

**The Use of Two Directives :
A Sociolinguistic Study**

by

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Abstract

There is now some emphasis on the sociolinguistic variation associated with the speaker's sex. It is now acknowledged among sociolinguists that sex is a significant factor that affects speech and response to it. The purpose of this study is to investigate the difference in directive structure on responses of members of a certain social group. The study involves a field research that was done in the U.S. It comes up with a conclusion that there are differences and similarities between men and women reactions depending on the given directive.

Sociolinguists have become aware of the fact that sex is a variable that strongly affects speech and response to speech. Recent linguistic studies indicate that there are differences between male and female speech in syntax, phonology, intonation and even sometimes in the selection of vocabulary.

In this study, I will not discuss the above issues. My focus will instead be upon analyzing the two human sexes' response to speech rather than analyzing speech itself. The aim of my study is to find out the effect of the difference in directive structure on responses of members of a certain community.

The type of directive used in getting service is important in specifying the kind of information we get. Using a direct directive with a person you meet for the first time may lead to a negative consequence while using embedded directive could bring a desired end. In this paper I will consider these two types of directives, i.e. the direct directive and the embedded directive in investigating the response of students at Michigan State University (MSU) while I was visiting it this past summer.

People rarely think of the two sexes' use of language, especially their response to a certain linguistic choice. We usually assume that there is no difference in women's and men's reaction or response to a certain place or situation. To test this hypothesis, I conducted this research project with male and female subjects, trying to give a good account of their responses to the two kinds of directives.

Procedure

The subjects involved included 80 American students studying at MSU. The sample was selected randomly by the experimenter while walking between Holden Hall and the International Center. As I estimated, the age of the students ranged from 20 to 24 years old.

On a bright sunny morning, I got off my bus near Holden Hall and started walking down Shaw Lane towards the International Center where I met my subjects. I used the two different kinds of directives with the students to give me directions to get to MSU's Union. The directives were of two kinds, i.e. direct directive and an embedded directive. The two questions I used were as follows :

1. Tell me where the Union is.
2. Would you kindly tell me where the Union is.

The directives were used on 80 students. I gave the first directive to 20 male students and to 20 female students and I did the same for the second directive. I took notes on their responses after they finished giving me directions to the Union.

In order to differentiate between their responses, I used a model of four different variables to assess their responses. The variables were whether the subject's response was elaborate, polite, compliant or friendly. By elaborate I mean giving clear directions and by polite I mean welcoming me by saying hi or hello and saying good-bye when he/she finished giving the directions. By compliant I mean that the subject was willing to help me in finding the directions to the Union, and by friendly I mean that he/she smiled and assured me I would find it easily.

Findings

If we take a look at the first group of the subjects' responses as shown in table (1), we find that the male students were more responsive and positive than the female students. Looking at the first variable, "elaborate", in table (1), we find that 14 male students responded elaborately and gave good directions to get to the Union. The same table indicates that only 2 female students were elaborate in their answers. Again, table (1) reveals that 18 male students were polite but I received only 10 polite responses from the females. The third variable in the same table also shows a big difference in both sexes' response and finally we find the same thing applies for the "friendly" variable but to a lesser degree.

The investigation of the first groups' responses reveals the significant result that male students are more responsive to direct directives than female students who were sensitive about the directive when it was given in a direct way without hedges. This may explain why one girl quickly responded, "Oh shit, I don't know !" In general, direct directives are mainly used in situations which are rank-sensitive such as in hospitals and military service or among intimate people.

Table (1)

Responses to Direct Directives Given by 10 Males and 10 Females

| Elaborate | | Polite | | Compliant | | Friendly | |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 14 | 2 | 18 | 10 | 18 | 4 | 12 | 2 |

Table (2) reveals a significant difference between the male and the female students in responding to an embedded directive. As for the variable "elaborate" the number was the same for both of them. The table also shows that there is a slight difference in the response for the variable "polite" in that the female students were more polite than the male students – they actually showed their politeness by smiling and

even joking with me. For the third variable, we find that all the subjects were compliant but for the fourth variable there is a significant difference in the degree of their friendliness. In general, the female students of this group were much more friendly to me than those of the first group who were given direct directive. For instance, some girls talked to me warmly and even walked me back a hundred or so yards to show me the right way to the Union.

On the whole, table (2) shows that there is a slight difference between the male and female students' responses in that the females were more friendly, polite and compliant. This conclusion about the second group of respondents complies with a common belief that embedded imperatives are the most heavily used because they are neutral in their social significance and usually elicit positive responses from the addressee.

Table (2)

Response to Embedded Directives Given by 10 Males and 10 Females

| Elaborate | | Polite | | Compliant | | Friendly | |
|-----------|--------|--------|--------|-----------|--------|----------|--------|
| Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| 18 | 18 | 18 | 20 | 20 | 20 | 12 | 20 |

Comparison of the two tables reveals that there is a small difference in the male students' responses in the two groups but there is a big difference in the responses given by the female students. This implies that the female students were sensitive to the type of the directive given while the male students did not care about the type of the directive given. If it is possible to generalize from such a study, I would say that female students in the MSU community are polite and sensitive to the type of the directive given while male students are compliant, polite and insensitive about the same things.

Conclusion

One of the main short-comings in this study is that the sample is not very large to be used for big generalizations. Therefore, I think this study would be more effective, and therefore more accurate, if it were carried out on a large number of subjects. Also, if our aim is to reach generalizations, ordinary people should be included in the study or in a follow-up one.

To conclude this study, I would like to say that one part of the study supports the hypothesis that people think there is no difference in males' and females' responses to different directives while the other part of the study contradicts the hypothesis by showing the big difference between the female and male students' response to direct directives. All in all, this proves that there are differences and similarities between the two sexes' reactions and responses depending on the type of the directive used.

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