

# *A Study of Gender Differences in Chinese Speech Acts*

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**Abstract:** Society and language are closely linked, and language is a mapping of real society. Language produces various differences due to the influence of social attributes such as ethnicity, class, stratum, occupation, age, gender, education and status. With the development of society, the various differences in language are constantly changing. Among these, gender differences have a great impact on language. Since the 20th century, linguists have gradually paid attention to the close connection between gender and language. Adopting the sociolinguistic approaches, this paper focuses on analysing gender differences in Chinese speech acts and exploring their causes, with a view to deepening people's understanding of gender differences in specific language use, enabling both genders to understand each other better in the process of communication, thus reducing misunderstandings in communication and better achieving the purpose of communication.

## **1. Introduction**

After the birth of sociolinguistics, sociolinguists began to focus on the various differences between language variants caused by factors such as gender, age, occupation, class, and context. Among these, gender differences in language were found to be a universal linguistic phenomenon, widely present in different languages. It was also found to influence language more directly than other factors. Lakoff states, "For everyone, gender is at the bottom of our sense of identity; the answers to the questions of what kind of people we are, what we can do, and what we ought to do depend on how we position our sense of gender in early childhood." Historical linguists and comparative linguists also agree that gender differences have always been an important theme in linguistic research. This thesis will mainly use the method of literature analysis, combined with the results of previous research, to analyse the specific differences between males and females in Chinese language in terms of speech acts and the reasons for their formation, with a view to being able to reduce the misunderstandings due to the gender differences in language.<sup>[1]</sup>

## **2. Gender Differences in Speech acts**

The theory of speech acts is a very important topic in the field of linguistic research. At present, there are a lot of in-depth studies on speech acts from the perspectives of "apologies", "compliments", "interruptions" and so on, but few studies have analysed and interpreted these speech acts from the perspective of gender differences. Therefore, this thesis attempts to explore the gender differences of the above speech acts within the framework of Austin's speech act theory.

## 2.1. The apology speech act

An apology is an expression of regret by the perpetrator for his or her inappropriate words, actions or offensive behaviour. Some offensive behaviours may hurt the victim's face or cause physical or psychological harm, which may lead to more serious consequences if the perpetrator does not adopt an apologetic strategy in a timely manner. It is therefore important for the apologising party to ask for the victim's understanding in a timely manner in order to ease the interpersonal relationship and avoid causing further harm to the victim. Apology speech act is a hot research topic in pragmatics, Investigated and analysed the frequency and proportion of apology strategies used by male and female college students in a university in Henan Province with 60 post-95 college students as the research subjects.<sup>[2]</sup> The results of the study showed that both male and female subjects tended to use direct apology strategies to express their apologies, and males were more willing to make amends for the offence, while females were more willing to explain the reasons for the offence. In addition, the study also found that women are more willing to apologise than men. Women are willing to apologise for even minor offences, whereas men are more inclined to apologise for serious consequences they have committed, while women use the strategy of apologising to maintain social relationships. For example, in the open-ended questionnaire designed for this study, one of the scenarios was: when you hang your clothes on the dormitory floor and accidentally dripped water and wet the shoes of one of your classmates downstairs, how would you apologise to him/her? In the statistics of the results, it was shown that females would apologise to the other person even if he/she was not to blame, while males would make a different choice.

According to Han<sup>[3]</sup>, when it comes to the use of apologies, males will use more formal apologies rather than making decisions based on the friend's previous closeness. Men generally consider apologising as an act that damages their own face, whereas women are more likely to use apology strategies to keep social relationships cordial. Taken together, the author believes that women will be more adept at using the strategy of apologising compared to men, and will also be more likely to accept apologies from others. As a carrier of culture, language and culture are closely related, and there are differences in the choice of apology strategies among people of different cultures. Traditional Chinese culture requires that men should be self-reliant, decisive and assertive, while women are expected to behave in a docile and well-behaved manner. Therefore, in apology speech acts, women are more likely than men to express their apologies to others, even if they have only made minor mistakes themselves.

## 2.2. The compliment speech act

"Compliments", is positive language. Compliment speech act is also a hot topic in sociolinguistics. In everyday life, there are gender differences in the use of compliments between men and women, due to differences in the environment, family background, age, psychology and physiology of individuals. Compliment speech acts have a remarkable feature that there exists a symbiotic and coexisting relationship between compliments and compliment respondents. Compliment respondents can both show respect for the speaker and explore and analyse the way in which the person being complimented responds when their personal and social identity is being evaluated externally. From this research perspective, compliment respondents can fully reflect the social and cultural values of individuals.

Yan used a questionnaire survey method to study the characteristics of compliment speech acts among university students in Gansu Province and analyzed the gender differences.<sup>[4]</sup> According to the statistical results of the data, it was found that there are significant differences between males and females in terms of the vocabulary they choose to use when making compliments, compliment strategies, frequency of use, and frequency of reception. Women are more likely to use positively

evaluative words than men. Typically, women often use strong adverbs of degree such as "too", "very", "very much" and "especially" in order to show strong praise or appreciation. Men, on the other hand, rarely use such adverbs of degree to compliment others. In terms of the strategy of using compliments, females would be more inclined to use the direct strategy. In contrast, males will more often use indirect compliment strategies. This reflects the fact that women are better at establishing and maintaining good interpersonal relationships through positive verbal behaviour. Men, on the other hand, are reluctant to be too direct in their compliments and turn to indirect compliments to save face or for other reasons. In terms of the frequency of use of compliments, women engage in more complimentary verbal behaviour than men. In terms of the frequency of receiving compliments, men are more likely to receive them than women. This is because males are more inclined to receive compliments and recognition. Females, when faced with compliments, usually avoid receiving them positively out of modesty.

The author argues that in the process of growing up, men are usually given higher social status and power and are considered the breadwinners of their families and jobs. As a result, males will focus more on competence and achievement in compliments to demonstrate their value. Women, on the other hand, are more expected by society to take on a caring role, and they pay more attention to building and maintaining harmonious relationships when giving compliments.

### 2.3. The interruption speech act

Interrupting is a common language phenomenon in the process of communication, scholars have carried out a lot of research on this speech act, the most influential one is the gender difference research of Vest and Zimmerman.<sup>[5]</sup> They found that there are obvious gender differences in interrupting behaviour, and the frequency of male interrupting female is higher than that of female interrupting male. They believe that men act in this way in order to show their dominant position to achieve the purpose of controlling and dominating the direction of the dialogue. There are fewer Chinese studies on gender differences in interrupting speech behaviour. Examined the differences in interrupting behaviour between males and females of different ages in Juno County, Shandong Province, in 2003.<sup>[6]</sup> Her study found that there were significant differences between males and females in terms of frequency of interjections and success rate of interjections, and that the gender differences in interjections increased with age. Zhang,<sup>[7]</sup> on the other hand, found in her study that the gender differences in frequency of interjections between men and women were decreasing and that the success rate of interjections was significantly greater for men than for women.

Investigated the gender differences in interruption speech acts of male and female college students in conversations with the output of 12 sophomore students from Tianjin Agricultural College.<sup>[8]</sup> Among them, in same-sex conversations, the frequency of male interruptions is slightly higher than that of females, which indicates that males are more inclined than females to grab the right to speak to express their opinions. In addition, males and females also show significant differences in the function of interruption. In male conversations, boys interrupt more often to express disagreement or to try to change the subject than to express agreement or to advance the dialogue. This suggests that in same-sex conversations, males are less likely to consider the speaker's face and more likely to lose interest in the ongoing topic. As a result, they resort to interjecting behaviours to transform the topic in order to express their emotions and opinions. In female conversations, on the other hand, although girls aim to express opposing views slightly more often than interjections to advance the conversation or to express approval, women seldom take the initiative to change the topic. This suggests that in same-sex conversations, women have a better co-operative attitude and better patience to maintain an ongoing topic.

The author has also observed in daily life that in social situations, men may be more inclined to

directly intervene in the dialogue and express their views. Women, on the other hand, may pay more attention to interaction and emotional communication with others, and they often choose to insert words at the right time. Such gender differences may be due to differences in social roles and division of labour. In the traditional division of social roles, men are usually given more authority and higher social status, while women play more of a supporting and secondary role. This division of social roles makes men more assertive and dominant in their interjections, while women may be more cautious and modest.

### **3. Exploring the causes of gender differences in speech act**

Based on the above analysis of the performance of males and females in different speech acts, we can find that there are indeed gender differences in the use of language. The reason why the gender factor can affect the use of language is that men and women are expected to play different social roles and take different social responsibilities, as well as people's self-consciousness and various social factors also play an interactive role in it. In conclusion, the causes of gender differences in speech behaviour can be summarized into three factors: social status factors, socio-cultural factors and psychological factors.

#### **3.1. Social status factors**

The most fundamental reason for the differences between men and women in their speech acts is the different social division of labour. Throughout history, men have had a higher social status than women in most dynasties. Since the change from matrilineal to patrilineal systems, men have taken over the position of ruling the social situation in place of women. In ancient times, it was men who were active and powerful in politics and business, while women's activities were limited to domestic work and handicrafts. Especially during the feudal period in China, women's status in society was so low that they even became subordinate to men, and at that time many women no longer used their own surnames but only their first names after they got married. In contemporary China, however, there is still a large gap between the social status of men and women. This phenomenon is manifested firstly in economic life, where women are still at a disadvantage in terms of access to resources, where the average level of income is lower than that of men, and where the protection of women's rights and interests by business organizations is weak; and secondly in politics, where the proportion of women's participation in the management of State and social affairs is still lower than that of men. As language can reflect various social phenomena in the real world, these differences in social status are also reflected in speech acts.

#### **3.2. Socio-cultural factors**

Language is both part of culture and a projection of a society's culture. Due to differences in the gender division of labour, men and women are expected to have different social expectations, which results in differences in the characteristics of men and women's speech acts. Men are usually expected to be externally empowered, while women are expected to be internally sustained. Flotow [9] suggests that a newborn baby girl is not truly female in the sense that she has to transform herself into a woman. More precisely, she gradually becomes a woman in her upbringing and is distinguished from other women by differences in factors such as the subculture, ethnic group and religious denomination in which she lives. In traditional Chinese society and the family, it is common that men focus on social work and labour, while women focus on the family and raising children. In many cultures around the world, especially in Chinese culture, men are expected to be courageous, decisive, aggressive, and undaunted by hardship, while women are expected to be gentle and amiable. Influenced by this common perception, in order to play the right social role, men subconsciously tend to be calm, assertive, and ambitious in their speech acts (e.g., behaviors

such as frequent interruptions, blunt apologies, etc.), while women tend to be warm, gentle, and empathetic (e.g., avoiding initiating a change of topic during social interactions).

### 3.3. Psychological factors

The use of language is a conscious activity carried out under the action of the brain, and the differences between men and women in speech acts are also importantly linked to their psychological perceptions. Since men are taught from childhood to be brave, strong and aggressive, while women are taught that they should be gentle, dignified, kind and friendly, this educational concept will make men and women make different choices deep down in their hearts and develop in different directions, thus forming different character traits. For example, in the act of apologising, male personality traits are expressed in words as simple and direct, and they usually adopt a straightforward way to express their apologies; whereas female personality traits are expressed in words as euphemistic and implicit, and they are more willing to state and explain the reasons, and adopt different apology strategies according to the differences in affinity. In addition, both males and females have personality traits that intensify as they enter adolescence. Males tend to be more expressive and will strive for as many speaking opportunities as possible in their interactions. Females, on the other hand, are more sensitive and concerned about their image in the eyes of others, which is reflected in their use of language by avoiding forceful expression of opinions, frequently using questioning sentences to seek approval from others, and using more standardised linguistic variants to make themselves appear more elegant.

### 4. Conclusion

The gender difference of language may be formed initially by the difference of male and female physiological structure, but it has no fixed pattern, and it will keep changing with the development of the society, which is closely related to the different social status, education level, class, occupation and language structure of men and women, and other factors. In today's time, along with the progress of people's thinking and the rise and development of feminist movement, the status of women has been greatly improved, and the gender differences in language are constantly evolving and changing in the form of expression. Understanding as much as possible the different linguistic characteristics, ways of speaking and thinking of men and women in communication, and adopting targeted speech and behaviour strategies that are compatible with each other can prevent misunderstandings and disagreements in communication, and is also conducive to the promotion of harmonious coexistence between the two sexes.

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