**How Language Defines Gender: Stereotypic and Gendered Language and the Limitation on Gender Identity Expression**

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**How Language Defines Gender**

The language we use is a social fabric that unites people within a community. Consequently, the use of a specific language can work towards limiting or freeing gender expression (Green et al., 2018). More importantly, as a fundamental tool of social interaction, language significantly influences the perpetuation of gender norms bringing out a rigid perspective on gender identities and roles. This paper is going to focus on how linguistic structures and history have influenced our understanding of gender identity as well as the influences of language on improving gender expression especially with specific languages.

**Language and Gender Identity**

Different languages across the world vary in their structure, rules and phonetic characteristics. When it comes to gender, some languages are genderless in that they do not have specific descriptors of gender in referring to people or items (Perez & Tavits, 2019). One way that genderless languages affect gender identity is the absence of male/female biased phrases and sentence structures that limit the speaker to aligning to one gender. For instance, French speakers may have to delineate underlying gender pronouns to various objects while languages like Basque, Swahili and Turkish do not have any gender underpinnings. Essentially, using genderless language can provide gender-neutral people with a better way of expression outside of structured gender stereotypes and norms.

Aside from assigning grammatical gender to nouns, some languages have a dominant binary gender expression structure that limits those communicating to a two-way view of gender. The use of traditional English grammatical systems, he and she, has led to a bias in understanding gender whereby people relate only to masculine or feminine genders leading to a misrepresentation of gender-neutral and gender-fluid persons (Lindqvist, et al., 2019). With such languages, gender expression has been limited leading to a rigid perspective by individuals and an inability to fully express oneself in a way different from the binary gendering code. Ultimately, languages like English have proven difficult for users to express themselves without changing the traditional system of gender typing.

On the flip side, the limitations that binary-gendered languages have on gender identity have been challenged by modern language phrases and structures. According to Dembroff & Wodak (2018), the use of a novel third-person singular pronoun and gender-neutral pronouns has been monumental in improving gender identity expression in the English language. The study outlined the introduction of ‘Ze’ as a third-person pronoun that defies the traditional gender system bringing out a unique and gender-neutral expression of self or others. Additionally, the widely-spreading use of the word ‘they’ to define first, second and third person has provided a solution for gender identity expression in the English language. Such modern changes bring about a potential for gendered languages shifting toward a more gender-neutral structure.

**Language and Gender Stereotypes**

Languages can sometimes perpetuate gender stereotypes leading to various biases when it comes to gender expression and identity. Jones et al., (2020) outlined the chronological decline of stereotypic gender associations which are still quite present including the automatic masculine inclination seen in the English language. When defining professions, a good number of them are based on male professions despite the inference that they are neutral. For instance, professions will be termed as policeman or businessman bringing out a sense of masculine view that limits other forms of expression in careers. In the same way, it has been normalized to use ‘his’ when talking about neutral gender and ‘her’ when one needs to specify gender. Ultimately, language can at times perpetuate gender stereotypes and further limit gender-neutral expression.

Similarly, the structure in a language can be gender-biased through the phrases and linguistic norms the language harbors. In the English language, a major element stands out in the use of specific phrases that use binary gender norms to push the point forward for instance, the phrase ‘man up’ (Zeinali, et al., 2019). Phrases, idioms and similes, as used for a long time within the English context, have carried along gendered notions that perpetuate stereotypic gender views further limiting gender expression or progression among English speakers. Other phrases like ‘throwing like a girl’ or ‘be a man’ or ‘She's bossy; he's a leader’ have led to a rigid view of male and female gender norms bringing out a serious limitation in free gender expression outside of implied norms.

**Language as a Tool for Change**

As has been done in the recent past, language can play a role in changing gender perspectives and expression through putting aside unhelpful gender stereotypes within a language. Allagbe & Amoussou (2020) provide a useful ideal in shifting from dominant patriarchal language structures through the use of gender-neutral language and abolition of gendered nouns and language. For instance, the use of words like master of ceremony, gentleman’s agreement, statesman, Englishman should be eliminated in favor of words that are more gender-neutral.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, language is a dynamic medium that both reflects and shapes our understanding of gender. The use of gendered language has proven challenging when it comes to gender identity expression. Likewise, the use of traditional language harbors various stereotypic gender norms that have limited the transformation of gender identity and expression in the 21st century. However, the pursuit of gender-neutral pronouns, grammar and phrases has opened up the potential for change in addressing gender fluidity for language users.

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