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BREAKING GENDER AND GAY STEREOTYPES IN GEORGIAN SOCIETY

(on the Example of the Georgian Gay Discourse)

Abstract

Gender has always been a popular field of investigation in the 21st century. It has been studied from different perspectives and points of view. A number of works in language and sexuality have revealed diverse linguistic features, deviating from traditional linguistic expectations both at lexical (e.g. Rodgers 1972) and discourse levels (e.g. Leap 1996).

This paper discusses several characteristics of speech discourse of Georgian gay males based on the experiment designed by the author. While answering the questions of an open-ended questionnaire, focus-groups of Georgian gay men discussed neutral topics as well as issues connected with the stereotypical perception of gender roles in society.

Georgia is a traditional, conservative, Orthodox country. These factors play a great role in the formation of stereotypes in society and heteronormative stereotypes associated with gender roles are highly popular. Sexual minorities represent vulnerable groups in Georgia, [ჯალაღანია; 2016]. Accordingly, there is little space left for them to reveal their speech characteristics and show their attitudes towards certain issues.

This research has revealed speech patterns and linguistic strategies utilized by Georgian gay males which confront heteronormative stereotypes widely spread throughout the country. During the research, members of the gay community expressed themselves through the strategies employed in their community but considered uncommon in the wider society, e.g. using relative pronouns indicated the opposite gender as well as metaphors creating a certain discrepancy in the discourse from the stereotypical heteronormative perceptions..

Keywords: *Sociolinguistics, Gay community, Stereotypes.*

1. Introduction

The stereotype is a widely spread word and denotes a complex concept. The diversity and the impact of the stereotypes on a specific society should be taken into account while conducting research concerning this concept.

The word "stereotype" comes from the French word "stéréotype". On the other hand, this word-form is believed to have derived from the Greek στερεός (stereos), τύπος (typos), and finally, it is considered to be a combination of words "solid" and "type". (Liddell, Scott, Greek-English Lexicon). Nowadays the word "stereotype" is used when a specific image, topic or issue is interpreted and defined as a superficial, simple, inaccurate concept or belief. The stereotype is largely associated with the public opinion which lacks in precision, does not denote a scientifically proven fact or does not match individual situations or specific theories. (Cardwell, Mike; 1999).

People are usually able to follow explicit stereotypes accepted by society. However, in certain cases, they might fail to do so. On the other hand, implicit stereotypes exist in the human subconscious and cannot be controlled by people. Sometimes people may not even be aware of the fact that they are under the influence of stereotypes. This can lead a person to partiality as people with an implicit stereotypical point of view tend to characterize theories or people as unity and judge people according to their general belief [Judd, Charles M.; Park, Bernadette; 1993].

Terms like "stereotype", "prejudice", and "discrimination" are related to each other. The stereotype creates prejudice and expectations about specific facts or things which means that people feel comfortable to follow the public opinion acceptable within the community. Confronting their ideas with something unacceptable or new makes people leave their comfort zones and start thinking critically. Though stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination denote different concepts, they might cause a chain reaction or behavior in the society [Operario; Fiske; 2003]. Despite negative effects, stereotypes can still help understand and categorize the world. They can simplify and systematize a huge amount of data. [Tajfel; 1981]. Moreover, according to modern studies, stereotypes appear to be true and accurate only in some cases. [Lee; Crawford; Rubinstein; 2015]. For example, the stereotype about gay people and their linguistic markers, specifically, concerning gay men employing feminine speech markers can appear true in the case of some individuals. However, it cannot be assumed that all gay people are characterized by this specific manner as there is ample evidence that masculine speech style may also be utilized within the gay community. Some people might be under a strong influence of stereotypes, adopt attitudes and use speech markers

subconsciously to identify themselves as part of a certain community. Accordingly, it can be claimed that people may practice stereotypical attitudes towards stereotypes.

2. Gay stereotypes

Social psychologist Henri Tajfel highlighted the main social functions of stereotypes, one of which is that people tend to assess and criticize people from a different community or culture. Social stereotypes become more aggressive when there is a conflict between social groups. Stereotypes might change as a result of political and social changes. [Tajfel; 1981]. We should also take into consideration the fact of self-stereotyping when an individual adopts stereotypes unconsciously and follows them as rules. In some cases, the negative stereotype can lead a person or members of a group to low self-esteem and even depression [Cox; Abramson; Devine; Hollon; 2012]. [Sinclair; Huntsinger; 2006].

Gay stereotypes, as well as LGBT stereotypes, are superficial and generalized, though a common understanding of the society is based on the formulation of general concepts and ideas which basically derive from sexuality and gender. [R.McCrady; J. McCrady 1976]. Gay stereotypes which involve gay speech, manners and behavior are widely spread not only in some cultures and communities but also throughout the world. When stereotypes about certain issues become global, questions arise concerning how similar stereotypes can be spread effectively all around the world. When it comes to spreading information, the media plays a big role. A stereotyped gay man's behavior is discussed from many points of view in society, characteristics of gay men are often associated with those employed with stereotypical heterosexual women, and members of the gay community can be depicted as possessing a feminine nature, behavior, manner, and style. ["Chrysler TV ad criticized for using gay stereotypes". The Advocate. 2006-04-07].

The modern sociolinguistic approach to gay men is based on the identification of features of gay speech or gay accents, as well as on discourse analysis and its semantics. The researchers argue that gay men's speech and phonological features differed from other people's speech at lexical (Rodgers 1972) Phonetic (Crist 1997) and discourse (Leap 1996) levels. Leap notes that gay men may reveal the specific speech aspects which may not be possible to describe as a necessary marker for gay speech. Code-switching which involves changing one's discourse at syntactic or phonological levels is widely used in gay speech. Existence of code-switching in gay discourse proves that the above-

mentioned theory about linguistic diversity of homosexual speech is adequate. (Podesva, Roberts, Campbell-Kibler; 2001). Leap does not deny the uniqueness of the conversation of homosexuals but encourages researchers to rely on more data in discourse analysis (social, cultural and other facts) rather than focus only on linguistics. (Leap 1999)

3. Research methodology of discourse analysis

The modern sociolinguistic approach to gay men is based on the identification of features of gay speech or gay accents, as well as its discourse analysis and its semantics. A number of books, articles, and dissertations are written based on discourse and gender analysis. The methodology employed is so varied that at times, it becomes difficult to identify basic methods to conduct gender and language discourse analysis. Due to the diverse process in gender research, the phenomenon of discourse, which has always been a strong basis for language and gender research, is becoming the main driving force of this field.

Mary Bucholtz offers qualitative methods of discourse analysis [Butcholtz: 2003]. As well as this, gender discourse research employs a number of methodological approaches some of which are listed below:

1. An anthropological tradition focused on cultural practice;
2. A sociological tradition that emphasizes a social action;
3. A critical tradition concentrated on texts;
4. An anthropological tradition which discusses the historical trajectory of discourse.

According to the diversity and depth of the sociolinguistic research, the approaches mentioned above widen the research sphere, unlike critical discourse analysis that only focuses on text and linguistic features of discourse. The diverse approaches, along with critical discourse, in terms of language and sexuality provides fundamental and informative results whose analysis demands the involvement of not only linguistics but also anthropology, sociology, and culture.

4. Important Findings Concerning Gay Discourse Analysis

Numerous research in sociolinguistics revealed interesting characteristics of gay speech. In terms of historical trajectory, an important example is Polari which was a homosexual coded language during the 1960s in England [Richardson, 2005]. In modern linguistics, the gay lisp was considered to be a significant marker for the gay speech which involved stabilization of consonants, hyper-

articulation of /s/ and high-frequency of speech and long duration of vowels. [Munson et al., 2006, p. 216]. According to Benjamin Munson's research "The acoustic and perceptual bases of judgments of women and men's sexual orientation from read speech", the phenomenon of a stereotypical gay lisp is not a speech pathology and it is not fully replicated from the feminine speech. [Munson et al., 2006] The fact is that gay people selectively use feminine speech patterns and some other features that are adopted during their lifetime. [Munson et al., 2006, p. 216.] However, there is no scientific evidence that there exist specifically established gay speech markers since, in the process of such research, individual cultural, social and psychological factors should also be considered.

Soon after Robin Lakoff created her famous work named "Language and woman's place" in 1975 [Lakoff; 1975], numerous scholars started investigating male and female genders and highlighting their linguistic markers. In 2004 Mary Bucholtz published commentaries on Robin Lakoff's research: "Language and woman's place". [Bucholtz, Mary (2004) [1975]. "Editor's introduction" to "Language and woman's place: text and commentaries.] In 2006 Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes published their work "American English: dialects and variation" which involved findings not only concerning the diversity of American English but also gender-based differences. [Walt; Schilling-Estes; 2006]. Another important publication about gender is authored by Jennifer Coates. In her book "Women, Men, and Language", she describes different approaches to gender throughout history; [Coates; 2016]. As a result of this research describing the female style of speaking, numerous markers were revealed, which included empty adjectives, super-polite forms, indirect requests, diminutive forms, etc.

4. Georgian Gay Discourse Analysis

In order to demonstrate the characteristic features of gay speech in Georgia, a special questionnaire was composed, which consisted of open-ended questions regarding the personal experiences of the respondents and their perception of several topics regarding the gender issues.

Patterns identified as feminine are diverse and are provided by different scholars. For instance, Deborah Tannen in her studies about "Language and culture", highlights the fields of interests while investigating speech. Scholars tend to show interest focus on specific fields of language. For instance, one of the popular studies involves speech variety connected with a different gender. Another important issue that scholars investigate is the social norm that plays a great role in the

production and use of gendered language (Tannen;2006). Society categorizes people according to stereotypical views that include stereotypes characterizing female speech, more specifically phonological patterns that are usually used by women, for example, high pitched voice and a special manner of articulation of vowels. (Tannen;2006).

Linguistics strategies revealed during this research, break widely spread heteronormative stereotypes. The term “heteronormativity” is a belief about a heterosexual norm which maintains that heterosexual relationship should be established between opposite sexes. It also involves views about sex, gender, sexuality and excludes the idea of non-standard ways of self-expression. This theory generates stereotypes within some communities that believe that feminine speech strategies are used only by females whereas male speech features are employed only by the representatives of the male gender. (Harris 2018).

The questionnaire consisted of several parts. It started with neutral topics about colors, weather, food, hobbies, which generated small talk. e.g. What is your favorite color? What kind of weather do you like? What is your favorite food? What is your hobby? Another set of questions involved general gender-oriented themes concerning the qualities of a man and a woman e.g. What qualities should a woman possess? What qualities should a man possess?

Topics about neutral questions, chosen by me as a researcher, were selected for different reasons: Firstly, they helped to create a pleasant atmosphere amongst the interviewees and encouraged them to express themselves freely. Secondly, they helped to explore the interviewees' answers to the questions and decide whether they had stereotypical attitudes toward the specific subject or not.

10 focus groups with 20 gay men (20-25 years old) were interviewed using a questionnaire. The focus groups included Georgian gay members of LGBTQI association “Temida”. The discussion and verbal interactions were recorded.

Quantitative analysis of the research showed that among 20 respondents only 5 was characterized by simple standardized markers of masculine speech (deep, husky voice, low pitch sounds), while 15 gay males revealed some stereotypical feminine discourse markers (high pitch voice, slower and stretched speech)

At the beginning of the conversation, when the neutral questions were asked, respondents discussed general topics such as weather, colors, music, food, etc. Interestingly, gay men tended to use Georgian words namely, sister, woman, girl, დაო, ქალო, გოგო (dao, kalo, gogo) while addressing each other.

Like the English language, diminutive forms in Georgian are also associated with the speech of female individuals. However, these forms were used by gay males during the conversation, words – ფერუკა, ცუნაფუნა (peruka, tsknapuna) which expresses the diminutive form of the words denoting color and tiny, were constantly vocalized by respondents. Apart from phonology, interviewees tended to choose colors like pink and purple typically associated with the female gender. These two characteristics- usage of diminutive forms and a choice of colors unusual for a male, break stereotypes referring to males and enable us to search for answers not only in stereotypical views accepted in the society, but also in the diverse perception of each person.

The analysis revealed not only specific words but also sentences that carry important semantic meaning and show the attitude of gay men to gender stereotypes widely spread in society. Interestingly, the respondent's ironic comment on the question is:

-"Nick: Sister, do you like cooking? Whether you get married or not depends on the answer" (Respondents laugh).

ნიკა: დაო შენ გიყვარს საჭმლის კეთება? ეხლა ამ პასუხზეა დამოკიდებული გათხოვდები თუ არა (რესპოდენტები იცინიან).

It is obvious that irony in this context is directed against the stereotype which obliges a woman to be a perfect housewife and have good culinary skills if she wants a happy marriage. It is impossible to overlook the fact that stereotyped woman's skills, which have a negative connotation and present a standardized view of a woman, have become a subject of irony between gay males. Moreover, Nick adjusted this role to another gay male and used the word – გათხოვება – “get married” while referring to a man. Interestingly, in the Georgian language, the word გათხოვდები (you will get married) refers only to women, while another phrase is used to refer to a man getting married – ცოლის მოყვანა. Even in case of teasing and irony Georgian gay men don't tend to adjust the role of women as it still seems to be insulting, even for the purpose of joke and laughter.

Another example of adjusting the opposite gender role and name was revealed in discourse:

“Nick: What qualities should a man possess generally?

Gio: Qualities like I have, but boys don't like girls like me. “ (Laughter)

(ნიკა: -როგორი თვისებები უნდა ქონდეს კაცს?

გიო: -როგორი და ჩემნაირი, მარა ჩემნაირი გოგოები კაცებს არ მოსწონთ) (იცინიან).

Despite the fact that at the beginning of interview Gio identified himself as a gay male individual, he still uses the word "girls" (გოგოები) during the conversation, in order to identify

himself as a stereotypical feminine gay man. This type of self-identification which involves mixed gender roles, serves to express irony towards feminine gay stereotypes. In the same way, the respondent expresses ironic attitude toward strictly defined markers of masculine behavior in society that obligate men to follow standardized masculine behavior.

Mocking masculinity and its characteristics within the gay community is a frequent practice. See the extract from the dialogue:

-What kind of squirrels (i.e. boys) do you like, boys who work with spuds and spades? (Respondents laugh). შენ როგორი ციყვები მოგწონს, თობზე და ბარზე ნამუშევარი ბიჭები?" (იცინიან).

The masculinity of men promotes heteronormative beliefs. Within the heterosexual community, it is mostly idealized by the society, therefore it is less likely to build an ironic attitude and is considered as a necessary marker for men. In contrast, the respondent refers to the male with the word "squirrel". Connotation of the word "squirrel" creates an emotional association of a weak person, while in the same sentence, a masculine man is compared to an individual involved in agricultural or farming activities – "boys who work with spuds and spades". By creating a binary opposition of the metaphorical contrast of "weak" and "strong", both describing masculinity, the respondent revealed an uncommon and exceptional perception of the male gender concept, confronting the stereotypical view that identifies masculinity as strength and machoness.

The loyal and supportive attitude of gay men towards women and their rights should also be taken into consideration. Gay men believed that women should be stronger to cope with the pressure of society, which is directed towards them and teaches them how to live. Answers to the question: "-What kind of characteristics should women have?" were as follows:

-A woman should be as she wants to be; women should be free, neither her family nor children or her job must lead her to lose herself. („ქალი უნდა იყოს ისეთი, როგორც თვითონ უნდა რომ იყოს“; „ქალი უნდა იყოს თავისი თავის უფალი, არც ოჯახი, არც შვილები, არც სამსახური არ უნდა ახდენდეს გავლენას რომ ამ ქალმა საკუთარ თავზე უარი თქვას...“)

All respondents believed that a woman should be independent and free from negative gender roles which society imposes and obliges her to adopt against her will.

Based on the examples mentioned above, we can conclude that the analysis of gay men's discourse breaks the heterogenic stereotypes that are widely spread in our male-dominated society.

5. Conclusions

The overall aim of this research was to reveal the general linguistic characteristics of gay male speech in order to specify the reliability of stereotypes about gay male speech markers. Another goal of the research was to clarify gay male attitude on general topics and standardized issues, in order to make an observation and conclude to what extent the gay community falls together with heteronormative stereotypes. The final intention of the research was the identification of gay male attitude and perception towards stereotypical and standardized roles practiced in society.

According to stereotypes widely spread in Georgian culture, utilization of feminine speech strategies is considered to be the gay speech marker while masculine speech is always associated with heteronormativity. The quantitative analysis of gay speech revealed that 15 out of 20 gay males had stereotypically distinguished feminine speech with high pitch voice and slow and stretched speech. On the other hand, 5 gay males produced their speech in a stereotypical masculine manner, such as deep husky voice and low pitch sounds. The employment of the words denoting feminine content such as girl (გოგო, gogo) sister(დანა, dana) as well as feminine phonological features was demonstrated by the participants, although some of the respondents did not use these markers. Based on community perception, characteristics of individuals cannot be generalized and considered as a common norm. A stereotype may be real, but it is important to take into account the identity and uniqueness of each individual before drawing conclusions about them.

LGBT community, including the gay community, is one of the vulnerable groups in Georgia, they often become victims of oppression [ჯალაღანია; 2016], thus in a safe environment, gay males clearly express the opinions about the public restrictions and have an ironical attitude towards stereotypes. As heteronormativity is a popular theory in Georgia, there are a number of stereotypes concerning the issue. The questionnaire which was created for this research encouraged speakers to talk about general issues, such as favorite colors, cooking, etc. The unusual choice of colors as well as adjusting opposite sex roles have proved that members of the gay community involved in interviews are not self-stereotyped according to the expectations of society. Georgian gay males refer to male individuals by metaphors which have controversial meanings (in this case, the juxtaposition of weak and strong features was used) Accordingly, they accept the fact that the word "male" can mean strength as well as weakness.

In order to discover the non-stereotypical attitude demonstrated by a gay man, questions connected to men and women general characteristics were given to the respondents. The fact that

gay men have demonstrated a supportive attitude towards women in the discourse, reflects their high sensitivity and awareness of the matter, towards the women.

In conclusion, it can be claimed that the Georgian Gay Discourse breaks stereotypes of the heteronormative society. The usage of gender-specific words, adjusting opposite sex roles, expressing sensitivity about gender issues highlight the diversity of each individual.

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