

Language, power and gender: A critical appraisal of Assamese, an Indo Aryan language

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Abstract: An attempt has been made in this paper to enquire if women experience linguistic discrimination which reduces them to invisible frail creatures devoid of individual identity in the backdrop of Assamese, an Indo-Aryan language. The methodology of this paper is partly based on a survey conducted at Jawaharlal Nehru University campus and partly based on the critical appraisal of some famous proverbs available in Assamese. The Assamese language, being a cultural mirror and an echo of prejudices and stereotypes prevalent in Assamese society, portrays an explicit canvas of the male dominance and powerlessness of females.

Keywords: Feminist studies; gender; language; power

Is language related to gender?

Social factors and attitudes play a vital role in shaping language because it is the social system within which we live that determines the linguistic choices we have available to us in ways that reflect our society's main concerns. These effects imply that the language one speaks imposes constraints both on what it is possible to say and perhaps, more important, on what it is possible to think. Language is continually constructed in practice. Both language and gender are fundamentally embedded in social practice, deriving their meaning from the human activities in which they figure. Men and women are socially different as the society lays down different social rules for them and expects different behavioural patterns. Human society is tainted with sexism, which may be described as a system of beliefs, prejudices and behaviours by which a group of people are oppressed, controlled and exploited owing to gender differences. Unfortunately such differences are never allowed to retain their status and usually tend to become hierarchical in popular consciousness. Thus gender does not only refer to sexual differences but also to a set of socially-defined roles, and identity which people come to develop in the process of socialization involving power relations. Gender is related to language.

Sexism in language

What is meant by sexist language? Braggin (1981) defines a statement as sexist if it creates, promotes, constitutes and exploits any irrelevant or impertinent marking of the distinction between the sexes. Thus a sexist statement refers to some one's gender when gender is not relevant. Lakoff (1987) claims that women experience linguistic discriminations not only in the way they are taught to use language but also in the way general language treats them. Female words are often negative, conveying frailty and a sense of subordination as well as immaturity. The words associated with women generally undergo a process of semantic derogation. When the sexist language is accepted as part of our everyday interaction the subjugation of women becomes reutilized in daily discourse. The routine uses of forms that conceal or trivialize women reduce the salience and significance of women as a social category. Sexist language can be equated with social behaviour which helps to create and maintain an atmosphere of inequality.

In many traditionally acclaimed literary texts, mostly written by males, men are presented as strong, active and rational and women as weak, passive, and emotional supporting an

underlying belief in the superiority of male over the female. As such images purport to represent reality, they contribute to an oppressive or restrictive model of femaleness, with which women are assumed to identify, thereby perpetuating inequality. Women's lower position and dignity in the society may be attributed to the patriarchal structure of society. According to Tannen (1990) in order to be socially acceptable, women cannot exert control and must support men in their control. In this casting of social power, men are not necessarily consciously flaunting power, but are simply rewarded by the social system.

Language, gender and power dynamics in Assamese

This paper seeks to explore the gender inequalities and sexism inherent in the Assamese language which belongs to the Indo-Aryan language family. On the basis of some lexical categories an attempt has been made in order to analyze if the male or the female can serve as the superordinate or the hyperonym. The study also investigates some Assamese terms and usage that are exclusively used for females.

An open ended questionnaire (Table 1) was used to survey twenty informants who were chosen by random sampling. The respondents were given the choice to write for most of the items. The informants were not told the explicit purpose of the survey and they were not monitored during the completion of the questionnaire. The first section (Table 1) involved the translation from English to Assamese. Each sentence carried a specific categorical noun such as doctor, teacher, nurse, leader, director, manager, dancer, bus driver, servant or student. Whether the respondents use the male terms or the female terms or both while translating the sentences in to Assamese is the major concern of the study. The second section (Table 1) had seven pairs of words. The informants were asked to tick the odd ones from each pair. The word pairs include for example, *tiruta xeruwa* (henpecked husband)/*purux xeruwa* (henpecked wife), *ghor ghoini* (house wife)/*ghor giri* (house husband). This set of questions aims at interpreting the attitude of the informants by judging if they can bear the subordinate status of men and superior position of women.

Table 1. Questionnaire sections and items

SECTION 1:

Translate the sentences in to Assamese:

- 1) The teacher can shape the destiny of a nation.
- 2) Students can play the role in politics.
- 3) The behaviour of the doctor is very nice.
- 4) That nurse is known to me well.
- 5) The police officer is very brave.
- 6) We want such a leader to guide our society.
- 7) The director of the company is very strict.
- 8) The manager of this tea garden is from Guwahati.
- 9) The dancers are requested to come to the stage.
- 10) The bus driver is very careless.
- 11) The servant has been working in our family for ten years.

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Table 1 continued

SECTION 2:

Mark the odd words given in pair below:

- 1) *potibrota stri* (devoted wife)/ *potnibrota swami* (devoted husband)
- 2) *tiruta xeruwa* (henpecked husband)/ *purux xeruwa* (henpecked wife)
- 3) *obola nari* (weak woman)/ *obola purux* (weak man)
- 4) *nixohai nari* (helpless woman)/ *nixohai purux* (helpless man)
- 5) *durbhogiya tiruta* (unfortunate woman)/ *durbhogiya purux* (unfortunate man)
- 6) *ghor ghoini* (house wife)/ *ghor giri* (house husband)
- 7) *pahuwal gabhoru* (strong girl)/ *pahuwal deka* (strong boy)

SECTION 3:

What are the equivalent terms for male counterpart of the following terms which are exclusively used for females?

- 1) *oxoti* (adulterous)
- 2) *swamiporayon* (devoted wife)
- 3) *ordhangini* (wife)
- 4) *daini* (witch)
- 5) *kulokhini* (a woman who brings bad name to the dynasty)
- 6) *notesori* (adulterous)
- 7) *mahi mak* (step mother)
- 8) *xotini* (co wife)
- 9) *beisya* (prostitute)
- 10) *dehupojibini* (prostitute)
- 11) *bonori* (a woman of bad character)
- 12) *xakhiniteja* (abusive word against woman)
- 13) *poyeror murkhati* (a woman who eats the brain of the husband)
- 14) *kulta* (a woman who brings bad name to the family)
- 15) *dehesori* (sexually promiscuous)

SECTION 4:

Say if the following terms which are derived from the words denoting males refer to male/female or both:

- 1) *xatampuruxia* (ancestral)-M/F/both
- 2) *uttor purux* (next generation)-M/F/both
- 3) *jubo xokti* (youth power)-M/F/both
- 4) *deka xokti* (youth power)-M/F/both
- 5) *xikhok xontha* (teachers association)-M/F/both
- 6) *satro xomaj* (student's association)-M/F/both

SECTION 5:

Say if the following terms which are derived from the words denoting females, have the potentiality to refer to females/male or both:

- 1) *gabhoru xokti* (young girl's power)-M/F/both
- 2) *juboti xomaj* (young girl's society)-M/F/both
- 3) *satri xomaj* (female student's association)-M/F/both
- 4) *xikhoitri xomaj* (lady teacher's association)-M/F/both

In the third section of the questionnaire (Table 1) the respondents were asked to give the equivalent terms for male counterparts of some terms which are exclusively used for females (all related either with subordinate status of women or with sexual behaviour). If the respondents found no word in Assamese, he or she was given freedom to coin a new term. The fourth section consisted of some words the meaning of which has been derived from masculine terms. The respondents were asked if the terms can refer to males, females or to both. In the same fashion the next section used words that derived meaning from feminine

terms. If one entails the other but not vice versa it is possible to treat Assamese as a sexist language.

Results

The data show that the respondents predominantly used the masculine terms for the lexicons used in section 1 (such as doctor, teacher, police officer). Only in the categories of nurse and dancer were female terms used by all the respondents. In the other categories, male terms are used in the generic sense or they can function as the super-ordinate terms which are not applicable in the case of the lexicons denoting females. The fact that masculine generics have been used for referring to sex-indefinite referents can be indicated as a primary example of how language conceals women. In response to the second section, 12/15 respondents find those words which assign a sense of frailty to male figures (such as *obola purux*) as being odd or inappropriate. However, three of the female respondents found them normal. Other findings show that concepts such as virginity and prostitution are exclusively used for females in Assamese.

Female words in Assamese are often negative, powerless and indeed those words associated with women undergo a process of semantic derogation. There is no male counterpart for the abusive words such as *bonori*, *notesori*, *dehesori*, *kulota*, *xakhiniteja*, *poyeror murkhati*, *kulokhini*, *oxoti* etc. However, what is conspicuously observed in this study is that masculine terms function as super-ordinate terms which entail both males and females. As for example, *uttar purux* (next generation) can refer to both males and females although the etymological meaning of *purux* is male. In the same way *deka xokti* (youth power) embraces both boys and girls, but the Assamese meaning of *deka* in isolation is young boy. But unfortunately the terms deriving from lexicons denoting femininity are deprived of the capacity to refer to both male and female. They are exclusively restricted for females. As for example, *gabhoru xokti* refers to the power of the young women. In Assamese *gabhoru* means young woman. In the same fashion *satri xomaj* refers to the society of the female students, not male students. The male terms can function as autohyponyms or autosuperordinate term. Autohyponymy occurs when a word has a default general sense and a contextually restricted sense which is more specific in that it denotes a sub-variety of the general sense.

The role of literature in reinforcing gender stereotypes

Literature is an important cultural practice which not merely reflects but also affects the way women are perceived. In the literary texts women are portrayed consciously or unconsciously in negative ways and such portrayals contribute to broaden cultural assumptions about gender differences. There are some proverbs in Assamese which reduce women to lifeless commodities and are quite antithetical to the idea of women's progress and empowerment. For example, the proverb: *Lau jiman dangor holeu pator tol* says that a pumpkin may be very big in size, but it always remains enveloped in its leaves. The underlying theme is that a woman can be very famous, but she will be under the control of a man. In a second example, the proverb *Puruxor ron tirir biyon* implies that the credibility of men lies in the battlefield, but for women it is tolerance which is considered to be a great virtue. It shows men as agents of aggression and women as puppets of passivity devoid of individual identity.

In a third example, the proverb: *Kelei kutila kumolkoi posola luke bati bhorai khabo; Kelei tulila rupohi aidewk luke bone korai khabo* poses the question of why do you cut the tender banana trunk to fine pieces for the curry, only others will have bowlfuls of it; what is the necessity of bringing up the beautiful daughter, because others will enjoy the fruits of her labour. It considers the girl-child as a liability but not as an asset. These kinds of proverbs are instrumental in lowering the position of the women in the society.

Conclusions

The fight for gender equality in India still remains a steep task in our society where women, from womb to grave, face violent forms of gender bias such as female infanticide, apathy for the girl-child, sexual harassment and the menace of dowry. Women are not born, they are made. The making of a man or a woman is a never ending process that begins before the birth. It is because gender is not something we are born with, and something we have, but something we do and something we perform, particularly through our linguistic behaviour. The predominance of masculine terms as hyperonyms as well as the abusive words pertaining to the sexual conduct of women for which there is no male counterpart, portrays vividly the powerlessness of the females in the Assamese society.

Gender is so deeply engrained in our linguistic system, in our understanding of ourselves and of others, that we almost cannot utter a single word before others, without taking gender in to our consideration thereby paving the way for hierarchical power dynamics where man is at the top and woman at the bottom. However as sensitive individuals it should be our constant endeavour to fight for gender equality in order to ensure an egalitarian society. Let us begin with the elimination with sexist language by using gender neutral terminologies not only in written forms, but also in daily conversational discourse so that we can do justice to both genders.

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