Love Expressions by American and Chinese University Students

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Abstract

Male and female speech is different in many ways. This study intends to compare and contrast love expressions used by American and Chinese university students. The participants of 40 university students, including American male university students, American female university students, Chinese male university students, and Chinese female university students, were selected randomly. Each of them was given one questionnaire. There was an introductory question, which aimed at finding out whether the participants would choose to express their love in verbal or written language, and if they would, how they would express it. Then the participants were channeled into the four different parts. Results showed that male university students of both nations were more eager to express their love and also had less constraints and pressure compared with their female counterparts did. American university students of both genders were more open and direct when they expressed their love, whereas Chinese university students of both genders were more reserved and tended to express their love indirectly.

Keywords

Language and gender, love expressions, American university students, Chinese university students

The social behaviors of men and women are different in many ways. For example, “Though all humans need both intimacy and independence, women tend to focus on the first and men on the second. It is as if their life-blood ran in different direction” (Tannen 2001: 26). Among these differences, love expression is a universal everlasting topic.

The present study intends to compare and contrast love expressions used by American and Chinese university students. The following research questions are to be answered:

When a university student in America or China likes a person and wants him or her to be her boyfriend or his girlfriend,

- (1) Will she/he choose to express her/his love?
- (2) If she/he chooses to express her/his love, does she/he prefer verbal or written love expressions?
- (3) What are the reasons for her/his choice?

- (4) What results will her/his choice lead to?

- (5) Are there any differences for the result of options between different genders? If there are, what are the reasons for the differences?

- (6) Are there any differences for the result of options between different nationalities? If there are, what are the reasons for the differences?

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Male and female speech is different in many ways (Cameron and Kulick 2003; Cameron 2006; Eckert

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and McConnell-Ginet 2003). For example, from the aspect of style, male speech is more competitive and relatively less polite, and it shows the features of power, dominance, superiority, and aggression, while female speech is more cooperative, polite, and interpersonal, and it focuses on feeling and relationships. From the aspect of question, male speech tends to lay stress solely on information, while female speech attaches importance to both information and conversational maintenance. From the aspect of turn taking, in male speech the linkage, in most cases, is missing, while in female speech the linkage is crucial (Tannen 2003; Hall and Bucholtz 1995; Bucholtz, Liang, and Sutton 1999).

“People working in the women’s liberation movement, and other social reformers, can see that there is a discrepancy between English as used by men and by women; and that the social discrepancy in the positions of men and women in our society is reflected in linguistic disparities” (Lakoff 1975: 46).

We have shown that language use changes depending on the position in society of the language user, that a sentence that is “acceptable” when uttered by a woman is “unacceptable” when uttered by a man, or that one sentence may be “acceptable” under one set of assumptions in the subject matter, “unacceptable” under another. (Lakoff 1975: 47)

Moreover, “One variety may be forbidden to one gender, i.e., be taboo, but that gender is apparently nearly always the female gender” (Wardhaugh 2000: 318-319). Trudgill also pointed out that “In more than one language, therefore, women’s speech is more conservative than that of men” (Trudgill 2000: 69).

Female speech has more constraints compared with male speech.

So a girl is damned if she does, damned if she doesn’t. If she refuses to talk like a lady, she is ridiculed and subjected to criticism as unfeminine; if she does learn, she is ridiculed as unable to think clearly, unable to take part in a serious discussion: in some sense, as less than fully human. These two choices which a woman has—to be less than a woman

or less than a person—are highly painful. (Lakoff 1975: 6)

METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Participants Selection

The participants in the study were 40 university students, including 10 American male university students (AMUS), 10 American female university students (AFUS), 10 Chinese male university students (CMUS), and 10 Chinese female university students (CFUS). Each person was given one questionnaire, and the participants were chosen randomly.

Instrument

The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire, which consisted of four parts. There was an introductory question, which aimed at finding out whether the participants would choose to express their love in verbal or written language, and if they would, how they would express it. Then the participants were channeled into the four different parts. If the participants chose A, they needed to go to Part One, and went over those questions there. The answer B matched Part Two, the answer C matched Part Three, and so did the answer D. Therefore, the participants who chose B, C, or D followed the same routine. Part One consisted of nine questions ranging from Question No. 1 to Question No. 9; Part Two included nine questions starting from No. 10 and ending with No. 18; Part Three was composed of 15 questions ranging from No. 19 to No. 33; and Part Four consisted of eight questions starting from No. 34 and ending with No. 41. The last question of each part was an open-ended question for the participants to write down any comments they had.

Procedure

There were four groups of participants in this study, including AMUS, AFUS, CMUS, and CFUS. Each group was given 10 questionnaires, and the participants were chosen randomly.

When the study was conducted, the participants were told that these questionnaires were used only for research purpose, and would not have any influence on their academic study as well as their daily life. They were asked to respond to the questions with their true feelings and without pausing too much on each of them. The questionnaires were written in English for the purpose of avoiding the possibility of misunderstanding.

Data Collection and Presentation

Among the participants of AMUS, 40% chose verbal love expressions and 60% chose both verbal and written love expressions (see Figure 1). Among the participants of AFUS, 60% preferred verbal love expressions and 40% liked both of them (see Figure 2). Statistics also showed that 20% of CMUS chose to express their love verbally, 40% of them would like to express their love through verbal and written language, and 40% of them chose neither of them (see Figure 3). Among the participants of CFUS, 20% preferred to express their love verbally, 20% chose written love expressions, and 60% of them chose neither of them (see Figure 4).

The below chart (see Figure 5) showed that all the participants of AMUS, AFUS, and CMUS agreed or strongly agreed that it was appropriate for their gender to express their love verbally or through writing. However, only 20% of CFUS agreed on that. Among the participants who chose verbal or written love expressions, 100% of AMUS preferred to express their love directly, 80% of AFUS would like to choose direct love expressions. Nevertheless, only 33.3% of CMUS would like to do that, and none of CFUS showed preference to direct love expressions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Comparison of Participants With Different Genders

Comparison of AMUS and AFUS. Both AMUS and

AFUS were very open and direct concerning the issue of love expressions. The main evidences are listed in the following: (1) All of them considered that it was important to express their love either verbally or through writing; (2) All of them believed that it was appropriate for their gender to express love; (3) The majority of them preferred direct love expressions. Statistics showed that 100% of AMUS and 80% of AFUS chose to express their love directly; and (4) 80% of AMUS and 80% of AFUS held the view that love expressions would exert positive influence on their relationship with their girlfriends or boyfriends.

Comparison of CMUS and CFUS. Most Chinese university students, no matter what their genders were, preferred to express their love indirectly. Among the Chinese university students who chose to express love in either way, only 33.3% of CMUS preferred to express their love directly, and moreover, none of the CFUS chose direct love expressions.

Contrast of Participants With Different Genders

Firstly, both American and Chinese male university students were more eager to express their love either in verbal or written language compared with their female counterparts. Among the participants of AMUS, 40% chose verbal love expressions and 60% chose both verbal and written love expressions. Among the participants of AFUS, 60% preferred verbal love expressions and 40% liked both of them. Statistics also showed that 20% CMUS chose to express their love verbally, 40% of them would like to express their love through verbal and written language, and 40% of them did not choose either of them. Among the participants of CFUS, 20% preferred to express their love verbally, 20% chose written love expressions, and 60% of them chose neither of them.

Secondly, both American and Chinese female university students had more constraints when they expressed their love than their male counterparts did.

Figure 1. Percent of Choices of Love Expression by American Male University Students.

Figure 2. Percent of Choices of Love Expression by American Female University Students.

Figure 3. Percent of Choices of Love Expression by Chinese Male University Students.

Figure 4. Percent of Choices of Love Expression by Chinese Female University Students.

Figure 5. Percent of Appropriateness and Directness of Love Expression.

The author elaborates the important evidences in the following:

(1) The 40% of AMUS said that they were not afraid to be refused when they expressed their love; on the sharp contrary, none of AFUS stated that they were not afraid to be refused;

(2) The 20% of AMUS thought that they lost face after they were refused, while 40% of AFUS stated so;

(3) Female university students had more pressure for their love expressions. None of AMUS considered that they would have pressure from their parents, friends, or colleagues if they expressed their love, whereas 20% of AFUS thought that they would have such kind of pressure by stating that “People want you to get married”. This difference was much more significant among Chinese participants. Among those Chinese university students who chose to express their love, 100% of CMUS stated that they would not have

any pressure because of love expressions; on the sharp contrary, 100% of CFUS said that they did have pressure, and they specified the pressure by stating “I am afraid that the boy and I won’t be friends as we were before. Maybe some friends of mine who is familiar with him won’t get along well with me”. “Pressure from my parents. Because I am afraid that my parents don’t want me to contact him”. The statement indicated that the pressure for CFUS mainly came from their friends and parents;

(4) The 100% of CMUS believed that it was important to express their love even though 40% of them did not choose love expressions in either way. Nevertheless, only 60% of CFUS considered that it was important to do so;

(5) The 100% of CMUS believed that it was appropriate for their gender to express their love, while only 20% of CFUS considered that it was

appropriate for them to do so;

(6) Among all the participants of Chinese university students, no matter what their choices were, 80% of CMUS believed that love expressions would exert positive influence on their relationship with their girlfriends. However, 0% of CFUS agreed on this statement.

Comparison and Contrast of Love Expressions Between Participants With Different Nationalities

There were very few similarities of love expressions delivered by American university students and Chinese university students. The only similarity was that the majority of them considered that it was important for them to express their love.

However, there were some significant differences of love expressions between participants with different nationalities.

Firstly, American university students were more eager to express their love compared with their Chinese counterparts. Statistics showed that all American university students chose to express their love in some way; however, 40% of CMUS and 60% of CFUS did not choose either verbal or written love expressions.

One interpretation for such a phenomenon was that it resulted from the differences between the two cultures: American culture is more open, while Chinese culture is more reserved. The following statements, which came from Chinese university students who did not choose to express their love in either way, strongly demonstrated this viewpoint.

(1) “Because I think love is often beyond words. You cannot always find proper expressions to describe your love to somebody. When that happens, I just want to take action instead of using words”.

(2) “Different culture makes different people. Some people don’t say love verbally, but it does not mean they don’t want it or like it. They just have the special way of expressions”.

(3) “Perhaps Chinese people do not like expressing their love to someone in a verbal way”.

(4) “I will write or say something to the one I love, but before I know that he loves me, I won’t express love in either way above, because I think that expressions in these ways will give some pressure to him and that they are too direct and are lack of romantic sense”.

(5) “I think action is better than written and verbal expressions. By action, I mean that if I loved someone, I would care him in everyday life, help him if he needed, and maybe say or write something but not to express love”.

Secondly, American university students preferred to express their love directly, while Chinese university students would like to do it indirectly. The 100% of AMUS and 80% of AFUS chose direct love expressions; on the contrary, only 33.3% of CMUS and 0% of CFUS had the same choice. The main reason for this difference was the same as the one discussed above.

CONCLUSIONS

Major Findings

Male university students of both nations were more eager to express their love and also had less constraints and pressure compared with their female counterparts did. American university students of both genders were more open and direct when they expressed their love, whereas Chinese university students of both genders were more reserved and tended to express their love indirectly.

Recommendations for Further Consideration

There are mainly two limitations in this research. Firstly, due to the fact that the number of participants was insufficient, the same study could be replicated with more American and Chinese male and female students. Therefore, the findings could present us with

a more precise and holistic picture of love expressions by American and Chinese university students. Secondly, by carrying out a series of such studies, hopefully, a standardized questionnaire on love expressions could be developed and a model of factors affecting love expressions could be established.

Appendix

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at finding out how male and female university students in China and in America express their love. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

- Your gender is

A male B female

- You are a university student at _____ University

• If you like or love a person exclusively and want him or her to be your boyfriend or girlfriend, which of the following options will you choose?

A You will express your love in verbal language (If you choose A, please go to Part One and answer the questions from No. 1 to No. 9)

B You will express your love in written language (If you choose B, please go to Part Two and answer the questions from No. 10 to No. 18)

C both A and B (If you choose C, please go to Part Three and answer the questions from No. 19 to No. 33)

D neither A nor B (If you choose D, please go to Part Four and answer the questions from No. 34 to No. 41)

Part One

1. Do you think it is important for you to express your love verbally?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

2. Do you think it is appropriate for your gender to express your love verbally?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor

disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

3. When you express your love verbally, will you express it in a very direct way?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

4. If you express your love to him or her verbally, are you afraid that he or she will refuse you?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

5. If he or she refuses you, do you think you lose face?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

6. If you express your love to him or her verbally, will you have pressure from your parents, friends, or colleagues?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

If you choose A or B in this question, please describe what kind of pressure you will have and why you will have that kind of pressure in detail in the following box.

7. Do you think verbal expressions of love will exert positive influence on your relationship?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

8. What's the reason for you not to choose to express your love through writing?

9. If you would like to make any comments concerning verbal love expressions, please write it here.

This is the end. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

Part Two

10. Do you think it is important for you to express your love through writing?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

11. Do you think it is appropriate for your gender to express your love through writing?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strong disagree

12. When you express your love in written language, will you express it in a very direct way?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

13. If you express your love to him or her in written language, are you afraid that he or she will refuse you?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

14. If he or she refuses you, do you think you lose face?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

15. If you express your love to him or her in written language, will you have pressure from your parents, friends, or colleagues?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

If you choose A or B in this question, please describe what kind of pressure you will have and why you will have that kind of pressure in detail in the following box.

16. Do you think written love expressions will exert positive influence on your relationship?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

17. What's the reason for you not to choose verbal love expressions?

18. If you would like to make any comments concerning written love expressions, please write it here.

This is the end. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

Part Three

19. Do you think it is important for you to express your love verbally?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

20. Do you think it is important for you to express your love in written language?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

21. Do you think it is appropriate for your gender to express your love verbally?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

22. Do you think it is appropriate for your gender to express your love in written language?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

23. When you express your love verbally, will you express it in a very direct way?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

24. When you express your love in written language, will you express it in a very direct way?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

25. If you express your love to him or her verbally, are you afraid that he or she will refuse you?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

26. If you express your love to him or her in written language, are you afraid that he or she will refuse you?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

27. If he or she refuses you, do you think you lose face?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

28. If you express your love to him or her verbally, will you have pressure from your parents, friends, or colleagues?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

If you choose A or B in this question, please describe what kind of pressure you will have and why you will have that kind of pressure in detail in the following box.

29. If you express your love to him or her in written language, will you have pressure from your parents, friends, or colleagues?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

If you choose A or B in this question, please describe what kind of pressure you will have and why you will have that kind of pressure in detail in the following box.

30. Do you think verbal love expressions will exert positive influence on your relationship?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

31. Do you think written expressions will exert positive influence on your relationship?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strong disagree

32. Which one do you prefer, verbal love

expressions, written love expressions, or both? Why?

33. If you would like to make any comments concerning verbal or written love expressions, please write it here.

This is the end. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

Part Four

34. Do you think it is important for you to express your love in verbal or written language?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

35. Do you think it is appropriate for your gender to express your love in verbal or written language?

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

36. You don't choose to express your love in verbal or written language because you are afraid that he or she will refuse you.

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

37. You don't choose to express your love in verbal or written language because you are afraid that when he or she refuses you, you will lose face or you will be in an embarrassing situation.

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

38. You don't choose to express your love in verbal or written language because you are afraid of the pressure from your parents, friends, or colleague.

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

If you choose A or B in this question, please describe what kind of pressure you will have and why you will have that kind of pressure in detail in the following box.

39. You don't choose to express your love in verbal or written language because you do not think love expressions will exert positive influence on your relationship.

A strongly agree B agree C neither agree nor disagree D disagree E strongly disagree

40. If you have any other reasons for you not to choose written or verbal love expressions, please write it here.

41. If you would like to make any comments concerning your choice, please write it here.

This is the end. Thank you very much for your help and cooperation.

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