

## Gender Language Differences: Theory and Practice

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### ABSTRACT

Can one trace gender in the language or the language is gendered? The current paper analyses theoretical stance of feminist theorists - Helen Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, Elaine Showalter and Dale Spender on the issue of Feminine writing. Various theories assess whether men and women use language differently while creating texts. Robin Lakoff's analysis of how these differences in language of genders look like, brings to light the fact that though they might speak the same language/dialect, but still the style differs. The paper studies the sexist bias inherent in the English language. Germaine Greer's theory asserts that language is gendered. Finally, the use of a gender-neutral language is recommended.

Use what language you will, you can never say anything but what you are.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

That is undoubtedly the reason...her language...goes off in all directions and...he is unable to discern the coherence."

Do men and women use different languages or use the language differently? Does there exist a disparity in the usage or there exists a disparity in language itself? Can one trace the gender in the language or the language is gendered? These questions have occupied the centre stage in many feminist debates.

Helene Cixous in her essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', introduced the term '*écriture féminine*' which Fiona Tolan refers to as a

"...uniquely feminine style of writing characterised by disruptions in the text; gaps, silences, puns, rhythms and new images all signal *écriture féminine*. It is eccentric, incomprehensible, and inconsistent..."

The difficulty to understand it is attributed to centuries of suppression of the female voice, which now speaks in a borrowed language. The female language is regarded to have genesis at a stage of mother-child bond that precedes the attainment of androcentric verbal-language. This 'pre-linguistic and unconscious potentiality' is exhibited in writings that defy repressions, reverse meanings, disregard the male-centric language and invests improvised, unrestricted meanings in the text.

Irigaray terms this female writing '*parler femme*' or 'womanspeak.' It evades male monopoly, threatens patriarchy and allows novel creativity in women. Drawing a parallel between a woman's writing and her body, she asserts that women's writing is as diverse and diffused as her sexual experience- 'jouissance' unlike men's unitary, phallic pleasure.

"woman has sex organs just about everywhere...feminine language is more diffusive than its 'masculine counterpart'.

Irigaray's research asserts that men and women have specific speech patterns and women usually elude the subject position in language used by both the sexes. Both French and English languages are not exempted from sexism-she discusses the dominance of the masculine in both the plural and the neuter. Irigaray argues that all objects of merit/ power/ strength such as the sun or God, are vested with masculine gender while the less important objects are designated as feminine. Irigaray asserts that the "I" and the "you" denote subjectivity and women must learn to fill these subject positions in language.

Julia Kristeva coined the term 'chora' which has its roots in what Freud terms as pre-Oedipal and Lacan terms as pre-mirror stage. It is the unsystematic language associated with the mother, which she calls the "semiotic." It is muted on acquiring 'the father-controlled syntactically ordered, logical language'- the "symbolic". Augustine Perumail while elaborating Kristeva's concept remarks that semiotic is "an emotional field, tied to the instincts, which dwells in the fissures and prosody of language rather than in the denotative meanings of words." According to Birgit Schippers,

"The semiotic is a realm associated with the musical, the poetic, the rhythmic, and that which lacks structure and meaning. It is closely tied to the "feminine", and represents the undifferentiated state of the pre-Mirror Stage infant.

The semiotic language refutes the order and rationality of the acceptable masculine language which roots from the symbolic. The authoritarian subject is disrupted and allows chaos to replace order. The symbolic is linear and realistic and assigns marginality to women. Kristeva asserts that the subject can revert to the semiotic even after stepping into the symbolic. The truth behind a women's sustained

connection with the semiotic lies in the continuous identification of the girl child with the mother.

Elaine Showalter analyses if men and women use language differently while creating texts. It studies if factors like biology, social preferences and cultural beliefs could affect the language of a gender. Showalter borrows a diagrammatic representation from anthropologists Shirley and Edwin Ardener to explain the theory of women's culture. Ardener uses two circles that intersect. The two circles depict men's and women's culture. The intersecting section represents the zone of common experiences that men and women share. The remaining crescent shapes refer to exclusive men's and women's culture.

Historically women have been the muted (or silenced) group and men the dominant group. The acceptable language is the one that is of the dominant group and the muted group is bound to use the borrowed language. The crescent that does not form a part of the intersecting circle reflects the experiences of women which have remained unexpressed in history. Men thus, have remained oblivious to their emotions, thoughts and activities. Showalter terms this 'female zone' as 'wild zone' since it is beyond the ambit of the dominant group. Exclusive expression of wild zone experiences is unacceptable. Thus women's writing is a mix of the dominant and the wild zone experiences, feelings and language. Showalter points out the use of 'oppressor's language' for domination of women. The differences in male and female speech in terms of speech, intonation and language use are the most obvious examples of difference in man's and woman's language.

To assess the practical differences between men's and women's language, a study of Robin Lakoff, Pamela Fishman is undertaken. Robin Lakoff's analysis of how these differences in language of genders look like, brings to light the fact that though they might speak the same language\dialect, but still the style will differ. Women's language reflects their specific characteristics: emotional, sensitive, sociable, etc. Men's language signifies their status- dominance and freedom etc. Women are generally thought to be more polite as compared to men. Language politeness can be gauged from the use of terms of compromise, terms that weaken or soften the utterances and make it sound more gentle.

Verbal fillers, also termed as 'pragmatic particle' viz. 'I think', 'basically', 'actually', 'of course' are linguistic features that are characteristic of women's language and highlight their politeness. Use of question tags are also marker of women's speech. They signify politeness as well as their desire to get the approval/appreciation of the listener.

Pamela Fishman delineates another aspect of women\men speech in terms of minimal responses used by both sexes. The sounds 'hmm'/'yeah' that the listener produces while listening connote different meanings for both men and women. Women's use of minimal responses reflect their involvement in the conversation taking place. Contrarily, men's use of minimal responses show their disinterestedness. Use of 'hedgies' i.e words like seem, appear, believe etc. are

also abundant in woman's speech and lessen the impact of the speech uttered.

Deborah Tannen insists women are likely to use "hint language"; that women avoid saying things directly because they are conditioned since their childhood to use such a language. Direct assertion is inappropriate for girls. Men, on the contrary, are quite open and straight about their choices with no hints or undertones. Also, women love details, they talk about the subject keeping the key idea till the end, because for them process of telling is more important than the message by itself, while men want key idea in the first place.

Analysing the sexism in English Language, Germaine Greer, in her book *Female Eunuch* contemplates the 'terms of endearment' for women and inferences that these terms correspond to food items e.g. 'honey', 'sweetie', 'sweetie-pie' and hence connote objects for consumption. Invariably, abuses in the language are women-centric and are said to 'define, degrade and stereotype' women.

Another step in this direction was Dale Spender's book *Man Made Language*. She focuses on the difference between men's and women's way of talking; how men have historically constructed the language; how the word man is used to refer to both men and the species; how God is always seen as male. She argued that our social world is described using language which is biased against women. As we use language to speak our views, Spender argues that the words which are acceptable and commonplace generally express male experiences.

Examining the practical aspect of the English language, one finds various instances which clearly prove the sexist bias inherent in the language. The fact that the feminine gender is derived from the masculine gender by the addition of suffixes '-ess'/'-ette' (poet-poetess/ host-hostess) reflects the bias. This connotes that women are a derivation from men just like the feminine words are derivatives of masculine words. This change in gender by the addition of suffixes not only reflects the change in reference of the word but to a great extent implies triviality, diminution and dependence of women to men in language. Also, the masculine nouns have more flexibility in word-formation, hence, have more meaning concepts. This suggests reinforcement of masculine imagery, more social activities for men and better expression of male experiences.

The stereotypes also affect the relation between gender and words denoting profession e.g words like writer, president, wrestler, astronaut, scientist, lawyer etc. evoke male images in the mind because of centuries of domination of men in these professions. In case a woman occupies these positions, the profession word has to be combined with a female title word such as 'woman'/'lady'. Professions denoting power and strength are masculine whereas professions of patience, service and inferior status are for women. This allocation of professions on the basis of sex denotes the prevalent gender specific roles in the society.

The neuter nouns when used in singular, call for use

of masculine pronouns e.g. The president ordered his guards to move. Also the neuter pronouns like everybody, one etc. generally take masculine possessive pronouns e.g. One must carry his own load. The pronoun 'one' is common for both genders, but the subsequent use of the masculine pronoun 'his' manifests male imagery despite the semantic meaning of either sex. Thus, masculine pronouns have a superior position and can be used to denote both genders but the same does not stand ground for feminine pronouns.

To overcome the bias inherent in English Language, a

gender-neutral language was put into practice not so long ago. Many gender-specific words are now replaced by neutral ones, for example, instead of chairman, use of chairperson is recommended. Use of suffix- "ship" helps to avoid gender-specific words. Careful word-choice like 'people' instead of 'men', 'police officer' instead of 'policeman' etc exemplifies a gender neutral language. Language is rich in synonyms, alternatives and they should be used in order not to discriminate. It is necessary to use gender-neutral language in academic writing and political speeches in order not to specify gender or make exclusions.

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