LANGUAGE

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Genderlects in Polish Teenagers' Writing

Abstract. The aim of this paper is to verify several assumptions concerning genderlects on the basis of an experiment carried out with a group of Polish teenagers. We enquire whether there are any significant differences in the use of diminutives, colour terms, markers of emotional language and verbosity by Polish teenage males and females. The experiment involved 40 16–17 year-old pupils of a senior secondary school, who were asked to respond in writing to the offered stimuli. It has revealed some significant differences in the language of male and female participants in all the examined categories.

Keywords: genderlects, diminutives, colour terms, verbosity, emotional language

1. Introduction

With the growing popularity of gender studies, interest in this topic has also been sparked within linguistics. Starting with Lakoff's (1975) famous book, a large body of research has shown that men and women exhibit some striking differences in how they use language. Women have been claimed, among other things, to talk more than men, use more diminutives and hypocoristics, colour terms, question tags, rising phrase-final intonation, empty adjectives and adverbs (such as *nice, lovely, great*), as well as have richer vocabulary pertaining to housekeeping and child raising. They are also supposed to often hesitate and show uncertainty and employ more emotional language (e.g. Lakoff 1975, Handke 1994, 2012). Other researchers (e.g. Pauwels 1998, Weatherall 2002) are sceptical about the validity of these generalizations.

The present paper aims at verifying some of the above claims experimentally. More specifically, our goal is to find out whether there are any significant differences in the use of diminutives, colour terms, markers of emotional language and verbosity by Polish teenage males and females.

2. Experimental design

Below we present the experimental design, its participants and the employed stimuli. The experiment was carried out in winter, 2015.

2.1 Participants

The participants of the experiment were 40 pupils from Mikołaj Kopernik Senior Secondary School in Tarnobrzeg, 20 boys and 20 girls, aged 16 – 17. They were informed that the study concerned the language used by Polish teenagers, but without any other details. It should be added that they approached the experiment enthusiastically and were very curious about its results.

2.3 Stimuli

The experiment involved four tasks to which the students were supposed to respond in writing. It was meant to elicit the use of diminutives, emotional language and colour terms. The following tasks were provided.[1]

Task 1. Your bitch has had several puppies which you want to give away to good people. Write an appropriate announcement to be placed on an information board or in social media.

Task 2. Name all the colours found in the picture given below
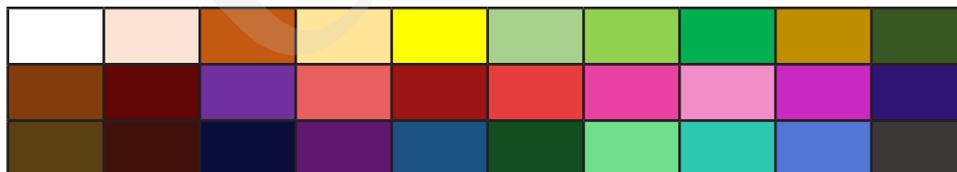
Task 3. You are to inform a good friend about an unpleasant situation you have found yourself in recently.

Task 4. Summarise your favourite film or a novel and explain what you like about it.

   The experiment was carried out during regular school lessons and lasted for 90 minutes (two 45 minute lessons and a ten minute break between them). The participants were asked not to consult each other while doing the tasks. They were also informed that there were no incorrect answers.

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[1]   The tasks were formulated in Polish. Here we enclose the translated versions.

3. Results

In this section we present the experimental results concerning the use of diminutives, colour terms, emotional language, language focus and verbosity in the participants' responses.

3.1 Diminutives

In Task 1 the students were asked to write a note informing that they have puppies to give away. The exercise was designed to investigate the use of diminutives and verify the claim (Lakoff 1975, Handke 1994) that women use them more often than men.

Table 1 shows the number of diminutives used in the first task by the two groups of participants.

Table 1. Diminutives referring to dogs used in students' papers

Total		Diminutives			
		szczeniaczki 'little puppies'	*pieski* 'little dogs'	*suczki* 'little bitches'	*psiaki* 'little dogs'
33	Females	6	13	9	4
19	Males	2	7	8	1

The data in Table 1 clearly show that each of the diminutives found in the participants' papers was used more frequently by females than by males, and the overall disrepancy was 33 to 19. This confirms the claim that such forms are more typical of women's than men's language. The word *kundelki* 'little mongrels' was found in the papers of one male and one female student. Neutral words, on the other hand, were used more frequently by men, with the exception of the word *psy* 'dogs'. This may be explained by the fact that this is the most general and neutral term of all the words and the most prototypical one to refer to a dog. The less frequent use of diminutives by men and their preference for employing more neutral terms can probably be explained by their wish to avoid sounding childish and effeminate.

3.2 Colour terms

The second task concerned the use of colour terms and aimed at verifying whether women use more complicated terms than men, as suggested by some scholars (cf. Lakoff 1975).

In the investigation of this issue it is crucial to distinguish between basic and complex colour terms. Berlin and Kay (1969) distinguish eleven basic colour terms They describe a basic colour as one that meets three conditions. Firstly, it has to be simple and cannot be a derivative of any other name. It also has to have a broad application and be commonly recognized. According to the researchers, the colours that fulfil

these requirements are the following: black, white, red, yellow, green, blue, brown, grey, orange, violet and pink. These colour terms are said to be acquired by children naturally, easily and independently of the speaker's sex. The more complex colour terms constitute a broad set of expressions in every language, and may include derivatives of basic terms, borrowings, or modifications of basic names created by adding adjectives such as light, dark, strong etc.

To provide a clear distinction of the terms with respect to their structure, the following classification was applied:

1. basic colour terms;
2. modified basic colour terms:
    a. by adjectives e.g. *jasny* 'light,' *ciemny* 'dark';
    b. double-barrelled terms, created by combining two basic terms, e.g. żółto--zielony 'yellow-green';
3. morphologically complex terms based on basic colour terms:
    a. basic terms modified by the suffix *-awy* '-ish', e.g. *szarawy* 'greyish'
    b. names modified by an adjective different than *jasny* 'light'/ *ciemny* 'dark,' e.g. *mocny* 'strong'; or by the adjectives *jasny* 'light'/ *ciemny* 'dark' which are further modified, e.g. by creating a diminutive (e.g. *jaśniutki*) or adding the suffix *-awy* '-ish', e.g. *ciemnawy* 'darkish';
4. non-basic colour terms:
    a. created metonymically, e.g. *liliowy* 'lilac';
    b. referring to an object of that colour, e.g. *kolor nieba* 'the colour of the sky', *kolor morza* 'the colour of the sea';
    c. borrowings, e.g. *beż* 'beige,' *ecru*;
    d. fancy names, e.g. *różowy zachód słońca* 'pink sunset'

It may be assumed that a person using only words from the first category has a poor colour vocabulary. The second category is a little more complex but does not require a high level of linguistic competence from the speaker to reach for those terms. The third set contains more demanding terms that involve the employment of some word formation processes. The use of such words may indicate a higher level of proficiency and/or creativity regarding colours. The fourth category requires the speaker to have not only a broad knowledge concerning colour terms, but also a dose of creativity and an innovative imagination, and will be regarded here as the most advanced.[2]

After a careful analysis of the students' writing samples, it was established that all four types of colour terms were used by both genders. However, when the frequency with which different kinds of such terms were employed in the participants' papers is considered, some interesting gender-related differences become apparent.

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[2] It should be added that this part of our experiment is modelled after the study of Winiarczyk (2012).

Table 2 shows the total number of colour terms from each category employed by female and male students.

Table 2. The number of colour terms from each category provided by the subjects

Types of colour terms	Females (600)	Males (595)
1. basic colour terms	169	286
2. modified basic colour terms	78	100
3. morphologically complex terms based on basic colour terms	39	17
4. non-basic colour terms	314	192

A comparison of the data in Table 2 indicates that colour terms which belong to the first two, i.e. simpler, categories were used more frequently by teenage boys than girls. The opposite holds true in the remaining items, which are more complex and sophisticated and were employed predominantly by females. Thus, basic colour terms were found 286 times in the boys' papers and only 169 times in the girls' samples. The same regularity can be observed in the case of modified basic colour terms supplied by young males 100 times and by young females 78 times. The categories of morphologically complex terms and non-basic colour terms show female dominance. The former type was used 39 times by girls and only 17 times by boys, the latter 314 times by girls and 192 times by boys. This means that simpler terms (types 1 and 2) constituted 65% in the case of males and 41% in the case of females. Only 35% of the more complex items (types 3 and 4) were supplied by males and 59% by females. These results suggest that girls not only know and use more complex colour names, but they also employ them more often than the basic ones, while boys do the opposite.

3.3 Emotional language

The experiment included two tasks (3 and 4) that aimed at investigating the use of emotional language. For the sake of analysis the expressions were divided into two categories: references to personal feelings and emotional states, and markers of emotion typical of written language and computer-aided communication in particular.

3.3.1 Markers of emotion typical of written communication

Dąbrowska (2013) presents a very detailed investigation of emotional language in written computer-aided communication. She divides the markers into twelve groups, ten of which appeared in students' works investigated in this study. Those were the following:
– exclamation marks,
– question marks followed by an exclamation mark,
– a sequence of dots,
– capital letters which in computer-aided communication stand for shouting,

– combination of capital letters and exclamation marks,
– onomatopoeic expressions,
– computer based communication acronyms,
– emoticons,
– emotionally loaded vocabulary, e.g. slang or swear words,
– the use of 'empty' adjectives or adverbs (e.g. *nice, lovely, wonderful*)

The use of these markers of emotion in the experimental material is summarised in Table 3.

Table 3. Markers of emotion in the experimental material

markers of emotion	females	males
exclamation marks	7	5
question marks followed by an exclamation mark	2	0
a sequence of dots	8	2
capital letters	3	1
combination of capital letters and exclamation marks	0	1
acronyms	7	2
emoticons	13	4
onomatopoeic expression	0	1
vulgarisms	4	5
'empty' adjectives & adverbs	11	7
Total	**55**	**28**

The data in Table 3 demonstrate that the female participants employed twice as many markers of emotion than their male colleagues. The differences are particularly striking in the case of the use of a sequence of dots, acronyms and emoticons. It is also worth mentioning that only three girls did not include any of the above markers in their papers while there were eight boys who did not use them at all.

3.3.2 References to personal feelings and emotional states

Apart from the features described in the previous section, emotional language can also be seen in references to personal feelings and emotional states found in the students' papers. Generally, the female participants referred to their emotions more often than the male ones (16 expressions of emotions in the girls' papers versus 9 in the boys' samples), which can be explained by the fact that in our culture women can display them openly while men are considered weak if they do it, as evidenced by a popular saying *chłopaki nie płaczą* 'boys do not cry.' Another fact worth mentioning is that the boys referred more often to emotions like anger and irritation, while the girls wrote that they felt silly, naive or sad. The young men almost never expressed such feelings, which corroborates the previously formulated opinion that they avoid expressing emotions because this might suggest that they are weak or unmanly and undermine a popular stereotype of masculinity.

3.4 Different language focus

It is frequently claimed that women focus on different things than men in their communication. Females concentrate mainly on their feelings and relationships with other people, while males stick to facts and numbers. This study seems to corroborate that observation. After analysing the students' texts from Task 3, in which they were supposed to describe an unpleasant experience, an interesting regularity was noticed. Fifteen girls, i.e. 75% of the whole group, described a personal situation concerning a quarrel with their boyfriend, close friend or parents. Boys preferred to describe problems connected with their poor grades at school or some unexpected events. Only six (30%) of them described an unpleasant personal situation. Girls, on the other hand, included many details concerning their private relationships, including even the names and nicknames of the people connected with the situations being described.

Another interesting aspect of language that can be noticed in the students' notes is the volume of additional information concerning the dogs present in the notes in Task 1. Girls tended to include a lot of other information about the animals apart from the fact that they have to be given away. They frequently specified the number, breed and colour of the dogs as well as their subjective judgements like the opinion that the puppies are cute. Boys provided such information, too, but less frequently and in a less complex form.

3.5 Verbosity

According to a common stereotype, women speak more than men. After analysing the length of all texts produced by students and measured in terms of the number of words, it became clear that in the experimental group girls wrote more than their male colleagues. Table 4 shows the average length of texts written for each of the tasks.

Table 4. Average length of texts for each task

	Females			Males		
	Task 1	Task 3	Task 4	Task 1	Task 3	Task 4
average number of words in a given task	31	51	50	21	30	44
average of all 3 tasks		44			33.6	

The average length of texts written for three tasks amounts to 44 words in the girls' samples and 33.6 words in the papers produced by the boys. This finding is further supported in the comparison of more detailed results. For example, the shortest text written by a boy contained only eight words and by a girl 13 words. In the case of males the longest response comprised 86 words and in the case of females 128 words. These figures show that in our study the girls wrote longer answers than they boys. This result may be interpreted in terms of greater verbosity of women. Alternatively, we can argue that longer texts provided by the girls stem from their deeper and more

intense involvement in the experimental tasks. The first interpretation confirms the claim that women speak or write more than men (for a different view see Pauwels (1998) and Weatherall (2002)).

4. Conclusion

The analysis of the experimental results has shown significant differences in the use of Polish by male and female teenagers. The girls in our study used more diminutives, more diversified and complex colour terms and more emotional language than the boys. Moreover, the females focused on describing their feelings and personal relationships while the males reported facts and events. Finally, the girls displayed more verbosity than the boys. Thus, the experiment has confirmed the validity of some common views concerning the differences in linguistic communication between the two sexes. Needless to say, more empirical data are needed to support these conclusions.

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