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**A LANGUAGE AND GENDER ANALYSIS IN “THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST” BY OSCAR WILDE**

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**Abstract**

Language is a means of communication; it is mostly influenced by gender. For a long time, language and gender studies turn to be an endless issue in both sociolinguistics and pragmatics areas. Many studies focus on linguistic levels such as phonology, grammar, pragmatics and morph syntax. However, few of them are conducted in specific contexts. Based on the social condition above, this research examines the specific context about language and gender in “The Importance of being Earnest” based on conversational analysis as its theoretical framework. It employs each act from all four scenes as data source and adopts quantitative and qualitative analysis, comparison and contrast method. The study mainly concentrates on differences in the amount of talk, the amount of turns and also distribution of them. “The Importance of being Earnest” shows how people in the old day (1895) have views about education, politeness and gender. This drama is suitable to find out the different social interaction between men and women since the ways they use the language is different. By conducting this research, it leads to capture these findings: in terms of the amount of talk, women use more words to compose more sentences. In other words, they are more talkative than men. Meanwhile, in the aspect of the amount of turns, men are inclined to take the turn floor for a longer time.

**Keywords**: sociolinguistics, language and gender, The Importance of being Earnest

* + 1. **Introduction**

Linguistics is divided into micro and macro linguistics. Sociolinguistics is a branch of macro-linguistics. It has been popular since 1960s in America. Since then, it has involved many significant research topics, among which is language and gender. As Wardhaugh (2000: 309) states, “A major topic in sociolinguistics is the connection, if any, between the structures, vocabularies, and ways of using particular languages and the social roles of the men and women who speak these languages”. The topic has evoked heated discussion, such as Lakoff, Bloomfield, Whorf, Sapir, and Bolinger, and so on. Generally speaking, most of the studies on language and gender focus on these three aspects: gender differences in language; sexism in language; causes for gender differences and sexism in language. Few of them are conducted in specific contexts.

Like a drama script entitled “The Importance of being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde. It takes a good appreciation and high popularity since it was performed in the early beginning of its first show. It contains a large number of authentic and daily conversations between males and females, which can serve as a typical and representative data source of language and gender study.

This research is expected to obtain some useful insights into and adding fresh blood to language and gender study. In this study, Conversational Analysis (CA) functions as the theoretical framework for it is quite suitable for the study of conversation and gender. Based on former studies on language and gender and CA, the author originally divides this analysis into two main parts: the analysis of the amount of talk and the analysis of turn-taking.

* + 1. **Literature Review**

Since this research is intended to analyze language and gender in “The Importance of being Earnest” from the perspective of sociolinguistics, it is necessary to have a brief review of studies on language and gender and “The Importance of being Earnest” respectively.

Previous Studies

This research uses the former almost-similar researches as the previous studies. First is entitled “A Sociolinguistic Study of Language and Gender in Desperate Housewives” written by Jie Li Foreign Languages College, Inner Mongolia University, W. Hohhot, 010021, China. This research employs the language phenomena in a well-known TV series Desperate Housewives. The findings are: males dominate the conversation rather than females do, and females take the turn taking ratio lower than males.

Another research is “Language, Gender and Sexuality: Current Issues and News Direction” by Deborah Cameron, University of Oxford. She employs a research about the modest people view of language in the influence of gender and sexuality. It raises a finding that the concept of binary difference has been superseded by one that is concerned with the diversity of gendered and sexual identities and practices.

However, this research tries to find out the influence of gender differences in the amount of talk, the amount of turns and also distribution of them.

The Studies of Language and Gender

The earliest research about language and gender can be found from the ancient Greek manuscripts. At that time, many dramas witnessed gender differences in language. Though there is a trend to study language and gender, it has not become an independent linguistic topic until the 1960s, when feminist movement appeared and sociolinguistics advanced. In the 1770s, such well-known linguists as Lakoff, Trudgill, Zimmerman, West, Thorne and Henley made a great contribution to the study by exploring the social roots of gender differences in language. Gradually, researches and studies began to flourish. In the early 1980s, Bolinger and other linguists thought of gender differences in language as a kind of sexism. In recent years, conversational analysis serves as a new and important approach in the study of language and gender. It is regarded as an influential branch in the modern gender language field for it has broadened its scope into a variety of formal and informal settings, and connected gender with conversational features, such as the amount of talk and turns. Generally speaking, the studies abroad emphasize on three aspects: gender differences in language; sexism in language; causes for gender differences and sexism in language. Based on the studies abroad, the proposed research adopts the conversational approach and tries to make a deep analysis of language and gender in “The Importance of being Earnest”, in the hope of adding fresh blood to relevant studies.

* + 1. **Method of Investigation**

Based on the research background, it captures these two research questions:

What are the differences between men and women in the amount of talk in “The Importance of being Earnest”?

Is there any difference in the amount of turns and distribution of them in “The Importance of being Earnest”?

The data employed in this research are from the drama script of “The Importance of being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde. The writer chooses the scenes as the subject of study because it contains many daily conversations among men and women. This makes it suitable for the study of language and gender. In terms of data collection, the study selects each scene for the scientific and objective purposes. In order to gain the exact and proper data, the writer gets the complete script from the internet. She downloads the original version since it shows the pure dialogues written by the author in the old day. Meanwhile, relevant speeches and conversations between men and women are written down on paper for later observation and analysis.

Research methodology in this study refers to the combination of research methods. The methods used in this research can be classified as a case study with the combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The quantitative approach is to use tables and figures to show the differences in the amount of talk and turns. The qualitative approach is to give a systematic description of the data. The exact analysis procedure proceeds in the following way. Since the conversational analysis serves as the theoretical framework, a thorough analysis of language and gender in “The Importance of being Earnest” is conducted from two main aspects: the analysis of the amount of talk and the analysis of turn-taking. To be specific, the analysis of the amount of talk concentrates on the amount of words and sentences; the analysis of turn-taking only focuses on the amount of turns and the distribution of them. In the process of analysis, statistic exploration is demonstrated in tables. Following it, qualitative analysis is made to study gender differences in these two aspects in this literary work. Meanwhile, comparison and contrast method is employed to make a scientific and systematic study. After the detailed analysis, the writer puts the conclusion of this study by clarifying major findings, limitations and suggestions for further studies.

* + 1. **Findings and Discussion**

The following is a thorough and detailed analysis of language and gender in The Importance of being Earnest. We mainly focus on the amount of talk and turns, and the distribution of them.

Analysis of the Amount of Talk

In the general, amount of talk means how much a speaker speaks in a conversation. Its study concerning gender is to study which gender is more talkative. As is widely acknowledged, women are more talkative. A large amount of former studies have proven this belief. However, recent studies challenge it. Mary M. Talbot (1998), in her book Language and Gender: An Introduction, made the conclusion that men are more talkative under some occasions. Many other scholars further deepened the study and arrived at the same conclusion. Then, how about the result in “The Importance of being Earnest”? Can the results of previous studies applied to the drama scripts? The writer investigates it in the following paragraph. First, she employs the common method which compares the total amount of words and sentences, and the average amount of them of both genders. The table presents the findings of the amount of words and sentences in the three scenes adapted from the drama script “The Importance of being Earnest” by Oscar Wilde.

Table 1. Table of Amount of Talk

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **Word Amount** | **Sentence Amount** | **Average Sentence Length** | **Word Ratio** | **Sentence Ratio** |
| **Males** | 875 | 147 | 5.39 | 40.8% | 48.8% |
| **Females** | 1020 | 196 | 7.69 | 59.2% | 51.2% |
| **Total** | 1895 | 343 | 13.08 | 100% | 100% |

From the table above, it can be seen that among the 1895 words, there are 875 used by males, accounting for 40.8%, while 1020 used by females, accounting for 59,2%. In terms of the amount of sentences, males use the 875 words to compose 147 sentences, taking up 48.8% of the total number. However, females take the dominant one by composing 196 sentences, taking up 51.2% of the total number. This clearly shows that female speak far more than male in conversations. This finding is not in line with the theory of Mary M. Talbot (1998) that states men, in a conversation between both genders, are relatively more talkative. The conversation below is found from the total act in all four scenes. It happens among all of the characters in the script of “The Importance of being Earnest”.

The analysis can help us fully understand the conclusion above. Example one is taken from first act (scene one page 7-9). From the conversation, the men (Jack and Algernon) used 188, whose word ratio reaches 43.7%, less than that of the women, 56.3%. In terms of the sentence number, there are 18 composed by the man, occupying 66.7% of the total number, while there are only 9 made by the woman, occupying 33.3%. It is clearly shown that women talk more than men do. The women appeared to be much more talkative in their short conversation.

Example two is adapted from the similar scene on page 10. The conversation happens between Jack and Gwendolen. They have a long conversation about confession their intimate feeling. In this conversation, there are 32 sentences made up of 249 words. Among all these 32 sentences, the man and the woman take up 6 respectively. However, the woman used 121 words, whose word ratio reaches 56%, far more than that of the man, only 44%. Obviously, the woman spoke more than the man. They all show the differences in the amount of talk in conversations between males and females.

Analysis of Turn-Taking

Turn-taking is the fundamental rule to guarantee the smooth transition of a conversation. It means one participant A to another participant B; another participant B begins to talk and then stops. (Levinson: 2001). Its study concerning gender is to study which gender initiates or offers the turn, and which gender takes the turn floor for a longer time. In the proposed research, we focus on the latter. It is agreed that men are inclined to take the turn for a longer time in a conversation between males and females. However, it does not happen in The Importance of being Earnest. We see differences in the time of both genders taking the turn floor. The following table shows the amount and distribution of turns in conversations between males and females.

Table 2. Table of Turns

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Gender** | **Turn Number** | **Word Number** | **Average Turn** | **Length ratio** |
| **Males** | 107 | 875 | 12.16 | 47.3% |
| **Females** | 126 | 1020 | 16.72 | 52.7% |
| **Total** | 233 | 1895 | 28.88 | 100% |

From the table, we can see that women’s turns reach as highly as 126 in all the four scenes of the whole story, which take up 52.7% of all the turns. Compared with women’s turns, men’s turns occupy 47.3% of all the turns. In terms of average turn length, there is an obvious difference that a gap of 4.56 words between male talks and female talks. Thus, men speak far less than women in a turn. Example three is taken from second act (scene two page 19-21). In the conversation, there are all together 40 turns, each gender occupying 20. Even though, the young woman, Cecily, says more words than the man, Algernon. In other words, she takes the turn floor for a longer time. To sum up, there are differences in the amount of talk and turns, and the distribution of them. It is safe to say that on some occasions women are more talkative and tend to take the turn floor for a longer time than men.

* + 1. **Conclusion**

This research is conducted under the theoretical framework of conversational analysis. Exactly speaking, analysis of language and gender in this paper involves two main parts: the analysis of the amount of talk; the analysis of turn-taking. It has made a thorough study of these two aspects in the specific context. Quantitative and qualitative examination, together with comparison and contrast method shows the differences in the amount of talk, turns and distribution of them. In terms of the amount of talk, this research finds that women occupy a higher rate. Their word and sentence amounts take up 59.2% and 51.2% of the total in all four scenes, while men’s only 40.8% and 48.8% respectively.

The statistics show the fact that women are more talkative than men on some occasions. Analysis of turn-taking concerning gender in “The Importance of being Earnest” mainly centres on the amount of turns and distribution of them. Among all the turns in the eight episodes, women occupy 52.7% while men 47.3%. Although the gap is not large, it shows that women are inclined to take the turn floor for a longer time when they have a conversation with men.

Since this research is conducted in an English context, its data is only collected from one of the popular drama scripts. Others are supposed to be taken into consideration. The writer only examines one sample, a much larger sample is needed so as to add colour to present study. Besides, this research only focuses on the most typical aspects in “The Important of being Earnest”. In the analysis of the amount of talk, it only studies the amount of words and sentences. However, there are other aspects worthy of study, such as the amount of adjacency pairs, intonations, accents, and so on. Likely, in the analysis of turn-taking, this study mainly concentrates on the amount and distribution of turns while other aspects like interruption and overlap are ignored. In addition, language and gender study from the perspective of conversational strategies including silence, minimal response, and styles including politeness and directness is missing. Thus, the writer expects this research will have another extended domain of the limitation area.

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