

Chapter II

The Gender Communication Gap in Online Threaded Discussions

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ABSTRACT

Threaded discussions are one of the central tools of online education. These tools enhance student learning and compensate for the lack of social interaction. This study examines whether these social interactions are affected by some typical gender related conversational behaviors, despite the fact that these threaded discussions are designed to operate in a seemingly gender neutral online environment. That men and women communicate differently in open conversation due to their different respective social objectives in communication is at the core of sociolinguistic theory. A direct result of these differences is a tendency toward same-gender oral conversations. To some extent, according to sociolinguists, cross-gender communication resembles cross cultural conversations. This study analyzes threaded discussions in online courses through the lens of sociolinguistic theory, and conjectures that these gender differences should be reflected in mild gender segregation in the threaded discussions as well as men showing a greater inclination to dominate the discussion. Data from 233 students in 27 online courses support these hypotheses and enable a significant identification of the gender of the student based on whom they reference in the threaded discussion and the way they reference others. Theoretical and practical implications on managing threaded discussions are discussed along with directions for further research.

INTRODUCTION

Conversation, as we all know, is more than a mere exchange of words and the meaning these words convey. Language, being a central aspect of culture and social interaction, also carries a social message and the resulting social segregation and hierarchy such a message creates. This unconscious inclusion of a rich social message is common in conversations by both men and women, albeit each inserts a different social meaning. The problem is that men and women communicate with very different social objectives. So different, in fact, that men and women may totally misunderstand the underlying meaning an opposite gender member is making. Think of shopping as an example. When a woman discusses her shopping it is often with the intent of including the other in the conversation, nothing to do with asking permission, but too often men understand this communiqué as a request of approval. This is because men, more than women, typically communicate with an objective of establishing and maintaining their social status. Commenting on and approving a communiqué establishes their importance. On the other hand, women, more than men, communicate to broadcast rapport. Sharing their shopping excursion story is a good opportunity to involve others or be involved oneself in a conversation. The opposite approach to communication often results a cross cultural misunderstanding (Tannen, 1994). A direct consequence of these differing social objectives and cross cultural misunderstanding is the emergence of gender segregated discussions, as evidenced in many cocktail parties. Men prefer to talk to other men, and women prefer to talk to other women. This is the basic premise of sociolinguistics (Yates, 2001).

Although sociolinguistics research has dealt mainly with the context rich scenarios of oral discourse, the applicability of this idea to the Internet with its more lean social context has received some verification in recent years (Gefen & Ridings,

2005). Virtual communities are online meeting places in which people freely interact as though they were interacting in a face to face manner in a social club. Virtual communities apparently exhibit much of the same gender related behavior predicted by sociolinguistics. Men join these communities to gather and share information, women join to give and share social support. Moreover, although many virtual communities are voluntarily mostly single gender communities, when men seek social support in virtual communities they go to mixed gender communities, supporting the typically stereotyped tendency of women to center their communication on the social side of things. Likewise, when women seek information they go to mixed gender communities, supporting the typically stereotyped tendency of men to center their communication on information exchange (Gefen & Ridings, 2005). These cross gender boundary preferences portray the characteristic gender behavior observed in oral communication (Hannah & Murachver, 1999). And, across cultures, business related email messages, although generally not there to serve a social purpose, are perceived differently by men than by women, with women significantly sensing more social presence in these emails and as a result perceiving them as a more useful medium in their work (Gefen & Straub, 1997). Similar results were reported about the differences of reaction to online purchases by men and women, men being more impulsive online shoppers than women (Zhang, Prybutok, & Strutton, 2007).

But whether and how this applies to online class settings remain open questions. These are important questions to answer because threaded discussions are among the most valuable activities in online classes (Levy, 2006). If gender is a consideration in how students interact online, then teachers should be aware of this. On the face of it, the controlled social environment of a threaded discussion in an online class and the limited power play available in these settings should make these gender tendencies, especially

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