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Language Sciences

Gender and mobile phones in cross-national context

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ABSTRACT

The sociolinguistic literature has frequently noted differences in how males and females communicate face-to-face and in writing, and more recently, through information and communication technologies. This article reports on gender patterns identified in a cross-national study of mobile phone use by university students in Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan and Korea. Data were analyzed with respect to the purpose of communication, politeness issues, contact management and volume of use (along with user complaints about dependency and reachability). Results indicated a number of gendered usage and attitudinal patterns. However, in some cases, cultural variables may prove more explanatory than gender.

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Communicating online and via mobile devices has come of age. As of 2010, there were an estimated 2.1 billion internet users and almost 5.3 billion mobile phone subscriptions (ITU, 2010), out of a world population of roughly 6.9 billion. In much of the world, males were initially more likely than females to utilize information and communication technologies (ICTs) (Ono and Zavodny, 2005), though in a growing number of countries, the gap is closing or has been closed (Rainie et al., 2000; World Internet Project, 2010).

Gender differences persist in the uses to which new media technologies are put. For example, more American females than males send email to strengthen ties with family and friends (Rainie et al., 2000); at least some American men use mobile phones to adjust personal schedules in their favor, leaving women to bear the brunt of household responsibilities (Chesley, 2005). A growing body of research documents differences in male versus female use of mobile telephony in a range of national and/or cultural contexts (e.g., Baron and Hård af Segerstad, 2010; Fortunati, 2009a; Fortunati and Manganelli, 2002; Fujimoto, 2005; Hijazi-Omari and Ribak, 2008; Hjorth, 2005; Lee, 2005; Lemish and Cohen, 2005; Skog, 2002).

The present study explores gender and mobile telephony by analyzing data from a cross-national investigation of mobile phone use by university students in Sweden, the US, Italy, Japan and Korea. Collecting data from multiple countries enables us to compare the role of gender versus culture (to the extent culture corresponds with nationhood) in use of and attitudes towards mobile telephony.

1. The gender question in language

The sociolinguistic literature has frequently reported that males and females tend to use language differently (e.g., Bergvall et al., 1996; Holmes, 1993, 1995; Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; James, 1996; Labov, 1991; Lakoff, 1975; Romaine, 2003; Tannen, 1994). Linguistic variation runs the gamut from who dominates the conversation to type of vocabulary, function of message, or use of politeness conventions. Many scholars (e.g., Aries, 1996; Dindia and Canary, 2006; James and Clarke, 1993; Tannen, 1993) rightly observe that differences in linguistic interaction sometimes have more to do with

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the relationship between interlocutors (including how long they have known one another and their relative position of status and power) than with gender. In recent years, the field of language and gender research has developed in new post-structuralist directions that focus on discourse-levels of analysis and rethink the notion of gender itself (e.g., Bucholtz, 2003; Cameron and Kulick, 2003). Nonetheless, correlations observed using more traditional approaches to gender and language are too strong to ignore, even where findings are traceable to socialization and circumstance.

Among the many linguistic domains we might consider, we will focus here on four: purpose of communication, politeness issues, contact management and volume of use. In some instances, previous studies of language and gender offer direct parallels to issues involved in mobile telephony. In other cases, we use the existing literature as a conceptual springboard for suggesting areas of inquiry that are relevant to mobile phones.

1.1. Purpose of communication

The language and gender literature reports that while women frequently use language to facilitate social interaction, men more commonly employ language for conveying information. This finding has been documented for both face-to-face spoken language (e.g., Cameron, 1998; Coates, 1993; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Holmes, 1993; Romaine, 2003; Smith-Lovin and Robinson, 1992; Tannen, 1994) and written communication (e.g., Argamon et al., 2003; Biber, 1988; Biber et al., 1998; Mulac and Lundell, 1994; Palander-Collin, 1999).

Studies of online communication reveal similar trends. Research in the US and the UK indicates that statistically, the content of female email and instant messaging (IM) is more social in nature, while male messages more often convey information (Boneva et al., 2001; Colley and Todd, 2002; Colley et al., 2004; Fox et al., 2007; Lee, 2003). Herring's studies of US college students (2003) found that in online mixed-gender discussions, females showed more of an 'aligned' and supportive orientation towards their interlocutors than did males. In their analysis of blogs, Argamon et al. (2007) reported that male bloggers used more words referring to topics such as politics and business, while female topics commonly involved interpersonal conversation or relationships.

A gender dichotomy is also evident in text messages sent on mobile phones. Drawing data from adolescent and/or college student populations, studies of mobile phone use in Japan (Igarashi et al., 2005; Okuyama, 2009; Schiano et al., 2007), Korea (Yoon, 2003), Hong Kong (Lin, 2005) and Taiwan (Wei and Lo, 2006) indicate that females are more likely to use phones for social purposes, while males more commonly engage in information-seeking or planning. In the US, Lenhart et al. (2010) report that while 59% of teenage girls age 12–17 text several times daily to 'just say hello and chat', only 42% of boys do so. Horstmanshof and Power (2005) found that the Australian males they studied tended to become disenchanted with texting because they were less willing (than females) to follow contemporary social texting conventions, such as immediately responding to messages or sending 'good night' messages to significant others. Yates (2006) reported that female messages in his corpus expressed more 'support' and 'affection' than did male messages.

Gender differences also exist in the ways IM and text messages are structured. Baron (2004) reported that IM conversational closings between female college students (FF) took twice as long (both in number of turns and time on the clock) as closings between males (MM). Similarly, in comparing FF and MM IM conversations, Lee (2003) found that female subjects used explicit openings and closing about 80% of the time, compared with males – who used them in less than 30% of messages. Females are generally more likely than males to use emoticons (or their equivalent, e.g., Japanese *kaomoji*, *emoji* or *de-mo* – Okuyama, 2009) and exclamation marks, both in computer-based communication (e.g., Baron, 2004; Colley and Todd, 2002; Colley et al., 2004; Herring, 2003; Lee, 2003; Waseleski, 2006; Witmer and Katzman, 1997) and in text messaging (e.g., Baron and Ling, in press; Miyake, 2010; Scott et al., 2009).

1.2. Politeness issues

Our second focus is on politeness. The language and gender literature includes discussion of such issues as paying compliments, interruptions, and use of profanity, off-color humor or insults. In studies of face-to-face speech, email, IM and texting, males are generally found to be less polite than females by one or more of these measures (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Colley et al., 2004; Herring, 2003; Holmes, 1988, 1991, 1995; Lee, 2003; Selnow, 1985; Smith-Lovin and Robinson, 1992; Tannen, 1994; Yates, 2006; Yates et al., 2005). While the present study did not address any of the above specific issues, we used previous findings as conceptual grounding for creating measures of politeness more directly relevant to our data.

1.3. Contact management

A third issue is what we called contact management: How do interlocutors choreograph their interactions with others? Traditional forms of management range from dominating the conversational floor to ignoring an interlocutor or interrupting (also a politeness issue). Some of these behaviors are customarily associated with males (e.g., in face-to-face speech: Holmes, 1993; on listservs or newsgroups: Herring, 2010). However, the notion of contact management also encompasses other types of interaction between interlocutors, such as users delaying responding to a letter or choosing a written reply in lieu of a face-to-face meeting.

New media offer further venues for contact management. Users of ICTs can choose not to reply (or delay replying) to messages (though failure to respond promptly sometimes bears social consequences). Multitasking behavior (e.g., engaging in