

## Gendered ‘Dominance’ and ‘Difference’ in Interactional Sociolinguistics

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**Abstract:** *Language, being a mirror of society, reflects the difference and dominance of gender as femininity and masculinity are regulated and well thought-out in an opposite binary, which has been playing a vital role in the sociolinguistics studies of it. This paper aims to explore diversity among women and men looking at the content of spoken language, their conversations in milieu of people’s beliefs and social formation of gender. It argues how female speakers have particular words and phrases to use in different social situations that male speakers usually don’t tend to use because of social unacceptability. The male speakers too have many unusual expressions, which female speakers comprehend well but never pronounce publically. Therefore fluid models of ‘language’ and ‘gender’ are taken into an account with ‘differences’ between female and male speakers concerning distribution of ‘power’ and ‘dominance’ for the interpretations of gendered language use in face-to-face interactions. The paper makes an attempt to identify the gendered dominance and difference as displayed in cyber world as it prevails in electronic media, silencing women’s voices and ignoring their opinions.*

**Keywords:** *Sociolinguistics; femininity; language; masculinity; interaction; dominance.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistics, one of the sub-disciplines of linguistics, studies language in different social contexts that’s said to be identical of one’s status, nation, gender, age and social class. ‘Language’ in relation with ‘gender’, an interdisciplinary term which is used repeatedly for the studies of various disciplines such as anthropology, human psychology, philosophy, education, sociology, women’s studies and many more, is more particular and interesting research. This paper aims to observe the impact of extra-linguistic factor of gender on language use in interactions. Male and female speakers’ linguistic utterances are different at several levels whether they are participants of single-gender interactions or mixed-gender interactions. Femininity and masculinity, being apart polar, sometimes make them distinct in mixed-gender talks, one overpowering and the other submissive. These linguistic distinctions form the base of study for this paper.

### 2. LINGUISTIC DISTINCTION IN MALE AND FEMALE SPEAKERS’ LANGUAGES

Linguists who have been studying several languages in context of gender have found many evidences of ‘gender exclusive’ language forms. In these language forms, grammatical distinction is made clear by male speakers and female speakers while constructing their sentences for conversation. This distinction is quite mandatory. Such linguistic distinctions between verbs form depend on mindset, social practices and principles of society where men play more dominant role and the used language also tend to exhibit it consciously or subconsciously. Furfey (1944) discussed about the existence of difference and dominance between usage of language forms, saying that, men and women were fully conscious about usage of separate language forms as differently categorized human beings because of their gender. (Furfey; 222) For example, see the table given below to know how Indian female and male speakers use verb forms differently while speaking in Hindi:

**Table 1.** *Indian speakers using verb forms differently*

Verb Forms (Male)	Verb Forms (Female)	Meaning in English
Mein ghar jaa raha hu	Mein ghar jaa rahi hu	I’m going to home.
Mein isse utha raha hu	Mein isse utha rahi hu	I’m lifting it.

In languages like Hindi, usage of verb forms and sentence structure by male and female speakers have been seen distinctive at several levels like phonological, lexical and morphological which drew attention of many socio-linguists. The way the different genders use verb forms, pronouns, structure

their sentences and pronounce the words, give an impression that female speakers are relatively more 'polite, gentle, soft-spoken, non-assertive and empathetic'. (Okamoto 1995: 298)

Situational use of language is not fully dependent on linguistic factors and sometimes, depends on non-linguistic factors too, as our language is a mirror of our society and culture, creating impact on our speech consciously or subconsciously. For instance, many young schoolgirls psychologically behave like boys, sometimes, imitating and shifting to masculine form of language when they can't win the fight from boys or compete them in competitions. They want to discard Okamoto's notion of polite and soft-spoken girls, as they want to enjoy power of domination that they find boys exhibiting all the time with elders' acceptance and consent.

On the other hand, in some families, where there is a single girl child, parents usually bring her up like a boy. As a result, she starts using verb forms of language that are basically meant for boys. It *ipso facto* proves the deep-rooted male dominancy in the society and affects the usage of language. Sometimes such girls speak in front of the guests or in public places also like a boy. For example, a nine-year-old girl using male language form of Hindi while conversing with her mother and mother's friend:

Suhani: Namaste aunty. (In Hindi)

Suhani: Hello aunty. (Suhani is a nine-year-old girl who is greeting when her mumma's Friend enters in the house.)

Mumma's Friend: Namaste Beta. Kaise ho. (In Hindi)

Mumma's Friend: Hello daughter! How are you?

Suhani: Acchha hu aunty. (In Hindi)

Suhani: I'm fine aunty.

Mumma: Suhani, aunty k liye juice and namkeen le aao. (In Hindi)

Mumma: Suhani, bring juice and snacks for aunty.

Suhani: theek hai mumma do minute me laaya. (In Hindi)

Suhani: Okay mumma! I'll bring in two minutes.

Here in the above conversation, *acchha* and *laaya* word are male verb forms of language that a girl has used being single and cuddly child brought up like a boy by her parents. It expresses the dominance of one gender's language on another. But later on the girl grows up, she is told again and again to be polite and feminine in behavior and in terms of language too. A traditional society accepts such imitation by girls of masculine form of language at some extent, not fully. Even though girls feel it easy to move from feminine linguistics features to masculine linguistic features but for boys, it's problematic to shift, and moreover such shift or movement is strictly prohibited, socially unaccepted as a taboo, and symbolic of their dominance and superiority.

Distinctions between status and role of different genders, femininity and masculinity, being bipolar opposites in a traditional society like India are clearly reflected in the gendered language forms, for example, female's powerlessness and relative politeness or masculinity and power of males overpowering their speeches. However, in Indian context, some variability can be seen in the use of gendered pronoun forms as follows:

**Table 2.** Gendered Pronoun forms of Indian Men and Women

Second Person (You)	Men's speech	Women's speech
Formal	Aap	Aap
Plain	Aap Tum Tu (to show less respect or more closeness)	Aap (to show more respect) Tum

In the table 2, given above, two kinds of differences can be noted. One, the level of formality of *aap* is formal for men but it is used formal and informal, in both ways by women. It makes women's speech more polite, cultured and sophisticated. Second, it shows that men are free to speak more informally as they can say *tu* or *tum* to show less respect or sometimes to exhibit friendlier relationship with another person.

Even though *aap*, *tum* and *tu* pronouns of Hindi language have the similar connotation as 'you' second pronoun has in English language but morphologically and semantically, situational use of pronouns *aap*, *tum* and *tu* are different. In English language, this pronoun 'you' is used for all without creating any 'difference' of gender and without showing any 'dominance' of gender. Nevertheless, in Hindi, it exhibits difference and dominance. For example, a young woman married into a traditional joint family, uses *aap* to address elderly male and female relatives with respect, particularly the father-in-law, mother-in-law, elder sister-in-law and brother-in-law, father-in-law's brothers and wives and father-in-law's sisters etc. While a woman, either born and brought up in urban environment carefully or working in urban environment, too uses language carefully and dually switching from one to another according to the situation. Such language usage as a daily practice of them reflects their traditional status differentials from men in the society.

### 3. SOCIETAL STRATA AND GENDER IN LANGUAGE USE

Many studies of varied language use in context of social stratification have verified gender differences in the area reviewed from this point of view. In their studies of New York and Norwich, William Labov and Peter Trudgill have discovered that within those all social classes they studied and those all stylistic contexts they researched across, women informants were inclined for the usage of more prestigious or high-status linguistic features, but, men informants were leaned towards using more vernacular features of language. This result has been imitated in several studies done, later on, particularly in 'western' context and other English-speaking areas also. (Labov; 1966)

Even though in English, there is statistical tendency to exhibit gender difference including social strata, but still, there are not clearly distinct gendered forms of language spoken by men and women. Male and female are found, in many stratification studies, using 'prestige' pronunciations, but, again, all other aspects being similar, females use language in more venerated style. Trudgill further discusses that they use more prestige forms of language than men because they are more status conscious and more aware of importance of language in the society. On the other hand, men feel working class speech more fascinating as it has associations of masculinity.

Allocation of social class as their primary social division, making distinction between the genders of same social class has also been identified. According to Trudgill's study, males are allocated to a social class on the basis of such factors like their education, profession, salary and location of house or the vehicle they have. Allocation of a social class to females is normally based on their father's class before marriage and of their husband's class after marriage, rather than what they essentially own or have. In India also, societal class is assigned on the same basis as Trudgill's findings discusses, a woman owns the same class what her father or husband possesses. Therefore they speak the same language suitable to their class. Furthermore, where the stratification is based on the family background in a traditional society, Deborah Cameron argues that-

*"wives and husbands are allocated to class group on the basis of economic criteria, wives would occupy a lower position than their husbands; but if one used education and type of occupation as criteria, many women, especially wives of working class men, would come out above their husbands."* (Cameron 1992: 64)

Some linguist like Cameron, don't accept Trudgill's concept as it is and that has been subject to criticism. There are some indications that decipher gender differences with their class- working and middle class. Working class speech is linked with more masculinity and middle class speech is with more feminineness. J. R. Edwards (1979b) found in his evaluation of the speech of children that girls of working class were misidentified as boys and boys of middle class were mistakenly perceived as girls. Further he adds that-

*"middle-class voices were perceived as higher smoother and more feminine and working class voices as lower, regular, and more masculine"*. (1979: 121-7)

Labov and Trudgill's studies of societal strata are concerned to recognize 'interactional sociolinguistics patterns' within a speech community with gender 'difference and dominance' which helps in understanding different language behavior of male and female speakers. Joan Swann (2000) outlooks that the relationship between gender and language can be focused and customized in numerous regards with "*differences in women's and men's lifestyles and patterns of interaction*". (2000: 224) The best examples of status-conscious gendered talks can be seen in Indian daily soap operas where TV actors and actresses exhibit it into their lifestyles and patterns of interaction.

#### 4. FACE-TO-FACE GENDERED DISCOURSE

Many studies on language and gender have focused on how men and women interact with one another in various situations stretching from formal discourses like at seminars, workshops, meetings and offices to more informal like at house, party or public places so on. In such practical and theoretical suggestions of linguists' studies and findings, it has been substantially stated that male and female speakers, girls and boys have different interactional style and varied patterns, not quite distinctive but at some extent. If one takes it person to person, it can be called *ideolectal* but it is more gendered stylistic variation rather than *ideolectal* variation of language. Janet Holmes, a New Zealand linguist, designed a book for English language teachers and educationists, suggests,

*“women appear cooperative, facilitative participants, demonstrating in a variety of ways their concern for conversational patterns, while men tend to dominate the talking time, interrupt more often than women, and focus on the content of the interaction and the talk in hand, at the expense of attention to their addressees....”*  
(Holmes 1994: 156)

During the routine communication of male-female speakers for pragmatic studies of gender and discourse, linguists have witnessed and highlighted some particular characteristics of their diverse discourse styles and patterns that are said to be indexical in terms of gender power and difference. Some characteristics are given below:

- **Spoken Quantity:** Men speak more than women, predominantly in formal or communal settings, even though these are general tendencies, not very specific, because neither all women nor all men talk in completely similar or dissimilar way in different contexts. Either it is because of cultural differences between two genders or because of power dominance of one gender on another in the community. Robin Lakoff tells that women talk less or use numerous linguistic features that indicate *“uncertainty and hesitancy”* of them. What they talk or how they express, sometimes appear trivial and deny them *“access to power”* either because of social inequalities or their inadequacy in speech contexts. (1975: 7)
- **Interactional Aids:** Women use this feature more than men in their conversations. If they feel interested in some discussion, they use more frequently minimal responses such as *yeah, oh, right, ah, mmh,* and *hmm* to denote their participation and interest in talk. Power, in hierarchical relations between men and women, is raised and sustained in such a way that women feel like taking conversational support or aid to encourage them and to keep the interaction continued. Even the gendered usage of minimal responses can be semantically interpreted in different way in terms of their being from different gender subcultures. For female speakers, such linguistic features are supportive aids to seek attention that they are part of the conversation, moreover, involved and listening actively. For male speakers, use of such minimal features, is to express their agreement or consent with the point raised in interaction that itself indicates their dominancy in interaction.
- **Disruptions and Interferences:** Disruptions and interferences occur more frequently in mixed-gender talks rather than single-gender conversations; moreover, mostly female speakers are being interfered or stopped by male speakers, not because of females' inadequacy, but because of males' domineering discourse style and behavior. They overrule the equal right of women to talk. Don Zimmerman and Candace West tell that there are *“definite and patterned ways in which the power and dominance enjoyed by men”* in their conversations with women in different social contexts. (1975: 105) Women speak more a language of relation and closeness, of intimacy and care, while men focus on speaking and listening a language of status and freedom. When both genders don't try to comprehend such interactional differences in social contexts, they start feeling irritated by each other's disruptions and interferences in between their mixed-gender conversations.
- **Complimentary Phrases:** Women use more compliments in single-gender talks and even expect a wide variety of appreciating phrases and words from men addressed to them in mixed-gender talks. Although they like receiving compliments more than giving but still they generously manage to pay others good compliments, in both kind of gatherings- formal or public such as 'you're looking stunning', 'I love talking to you', 'you've pretty eyes', 'gorgeous' and 'nice smile' so on.
- **Apprehension:** Female speakers use some specific linguistic features that sometimes, make their speech more cautious and indeterminate. They make their utterances weak and exhibit their

tentativeness and uncertainty with use of such hedges- 'may be', 'I thought', 'I was about to', 'sort of' and 'you know' so on. Tagging their questions with a tag is a common habit of women and girls, for example- 'it's so cold today, isn't it?' On the other hand, men don't use much these kinds of linguistic tags and hedges being hesitant or apprehensive. Jennifer Coates, a British linguist and feminist, argues that power and dominance in gendered speech have given upswing to a rather bad interpretation of women's style of using language, furthermore, she exhorts to use 'cooperative' term for women instead of 'powerless' or 'tentative'. (1988: 95)

The above given characteristics in one or another way, linguistic behavior of men and women are different from each other and at some extent, ruled by male dominance and power. This differentiation can be further explored in many other new means and modes of communications.

### 5. GENDERED DISCOURSE THROUGH ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Gendered language in face-to-face interaction has been examined above, with many submissions from empirical studies of sociolinguistics. There are alternative forms of interaction and communication in techno-advanced era, such as electronic or computer-mediated communication system that can give new dimensions to the study of gender in interactional sociolinguistics considering 'difference' and 'dominance'. Through electronics media such as email, conferencing or official discussions, done in written mode but the language that has normally been used in such communications, has many features of spoken discourse. In electronic communication people can't see or hear those people with whom they talk to. Even though some of them hide their gender identity and construct a fake personae but normally people interact with actual identity as men or women, although they behave traditionally in interactions like face to face communications.

Nowadays people use Face book, Twitter or Google+ etc. for interaction or sharing their ideas with people of different gender, tastes, arenas and cultures. It seems encouraging democratic participation from all the connected people on these social sites but it is found male dominancy prevails in electronic communication and quite in practice in a conventional country like India. When male participants raise some issue or post something for further discussion on social sites like Facebook, they themselves 'talk' more, 'like' more and 'comment' more.

Susan Herring (1993) claims that men take more 'authoritative stand' in public discourse, and frequently undervalue women's opinions. Male participants use various strategies to ignore opinions or contribution by females or sometimes try to divert the attention of others away from their viewpoint or questions raised. Whenever female participants try to take control of the discourse or put forward their point of view on the topic or raise some question, they are completely discarded or not liked or not replied further after their comments on the discussion raised by the post. Going through Facebook posts for studies of gender identified language forms, got struck with a post of a male TV journalist from India. The extract which was posted by the journalist in Hindi language, is reproduced in English and given below:

*"After advocates and cops, now the species of journalists has also become disreputable that no common man wants to give them a house on rent. I'm telling from own experiences, brothers, I'm wandering for a 3BHK house. From several places, I got positive answer on phone but that was changed in 'No' with a readymade excuse after knowing about my profession. At times this profession has been a mission but now it is in such state. Pakistan is also not responsible for such state of this profession. Then who is????"*

This journalist gets more than 130 likes and 35 comments on this post but the use of 'brother' vocative drew the attention of a lady instigating her to comment on his post. Either that journalist or some other man, no one replied or liked to what she said, to ignore her question. Even though her comment was not directly related to the issue rose in the post for further discussions and opinions, however, she still had some logical points to be answered genuinely by that journalist whatever she upraised being feminist in her comment .

In this below-mentioned comment of that lady, she receives only one 'like'. The prolonged silence to ignore her question helped in diverting attention of other contributors in the discussion. With such strategy, that journalist regains the control of interaction and that voice of that lady remains unheard. If she had posted a photo on Facebook, she might have got many likes and comments as females' photos are liked or commented more than their genuine posts where they raise some issue for further discussion or opinions.

Sir, I've some resentment to express..some complaints to register..some questions to raise--

>Why is only "भाइयों" vocative used for the discourse's initiation??

>Is this gender discrimination happened knowingly..or unconsciously?? (whereas a 'मकान' becomes a 'घर' only with the presence and efforts of a woman)

>Aren't females aware citizens and intellectual enough to be involved in these discussions??

>Are females not contributing in every sphere?? (although percentile differs statistically)

>Are Male Chauvinism n favoritism also prevalent in the world of Journalism??

21 Nov 2014 · Like · 1

Comment made by a woman on Facebook: Electronic media for communication

Herring suggests that it is an expression of-

*"a deeply rooted pattern of female muting and male dominance on the internet. According to this pattern, individual acts of silencing interact with socialization force and male gendering of computer technology to create larger and more oppressive silencing contexts. (1995: 68)*

Women' voices are silenced by men on such socio-democratic sites where everyone has a right of speech and to give opinions, whereas their photos are liked and commented on a lot but not their posts raising some issues for further discussions. Such threads for further discussions are ignored and avoided or less liked and commented on. As Wylie reports from her findings: *"a female-initiated subject gets roughly less than a third of replies that a male initiated thread does..."* (Wylie 1995; cited Spender 1995:197) Electronic communication has also encouraged 'difference' and 'dominance' between men and women making the discourse traditionally dis-courageous and disadvantageous for women.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This research paper has focused on the role of gender in interactional sociolinguistics creating 'difference' and exhibiting 'dominance' between gendered talks. Language and gender, being interdisciplinary fields of study, when studied and analyzed together, identified gender patterns in allocation of linguistic features for studying language use in sociolinguistics. Whereas interactional sociolinguistics focuses on jiffy-by-jiffy formation of speakers' gender identities, this study assists researchers to restructure and modify larger simplifications about gendered language behavior. Issues of power and inequality between male and speakers' interactions have been challenged and put forward by giving instances where women tend to assert for their equity in interactions. Cyber-masculinity is exposed and rejected by women with creation of their own boards and bulletins for sharing opinions. Women's politeness and cooperative nature should be taken as good linguistic feature to be adapted by one and all and they should be given more chances to open up and put forward their opinions as equal personae in mixed-gender interactions. These gender differences and dominance are not very distinctive but still prevail whole over the world in every sphere public or private, in face-to-face or electronic communications which have made this research worthy, interesting and thought provoking for the research scholars who feel interested in analysis of gendered language.

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