

# **LANGUAGE, POWER AND POLITICS IN INDIA: FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF GENDER AND MARGINALISED**

**Bijender Singh**

*Indira Gandhi University, Meerpur, Rewari, Haryana, India*

## **ABSTRACT**

*Language plays a very crucial role in the lives of human beings. It has been used as a tool to dominate, subordinate, exploit, enslave, and colonize others at different times and places. Consequently, it empowered some sections of society and disempowered others. It represents people, culture, and shapes their ideas which consequently create social, political, religious, and economic structures. Language is power, life, and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation (Carter, 1998). Taking into account, language as a power of domination and liberation, this paper attempts to examine how language dominates on the axis of caste, class, and gender and how the other language liberates the subjugated from the trauma of being humiliated by the tool of language. It also tries to explore how dominated sections perceive the use of language and why. The study reveals that Indian languages have been used only as a tool to dominate and hardly serious efforts are made by the linguists to gender neutralize Indian languages. Contrarily, English linguists have attempted to make English gender-neutral and it has helped all marginalized sections to progress economically, socially, and linguistically in addition to boosting their confidence, self-respect, knowledge, and identity formation. English, though colonial language, has proved a great tool in decolonization.*

## **KEYWORDS**

*Power, Language, Gender, Dalits, Politics, Marginalised*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Language plays a very crucial role in the lives of human beings. It is mainly used to communicate in addition to express feelings, and state of mind. This process has helped people to dominate, subordinate, exploit, enslave, and colonize others at different times and places. Consequently, it empowered some sections of society and disempowered others. In the power game, it shapes ideas which consequently create social, political, religious, and economic structures. Carter (1998), in this regard, argues that language is power, life, and the instrument of culture, the instrument of domination and liberation. The domination that exists in society happens to be on a diverse axis i.e. gender, class, caste, race, color, and ethnicity etc. Lakoff (1973) underlines that language is sexist. Words are the basic units of language. Underlining the perception of the world through linguistic

---

system Whorf, in his famous essay “Science and Linguistics”, argues that “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. Words can influence others. It has power and energy. These have the power to heal the wounds as well as these words can hurt others. Thus the linguistic system has evolved over the period from a biased mindset and turns the ideas into words. The omnipresent bias in the world is gender bias. The discrimination on the axis of gender starts at home and from birth and continues till death, or to say even after death ritualistically in India, at home as well as outside equally. The gendered notions and practices are imprinted in the mind and psyche of people from childhood through language as almost all the languages of the world have gender-specific words and this development of gendered language starts from ancient times. According to Aristotle, the Greek philosopher Protagoras used the terms masculine, feminine, and the neuter to classify nouns, introducing the concept of grammatical gender. Thereafter gender appeared in almost all the languages i.e. French, German, Greek, English, or Indian languages, etc. Twain regarding gender in the German language wrathfully comments:

To continue with the German genders: a tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female—tomcats included, of course; a person's mouth, neck, bosom, elbows, fingers, nails, feet, and body are of the male sex, and his head is male or neuter according to the word selected to signify it, and not according to the sex of the individual who wears it—for in Germany all the women have either male heads or sexless ones; a person's nose, lips, shoulders, breast, hands, and toes are of the female sex; and his hair, ears, eyes, chin, legs, knees, heart, and conscience haven't any sex at all. The inventor of the language probably got what he knew about a conscience from hearsay (Twain, 2006).

In Hindi also, similar to German, the shoe has a gender — joota is masculine while jooti is feminine. Clothes too are perceived in gender perspective such as— kurta is masculine and salwar feminine. Likewise, all other nouns have gender representation. Thus, not only living things but non-living things in Hindi have gender centric representation. Likewise, verbs are used in accordance with the gender of nouns or pronouns. There is a strictest agreement between noun and verb according to gender as in ‘Raam jata hai’ and ‘Sita jati hai’ wherein the verb changes according to the gender of the noun.

The gender in language categorizes human beings into two cultural groups—male and female. Both groups have different linguistic attributes in their use. As our language infers attitude and meanings Lakoff states that “Our use of language embodies attitudes as well as referential meanings. ‘Woman's language’ has as a foundation the attitude that women are marginal to the serious concerns of life, which are pre-empted by men. The marginality and powerlessness of women are reflected in both the ways women are expected to speak and the ways in which women are spoken of” (Lakoff, 1973, p. 45). The marginality of women and centrality of men is visible in the tone and lexicons in use. Undoubtedly, society marks the sub status of women linguistically. Tennen (1990) extending the argument of Lakoff (1973) reveals that women use the language with a connection intimacy whereas men use it with the status of independence and in a dominating tone. Thus the communication between both, male and female, proves to be cross-cultural.

The communication in cross-culture which is between center and periphery whereby the existence of the periphery depends on the centre exposes the very conditions of women. In this connection, Morgan argues that “the very semantics of the language reflects women’s condition as they do not even have generally their names rather bear that of the father until a woman exchange it for that of

a husband” (Morgan, 1977, p. 106). These given names are not just names but a culture, language, thinking, and perception which gradually turns women into the non-entity. Since the dominance of men is all-pervasive, the positions and profession are in their sole domain consequent to which the words for designations are invented such as Chairman, Airhostess and Nurse, etc. This has led to binaries of the terms i.e. master and mistress; bachelor and spinster; actor and actress; widow and widower, etc. All such sexist words mutilate women’s self-identity and respect.

This leads to turning women into silenced or reticent beings. Spender regarding the silence of women argues that the differences in conversational styles turn out women being effectively silenced. Gender dominance is perceptible in the conversation between male and female which does not only occur in terms of tone and selection of the words but in interruptions also. Zimmerman and West (1975) in their study on interruptions in conversation found out in their 11 recorded conversation that 46 interruptions were used by men while only two by women. In addition to it, women not only are generally silenced and interrupted but they use less directive language as compared to men. So, power in praxis points out this difference whereby a man easily uses assertive language which seems natural to him. As a matter of fact, Spender also identifies power with a male patriarchal order in his theory of dominance.

This dominance does not prevail only in gender cases but in every sphere where hierarchy exists based on any social constructs i.e. caste, class, gender, race, color, and ethnicity. This governs equally the speech patterns of both dominant and dominated equally along with social behavior. Bama underlines “her grandmother’s Phatti’s respectful address to even little Naicker children as ‘Ayya, Master,’ and run about to do follow his orders” (Bama, 2012, p. 17). While “tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about” (Bama, 2012, p. 16). Evidently, a Dalit is never treated as a grown-up by upper caste people and contrarily an upper-caste little child behaves like a grown-up before Dalits and commands unhesitatingly a Dalit old enough to be equal to his/her grandparents. Moreover, this infers the gender difference also. This leads to creating tension between the people or groups. With regard to it, Gumperz (1978) supports that the result of differences in systems of conversational inference and, the cues for signaling speech acts and speaker intend creates problems among the people of different ethnic groups.

This leads to males of sexist society use imperatives and directives for the females. The sexist use of language gradually conditions women accordingly and they consequently internalize the sexist language and their treatment as a child forever. But, in the discourse of the feminist wave of the 60’s and 70’s, the use of sexist language remains center stage. It protested against all those nouns which were gender-specific. Consequently, some amendments were made in the western world but in countries like India, the conditions remained static or to say it worsened. In Hindi, when women were absent in politics, the word neta for leader existed but after the feminist movement women entered into politics and the word netri for the women leaders was invented. Thus when the developed countries were on a mission to gender neutralize the language, Indian languages were in process of gendering the languages.

Likewise, in English, the singular use of ‘you’ as thee is obsolete for centuries and now archaic completely. But in the Indian language it still is in use as tu, tum and tumhara which is mainly used for all powerless i.e. women, children, and other marginalized groups but not reciprocally. The address of a woman has always been sexist irrespective of a woman’s education, power, and designation. Pawar (2003) highlights the prejudiced sexist address to women in the patriarchal

relations. A woman is addressed as the ‘mother of the son’ rather than the ‘mother of a daughter’. The husband, brothers-in-law, and father-in-law are always supposed to be addressed in the plural. Pawar’s *sasu* dictated her to “always address your *dirs* [brothers-in-law] with respect, in the plural. Never call them using the singular form even though they are younger than you!” (Pawar, 2003, p. 196)

Chauvinistic society demands a woman’s conformity to plural address. Women’s inadvertent abidance to patriarchal codes makes women to flaunt motherhood of son(s) while motherhood of daughter(s) is treated as a poor thing. The thought ‘*aurata kē li’ē jamānā kabhī nahīm badalatā*’ [nothing changes for a woman ever] (Chopra & Chopra, 2003) is true at all. The change is the only law of nature but in society, it is very slow if not totally absent. In the case of other marginalized groups such as Dalits, it seems even slower. Pawar indicates that there is hardly any change linguistically in the treatment of women in the home and at offices. A woman does not get treatment equal to their counterpart even though she has equal/higher—education, designation, salary and powers. She articulates that a man becomes “Bhausahab’ or ‘Raosahab’ as soon as he promotes but a woman remains simply, “Bai’ without the ‘sahab’ even after her promotions!” (Pawar, 2003, p. 235). When a Dalit sits in power it is impossible to receive due respect. “Why should she expect to be addressed as Bai Sahab?’ ‘Why should we ask for her permission?’” (Pawar, 2003, p. 235). the mainstream people grumble.

She realizes in the flux of languages the significance of English for Dalits and women. In absence of English, the use of more personal ‘you’ *tu, tum* is used in Indian languages for women and Dalits but the same ‘you’ in English becomes sweet and beautiful and respectful. She underscores that these days everywoman, housewife or working girl, has become ‘Madam’ because of the tremendous influence of English which has reached our kitchens. Because of this verbal promotion, even a woman peon is now addressed in the plural form, with a show of outward respect. Thus “English has generated self-respect, which finds expression even in the lowest of the low” (Pawar, 2003, 235).

The age of globalization, commercialization, and liberalization has helped women feel respected to some extent. But the anti-English movement in India raises questions as to why the Indians, all mainstream people, protest against the English language. Socialists like Lohia were fanatically “anti-English and launched an ‘Angrezi Hatao’ (remove English) agitation in 1957” (Aiyar, 2014). Likewise, the Jan Sangh in 1963 “launched a violent agitation for abolishing English not only in official use but in shop signs, street signs, and even car number plates” (Aiyar, 2014). All these agitators wanted Hindi as the official language. But C N Annadurai, first DMK chief minister of Tamil Nadu, who is remembered mainly for ending Congress and Brahmin hegemony, perceived north Indian Brahmins as imperialists. Therefore, Aiyar states that the DMK denounced the move to abolish English as brazen Hindi imperialism.

In addition to it, Annadurai did not want the English proficiency of elite Tamil Brahmins to become an advantage, therefore, attempted to limit their access to educational institutions and state government services through a stringent quotas system. He wanted English for keeping the Hindiwallahs at bay, by ensuring that Tamilians were not disadvantaged in all-India exams, for educational institutions and, the civil and defence services. This is why Annadurai was criticized in his lifetime by the Jan Sangh, which spearheaded the anti-English agitation of the 1960s. “One of

those agitators was Atal Behari Vajpayee. How ironic that the same Vajpayee should now boast about a Shining India based on comparative advantage in English” (Aiyar, 2014).

The current government also attempts to impose the teaching and reading of Sanskrit and to cast off foreign languages. Alike Annadurai and Shepherd (2013) a Dalit-Bahujan thinker, understanding the relevance of English for marginalized sections recommends English Education to compete with the mainstream people. He, delivering a valedictory speech in an international conference on the theme of ‘Literature and Marginality’ at

IGNOU in 2013, emphasized that Dalits must provide only ‘English education’ to their children even if they have to sell their house or property for it. While Prasad (2011), a self-trained anthropologist and social psychologist, goes a step further and lays the foundation stone of ‘English goddess,’ an English Centre, for Dalits in the hope to spread this message to every Dalit. "She is the symbol of Dalit renaissance," says Prasad. Lack of English education disempowers marginalized sections, Dalits especially, which is apparent in the case of Pawar’s children. The children experienced the gap between their lives and that of their friends. They could not speak about these things to us explicitly. They felt some kind of emotional insecurity, a void inside. All three of them felt that we should have put them in English-medium school. . . . Had English been sown in their flesh and blood, things would have been easier for them. If you do not keep up with the times, you get beaten” (Pawar, 2003, p. 308)

Thus, it can be concluded that language is a means of domination. To establish this domination forever, the language is created which fulfils that purpose subtly through the use of nouns, pronouns and verbs, etc. and the marginalized social groups internalize that inadvertently. Consequent to the feminist movement against sexist language some languages such as English neutralized gendered nouns etc. but in Indian languages, particularly Hindi, did not make any great change. The English Language, the study proves, boosts the marginalized person’s confidence and respect and the dominant section persons are helpless to give respect. Moreover, English not only empowers marginalized sections but brings them at par with the dominant sections. English being a means to end the cultural and social hegemony, which was used by the dominant section of India as a tool to free India from the English imperialism in the colonial period, the same section from the dawn of independence have been protesting against the English language. This shows clearly the colonial mind-set of the dominant section in India on the axis of gender, class, caste, and religion. Through Indian languages, this section may continue its hegemony for a further period. In nutshell, English is the tool of decolonization in modern times and thus empowers all who have been disempowered for centuries boosting their knowledge, confidence, self-respect, and identity formation.

## REFERENCES

- Bama. (1992). *Karukku*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Benjamin Lee Whorf. (1964). Science and Linguistics. In *Language, thought, and reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Carter, A. (1998). *Shaking a leg: Collected writings*. New York: Penguin Group.
- Chopra, R. (2003). *Baghaan*. India: B. R. Films.

- Geeta Pandey. (2011). An “English goddess” for India’s down-trodden. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-12355740>
- Gumperz, J. J. (1978). *The conversational analysis of interethnic communication* (In E. Lama). Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and women’s place. *Language in Society*, 2(1), 45–80.
- Morgan, R. (1977). *Going too far: The personal chronicle of a feminist*. New York: Open Road Integrated Media.
- Pakzadian, M., Tootkaboni, A. A., & Koo, A. C. (2018). The role of gender in conversational dominance: A study of EFL learners. *Cogent Education*, 5(1).
- Pawar, U. (2003). *The Weave of My Life: A Dalit Woman’s Memoirs*. Columbia: Columbia University Press.
- Shepherd, K. I. (2013). Valedictory Speech. In *international Conference on Literature and Marginality*. New Delhi: IGNOU.
- Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar. (2004). How English survived in India. Retrieved from <http://swaminomics.org/how-english-survived-in-india/>
- Tannen, D. (1990). *You just don’t understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers Inc.
- Twain, M. (n.d.). The Awful German Language. Retrieved from <http://www.languagerealm.com/german/awfulgerman.php>
- Zimmerman, D., & West, C. (1975). Sex roles, interruptions and silences in conversation. In *Language and sex: Difference and dominance* (Thorne, B.). Rowley: Newbury House.



© 2020 by the authors. Submitted for possible open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).