

Language and the Culture of Gender: Constructing Women Identities in Pakistani Society

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Abstract:

The present study sets out to investigate gender as performative construct and its importance for feminists in general and especially for women in Pakistani society. Different ways of conceptualizing gender-difference along with various social, cultural and psychological dimensions have been explored. The study looks into the factors in which discursive language practices in various dimensions work to construct women identities. Subsequent parts of the study examine different reasons and mechanisms that can account for dichotomous speech patterns and asymmetries which exist between participants in social discourse. Moreover, the two-way function of language has been focused as on the one hand language reflects the social identity of women performed through the language itself, and the realities about the social position of women in Pakistan on the other.

Language is the prime means of not only interpersonal discourse but also of creating identities and ideologies within a society. There is no denying that there is a close relationship between socio-cultural or psychological patterns of communication, institutionalized gender roles, and ideologies to gender-specific faculties in social beings. In the words of Romaine (1999): “Language has a crucial role in particular and communication more generally in doing gender and displaying ourselves as gendered beings... all representation, whether of women, men or any other group, are embedded first in language, and then in politics, culture, economic, history, and so on”.

Gender, as a dynamic process, is produced and performed through language. Gender, in fact, ‘is a system of meaning - a way of constructing notions of male and female - and language is the primary means through which we maintain or contest old meanings, and construct or resist new ones’ (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Within this perspective, language can not be analyzed as an isolated phenomenon, rather as a colossal and complex system of meanings, structures, activities, and subsystems.

Gender is an important segregation in ‘*Pakistani*’ society as it has far-reaching consequences for an individual. It is *gender* which determines our role, act, language

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behavior, and treatment. 'It is a cultural achievement which has to be learned, and exactly what has to be learned is different in different times and places' (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). The diverse components of societal framework relate in predictable manner to socio-cultural or economic conditions, and gendered personae, and the gender ideology functions in relation with other hierarchies based in different socially constructed categories as class, race, ethnicity, age etc. Thus, 'social interaction is both composed of and composed by the interactants, their roles, their expectations, and their obligations within a social situation' (Roy, 2000). The '*performance*' term has led language scholars to question the categorization of men and women to explore the variety of ways in which linguistic performance put forth in constructing conversational gendered identity. The present study examines this issue with a view of socio-psychological, -economic, -religious, and -political contexts with reference to Pakistani women in particular. We have focused on analyzing the gender-related linguistic phenomenon, elaborating the general conversational style, feminism on the discourse turn, and social underpinnings of linguistics along with the overt factors involved in linguistic performance.

Linguistically gender is a founding category, and all pervasive in some languages and totally absent in others (Corbett, 1995). It is a topic which interests and fascinates today's linguist as it helps to understand individual relationship between the function carried out by a language and socio-culturally situated users of that language. Especially, '*feminist*' studies of gender and language use recognize and explicate potentially significant patterns in society and manifest that language does not merely correspond to an individual's identity because how we delineate individuals not only stipulates his/her status but also a particular set of behaviors, thoughts, and emotions (Buchbindev, 2000, cited in Reich, 2002). Therefore, Dobash & Dobash (1990) assert that 'the articulation of women's identities must be understood in its social, historical, political and institutional contexts' (cited in Reich).

Women language is commonly stated to be different in diverse situation and reflection of support or male-dominant socio-cultural paradigms. This has led to the development of a variety of feminist approaches, as of '*Difference*', '*Deficit*', and '*Dominance*' on the basis of fundamental social or psychological differences in relations, status and responsibilities between male and female or man and woman. It was 1970's when sex difference in language grouped together as exclusive differentiation, in the words of Rubin (1975) and Genovese (1982): "set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human social intervention" (cited in Greene et al, 2002). Lakoff (1975), Borker & Maltz (1982), Spender (1980), and Tannen (1990, 1994)'s feminist research assert that men and women's languages are necessarily different even though they often disagree a propos the causes. In consequence, twentieth-century dominant ideology of feminism and linguistic conventions get together by sharing rules for the conduct and interpretations of speech. Virtually, feminist scholarship is a form of politics, dedicated to bring about social change, and ultimately to arrest the reproduction of systematic inequalities between

men and women. 'Difference' approach avows that 'men and women speak differently due to the differences that are implemented during the socialization process' (Mullany, 2000). The basic reason behind this argument is that men and women live in different cultures, analogous to divergent subcultures correlated with those from discrete class or ethnic milieus, thus develop different conventions for verbal interaction. So, any linguistic differences can be attributed to cultural differences (Baalen, 2001). Cameron (1997) believes that 'men and women are fully capable of resisting and subverting these norms, although speakers who deviate from the expected norm may be subjected to negative evaluations' (cited in Mullany, 2000). While 'Deficit' framework articulates that women as language users are disadvantaged, their speech grows out of that silence which shows lack and antiauthoritarianism, that is why their language deficient of domineering note, tone and pitch. On the contrary, 'Dominance' framework views this phenomenon as a result of woman's subordination and male-dominance in society where she always needs a platform of man's affirmation for her acts, decisions, and even language choice. Furthermore, language patterns and structures are based on patriarchal social order than on matriarchal. Man is viewed as powerful monolithic having the control of language and of whole configuration of power through the linguistic structures.

No wonder, there are explicit and subtle determining differences between men and women which can be regarded as natural, inevitable, and partially developed by socio-psychological patterns within the language. It is important to note that only biological propensities are not responsible as the famous words of *Simone de Beauvoir* (1961) vindicate this very fact that 'women are not born, they are made'.

Considering the Pakistani patriarchal society where certain cultural, behavioral and psychological traits are associated typically with either male or female, gender acts together with other hierarchies engrained in such socially constructed categories as class, age, ethnicity, regional affiliations, race and religion etc. All such social hierarchies are not only interactive but also impinge on one another unequivocally. Hence, discussing gender and language without taking any of them into consideration would be potentially deluding, and subsequently deceiving in the way of reaching at any incisive upshot.

It is a fact that 'sex' is biologically formed and 'gender' is socially constructed (Talbot, 2003). Sex is chromosomal, physical state of being 'male' or 'female', associated with the fact of dimorphism whilst gender is a matter of being 'masculine' or 'feminine'. Thus, gender identity can be regarded as an expression thing or mind thing. Nevertheless, gender can not be studied totally indifference to the biological factors as it is communally argued that your biology determines your behavior, disposition, distinct modes of communication etc. In this regard, Preisler (1986) envisages that sex is a more general determinant of speech than the interactional role, which means that *men and women* develop sex-specific speech patterns naturally. For example, it is argued that 'higher levels of testosterone lead men to be more *aggressive* than women; and left-

brain dominance is said to lead men to be more *rational* whilst relative lack of brain lateralization in women leads them to be more *emotional*' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Another scientific fact is that women's corpus collosum between two hemispheres is well connected and larger than men, so can succumb more integration. In fact, sex-linked biological differences, ranging from voice pitch and quality tone to relative physical stature, are extended and amplified in the itinerary of the construct of gender. For instance, women are labeled as 'emotional' beings but the role of 'socialization' process is ignored; that it is society which edifies them when to express emotions, when to laugh and when to cry. Thus, gender is the very process of creating a dichotomy by obliterating similarities and convoluting on profound differences. It strengthens the argument that gender is produced and even reproduced by society, by gender order, by allocating roles, behavior and language. This developmental narrative raises several fundamental principles about gender; first, its learn affixes restriction of choice with reference to conduct and asymmetries. Second, it is collaborative, appends individual to the social order in terms of gender, hence engrossed cavernously into our ways of thinking, behaving and performing in social array and in some situations so profoundly that it becomes indiscernible and consequentlly uncontestable. In the words of Eckert and McConnell- Genit:

The gender order is a system of allocation, based on sex-class assignment of rights and obligations, freedoms and constraints, limits and possibilities, power and subordination. It is supported by – and supports – structures of *convention, ideology, emotion* and *desire*. These are so interwoven that it is often difficult to separate gender from other aspects of life. The power of convention, or custom, lies in the fact that we simply learn ways of being and ways of doing things without considering any reasons behind them, and without recognizing the larger structures that they fall into. (2003, p. 34)

Hereafter, the *structure* decides which linguistic convention has been verified overtly by gender ideology and shores up that ideology which governs people participation either through culture or language. Gender ideology is, in fact, a 'system of beliefs and assumptions - unconscious, unexamined, invisible - and practices that informs every aspect of daily life.... Though it originates in particular cultural conditions, it authorizes its beliefs and practices as 'universal' and 'natural', presenting women not as a cultural construct but as eternally and everywhere the same' (Greene & Khan, 2002). The idea of dichotomous gender has been based on opposition in behavior, thinking capabilities and language use, and inscribed in discourse practice. In Pakistan this idea is all pervasive; women are seen as failure to men not culturally or socially but in their creative and linguistic capabilities. Thus, the implication of gender in the patriarchal society is 'not simply "difference", but...division, oppression, inequality, interiorized inferiority for women' (Barrett, 1980). Men and women categorization rests on social practices and their capabilities in relation to social structure, what it allows

women and what it makes possible for men, and at this point language enters into gender construction. For instance; in Pakistani society a female speaker has to identify her biological gender through the use of different linguistic features such as self-referring words, markers, mitigators and superfluous qualifiers etc., which play significant role in the constant reaffirmation of the biological gender identity of the speaker (Pande, 2004).

The anthropologists and socio-linguists place and locate structure or pattern configuration in social unit by referring to speech community as Hymes (1972) has defined it: “a community sharing rules for conduct an interpretation of speech and rules for interpretation at least one language or languages”. It is because of this level of communicative practice that ways of speaking are most closely synchronized. Communities develop their own ways of speaking out of the whole fabric of speech according to need and purpose for participation in societal modes of subsistence which provide a link between individual experience and larger social order. Social features of any given situation determine and modulate what type of language is most appropriate (Freed & Greenwood, 1996, McFadyen, 1996, Mulace, 1998). All categories such as gender, class, race and language emerge in cluster experiences. So, it signifies that conversation or linguistic communication is the key to get meanings into discourse with the assumptions what is communicated linguistically and what is employed. For example; the word ‘man’ refers to the quintessence of a male being, and the word ‘wife’ describes a woman, not as an individual, in her essence, but as dependence - this is to say as a part of her male counterpart (Furman, 1980). Linguistic phenomenon does not take place in isolation rather an individual’s whole personality along with the background situation; mental physical constraints play a part in shaping mode of communication as Romaine (1999) asserts: “Although language is central to our constructions of the meaning of gender, much of language is ambiguous and depends on context for its interpretation, a factor far more important than gender”. In this way, another important factor is of *pragmatics* which equally addresses the social and cultural contexts.

Pragmatics focuses on meaning, context and the communication of constructed utterances in hypothetical contexts. The communicative meaning of a particular utterance is derived through general assumption about human rationality and conduct, together with the literal meanings of utterances these assumptions are the basis for which to draw highly seeifies inference about intended meanings. (Schiffiring, 1994)

It is obvious that pragmatics, language, and gender are interconnected trio. Mainly with reference to Pakistani society which is incredibly binary one, and where there is a clear-cut demarcation of language use for men and women. Therefore, an explanatory gap is mostly present between ‘linguistic’ meanings and ‘speaker’s meaning especially in mixed-sex conversations. The illocutionary force of the speech helps in such situations to convey the intended meanings. Gender-atypical forms of discourses are reinforced to serve several social purposes. For example; women are better liked, more accepted

and more persuasive when they employ powerless, nonassertive speech (Carli, 1990; Holtgraves, 2002; Krauss & Chiu, 1998). Henceforth, Pakistani women's language has been found to include sympathy, gentleness and dependence (Edelsky, 1976). They are noticed to provide more personal information and are more self-disclosing (Hay, 2000) and are more conscious about language concerning social and emotional behaviors. As it is argued that language has performative capacity, the theory of 'speech act', simultaneously, stems out to combine language with pragmatics and gendered behavior. In this regard, Austin (1975) entails desires, interests and likelihood of multi-meanings within a core utterance. Additionally, Searle (1971) has combined the elements of intentions and conventions of language. Thus, a valuable framework is being provided for explaining an utterance's extant function not only at an interactive level but also for addressing questions about the impact of gender in interpersonal discourse.

Feminist's focus of attention regarding language, women and pragmatics is evident. When they address the question how women are presented in the existing language system and how the linguistic behavior of women and germane pragmatic features are different from that of men, of course, whether culture, religion or class, no aspect or factor is overlooked.

The above mentioned argument is of controversial concern in general and specifically with Pakistani women. For, grave heterogeneous complexity that exists within many gendered orders does not allow any generalization about the grounds for dichotomous speech patterns and asymmetries within language. Central to this idea is power relationship between men and women and dichotomy; who is ruling and who is being ruled by the language. The power asymmetry between the people involved, may influence the recipient's perspicacity and sense of understanding. In Pakistan, being a traditional society, public sphere whether market or any institution, is considered exclusively a male domain. It is a society where high status authority is for men and women are kept silent in the public sphere. 'The word woman in Pakistan is synonymous with endurance' (Najam, 2007). If any woman expresses her decision, desire, ambitions, and wishes or passes her judgment, she is thought to be a frivolous creature, deviating from the ideal of a docile, demur, stereotype, and self-sacrificing woman. Therefore, their speech is mostly lacking in the forcefulness, clarity, and direction of opinion, and often not judgmental. As the words of Wilson (1533) seem to juxtapose the centuries old legacy of patriarchal traditions and the typical subjugated and underprivileged image of Pakistani women:

“What becometh a woman best, and first of all: Silence. What
Seconde: Silence. What third: Silence. What fourth: Silence.
Yea if a man should ask me til, downes day, I would still cry
silence, silence. (cited in Romaine, 1999)

Taking the diversity of Pakistani society into account, power structures have different meanings for women from different strata. Nevertheless, a blatant instrumental split associated with male and female division subsists ubiquitously. The embedded

gender biases continue to maneuver the female speech irrespective of the social status or profession of the female. Whether they are working in jury, teaching, banking, law, medicine or media etc., their participation in every sphere of life is too dominated by men partially being the individual of a religious society and partly they are muted and make uncommunicative by men. They have low profile in education also as compared to men. This relegation of women has been observed by Eckert and McConnell- Ginet:

Men are strong women are weak; men are brave women are timid; men are aggressive women are passive; men are impressive women are emotional; men are rational women are irrational; men are sex-driven women are relationship-driven; men are direct women are indirect; men are competitive women are co-operative; men are practical women are nurturing; men are rough women are gentle. The list goes on and on, and together these oppositions yield the quintessential man and woman – Superman and Scarlett O’ Hara. . . . The dominant ideology does not simply prescribe that male and female *should* be different – it insists that they simply *are* different. (2003, p. 35)

Same is the case with language use. Negative stereotypical images of highly emotional and suppressed women determine feminine behavior by identifying ‘*Singsong intonation*’ as a female pattern as man’s speech has manifestation of power and entitlement whereas submissiveness and deference in woman’s. Silence and speech keep interplaying and framing each other. Women are interested in promoting intimacy and sympathy, consolidating afflictive bonds and love whilst men in contrast establishing their autonomy and superiority through the speech. ‘The unequal footing of men and women as the supportive role is *permanently* assigned to women turning it into an unconscious submission to men, to follow the compassionate, understanding stereotype’ (Pande, 2004). So, it is claimed that men engaged in speech acts build hierarchies whereas females speak in ways that build egalitarian society. Women in Pakistan position themselves as conversational facilitator like the general lot of women all over the world.

The relation between gender order and conversational practice is not one way. Marxists identify *class difference* as one of the seminal and most influential factors of certain modes of speech followed by different classes, sub-classes or the status of men and women within a society. They are defined by the kinds of rights in power a particular class has, and assignment of certain latitudes or restrictions to men or women respectively. Class relation and the subsequent social position have pivotal impact on the gender order and consequently on the exploitation of sex-specific modes of communication and styles. Class and gender are intertwined and link people on various kinship networks. ‘The way in which gender sorts people into class locations is probably the most obvious aspect of the interconnection of class and gender’ (Wright, 1997). Whether it is the matter of political consciousness, education, articulation of rights, contesting gender ideologies or sense of self-presentation, all in terms of linguistic

behavior are determined by economic status and condition of the class with reference to men and women (Trudgill, 1972). But the interconnectedness of this relation depends mainly on how the class structure and the ways gender and class influence the lives of men and women are conceptualized. 'The mediated class locations affect both the gender interests of men and women – the interests they have by virtue of their location within the specific gender relations in which they live – and their class relations' (Wright, 1997). Pakistani society is divided into *three* big chunks of lower, middle and upper classes. The language expressions pragmatically and culturally vary class to class. However, our society delineates distinctly different life courses for men and women irrespective of their class. 'This asymmetry is partially a function of the cultural devaluation of women and of the feminine' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Woman is taken as repository of family honor (even though not considered as honorable in themselves), therefore her role is limited to the social reproduction of the family and household while men carry out paid work. Man has assigned the position of the head of the house and woman as his subordinate. Man is supposed to tackle the affairs outside the house and home affairs are settled by the woman. Even women doing jobs and working in public sphere are not treated on equal footing and are affected not only by occupational sex segregation but also by authority hierarchies and gender gap in authority. This inferior social position of women is the obvious cause of the emergence of certain language patterns and structures in accordance to situation, context, behavior, status, class, role and power. The whole configuration of the structure of power is interrelated and interconnected to all above-mentioned aspects including cognitive and psychological dimensions, emotional facts and moral aspects. The investigation of the private talks justifies women powerlessness and relegated position. Women usually fail to illicit responses from men although they are interested listeners by using attention getting devices. Whereas men's topics succeed and women are pushed into lower status interactional discussions. Women adopt cooperative, supportive and back channeling contrasting style with men. Even the difference between the husband and wife's language is so explicit that exhibits social order in every day interaction as well. Just as an unequal distribution of labor on the ground of sex, labor conversation is also divided unequally. Pakistani context stands parallel to it where women tend to focus on '*rapport*' and the effective supportive function of conversation, and men conversely tend to focus on '*report*' (Tannen, 1991) and informational function of conversation.

Religion is another significant factor which plays an important role in determining the status of men and women in Pakistani society. As Stopler (2003) argues that 'religious and cultural norms continue to be the most prevalent and widely-accepted justifications for discriminations on the basis of sex'. Islam, indubitably, grants equal rights to men and women. Notwithstanding, the myopic social and cultural structures seem to continue with the generations of ignorance and practices that do not follow Islam which presents a gender-balanced portrayal of society in general, and of women specifically. As the renowned Muslim woman scholar Dr. Riffat Hassan asserts:

In spite of the fact the Holy Quran is particularly solicitous about Women's wellbeing and development, but the contrariety that exists Between Quranic ideals and practice of a number of women-related issues contributes to a large extent the present status of women. (cited in Parveen, 2007)

Religion-based gender biases, institution of '*pardah*', and the gender order in Pakistani-Muslim culture coalesce to control the women physically, emotionally and psychologically. As Lakoff (1975) remarks: "In fundamental Muslim societies women must be veiled in public". It shows her resentment against the silence of freedom of speech, action and performance which has reduced women to invisibility even the sdecision of her marriage is taken by others and she is kept or supposed to be silent. In *Medieval-Europe* woman speech was censored and society was directed by church proclaiming that 'Let few see her and none at all hear her'. Though our social order does not proclaim this, but dominant social practices seem to maintain such centuries old index for the conduct of women as a social being.

To sum up, three frameworks of deficit, dominance, and difference help not only to understand the gendered position of men and women in Pakistani society but also to recognize and analyze the gender-specific speech patterns, conversation and communicative talk. Momentous but different myths keep going on provided that men and women's lives are integrated; they do not exist in total separation and isolation. It is the socio-linguistic interaction in specific conditions, context, and social hierarchical considerations which operates at the level of social construct and gives power to certain linguistic practices, so language is both action and convention. Pakistani men and women follow the same chain of action and convention in conformity with the social or cultural norms. But the above discussed analysis does not mean to erase similarities or it is not equal to say that women and men have stereotype notions forever as neither language nor the social world is quiescent. Rather, it reflects the themes of intimacy and interpersonal relation on one hand, and of competition and status for men and women in the thick of social life on the other, where class, status, culture, psychology and any one religion plays an important role to shape the structure of dominancy for social move and socialization through language, and then language dictates category for the rest of the society. Thus, it shows that men and women have valid interaction styles cause both of them live in their subcultures and socialize to and homological with in relation to social beings and have an independent entity. However, it is still the most contested phenomenon to decide whether it is really *culture* in society which shapes social modes through the linguistic behavior as *ideology* with wide range of linguistic features to present men and women as incongruent to produce gender personae and to signify new kind of femininities and masculinities especially with reference to Pakistani society.

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