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Sex differences in linguistic ability: a case for Xhosa

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Research indicates that sex¹ determines the extent to which linguistic performance affects achievement. In a study undertaken by Liski and Puntanen (1983) aimed at determining the extent to which oral performance in spoken English is affected by variables which have been found to be related to achievement, sex proved to be one of the most important variables in explaining differences in language skills. Comparison between the girls' and the boys' distribution of marks revealed that the girls in their study were better than boys at matriculation level.

A similar study was undertaken by the writer, concerning oral proficiency in Xhosa as a second language in schools under the Cape Education Department. A total of 159 pupils was tested, spread over three areas; the Western Cape, Port Elizabeth-Uitenhage and Border. Sex was one of the variables selected. Test results show some interesting findings in a situation where Xhosa is learnt.

There was a statistically significant difference between the performance of females and males in important sections of the communicative test.

1. Introduction

Language learning folklore says that women learn languages "better" than men. However, this belief has not received much investigation in studies of language learning strategies. Omission of sex as a variable in language learning research is rather surprising,

1. 'Sex' is used here in preference to 'gender':
'Gender' is the more accurate term: 'sex' refers to a biological distinction, while 'gender' is the term used to describe socially constructed categories based on sex ...
However, 'gender' has the disadvantage that it is already a technical term in linguistics.
(Coates, J. (1991). *Women, Men and Language*. Harlow: Longman, p. 4)

since sex is a classic and significant predictor in other educational, psychological and linguistic research (Maccoby and Jacklin: 1974).

Linguistic sex varieties emanate from the fact that language, as a social phenomenon, is closely related to social attitudes. Men and women are socially different in that society lays down different roles for them and expects different behaviour patterns from them. Language simply reflects this social fact (Trudgill 1992). According to Powell (1970), a child is bombarded by sex-specific images from the media, from infancy and from educational spheres, as soon as he or she reaches school age. Parents' expectations for their children, especially in the mother-daughter relationships, often reinforce this sort of subliminal programming.

The aim of this paper is to examine sex as a variable in language performance of girls as opposed to boys. The author will present test results against the background of sex as a variable which may have affected the scores gained by testees. The writer will demonstrate how social language strategies favour females over males, thus promoting the notion of female superiority in language proficiency.

2. Literature survey

Research indicates that sex determines the extent to which oral performance affects achievement (see McGuinness and Pribram 1975, Powell 1979 and Liski and Puntanen 1983). Liski and Puntanen (1983) undertook a study aimed at determining the extent to which oral performance in spoken English is affected by variables which have been found to be related to achievement in group conversation tests of English as a foreign language. In this study, sex proved to be one of the most important variables in explaining differences in language skills. Liski and Puntanen point out that systematic differences were found between males and females in their data. Comparison between the girls' and the boys' distribution of marks revealed that the girls in their study were better than boys at Matriculation level (Liski and Puntanen 1988: 239). Evidence exists of male superiority in spatial ability, i.e. in activities in which the ability to organize and relate visual inputs in spatial context is uppermost (Hutt 1972 and Maccoby and Jacklin 1974).

According to Powell (1979) international tests in modern language achievement carried out at the same time as those for science, have provided ample data for researchers to be able to conclude not only that second language learning is a "feminine" activity in terms of numbers and attitude, but that girls excel in terms of overall attainment as well.

3. Method

3.1 Procedure

A study was undertaken by the author (Gxilishe 1987). The researcher devised a communicative test in Xhosa for second language pupils. It was an educational test of oral achievement in Xhosa at Senior Certificate level under the Cape Education Department. The principles of testing were drawn from the notional-functional teaching approach. The test was subdivided into four sections:

- listening comprehension test
- understanding of selected functions within contexts
- understanding of selected notions in various contexts
- unstructured conversation based on specific situations

This test was designed to ascertain whether the objectives of the Cape Departmental syllabus had been attained. It was first subjected to evaluation in a trial run to determine the level of validity, reliability and practicability. Once it had been established that the level was acceptable, the test was administered to Senior Certificate pupils in schools in three areas: the Western Cape (Area 1), Port Elizabeth-Uitenhage (Area 2) and Border (Area 3) under the Cape Education Department.

3.2 Subjects

A total of 159 out of 193 pupils, 126 Higher Grade and 33 Standard Grade who were doing Xhosa as a subject for Senior Certificate at the various schools, were tested in this study. Therefore, an almost full sample (82,38%) of the total number of pupils taking Xhosa at Senior Certificate level during 1985 was incorporated in the study. The sample applied in this study is therefore a highly representative one.

Table 1 shows the number of pupils tested. They have been classified according to the area they come from. They are also divided according to sex, home language and grade.

The figures presented in Table 1 show that more than half of the pupils were from the Western Cape. Furthermore, 56% of the pupils were female and 61% were English-speaking. Nearly 80% of all the pupils studied Xhosa on the Higher Grade.

Table 1: Pupils according to selected variables (summary table)

Variable		No of pupils	Percentage
Area	1	91	57,2
	2	44	27,7
	3	24	15,1
Total		159	100,0
Sex	Male	70	44,0
	Female	89	56,0
Total		159	100,0
Home language	Afrikaans	57	35,8
	English	97	61,0
	Other	5	3,2
Total		159	100,0
Grade	Higher	126	79,2
	Standard	33	20,8
Total		159	100,0

4. Results

It has been suggested that females tend to obtain higher scores than males in languages. It will now be established how valid the above contention is in a situation where Xhosa is learnt. Tables 2 and 3 show average percentage scores obtained in respect of sex by pupils under discussion, as well as differences in these scores between females and males.

Table 2 shows that females obtained higher average percentage scores when scores of the whole test battery were combined and also when individual scores of sub-sections of the test were observed. When differences were calculated as in Table 3, a statistically significant difference was observed in respect of scores obtained in the combined scores and also in the sub-test on unstructured free conversation.

Table 2: Average percentage scores according to sex as obtained by pupils doing Xhosa for Senior Certificate under the Cape Education Department

Test	Females N=89	Males N=70
Listening	65,6	60,4
Functions	45,3	38,3
Notions	44,5	39,6
Free Conversation	54,5	49,0
Total test	52,7	46,9

Table 3: Differences in scores according to sex, obtained by pupils doing Xhosa for Senior Certificate under the Cape Education Department, p-values based on t-tests

Sex	Listening	Functions	Notions	Free conversation	Total test
Male/Female	0,059	0,032	0,114	0,003*	0,01

* significant at $p = 0,025$ (one-tailed testing)

The difference observed in respect of the section on free conversation, on combined scores and also on the combined scores of the test battery is important. More marks (35,8%) were allocated to free conversation than to the other three remaining sections of the test battery, the sub-tests on listening comprehension, language functions and language notions, each being allocated 21,4%. The sub-test on free conversation is important in another respect. To perform well in it, one has to be competent in language functions as well as in language notions, which are both important in the language communication process.

From the above observations it appears that findings based on a literature survey that sex influences second language acquisition may be valid and that these findings relate to the present study as well. This is supported by the fact that there was a statistically significant difference

between the performance of females and males in important sections of the Xhosa communicative test.

The present study supports Powell (1979) concerning the performance of girls as opposed to boys. He points out that international studies for the evaluation of educational achievement in both French and English as a foreign language showed that girls perform better universally. He also points out that more girls than boys study languages to examinable levels.

5. Discussion

5.1 *Learning strategies*

In an article by Oxford *et al* (1988) reporting on the few studies which have explored sex differences in the use of language learning strategies, females showed significantly more use of strategies in conversational/input elicitation strategies, all of which are forms of highly social interaction. Some of these strategies involve consciously eliciting certain kinds of input (help, correction, slower speech) from the conversation partner. Others reflect social empathy (e.g. guessing what the speaker will say, noting reactions of others, noticing body language). The greater use by women of these types of foreign language learning strategies is consistent with sex differences found in native language use. Linguistic research shows that women and men actually use their own native language differently, reflecting the greater social orientation of women. Greater empathy, politeness and concern for others is displayed in women's speech. Fishman (1977, 1978) found that women use monosyllabic responses to show interest and encourage the conversational partner to talk, while men use such responses to discourage interaction.

5.2 *Verbal fluency*

After the age of 10 or 11, and particularly throughout high school and college, girls consistently outscore boys in a variety of verbal skills (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974). Females typically excel at verbal fluency (Tyler 1965). Hints of female verbal advantage appear early: girls learn a little earlier than boys to talk, to use sentences, and to employ a greater variety of words (Gage and Berliner 1975).

5.3 *Attitudinal factors*

The importance of attitudinal factors and how they determine successful acquisition of a foreign language has been stressed in many studies. It has often been indicated for instance that learners who have favourable

attitudes towards a language and towards its speakers and their culture, tend to be more successful in their learning than those who have negative attitudes (Gardner and Lambert 1972; Burstall 1974).

Sex differences in attitudes towards the study of language has become a widespread area of investigation. It has emerged from research studies that boys and girls, in general, have different attitudes (Loulidi 1989). Girls, we are repeatedly told, tend to show significantly more positive attitudes than boys. The findings of Burstall (1974) for instance, confirmed that attitudes of girls learning French were consistently more favourable than those of boys. More recently Powell and Batters (1985) conducted an attitude survey involving 953 pupils at the beginning of the second year of French or German in sex-mixed comprehensive schools. Again, the general findings supported the common view that girls express more positive preference for foreign languages than boys.

The predominance of women teachers in language departments and the gap between male and female teachers is gradually widening. This state of affairs caused some concern for some educationalists who felt that boys might end up by being taught predominantly by women teachers (Powell 1986; Pritchard 1987), a fact which it has been argued, is likely to reinforce the male perception that languages are "a girl's subject" which contributes to the perception of a vicious circle resulting in boys' underachievement in languages.

5.4 Motivation

Possible sex differences in motivational orientation might influence strategy use. Based on the research on females' greater social tendency, it could be expected that females more than males would demonstrate *integrative* motivational orientation: i.e. a socially-based orientation reflecting a desire to learn the language in order to identify with the language group. Similarly, males more than females would demonstrate *instrumental* motivational orientation, in which knowledge of the language is chiefly desired for job advancement or some other instrumental reason.

5.5 Personality

Studies in sex differences in personality characteristics have also been carried out in order to ascertain the extent of the difference between male and female (Loulidi 1989). One of the personality tests upon which clear-cut, set sex differences have been found is the Allport-Vernon study of values (Tyler 1976). Most of the items in this test require the subject to

choose between alternatives, each of which is related to a dominant value. The significant findings are that men obtained higher average scores than women in theoretical, economic and political values. This would indicate more and more desire for influence and power over others as goals for living. Women, on the other hand, obtained higher average scores than men in aesthetic, social and religious values, which would indicate more interest in art, more emphasis on religion and more concern for the welfare of others as goals for living.

6. Conclusion

From the above, I have attempted to show, through various examples, that boys' and girls' attitudes towards language learning cannot and should not be seen in isolation from socio-cultural and educational factors.

I have argued throughout this paper that society has norms for the sexes and that these social norms do not seem to conflict with girls learning a language, whereas they do for boys.

However, one cannot suggest that languages are indeed "feminine" or that girls are somehow innately endowed or predestined for excellence in learning and using foreign or second languages. This preconception is no doubt still prevalent in society. It must be clearly emphasized that in spite of the considerable amount of debate and polemic, research studies on the existence of predestined biological sex differences in languages are scant and inconclusive. Any empirical research in this field should therefore be cautious in drawing conclusions.

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