

**Gendering of Language and the Challenges of Globalization:
A Sociolinguistic Account of Bengali Women's
Linguistic Patterns in 21st Century Kolkata**

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Abstract

Gendered language, which is defined as a symbolic device that limits the activities of one sex, but not those same activities of the other, actually spreads and reinforces sex role stereotypes and thus complements the existence of sexism in a society. At the dawn of 21st century when everything in our society is undergoing rapid changes due to the immense influence of modernization and globalization, language still acts as a catalyst for gender discrimination. Today globalization is on everyone's lips. It has not only referred to the expansion of global linkages, the organization of social life on a global scale but also to the growth of a global consciousness. However, while it has become a central lens through which social scientists have reframed old questions of last couple of decades, researchers working on 'gender-language interface' have been slower to do so. And now when sociolinguists are increasingly recognizing that the phenomenon of globalization has implications for patterns of language use, linguistic variation and change, it is also evident that even in this global era each language has inherent in it expressions that are indicative of society's differential treatment for women, which is on the whole negative. Due to the acute dearth of substantial research in gender-language interface in India or more specifically in Kolkata, the primary aim of this paper is to investigate society's bias against women with evidence from an Indian language, i.e., Bengali. The paper will focus on how in a patriarchal country like India, in spite of numerous socio-cultural transformations, language acts as a tool of coercion as well as it is internalized as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms

and in turn keeps them in their place. Given this backdrop, this article attempts to show how over time, with the rapidly changing culture of our society language in general and Bengali language in particular facilitates the construction and reinforcement of gendered identity of educated Bengali women (18-25 years, 30-45 years) in Kolkata. Moreover, special thrust is given on how despite the introduction of several gender-neutral vocabularies in recent times, gendered linguistic practices continue unabated till date.

Key words: language, gender, globalization, women, urban-metropolis.

Introduction

Globalization is changing or has the potential to change many of the social realities that preoccupy social scientists, among them ‘class’, ‘ethnicity’, ‘race’, ‘gender’, ‘work’ and indeed ‘language’. These developments are as significant for sociolinguistics as for any other social science discipline.¹ While globalization has become a central lens through which social scientists have reframed old questions in the last couple of decades, students of language and gender in their socio-cultural context have been slower to do so. Yet global processes are of concern to people’s daily lives in all contemporary societies, as they gender themselves and each other through the intersubjective negotiation of the intersection of the global and the local.² The intimate connection between globalization and gender is not confined to the reproduction of old patterns and the emergence of new patterns of gendered inequality as the result of global exposure. Rather, the very process of globalization is gendered, despite the masculinism that underlies hegemonic forms of globalization ideology (Gibson-Graham 1996).³

To date, linguistic anthropologists and sociolinguists have lagged behind in taking an interest in globalization, in contrast to sociocultural anthropologists, cultural geographers, and other social scientists (Blommaert 2003; Coupland 2003; Jacquemet 2005). Nor have they paid much attention to the intersection of globalization with gender, even though their analytic toolboxes have much to offer to the investigation of how

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people embrace, resist, and negotiate large scale socio-cultural dynamics in their day-to-day interactions. There is of course a long tradition in linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics of research bearing on the gendered dynamics that make and contest the constitution of what Silverstein (1998) terms ‘local linguistic communities.’

Early variationist sociolinguists were aware of the importance, if not the centrality, of gender in the interactional strategies that people utilize to index various positions vis-à-vis localness. For instance, Labov’s (1963) classic variationist analysis of language use on Martha’s Vineyard Island off Massachusetts illustrates how the phonological features of the speech of islanders index the relative claims they make to local privilege and grounding in local life ways (fishing industry, village life, a conservative outlook, etc.), in opposition to an orientation to the tourism industry, socioeconomic change, and the urban mainland. But Martha’s Vineyard women have much less to gain than men from the local economy of power, and they articulate this disadvantage by aligning their phonology with the hegemonic mainland standard.⁴

One of the more recent and significant developments in our understanding of the relationship between gender and language is the recognition that the gendering of language is semiotically complex. In fact linguistic forms and practices do not define ‘women’s language’ and ‘men’s language’ as earlier researchers argued (e.g., Lakoff, 1975), but articulate with a host of social categories and processes that surround gender and help construct it. It is also clearly demonstrated that gendered linguistic practices are both indexical and indirect.⁵ Indexicality captures the insight that features of language (phonological, syntactic, discursive etc.) ‘point to’ or suggest gendered identities and do not refer to gender in an unequivocal fashion. In this respect the relation between gender and language is no exception from the relationship between language and any other form of socio-cultural identity that was highlighted in the works of earlier sociolinguists (e.g., Labov, 1966a).⁶ And thus before probing deep into the discussion of gender-language interface in the face of globalization, we should go through the existing theoretical approaches in order to enable ourselves to think sociologically.

Sociolinguistic Theories on ‘Gender-Language Interface’:

Realistically speaking under the influence of reflexive theoretical paradigmatic shifts the study of language and gender is increasingly becoming the study of discourse and gender. While phonological, lexical and other kinds of linguistic analysis continue to be influential, the interdisciplinary investigation of discourse-level phenomena, has also become the central approach in the field of Sociolinguistics.⁷ In Sociology also, discourse analysis is rapidly growing especially in its attempt to structure and shape society, social identity etc. It is argued that social identities such as gender are achievements or accomplishments, that gender is something that people “do” rather than simply having one. This, noticeably had powerful impact on language and gender research as well as on gender studies more generally.⁸ Interest in the way women and men talk has grown astronomically since the mid 1970s and studies, identifying gender as a major parameter for language variation, appeared especially in the English speaking world during this time particularly under the impact of feminist movements.⁹

Then it was the publication of Robin Lakoff’s (1973, 1975) *Language and Woman’s Place*, that the study of language and gender was launched formally. Lakoff’s article argued that women have a different way of speaking from men – a way of speaking that both reflects and produces a subordinate position in society. Women’s language, according to Lakoff is rife with certain devices as mitigators for example expressions like sort of, I think etc., inessential qualifiers e.g. really happy, so beautiful.¹⁰ This language therefore renders women’s speech tentative, that is not so firmly expressed and established as that of men. Therefore it becomes powerless and trivial; and as such it disqualifies them from position of power and authority. In this way language itself is a tool of coercion in a patriarchal society and it is internalized as part of learning to be a woman, imposed on women by societal norms, and in turn it keeps women in their place. This publication then brought about a flurry of research and debate. Lakoff’s claims that – 1) women and men talk differently and that 2) differences in women and men’s speech are the result of and support male dominance have given rise to two different

paradigms.¹¹ These are called the difference and the dominance approach respectively. Those who focused on the difference approach proposed that women and men belong to different subcultures¹² and that they speak differently because of fundamental differences in their relation to their language, perhaps due to socialization and experiences early on. Deborah Tannen's very popular book "You Just Don't Understand" (1990), has often been taken as representative of this framework.¹³

On the other hand the dominance approach considers women as an oppressed group and interprets linguistic differences in women's and men's speech in terms of men's dominance and women's subordination. Researchers associated with this paradigm are Dale Spender, Pamela Fishman, Don Zimmerman and Candace West.¹⁴ However Lakoff herself believed and made it clear that issues of difference and dominance were inextricably linked¹⁵ and cannot be isolated in practice. Apart from these, the gender and language research has also flourished in the works of French feminist writers eg. Julie Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Helene Cixous, and Monique Wittig. Here we can refer to their approach to examining how gender is constructed in language and discourse.¹⁶

In Cate Poynton's "Language and Gender: Making the Difference", for instance, the focus is on the ideological reasons for language practices that keep women alienated from power. Elaine Showalter also echoes Poynton's appeal to a universal female oppression, suggesting that (a phallographic) language structure is not the problem; the problem is getting the "full resources of language" to women so that they might begin to alter language usage as they speak themselves into it ("Wilderness").¹⁷ Apart from that French feminist-psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray has examined the uses and misuses of language in relation to women in such works as "Speculum of the Other Woman" (1974), which argues that history and culture are written in patriarchal language and centred on men.¹⁸

Finally, the fourth and most recent approach to study the interrelationship between gender and language is called the Discourse approach or sometimes the

Dynamic approach because there is an emphasis on dynamic aspects of interaction. Researchers who adopt this approach take a social constructionist perspective. Social constructionist perspectives de-emphasize gendered speakers (and writers) as agents, focusing rather on *what* is communicated *by, to* and *about* women, men, boys and girls.¹⁹ In this context, we can refer to Judith Butler (1956-), who has also attempted to discuss how linguistic performativity is connected to gender? Towards the beginning of *Gender Trouble* Butler states that “[w]ithin the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative, that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be” (GT: 24–5). Gender is an act that brings into being what it names: in this context, a “masculine” man or a “feminine” woman. She states that gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language.²⁰

Linking up Gender-Language Research with the Challenges of Globalization:

Globalization broadly refers to the expansion of global linkages, the organization of social life on a global scale, and the growth of a global consciousness, hence to the consolidation of world society. Such an ecumenical definition captures much of what the term commonly means, but its meaning is disputed. It encompasses several large processes; definitions differ in what they emphasize. Globalization is historically complex; definitions vary in the particular driving force they identify. The meaning of the term is itself a topic in global discussion; it may refer to "real" processes, to ideas that justify them, or to a way of thinking about them. The term is not neutral; definitions express different assessments of global change. Among critics of capitalism and global inequality, globalization now has an especially pejorative ring. Defined as- "The historical transformation constituted by the sum of particular forms and instances of [m]aking or being made global (i) by the active dissemination of practices, values, technology and other human products throughout the globe (ii) when global practices and so on exercise an increasing influence over people's lives (iii) when the globe serves as a focus for, or a premise in shaping, human activities" (M. Albrow, *The Global Age*, 1996,

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p. 88), globalization has succeeded enough to exert enormous impact on people's lives. Not only that the increasing awareness about global influences as well as its rising significance has also changed several existing world-views. Of course ideas about gender, linguistic practices as well as the interface of gender and language have also undergone significant paradigmatic shifts in recent times.²¹

Just as gender is a complex set of identity resources that people can foreground, background, or negotiate across contexts, the boundary between the local and the global is shifting and contestable, and an attention to language can provide fascinating resources for the negotiation of this boundary.²² If gender is approached not as a homogeneous category but as a complex bundle of dynamics that other categories transverse (the usual litany of social class, race, ethnicity, age, sexuality, etc.), it comes as no surprise that certain women and certain men associate with localness in certain contexts, while other women and other men engage in centrifugal projects in other contexts.²³

Globalization of course has won the popularity contest among topics of concern to contemporary social science disciplines and there is also consensus among many that it offers local lives both new opportunities and constraints. For example, global forces may provide new forms of imagined experience through television soap operas, the Internet and white collar work, for example, to persons hitherto excluded from the experiences and horizons associated with them. At the same time globalization has all-too-well documented nefarious effects, a simple example of which is the economic enslavement of people to menial and unstable work that corporate-controlled global development have engendered.²⁴ It informs and transforms people's lives, creating new forms of agency as easily as it perpetrates structures that are continuous with the past. It also works in material fashion, shaping social relations, economic conditions, and social practices. And even if it shapes identities and lived experiences of persons²⁵ (ibid) it is still not able to eliminate the inherent tendency of discriminating people in terms of their 'gender' and thus in case of language also gendered/sexist language still spreads and reinforces sex role stereotypes.

Gendered Language Use in Present Times

Gendered language oppresses people through metaphoric identification (Ross, 1981), exclusion, labeling, and referential genderization (Beardsley, 1973). Metaphoric identification involves the deep structure of words and phrases- their etymologies, allusions, psychological undertones. Gendered language conveys prejudice through the everyday vocabulary used in social intercourse. Many gender-related words metaphorically insult or belittle women by identifying them as children, animals or objects (girl, baby, dish, chick, bitch, hot tomato etc.). Exclusion involves the creation of sex-based names, terms, and expressions to characterize essentially sex-neutral positions, occupations, etc. through exclusionary devices, sexist language restrains one gender from pursuing activities similar to those allowed the other gender in the same society. Words such as ‘chairman’, ‘foreman’, ‘fisherman’, exclude women by calling to mind male actors; thus, implicitly eliminating qualified women from consideration in these positions and occupations.

Labelling assigns the arbitrary tags ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ to areas that have no relation to gender. In everyday life, activities such as washing dishes or playing quietly may be despised by boys simply because they carry the label ‘feminine’, the bane of ‘masculinity’.

Referential genderization involves linguistic practices that encourage the use of one gender pronouns as universal generics appropriate for signifying both the sexes. The use of masculine pronouns as generics is the most blatant example of such incorrect locution. By legitimizing the ambiguity of the masculine pronoun (it may mean a man or it may mean a man or woman) referential genderization ignores the fact that for every ‘he’ in the language there is a reciprocal ‘she’. In perpetuating such usage, patriarchal grammar also promotes the notion that women as individuals, and feminine pronouns as words, are inferior and limited in comparison with their male counterparts.²⁶

Even today, language is fundamental to gender inequality, where language used about women, and also used by women places them in a double bind between being appropriately feminine and being fully human. In addition, women's social class positions based on their education, occupation, income and lifestyle patterns also further their domination giving rise to 'multiple oppressions' even in the modern urban metropolis- Kolkata. Women are marginalized initially for being 'women' and subsequently their linguistic practices also facilitate their marginalization, by labeling them as 'not fully human' or even by raising questions against their certain linguistic usages, where they instead of conforming, deviate from the societal sanctions and normative structure. Here some narratives will definitely help us to understand this situation.

Papiya (41 years, School Teacher) shared, "Girls think and then speak. Exceptions are there. We are aware of the person who is sitting in front of us, what is his/her status, if she/he minds any of my words. We normally think in these perspectives before we speak. But it does not normally happen with the boys. Here also exceptions are there. Girls think in all respect and then speak. But boys don't. What they feel at that moment they just speak that".

Sulagna (21 years, B.A. 3rd year student) opined that there is difference between women and men because of the nature that they are born with. Men are with force and have masculine way of speaking while women have feminine way of it. Generally females use more of subtle words, not hurting anyone; while men use more rude approach because of their inherent masculine nature.

Another respondent Kuheli (39 years, School Teacher) also shared same opinion. She said, "Mainly our society is patriarchal society, hence what men say women generally admit and accept that. Men or boys use more slangs or swear words during their conversation, while in comparison women do not use these so much".

Ideas about gender are conveyed through the linkage of specific words to one sex or the other, implicitly or explicitly stating what is culturally defined as male or female. By analyzing the particular words used to describe women only or men only, we can discover the dominant views of what inheres in masculinity and femininity (Kramer and Freed 1991). Men are much more often described with words that connote competence in highly valued spheres (for example, the word ‘mastery’ means ‘competence’ and is derived from a masculine noun), and with words that also often connote the abuse of power. On the other hand women are more often described with words associated with nurturance, softness, and a manipulative sexuality.

For example, a ‘tease’ almost certainly refers to a woman. A sissy is a boy who is like a girl; in this instance, femininity is obviously negative because it is used to insult a male.²⁷ It is always noted that the ideas, norms, and even the things created and used as part of a culture’s way of life carry implicit and explicit significance for females and males in a society. For example, the acceptable language, posture, dress and tasks for one sex are often different from those for the other. To be viewed as ‘gender appropriate’ one must follow the norms applicable to one’s sex. Biological difference between the sexes is a universally popular, essentialist explanation for their social differentiation. However, the behaviours labelled as masculine and feminine actually vary from one culture to another, and within a culture they vary over time, supporting the view that gender is socially constructed.²⁸

In *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff had opened up new pragmatic perspectives on politeness by proposing that talking politely is an essential part of being a woman. Lakoff’s proposition answered a critical question in language socialization: how children create a gendered self through their own language practices. Women recognize the importance of relations with others, and as Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson (1987) pointed out, politeness provides the essential social mechanism for establishing positive bonds within a group. Politeness thus provides a blueprint for exploring the ways in which children’s early understanding of relations with others leads

to an awareness of a gendered self. Children's spontaneous talk shows how they differentiate life within the intimate relationships of the family from life in the more public domain of their peers and unfamiliar others outside of the home. Child development theory has generally assumed that until middle childhood, gender does not play a significant part in the lives of young children. Children are treated as passive recipients of their parents' views of gender. While parents are said to create a differentiated world of activities, names, clothing, and playthings that map their expectations about gender-appropriate behaviour onto their children's lives, their ways of talking also model their expectations of gender. And the discourse of politeness is an essential part of these gender expectations, although children's politeness has been studied as merely the routine repetition of parental models (Berko Gleason 1987).

Similar views have been put forward by several respondents in this study. It has been experienced by almost all the respondents as well as other female members around us that the process of socialization at a tender age inculcates within a child the norms of expected behaviour which is distinctly different in case of a girl and a boy. Women and men face different normative expectations regarding their language usage. It is often found that what women are taught not to say both in public and private domains, men can and also they do say very easily and casually. It has also been noted that people also use language to colour themselves as they talk.

Linguistic resources can be used to present oneself as a particular kind of person; to project an attitude or stance; to affect the flow of talk and ideas. And these can involve gender in a myriad of ways. Tone and pitch of voice, patterns of intonation (or 'tunes'), choice of vocabulary, even pronunciations and grammatical patterns can signal gendered aspects of the speaker's self-presentation. They can also signal the speaker's accommodation to, or enforcement of, the gender of other interactants in a situation. At the same time, the association of these linguistic devices with feminine or masculine ideals makes them potential material to reproduce or to challenge a conservative discourse of femininity or masculinity. For example, using a soft, high-pitched voice

invokes the connection between female gender and smallness and fragility. Avoiding profanities, or using euphemistic substitutions such as ‘fudge’ or ‘shoot’ invokes the connection between female gender and propriety. Ideas about gender are conveyed through the linkage of specific words to one sex or the other, implicitly or explicitly stating what is culturally defined as male or female. By analyzing the particular words used to describe women only or men only, we can discover the dominant views of what inheres in masculinity and femininity (Kramer and Freed 1991). Men are much more often described with words that connote competence in highly valued spheres (for example, the word ‘mastery’ means ‘competence’ and is derived from a masculine noun), and with words that also often connote the abuse of power. On the other hand women are more often described with words associated with nurturance, softness, and a manipulative sexuality. For example, a ‘tease’ almost certainly refers to a woman. A sissy is a boy who is like a girl; in this instance, femininity is obviously negative because it is used to insult a male.

As R. W. Connell (1987; 2001; 2005) has set forth that gender relations are the product of everyday interactions and practices. The actions and behaviour of average people in their personal lives are directly linked to collective social arrangements in society. These arrangements are continuously reproduced over lifetimes and generations, but are also subject to change. However, in reality the fact is that gender socialization is very powerful, and challenges to it can be upsetting. Once a gender is ‘assigned’, society expects individuals to act like ‘females’ and ‘males’. It is in the practices of everyday life that these expectations are fulfilled and reproduced (Bourdieu 1990; Lorber 1994).²⁹ Most gender and language study today broadly encompasses social constructionist meanings of gender together with a nuanced version of ‘differential tendencies’.

Thus, as one respondent Sumita (38 years, Psychological Counsellor) and many others also opined the same view. According to her, “Dress, behaviour all these determine that boys and girls should be treated differently. Then from our childhood, we have been taught that we can not talk in the same way as loudly as like our brothers,

because then people will label us as ‘bad girls’.” Most of the respondents believe that the entire process of gendering or gender-learning starts from the inception and since people are accustomed to think in such lines they rarely protest against these. Gender discrimination has been continually practised in almost all societies, though in recent times some transformations have taken place. But still ‘gender’ is constructed everyday in a number of ways and of course language use is not an exception there.

During her interview Antarika (34 years, Assistant Professor in Engineering College) shared one of her childhood experiences. She said, “I was always told not to go out and mix with others in my ‘para’ or neighbourhood. However, similar restrictions were not there for my brother. Then once I expressed my wish of learning swimming, which was once again rejected, whereas my brother got the chance. Thus there was always discrimination through my parents’ language or talk from the very childhood days.”

Besides, Sexist or Gendered language is defined as a symbolic device that limits the activities of one sex, but not those same activities of the other and thus actually spreads and reinforces sex role stereotypes and thus complements the existence of sexism in a society.

For instance, according to Sanghita (31 years, Lecturer in college): Sexist language refers to language or words that disrespect women. For example the words ‘bitch’, ‘slut’, ‘whore’ etc. carry with them a negative connotation, which does not have an equivalent term for men.

Another respondent Shruti (25 years, Ph. D student): there are several gendered words in Bengali, e.g. ‘chhichkaduni, dajjal, rakkhashi’ etc., which always focus on a negative portrayal of women.

So, we find that most of the respondents admitted the fact that they are aware of the use of sexist language in daily life. It is also argued that sexist language does not always refer to the expletives or specific swear words indicating and humiliating a person on sexual ground, rather the languages which are used during everyday interaction between both women and men are also often sexist. According to them this 'sexism' initiates from early childhood or even before that when a child is in the wombs of its mother.

Sex discrimination starts through sex-selective abortions (female foeticide) as well as after the birth of a child, if it is a girl child (female infanticide). Sexist remarks are incessantly experienced by women of all ages in all societies. There has always been a tendency to create a barrier or demarcation line between males and females. Men are always given immense freedom to do what they want, behave the way they want to as well as speak in their desired and preferred manner. On the other hand, women are more often advised or rather restricted from doing certain things, speak certain specific language and be obedient to what the elders especially the elder males of the family tell them to do. Thus as we have seen earlier also, through our regular interaction and gender socialization, our language becomes gendered or sexist, which undoubtedly reinforces the prevalence of sexism as well as patriarchal domination in the society.

Conclusion

However, it is being noticed that globalization has created multiple new opportunities for individuals and for youth in particular to rework, reinvent, and recreate identities through the remixing of styles which are now, as a result of a multitude of technological innovations, more globally available than ever before. In present day fast-paced globalized world, sexism or gender discrimination through language has decreased to a great extent. One such important change has been the introduction of gender-neutral language/vocabularies. Actually it is a style of writing or speaking that adheres to certain

‘rules’ that were first proposed by feminists in the 1970s. These rules prohibit common usages that are deemed to be sexist, such as the word ‘chairman’ or ‘postman’.

As the respondents have observed and admitted that nowadays the use of gendered language especially in the formal, public spheres has lessened. Now there are words that neither have negative connotation or bias against women nor that women are always neglected from various areas. Thus there has been emergence of gender neutral words to compensate the longstanding notion of sexism and male domination. Some examples of such neutral words are- chairperson, sportsperson, business person, salesperson, mail-carrier, actors, doctors, flight-attendants instead of airhostess and stewards, attendants in case of nurse and male-nurse, using he/she or even they instead of using only he as the generic form etc.

Thus, there has been the first initiative to combat the process of gendering with the help of an alternative process, what may be termed as ‘degendering’. Globalization has not only changed the mindset of people especially young individuals but also that it has been able to create and nurture a society free from any discrimination. Though, most of the time older generations of our society still prefer to adhere to the stereotypical, gender-specific roles and behaviours, but young adults have often stepped forward against this. They often think that practices, whatever form they may take, if are bad for a female in society that also applies to a boy. For instance they think just like smoking or drinking, which are considered bad not because of the users but because of their adverse effects on individual’s health, similarly using abusive language against women, using gendered remarks also necessarily de-motivate women, which in turn reflects their low self-esteem.

Thus, with globalization and its new mechanisms the attempt should be to remove all gendered practices including the linguistic ones from our society and welcome new, refined and good thought for the future. Furthermore, new researchers in sociology should be welcomed so as to develop some new proliferation of literature on the

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interrelation of gender, language and other social dimensions etc. in the context of the continuing challenges of globalization, which can actually help in the advancement of several academic discourses in India.

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