INTERPRETATION OF GENDER AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCT AND ITS MANIFESTATION IN SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

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Abstract

This article analyses the theoretical interpretation of the concept of gender in contemporary humanities and its social and linguistic dimensions. Unlike biological sex, gender is presented as a socio-cultural construct, understood as a system of norms, stereotypes, and roles established by society. The study examines the mechanisms through which gender develops during socialisation, its intrinsic connection with sociolinguistic competence, and its influence on verbal behaviour across various social contexts. Furthermore, the paper explores the components of the gender concept as proposed by Pushkareva, Goffman's theory of ritual interaction, and the empirical research of Mulac and colleagues, illustrating the manifestation of gender in communicative practices. The article argues that gender differences are not biologically determined but socially and culturally conditioned. Consequently, it concludes that a comprehensive study of gender, integrating social, cultural, psychological, and linguistic factors, is essential for a thorough scientific understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords

gender, socio-cultural construct, sociolinguistics, gender identification, verbal behaviour, stereotype, gender asymmetry, communicative strategy, social institutions, linguistic analysis

In contemporary humanities, the issue of gender has emerged as a significant area of inquiry within social, cultural, and linguistic research. Unlike biological sex, the concept of gender is considered a socio-cultural construct, representing a system of norms, stereotypes, roles, and behavioural models established by society. In every society, notions of gender begin to develop from early childhood through family upbringing, the educational system, mass media, daily communication, and social institutions. Consequently, gender is often perceived as a natural and immutable phenomenon, whereas in reality it is a historically and culturally variable social construct.

In any society, gender categories are formed from the initial stages of socialisation. They are transmitted from one generation to the next through daily interaction, humour, family upbringing, educational institutions, mass media, and other social organisations. As a result, gender often appears to be a self-evident concept, seemingly natural and even scientifically grounded for many individuals.

Contemporary scholars seek to uncover the social and cultural constructions underlying this "common sense" understanding, as well as to analyse the mechanisms by which gender is accepted as a normative and conventional phenomenon. Such scientific inquiry necessitates a critical reassessment of prevailing stereotypes and aprior assumptions regarding gender and calls for evaluation of the concept from alternative theoretical perspectives.

Researcher K.I. Megela defines the concept of "gender" as a set of social and cultural norms through which society categorises individuals according to their biological sex. This concept constitutes part of speakers' sociolinguistic competence, encompassing the norms, rules, and characteristics involved in designing verbal messages in various social interactions. In each social context, specific types of verbal behaviour correspond to particular social-stylistic preferences, along with a distinct set of linguistic means.[Strizhneva, 2018]

Gender studies focus on stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and femininity, the verbal behaviours of individuals associated with a particular sex, the linguistic expression of gender categories, the presence of gender asymmetries, and related phenomena.[Kirova, 2009]

According to Pushkareva, the main theoretical and methodological principles of the gender concept are based on four interrelated components:

1. cultural symbols;
2. normative statements expressed in religious, scientific, legal, and political doctrines that determine possible interpretive directions of these symbols;
3. social institutions and organisations;
4. individual self-identification.

Thus, the term "gender" is used to describe the social, cultural, and psychological characteristics of "woman" as opposed to "man," encompassing everything that constitutes signs, norms, stereotypes, roles, and typical traits deemed appropriate by society for individuals categorised as male or female.[Kirilina, 2021]

According to I. Goffman, gender forms an integral part of numerous rituals. The entire ritual life of society is framed by the "male–female" dichotomy. Names, forms of address, voices, hairstyles, clothing, and self-presentation are all markers of gender identification. The performance of ritualised actions is regulated by society; the ritual norms known to all participants structure individuals' expectations of symbolically reproducing the social order and their readiness to behave accordingly.[Kirilina, 2021]

In the 1980s, a more balanced understanding of gender emerged, not only addressing issues related to women's history and psychology but also encompassing a comprehensive study of femininity and masculinity and the associated social and cultural norms. In the 1990s, a movement focusing exclusively on masculinity appeared, alongside the recognition that expressions of masculinity vary across different societies.[Kirilina, 1999]

Another distinctive study in the field of language and gender is the work by Mulac and colleagues, "Differences in Male and Female Speech in Children's Television and Their Attributional Consequences", which aimed to identify the different speech patterns of male and female characters in popular children's television programmes of the 1980s. According to the data collected by Mulac et al., significant differences were observed in the ways male and female characters used language. The thirteen features identified by Mulla and colleagues are as follows: vocal pauses, verbs, uncertainty verbs, action verbs, present-tense verbs, clauses beginning with adverbial phrases, justifiers, evaluative adjectives, concrete nouns, appended subordinate clauses, grammatical errors, and politeness markers.

Based on these features, male characters more frequently exhibited vocal pauses, action verbs, present-tense verbs, justifiers, subordinating constructions, and grammatical errors. Female characters, on the other hand, more commonly displayed general verbs, uncertainty verbs, main clauses, evaluative adjectives, specific nouns, and politeness markers.

Thus, gender constitutes a crucial component of sociolinguistic competence, directly influencing the formation of speech behaviors, stylistic choices, and communicative strategies across various social contexts. Stereotypical perceptions of masculinity and femininity, ritualized and symbolic practices, as well as everyday interactions, all reflect the role of gender in symbolizing and reproducing the social order.

At the same time, empirical studies—particularly in the fields of language and communication—indicate that while certain tendencies exist in male and female speech, these differences should not be regarded as strictly biologically determined; rather, they are phenomena shaped by social and cultural conditions.

Therefore, it is necessary to analyze gender through a comprehensive approach that integrates social, cultural, psychological, and linguistic factors. Such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of the essence of gender, a critical reassessment of prevailing stereotypes

and normative assumptions, and a scientifically grounded evaluation of its role within society and language systems.

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