DO SINGAPOREAN YOUTH USE LANGUAGE DIFFERENTLY?:
GENDER AND LANGUAGE USE IN PERSONAL WEBLOGS

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a group of Singaporean Chinese polytechnic students' use of
discourse features that are deemed to be distinctive in blog writing. Specifically, the
research delved into areas pertaining to structural properties of male and female blogs,
content type and replies to blog entries. Further, an examination of lexico-grammatical,
profane and emotive language features in these blogs was carried out. The findings show
that overall, male and female blog entries did not reveal clear-cut gendered differences,
with exception of the use of profane language. Based on the results, we can infer that
participants of both genders seek to present themselves as members of a particular
blogging community through the use of different discourse features that serve the
contextual needs within a particular blogging community. Pedagogical implications of
blogs as a teaching tool for classroom language practitioners are discussed.

1. Introduction

This research focused on a group of Singaporean Chinese students from a local
polytechnic. In general, weblogs refer to webpages which are updated on a regular basis
and contain entries that are posted in a reversed chronological order (Quiggin, 2006;
Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004a; Herring, Scheidt, Bonus & Wright, 2004b).
Personal web logs or online diaries, henceforth, ‘blogs’, maintained by students of a
particular polytechnic were examined in this study. The reason for using these blogs
rather than those from public blog sites was to ascertain the physical identities of the
participants before the study was conducted. This is significant because gender is an
independent variable in this study. According to Penrod (2007:2), blogging is an area of
interest particularly close to the hearts of youth, and this online writing activity has
produced “a form of youth subculture communication” among these users. It is noted
that many research studies have discussed issues regarding gender and language of blogs
in the context of western societies (Ducate & Lomicka, 2008; Greer & Reed, 2008;
Stefanone & Jang, 2008; Quiggin, 2006; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Herring et al, 2004a,
2004b; Herring, 2003, 2000); studies on gender in relation to language use in blogs are
relatively scarce in a modern Asian society like Singapore. Based on existing literature,
there have been studies pertaining to the differences in language use between male and
female speakers. Given a modern society like Singapore where gender inequalities are
largely evened out due to equal educational and career opportunities, this study seeks to
investigate if there are differences in the language use between male and female youth
bloggers and, if there are, would the motivation for such differences be gender or genre-
based? This study seeks to contribute to filling the research gap and help us gain a better understanding of the dynamics of language interaction between male and female youth in an Asian context of modern Singapore. In view of this, the study seeks to fill the identified research gap through exploring the following research questions:

1. Do male and female blogs show gendered differences in terms of their structural properties?

2. Do male and female blogs show gendered differences in blog content in terms of content-type and replies to blog entries?

3. Do participants' blog entries reflect gendered patterns in the usage of lexico-grammatical, profane and emotive linguistic features?

2. Studies on gender differences in communication

According to Coates (2004: 4), the four main approaches to the study of language and gender are namely, the deficit, dominance, difference and dynamic approaches. The deficit approach, which includes Lakoff's (1975) work, emphasizes male and female usage of linguistic forms in oral rather than online interactive exchanges. Further, Lakoff's argument (1975) does not take into consideration the influence that socio-contextual factors have on the usage of various linguistic forms among men and women. The dominance approach argues that female interaction patterns are a result of their subordination to the males. This approach again emphasizes only male and female oral exchanges, including mixed gender exchanges. It does not take into account same-gender interactive exchanges, which are present in the context of blog writing. Similarly, the difference approach which claims that there are gender differences in linguistic practices, contends that there are different subcultures unique to each gender (Coates, 2004). Unlike the previous approaches, studies which adopt the dynamic approach argue that gender is socially constructed through one's linguistic behavior (Weatherall, 2002; Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). The consideration of contextual influences on interactional practices in such an approach would be useful in studying gender differences in terms of the usage of different discourse features in a specific genre like blog writing.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) researchers have claimed that gender-signaling linguistic features are present in online interactive exchanges (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Nowson & Oberlander, 2006). However, the work of these researchers focused on participants from different age groups. Structural features commonly examined in research on blogs include the visual design of blogs, length and number of blog entries (Nowson & Oberlander, 2006; Herring et al, 2004a, 2004b). However, research emphasis in these studies was not placed on individuals within a specific age group. Further, very little research has been carried out on the visual design of female and male blogs (Scheidt & Wright, 2004). Studies have also claimed that female bloggers
tend to maintain more diary-style blogs as compared to their male counterparts (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007; Herring et al, 2004a). Again, these studies did not focus on diary-style blog type, which is the focus in this study.

A study by Huffaker and Calvert (2005) however, showed that there were no significant gender differences in terms of participants’ willingness to discuss content that is closely related to their personal lives. Herring and Paolillo (2006) discovered that blog-type exerts a large influence over participants’ lexico-grammatical choice of male-preferred or female-preferred features, as opposed to participants’ gender. However, participants’ age was not specified in the study. Third, past research has largely shown that males tended to use more profane language and appeared to be less expressive with their emotions (Herring, 2004a, 2000). However, Huffaker and Calvert (2005) found that females were less concerned with the use of polite and cooperative language, and that males favored the use of emoticons as compared to females. In view of this, the use of such language features was examined to determine if our study would yield similar findings.

In short, much of the research work on gender and language use in the field of blog writing has been carried outside Singapore and is largely centred on bloggers within a wide age range. This paper aims to contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of online communication among individuals who are members of particular blogging communities among youth in Singapore.

3. Theoretical underpinnings

Herring et al’s (2004b) analytical framework draws on genre practices to understand the linguistic practices of individuals in different types of blog writing. Broadly characterizing the notion of genre as a group of social events which share common characteristics in terms of “structure, style, content and intended audience” (Swales, 1990: 58), this study further refines the framework by examining the practices within the communicative context of a particular type of blog writing. Taking Swales’ (1990) definition of genre into consideration, it is argued that blogs share a collection of identifiable features (Miller & Shepherd, 2004). These features include a tagboard, hyperlinks and the display of fairly updated, date-stamped entries which are placed in a chronologically reverse order. In addition, researchers believe that these blogs hold content that is closely related to the bloggers’ lives (Stefanone & Jang, 2008; Herring & Paolillo, 2006). Such features are deemed to be characteristic of blogs owned by participants who are members of a community or “specific group” (Ho, 2005: p.2).

The distinctiveness of a discourse community as defined by Swales’ (1990:26) include “a broadly agreed set of public goals”, “mechanisms of intercommunication amongst its members”, “participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback” and the acquisition of “specific lexis”. Echoing Swales’ (1990) concept of a discourse community, Wenger (1998: 83) argued that individuals in a “community of practice” signal their identities as members within the discourse community, in
"reificative and participative aspects" of shared practices. Taking the above concepts into consideration, the formation of a distinct discourse community of bloggers was examined based on a collection of identifiable features which include shared interests, expectations and norms in terms of participants' language use in blog writing. Through quantitative and qualitative analyses of participants' blogs, this paper seeks to examine if individuals within the blogging community work towards constructing a recognizable "discourse community with identifiable norms and conventions for interaction" (Ho, 2005:3).

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Participants

The term 'participants' in this study refers to individual bloggers who have volunteered for the study and are owners of their respective blogs. These participants comprise 14 Chinese polytechnic student-bloggers (7 females and 7 males) who span an age range of seventeen to twenty years of age. In keeping the ethnic and age group of these students homogenous, the data elicited from the blog entries of these students enabled investigation for gender variation, in terms of the usage of specific linguistic features, with greater accuracy and reliability.

The blog entries were studied from September to November 2007, providing a good mix of the polytechnic school term and vacation periods. Data samples collected during this period would provide a reliable insight into the kinds of student activities within and outside school.

3.1.2 Procedure

Prior to conducting the study, blog addresses were collected from the female and male student bloggers on a voluntary basis. Before participants submitted their written consent, subjects were informed of the objectives of the research study so that they could make an informed choice as to whether they wanted to participate in the study. Besides ethical considerations, knowledge of participants' personal data helped us to determine participants' identity. This was important to minimize gender "identity-hopping" (Mesthrie, Swann, Deumert & Leap, 2004:245) and to increase the reliability in data consistency.

3.1.3 Analysis

A total of 446 blog entries - 212 entries (male) and 234 entries (female) were analyzed over a period of 3 months. The following features were examined, namely, structural properties, content-type, lexico-grammatical, profane and emotive language features.

Building on Herring and Paolillo (2006)'s work, statistical documentation was collected before a qualitative analysis. Quantification of data enabled the study to
evaluate the applicability of genre theory and the extent to which our findings affirmed the claims made in previous studies (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Blog entries in this study have been reproduced verbatim and are unedited.

4. Results and discussion

4.1 Structural properties of blogs

4.1.1 Length of blog entries

Firstly, overall, it was observed from the data that it was the external environment, and not participants' gender that played an influencing role in determining the average length of each male and female blog entry. A quantitative analysis of the blogs revealed that, overall, more males and females posted an average of at least 100 words per blog entry during the months of September and October as compared to the month of November. In sum, our findings revealed that, 71.4% of the male participants and 28.6% of the female participants wrote an average of at least 200 words per entry in the three month period. Further, an average of 28.6% of the male participants and 71.4% of the female participants wrote an average of below 200 words per entry within the same time period. A qualitative analysis of the blog entries demonstrated an increase in the percentage number of males and females who wrote a low average of below 100 words or at least 100 words per blog entry in the month of November. This was attributed to the fact that there were many assignment deadlines and examination dates set in that month.

In terms of the average length consistency of male and female blog entries over the three month period, we noted that the percentage increase of individuals who wrote less prolifically in October and November was more pronounced in the male gender group as compared to the female gender group.

4.1.2 Number of blog entries

71.4% of females and 57.1% of males posted a blog entry more than once a week in September and October. From the findings, we could infer that the frequency of weekly postings of blog entries was not determined by the gender variable but a sense of shared awareness between male and female participants on the expected norm of regular entry posting in the social practice of blog writing.

However, we observed a drop in percentage figures for participants of both gender in November. This finding reinforces the earlier observation, in that due to approaching assignment deadlines and examination dates, there was a noticeable increase in the number of male and female participants who wrote less prolifically in that month.
4.1.3 Visual design of blogs

According to Badger (2004), the visual design of blogs — “blog skins” (Gray, 2005:18) serves as a visual representation of the self, to the target audience of bloggers. Overall, female participants were consistently more active in posting photographs in their blogs as compared to their male counterparts. Upon closer analysis, it was observed that the majority of male and female blog entries showed photographs that participants had taken with individuals with whom they shared platonic friendships. Very few female blogs and none of the male blogs contained photographs of individuals with whom the participants shared intimate relationships — i.e. their family members, boyfriends or girlfriends. We could infer that participants of both gender groups had a common understanding of the perceived use of photographs as a visual representation of the friendship ties shared among the participants and other individuals within the blogging community. Such friendship ties were further evidenced in our observation that the majority of male and female participants, 85.7% of them, chose to disclose exactly who they are, to their audience, in terms of explicit written disclosure of personal information.

In terms of participants’ usage of particular visual images in their blogs, our data showed that majority of the male participants (85.7%), and all female participants, preferred to use light, soft shades in the depiction of various images in their blogs. Further, 85.7% of the participants of both gender groups chose images and banners that presented them as friendly and approachable beings to their reader audience. Our analysis also showed that only 28.6% of the male participants and 14.3% of the female participants posted video clips in their blog entries. In terms of participants’ usage of aural input, 71.4% of the male and female participants posted music galleries in their blogs. In short, our findings on the visual features of male and female blogs, showed that most participants of both gender groups generally displayed similar practices in terms of visual, aural-visual and aural representations of their identity in the wider context of blog writing.

4.2 Blog content-type

Our analysis showed that 88.7% of the blog entries posted by male participants and 73.5% of those posted by female participants contained content areas associated with occurrences in the personal lives of the participants, namely, school-related events, events involving friends from school or outside school as well as reflective thoughts on one’s life, goals, hopes and worries.

4.2.1 Replies to blog entries

Social interaction between members of the audience and the participants, in terms of their replies and comments posted on the tagboards, extended beyond topics that are related to the content areas of participants’ blog entries. This suggested that these individuals did interact on a social basis outside the field of blogging, and that these blogs served as highly dynamic platforms where the individuals within a community of bloggers interacted on a diverse range of topics.
4.3 Lexico-grammatical features

The use of lexico-grammatical features in terms of personal pronouns and "noun specifiers" (Argamon, Koppel, Fine & Shimoni, 2003:9) were recognizable features in the blogs. First, the findings revealed that the usage of first person singular pronouns - 'I, me, mine', by all male and female participants was more than two times higher than that of other personal pronouns. As Herring and Paolillo (2006) indicated, first person singular would help create a sense of personal involvement and closeness shared between the participant and the audience. The data indicated that 57.1% of males and 71.4% of females used the first person plural - 'we, us, our, ours', more than the other pronouns, with the exception of the first person singular. As noted by Ho (2005), the use of such pronouns would play an instrumental role in helping the writer create ties of solidarity with the target audience.

Data pertaining to the usage of the second person singular/plural - 'you', indicated that the frequency scores of the female participants were about two times higher than their male counterparts. Upon closer analysis, we found that, with the exception of 2 females, the rest of the female participants (5 out of 7) and all the male participants (7 out of 7) used less than 100 of such pronouns within September, October and November. More importantly, overall, we learned that the use of 'you' also served as a marker of solidarity between the participants of both gender groups and members of the audience as a whole.

Our analysis showed that 85.7% of the male participants and 57.1% of the female participants used less than 30 third person pronouns - 'she' and 'he', within the three-month period. We observed that, overall, the male and female participants did not narrate past happenings which involved a specific person. Instead, participants related their experiences with a group of individuals with whom they shared strong friendship ties. With regard to the use of third person plural - 'they, them, their, theirs', majority of participants had a frequency scoring of less than 100. More significantly, the male and female participants used these pronouns to refer to individuals or objects outside their community.

With reference to the use of specifiers, determiners - 'the, a, an' - ranked the most frequently used compared to other specifiers. This finding is contrary to the observation from previous research studies that determiners are deemed to be male-favored as they function as information-giving markers (Schler, Koppel, Argamon & Pennebaker, 2005; Argamon et al, 2003; Koppel, Argamon & Shimoni, 2002). Our data showed that the determiners were favored by both male and female participants as a referential term to direct the audience’s attention to an event, thing or person.

Further, the data indicated that 71.4% of participants used less than 100 demonstratives - 'this, that'. In addition, the percentage difference in terms of quantifier use - 'some, all, many', between the two genders was not significant. Finally, we found
that the use the possessive pronoun ‘its’ ranked the least popular among both male and female participants.

4.4 Profane language

Female participants favored the use of profanity more than male participants. More significantly, the finding suggested that female participants’ use of such features was motivated by their understanding of the positive interpretation of profanity by the blogging community. The use of such features served as an indication of the trust that participants had in their friendship, to a point where the participants felt comfortable to be open with their thoughts and feelings about certain issues, without having to communicate behind a polite façade.

4.5 Emotive language

Male and female participants used different emotion indicators – emoticons as well as word-based verbalization of laughter - to strengthen their rapport with the target audience. Second, gender-based differences in terms of the overall usage of emotion signaling features were not clear-cut. Third, the high frequency usage of the different emotive language features by the participants of both gender enabled participants to convey their underlying intent and emotional state during a particular event.

In sum, the data did not reveal clear-cut gendered differences, with exception of the use of profane language. Results support the view that participants of both genders seek to “position themselves as members of the community” (Wharton, 2006: 41) within the wider context of blog writing, through their common selection of specific language features.

5. Implications for teaching

The findings from this study shed light on the need to intensify the use of blogs as a writing tool for learners. The presence of a tagboard on the blog site allows the reader audience to share more about a certain topical area or comment on what has been published by the blog author. This “feedback loop” (Penrod, 2007: 23) creates opportunities for meaningful group interaction and encourages learning through peer feedback (Richards, 2005: 3). Further, our overall finding that gendered differences in blogging practices are generally not clear-cut have fortified our belief that intensifying our efforts in harnessing the potential of blogs for the collective sharing of ideas and perspectives, could help learners develop more effective writing skills, regardless of gender.

Second, our findings on the similarities in male and female participants’ overall usage of identifiable features in their blogs could encourage educators to use blogs to
help student writers develop meta-cognitive knowledge and skills in tailoring their writing styles to suit the demands of different communicative contexts.

In sum, the responsibility lies in the hands of classroom practitioners to design opportunities to help students expand their repertoire of discourse strategies so as to help them engage more effectively with their audience in a classroom blogging situation. Further, students can be helped to develop more effective decision-making skills in their selection of writing styles to meet the expectations of different genres of writing.

6. Conclusion

Blogs, which are increasingly used by the younger generation in society, have pedagogical implications on language teaching and learning in our classrooms. That is, through the reading, writing of blog entries and replies, the blogging technology creates meaningful opportunities for engaging youth in an interactive learning environment. The high levels of interactivity and learner involvement, in turn, would encourage active and authentic learning. Having an enhanced understanding of how youth of both gender communicate through blogging would help educators make informed decisions on how to increase the effectiveness of the teaching and the learning of successful writing skills.

References


