

GENDER AND LANGUAGE



Notes

Imagine a world without language! Language is the primary communication channel humans use to connect, share, and express their thoughts and views. Language caters to the basic need of humans to talk and reciprocate through words, signs and writing.

Language is specific to a social group, community, and society, which are the spaces both men and women inhabit. While speaking, it is to be noticed that men and women are addressed differently. The differentiated words and terminologies used for men and women are significant components of a language spoken worldwide. These refer to the particular sex category and cast men and women in separate compartments.

The reference to the sex category in a social context is gender. When the language is spoken in the context of gender, it usually refers to the social definition of men and women as they exist, interacts, and carry out specific roles and responsibilities. This lesson presents the relationship between gender and language and how one impacts the other.



OUTCOMES

After completing this lesson, learner:

- describes the key approaches to the understanding of gender and language;
- explores the relation of gender and language in general;
- reflects on the use of gender-specific vocabulary;
- explains the role of language in promoting gender equality in society.

*Notes***18.1 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

The study of gender and language has been increasingly prevalent since the early 1990s. Then, men and women were considered two distinctive humans with different personality attributes. The literature and books at that time were the major contributors to this school of thought. They reiterated the fundamental difference between men and women and claimed that women used more socially acceptable language than men.

It is generally perceived that women prefer to talk, but men choose action above words. Women see speech as a method to connect emotionally with people, whereas men see speaking as either a functional tool or a competitive sport. Women are better at listening, creating rapport, and avoiding or defusing conflict than men, who approach each other more directly and are less sensitive to their own or others' feelings.

The gender and language inequalities constituted the central point of prevalent theories. These key theories are as follows:

Key theories of exploring Gender- Language inequalities



Fig 18.1: Key theories of exploring Gender-Language inequalities



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- **The Deficit Theory**—This theory was based on the belief that men have specific attributes that women lack. Therefore, men tried to control women in all sectors and kept all the vocations to themselves .
- **Difference Theory**—In this theory, the socialisation process was the pivotal point that argued that boys and girls are socialised differently at home, in the family and schools etc. This difference in their socialisation refers to gender disparities between boys and girls. This is also known as Two Culture Theory because it represents differences owing to different cultures and socio-cultural practices.
- **Social Power Theory**—Emerging in the 1990s, also known as the Modern approach, it considers language a tool for establishing social structure and power. It implies understanding the language regarding the underplaying power dynamics concerning who, why, and how a subject is to be conveyed.

18.2 EXPLORING LINKAGES BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Language and Gender: The differentiated language used for men and women and the link between the two come under the term “language and gender”. Social reference to men and women in the context of gender constitutes a part of our general communication. As we know that gender differences exist as social facts are reiterated and followed as per the norms of society.

In the context of language, gender disparities are reflected in two major domains:

- **The Statements:** Men and women compose their statements differently. For example, the men, being the traditional power dominant, compose their statements as a mix of power and authority. On the other hand, women are groomed for a subordinate role, and therefore, their statements may reflect more adjustment and compliance.
- **Distinct lifestyles and attitudes:** The male and female lifestyles are different and determine the words and their connotations differently. For example, men are known to communicate directly, focusing on information and knowledge. On the other hand, women tend to speak indirectly, implicitly, and gently. In addition, while their emotions manifest when talking, men tend to suppress or hide their feelings during communication with others.



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Fig 18.2: While men present authoritatively, women present humbly



ACTIVITY 18.1

Relate the following words with men and women –

Words	Men	Women	Both Men+Women	None of the Men & Women
Gentle & loving				
Aggressive & angry				
Authoritarian				
Complying & adjusting				

18.2.1 Gender and communication in everyday life

Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that gender impacts language acquisition, development, and use. In addition, they have pointed to a strong relationship between gender and language in different historical and cultural contexts.

In our daily life communications, we feel two distinct concepts represented through speech, signs and acts. These are masculinity and femininity, evident through how people dress, choose colours and move around in social life. For example, a man wears pants and a shirt, chooses dull colours and moves around authoritatively, conveying that he is an important leader in his own right. On the other hand, a woman may choose flashy dresses and bright colours and move around adhering to social norms and behaviour. In both cases, the man and woman

convey their relationship to the social construct of gender and how they identify themselves with the categories of man and woman. This gets engrained deeply and may impact the words they use to communicate every day. One thing that becomes very clear here is that gender is imposed by society and has resulted in gender communication that conforms to behaviour and conduct as dictated by society.

Several researchers have studied the relationship between gender and language. In 1972, Robin Lakoff was the first to raise the issue of the relationship between gender and language through his article 'Language and Woman's Place'. He believed that women generally use lower/subordinate linguistic forms than men. For example, women use more tags like *Isn't it?* Or *Am I?* which are questioning expressions that mean as if not too sure or *I think*. They imply the need to be acknowledged or a presumption that they may be incorrect.

Following Lackoff's argument, there was a discussion about why women spoke in terms of submissive language. The reasons provided were difference and dominance, both attributing to a disparity between the genders.

“The worthier is favoured and set before...let us retain a natural order and set the male before the woman for manners' sake,” - Thomas Wilson, The Arte of Rhetorique, a definitive guide and English literary success published in 1553.

The impact of gender on language is also seen in how language develops and how people tend to express themselves based on gender. For example, women tend to use language more relationally or in the context of close relationships with others. Women also tend to have a broader range of emotional vocabulary, using language more readily to describe their feelings and emotional states.

Conversely, men tend to use language more assertively and are more likely to suppress or hold back their emotions. As a result, men tend not to express their emotions through language. If seen in a social context, men are expected not to cry and brood but be instant in solution hunting.

It is highly beneficial to have a broad understanding of gender and language in sociolinguistics. This is because language is an important communicative instrument in human society that evolves with society to create a favourable ecosystem for growth.



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ACTIVITY 18.2

Strike the following statements -Correct or Wrong.



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S. No.	Statement	Correct	Wrong	Not sure
1.	Women are afraid to speak			
2.	Men should speak assertively			
3.	Bad women use foul language/words			
4.	Men should talk like a leader			
5.	Men should speak the aggressive language because they are men			
6.	Women should speak gently.			



INTEXT QUESTIONS 18.1

1. Cite the reasons why difference theory can also be called as Two Culture Theory?
2. How does gender differentiate the language spoken by men and women?
3. Is it correct that men use authoritarian words and women use compliant words while talking to others? Justify your answer with suitable arguments.

18.3 USE OF GENDER-SPECIFIC VOCABULARY

Language may hurt or offend others if it is not used carefully. It is common to hear that one should choose the words carefully. When we talk about the choice of words in the context of gender, it becomes all the more important to ensure that we do not inadvertently use language considered sexist. In recent decades, some words and expressions can be seen as discriminating against women. These may be seen in three contexts:

- a) The words are based on male terminology. For example, occupations like people in business or mail carriers (Postman) are predominantly male and expressed in terms of their sex. If a woman is a postman, she would also be addressed as a postman. There is no gender-neutral version of a word for a female postman.

- b) The words appear to give women a less important status than the male equivalent. While a man is called an actor, the woman is called an actress. If the male is a steward, the female is a stewardess.
- c) The gender-neutral words are very few. In the contemporary era of technology and advancement, words are compartmentalised into feminine and muscular categories. If gender-neutral words exist, they are hardly used in day-to-day communication. The use of plurals can help offset masculine-based writing.

Following are a few words that are coined separately for men and women. These words also have gender-neutral connotations. However, they are sparingly used in everyday communication.

Masculine	Feminine	Gender Neutral
man	woman	person
father	mother	parent
boy	girl	child
Uncle	Aunt	Relative
Chairman Actor (Male)	Actor (female)	Chairperson



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INTEXT QUESTIONS 18.2

1. Give two gender-neutral words of people engaged in different occupations.
2. Do we address men and women differently in our everyday language?

18.4 ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY

A language is a potent tool used to speak, share, and express the thought process of humans who have developed codes of words and signs to communicate with each other. Humans have developed language to communicate, work together as a cohesive force, and sustain the human race over generations.

Let us not forget that language exists in a continually changing social context; it is influenced not just by gender but also by social, cultural, and psychological aspects. Therefore, in the world of language marred by gender disparities and differentiation, there must be a transformative change in how language is used.

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1. **Gender-fair language (GFL)** was developed in response to gender-based structural disparity. It was meant to minimise gender stereotyping and prejudice in language. It aimed to eliminate gender disparities in addressing and referring to men and women, for example, by replacing masculine forms (policeman) with gender-unmarked forms (police officer) or by utilising both masculine and feminine forms (i.e., the applicant... he or she instead of the applicant. he).
2. **Gender disparities in language should be minimised.** References to people's personalities and communicative styles should be independent of gender. The words used to discriminate against men and women should be discouraged. For example, using words such as chairperson instead of chairman in normal communication should be encouraged.
3. **Sexist language to avoid:** The sexual undertones of language create a marked gulf between men and women. The use of particular words demeans women in the form of jokes, fun statements and mockery of being a woman. These reiterate the gender stereotypical perception of women and their perspective and promote casual sexism that targets women in jobs and informal conversations. For example, the teacher says to Geeta in class that she cannot shift the heavy desk because she is a girl.
4. **Similarities to include:** Some studies on gender and language overemphasise the differences. These studies ignore the similarities and fail to account for context, variance, and other aspects of gender. The similarities between males and females should be considered to obtain a comprehensive and objective explanation for the connection between males and females because they play the same significant role. For example, they are referring to both boys and girls in the class being equally capable and competent to succeed.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 18.3**

1. Describe the purpose of using gender fair language for maintaining gender equality.
2. Explain with examples how gender disparities in language can be minimized?

**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

- Language is the primary communication channel humans use to connect, share, and express their thoughts and views. Language is specific to a social group, community, and society, which are the spaces both men and women inhabit. However, it is common

to notice that men and women speak different language tones. In addition, the choice of words and the way to speak differently. These refer to the particular sex category and cast men and women in separate compartments.

- Several researchers have studied the relationship between gender and language. In 1972, Robin Lakoff was the first to raise the issue of the relationship between gender and language through his article 'Language and Woman's Place'. He believed that women generally use lower/subordinate linguistic forms than men.
- Following Lackoff's argument, there was a discussion about why women speak in terms of submissive language. The reasons provided were difference and dominance, both attributing to a disparity between the genders.
- Gender-fair language (GFL) was developed in response to gender-based structural disparity. It was meant to minimise gender stereotyping and language prejudice by replacing masculine forms (policeman) with gender-unmarked forms (police officer).
- The studies on gender and language fail to account for context, variance, and other aspects of gender. The language should be such that both genders are considered equally capable and competent to succeed. In other words, gender-neutral aspects of language need to be emphasised.



Notes



TERMINAL EXERCISE

1. Why does gender affect how people acquire, develop, and express themselves through language?
2. How does Social Power Theory define language?
3. Who was the first to raise the relationship between gender and language?
4. Do you think that sexist language is used in schools?



ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS

18.1

1. Difference theory can also be called as Two Culture Theory because it represents differences owing to different cultures and socio-cultural practices.
2. Gender conditions the language spoken by men and women. The patriarchal set-up and dominance of male power dictate the choice of words and manner of speaking in public and private spheres.

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3. Yes, it is correct to say so. During socialisation, women are groomed for a subordinate role and are expected to adjust. This affects the language they use, which is kind, humble and compliant. On the other hand, men are taught to be commanding and powerful, which reflects in the choice of words used by them which are authoritarian.

18.2

1. Female-Carpenter, Male-Teacher
2. Yes, we address men as Mister and women as Mrs (Missus)

18.3

1. It was meant to minimize gender stereotyping and prejudice in language. It aimed to eliminate gender disparities in addressing and referring to men and women
2. Use of words such as chairpersons instead of chairman in normal communication should be encouraged.