UNIT 2  LINGUISTICS, SEMIOTICS AND FEMINIST RESEARCH

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the previous unit, we looked at the nature of representation, and the gendered uses of language. In this unit we examine the way that feminist researchers and scholars in the area of gender/women’s studies as well as linguistics have framed the interaction of gender and language. All such research has naturally proceeded from the premise that the patriarchal organization of most human societies provides the medium in which women and men’s linguistic communication is to be evaluated. Modern scholarship also recognizes that language itself is also the product of systematic knowledge of structure and use. Researchers in the field of gender and language have thus increasingly defined this field of enquiry as the interaction between these two systems. Let us have a book at the objectives of reading this unit.
2.2 OBJECTIVES

After having read this unit, you should be able to:

- Distinguish between *langue* and *parole*;
- Describe sociolinguistics studies;
- Explain the meaning of a ‘sign’;
- Discuss the varying perspectives on the relationship between gender and language; and
- Examine the ways in which gender and language interact in your own language/context.

2.3 THE STUDY OF LANGUAGE AND GENDER

In the previous Unit, we examined the nature of representation in relation to gender, and obtained a basic understanding of discourse analysis. Now, let us continue our study of language by looking more closely at some of its aspects from a gender perspective.

2.3.1 *Langue* and *Parole*

You have already been introduced to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and the distinctions between ‘*langue*’ and ‘*parole*’ in Unit 4, Block 1, MWG-003. Let us review what we had learnt earlier, in the context of language and gender.

While the study of the communicative nature of language can be traced to the earliest periods of human enquiry, the birth of modern linguistics is often attributed to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). Saussure argued that the study of human language must recognise the fundamental difference between ‘*langue*’ and ‘*parole*’ (de Saussure 1983). Let us renew what we had learnt earlier about these themes. By *langue*, Saussure meant the system of a language, i.e., the arrangement of sounds and words that speakers of a language have a shared, collective knowledge of, and which is used as the basis to communicate with each other. *Parole*, on the other hand, is an instance of individual linguistic behaviour in context. A manifestation of the abstract system of *langue*, *parole* is individual, and unlike *langue*, not community-based.

For example, if I ask the question ‘Who did you see?’ this would be an instance of ‘*parole*’ that, in turn, realizes the abstract knowledge that we share as English speakers about how questions are formed in English (informally, move the question word to the front of the sentence and add a helping ‘do-verb’ after it, marking it for the tense of the sentence). If,
on the other hand, I was to utter the same question in Hindi - ‘tumne kise dekhaa’, this instance of parole would be an individual manifestation of a different abstract shared system (informally, leave the question word where it is and mark tense on the main verb). As you can see from these examples, the sense conveyed by both questions is the same; however, the shared system of language (English or Hindi), results in a different grammatical pattern.

**Activity:**

i) Write three other examples where knowledge of English will be different from knowledge of the language of your native language?

i) Describe the differences between them in the manner above.
2.3.2 Modern Linguistics in Reference to Sociolinguistics

Over the last century or so, the development of modern linguistics as the scientific study of language has proceeded along two major lines of investigation. The first has been the study of *langue* itself, i.e. the study of the system of language. This involves the following aspects:

- Enquiry into the systematic and rule-governed ways that the sounds of language are produced and combined (phonetics and phonology);
- The means by which some segments of sound constitute linguistic units, such as words, affixes, parts of speech, etc. (morphology);
- The ways in which these linguistic units can be combined into phrases and sentences (syntax); and
- The ways in which these linguistic units (words and sentences) map onto sentential meaning (semantics) and interaction (pragmatics).

The second trend in modern linguistics has been a study of *parole* - language in use. This trend gained greater momentum only in the second half of the twentieth century. This later development was because of what the sociolinguist William Labov has called “the Saussurean Paradox” (Labov, 1972, pp. 185-6). If we all share knowledge of the community *langue*, one can obtain all the data necessary for linguistic description from a single person—perhaps oneself; but one can obtain data on individualistic *parole* only by studying linguistic behaviour in the community. Since the 1960s therefore, sociolinguistics has become a core subject area in linguistics. The discipline focuses on the relation of language to society, examining questions like:

- The social importance of language, from small groups to whole nations; how language is used to define group, society and nation.
  
  For example, take a nation like England, which has a large number of immigrants, yet it has only one officially recognised language. Compare this to India, which does not have one national language (Hindi is only an associate ‘official’ language, along with English.)

- The development of national standard languages, and their relation to regional and local dialects; how certain varieties and forms enjoy prestige, while others are looked down upon as ‘inferior’, ‘non-standard’, etc.
  
  For example, consider the fact that many people who claim themselves to speakers of standard Hindi often look down upon languages the languages of South India as ‘unrefined’, even though these languages are all much older, and have a richer written literature, than standard Hindi.
• How individual ways of speaking reveal membership in social groups: working class vs. middle class, urban vs. rural, old vs. young, female vs. male, etc.

For example, educated speakers from urban centres tend to mix English words into their speech than rural speakers, male speakers across all other variables are more likely to use taboo words like abuses than women speakers, etc.

• How speakers and listeners use language to define their relationship and establish the character of their talk; how talk conveys attitudes about the context, the participants and their relationship in terms of membership, power and solidarity.

For example, supposing you are a Bangla speaker, and you are in a group of people in which only one other person speaks Bangla. All of you speak English. Now, if you suddenly decide to utter a few sentences in Bangla, then it is very likely that the other speakers will interpret your choice as an attempt to exclude them from the conversation. Your Bangla utterances would most likely be seen as a rude comment on the conversation on at the moment, unless you translate what you have said.

Activity:

i) Can you count the languages that are spoken in your neighbourhood? Do you think that any of these languages are considered to be ‘better’ or ‘worse’ than yours?

ii) How far do you think that these attitudes are based on facts about the language? Could we say that the ‘inferior’ and ‘superior’ languages lack a langue, i.e. a system by which they are spoken? Do not take into account whether they have a script and a written grammar.
2.3.3 The Semiotic Turn

Besides the formal approach to language that we described in the previous section, Saussure’s theories of semiotics also had an enormous impact on the study of social life. Saussure defined semiotics as the

“science that studies the role of signs as part of social life. It would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology” (Saussure, 1983, 15-16).

In his definition, the sign is necessarily composed of two parts:

- A ‘signifier’ - the form which the sign takes; and
- The ‘signified’ - the concept it represents.

As we have already seen in MWG 003, Block.1, Unit.4, the sign is the whole that results from the association of the signifier with the signified. The relationship between the signifier and the signified is referred to as ‘signification’. Taking a simple example of a word like ‘closed’, we know that when we see this on a sign in a shop doorway, we know the word ‘closed’ (the signifier) points us to the signified concept that the shop will not be selling anything to you. However, if we encounter the same signifier in another context like ‘The door is closed’, we know that this time the signified is different here - all this means is that the door is in a position that the shuts the doorway. So each instance of the pair between signifier and signified constitutes an independent sign. This flexibility of ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’ arises because the relationship of signifier to the signified is arbitrary. There is nothing in the sounds that make up the word ‘dog’ which ties it up with representing the canine animal it does, which is why we can use the word ‘pooch’ to also refer to the same animal.

A sign must have both a signifier and a signified, but it is not necessary that either the signifier must be a word or that the signified is some linguistic concept. For example, a picture of trees (signifier) can signify a public garden, or a forest, etc. (signified), Similarly, the sound of a loud explosion can signify a gas cylinder bursting in one context, or the blasting of rocks in another.

Activity:

Write ten examples similar to the ones above, i.e. where the same linguistic signifier can have distinct signified events/objects/concepts, etc.
2.3.4 Study of Gender and Language: Implications

Both the fields of sociolinguistics and semiotics have had a tremendous impact on researchers in the area of gender studies and feminist theory. The insights from sociolinguistics have led feminist researchers to ask the basic question: If society and its gender/region/class/ caste organisation have so much of a systematic effect on the ways that parole is expressed, then just describing langue as a shared system was not adequate. The regular patterns in parole, too, must be produced by a system — however, in this case, the system is not a linguistic, but a societal, one, based on the social relations of power and dominance.

The discipline of semiotics has also considerably influenced the study of language and gender. Semiotics has proved to be a useful tool in enabling an understanding of the underlying reasons for the phenomena we observe in social life. Because the relationship between the signifier and signified is arbitrary, feminists have argued that the differences that we see in the linguistic behaviour of men and women does not originate in language itself, but rather from the social inequality between the sexes maintained by the patriarchal organisation of society.

2.4 SOCIOLINGUISTIC APPROACHES: WOMEN’S AND MEN’S LANGUAGE

Sociolinguistics is one of the first areas in which the linguistic differences between male and female speech have been investigated. Work on language and sex/gender has raised general questions like: Do men and women use language differently? How does language reflect and contribute to inequality between men and women? Below, we consider two examples of research in this area.

2.4.1 Language Use and Social Place: Robin Lakoff

In the previous unit, you were introduced to the idea of how women’s use of language may differ from that of men. Now, let us examine this further from the perspective of feminist research on this subject.

In her path-breaking book *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff argued that since our use of language embodies social attitudes, women’s language “has its foundation in the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men” (Lakoff, 1975). In a related article, she listed a set of basic assumptions about what marks out the language of women. Among these were claims that women:
Hedge: women use phrases like ‘sort of’, ‘it seems like’, and so on.

Use (super) polite forms: ‘Would you mind…’, ‘I’d appreciate it if…’, ‘…if you don’t mind’.

Use tag questions: ‘You’re going to dinner, aren’t you?’

Use empty adjectives: divine, lovely, adorable, and so on.

Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation: English prestige grammar and clear enunciation.

Use direct quotation: men paraphrase more often.

Use question intonation in declarative statements: women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty. For example, ‘What school do you attend? Eton College?’

Speak less frequently.

Apologise more: (for instance, ‘I’m sorry, but I think that…’)

Avoid coarse language or swear words.

Use indirect commands and requests: (for example, ‘My, isn’t it cold in here?’ - really a request to turn the heat on or close a window)

Use more intensifiers: especially so and very (for instance, ‘I am so glad you came!’)

Lack a sense of humour: women do not tell jokes well and often don’t understand the punch line of jokes.

(Lakoff, 1975)

Lakoff argues that these distinctive properties of women’s speech collectively indicate uncertainty and hesitancy, and this speech style denies women the opportunity to express themselves strongly, making what they are talking about appear trivial, and women, powerless. At the source of all this lies the social inequality that characterises women as illogical emotional beings and prescribes to women that they must be meek, and respectful of men. It was in service of these power relations, Lakoff asserted, that women used hedges, tag questions, question intonations, and indirect commands, in a bid to weaken or mitigate the force of their ‘unwomanly’ assertion of a fact or the making of a request.
While many feminists immediately embraced Lakoff’s thesis as indicating that women had a different speech style from men, others asked whether Lakoff’s list was indeed based on empirical fact, as her claims were made from impressions she had gathered over the years rather than a scientific study. In the decades that followed, when feminist researchers went out in field studies, they often found it difficult to confirm her observations. For instance, some studies found that men actually used more tag questions than women did. Other studies found that while it was true that speech styles did embody power, it was not the case that the sex of the ‘powerless’ speakers was always female.

**Activity:**

i) **What would be the equivalent of Lakoff’s list in your mother tongue?**

ii) **Are they the same properties as she has listed for English? Explain.**
For example, a study of the use of conversational tags by Holmes (1984), showed that in contexts when women were ‘institutionally responsible for the conduct of the talk’, and typically also endowed with greater social power and status in the context of the conversations — doctor vs. patient, teacher vs. student — the sex/gender effect disappeared, but the power effect remained. In other words, when women were in charge of the conversations, and therefore the ‘powerful’ speakers, they did not display the speech style that Lakoff had claimed to be always theirs. This led to the conclusion that at best speech style differences were determined by situation-specific authority or power, but not gender.

However, other researchers have argued that these later findings do not refute Lakoff’s basic thesis that women do have a distinct speech style. These researchers, led by Deborah Tannen, suggest that Lakoff’s thesis is one about a cultural difference between women and men. Let us look at this question in greater detail below.

2.4.2 Sex Difference as Cultural Difference: Deborah Tannen

In most of her work over the last three decades, Deborah Tannen, has made the important point that gender does influence the way that we speak, but not in the reductive way that Lakoff originally proposed, that is, through the occurrence of a list of women-typical utterances. Rather, she has argued that the differences between the socialisation of the sexes results in a cultural difference between the two (in Anglo-American societies) —“because boys and girls grow up in what are essentially different cultures...talk between women and men is cross-cultural communication” (Tanen, 1990, p.18). This difference is located in conversation styles and interactive communication.

In her 1990 book, You Just Don’t Understand: Men and Women in Conversation, Tannen argues that the functions of conversation are distinct for men and women. While women in conversations today use language for intimacy, for men conversations are for information; in her words, women do ‘rapport-talk’, whereas men indulge in ‘report-talk’. This distinction is due to the fact that right from childhood, girls are brought up to believe that “talk is the glue that holds relationships together” (Tanen, 1990, p. 85); therefore, adult women see conversations as “negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus” (Tanen, 1990, p. 25). For women, Conversation is for Community. As the woman is an individual in a network of connections, her ‘job’ in the conversation is to keep the community together. On the other hand, for men, who as boys are socialised to believe that they must maintain relationships primarily through their activities, conversation becomes a Contest. A man is an individual in a hierarchical social order.
Activity:

Spend some time observing young children in interaction with their parents.

i) Do you find any evidence of differences in the way boy and girl children are treated?

ii) Is there any sex difference in the way that girl and boy children are corrected for language or behaviour?

These differences between what men and women seek to accomplish by conversation results in very different linguistic behaviour, Tannen claims. In all, she lists six contrasts that she finds to be the basic:
i) **Status Versus Support:** Given that men grow up in a world in which conversation is competitive, they strive to achieve the upper hand or to prevent others from dominating them even in conversation. Women, however, often use talking as a way to gain confirmation and support for their ideas; they talk ‘a lot’, whereas men are brief.

ii) **Independence Versus Intimacy:** As women often strive to preserve intimacy, they prefer smaller groups and private conversations. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. This has a direct consequence on the way that same-sex conversations are structured — while conversation between women may involve less interruptions, and longer turns at speaking, those between men, may show a higher incidence of both interruptions and shorter turns.

iii) **Advice Versus Understanding:** For many men a complaint is a challenge to find a solution, and therefore, they fail to correctly respond to women’s requests for advice or sympathy.

iv) **Information Versus Feelings:** As women use conversation to build a network of support, conversations between women are frequently long and ‘about feelings’. Conversations between men, governed as they are by male socialisation into a competitive spirit and the quest for information, are brief and matter-of-fact.

v) **Orders Versus Proposals:** Driven by the intention to build community and consensus, women would rather suggest than command, whereas men may use, and prefer to hear, a direct imperative.

vi) **Conflict Versus Compromise:** Women’s rapport-driven approach lies at the heart of women’s mitigation of the assertive force of their utterances; whereas men’s report-driven approach predisposes them to value bald assertions.

**Activity:**

Find any language data (for example, record a broadcast from a chat show that show men or women in conversation. Look at each of Deborah Tannen’s six contrasts, and see how far they illuminate what is happening. If the contrast seems not to apply or to be relevant, then consider why this might be — is the sample untypical, is Tannen’s view mistaken, is something else happening?
In the next section, let us now read about the possibility of analysing language in its relationship with patriarchal power.

2.5 DISCURSIVE APPROACHES: LANGUAGE AND PATRIARCHAL POWER

In the interaction of gender and language, the work of Lakoff, Tannen, Holmes, and other researchers like Deborah Cameron, makes a central issue crystal-clear - language is the means by which the patriarchal order is perpetuated. Since the early 1970s, therefore, a major focus of gender and language research has been on determining how public and private discourse produces the inequality of women. In this section, we consider three such approaches.

2.5.1 The Crusade Against Sexist Language

Sexist language perpetuates attitudes that show men as superior (morally, spiritually, intellectually or absolutely) to women. Feminists have argued that there are (in English) clear instances of language use that are inherently sexist language forms, because they fail to reflect the presence of women in society adequately. The most frequently cited examples are:

- Over-use of gender-specific pronouns like ‘he’.
- Use of ‘man’ to refer to all people.
- Over-use of gender-specific job titles.
- Use of Miss and Mrs. (see Ms).
- N-parallel usage, such as ‘man and wife’.
- Stereotypical words such as virile and ladylike.

These uses, it has been argued, marginalize women and create the impression of a male-dominated society. They also are patronising to women, and display the implicit assumption that the male is the norm.

As a result of the campaign by English and American feminists, many organizations (almost all American universities) publish guidelines for non-sexist usage. These can be very detailed in their examples, but here is a short outline.
Box No. 2.2

Guidelines for the Non-Sexist Use of Language

i) When constructing examples and theories, remember to include those human activities, interests, and points of view that traditionally have been associated with females.

ii) Eliminate the generic use of he by:
   - using s/he or she/he, or plural nouns
   - deleting he, his, and him altogether

iii) Eliminate the generic use of man:
   - for man, substitute person/people, individual(s)
   - for mankind, substitute humankind, humanity, the human race
   - delete unnecessary references to generic man

iv) Eliminate sexism when addressing persons formally by:
   - using Ms instead of Miss/Mrs., even when a woman’s marital status is known
   - using the corresponding title for females (Ms., Dr., Prof.) whenever a title is appropriate for males
   - using Dear Colleague or Editor or Professor, in letters to unknown persons (instead of Dear Sir, Gentlemen)

v) Eliminate sexual stereotyping of roles by:
   - using the same term (which avoids the generic man) for both females and males (e.g., department chair or chairperson
   - not calling attention to irrelevancies (for example, lady lawyer, male nurse)

The situation of ‘non-sexist’ usage is very different in languages that have masculine and feminine grammatical gender, such as French, German, Spanish, and Hindi, Marathi, etc., simply because it is impossible to construct a gender-neutral sentence the way it can be done in English.
Activity:

i) Many professions that appear to be gender neutral in terms of their form are often not interpreted as such. In English, speakers will show this in forms such as ‘woman/lady doctor’ or ‘male nurse’. Make a list of twenty such professions and discuss whether they receive a gender-neutral meaning.

ii) Listeners may not show it but you can test their gendered expectations by statements or short narratives that allow for contradiction of assumptions. One such story you can use to test is: ‘A man was driving with his son, when the car was struck by another vehicle. The man was killed instantly, but his son, injured, was rushed to hospital. The surgeon came into the operating theatre, gasped and said: ‘But this is my son’. How many people that you narrate this to find this story contradictory at first?

iii) Scan through newspapers or stories written in your native language. Try and find as many examples of sexist language as you can. Is the sexism shown here any different from that in English. Why?
2.5.2 The Issue of Fair Representation

Many feminists have argued that merely regulating the parole of sexist language does not reveal the extent to which language produces patriarchal power. Rather, as an investigation of the words in the language we speak show, patriarchal strategies of patronizing, controlling, and insulting women, are part of the langue.

In Anglo-American cultures, patronizing terms include dear, love, pet, and a group of adult women as girls - all of these deny women a recognition as independent thinking adults. Insults and abuses, such as ‘slut’, ‘tart’ and the many other words that mark women out as promiscuous or unattractive (irrespective of whether used by men or women) are all instances of enforcing patriarchal control of their sexuality. Even the so-called compliments of revering and honouring women as ‘mothers’, goddesses’, princesses’ are in service of the same goal - the ‘praise’ these words signify is simply another way of denying women the right to be ‘normal’ and equal human beings.

Judging women by appearance is well attested by language forms. Blonde, an adjective of colour, becomes a noun, with connotations of low intelligence. In fact, ‘blonde’ jokes are a category of jokes, as are jokes about ‘mothers-in-law’ and “women’, but there are no jokes in the category of ‘men’. The term ‘bimbo’ signifies a woman who is attractive but brainless, but there are no ‘bimbo’ men. Again, all these well-entrenched forms of linguistic behaviour are reflections of the patriarchal strategy of demeaning women.

2.5.3 Sex/Gender as Performance

Feminists have long assumed that while sex is biological/natural and ‘equal’, gender is a social construct of the patriarchal order. In recent years, feminist research has begun to problematise this simple premise, by asking the simple question – how do we know this? Is it not possible that our notions of sex and gender both are constructions of the discourse of patriarchy? For example, while we may define ‘sex’ in terms of the male and female body and its reproductive organs, sex chromosomes and hormones, the fact that this notion is culturally transmitted as ‘knowledge’ by a patriarchal society should make us suspicious of this definition as factual.

As previously discussed in MWG 4, Block 4, Unit 2, section 2.4, Judith Butler, a post-structuralist philosopher, has claimed that our knowledge of the terms sex, gender, and sexuality are pure linguistic constructs, because our knowledge of what they mean is only through the definitions that language provides of them and not what actually exists ‘out there’ in nature (where women and men may ‘naturally’ have three copies of the sex chromosomes instead of two). In a very real way, these terms are no different from the word ‘demon’ - we know what that word means through the definitions we get of it from stories (that is, language), as there is nothing in the real world that we can point to as an example of one.
Butler therefore argues that both the categories of sex and gender are iterations of cultural, and therefore linguistic, ‘performance’. In other words, these categories replay meanings that are already embedded in culture. As she remarks in *Gender Trouble*:

“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, 1990, p.33).

She has argued that feminism makes a mistake in trying to make ‘women’ a discrete, a-historical group with common characteristics, as this only reinforces the patriarchal binary view of gender relations. Butler’s perspective thus puts a great weight on the role of the language speech event as a site of the **production** of the female/\textit{feminine} and male/\textit{masculine} identities for the speaker.

Butler’s proposals have guided feminist research to ask how and why gender/sex differences are constructed in a particular way, and which political interests the creation and perpetuation of these identities and distinctions serves. Instead of asking, ‘what are the gender differences?’ this deconstructive feminist approach not only asks, ‘what are the gender norms?’ but also ‘what difference do they make to the system?’ and ‘how did they come to make the difference they do?’ In concrete terms, Butler’s thesis proposes that these questions can be answered by exploring transgressions of gender norms, such as, transvestism, cross-dressing and drag. This thesis, in turn, has led to a series of studies that focus on various kinds of sex/gender transgressions.

Butler’s arguments that sex/gender works as a performative, constituting the very act that it performs, mark a point of radical departure in feminist research on language. At the most basic level, it calls into question all studies that have investigated ‘female/women’ and/or ‘male/men’ subjects, because these studies are based on the assumption that these are ‘natural’ identities, unmarked by patriarchy. At the highest level, her radical reconceptualisation places language at the heart of the construction of patriarchy, and not merely as a mirror that reflects patriarchal power.

### 2.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have surveyed some ways that researchers have used to approach the complex issues of the relationship between gender and language, combining feminist insights with the basic principles of linguistics and semiotics. In a few words, the whole range of approaches discussed here, signify an engagement with the question of whether language is a manifestation of the inequalities of the patriarchal order, or whether it is itself constitutive of it.
2.7 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) Discuss Saussure’s notion of semiotics while contextualising the relationship between gender and language.

2) Does languages have a gender bias? Justify the statement with appropriate examples.

3) Critically analyse the relationship between language and patriarchal power with the help of appropriate examples from your mother tongue.

4) How has Judith Butler radically changed the way feminists have approached the relationship between language and gender? Do you agree or disagree with Butler’s thesis? Discuss.

5) Re-examine in the light of Butler’ work, the work of Deborah Tannen. How would Tannen’s claims be reinterpreted by Butler?

2.8 REFERENCES


2.9 SUGGESTED READINGS


Moore, Andrew. Language and Gender.

http://www.teachit.co.uk/armoore/lang/gender.htm#printing Last accessed on 21st May, 2014