



A Linguistic Insight into Feminism

Hemant K. Jha

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

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Abstract

The present study aims to investigate the feminist foundations of language, gender and sexuality. The study discusses the various kinds of feminism and its relevance to the linguistics scholarship. By taking into account Deborah Cameron's book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory*, Robert Lakoff's *Language and Women's Place* and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1980), and other contributions to the field, the paper talks about different kinds of feminism and how they are related to the language studies. The paper also explores the concept of queer linguistics which advocates identity, desire and performative centered approach to linguistics. However, the paper does not study feminist theories which are studied in other disciplines of study.

Keywords : scholarship, sexuality, gender, feminism, performative approach

(A Reflective Article)

In the last three decades, the field of language and sexuality has gained immense significance within socio-cultural linguistic scholarship. The term feminist linguistics is used alternatively with language, gender and sexuality. However, the latest studies have advocated a desire centered view of sexuality. The connection between desire and sexuality is essentially a part of queer linguistics which draws insight from feminism and sociolinguistic theories to analyze sexuality as an important human activity with reference to language and its various other aspects. The field of language and sexuality has gained much importance within the field of anthropological- linguistic scholarship.

Feminist Linguistic Scholarship

In the past several decades, feminist studies have been an extremely important field of study. Nevertheless, all aspects of feminist studies do not have much

significance for feminist linguistic scholarship. A broader discussion of the relationship between feminist theories and empirical research on language, gender and sexuality is required to have deeper knowledge of the subject. The field of feminism and linguistic scholarship is both unified and divided: unified in its goal of achieving equality between men and women, and divided in their ways to achieve these goals (Bucholtz, 2014). It was after the publication of Deborah Cameron's pathbreaking book *Feminism and Linguistic Theory* (1985) which strongly articulated theoretical and political grounds for linking language and gender. Cameron delved deep into the linguistic roots of feminist questions. It was then, researchers began to explore certain form of feminism over others in the study of language, gender and sexuality. With respect to the study of feminism and language, there are different feminist theories which grew popular between 1960 and 1980. These theories are Liberal Feminism, Cultural Feminism, Radical Feminism and Queer Feminism.

Liberal Feminism and Women's Language

The primary goal of liberal feminism was to establish equality between women and men in all aspects of their activities. Liberal feminism focused on the early development of language, gender and sexuality study. The most widely discussed aspect of liberal feminist linguistics has been the effort to highlight and remove the clearly visible forms of sexism in the English language. The liberal feminism attacked over the use of masculine form like *fireman*, as well as the use of pronoun *he* for the unknown gender. However, the concept of sexism in language had its limited effect, and didn't serve the purpose of achieving the lofty goal of feminist linguistic scholarship.

Robert Lakoff

The first important writer associated with liberal feminist linguistics is Robert Lakoff whose text book *Language and Women's Place* (1983) played a significant role in establishing the study of language, gender and sexuality as an important area of linguistic studies. Lakoff's initiation into radical feminist approach began with her work *Language and Women's place*. It remained a landmark study for the next several decades for its clear projection of 'women's language' restricting women's ability to enter and play an active role in the male domain of power. According to Lakoff, women are frequently denied access to power on the grounds that they are not capable of managing it as demonstrated by their linguistic and other psychological behavior pattern. Lakoff's concern against the use of stereotyped language behavior in restraining women's attempt to occupy a position of power remains an 'important liberal feminist contribution'.

Judith Baxter

In her book, *Language of Female Leadership* (2010), Judith Baxter also shares the same concern regarding the language used by women who hold important position in the corporate world. Baxter's analysis draws attention to the fact that ideological expectations in male dominated work place restrict women's access to the senior position in the world of business. Baxter's study that women in workplaces must constantly monitor their language, is almost similar to that of Lakoff's concern that 'a woman is damned, if she speaks in accordance with stereotyped gender ideologies and damned, if she doesn't (Baxter 1983, 85). Both Lakoff and Baxter have significantly contributed in highlighting the problems of women's linguistic behavior which hinders women to occupy senior positions in the offices. Thus, liberal feminist issues have continued their relevance in research on language, gender and sexuality.

Cultural Feminism

Cultural feminism is almost an extension of liberal feminism. Cultural feminism views women's ways of thinking, acting and speaking as distinctive and that should be validated by scholars and society (Belenky, et al , 1986). The most important writer in the field of cultural feminist approach is Deborah Tannen, whose bestselling book *You Just Don't Understand* (1980) brought forth the study of language and gender to limelight. Tannen's aim in this book, and in all her writings is to highlight that women and men in intimate heterosexual relationships often miscommunicate because of different gendered interactional style. In particular, Tannen observes that women have a cultural preference for cooperative, egalitarian interaction and for rapport talk or emotion based communication, while men have a preference for competitive, hierarchical interaction and 'report talk' or fact based information oriented communication. (Tannen, 1994).

Tannen's analysis of heterosexual interaction is deeply influenced by gender differences which stem from early childhood cultures in girls' and boys' gender-segregated play groups (Maltz and Baker 1982). Scholars have observed that female interaction is most often 'characterized by both cooperation and competition.' Tannen's goal has been to encourage individual men and women address challenges in their personal relationships by sensitizing them of 'gendered interaction differences.' Yet, the scope of her work was not adequate for deep linguistic analysis of the male-female interaction which occur in their intimate situations.

Radical Cultural Feminism

The more recent form of cultural feminism is known as radical cultural feminism which claims women's ways of thinking, speaking and acting as distinct from men's. The radical form of cultural feminism does not treat the two genders as equal partners in all aspects. Rather, the radical version elevates women's practices over men's, often 'grounding this position in women's reproductive capacity.' The radical feminism claims that 'women have superior cognitive, affective and experiential relationship to the world.' Some radical feminists even created a new lexicon that placed women's concern at the center of language (Daly and Caputi, 1987). However, within linguistic research, the focus of the radical cultural feminist analysis has been more concerned with providing information to the concerned rather than developing a lexical study to address the issue.

In her book *Women, Men and Politeness* (1995), Janet Holmes finds that in conversation, women are more concerned to their interlocutors' facial needs, producing more facilitative tag questions, and fewer interruptions among other practices. Holmes acknowledges the fact that 'women's interactional dexterity may work to men's advantage in conversation due to a general male's "lack of interactive sensitivity' (Holmes, 1995, 112). By modifying 'the liberal feminist understanding of women's linguistic practices as the interactional apparatus of gender subordination', Holmes elevates women's position as skilled speakers, effective communicators and efficient language users.

One more linguistic study which draws on women's talk is Jennifer Coates's book *Women Talk* (1996). Coates claims that women can be seen as a model of the way relationships should be, and of the way relationships might be in the future (Coates, 1996, 286). Coates's 'tone is almost similar to that of Holmes' positive assessment of women's special interactional abilities'. Such work provides an important alternative to the pessimistic view of women's interactional practices found in liberal feminism. Within Linguistics, radical cultural feminists have made an important contributions by 'celebrating the often undervalued interactional practices associated with women'. The radical cultural feminism has helped the feminist linguists to highlight women's linguistic abilities as highly skilled and sensitive.

Language and Sexual Violence

Language and sexual violence are strongly related to each other. The linguistic dimensions of rape and sexual violence as a radical feminist issue are investigated in Susan Elrich's work on *Language and Sexual Violence* (Elrich 2001). The threat of such violence is evident not only in the acts of rape and sexual assault but also through 'mundane linguistic practices' in the cases of women's assault as discussed by a number of scholars like street remarks

(Gardener 1980) and sexual harassment in the offices and business establishments, and even in the virtual online setting. Online bullying, though, a very recent phenomenon, is increasingly getting more dangerous since the advent of the digital world.

Radical feminism has provided an 'insight into the mechanism of gendered power which remain directly relevant to feminist linguistic efforts to combat linguistic and physical violence' (Kitzinger and Frith 1999). Yet, there is much more to the field of language, gender and sexuality which is beyond the scope of one single theory.

Queer Feminism and Queer Linguistics

Queer feminism takes into account the broader social and political perspective of language and sexuality. The relationship between queer feminism and linguistic scholarship is a recent addition to the field. Queer feminism highlights the issue of sexual identity and sexual practices. The scholars of queer feminism 'advocate a desire centric approach to sexuality'. The 'connection between desire and sexuality emerges strongly in queer linguistics'. This provides an approach to language and sexuality that receives 'insight from queer feminism and sociolinguistic theories to analyze sexuality as a broader socio-cultural phenomenon'. A large number of language scholars have addressed questions of sexual identity, sexual desires and sexual practices with respect to gender and sexual diversity (Bucholtz, 2004).

Queer speakers are those 'speakers whose gender identities fall outside the periphery of the normative heterosexual boundary'. The study of queer speakers have provided a greater insight into the field of sociolinguistics. Similarly, 'studies of speakers with queer identities were primarily concerned with discovering linguistic differences between queer and straight speakers, but, they have increasingly come to emphasize the diversity of queer voices in various contexts and how these voices contribute to the construction of a range of queer identities' (Bucholtz, 2004).

Gay Language

The studies of queer linguistics, over the years, has immensely evolved. While early studies were concerned with 'discovering broad linguistic differences between queer and straight speakers, searching for linguistic signals that comprise the gay voice,' more recent research has increasingly focused on 'the issue of the diversity of queer voices in various contexts, and how these voices contribute to the construction of a heterogeneous range of queer identities'. 'Early studies of queer language aimed to provide descriptions of the ways gay

men and lesbians talk, especially how they speak differently in the intimate situations from those of the straight speakers (Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. 2004).

The first known 'work on gay language', Gershon Legman's *The Language of Homosexuality* (1941), appeared in medical perspective, as homosexuality was considered a medical condition' during Legman's time. Nevertheless, the issue of 'gay language with gay speakers was positioned as the exotic, deviant in comparison to straight speakers'. Furthermore, while the earliest authors 'speculated that in-group terms served to create an isolated and secret subculture separate from the greater society', writers in later decades, instead, argued that 'gay slang promoted in-group solidarity, used as a survival strategy in response to the greater society's hostility towards gay and lesbian individuals'(Calder,2020).

Performativity Approach

'With this discursive turn, *queer linguistics* emerged as a distinct field of study' in the last three decades. 'The emergence of queer linguistics as a significant area of study came with numerous' related fields of study. Studies increasingly began to include 'social structure and performativity into analyses of queer language'. 'As research began to proliferate within the fields of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology, studies moved beyond the lexicon' and began to consider other elements of language like sound, sentence structure and conversational analysis. Queer linguistics also increased the 'representation of research on the language of queer speakers beyond gay men, increasingly incorporating the perspectives of queer women and gender non-normative individuals'. While acknowledging substantial similarities between men's and women's languages, and the fact that though the differences appeared very small, they started considering the other minute differences. Many of the scholars responded to and expanded beyond the bulk of earlier work on the language of queer individuals and moved beyond the field of lexical study. This represented a larger new field of sociolinguistic research, with an increased incorporation of ethnographic methods to explore how individuals' linguistic performance of queerness is influenced by, and should be interpreted within particular socio-historical and geographic contexts (Calder, 2020).

Language and Desire

With the 'shift in the 21st century linguistic scholarship, the scholars began to question the role of identity in the studies of language and sexuality'. In his 2000 review *Gay and Lesbian Language*, Don Kulick argued that the scope of language and sexuality research should extend beyond the relationship between language and identity and instead consider the relationship between language and desire. This approach suggests that a focus on the study of language and identity overlooks 'the range of linguistic practices in various

contexts which express eroticism and desire that goes beyond the visible identity of a person' (Bucholtz, 2004).

Recent studies have also observed an increased focus on transgender speakers exploring topics like transgender's narratives, the use of pronouns, and phonetic features in the construction of transgender identity. In his study of transgender men Lal Zimman 'explores the role of phonetic variables in the articulation of trans-masculine identity (Zimman [2012](#)). Such studies of trans-linguistics increasingly serve to ideologically detach femininity and masculinity from certain types of bodies, illuminating the socially constructed nature of the connections between particular linguistic performances and particular bodies. There remains huge scope of 'exploring how linguistic patterns reflect complex and multidimensional orientations to the gender binary'(Calder, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Although work on language, gender and sexuality has 'increasingly explored the role of performativity in the linguistic articulation of queer identity' over the past couple of decades, yet much scope is left for further study. 'Given the ideologies surroundings and how these bodies relate to sexual orientation, a huge scope of the performative collaboration between queer language and the queer body remains an exciting avenue for future work in linguistics feminism and linguistic anthropology'. It seems likely that the field will have to continue to engage with challenges to this view of language and gender in wider society and in other branches of study (Meyerhoff & Ehrlich, [http:// doi.org/10.1146](http://doi.org/10.1146)).

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Prof Hemant K. Jha is currently associated with Amity School of Liberal Arts at Amity University Haryana as Professor of English. Prof. Jha has been teaching English language and literature for more than three decades. Prof. Jha has written and published numerous research papers in the various national and international journals. He has authored two books and currently working on a book based on the culture and heritage of India. Prof. Jha is associated with several organizations of academic repute.