

LANGUAGE, GENDER, AND POWER

The Politics of Representation and Hegemony in South Asia



Shahid Siddiqui

OXFORD

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In memory of
my beloved
MOTHER

Acknowledgements

The process of writing a book is like a journey to a distant land, full of excitements, frustrations, disappointment, distractions, surprises, discoveries, and rewards. For me, this journey, which had started seven years ago, is finally coming to an end. During this long and, at times, tiring journey I was given academic assistance and emotional support by a number of people. Without them, this journey was simply impossible. I take this opportunity to thank all those whose help, cooperation, and encouragement made it happen. I would like to thank Umar, Javaria, Parveen, Sufia, Saeed, and Nasir for their constant support. I would like to thank all my students in various places who were a source of inspiration and learning for me. I would also like to thank Asma, my wife, for her motivation and support.

Introduction

Language had long been considered as a neutral and passive phenomenon whose main function was to communicate or to reflect what was happening in the society. This value-free view of language led to the use of a quantitative approach to the study of language, where different aspects of language, i.e. grammar, phonology, and semantics, were studied in isolation. Especially in South Asian societies, the study of English revolved around learning of grammatical rules and structures. The focus on usage, form, and structure impacted negatively on students' actual use of language.

Language proficiency was thus linked solely with grammatical accuracy and the knowledge of grammatical rules was considered as a major criterion for language proficiency. This apparently very convincing view was challenged by Hymes (1972), who drew our attention to another important aspect of language proficiency, i.e. communicative competence, which was hitherto ignored by the linguists. The notion of communicative competence highlighted the *social* aspect of language.

This active social aspect of language was brought to light in a convincing manner by Sapir and Whorf, whose hypothesis presented language as a constitutive force in the construction of social reality. The hypothesis challenged the value-free view of language and led to the viewpoint that the function of language is not just reflection but it is also involved in the construction and perpetuation of social reality. Although the branch of sociolinguistics was already there, the *socio* part of it was not very active (Romaine, 2000). The general view of linguistics was an 'objective' study of language.

This 'objectivity' in the process of studying linguistics either ignored or underestimated issues of power and politics. Butler (2000: 175) rightly points out that, 'Language is not an *exterior medium of instrument* into which I pour a self and from which I glean a reflection of that self.' There has recently been a growing realization of the relationship of language and power and thus a need to bring forth the critical aspect of applied linguistics for discussion. This critical aspect could only be appreciated if we adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of language. This may include benefiting from theories of sociology, psychology, politics, gender studies, anthropology, literature, culture studies, feminism, etc. to obtain a more holistic view of intricate language related issues. Language, in its turn, plays an important part in understanding the concepts contained within these disciplines.

How is language associated with power in the process of hegemony? Gramsci (1996) elaborated the role of the discursive approach in controlling others. Said (1978) demonstrated the role of discourse in constructing social reality and its role in the politics of representation. His work was inspired by the theories of Gramsci and Foucault, who considered discourse to be a highly political phenomenon, directly linked with power. As the linkage of discourse and power was brought forth by certain linguists, anthropologists, and social thinkers, a number of movements, including the feminist movement, realized the importance of language, got inspiration from it and used it for constructing their arguments.

The notion of gender, which is a social construct (explained in detail in Chapters 4 and 5), determines the roles, expectations, and opportunities for women and men. Language plays an important part in the process of socialization. The issue of differences, in the languages spoken by men and women, was taken up by Jespersen (1922), who devoted a chapter entitled *The Woman* in his book, suggesting that women's language is something deviant from the standard, men's language.

But the real focus on the mutual relationship of language and gender came with the arrival of Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place* (1975) followed by Spender's *Man Made Language*, and Deborah Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand*. These books tried to understand the issue of language and gender from different perspectives. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) and Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) provided some useful theoretical bases for this discussion.

One should, however, not forget the role of the feminist movement, which gave impetus to the issue of gender and its relationship with language. It was the feminist critique of language that underscored the issue of power and underlined the significance of the socio-political context. Feminists also shifted the emphasis from the language used *by* women to language used *about* women.

The most interesting aspect of this language and gender linkage is that language helps perform gender (Austin, 1962; Butler, 1990, 1993; Crawford, 1995). Gender is performed every day in different walks of life through different means of expression, e.g., sayings and proverbs, jokes, songs, advertisements, films, theatre, and TV plays, etc.

In South Asian countries, where there has always been a serious challenge of low female literacy rates, the discipline of gender studies is relatively new. Although there were women studies departments functioning in some universities, the questions of power and politics were not pursued in such programmes in an academic manner. It was in 2004, when I planned to offer the course *Language, Gender, and Power* at Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS), that I realized the paucity of indigenous academic work in this area.

During the pre-course preparation phase, I travelled to different universities and met with NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) personnel working on issues of gender. I could not find a single course in the universities of Pakistan focusing language and gender with special reference to the question of power. In

some universities, there were programmes in the field of women studies but the critical and reflective approach was missing. Some NGOs, including ASR, Simorgh, Uks, and Shirkat Gah, had a positive contribution in creating awareness about gender disparity through research and publications but most of the other NGOs' work suffered from various problems: (a) The material they were using was imported from abroad without personal reflection. (b) An extreme approach against men was adopted. (c) There was inadequate academic depth in their work. (d) The indigenous context was ignored while discussing the issue of gender. (e) There was not much work available on the issue of language and gender.

This book is a result of my intimate involvement with the Language, Gender, and Power course I have been teaching in LUMS and Lahore School of Economics since 2004. Teaching a course on this topic was an exciting and enriching experience for me.

The book is divided into six parts.

Part 1, *Language, Representation, and Hegemony* (Chapters 1–3): This part focuses on language and tries to unpack the issue of power and politics in relation to language. It deals with the issues of language as a political phenomenon, notions of power, politics of discourse, language and control, and construction of social reality and representation.

Part 2, *Language and Gender Construction* (Chapters 4–6): This part focuses on gender and language and deals with the topics of manufacturing of gender, language and gender, and research done in the area of language and gender.

Part 3, *Language and Gender Performance* (Chapters 7–10): This part is based on the indigenous examples of gender construction and gender perpetuation in South Asian societies. It deals with gender construction in the areas of sayings and proverbs, jokes, songs, film, theatre, and literature.

Part 4, *Language, Gender, and Education* (Chapters 11–13): It focuses on formal education for children in schools and their exposure to nursery rhymes and fairy tales.

Part 5, *Language, Gender, and Media* (Chapters 14–18): This part deals with the impact of media, commercial advertisements, television plays, songs, and their role in the construction and perpetuation of gendered stereotypes.

Part 6, *Gendered Discourse: Reform and Resistance* (Chapters 19–20): It deals with the questions of language reforms and resistance through language.

The approach adopted in the book is interdisciplinary in nature. One can trace threads of sociology, linguistics, gender studies, feminism, literature, politics, and anthropology, etc., used in order to have a fuller view of the phenomenon of language and to understand and appreciate the issues of language, gender, and power and their interaction.

The book is not written exclusively on gender or language. Rather, it focuses on the interrelationship of language, gender, and power and their impact on one another. It is an attempt to see gender through language. In other words, the issue of gender is viewed from the perspective of language. Being of an interdisciplinary nature, this book should interest academics, students, researchers, curriculum planners, and policy makers in the fields of gender studies, linguistics, sociology, politics, and culture studies. The book should also interest the members of civil society as it deals with social change in terms of reducing gender gaps by being more sensitive to language use.

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PART 1

LANGUAGE, REPRESENTATION, AND HEGEMONY

Chapter 1

Language: A Socio-political Phenomenon

Everyone lives in a given language; everyone's experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in that language.

– Edward Said

Ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behaviour, and the form of social behaviour where we rely on 'common-sense' assumptions.

– Norman Fairclough

Only a few decades ago the popular paradigm, prevalent in most of the educational institutions in South Asia, was highly positivistic in nature. In this paradigm, language was considered a purely linguistic phenomenon, comprising semantics, phonology, and grammar. The study of language was usually done on an *etherised table* in a lab-like controlled environment, where linguists would dissect it into different components and analyse them in isolation. Sweeping judgements were passed about languages, e.g., X was a superior language or Y was an inferior language, etc. This fixed and judgemental view of language was a natural consequence of studying it in isolation.

LANGUE AND PAROLE

It was Saussure, cited by Fairclough (2001: 5) who introduced two useful terms *langue* and *parole* to describe the two aspects of language and reinterpret the phenomenon of language. *Langue* denotes the rules and regulations and *parole* refers to the actual

use of language. This division of *usage* and *use* encouraged other linguists to explore the socio-cultural dimensions of language.

A gradual realization started taking place that language has a strong link with its speakers and no language, in its essence, is strong or weak but it is the group of speakers of a particular language that decides its strength. A very recent example is the status of Persian in the Indian subcontinent. Persian was considered to be a symbol of prestige and status but, after the decline of the Mughal empire and the ascendancy of the British in the subcontinent, Persian was gradually replaced by other local languages and English began to emerge as a language of power and prestige. It was not because of the innate strength of the English language but because of the powerful group of speakers who owned it that English attained a prestigious status.

LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

Since the speakers of a language live in a certain society, it is important that the study of language take into account its linkage with society. Not long ago, proficiency in the English language was largely linked with accuracy, i.e. grammatical use of language. It was Hymes (1972) who advocated the idea of communicative competence. According to this notion, grammatical accuracy alone was not sufficient for language proficiency; social appropriateness was also required. The notion of social appropriateness highlights the significance of context and the legitimacy of some basic questions like: What is the topic of conversation? Who are you? Who are you speaking to? What is your relationship with him/her? Why are you engaged in communication? Where is this communication taking place? When is this conversation taking place? The answers to these questions can help produce a socially appropriate discourse.