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An Analysis of Gender Differences in Language from the Perspective of Cooperative Principle——A Case Study of *Downton Abbey*

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Abstract:

Downton Abbey is a classic British drama in the setting of the two Industrial Revolutions and the World War I. It presents to the audience a portrait of aristocratic families and servants living under a rigid hierarchy in the last century. The characters in the drama are numerous and distinctive, and the dialogues between different roles are full of unconscious humor. The equality between men and women has drawn more and more attention, and gender differences have become one of the hot issues today, including differences in language. By analyzing the differences, we can better understand the plot and characters. This paper will analyze the dialogue of characters in the first season of Downton Abbey from the perspective of the cooperative principle, so as to conclude the gender difference in language and explore the reasons.

Key words: gender differences; the Cooperative Principle; Downton Abbey.

1. Introduction

This paper tries to analyse dialogues between characteristics of different gender in the season one of British TV series Downton Abbey, also it explores the reasons from three aspects. Focusing on the two research questions: what are the gender differences in language in the first season of the TV series Downton Abbey and why do these differences exist, this paper will mainly include three chapters——the first chapter is literature review, which covers studies home and abroad of gender differences in language; the second chapter is divided into three parts: part one is the

introduction of the cooperative principle; part two is the synopsis of the season one of *Downton Abbey*; and part three is the concrete analysis of conversations from the perspective of four maxims; the third chapter is the exploration of the reasons of gender differences in language. At the end there are conclusion and reference.

Downton Abbey is where a British aristocratic family lives. The story of the first season starts from the Titanic's sink in 1912, and the heirs to *Downton* are with it. British law says the heir must be male, but Lord Grantham-Robert only has three daughters: Mary, Edith and Sybil. Lady Mary's marriage is the best way to keep the estate, so she is set to marry a distant cousin, who is gone with Titanic now. Another distant heir is found, cousin Matthew Crawley, a middle-class lawyer. Matthew and his mother Isobel, a nurse, come to *Downton* and start a new life. Matthew and Mary exchange barbs, but something romantic is brewing. Edith also longs for her love story, and Sybil becomes political. This season also delves into the lives of the staff downstairs: loyal butler Carson, nasty O'Brien, kind Mrs. Hughes, evil footman Thomas Barrow, newcomer Mr. Bates, warm-hearted Anna and the sharp-tongued Mrs. Patmore and so on.

As for the important reasons for choosing this topic, there are three. The first reason is that *Downton Abbey* is an excellent TV series, which wins numerous awards, such as the best director, the best scenarist, the best drama, the best costume, the best leading actor or actress, the best supporting actor or actress and so on. I have been watched it several times since high school, therefore it is very attractive and familiar to me. The second one is that I am fully interested in stories about history and culture, especially that of Eastern countries and something about noble lives, for example, what they dress, what they eat, how they behave, how they socialize, and so on. The British noble had left me an impression of elegance, patience, gentility and tenderness, so I want to explore it. And the third one, as I am a bit unsociable, I hope this study could help me to think a lot and to get some communicative skills.

2. Literature review

Since last century, people pay more and more attention to the gender issue, and a lot of scholars have been doing researches on gender differences, including psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists and later linguists. However, when mentioning gender difference, the feminism cannot be ignored, for the waves of feminism offer a strong driving force. Thus, the early phase of gender difference is deeply influenced by the feminism movement in 1920s, which emphasizes the egal position between male and female. Based on this point, some western linguists put forward the Biological Determinant Theory, which believes that the gender difference is determined by the biology. Then in the next phase, that is in 1960s, Kate Millet put forward the concept of "gender" which is created by cultural ideas and norms; thus, the researches of gender issue turn to the social and cultural area. And there exist four dominant theories: The Deficiency Theory; the Dominance Theory; the Difference Theory; the Courtesy Theory. These theories discuss gender differences of language from perspectives of status, power, culture and courtesy. The third phase is in 1990s, when appears Social Constructionist

Gender Theory, including the Community Practice Theory and the Performance Theory. These three stages have involved many fields, and the following content will concentrate on the linguistics.

2.1 Studies abroad

Robin Lakoff is considered as one of the pioneers of women's language research. In her famous book of *Language and Women's Place*, she put forward 11 characters of women's language, including lexical, syntactical and semantic levels. And she argued that the language used by men and women mirror the social role played by respective gender as language do reflect and reinforce the social conventions. An American sociolinguist Deborah Tannen discussed male's and female's linguistic forms on the same items. According to her, the different expectations and requirements of men and women from the society are the important aspects to influence language use (Shao Qingqing, 2013). A New Zealand scholar Holmes shares the same idea, but he uses the pragmatic theories to analyse gender differences in English using, such as the cooperative principle and the politeness principle.

2.2 Studies at home

According to Li Xue (2019), in general, male tend to disobey the cooperative principle out of some communicative purposes, for example, to save face or to avoid embarrassment; while female tend to cooperate and make the conversations smooth by some means. Chen Xi (2014) uses the politeness principle to analyse *Pride and Prejudice*. According to her, when men and women are talking, in order to ensure the conversations smoothly, women generally follow the principle, while men usually violate. It can be seen that there has been some thesis which apply pragmatic theories to the literature, film and TV works. This paper will also do research in this way: to analyse gender differences in language in *Downton Abbey* with the cooperative principle, for that the number of related papers is not too large and there should be a gap.

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Introduction of the materials and methods

This article takes the lines and episodes of the first season of the television series *Downton Abbey* as the research object of study. Using the cooperative principle proposed by Grice, the dialogues between the different male and female characters in the series are analysed, from which the gender differences in dialogue are explored and the reasons for the differences are analysed, in order to be able to communicate better with others and to gain a deeper understanding of their conversational positions.

3.2 Introduction of the cooperative principle

The cooperative principle is put forward by Grice in 19. According to him, this principle means that in the process of communication, the two sides of the conversation seem to follow a certain

principle consciously or unconsciously in order to cooperate effectively, and to complete the communication task. As Grice says, “Make your conversational contribution, such as is required at any stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.”

For elaborating the cooperative principle in detail, Grice subdivides the general principle into four maxims: The Maxim of quantity, the maximum of quality, the maximum of relevance, and the Maxim of manner—The maxim of quantity aims to make the contribution as informative as it is required and not make the contribution more informative than is required. The maxim of quality tries to make the contribution one that is true: not to say what you believe to be false and not to say that for which you lack adequate evidence. The maxim of relevance is to make the conversation relevant. The maxim of manner is to be perspicuous: to avoid obscurity of expression, to avoid ambiguity, to be brief and orderly.

4. Findings and Analysis

4.1 Gender Differences in Language in Downton Abbey with the Cooperative Principle

Some conversations in the season 1 of Downton Abbey are chosen and analyzed from the four maxims of the cooperative principle.

4.1.1 From the perspective of the maxim of quantity This maxim requires the proper quantity of information. Example 1 (season 1 episode 1):

Lady Grantham: The problem is, saving your dowry would break up the estate. It would be the ruin of everything Robert’s given his life to.

Cora: And he knows this?

Lady Grantham: Well, if he doesn’t, he will. Cora: Then there’s no answer.

Lady Grantham: Yes, there is, and it’s a simple one. The entail must be smashed in its entirety and Mary recognised as heiress of all. Cora: There’s nothing we can do about the title.

Lady Grantham: No. She can’t have the title, but she can have your money. And the estate. I didn’t run Downton for 30 years to see it go lock, stock and barrel to a stranger from God knows where.

Cora: Are we to be friends, then?

Lady Grantham: We are allies, my dear, which can be a good deal more effective.

Lady Grantham and Cora are mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, actually they have not got along very well with each other before the Titanic event, however, when confronting the special situation, they could break down their barriers. Lady Grantham wants to keep the family’s honour; Cora wants to save her dowry and her daughter’s status. In this conversation, Cora

seems to be a bit anxious and she uses some interrogative sentences and short sentences, serving as a questioner; while Lady Grantham appears to be stable because she is the seniority, also she gives advice to Cora to help with the dilemma. They have their different positions but the same goal, then they could make the conversations move on.

Example 2 (season 1 episode 1):

Thomas: I just think you should know it's not working, Mr. Carson. Mr. Carson: Do you mean Mr. Bates is lazy?

Thomas: Not lazy, exactly. But he just can't carry. He can hardly manage His Lordship's cases. You saw how it was when they went up to London for the memorial. He can't help with the guests' luggage neither. And as for waiting at table, we can forget that.

Thomas should have got the position of Lord's valet, but the new comer Mr. Bates got it as he was comrade-in-arms of Lord Grantham, thus Thomas harboured a grudge against Mr. Bates and said something bad to butler Carson in order to drive away Bates. When Carson asked the question, Thomas answered and he added a lot of extra information that is not good for Bates, which violate the maxim of quantity.

4.1.2 From the perspective of the maxim of quality

This maxim requires true information. Example 3 (season 1 episode 1)

Lord Grantham: How are you settling in?

Mr. Bates: Very well, I think. Unless your Lordship feels differently. Lord Grantham: No complaints?

Mr. Bates: If I had any, I should take them to Mr. Carson, my Lord, not you.

Lord Grantham: You're probably right. And the house hasn't worn you out with the endless stairs and everything?

Mr. Bates: I like the house, my Lord. I like it as a place to work.

Though Mr. Bates does meet some difficulties, he would not tell his lordship and just says he likes the house to conceal his unhappiness, because he does not want to always bother Lord Grantham and as well there is no need of others' pity for his leg. Bates' answer seems to be a white lie, also it's a way to keep the face of the two sides in conversation.

Example 4 (season1 episode 2) O'Brien: Can I help, Your Ladyship?

Cora: This is the button we're missing from my new evening coat. I found it lying on the gravel. But I was shocked at the talk I heard as I came in. Mr. Crawley is His Lordship's cousin and heir. You will therefore, please, accord him the respect he's entitled to.

O'Brien: But you don't like him yourself, my lady. You never wanted him to... Cora: You're sailing perilously close to the wind, O'Brien. If we're to be friends,

you will not speak in that way again about the Crawleys or any member of Lord Grantham's family. Now I'm going up to rest. Wake me at the dressing gown.

O'Brien is lady's maid of Cora, so they have a relatively intimate relationship and Cora does not make a fuss about little things. This time, it is about the inheritance of property which involves many factors that O'Brien keeps talking a lot of nonsense, it's no wonder that Cora gets angry. However, according to her usual behaviours and statements, Cora would not say anything rude, so she just warns with a bit threatening tone, to save both O'Brien's and her face.

4.1.3 From the perspective of the maxim of manner

This maxim requires clearness. Example 5 (season 1 episode 4)

Daisy: Thomas is lovely, isn't he? He's funny and handsome, and he's got such lovely teeth.

Mrs. Patmore: He's not for you, Daisy.

Daisy: Of course not. He's too good for me, I know that. Mrs. Patmore: No. He's not too good.

Daisy: What, then?

Mrs. Patmore: He's not the boy for you, and you're not the girl for him.

Daisy: Isn't that what I just said? And why would he be? When he's seen and done so much, and I've been nowhere and done nothing.

Mrs. Patmore: Perhaps Thomas has seen and done more than is good for him. He's not a ladies' man.

Daisy: Well, isn't it a blessed relief?

Mrs. Patmore: Daisy, Thomas is a troubled soul. Daisy: I don't know what you mean, Mrs Patmore. Mrs. Patmore: Oh, nothing. I don't mean anything.

Daisy is such an innocent girl, who is attracted by Thomas' appearance and easily tricked by him. Mrs. Patmore has been staying in Downton for a quite long time, and she clearly knows Thomas, including the fact that Thomas is a gay. At the meantime, Patmore even considers Daisy as her own daughter, and she does not want Daisy to be hurt, so she reminds her politely "He's not a ladies' man", however Daisy could not get the deeper meaning.

Example 6 (season 1 episode 2)

Anna: Mr. Bates? I am going to have to insist that you tell me what is the matter.

Mr. Bates: I thought it was for Mr Carson to give me orders.

Anna: Mr Carson's no better than any other man when it comes to illness. Now, tell me what it is and I'll see what I can do.

Mr. Bates: It's nothing, truly. I twisted my bad leg and walked on it too soon, it'll be fine in a day or two.

Anna: Well, if it isn't, I'm sending for the doctor.

Mr. Bates has been wounded in the war and his leg has something wrong. Bates also has a strong self-esteem, so when Anna cared about him, he did not tell the truth that he bought a leg straightening machine that made him very painful. He just pretended to say that he twisted his leg in order to keep his secret and not to bother others.

4.1.4 From the perspective of the maxim of relevance

This maxim requires relevant information. Example 7 (season 1 episode 4)

Mrs. Hughes: Haven't you got anything to do? William: Yes, I have. Of course, I have.

Mrs. Hughes: You mustn't let Thomas get you down. He's just jealous. Everyone likes you better than him.

William: Not everyone.

Mrs. Hughes: Then she's a foolish girl and she doesn't deserve you. Though why am I encouraging you? Forget all that. For 10 years, at least.

William: You're a kind woman, Mrs. Hughes.

Mrs. Hughes saw William disappointed because the girl he liked—Daisy, preferred Thomas. She did not say that there were many other good girls or he still had opportunities, but to encourage him directly standing on his position.

Example 8 (season 1 episode 1)

Mr. Carson: And what do you want me to do?

Thomas: Well, it's not for me to say. But is it fair on William to have all the extra work? I don't believe you'd like to think the house was falling below the way things ought to be.

Mr. Carson: I would not. Thomas: That's all I'm saying.

This example is the latter part of the example 2. Thomas did not answer Carson's question directly, but he said something else to make Carson believe that Bates should not get the job in Downton.

4.2 The reason analysis of gender difference in language in Downton Abbey

From the chapter two, we can see obviously that there do exist gender differences

in language, and the question that what the reason for this phenomenon should be put forward. Many researchers have also made efforts, for example, Thorne and Henley (1975) say, “why there are sex differences in language and speech... one must reach beyond linguistics and directly examine the social context”. And this chapter will give a relative statement of reason analysis of gender difference in language in Downton Abbey.

4.2.1 Social background factor

The story of Downton Abbey happened from 1910s. At that time the feminist movement just began to develop. Male have had more freedom in all aspects, while female have got some changes. Female used to be tied to their families, no matter they were rich or poor, married or unmarried. They had only three identities: daughter, wife and mother. Their jobs were being ready to marry a man, doing housework at home and taking care of husband and children, just like what Mary said to Matthew: “Women like me don’t have a life. We choose clothes and pay calls and work for charity and do the season. But really, we’re stuck in a waiting room until we marry. At that time, the society was dominated by male, so it was natural that the task of raising family would not fall to female. In the early 20th century, the impact of modernization included industrial structure and employment system, which broadened the way for women to go out of the house and promoted women’s self-independence.

Also, people at that time no longer only pay attention to the matching of social rank between the two parties of marriage, but also consider whether their marriage can bring considerable economic support, whether two people have something in common and other more modern thoughts. Some young people affected by the new ideas directly abandon the old idea of social hierarchy, advocate free love and independently choose marriage objects. As for the political rights, with the outbreak of the World War I, two of the most important women’s organizations in Britain adopted the attitude of reconciliation with the government, setting an example for all women in Britain. The outstanding performance of women made the British society understand the social role of women. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act 1918 was finally published. Under the act, the number of British voters rose to more than 21.4 million, with 8.4 million of women. Although the bill did not give women the same right to vote as men, only proprietress who was 30 and over, or the spouse of a male proprietor can vote. In 1928, Britain introduced another electoral reform, which marked the final achievement of women’s equal right to vote with men.

4.2.2 Habit of thinking factor

It is normal to hear that male tends to have a rational thinking while female tends to have an affective thinking. Just as the beginning of the TV series, facing the Titanic event, Lord Grantham tried to find the next proper son-in-law to inherit the property and his wife Cora began

to worry about Mary's emotion. It seems that Lord Grantham was a bit indifferent, but actually he was for the whole family. Out of his identity and status, he could not behave and speak casually. As for Cora, although she was the honourable hostess, she was Mary's mother at first, hence she could have empathy with her daughter and consider for her.

4.2.3 Psychology factor

Some scientific researches prove that the differences in vocal organ and cerebral development are inherent and female's cerebral cortex structure are better at processing information, thus it is no wonder that female has a relatively more excellent language ability. In the TV series, personally speaking, the female characters are more attractive, not only because of their beauty, but also for their wisdom and style of conversation. The most typical one is Lady Grantham, who is full of witty remark, no matter happy or sad things she is confronting.

5. Conclusion

From the above three chapters, the general rule of gender differences in language could be concluded that female usually tries to cooperate and push the conversations, while male is on the contrary, sometimes there is exception. This paper also briefly discusses the reasons from three factors. However, though the changes improved female's position and got them rid of more constraints, the gap between male and female cannot be ignored. The society has formed its stereotype for the two genders: male should be stronger and female should be more tender; male should take the responsibility to work outside and female should charge for the family affairs. Reflected in language, male talks directly and powerfully; female uses more euphemism. Furthermore, after analysing conversations with the cooperative principle, it is much easier to understand the characters and plots. I could learn some speaking skills from them and try to use them in the real communication.

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