INTRODUCTION
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Addition of gender as a sociolinguistic variable in linguistics transformed the very conception of language from an ideal, neutral and value free medium of communication into an instrument of subjugation. Until the last phase of structuralism, the category of gender has played a relatively minor role in sociolinguistics. But the emergence of feminism, post structuralism and post modernism has made an interdisciplinary ecology to enhance the study of language in relation to gender as an important branch of linguistics. The publication of Man Made Language by Dale Spender (1980) paved an ideological base for feminist linguistics, which generated a politically charged motivation for this area. In the new era of post feminism and post humanism, the study of language in relation to gender has transcended the boundary of feminism, and now it has got its own intellectual space as a separate branch of linguistics under the banner of gender and language.

The emerging paradigm on the study of gender and language includes the following waves of interest and enquiry.

2. How language functioning as an instrument in the construction of femininity and masculinity.
3. How male and female subjectivities are constructed by the discursive and instrumental nature of language.

The first wave has a minor but an important base from the Lakoffian tradition of sociolinguistics. Lakoff’s studies on language and gender usually considered the language or speech behaviour of women in terms
of deficiency model. That is, she considered the speech behaviour of men as stronger and more desirable (Lakoff, 1975). The second decade of linguistics and gender studies, research in linguistics, sociology, anthropology and communication science investigated subtle differences in the speech behaviour of men and women, resulting in a situational ranking of the sexes. The specific investigation on the reflection of gender in language by William Labov (1960) considered sex as one factor among many influencing the variation of language behaviour.

The second wave was intellectually stimulated and ideologically underpinned by the emergence of feminism and the discourse on Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in linguistics. Whorfian idea of language and Dale Spender’s conception on language questioned the articulated idea on language which is *ideal; value free* and it reveal the discursive and instrumental function of language in the construction and generation of gender differences.

The third wave emerged under the interdisciplinary banner of post-structuralism and post-modernism. Foucaultian conception on language in the construction of social ontology has much impact on this paradigm. Language is the place where actual forms of social organizations and their likely social and political consequences are defined and contested. It is considered as a place where our sense of ourselves, and our subjectivity which is not innate and genetically determined but produced in a whole range of discursive practices, such as economic, social and political and the meanings of which are a constant site of struggle over power. Since, language is not the expression of unique individuality; post structuralism theorizes subjectivity as a ‘site of disunity and conflict, central to the
process of political change and to preserving the status quo.’ (Uma Sankar Jha, et al. 1998, p.40) Derridian conception on the free floating nature of meaning and the instability of language in the construction of meaning has given a new dimension to the enquiry.

As an epistemological commitment, any study on language in relation to gender shall consider these three approaches. The present study on gender in relation to Malayalam has considered the three ways up to its maximum extent. Each approach is different in its method, conception and analysis and each paradigm generating its own data. The reflection of gender in language can be finding out by the traditional quantitative paradigm. The second, the instrumentality and the discursive component of language can be find out only by a qualitative approach which needs more interpretative factual backup according to the context of articulation. The current and third trend of the discursive function of language in the construction of femininity and masculinity need discourse analysis with more interpretative tools.

The present study focused on Malayalam, which is the language evolved from Dravidian languages, has its own diversity due to its history of Aryanisation, Modernisation etc. It aims at to identify the gendered variation in different contexts, to identify the conversational differences of male-female speech and to disclose the discursive components in the construction of femininity and masculinity by language. This is an initial attempt to provide a description on the inequality in the use of language that has been claimed to exist in our society and the inequality between the roles of men and women. The linguistic disparities which experienced by both men and women in accordance with the way they are taught to
use language and in the way language use treats them. This tend to give women to certain subservient functions such as the object of the game, or servant and therefore some lexical items mean one thing when applied to men and another to women. These differences cannot be predicted except with reference to the different roles both sexes play in society. The study will flash light on the relation between language and gender in general and the gendered features of Malayalam with specific empirical backup. It opens a sociolinguistic dimension of the gendered variations of Kerala society. The analysis of the role of language in the construction of femininity and masculinity will generate a new way of sociolinguistic understanding. The discursive approach on the study of gender and language is very much relevant in this new context of feminism and post structuralism.

The data for the study were collected from the university community, Kerala university campus, Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital of Kerala. The spontaneous natural speech and conversations of twenty persons, ten women and ten men recorded in different settings and contexts. The informants belong to twenty to thirty years of age group from middle class backgrounds. Both formal and informal conversations were recorded through folk participating observation, question-answer method and the observations of spontaneous speech. In participatory observation, the researcher took initiative to discuss about some current issues both in single sex group and in the mixed sex group and then recorded the conversations of the participants. Specific questions were asked to the informants to get their response. It led to identify the formal and quintessential variations of male and female speech, phonological and grammatical variations were observed. The informants were initiated
to discuss about some topics of recent importance. And it was recorded and converted into the text form for analysis. The identified sociolinguistic variables were quantified by statistical method; conversational data were interpreted with the distinctiveness of context and in relation to gender variables.

Presentation of the thesis is organised into five chapters and a summary part. The first chapter of the thesis is elaborated upon the general issues; language, sex and gender and their interrelationship, biological and social interpretation of sex and gender and their influence in framing different individuals. The historical overview of the study of gender and language provides the evolution of major theoretical frameworks. It explores the development of gender identity and self-esteem as affected by such forces as cultural interpretations of femininity and masculinity and the agents of socialization such as families, peers, schools etc. The socializing process framed girls and boys to use only the appropriate linguistic forms of their own which are deeply embedded in its context and the social milieu. Thus social influence is very much effective particularly when it encourages continuation of stereotyped portrayal of the sexes. Then the gender-related beliefs and expectations exerting powerful and often subtle influence on the use of language and behaviour of each individual. The linguistic variations based on sex have deep far-reaching consequences. It leads to the differentiation in communicative competence as well.

The second chapter is an analysis of the difference between the use of language by men and women. It examines the phonological and grammatical differences, use of vocabulary and the attitude behind it etc.
Since language is an instrument which is intended for the social interaction, the rules and knowhow that every individuals should acquire it for a healthy communication or interaction. That is one should possess to operate in a way which is acceptable to other members of the speech community. The patriarchal nature of our society gives a high and respectable position to men which bring up men to name the entire things and the world as well. So it promotes to consider the male as the norm and the subjugated females as the other. Then the inferior position of women trains them to be timid and moreover use language which is indirect, repetitions, polite and considerable. The acquired knowledge of differentiation and the inequalities in the case of power and authority which promote different roles in society, men and women instructed to reflect the appropriate linguistic behaviour in certain circumstances. Moreover, the inappropriate forms to their gender will be strongly reprimanded.

The third chapter deals with the gender difference in conversational practice. It explores the way in which men and women characteristically draw on different strategies in conversational interaction, selection of topics, amount talk, interruption and overlapping etc. It looks at a very different aspect of communicative competence, the competence in switching between different languages and dialects because bi/multilingualism or bi/multidialectalism is a common feature of societies all over the world. Conversation is a form of social practice which allows initiating and maintaining relationship and the conversational patterns between men and women reflect the inequalities existing between them. The choice of topic is influenced by the society in which they live and in the case of women many topics and words are
taboo to her in certain circumstances. Interruptions and overlapping are the strategies which enable speakers to dominate their partners in conversation. Since, to interrupt someone is to deprive them of the right to speak, men use various non-cooperative strategies such as no response, inadequate or delayed response etc to control conversation.

The fourth chapter focuses on the gendered history and gendered peculiarity of Malayalam language. It examines the grammatical gender which distinguishes animate nouns into masculine, feminine and neuter. Human perceive the world from the primary categories of animate and inanimate and attributes gendered qualities to inanimate things also. It explores the social issue-linguistic sexism which is the act of linguistic discrimination on the grounds of sex, sexism as shown through the Malayalam vocabulary and how this vocabulary defines sex roles. Male gendered terms make females feel that they are excluded from the game, because, the practice of assigning masculine gender to neuter forms comes from the fact that every language reflect the prejudices of the society which is evolved from the male centered patriarchy. So linguistic favouritism towards male have given women a subordinate and inferior position and considered as the second sex.

The last and fifth chapter deals with the construction of masculinity and femininity by the ideological and discursive components of Malayalam language. It affirms that language includes not only expressions or reflections but also experiences and constructions. From the very beginning of one’s identity formation he/she has to be involved in the polyphonic discursive practices of the society which instructed men and women to follow a particular stereotypical way. The existing
dominant phallocentric discursive practices impose and fix the micro structures of femininity on women and masculinity on men. The behavioural attributes femininity and masculinity being constructed by the intensive interference of the socio-cultural institutions and discourses which work as verbal instrument to the purposive subjugation of women to generate the patriarchal power structure. It examined the role of conversation in constructing one as gendered beings. By doing and performing gender one is presenting him/herself to others as gendered beings. By the way of talk, dress, etc women express their femininity which is not the same in all circumstances. She becomes different person in different situations.

To summarize, I have pointed out the main arguments and issues presented in the other five chapters. Society is not at all stagnant, so is language. The changing pattern of society reflects upon gender relation and the very mechanism of gendering also. In the context of gradual shifts in the microstructures of the society enacted and enriched by the new movements of post-modernity and post-feminist thought, an incisive analysis of the language centred gendering process is essential.