Gender Differences in Giving Advice

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1. Introduction

Giving advice, according to Searle (1969:67) is a type of speech act which the speaker believes will benefit the hearer. Searle maintains that by giving advice, the speaker is doing the hearer a favor because it is not obvious to both the speaker and the hearer that the latter will do the act without the advice being given. Searle also points out that advice is not a species of request because advising is more like telling one what is best for him/her rather than what s/he should do.

Although advice is usually given in the hearer’s best interest, Anglo-American society seems to regard advice as an imposition upon the hearer. Brown and Levinson (1987) consider that giving advice threatens the hearer’s (H’s) negative face in that the speaker (S) indicates that s/he thinks H ought to (perhaps) do some act A and therefore impedes H’s freedom of action. Tannen (1990) also suggests that in power symmetric contexts, such as everyday conversation among friends, giving advice frames the advice giver as more knowledgeable, more reasonable, more in control—in a word, one-up. And this contributes
to the distancing effect.

Tannen's observation is consistent with Verschueren (1981), who points out that advising implies some kind of authority on the part of the speaker; not the kind of 'power authority' needed to be able to force someone to do something, but some sort of 'knowledge authority'. It is assumed that the person giving the advice knows what the best course of action is. As a result, the hearer is expected to respond positively and not to disregard the advice so as to maintain the harmony of interaction.

Since advice giving may result in asymmetrical role relationships, in American society it is sometimes said 'Be chary of giving advice. Wise men don't need it and fools won't heed it (Landers 1986:10, cited in Banerjee and Carrell 1988:319). With society telling one not to be too quick to give advice to others, S may decide it is best not to say anything in many situations. It is also possible that even though H may benefit from the advice, it might not be appreciated.

As when performing any other face-threatening acts (FTAs), there are several factors that affect the speaker's choice of linguistic strategies when giving advice, such as the social distance between the speaker and the hearer; speakers will be more likely to give advice to one they feel close to. The perceived
difference in power between the speaker and hearer is also an influential factor. In addition, the urgency of the advice affects the directness of the linguistic form. The more urgent the need for advice is, the more bald on record the form will be.

This paper aims to explore how gender emerges as a strong variable with respect to both the occurrence of advice-giving as well as the form and style of this speech act. My analysis has found that, while no advice-giving examples are found in the 10 mixed-sex conversations, there are more than 4 times as many examples in all-female as in all-male conversations (18 vs. 4). What is more important, men and women in my data use quite different linguistic strategies when giving advice to their interlocutors. In the following, I will first describe the data which my analysis is based on, and then I will discuss action patterns (discourse strategies) which speakers use in giving advice, the positioning of the advice in the interaction, as well as the ways in which women and men use advice to secure desired outcomes.

2. THE DATA

30 tape-recorded conversations were collected over a period of two months in 1994, each of which were 30-minutes long. All participants were undergraduate students at National Tsing Hua University. These 30
conversations were obtained from 10 groups. For each group, all speakers in Conversation A were females, in Conversation B all were males, and Conversation C was mixed-sex, consisting of at least one speaker from Conversation A and one speaker from Conversation B. As a result, it is possible for us to examine a speaker’s talk in both same- and mixed-sex verbal interactions. In addition to being similar in age and educational background, all participants in each conversation were familiar with one another and in some cases were close friends. Therefore, gender would seem to be the only social factor influencing their speech styles and communicative strategies. Most of these conversations took place where the participants lived (e.g. school dormitory, off-campus housing), and a few were recorded in school cafeterias or off-campus restaurants. In general, all these conversations were characterized by spontaneity and group solidarity.

3. Analysis

My analysis has found that while 7 out of 10 all-female conversations contain advice-giving instances, only 3 all-male conversations contain this speech act. Generally, the 4 examples found in men’s conversations are more direct in form and they tend to occur when the need for advice is more urgent or the advice-giver is perceived