

CONVERSATIONS AMONG FRIENDS: REFLECTING GENDER SOCIAL NORMS

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The article studies gender differences in speech in the sitcom series "Friends". The research focuses on the topic choice made by characters. The dialogue discourse under study is interpreted and subdivided into minimal conversational fragments. The conversation topics are considered in three groups: conversation between two female friends, conversations between two male friends and conversation in the mixed sex group. To study gender peculiarities of the conversation among friends the following methods have been applied: discourse analysis, context-interpretation analysis and conversational analysis — the combination of these analyses is used to study the dialogue discourse with the aim to select, mark and separate minimal dialogue fragments for further gender topic research; comparative method is used to compare topics in three groups of characters: F-F (homogender conversation between women), M-M (homogender conversation between men), M-F (heterogender conversation between a man and a woman).

Television series are marked by a number of particular features: regularity of broadcasting, stable plot unfolding, length, recurrence of some plot lines. Furthermore, series are in an advantageous position if compared with any other television product due to their unique relations with the viewers. Television series are considered to be an impactful instrument of reaching the audience and one of the primary sources of giving information to those who watch. Being the mass culture outcome, series express the spirit of the contemporary society, have enormous ability to effect emotional reaction and simultaneously and to moderate (weaken, reduce) rational perception of the reality. Moreover, series create the peculiar picture of the world which is immensely different from everyday routine life. Besides, due to series the audience is given some new experience. Furthermore, present-day films focus on the future norms of the society more than reflecting the past ones; they create and introduce new vision of social norms and stereotypes.

Gender is studied as a set of physical, psychological, behavioural features that are expected from the corresponding gender in the society, in other words it is the blending, mixture or cooperation of sex and social status of a personality. The sitcom "Friends" has created a particular image about young people's life implying clearly that women might be seeking more independence than it is usually depicted in fiction stories and movies. The series has been forming a public perception of friendship in the modern society stressing the fact that friendship is possible not only between friends of the same sex but of the opposite as well. This idea is rather revolutionary. In huge megalopolises when people feel more and more lonely the idea of someone you can talk to, someone you can share your feelings with and simply spend time and talk about whatever is supported and developed in the series. The idea is that you can make friends and enjoy relationships not only with the friends of the same sex.

Recent research on everyday dialogues has revealed that five broad topic areas can be identified: people and relationships, work and money, leisure activity, appearances and personal traits of character, and social issues such as current events, politics, sport.

Social roles in films may accentuate dynamics of changes in the society. Generally, according to social stereotypical patterns, girls should be taught to wash clothes, to separate clothes, to be aware of similar things. On the contrary, in the series "Friends" male character Ross teaches his female friend Rachel how to deal with her clothes. It creates a certain comic effect in the scene. On the other hand, it reflects possible true-to-life situations and in its turn makes the audience accept the new variant of social roles when young men do know how to do the chores and young girls have no idea about it.

Analyzing conversation discourse of the series "Friends", 81 fragments of minimal dialogue part have been singled out for the study: 36 fragments of conversation between female friends, 15 fragments between male friends and 30 fragments between a male friend and a female friend.

The topic variation is presented with the biggest proportion of talks about people and relationships: 63.9 % of all conversations between female friends, 73.3 % between male friends and 66.7 % between a male friend and a female friend.

Topic choice in the comedy mostly concerns relationships. Topic choice suggested in comedies mainly concerns relationships. The explanation is determined by the aim of the series to entertain the audience instead of speaking about job or money problems.

The aim of the further research is studying gender conversational topics in series demonstrating friendship of middle aged generation representatives paying attention to the sitcoms made in Ukraine which will enable the researchers to make a comparative analysis of gender topic choices in different cultures.

Key words: gender, dialogue, social stereotypes, topic choice, situational comedy.

Цапро Г.Ю., Кичан Т.О.

Розмови серед друзів: відображення гендерних соціальних норм

Стаття присвячена вивченню гендерної специфікації мовленнєвої поведінки друзів на матеріалі американської молодіжної ситуативної комедії «Друзі». Розвідка загалом сфокусована на тематичному виборі героїв серіалу та відповідному зображенні гендерних стереотипів у діалогах, що подаються зі зміщенням гендерних соціальних ролей з метою створення комедійного ефекту. Вибрана тематика персонажів в основному варіюється у межах «Люди і особистісні відносини», «Зовнішність і особисті якості», «Робота і гроші», «Відпочинок», зі значною перевагою обговорення стосунків між людьми представниками обох статей, що відображає інтереси молодого покоління незалежно від гендерної приналежності.

Ключові слова: гендер, діалог, соціальні стереотипи, тематичний вибір, серійна ситуативна комедія.

Цапро Г.Ю., Кичан Т.А.

Разговоры среди друзей: отображение гендерных социальных норм

Статья посвящена изучению гендерной специфики речевого поведения друзей на материале американской молодежной ситуативной комедии «Друзья». Исследование в целом сфокусировано на тематическом выборе героев сериала и соответствующем изображении гендерных стереотипов в диалогах, которые подаются со смещением гендерных социальных ролей с целью создания комедийного эффекта. Тематика персонажей в основном варьируется в рамках «Люди и личностные отношения», «Внешность и личные качества», «Работа и деньги», «Отдых» со значительным перевесом обсуждения отношений между представителями обоих полов, что отображает интересы молодого поколения независимо от гендерной принадлежности.

Ключевые слова: гендер, диалог, социальные стереотипы, тематический выбор, серийная ситуативная комедия.

Introduction

In several influential books on conversation and gender [5; 11] it was assumed that men and women talk differently, use different conversational styles and explanations of the differences in speech behaviour were provided. In this article we aim at studying how these gender differences in speech are filmed by series makers, thus creating and supporting the stereotypical images of male and female speech behaviour. We are going to mainly concentrate on the choice of conversational topics and see that this choice is gender biased.

Theoretical Background

Television series are characterized by a set of specific features such as regularity of broadcasting, stability in the plot development, repetition of several plot lines, duration; at the same time they are in a privileged position compared with other television products, as series form their specific relations with the audience. According to Professor G. Pocheptsov [1], nowadays series have become almost one of the main sources of informing the audience. Series, being a product

of mass culture and consequently representing the spirit of the modern society, has a great potential power to provoke emotional reaction, and simultaneously to lessen rational perception of the reality. Series create the specific picture of the world that differs tremendously from everyday routine life. So this is the main factor that as well as in the motion pictures attracts the spectators giving them some new experience. Modern films are more likely to be oriented on the future norms of the society than to reflect the past ones, they create and initiate new vision of social norms and stereotypes.

“Dialogue as discourse is characterized by a fundamental structural principle; it is interactive and interactional. It is a mode of speech exchange among participants, speech in relation to another’s speech and not merely the verbal expression of one character or actor’s ‘part’” [8, 1].

Researches on dialogues in everyday life have revealed that five broad topic areas can be identified: people and relationships, work and money, leisure activity, appearances (encompassing both personal

appearance and building decor), and issues (such as current events and politics) [2, 6].

Gender is studied as a set of physical, psychological, behavioural features that are expected from the corresponding gender in the society, in other words it is the blending, mixture or cooperation of sex and social status of a personality.

There are several approaches to gender study:

1) dominance approach treats women as a minority group that lacks power in the society and men's speech is considered to be as the norm in the society and women's speech is perceived as deviation from the norm, the language is made by men and for men;

2) cultural approach states that men and women are brought up in different socio-cultural groups and thus there are differences in communication styles of two sexes [12];

3) performative approach studies gender on the basis of speakers' communicative strategies which means that speakers create their social gender depending on their communicative aim and desire to sound feminine or masculine [4];

4) Community of Practice approach shows that gender is acquired while practicing the language in the society and learning to achieve the desired effect [9];

5) postmodernist approach does not concentrate on differences in speech of men and women but on linguistic choices of a speaker [3; 7].

Methods

To study gender peculiarities of the conversation among friends the following methods have been applied: discourse analysis, context-interpretation analysis and conversational analysis — the combination of these analyses is used to study the dialogue discourse with the aim to select, mark and separate minimal dialogue fragments for further gender topic research; comparative method is used to compare topics in three groups of characters: F-F (homogender conversation between women), M-M (homogender conversation between men), M-F (heterogender conversation between a man and a woman).

Results and Discussion

The sitcom "Friends" has created certain image of young people's life implying clearly that friendship among men and women is possible and that women might be seeking more independence than they usually depicted in fiction stories and movies.

"*Friends* is about the idea that friendship between a man and a woman can be just as rewarding as a romantic relationship, a possibility rooted in the equality of the sexes. Believe it or not, this was a pretty revolutionary idea at the time. And more than 20 years after its premiere, *Friends* represents one of the best portrayals of the messy, complicated, beautiful reality of modern relationships between men and women" [6].

The sitcom managed to show a real picture of young people's everyday life though it is necessary

to mention that a picture will always be a fiction reproduction of real life situations.

"Have you noticed how much time friends seem to have on their hands? The six young friends in NBC's "Friends" seem to have nothing but time — the time they spend hanging out together in a cohort's apartment, or at one of those coffee shops that are popping up all over TV. And what do they do? They talk, of course. They sit around and discuss secret dating language... They talk through complicated life crises... In short, they do what friends do, only they do more of it more often. Too often actually" [10].

Social roles in the film may state dynamism of changes in the society. Thus due to social stereotypical norms girls should be taught how to do the laundry, how to separate clothes and, surely, be familiar with new washing power and things like that. On the contrary, in the series "Friends" male FRIEND character Ross teaches his female friend Rachel how to deal with her clothes. It creates a certain comic effect in the scene. On the other hand, it reflects possible true-to-life situations and in its turn makes the audience accept the new variant of social roles when young men do know how to do the chores and young girls have no idea about it.

Ross: Okay. Let's do laundry.

Rachel: That was amazing! I can't even send back soup.

Ross: Well, that's because you're such a sweet, gentle... Do you? Do you? Oh, hey. You must need detergent.

Rachel: What's that?

Ross: Uberweiss. It's new. It's German. It's extra tough! Rach, are you gonna separate those?

Rachel: Oh, God. Am I being a total laundry spaz? Am I supposed to use one machine for shirts and another for pants?

Ross: Have you never done this before?

Rachel: Well, not myself. But I know other people that have. Okay. You caught me. I'm a laundry virgin.

Ross: Don't worry. I'll use the gentle cycle. Basically, you wanna use one machine for all your whites. A whole other machine for your colors. And a third for your... delicates. That would be your bras... and your underpanty things.

Rachel: These are white cotton panties. Would they go with whites or with delicates? That would be a judgment call.

(Season 5 (1), 12:44)

The conversation between the two male friends discussing possible Ross' date with Rachel in the laundry sounds comic and resembles the way girls usually discuss their preparation for the date only with the reverse depiction of men's version of it.

Ross: Hold on a sec. You need to not touch any of those. Okay, bye. Monica's not coming. It's just gonna be me and Rachel.

Chandler: Hold on, camper. You've thought this through?

Ross: It's laundry. The thinking-through is minimal.

Chandler: Just you and Rachel? Just you two? This is a date. You're going on a date.

Ross: Uh-uh.

Chandler: Uh-huh. I haven't done that in a while.

Ross: Is it a date if she doesn't know?

Chandler: Yes, absolutely. Saturday night, all rules apply.

Ross: What are you saying? I should shave again? Pick up some wine?

Chandler: Well, you may wanna rethink the dirty underwear. It's the first time She'll see your underwear. You want it dirty?

Ross: No.

Chandler: And the fabric softener?

Ross: Okay, now what is wrong with my Snuggles? What? It says I'm a sensitive, warm kind of guy. You know, like a little fuzzy bear. I'll pick something else up.

Chandler: There you go.

(Season 5 (1), 7:23)

Sharing secrets is natural for friends. The conversation is between two female friends. Rachel starts the talk with Monica offering the topic about personal relationships and she reveals her secret of dating with the boy Monica liked in high school. It sounds as if it has been torturing her for years, but the real reason for this is her desire to find something out about Monica's relationship with Chandler. As Monica has no hints about Rachel's interest, she cannot get the gist of the talk; so, Rachel has to go straight ahead and tell Monica about her overhearing the conversation on the phone. The comic part is that Rachel does not listen to the end of the talk and while speaking to Monica she is still in her fantasies about her two friends' possible relationships.

Rachel: I have to tell you something that I've never admitted. In high school, I made out with James even though I knew you liked him. That feels so good to get off my chest. Okay, you go.

Monica: My turn? What are you talking about?

Rachel: I know about you and Chandler. I overheard you on the phone the other day. You said, "I'll tell Rachel I'm doing laundry

for a couple of hours." And he said, "Laundry? Is that my new nickname?" And you said: "You know what your nickname is, Mr. Big."

Monica: You're writing yourself a little play there, Rach. Let me know how it turns out.

Rachel: I wouldn't know, because I got so freaked out I hung up the phone.

Monica: Well, if you had kept listening... you would have heard me call him Mister... Bigot. Mr. Bigot. He tells the most racist jokes.

Rachel: All right. So that's it. There's nothing going on between you and Chandler?

Monica: Me and Chandler?

(Series 12, 12:20)

The topic of personal relationships is common for friends, but it is expected to be discussed between the friends of the same sex. Rachel is complaining to Ross about her splitting up with an Italian man and Ross finds the right words to comfort her. He sounds like any girl would sound in this situation. Rachel is so upset that she even seeking a bit of sympathy says unpleasant things to Ross but later she appreciates his being nice to her.

Ross: You all right?

Rachel: I've been better. I don't believe this. I wasn't supposed to care about this guy. It was just supposed to be this big, fun, Italian thing. Someday I could look back and say, "That was a big, fun, Italian thing." It wasn't supposed to feel like this when it was over.

Ross: Come here. Listen... you deserve so much better than him. I mean, you... should be with a guy who knows what he has when he has you. What?

Rachel: I'm so sick of guys! I don't want to look at or think about another guy. I don't even want to be near another guy. Ross, you're so great.

(Series 12, 20:12)

Analyzing conversation discourse of the series "Friends", 81 fragments of minimal dialogue part have been singled out for the study: 36 fragments of conversation between female friends, 15 fragments between male friends and 30 fragments between a male friend and a female friend.

The topic variation is presented with the biggest proportion of talks about people and relationships: 63.9 % of all conversations between female friends, 73.3 % between male friends and 66.7 % between a male friend and a female friend (See Table 1).

Table 1

Topic	F—F	M—M	F—M
People and relationships	23	11	20
Work and money	2	—	—

Appearance and personal characteristics	4	4	5
The chores, everyday routine	3	—	3
Leisure activities	4	1	—
Pets	—	—	2
Total	36	15	30

The friends almost do not discuss work and money or leisure activities. Such topic choices do not correspond to the results of studies that present real life conversations.

Conclusions

The study on gender and conversation among friends has presented the topic choice made by friends in the sitcom. As any motion picture the series reflects the reality of everyday life. The topic

choice in the comedy is mostly about relationships. Such choice can be explained by the fact that the aim of the series is to entertain the audience and not to speak about money problems or problems at work. Further research will be aimed at studying gender conversational topics in series depicting friendly relationships of a middle aged generation and also studying sitcoms made in Ukrainian that will enable to compare gender topic choice in different cultures.

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