Understanding Women's Dialect*

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Abstract

In the domain of linguistics one of the earliest writings as well as the most influential study on women's dialect is Jesperson (1922). Since then numerous studies in this domain are meticulously unveiling various aspects of women's dialect and in turn enriching the field of knowledge. The present paper, on the one hand, provides a glimpse of a few major issues and arguments of this domain in its three parts, viz. variation between men's and women's speech, understanding sex and gender and dialects vs. variation. On the other, it points to the differences between three categories of studies dealing with women's dialect, viz. those dealing with (i) unsubstantiated stereotypes, (ii) observed trends in language and (iii) encoded traits in language, along with examples and justifications, chiefly based on the existing literature of linguistics and gender studies.

Keywords: *woman's dialect, sexist language, gender based variation, folklinguistics, feminism, linguistic activism, sex, gender, norm, marginal.*

Introduction

Women's dialect in its various types, aspects and designations is an area of growth in the domain of knowledge. The literature on it has become and is

becoming rich day by day with many studies, observations, data, stereotypes, controversies, debates, theory framing and so on, and they range from intuition-based observation to empirical evidence, from thin description to thick explanation, from quantitative study to qualitative analysis – to mention a few. The painstaking researches in this area continuously offered a better understanding of various aspects of the subject and contributed positively to its journey from 'sexist language/ dialect' to 'gender-based variation of language'. Moreover, currently the subject matter 'language and gender' has crossed the disciplinary boundaries and has become a topic of interest in the domains of linguistic anthropology, conversation analysis, gender studies, feminist psychology, culture studies, studies on feminism and so on besides linguistics and sociolinguistics. However, the present deliberation intends to look at the matter chiefly from a linguistic point of view. The section 1 will focus on variation and report a few studies that capture variation between men's and women's speech, section 2 will underscore the difference between sex and gender and discuss the connection between language-gender, folklinguistics and feminism, while section 3 will provide a brief discussion on linguistic variation, which will be followed by a conclusion.

Variation between men's and women's speech

Women's dialect, the designated topic of the seminar, naturally indicates to the difference between women's and men's speech. In the domain of linguistics one of the earliest writings as well as the most influential study is Jesperson (1922). In his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* in chapter 13, The Woman, Jesperson (ibid.: 237-254) deals with differences between men's and women's speech. The chapter duly drew attention of the feminist linguists and the reviews of it ranges from highly negative criticisms to constructive ones via mentioned-without-comment type of neutral ones – as is evident in Thomas (2013: 387-388). Thomas (ibid.) offers a positive re-interpretation of the chapter, The Woman, with sufficient justification. She also draws our attention to the fact that references to Jespersen (1922) almost invariably appear in the first few pages or in the first chapter of an article or a book dealing with language and gender and states, "This fact materializes how Jespersen's chapter has been recruited to represent the starting point away from which modern analysis of language and

gender has moved" (Thomas 2013: 391-392). Thus, it is nearly a century now that scholars noticed and took interest in studying the differences between women's and men's speech. The present section will elaborate on some such differences reported in a few leading studies in the field.

Taking into consideration the content of studies based on the idea that men and women speak differently Ghosh (2018) proposes the following three typological classifications.

1. Unsubstantiated stereotypes which are either reinforced or challenged by linguistic behaviours/ folklinguistics

2. Observed trends in language

3. Encoded or fixed in language

The studies belonging to the third type are more empirical in nature than the others and they report comprehensible differences meticulously. The second type includes studies that mainly focus on trends while the first type includes the ones that report chiefly stereotypes, hence least linguistic. In order to give a clear idea of speech difference the present section will report studies belonging to the third and second type while the next section will aptly touch upon the first type.

1.1 Differences encoded in languages

This sub-section will report speech variation of the third type from some seven languages.

1.1.1 Carib Indians

One of the most celebrated examples of gender differentiation in speech, first reported by Dominican Breton in his *Dictionnaire Caraibe-fran Qais* (1664), as mentioned in Jespersen (1922: 237), is found in the Lesser Antilles of the West Indies among the Carib Indians, where men and women are reported to speak two different languages. The story says - this was resulted from an ancient conquest in which a group of invading Carib speaking men killed the local Arawak speaking men and met with the Arawak-speaking women. In the next generation, it was

reported that the boys spoke Carib, which they learnt from their fathers while the girls spoke Arawak, which they learnt from their mothers.

However, the claim of the two separate languages was rebutted by Jespersen (1922: 238). After a careful examination of the glossary offered in the book *Histoirenaturelle et morale des lies Antilles* by Rochefort (1965) Jespersen concluded that they actually speak one language with remarkable gender-based characteristics. For example, in the domain of kinship terms for 'my father' men say *youmáan* while women say *noukóuchili*, though both in addressing him use the same word *bába.*

Jespersen in the chapter, The Woman, suspiciously examined a few indications about linguistic differences between men's and women's speech in the earlier works and claimed that the differences are not directly correlated to sex. For example, in some linguistic groups, the wife is not allowed to utter her husband's name because of a verbal taboo rather than of sex difference (1922: 239). In Sanskrit dramas the women talk in Prakrit, a worn out stage of Sanskrit, while men have the privilege of talking in Sanskrit. Jespersen relates this disparity not with sex, rather with social ranking of women (ibid.: 242).

1.1.2 Koasati

A very significant example of difference in men's and women's speech was reported in Koasati, a Muskogean language of southwest Louisiana, as noted in Haas (1944). Hass provided a few phonological rules of gender-based language variation in the verbal forms of Koasati.

i & ii) Men and women use same form if the form ends in a vowel or in č.

iii) If the woman's form ends in a nasalized vowel then the corresponding men's form has a non-nasalized vowel followed by s.

iv) If the women's form has a vowel with falling tone followed by n, then the corresponding men's form replaces the n by s.

v) If the women's form has a vowel with falling tone followed by l, then the corresponding men's form replaces the falling tone by a rising one and the l by s.

vi) If the women's form ends in one or two vowels followed by one or two consonants, then the corresponding men's form adds an s after the same structure.

Following examples explain the above rules.

	Women	Men	Gloss
i) v# = v#	[iskó]	[iskó]	'he drank'
ii) č# = č#	[híč]	[híč]	'he is looking at it'
iii) ṽ = vs	[lakawwã]	[lakawwas]	'he will lift it'
iv) v̀n =v̀s	[tačilwàn]	[tačilwàs]	'don't sing!'
v) v̀l = v́s	[molhìl]	[molhís]	'we are peeling it'
vi) v(v)c(c) = v(v)c(c)s	[lakáw]	[lakáws]	'he is lifting it'

1.1.3 Gros Ventre

Wardhaugh (2010: 336) reports phonological differences in the speech of men and women in Gros Ventre, an Amerindian language of the northeast United States. In this language, women utter palatalized velar stop [kjasta] 'bread' while men utter palatalized dental stop [djasta]. In addition, when a man quotes a woman

he attributes male pronunciation to her and when a woman quotes a man she attributes female pronunciation to him.

1.1.4 Japanese & Thai

Japanese presents gender differences at the morpho-syntactic as well as word levels (Wardhaugh 2010: 339). In Japanese, women add a sentence-final particle, either [ne] or [wa], which result in a difference between male & female speech. For example, a female speaker says - [watasi kaeru wa] 'I'll go back'.

This is comparable to Hindi, in which a female speaker adds an ending [-ii] after a verb, e.g. [kərungii] while a male speaker adds [-aa], [kərungaa] meaning 'I'll do'.

At the word level a Japanese male speaker refers to himself as [boku] or [ore], while a female speaker refers to herself as [watasi] or [atasi]. For example, a man says [boku kaeru], while a woman says [watasi kaeru wa] 'I'll go back' in plain informal speech. This distinction is learnt by the children at a very early age. However, a study (Reynolds 1998: 306) indicates that the use of [boku] by junior high school girls has become very common currently. Girls were interviewed in a TV programme to know the reason behind this and they explained that – they cannot compete with boys in classes, in games or in fights with the word [watasi]. [watasi] is not sufficiently powerful, while [boku] is directly linked to power. In fact, the use of [boku] and other male forms are increasing currently in female speech.

In Thai also in polite conversation a female speaker refers to herself as [dichan], while a male as [phom]. Again women emphasize a repeated action through verbal reduplication, while men put a descriptive verb [mak] after the verb (Wardhaugh 2010: 339).

1.1.5 Kurukh

The Kurukh language of the Dravidian family presents speech difference based on sex of both the speaker and addressee (Fasold 1990 as mentioned in Ghosh 2018).

In Kurukh, if the addressee is a male then both male and female speakers use [barday] 'you come' and [barckay] 'you came'.

If both the speaker and addressee are female then the forms are [bardin] 'you come' and [barckin] 'you came'.

If the speaker is male and the addressee is a female then the forms are [bardi] 'you come' and [arcki] 'you came'.

1.2 Observed trends in languages

Both the studies reported in this part are on Bengali and they belong to the 2nd type, viz. observed trends in language.

1.2.1 Sukumar Sen (1928)

In the publication titled *Women's Dialect in Bengali* by Sukumar Sen, (1st published in 1928) the author identifies trends of differences between women's and men's speech in the areas of noun/verb/adjective and other grammatical categories, relationship words/phrases, taboos and euphemisms, proverbs and personal names. A few examples are as follows. Substantives like /ɔnaʧʧʰiʃʈi/ 'bizarre', /adikkʰeta/ 'fuss', /eo/ 'married woman', adjectives like /alladi/ 'cute', /doʃʃi/ 'restless', /naʧuni/ 'over enthusiastic', relationship terms like /dæor/ 'brother-in law', /nɔnod/ 'sister-in-law', /bʰagni/ 'niece', /bʰatar/ 'husband', and proverbs like /age ʤamai kãʈʰal kʰan na, ʃeʃe ʤamai bʰutio pan na/ 'at first the son-in-law does not show interest in jackfruit, in the end he doesn't even get the waste part of it' and so on are typically used by women.

Sen's conclusions include – in language use women are more conservative, they avoid neologism; their speech is marked with the use of emphatic particles, intensive words, euphemism and limited vocabulary. In his opinion, women are "Exceedingly fond of pejorative terms and expressions … masters in the exchange of saucy ridicule." Sen also states, "In modern days less civilized people have preserved some kind of sex dialects…though languages of modern civilized people have no sex dialect proper, yet almost all of them preserve some characteristic idioms which entirely, or almost entirely, confined to the womenfolk."

1.2.2 Sharmila Basu Dutta (2000)

Basu Dutta also notes various traits of women's speech, viz. differences at phonetic level; use of elaborate kinship term; elaborate colour terms; figure of speech; baby talk items; incomplete sentence; pejorative terms; specific suffixes; exclamatory terms; name substitution and some syntactic traits like tag question, request, story-telling style, indirect speech, casual style and so on. She provides ample examples of each category. However, most of her examples are from literature. She presents a rich collection of proverbs, including a good number of proverbs about women.

The authors of the above studies chiefly concentrate on the areas of speech differences identified in earlier works in other languages and present plentiful corresponding data from Bangla.

Understanding sex and gender

Earlier researchers studied women's language in relation to sex, i.e. sex was taken as a variable. However, our understanding became clearer based on researches in the domain of gender studies that meticulously underscore the difference between sex and gender. These researches are often naturally linked to the various phases of modern Women's Movement that began in the late 1960s, prompted by the Civil Rights Movement in the USA and spread across the western countries. Some of the pertinent arguments employed in these researches are as follows.

i) Sex is a biological category that marks humans and other animals as either male or female, while Gender is a social category that refers to cultural traits and behaviours deemed appropriate for men or women by a particular society.

ii) Sex is something we are born with, but "Gender is not something we are born with, and not something we *have*, but something we *do* (West & Zimmerman 1987), something we *perform* (Butler 1990)" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10).

iii) Being a natural, hence innate category, sex is hardly a fluid concept, whereas gender, being a social construct, allows ample fluidity.

iv) As regards gender the expected behaviour of women or men changes from one generation to the next, from one place to another, from one social class to another, but this is not so with sex. For example, some hundred years back in India girls were not allowed to receive institutionalized education, while it was not so in the western societies.

v) There is no biological reason why females have red toes and men white; females dance and men play percussion; females become nurse and male security guards; pilots are male and females are airhostess. These are just the outcome of the gender-dependent expectations and cultural beliefs of the society and they vary.

vi) Sex and gender ideally do not share any inherent feature, which is why there are exceptions like females with white toes, female pilots and male cabin crews.

vii) "Sex is a biological categorization based primarily on reproductive potential, whereas gender is the social elaboration of biological sex. Gender builds on biological sex, it exaggerates biological difference, and indeed, carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant" (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10).

As regards gender as a social construct one is invariably reminded of the celebrated slogan "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" by Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949), which first articulated the distinction between sex and gender and is often regarded the feminist bible.

The process of 'becoming' is a continuous one and a human baby becomes a part of it as soon as it is born. Naming boys and girls differently, selecting outfits of different design and colour for them, the doll and ball treatment while giving them toys, forming same-sex play groups and the like are instrumental in creating gender distinction since the beginning. As a result gender becomes such an indispensible part of our identity that it becomes impossible to live a non-gendered life. This gendered life, in addition, is full of inequalities as here men

occupy the role of subject while women are treated as object, the second sex compared to men, the primary as well as the ideal category. The oppressed condition of women is reflected in their linguistic behaviour also. According to Lakoff (1973: 45) "Woman's language has as foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men." Researches in this line fortify the connection between language and gender.

The rest of the present section will throw light on the connection between language and gender, folklinguistics and feminism.

2.1 Folklinguistics

Though systematic inquiries about the relationship between language and gender began as an outcome of the feminist movement of the 1970s, mainly in the fields of linguistics and feminist theory, unsubstantiated remarks and comments on women's dialect are available since yore and also across the globe. Such unsubstantiated stereotypes, which are either reinforced or challenged by linguistic behaviours are termed folklinguistics, as has already been mentioned in section1. Here we shall give examples of stereotypes along with examples of systematic observations to show that "The marginality and powerlessness of women is reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak, and the ways in which women are spoken of" (Lakoff 1973: 45).

2.2 Two sets of data

We shall present two sets of data - the first contains myths and proverbs, i.e. stereotypes, in different languages and represents folklinguistics, while the second consists of "one set of facts" the majority of which "will hold for the majority of speakers of English" (Lakoff 1973: 47) and represents systematic study.

2.2.1 Myths and Proverbs (Gebeyehu 2019, Kochman-Haładyj 2012)

Myths

- Women in general are ascribed negative qualities like stupidity, inferiority, changeability, weakness, ill-nature, talkativeness etc.

- Women in specific roles or situations are thought of as mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law, wives, widows, prostitutes etc.
- Women's speech is gossip-laden, corrupt, illogical, euphemistic, idle and deficient.
- Women talk more than men.

Proverbs

- A man is as old as he feels, a woman as old as she looks. (English)
- A house well-furnished makes a woman wise. (English)
- There is not a wise woman and a donkey with a horn.(Awngi)
- A home without a woman is like a barn without cattle. (Ethiopean)
- A silent woman is a gift from God. (French)
- Beauty is the wisdom of women. Wisdom is the beauty of men. (Chinese)
- There was never a conflict without a woman. (English)
- It is easier to guard a bushel of fleas than a woman (German)
- Cats, flies and women are ever at their toilets. (French)
- He that marries a widow and four children marries four thieves. (Danish)
- A woman has a shape of an angel, the heart of a snake, and the brain of an ass. (German)
- Long hair, little brain. (Turkish)

2.2.2 A set of facts (Lakoff 1973)

Lakoff (1973, 1975) are considered the pioneer researches in the field of language and gender. With regard to English Lakoff explores and analyses both the "language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone" (1973: 48) and offers "diagnostic evidence from language use for one type of

inequity that has been claimed to exist in our society: that between the roles of men and women" (ibid.: 46).

Lakoff (1973) shows that women's speech can be distinguished from that of men in a number of ways, some of which are as follows.

In the choice of lexical items women

i) make far more accurate discrimination in naming colours than men do, e.g. mauve, beige, lavender, aquamarine etc. words are part of their active vocabulary;

ii) use "weaker" expletives bereft of semantic load compared to the meaningful "stronger" ones used by men, e.g. 'oh dear', 'goodness', 'oh fudge', 'dear me' etc are used by women while 'shit', 'damn', 'hell' etc. by men;

iii) Use empty adjectives like 'adorable', 'divine', 'charming', lovely' etc. that are not found in men's speech.

In the area of syntax women's speech is marked with frequent use of tag-questions (e.g. John is here, isn't it?), hedges (e.g. phrases like 'it seems like', 'sort of'), super-polite forms (e.g. 'would you mind…', 'is it okay…'), apologetic forms (e.g. 'I'm sorry, but I think that…') etc.

As regards language descriptive of women alone Lakoff analyzes the disparity in the use of word pairs – lady : woman, master : mistress, widow : widower and Mr. : Mrs., Miss. For example,

(Lakoff ibid.: 63, cf. example 19)

i) *Harry declined to be my master, and so returned to his wife.

ii) Rhonda declined to be my mistress, and so returned to her husband.

(i) Cannot be said in English.

Such word pairs are not restricted to English only. Let us give an example from Bangla, /ʃɔt/ 'honest': /ʃoti/ 'chaste and faithful woman'. /ʃoti/ is derived by adding the feminine suffix /-i/ to /ʃɔt/. However, in terms of meaning they are far apart from being members of a pair.

Lakoff (ibid.: 67) comments on the concluding part of the traditional marriage service, viz. "I now pronounce you man and wife" – in which "the man's position in the world, and in relation to other people including the bride, has not being changed by the act of marriage. …. But the bride went into the ceremony a 'woman', not defined by any other person, at least linguistically: she leaves it a 'wife', defined in terms of the 'man', her husband."

According to Lakoff (ibid.: 62) "if women are there for the use and enjoyment of men, they are not fully human beings in their own rights" and "a man is defined in the serious world by what he does, a woman by her sexuality, that is, in terms of one particular aspect of her relationship to men" (ibid.: 65). She elaborates on the process of objectification of women and the power politics involved in the process.

Researches in this line linked language, gender and power and exposed the oppressed status of women in terms of linguistic codes.

2.3 Folklinguistics and Linguistic Feminism

The unsubstantiated stereotypes, proverbs and myths, under the type folklinguistics were severely challenged by the feminist linguists. Meticulous studies by them revealed linguistic facts, analyzed them, documented sexist language practices, demanded for a non-sexist language reform, chose alternative terms and ensured their implementation. The words of Simon de Beauvoir, "All oppression creates a state of war. And this is no exception" took shape in their studies. Thus linguistics accelerated and fortified feminist movement and activism. In the words of Pauwels (2003: 551) "It was the linguistic activism associated with the women's movement starting in the 1970s that posed the first major female challenge to male dominance in language regulation and planning. Women of all walks of life started to expose the biased portrayal of the sexes in language use and demonstrated that this portrayal was particularly discriminatory and damaging to women. Furthermore, their activities targeted the uncovering of the gendered nature of many linguistic rules and norms."

In fact, feminism is a complex concept, which has different interpretations and perspectives for people belonging to different generations, social classes, ethnic

identities, nationalities and even sexual orientations. The first wave of feminism occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries while the second wave during the 1960's and 1990's, which was followed by a third wave. The linguistic activism strengthened the second wave of feminism. The feminist linguists worked on different languages and in different corners of the world - Robin Lakoff (English, USA), Dale Spender (English, Australia), Rolv Blacker (Norwegian, Norway), Maria Yaguello (French, France), Senta Troemel-Ploetz (German, Germany), Meseguer Gracia (Spanish, Spain) – to name a few. The outcomes of linguistic activism gained importance institutionally in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced heavily the sector of corpus planning and got documented in 'codes of practice'. For example, non-sexist terms like 'chair', 'firefighter', 'supervisor', 'workers', 'spokesperson' gained supremacy over sexist terms like 'chairman', 'fireman', 'foreman', 'workmen', 'spokesman' respectively; use of singular 'they' in place of 's/he' in English (as in the sentence 'Everyone should bring *their* lunch') and so on.

Dialect Vs. Variation

The phrase Women's Dialect implies the existence of a standard variety to which this variety is not equal in prestige and that standard variety or the norm is the Men's variety. This status-inequality between men's language and women's language was countered by Peter Trudgill (1972), William Labov (2001) and many others in sociolinguistics as well as in the domain of language and gender study. Hence, the term variation rather than dialect suits more for the purpose.

Moreover, sociolinguistics classifies three types of language variation as follows.

- Dialect: Geographical/ areal variation – any speaker naturally possesses and performs in one dialect.
- Sociolect/ social dialect: Social variation (e.g. class & caste variation etc.) - any speaker naturally possesses and performs in one sociolect.
- Situational variation (e.g. formal & Informal variation etc.) - any speaker naturally possesses and performs in many varieties.

However, the micro division of gender based variation in language does not neatly fit into any of the above macro groups. This suggests that the gender

based variation naturally occupies a position on the list of various types of linguistic variation in its own right.

Conclusion

The domain of women's dialect, or language and gender is an interdisciplinary area of study. The domain has been developed and enriched with the contributions from different fields, viz. linguistics, sociolinguistics, feminism, gender studies, power dynamics, linguistic activism and feminist movement and activism. Hence an understanding of the given topic involves an overall understanding of these aspects.

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