**HOW LANGUAGE DEFINES GENDER**

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**Introduction**

Gender is a social construct that refers to the attributes, and norms of men, women, girls, and boys, and the societal roles and behavior associated with being one. The social construct of gender as an identity varies from culture to culture across the world and has evolved over time to mean different things to different people. These variations are caused by different life influences in a given society, shaping their views on gender identity. Studies have indicated that language - a tool of communication - is one of the key aspects that play a part in the construct of gender identities. Upon birth, individuals are assigned gender roles determined by linguistic indications entrenched in their social interactions, usually portrayed in our speech and our choice of words. This can be traced back to the earlier linguistic and anthropological studies that record the existence of philological gender that painted the difference between women’s and men’s speech (Hall et al., 2020). It is argued that how we use language results from who we are, and that who we are to some extent is because of how we use language (Litosseliti, 2016). Litosseliti further points out that language plays a huge role in our own view of ourselves and the world. Language has played a major role in defining gender, from the way we speak, to the type of language spoken, and even the existence of gendered language. It is therefore imperative to examine the ways in which language and linguistic practices define our understanding of gender identity, gender stereotypes, inclusivity, and social change. This paper seeks to explore the ways in which language has shaped the construction of gender and the relationship between language and gender.

**Body**

One of the ways in which language defines gender is portrayed by the existence of gendered language in several cultures. The concept of gendered language extends beyond pronouns to encompass a wide range of vocabulary and grammar elements. These gendered languages are distinguished by the distinction of words and linguistic structure based on gender, with some of these languages such as Spanish having classifications, in which some nouns or verbs are categorized as either masculine or feminine, or neuter (Hall et al., 2020). These languages are said to have bias inclined to a particular sex, which automatically leads to a categorization of humans into a binary gender identity of either male or female. Over time, gendered language has been a significant force in how society defines and reinforces gender norms and stereotypes (Hall et al., 2020). Certain phrases and words are often associated with certain genders, reinforcing stereotypical roles and expectations. It is common to ascribe masculinity to adjectives such as "strong," "assertive," and "leader," while femininity is associated with adjectives such as "nurturing," "sensitive," and "emotional." In perpetuating gender stereotypes, this linguistic association prevents individuals from expressing themselves freely and reinforces unequal power dynamics within society (Holmes & Stubbe, 2016). Language further reinforces gender stereotypes and expectations by putting a gender label on titles and professions. It is implied by terms like "actor," "chairman," and "hostess" that certain roles are more suited to or accessible to one gender than others. The idea that particular professions are fundamentally associated with a specific gender is contested by the usage of gender-neutral alternatives, such as "businessperson," "chairperson," or "flight attendant," advocating inclusivity and equitable chances (Holmes & Stubbe, 2016). Our understanding of gender is greatly influenced by language, and gendered language is a defining factor in social norms, expectations, and stereotypes. Vocabulary, titles, vocations, and pronouns all have a role in the development and maintenance of gender identities (Bergvall et al., 2016). There is a rising understanding of the need for inclusive language that reflects the diversity and flexibility of gender identities, whereas gendered language has historically supported binary ideas of gender and sustained stereotypes. We can promote a more inclusive and egalitarian society that embraces and celebrates the full range of gender diversity by confronting and reforming discriminatory language.

We use pronouns in language as a way of classifying people according to their gender. In many languages such as English, pronouns such as ‘he’ or ‘she’ are usually gendered to portray a binary view of gender as male or female. However, there has been an evolution of pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘them’ as gender-neutral pronouns that challenge the conventional gender conventions as society evolves to be more diverse and inclusive (Litosseliti, 2016). This is mainly because there has been an increasing number of individuals in different cultures that do not conform to the binary gender identity. The binary understanding of gender has been traditionally strengthened by the use of gendered pronouns. Individuals are classified as male or female, with their assigned pronouns aligning with specific gender roles and societal expectations. This distinction is a major contributing factor to gender stereotyping, associating certain traits, responsibilities, and behaviors with a specific gender. For instance, the societal ideas associated with masculinity and femininity are reflected in terms like ‘strong’ and ‘nurturing’. By using gender pronouns, language plays a significant part in teaching people to comply with traditional gender roles (Hall et al., 2020). The use of pronouns that are gendered can affect a person’s sense of identity and expression, as people who do not identify with binary gender identities may feel marginalized, for example, transgender people. As a result of the traditionally binary pronouns, these people are often misgendered leading to a threatened sense of self. It is therefore noted that language that only recognizes binary gender pronouns has a tendency to promote discrimination as well as against non-binary and transgender people. However, there has been a growing movement to advocate the use of gender-neutral pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘them’ to challenge the binary view of gender and create a more inclusive setting. These pronouns offer an alternative to people who do not identify in a binary way and allow them to be seen and acknowledged by recognizing their existence and legitimacy (Hall et al., 2020). As our perception of gender is significantly influenced by language, it is therefore imperative to evolve and include gender-neutral pronouns to challenge the conventional limitations to expand the existing knowledge of gender identity.

Language can also contribute to occupational stereotypes by using gendered terms to describe occupations. Some of these terms imply that there is exclusion and marginalization of people of certain genders. These terms such as ‘policeman’ portray inequality in representation and further, enforce gender-based bias in the workplace by supporting the idea that professions are innately masculine or feminine (Holmes & Stubbe, 2016). These gendered identities not only act as barriers to entry to certain professions by certain genders but also causes discrimination and unequal power dynamics in the workplace to people of certain genders who are pursuing a profession that is traditionally considered to be of the opposite gender (Holmes & Stubbe, 2016). Society’s expectations are molded by language as language allots certain attributes and duties to gendered phrases, therefore, reinforcing gender duties and professions at the workplace. These stereotypes do not only apply to the choice of possession but also to the way certain genders are expected to behave and communicate in the workplace. Men are usually described with words such as strong and ambitious whereas women are usually described with words such as calm and sensitive. This increases the marginalization and stigmatization of people who defy these gender norms. This is mostly seen in women, as women who are seen to pursue traditionally masculine roles at work with the same vigor and ambition as men may be frowned upon and be termed as aggressive – often to portray them in a bad light. These women often encounter hostility at the workplace, sometimes being told to ‘act like ladies.’ This may limit such individuals’ autonomy and liberty.

Language has also played a key role in the socialization of individuals right from birth thus influencing their awareness of their own identities and how they interact with others (Litosseliti, 2016). As a result, their awareness of the societal expectations of them is formed due to the exposure to gendered language that children have from birth. They are expected to act in certain ways according to the societal norms of their assigned genders at birth. This is seen in phrases such as ‘men don’t cry’, which is used to perpetuate the expectation that males are required to be strong and not to display emotions, like their female counterparts (Bergvall et al., 2016). Women on the other hand are expected to carry themselves in a graceful manner and are often seen as the inferior gender showing emotions. This type of socialization has been criticized by the feminist movement as it promotes discrimination and detrimental gender bias, especially against girls and women, and limits their individuality (Bergvall et al., 2016). However, the language keeps evolving over time, and as a result, there has been an emerging effort to champion gender-inclusive language to counter the impact of language on stereotypes based on gender. This is in an effort to promote inclusivity and to acknowledge the existence of individuals who do not conform to gender and those that identify as non–binary. These changes have made a great impact in undoing socially constructed gender stereotypes and accommodating a wider range of gender identities (Bergvall et al., 2016). These changes have occurred both in the workplace and society, as is seen by the increasing use of gender-inclusive terms such as ‘people’ instead of terms such as ‘guys’ or ‘ladies.’ All this has been a welcome improvement, especially in the wake of the rapidly growing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer community (LGBTQ+) – which has been at the forefront of championing for recognition and legitimization of gender non – conforming individuals (Litosseliti, 2016).

**Conclusion**

It is evident that language is a significant instrument in driving societies’ awareness and expectation of gender – whether intentional or unintentional. Many languages all over the world have preconceived notions of gender identity based on their linguistic inclinations that are deeply rooted in their cultures, as evident from the earlier linguistic discovery of linguistic gender in primitive cultures of non-European-speaking regions by anthropological researchers (Hall et al., 2020). Gendered languages, such as French and Spanish, that classify their nouns and adjectives as male and female have played a role in gender identity not only in defining the way the language is spoken but also in the behavioral expectations of specific genders towards others. The historical use of binary the pronouns ‘he/she’ in languages such as English has reinforced traditional binary classification of gender in which children are assigned from birth, and socialized according to the social norms of their assigned genders. Gender stereotypes in pronouns, professional titles, and general human interactions have greatly been perpetuated by language underpinning societal expectations and restricting self-expression in individuals. However, language has not remained static and has progressed over time with the changing world. With this, societies have also become increasingly aware of the emergence of diverse genders and have worked towards championing the recognition of these genders and the adoption of gender-inclusive language in various aspects of society. Language has evolved to include pronouns such as ‘they’ and ‘them’ to recognize and acknowledge individuals who do not conform to binary genders. Therefore, we can endeavor to be a more inclusive society by tapping into the potential of language transformation.

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