UNIT 6 : GENDER AND LANGUAGE

UNIT STRUCTURE

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you will be able to -

- know about the relationship between gender and language usage.
- Know the approaches to understand the relationship between gender and language

6.2 INTRODUCTION:

Language and gender is an area of study within sociolinguistics, applied linguistics, and related fields that investigates varieties of speech associated with a particular gender, or social norms for such gendered language use.This unit tries to discuss the effect of any and all aspects of society, including cultural norms, expectations, and context, on the way language is used, and the effects of language use on society.

6.3 BRIEF HISTORY ABOUT THE STUDIES ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Studies on the relationship between language and gender (the latter understood to mean a biological and a cultural category) have had a long tradition. The first extensive studies on language-gender relations were conducted in the mid-1970s at the University of California. Marina Yaguello's book *Les Mots et lesFemmes* was published in Paris in 1978. With time, studies of these issues transformed into a separate, rapidly developing area of knowledge, which included strictly linguistic studies, describing the differences in language use between women and men, and studies of the cultural roles ascribed to gender. This range of issues surfaced in the United States in the years of intensified feminist movements and the simultaneous interest in the specificity of cultural differences . The sociologically focused American studies of minorities were followed by papers on language and communication styles in local subcultures.

The existence of correlations between language and gender has been noticed practically from the very start of systematic reflection on language and speech, though they were interpreted differently in different periods of history. For example, Cicero believed women's speech to be the main carrier of linguistic tradition, as it was the women's task to teach children to speak properly, though - paradoxically - women's ways of speaking were considered a rather inferior counterpart of men's speech (Baron, 1986). The explanations of the differences were mythological, sociological or biological, depending on the viewpoint of the time. Baron says that the biblical myth of the creation of woman from Adam's rib largely contributed to female language being considered as less perfect (secondary), which was reflected among other things in the belief that all feminine gender forms were derived from masculine forms (Baron, 1986, p. 78). Female speech was not denied creativity, but in general it was the male patterns of speech that defined linguistic standards, as they were more lasting and more prominent (speaking in public). With time, social inequalities began consolidating due to the belief in the biological equipment

of the genders, and thus beliefs regarding the language of women and men were related, openly or otherwise, to assessments of the value of gender, its social role and cultural identity. Differences in the way women and men speak are unquestionable; It can be observed at every level of organization of language and speech: on the morphological, lexical and syntactic planes, and in the use of different styles and communication strategies. In some cultures, these differences are so obvious that they appear in the form of diglossia, which consists in using two separate languages whose distribution is strictly defined by the binding rules of conversation (social communication). Diglossia is most often treated as a variation of bilingualism, a case of functional specialization of different ethnic languages, one of which plays the role of the "high" language (for public speaking), and the other is the "low" or private language used in informal communication situations (Heintz, &Polañski, 1968; Ferguson, 1977). A permanent separation of situations in which men and women speak a different language (in the sense that is very close to an ethnic language), allows these kinds of cases to be considered an unusual form of diglossia, in which the social function of different languages is additionally correlated with gender. Such situations are known to linguists and researchers of culture. For example, it is a fact that "among the Indian tribes in the Antilles, women's language preserves words from the language of a long extinct community, while men's language is that of the conquerors, e.g.among the Carib, the men speak Carib while the women speak Awak" (sHeintz, &Polañski, 1968, p. 292) . The marked dependence of means of communication upon the gender category is present in the Yana language (Sapir, 1963). Yana is one of the languages of North Californian Indians forming a closed community which is internally varied in cultural terms. There are four dialects of Yana: Yahi, Northern, Central and Southern. Sapir writes that Yana does not have the category of gender, instead using specialized inflexional forms in this role whose usage is strictly defined by the situation. The main reference system governing the distribution of these forms is, in fact, the gender of the persons involved in communication,as the forms are different when a man talks to

another man and when a woman communicates with another woman, and different when a woman talks to a man or a mans peaks to a woman. In the Yana language, there is a strict distribution of dialects which defines the conventions of communication. Like classical rhetoric in Europe, the customs of the North Californian Indian community defines precisely what can be said, to who and how. In Yana, there are separate word forms denoting actions performed by women and men. Interestingly, feminine forms are three times more frequent in the Yana community than masculine forms: Men cannot use feminine forms in any situation, while women may use masculine forms for quoting men's words or for telling myths in which one male hero says something to another. This shows that women in this community have their unique social status, different from the men's, related to the means of representing forms denoting gender. One could conclude that the functional differentiation between male and female conversational customs is a derivative of the culture in which the Yana language exists, and not the intellectual makeup of the genders, given that the women may speak in the same way as the men. Since gender differences are reflected on the plane of dialectal diversity of means of communication, gender differences being in line with linguistic differences, relations between gender and language can presumably be described primarily as stylistic differences related to the choice of communication strategies that are subordinate to specific goals and confirm the gender-related, and thus the cultural identity, of the speakers. The issue of differences in language usage, considered in the context of gender, are obviously linked to the issue of value judgment in language (Golab, Heinz, &Polañski, 1968).

6.4 APPROACHES TO STUDY THE RELATION BETWEEN GENDER AND LANGUAGE

Two major approaches which are employed to understand the relationship between gender and language they are as follows ::

- Deficit approach: Deficit is an approach established by Lakoff (1975) that introduces a 'women's language' as classified by linguistic

trends in women's speech. This approach created a dichotomy between women's language and men's language.

- Dominance approach: Dominance is an approach whereby the female sex is seen as the subordinate group whose difference in style of speech is seen as a result of male supremacy and also possibly an effect of patriarchy.

6.5 GENDER OF LANGUAGE OR GENDER IN LANGUAGE

Feminist linguistics in the 1970s and 1980s quite often, and rather eagerly, hurled accusations at the language system. They firmly argued that differential attitude towards different sexes was determined by the language system. Arguments were provided by observations of the category of grammatical gender which is the most obvious expression of sex differences and that exists in most languages. This was due to the fact that in languages grammatical gender corresponds to natural gender but asymmetry in treatment of the sexes opens up the possibility of far-reaching speculation or interpretation. This was perceived as one among many signs of the sexist attitude of language itself, which was for too long governed by men. Therefore language as gender neutral is contended. Sexuality was also treated as a feature of the language system which governed the thinking and world of langue. Different works in this direction affirmed this fact. For example the work of Roland Barthes on the absolute domination of the language system over speech, on the totalitarian nature of the language system reflected this fact. Baron had analysed English grammars of the 18th century in this context. He wrote that the statements on grammatical gender contained in those systems display a marked relation to valuation of the sexes. He observed that in the work on grammar written in 1751 (Hermes, on a Philosophical Inquiry Concerning Universal Grammar) by James Harris assigns masculine gender to the sun because it radiates light, and the feminine gender to the moon because this celestial body only shines with reflected light, so it is passive, like a woman .



Rolland Barthes was born in the year 1915. He was a French literary theorist. His works have influenced different schools of thought like structuralism, semiotics, social theory, anthropology and post-structuralism.