

# Undoing Gender Stereotypes in Hindi\*

Anjali Pande (New Delhi)

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## Abstract

The basic prerequisite for using any language is the willingness of the speaker to follow the rules of the game. Socially defined norms of language use then tend to set the limits within which one can express oneself using this language. Whether these norms set the speaker free or whether they act as constraints in a free expression of Self, is a question that will be raised in this article. Using examples from Hindi, the paper highlights the role of such norms of language use in perpetuating gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes get constructed as part of a broader process of social differentiation but the site of this construction is to a large extent the normal everyday discourse. A normal classroom discussion amongst university students in New Delhi thus shows how deep rooted such stereotypes are and how effectively they get perpetuated through language and linguistic norms in Indian society. The basic premise in this paper is that meanings are context-specific, they are not fixed and they get created in discourse. But since language use is one thread in social fabric, it serves as an instrument to construct and perpetuate gender stereotypes. The paper is more of an essay on issues that became obvious about gender stereotypes during two classroom discussions. It should not therefore be taken as a study into the deeper aspects of gender representation in Hindi.

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## 1 Introduction

As member of a particular language community the speaker is more often than not negotiating the space prescribed to her believing that she is using the language as a neutral means of expressing the Self. Through this process of using a particular language for giving voice to her subjectivity, she becomes party to the agreement to abide by the norms laid down by that language community. This tacit alignment with the socially sanctioned norms of linguistic behaviour serves to strengthen the role of discourse as a site for construction of gender stereotypes. Research on gender and language structures as well as studies on language and construction of social identities have clearly shown that language cannot be a neutral medium for expression of Self. (cf. Cameron 1995, Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 2003, Mills 1995, Romaine 1999, Thorne/Kramarae/Henley 1983) Meanings are created and imparted in the process of language use. Language comes with its social, cultural and historical baggage and is to say the least as loaded as any other system of symbols. But it is in the context specific

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discourse that the individuals interpret meanings and views from these symbols. This paper thus, considers language as a two pronged device, on the one hand giving voice to identities but on the other hand constructing identities suited to the social palate. One is not denying that language could be a medium to transcend gender dichotomy, to break out of hierarchical social structures or to subvert the enterprise of social differentiation itself. However, it must be made clear that examining the cultural roots of language use calls for an awareness of the role that language plays in perpetuating established stereotypes. As Marlis Hellinger points out "contrary to the assumption that language merely reflects social patterns such as sex-role stereotypes, research in linguistics and social psychology has shown that these are in fact facilitated and reinforced by language." (cf. Hellinger 1984: 136) It is in this broader frame of looking at the interplay between language as manipulated and manipulating and its speaker as a product of that particular linguistic environment that this paper sets out to analyse gender in language.

In the context of this paper the term "speech norms" stands for socially accepted ways of language use, especially those which regulate the social behavioural aspect of language use in spoken interactions. For other language related social norms the broad term "linguistic norms" is used. It is not possible to speak of Indian women as a uniform entity since the economic, social, regional, religious and linguistic differences in India are too wide to allow such a generalisation. The reference here will be specifically to urban, educated, middle class, Hindi speaking Indian women as the language being described here is Hindi, spoken mainly in North India.

Many of the major Indian languages like Hindi and Punjabi which belong to the Indo-Aryan language family identify two grammatical genders -masculine and feminine, while some languages from the same language family like Marathi and Gujarati have a third neuter gender. The differentiation based on biological gender works at different levels in a language, for one within the grammar of that language the biological gender is marked morphologically, secondly at the lexical level, and thirdly outside this grammatical frame it is marked through norms of language use. As Hall and O'Donovan point out, in Hindi "the habitual, progressive and intransitive perfective verb forms (...) show gender concord with the subject." (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 236) This is true of many Indian languages, which means even while using a first person singular pronoun the biological gender identity needs to be clearly stated for the subject in the sentence. The Hindi speaker has to identify her biological gender through the addition of biological gender specific markers to the verb stem or through different suffixes and verbal auxiliaries. Adjectives are inflected depending on the grammatical gender of the nouns and inflecting postpositions mark out the grammatical gender of the main noun, for example, inflecting postpositions that function as genitive, locative, and ablative markers agree with the gender of the main noun. The feminine and masculine self reference in Hindi thus becomes a constant reaffirmation of the biological gender identity of the speaker. The focus in this paper is, however, on the gendered norms of language use. The generic 'man' in Hindi is also the masculine noun *aadmi*, which means 'man'. The other alternative is the masculine noun *insaan*, which means 'human being', but in non-generic usage this noun is not used to denote female human beings.

## 2 Normative social expectations in language use

It is vital for the members of a speech community to conform to the prescribed linguistic behaviour to establish their social identity. Speech including gestures and body language represents a special act, the first signal going out to the society constructing the gendered identity of the individual. In their study on the so called "third gender", the *hijra* community of India, Hall/O'Donovan (1996) discuss how the *hijras* switch between their male and female identities (see also Hall 2002). *Hijras* or 'eunuchs' as they are termed by many researchers are raised as boys but eventually go on to live as women, in most cases in ghettoised, socially marginalised communities. The way they define their femaleness through both language and body language is of significance to understand social markedness of female linguistic behaviour. The most obvious difference that is observed as "deviance" in these boys is their linguistic behaviour which sets them apart as effeminate. They are termed as *baiylo* meaning girlish, where it is mainly the linguistic performance that is judged to be deviating from "the sex-roles, norms and values expected of men in Indian society" (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 235). Then in the *hijra* community there is a conscious effort to acquire the "female way of speaking" and the initiates are termed "ill behaved or ill mannered" if they fail to acquire this female verbal behaviour. Irrespective of their linguistic variety speech communities in India show a certain level of uniformity with regard to the definitions of and differentiation between male and female linguistic behaviour. Female body language is deemed to express the delicate femaleness through harmonious movements devoid of abruptness, devoid of any unpredictable attempts at appropriation of the floor in a conversation. In fact, the rules prescribed for a subordinate body language like not trying to establish a direct eye contact are touted as ideal behaviour for women. Of course, when it comes to legitimisation of social hierarchies, language and speech norms are only one of the many other complex social control mechanisms at play. Socially marked linguistic behaviour expected of women concurs with the general stereotype notion that a docile and demure woman is virtuous. A woman who expresses her wishes, her ambitions is seen as being too self-centred. The voice of the ideal self-sacrificing Indian woman is one of silence. Girls are told to keep their voices low while speaking and not to smile or laugh too much. A smile can get interpreted as sexual innuendo or as a sign of frivolity in a girl.

As it will become clear in the discussion in section 7.5, the body language of women is generally subject to closer scrutiny than that of men. Stereotypes are used to draw conclusions about her morality based on features like the way she looks at the partner or her hand gestures etc. The male body language differs from the female body language even in the way a man occupies physical space. A woman is expected to sit with her legs drawn together whereas the man is expected to "spread out" occupying in most cases more physical space than a female speaker. Looking at gender specific norms related to linguistic behaviour as part of the whole social power relations could help understand why imposition of these stereotypes becomes so important in every speech community. At different points, for different purposes a speaker has to negotiate her gender identity in conversations and depending on the power equation she manages to use features of both stereotypical elements; a woman police officer uses more "masculine" features in her work interactions in this sense and is more "feminine" when

talking with her family. As Hall and O'Donovan state, "(...) women and men of many communities manipulate linguistic expectations of femininity and masculinity in order to establish varying positions of solidarity and power." (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 258)

Gender stereotypes affect the expectations of a particular linguistic behaviour placed on women but they do not spare the males either. It is this stigma of a lower social status attached to a "female way of speaking" in a man which teaches men to conform to the prescribed norms. Violation of these norms of speaking marks out the *hijras* as social outcasts even before they start forming their gender identity. A subject in the Hall/O'Donovan study reveals that she views "gender as something to be put on in the way one would put on a *sāri* (a dress traditionally worn by Indian women), an investiture which eventually leads to the acquisition of what she calls *aurat ki bāat* ('women's speech") (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 240). Similar transgression of norms of language use on the part of a girl invites immediate repudiation in the form of an allegation of being 'mannerless' (an expression commonly used in India ) or of trying to be like a man or it invites corrective measures in the form of parental scolding. The term *aurat ki baat* or 'the female linguistic behaviour' is complex, mostly constituted by context and other social hierarchical considerations like age and social status.

But there is a broad consensus in India on what can not be accepted as a female way of using language. The specific areas forbidden to "cultured" female Hindi speakers are curse words for obvious reasons but interestingly also uttering the name of the husband is taboo for a "good" wife. The wife is not allowed to utter her husband's name, perpetuating the socially higher position of the husband. Rajeswari Sundar Rajan (1993: 98) points out that the motive behind such prohibitions is to mystify and exalt the signified. Response to such exalted mystification is an immense respect for the husband and being a society where respect is equated with submission to subordinate status it is easy to understand why words like *patidevta* (literally meaning 'Husband God') and *pativrata* (a woman devoted to her husband) are still in currency in India.

### 3 Reflection of stereotypical gender notions in matrimonial advertisements

Though it is a rather simplistic argument that language or linguistic behaviour reflects social processes, the fact remains that the terms a society devises to define women reflect the social place acceded or denied to them. Interestingly enough, the denial of social space is sometimes realised by means of attributes which in normal case would designate a positive trait, for example, one just needs to pick up any Indian newspaper and look at the advertisements for matrimonial alliances. The common adjectives used to describe brides are *sophisticated, down-to-earth, with good etiquette, disciplined, soft-spoken, simple, compassionate, sincere, hard-working, adorable, smart, beautiful, takes interest in household work and possesses excellent cooking skills* etc. Clearly, the qualities highlighted through such advertisements reflect social expectations aimed at denying these young women any independent aspirations, portraying them as perfect "material" out of which to mould a wife. The gender stereotype of an ideal woman is reinforced by employing seemingly harmless vocabulary. In similar advertisements from bridegrooms one comes across adjectives like *serious, ambitious, driven*

*to prove himself, aggressive, decision maker, realistic, moderate, open minded, optimistic with broad vision* etc. Thus, the picture is complete, of a docile, homely female in a supportive role, and the "achiever" the "provider" male in the role of the decision maker. The underlying message conveyed in such texts is powerful not only because they reflect the social expectations, but also because they provide an attractive self-image for the women, an ideal, which when achieved guarantees them a place in the social hierarchy. Placing this creation of a social definition of 'woman' in a broader context by looking at it in terms of dialectics of power, it can be argued that here 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. Indeed, social reality is itself a social construct and not a given. It needs to be pointed out that the whole linguistic gender stereotyping is a socially constructed way of classifying and categorising members of the society. Discussing the power wielded through language use, O'Barr points out that "In attempting to understand the relations between language and power, it is important to keep in mind that there is no simple, single way in which the two are connected, nor is the connection limited to particular portions of the spectrum of social organisation. Rather, the evidence points to the conclusion that language is both a mirror of society and a major factor influencing, affecting, and even transforming social relationships:" (cf. O'Barr 1984: 265) In skewed power relationships the meaning of 'supportive' can easily change to 'subordinate'. If there is mutuality in playing the supportive role, the power relation gets balanced, but in case of gender relations in India the supportive role is permanently assigned to women turning it into an unconscious submission to authority. While the male counterpart in a mixed conversation can be 'ambitious, aggressive and decision maker' the female speaker in India is generally expected to play a supportive role, to follow the compassionate, understanding stereotype.

#### 4 Goddess or Doormat

There is no doubt about the exclusion of women from languages of power in institutional domains like religion and politics in India. Just a few years back women legislators voicing their frustration at the failure to pass the bill enabling women to have a certain percentage of representation in the parliament were shouted down and labelled *par katy* by male parliamentarians meaning 'women whose wings are cut', an extremely base comment associating short hair with the socially unacceptable behaviour assigned to "feminists". Viewing women who dare to challenge social sanctions as a threat to the set order is not new nor is it exclusive to Indian society. Deborah Cameron cites a study by Penelope Harvey in Peruvian Andes where "Andean women who abandoned tradition, symbolised by dress as well as the Quechua language, risked slurs on their sexual reputation, which could lead to social ostracism and violence." (cf. Cameron 1992: 201) In India, in a tradition where the birth of a girl child is equated to an eclipse or to a curse on the family,<sup>1</sup> where women are

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on depiction of the death wish for a girl child see: Death Wish for Daughters - Son Preference and Daughter Aversion in Bihari Folk Songs By Sangeeta Krishna  
<http://free.freespeech.org/manushi/131/deathwish.html>.

expected to suffer without complaint, one is hardly surprised to find that women challenging this social order do ruffle a few feathers.

On a different note, exalting women to a goddess is common in Hindi colloquial usage. A daughter is often referred to as *Laxmi* (the goddess of wealth) or a daughter-in-law is called *ghar ki Laxmi* ('goddess *Laxmi* of the house'). The fierce goddess *Durga* or *Kali* or *Chandi* is conceptually a way of sanctioning the female members of the society some space to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against them or to punish the perpetrator. In a recent article questioning the "manliness" of an opposition party and praising Indira Gandhi (ex prime minister of India) one columnist in a leading magazine comments, "the country is still paying for that insult to the woman who was once described even by her detractors in the opposition (...) as *Durga Mata*, and by others as 'the only man in India's Parliament'" (cf. Gill 2004). So depending on the context any act of courage or valour is seen either as "manly" or as coming from a goddess *Durga*, *Kali* or *Chandi*.

In such fluid use of mythological figures in everyday language a normal human identity of women can fluctuate between the extremes of the status of a goddess and a *paer ki juti* (footwear). Highlighting the dictum "it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicidal" Gandhi and Shah (1991: 325) suggest the strategy of finding a middle path, of using tradition to change mind sets. Here again the pivotal role of language in establishing dominant discourse as the given and therefore true becomes important. How does one subvert these social power equations using the same language that is to a large extent instrumental in perpetuating them?

## 5 Two ways of overcoming social normative restrictions of Hindi

In my view, there are two ways of getting around limitations imposed by a language.

### a) Subverting the meaning

On one of those rare occasion when I hired a *rikshaw*<sup>2</sup> to reach the university, the *rikshaw-puller*, a man much older to me, addressed me with *Saab* a word loaded with colonial legacy, a word replete with rigid social class differentiation, a word denoting nothing but absolute dichotomy of high versus low social status, a word used to address masters. And most importantly a word used to address only men in such positions. The female equivalent for *Saab* from the colonial times is *Memsaab*, which is already out of the current vocabulary except for depicting a servant-master relation or is used with pejorative intention to belittle a woman, meaning 'a haughty little miss'. Now this use of *Saab* made me acutely aware of the way language plays into the hands of its speakers defining territories in social interactions, assigning roles to the language users. Appropriating a gendered word this man had turned it into a gender neutral denotation of social class hierarchy. The word had acquired a new meaning in this context through its use. Whether one reacts to this subversion positively welcoming it as a strategy to overcome the handicap imposed by language or whether one

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<sup>2</sup> A tricycle pulled by a man, which can be hired to cover short distances. A common mode of transport in many Indian cities

takes it as a negation of the female identity as something that basically can not be in a socially higher position, is debatable. What becomes obvious is the fact that it is the social assumptions behind the language which impart meanings to words depending on the context. The word-meaning congruence is indeed not a one to one fixed relation. The final outcome is definitely more than the sum of the parts.

### **b) Code mixing**

The second way of dealing with limitations of a language is the widely studied phenomenon of code mixing, common amongst fluent bilingual speakers. It can be a part of the broader bilingual conversation strategy of switching between languages in the same speech situation, which is termed as code switching. Code mixing mainly includes mixing two languages or language styles in one utterance, using grammatical conventions of one language on to the other, or just mixing words from another language in specific contexts. In urban north India English is mixed with Hindi to get the mixed form called Hinglish, which is widely used by educated, urban social groups. Kachru (1984: 186) points out the case of the word *mond* ('widow') in Kashmiri language which has traditional negative connotations of a use restricted to abuses and curses. To neutralise such loaded terms speakers employ code mixing as a strategy, as shown later in the examples from transcripts in this paper (cf. Examples 4 & 5 Section 7.3).

## **6 The problem of giving a name to the man-woman relationship**

A man-woman relationship is a subject on which one reads in magazines and newspapers, particularly of the urban cosmopolitan English press variety in India. Of course it is an important topic in many a familial conversation, or amongst friends and relatives since as in any other society gender relations are an integral part of the social life in India. But man-woman relations before marriage or outside of the marital sanctions are not encouraged. There is less social acceptance of a man-woman friendship. The socially accepted relationship between unrelated male and female members of the same age is mainly that of a brother and sister. So in some universities, a male student from a senior class becomes a *Bhaiya* ('brother') and a female student from a senior class becomes *Didi* ('elder sister'). Amongst urban youth the word *dost* ('friend') is generally used to refer to both male and female friends. But there is still no semantically equivalent word for girlfriend or boyfriend in Hindi. Instead both these English words have been readily included in the urban vocabulary, since changing lifestyles and social relations demanded words to describe a type of male female relationship which was taboo earlier. Now giving this relationship a name is also problematic in Hindi for the simple reason that there is no commonly accepted word for a live-in relationship. It is possible to say *woh saath rahte hai* ('they live together') but then this expression could just as well mean the simple living together of anyone, so it needs an elaboration by specifying that the said two persons are living together without marriage. Mentioning that they are living together without marriage gives the whole situation and its expression a tone of breaking the social norms, or of doing something immoral. Most of the vocabulary referring to male-female friendship in Hindi is negative. The equivalent for love, *pyar*, is one alternative that can be used without

much negative hidden meaning, but it has a history of being a favourite word in Hindi movies mostly denoting love between a young man and a young woman. So what does one do to talk about a relationship or a feeling which belongs to the banned areas in a speech community? Something which can only be described in negative terms since the social taboo leaves space only for negative lexica.

## **7 Some examples showing stereotyped notions on gender**

In view of the preceding discussion this section will highlight how gender stereotypes in India get reflected in normal conversations. I will be presenting few examples from the transcripts from audio data collected in 2003 for my research on oral communication in German as foreign language in two universities viz. Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University in New Delhi, India. It must be made clear that the aim of this data collection was not a study of stereotypical gender notions. The students belonged to the age group 18 to 20, were in their second year of the Bachelor of Arts course, and came from urban, educated, middle class families. The languages they used are English, Hindi, Hinglish and partly German.

### **7.1 Purpose behind showing the film**

Two groups of these Indian undergraduate students studying German language in the two universities mentioned earlier were separately shown a short film portraying the loneliness in the life of the elderly and their need for companionship. One was an all female group, the other one was a mixed group. The aim was to document how a conversation based on a specific theme would develop if the socio-cultural context is foreign to the students. The focus of this data collection was thus purely on oral communication and use of the foreign language (German) and a gender aspect was not involved at any level. But while analysing these transcripts it became obvious that since the topic of discussion happened to be such, the stereotypical gender notions got expressed in these conversations. During the discussion of more than 90 minutes, students talked about gender stereotypes, old age related stereotypes and the societal pressures at work in India. Although each one of these students was well aware of the double standards used in judging women, through many of their comments they proved to be the products of the same gendered socialisation which they were criticising. In the following section these two aspects will be discussed using the transcripts:

- At the discourse level the speakers use code mixing as strategy to overcome linguistic restrictions of Hindi
- The views expressed by these students reflect gender stereotyping

### **7.2 Context of the film**

There were no dialogues in the film, only background music. The film is set in Germany; and the only characters are an old white couple. The story starts with this lady who is very lonely. In the house across the street one old man moves in and the woman starts observing him most of the time from behind the curtains. She then tries to attract his attention and he seems not to notice it. The woman buys a new dress and gets a new hairstyle. The story develops through a

chance encounter in a supermarket, where the man realises that there could be a friendship. In the final scene he goes over to her apartment with flowers, rings the door bell and waits. She hesitantly opens the door just as he sadly turns to go back. The film ends with the protagonists smiling at each other. Most of the scenes in the film depict the woman's loneliness. Both the protagonists are quite old and shown to be leading a secluded life without family or friends.

### 7.3 Presentation of a few examples

In the course of the discussion the participants found it difficult to express themselves adequately when it came to talking positively about a love relationship using Hindi. The topic of the film did provoke an involved discussion in Hindi, English, Hinglish and a few utterances even in German. For them the situation in the film was quite new and they readily imparted a romantic angle to the story in their interpretation. That precisely was then the most foreign aspect of the film, a romantic relationship between an old woman and an old man.

(In the transcripts:

F=female speaker and M =male speaker Overlap with the next speaker is shown with //

Commonly used transliteration is used for Hindi and loose translations in English are provided)

Example 1

F1: Short and cute love story (laughs)
F2: Es ist ein fantastisch Film...
F3: Es war gut... aber... es ist nicht so in Indien

So the reaction was: "It is nice, but it is not so in India". Calling the woman *verrückt* (mad) the students decided that the old woman was just waiting to 'catch the man'.

Example 2

F4: Die eine Dame... ist sehr sehr verrückt... (all laugh) Sie will alte Mann lieben.
F5: Die alte Dame war... hinter dem Mann (laughs)

Throughout the discussion the common refrain was how she being a woman could take initiative in starting 'something like this'. Students used a proverb *buddhi ghodi laal lagaam* ('old mare with red reins') to show how Indian society reacts if an old woman tries to act young.

Example 3

F1: usko dar tha ki shayad main jo kar raha hun woh thik nahin hain // isliye..	F1: He was scared, thinking, may be what I am doing is not right // so..
F3: ..... to usko dar nahi tha? Woh bahot besharam thi? (laughs)	F3: You mean she was not scared? [as if] She was shameless?
F6: Woh sharif tha	F6: He was sharif
F2: woh sharif nahi // thi?	F2: She was not sharif?
F4: ..... Woh bhi sharif thi	F4: She was also sharif

In the above conversation F3 tries to defend the old woman but uses a word *besharam* ('shameless') implying that a woman who is not scared of the society is shameless. The reply to this rhetorical question 'she was shameless?' gets is very interesting. F6 replies saying that the man was *sharif*, a word meaning 'of good moral character'. It becomes clear here that in the students' interpretation of the old woman's behaviour is judged as a deviation from the social norms of good moral conduct prescribed for women, whereas the old man is judged positively because he seemed to be scared of society.

Code mixing was used as a strategy whenever the speakers had to mention the love relationship. In the following example the Hindi expression *line maarne lag gayi* is a pejorative phrase used to describe flirtatious activities of young people, meaning something like 'trying to hook'. But then the same relationship gains some respectability back when expressed in English or German.

#### Example 4

F6: woh akela mila to Line // maarne lag gayi	F6: knowing that he is alone she started 'to put a bait to catch him'
F5: ..... To hua kya? Dono akele the	F5: So what? Both were alone
F1: line kaha... woh... woh // she was in love with him	F1: she was in love with him
F2:..... Sie war verlobt mit ihm	F2: she was engaged to him

The German verb form *verlobt* has apparently been confused with *verliebt* since the speakers clearly were talking about 'being in love'. The way students here avoided using Hindi when ever they had to talk in favour of the woman is a continuous pattern through out the transcript of about two hours. One typical interaction was:

#### Example 5

M2: Da sind zwei verliebt (laughs)
M1:(laughs) they are falling in love (laughs)

Code mixing was extensively used to replace Hindi expressions during this discussion. Although code mixing is very common in spoken language of university students, in this particular discussion it appears to have been used consciously as a strategy to overcome the restraints of one language. Studies on code mixing focusing on the use of English in Indian languages have shown that "English is (being) used to *neutralize* identities one is reluctant to express by the use of native languages or dialects." (cf. Kachru 1984: 186, emphasis original).

### 7.4 Stereotypes are here to stay

Every reference in Hindi was either a negative expression like *fasaana*, *chakkar*, *pataana* etc. (all more or less meaning 'to hook') or some vague wording like *yeh sabkucch*, *yeh jo kaarna us lady ka* ('all this, all these doings of the lady') where instead of a direct reference just an indirect hint was used to get as close semantically as possible to the expression 'relationship'. But even such efforts had an undercurrent of negative judgement of the lady's conduct.

## Example 6

M3: they are living alone they need support	M3: They are living alone they need support
M1: yah	M1: Yah
M4: who will prepare the tea for the old man (laughs)	M4: Who will prepare tea for the old man
M2: (laughs) you are thinking of old man //	M2: You are thinking of the old man
M1: ... woh rahi hogi na // wife to rahi hogi na?	M1: He must be having a wife, or?
M2:..... amm? No, now he is alone	M2: amm? No, now he is alone
M3: ya, he is dead... // he is dead and she is dead	M3: Ya, he is dead, he is dead and she is dead
M1: ..... to isse kya alone hai to // alone hai to/	M1: So what if alone // ... if alone..
M2: ... koi to chahiya ki uske kapde kapde dhoye (laughs)	M2: someone's got to be there to wash his clothes
M1: matlab tum vichar kar rahe ho ki koi kaam karne ke liya chahiye // kaam karne ke liye chahiye	M1: you mean there should be someone to do house work
M3: ..... he was saying ki // nahi nahi... its basically to basically to support each other	M3: He was saying that its basically to support each other
F1: but why did you interpret that she was looking for a boyfriend, she could have ..amm.. // been looking to make a friend, that's it!	F1: but why did you interpret that she was looking for a boyfriend, she could have ..amm.. // been looking to make a friend, that's it!
M3: ... yah a company	M3: ... yah a company
F2: Everybody wants companionship	F2: Everybody wants companionship

In the above conversational piece the female speaker F1 is able to make a differentiation between a boyfriend and a friend, whereas for the male speaker M1 the idea of a woman as a friend can only be related to being a wife, who is supposed to do the 'house work'. The stereotype of wife merely as someone taking care of the man and his needs is criticised at every possible level in India and one would have assumed this particular notion to have at least become a little milder. But as is obvious from the above exchange, the male speakers reflected the mindset still prevalent when they sympathised with the old man's need of having someone to take care of him with a blunt observation that "if his wife is dead, he needs someone to wash his clothes, to make tea for him". This comment coming from urban university students brings out the hollowness of the belief that the urban educated Indian male is gender sensitised. One just needs to scratch the surface for the deep rooted traditional attitudes to become obvious.

### 7.5 Interpreting motives

The body language and gestures of the woman in the film were interpreted by male students as her efforts to attract the 'decent old man'. In the film the woman goes to have a hair cut and buys a nice red dress which she then wears, when she knows that the old man will see her from his balcony. There were three interpretations of this behaviour and her body language. One as mentioned above was by the male students and two by female students. Male students read into the behaviour an ulterior motive since they felt that a woman who tries to attract a

man can not be looking for a genuine friendship. They specifically mentioned that from her gestures one could judge that she had other intentions.

Example 7

M1: thik hai friend banana ke liye kya jarurat tha bal katane ka accha dress karne ka aise friend nahi banneka, jisko friend banna hai woh aisehi banega	M1: alright, to make friends was it necessary to have hair cut, wear nice dress, you can't make friends like that, one who wants to be friends will become friend without all this
M2: Hmmm this is to attract //	M2: Hmmm this is to attract //
M4: ..... to attract... good	M4: to attract... good
M3: ..... to attract friendship nahi thi	M3: to attract not for friendship

The first interpretation of a female student also reflects the notion that the partner should be presentable. This student justifies the protagonist's actions by arguing that everyone wants to be presentable and everyone wishes to have a partner who is presentable. This argument coming from a female student again confirms the hold of social image on the thinking of these young people. The image of a smart, pleasant, fair, well dressed woman as the ideal, desired by men is created and sold as socially sanctioned mainly through Hindi movies, television and advertising in different media.

Example 8

F3: I also feel ki friend banna hota hain to appearance itni matter nahi karti but kahi na kahin we have that feeling that our friend should be a decent girl //	F3: I also feel that appearance does not matter in making friends but somewhere we have that feeling that our friend should be a decent girl //
M1: Wah, amm koi dekhne main kharab ho to uska friend nahi hoga?	M1: You mean someone who is not good looking will not get friends?
M2: I am going to do the same	M2: I am going to do the same
F3: to a certain extent aata hai... chahe matlab he should be at least a... ki presentable probably isiliye she got a haircut ki she should be presentable // that's why	F3: to a certain extent it does matter, may be... I mean he should be at least a... presentable, probably that's why she got a haircut that she should be presentable // that's why

One interesting point in the first sentence of F3 above is that she refers to a common wish that 'our friend should be a decent girl'. Why does she express this wish as common ideal in spite of being a girl herself? The conditioning that the young urban Indian women undergo is so strong that the ideals imposed by the society are unconsciously acquired and accepted as their own ideals. Language and related social norms only help in this process of internalising given images and meanings.

The other interpretation given by another female speaker could be an example of a gender neutral explanation and it was heartening that it came from a female speaker.

## Example 9

F1: she started enjoying her life you know, in a way she has this incentive to live otherwise she was bored there was no way to live her life anymore.

M3: Is it like entertainment?

M2: She was bored with her life because when she was eating //

F1: Yah, because this man... not only because he is a man... listen, not only because he is a man or the opposite sex that it will drive her crazy or that I have to fall in love or something like that, he came as something... you know some incentive into her life, you know... it brought happiness into her life you know... she wanted to live more and then do... you know... do anything

F2: like a normal person

M2: Yah she was bored with her life //

F1: and its very natural

## 8 Women as language users

As language users women are said to be less adventurous, preferring to use the prestige varieties and correct language. However such differentiation can not solely be called a gender different language variety; there are other factors involved in such developments like the social status attached to different pronunciations or to use of certain sounds. It is true that women are subjected to social pressures to ensure that they use the 'better' language. This pressure is at work to make them abide by the norms of language use. Normally for an effective communicative act, the speakers are supposed to follow Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner, but for women the standard parameters seem to change. A woman is expected to talk less than necessary, talk in a softer voice, talk only when absolutely necessary and at best not talk at all. Cameron points at this imposition of feminine linguistic norms "For any woman who talks too much, too loudly, too frankly, too authoritatively, the epithet 'unfeminine' is waiting on someone's lips." (cf. Cameron 1992: 210)

The prescriptions of this normative behaviour are imparted to a girl even as she is learning to use a language, in the form of proverbs or phrases. Indian girls are advised not to laugh showing all the teeth, not to let their voices be heard by a neighbour, not to answer back, not to argue, not to ask questions. Remaining within the socially accepted norms sometimes women tend to be using language in a different but positive way than men. The basic premise in this paper remains that the observed gender related differences in the style of language use appear to be more constructs of social contexts and vary depending on other social variables. A female speaker in a socially powerful position would have more similarities with the so called male style than a socially less powerful male speaker. But having said that; there are some common features, which can be ascribed to a more "cooperative" style of speaking. (cf. Graddol/Swann 1989:82). More women seem to be using it than men, which Tannen terms as "rapport speaking", where the "phatic function seems to override the informational." (cf. Tannen 1994:210). Women speakers tend to function in a more democratic manner and conversations in all-female groups develop as a combined activity rather than as 'competing for the floor' found commonly in an all-male group. Characteristic female strategies are said

to be indirectness and politeness, both results of a socialisation which discourages open display of frank, challenging behaviour in women.

Based on earlier researches Jennifer Coates summarises eight factors mostly found in all-female group interactions. The basic principle identified by Coates (1986: 189) is "more than one speaker may speak at a time, with speakers working collaboratively to produce talk" which portrays the cooperative nature of such exchanges. The eight factors discussed by Coates are: Minimal Responses, Questions, Links between speaker turns, Topic shifts, Self Disclosure, Verbal Aggressiveness, Listening and Simultaneous speech. (cf. Coates 1986) Although different culture-specific aspects can change the way these factors are realised in natural conversations, they do outline a basic minimum structure which can be applied to other data as well.

In the discussions amongst university students mentioned above, most of these features were found to be present in women's speech. Minimal responses of the 'I am listening' variety were used extensively in the all-women group for e.g.

Example 10

F3: because if the family is taking care of them then they // won't be lonely.
F2: they won't be lonely (pause) hmmm... you think so?

while in the mixed group the typical minimal responses of male speakers were of the 'I agree with you' type e.g.

Example 11

M2: Hmmm this is to attract //	M2: Hmmm..this is to attract
M4: ..... to attract... good	M4: to attract... good
M3: ..... to attract friendship nahi thi	M3: to attract... not for friendship
M2: Hammm Friendship ke liye to itna woh //	M2: Hmmm.. for friendship not so much //

There were few instances of questions being used as a strategy to maintain conversation but they occurred almost equally in both groups. There was no marked variance in this respect between male and female speakers. Links between speaker turns were smoother in the all-female group, compared to the mixed group where typically the female speakers got the turn only at the end or they had to try and squeeze in to get the turn, for e.g.

Example 12

M3: But she can she can directly talk with him
M2: She has some hesitation
F1: she is trying to but he was //
M2: Hesitation
F1: Yah she tried to

According to earlier research findings topic shifts are slow in all-female conversations. (cf. Tannen 1994, Coates 1993) In case of the two student groups the all-women group did stay on longer on one topic and the next topic often evolved out of the discussion, unlike in the mixed group where the topic shifts were more frequent and more abrupt. Conversation in the mixed group thus developed in bits and pieces lacking the flow of the all-women group. The all-

women group managed to discuss the same topic longer, for example one topic lasted for about more than 25 turns in this group as against most topics lasting not more than 15 turns in the mixed group. There were four instances of self disclosure, all of which came from female speakers. On verbal aggressiveness and listening the data from these transcripts is not sufficient. There were many instances of simultaneous speech; in fact there were all the three varieties of supportive simultaneous speech: e.g.

1) Completing the utterance of the partner

Example 13

F3: Aur jaisa ki usme dikhaya gaya tha, woh Supermarket ka //	F3: And as shown in it, that one in supermarket //
F2: ..... Hmm	F2: Hmm
F3: ..... usme usme to usko...	F3: In that... in that, seeing him...
F4: ..... usko to dekh ke hi dar gayi	F4: ... seeing him she got scared

2) Contrapuntal talk to support the partner's utterance

Example 14

F2: lekin woh thoda ghabrati thi ki samajwale kya kahenge // isliye thoda	F2: But she was a little scared about what community will say // that's why a little
F1: ...Society	F1: Society
F4: Society ki parwa thi	F4: Society was the point of concern

3) Repeating part of the sentence

Example 15

F4: Hamare yaha bhi hota hai lekin khule main nahi hota	F4: It happens here also but not openly
F6: Khule main nahi hota	F6: Not openly

### 8.1 Trying to seem less aggressive by using 'we'

In addition to the features mentioned above, in the mixed group the female speakers' participation in discourses featured a fine act of balancing between arguing or self expression and trying not to seem aggressive. They often used generalising statements or tried to create face saving opportunities for other speakers. They were more sensitive to loss of face not only their own but also of the partner. One strategy was the intentional use of 'we' in arguments, shifting the burden of responsibility of the subject to this inclusive 'we' rather than the 'I', which would be considered impolite or aggressive in Hindi. Of course, one could also just trace this use of 'we' as subject to the use of Hindi first person plural 'hum' as singular self reference. But if that was the case then this feature should have been present in the utterances of male speakers as well. Citing an example from a study by Goodwin where organisation of talk in single sex groups of children was analysed, Graddol and Swann observe that, "(...) the girls group was not organized hierarchically and there was minimal negotiation of status. Directives took the form of proposals for a future activity rather than an explicit command. A

'we' form was often used, which included the speaker in the proposed activity." (cf. Graddol/Swann 1989: 81). That the 'we' was used by female speakers especially in utterances in face threatening situations points to the fact that female speakers were more concerned about playing a 'mature' and 'supportive' partner. But it was clear that through these supportive arguments female speakers managed to round off many topics very decisively in their favour.

Example 16

F1: I think why we found it very strange was because we live in a very different set up and we can not accept that in such a age people are // trying to be friends	F1: I think why we found it very strange was because we live in a very different set up and we can not accept that in such a age people are // trying to be friends
M2: Hmmm wahi baat hai	M2: Hmmm that's the point
M1: Yah, apne hi context mai maine bola	M1: Yah, I also meant it in our context

Looking at the different styles of collaboration in a conversation event is one way of figuring out in what way gender could affect verbal interactions, but this also calls for caution against reading into such examples to find an exclusive gender related pattern of behaviour. The extension of the social expectation on to womens' linguistic behaviour is in tune with the fact that women in India are generally socialized to play a supportive role. There are subtle and not so subtle ways of imposing these linguistic norms, which become that much more rigid in case of female language users. In the case of Hindi, notions like women talk too much, or that women cannot be trusted with secrets are common, putting restrictions on linguistic behaviour of women.

## 9 Conclusion

In sum language is not a gender neutral instrument of expression nor is it free from socio cultural prejudices. It contributes to the process of shaping and reshaping of identities by virtue of its own dynamic nature and thereby gets used creatively or gets manipulated to create social distinctions. In theory the two approaches of 'difference' and 'dominance' have brought out the role of language in creating social gender differentiation. It is through using the language that we become gendered members of the speech community. In studying the intertwined relationship between language and construction of gender, the agency remains a point of debate. But looking at language use as one of the varied social practices it becomes possible to understand the social factors underlying each speech act. As Thorne argues, "Larger structures are instantiated, reproduced, and challenged through the daily practices of social actors, who in turn are constrained and enabled by social structures." (cf. Thorne 2001: 11). The language user as social actor conforms to as well as deviates from the social norms of speaking. She constructs, destroys and redefines her territories and her identity. Gender is one such social identity, "a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time." (cf. Butler 1990: 16). However societies have tried to fix this ambivalence in gender identity using compartmentalised instructions for language use separately for men and women. A child internalises her gender identity and in performing it she conforms to the gender stereotype. As literature on gender and languages shows, there is

hardly any language in the world that is completely gender neutral and efforts at creating such a language have not borne fruit. That leaves us with the alternative of using whatever languages we have in a best possible way to subvert linguistic gender discrimination. As highlighted in the discussion earlier the strategies could include using the same language or using code mixing. In India gender stereotypes are deeply anchored in the social psyche, they remain a valid form of establishing social hierarchies, finding their justification through religion and traditions. Challenging the existing notions of linguistic femininity or masculinity will go a long way towards displacing these gender stereotypes favourable to patriarchal traditions.

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