# Feminism, Language Choice and Discourse Practice A Pakistani Perspective

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**Abstract:**

*The present study focuses on investigating the nature of linguistic choices made by Pakistani women in interpersonal discourse in the background of feminism. The relationship between attitudes, social backdrop and language was explored. It was hypothesized that the exploitation of linguistic choices in the spoken discourse would correspond the explanations provided by Dominance approach about the difference in language use between men and women. For the purpose of the present study, we observed and analyzed thirteen groups of subjects (women), varied in number of subjects. All the participants were students of university level, approximately aged between18 to 25. Data were obtained by recording the conversation. The participants did not belong to any particular social class. The topics of their conversation were various, and ranged from personal and general to quite universal and emotional. Results indicate that the extensive uses of linguistic choices, significantly, support the feminist view of language use, and that there are certain distinctive features that characterize women language. For instance, there is a considerable correlation between the power structures in society and language use.*

Language is a highly structured system of lexical and syntactic choices or combinations of form and meaning. Gender is engrained in these choices and in their use in communication practice in variety of ways (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). Even the gender is so deeply rooted and intricately organized in our social order, in our understanding of ourselves and others being a part of a well-knitted social system that we cannot perform our social roles successfully without taking enough gendering behavior into consideration. This paper investigates the gender-related linguistic behavior in Pakistani society with special reference to the lexical and syntactic choices made by Pakistani women in interpersonal discourse.

Dichotomous gender, as central to our social practices, cultivates the idea-that "*being masculine and feminine is something we perform rather than something we acquire*" (Christie, 2000). Gender's life long process starts from the very first day of our sex determination. This perspective emphasizes that biological differences and anatomized characteristics between men and women are identified, elaborated, compared,

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judged, extended and even exaggerated, negatively or positively, in the process of the construct of gender. These differences, codified in the language, range from the intonation patterns to the ways of performing different acts which reaffirm social arrangements. As in the words of Cameron (1997): "*men and women do not simply learn and then mechanically reproduce ways of speaking appropriate to their own sex, males and females learn a much more complex set of gendered meanings and both sexes are fully capable of using strategies associated with either masculinity or feminity"*. Convulsive gendered dynamics in language imply that social features of any given situation determine what type of language is most appropriate for an individual (Freed & wood, 1996; Fadyen, 1996; Mulac, 1998), so every individual is a product of a particular socio-linguistic phenomenon. Most of the Pakistani languages like Urdu, Punjabi, Saraiki etc. (known to the present authors), identify two grammatical genders; masculine and feminine, which provide a constant re-avowal of the biological gender identity of the speaker. It is difficult to take Pakistani women into account as a single unit or speak of them in their entirety because the social, economic, regional, religious, linguistic and class differences are embedded so profoundly in Pakistani society that does not allow any such generalization. We are concerned here, specifically, with educated, middle class, urban and mostly Urdu speaking Pakistani women to analyze the speech norms especially which standardize and regulate the societal behavioral mode of language use in spoken discourse. Presumably, linguistic difference between Pakistani men and women is the reflection of an intricate network of social, political, cultural and religious practices within society in general, and manifestation of less secure, relegated and atypical position of women specially.

With regard to this, two main approaches i.e. *'Difference approach'* including Maltz and Borker (1982) and Tannen (1990, 1994), and *'Dominance approach*' including Spender (1980) and Lakoff (1975) provide a wider framework to observe and examine the gender related linguistic phenomenon. *Difference* approach suggests that men and women speak differently due to differences that are implemented during the socialization process, while *Dominance* approach articulates that these differences are the result of women's oppression by men and by a patriarchal social system, and that women's subordinate status is reflected in the language they use and the language used about them (Talbot, 1998). In spite of different paroxysmal explanations offered by both approaches, dominance and difference approaches have polarized gender, resulting in an assertion that men speak one way whilst women speak another. (Mullany, 2000). Virtually, when we look deep into our social hierarchy and observe women in their dichotomized way, we find ourselves confronted with belligerent social dilemma that; *'Men have power because men define meanings and men define meanings because men have power*', thus cognizant of more vulnerable, more depreciated, and powerless position of women, as an individual being at social level. In the words of Pande (2004): "*…language and social reality become cause and effect at the same time. Language reflects social reality about the position of women while the social identity of women is in turn performed through the language*". Hence, the realities about the asymmetrical function of the cultural or social deflation of women in Pakistani society specifically,

and of the feminine in general, as gendered behavior in our endocentric society is not just learned by women but taught and enforced, strengthen the '*feministic'* view of gender and language, and thus the dominance approach. For example; gender studies from 1970's illustrate that men interrupt women in conversation more often than the reverse (Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann & Gibson, 1988, Natale, Entin & Jaffe, 1979; West & Zimmerman, 1983), and hence espouse the notion that men use interruptions as a discourse stratagem to dominate women. More or less we all come upon expressions like; 'you think/talk like a woman', uttered by men deliberately, which appear to be insulting or downgrading woman's image. Such gender discriminatory and enigmatic speech acts energize the idea of female subordination or submission in our male-chauvinistic society, so strongly, that puts a stop to their progress on all sides and cramp their own style, personality and individuality.

Women in our society are commonly blurt out as talking excessively and trivially (McConnell-Ginet, 2003), reiterating that there is a pre-existing coherent code of subjection or 'women's language', operational at all levels i.e. semantic, lexical, syntactic, pragmatic and discourse etc. Moreover, it has been so enmeshed into the fabric of our society that it sometimes become invisible and therefore uncontestable (Stopler, 2003).

As feminists uphold that women's language use is attributable to their low power and position to the exclusion of various other dimensions vis-à-vis men. Some gender studies held that the speech of women or people with lower status includes the markers of powerless speech e.g. tags, hedges, intensifiers, qualifiers (Crawford 1995; Edelsky, 1976; Kipers 1987, Krauss & Chiu, 1998; Mulac 1998). They may be employed to evade confrontations (Smith, 1079).

Lakoff (1975), radically, focuses on gender difference to syntax, semantics and style, and suggests converse to classic sociolinguistic assertion that women use a language closer to standard form. He describes the following linguistic features which characterize women's speech. The internal consistency and coherence of these attributes can be observed as their hedging or reducing and boosting or intensifying effects:

- Lexical hedges or fillers,
- Tag questions,
- Rising intonation,
- 'Empty' adjectives,
- Precise color terms,
- Intensifiers,
- 'Hypercorrect' grammar,
- 'Super-polite' forms,
- Avoidance of strong swear words,
- Emphatic stress.

The present study examines the prominent linguistic features in the Pakistani women's speech as identified by Lakoff.

Table: Figures for 'Hedging Devices' Used by Women

| Total Number of Subject (Women) | Total Number of Hedging Devices | Total number of Units | Average | Hedging Devices per 100 Units |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 56 | 739 | 10,968 | 739/56=13.19 | 6.77 |

In calculating these figures, we have considered utterances as units rather than the words of each utterance.

*'Hedging devices'* are semantically empty phrases. According to Lakoff, lexical hedges and fillers are used by women as one way of sounding feminine, less doctrinaire, and consequently reflecting their position as are of no great shakes in society. Interestingly, women's use of hedges arises out of a fear of seeming too masculine by being assertive, indecent and saying things directly as socially endorsed norms of linguistic behavior do not permit them to attain the control of the floor and dominate conversational counterpart and especially if it is a male. Such devices are used to speak tentatively, side stepping firm commitment and the appearance of strong opinions. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003).Women sometimes deliberately use hedging devices to avoid a hierarchical structuring of relationship (Baalen, 2001). On the other hand, Holmes's (1996) viewpoint is that the use of hedging devices by women, frequently, signals the softness, to assuage or mitigate utterances not to impair the addressee's feelings rather than as devices for expressing uncertainty and indecision. The analyses of Pakistani women's speech also support the idea that women lead in the use of hedges in general discourse. The common hedges or fillers which have been found frequently in use in the Pakistani women's speech are: *'uff Allah', 'khawamkhwah' (fornothing), 'waqei' (really), 'darasal', (infact), 'hae Allah!' (o God!), 'uf allah!', 'khudanakhwasta', 'kiunke' (because), 'wo kesy' (how), 'mera nhn khayal k—' (I don't think so),'dhar de', 'la holwala'(zounds), 'ho hae', 'o ho', 'aisy he', 'fazul', 'Allah na krey', 'oh mere Khudaya!'(oh my God), 'ghalibun' (probably), 'asal men' (actually), 'mere khayal mein—' (I think), 'kesy kahun' (how to say), 'Allah muaf krey' (God forbid), 'hae men mar gae' (oh! I am dead!) 'khan jaun' (where to go), 'sadqy jaun', 'choro' (leave it), 'toba he', 'hae o Rabba!' (o God!), 'kuch nahin' (nothing), 'Allah toba', 'kiyun nahin' (why not), 'han jee' (o yes), 'naa jee' (o no), 'aur' (and), 'tau', 'phir' (then),'wesy' (by the way), 'bas' (stop), 'muje kya pata' (I don't know), 'bhar men jaen' (go to hell), 'uf'!, etc.* Some of English words also serve this purpose lucratively such as*: 'I know', 'you know', 'ok', 'sort of', 'kind of', 'I mean', 'I guess', 'well', 'by the way', 'just', 'for the sake of',* and non-fluencies like *'umm', 'uh', 'eehm', 'eeh', 'err', 'aaa' 'nnn', 'unhnn' etc.*

*'Intensifiers'* are used as boosting devices in discourse. These devices are supposed to weaken a speaker's strength of feeling (Talbot, 1998). Some of the commonly practiced intensifiers in Pakistani women's speech can be listed as; *'very', 'so', 'too much', 'great', 'good', 'zabardst' (excellent), 'abhe ke abhe' (just now), 'puri trah se'*

*(completely), 'pura'(totally), 'right now', 'bilkul sahih' (right), 'boht ziyada' (too much), 'kesy nahin', 'bilkul ghalat' (totally wrong), now, 'bilkul nahin' (not at all), 'abhe nahin' (not yet), 'too good', 'very bad', 'men khud' (myself), 'mera' (mine), 'uska'(him/her)* etc.

*'Tag Questions'* are used to turn a statement into a question, and Lakoff argues that women were the primary users of tags and that tags express a speaker's insecurity, lack of commitment or inability to take stock ( Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). She takes them as indications of endorsement (cited in Talbot, 1998). Fishman (1983) observes that women put significant efforts in, thus support the conversational needs of men. They do so at their own expense, especially in informal conversations women are expected to invest more efforts to keep the conversation going on by asking questions. Analysis of the discourse of Pakistani women in both overt and covert asymmetric encounters has shown a higher proportion of tags uttered in an attempt to be facilitative in conformity to with the situation, and higher proportion of those from men to be confirmation-seeking. (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003), or they also endow an addressee with an easy entree into a conversation especially being women. For example: *'kesa?', 'he na?', 'kya kethi ho?', 'Is'nt it?', 'kiyun thek nahin?', 'maslun?', 'kiyun he na?', 'can't he/she?', 'kya krein?', 'had he na?', 'isn't like that?', 'don't you?', 'isn't he/she?', 'phir?', 'kitni Ziadti he na?', 'disgusting na?', 'right na?', 'now?', 'what to do?', 'aisa nahin?', 'fine na?', 'then?', 'when?', 'am I right na?'* etc.

According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet:

> There are many reasons why women might often position themselves as conversational facilitators…conversational facilitation is, on the surface, "nice" cooperative behavior, thus offering a socially approved mode for women's coping and resistance in particular social contexts. There certainly are many other complexities….One may adopt an apparently tentative stance toward content for primarily social reasons of the sort Lakoff suggested: …in order to construct the other as authoritative and to demur from assuming authority oneself. Yet the much same effect is produced by someone who is trying to construct the self as non-arrogant, respectful of others and open to their potential contribution. (2003: 172)

In most of the Pakistani languages *'intonation'* rises at the final point of questions. As with the tag questions, this is supposed to turn a statement into a question, thereby weakening the force of it and making the speaker sound 'uncertain' and 'sometimes 'capricious'(Talbot, 1998). Lakoff identifies such use of question intonation on sentences that are not questions as '*inappropriate question intonation*'. She categorizes it one of the vital elements of the style emblematic as 'women's' and people with little or no power. Such intonation has a high-rising tone at the end of the sentence. For example:

'oh! ab kya ho ga?' (oh! What would be happen now)

~

| | |
|---|---|
| 'phir kab tak?' | (then till when) |
| ~ | |
| 'agar aisa na hua to!' | (if it wouldn't be so!) |
| ~ | |
| 'ab kya karen?' | (what to do now ) |
| 'teen baje?' | (at three'o clock) etc. |
| ~ | |

Women's speech manifests the excessive use of *'super-polite'* forms and avoidance of strong expletives to sound more feminine, as female language is deemed to express the delicate femaleness and softness through linguistic behavior. In our society, supportive role is assigned to woman, turning it into an unconscious submission to authority and lunatic fringe to follow the compassionate, understanding stereotype (Pande, 2004). Therefore, women are expected to use a language more sophisticated and civilized in compliance with societal standards and devoid of any unpredictable attempts at appropriation of the floor in discourse. As women have been socialized to be 'docile', well-mannered and passive (Lakoff cited in Crawford, 1995). Such expectations compel women to attain a linguistic performance lacking in self-confidence, courage and vantage, stereotype, humble, submissive, and easily influenced in accordance with the social and cultural norms and paraxis, which purvey definitions of '*feminity*' and '*masculinity*'. So, Pakistani women's speech also demonstrates an unflagging exertion to fulfill the requirements for such standards of *'femaleness'* by using the super-polite forms and assuming tentativeness of content unequivocally and unmistakably. For example: *'every thing will be all right na', 'nahin nahin phir kya hua—' (nothing to worry it's ok), 'nahin koi baat nahin na' (there is nothing to say), 'Its ok na', 'phir kya hua' (doesn't matter), 'maalum nahin', 'to kya hua', 'so sweet na', 'leave it please', 'so nice of you', 'I am really thankful' etc.*

In women's speech *'indirect requests'* can also be noticed significantly which communicate things like; lack of authority and power, insecurity, deference and uncertainty. Women construct indirect requests as indices of female gender, signaling social and cultural identity being a woman. In the words of Crawford (1995); *"tentative and indirect speech may be a pragmatic choice for women. It is more persuasive, at least when the recipient is male, less likely to laid to negative attributes about personality traits and likeability, and less likely to provoke verbal attacks"*. It is noteworthy that in Pakistani society women are able to produce the type of behavior that is generally categorized as '*assertive*' but women's this assertion is taken as a negative attribute, so is discouraged and regarded sometimes as a rebellion against societal and even religious norms, especially by the male members of society. They are labeled as wonky, ill-bred, disdainful and even noxious in some situations.

Lakoff asserts that women generally have much larger color vocabularies than men and that '*men often deride women's attention to subtle color distinctions…. As with eating practices, home decoration and clothing practices are sites for constructing class and gender*' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003). The use of '*precise*

*color terms'* is another linguistic feature which is attributed to women's speech. From male point of view, the use of such precise terms is beneath their notice and such fine distinctions are trivial and not so much important to take into account seriously. Some of the most commonly used such terms by Pakistani women are: *'laal' (red), 'gulabi' (pink), 'aatshi gulabi' (shocking pink), 'hara' (green), 'saleti' (grey), 'jaamni' (purple), 'mauve', 'khatta' (yellow), 'aasmani' (sky blue), 'zardai', 'ma.genta' (reddish purple), 'surmaei' (blackish grey), 'beige' (light brown) etc.* Some '*distinctive utterances'* are used by women in their speech enormously which contribute to convey certain emotions and feelings like irritation, joy, sadness, cautiousness, repentance, thoughtfulness, excitement etc. For example: *'this is too much' (irritation), 'kya bdtamizi he?' (anger), 'toba astghfar' (satire), 'had hoti he' (irony), 'afsos' (sadness), 'ho haey' (amazement),* and the use of interjections like *'o`h no' (sadness), 'oh `no' (repentance) 'oh God' (helplessness), 'oh yes!' (excitement), 'oh Khudaya!', 'hai Allah ji' (remembrance) 'aa ha!' (vehemence), and use of empty adjectives like; 'v.bad', 'terrible', 'sweet', 'cute', 'nice' 'grogeous', 'disgusting', 'excellent', 'beautiful', 'superb', 'tasty', 'v.sad', 'stupid', 'bdtamiz', 'nonsense' etc.*

Considerably, there are some '*Arabic terms'* also which are used excessively by Pakistani women in their speech to articulate the feelings of thankfulness, happiness, contentment, disgust or dislike, satire, praise etc. The ironical use of these utterances is very common and gives a special kind of feminizing touch to Pakistani women's linguistic demeanor. Further more, the use of such utterances indicates the significance and impact of *'religion'* in the lives of women as being part of a '*Muslim*' Society. *For example: 'Mashallah!' (happiness), 'Astaghfirullah' (repentance or irony), 'Alhamdullilah' (thankfulness), 'Nauzbillah' (contempt), 'Bismillah' (investiture), 'Subhanallha' (praise), 'Innalillah (endurance & tolerance)', 'Inshallah' (will, hope & faith in God) etc.*

'*Emphatic stress'* is exploited by women to avoid communicative failure within the limitations imposed by the codified socio-linguistic conventions in a gendered society. Lakoff states that women oftenly over emphasized because they anticipate not being taken seriously. For example, such words in Pakistani women vocalizations serve best for this purpose:

'boht' (too much), 'kitna' (how much), 'sachi' (really), 'bilkul' 'excellent' etc. , like; 'kitna pyara mosam he' (weather is v. pleasant), 'boht khubsurat libas he' (this dress is very beautiful) etc.

The '*address term'* usage by Pakistani women appears to be related to addressee's age, profession, class, relation with the addressor, etc. In '*formal'* conversations, mostly, women use first name of girls and boys, and elder people are addressed by titles *(Mr., Madam, Miss/Mrs*.) plus surnames. While in '*informal'* conversations, especially between friends address terms like *'yaar' (dear), 'jaan' (sweet heart), and* nick names have been noticed. Moreover, words like '*listen'* and *'excuse me'* have also been observed functioning as address terms.

*'Euphemism'* is another linguistic device utilized in women's language to avoid profanities by employing circumlocutions or such expressions which help them to adopt a linguistic behavior devoid of vulgar or tabooed linguistic items. The use of bold expressions and adaptation of openness regarding matters related to sex or some other sensitive issue invites allegation of being manner-less, less-virtuous and outspoken against women. Interestingly, still in many existing Pakistani smug sub-cultures, wife is not allowed to utter husband's name as uttering the name of the husband is a *'taboo*' for a modest, commendable, virtuous and an ideal wife. So, it is the ferocious circle of socio-cultural norms, warts and all which tie women's linguistic practices down.

Lakoff denotes that the use of '*swear words'* by women sounds '*unladylike*' or *'less feminine'*. However, here we find a contradiction with reference to Pakistani society. In Pakistani women's speech swear words have been found excessively in use. Virtually, this phenomenon provides a testimony to the more vulnerable and subservient role of women in society. In Pakistan, women emphasize more upon using such words in order to minimize the degree of uncertainty, to convey strong feelings and solidarity, as helping devices in an attempt to be listened seriously by the addressee, to increase the degree of volubility and to yield the propositional meanings, presuppositions and entailments to the utterances. They are put into practice to weaken or strengthen the force of an utterance in discourse. For example: *'Allah ki kasm' (by God), 'kasm se' (I swear), 'tumhari kasm', 'blieve you me', 'trust me' etc.*

Women use '*standard forms, hypercorrect grammar'* and *'prestige variants'* commonly as they are more status conscious, less secure socially and psychologically, and more likely to be judged on appearances (Trudgill, 1972), as compared to men. Moreover*, 'refinement'* and *'sophistication'* are much preferred to be sound more feminine. As the words of Talbot (1998) vindicate this very fact; *"women are more correct than they ought to be.'* This tendency is due to the verity that women speech is not expected to be *'rough*' at all.

The uncontested gendered dynamics in language style, as articulated in Pakistani society in general and specifically women's speech, endorse that gender cannot be identified as the sole responsible factor as men and women perform different roles in society, and explanations of sex or gender differences in speech behavior, referring only to the status or power dimension, are unsatisfactory. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that gender is the most influential, effective and inherently communicative process. By groping the attributes of women's language during interpersonal discourse, there have been found, in the words of Baker, Mehl & Niederh (2003) offer some more *stable aspects of personality* i-e dependence, gentleness and low-aggression (Edelsky, 1976) more self-disclosing (Hay, 2000) sympathy and language concerning social and emotional behavior. All such attributes manifest women's consideration for *gender-appropriate* ways of language use. Gender is constructed or enacted through discourse and the common characteristics in Pakistani women's speech like *'uncertainty'* , *'tentativeness' or 'politeness'* provide us with enough evidence that gender helps the

people to create or subsist their identity or display language behavior apposite for a '*male*' or '*female*' in existing socio-linguistic phenomenon. The same as Holmes (2001) asserts: *'Gender and language may also determine what people notice, what categories they establish, what choices they believe are available, and consequently the way they believe'*.

To sum up, Pakistani women's speech tend to provide a great support to Lakoff's classification of the features of women speech. This phenomenon supplies a fact that women are conscious of their subordination or classification as individuals with little power in society, and that they are aware of the social or cultural significance of linguistic variables (Talbot, 2003). The tendency of using more standard forms can be viewed as their struggle against constructing, or reinforcing typecast behavior or identities. As Key (1975: 103, cited in Pande, 2004) assumes: *"It would appear, then that women have not universally accepted their position in lower ranks, and that out-of awareness, and in a socially acceptable and non-punishable way, women are rebelling"*.

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