niños" (the masculine form) rather than "las niñas" (the feminine form).

The use of masculine linguistic forms to refer to general cases is considered problematic for three inter-related reasons. First, studies with children (e.g., Hyde, 1984; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2002) and adults (e.g., Hamilton, 1988; Martyna, 1980) indicate that people tend to imagine male characters when reading material written using the masculine generic. Thus, girls and women who read material using the masculine generic may be less likely to find it self-relevant and less likely to identify with the characters (Conkright, Flannagan, & Dykes, 2000; Stout & Dasgupta, 2011). Second, when the masculine linguistic form is the default, it may reinforce the tendency to view gender-neutral cases as male. For example, researchers have observed that parents and teachers were overwhelmingly more likely to label gender-neutral animal characters in stories as male than female (DeLoache, Cassidy, & Carpenter, 1987; Gelb, 1989; Lambdin, Greer, Jibotian, Wood, & Hamilton, 2003). Finally, the pervasive use of the masculine generic systematically reinforces the higher status of males relative to females. In this regard, MacKay (1980) noted that the masculine generic meets the criteria for effective propaganda: frequent occurrence, early age of exposure, and association with high-prestige sources (e.g., teachers, books).

In the United States and many other English-speaking countries, the more inclusive use of "he or she" rather than "he" to refer to generic cases has increased in prevalence over the years. Nonetheless, some people resist making these changes. Perhaps it is not surprising that researchers found gender-inclusive language was less likely to be favored by individuals with sexist than non-sexist attitudes (Parks & Robertson, 2004; Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004).

Gendered Titles

Henley (1989) noted that linguistic practices in English and other languages often define women as subordinate to men. One such practice is the use of titles preceding surnames. In English and other languages, there is a single salutation for men, which is *Mr.* However, until recent decades,

a woman was addressed variously as *Miss* if she was unmarried and *Mrs.* if she was married. There is obvious inequity inherent in these naming practices. A woman's marital status is immediately signaled by her title, whereas a man's status is not. Thus, through usage of these titles, a woman is defined by her relationship to a man—but not the reverse.

Coinciding with the feminist movement in the 1970s, the term *Ms.* was introduced into the English language. *Ms.* and *Mr.* are parallel titles whereby neither signals the individual's marital status. Whereas *Ms.* was often viewed as radical when first introduced, it has gained wide acceptance over the years (Crawford, Stark, & Renner, 1998). Today, *Ms.* is the standard used in business and journalism. Furthermore, research generally suggests that the *Ms.* title has positive connotations (Crawford et al., 1998) and may possibly reduce gender-biased perceptions of women's agency and competence in professional settings (Dion & Schuller, 1990; Malcomson & Sinclair, 2007).

Despite the mainstream acceptance of *Ms.* as a title, many speakers and writers continue to prefer *Miss* and *Mrs.* For example, in an online survey, Lawton, Blakemore, and Vartanian (2003) found that married women were much more likely to favor *Mrs.* over *Ms.* The same researchers also found that many young women (below age 20 years) misconstrued the meaning of *Ms.* to signify an unmarried woman. The researchers inferred that some younger women might consider *Ms.* as a title for single women who are too old for *Miss*. Paradoxically, if the latter view became a common linguistic practice, it would define women even more than the traditional *Miss/Mrs.* distinction has done. That is, not only would women be defined by marital status (*Miss* vs. *Mrs.*), they would additionally be defined by age (*Miss* for single/younger and *Ms.* for single/older).

Family Surnames

Another common gender inequity in naming occurs in the selection of a surname when a woman and a man marry. The traditional practice in many cultures has been for the woman to take the man's family name. Although most women take their husband's last name upon marriage, it is now common in many Western societies for women not to change their name. Also, for some couples, the solution is to hyphenate both last names (e.g., Brown-Davis).

Still another option is for the couple to create a novel surname that each partner adopts (e.g., see Rapacon, 2011).

Surveys indicate that women and men commonly cite tradition as a justification for why the wife should take the husband's family surname (Robnett & Leaper, 2013; Twenge, 1997). When women cite tradition, however, they may not realize its historical basis. The practice of a woman taking her husband's family name goes back to patriarchal traditions whereby the woman was considered property of the man (Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005). A related tradition is paternalism, which refers to the notion that the man is responsible for protecting the woman in exchange for her childbearing and housekeeping. Attitudes in support of paternalistic practices are known as *benevolent sexism* (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Robnett and Leaper (2013) observed in a sample of heterosexual undergraduate women and men that benevolent sexism was positively related to favoring the adoption of the man's family name in marriage.

Hoffnung (2006) examined correlates of married women's name choices in the United States. Factors related to nontraditional name choices (e.g., not changing name, hyphenation) included higher educational level, older age at marriage, higher career commitment, and stronger feminist attitudes. Also, women of color were more likely than white women to favor nontraditional name choices.

The increasing acceptance of hyphenated names was implicated in a study of American college students (Forbes, Adams-Curtis, White, & Hamm, 2002). Participants were asked to rate hypothetical married women and men with either hyphenated or nonhyphenated married names. The students were more likely to rate married men and women higher in both instrumental/assertive and expressive/affiliative qualities if the targets had hyphenated names.

Even when a woman retains her own family name after marriage to a man, another dilemma that typically remains is what surname to give any offspring. The traditional practice in many cultures, of course, has been for offspring to take the father's last name. Children are rarely given the mother's last name. (In many Spanish-speaking countries, however, children are commonly given both parents' last names.) One contemporary alternative for many Western couples is to hyphenate both

parents' family names. As a way to retain family names, however, this strategy will prove challenging in succeeding generations when two individuals with hyphenated names get married (e.g., Jane Garcia-Harris and Hugo Cheng-Stein become married). Still another strategy mentioned earlier is to create a novel family name for the child, as well as for both parents.

Essentialist Language

Essentialism is another means by which gender bias may occur in language (Gelman, Taylor, & Nguyen, 2004). Essentialist language occurs when males and females are each described as having inherent qualities. Essentialist statements can be either prescriptive or descriptive. Examples of *prescriptive* essentialist statements include "Only girls can play with dolls" or "Only boys can play with footballs." These sentences explicitly state that certain qualities are supposed to be associated with one gender rather than the other. Alternatively, examples of *descriptive* essentialist statements include "Girls play with dolls" or "Boys like football." Unlike the prescriptive statements, descriptive statements do not assert that only girls can play with dolls or that only boys can play football. However, descriptive essentialist statements offer broad generalizations about each gender. They do not acknowledge the possibilities of within-gender variability (e.g., "Some—but not all—girls play with dolls") or overlap between the genders (e.g., "There are *more* boys *than* girls who like football").

Researchers have observed mothers commonly using descriptive essentialist language—but not prescriptive essentialist language—in their speech to children (Friedman, Leaper, & Bigler, 2007; Gelman et al., 2004). Furthermore, in these studies, descriptive essentialist statements were commonly expressed even among mothers who endorsed gender-egalitarian attitudes. Whether they intend to do so or not, adults who use essentialist statements may perpetuate gender stereotypes in children (Bigler & Liben, 2007; Leaper & Bigler, 2004).

Another way that language can essentialize gender is through using the terms "feminine" and "masculine" to describe social behaviors (Leaper, 1995; Lott, 1981). This usage became popular with the advent of the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (Bem, 1974) and the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (Spence & Helmreich, 1978) to measure self-perceived attributes. Both measures include separate Femininity and Masculinity scales comprised of items assessing self-perceived affiliative

attributes (e.g., understanding, emotional) and assertive attributes (e.g., self-confident, independent), respectively. However, a problem with labeling behaviors as "feminine" and "masculine" is that it perpetuates the notion that certain behaviors are inherently either female or male (Lott, 1981; also see Leaper, 1995). Thus, for a man to show affection implies that he is somehow not masculine; conversely, for a woman to act confident implies that she is somehow not feminine.

Alternatives to describing behavior clusters as "feminine" and "masculine" include the terms affiliative and assertive (e.g., Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Leaper & Smith, 2004), communal and agentic (Bakan, 1966), or socioemotional and instrumental (Bales, 1950, 1970), respectively. These options allow us to consider these behaviors as *human* attributes that occur in both women and men (Lott, 1981). If one wishes to specifically discuss how these behaviors are differentially socialized in males and females, the compound adjectives "masculine-stereotyped" and "feminine-stereotyped" can be used to characterize them. The latter usage of the term "stereotyped" underscores the point that these behaviors are socially prescribed for (rather than inherent to) persons based on their gender.

Gender-Related Variations in Language Use

Having previously reviewed some of the ways that English and other languages can reflect gender bias, the next section addresses ways that males and females sometimes differ in their uses of language in social interaction. That is, gender differences and similarities in the areas of talkativeness, turn-taking and interruption, conversation topic preferences, and speech acts are explored.

The average effect size associated with a particular gender difference will be reported when a relevant meta-analysis has been conducted. The reader is advised to review the conventions for interpreting effect sizes described in the section "Narrowing the Scope of the Present Review." As noted later, most significant average gender differences in language are typically in the negligible or small range. However, meta-analyses often point to various moderators affecting the likelihood and the magnitude of gender differences. These include individual characteristics (e.g., age), activity settings (e.g., conversation topic), and the relationship among interaction partners (e.g., familiarity, gender composition). Cultural and social-structural factors may also moderate

some gender differences; unfortunately, however, the numbers comparing studies of individuals from diverse backgrounds have been insufficient to consider these moderators in meta-analyses.

Talkativeness

Many people stereotype women as talkative relative to men (see James & Drakich, 1993). In support of this view, some studies found that women were more likely than men to cite talking as a favorite activity in their same-gender friendships (see Aries, 1996). However, stereotypes are often inaccurate. Also, stating a preference for a particular activity such as talking does not necessarily mean that one performs that behavior more often than others. To help shed some light on the extent that gender differences in talkativeness might occur, two separate meta-analyses were conducted of studies of children (Leaper & Smith, 2004) and adults (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). (Positive effect sizes reflect higher average talkativeness for women than men.) The meta-analysis of child studies indicated that girls were significantly more talkative than were boys, although the average effect size was negligible in magnitude ($d = .11$). In the meta-analysis of adult studies, there was also a significant average gender difference in talkativeness with a negligible effect size; and it was men rather than women who tended to score higher in average talkativeness ($d = -.14$).

A study published in the same year as Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis is also revealing. Mehl, Vazire, Ramirez-Esparza, Slatcher, and Pennebaker (2007) recorded the speech of 396 adults aged 17–29 years in the United States and Mexico over 4–10 days. They found no significant gender difference in talkativeness ($d = .07$). This study is notable, given the researchers were sampling natural conversations over the course of several days. Thus, the overall trend—from Mehl and colleagues' (2007) recent study and the two previously cited meta-analyses—is the absence of a meaningful average gender difference in talkativeness.

There may be certain conditions when more substantive gender differences in talkativeness are more likely to occur. The aforementioned meta-analyses indicated significant moderator effects on average gender differences in talkativeness. Among studies of children (Leaper & Smith, 2004), one significant moderator was the children's age. A significantly larger effect size was seen in studies of children below 3 years ($d = .32$) than studies of children 3–16 years of age ($d = .08$). The greater talkativeness among girls than boys during the toddler years may

possibly reflect girls' faster average rate of language development—with boys eventually catching up (Gleason & Ely, 2002).

Another moderator of gender differences in children's talkativeness was the conversation partner (Leaper & Smith, 2004). There was not a significant average gender difference across studies of children's interactions with peers ($d = .03$). However, a significant difference in talkativeness—with girls higher than boys—was seen in children's interactions with adults ($d = .19$). Most of the child–adult studies were with mothers. This is pertinent because in a different meta-analysis Leaper, Anderson, and Sanders (1998) found that, on average, mothers were more talkative with daughters than with sons ($d = .29$). (There were not enough studies to consider child gender effects on fathers' talkativeness.) The direction of possible influence is not clear, however. The child average gender difference in talkativeness may result because some mothers talk more to daughters than sons. A second possibility is that girls are more likely than boys to initiate talk with mothers, and this leads to greater mother talkativeness with daughters than sons. A third alternative is that there is a reciprocal influence whereby, on average, mothers and daughters each initiate talk more to one another than do mothers and sons.

Significant moderators of gender differences in talkativeness were also indicated for adults (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). One was the gender composition of the interaction partners. Men's greater talkativeness was more likely during mixed-gender interactions ($d = -.28$) than same-gender interactions ($d = -.08$). This pattern suggests that greater male talkativeness may reflect some men's attempts to establish dominance in mixed-gender interactions (Carli, 1990; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). During mixed-gender interactions, some men may wish to establish their authority through talking; at the same time, some women may wish to affirm their support through deference.

Another contextual moderator of gender differences in adult talkativeness was the activity setting. This factor influenced the magnitude as well as the direction of average gender differences. Men were significantly more talkative during discussions of impersonal topics ($d = -.79$) or assigned decision-making tasks ($d = -.13$). In contrast, women were significantly more talkative during socioemotional contexts that involved either interactions with children or self-disclosure with another adult ($d = .39$). The conversational topics in which gender differences occurred are relatively

gender-typed: Self-disclosure or discussions with children reflect the emphases on nurturance and expressiveness associated with women's traditional gender role; in contrast, decision-making tasks and discussing current events are compatible with the emphases on instrumentality and self-assertion associated with men's traditional gender role. Thus, gender-typed settings may increase the salience of gender-typed norms for some women and men and lead to correspondingly different levels of conversational engagement.

Turn-Taking and Interruption

Conversations involve different speakers taking turns to talk. Conversation analysts have been interested in how these turns are negotiated. One approach has been to consider asymmetries in the *length* of speakers' conversational turns. In Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis, different operational definitions of talkativeness were considered. One was the duration of talking. For this particular measure, significantly higher average talking time was indicated for men than women ($d = -.24$). This suggests that men were more likely to control the conversational floor for longer periods of time. In support of this dominance interpretation, Mast's (2002) meta-analysis indicated a significant average association ($r = .51$) between speaking time and measures of dominance. Moreover, the association was significantly stronger for men ($r = .56$) than women ($r = .44$).

In addition to talk time, another way that some speakers seek to control a conversation is through *interruption*. Anderson and Leaper (1998) conducted a meta-analysis to test for average gender differences in adults' use of interruption. On average, men were significantly more likely than women to interrupt during conversation—but the effect size was negligible ($d = .12$). The researchers further differentiated between intrusive interruptions (i.e., breaking into the other speaker's utterance) and other types of interruption (e.g., short acknowledgements). A more meaningful effect size ($d = .23$) was indicated among studies specifically looking at intrusive interruptions. Gender composition (same- vs. mixed-gender interactions) was not a significant moderator, which may contradict some earlier proposals that some men use interruption to dominate women in conversation (see Aries, 1996, for a review). Instead, it appears that intrusive interruptions may be more likely for men than women—regardless of the partner's gender.

Conversation Topics

People discuss a variety of topics in their conversations. Some examples include relationships, personal problems, work, sports, entertainment, fashion, health, finances, philosophical ideas, and current events. There have been no meta-analyses testing for average gender differences in conversation topic preferences; however, there are two observational studies of conversation topics among university students. First, Bischooping (1993) found women were more likely than men to discuss people and relationships (32 vs. 15 percent, respectively). In addition, Newman, Groom, Handelman, and Pennebaker (2008) similarly found that women were significantly more likely than men to reference social processes ($d = .14$). They also noted higher average incidences among men than women in discussions of money ($d = -.39$) and sports ($d = -.39$). The magnitudes of these differences are in the negligible to small range. Also, the samples are limited to college students. Therefore, the generalizability of these findings needs to be tested in future research.

As reviewed next, there are other studies that have considered possible gender-related variations in talk about particular kinds of topics. These include discussions about personal disclosures and gossip about other people.

Self-Disclosure in Conversation

Self-disclosure refers to discussions of personal thoughts or feelings. The research literature points to greater average disclosure among females than males. First, this was indicated in a narrative review of studies examining self-disclosure during childhood and adolescence (Buhrmester & Prager, 1995). Half (49 percent) of studies indicated self-disclosure was higher among girls than boys, but 13 percent of studies found boys were higher and 38 percent found no significant difference. When age was taken into account, greater female disclosure was reported in 59 percent of studies of children aged 9–11 years and in 89 percent of studies of youth aged 12–20 years. Thus, existing reports suggest that average gender differences in self-disclosure may increase from childhood into adolescence. A meta-analysis of studies on self-disclosure in child and adolescent samples would help to clarify the magnitude of the average gender difference as well as the possible impact of moderator variables.

A meta-analysis has been conducted of studies testing for gender differences in adults' self-disclosure (Dindia & Allen, 1992). Across studies, there was a significant difference with a negligible to small effect

size, whereby greater self-disclosure was slightly more likely for women than men ($d = .18$). The gender composition of the interaction partners was a moderator. Although significant average gender differences occurred in both contexts, the effect size was more meaningful during same-gender interactions ($d = .37$) than mixed-gender interactions ($d = .13$). The partners' relationship and familiarity also moderated the effects. Average differences were larger during interactions with familiar partners (friends: $d = .28$; spouses/partners: $d = .22$) compared to interactions with strangers ($d = .07$).

Average gender differences in self-disclosure behavior reflect the gender-typed norms that often emerge in same-gender friendships. A meta-analysis of friendship expectations in children and adults indicated that females were more likely than males ($d = .39$) to expect self-disclosure, understanding, and emotional support in their same-gender friendships (Hall, 2011). Many males may actively avoid expressions of intimacy in their same-gender friendships. Traditional masculinity norms dictate that vulnerable emotions should be controlled and not shared (Levant & Richmond, 2007; Oransky & Fisher, 2009). For many traditional boys and men, self-disclosure is viewed as a sign of weakness. This socialization may begin in childhood. Some studies have found that parents were more likely to discuss emotions with daughters than sons (e.g., Aldrich & Tenenbaum, 2006; Fivush, Brotman, Buckner, & Goodman, 2000). Later in childhood, male peers may tease boys who discuss their feelings as being weak, feminine, or gay.

Over time, the demands of conforming to traditional masculinity may lead to skill deficits. Higher rates of alexithymia (the inability to put emotions into words) are positively related to hypermasculinity among boys and men (Levant & Richmond, 2007). Also, peer pressures toward emotional restrictiveness in adolescents' same-gender friendships may contribute to difficulties in later heterosexual relationships for men and women (see Leaper & Anderson, 1997, for a review). In Dindia and Allen's (1992) meta-analysis, there was a small but meaningful average gender difference in self-disclosure between heterosexual spouses ($d = .22$), with women higher than men in disclosures. If men are reluctant to share their feelings to their partners, it can undermine the quality of a relationship. Studies indicate that self-disclosure is related to relationship satisfaction in heterosexual couples (e.g., Finkenauer & Hazam, 2000; Sprecher & Hendrick, 2004) and in lesbian and gay couples (Kurdek, 2005).

Online Self-Disclosure

The advent of electronic social media (e.g., e-mail, text messaging, Facebook, etc.) has broadened the means by which individuals can communicate with one another. As with other forms of communication, electronic media can be used to pursue intimacy or aggressive goals (see the later section, "Aggressive Controlling Speech Acts"). With regards to potentially positive outcomes, online communication can stimulate self-disclosure and enhance relationship quality (see Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). The benefits of online communication with friends may be especially beneficial for adolescent boys, given the reluctance of many boys to disclose with one another in face-to-face interactions (Schouten, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2007). A question to test in future studies is whether online disclosures spill over to face-to-face interactions.

Gossip

Gossip refers to conversations about persons who are not present. Some gossip can be neutral, inasmuch that the speaker only describes something about another person in a nonevaluative manner (e.g., "I heard Jamal got a new job"). Much of the time, however, gossip involves offering some kind of positive or negative evaluation about a third party who is not present.

Several affiliative functions are associated with gossip. They include entertainment, establishing shared norms regarding desirable (and undesirable) behavior, and creating a sense of solidarity (Foster, 2004; Eckert, 1990; Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Negative gossip about a third party may also be a means to assert power in relationships by negotiating norms for acceptable behavior with friends. That is, when two speakers evaluate another person's behavior, they define what are considered appropriate social norms.

Despite a common conception of women as gossips (see Levin & Arluke, 1985), there has been surprisingly little research specifically testing for gender differences in gossip during childhood or adulthood. (Some researchers studying indirect aggression have included negative gossip in composite measures, but they usually do not separately report findings for gossip.) Among the few studies testing for gender differences specifically in gossip, the observed pattern has been of higher rates among females than males (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006; Leaper & Holliday, 1995; Levin & Arluke, 1985).

Traditional gender differences in power and status may be related to average gender differences in

gossip (Eckert, 1990; Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Men's status and self-worth have traditionally been defined through instrumental pursuits such as work and sports, whereas women's status and self-worth have been derived through their close relationships. Also, aggression and overt competition have traditionally been encouraged more in males than females (see later section "Aggressive Controlling Speech Acts"). Thus, girls and women may be more likely to negotiate their status within their friendship networks in indirect ways through gossip, whereas boys and men may be more apt to compete directly for dominance with their peers. Consistent with this interpretation, one recent study indicated that adults tend to perceive individuals who often gossip as less powerful than those who rarely gossip (Farley, 2011).

Speech Acts

One common approach in the analysis of language style has been to examine the social functions of utterances. These social functions are known as *speech acts* (e.g., Searle, 1969). Many researchers distinguish between self-assertive and affiliative functions. Assertion refers to acts that exert the individual's agency and influence, whereas affiliation refers to acts that affirm and join with the other person. Other constructs that are similar to assertion and affiliation include instrumentality and expressiveness (Bales, 1970), task and socioemotional orientations (Bales, 1950, 1970), and agency and communion (Bakan, 1966).

Whereas some researchers have framed assertive and affiliative functions as mutually exclusive (dichotomous approach), others have conceptualized them as orthogonal dimensions (multidimensional approach). The latter approach allows for the possibilities of speech acts that can range from low to high in affiliation and simultaneously range from low to high in assertion. Earlier studies of language and communication were based on the dichotomous approach (e.g., Anderson & Blanchard, 1982). But an increasing number of studies are applying a multidimensional approach, whereby high assertion and high affiliation are not viewed as mutually exclusive (e.g., Leaper, 1991; Leaper, Tenenbaum, & Shaffer, 1999; Leman, Ahmed, & Ozarow, 2005; Penman, 1980; Strough & Berg, 2000; Tenenbaum, Ford, & Alkhedairy, 2011). *Collaborative* speech acts refer to statements that are high in both affiliation and assertion. Examples include making initiatives for joint action, elaborating on the other person's comment in a relevant manner, and expressing support.

Obliging speech acts reflect high affiliation and low assertion. Examples include simple expressions of agreement, conceding to the other person's view, and requests for help. Conversely, *controlling* speech reflect high assertion and low affiliation. Examples include hostile comments, directive statements, or expressions of disagreement.

The subsequent sections address findings regarding gender-related variations in collaborative speech, obliging speech, and controlling speech. When reporting average effect sizes from meta-analyses, the direction will be positive if females scored higher than males in collaborative or obliging (i.e., high affiliation) speech acts. In contrast, the direction will be positive if males scored higher than females in controlling speech (i.e., high assertion and low affiliation). After reviewing the evidence for average gender differences in speech acts, some of the factors that moderate some of these differences will be considered.

OVERALL ASSERTIVE AND AFFILIATIVE LANGUAGE

Meta-analyses point to average gender differences in the relative emphases on affiliation and assertion in the speech acts of children (Leaper & Smith, 2004) and adults (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Findings from these meta-analyses are summarized in Table 4.1. On average, studies indicate that females were somewhat more likely than males to use speech acts high in affiliation (collaborative or obliging speech acts combined). However, the magnitudes of the average effects were small with children ($d = .26$) and negligible with adults ($d = .12$). In the same set of meta-analyses, males were slightly more likely than females to use speech acts low in affiliation and high in assertion (controlling speech acts). Although the average effect sizes were significant, the magnitudes were negligible in studies of children ($d = .11$), as well as of adults ($d = .09$). More meaningful effect sizes were often indicated when particular speech acts were examined (reviewed next).

COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE

Collaborative speech acts are high in both affiliation and assertion (Leaper, 1991; Penman, 1980). These acts include elaboration and verbal support. *Elaboration* occurs when a person builds on the prior speaker's statement in a relevant manner. For example, among children, this might include advancing the plot in a fantasy-play scenario that a friend has introduced; among adults, it includes

Table 4.1 Effect sizes and statistical significance for tests of average gender differences in speech in children and adults

Language variable	<i>k</i>	Combined <i>N</i>	<i>d</i>	95% Confidence interval (CI)	Direction
Overall Affiliative Speech					
<i>Children</i>	46	2,694	0.26*	0.16/0.28	F>M
<i>Adults</i>	54	2,781	0.12*	0.06/0.18	F>M
Elaboration/Active Understanding					
<i>Children</i>	24	1,251	0.41*	0.13/0.57	F>M
<i>Adults</i>	3	152	0.41*	0.10/0.72	F>M
Support/Praise					
<i>Children</i>	7	811	0.13	-0.01/0.26	F=M
<i>Adults</i>	10	554	0.16*	0.01/0.32	F>M
Agreements					
<i>Children</i>	9	492	0.05	-0.11/0.22	F=M
<i>Adults</i>	13	818	0.08	-0.03/0.18	F=M
Simple Acknowledgments					
<i>Children</i>	8	517	0.09	-0.08/0.26	F=M
<i>Adults</i>	26	1,577	-0.01	-0.09/0.08	F=M
Overall Assertive Speech					
<i>Children</i>	75	3,495	0.11*	0.05/0.17	M>F
<i>Adults</i>	50	2,541	0.09*	0.02/0.15	M>F
Suggestions					
<i>Children</i>	13	1,092	0.13*	0.02/0.24	M>F
<i>Adults</i>	13	934	0.27*	0.16/0.38	M>F
General Task Comments					
<i>Adults</i>	9	386	0.38*	0.20/0.56	M>F
Directives					
<i>Children</i>	38	1,806	0.23*	0.15/0.32	M>F
<i>Adults</i>	11	467	-0.06	-0.22/0.09	M=F
Disagreements					
<i>Children</i>	11	477	0.10	-0.07/0.27	M=F
<i>Adults</i>	10	499	-0.06	-0.22/0.09	M=F
Criticism					
<i>Children</i>	16	918	-0.01	-0.12/0.10	M=F
<i>Adults</i>	12	672	-0.13*	-0.25/-0.02	F>M

The above findings are from meta-analyses of gender differences in language among children (Leaper & Smith, 2004) and adults (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). “Overall affiliative language” refers to a composite of all speech acts that reflect high affiliation. “Overall assertive language” refers to a composite of all speech acts that reflect unmitigated assertion (high assertion and low affiliation). General task comments were only included in the meta-analysis of adults’ speech.

**p* < .05.

building on a partner's prior comment in ways that demonstrate active understanding. Verbal *support*, another type of collaborative speech, is expressed through the use of reassuring comments or praise. These speech acts affirm the other person and therefore reflect high affiliation; at the same time, supportive statements are moderately assertive because they are aimed at directly influencing the recipient (i.e., make the person feel better).

Average gender differences in collaborative speech have been indicated in reviews. In Leaper and Smith's (2004) meta-analysis of children's speech, elaborations (or responsive statements) were significantly more likely among girls than boys ($d = .41$). No significant gender difference in supportive statements was found, although the trend was toward a higher average among girls than boys ($d = .13$). A similar pattern was indicated in Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis of adults' speech. Elaboration was significantly more likely among women than men ($d = .41$). Supportive statements were also significantly more common among women than men, although the effect size was negligible ($d = .16$).

Average gender differences in collaborative speech have implications for close relationships. Active understanding and verbal support are associated with satisfaction in heterosexual couples (Pasch & Bradbury, 1998), as well as in gay and lesbian couples (Kurdek, 2005). Traditional gender roles, however, may disadvantage women in cross-gender relationships. Some studies have found, on average, that men were less likely than women to provide supportive responses to partners in cross-gender friendships (Leaper, Carson, Baker, Holliday, & Myers, 1995) and heterosexual relationships (Steil, 2000). This average difference has been observed in studies of heterosexual couples in America and other parts of the world including China (Xu & Burleson, 2001) and Costa Rica (Schwarzer & Gutiérrez-Doña, 2005).

One potential limitation of some of the research on spousal satisfaction and support is that many studies have been based on individuals' self-reports of perceived support in their relationships—which may not always be accurate. Neff and Karney (2005) sought to address this concern by collecting both observational and diary data of heterosexual couples' supportive responses. They found no average difference between women and men in providing verbal support. However, there were average gender differences in the *timing* of support. Women's supportive responses were tied to the severity of their spouse's stress. If their husband's

stress was more severe, then women tended to increase their positive support. In contrast, men's provision of emotional support was not related to the severity of their wives' stress.

Co-Rumination

Although verbal support is generally considered a positive sign of support, recent research suggests it is possible to have too much of a good thing. Sometimes, a personal problem can be discussed excessively in a relationship. This is known as *co-rumination* (Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007). Although actively discussing a friend's or a partner's personal problems can be perceived as supportive, it may inadvertently reinforce the other person's negative feelings about the event. A 6-month longitudinal study of children indicated that frequent co-rumination was related to increased positive friendship quality in girls as well as boys. Only for girls, however, was co-rumination additionally associated with increased anxiety and depression (Rose et al., 2007). Co-rumination may have increased these symptoms in girls but not boys because girls are at greater risk for internalizing symptoms (anxiety and depression). Also, because self-disclosure tends to be more common among girls than boys, perhaps co-rumination more readily becomes a tipping point toward distress for girls than boys.

Research on co-rumination suggests that, as with many things in life, finding the right balance is important when it comes to providing verbal support in close relationships. In addition to friendships, this is indicated for marital relationships. Brock and Lawrence (2009) examined degrees of reported partner support in relation to marital satisfaction over a 5-year period. They considered overprovision as well as underprovision of support (i.e., more or less support received than desired, respectively). Consistent with traditional gender roles, wives were more likely to report underprovision of support from their husbands than the reverse. There was no average gender difference in reported overprovision of support. However, both under- and overprovision of partner support were related to declines in marital satisfaction for women and men. Thus, it is in both women's and men's interest to provide and receive optimal support in close relationships.

OBLIGING LANGUAGE

Obliging speech acts are high in affiliation but relatively low in assertion (Leaper, 1991). They reflect an emphasis on going along with the other

person without directly influencing her or him. Two forms of obliging speech acts are agreement and simple acknowledgments. An agreement is high in affiliation and low in assertion because it affirms another speaker's proposal without asserting anything new (e.g., "Sure, let's do that"). Simple acknowledgments include short statements ("That's too bad") or minimal responses ("Um-hm") that demonstrate the person is listening. As summarized in Table 4.1, meta-analyses do not indicate significant gender differences in agreements or simple acknowledgments among either children or adults.

According to characterizations of the traditional female role as emphasizing high affiliation and low assertion (e.g., see Spence & Helmreich, 1978), one might have expected obliging speech acts would be more common among females than males. The more likely pattern is that females are somewhat more likely than males to coordinate affiliative and assertive goals (collaboration) in their social interactions (e.g., Leaper, 1991). Indeed, as noted in the previous section, significant average gender differences (with modest effect sizes) in collaborative speech acts were indicated for children and adults in meta-analyses.

POLITENESS: AFFILIATION WITH OR WITHOUT ASSERTION?

Politeness terms include phrases expressing civility such as "please" and "thank you." These speech forms are construed as affiliative language because they demonstrate interpersonal sensitivity. Timmerman's (2002) meta-analysis indicated a significantly higher likelihood of politeness terms among women than men ($d = .27$). This pattern was indicated during same-gender and mixed-gender contexts.

Researchers have differed regarding whether or not politeness should be seen as powerless (unassertive) (see Timmerman, 2002). In some situations, politeness terms may reflect high affiliation and low assertion. An example might be saying "thank you" in response to receiving a compliment. Speakers also may be more likely to use politeness terms to signal deference to higher-status persons. In other contexts, however, politeness terms may be high in both assertion and affiliation. An example might be requesting someone to do something (e.g., "Please bring me a glass of water"). These are potentially interesting distinctions to explore more fully in future research.

TENTATIVE SPEECH: INTERPERSONAL SENSITIVITY OR POWERLESSNESS?

In a frequently cited monograph, Lakoff (1973, 1977) proposed that women were more likely than

men to use various forms of tentative speech, including expressions of uncertainty (disclaimers [e.g., "I may be mistaken, but..."] or qualifiers [e.g., "It was somewhat unclear"]), hedges (phrases that downplay the force of one's assertion [e.g., "I guess..."]), and tag questions (a confirmation-seeking question following a declarative statement [e.g., "That seems interesting, doesn't it?"]). Leaper and Robnett (2011*b*) recently conducted a meta-analysis of studies testing for average gender differences in these speech forms. On average, all three forms were significantly more likely among women than men, with negligible to small effect sizes (expressions of uncertainty: $d = .33$, hedges: $d = .15$, tag questions: $d = .23$).

Lakoff (1973, 1977) proposed that women were more likely than men to use tentative language due to power asymmetries between men and women. If so, then one might find larger average differences during mixed-gender than same-gender interactions. However, Leaper and Robnett's (2011*b*) meta-analysis did not point toward this pattern; gender composition was not a significant moderator.

Rather than characterize tentative speech forms as unassertive, it may be more meaningful to consider their potential affiliative function. Speakers may sometimes use tentative language to soften their assertion and thereby increase the other person's involvement. That is, they may reflect politeness and interpersonal sensitivity. For example, consider a speaker who prefaces a statement of opinion with a disclaimer ("I may be wrong but I think..."). Rather than directly asserting one's point of view, this strategy acknowledges the listener may have a different view (see Leaper & Robnett, 2011*b*). Thus, these speech forms can be both assertive (stating one's view) and affiliative (sensitivity to other's perspective).

CONTROLLING LANGUAGE

Controlling speech acts are high in self-assertion and relatively low in affiliation. They emphasize the speaker's agency while negating the other person. That is, they reflect unmitigated assertion. If one thinks of the affiliation dimension as ranging from highly positive to highly negative toward the other person, a distinction can be made between controlling acts that are nonaggressive (i.e., moderately low in affiliation) or aggressive (i.e., very low in affiliation). Evidence for average gender differences in each type of controlling speech is described below. Afterward, research on gender-related variations in verbal sexual harassment and sexist jokes is reviewed.

Nonaggressive Controlling Speech Acts

Nonaggressive forms of controlling speech include making suggestions or other task-oriented comments, directives, disagreements, and criticism. As summarized in Table 4.1, males were significantly more likely than females to use some nonaggressive speech acts in studies of children and adults. In Leaper and Smith's (2004) meta-analysis of studies examining children's speech, there were no significant average gender differences in expressions of disagreement ($d = .10$) or criticism ($d = -.01$). However, boys were significantly more likely than girls to make suggestions ($d = .13$) and directives ($d = .23$). In Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis of gender and adults' speech, no significant gender differences occurred in disagreements ($d = -.06$) or directives ($d = .00$). However, men were significantly more likely than women to offer suggestions ($d = .27$) and to use general task comments ($d = .38$). The significant average differences among children and adults are consistent with prior conceptualizations of the traditional male role as emphasizing task orientation (see Anderson & Blanchard, 1982).

Leaper and Ayres (2007) additionally noted a significant but negligible average difference in criticism—with women slightly higher than men ($d = -.13$). Perhaps the pattern reflected a greater average willingness among women than men to express feelings. In the context of heterosexual relationships, women may be more likely than men to make emotional demands (e.g., "I wish you were more affectionate" or "You aren't listening") (Holley, Sturm, & Levenson, 2010).

Aggressive Controlling Speech Acts

Archer's (2004) meta-analysis indicated that verbal aggression was more likely among males than females across studies of children and adults. (Age was not a significant moderator.) Average effect sizes were reported separately for studies based on either observations or peer reports. Among observational studies, the effect size was significant but negligible in magnitude ($d = .14$). However, when studies employed peer report measures, the average effect size was considerably larger ($d = .51$).

Additional research is needed to clarify the reasons for the difference in effect size due to methodology. One possibility is that peer reports were subject to people's gender stereotypes and led to exaggerated perceptions of gender differences in aggression. An alternative possibility is that peer reports were more accurate than observational studies because peers can take into account how people act across times and contexts.

Verbal Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment occurs when an individual directs unwanted sexual conduct toward someone. As with other forms of aggressive behavior, sexual harassment can be physical (e.g., unwanted touching) or verbal (e.g., unwelcome sexual comments). The American Association of University Women (AAUW, 2011) recently conducted a large-scale study of sexual harassment during adolescence. They surveyed a nationally representative sample in the United States of 1,965 students in grades 7–11. Verbal forms of sexual harassment included unwelcome sexual comments or jokes, as well as being called lesbian or gay in a negative way. Girls were twice as likely as boys to report being targets of unwelcome sexual comments/jokes (46 percent of girls vs. 22 percent of boys). Girls and boys reported experiencing anti-gay or anti-lesbian insults at similar rates (18 percent of girls vs. 19 percent of boys). Other surveys of adolescents' experiences with sexual harassment have indicated similar patterns, although the percentages vary somewhat (e.g., Lacasse, Purdy, & Mendelson, 2003; Leaper & Brown, 2008; Pepler et al., 2006).

Ilies, Hauserman, Schwochau, and Stibal (2003) conducted a meta-analytic review of the incidence of workplace sexual harassment for women in the United States. Across samples, the researchers found 24 percent of women reported having experienced sexual harassment at work. Reports tended to be higher for women in the military compared to private sector, government, or academic work settings. The review did not differentiate between verbal and nonverbal forms of sexual harassment. Also, it did consider men's experiences with workplace sexual harassment. According to other sources, at least 40 percent of women and 13 percent of men in the United States experienced sexual harassment in the workplace (Aggarwal & Gupta, 2000). Furthermore, studies from other countries indicate that sexual harassment is a problem across the world for many adolescents and adults (see Leaper & Robnett, 2011a; Willness, Steel, & Lee, 2007, for reviews).

Studies generally indicate that males are more likely than females to be perpetrators of sexual harassment during adolescence in school settings (see AAUW, 2011; Leaper & Robnett, 2011a, for reviews) and during adulthood in the workplace (see Aggarwal & Gupta, 2000). In addition to being somewhat more liable to be targets of sexual harassment, females are more likely than males to be negatively affected by sexual harassment during

adolescence (AAUW, 2011; Fineran & Bolen, 2006). Sexual harassment also tends to have a more negative impact on sexual-minority boys than on heterosexual boys (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Workplace sexual harassment appears to have similar effects on women and men according to a recent meta-analysis (Chan, Lam, Chow, & Cheung, 2008). For both adolescents and adults, negative reactions to sexual harassment include internalizing symptoms (e.g., anxiety, depression) and declines in academic or work performance (see AAUW, 2011; Leaper & Robnett, 2011a; Chan et al., 2008; Willness et al., 2007, for reviews).

Online Sexual Harassment

In addition to face-to-face encounters, verbal sexual harassment can be instigated through the use of electronic media such as text messages, e-mail, and web postings. According to the AAUW (2011) survey, 36 percent of girls and 24 percent of boys experienced online sexual harassment. Forms of online harassment included being sent unwelcome sexual messages (26 percent of girls and 13 percent of boys), being the target of unfavorable sexual rumors (17 percent of girls and 8 percent of boys), and being called gay or lesbian in a negative manner (12 percent of girls vs. 12 percent of boys). The use of electronic media for harassment is an increasing concern among researchers, policy makers, teachers, and parents.

Sexist Jokes

As previously noted, sexist jokes are one form of verbal sexual harassment. Studies of adolescents indicate that girls are more likely than boys to report feeling distressed when told sexist jokes (AAUW, 2011). The latter finding may reflect the fact that most sexist jokes are disparaging of females. Sexist jokes can also undermine women's status in the workplace (Boxer & Ford, 2010).

Unlike outright hostile comments (e.g., "Women make terrible managers"), sexist jokes are a more subtle form of sexism. The joke-tellers' typical rebuttal to charges of poor taste is that they are "just joking" and the offended party lacks a sense of humor (Boxer & Ford, 2010). However, men's enjoyment of sexist (female-disparaging) humor is correlated with sexist attitudes (Thomas & Esses, 2004) and acceptance of rape myths (Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998). Women's enjoyment of sexist humor is associated with a belief in adversarial heterosexual relationships and tolerance of sexual violence (Ryan & Kanjorski, 1998).

Sexist humor may activate sexist thinking in men who already hold sexist attitudes. In experimental studies, Ford and colleagues have found that exposure to sexist (vs. neutral) jokes increased tolerance of sexist events (Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001) or decreased support of women's organizations (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008) among men with hostile sexist attitudes but not among men with nonsexist attitudes. This work and the previously cited studies point to the pernicious effects that sexist jokes can have on women and men.

Moderators of Average Gender Differences in Speech Acts

In light of the exaggerated views of male-female communication differences (see Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Cameron, 2007; MacGeorge, Graves, Feng, Gillihan, & Burleson, 2004), it is revealing to note that average gender differences in communication style across studies are typically negligible to small when they occur. To understand the kinds of factors that may influence if and when average gender differences in language do occur, moderator analyses can be helpful. To illustrate, some findings associated with three moderators of gender differences in affiliative and assertive language are reviewed: gender composition, familiarity, and activity setting. The reader is also referred to the cited meta-analyses for examples of other moderators.

GENDER COMPOSITION

Prior research indicates that the gender composition of a dyad or a group can have a significant impact on people's behavior. During same-gender interactions, individuals are more likely to share similar gender-related norms for social behavior. In contrast, during mixed-gender interactions, gender may become a status characteristic that differentiates individuals from one another (Deaux & Major, 1987; Wood & Karten, 1986). Thus, some researchers (e.g., Carli, 1990; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999) have proposed that gender composition effects point to the relative influences of gender-related ingroup norms versus intergroup dominance on observed gender differences in social behavior.

As noted earlier, support of the dominance and status explanation was indicated for gender differences in adults' talkativeness. That is, differences were greater during mixed-gender than same-gender interactions. In contrast, support of the social

norms explanation was indicated for average gender differences in assertive and affiliative speech. Among studies of children, this was seen regarding gender differences in controlling-assertive speech in Leaper and Smith's (2004) meta-analysis. Across all forms of controlling speech, the average incidence was significantly higher for boys than girls among studies of same-gender interactions ($d = .29$); in contrast, there was no difference among studies of mixed-gender interactions ($d = .01$). Among studies of adults, Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis similarly indicated that gender differences were more pronounced during same-gender than mixed-gender interactions across measures of affiliative speech (same-gender: $d = .33$, mixed-gender: $d = .01$) and controlling speech (same-gender: $d = .29$, mixed-gender: $d = .03$).

The social norms explanation is consistent with intergroup theory and other approaches emphasizing how ingroup members tend to share similar behavioral norms (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Also, the social norms interpretation does not have to be seen as contradictory to the male dominance explanation (Leaper, 2000*b*). Gender inequalities in society shape the ways that girls and boys are commonly socialized (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000; Leaper, 2000*b*).

Asymmetrical Accommodation During Mixed-Gender Interactions?

One question that the meta-analyses did not address was whether the absence of gender difference in speech acts within mixed-gender interactions was due to one gender or both genders modifying the communication styles that they might favor during same-gender interactions. Individual studies addressing this point suggest that females may be most likely to modify their preferred style. For example, Miller, Danaher, and Forbes (1986) considered gender composition effects in relation to children's uses of conflict strategies. During conflicts with same-gender peers, boys tended to use fewer conflict-mitigation strategies (e.g., compromise) and more power-assertive strategies (e.g., demands) than did girls. During conflicts between cross-gender peers, there were no average differences in strategies because girls, on average, increased their use of power-assertive strategies and decreased their use of conflict-mitigation strategies. In contrast, boys, on average, used similar rates of power-assertive and conflict-mitigation strategies during same-gender or cross-gender conflicts. Thus, from an early age, many girls may find that

they must play by the boys' rules to get their way in society.

FAMILIARITY

People tend to be more likely to enact some gender-typed behaviors with unfamiliar than familiar partners (Deaux & Major, 1987). This may occur for at least two reasons. First, when encountering strangers, individuals may be more apt to invoke their gender schemas to form expectations about them. A second reason is that people tend to be more concerned about self-presentation with strangers than with familiar persons. For many individuals, appearing in a gender-stereotypical manner may be important in these situations. Although familiarity was not a significant moderator in the meta-analysis of children's language (Leaper & Smith, 2004), it was a significant factor in the meta-analysis of adults' language (Leaper & Ayres, 2007). Consistent with the self-presentation model, gender differences were significantly more likely among strangers than familiar partners (e.g., friends, spouses/partners, family). This was seen with regards to affiliative speech (strangers: $d = .18$, close relationships: $d = .02$) and controlling-assertive speech (strangers: $d = .22$, close relationships: $d = -.04$).

ACTIVITY SETTING

As emphasized in social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), the likelihood of enacting particular behaviors depends partly on having the opportunity to practice them. Gender-typed play activities during childhood create correspondingly different occasions for girls and boys. Gender-typed activities for boys tend to stress competition (e.g., sports), aggression (e.g., playing war), and task orientation (e.g., playing with construction toys). Conversely, gender-typed activities for girls tend to focus more on nurturance (e.g., caring for baby dolls) and close relationships (e.g., playing house). Different activities, in turn, tend to emphasize different styles of talk (Leaper, 2000*a*; Maltz & Borker, 1982). In support of this argument, average gender differences in affiliative speech (with girls higher than boys) were moderated by the activity setting in Leaper and Smith's (2004) meta-analysis. The average gender difference was larger during unstructured activities ($d = .65$) than structured (i.e., assigned) activities ($d = .20$). In a similar manner, Leaper and colleagues' (1998) meta-analysis comparing mothers' speech to daughters versus sons indicated that differences in affiliative speech were mitigated when the activity was assigned. The

smaller effect sizes seen in structured activities therefore suggests that the type of activity or conversation topic may partly mediate (a) gender differences in children's affiliative speech as well as (b) parents' differential speech to girls and boys (Huston, 1985; Leaper, 2000*a*).

The activity or topic may have a different impact on gender differences in adults' speech style. Gender differences in communication during childhood may be largely a consequence of the different activity contexts in which many girls and boys are engaged. When placed in similar situations, most girls and boys may have the flexibility to modify their behavior to fit the activity (e.g., girls and boys similarly used affiliative speech when asked to play with toy foods and plates [Leaper, 2000*a*]). Over time, however, these experiences may shape individuals' expectations and preferred styles (see Leaper, 2000*b*).

When placed in feminine- or masculine-stereotyped settings as adults, gender-typed women and men interpret and respond differently to these situations. This idea is consistent with the patterns indicated in Leaper and Ayres' (2007) meta-analysis of gender differences in adults' speech. In unstructured settings, there were no significant gender differences in affiliative or assertive speech. But there were significant differences indicated during particular activities. (This is the opposite of the pattern seen among children.) For example, during discussions of assigned nonpersonal topics, men's averages were significantly higher than those of women for controlling-assertive speech ($d = .48$). Conversely, during discussions of assigned personal topics, women's average was significantly higher for affiliative speech ($d = .20$). These patterns may reflect the different kinds of situations in which gender-typed women and men (a) expect to enact gender-typed behaviors (as emphasized in expectation states theory) and/or (b) feel comfortable and have a stronger sense of self-efficacy (as emphasized in social cognitive theory).

Conclusion and Future Directions

Three important conclusions can be drawn from the foregoing review of research on gender and language. First, languages tend to be gender biased. For example, masculine nouns and pronouns are commonly used to refer generically to people. Second, when average gender differences in language style occur, they tend to be small in magnitude with a great deal of overlap in the distributions of females and males. And third, gender-related variations in

language behavior tend to vary across different situations. The latter two points are striking in light of popular accounts of females and males as being so different in their respective communication styles that they might be from different cultures or planets (see Barnett & Rivers, 2004; Cameron, 2007; MacGeorge et al., 2004, for discussions of this issue).

In a recent review of various meta-analyses testing for gender differences in various social behaviors, Hyde (2005) advocated for the gender similarities hypothesis. She noted that for many social behaviors, the degree of similarity between males and females is much greater than the amount of difference. Yet, why do popular myths about gender differences in language style persist? As with other kinds of stereotyping, people tend to pay more attention to cases that support their views and to ignore instances that contradict them (Rudman & Glick, 2008). Also, people tend to associate themselves with like-minded people who endorse and practice similar gender roles. In these ways, stereotyped beliefs are perpetuated.

Although the average effect sizes for most language behaviors tend to be small or negligible, there are some consistent patterns when statistically significant gender differences were indicated. One pattern was females tend to be more likely to use language that coordinated affiliative and assertive goals (collaborative speech). Conversely, males tend to be more likely than females to use language that emphasizes assertion over affiliation (controlling speech). There was no evidence from meta-analyses that females were more likely than males to use language that emphasizes affiliation while downplaying assertion (obliging speech). With all of these average patterns, however, situational factors tended to moderate the incidence and magnitude of gender differences. Some of these included familiarity among interaction partners, the gender composition of the dyad or group, and the activity setting or conversation topic.

Understanding how contextual factors influence gender-related variations in language should be a continued focus for research. In addition to facets of the interactive context (e.g., familiarity, gender composition, activity), it is also important to consider how people's sociocultural backgrounds may play a role. One of the shortcomings of the present review is that cultural and socioeconomic variations in gender-related differences in language were not addressed in more

depth. Unfortunately, there have been relatively few quantitative studies taking into account culture and other social-structural factors as possible moderators of gender differences in language. Indeed, this is a limitation for the behavioral sciences in general (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Ethnographic research (e.g., see Goodwin, 2002; Kyratzis & Guo, 2001) and a few pertinent quantitative studies (e.g., Filardo, 1996) suggest some ways that gender-related language might vary depending on people's sociocultural backgrounds and contexts.

Another suggested area for future research is to clarify how social-cognitive processes underlie gender differences in language. The results have been mixed in past studies when researchers have sought to identify possible cognitive mediators of gender differences in language. It may be that certain cognitive processes (e.g., goals) are better predictors than other cognitive processes (e.g., attitudes) of language style. Furthermore, links among cognitive processes, gender, and behavior may vary across different contexts. For example, people's attitudes and values may have a weaker impact on their behavior when they are interacting with strangers (Deaux & Major, 1987).

Continued research on language and gender is important for at least two reasons. First, there is widespread interest among the general public on the topic—as seen in the ongoing popularity of books and other media on the topic. Unfortunately, much of the information dispensed is inaccurate and perpetuates unfounded gender stereotypes (see Barnett & Rivers, 2004, for a review). This is all the more reason for more scientific research.

Finally, advancing our understanding of gender and language is important because it has practical implications. Language is used to create and maintain gender divisions in society. Furthermore, the way that people use language in conversation affects the quality of their relationships with co-workers, friends, and romantic partners. Gender imbalances in language style are correspondingly related to problems in each of these relationship contexts. At the same time, as this review has highlighted, we have a good understanding of some of the ways that language can be used to facilitate greater gender equality and to improve people's relationships.

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