

Academic discourse, gender, and politeness - Negative evaluation in book reviews by male and female linguists

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“[T]he expression of the writer’s or speaker’s opinion is an important feature of language” (Thompson & Hunston 2000:2). This is particularly true for book reviews in which the expression of opinions is one of the central features. In this special text genre authors provide the research community with valuable information about new publications in their area of study and thus help people choose from the wide range of available books those books which they might most profit from.

An important part of each review is a critical evaluation of the book. In the guidelines for submitting reviews for Linguist List issues, for instance, prospective reviewers are explicitly asked, in addition to summarising the book’s contents, to “point out merits and defects, identify problems, ask questions, and present positive or negative implications of the analysis.” (Linguist List 2003:2) The present paper centres on *negative* critical evaluation in linguistic book reviews and looks at ways in which review authors refer to defects and problems of the work under review. My main interest lies in the expression of negative evaluation as reviewers (including myself) may often find it difficult to criticise other researchers’ works in a polite and face-saving way, face-saving (in the sense of Brown and Levinson 1987) both for the reviewer and for the author of the book.

I use the term “evaluation” in a rather general sense as defined by Thompson and Hunston. They refer to evaluation as “the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer’s attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about.” (2000:5) An analysis of negative evaluation in book reviews hence deals with the expression of a *negative* attitude towards, a *negative* viewpoint on, or *negative* feelings about the books under review. I apply a corpus-driven method of tracing negative evaluative expressions in the Book Reviews In Linguistics Corpus (BRILC), an electronic collection of 222 English language reviews, 111 by female and 111 by male authors, published online in Linguist List issues in 2002 and 2003. The focus of the analysis lies on adjectival criticism, in particular on a list of some 70 graded adjectives which are used in critical or negative contexts (e.g. *difficult*, *unclear*, or *vague*). Thus, one of the research questions is “Which adjectives do people repeatedly use to make critical statements about linguistic books?” These adjectives are often found to be premodified by adverbs like *somewhat*, *rather*, or *quite*, which have a downtoning or softening effect, often labelled “hedging” by pragmaticists. A further question, therefore, deals with the shares of hedging of negative graded adjectives.

In the context of this analysis, BRILC concordances of the selected adjectives were filtered and sorted according to the gender of the reviewer. This sorting process made it possible to see whether there are qualitative and/or quantitative differences in the use of critical adjectives by men and women, i.e. whether the language of male or female reviewers contains more (or more critical) instances of negative evaluation. The results of this gender-related part of the analysis are particularly striking and imply the necessity of rethinking traditional assumptions about the relations between language and gender. Empirical

sociolinguistic findings concerning politeness phenomena in conversational interaction (e.g. that women are more polite, less critical, and use more hedging or softening devices, cf. for instance Lakoff 1975, Holmes 1995) do not seem to be valid in the context of academic (review) writing. Often language differences which are ascribed to gender may depend on other factors like aims of the discourse, power relations, or the context of the actual speech or writing situation. As has been hinted at in recent sociolinguistic studies, we probably have to include “the perceived norms of the community of practice” in our analyses of politeness and gender (Mills 2000:10; cf. also Bing and Bergvall 1996). Further comparative analyses of the writing of men and women in different settings (and in different written registers) might challenge or at least weaken the oversimplified male-female dichotomy and lead to a more contextualised, more complex, and less binary approach to gender studies in linguistics.

Select references

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