# **Gendered language**

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## Gendered language

Gendered Language: Shaping Perceptions and Challenging Norms

I. Introduction

Language is a powerful tool that shapes our perceptions, influences our behavior, and reflects societal norms. One facet of language that has garnered significant attention in recent years is gendered language. Gendered language refers to the use of words, phrases, and linguistic features that associate certain attributes or roles with specific genders. This essay explores the significance of gendered language in society, its historical roots, its impact on perception, the linguistic features and theories that contribute to its perpetuation, cultural variations in gendered language practices, debates surrounding inclusive language, and efforts towards promoting more gender-inclusive communication.

II. Definition of Gendered Language

Gendered language encompasses various aspects of speech and writing that reflect traditional gender roles and stereotypes. Language that is gendered often results in gender inequality, creating unfair bias towards a certain gender. Stereotypes can be harmful and promote discrimination against people based on gender. It is often women who are the subject to these stereotypes and negative views. For many years women did not have the same rights and opportunities as men and the use of gendered language reinforces and perpetuates these views. For instance, using generic masculine pronouns (e.g., "he" or "him") when referring to both men and women reinforces the notion that men are the default or normative category. A man is addressed as Mr regardless of his marital status. However, women are addressed with Miss or Mrs depending on marital status. Similarly, job titles such as "fireman" or "policeman" imply a male-dominated profession while neglecting the contributions of women in these fields. Still, the language we use when describing these jobs continues to cement the idea that they’re generally done by men. This portrays men as stronger and smarter than women.

III. Historical Perspective on Gendered Language

The origins of gendered language can be traced back to ancient societies where hierarchical structures reinforced strict gender divisions. The study of language and gender has developed greatly since the 1970s. The study of gender and language in sociolinguistics and gender studies is frequently said to have begun with Robin Lakoff's 1975 book, Language and Woman's Place, as well as some earlier studies by Lakoff. As societies evolved over time, so did their attitudes towards gender roles and expectations. The influence of religious beliefs further shaped notions about appropriate behaviors for each gender.

IV. Impact of Gendered Language on Perception

Numerous studies have demonstrated how gendered language affects our perception of individuals and groups. Research by Koll Mayer et al. (2018) found that exposure to stereotypically masculine terms led participants to perform better on a thinking task associated with those terms compared to exposure to neutral terms.

Varying linguistic forms also shape perceptions within different contexts.

Wu (2018) examined an online economics forum and found that gendered language was prevalent, with women often being discussed in relation to their physical appearance rather than their professional qualifications. Such objectification perpetuates harmful stereotypes and undermines the contributions of women in male-dominated fields.

V. Linguistic Features and theories of Gendered Language

Specific linguistic features contribute to the gendering of language. The English language, for example, lacks commonly used gender-neutral pronouns, leading to default masculine forms as the norm.

Furthermore, titles and job descriptions frequently reinforce traditional gender roles by using male-specific terms or generic masculine forms.

To better understand how men and women utilize language, linguists have produced a number of hypotheses. Through the vocabulary we use in conversation, this enables us to better comprehend potential parallels and differences between genders. These four theories explain gendered language in the following perspectives.

The difference theory seeks to establish that men and women do communicate differently. However, this does not imply that one approach is superior to the other. Deborah Tannen thinks this notion to be true. Tannen examines these variations in her 1990 book, You Just Don't Understand. Here is an overview of what she discovered, men see communication as means to gain social status, are more independent, try to fix problems by speaking directly, briefly by using facts and are more likely to express opinions and argue against each other whereas women communicate to gain support of others, more dependent, seek sympathy, indirect and give suggestions and are less likely to cause conflict.

Dominance theory argues that men's language is superior and more dominant in society than women's language, which is viewed as inferior. This hypothesis raises the possibility that women should be obedient to men because it implies that men have greater power over them. Linguists like Don Zimmerman, Candace West, Pamela Fishman, and Dale Spender are a few who support this.

The deficit theory Argues that men's language is regarded as the norm, whereas women's language deviates from the norm and is viewed as inadequate. This hypothesis raises the inequality experienced by women by depicting them as weaker and of lower status, which could be perceived as sexist. Otto Jespersen and Robin Lakoff are among those who believe in this theory.

The 'diversity theory' is centered on the premise that our socialization and status in society, rather than the sex we are allocated at birth, determine how we use language.

VI. Cultural Variations in Gendered Language

Cultural perspectives on gender vary widely across societies and are reflected in their linguistic practices. For example, some languages have grammatical systems that assign genders to nouns based on attributes unrelated to biological sex.

Comparing various cultural examples can highlight how different societies construct meanings around gender through language.

VII. Debates Surrounding Gender-Inclusive Language

The use of inclusive language has sparked debates regarding its effectiveness and potential drawbacks.

Advocates argue that inclusive language challenges traditional notions of gender, promotes equality, and fosters inclusivity for individuals who do not identify within the binary categories of male or female.

Critics express concerns about the potential dilution of meaning or confusion caused by new pronouns or neutral job titles.

VIII. Efforts towards Change: Promoting Gender-Inclusive Language

Efforts towards promoting more inclusive communication have gained momentum in recent years.

Initiatives include introducing non-binary pronouns (e.g., "they" as a singular pronoun) and adopting neutral job titles such as "firefighter" instead of "fireman."

These changes aim to challenge traditional norms surrounding gender while fostering a more inclusive environment where all individuals feel seen and respected.

IX. Conclusion

Gendered language plays a significant role in shaping our perceptions, perpetuating stereotypes, and reinforcing societal norms regarding gender.

By critically examining our use of language and promoting more inclusive forms of communication, we can work towards greater equality and respect for all genders.

Efforts to challenge traditional notions of gender through language are crucial steps in creating a more inclusive society where individuals are valued based on their abilities rather than their adherence to prescribed gender roles.

## References

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