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Over the years, many scholars have explored gender-related aspects of linguistic behavior, with a longstanding interest in examining the differences in language usage between men and women within discourse studies. Language is recognized as a key medium through which gender norms and identities are constructed, negotiated, and performed within diverse social contexts. The present article reviews the theoretical background of the basic approaches and theories studying language and gender. To achieve the goal of illustrating different approaches and theories to the study of this phenomenon, the methods of observation and comparative-contrastive analyses are used. In this context, it is essential to have a comprehensive grasp of various aspects to effectively explore gender disparities in communication. This article is an attempt to highlight the significance of understanding gender as a socially constructed phenomenon and explore how language both reflects and shapes individual and group identities.

**Keywords:** Genderlect, discourse studies, social context, theoretical background, gender disparities.

**Introduction**

The concept of gender has gained widespread attention and has become a foundational concept in the study of gender and language. It has been used by scholars across various disciplines, including linguistics, communication studies, sociology, and psychology, in order to explore and analyze gender differences in communication.

The term *gender* comes from the Latin word *genus* which means race, kind, birth, family, and gene. Meanwhile conditioned by the demand on linguistic usage, several words are derived from *genus* which is still used with its prior meaning. As an illustration, we can mention generation, and genocide.

Another interesting term coined by D. Tennon (1990) as a result of combining the word *gender* and *dialect*, is *genderlect*. It reflects the idea that gender influences language use in a similar way to regional and social dialects. She proposed that men and women speak different “dialects” of the same language, characterized by distinct conversational styles, preferences, and communication goals.

There is also a necessity to draw a demarcation line between gender and sex; while sex refers to a biological and generally binary distinction between male and female, gender relates to social

behaviors, expectations, and attitudes associated with being male and female. Therefore, the current study aims to examine various linguists' approaches and theories regarding the relationship between language and gender, with the goal of demonstrating the significance of existing perspectives in discourse analysis.

### **Basic approaches and theories to the study of language and gender**

The study of language and gender might seem like a narrowly focused field, but actually it is interdisciplinary. The gendered language was not taken as a serious topic of study until the 1970s, but nowadays gender studies enjoy popularity in many fields, such as psychology, female studies, sociolinguistics, etc.

Many linguists have been concerned about the differences between the language of men and women. This paper will focus on the current approaches to gender/sex in communication, which generally fall into three areas: *biological, psychological, and cultural*. In order to find out the pros and cons of these approaches, the methods of observation and comparative-contrastive analyses are used.

As we have already mentioned, the first approach to understanding gender/sex is the *biological approach*. The theorists believe that the feminine/masculine gender binary is naturally derived from sex, they emphasize on differences. The assumption of this approach is biological determinism, they don't completely deny psychological and cultural influence on gender, but they give a crucial role to genetics. The main areas of difference in this approach are chromosomes, hormones and, brain development.

It is well-known fact that males and females have an X chromosome, but only men have a Y chromosome. So, chromosomes may determine the sex of the person, here a question arises whether the chromosomes may determine one's gender identity.

Hormones affect people and their sex distinctions throughout their life pace, different hormones stimulate different actions and phenomena. Some evidence indicates that females and males tend to specialize in one hemisphere of the brain, though they each use both hemispheres. Biologists insist that men tend to specialize in the left hemisphere, which is responsible for language skills, abstract thought development, and linear, logical, and mathematical abilities, and women tend to specialize in the right hemisphere, which is responsible for intuitive thinking, artistic activity, nonverbal processing, and spatial ability.

In the early 1900s K. K. Campbell mentioned the argument that women's brain size was used to prove that women were incapable of engaging in the "rational deliberation required in politics and business". Some even went as far as to suggest that educating women and granting them opportunities to participate in public discourse could lead to the weakening of their reproductive organs, "since the blood needed to sustain development of their ovaries and womb would be diverted to the brain" [Campbell, 12].

Thus, the biological difference approach is not confined to the past, moreover public debates about women's appropriate roles continue up to now both by those who would keep women unequal and by those who want to value women's contributions. S. M. Gearhart in her work "The Womanization of Rhetoric" (1979) touches upon the problem of biologically determined approach to communication. According to Gearhart "any intent to persuade is an act of violence" [Gearhart, 195] which is a "very male chauvinist model" [Gearhart, 199], consequently she suggests the solution to this problem with the help of the womanization of rhetoric. It implies that generally communication

should be understood as “womanlike process” [Gearhart, 200] and everyone should communicate and be more like women.

S. M. Gearhart’s work was later extended by S. K. Foss and C. L. Griffin; they come up with *invitational rhetoric*. They agree that rhetoric with the intent to persuade is a form of violence, but in invitational rhetoric “absent are efforts to dominate another because the goal is the understanding and appreciation of another’s perspective rather than the denigration of it simply because it is different from the rhetor’s own” [Foss, Griffin 6]. Foss and Griffin suggest creating a relationship “in equality, immanent value, and self-determination” [Foss, Griffin 5] which are assumed to be feminine qualities. However, they don’t claim that only women can use these qualities or that all women employ them. So according to the biological approach, men and women have different qualities in communication and that difference is determined by their biological difference.

The second approach to gender in communication that we take into consideration is the *psychological approach*. The adherents of this approach don’t deny the biological and cultural factors in communication process, but they focus on how one’s identity becomes gendered through early childhood experiences. Although the early psychoanalytic theories recognize the influence of communication, they highlight gender. Each girl and boy develop in different ways, and they respond to gender identity individually.

According to French psychoanalyst J. Lacan (1998), communication plays a pivotal role in shaping one's personality development. It is through language that a person's identity is constructed, and the thought processes embedded within speech are inherently influenced by gender [Lacan, 6-8]. Additionally, the concept of masculinity is often utilized by men as a means of asserting and maintaining power over women.

Feminist theorists criticized the theorists who consider masculine as the norm and feminine as devalued. The feminist psychoanalytic theory explains the links between gender, sex and sexuality and one of the most prominent figures in these studies is J. Butler, a professor of rhetoric, comparative literature, and women’s studies. J. Butler states that sex is as socially constructed as gender and that gender is as immutable as sex [Butler, 42-43].

The social learning theory delves into the process of socialization wherein children assimilate various identities and behavioral norms, encompassing more than just gender. Essentially, this theory portrays socialization as a passive mechanism where children learn through observation, imitation, and reinforcement of gender-appropriate behaviors [Bandura, Walters 47-50]. The theory suggests that young girls are often rewarded for exhibiting qualities such as politeness, tidiness, emotional expression, and good conduct, while young boys are typically praised for their independence, emotional control, and engagement in physical activities [Mischel, 95-97]. Consequently, girls are encouraged to develop feminine attributes, and boys are encouraged to cultivate masculine traits.

On the other hand, the cognitive development approach shares similarities with psychoanalytic and social learning theories. Similar to psychoanalysis, it interprets gender identity development as a mental process. Like social learning theory, it acknowledges that children conform to societal gender norms. However, the cognitive development approach diverges from social learning in that it posits the motive behind learning gender is not solely imitation or the desire for rewards, but rather a quest for self-growth and competence. This implies that children are not merely passive imitators; they are individuals capable of actively shaping their own gender identities.

And the last approach that we touch upon is the cultural approach, which doesn’t reject biological and psychological influences but it is mostly structured by social influences. The cultural approach in its turn is divided into descriptive cultural approach and critical cultural approach.

According to the cultural descriptive approach individuals learn gender through cultural socialization. The philosopher and social scientist G. H. Mead (1934) suggested that individuals shape their personal identities and perceptions of the world solely through their symbolic interactions with fellow members of society [Mead, 5-6]. In other words, gender and other identities are not inherent to the individual but are instead formed through interactions within the social order. We can deduce that society plays a central role in how personal identities are constructed.

In some cultures, women and men are expected to use different pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, so the usage of linguistic means is determined by sex, age and class. For example, traditionally in Japanese the words were distinguished to be used by men and women. This kind of sex differences in language can be found in many other countries where women and men traditionally are not allowed to use each other's language forms. In addition to this, different cultures have different gender/sex preferences in communication style. These findings collectively support the notion that gender is predominantly a product of cultural construction.

Examining two-culture theory, it is worth mentioning the work of the sociolinguists D. Maltz and R. Borker. In their paper, "A Cultural Approach to Male-Female Miscommunication" they contend that communication challenges between women and men resemble those encountered when individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds interact [Maltz, Borker 196-216]. These differences stem from varying cultural objectives and communication norms. Maltz and Borker claim that boys and girls undergo socialization within separate language groups, a phenomenon partly influenced by the tendency for childhood play to be self-segregated.

In her attempt to understand the peculiarities of gender and language R. Lakoff (1957) has come to the conclusion that women and men have two separate language styles and the reason is social role inequality. She mentioned that women's language style is a kind of weak and insecure, while men's language style is dominant. She described women's language as deficit with its special characteristics (e.g. empty adjectives, tag questions, hedges) [Lakoff, 49-54]. Lakoff contends that the variation in language usage primarily stems from women's subordinate position in society and the consequent feelings of social insecurity. In other words, the linguistic patterns observed among women are seen as contributing to the perpetuation of their perceived inferior status within societal structures. Thus, the main idea, that Lakoff put forward with her theory, is that women and men speak differently.

Another important investigation of language and gender is presented by sociolinguist D. Tannen, in her book "You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation" (1990). She characterizes women's style of communication as *rappor*t talk and men's style of communication as *report* talk. As per this understanding, during communication, women tend to prioritize relationship-building and display empathy, whereas men often focus on tasks and competitiveness [Tannen, 16]. Consequently, women typically adopt a more accommodating and collaborative communication style, while men tend towards independence and competitiveness. When individuals representing these distinct communication styles interact, they encounter gender-specific communication challenges.

In the descriptive cultural approach, researchers concentrate on delineating cultural distinctions, while in the critical cultural approach, they aim to deconstruct and critically scrutinize the cultural construction of differences and inequalities. This approach emphasizes uncovering potential explanations for socially constructed disparities and similarities. According to this perspective, gender/sex and other social identities are not solely attributed to the individual but rather embedded in social systems and structures. In this context, gender/sex is imposed on individuals by

the social system, suggesting that gender is not an inherent aspect of a person's identity but rather a set of behaviors.

The critical cultural approach stands out from other approaches by dismantling artificial boundaries among biological, psychological, and cultural perspectives. It advocates for a highly interdisciplinary approach where each of these perspectives complements one another. This approach challenges conventional thinking and encourages a more holistic understanding of cultural phenomena by recognizing the interconnectedness of biological, psychological, and cultural factors in shaping individuals' experiences and identities.

Overall, the critical cultural approach to the study of language and gender offers a framework for understanding the complex ways in which language both reflects and shapes cultural understandings of gender. By critically interrogating language use within its cultural context, scholars can uncover the ways in which language contributes to the reproduction of social inequalities and explore possibilities for resistance and social change

### Conclusion

Language is not merely a neutral medium of communication but a powerful tool through which gender norms and identities are constructed and negotiated. The investigation of language and gender through various approaches and theories offers a rich tapestry of insights into the intricate relationship between language use and gender identity. Hence, overview of different approaches to the study of language and gender is of paramount importance in gender studies.

The results of our research demonstrate that the theories and approaches we examined are diverse, and they cannot be considered separately, since the overall idea of genderlect is comprehended if combined. Consequently, considering each of these theories and approaches, highlighting their benefits and drawbacks, we concluded that to examine the gender issues thoroughly and to have an in-depth idea of genderlect, one should combine all the existing theoretical background of the issue and investigate it from all angles. In addition, the main finding of the present article is that, given that gender is a complex and diverse phenomenon, gender approaches; namely biological, psychological, and cultural, are diverse themselves, hence, gender is better to be considered as a diverse rather than a binary phenomenon.

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