Chapter VI

Conclusion

This research work entitled “Gender and Class Roots of Language: A Sociolinguistic Inquiry of Bengali Women in Kolkata” has been an attempt to explore the hitherto unearthed area of the interrelationship of ‘Gender, Language and Social Class’. The kernel departure point here was to explore Bengali women’s subjective perceptions about their everyday linguistic practices vis-a-vis their male counterparts. By now, it has been noticed that as one of the most significant and interesting sub-areas of Sociolinguistics, gender differences in language use have received enormous importance and popularity in the English speaking societies since the first half of the 20th century. However, extensive research in the field burgeoned with the publication of Robin Lakoff’s monograph ‘Language and Woman’s Place’ (1975) under the impact of the third wave feminist movements (in the mid 1970s). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, sociolinguistic research has moved on from the simple correlation of linguistic form with social category. Researchers now analyze spoken and written data with the aim of understanding how gender is constructed in everyday life and of assessing the role of language in creation and maintenance of contemporary masculinities and femininities. There is increasing emphasis on the need to be aware of similarities as well as differences between male and female speakers, as well as to assert the plurality of masculinities and femininities. Since then this particular field is investigated through a vast variety of theoretical and methodological approaches. But, despite the nascent beginning of the subject- sociolinguistics in India, the issue of gender-language interface is yet to come up as an attractive area of research in both the disciplines of Sociology and
Linguistics. Therefore working on this issue was of pivotal significance since it helped the researcher to bring to light issues that are embedded in the existing social structure but not recognized to be considered seriously.

With this backdrop, I aimed at researching the interrelationship of the three most significant variables present in any society and provide a detailed analysis of the valued opinions of the women respondents. The first chapter of the study has attempted to introduce this new area of study with proper literature review. Going back to early 20th century, this thesis has tried to explain and illustrate the chronological development of gender and language research, which primarily originated in several English speaking societies as well as other European and African native communities. The chapter not only demonstrated the development of this sub-discipline but also provided a cue for others regarding the intricate details of gender and language studies. It has also tried to present the probable dimensions of gender and language relationship to enrich our knowledge of the global context as well as that of our own Indian society. The review of relevant literature has also helped in formulating the research questions and objectives of the study as well as has laid down the guidelines for conducting the research in an effective way. The first chapter also includes the research methodological parameters so as to give a brief overview of the research strategy undertaken for this purpose.

Continuing from the previous section the second chapter has provided the basic and major theoretical frameworks applicable in this research. Here both sociological and sociolinguistic theories have been reviewed and also their applicability has been scrutinized, which has later helped us in relating the theoretical with the empirical and thereby in providing concluding remarks.
The third chapter of the study focuses on the interpretation of the results and here analysis is based purely on the respondents’ accounts. In this chapter the differences in linguistic style and forms of women and men have been discussed with reference to both private and public spheres. Since the research is based on qualitative methodological approach and narrative analysis was taken into consideration for presenting the results, therefore narratives obtained from the respondents during the in-depth interview have been used in order to support or refute the existing theoretical perspectives. Here women’s subjective and individualistic perceptions and judgements have been recorded and used for the interpretation of the research as a whole. This section also included the use of different linguistic patterns in same-sex as well as mixed-sex groups. In this context it was concluded that women and men differ largely in terms of their language use patterns or style of speaking both in private and public domains. Women’s and men’s general linguistic approach has been analyzed here that has ultimately led to conclude that gender stereotypes, norms and ideologies exert a cumulative effect on both women and men in terms of the expectation of their respective behavioural pattern along with their linguistic usages.

In continuity with this chapter the next section primarily focused on the interrelationship between gender and language. Here the thrust was on the social construction of gender and its role in facilitating the use of differential linguistic forms. It was commonly believed that language becomes gendered during the process of socialization and other experiences thereon. Gendering of language further moved on to discuss about specific features of women’s and men’s language followed by gendered or sexist language, which are used in everyday life but not always recognized as something wrong or derogatory. Attempts have been made to throw light not only on the characteristic features of women’s and men’s language but also on ‘queer’ or ‘other’ relationships. The notion of existence of separate women’s and men’s language has been
supported mostly in this research and how gender is being socially constructed as well as ‘performed’ through everyday practices including linguistic ones has also been taken into consideration as a serious matter of concern. So in sum, this chapter has focused on two different things, viz.

1) How language reveals, represents, constructs and sustains attitudes to gender and

2) How language users speak in ways that reveal and construct their genderedness.

The next chapter i.e. the chapter on gender, language and social class attempted to provide information on the perceptions of women regarding the relationship between gender, class and language. Here, education, occupation, income were primarily considered as the most determining and influential factors affecting the linguistic practices of women and men. Since one’s education often broadens up one’s horizon, and also helps in acquiring better occupational facilities as well as in earning more, therefore it was observed that lower class people are more likely to use the non-standard and less-polished/refined forms of language in comparison with the upper class people, who use more standard and prestige forms along with a more refined and polished way of speaking. However, the observation here is that instead of income, education and occupation have enormous influence on the way language is used by both women and men of different social positions. It has been quite obvious that people do not only speak to others keeping in mind their income pattern, rather their formal, informal and value education affect their linguistic practices along with their childhood socialization and occupational pattern and position. Since the research aimed to explore the impact of social class on language use and more specifically in connection with gender, it was discerned that one’s social position or standing definitely affects his/her language use patterns because our society, the culture and values
embedded in it are actually socially constructed, which always expects us to adhere to the prevalent, conventional set of societal rules and regulations.

In addition, here the use of intersectional approach has also made a major impact on the entire research, since Indian sociology does not fully recognize the significance and fruitfulness of adopting an intersectional paradigm in a feminist-qualitative research like this. However, with the help of such perspective the research has attempted to blend several theoretical as well methodological influences in order to reach a fruitful conclusion.

At the final stage it is being noted that language becomes gendered over time. However, with time and various social and cultural transformations in present day society the issue of gender discrimination has changed its nature to a large extent. The intensity and frequency of using gendered language has not diminished entirely, but several initiatives have been taken to eradicate the practice of using gendered language in everyday life. The introduction of gender-neutral vocabularies has also led to the disintegration of the feeling of superiority and inferiority in terms of gender identities. Nevertheless, from this research work it may be deciphered that language use of a woman or man is often determined by their gender and social class and also that despite the emergence of some gender-neutral languages or vocabularies gendered linguistic practices continue unabated till date. Realistically speaking, Gender stereotypes in general as well as in India get reflected in almost all normal conversations. Language reflects social reality about the position of women while the social identity of women is in turn performed through the language. Linguistic gender stereotyping is a socially-constructed way of classifying and categorizing members of the society. In case of gender relations in India a kind of supportive role is permanently assigned to women turning it into an unconscious submission to authority. Sexism in language is more than a matter of vocabulary.
Women have engaged in protracted struggles to be treated on an equal basis with men, especially in the workplace. This has involved challenges to sexist practices in interaction, including women’s efforts to be taken seriously. This is the context in which Ms has come into use, as a way of placing women on the same footing as men. Marital status has never been an issue for men in the workplace; it need not be for women either. Address terms to women can also be used in a patronizing way. It is this kind of usage which feminists have identified as sexist. Terms of affection can be used, for instance, to diminish a woman’s serious contributions to a discussion (Talbot, 2010: 226). Other sexist practices involving language are the negative evaluation of women’s voices (as shrill, strident and suchlike), of women’s talk (as trivial, mere gossip) and folklinguistic beliefs about talking incessantly. Guidelines drawn up in various institutional contexts for avoidance of sexist language are one limited example of organized resistance to sexism. The purpose of such guidelines, and of other attempts to curb sexist language, is to promote social change, to bring about changes in behavior and equitable treatment for women. (Talbot, 2010: 227). 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. So it can be said that it is vital for the members of a speech community to conform to the prescribed linguistic behaviour to establish their social identity or rather their gendered social identity. However, no individual in our society has only one identity, rather they actually have numerous social identities that profoundly influence one’s beliefs about and experience of gender. As Patricia Hill Collins (1990; 2000) has argued, in particular gender must be understood in the context of power relations embedded in social identities including class, race, ethnicity, sexuality etc. and many more. Thus, the mutually constitutive relations among social identities or more specifically
‘intersectionality’ become significant not only in feminist theorization but also in our present understanding of gender. The concept of ‘intersectionality’ is regarded significant not merely for being complex, irreducible and varied but also because the variable effects ensuing multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. Thereby, here the present research work has attempted to look at multiple inequalities and marginalization of women from an intersectional perspective by linking up gender, language and social class to each other. Here the question of how women face ‘triple-oppression’ on the basis of their gender, language and social class has been attempted as a serious concern. It has been noted here that women’s social positions are multiple so as their oppression and marginalization. The multiple and unequal positioning of women is still prevalent in the so-called postmodern fast-paced world, where the impacts of globalization along with huge media exposure and growth of information and communication technology have radically changed the norms and values of modern times. Today globalization is on everyone’s lips. It has not only referred to the expansion of global linkages, the organization of social life on a global scale but also to the growth of a global consciousness. However, while it has become a central lens through which social scientists have reframed old questions of last couple of decades, researchers working on ‘gender-language-class interface’ have been slower to do so. And now when sociolinguists are increasingly recognizing that the phenomenon of globalization has implications for patterns of language use, linguistic variation and change, it is also evident that even in this global era each language has inherent in it expressions that are indicative of society’s differential treatment for women, which is on the whole negative as well as further facilitated by the catalytic roles played by social class. Thus, the paper was attempted to underscore the multidimensional inequalities and oppressions, experienced by Bengali women with the help of
feminist intersectional perspective, which has unquestionably opened up a new vista for sociological research in India. Intersectionality has aimed to address precisely the issue of differences among women by providing a ‘handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it’ (Phoenix, 2006: 187). At the same time, it promises to address (and redress) the exclusions which have played such a distressing role in feminist scholarship through the (deceptively) easy procedure of ‘asking the other question’. Thus, intersectionality here, seemed ideally suited to the task of exploring how categories of language, class and gender are intertwined and mutually constitutive, giving centrality to questions like how language is ‘gendered’ and gender is ‘presented linguistically’ by linking them to the continuities and transformations of social class. On a final note, in this research the attempt was to focus a) on the subjective perceptions of the respondents regarding their language use patterns vis-à-vis their male counterparts, b) to explore the actual empirical situations regarding the linguistic practices of everyday life experienced by the respondents and c) in the end to seek suggestions from them so that future research potentialities can be enhanced.

Finally, to conclude we need to relate patterning in language to patterning in the wider society. Initiatives should and could be taken for language reform than to precede social change in favour of equality. Here, reforming language can only help partially in raising awareness about the power of language to marginalize and insult certain social groups. Though it is true that there is no language reform that can suit all languages, but native speaker intuition about the connotations of linguistic forms will surely tend to determine proposals for change. Moreover, differences in approach within the discipline of sociolinguistics actually contribute to healthy ongoing debate, which will ultimately lead us to carry out further research, attempting to remedy
the void of the previous ones as well as the focus should be on resistance rather than victimization. Furthermore, new researchers in sociology should be welcomed so as to develop some new proliferation of literature on the interrelation of gender and language, language and social class, age and language etc., which can actually help in the advancement of several academic discourses in India. And finally, more fruitful research on the intersectional aspects of language, gender and social class should be taken into consideration as a serious concern, so that both sociologists and sociolinguists in India can widen up the conventional academic disciplines to a much enriched and enlightened one.
End Notes (Website References)

1) http://people.cohums.ohio-state.edu/schwenter1/Romaine%202003.pdf - visited on 19.04.08.
2) http://www.doceo.co.uk/language_codes.htm - visited on 05.05.2008.
3) www.doceo.co.uk/background/language_codes.htm - visited on 17.06.2010.
4) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basil_Bernstein - visited on 17.06.2010
5) Ibid.
6) www.doceo.co.uk/background/language_codes.htm - visited on 17.06.2010.
7) Ibid.
9) Ibid.
10) Ibid.
12) Ibid.
13) Ibid.
20) ibid.
21) ibid.
27) ibid.
29) ibid.
34) Ibid.
36) Ibid.


