

## Language and Gender: a Socio-Cultural Feature Dominating Perception

Anfal A. Alhumaid  
Northern Border University  
Saudi Arabia

### Abstract

*This article is dedicated to the correlation of language and thought in the modern socio-cultural discourse. Particular attention is paid to the influence of language on the social gender roles formation. The opening section provides a historical overview of the related theories, one of the most influential being the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It also studies the contradictory arguments, highlighting the alternative perspectives of the issue under discussion. Being an international language, English is taken as an illustration of gender based lexicon reflecting the social and lexical structure and differentiation. Additional examples from French and Arabic languages are provided to compare differences in linguistic gender. The article also shows that the language itself cannot be formed without the presence of initial human thought. However, being once established, a linguistic norm can greatly influence public opinion, support the social stereotypes and facilitate labeling. Only significant social and economic changes can modify the language usage in a particular location.*

**Keywords:** language, thought, perception, expression means, grammatical gender, gender role.

### 1. The Correlation of Language and Thought

Language studies have evolved greatly throughout the last decades and centuries. The number and variety of language aspects under analysis continue growing rapidly, promoting the notions of applied and descriptive linguistics, which explore the range of interdisciplinary issues connected with language means. A peculiar connection between linguistics and psychology has generated a fervent debate on the relationship of language and human thought and the nature of their correlation. While some of the researchers believe the regional and national culture and thought peculiarities have shaped a particular language, the others state it is the language which creates a basis for cognition and perception. These opposite views are also reflected in the socio-cultural studies, influencing the discussion on social concepts construction.

In particular, it is a crucial argument regarding the formation of race, class and gender concepts be it socially or linguistically. This article aims to investigate the most substantial theories on the topic of language and thought interdependence, paying a special attention to its embodiment in the sociology of gender. It also investigates grammatical gender as a linguistic phenomenon. To begin with, one should consider the historical perspective of the issue. The first contemplations on language and thought are traced back in the works of the eighteenth century authors, representing the Romanticism and Enlightenment movements. For instance, the German philosopher and literary critic, Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) maintained the idea that thought is defined by language means, so the speakers of different languages percept the world quite distinctively.

According to him, “language gives the whole of knowledge its limits and contours” and “thinking is almost nothing more than speaking” (as cited in Leavitt, 2010, p.78). The philosopher was one of the first supporters of the thesis that a certain language creates a mode of thinking for the particular nation. He and his followers described language categories and means as the ultimate source for the expression of thought. This way, a person cannot think of a notion, if it is not present in the language he/she speaks. Herder’s opinion was further developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) who differentiated two separate concepts of worldview. In German they are called “Weltansicht” and “Weltanschauung”. The first was understood as the ability of the mind to percept the world through language and express the knowledge in linguistic concepts, while the second was a subjective notion of personal ideology which is not necessarily language-bound. Therefore, whereas the first mentioned notion would be common for the people of a certain nation, the latter was seen as a unique individual worldview. Humboldt believed that a person’s thought can be developed due to the learning of foreign languages, providing a new perspective for the familiar notions and introducing some new ones absent in the native language.

According to him, “it is possible for the individual to escape [the language circle] only by stepping into a different one.” (as cited in Pavlenko, 2014, p.3) Therefore, he supported the previous statement of Herder, stating a language basically formed all the thoughts of a speaker. Hence, the only solution to extend one’s thought limits was seen in the learning of different languages. However, probably most famous argument in the language and thought theory belongs to Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). Their ideas were utterly similar and expressed nearly at the same time. They were united accordingly and are commonly known as the “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis”. These two researchers expanded the previous theories, claiming that “Human beings do not live in the objective world alone... but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society” (as cited in Pavlenko, 2014, p.9). This thesis presents society as a dependent unit, creating its social categories due to the language means available. Whorf found confirmation to the theory in learning the languages of Native American tribes, in particular, the language of Hopi. He discovered that many notions present in those languages do not find their reflection in English. Even if the subject matter is the same, words denoting the subject may bear completely different connotations, shaping the thoughts on the subject. The simplest example is that Hopi language has two separate words for water.

“One word... means water in a container. The other... means water in the sea, water in a pond” etc. (as cited in Barnard & Spenser, 2010, p. 627). Practically, it means that the representative of a Western culture, being a native English speaker, would make no distinction between the notions of still and running water, having no word to dwell upon. In contrast, a Hopi speaker would be confused by the English word “water”, requiring a clarification of the notion. The “Sapir-Whorf hypothesis” took a prominent place in the language and social studies, suggesting that every existing social category is made possible only by the use of language. However, many researchers have contradicted the theory since its appearance. Therefore, the opposite views should be also mentioned here, for the clarity of the issue under discussion. The end of the twentieth century was marked by prevailing skepticism regarding the influence of language on thought. As Amorey Gethin puts it, “Thought is not based on language.” (Gethin, 1999, p.32) To him and many more researchers, the link between language and thought is obvious, but it is opposite to the one presented earlier by Sapir and Whorf. Namely, “without thinking humans could not produce language.” (Gethin, 1999, p.32) The supporters of the given view claim that cognitive processes are primary, while the means of their expression are only of secondary importance. People often think about the objects or processes which they do not know the word for. In terms of lexicon, the representatives of the same nation may have poorer or richer vocabularies, but it will not hinder them to ponder over a certain notion. The existing, yet unknown, word can be conveyed descriptively, with the help of gestures, drawings, associations etc. Besides, many newly coined words, neologisms and borrowings enter the lexicon yearly, describing both newly created objects and existing processes. It proves that the thought is possible without any language means to express it. Furthermore, once the idea settles in someone’s mind, the expression for it can be created.

Many scientists believe the eighteen-century theories described above greatly limit the importance of human intellectual processes. Julia M. Penn (1972) concludes, “To equate thought with language as Humboldt did is to deny the possibility of thought without language.” (p.21) It would also deny the presence of thought for the babies, hearing and speaking impaired people, mentally challenged patients or any other categories unable to articulate their thoughts. However, thoughts are the operations of a mind, not a verbal apparatus. Furthermore, the extreme statement of language being the prerequisite of a thought suggests that there was no human thought behind the creation of language. Even the creators of the linguistic relativity theory “could not ascribe the origin of language to the divine”; even though Humboldt did assume that a super-human force called Geist (Spirit) was responsible for language creation. (Penn, 1972, p.18) Fierce criticism of the extremities of the language relativity supporters forced most of the scientists to turn to the milder assertions, claiming that thought influences language. The claim is far more justified, and supported by powerful evidence, especially in the realm of the social studies.

## **2. Sociology, Language, and Gender**

Many sociologists prove that peculiar language inherent to every separate nation not only represents but also influences its social order and realities. According to Wardhaugh (2006), “the sociology of language is trying to discover how social structure can be better understood through the study of language” (p. 13). The examples of how social stratification of the population is reflected in the usage of standardized language are numerous. For instance, upper and middle classes tend to have higher level of education and use official standard version of the language more often. At the same time, lower classes can be characterized by using slang, dialecticisms and colloquialisms.

The marginal strata of the population may be easily recognized by using pidginized varieties of language. These general tendencies also obviously influence public thought. A person is likely to be classified to a certain social group or class judging by their speaking habits, vocabulary choice, grammar use and stylistic peculiarities of the speech. The language here is one of the key factors, prevailing over the initial judgment based on appearance or clothing. Since language is learned in the very young age, a child accepts the way of expression peculiar for the social group he/she grows up within as the only acceptable. Basic speech habits adopted on the subconscious level remain, even after the external attributes of a social group are changed. They also linger in the collective consciousness in the form of prejudices and labeling. Researchers widely discuss the role of language in formation of the social concept of gender. Many scientists agree that biological factors do not play the main role in the construction of gender notion. The concept is chiefly constructed by means of communication. Therefore, language is one of the social tools establishing one's gender identity. There is a special branch of research called critical discourse analysis, which is "committed to examining the way language contributes to social reproduction and social change". (Talbot, 2010, p.117). Great attention here is paid to the significance of gender based titles, names of the professions, differences in polite addressing etc. Taking into consideration the existing controversies in language and thought discourse, it is no wonder that many disputes still arise regarding the role of language. Whereas some researchers treat it as a product of social conventions, others consider it a source of existing gender roles.

Gender projection begins working long before a baby is born. It is noteworthy that the first projection means are linguistic ones. On some stage of pregnancy parents begin to wonder whether a baby is a boy or a girl. They change the impersonal "it" into the gender related pronoun "he/she" while thinking about their child or addressing the baby in conversations. The process continues with the choice of name, which almost always also bears clear gender connotation, except rare exceptions applicable for both genders. Verbal means are complimented by other external signs of gender such as: clothes coloring and patterns, distinctive toys, choice of accessories, haircuts, ear piercing etc. The system of social formation of gender is complex; it includes the distribution of household duties, labeling certain behavior as appropriate only to male or female and so on. However, most of the gender differences are deeply embedded in language. Comparable to the centuries-long language development, feministic movement and gender equality are still rather new conceptions. Long history of patriarchal social order is reflected in the names of some professions in English. Namely, there are many professions and occupations traditionally ending in -man such as: fireman, spokesman, businessman, salesman, anchorman, chairman, congressman, clergyman, fisherman, sportsman, nobleman, policeman, repairman etc. Analyzing the spheres of action, one may see that "-man" professions are usually those associated with political or social power, provision, danger or physical strength. That is a vivid example of socially constructed gender role attributed to the male part of humanity. The societies using such occupation names expect their men to be physically much stronger than women, which is partly conditioned by biological factors, however, is not universally true. They also suggest men to be more aggressive, risky, adventure-prone and competitive.

Again, to some extent these qualities are predisposed by hormonal peculiarities, but due to the social norms reflected in language they would be expected from every man, in spite of his genetic inclinations. The notions of social power, leadership and providing for one's family are prescribed to men by long-rooted patriarchal systems rather than biological factors. According to Talbot (2010), "a key element of hegemonic masculinity" is "the breadwinner role" (p.176). Nevertheless, the changing economic conditions and "feminization" of the workplace in the West led to the changes in profession naming. The gender-based endings were substituted by neutral: -person, and -officer. Introducing such linguistic alterations not only influenced public acceptance of female career opportunities, but also alleviated the social imperative for male breadwinning.

The examples of femininity representations in language differ from those displaying masculinity, but are not less numerous. Whereas the society demands men to support their families materially, women are supposed to provide care and moral support. Their main functions are of wives and mothers, which can be seen in the term "maternity leave" or considering the negative connotation of the word "spinster" compared to the rather positive one of a "bachelor". Social pressure for young girls to get married is still quite sensible and can be traced in language. The word "spinster" is now a legal term for a single woman, although it reflects negative attitude or pity towards young unmarried females, as in the word combination "old spinster". The newly-coined term "bachelorette" becomes more widespread due to popular culture and is aimed to put single women on the same footing as male bachelors.

Word contextual usage clearly shows that the attitude to single men is quite appropriate if not approving. Consider the terms eligible bachelor, bachelor party, and confirmed bachelor etc. Besides, the term is historically connected to the knighthood and chivalry and is also used for the education degree, which adds more honorability and recognition to the word. Further examples of feminine gender role limitations may be found in the professions naming as well. The occupations prescribed to women linguistically are usually those connected to service, care, displaying beauty or artistic inclinations. For instance: stewardess, waitress, maid, nurse or midwife. Despite the ongoing movement towards gender neutrality in the workplace, the language traditions betray social expectations to the working women. They are not anticipated to hold leading posts or acquire great social power, but perform rather decorative and submissive functions.

### 3. Linguistic Gender

When discussing gender and language, one should note that the notion of grammatical gender does not always refer to biological sex. As Weir (2014) puts it “grammatical gender is merely a way for partitioning reality into different sets of things on a grammatical basis.” In fact, many languages have three or more grammatical genders that refer to many classes of things. For instance, The Australian language Dyirbal has four gender classes, including a gender for women, fire and dangerous things; a gender for most animate objects, including all men; a gender for edible fruit and vegetables; and a fourth residual class of things that are not classified in the first three. Other languages like the Nakh-Daghestanian language Batsbi spoken in Georgia have even more intricate gender systems where eight different gender classes can be recognized. Five productive gender classes and three nonproductive genders called in quorate genders. What’s interesting is that Batsbi has a small number of verbal prefixes that agree with objects or subjects: v-, b-, d-, y-, and the way to tell the gender of a noun is the combination of these four prefixes that it takes in the singular and plural (Weir, 2014).

In other languages where masculinity or femininity is assigned to objects, no inherent reason was found to justify the classification. While some researchers may attribute it to the fact that sometimes the grammatical genders of some nouns are reflected in the properties of their referents, it is most certainly not always the case. Boroditsky & Schmidt (2000) maintained that people perceive an inherent masculinity or femininity in objects, independently of the language they speak, and for this reason claimed that speakers of English who had no prior exposure to foreign gender languages, when asked to assign a gender to nouns, they should agree among themselves, and also with the gender assignments of other “gender” languages (as cited in Foundalis, 2002). Boroditsky & Schmidt (2000) conducted a study which supported their claim. They found that English speakers’ intuitions about the gender of certain nouns correlate with the gender assigned to those nouns in languages such as German and Spanish. However, when Foundalis (2002) conducted the same study in order to reproduce the same results, their claim did not stand. While speakers of English in Foundalis’s study agree among themselves in the way they assign masculinity or femininity to nouns, they disagree with every other speaker of the gendered languages in question in the world.

Analyzing the linguistic gender peculiarities of other widespread languages, one can see that the attitudes to both genders differ from country to country, which is reflected in word usage and forms. For instance, unlike English, French categorizes most words within a dual-gender framework. There “gender is usually conveyed not only by the third-person pronouns ... but also in adjectives and past participles” (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008, p.149). For the French speakers it means they are obliged to label themselves and the people around either as a man or a woman. Holmes and Meyerhoff (2008) denote such language discourse as “performative”, as its usage performs a function of gender role formation. Speakers are obligated to gender themselves by the vocabulary and syntactic structures in a restricted way and label themselves in the traditional roles of men and women. Holmes and Meyerhoff (2008) note that in literary works, English writers are able to create genderless characters in their works where no grammatical clues are given to indicate the gender of the protagonists. This is made easy by the fact that morphological gender in English is limited to the distinction between he/she, his/her, his/hers. This is particularly difficult to achieve in languages like French and Arabic.

For instance, in a sentence like *‘la vieille femme est assise’* (“the old woman sat down”), gender is indicated four times. First, in the definite determiner *la*, then in the form of the adjective *vieille*, in the lexical item *femme*, and once again in the form of the adjective *assise*. Hence, the method of avoiding a “he/she” form by substituting it with a neutral “them” used in English does not apply in French or Arabic. Accordingly, the gender of the subject(s) should be always clearly marked.

Much like French, Arabic is a “gender language”, or a “formal gender language”; it arbitrarily assigns gender to nouns. For example, in Arabic the chair is masculine, and the table is feminine. Moreover, Arabic third person pronouns are gender-marked both in singular and plural forms. However, only the female forms are the “marked forms”; Atiqah Hachimi (2007) notes that “only feminine words are morphologically marked for gender, as most, but not all of these, carry the feminine suffix -a. Masculine words, on the other hand, carry a zero suffix, they are thus unmarked for gender” (as cited in Vicente, 2009, p. 11). Some scholars argue that the difference in the linguistic representations of male and female forms is the reflection of the sexist ideologies of the societies where they were produced.

According to the view, the symbolic and social power of the masculine gender was embedded in the grammar of the language. Others argue that the sexist connotations were attached afterwards to the grammatical classification. Ibrahim (1986) concludes that “grammatical gender is merely a means for classifying nouns according to their suffixes without in the beginning any allusion to sex; the sex reference of gender was always posterior to the emergence of grammatical gender” (as cited in Vicente, 2009, p. 11). In recent years, the categorical, fixed, and static conceptions of gender have been abandoned in favor of more dynamic, constructivist ones (Davies & Elder, 2004). This is partly due to the fact that modern day societies have started to recognize individuals who do not wish to be classified within the confines of the traditional gender system. This includes transgenders, gender fluid or gender queer individuals in general. According to Holmes and Meyerhoff (2008), “This view of gender as performative has become a key tenet of queer theory, which investigates and analyzes the naturalizing narratives of ... and the various sexually liminal figures who do not fit into this traditional framework” (p. 149).

Davies & Elder (2004) further add, “The very existence of gendered identities that do not correspond to dominant notions of masculinity and femininity attests to the constructed, as opposed to the natural, character of gender and to the greater agency ascribed to social actors under the “performativity” thesis. “ (p. 305). Being the language of societies dedicated to religion and traditions, Arabic leaves even less space for the expression of transgender or gender neutrality. It is hard for a person to express the notion of transgender or gender fluid individual, as the language norms force one to choose one of the traditional dual genders. As Susan Erlich puts it “these same cultural norms render other gendered identities inappropriate or unintelligible, and often subject to social and physical sanctions and penalties.” (Davies & Elder, 2004, p. 305). In most languages where the third neuter gender exists, it is usually used for inanimate objects or animals. This way, referring to a person in a neutral way would degrade and humiliate them. The fact that the majority of languages deny gender neutrality for human beings reflects the prevailing negative attitude of society towards gender minorities. The above given examples illustrate the wide scope in which language supports the existing gender and class differentiation within a particular society.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis is partly justified in the modern world, but only to the extent where the language greatly influences the public opinion. Having analyzed the existing linguistic and psychological arguments, one can see that the thought itself is a separate notion and it may arise without language involved. Otherwise, the origin of language would be connected with some super-human or divine nature, as in some religions. Besides, there are many instances when a person has a certain idea which they cannot embody in language means. Nevertheless, thoughts are dependent on language, being the most conventional instrument of their expression. Hence, each individual is limited in their communication experiences by the linguistic forms available. Despite the existence of thought, it may stay in at the subconscious level forever, unable to be uttered and thus shared. Further social and linguistic analysis of the peculiarities of different languages spoken in different countries reveals different attitudes toward both genders.

While some languages are gender neutral, others assign genders to different objects. Some scholars maintain that the difference in the representation of feminine and masculine forms is the result of the established ideologies of the society in question while others assert it is random. Furthermore, a language is a powerful tool for every society, keeping the existing social order without an effort. Significant social changes may be easily traced due to the thorough analysis of the language they use. For instance, women rights movement and ratification of gender equality in the Western world have reflected in the increasing gender neutrality of the English language, which is universally considered international one. In less liberal and more patriarchal societies the gender distinctions are rigid and preserved. Therefore, the language contributes to the formation of traditional gender role models and class stratification.

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