

Goroshko Olena, Sokolinskaya Olena

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN NETSPEAK

Статья посвящена анализу гендерных особенностей коммуникации в Интернет. Анализируются гендерные аспекты коммуникации в чатах, электронной почте, в виртуальных Интернет-играх (MUDs) на примере англоязычной виртуальной среды. Высказывается предположение о социальной обусловленности этих различий и о тенденции их постепенного уменьшения. В статье рассматриваются также методические аспекты, связанные с применением технологий дистанционного обучения и Интернет в учебном процессе.

Today we are witnessing a large-scale growth of virtual communications within World Wide Web. This kind of communications even has its own name yet - i.e. CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) or speaking plainly Netspeak. And gender matters appear to obtain a new approach being considered in the light of this faceless, colorless, and genderless interface. But is it genderless indeed? The absence of visual and auditory clues in CMC would seem to indicate the masking, if not obliteration, of gender. After all, the participants seated at distant terminals are unable to see or hear each other to realize the biasing of voice pitch, appearance, facial expressions or any external manifestations of gender. The only thing that helps us make a conclusion about our online interlocutor is the language itself: choice of words, their combinations, forms of questions, structure of discourse, etc. Is there anything special in language features or communication patterns, which can anyhow reveal the gender of the user? Here we'll consider an issue of gender-based differences in online communication patterns.

In the number of recent studies on communication patterns it was found that gender-based differences really existed and sometimes considered to be quite notable. We can refer to such authors as Allen, 1995; Bromley, 1995; Danet, 1998; Hara, C. J., & Angeli, 1998; Herring, 1994; Herring, 1996; Jones, 1998; Mason & Kaye, 1989; Rodino, 1997; United Nations' Women's International Network, 1998; Witmer & Katzman, 1997. The difference in communication patterns appeared so striking as to become the foundation for numerous gender theories (Theory of male and female subcultures (D. Tannen), Feminist critique of Language, etc.).

Bonebright, Thompson and Leger (1996) studied gender stereotypes in vocal expression and found that females were better at perceiving fear, sadness and happiness, supporting the conclusion that women are more sensitive to nonverbal cues. They also found that male actors were better at portraying anger and this was the only emotion that males identified more often than females.

It's natural to suppose that if the ability to hear and see non-verbal cues were eliminated (as in CMC) then identification of the message composer's gender would be difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, gender domination in CMC discussion groups might be based on something other than prosodic clues. Anyhow further research revealed some differences in male/female communicational patterns online. And the explanations to this were to be found.

Some authors believe that when CMC first began to come of age, most, if not all, of the communicators were male. They assume that the reasons more females didn't participate in online discussions were related to a lack of skills and experience with the medium. However, Herring (1994) theorized that the reasons for male domination of many discussions had more to do with style rather than the lack of computer or discussion skills among women. In her analysis of message content, men were more adversarial with "put-downs, strong, often contentions (sic), assertions, lengthy and/or frequent postings, self-promotion, and sarcasm" (1994). They were more likely to "flame" or berate another.

Women, on the other hand, displayed two other aspects: supportiveness and attenuation. Supportiveness was shown in words of appreciation, thanks, and other community-building expressions. Attenuation included asking questions, expressing doubts, making a question of a statement, and offering suggestions. These differences in expression were by no means an exclusive list of behaviors, but rather appeared on a continuum, just as maleness and femaleness is more of a continuum from the very macho, aggressive male to the extremely submissive female.

Very curious examination was conducted by T. Zakharova (Zakharova, 2002). She traced gender aspects of pseudonyms (nicknames) used in German and English chats. The nick is a means of electronic identity. The main upshot of her study concerns the intensification of gender manifestation in virtual communication. A person taking or devising a pseudonym tried to self-advertise and expressed her/his gender in anyway. Her study revealed that gender is connected directly with age, social background, education, etc. of a person. Thus, the link between gender and age manifested into a sharp increase of gender differences namely in youth. T. Zakharova considering chat-communication as carnival thinks that it is the CMC, which intensifies the relativity of gender (Zakharova, 2002, p.262).

D. Crystal depicting the language of chatgroups indicates that the study of an academic newlist showed that males sent longer messages, made stronger assertions, engaged in more self-promotion, made more challenges, asked fewer questions, and made fewer apologies (Crystal, 2001, p.167).

Witmer and Katzman (1997) study of material from newsgroups and special interest groups, revealed that women used more smileys than men (Witmer and Katzman, 1997, p.36). Unexpectedly this study found that challenges and flaming were more common in females than in males.

Analyzing the data obtained in this area of study we can see their high divergence. Not enough research has been done to determine how far differences of this kind will be converted into reliable intuitive impressions about

gender, age, or other features of persona. However, all virtual communication is directly intervened with the notion of identity. We share completely the opinion by D. Crystal that "the questions about identity – of a kind which would be totally redundant in face – to face settings – are also a feature of initial chatgroup encounters. Certain kinds of information are asked for or given, notably about location, age, and gender (not usually about race or socio-economic status)" (Crystal, 2001, p.51). It is the gender that is so sensitive a point that it has initiated the terms Morf (= 'male of female'), an online query addressed to someone who used a gender-ambiguous name (Chris, Hilary, Sasha) and Sorg (= 'straight or gay'). According to D. Crystal and not only him people seem to become particularly anxious if they do not know the gender and sexual orientation of the person they are talking to (Ibid).

Herring interpreted the stereotype of men being more interested in information exchange in light of the socio-cultural screen where men are expected to be "knowledgeable, rational, and dispassionate" (p. 105) and asserted that these expectations are exaggerated in the "Information Age," where technology and computers are inherently thought of as male domains. She further posited that in practical consequences, these stereotypes produce reluctance in women to go online and a lack of confidence in their abilities when they do use the medium. We may admit the rightfulness of similar judgments and conclusions. Nevertheless, it's important to point out that alike socio-cultural changes in favour of overcoming negative stereotypes definite changes should take place in computer-based communication, causing diminishing in online gender differences. We'll consider this thesis a little further.

A lot of research was conducted to find biological reasons for such differences. We can remember DeCourten-Myers (1999), Cowell, et. al. (Cowell et al., 1994), Allen, Hines, Shryne and Gorski (1989), Hofman and Swaab (1991), and Knecht, Deppe, Drager and Bobe (Knecht, Deppe, Drager, & Bobe, 2000). Some experiments were basis for conclusions about fundamental differences in brain leading to differences in communication (Shaywitz et al., 1995). Other did not give definite results about very striking biological distinctions (Frost, et. al., 1999). Contradictory results make us doubt as for the biological nature of gender/linguistic distinctions and give way to speculations on social and cultural nature of these distinctions. Rejecting biological approach to gender matters we can rely on ideas of Shawn M. Burn expressed in her "The Social Psychology of Gender".

If we assume that online communication patterns depend on educational and cultural background than we may expect that those above mentioned differences are 1) not very significant and 2) changeable (what is impossible to expect with biological approach). Even more. We should suppose that gender differences in CMC would tend to decrease. The main Internet users have to acquire the same skills to navigate in cyberspace, to be aware of specific vocabulary items and I-net language features. Their educational level should be high and interests – quite diversified. Bearing in mind all these assumptions we may predict that all those similarities will inevitably be reflected in male/female online communication patterns making them more homogeneous and universal.

It's quite evident that to prove these ideas a thorough research is to be conducted. But even today there are numerous facts when men or women taking part in online chats, discussions, worn the mask of opposite gender without fear to be identified. They can have various reasons for such acts. It's possible to guess that they try to realize their androgynous qualities and aspirations or they just feel free and comfortable to benefit from absence of appearance or voice pitch cues in Web-based communication. Yes, we must admit that Computer Mediated Communication is a great equalizer of gender differences though it hasn't eliminated them yet. And if we don't regard intentional elimination of gender differences in the language of Internet communication, existing distinctions can represent serious ground to research and concern of those involved in teaching through Internet or in developing distance learning courses. These considerations might be especially valuable while creating evaluation criteria in Internet courses. Ruth Burkett (The Biological Basis for Gender Based Differences in Web-Based "Discussions" and Assessment, 2001) thinks that 'to equitably assess student contributions, it is imperative that instructors requiring some aspect of CMC understand that these gender-based differences are not merely a question of style or preference. Assessment of online communication cannot be a one-size-fits-all arena. Efforts must be made to celebrate these differences in communication styles while evaluating students' work in light of these differences'. She also notices that when the American Association of University Women report on Gender Gaps pointed to the need for equity in math, science and technology (American Institutes for Research, 1998), that meant that true equity can only be achieved when we not only recognize our differences, but champion them for the diversity of thought that they engender.

With the burgeoning use of the World Wide Web as a vehicle for course delivery in Ukraine, gender equity issues in communication become extremely relevant for instructional design and evaluation of student performance.

To summarize all assumptions we can say that:

1. there are clear-cut (but not very striking) differences in gender manifestations in the language of Internet communications;
2. they are to be taken into account while creating distance learning courses or how to write or communicate effectively online generally;
3. the nature of those differences is more social than biological;
4. because of their social nature gender-based differences in Computer Mediated Communication will tend to decrease.

Finally, we see the arrival of Netspeak (CMC) as similarly enriching the range of communicative options available to us and 'showing us *homo loquens* at her/his best...

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