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Between Words and Worlds: Generational Linguistic Shifts and Gender Identity in the South Asian-Canadian Diaspora

Introduction

It is widely believed that language holds a distinct capacity to transmit culture by shaping and reflecting constructs that define and negotiate identities within society. As both a mirror and tool for social values, language is not only a mechanism for communication, but embeds within it the histories, traditions, and ideologies of people. Gender identity is no different: it is profoundly influenced and expressed through the linguistic choices and patterns that permeate everyday interactions. The question, then, about what language may distinctively contribute to cultural evolution remains pertinent.

As such, this paper explores how generational differences in language develop overtime to reflect evolving norms and expression of identity, particularly in regards to perceptions of gender. Specifically, this research narrows in on the South Asian diaspora in the West, examining the role historical events and cultural shifts have played in shaping such linguistic patterns. The South Asian diaspora in the West is highly culturally rich and diverse, making it the ideal context for exploring how the interplay of historical and cultural factors contribute to changes in linguistic projections of gender identity. At the same time, it is a highly understudied minority, presenting us with a critical opportunity to fill an academic gap in the discourse of gender and linguistic studies.

Thus, this paper uses the sociolinguistic theoretical approach to make the following argument: colonization and Western notions of gender identity have significantly reshaped South

Asian linguistic and cultural practices by shifting traditionally gender fluid language and expression to more rigid binaries. To illustrate this, I first conduct a literature review that establishes the historical and cultural background influencing linguistic patterns in the Canadian South Asian diaspora. Then, I report the findings from my comparative research of older South Asian immigrants, who were raised in their native countries before relocating to Canada, against those of younger South Asian immigrants who were born or raised in the Canadian diaspora. In doing so, I conclude the implications of linguistics on understanding gender and thus, cultural evolution, as a whole.

Literature Review

One of the earliest notions of social inequalities arises from the changing sociopolitical dynamics in the West, particularly during and after significant historical shifts such as the Industrial Revolution. This period highlighted disparities that were later critiqued through ideologies such as Marxism, that focused specifically on the distribution of power and the conflict it raises between different groups in society. Antonio Gramsci (1950), was one of the theorists who elaborated on this by introducing the concept of hegemony, explaining that power works through ideas and ideologies so that the powerless subconsciously internalize the systems that enforce their powerlessness, thereby colluding in its perpetuation. Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony highlights how societal control is achieved not just through coercive means but through the shaping of consent, where the dominant group's values and norms become the societal standard.

Following the early 1970s during the second wave of feminism, then, women were actively beginning to question how society was socially organized from a male perspective through institutions, traditions, ideologies, laws, and practices. Thus, the term ‘patriarchy’ came

into the lexicon, with feminist theorists such as Lakoff (1971) proposing that power is distributed differently between the two genders, leading to a systemic and social difference in the construction of their identities. As such, language becomes one of the mechanisms through which this unequal distribution of power is reflected and perpetuated. Robin Lakoff (1971) particularly emphasized how language encodes and reinforces gender norms, shaping perceptions and interactions in ways that sustain patriarchal systems. By analyzing the subtle nuances in speech patterns and language use among genders, Lakoff highlighted that the language associated with women often exhibited markers of uncertainty, politeness, and deference, which contrasted sharply with the more assertive and authoritative language typically associated with men.

Later, other Western feminist scholars such as Grosby and Nyquist (1977), Kramer (1974) and Mulac (1986) extended on Lakoff's ideas, theorizing terms such as 'genderlect', 'women's language' and the 'female register' to further explore the specific linguistic features that characterized women's speech. Grosby and Nyquist (1977) and Kramer (1974) coined the term 'genderlects', for instance, arguing that these gender-specific languages serve to reinforce gender roles prescribed by society. Mulac (1986), on the other hand, focused on the quantitative differences in communication styles between genders, such as differences in verbosity, assertiveness, and language politeness.

More recently, scholars such as Cameron have extended on such evolving themes of sociolinguistic research, critiquing earlier models that might oversimplify gender distinctions in language use, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding that considers context, audience, and individual identity. Cameron's work seeks to dismantle the binary views of gender

and language by illustrating the variability and fluidity in how individuals of different genders communicate, thus challenging the notion of fixed 'genderlects.'

Still, while these analyses provide insights into the relationship between gender and language use, they often fail to fully incorporate the intersections of other historical evolutions and identities that Gramsci emphasized in his theory of hegemony. This limitation arises because these perspectives are predominantly from a Western feminist viewpoint, which may not universally apply to the intersection of identities and diverse historical and cultural contexts experienced by women in different regions. For instance, language can also be a tool for perpetuating violence in a broader a dimension that extends beyond the Western conceptualization of gender dynamics.

Significant in this broader context is the work of scholars like Ravishankar A. (2020), who explores the concept of linguistic imperialism in his study "Linguistic Imperialism: Colonial Violence through Language." This research, hosted by the Trinity College Digital Repository, delves into how language has been used as an instrument of colonial domination and oppression, underscoring the violent aspects of linguistic control. Ravishankar's analysis demonstrates that language not only shapes social interactions and gender identities but can also enforce and sustain systems of oppression and violence, expanding upon Gramsci's ideas of how hegemony can infiltrate all intersections of identity.

Methodology

It is within this context, then, that I propose the central research question: how do generational differences in language use within South Asian Canadian communities reflect the evolving norms of gender and what role have historical events and cultural shifts played in shaping these linguistic patterns? To explore this, I conducted semi-structured interviews with

two different demographic cohorts from the diaspora, for an in-dept exploration of personal narratives.

Participants

This study employed purposive sampling to recruit twelve participants from the South Asian Canadian diaspora. The sample was evenly divided into two distinct generational cohorts: six elderly South Asian immigrants, aged between 60 and 70, who migrated to Canada during the 1970s; and six younger first-generation South Asian Canadians, aged between 18 and 28, who were either born in Canada or arrived before the age of five. Participants identified as Pakistani, Indian, or Bangladeshi in origin and this purposive sampling was instrumental in contrasting the linguistic and cultural assimilation experiences of participants who have lived through different historical and social contexts. In doing so, I ensured a comprehensive understanding of the intergenerational dynamics within the community, providing insights into both continuity and change in language use related to gender norms.

Data Collection

Twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted over a four-week period. Interviews were conducted in environments selected by participants—typically their homes or community centers—to promote comfort and facilitate an open and honest dialogue. Each interview lasted between 45 to 75 minutes and was conducted in English, Urdu, or a combination of both, depending on the linguistic preferences of the participants. All participants were informed about the study's goals and rights, including confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and personal identifiers were removed from the transcripts to maintain confidentiality. The semi-structured

nature of the interviews allowed for the flexibility to probe deeper into interesting or unexpected areas that emerged during the conversations, while still covering a set list of topics designed to elicit information relevant to the research questions. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission, and I also actively took notes.

Research Design

The study employed a semi-structured interview format of around 10 to 12 open-ended questions designed to prompt participants to discuss their experiences with language use in various social contexts, their observation of their language's evolution overtime, including in the community's linguistic practices over time, and their perceptions of how these changes correlate with shifts in gender roles and identities. Questions were designed to encourage reflection on personal experiences and cultural observations, such as: "Can you describe how you have seen the use of language evolve in your community since you arrived in Canada?" "In what ways do you think language reflects or influences gender roles in your community?" "Could you share any personal stories where language played a significant role in a cultural or gender-related interaction?" amongst others. Interview questions were adapted slightly depending on generational context to ensure cultural and experiential relevance. The flexibility of the semi-structured format allowed participants to explore topics in depth, and allowed me to probe unexpected but relevant areas of discussion, which enriched the overall data set.

Findings

The findings from the interviews revealed a stark contrast in the linguistic behaviors and perceptions between the older and younger generation. The first group, the older participants, reported that their use of language, particularly in their mother language, tended to be much more neutral. Older Pakistani men, in particular, largely reported that they were taught to be

softspoken, keep their voices low and not use overtly aggressive language as a sign of respect for whoever they were speaking to and expected the same from women. They expressed an aversion to raising their voices, viewing it as uncouth and inappropriate. Furthermore, they reported that their use of language was inherently tied to traditional values and customs that emphasize modesty, respect, and the maintenance of societal harmony. This practice of keeping conversations at a subdued level and avoiding aggressive language was described not just as a personal choice but as a cultural imperative ingrained from a young age. Furthermore, in their view, terms that are inherently gendered are often associated with inappropriate language because it involves implicitly objectifying women or at the very least, acknowledging differences that are deemed unnecessary in society. The participants from the older generation also reported that their engagement with literature and poetry was predominantly taught and interpreted within a gender-neutral framework. Texts, whether poetic or narrative, were often presented in such a way that the speaker or writer could be referring to anyone, irrespective of gender. This approach to literary interpretation aligns with the broader cultural emphasis on minimizing gender distinctions in public and intellectual discourse. Additionally, when confronted with compliments typically associated with femininity in English or with slang terms that carry overtly gendered connotations, these older participants expressed that they did not perceive these expressions in a gendered manner. Instead, they viewed such language as universal in scope, applicable to any individual regardless of gender.

On the other hand, the younger generation displayed a notably different approach to language and its relation to gender. This group tended to embrace and utilize more overtly gendered expressions, both in casual and formal contexts. They were more likely to use and accept gender-specific slang and compliments that clearly differentiate between male and female

in their daily speech. For instance, slang terms like "king" and "queen" in English, which are laden with gendered connotations, are embraced by the younger generation as terms of empowerment rather than as markers of gender roles. They reported frequently employing gendered and sexually charged slang like 'ting' or 'baddie,' they viewed these terms through a contemporary lens, often detached from the potentially derogatory connotations perceived by older generations. Simultaneously, they also reported being hyperaware of the language they use depending on the gender of who they are speaking to. For instance, male participants especially noted that they alter the types of compliments they offer based on whether they are addressing male or female peers. This differentiation stems from concerns about how certain compliments might be perceived differently by men, potentially conflicting with social expectations around masculinity. For example, expressions of admiration that are commonplace and positively received among female friends might be viewed as inappropriate or unwelcome among their male peers. Additionally, young men expressed feeling pressured to conform to the overtly sexual and gendered language that pervades certain online spaces and popular music. This pressure influences them to adopt specific styles of communication that align with hyper-masculine or dominant male stereotypes, which are often celebrated in these media. The adoption of such linguistic styles is not merely a passive reflection of media consumption but is also motivated by a desire to fit in with peer expectations and avoid being labeled as too soft-spoken, which could lead to social ostracization.

Discussion and Analysis

As a result, the findings from the interviews revealed a stark contrast in linguistic behaviors and perceptions between the older and younger generations within the South Asian Canadian diaspora, illustrating a profound impact of historical colonization and subsequent

cultural shifts facilitated by globalization. Particularly, this can be explained from a sociolinguistic perspective which maintains that language use varies across different social contexts, such as historical, socioeconomic, and cultural. Sociolinguistic theory argues that language is not just a means of communication but also a social practice that reflects and constructs identities, relationships, and power dynamics (Cameron, 2006).

In this case, historical colonization has significantly impacted linguistic practices, as it introduced and enforced Western norms and languages in the South Asian region that often conflicted with their traditional cultural practices and socialization of language use. For instance, as Ravishankar finds, colonial imperialism imposed binary gender roles that were reflected in and reinforced in Britain, influencing how gender was and continues to be perceived and articulated. The formal, somewhat rigid use of language seen among older South Asians may stem from the colonial imposition of English, which was often taught and used in a very structured and formal manner (Ravishankar, 2020, 3). This formality has permeated even the native languages spoken by these communities, influencing how older generations communicate and perceive appropriate linguistic behavior (Hickey, 2005, 540). Specifically, the older generation's preference for gender-neutral language and formal communication styles can be seen as a retention of pre-colonial linguistic norms that resisted these colonial impositions. Thus, their use of formal and restrained language reflects a broader historical context where language was a site of both colonial control and cultural resistance.

At the same time, the linguistic choices of the younger generation in the South Asian Canadian diaspora, characterized by the use of overtly gendered slang and more assertive expressions compared to their elders, illustrate a complex interplay of conformity to colonial gender binaries and simultaneous resistance to their own traditional cultural norms. Younger

South Asians are navigating their identities within a post-colonial globalized context that still bears the imprints of colonial legacies, while also interacting with the global cultural currents that challenge these historical frameworks. This process is implicit: due to the insufficiency of the colonial language, the colonized subject – in this case, the South Asian diaspora – proceeds to perceive their cultural experiences and understanding of the world as fatally and legitimately skewed. As Ravishankar states, their language use is codified in favor of those in power and in active spite of those who are not (Ravishankar, 2020, 4).

Thus, by adopting gender-specific language, the younger generation appears to align with the binary gender constructs that were solidified during the colonial era. At the same time, their linguistic behavior represents a break from their cultural traditions: the adoption of modern, globally influenced gendered language not only allows them to engage with the broader Canadian and global culture but also serves as a form of resistance against the traditional constraints of their community.

This dual act of both conforming to and resisting different sets of norms —colonial and traditional— then, suggests a deeper struggle for identity among young South Asian Canadians. They are at once navigating the implicit legacy of colonialism, which continues to influence perceptions of gender and language, while pushing against the boundaries of their cultural heritage to forge identities that resonate with their contemporary, globalized experiences. As such, their linguistic choices become a powerful tool for negotiating these complex social landscapes, representing the notion that language is an instrumental mechanism for shaping and tracing cultural evolution in humans.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the dynamic implications of linguistics on understanding gender from an intersectional perspective, showcasing how language serves as a pivotal tool in shaping and reflecting cultural evolution. In doing so, the study underscored the need for a more comprehensive understanding of language and identity within diasporic communities. While the focus was on generational differences in language use related to gender norms, future research could delve deeper into the intersectionality of language with other facets of identity such as race, class, and religion. This approach would provide a more nuanced understanding of linguistic practices within diverse contexts. In hindsight, this study could have benefited from a longitudinal design to track linguistic changes over time and across different waves of immigration.

What emerged most powerfully, however, was how deeply personal these shifts in language felt—both to my participants and to myself. Listening to the stories of older and younger generations, I was reminded that language is never neutral; it carries memory, tension, and hope. In many ways, this project mirrored my own journey of rediscovering a language that once felt distant, and now feels central to how I understand identity. These findings, then, are not just analytical, they are lived. And they reinforce a simple but profound truth: language is not only a means of describing the world, it is a way of belonging to it.

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