
UNIT 13 GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Structure

- 13.1 Introduction
- 13.2 Objectives
- 13.3 Gendering the Language
- 13.4 Sex Versus Gender
 - 13.4.1 Sex
 - 13.4.2 Gender
 - 13.4.3 Socio-cultural Training
- 13.5 Some Terms to be Understood
 - 13.5.1 Gender Boundaries
 - 13.5.2 Gender Identity
 - 13.5.3 Gender Stereotype
 - 13.5.4 Gender Ideology
- 13.6 Male and Female Traits
- 13.7 Male-Female Difference in the Use of Language
- 13.8 Is Language Sexist?
- 13.9 Factors Influencing Language
 - 13.9.1 Biological Factors
 - 13.9.2 Cultural Factors
 - 13.9.3 Examples from Literature
 - 13.9.4 Power and Domination Factor
- 13.10 Gender Difference in Vocabulary
- 13.11 Interrogative Sentences
- 13.12 Imperative Sentences
- 13.13 Difference in Attitude towards Language
- 13.14 Difference in Non-verbal Language
- 13.15 Difference in Choosing Topics
- 13.16 Reasons behind These Differences
 - 13.16.1 Different Psychology
 - 13.16.2 Different Social Status
 - 13.16.3 Different Social Roles
- 13.17 Summing Up
- 13.18 Key Words
- 13.19 References
- 13.20 Suggested Reading
- 13.21 Unit End Questions

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Students, we shall begin this unit with a small story. A professor at a university in America gave an interesting exercise to his students, to make a list of words

that they could think of fast. It was a mixed class of male and female students. The result showed that male students listed words denoting travel, adventure, sports, business, economics, politics and outdoor life; in brief, their preference was for the abstract; while the women candidates preferred words for beauty, colors, fragrance, friendship, food items and domestic life, in brief they were inclined towards the concrete and the ornamental. This simple exercise speaks volumes for the difference in the usage of language by men and women.

Looking around, you too may have noticed that men and women use language differently while communicating. That is to say, their preference for words, emphasis, pronunciations and intonations are markedly different. Have you ever wondered why? Just because of gender difference. Or take another example. You may have heard someone saying to a female colleague, “Oh, Tanu, you should have been more assertive to get your point home.” Obviously, Tanu lacks assertiveness. Why? Because she has been brought up that way!

This brings us to our topic, ‘Gender and Language’. Let us study in this Unit how the relation between the two – gender and language – works in life and literature. How gender influences language and how language emerges as gender-specific.

13.2 OBJECTIVES

After completing this Unit, you will be able to:

- Define the concepts of sex and gender;
- Describe gender differences in language use;
- Demonstrate the relationship between gender and language;
- Analyze gender boundaries and social expectations to use language as per socio-cultural norms; and
- Distinguish masculine and feminine traits and analysis of the causes of the difference.

13.3 GENDERING THE LANGUAGE

We begin on the premise that the study of gender is important to the study of language. It makes us realize the difference in communication process and its impact on social behavior of men and women. Language is used for communication — oral as well as written. In its oral form it is used for conversation and dialogue; in its written form it is used for reading and writing. Men and women both use language to communicate; but though they may be speaking the same language, its pattern changes according to the gender of the speaker/writer. Take a simple sentence, “close the door.” A man will say more directly, “Close the door, please;” while a woman may say, “will you please close the door?” The first sentence shows assertion and authority of the speaker; the second, though more polite, denotes hesitation and lack of authority. Such differences in the use of phrases, vocabulary, intonation and non-verbal communication are due to factors like physical, psychological, economic and social differences in the approach of men and women.

Gender issues and language issues are interconnected. Since the time women’s movement started debating the power of the language, gender studies and language

studies have become important interdisciplinary academic fields. Language reflects existing social reality. Socio-linguistic and feminist scholars are examining how language upholds, supports or devalues women; how it shapes the social and cultural contexts and how it is shaped by these contexts; and what measures can be taken to change the social perception of gender.

To understand the role language plays in gender studies, we must first understand the meaning of some of the key terms like ‘sex’ and ‘gender’.

13.4 SEX VERSUS GENDER

Let us learn What is Sex? And What is gender?

13.4.1 Sex

We generally associate the term ‘Sex’ with the biological self.

13.4.2 Gender

Gender is a socio-cultural construct. This means that the process of social training starts after birth as the family takes charge of bringing it up. A boy or a girl is brought up according to the socio-cultural norms of his/her society and with the passage of time he/she acquires traits that are expected of a man or a woman of that group. Thus, the idea of gender can change with social changes though sex remains the same.

Do you know what the feminist writer Simone Beauvoir said? She wrote, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” We take a few examples to understand the meaning of this sentence. As soon as a child is born, we ask “boy?” or “girl?” We do not refer to the gender of the new-born; we refer to its sex. We do not say “What is its gender?” That would be incorrect. Later the child acquires the traits of a girl or a boy and starts behaving accordingly. This is because of training in social and cultural norms.

13.4.3 Socio-Cultural Training

The child starts growing. We train him/her as per our social outlook. Parents buy dolls and frocks for girls, cars and guns for boys. Then there are many do’s and don’ts that elders start imposing. We expect the male child to be strong and brave; we cuddle the little girl. Slowly, the idea of gender takes root. Boys tend to become naughty, rowdy and aggressive. We let them be. A popular phrase in English is “boys will be boys.” We expect the girls to be docile, gentle and obedient. We unknowingly create two categories – girl and boy; man and woman. Boundaries are formed; these are gender boundaries.

13.5 SOME TERMS TO BE UNDERSTOOD

In this section the Unit writer explained few terms that needs to be clarified.

13.5.1 Gender Boundaries

These boundaries are related to ideas; they are not physical or geographical. So they are called ‘conceptual’. They can change with times e.g. a few decades back women/ girls (in India) did not wear pants or jeans; now they do. Men

wearing ear-rings is perfectly acceptable today. Likewise, women are getting higher education today. Was it acceptable a hundred years back? No! So, gender boundaries can and do change with time.

13.5.2 Gender Identity

Gender identity is a person's inner sense of being male or female. It is developed in childhood. It also refers to markers like voice, physique, dress, hair style, behavior and language use.

13.5.3 Gender Stereotype

These are widely held beliefs about the abilities, characteristics and social behavior of girls and boys/men and women such as, women have to be pretty, delicate and so on. Men have to be dominant and powerful.

13.4.4 Gender Ideology

It is defined as a set of attitudes and values about the proper role of women and men in the family or society. For example, a man must be competitive or aggressive; woman must be patient and tolerant is a gender ideology.

13.6 MALE AND FEMALE TRAITS

Physical: Physically men are rugged, strong, aggressive; Psychological: psychologically they are rational, analytical and problem solving; Personality: their personality is daring and they tend to be dominant. Consequently, men's use of language generally shows aggressiveness, dominance and authority.

Physical: Physically women are considered to be petite, gorgeous and sexy; psychologically, they are more imaginative, intuitive and artistic; Personality: sympathy, affection and kindness mark their personality. Their focus is on community and on others. Consequently, their language shows conciliation, docility and unassertiveness.

13.7 MALE-FEMALE DIFFERENCE IN THE USE OF LANGUAGE

Language is used by both men and women but somewhere in its course of development it gets divided (unknowingly) between two parts – male and female — as per social and cultural norms. Language mirrors, records and transmits differences. These gender differences can be marked in various ways. Men and women are socialized to express themselves in appropriate social language that teaches and reinforces differentiated gender roles. Following three questions can lead us to clarify our point:

- 1) Do men and women speak different languages? The answer is No and yes. No, because it is the same language they speak. In this case, let us say English. Yes, because their phrases, expressions and intonations are so different that they appear to be speaking different languages.
- 2) Do they use language differently? Yes. Otto Jespersen, in his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* observes that men have many expressions peculiar to them which women understand but do not use; on

the other hand, women have words and phrases which men know of but never use for fear of being scorned at. That is the reason the language of men and women appears different.

- 3) Is there gender bias in English language? Yes. This bias is obvious in the manner in which language uses women. Women are ignored when words such as ‘he’ or ‘man’ signify women too. For example, “everyone must do *his* duty.” Here the pronoun ‘his’ denotes woman also. “Man is mortal.” In this sentence ‘man’ also means ‘woman’. In both these sentences her presence is ignored. These are known as ‘masculine generics’ and are widely accepted. Language also defines women’s status vis-à-vis men’s and by inference gives them secondary position. Let us look at the titles of respect, *Mrs* or *Miss*. These terms show the presence/absence of man in a woman’s life whereas the appellation *Mr* is independent and does not need woman’s presence. Feminine nouns of some words are derogatory like ‘dog-bitch’, ‘wizard-witch’. Similarly, words like ‘lady doctor’, ‘lady lecturer’ specify gender unnecessarily. Terms of endearment used by men for women like ‘chick’ or ‘babe’ highlight how language devalues women. Have you read Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House*? In it a reader comes across many terms of endearment that Nora’s husband uses for her to show his love.

13.8 IS LANGUAGE SEXIST?

Sexist language is a language which excludes women and considers men as the norm. It shows gender bias (as explained above). For example, the sentence “Each student must write *his* name on the paper” leads the reader to assume that all students are males. The presence of female students is not considered. This exclusion is devaluing; it encourages discrimination and is also offending.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1:

Note :

- i) Use the space given below the questions.
 - ii) Compare your answer with the course material of this unit.
- 1) Fill in the Blanks:
 - i) Gender is a ... construct; sex is a..... term
 - ii)said, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”
 - iii) Men’s style of speaking can be, while women’s style is(use one word each at appropriate place: aggressive/impolite/ polite/ irrational)
 - iv) Language as such is dominated.
 - v) We use ... for a good looking man and for a good looking woman. (use adjectives)
 - 2) Write a short note on language bias (about 20 words)

13.9 FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE

Now we will look into the factors influencing language

13.9.1 Biological Factors

The biological factor can be studied from three angles – voice, phonology and intonation.

Voice: Women have a thin voice as compared to men's gruff voice and their voice-frequency is almost twice as high as that of men. Psychologists say that speaking in high-pitched voice is their physical limitation but socially it is associated with their timidity.

Intonations: There are two types of basic intonations – rising intonation and falling intonation. Women usually answer a question with rising intonation which suggests their docility and gentleness, besides lack of self-confidence.

Phonology: Pronunciation comes under phonology. Women pronounce words in a better manner than men do. For example, women pronounce the letter 'r' softly as in 'chair' which sounds like 'chaise'. In English, the ending "...ing" as in running, walking, writing is pronounced fully by women while men miss the last 'g' and pronounce these words as "runnin..", "walkin". Women's pronunciation denotes use of proper formal language, compliance to accepted social expectations and politeness; men's pronunciations suggest their assertion and informality. The above example drawn from the situation of language use is in the American context.

13.9.2 Cultural Factors

Culture is a dominant factor in maintaining language identity. Culture is a blanket term; within it several diverse groups live and operate, which are called sub-cultures. There is a sub-culture of men and also sub-culture of women. Men and women belong to their respective sub-cultures and these sub-cultures mould their behaviour pattern, language use and conduct.

As per the expectations of their sub-culture women use language that is not aggressive or adventurous. In larger groups they remain silent but speak in smaller groups. Their conversation aims to build friendship, loyalty, equality and such other traits. They usually speak of simple domestic or personal matters which men consider ridiculous. On the contrary, men choose to work in larger groups. They want power, control and status. They like to compete and win; and they dominate the conversation. These cultural differences in the male and female groups lead to the different ways in which they converse.

13.9.3 Examples from Literature

Two examples from literature would illustrate the above points. In William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*, we get a fine example of how boys can be aggressive for power. Their language and games drive them unwittingly to frenzy and murder. In *To Kill A Mocking Bird*, the girl protagonist's aunt always upbraids her to speak proper lady-like language and criticizes her for tomboyish activities.

13.9.4 Power and Dominance Factor

In the patriarchal system women are seen to be in a subordinate position. The male members of the society used patronizing language when conversing with them. This is called *male language* which is the language of power and authority. Therefore, interaction between the males and the females has always been male

dominated. Language also shows social inequality. Women's speech was considered unimportant; therefore, they used linguistic forms that were associated with their low status. These forms included tag questions, intonation, hedges, politeness strategies and others. Conversely, men's speech became a tool of patriarchal power through gender-role training. They learned to dominate the conversation through interruption, cross-talk or talk time.

13.10 GENDER DIFFERENCE IN VOCABULARY

Men use hard and aggressive expressions like *damn*, *shit* to express anger or frustration, women would never use these tabooed words that are rated as slang. They usually go for harmless expressions like *oh*, *ah*. Tabooed words and slang are found more in men's speech than in women's though they may be of same educational level or social class. For example, when a woman is frightened, she will shout, "Oh, how frightened I am!" But a man would only say, "damn it!" and rarely admit that he is frightened. The difference in vocabulary is shown in the following five aspects:

- i) **Color words:** Women use color words like blue and lavender and azure more frequently but men would not.
- ii) **Adjectives:** Women use adjectives such as adorable, charming, lovely more often. When a woman leaves a restaurant, she will remark, "It is a gorgeous meal." If a man wants to express the same idea, he will use the word "good". Using more adjectives to express their feelings or to describe things is because women are sensitive to the environment.
- iii) **Adverbs:** Women tend to use adverbs like *pretty*, *terribly*, *vastly*, *quietly* etc more freely than men do. Men, on the contrary use, *really*, *very*, *utterly*. In 1992 Jespersen found that women like to use *so* quite regularly. Like "She is *so* pretty" or "The play was *so* interesting."
- iv) **Swear words and Expletives:** Swear words are considered dirty and impolite and women do not use these like damn, shit, hell. Women pay more attention to their manners and social propriety. In order to express their sudden and deep feelings they may say, *O God!*, *oh dear* or *dear me!* Let us examine the following example:

Woman: *Dear me! Are we going to be late again!*

Man: *Shit! The train on the platform and we have to run.*

- v) **Modulation:** When a woman talks, she often takes what others think into consideration. She uses tag questions such as, "It is cold, *isn't it?*" and hedges like *well*, *you know...* *I think...* *I suppose, kind of,.... may be I am wrong but...*

13.11 INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES

Compared with men, women are more likely to use an interrogative sentence to express their ideas, and they use tag questions, because the tag questions can make the tone less tense. Some linguists researching in this area collected many couples' conversation tapes, and found that women used 3 times more interrogative sentences than men. Women do this because they are less sure about

themselves and their opinions. They lack the confidence to use direct and firm statements. On the other hand, this style shows politeness and gentleness.

13.12 IMPERATIVE SENTENCES

Imperative sentences give command or order. Since women hold a subordinate position in the patriarchal society they are trained to not to order about. A study showed that in conversation women use the “let us” pattern of sentence, such as “let’s go out for a long drive.” A boy/man may say it directly, “Today we are going for a long drive.” This sentence has the sense of giving order. Some other examples are:

Man: Give me that pen.

Women: Would you give me that pen, please?

Man: It’s time to go

Woman: Let’s go.

13.13 DIFFERENCE IN ATTITUDE TOWARD LANGUAGE

Language is constantly changing. It evolves. It grows. Both men and women have helped in the development of language but their approaches have been different. Women instinctively shrink from gross and rough expressions. They prefer refined and indirect expressions whereas men use direct and often coarse expressions. Men find women’s language too delicate and feel that if this style is adopted, the language will become weak and insipid. It will lose its vividness and strength. Men renovate the language by adding new words. In the beginning these words may appear slang but later they are accepted into the main language. On the other hand, women are conservative by nature and they prefer to use traditional language. Thus they help in preserving old language. It may look comical today but it is a fact that women used to avoid words like *vulgar*, *indecent* in their routine conversation. They preferred to use *common* for *vulgar* and would break half way through a sentence if they were supposed to use the word *indecent*, like “this book is a little ... *um h* ... Isn’t it?” Women were prevented, in the past from using such words as legs, or pants, or trousers.

13.14 DIFFERENCE IN NON-VERBAL LANGUAGE

We can see that women do not like to patronize any conversation or discussion, they like to listen and then reply; men on the other hand interrupt other’s talk. Men do not like to be silent in conversation/discussion. When a conversation involves both sexes, women are at the receiving end; they play the role of patient listeners.

13.15 DIFFERENCE IN CHOOSING TOPICS

In social interaction, men and women have different interests in choosing their topics. Men are more likely to discuss politics, sports, economics and current news; women prefer cooking, domestic chores, clothes, fashion, children etc. Women talk more in informal situations but they play a secondary role in the formal meetings. They speak less.

13.16 REASONS BEHIND THESE DIFFERENCES

Biological difference between the two sexes cannot explain the reasons behind the different ways of communication. But gender difference plays a great role in creating these differences. The causes behind the difference can be understood as under:

13.16.1 Different Psychology

It is an accepted idea that women are more careful, sensitive and considerate than men. Before a woman speaks she usually thinks of the effect her words may have on the listener, so she often appears to be hesitant or more polite. On the contrary, men are rash, they do not bother much for public opinion and they just say what they want to say and seldom care what others think. So man's speech is usually blunt and solid.

13.16.2 Different social status

Of the social causes of gender differences in speech style, one of the most significant is level of education. Studies show that the greater difference in the educational level of boys and girls, the greater is the difference in their speech. The gap between men's speech and women's speech has reduced considerably with improved and equal educational opportunities for girls. But even then women display care and caution in the appropriate use of language.

13.16.3 Social Roles

Language use also depends on the social roles of men and women. Linguistic studies carried out in the 1970 reveal that in almost all countries men hold higher job positions that give them opportunities to dominate everything, including women. Men can order about freely while women are not so confident of giving order even when they hold higher position today. Women have had very less power in the society and this lack is obvious in their language. Women's social status makes them submissive to men.

13.17 SUMMING UP

In this unit our focus has been on gender and language and how each influences the other. This lesson prepares us to understand the socio-cultural side of gender and paves the way for gender study. We have studied following aspects:

- Language has a great connection with society, so if change in social structure takes place, language use will also change.
- The male language and the female language are different in emphasis, vocabulary and presentation. We have studied the difference as well as the reasons for it.
- With the development of new ideas and feminist theories, the strict rules governing women are changing in many parts of the world. Rules prescribed for men and women are also changing.
- Consequently, women do not consider it wrong to assert themselves and men too are comfortable to let women have their say. Women are becoming more confident and assertive; young women are especially in the forefront of language change.

- Since people's linguistic behavior is not only connected with social status, but it is also connected with their education and profession, young women getting into high-paid jobs are finding it perfectly acceptable to use language freely.

13.18 KEY WORDS

Interrogative Sentences: Interrogative sentences are one which asks questions.

Imperative Sentences: Imperative Sentences give advice or instruction or expresses request or command.

13.19 REFERENCES

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. (1949/1970) Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York; Knoff.

Lee, Harper. *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960/2006) New York: HarperCollins.

Golding William. *The Lord of the Flies* (1960) London: Faber& Faber.

Jespersen, Otto (1922/2013). *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*. London: G. Allen and Unwin.

13.20 SUGGESTED READING

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex* (1949/1970). Trans. H.M. Parshley. New York; Knoff.

Crawford, M. (1995) *Talking Difference: On Gender and Language*. London: Sage.

Jespersen, Otto (1922/2013). *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin*. London: G. Allen and Unwin.

Lackoff, R. (1975). *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.

Xiufang Xia. "Gender Differences in Using Language." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*. Vol2, No 8. Pp. 1485-1489, August 2013.

13.21 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) Write short notes on: (i) Gender Identity (ii) Gender Stereotype (in 20 words each)
- 2) What are the cultural factors responsible for gender-specific language?
- 3) Who could have spoken these lines (tick mark the correct word):
 - i) Let's get some coffee en route (man/woman).
 - ii) Give me that pen (man/woman)
 - iii) Damn it! I misplaced my spectacles again. (husband/wife).
 - iv) Could you please lend me your umbrella? (man/woman)
 - v) Dear me! Look at the child jumping from that wall (man/woman)
- 4) List the possible topics that men would choose for debate/discussion out of the following: cooking, fashion, sports, politics, economics, weather, boss.