Gender Differences in E-mail Communication

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Introduction

This article examines the implications of gender differences on language use in electronic mail discussion groups. In order to arrive at an analysis of gender-related language differences in this medium, we will first draw on more general gender concerns.

Language and Gender

Language, culture and society interact to give members of different genders different levels of power and recognition in society. The different way boys and girls are socialized has significant ramifications on the way they communicate as adults because this encoding of social behavior is carried on into adulthood. In other words, it is consistently reflected in the different social and communicative styles of women and men.

According to Tannen (1995:138), "communication isn't as simple as saying what you mean. How you say what you mean is crucial, and differs from one person to the next, because using language is a learned behavior: how we talk and listen are deeply influenced by cultural expectations". Women and men are like people who have grown up in two subcultures - they have two broad different styles of speaking and establishing social status.

In the process of socializing with peers, children generally tend to play with other children of the same gender, resulting in different ways of creating rapport and negotiating status within their group: childhood play is where much of our conversational style is learned (Tannen, 1995:138).

The main distinction between the way boys and girls communicate is that girls generally use the language to negotiate closeness - that is, to establish intimacy as a basis of friendship (collaboration-oriented); and, in comparison, boys generally use language to negotiate their status in the group (competition-oriented).

The theme of using power to negotiate status by males and cooperation to establish rapport by females is consistently played out throughout adulthood and repeated in the social and linguistic communicative styles between the two sexes at all levels: at home, work, meetings, social occasions, and in personal, casual and formal contacts. Consequently women and men tend to have different habitual ways of saying what they mean.

E-mail Communication

An appropriate forum in which to consider these assumptions would be one in which there is no interference in the form of interruptions, oral/aural markers, restrictions of topics or any sort of physical contact. One where both genders are welcome and encouraged to participate in the topic at hand: a forum where the gender of the contributors is irrelevant and can only be discerned by the voluntary addition of a name by the participant. Such a forum would be electronic mail discussion groups, also called electronic mailing lists. (Shea: 1994, 26)

Electronic mail discussion groups exist in the tens of thousands on every possible topic imaginable. These are groups of people - some groups in excess of 35,000 participants - who for the most part never physically meet.

They communicate with one another through e-mail, offering opinions and advice with regards to the topic at hand. Part of the great success of e-mail discussion groups has been the fact that participants must actually subscribe in order to be able to post their

messages, therefore practically eliminating the disturbances created in Usenet groups (no subscription required) where anyone could post anything to any list. (Shea: 1994, 26)

Another cause for the enthusiastic growth of e-mail discussion is the format of the messages and the relaxed style of writing required. Along a continuum with the two extremities marked relaxed spoken language and formal written language, e-mail postings would most probably rank the closest to spoken language than any other written text.

In fact, e-mail is often written as if the message were spoken out with few attempts to edit the text at all - and writing e-mail messages back and forth is often referred to as "holding a conversation online. " (Shea: 1994, 35).

And while the Internet has historically been more welcoming to males than females, Pittaway (1997:1-2) has found that in 1996 "estimates say 40 to 49 percent of online users are female, up from just 10 percent" in 1993. Adding that "65 percent of women live in households where a personal computer was purchased" between 1995 and 1997. It is clear, therefore, that there is no more a great gender gap in computer mediated communication. According to the results of the surveys published by Pittaway, of the 17. 6 million people using Internet e-mail in the United States and Canada, just under half would probably be women.

Gender in E-mail Communication

One can only expect there be a noticeable difference in the language used to discuss issues online - in fact an absence of such differences would be surprising when one considers the different upbringing and consequent socialization and integration of individuals of both sexes in society.

In fact, Herring (1994:introduction) claims that "men and women have recognizably different styles in posting to the Internet" and that "women and men have different communicative ethics"; in contrast to the understanding that the Internet provides a gender-less, age-less, race-less and any-other-bias - less opportunity for interaction. (Shea: 1994, 40)

In the keynote speech at the American Library Association annual convention in 1994, Herring (1994:3-4) proposes that this is the case in that "women and men have different characteristic online styles" that echo the differences of culturization and integration into society: "The male style is characterized by adversiality - put-downs, strong, often contentious assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm"; while the female style, in contrast, is characterized by "supportiveness and attenuation" with expressions of appreciation, thanking, and community-building; as well as apologizing, expressing doubt, asking questions, and contributing ideas in the form of suggestions. "

It would therefore appear that even though the Internet does offer the theoretical opportunity of equality, in reality women are not provided with an equal opportunity for discussion due to the different communication styles existing between the two sexes - in other words, if women use language that is considered weaker, more frivolous or somewhat less powerful than men, they will continue to be relegated to secondary status by men; and that if men use a more aggressive, competitive, dominating style, they will continue to remain in power.

Or could it be that as people adapt to the virtual societies of computer communication this female/male dichotomy is no longer valid, and that individuals of both sexes are enabled to choose between both styles at their leisure depending on what their purpose is? Could males adopt a more cooperative style of writing if their goal was to secure group support and understanding? And could females opt to write in a more traditionally male style to gain prominence and successfully 'win' an argument?

Research

Hence the writer of this paper has undergone a project of informal research into the different styles women and men adopt when contributing to e-mail discussion groups.

Over the span of the third and fourth weeks of May 1997, a total of 100 e-mail messages were randomly collected from a variety of e-mail groups spanning the following topics: bird watching, politics, auto racing, single parent issues, martial arts, teaching English as a second language, dog training, women's basketball, fire fighting, ecology, vegetarianism, computer aided software engineering, gardening, civil rights, and women's religion.

While the data collected for this modest research is presented attached to this paper, there could be certain factors which affect the results. First of all, the only way the gender of the writer could be determined was through the name placed at the end of the message - therefore 18 messages signed with neutral gender names were discarded (eg. Jamie, or PK), and there is no guarantee that the signature represents the actual gender of the writer (Paul could sign off as Paula, should he wish to). Secondly, a random selection of 82 messages does not provide a large enough sampling when compared to the thousands of messages produced daily.

Of the 100 e-mail messages collected, as mentioned above, eighteen were discarded, and the remaining 82 were divided according to gender: 46 were written by men, and 36 by women. Therefore, 56. 1% of the messages were written by men, and 43. 9% by women - a ratio which quite accurately reflects the percentage of female online users reported by Pittaway. (1997:1-2)

Analysis According to Gender

The analysis undertaken was to identify expressions from both groups which appeared to have an obvious or underlying expression of aggressiveness (appendix 1) or supportiveness (appendix 2). Additionally, samples of language expressing opinions (appendix 3) were collected from both groups. This analysis is based on the assumption of a an aggressive/male, supportive/female dichotomy expressed by Herring. (1994:3-4)

From the data collected, there is a clear difference in the language used by males and females online. 'Aggressive' expressions recorded in the messages written by men far outnumbered those written by women - in fact, men used a total of twelve separate aggressive or sarcastic expressions, while women used five. Additionally, men used far more openly aggressive language, including personal attacks and put-downs as well as two references to 'taboo' body parts.

On the other side of the dichotomy, women used far more expressions offering support and a deepening of their relationship with the readers. Men used only six 'supportive' expressions, while women used eighteen. In addition, women used much more open expressions of appreciation and thanks, while men used 'tighter' and less direct expressions.

Furthermore, men were found to be more interested in presenting their personal point of view in order to present an 'authoritative' contribution to the discussion, while women were more interested in the contribution itself.

Conclusion

In conclusion, therefore, there is undeniably a gender difference in styles in e-mail messages posted to electronic discussion groups: males are more prone to write in an aggressive, competitive style, while women tend to be far more supportive in their writing. The male/female language style dichotomy has been transported into computer communication regardless of the lack of physical contact.

The reason, it seems, lies very much in the different approach taken by women and men towards this new electronic technology - an approach which is congruent with the socialization and integration of males and females into society.

Men apparently see the opportunity provided by this technology as a chance to further one's own influence, by gaining valuable information and by extending one's own authority and respect in society; while women ostensibly view this technology as an opportunity to nurture existing relationships and develop new ones. Language styles online are different, to a certain extent, because they reflect the different goals of the users.

Bibliography

Appendix 1 - Total Count Of Female And Male Aggressive / Sarcastic Expressions

MALE

Facts be damned
Do you understand that?
You should realize that. .
. . or do you exist in some alternate reality?

Go back to the cranial explorations of the upper reaches of your ******, it suits you.
It is absurd to think. .
Get a life!!!
Painting with a pretty big brush there, Glen.
Whoa!! I said nylon HIKING pants! Not rain or warm-up pants!
I have no intention of 'lightening up' when you continue to make trashy postings.
Please allow me to drop a pebble into the tranquil discussion on. .
Did you just pull that out of your ****?
I have a real problem with. .

FEMALE

I'd rather sit around and watch the paint peel in my apartment.
I have to disagree. .
Sorry, but you'll have to keep trying
I tried to reply earlier, but Jeffrey somehow managed to delete it for me:/ Grrr, oh well.
Make no mistake about it, the ill-informed and the ignorant are now in charge.

Appendix 2 - Total Count Of Female And Male Supportive Expressions

MALE

Life sure is interesting!
Glad to help.
I hope that all concerned will accept this apology for my ill considered words in the previous posting.
Have a nice day.
Thanks in advance for your help.
Thanks, buddy.

FEMALE

Congratulations to Kim.
I'm sure you CU folks will love her.
I'm sorry for my glib reference to. .
Thanks for all the tips on. .
Good point.
Good for Ricki Rudd!
Hope this helps!
I hope that you can help me.
Any suggestions would be appreciated.
I agree with you, Paul.
Should be an interesting scene!
I envy all of you going to Dearborn.
I apologize for having to. .
As always, thanks for your support!
It's a neat cookbook and I can't wait to send it on!
This is my first posting - thanks for your patience.
I can't tell you how much it helps to know that I am not the first person to. .
Your replies were most interesting and helpful.

Appendix 3 - Samples Of Male And Female Contribution Of Ideas

MALE

It is my experience after years of teaching. .
I'm in charge of a. .
That's been my experience.
I believe. .
In my opinion,. .

FEMALE

I haven't seen it first hand but have heard good things.
I don't think there's a limit. .
It is possible that you can also provide. .
Here's my advice:. .
At least, that's what I think it is.
. . , I think.

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