Gender in Chinese Language: A Study of Words containing Woman Radical in Chinese Characters

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Abstract:

It has been opined by many scholars of linguistics that Chinese language has a strong patriarchal bias. In the 20th century China, the linguistic and cultural bias in its language somehow remained intact despite the turbulent changes that China experienced thorough the processes of Socialist and modernist transformations. The paper, through the perspective of theory of Sociolinguistics and Markedness, will examine a selection of Chinese characters that contains women radical "女", such as forms of address for women, certain nouns, verbs etc with women radical marking. The paper will also try to make a general attempt in understanding how certain words and terms in their deployment in communicative context are linked to influencing a person's thought cognitively and socially.

Keywords: Gender, women, Chinese characters, feminine, masculine, gender bias, gender discrimination, linguistic features

It is an everyday phenomenon to see gender in languages that we speak, and then there are appellations, language universals and linguistic or cultural impressions that also find many resemblances in most languages of the world. Does language influence the perceptions and thoughts towards a particular community, men or women? Is language a reflection of a person's thought or it helps one construct and shape their thoughts? Is there a relationship between language and thought of a person?

In recent few decades of research, it has been explored that there is a relation between the extent of patriarchal bias in a culture which gets translated in language structure and language use. Research on some Indo-European languages have also revealed that there are possible universals in these languages where they allow the masculine form as the generic or sex neutral but specifically mark the feminine. This peculiar feature has implications on perception, as the ideas and thoughts it generates about men and women or their distinct behavior, gets transformed into a social behavior. This transformed social behaviour is what is eventually understood and accepted as 'gender' and humans, men and women alike, then go on to perform their gender. Judith argues that one's learned performance of gendered behaviour is an act of sorts, a performance imposed by the normative heterosexuality. Therefore, every individual wants to be seen as a 'man' or a 'woman', to perform their gender, and it is exactly how gender takes the shape of being 'performative'.[1]

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[1] Judith Butler calls gender as "performative" and questions to what extent our acts are determined for us by our place within the language and convention. Butler, Judith, *Sex and Gender in Simone De Beauvoir's 'Second Sex'*, p. 40, Yale French Studies, No-72, 1986, p. 35-49.

It is through these interventions that certain distinctions were made, such as sex was established to be known for its biological differences (chromosomes, hormonal profile, internal and external sex organs) and gender (which is associated with, or rather, is their very identity) was known to be a social construct with its distinct masculine or feminine traits.

The reason why many postmodernist and poststructuralist theoreticians started using 'subject', rather than 'individual' or 'person', to highlight the linguistic nature of our position within the 'symbolic order',[2] a set of conventions and signs that determines our perception of what we see as reality…. Just like theatrical performance, one cannot even assume a stable subjectivity that goes about performing various gender roles (rather it is the very act of performing gender that constitutes who we are).

Owing to these social conventions, we saw the birth of stereotypes about how men and women talk, i.e. women talk more than men, talk too much, ask more questions, are supportive, co-operative., polite, hesitant, complain or nag. Men, on the other hand, talk about sports, talk about women and machines the same way, don't talk about emotions, dominate conversations, speak with authority, give more commands, interrupt often etc.

Despite many countries around the world that are striving to provide equal opportunities and status to women, such stereotypes have not been ousted out. Invariably a range of women's issues, such as equal pay, safety etc also continue to remain in low priority. Women entering the workforce has provided them with a basic opportunity, yet women bear the double brunt of work and home, profession as an area of work and domestic responsibilities as men still haven't picked up on the domestic front. The age-old 'male-female' binaries and the roles therein have been deeply ingrained and glorified in religion, language, culture, education, mass media, art etc. Therefore, gender seems as natural as biologically determined sex, and the stereotypes about gender also seem as the natural given.

Gender Difference is apparent in Social Practices, Language is just one of them.

There are theories and arguments on the connection of Gender with language or the influence of gender relations on language. Some of the prominent views are of Jennifer Coates, Deborah Tannen, Robin Lakoff and others that locate the relationship of language with gender through various approaches and methods. For example, Jennifer Coates as pointed out men rejects topics of conversation that women bring forth, whereas women accept and reciprocate the topics introduced my men. men bring forth male topics such as sports, and women are more likely to initiate the conversations, but are less likely to make it succeed.[3] Deborah Tannen suggested the difference model. Her difference theory is based on studies on social interaction and communication that establishes cultural differences between men and women. While men are concerned with status and independence, they use language to assert dominance. Women are interested in forming bonds, try to avoid conflict, show understanding by compromise, and show support rather than solutions, so women tend to use language to establish rapport and build relationships.[4]

With regards to a woman's place in language, Robin Lakoff examined the characteristics of the female language. Women talk in a specific manner, and his study about stereotypes of their language concluded

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[2] Lacan, Jacques. Accessed from cl.purdue.edu on 22 July 2024. Original text can be accessed from Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, translated by A. Sheridan, London, (1994), pp-126-246 and another book on his published papers (1953-1981) *Écrits: A Selection*, London, 1997.

[3] Coates, Jennifer. Women, Men and Language: A Sociolinguistic Account of Gender Differences in Language (3rd edition), Routledge: London, 2015.

[4] Tannen, Deborah. You Just Don't Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, New York: William Morrow & Co., 1990.

that women use more of "empty adjectives (lovely), more hedges (sort of), more tag questions, more indirect questions, swear less, speak less" etc.5 These theories depict how men and women engage themselves with the traditional binary and how each one of us then 'perform' and within that specific gendered narrative of social and cultural construct, often unconsciously and unaware. This construct is passed on as the 'values' or societal values, and language is the best carrier of it through ages. This vital link between gender and language is best indicated in pictographic language like Chinese, where gender relations play a pivotal role in coining of words and expressions. Chinese characters mark and identify everything 'feminine' or masculine, through symbols, but the language is heavily gendered as it feminizes even things that doesn't need a 'feminine' symbol to start with. Many words, terms, and expressions, of cultural construct, use the symbol of woman (called woman radical) to denote ideas and concepts that are stereotypical, demeaning or derogatory to women.

Gender Based Linguistic Features of Chinese Language

From the ancient times, Chinese characters were recorded as the written symbols for the objects they represented and have come to convey the rich social history and cultural concepts of different times. An insight into Chinese characters have also epitomized the concepts and thought process of the people, gender discrimination being one such concept.

In Chinese language, where Pictographs- objects they represent, there are components of those pictographs that can serve as classifier, which are known as 'radicle' or 'radicle strokes'. Most Chinese characters comprise of two components, one part is phonetic, and another is symbolic. The symbolic part is radicle, and it often is the semantic indicator from where comes the meaning; it is only sometimes that a radicle also indicate sound. There are covert terms with woman radical (女) such as 奴 (nu slave), 妃 (fei concubine), 妾 (qi concubine), 妓女 jinü (or 娼妓 changji prostitute), 婊 (biao prostitute), 嫉妒 (jidu jealousy), 姦 (jian treacherous / evildoer) , 奸 (jian bad person, illicit sexual relations), 媮 (tou improper), 婪 (tan avaricious/ greed), 嫌 (xian ill will/ suspicion), 娱乐 (yule entertainment), 婬 (yin obscene/ illicit) etc.

In overt terms, we can see 安 (an peace), 娇 (jiao charming/ delicate), 妙 (miao clever/ wonderful), 娴 (xian refined/ skilled), 婉(wan beautiful/graceful) etc

There are gender asymmetries in Chinese with many terms, such as

• 家庭主妇 a more accepted term, does not quite have an opposite which could be coined as 家庭主夫

• 妓女 a word for sex worker but specifically for women alone. There is no terms like 妓男 or 男妓 that exists

• 处女 does not have an opposite of 处男

• 小老婆 a not very well meaning sort of term for wives, also does not have an opposite of 小老公

In written Chinese, the male-female marking was established only about little over a century ago in China; the word for 'her' or '她' in Chinese was coined as late as 1870. Before that, ta coded for third-person singular in spoken Chinese was an unspecified category.6 However, it was only during the May-Fourth

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5 Lackoff, Robin. "Language and Woman's Place", *Language in Society*, Vol 2, No. 1, April 1973, pp. 45-80.
6 See Liu Bannong's biography on https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/jiangsu/zhangjiagang/2018-07/20/content_16137733.htm and https://harvard-yenching.org/cultural-history-of-the-Chinese-character-ta

period that the character "她" had gained its modern meaning, and subsequently, the differentiation between "he" and "she" was established.

The origin of Chinese feminine pronoun ta (她) is credited to Liu Bannong (刘半农), a leading figure of New Culture Movement (1917) who was also a Chinese linguist and a poet. It was Liu Bannong who used this character "她" in his poems and popularized it in 1930s.

It is significant to mention that in 1920s, Poet Liu Dabai's (刘大白) used the new 'nan'character, which was written as "男也"（and not as 男）, for quite some time in his works which utilised the male radicle.

Then it was changed to the current so-called gender-neutral and more generic ta with a 'human' radicle (人) around the May Fourth period only. Native Chinese speakers often say that the pronoun ta was unclear, and it was assumed it was a male person. Yet there have been views that opposed this change. Such as, Ling Yuanzheng (1989) writes in 《"她"字的创造历史》：

"….Since the third-person pronoun in Chinese was originally genderless, there was an objective need to create feminine and neutral characters 她 and 它 for the third-person singular. Thus, there was no need to denote masculinity; and since there was no need for such a character, to create one naturally would have been superfluous. "7

In overt and covert terms, we can see that when we use the word for 'human' or 'people', it is not really a Gender-neutral term, and in fact, it is by default Masculine.

In covert terms, there are umpteen terms that are biased and not clear at all when read out of the context. The phrase renjia (人家 literally meaning "person family"), a term exclusively used by women, is seldom used by men as a first-person pronoun. A standard use of wo (我 or "I") is the norm for men, but if a man uses renjia, it may be perceived that he mocking or mimicking a woman. Certain terms and expressions innately carry the flavour of femininity, i.e. indirect or passive agent, and if a man was to attempt it, he would be a laughingstock. The term itself again is explained as owing to feminine expectations of indirectness. For example, the usage of 佳人 (jiaren beautiful/impressive), 丽人 (liren beautiful/pretty), 美人 (beautiful person/woman), 内人 (a term for wives, as homemaker, stay at home woman) etc. are all words to denote women, despite of using ren, their usage are very gender specific. Similarly, a range of words denote men but of different semantic and emotion such as 才人 (cairen a person of talent), 圣人 (shengren sage), 伟人 (weiren a great person), 要人 (VIP, important person) etc.

The highly gendered language like Chinese have their semantic triggers, i.e. Males are not seen as person, but rather super humans, that are not and cannot be beautiful, pretty or impressive. Similarly, women haven't ever been assigned a category of VIP or any important person because, historically speaking, they are perhaps not viewed as a person of talent or a great person.

Additionally, when we look at the language structures also, sentences in Chinese could be misleading or misunderstood due to the psycholinguistic implications of ren (人), as the character for 'person' is largely understood as masculine alone. It is confusing to use terms such as :

- 有一个人，天天让他老婆做牛面…… (It is better to say 有一个老头儿 than to use ren (人))
- 有一个人在海滩晒太阳 ， 穿着三点式的游泳衣….. (It is implied that the person on the beach was

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7 Original text quote: "…. 因为汉语第三人称代词原本 无性的分别， 由于客观的需要创造了阴性和中性的 她字 和它字；因此阳性也就再 无必要表示了。 既无必需，却又便要造新字，自然变成了赘疣。" Translation by the scholar.

a male, but only when we read 三点式的游泳衣, we realize it is a woman. Thus, 有一位小姐 would have been better)

- 一位学者在新婚燕尔之际， 仍然手不释卷读书， 丈夫纷纷埋怨道…… (It is implied that the person (scholar) on the honeymoon was a male, but only when we read 丈夫纷纷埋怨道, we realize it is a woman)

All of the above examples have covert male associations, and enlighten us that at the very first instance, the combination of character of 'person' ren (人) has been selectively and tastefully crafted to perpetuate and enhance male domination, gender inequality and the development of patriarch.

Conclusion:

These terms denote a variety of nouns, verbs and verbal expressions that may not necessarily be related to womanhood. It seems evident that such a preoccupation with assigning words and terms with woman radical had been age-old and conscious practice of the Chinese mind.

It is evident that the he/she distinction did not exist before 1910 as there was only one *ta* (他) which was a regular third person pronoun, but it did not specify gender or humanness. The pronoun *ta* (他) could also refer to females earlier but somehow it got restricted to denote 'he' in written text. The construct of the character shows that it was a generic term for 'people' in general, instead of a term specially reserved for males. But did, in the process of modernization, if at all, and where exactly perhaps the Chinese started to feel women are not people?

Chinese language has gender bias inbuilt in its linguistic features, and the study of these linguistic features only demonstrate that Chinese language is heavily gendered and therefore, the gender stereotypes are enforced and reinforced through language in its day-to-day communication. Through the constant process of modernization, globalization and increased interaction with the world, lines are blurring, of course, but China still has a miles to go. Chinese society will inevitably be in a flux of gender related issues because of this discrimination that is in the very construct of these words and expressions, perhaps what they can do to tackle such a problem is initiate 'linguistic reforms'. An overhauling of such linguistic features that carry gender discrimination or place all the value on the masculine would eventually and slowly bear fruit and bring some concrete changes in people's attitude and behaviour towards the fair sex. Irrespective of where these reforms take the language, Chinese language will still hold its beauty and mystery.