



Theory of Dominance and Difference

(A Study of Language and Gender)

Hemant K. Jha

Professor (English Literature), Amity School of Liberal Arts
Amity University Gurgaon, Haryana, India

Received: July 09, 2019

Accepted: July 15, 2019

Online Published: August 30, 2019

Abstract

The relationship between language and gender has long been of interest for ethnographers, sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists and also for the experts of communication and conversational analysis. This paper is based on the argument that despite having similarities between men and women, there exist differences in the way they use language. By taking into account the ideas propagated by Robin Lakoff and Deborah Tannen, this study aims to understand the concept of linguistic dominance and difference that women face in their real life. The paper also intends to analyze the significance of linguistic determinants that influence language and gender in their speech. The paper also briefly touches upon the concept of diminutive form in the use of language.

Key Terms : *anthropologists, linguistic discrimination, determinants, gender, conversation*

Introduction

Men and women are an integral part of a human society, nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that differences in the language between men and women exist, which can be observed in the day to day use of language and speech at every level: morphological, lexical and syntactic levels. Difference of language usage between the two sexes has, quite often, attracted the interests of the sociolinguists. A person's attitude is reflected in the language one uses. In appropriate women's speech, strong expression of feeling or desire is avoided, and expression of uncertainty is favored. Speech about women implies an object whose sexual nature requires euphemism, and whose social roles are derivative, and are dependent in relation to men (Lakoff, 1973).

However, since the beginning of their childhood days, "little boys and little girls, learn two different ways of speaking. A girl child is encouraged to talk like a lady i.e. in a feminine

manner, and if she does not follow the prescribed norm, she is ridiculed and labelled as unfeminine. She is blamed for not thinking clearly, and unable to take part in a serious discussion. These experiences make a woman feel less important than a human which is highly painful (Lakoff, 1975). The impact of this language discrimination is such that “it submerges a woman’s identity by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly”(Lakoff, 1975). Rather, her linguistic expression makes her feel marginal and substandard. Moreover, patriarchal attitude is that “women are marginal to the serious concerns of life”. The marginality and powerlessness of women is seriously reflected in the language used by men and even by women (Lakoff, 1975).

Dominance and Difference

The nature of language and gender studies are concerned with differences in language as used by men and women. Several findings emerged about the relationship between language and gender with two gaining particular focus. The sociolinguists have emphasized that relationship between man and woman is dependent on two paradigms : dominance and difference (Alami, 2016). Dominance can be attributed to the fact that in mixed sex conversation, men are more likely to interrupt than women. However, language differences are based on situation specific authority or power and not on gender (<https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/sociolinguistics/FOlivieraSocioling.pdf>). Power, authority and situation are the important determinants which shape the process and outcome of utterances produced by humans. Dale Spender (1980) identifies power with a male patriarchal order – that is known as the theory of dominance. The difference approach establishes the fact that male and female’s language is dissimilar, and the dominance theory emphasizes on the accepted patriarchal relationship between men and women.

Participation in Conversation

Women’s greater participation in conversation is “influenced by familiarity with the conversation topic and the people they are with, as observed by Cameron and Coats (1985). The major determinants which play a significant role in conversation of women are acceptance, reconciliation and recognition. According to the interactive theory of communication, speaking defines social relationships. The use of a specific style in conversation exemplifies one of the many possible variations of the stereotypes of gender, which, in itself, is an important element of the linguistic image of the world (Zbigniew, 2000). Cicero believed that women’s speech is the main carrier of linguistic tradition, as it is the women’s job to teach children to speak properly, though paradoxically—women’s ways of speaking were considered an inferior counterpart of man’s speech (Baron, 1986). On the contrary, it was the male structure of speech that denied linguistic standards.

Social Functions of Language

Social functions of language and gender are correlated. Linguists and the researchers of culture are well aware of this fact. Linguistic identity of a woman can be understood with reference to its social role and cultural identity. The gender of the persons involved in communication are different when a man talks to another man, when a woman communicates with another woman, and different still when a woman talks to a man or a man talks to a woman. Women and men use different strategies and styles of communication. By using a certain style, men try to define their

own place in the hierarchy of the speeches while women usually aim to confirm the character of relations, to build bonds between the speakers(Zbigniew, 2000).

Linguistic Determinants of Sexuality

Every language has its own way of expressing sexuality, and each has its own stereotype. Sexuality is treated as a feature of the language system which influences human thinking and world of *langue*. The way by which sexuality is inscribed in language organizes our perceptions of the world. The opposition of masculine and feminine is super imposed on oppositions like ‘day-night’, ‘light-dark’, ‘activity-passivity’ thus gaining additional meanings (Zbigniew, 2000). Language does not give the two sexes equal rights, and it holds discrimination against women. As Irigaray remarks, “language expresses the inequality of the sexes in different ways (Irigaray, 1990). Seen in this perspective, discrimination against women would be a feature of the language system. Irigaray thinks of language (*langue*) as a system that is unjust towards the sexes.

Gender and Language Style

Lakoff believes that in gender correlated language, styles are the effect of learning, socialization, and preparing men and women for specific roles e.g. exercising power, raising children etc. Girls are taught to speak in a certain way but when they grow up they are criticized for the very modes of speech, they learned earlier, because communication patterns are determined by masculine style. Thus, women are subject to linguistic discrimination in two ways : first, they learn the ‘inferior’ variation of language i.e. feminine and neutral as Lakoff calls them, and secondly, they are criticized for using those variations, which proves that the way, often women speak, reduces them to the role of a sex object or servant(Cuellar , 2004).

Lakoff argues that differences in speech are present at every level of language, e.g. in vocabulary, in the kind of interjections used. Feminine speaking is much more ‘polite’ than ‘masculine’ as demonstrated in the use of courteous forms (‘won’t you do this for my sake’ instead of ‘do this’), expressions weakening the force of an utterance (‘you know’, ‘I guess’, ‘maybe’ etc.) and the use of tag questions (it’s really very humid here, isn’t it ?). These means of expression place women in a role corresponding to the stereotype of their social positions. The way people speak influences the way they are perceived(Mykhailuk, 2015).

Styles and Strategies

Deborah Tannen(1986, 1990, 1994), in her work, describes communication styles and strategies and their effects on language and gender. A strategy is an acquired way of speaking used for achieving a specific goal. Women and men use different communication strategies, reflected in the way they communicate in the stylistic structure of their utterance. Broadly speaking, men tend to use language strategies that confirm their status within the group, while women aim to confirm relationships to consolidate group bonding i.e. confirmation of relationships aiming to maintain a socially accepted status.

In the past three decades or so intensive research has been carried out to understand the relationship between language and gender, largely by female scholars, because of the obvious discrimination against women which has taken place in the past and which can be observed even today(<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/229047/4/chapter%203.pdf>).The

initial impulse was the work of Robin Lakoff, who in the early 1970s focused her attention on certain themes with the language and gender complex above those which she rightly felt were in need of rectifying. Her work stimulated other scholars to engage in this study and soon language and gender became a full-fledged research area in universities across the western world (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>).

Differences in the Use of Language

In the past couple of decades, a growing debate has surfaced among sociolinguists and psycholinguists as to whether human thought patterns are universal and innate or whether they are a result of cultural and social conditionings which vary from place to place or from one language to another (Jha, 2020). In this study, the researcher narrows down this dichotomy between differential use of language by man and woman. It is evident that men and women use language differently. From early childhood onwards, gender roles, as they are, lead them along paths full of preconceived opinions. The first act is the giving of typical names. Females and males are usually recognizable by their firstnames, however, there are few names, e.g. Hilary, Chris, Pat etc. which can apply to both genders (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>). There are essential differences between boys and girls, not just in external physiology, but also in mental makeup. 'Reason' is for boys while 'emotions' are for girls. Crying becomes increasingly unacceptable for boys who are supposed to come to terms with unpleasant situations in a rational manner. Girls are allowed to display emotions whereas boys are discouraged to display their emotions. Girls can show fear while boys are supposed to hide fear and anxiety (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3597769>).

Diminutive Formations

A diminutive form is a word-formation device used to express specific meanings. In many languages, such forms can be translated as "little" and diminutive or word-formation can be formed as multi-word constructions such as "[Tiny Tim](#)". Diminutives are often employed as [nicknames](#) and [pet names](#), when speaking to small children, and when expressing extreme tenderness and intimacy to an adult (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diminutive>). Diminutive formations are commonly used for girls, which stresses their lack of power and conversely their need for protection. For instance, there is 'girl' and 'girlie' but no 'boy' and 'boyie'. Some labels seem to imply that one gender is particularly well adapted to the expected role, e.g. the word 'lad' is an approving term which refers to a 'boy' who is clearly 'boyish' in character. Toys given to children to play with: 'guns for boys', and 'dolls for girls'. (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>)

Use of Standard Language

Women tend to use more standard language than men. Though, everyone doesn't agree with this, yet, the evidence for it is very powerful, and investigations have proved this objectively. Another aspect of this complex concerns the use of 'strong language', e.g. curses and swear words, like 'four-letter words'. Using such language has been part of the 'rough and tough' male image in many countries across the world. Women were supposed to be more polite and soft spoken. Strong language was regarded as not 'lady like' (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>).

Sexism in Language

Sexism in language exists when language belittles members of a certain gender. Sexist language, in many instances, promotes male superiority. Sexism in language affects consciousness, perceptions of reality, encoding and transmitting cultural meanings and socialization(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexism>). While using language, animal comparisons are common in metaphoric usage, e.g. strong as an ox, meek as a lamb, sly as a fox. But many of these are also used derisively for women, e.g. stupid cow, silly duck, awful bitch. A further type of sexism is found in expressions which stress women as objects of sexual desire, e.g. *chick* or *peach*. Some special vocabulary is used to describe women who, because of age, are not regarded as sexually desirable and hence viewed negatively by men, are called as 'old hag'. Other abusive labels for women with asexual origin are also found, e.g. *cunt*. Such terms stem from derisive male attitudes to women(<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>).

Desexifying the Language

Linguists have, often, made attempts to desexify language, that is to remove inherently sexist structures. One obvious means is just not to use such language, as in the case of abusive terms like those mentioned above. Instances where one cannot avoid the issue, speech communities have devised various ways, for example, by creating new generic forms. 'Humankind' for former *mankind*, *chairperson* instead of *chairman* / *chairwoman*. The use of a different word to indicate occupation is sometimes possible, e.g. 'police officer' for 'policeman'. In other cases a form has been replaced, e.g. 'air hostess' by 'flight attendant'. There are difficulties where lexical replacement is not possible. The word 'doctor' has sometimes been qualified by an adjective or by the use of a further noun to indicate the gender of the individual. Apart from the distinctly quaint *lady doctor*, there is *female doctor* or *woman doctor*. Other pronouns like 'one' or 'you' are another option. Reformulations are often a solution to occupy/fill the position. Formally marked feminine forms is decreasing in popularity. Often, one finds actresses referred to as actors (generic for both genders); poetess is definitely antiquated(<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>).

Conclusion

The feminist movements in the 1960s brought it to the forefront that the use of human language reflected a patriarchal attitude which exhibited male dominance over women. The study of dominance was associated with Dale Spender, Pamela Fishman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West, while the difference theory is associated with Deborah Tannen. It was Robert Lakoff who claimed that women's speech styles are developed as a result of sex role expectations in the society (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robin_Lakoff). Current research in this area has improved an understanding of the ways, gender is manifested linguistically in different communities (Coates, 2013). However, further research is required to have a better understanding of social, psychological and linguistic determinants which create discrimination between language and gender.

References

1. Alami, Manizheh, 2016, Approaches to Gender Studies: A Review of Literature, [Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research](#) 3(3):247-256 · January 2016
2. Baron, D. 1986, *Grammar and Gender*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press.

3. Cameron, Deborah and Coates, J. 1985, *Some Problems in the Sociolinguistic Explanation of Sex Differences*. Language and Communication.
4. Coates, Jennifer, and Pichler, Pia, eds. 2011, *Language and Gender: A Reader*. 2d ed. Malden, MA: Blackwell
5. Cuellar, Sergio Bolaños, 2004, Women's language: a struggle to overcome inequality (<http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/fyf/n19/n19a08.pdf>.)
6. Hickey, Raymond, *Language and Society* (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>)
7. Irigaray, L. 1990. Sexes et genres a travers les langues. Elements de communication sexuée. Paris Grasset. (English Translation)
8. Jha, S. K. (2020). Assessing the Implications of Linguistic Relativity in Maithili Speakers. International Journal of Humanities, Arts, Medicine and Sciences. Vol. 8, Issue 04. Apr 2020, 5-8
9. Kloch, Zbigniew, 2000, Language and Gender : Social and Psychological Determinants in Communication, psychology of Language and Communication 2000, Vol,4, No.2 (<http://www.plc.psychologia.pl/plc/plc/contents/fulltext/04-24.pdf>)
10. Lakoff, Robin, Language and Woman's Place, Source:Language in Society, Vol 2, No 1 (Apr., 1973), Published by: Cambridge University Press (URL:<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4166707>)
11. Lakoff, Robin, Language and Woman's Place, 1975, Harper & Row, 1975
12. [Mykhailiuk, O.Yu. Pohlod, H.Ya. 2015 The languages we speak affect our perceptions of the World. \(http://journals.pnu.edu.ua/index.php/jpnu/article/view/627/686\)](http://journals.pnu.edu.ua/index.php/jpnu/article/view/627/686)
13. Spender, Dale, 1980, *Man Made Language*. Routledge & Kegan Paul
14. Tannen, Deborah, 1986, That's Not What I Meant (cf. Coates 1998:414). The subtitle "How Conversational Style Makes Or Breaks Relationships"
15. <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Documents/college-artslaw/cels/essays/sociolinguistics/FOLivieraSocioling.pdf>
16. <https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/the-handbook-of/9781118033388/c11-sec1-0005.xhtml>
[Deborah Tannen\(1984, 1986, 1990, 1994a, 1994b\)](#)
17. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/language_and_gender
18. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sexism>).
19. (<https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/229047/4/chapter%203.pdf>)
20. (<https://www.uni-due.de/ELE/LanguageAndSociety.pdf>)
21. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3597769/>)
22. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diminutive>)

Sources Consulted

1. Jourdan, Christine, Tuite Kevin, 2006, Language, Culture, and Society, Edited by Cambridge University Press
2. Tannen, Deborah. 1990. *You Just don't Understand: Men and Women in Conversation*. New York: Ballantine
3. Cameron, Deborah. 2005. *Language, Gender, and Sexuality: Current Issues and New Directions*. *Applied Linguistics* 26.4: 482–502.
4. Cameron, Deborah, and Don Kulick. 2003. *Language and Sexuality*. Cambridge University Press, UK
5. Coates, Jennifer, 2013, Women, men and Language : a sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language, 34e ed. Routledge, New York

6. Coates and Pichler, 2011, (the second edition of Coates' *Language and Gender: A Reader*, 1998)
7. Cameron, Deborah, ed. 1998, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. New York: Routledge
8. Deumert , Ana, March 2013, *Language, Culture, and Society*, [The Oxford Handbook of the History of Linguistics Edited by Keith Allan \(https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com\)](https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com)