**HOW LANGUAGE DEFINES GENDER**

Gender is a social construct which is developed by various cultural practices and societal customs. Language on the other hand is a communicative practice which influences and is influenced by cultures. There is a close connection between the structures, vocabularies and the ways of using language and the social roles of men and women who speak the language. Why are there different varieties for men and women? Do men and women use language in the same way? Why do these differences arise? Is it because of the structures of that language? Or because of the norms of the society, which prescribe the ways men and women should use language? First question gives rise to another question: ‘Is it possible to describe a particular language ‘sexist’? The second question also produces another question: ‘Is it possible to label the users of that language and the norms regulating the use of language as ‘sexist? These questions are actually the issues of discussion on how language defines gender.

The use of language to define gender starts off when we are young when we are taught by our parents, teachers, friends etc. Often times the young children begin to stereotype people and behaviours in order to differentiate by following the discourse they hear and the gender displays seen to embody them and distinguish which role they play. For example when a girl may try to embody what’s considered to be masculine characteristics ,they are disciplined by being told ‘it’s not lady like’ in efforts to conform to more feminine qualities and the vice versa is true.

Research into the many possible relationships, intersections and tensions between languageandgender is diverse. Language can influence how we see the world in terms of gender and also culture manifests. We know that some cultures are more conservative than others, some are more open minded, some still have male as dominant figures and others hold more antiquated views***.*** With language we come up with labels, stereotypes, characteristics and descriptions of our world. This plays a role in the construction of our society to be socialized and characterized by gendered roles. The language we use becomes so common that it characterizes our perception of both men and women ascribing to certain masculine and feminine traits. The linguistic forms of verbal communication enforce the continuation of the social hierarchy. Where discourses surrounding gender comes in and describes males to be dominant and females to be submissive .The creation of language is a product of social construction that reinforces certain ideals placed on each gender.

Language in a way influences our way of thinking especially through its grammatical gender. There are three main groups in which almost every language can be categorized: natural gender, gendered and genderless. Natural gender are those characterized by their use of pronouns to distinguish the gender of the noun because most of the nouns in these languages don’t have grammatical gender marking .Gender markers give the language a structure and categorization which is a way of signaling that a word refers to male or female object or being.In gendered languages all nouns have a feminine or masculine or in some cases neutral attached to them. Language can direct or redirect our attention to certain aspects of reality, for example someone who is bilingual Spanish and English speaker may find themselves less likely to use feminine distinctions when they speak English compared to when they speak Spanish .Whereas the third group, genderless languages can be recognized by their lack of gender distinction assigned to them.

While it can be difficult to change an entire culture, introducing gender –neutral language options can have an impact on the people who employ or are exposed to them.

Many different languages have an inverted gender for the same nouns or concepts, but not all languages have marked gender. An example is English which does not, therefore making it easier to convert the language choices to gender neutrality. Research has uncovered how people describe objects often correlates with the object’s given gender in a language. For instance nouns across many languages can be gendered. Whether or not a noun is considered male or female can alter how the speaker perceives that specific word .For example in German the word bridge has a feminine pronoun, so Germans are more likely to call bridges beautiful or elegant –which is traditionally feminine traits. On the other had in Spanish the word bridge is masculine and is typically referred to as strong or study which are mainly masculine traits.

Language is so gendered in that there are specific words that are exclusively used to describe men and women, this can be said for most derogatory words that are used in reference to either gender. For example derogatory terms associated with women include slut, hag, bitch, airhead which are mostly based on sexuality and being sexually available or unavailable; whereas terms associated with men include include: assholes, wuss, dick, pussy, and loser etc to make them feel powerless and weak. These insults used for men tend to imply heavier demeaning sense of criticism compared to those used on women which is always lighter and tends to be said in a joking fashion. In general both male and female derogatory terms are a reflection of the construction of gender. Males are primarily evaluated by how competent they are by functioning within their masculine roles which are upheld by gaining and maintaining their male status from the approval of other male figures. Females on the other hand are primarily evaluated from heterosexual males desires and needs and how well women can conform to their standard of femininity.

Research indicates that gender equality is pegged on the language used. Countries where gendered language is spoken exhibit less gender equality than countries with genderless language. This because the former is fundamentally based on gender and hence it is complicated to reform their grammatical structures and rebalance the gender asymmetry in the way that still feels natural speakers.

Gender identity and expression are unique in every culture but the language around them is still limited .Western definitions of gender variance tend to overshadow how we view gender identity even in other parts of the world. There has been whitewashing of language where cultural nuances around gender have been lost in translation. This has been facilitated by the fact that translation of languages is not easy especially when you try to translate cultural experiences into identities. But even if cultures have languages for gender variance, that doesn’t guarantee understanding of acceptance. For example for centuries in India the word Hijra and transgender have been used interchangeably leading to the trans-community being misunderstood and under-valued. A number of them have been described as the third gender raising many questions as to whom the first and the second gender is.

The following are some comparisons on how different genders use language to express themselves and how society views individual use of language in relation to gender:

DualCultures is an approach of equality, differentiating men and women as belonging to different sub-cultures as they have been socialized to do so since childhood. The social difference between male and female roles affect communication. This then results in the varying communicative styles of men and women. Deborah Tannen is a major advocate of this position. Comparing conversational goals, she argues that men tend to use a "report style", aiming to communicate factual information, whereas women more often use a "rapport style", which is more concerned with building and maintaining relationships .Scholars including Tannen and others argue that differences are pervasive across media, including face-to-face conversation written essays of primary school children email, and even toilet graffiti .This comes from the socialization of boys and girls where these ways to interact become learned. Therefore it inherently becomes natural to form to the gendered societal norms.

Researchers have been trying to understand the patterns of language to show how it can reflect the power imbalance in society. Some of them believe that men have social advantages which can be seen in the men's usage of language. The speech patterns associated with males and females differ when they communicate. This can be seen through the paralinguistic features which are the aspects of spoken communication that do not involve words such as non-verbal cues. Women tend to use descriptive and polite words during conversations compared to men.

Some research has argued that men and women differ in their use of questions in conversations. For men, a question is usually a genuine request for information whereas with women it can often be a rhetorical means of engaging the other's conversational contribution or of acquiring attention from others conversationally involved, techniques associated with a collaborative approach to language use. Therefore, women use questions more frequently. In writing, however, both genders use rhetorical questions as literary devices.

On matters of Turn-taking as the work of Victoria De Francisco shows, female linguistic behavior characteristically encompasses a desire to take turns in conversation with others, which is opposed to men's tendency towards centering on their own point or remaining silent when presented with such implicit offers of conversational turn-taking as are provided hedges such as "you know. On changing topics of conversation, according to Bruce Dorval in his study of same-sex friend interaction, males tend to change subject more frequently than females. However girls and women link their utterances to previous speakers and develop each other's topics, rather than introducing new topics.

An examination of conversational topics pursued by men and women reveals notable differences. Dunbar, Marriot and Duncan found that men display self-promoting conversational behaviors. This can look like discussing achievements at work or competitive leisure activities. Researchers discovered that this behavior increases when women are present in the conversation. Women, however, converse more about personal topics, such as children, family, and health. This social-networking behavior was rarely found in conversations held by older men. On self-disclosure, Deborah Tannen's work argues that men and women have different views of self-disclosure, and that women have a tendency toward [self-disclosure](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self-disclosure), i.e., sharing their problems and experiences with others, often to offer sympathy.

Men are stereotyped to be more of a public speaker and leader, while women are stereotyped to talk more in private among their family and friends. For women, society views their use of communication as a way to express feelings and emotions. For men, society views their use of communication as a way to express power and negotiate status among other individuals.

Moreover there are also certain societal stereotypes about how men and women communicate within a heterosexual marriage or relationship. For women, society views their use of communication as a way to express feelings and emotions. For men, society views their use of communication as a way to express power and negotiate status among other individuals. When a man and a woman are communicating within their relationship, the traditional language roles are altered. The man becomes more passive and the woman becomes more active. A man's stereotypical silent communication style is often disappointing for women, while a woman's emotionally articulate communication style is often seen as aggravating for a man. This creates the assumption that women and men have opposing communication styles, therefore creating society's cliché that men and women don't understand each other.

Power is reflected in every aspect of communication from what the actual topic of the communication, to the ways in which it is communicated. Women are typically less concerned with power and more concerned with forming and maintaining relationships, whereas men are more concerned with their status. Girls and women feel it is crucial that they be liked by their peers, a form of involvement that focuses on symmetrical connection. Boys and men feel it is crucial that they be respected by their peers, as form of involvement that focuses on asymmetrical status. According to Tannen's research, men tend to tell stories as another way to maintain their status. Primarily, men tell jokes, or stories that focus on themselves. Women on the other hand, are less concerned with their own power, and therefore their stories revolve not around themselves, but around others. By putting themselves on the same level as those around them, women attempt to downplay their part in their own stories, which strengthens their connections to those around them.

The fundamental practices of language that are directed to both gender differ based on the impact of social influences. On politeness it is commonly believed that women are gentle, while men are rough and rude. This has been attributed to the desire to uphold the patriarchy where men have power over everything including women. Therefore women’s social status impacts their voice to appear unassertive being that they are inferior to men within the society making them to discuss , share and seek reassurance. On the contrary men tend to look for solutions, give advice and even lecture to their audience. Since there is no evidence for the total accuracy of this perception, researchers have tried to examine the reasons behind it.

On interruption, there are many features of interaction which differentiate the talk of women and men. Women tend to interrupt less in conversation and “to be more attentive listeners, concerned to ensure others get a chance to contribute” than men. In same-sex pairs, men argue more with other men just as women are more dramatic with other women. A number of studies show that in cross-sex interactions, men frequently interrupt women but women much less frequently interrupt men. In cross-sex conversation, women ask more questions, encourage others to speak, use more signals like- ‘mm hmm’ to encourage others to continue speaking, use more instances of you and we, and do not protest as much as men when interrupted. Men interrupt more, challenge more, dispute, and ignore more, try to control what topics are discussed, and make categorical statement

On cooperation and competition it is found that women are more supportive and cooperative conversationalists as in most society’s women tend to be bargainers and problem solvers in their households. In this case when women engage in conversations she takes into consideration other peoples participation in the conversation. Men on the other hand are more competitive conventionalists and their speech is indirect and circumlocutionary.

Language behavior reflects the social dominance of men. They try to take control, to specify topics, to interrupt, and so on. They do it with each other and they do it with women. Women feeling powerless, let them get away with it. Men and women are social beings who have learned to act in certain ways. Language behavior is largely learned behavior. Men learn to be men and women learn to be women. Most of the studies show that the differences between men and women in ways of interacting may be the result of different socialization and acculturation patterns and various gender assigned activities. It would be a stereotype to call women’s style as ‘cooperative’ and men’s style ‘competitive’. Most of the evidences suggest that men and women differ in the kinds of language they use because of their distinct roles in society. The more distinct the roles will be, the greater the differences. In societies that are less rigidly stratified and in which men and women’s roles are less clearly differentiated, the reflection can be found in language also. Changes in society also reflect change in language.

Being a complex and dynamic system that produces meaning about social categories such as gender language has been used from time immemorial to define gender. Thus men’s way of using language and women’s way of using language is different because of structure of the language, norm of the society or people of the society who use the language. Moreover, gender (male-female) is socially constructed. Because of the social institution or taboo, we find variations or differences between men and women. In addition to, men’s style of speaking and women style of speaking are deeply rooted in power structure. In addition, the personality of the individual and the vitality of the group are also involved in the explanation of variability in language use. Therefore, there is a close connection between the structures, vocabularies and the ways of using language and the social roles of men and women who speak the language.

The growth of social awareness changes this notion ,thus by changing dialogue it is becoming easier to be more inclusive in the way we speak and combat the divide created by gendered language. The importance of gender-neutral language is by embracing gender identity by using words such as humankind, police officer, chairperson to ensure that all groups are represented and not being confined to the binary gender in such conversations.

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