EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF GENDERED LANGUAGE IN DIGITAL SPACES

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the impact of gendered language in digital spaces, and how it reinforces gender stereotypes and biases. It explores how language shapes gender roles. The study reviews theories like Lakoff's and Cameron's to understand differences in how men and women use language. The findings of the article suggest that promoting gender-neutral language reduces stereotypes online and creates more inclusive digital environments.

Keywords: Gender, Language, Stereotypes, Social Media, Communication Online, Gender-Neutral Language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology used in the article is doctrinal. It mainly comprises the use of secondary sources such as journals, research papers, web articles, books and reports that are related to the topic 'Examining the Impact of Gendered Language in Digital Spaces'. The sources used have been duly cited. The emphasis is laid more on qualitative data rather than quantitative data.

INTRODUCTION

Background On The Influence Of Language On Society And Culture

Language is a building block of society. It plays an important role in influencing the society and its culture. 'Society and culture influence the words that we speak, and the words that we speak influence society and culture.'[1] Language is a factor in shaping how we think. It is the primary means of communication through which we convey our ideas and thoughts to others. The basis of social interaction is formed through language. In addition, language is closely linked with an individual's identity and reflects their social and cultural backgrounds. Language is the medium through which stories, traditions, and customs are passed down from

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[1] Exploring Relationship Dynamics, '3.4 Language, Society, and Culture' (2023) Maricopa Open Digital Press < https://open.maricopa.edu/com110r2023/chapter/3-4-language-society-and-culture/ > accessed 11 June 2024.

generation to generation. In some languages, nouns are classified as masculine and feminine and the pronouns as well as the other parts of speech correspond with the grammatical gender of the noun.

What Is Gendered Language

Gendered language refers to the use of words and phrases that emphasize the social differences between genders, typically classifying individuals as either masculine or feminine. Studies have shown that gendered languages that classify nouns like this are associated with more regressive gender attitudes. This phenomenon is prevalent in many languages where nouns, pronouns, and other parts of speech are often marked with gender-specific attributes. In many languages like Hindi or French, everyday objects and concepts are marked with a grammatical gender. For example, in Hindi, raat (night) is feminine and din (day) is masculine. In English, we automatically use masculine nouns if the gender of the subject is not clear. This feature of language forces gender into every aspect of life.[2]

The use of gendered language can also be seen in how people use gendered job titles. Because of the use of gendered language, we associate certain jobs and professions with a particular gender. For example using terms like businessman, postman, fireman, and policeman, or using masculine nouns while referring to a doctor, lawyer, or teacher when the gender is unclear, reinforces the already present gendered stereotypes and biases towards one gender.

How Gendered Language Shapes Gender Roles

Language along with various other factors is a major contributor in shaping gender roles in our society. The use of gendered language creates an unfair bias towards a certain gender, often women. Due to the use of gendered language, people associate certain roles and personality traits with a specific gender. For example, using gendered terms for job titles like businessman, chairman, and policeman, when we know that women are equally capable of doing these jobs, reinforces the idea that men are smarter and stronger than women. The language we use to describe the qualities of men and women is very different. Words like 'emotional' and 'gentle' are associated with women, and words like strong and provider are associated with men. The usage of such words reinforces the stereotypes of what roles are suitable for men and women. Throughout History, women have been seen as inferior to men. The use of gendered language

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[2] Pamela Jakiela and Owen Ozier, 'Gendered Language' (4 June 2018) World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No 8464, < https://ssrn.com/abstract=3191646 > accessed 11 June 2024

has the power to reinforce gender stereotypes and maintain the supremacy of men in our society.

To analyze the impact of gendered language in digital spaces, let us first understand the relationship between gender and language in detail followed by the prevalence of gendered language online.

GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Multiple factors influence our language development and gender is one of them. There is a close connection between the ways of using language and the social roles of the men and women using it. 'Why there are different varieties for men and women (?). Do men and women use language in the same way? Why do these differences arise? Is it because of the structures of that language? Or because of the norms of the society, which prescribe the ways men and women should use language.'[3] It has been argued that there is a difference between the way men and women speak because gender plays a significant role in how young boys and girls learn their native language.

Gender influences linguistic behaviour because of its impact on other things that influence linguistic behaviour more directly.[4] This statement suggests that gender does not directly influence language but rather influences it through other factors that have a more direct impact on how people use language. For example, in societies like India, there is an expectation that men have to be strong and they should not display emotions. This expectation can be a reason why men use an authoritative tone while speaking. Another factor that impacts linguistic behaviour can be the portrayal of gender roles in pop culture. Popular films and television series portray women as weak and fragile who need a man to get them out of trouble.

The metaphorical association of women and men and women speaking different languages has been very common since the early 90s when the view developed that Men are from Mars and enjoy action, while Women are from Venus and like to chat. Women see language as a means of communicating with people, whereas men see it as a competitive or combative tool.[5] The

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[3] Rafiul Islam Shazu, 'Relationship between Gender and Language' (2014) Journal of Education and Practice Vol 5 No 14, 93, < http://www.iiste.org > accessed 13 June 2024.

[4] Prof. Dr. Mahmut Kalpan, 'GENDER and LANGUAGE' (2011) < https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322293684_GENDER_AND_LANGUAGE > accessed 13 June 2024.

[5] Mohammad Abdalgane, 'Gendered Language: A Study of Sociolinguistic Theories and Approaches' (2021) 17(3.1) *The Asian ESP Journal* Research Gate < https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4565599 > accessed 13 June 2024.

issue of women and men using language differently has been discussed for a long time. The feminist movements of the 1960s later realized that language is also an instrument of female oppression by males. The use of gendered language is not only a reflection of the patriarchal society but also a way to imply the supremacy of men over women. Most of the work done in this field was mostly concerned with male language production.

THEORIES OF GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Different theories have been developed by linguists to study the way men and women use language. We will try to understand these different theories by analyzing the works of one of the many supporters of such theories.

Robin Lakoff's 'Language and Women's Place'

There are different theories that have been developed by scholars to study the way men and women use language. One such theory is the theory of deficit which presents the idea that the language used by men is the standard and the language used by women differs from the standard and is insufficient. This theory can be seen as portraying women as weaker and inferior to men, highlighting the inequality that women face. One of the supporters of this theory is Robin Lakoff. Let us look at her study to understand the theory better.

Robin Lakoff's study on gendered language given in her book Language and Women's Place (1975), is focused on the 'linguistic discrimination' faced by women in society. She divides this discrimination into two types – the way women are taught to use language and the way general language use treats them, both of which function to degrade the woman to a submissive position in society: that of sex object, or servant.[6] Lakoff perceives gendered language as an expression of the unequal roles of men and women in society. She compiled women's language in her book to highlight the language used by the women. She identified nine linguistic features which she called women's language. These include hedges, empty adjectives, tag questions, intensifiers, polite words, and modal constructions, all of which contribute to the oppression of the woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly.[7] Women use proper pronunciation and grammar whereas men paraphrase a lot; women

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[6] Amalie Svendson, 'Lakoff and Women's Language' (2019) < https://tidsskrift.dk/lev/article/download/112651/161421/230897 > accessed 13 June 2024.

[7] Amalie Svendson, 'Lakoff and Women's Language' (2019) < https://tidsskrift.dk/lev/article/download/112651/161421/230897 > accessed 13 June 2024.

apologize more than men; women tend to use more intensifiers like I am so happy for you whereas men avoid it.

Deborah Tannen's 'You Just Don't Understand'

Another theory is the theory of difference whose aim is to prove that men and women speak differently but this does not mean that one of them is better than the other. Supporters of this theory include Deborah Tannen, who explores these differences in her book You Just Don't Understand. Let us take a look at the findings of her work.

Deborah Tannen, a student of Robin Lakoff, in her book You Just Don't Understand (1990) claims that there are differences in the way women and men speak, that we need to identify and understand in order to avoid needlessly blaming others or ourselves or the relationship for the otherwise mystifying and damaging effects of our contrasting conversational styles.[8] She believes that since boys and girls are raised in different cultures, the talk between men and women is cross-cultural communication. This means that men and women learn different ways of communication because of the different ways they are raised, and this difference influences them in their adult lives. Tannen uses a socio-linguistic approach to study these differences. She challenged Robin Lakoff, who was a supporter of the theory of deficit. Tannen's theory suggests that language is defined more by the differences between men and women, rather than the dominance of men. She argues that men use language to assert dominance while women use language to build relationships. Deborah Tannen has given six main differences in the use of language by men and women. The first is, status v. support, where men seek power and status and women seek comfort and support. The second is, advice v. understanding, where men seek advice for solving their problems and women seek sympathy and understanding. The third is information v. feeling, where men communicate to give information and women communicate to build relationships. The fourth is, orders v. proposals, where men make and respond to demands and women make and respond to requests. The fifth is, conflict v. compromise, where men are okay with direct confrontation and women tend to avoid conflict and resort to compromising. The sixth and last difference is, independence v. intimacy, where men use language to show their independence and women use it to connect with others.

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[8] Deborah Tannen, 'You Just Don't Understand' (Virago Press 1992).

Tannen's research shows how men and women can have different ways of using language without one being superior to the other.

Pamela Fishman's 'Interaction: The Work Women Do'

Another theory is the **theory of dominance** which examines how communication happens between men and women and also suggests that it reinforces the power dominance of men. The use of he to refer to nouns whose gender is uncle shows how the dominance theory reinforces the power dynamics in our speech. Let us understand it better by taking a look at Pamela Fishman's paper titled Interaction: The Work Women Do, who is one of the leading supporters of this theory of dominance.

Pamela Fishman in her paper titled Interaction: The Work Women Do (1978), states that women do more interaction and conversation than men do. She gave the iconic expression of 'conversational shitwork' for the work women do by keeping the conversation going. She believes that women have more conversations than men because they are less likely to be successful. 'The failure of the women's attempts at interaction is not due to anything inherent in their talk, but to the failure of the men to respond, to do interactional work. The success of the men's remarks is due to the women doing interactional work in response to attempts by the men the women labour hardest in making interactions go.'[9] In an experiment she once conducted, she recorded the conversations of three couples. She observed that women asked more questions than men, the men were the ones who asked her to edit some parts out, men tried to exert control and the women were more engaged in the conversation. Fishman said that women do most of the work while interacting with men because men make minimal to no effort to respond.

Deborah Cameron's 'What Language Barrier?'

Another theory is the theory of diversity which is considered to be more progressive than the previous theories as it is recent and challenges the sexist research done earlier. Let us understand this theory by looking at an article written by a supporter of this theory, Deborah Cameron.

Deborah Cameron, in her article What Language Barriers? (2007) States that many theories on gender and language are based on the myth that men and women communicate in different

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[9] Pamela Fishman, 'Interaction: The Work Women Do' (University of California Press, 1978).

ways. She believes that difference is a myth. She challenges the idea that men and women speak differently and believes that any difference between the language used by men and women is because of the societal expectations placed on them and not any biological factor. Her research is focused on the impact of society on the relationship between gender and language.

Cameron coined the term verbal hygiene in her book by the same name in 1995, which refers to the discourses and practices through which people attempt to clean up language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility.[10]

PREVALENCE OF GENDERED LANGUAGE ONLINE

Now that we have understood the meaning of gendered language and the relationship between gender and language in our society, we will move further to study the prevalent use of gendered language in the digital world of online communities and multiple social media platforms.

With the emergence of social media platforms like X (Twitter), Instagram, Facebook and Reddit, the world is more connected than ever. Social media has made communicating with people from across the world very easy. People use social media to connect and communicate with their friends, acquaintances, and even strangers. Social media has had a severe impact on the massive amount of people we are able to communicate with and the frequency with which we can do it. People of different genders, use language differently on social media as well. Men and women write and present themselves very differently. Social media also influences the way people use words and phrases differently based on their gender. For example, women tend to use emojis on social media more frequently than men do. They tend to use different emojis and expressions like lol and rofl more often than men do. Whereas men tend to use more swear words in their posts online than women do. The topics of conversation also differ, men and women may tend to take part in discussions related to different areas of interest.

The rise of social media and online writing over the years has led to a significant increase in user-generated text that is easily accessible on the internet. On platforms such as Reddit and X (formerly known as Twitter), users write about things they want to talk about for the world to

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[10] Deborah Cameron, 'What Language Barrier?' (2007) The Guardian
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/oct/01/gender.books > accessed 15 June 2024.

see. Studies show that there is a notable difference between the way men and women write their posts on social media.

Research conducted by Margaret Ott[11] to do an analysis of gendered language on social media found that women are generally more likely to tweet about their home lives and personal concerns. Men, on the other hand, tend to tweet more about topics like news and technology. Women appear to use social media to post short updates on their everyday lives. Men are more likely to use sexual words and demonstrate anger in their posts. And the posts made by men are longer, they tend to use more articles and verbs. Men are more likely to post more polished updates about the world outside their everyday lives.

Research conducted by Facebook also found similar results, where women tend to share more posts about their personal lives on the platform such as their relationships and family matters, whereas post more about abstract things like news and politics. Words describing positive emotions like happiness, love and excitement, are used more by women than men. Women also tend to use intensive adverbs. The research found that men post more about politics and sports. Men are more likely to engage in trolling as compared to women. Psychology Professor Mark Griffiths says that the prevalence of male trolling may be related to the fact that men use the Internet as a way to vent their aggression, something they're not able to do in face-to-face communication, unlike women.[12]

A study conducted by the academics of the Hopkins University to do an analysis of the language users use on X, shows that women use punctuations excessively to put emphasis on their text. The phrases like lol are used by women more often whereas phrases like yeah are used more often by men.

Studies show that men are more likely to use authoritative and formal language, unlike women. Men tend to react more negatively in interactions whereas women respond warmly. The choice of the platform depends on what men and women like to post online. The way men and women frame their texts and posts is also different. Women tend to use more personal pronouns like me, mine, and you.

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[11] Margaret Ott, 'Tweet like a girl: A corpus analysis of gendered language in social media' (Yale University, Apr 2016)< https://ling.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/Margaret%20Ott.pdf > accessed 15 June 2024.
[12] 'Gender-Specific Behaviors on Social Media and What They Mean for Online Communications' (2016) < https://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-networks/gender-specific-behaviors-social-media-and-what-they-mean-online-communications > accessed 15 June 2024.

The use of gendered language on social media platforms and online communities is a reflection of how prevalent it is in everyday communications in the real world.

IMPACT OF GENDERED LANGUAGE ON ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The use of gendered language online has a powerful impact in shaping how men and women think. Research also says that gendered language has a link with gender inequality. We know that gendered languages refer to nouns, pronouns, verbs and other parts of speech as either feminine or masculine. This gendering of grammatical parts has a subtle impact on shaping our ideas and thoughts. The use of masculine pronouns when the gender is not clear instead of using gender-neutral pronouns shows how gendered languages reinforce the idea of male superiority. Previous research in other grammatically gendered languages, such as Dutch, German, Italian, and French has shown that relying on default masculine grammatical gender perpetuates a male bias in perception. This male bias in perception not only underrepresents women but also affects their perceived suitability for different occupations.[13] The way feminine and masculine words and phrases are used influences the gender stereotypes and biases that are already present in our society.

On social media platforms, we have seen that men and women talk differently but the way they are talked about is also very different. For example, while talking about a man and a woman in a sentence, it is most likely that the man is mentioned before the woman, which makes the first person mentioned look more important. Examples of this are husband and wife, boys and girls and Mr. And Mrs., notice how the man is mentioned before the woman. This upholds the idea of men being more important than women. While becoming less common, specific genders are often still given specific roles such as Employees and their wives are invited rather than Employees and their partners are invited, or Mothers can benefit from the school's pastoral program rather than Parents can benefit from the school's pastoral program. Referring to members of female sports teams as girls is infantilizing, while the use of lady over a woman has historic overtones of lower social status.[14]

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[13] Farida Soliman and Queen Mary, *A Content Analysis of the Gendered Language Used in Online Recruitment in Egypt* (University of London, 2023) < http://www.qmul.ac.uk/sllf/media/sllf-new/department-of-linguistics/documents/Soliman-QMOPAL-48-2023.pdf > accessed 15 June 2024.
[14] Avital Abramzon, 'What Is Gendered Language?' (8 March 2022) BLEND < https://www.getblend.com/blog/gendered-language/ > (accessed 17 June 2024.

The use of gendered language can also make those who do not conform to societal norms of gender feel excluded or invalidated. Instead of using gender-neutral pronouns to address someone when you don't know their gender, people on social media still use masculine pronouns.

Using feminine and masculine pronouns to refer to inanimate objects is also influenced by gender-based stereotypes. For example, in German the word bridge has a feminine pronoun, so Germans are more likely to call bridges beautiful or elegant (traditionally feminine traits). In Spanish, the word bridge is masculine and is typically referred to as strong or sturdy.[15]

The use of such language should be mitigated and a more gender-neutral way of using language should be adopted by users across social media.

MITIGATING THE USE OF GENDERED LANGUAGE

It is important to reduce the use of gendered language to mitigate gender stereotypes in our society. The use of gendered language can be mitigated by adopting a gender-neutral way of language. It can be done through creating awareness about the impact of gendered language by conducting educational campaigns and workshops in schools and colleges. Social media platforms can be asked to make community guidelines against the use of sexist language.

Recently, the Supreme Court of India released a 'Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes', to identify the words and phrases that reinforce the gender stereotypes and remove them. D.Y. Chandrachud, the Chief Justice of India, said 'The handbook identifies common stereotypes about women, many of which have been utilised by courts in the past and demonstrates how they are inaccurate and how they distort the application of the law'. The handbook includes a list of words and phrases that are rooted in gender stereotypes that should be avoided and their alternatives are given. The handbook says that instead of using stereotype-promoting language in courts lawyers and judges should use language that does not promote or encourage any gender stereotypes. For example, instead of using the word 'Adultress', say 'woman who has engaged in sexual relations outside of marriage', instead of saying 'ladylike', use a gender-neutral description of behaviour. The handbook also talks about the stereotypes and what is the reality. While it was made for the lawyers and judges to use, the general public

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[15] Jacqueline De Vore, 'How Language Shapes Our Perception of Gender' (29 March 2022) Terra Translations < https://terratranslations.com/2022/03/29/how-language-shapes-our-perception-of-gender/ > accessed 17 June 2024.

should also read the handbook and understand why it is important to use gender-neutral language.

CONCLUSION

Throughout History, gender and language have had a significant role in influencing our society and culture. Language is not just about communication but it shapes how we think, structures our thoughts, influences our perception of ideas, and our understanding of concepts. Gendered languages classify their nouns as either feminine or masculine which impacts how the speakers of those languages perceive the words and phrases of that language. In this project, we explored how the use of gendered language in the real world and in digital spaces is a major factor that reinforces gender stereotypes and the idea that men are above women. The use of such language shapes the gender roles.

The relationship between gender and language has been studied by multiple scholars and they have developed various theories that study how language and gender influence each other and how gendered language is used by men and women. These theories present different reasons for why and how men and women use language differently. All supporters of these theories agree on some points and disagree on others.

To understand the prevalence of gendered language in the digital world, various studies have been conducted. The way men and women present themselves online is a reflection of how society has conditioned them to behave. Men tend to use a way of language that makes them look strong and dominant because society has conditioned them to believe that men have to be strong and that showing emotions is a sign of weakness whereas women tend to use language in a way that makes them look kind and warm because society has forced them to believe that they have to talk politely. The kind of posts men and women make on social media reflect gender-based prejudices and stereotypes that are a result of the patriarchy that is very prevalent in most societies of this world.

It is important to mitigate the use of gendered language so that stereotypes and biases on the basis of gender can be eradicated. It is also very important to encourage and promote the use of gender-neutral language over gendered language so that people who do not conform to the traditional and orthodox norms of gender set by society do not feel excluded.