Democracy in computer-mediated communication: Gender, communicative style, and amount of participation in professional listservs

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the claim of democracy in computer-mediated communication with regard to amount of participation and communicative style of genders and the effect of topic of discussion on these aspects. To this aim, 300 randomly- chosen messages from two listservs (language testing and taxonomy) were coded for the number of female and male participants, frequency and length of messages, frequency of new topics, frequency of responses to each topic type and to the same and cross gender topics, stylistic features of females' and males' language, and frequency of flaming. For each aspect of analysis, χ^2 statistical test was applied to examine the significance of the differences between genders in and across the lists. The results indicated that given the amount of participation, the democracy claim was breached as male dominance and presence was more ubiquitous. However, the results supported the provision of a democratic platform as far as manner of participation is concerned since both genders presented common communicative needs and priorities and there was no support for differentiation of genders' communicative styles. The findings promise implications for EFL/ESL education.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, so many people use the Internet regularly to interact in chat rooms, discussion groups, listservs, and other virtual environments. Accordingly, the Internet communication has opened up very fresh avenues of research to social scientists and educators in order to examine the nature of peoples' behavior as well as the characteristics of the discourse taking place through computers. A hotly-debated question regarding the nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the past few decades has been to see in what ways computer-mediated discourse is similar to or different from face to face communication and if gender differences in discourse styles and amount of participation prevail in the anonymous Internet environment. It is argued that since information about peoples' gender is lost in the Internet and females and males can manipulate their identities in the light of anonymous environment the Internet provides, traditional differentiations between females and males found in face to face communication are resolved and the 'anonymous', 'impersonal', and 'egalitarian' (Ferrara, Brunner, & Whittemore, 1991) CMC creates a democratic environment in which females and males may enjoy equal access to information and communication and an equal right to participate freely (Landow, 1994; Spears & Lea, 1994).

Many studies have so far tried to examine the extent to which the Internet provides such a democracy. But it seems that no single conclusion or consensus is arrived at, since while some argue that the Internet has the potential to provide such an opportunity (e.g. Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, Turoff, & Benbunan-Fich, 2000), others (e.g. Herring, 1993) do not endorse such a view. The present study re-examines linguistic representations of women's and men's computer-mediated discourse in postings to two discussion group and adds a new dimension of the effect of academic topic on the gender-related discourse which is explored by few, if any, previous studies. The findings may have contributions to the existing gap concerning the relationship between gender and discourse (Herring, 1992, 1993; Rodino, 1997; Savicki, Kelley, & Lingenfelter, 1996; Smith, McLaughlin, & Osborne, 1997; Wolfe, 1999).

2. Literature review

2.1. Studies investigating the claim of democracy in terms of amount of participation

In this study, amount of participation refers to the number of female and male participants, frequency of each gender's postings, frequency of topics they posted, and the length of their messages. The results of studies investigating these features are mixed which implies that there is little consensus among scholars as to which gender dominates the discussions. Some scholars maintain that

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as far as the number of participants is concerned, men tend to dominate the discourse (Herring, 1993; Savicki et al., 1996; Smith et al., 1997) and post more frequent and longer messages (Herring, 1993; Sussman & Tyson, 2000). However, Barrett and Lally (1999) reported that women were only hesitant to make early participation in electronic spaces and although early in the project men were found to be more active than women during the project, both genders reached an identical peak. However, in their study too, messages sent by males were longer and included greater levels of social exchange than those of women.

2.2. Studies investigating the claim of democracy in terms of manner of participation

2.2.1. Communicative style

Regarding the communicative style of the two genders in CMC, there is also an array of contradictory studies. While some concede that, like face to face communication, females and males adhere to different rhetorical and linguistic strategies, others reject making binary differentiation between the two genders. From among the proponents of different communicative styles, Herring (1993) pointed out that there were significant differences between men and women. More specifically, she identified attenuated assertions, apologies, explicit justifications, questions, personal orientation, and supporting others as characteristics of women's language while strong assertions, self-promotion, presuppositions, rhetorical questions, authoritative orientation, challenging others, humor, and sarcasm were associated with men's language. In addition, the two genders were different with regard to their preferences for the kind of topics they contributed to. That is, whereas women had higher contributions to topics with real world consequences, men were more skilled at abstract theorizing. By the same token, Sussman and Tyson (2000) in their analysis of discussions on gender-based topics (masculine, feminine, and gender neutral) concluded that men wrote more opinionated messages in masculine and gender neural categories.

Other studies, however, do not confirm the existence of such distinctions between female and male language. Among studies with mixed results, Wolfe (1999) found no support for the hypothesis that women favored collaborative and supportive interaction as in her study, females responded less frequently to agreements and challenged their classmates' comments, which was considered a male-related discourse feature. On the other hand, women failed to speak in their own defense when confronted supporting the hypothesis that females tend to use adversarial style less frequently.

Also, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) focusing on disclosure of personal information, sexual identity, and emotive features which are all considered women's discourse features, established no difference in the manner of presentation of women and men in their blogs. Both genders revealed their personal information including their real names, ages, and locations. However, as they expected, males demonstrated more male-related features like sureness of self; employed a resolute and active style of language; and were more likely to present themselves as gay. Contrary to their prediction, however, there were no gender differences neither for the feature of aggression favoring males, nor for the feature of passivity favoring females.

Moreover, Savicki et al. (1996) found that while female-dominated groups tended to adhere to female-related features such as self-disclosure and avoidance of tension, they did not employ other features of female language such as opinions, apologies, questions, or 'we' pronouns. In contrast, discussion groups dominated by males tended to employ their own linguistic features such as impersonal and fact-oriented language, less concern for politeness and more flaming behavior.

In another study, Herring and Paolillo (2006) investigated female and male stylistic features including first and third-person pronouns for females and determiners, demonstratives, numbers, the possessive pronoun 'its', and other quantifiers for men and found little evidence for systematic gender patterning. In the same vein, Rodino (1997) found no evidence for the traditional binaries of facilitative/controlling (Fishman, 1983), and personal/authoritative (Herring, 1993) between men and women regarding their linguistic style. Gender was flexible and under constant construction through nick name choice, use of pronouns, or revealing personal information. She posited that gender distinctions in the studies on gender and language stemmed from the assumption that gender was an identity which was already formed when conversations occurred; that is, gender was 'pre-formed not performed' (p. 14).

2.2.2. Flaming behavior

Different definitions have been presented in the literature on the term 'flaming'. Aiken and Waller (2000) define it as "comments intended to offend others; at the extreme flaming includes obscenities and other inappropriate comments" (p. 96). As for flaming behavior, few studies have explored flaming in relation to gender in computer-mediated communications. Moreover, like other stylistic features, there are mixed results in the literature regarding flaming and gender differences. The majority of studies, however, support that males flame more than females. For example, Herring (1994) claimed that "the simple fact of the matter is that it is virtually only men who flame" (p. 283). She attributed the differences between men and women to their communication ethics; i.e. while women value consideration of wants and needs of others, men place greater value on freedom from censorship, forthright, and open expression and consider agonistic debate as a tool for advancing the pursuit of knowledge. In Smith et al. (1997), too, most reproaches were directed at males and males comprised two thirds of individuals who violated the rules of appropriate conduct. Witmer and Katzman (1997), however, found that it was women who utilized more challenging speech and inflammatory messages. They explained this by referring to the tendency of women to be more emotionally expressive.

Taking these findings into account, one can recognize two general trends in the studies investigating the claim of democracy: optimism about CMC as a platform for providing a gender-neutral and democratic environment and the opposing stand considering CMC as an arena for erecting the same social orders and power structures. These inconsistencies in the results of various studies stimulate the significance of re-examination of the democracy claim in this study with regard to two separate aspects of amount and manner of participation. Another issue of interest is whether the topic of discussion makes any difference in amount and manner of participation. According to Herring (1993), females and males have different priorities for the kind of topics they contribute to in that females give preference to topics with real world consequences and males to abstract theorizing. To look into the effect of topic, taxonomy was chosen as a subject incorporating more abstract theorizing and language testing involving real world consequences, though some degrees of theorization is also involved in language testing. Therefore, this study sought answers to the following general questions:

1. Does CMC provide a democratic environment fostering equal amount of participation of females and males?
2. Does CMC induce similar communicative styles and needs in females and males?
3. Does the topic of discussion affect the amount and manner of participation of genders in the two lists?