

Merging Trans Language and Identity: Transferring Trans-Gender's Dilemma into Language

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Abstract

The current study aims to explore the dilemma of transgender associating it to the derogatory language society use for them and their own feminine identity. It explores the phenomenon that how language and identity play their role in marginalization and degradation of a community in a society. The researchers have used qualitative approach to collect the data from online documentaries and semi-structured interviews (taken from trans-females residing in Islamabad). The data was analyzed through the lens of Bourdieu who relates social power to the language. The study reveals that the language used for and by transgender is powerless, full of derogatory and unsophisticated utterances which result in their powerless and marginalized status in society. The study also sheds light on the fact that in a patriarchal society the adaptation of feminine identity by transgender also results in their marginalization.

Keywords: Transgender, Marginalization, Identity, Language

1. Introduction

Human beings are classified into two main categories i.e. male and female but in sociolinguistics; dichotomous gender models are problematic in their conception of gender and in their assumptions about sex (Cameron, 1997). When a baby is born, he/she is immediately assigned a sex and assumed a gender. LaFrance, Paluck, and Brescol (2004) argue that gender and gender identity are terms that are used to define individuals' outward behaviors, traits, and attitudes. We have individuals who do not fit neatly into one of these categories and are thus considered as a third gender. When a person's gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth, they are known as transgender,

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while people whose gender identity does match their sex are known as “cisgender” (Patton et al., 2016). Burdge (2007) defines transgender as any person either male or female who has problem with his/her gender and finds conflict between his/her gender and inner self.

In the male dominated society of Pakistan, where even females are treated as second class citizens, we have the community of transgender that is not only marginalized but largely forgotten and disliked; even it is felt as a shame to talk about them. Unlike western countries, transgenders are considered and treated disrespectfully in our society. Half of transgender population experienced some form of harassment and violence within their life (Lombardi et al., 2002). This can also be observed from a sociolinguistic perspective that how people name them, give them low social statuses, and degrade them when talk to them. Usually, we perceive gender from the speaker voice (Thornton, 2008). The linguistic capital they carry also represents how much they are oppressed and discriminated in society. In our society they are popularly known as ‘HIJRAS’ but respectfully called as ‘KHAWAJA SIRAS’ (Sheraz and Awan, 2011). There are 10,418 transgender people in Pakistan (Wazir & Goujon, 2021). But Mona Ali (who is a leader of a Lahore-based transgender rights group known as the Khawaja Sira Society) argues that there are 40,000 to 50,000 transgender people in the Punjab province alone. Similarly, Bindya Rana, leader of the Karachi-based transgender rights group Jiya, claims that there are 300,000 transgender people across Pakistan.

The study of transgender has been the subject of research for some decades, but it got significant attention when their issues were raised at state level while slogging for their rights. They got more attention when in 2009 Supreme Court of Pakistan officially accepted them as a third gender and gave them the right of having national identity card. Western philosophers have carried out extensive research studies on subjects related to transgender issues but in our society less attention has been paid to this marginalized group. Studying the derogatory language used for them while associating it to their gender identity has never been explored. The purpose of choosing them as a subject is to explore the issue of oppression associating it to the language and their feminine identity. The study aims to explore that how people of high symbolic power use a type of derogatory language for a community of less symbolic power. This study also attempts to highlight some particular ways in which they manipulate language in different social settings to achieve personal goals.

Transgender community is oppressed and marginalized in our society which is likely because of either the language used for them (by other genders) or their own adopted feminine identity.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

In the male dominated society of Pakistan, where even females are treated as second class citizens, we have the community of transgender that is not only marginalized but largely forgotten and disliked; even it is felt as a shame to talk about them. Transgender community is oppressed and marginalized in our society which is likely because of either the language used for them (by other genders) or their own adopted feminine identity.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To explore the linguistic utterances frequently used by transgender which are associated to their gender identity.
2. To investigate the role of language (used for them/by them) in marginalization and degradation of transgender?
3. To investigate the role of Trans' gender feminine identity in marginalization and degradation of their community.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How does the use of derogatory terms and utterances degrade and marginalize transgender?
2. How does an adopted feminine identity of transgender play role in their marginalization and oppression?
3. Why is a feminine language used by transgender as a tool in a female oppressed society to get their goals?

1.5 Delimitations

The research is limited to the study of language of Trans-females only. It is mainly focused on language used by Trans-females for their earning purposes and language used for them in society. The study has not dealt with Trans males because it has only studied the transgender who have adopted female identity.

1.6 Significance of Study

The current study aims to investigate how and why transgender community is degraded and marginalized in our society, and how language used by society plays its role in their marginalization. Investigating the issue of oppression associating it to language will help us to explore the derogatory and uncivilized language used for transgender. The finding will help to recommend some positive steps to eradicate the stereotypical perception about transgender and give them a proper social status.

2. Literature Review

Voice plays an important part in the constitution of identity (Eckert 1992). Transgender, a marginalized community is treated very badly in our society. They are considered as a third gender and therefore they face high level of discrimination.

Burdge (2007) has explored from his study of “Bending Gender, Ending Gender” that the traditional dichotomous gender paradigm is oppressive. People mistreat them in society which resultantly produces psychological difficulties for transgender individuals. He argues that the traditional dichotomous gender paradigm should be changed. Miller and Grollman (2015) who were dealing with health issue of transgender; have found from a largest survey of transgender (N=4117) conducted in the United States that gender nonconforming Trans people face more discrimination than gender conforming Trans people which resultantly make them engage in health-harming behaviours (suicide attempt, drug/alcohol abuse).

Easterling and Byram (2022) while studying transgender language with the perspective of anatomical terminology and concepts concluded that identity approval is strongly based on the use of appropriate/inappropriate and inclusive language and hence; there is a close relationship between gender identity and anatomical terminology. Their research findings claim that an intentionality surrounding language in medical field, particularly anatomical language, is a demanding aspect of clinicians and gender changes mentioned. The study’s findings support Sheraz and Awan’s (2011) investigation of the secret spoken language of Transgender which argues that the very specific lexical items of their language not only make their language different from other languages but

also give them a pressed identity. The role of language used by them and for them plays a key role in shaping(reshaping) identity.

In another case study, Lovaas (2017), seeing the transgenders' dilemma from the language-practice perspective, came to the conclusion that they among the problems and difficulties faced by them, 'linguistic and social acceptance' are the top-listed issues. Their data presents a clear picture of marginalized transgenders who are not blamed for their physical bodies rather their language – they use or used for them. Similarly, a shaping identity with the use of language may result with discrimination and violence (Patev et al., 2019). Prejudiced behavior is closely related to biased language, people who carry non-suitable opinions about transgenders, also find it quite challenging to communicate in a gender-based manner. These implications are a symbol of positive sentiments portrayed through the usage of inclusive language.

In Western world where gender-identity is quite binary, investigates lexical variety of gender and their identification by society. They came up with a set of mechanisms and approaches for analyzing social platform (e.g. Twitter), and the finding reveals that in the USA, lexical variety used by and for people mirrors gender identity – marginalized as well as promoted class (Hicks et al., 2015). In like manner, in Italy, the invisible class are not allowed to construct a work-identity in the organizations which leads preventing the institutions from achieving their goals of being a complete inclusive work environment (Priola et al., 2014).

Sheraz and Awan (2011) investigated the secret language of Transgender by investigating the spoken language of Hijras settled in D. G. Khan and Rawalpindi, and explored that Farsi contains its own vocabulary and shows various syntactic and morphological differences. Further they argued that Farsi is as good a language as any other. However, the number of its lexical items is small as compared to other languages which are perhaps because of its limited and private usage. Their study is closely related to our study as they are dealing with the subject in the same social context, but their study is limited to lexical variation of Hijra-Farsi language from other languages. So, our study has dealt with the language of transgender (also touching vocabulary of their language) but our main focus is on their feminine language use and its association to their gender identity.

Winter and Udomsak (2002) have examined 204 Male-to-Female (MtF) Transgender to explore self-concept (actual and ideal) and gender-trait stereo-typicality and found that their actual and ideal self-concepts were quite opposite, and they disowned stereotypically female traits. Similarly, Boekesteijn (2015) has explored from his study that gender is not fixed like sex and gender and ethnicity are the two social variables which directly affect the use of language while identifying social role/status. He argues that men and women manipulate equally according to their needs in different social settings.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Language and Symbolic Power by Bourdieu (1979)

Our research framework is mainly based on Bourdieu's theory of language and symbolic power. Bourdieu develops a strong critique of traditional approaches to language and the linguistic theories of Saussure, Chomsky and Austin. He argues that language should be viewed not only as a source of communication but also as a medium of power through which individuals display their practical competence and pursue their interests. When individuals use language in particular ways, they deploy their accumulated linguistic resources and implicitly adapt their language according to the demands of the social field or market that is their audience. Bourdieu's account sheds fresh light on the ways in which linguistic usage varies from situation to situation such as class and gender. The data have been analysed through the lens of Bourdieu's concepts that how transgender are associated with the language of less symbolic power. The language used by or for them is not itself a civilised language. Like their language transgender have not given a decent status in society. Based on Bourdieu's ideas, it has been analyzed that how they use particular linguistic utterances for their earning purposes which they consider the requirement of their linguistic market and how people of high symbolic power degrade them with the use of their language. It can be seen how they use feminine language as a tool to pursue their purposes.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. The data have been collected from documentaries (N=5) available on internet on the lives of transgender. We have also interviewed 4 Trans-females. The detailed documentary films are of different length i.e. 10 minutes to 58 minutes

while the face-to-face interviews are of short length i.e. 5 to 20 minutes. The interviewed participants for the present research are the Hijras settled in city of Islamabad. The Hijras were randomly observed in the workplaces and asked questions wherever and whenever they were found. They were asked questions about language and the specific words they use within their transgender communities and the particular discourse they use in their workplaces. They were also asked about the labels and terms used for them which feel them as oppressed and marginalized community. All the interviews and discussions were audio recorded.

3.1 Participants

The participants of our study are adult Trans-Females who are biological males but reject their masculine identity and have adopted feminine gender. We have selected 5 online documentaries on their lives (each documentary film narrates one transgender) while also interviewed 4 Trans -females who are residing in Islamabad city.

4. Data Analysis

The study is qualitative based research and the researchers have collected qualitative data from online documentaries. The researchers have also conducted semi-structured interviews from few transgenders to explore more deeply the issue of marginalization in relation to language and gender identity. The data have been analyzed with the lense of symbolic power of language that is used for them by other genders and how their own adopted identity affect their marginalization.

The data is analyzed while focusing on- the specific feminine language they use, why they adopt the feminine identity and how people degrade them with the use of derogatory terms. From the obtained data we have found that how an uncivilized language play a crucial role in marginalization of transgender. The data show that language used for transgender is full of derogatory terms. They are labelled with names like **“khusras, Ararvani, Jagappa or Chakka, Khadra and Marasi”**. But most popular and common term is Hijras. Moreover, the term like **“chamak challo”** and **“double scoop”** are also used for them when people make fun of them. This degradation does not stop here, the name ‘Khusra’ itself is attached with negative connotation in our culture. It has been observed that people often use this term when they intend to insult someone. When a man is found unfit for any task or incapable to do something mainly, he is often labelled with this term to degrade him.

Besides the specific derogatory terms, they are addressed with uncivilized utterances. The participant while narrating their stories told that whenever people found them on ways, signals and chowks they are addressed like, “**chlain ge**” means “Will you go?”, “**Mood ha**”, means “what’s the mood/plan?” “**kia demand ha**” means “what is your demand?” “**Function ka kitney paise lenge**” means “how much money will you take for the function?”, “**Entertain karogey?**” means “will you entertain me?”, “**Tum Aadmi ho ya aurat**” means “are you a man or a woman?”, “**kia namuna ho**” means “what item you are”. Moreover, a participant told they are humiliated in bazars and they hear whispers like “**dekho kitna ajeeb ha**” means “ see how strange it is”, “**kaisa ja raha ha**” means “how he is going”, “**iske fashion dekho**” means “look at their fashion, “ **itne make up k paise kahan ce aty hn**” means “where do so much money for make-up come from?” and “**iski skin kitni ajeeb ha**” means “ his skin is so unusual”.

During our work, we also came to know that transgender community has a particular kind of language they use within their alhijras community led by Guru. They use a language termed as Hijra Farsi within their community. Linguistically, Farsi contains its own vocabulary and has syntactical and morphological differences from the other languages. But it is to be noted that number of lexical items is small which is may be because of its limited and private usage. They use **firka** for cross dressing, **Apara** for the female costume, **pan** for the customer, **chamkola** for dance, **cheesa** for beautiful, and **Moorat** for their guru. The participant let us know that they use feminine discourse within their community circle like one participant was telling “ **HUM JAB SAHELIAN BET THI HN TO HUM EK DOSRE K SATH AURATO KI TARAH BAT KARTEY HN**” means “when we sit together, we talk to each other like women”. Similarly, it has been observed that their language is full of feminine discourse. They use utterances like “**JAB MN STOP PE PAHUCHI TO MERI SAHILI B WAHAN THI**” means “when I reached at the station, my friend was also there, “**MN KAL AJAWUNGI**” means “ I will come tomorrow”, “**MENE OSE BOLA MN NAHI KAR SAKTI YE SHOW**” means “ I told him that I couldn’t do that show”.

When the participants were asked about their gender identity and why they have adopted feminine appearance and language, so they all were of view that the attainment of feminine identity gives them soul

satisfaction and that is the reason that they leave their houses and live within their community. A participant while telling his story told **“MN LARKA PAIDA HUA THA R GHAR WALO NE MUJE BETA KEHTY TY LEKIN BACHPAN SE HI MUJHE LARKIUN WALEY SHOQ ACHY LAGTY TY JAISE DOLLS SE KHELNA R MN APNE MAMA K LIPSTICK LAGATA TA JIS PE MUJHE BOHT DANT B PARHTI TI”** means “I was born a boy and my family addressed me a son, but since childhood, I had interests typical of girls, like playing with dolls, and I used to put on my mother's lipstick, for which I often got scolded”.

While observing transgender in their workplaces, it has been found that the discourse they use for their earning purpose is purely feminine in nature. As there are no opportunities for them, most of the Hijras beg or dance for their earning which also give them a lower social status. Their language is mostly consist of imperative sentences like **“ALLAH TERA BHALA KRY”** means “May Allah bless you”, **“SAHIB KHERAT DE DO”** means “Sir, give me alms”, **“ALLAH APKO KHUSH RAKHEY”** means “May Allah keep you happy”, **“DE DO SAHIB WRNA HIJRE KI BAD DUA LAG JAYGI”** means “give me sir otherwise transgender curse will befall”. This also shows that no symbolic power attached to their language and thus is marginalized.

4.1. Findings

We have found one of the ways that how transgender are marginalized in our society. The main issue of their marginalization is the language used for them (by other genders). People degrade them by using certain derogatory terms while addressing them. It has been found that use of such kind of disrespectful language shapes our perception about transgender community. Moreover, their own adopted feminine identity shapes a perception about them as a weaker body of society. Their own language enjoys no powerful and respectful role in society. As Bourdieu argues that language cannot be seen only as a medium of communication but as a medium of power through which individuals display their social status. It has been explored that the group with weaker language (as transgender) can only have the weaker social position in the society.

5. Conclusion

The present study has discussed the relationship among marginalization, language and identity. The study has analyzed the

derogatory language use for transgender community that results in setting a disrespectful perception about them. It is found that language plays a crucial role in defining a power social status of a particular community. The transgender community cannot have a respectable and powerful social status because of the powerless and indecent language associated with them. Where, indecent language plays a huge role in their marginalization, adoption of feminine identity also plays its part. As, we live in a society which is male dominated thus association with anything feminine either its identity or language will lead to the weaker perception. Transgender are deprived of an association with a sophisticated language that has resulted not only in their marginalization but also with derogatory image towards them. It has been concluded that in order to define a power of any societal group, the language used for or by the group must be analyzed, because language plays a defining role in giving power to any community. If a particular community like of transgender has a powerless language, it can never have a powerful status in a society.

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