

Do Men and Women Use Nonliteral Language Differently When They Talk About Emotions?

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① Background

Gender differences in emotional communication have been reported by some researchers, but not others (Link, 1999).

Nonliteral language has been shown to be used in emotional communication (e.g., Gibbs & Nascimento, 1996).

The purpose of this research was to examine the nonliteral language used by men and women as they described emotional experiences.

② Research Questions

Do people use more nonliteral language to describe more intense emotional experiences, as suggested by Ortony's (1975) vividness hypothesis?

Do men and women use nonliteral language differently when they describe their own versus others' emotions?

Do men and women use nonliteral language differently when they describe positive versus negative emotions?

③ Methods

Experiment 1: Participants watched film clips (as in Fussell & Moss, 1998), provided ratings of genuineness and intensity, and wrote descriptions of the characters' emotions.

Experiment 2: Participants watched film clips and wrote descriptions of the characters' emotions or how they would feel in the same situation.

Experiment 3: Participants read narratives based on the film clips and wrote descriptions of the characters' emotions or how they would feel in the same situation.

④ Variables

Independent Variables

Gender

Valence: whether an emotion is positive or negative

Perspective: whether a person reports one's own or another's emotional experience

Dependent Variable

Nonliteral language: the number of nonliteral expressions per 100 words of the participants' descriptions

Covariate

Verbal ability

⑤ Coding of Nonliteral Language

Two independent judges identified the nonliteral expressions in each participant's description.

Each expression was categorized as a **metaphor, simile, idiom, hyperbole, understatement, rhetorical question, irony, or indirect request** (Kreuz, Roberts, Johnson, & Bertus, 1996).

Disagreements were resolved through discussion.

⑥ Examples of Nonliteral Language

Hyperbole: "It takes all of his strength to write his letter."

Metaphor: "Through all of it I would be empty."

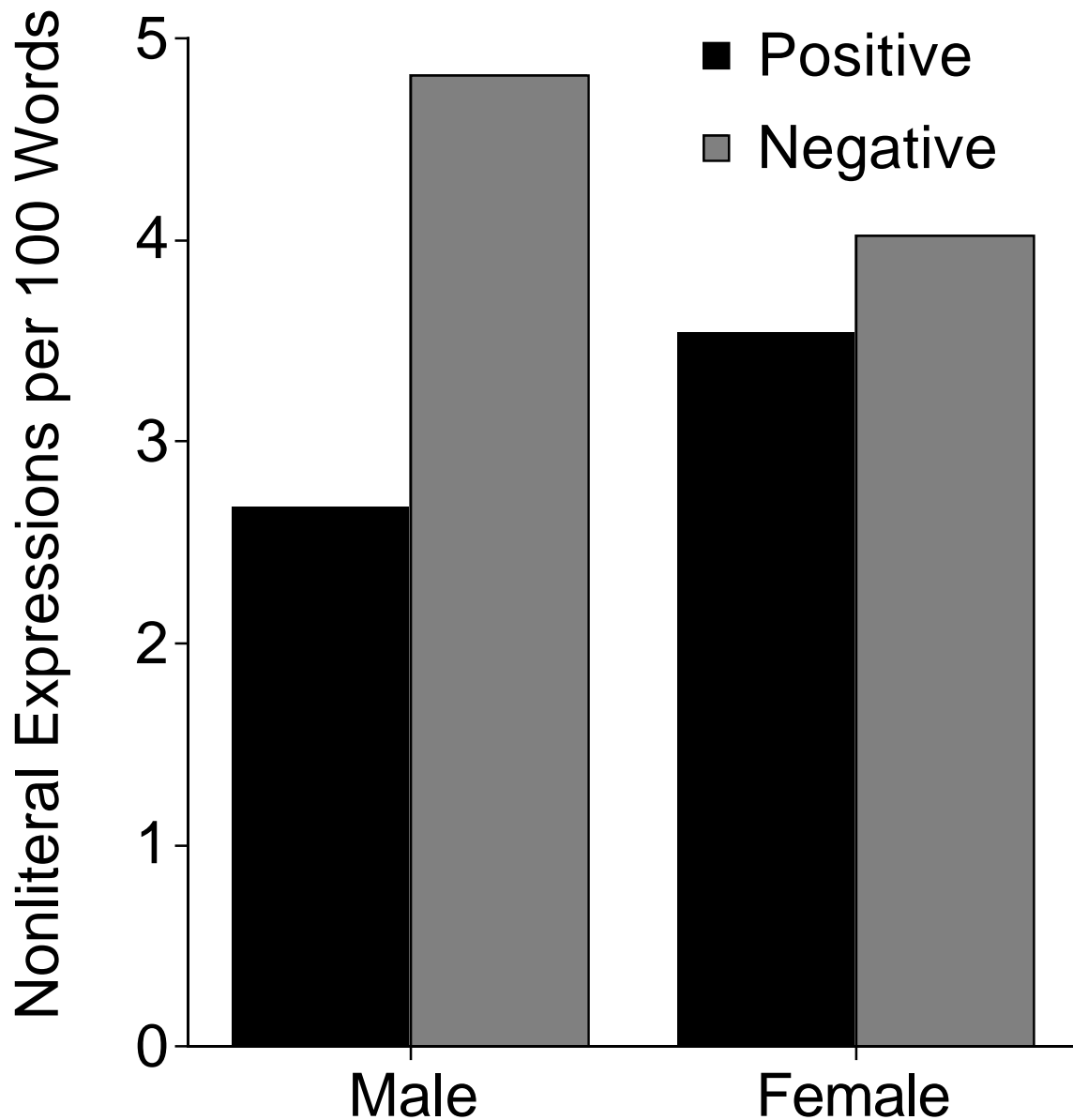
Simile: "I would feel like my heart will just jump out of my chest . . ."

Results

Test of the vividness hypothesis

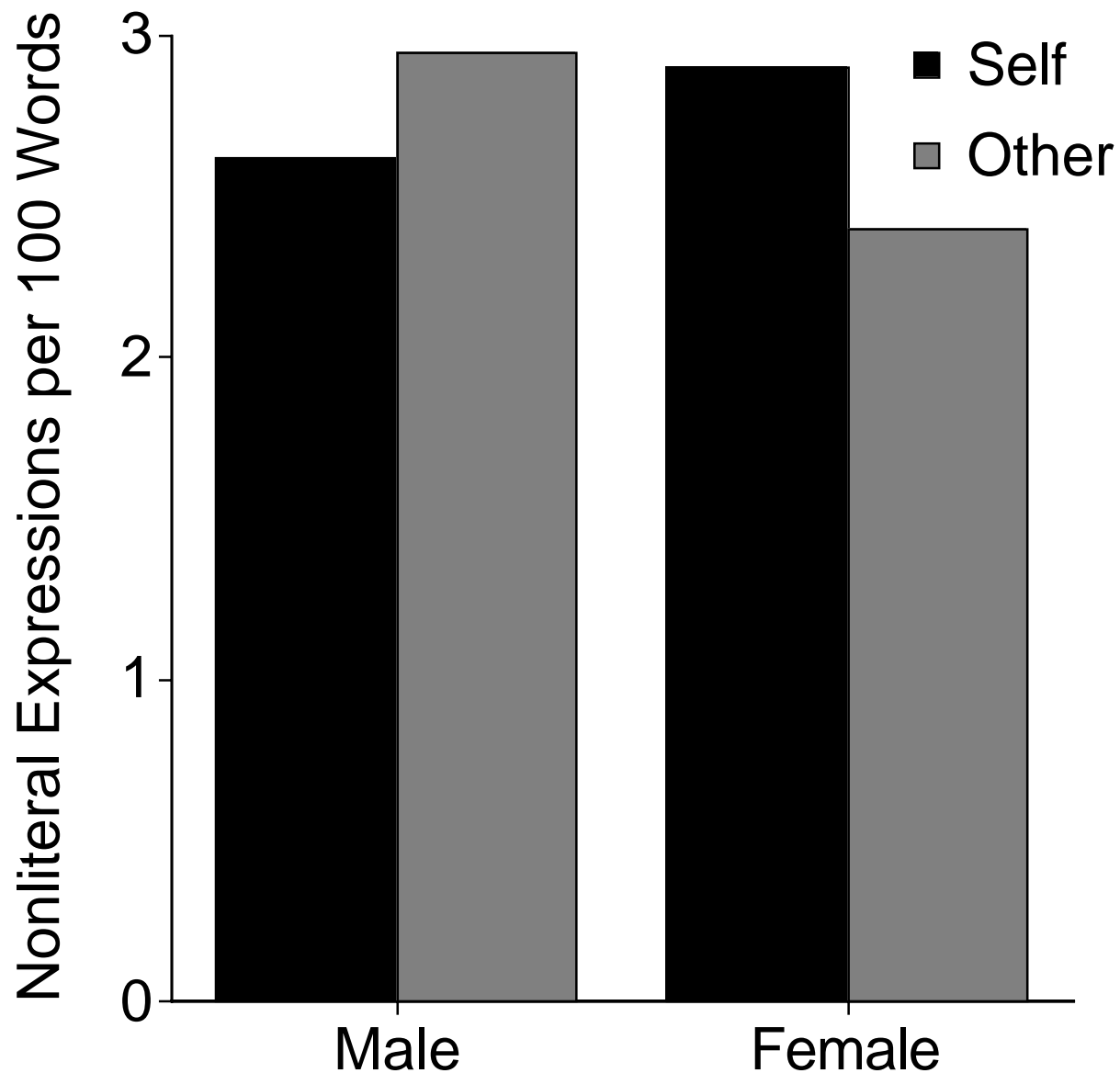
No correlation ($r = -.06$) was found between intensity ratings and amount of nonliteral language in Experiment 1.

⑦ Gender by Valence Interaction (Experiment 2; $p < .01$)



Males used more nonliteral language in descriptions of negative than positive emotions, while there was no difference for females.

⑧ Gender by Perspective Interaction (Experiment 3; $p = .059$)



Males used more nonliteral language in descriptions of others' emotions, while females used more in descriptions of their own emotions.

⑨ Conclusions

The results of Experiment 1 suggest that people do not use more nonliteral language when describing emotionally intense experiences, which is inconsistent with Fainsilber and Ortony's (1987) findings.

Experiments 2 and 3 suggest that males and females do use nonliteral language differently.

It may be worthwhile to examine whether these gender differences are the result of the different goals of speakers, such as "to be humorous" or "to manage the discourse."

⑩ References

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