SOCIAL CLASS, GENDER AND SPEECH: THE CASE OF FILIPINO CHILDREN

Francisco Perlas Dumanig

Abstract

Social class and gender are social factors that influence the speaker's speech. These factors manifest regardless of speaker's age. Exploring the social class, gender and speech provide evidence how social factors play an important role in influencing the speaker's speech. This study examines how gender and social class differences influence children's speech. Sixty (60) participants from the University of the East, Elementary School Department and from A. Mabini Elementary School took part in the study. The participants were divided in two groups categorized according to their status as middle class and lower working class. The children's speech was identified as male or female by judging their voices as rugged-delicate, high-low, masculine-feminine, and rough-smooth by 10 male and 10 female students from Far Eastern University. The findings of the study reveal that children in the middle class are identified as females while children in the lower working class are identified as males. The findings show that male and female inter-raters have slight difference in their perception in identifying the children's voices. Variation occurs in the average percentage of voice qualities of male and female children in both social classes. The findings clearly show how social class and gender manifest in children's speech.

Keywords: Gender, Social Class, Children's Speech & Filipino

Introduction

In communication, people do not necessarily follow similar ways and patterns of speaking. They exhibit certain differences in sounds, syntactic structures and choice of words, which are influenced by gender and class.[1] These differences show the individual uniqueness, which often leads to differentiation between male and female.

Studies show that differences between male and female are evident in their linguistic choices where women prefer the standard speech to show their femininity while men prefer the non-standard speech to show their masculinity.[2] It reveals why women tend to speak better than men. It is also argued that women use a more correct and standard variety of language than men because of their aspirations to ascend their status in the society (Coates 1998).

Gender construction may start at a very young age. Infant studies suggest that gender, as a relevant indexical linguistic category, is a salient part of the child's input at an early age (Curtin and Kiesling 2002). In fact, between 6-8 months, children are able to match gender through their face and voice[3] and gender can be

categorized based on children's voices.[4] Bee (1998) believes that awareness of one's own gender emerges at around 3 years old and this awareness stays stable throughout life at around 4 years old. These facts suggest that by the age of four, noticeable gender differences emerge along a number of dimensions. A study conducted by Bee consisting of sixteen four-year-old participants and forty adults took part in the study. The adults were told the children's age and asked to identify the gender of children through the recorded voices. The result shows that adults were able to correctly identify the gender more often than chance. Several children were identified quickly and reliably than others. The study reveals an important implication in understanding the linguistic cues that listeners use to identify the gender of speakers. Adult listeners rely on phonetic cues that are much more subtle than gross lexical, phonological or syntactic differences.[5]

It must be noted that in identifying gender, the social status of the speaker must be considered. Social status can be a factor that influences the speech of the speaker regardless of gender.[6] Edwards points some specific differences between male and female as far as their social status is concerned. It was found that working class children were noticed of having lower voices and more masculine voices than their middle class counterparts. This means that working class speech appears to have connotations of masculinity because it is associated with roughness and toughness.[7]

Male and female speech differences are sometimes brought by social class differences. Eckert's (1989) study on sex and gender differences proves that sex and social category are not necessarily independent variables but they can interact in a very significant way. This means that male and female behavior and personality is a product of social class differences.[8] In fact, women have some specific characteristics. They are more status conscious than men and more generally aware of the social significance of linguistic variation.[9] They tend to conform to the standard speech, which is labeled as feminine speech.

Even in the production of sounds, differences between male and female are evident. Dumanig found that different social classes influence the speakers' language production particularly in the production of (f) and (v) sounds. Findings show that middle class male and female speakers produced (f) and (v) sounds correctly than that of the lower working class. Participants in the lower working class had higher rate of interchanging (f) to (p) and (v) to (b).[10] It clearly shows that the social status of a speaker plays an important role in the language production. The possibility of using a more correct and formal language might be expected to speakers in the middle class than that of the lower working class. Similarly, Trudgill (1972) argues that female speakers use the highest rate of prestigious language forms while male speakers use the highest rate of non-standard or less prestigious form.

Areas on gender and social class may provide interesting issues in the field of sociolinguistics. As a result, this paper examines the children's speech and its relation to their social class and gender.

Methodology

There were 60 elementary students participated in the study and 30 of them were classified as middle class children consisting of 15 males and 15 females from the

grade school department at the University of the East, Manila. Another 30 participants classified as lower working class consisting of 15 males and 15 females from A. Mabini Elementary School in Sampaloc, Manila. All participants were grade three pupils whose average age was nine years old. Pupils from the University of the East Grade school department were classified as middle class participants because their family income while the students from A. Mabini Elementary School were classified as lower working class participants.

The study also included 20 (10 males and 10 females) fourth year Bachelor of Arts in English language students from Far Eastern University as inter-raters. The inter-raters identified the gender of the participants as male or female and judged the voices as rugged- delicate, high-low, masculine-feminine or rough-smooth.

To carry out the study, each participant was asked to read a short passage of 2 paragraphs, which was taken from the grade three English book. The recording took place after reading the short passage for four times and the participants were asked to read the passage and were tape- recorded. After the recording, children's voices were judged by twenty inter-raters.

Results

The findings of the study show that the social class of children influences their voices which were identified as masculine or feminine. The way children sound as rugged, low, masculine, rough, delicate, high, feminine and smooth are products of their social class affiliation.

Middle Class Children and Gender Identification
The findings reveal that children's voices vary depending on their social status. Those in the middle class were identified as female and the lower working class children were identified as males. The data are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Number of participants identified as male or female in the middle class by male and female judges

Children	Male Judges	Female Judges
Male	133 (44.33%)	123 (41%)
Female	167 (55.67%)	177 (59%)

Table 1 shows that children in the middle class are identified as female and the lower working class children are identified as male. The male judges identified 44.3% of the participants as male and 55.67% identified as female. Similarly, female judges identified 41% of the participants in the middle class as male and 59% identified as female. It shows that the participants in the middle class are more likely to be identified as female by both male and female judges. Forty four point three percent (44.3%) of male judges identified the middle class children as male and 55.67% are identified as female. However, only 41% of the female judges identified the middle class children as male and 59% are identified as female. The results show

that 55.67% and 59% of both male and female judges identified the children voices as female. It is clear that children in the middle class tend to sound more feminine.

Lower Class Children and Gender Identification
The participants in the lower working class reveal an opposite result in Table 1. The data are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of participants identified as male or female in the lower class by male and female judges

Children	Male Judges	Female Judges
Male	162 (54%)	158 (52.67%)
Female	138 (46%)	142 (47.33%)

Table 2 shows that 54% of the participants in the lower class are identified by male judges as male and 46% of them are identified as female. The female judges identified 52.67% of the participants as male and 47.33% of them is identified as female. The findings reveal that children's voices in the lower class are identified as male by both male and female judges. It clearly shows that the participants in the lower class sound more masculine.

The findings further reveal that male and female judges identified the children's voices in similar patterns. The male judges identified 54% as male and 46% as female while the female judges identified 52% as male and 47.33% as female. Both judges unanimously identified the lower working class children's voices as masculine.

Social Class and Gender Categorization
To specifically identify the gender of the middle class participants, specific gender characteristics for males and females are categorized. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Children's voices in the middle class identified by the male and female judges

Children's Voices	Male Judges	Female Judges
Rugged	96 (32%)	97 (32.33%)
Low	94 (31.33%)	91 (30.33%)
Masculine	97 (32.33%)	74 (24.67%)
Rough	102 (34%)	85 (28.33%)
Delicate	135 (45%)	109 (36.33%)
High	147 (49%)	111 (37%)
Feminine	135 (45%)	108 (36%)
Smooth	142 (47.33%)	101 (33.67%)

Table 3 shows the qualities of the children's voices classified as rugged, low, masculine, rough, delicate, high, feminine and smooth. The findings reveal that the participants in the middle class are identified mostly with feminine features by male judges. They identified the voices as high (49%), smooth (47.33%), feminine (45%), delicate (45%), rough (34%), masculine (32.33%), rugged (32%), and low (31.33%). The result shows that the feminine features are identified highly by the male judges. This means that most children in the middle class sound more feminine.

On the other hand, the female judges identified the participants in this order: high (37%), delicate (36.33%), feminine (36%), smooth (33.67%), rugged (32.33%), low (30.33%) and masculine (24.67%). The female judges identified the middle class children's voices with the feminine features.

It shows that there is a similar pattern in identifying the voices of the middle class children. The findings reveal that male and female judges identified highly the voices of the middle class participants with feminine features such as high, delicate, feminine and smooth.

Comparing the judgment made by both male and female judges, it shows that both judges follow a similar pattern in identifying the children's voices in which they highly rated the children's voices with feminine features. The male judges identified the children's voices as high, smooth, feminine and delicate. Similarly, female judges identified the children's voices as high, delicate, feminine and smooth. The qualities identified are exactly of feminine features.

On the other hand, the participants' voices in the lower class are also characterized to specifically identify the gender. Table 4 shows the results.

Table 4: Children's voices in the lower class identified by the male and female judges

Children's Voices	Male Judges	Female Judges
Rugged	148 (49.33%)	106 (35.33%)
Low	133 (44.33%)	112 (37.33%)
Masculine	125 (41.67%)	102 (34%)
Rough	148 (49.33%)	107 (35.67%)
Delicate	85 (28.33%)	98 (32.67%)
High	122 (40.67%)	99 (33%)
Feminine	101 (33.67%)	99 (33%)
Smooth	59 (19.67%)	80 (26.67%)

Table 4 shows that male judges identified the voice of the children in the lower class that 49.33% as rugged, 49.33% rough, 44.33% low, 41.46% masculine, 40.67% high, 33.67% feminine, 28.33% delicate and 19.67% smooth. The percentage average reveals that male judges identified the lower class participants as rugged, rough, low and masculine which are of masculine features. The findings show that the participants in the lower class sound like males.

On the contrary, the female judges identified that 37.33% as low, 35.67% rough, 35.33% rugged, 34% masculine, 33% high, 33% feminine, 32.67% delicate and 26.67% smooth. The female judges identified the children's voices in the working class similarly with the male judges who identified the children's voices as masculine. The male and female judges identified the lower class participants as males. The judges identified the lower class participants as rugged, rough, low and masculine, which further validate that most children in the lower class sound like males.

Discussion

The findings of the study presented in Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 show that male and female vary their voices in relation to their social class.

Middle Class Children

Table 1 shows the judgment of male and female judges in identifying the gender of children in the middle class. The male judges identified 44.33% as male and 46% as female. On the other hand the female judges identified 41% as male and 59% as female. It reveals that both male and female judges mostly identified the participants as female in the middle class. These findings lead to an idea that feminine features can be influenced by some factors like children's upbringing and exposure to their immediate environment. Baron (1992) noted that parents play an important role in the process of learning the language because the introduction of language begins at home with the parents. The family which is the immediate environment influences the children's language development like the pronunciation of words, word choice, the manner and ways of speaking. It could be argued that speeches are influenced by the immediate environment where the children stay. If an environment that the children are exposed is dominated by people who use non-standard speech or standard speech it may affect the way children sound in their speeches. Therefore, it is not surprising to find out that children in the middle class sound more feminine due to their exposure in a more refined environment.

The findings in of the study correlate with the findings of Edwards (1979) that most participants in the middle class were identified as female because they sound more feminine. Perhaps it is a product of their exposure in a female dominated environment whose behaviors are refined and formal.

In identifying the voices of children in the middle class, male judges identified the voices in this order: high (49%), smooth (47.33%), feminine (45%), delicate (45%), rough (34%), masculine (32%), rugged (32%) and low (31.33%). In this ranking, the first four features are of feminine features, which means that most of the participants sound like females. Similarly, the female judges follow similar patterns in their findings. In identifying the voices of the middle class children it follows this order: high (37%), delicate (36.33%), feminine (36%), smooth (33.67%), rugged (32.33%), low (30.33%), rough (28.33%) and masculine (24.67%). The female judges also identified the first four qualities of voices, which are of feminine features. It shows that the two groups of judges came up with similar judgment.

Lower Working Class Children

In the lower working class, the result shows that male and female judges have similar judgment in identifying the gender of the participants. Fifty four percent (54%) of the male judges identified the children's voices as male, 46% of them identified the children's voices as female, 52.67% of the female judges identified the children's voices as female and 47.33% identified as female.

Both male and female judges identified the children's voices in the lower class as male, which reveals that the children's voices in the lower class have masculine qualities. This finding has proven by identifying further the children's voices as masculine, rough, rugged, low, feminine, smooth, high and delicate.

Male judges identified the children's voices in the lower class in the following order: rugged (49.33%), rough (49.33%), low (44.33%), masculine (41.67%), feminine (33.67%), delicate (28.33%) and smooth (19.67%). The ranking reveals that the first four qualities identified are of masculine features. This findings support the previous studies of Coates (1998) and Edwards (1979) that social class differences affect children's speech and their manner of speaking. Most children in the lower class carry the masculine features due to their exposure to an environment that is male dominated and prefer the non-standard speech.

The female judges follow a similar pattern with male judges in identifying the lower working class children's voices. They identified the voices in the following order: low (37.33%), rough (35.67%), rugged (35.3%), masculine (34%), delicate (32.67%), high (33%), feminine (33%) and smooth (26.67%). It reveals that the first four qualities of voices are of masculine features.

The results show that the male and female judges obtain a similar result in identifying children's voices where both male and female judges identified similarly the first four qualities. Comparing the voices of children in the middle class and lower class, it shows that children in the middle class are mostly identified as females by male and female judges and their voices carry the feminine features such as smooth, high, delicate and feminine. On the other hand, the voices of children in the lower class are identified as males for their voices carry some qualities that are of male characteristics.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of the study show the differences in children's speech between the middle class and lower working class. The results reveal that children in the middle class are identified as females and children in the lower class are identified as males prove that social class differences influence children's speech. This means that the way children sound and behave is a product of their exposure to the environment they live.

The effeminate sound of children in the middle class represents the formal or standard use of language while the masculine sound of the children in the lower working class represents the informal or non-standard use of language. It can be generalized that language use reflects the children's social status regardless of their gender.

Endnotes

[1] Janet Holmes. *Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* (London: Longman, 2008), p. 45; N. Bonvillain, *Language Culture and Communication: The Meaning of Messages*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), p. 205.

[2] Jennifer Coates, *Language and Gender: A Reader,* (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publisher, 1998); Peter Trudgill, "Sex, Covert Prestige and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich," *Language in Society,* 1, (1972), p. 175; Janet Holmes, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* (London: Longman, 2008); Francisco Dumanig, "Phonological differences of (f) and (v) among young Filipino male and female students," *INTI Journal,* 1(4), (2004), pp. 318-319.

[3] A.S Walker-Andrews, L.E Bahrick, S.S. Raglioni & Isabel Diaz. "Infants' Bimodal Perception of Gender," *Ecological Psychology, 3*(2), (1991), p. 58; M. Patterson & J.F. Werker, "Infants' Ability to Match Dynamic Information in the Face and Voice," *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 81,* (2002), p. 100; C.L. Miller, B.A. Younger, & P.A. Morse, "The Categorization of Male and Female Voices in Infancy," *Infant Behavior and Development, 5,* (1982), p. 150.

[4] C.L. Miller, B.A Younger & P.A. Morse "The Categorization of Male and Female Voices in Infancy," *Infant Behavior and Development, 5,* (1982), p. 153.

[5] Helen Bee, *Lifespan Development,* (New York: Longman, 1998), p. 86.

[6] Holmes, J. *Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* (London: Longman, 2008), p. 45.

[7] John Edwards, "Social Class Differences and the Identification of Sex in Children's Speech," *Journal of Child Language,* 6(01), (1979), p. 124.

[8] P. Eckert, *The Whole Woman: Sex and Gender Differences in Variation: Language Variation and Change,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 30.

[9] Janet Holmes, *Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* (London: Longman, 2008).

[10] Francisco Dumanig "Phonological differences of (f) and (v) among young Filipino male and female students," *INTI Journal,* 1(4), (2004), p. 319.