

## **Language and Gender in Describing Physical Appearance**

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### **Abstract**

*This study aims to examine the gender differences in the language used for describing the physical appearance of people from the two genders. Thus, the language used for describing the physical appearance of twenty university students, from different genders, is analyzed. The data are collected by means of questionnaires answered by the participants. The study found that the language of describing the physical appearance was affected by the genders and the features to be described. Empty adjectives were found to be a characteristic of the descriptive language for both genders in the description of certain features such as height.*

**Keywords:** Physical appearance, Description, Gender, Adjectives.

### ***Introduction***

Several studies investigated the relationship between language and gender. Yet, no general consensus has been clearly stated by these studies (Yu, 2014). This may be due to the fact that the differences in the language used by the different genders were examined in different contexts. The domain of the studies and the type of the examined language may also be other factors affecting this diversity. For example, certain studies investigated the gender differences in formal contexts like Yu's study. Yu (2014) investigates whether the gender differences in language use exist in the congressional speeches. The findings of Yu study reveal that there are gender differences in the House Speech. These differences are categorized into two types. The first kind of differences goes with the stereotypical gender differences provided by previous studies. While the second type of differences contradicts with the stereotypical gender differences.

In less formal spoken context, Cholifah, et al (2013) examined the expletives adjectives, empty adjectives, and tag questions used by different genders in the television series "Friends". They found that there are no differences in the speech of men and women; instead both of them express their feelings in different ways using different linguistic features. In this study, it is found that 'strong' expletives adjectives are used by men and women when addressing men. On the other hand, 'empty adjectives' are used by women when addressing the two genders, while it is only used by men when communicating with women. Thus, the same linguistic features are used by the different genders, yet it is the hearer who affects the usage of such linguistic features. However, one may cast doubts on the reliability of Cholifah, et al study, because it examined the spoken language of actors and actresses used in a television series written by authors. Hence, the investigated language is neither natural nor spontaneous.

The gender differences are examined in the written language as well. The adjectives used in written magazine's articles targeting different genders and written by female and male authors were analyzed by Arvidsson (2009). Arvidsson (2009) found that there are no 'clear' differences in the used adjectives. The result of Arvidsson's study contradicts with the previous assumptions that women were found to be more descriptive than men. The newspaper articles were examined to see the effect of the gender differences and the language used. It was stated that there are differences in language used between genders (Ekström, 2009). In E-mail Communication, gender differences in the language of communication were investigated as well (Rossetti, 1998). In this study, women tend to be less formal compared to men. The differences in the language used by different genders seem to vary from one domain to another. Hence, it is noteworthy to examine such differences in the topic of the description of physical appearance.

## ***The Questions of the Study***

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. Are there any differences in the language used for describing the physical appearance and the gender of the users? If yes, what are they?
2. Are there any differences in the language used for describing the physical appearance and the gender of the persons to be described? If yes what are they?

## ***Methodology***

This study is a descriptive qualitative piece of research concerned with the description and the analysis of words and phrases. Thus, the language used for describing the physical appearance would be analyzed in an attempt to investigate the relationship between gender differences and the language of description. Up to this purpose, the data are collected by means of questionnaires submitted by (20) participants of different genders.

### **1. Questionnaire**

The questionnaire is divided into three parts: the pictures, general questions about the participants, and the analysis of the physical appearance.(see the appendix)

#### **1. a. Picture organization and selection**

Twenty pictures are given for analysis. These pictures are organized thematically and numbered from 1 to 20. Hence, the first eight pictures are targeted to examine the general description of height and the weight. The first couple of pictures are for short and tall men, while the third and the fourth are for short and tall women. Images for an overweight man and an underweight one are the fifth and sixth pictures, respectively. The same is for pictures seven and eight, but here they are for women. Pictures from 9 to 14 are included to assess the descriptions of complexion and hair styles, colors, and length for a group of ladies. This also applies for the men's pictures from 1 to 20. The pictures are picked up by the researcher from 'Google Images'. The twenty pictures of the questionnaire are selected and sorted among group of other pictures by the researcher and two other specialists in the field of nutrition and fashion. In order to avoid bias and to be more accurate, the specialists are from different genders.

#### **1. b. The Questions**

The second section of the questionnaire is a set of general questions. These questions are about the gender, age, height, weight and the specialization of the participants. For confidentiality, no question was raised about the name or the I.D number.

The third section of the questionnaire is the main source of data of the study. Here, the participants are asked to describe the pictures in the allocated spaces for the answers. Because the participants are Arab, the questions are written in the Arabic language.

### **2. The participants**

The participants of different genders were randomly selected from the students of the faculty of foreign languages at the University of Jordan. Here, it is noteworthy to highlight that the students of Applied English were excluded, since they learned how to describe the physical appearance in one of their courses.

Ten of the participants are females and the other ten are males. They are from different specializations and from different levels. There are first year, second year, third year and fourth year students.

### **3. Data Analysis**

The data collected from the different genders are classified into two groups, viz. the female data and the male data. Then, each set of data are analyzed thematically according to the general description of height, weight, hair, complexion, and any other facial description. After that, the analysis of each group is examined to draw generalities, if applicable. Finally, the results of the examined male and female analysis are compared to investigate the similarities and the differences between them.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The findings of the description of the height, weight, hair, complexion and other distinctive adjectives are illustrated in the following subsections.

## Height

The study found that the height adjectives as **tall**/tawi:l/ (طويل) and **short** /qasi:r/ (قصير) are used more by males and females when describing the persons of the opposite gender. Females only used these adjectives to describe the short and the tall men in the pictures. None of the female participants used these adjectives to describe the pictures of the women. They only limited their use to the opposite gender. Taking into consideration that the height of the female participants ranged from 171cm to 160 cm, it indicates that neither the tall nor the short women used these adjectives. Thus, it is not the height of the participants that stands beyond this. It may be that ladies have their own way of analyzing their height. This is why they used certain empty adjectives and phrases like **attractive** /dʒaððabih/ (جذابة), **graceful** /rafi:qah/ (رشيفة) and **'having a good body shape'** kasma:tha hilwi:n/ (كسما:تها حلوين) to describe the tall lady. On the other hand, the following adjectives are used to describe the short lady: **spontaneous** /safawijeh/ (عفوية), **small** /zye;rih/ (صغيرة) and **having an open, natural, and uninhibited manner** /bari:ʔah/ (برينة) to describe the short lady. It is noted that all of these adjectives have positive connotations. Men, on the other hand, are found to use empty adjectives with positive connotation to describe the tall man such as (**strong** قوي), (**handsome** وسيم) and (**elegant** أنيق); while they used the adjective (short قصير) to describe the short man. This also applies to the way they describe the tall and the short ladies. Not only they describe the tall lady by writing tall, but they also add other empty adjectives with positive connotation to describe the tall lady as (**a model** عارضة أزياء), (**attractive** جذابة), (**stunning** مزة) and (**graceful** رشيفة). This may lead to the assumption that men prefer tall persons, from different genders, over the short ones.

## Weight

It is found that all of the participants from the two genders clearly stated the feature of being overweight in the two pictures of the overweight man and woman. However, empty adjectives with negative connotations were used by the participant of the same gender to describe the overweight person. For example, the male participant used the adjectives **overweight** /sami:nih/ (سمينة) and **a mother** /um/ (أم) to refer to the overweight lady, while they used **stout** /dabdu:b/ (ديدوب), **husky** /kaʃbu:l/ (كعبول) and **'he has to go on a diet'** /lazim jiʃmal ruɟi:m/ (لازم يعمل رجيم) for the overweight man. Regarding the underweight persons, females used neutral adjectives to describe the underweight male and female. They used the adjectives **thin** / naħi:f/ (نحيف) /naħi:feh/ (نحيفة) and **slim** /daʃi:f/, /daʃi:fiħ/ (ضعيفة). On the other hand, the male participants negatively describe the appearance of the underweight man and woman. For instance, to portray the underweight lady they used adjectives like **skinny** lhazi:lih/ (هزيلة), **suffering from certain pain/ mare:daħ/ /tuʃani: min marad/ (مريضة، تعاني من مرض ما)**, **depressed** /kaʔi:biħ/ (كئيبة) and **mummy** /mu:mijaʔ/ (مومياء). **Highly unpleasant** /ziniħ/ (زنج), /ʔiŒgi:l daml/ (ثقل دم); **he thinks that he is a man** / laʔ wimfakkir haħuh zaħamiħ/ (لا ومفكر حاله زلمة!) are used by males to portray the thin man in the picture.

For females, to describe the weight in a neutral way may indicate that weight is a sensitive issue for them. Consequently, they carefully picked up their words on this regard. On the other hand, for males to describe the weight using empty adjectives with different connotations may reflect the importance of weight for them, and that they do not care about the feelings of the persons in front of them when it comes to weight.

## Hair

Regarding the colour of the hair, this study found that it is only the female participants who describe the colours of the hair. And they only describe it for females. On the other hand, the male participants did not describe the colours of the hair of the two genders at all. This may be due to the fact that men could not describe the colour as women do (Lakoff, 1975 as cited in Cholifah, et al, 2013) However, it is found that most of the female participants used the adjectives **reddish** /ʔaħmar/ (أحمر), **blond** /ʔaʃgar/ (أشقر) and **brown** /binni/ (بني) to describe the females' pictures, while they do not mention the colour of the dark hair. This may be correlated to the fact that having a dark hair in Jordan is not a distinctive feature. Hence, the ladies do not mention it.

Concerning the style of the hair, it is noticed that the participants from the different genders describe the hair style for the females in the pictures. Both genders used the adjectives **curly** /ke:rli/ (كيرلي), /ʔimdʒaʃʃad/ (مجدد) and **straight** /naʃim/ (ناعم) to portray the females' hair. For the hair style of the men in the pictures, it is only the female participants who describe the style of the hair. The male participants did not describe it. The description of the hair style indicates the awareness of the male participants of the different style of hair as curly or straight, but they do not use it to describe those with the same gender. It might be that they envy those who have such hair or that they care about it more when it comes to ladies.

Concerning the length of the hair, this study found that the length of the hair for the males in the pictures was described by both genders. However, only ladies described the length of the hair for the females in the pictures. Again, for the male participants, it is noticed that the description of the length of the hair is affected by the gender of the one to be described. Here, it is worth highlighting that empty adjectives with positive connotation like **great hair** /ʃaʔar hilu:/ (شعر حلو), **drive one crazy** /bi:ɖʒannin/ (بيجنن) were only used to describe the hair of the persons from opposite genders.

### Complexion

It is found that both of males and females describe the color of the complexion for both genders. The used adjectives are **Blond** /ʔafqar/ أشقر /ʃaqrəʔ/ (شقراء), **white** /ʔabjad/ أبيض /be;ɖah/ (بيضا) and **black** /ʔasmar/ (أسمر), /samrah/ (سمرة). However, the adjective **olive** /hitjjih/ (حنطية) was only used by ladies to describe one of the female participants. This goes with Lakoff assumption of the ability of women to name colours more than men (Lakoff, 1975 as cited in Cholifah, et al, 2013).

### Other Descriptions

This study found that some of the female and the male participants mentioned the colours of the eyes for persons of opposite genders. Yet they only highlighted the green and the blue eyes for the persons in the pictures. Thus, the description of colour of the eyes is noticed for the opposite gender with blue or green eyes.

The description of the smile is only found in the males descriptions of the ladies in the pictures. No single female participant described the smile of the persons from both genders. It might be that the smile of the ladies is an attractive feature for men; this is why they describe it using **attractive smile** /ʔibtisa:miih ɖʒaɖɖabih/ (جذابة).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, the language of describing the physical appearance is affected by the genders and the features to be described. Empty adjectives are found as a characteristic of the descriptive language for both genders in the description of certain features. For example, this study found that males and females act similarly in the description of certain features as the description of the height, overweight and the colour of the eyes. It is found that the participants from both genders used to highlight these features for the persons of the opposite gender.

For other features, like describing the colours, women are found to highlight them more accurately than men do. On the other hand, certain features are only tackled by men as the smile description. The conclusions that are drawn from this study cannot be generalized to all men and women. This is because the age of investigated participants ranged from 18 to 22 years old and all of them are university students. Thus, it is recommended to replicate the study on participant with different age groups and from different educational backgrounds.

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Appendix



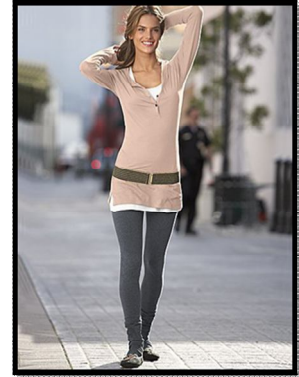
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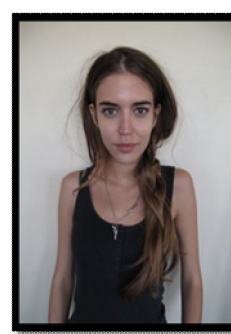
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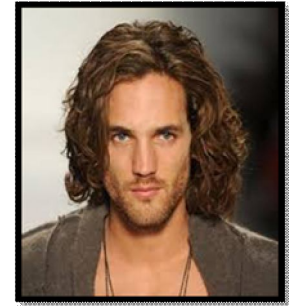
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### 1. Participants Information

العمر Age الجنس Gender  
 السنة الدراسية Major التخصص Academic Level  
 الوزن Height الطول Weight

### 2. Describe the previous pictures

الوصف Description	رقم الصورة Picture No.
	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
	6
	7
	8
	9
	10
	11
	12
	13
	14
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