Publically different, privately the same: Gender differences and similarities in response to Facebook status updates

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ABSTRACT

Social networking sites (SNS), and especially Facebook, have revolutionised patterns of language and communication. We conducted a study to examine gender differences in language use on Facebook, by surveying 600 undergraduate students (388 females and 207 males), and analysing males' and females' responses to two Facebook status updates. There were a number of gender differences in terms of public replies to Facebook status updates. Females were significantly more likely to 'Like' a Facebook status update than males, post a public reply to a Facebook status update than males and show higher levels of emotional support than males. In contrast there were hardly any gender differences in terms of sending private messages in response to Facebook status updates. There was no gender difference in terms of level of emotional support in private messages. Females were more likely to send a private message than males, but this difference was very small. The implications of these findings for explanations of gender differences in language are discussed.

1. Introduction

Social networking sites (SNSs) are becoming an integral part of everyday life, with more than a billion monthly active users on Facebook alone (Facebook Newsroom, 2014), and 66% of online adults using a SNS (Hampton, Sesions Goulet, Rainie, & Purcell, 2011). However, recent research demonstrates that males and female use these sites differently.

Large scale surveys have found more females than males use SNS. Hampton et al. (2011), for example, reported that 56% of SNS users were female, and Madden and Zickhur (2011), who reported females were not only more likely to use SNS, but were more likely to be daily visitors then males. Furthermore, a number of studies have found that females spend more time on SNSs than males. Denti et al. (2012), reported that on average, females spend

84 min a day on Facebook, compared to 64 min for males, with similar figures obtained by Shambare and Mvula (2011), Moore and McElroy (2011). Additionally, further studies have shown there are also gender differences in SNS use and activities, with females tending to use SNS for communicating and connecting with others, and males for gathering information (Denti et al., 2012; Junco, 2013; Smith, 2011).

1.1. Gender differences in language

Although the work above has shown that females are more likely to be prolific SNS users, there is little research into gender differences in language on SNS, despite these sites being (for many), an extremely important method of communication. In contrast, research on gender differences in written and spoken language and communication is a major area of research (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1990). One of the most consistent findings (and one with obvious parallels to differences in SNS use) is that females are more likely to use affiliative language (used for connecting to others), whereas males are more likely to use self-assertive

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language (used for dominance, and achieving practical goals). For a recent review see Leaper (2014).

There are two main explanations for these gender differences in language. The first is the socialisation theory (Maltz and Borker, 1982), which emphasises the impact of gender stereotypical activities, and same sex peer groups. By participating in these gender segregated peer groups and their associated activities, males and females develop different norms, social identities and language use. For example, research has shown that girls' interactions are more likely to involve cooperative social dramatic activities, and boys are more likely to participate in more solitary or competitive group play (see Maccoby, 1998). Maltz and Borker (1982), argue that these gender differences in activities lead to gender differences in language. Girls learn to use language to create and maintain social closeness through supportive and inclusive forms of talk, and boys use language to assert their dominance through commands and challenging statements. This theory predicts that gender differences in language will be greatest in same gender interactions, as partners of the game gender would share similar social norms concerning language and communication (Carli, 1989; Carli, 1990).

The second explanation is the social context theory (Deaux & Major, 1987; Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000; Leaper, 2000), which emphasises the social interactive impact of context, rather than individual factors. As contextual factors change, so to would males' and females' language and communication. For example, one important aspect of contextual influence is males' greater status in society. Males may therefore be more likely to dominate social interactions through the use of self-assertive language, whereas women may be more likely to act subordinately through using more affiliative language. Another important aspect of contextual influence is the activity setting. Males and females often engage in different activities, which in turn have their associated patterns of language. Affiliative language is more appropriate in self-disclosure tasks (more commonly associated with females), and assertive language is more appropriate in task oriented activities (more commonly associated with males). Finally, another important aspect of context is group size and familiarity. Deaux and Major (1987) showed that people behave in more stereotypical ways in front of larger and unfamiliar groups. Thus, females are more likely to use affiliative language than males in a large group context in front of unfamiliar people, whereas in private communication in a 1 to 1 communication context with a familiar person these gender differences in affiliative language will be reduced. Thus, the social context drives the language males and females use, and therefore gender differences can be expected to fluctuate across situations. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive and could both explain any observed gender differences in language use.

Recent empirical support for gender differences in language has been summarized in a meta-analysis by Leaper and Ayres (2007), who compared males and females both on talkativeness, and their use of assertive and affiliative language. Males were found to be more talkative than females, and used significantly more assertive language, whereas females used significantly more affiliative language. A recent study on language use in multiplayer video games found a similar pattern of results. Kuznekoff and Rose (2013) investigated gamers' reactions to male voices compared to their reactions to female voices. They found that the female voice received three times as many negative comments as the male voice or no voice. Furthermore, the female voice received more queries and more messages from other gamers than the male voice.

As mentioned above, there has been considerable research on gender difference in language use in general, but there have been very few studies that have explored gender differences in language use on social media. One exception is Thelwall, Wilkinson, and Uppal (2009), who explored gender differences in emotional language in MySpace comments. They found similar gender differences to Leaper and Ayres (2007), with females using more affiliative language. Female comments contained more instances of positive emotion and support than males, yet there was no difference in terms of negative emotion. Another more recent study by Wang, Burke, and Kraut (2013) investigated gender differences in the topic and the audience response of Facebook status updates. They found that females tended to share more personal topics, while males discussed more public topics. Females received more feedback, although topics posted by males received more feedback, especially by females. Finally, Walton and Rice (2013) analysed 3751 tweets and found that females were more positive, disclosed more information and disclosed more private information than males. They argued this finding was reflecting females' societal gender role as more nurturing and emotional.

The aim of the current study is to extend this research, and examine gender differences in language use on Facebook (especially the differences in affiliative language), by analysing public and private replies to different Facebook status updates. Public replies to Facebook status updates could be viewed as communication in a larger group context, whereas private messages could be viewed as communication in a small group or one to one context with a familiar person. The socialisation perspective, would predict that gender differences in affiliative language would be evident regardless of whether it is a public reply or private message in response to a Facebook status update. Therefore, the study will test the following two hypotheses.

H1. Females will use more affiliative language than males when replying publically to a Facebook status update than males.

H2. Females will use more affiliative language than males when sending a private message to a Facebook status update than males.

In contrast, the social context perspective would predict that gender differences would be more evident in public replies and would be less evident and may even disappear with private messages.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were 600 first year undergraduate students (388 females and 207 males), with a mean age of 19.2 (SD = 2.76).

2.2. Procedure and measures

The questionnaire was distributed during lectures and contained two Facebook status updates: 'I'm having a really Rubbish Day' and 'Oooooh my iPhone has arrived! Will pick it up tomorrow v v v exciting'. Both Facebook status updates were selected as examples of self-disclosure: one positive and one negative and could be classified as personal Facebook status updates using the classification scheme developed by Winter et al. (2014), who found that they were the most common Facebook status updates. Also, they are topics which are more likely to be posted by Females than Males (Wang et al., 2013). In the questionnaire, the participants were asked would they 'Like' the Facebook status update ("Yes" or "No"), write a public reply to the Facebook status update ("Yes" or "No"), and/or send the close friend a private message ("Yes" or "No"). If they indicated they would write a public reply or a private message, they were asked what they would write.