

SOCIAL GENDER STEREOTYPES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS IN HINDI

Anjali Pande

Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

India

anj_p@rediffmail.com

Summary:

This essay looks at the subtle ways in which gender identities are constructed and reinforced in India through social norms of language use. Language itself becomes a medium for perpetuating gender stereotypes, forcing its speakers to conform to socially defined gender roles. Using examples from a classroom discussion about a film, this essay will highlight the underlying rigid male-female stereotypes in Indian society with their more obvious expressions in language. For the urban woman in India globalisation meant increased economic equality and exposure to changed lifestyles. On an individual level it also meant redefining gender relations and changing the hierarchy in man-woman relationships. With the economic independence there is a heightened sense of liberation in all spheres of social life, a confidence to fudge the rigid boundaries of gender roles. With the new films and media celebrating this liberated woman, who is ready to assert her sexual needs, who is ready to explode those long held notions of morality, one would expect that the changes are not just superficial. But as it soon became obvious in the course of a classroom discussion about relationships and stereotypes related to age, the surface changes can not become part of the common vocabulary, for the obvious reason that there is still a vast gap between the screen image of this new woman and the ground reality. Social considerations define the limits of this assertiveness of women, whereas men are happy to be liberal within the larger frame of social sanctions. The educated urban woman in India speaks in favour of change and the educated urban male supports her, but one just needs to scratch the surface to see the time tested formulae of gender roles firmly in place. The way the urban woman happily balances this emerging promise of independence with her gendered social identity, makes it

necessary to rethink some aspects of looking at gender in a gradually changing, traditional society like India.

Palavras-Chave

Género; Índia; Estereótipo; Língua; Sala de Aula

Key Words

Gender; India; Stereotype, Language; Classroom

1. Introduction

As member of a particular language community the speaker is more often than not negotiating the space prescribed to her believing that she is using the language as a neutral means of expressing the Self. Through this process of using a particular language for giving voice to her subjectivity, she becomes party to the agreement to abide by the norms laid down by that language community. This tacit alignment with the socially sanctioned norms of linguistic behaviour serves to strengthen the role of discourse as a site for construction of gender stereotypes. Research on gender and language structures as well as studies on language and construction of social identities have clearly shown that language cannot be a neutral medium for expression of Self (cf. Cameron 1995, Eckert/McConnell-Ginet 2003, Mills 1995, Romaine 1999, Thorne/Kramarae/Henley 1983). Meanings are created and imparted in the process of language use. Language comes with its social, cultural and historical baggage and is to say the least as loaded as any other system of symbols. But it is in the context specific discourse that the individuals interpret meanings and views from these symbols. This paper thus, considers language as a two pronged device, on the one hand giving voice to identities but on the other hand constructing identities suited to the social palate. One is not denying that language could become a medium to transcend gender dichotomy, to break out of hierarchical social structures or to subvert the enterprise of social differentiation itself. However, it must be made clear that examining the cultural roots of language use calls for an awareness of the role that language plays in perpetuating established stereotypes. As Marlis Hellinger points out “contrary to the assumption that language merely reflects social patterns such as sex-role stereotypes, research in linguistics and social psychology has shown that

these are in fact facilitated and reinforced by language” (cf. Hellinger 1984: 136). It is in this broader frame of looking at the interplay between language as manipulated and manipulating and its speaker as a product of that particular linguistic environment that this paper sets out to analyse gender in language.

In the context of this paper the term ‘speech norms’ stands for socially accepted ways of language use, especially those which regulate the social behavioural aspect of language use in spoken interactions. For other language related social norms the broad term ‘linguistic norms’ is used. It is not possible to speak of Indian women as a uniform entity since the economic, social, regional, religious and linguistic differences in India are too wide to allow such a generalisation. The reference here will be specifically to urban, educated, middle class, Hindi speaking Indian women as the language being described here is Hindi, spoken mainly in North India.

Many of the major Indian languages like Hindi and Punjabi which belong to the Indo-Aryan language family identify two grammatical genders – masculine and feminine – while some languages from the same language family like Marathi and Gujarati have a third neuter gender. The differentiation based on biological gender works at different levels in a language, for one within the grammar of that language the biological gender is marked morphologically, secondly at the lexical level, and thirdly outside this grammatical frame it is marked through norms of language use. As Hall and O’Donovan point out, in Hindi “the habitual, progressive and intransitive perfective verb forms (...) show gender concord with the subject” (cf. Hall/O’Donovan 1996: 236). This is true of many Indian languages, which means even while using a first person singular pronoun the biological gender identity needs to be clearly stated for the subject in the sentence. The Hindi speaker has to identify her biological gender through the addition of biological gender specific markers to the verb stem or through different suffixes and verbal auxiliaries. Adjectives are inflected depending on the grammatical gender of the nouns and inflecting postpositions mark out the grammatical gender of the main noun, for example, inflecting postpositions that function as genitive, locative, and ablative markers agree with the gender of the main noun. The feminine and masculine self reference in Hindi thus becomes a constant reaffirmation of the biological gender identity of the speaker. The focus in this paper is, however, on the gendered norms of language use.

In Hindi, the masculine noun *aadmi*, which means ‘man’ is used generically to refer to all human beings. The other alternative is the masculine noun *insaan*, which

means 'human being', but in non-generic usage this noun is not used to denote female human beings. Recently there have been attempts to replace the generic 'he' in some textbooks by introducing feminine verb-endings in a generic sense as a linguistic norm. For example following sentences from the Civics textbook for class 7, published in Hindi for the new elementary school curriculum prepared by State Council for Educational Research and Training in Delhi: "Every citizen has the right to express her thoughts, cast her vote or contest elections" ; "In a modern democracy, a citizen has rights, through which she can participate in the formation of the government, in its smooth functioning, or in its removal". These efforts provoked protests and allegations of feminisation of the citizens of India and questions about the linguistic skills of the authors (cf. Bhog 2004).

2. Normative social expectations in language use

It is vital for the members of a speech community to conform to the prescribed linguistic behaviour to establish their social identity. Speech, including gestures and body language represents a special act, the first signal going out to the society constructing the gendered identity of the individual. In their study on the so called "third gender", the *hijra* community of India, Hall and O'Donovan (1996) discuss how the *hijras* switch between their male and female identities (see also Hall 2002). *Hijras* or 'eunuchs' as they are termed by many researchers are raised as boys but eventually go on to live as women, in most cases in ghettoised, socially marginalised communities. The way they define their femaleness through both language and body language is of significance to understand social markedness of female linguistic behaviour. The most obvious difference that is observed as 'deviance' in these boys is their linguistic behaviour which sets them apart as effeminate. They are termed as *baiylo* meaning girlish, where it is mainly the linguistic performance that is judged to be deviating from "the sex-roles, norms and values expected of men in Indian society" (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 235). Then in the *hijra* community there is a conscious effort to acquire the 'female way of speaking' and the initiates are termed 'ill behaved or ill mannered' if they fail to acquire this female verbal behaviour. Irrespective of their linguistic variety speech communities in India show a certain level of uniformity with regard to the definitions of and differentiation between male and female linguistic behaviour. Female body language is deemed to express the delicate

femaleness through harmonious movements devoid of abruptness, devoid of any unpredictable attempts at appropriation of the floor in a conversation. In fact, the rules prescribed for a subordinate body language like not trying to establish a direct eye contact are touted as ideal behaviour for women. Of course, when it comes to legitimisation of social hierarchies, language and speech norms are only one of the many other complex social control mechanisms at play. Socially marked linguistic behaviour expected of women concurs with the general stereotype notion that a docile and demure woman is virtuous. A woman who expresses her wishes, her ambitions is seen as being too self-centred. The voice of the ideal self-sacrificing Indian woman is one of silence. Girls are told to keep their voices low while speaking and not to smile or laugh too much. A smile can get interpreted as sexual innuendo or as a sign of frivolity in a girl.

As it will become clear in the discussion in section 10.5, the body language of women is generally subject to closer scrutiny than that of men. Stereotypes are used to draw conclusions about her morality based on features like the way she looks at the partner or her hand gestures etc. The male body language differs from the female body language even in the way a man occupies physical space. A woman is expected to sit with her legs drawn together whereas the man is expected to ‘spread out’ occupying in most cases more physical space than a female speaker. Looking at gender specific norms related to linguistic behaviour as part of the whole social power relations could help understand why imposition of these stereotypes becomes so important in every speech community. At different points, for different purposes a speaker has to negotiate her gender identity in conversations and depending on the power equation she manages to use features of both stereotypical elements; a woman police officer uses more ‘masculine’ features in her work interactions in this sense and is more ‘feminine’ when talking with her family. As Hall and O’Donovan state, “(...) women and men of many communities manipulate linguistic expectations of femininity and masculinity in order to establish varying positions of solidarity and power” (cf. Hall/O’Donovan 1996: 258).

Gender stereotypes affect the expectations of a particular linguistic behaviour placed on women but they do not spare the males either. It is this stigma of a lower social status attached to a ‘female way of speaking’ in a man which teaches men to conform to the prescribed norms. Violation of these norms of speaking marks out the *hijras* as social outcasts even before they start forming their gender identity. A subject

in the Hall/O'Donovan study reveals that she views "gender as something to be put on in the way one would put on a *sāri* (a dress traditionally worn by Indian women), an investiture which eventually leads to the acquisition of what she calls *aurat ki bāat* ('women's speech') (cf. Hall/O'Donovan 1996: 240). Similar transgression of norms of language use on the part of a girl invites immediate repudiation in the form of an allegation of being 'mannerless' (an expression commonly used in India) or of trying to be like a man or it invites corrective measures in the form of parental scolding. The term *aurat ki baat* or 'the female linguistic behaviour' is complex, mostly constituted by context and other social hierarchical considerations like age and social status.

But there is a broad consensus in India on what can not be accepted as a female way of using language. The specific areas forbidden to 'cultured' female Hindi speakers are curse words for obvious reasons but interestingly also uttering the name of the husband is taboo for a 'good' wife. The wife is not allowed to utter her husband's name, perpetuating the socially higher position of the husband. Rajeswari Sundar Rajan (1993: 98) points out that the motive behind such prohibitions is to mystify and exalt the signified. Response to such exalted mystification is an immense respect for the husband and being a society where respect is equated with submission to subordinate status it is easy to understand why words like *patidevta* (literally meaning 'Husband God') and *pativrata* (a woman devoted to her husband) are still in currency in India.

3. The needle and thread syndrome

If one were to look at the use of Hindi as a medium of expression in written form, one finds that, as in most other Indian languages, women writers in Hindi have generally felt limited by socio-cultural norms and linguistic implications of these norms. Restrictions are felt in terms of contents or themes that they are allowed to deal with as well as the kind of language a woman writer is expected to use. But right from the celebrated writers like Mahadevi Varma or Krishna Sobti to young writers like Alaka Saravagi or Jaya Jadhvani many women authors have gone beyond those limited 'female' issues and they have been writing about everyday issues faced by people. Modern writers have succeeded in breaking the limited view of equating women's writing with women centric themes. They are no longer eulogizing pains or trauma of womanhood nor are they glorifying the sufferings and sacrifices related to

it. The new women writers in Hindi are writing with a sensitivity which tackles the social issues head on, articulating the challenges faced by the modern woman. They are using 'bold' language raising questions which were considered taboo especially in small towns or semi urban India, from where many of these authors come. Themes like women's sexual desires, their bodies or adultery are spoken of as normal facts of life without their being judged on the social parameters of morality. For example in the novel *Samay Sargam* by Krishna Sobti the main character is an independent single woman in search of her identity. She does not indulge in self-pity nor does she have any remorse about her struggles in life as a single woman. These strong characters reflect gradual changes in Indian women's need for independence. Female characters have graduated from begging for a place in the society or from the other extreme of 'rebel feminist' to a more positive image of women as constituents of the family units, as integral part of the society. They are no more helpless victims; they are articulating their rights as a natural process of self-expression by a human being.

But written language as a means of expression in public spheres remained inaccessible to female members of the society in India for a long time. Women's writing in some Indian languages essentially started as a statement against social oppression and female social reformists were the ones who broke the 'silence' imposed by social norms. Later a gradual change in social power structures was seen taking place through social reforms, women's education and women's participation in the struggle for independence. Early women writers in some other Indian languages in late 19th century – like Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai, who wrote in 1880s in Marathi or Kailashbhashini Debi in 1860s writing in Bengali – were openly questioning imbalance in gender relations and portraying subjection of women in the traditional Indian society. Today women writers in India are using their varied languages as freely and as effectively as their male counterparts creating their own spaces to bring out gender biases inherent in social norms, in traditions or in religious practices.

Even so they talk of an invisible censorship at work when it comes to writing about relationships, sexuality, politics or about religion. In the 70s, the Hindi writer Mridula Garg faced court case for her novel *Chitkobra*, when she dared to write that the sexual act was devoid of pleasure for her heroin. Such indirect censorship on written language is imposed on women who dare to write in Indian languages about issues considered out of bounds for respectable women. As some participants in a

workshop – organised in 2003 by an organisation Asmita to study, discuss and publicize the odds facing women writers in India – put it, “Oppressed by respectability women Hindi writers avoid sexuality, religion, politics, even social issues. To write honestly, they agreed, was almost impossible and to write about the family was the most difficult. Many have avoided writing their autobiographies” (cf. Asmita 2003). Hindi poet Anamika speaks of a Needle and Thread Syndrome in women’s lives, which manifests as a ‘self imposed silence’ in the works of women writers. She points out that, “family honour, the compulsion to be a good daughter, a good wife and a good mother” all constituted a societal pressure which locked her into a ‘good girl syndrome’ (cf. Asmita 2003). In one of her poems she laments this ‘being silenced’ by social restrictions:

Scissors to cut with,
a needle and thread to sew my lips with.
If I write my subconscious,
the earth will be covered with paper.
(cf. Asmita 2003)

Although women’s writing today does not encounter the social rigidity prevalent some decades ago, notions of obscenity and propriety imposed through language do limit the canvas on which women writers can paint their lives, portray their ideas, or colour their world. One of the participants highlights how language forces these authors to make socially appropriate choices on which words to use, citing example of swear words in Hindi. According to her, “there is no way a woman can use swear words in Hindi, because they are specifically and abusively anti-women; to use them would be to deliberately endorse their derogatory intent” (cf. Asmita 2003).

4. Reflection of stereotypical gender notions in matrimonial advertisements

Marriage marks an important change in the identity of a woman in India, at two levels. On a concrete or more obvious level it imparts her a new name, she becomes part of a new family and enters a new place of residence since mostly

women go to live in their husbands houses. At the same time, at the social level this woman acquires a new identity, a changed social position, a different social role, that of a wife of Mr. Xyz or daughter-in-law of family Xyz. She ceases to be the daughter of Mr. Abc. This change in the social status from 'daughter' to 'wife' is brought out in the word describing the main ceremony in Hindu marriages. The word used is *kanyadaan*, a composite of two words *kanya* meaning daughter and *daan* meaning 'to give away'. So the ceremony is primarily a change of ownership. The father gives away his daughter to the husband, who from then on owns this woman. The word and the ceremony are integral to Hindu weddings and in the social conscience it is hardly perceived as problematic. It is in the context of this passive acceptance of ownership that Kalyanamalini Sahoo says, "A woman's life is always constrained by particular social rules. Before marriage she is in the custody of her parents. After marriage, she is in the custody of her husband and in-laws. In old age, she is in the custody of her son" (cf Sahoo 2003: 245). While looking for a wife then the decisive qualities are mostly those which would make this transition smoother for both the families. The stereotype of an ideal bride is thus a girl who obeys her father without questioning and is ready to mould herself according to the expectations of the new family.

Though it is a rather simplistic argument that language or linguistic behaviour reflects social processes, the fact remains that the terms a society devises to define women reflect the social place accorded or denied to them. Interestingly enough, the denial of social space is sometimes realised by means of attributes which in normal case would designate a positive trait, for example, one just needs to pick up any Indian newspaper and look at the advertisements for matrimonial alliances. The common adjectives used to describe brides are *sophisticated, down-to-earth, with good etiquette, disciplined, soft-spoken, simple, compassionate, sincere, hard-working, adorable, smart, beautiful, takes interest in household work and possesses excellent cooking skills* etc. Clearly, the qualities highlighted through such advertisements reflect social expectations aimed at denying these young women any independent aspirations, portraying them as perfect 'material' out of which to mould a wife. The gender stereotype of an ideal woman is reinforced by employing seemingly harmless vocabulary. In similar advertisements from bridegrooms one comes across adjectives like *serious, ambitious, driven to prove himself, aggressive, decision maker, realistic, moderate, open minded, optimistic with broad vision* etc. Thus, the picture is complete, of a docile, homely female in a supportive role, and the

‘achiever’, the ‘provider’ male in the role of the decision maker. In fact the social role theory does trace back gender stereotypes to the social sex-role expectations and shared beliefs about appropriate behaviour. Wood and Rhodes point out that “Women are expected to be friendly, unselfish, concerned with others, and emotionally expressive. Men are expected to be independent, masterful, assertive, and instrumentally competitive” (cf. Wood/Rhodes 1992: 106). The underlying message conveyed in such texts is powerful not only because they reflect the social expectations, but also because they provide an attractive self-image for the women, an ideal, which when achieved guarantees them a place in the social hierarchy. Placing this creation of a social definition of ‘woman’ in a broader context by looking at it in terms of dialectics of power, it can be argued that here language and social reality become cause and effect at the same time. Language reflects social reality about the position of women while the social identity of women is in turn performed through the language. Indeed, social reality is itself a social construct and not a given. It needs to be pointed out that the whole linguistic gender stereotyping is a socially constructed way of classifying and categorising members of the society. Discussing the power wielded through language use, O’Barr points out that “In attempting to understand the relations between language and power, it is important to keep in mind that there is no simple, single way in which the two are connected, nor is the connection limited to particular portions of the spectrum of social organisation. Rather, the evidence points to the conclusion that language is both a mirror of society and a major factor influencing, affecting, and even transforming social relationships” (cf. O’Barr 1984: 265). In skewed power relationships the meaning of ‘supportive’ can easily change to ‘subordinate’. If there is mutuality in playing the supportive role, the power relation gets balanced, but in case of gender relations in India the supportive role is permanently assigned to women turning it into an unconscious submission to authority. 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.

5. Goddess or Doormat

There is no doubt about the exclusion of women from languages of power in institutional domains like religion and politics in India. Just a few years back women legislators voicing their frustration at the failure to pass the bill enabling women to have a certain percentage of representation in the parliament were shouted down and labelled *par katy* by male parliamentarians meaning ‘women whose wings are cut’, an extremely base comment associating short hair with the socially unacceptable behaviour assigned to ‘feminists’. Viewing women who dare to challenge social sanctions as a threat to the set order is not new nor is it exclusive to Indian society. Deborah Cameron cites a study by Penelope Harvey in Peruvian Andes where “Andean women who abandoned tradition, symbolised by dress as well as the Quechua language, risked slurs on their sexual reputation, which could lead to social ostracism and violence” (cf. Cameron 1992: 201). In India, in a tradition where the birth of a girl child is equated to an eclipse or to a curse on the family¹, where women are expected to suffer without complaint, one is hardly surprised to find that women challenging this social order do ruffle a few feathers.

On a different note, exalting women to a goddess is common in Hindi colloquial usage. A daughter is often referred to as *Laxmi* (the goddess of wealth) or a daughter-in-law is called *ghar ki Laxmi* (‘goddess *Laxmi* of the house’). The fierce goddess *Durga* or *Kali* or *Chandi* is conceptually a way of sanctioning the female members of the society some space to avenge the wrongs perpetrated against them or to punish the perpetrator. In a recent article questioning the ‘manliness’ of an opposition party and praising Indira Gandhi (ex prime minister of India) one columnist in a leading magazine comments, “the country is still paying for that insult to the woman who was once described even by her detractors in the opposition (...) as Durga Mata, and by others as ‘the only man in India’s Parliament’” (cf. Gill 2004). So depending on the context any act of courage or valour is seen either as ‘manly’ or as coming from a goddess *Durga*, *Kali* or *Chandi*.

In such fluid use of mythological figures in everyday language a normal human identity of women can fluctuate between the extremes of the status of a goddess and a *paer ki juti* (footwear). Highlighting the dictum “it is good to swim in the waters of tradition but to sink in them is suicidal” Gandhi and Shah (1991: 325) suggest the strategy of finding a middle path, of using tradition to change mind sets. Here again the pivotal role of language in establishing dominant discourse as the given and therefore true becomes important.

6. Stereotypes in Media: *Behenji* vs. *Aajki Nari*

Words when associated with certain images for a long time change into labels or categories defining those particular images and their characteristics. Through these associations of words with images which have social contexts, a hitherto simple word acquires new meanings. In the vocabulary of urban young Hindi speakers a simple word *behenji*, where *behen* means ‘sister’ and *ji* is an added honorific suffix, has come to be used to mean a woman who is not modern in the way she dresses and who is conservative in her thinking. It is difficult to say when exactly this meaning developed but this pejorative use became accepted in normal vocabulary through its use in visual and print media.

In television serials *behenji* stereotypes are usually the ‘good, obedient, traditional’ women facing the ‘bad, westernised, skimpily dressed’ vamp characters. Jaidev Taneja outlines these two stereotypical depictions of women, where “The first image shows her as the embodiment of beauty, modesty, sacrifice, mercy, forgiveness, and dedication, qualities that enable her to win over men. The second image is that of the woman who is driven by ambition, pride, sexual frustration and the desire to dominate, all of which lead her to evil ways” (cf. Taneja 2002: 77). Although in real life young girls make every effort not to get categorised as *behenji*. Here is an example of images and labels getting created through media, especially the visual media and these then turning into social parameters to judge women’s moral conduct. In television soaps a *behenji* type of character is imparted all virtues, since she conforms to social norms. She holds on to the traditional values of the Indian society, respects institutions like family and marriage and thereby lives up to the expectations that the society has from her as woman. Other terms used in media to describe such a woman are *aadarsh nari*, the ideal woman, or *bharatiya nari*, the Indian woman. Invariably such a woman is a conformist, a non-rebel, who upholds the social values and derives her strength from her being ‘good’ and ‘chaste’. Naturally she emerges victorious at the end.

Strangely enough the image of this traditional ideal woman created in films and television serials holds less charm for modern urban young women in their everyday lives. It is seen as a nice definition of womanhood, but one which does not necessarily need to be followed in reality. The more appealing image is that of the

liberated, independent, modern and intelligent *aajki nari* or 'today's woman'. This term evolved more through advertisements, where consumer products targeted the urban middle-class working woman labelling her the new woman, who is aware of facts like which cooking oil is healthy for her family or why a particular brand of drinking chocolate is good for her children. She takes decisions about which brand of soap, washing powder or tea to buy, she is careful about her looks and uses cosmetics. She is young, works hard and does not hesitate to have fun. She is mobile, drives two-wheelers, uses technology, be it a washing machine, a microwave or a mobile phone. She works so hard for the family that her back aches and the progressive husband promptly applies this pain relieving balm. Gender equality for the modern woman. She is a multi-tasking working mother, wife and daughter-in-law. She is clever and knows how to please all in the family using tasty instant food instead of cooking herself.

She is a rebel only as a young unmarried girl. As a young college student she goes for parties, flirts with men and sneaks in her room through the window when she is late. She listens to loud music, colours her hair pink, and paints her nails in different shades. But come marriage, she uses fairness creams to attract the 'foreign returned engineer' chosen by her parents as her bridegroom. Wearing a *sari*, vermilion on forehead, with a shy expression and downcast eyes this rebel turns into a perfect wife. As a daughter-in-law, wife and mother she is the most successful ideal woman, modern and happy within the limits prescribed to her. The husbands, brothers or fathers in the family of this *aajki nari* have absolute understanding for her need to be modern and independent, but interestingly one never sees them washing clothes, cleaning toilets, changing nappies or buying cooking oil.

This image however does manage to offer a compromise between the extremes of being a *behenji* and a 'feminist rebel'. To a large extent it also reflects the way Indian women are managing to strike a balance between modernity and tradition. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993: 138) calls this the "relative freedom" of women which is encoded on the one hand as an 'absence of conflict', for example in commercial advertisements, where the modern woman is also at the same time the traditional woman and on the other hand as the 'resolution of conflict' in favour of the traditional woman as in television serials. The Hinglish speaking, modern, working woman can recite devotional songs with equal ease when she has to win her mother-in-law's heart. She sees no contradiction between being emancipated and being traditional or

religious. In this sense, the perception of gender equality in India is evolving with a realisation that without destroying the basic social institutions like family and marriage it is possible to create a liberal society.

7. Image of an old woman

In India, stereotypes related to old women vary slightly depending upon their marital status. Socially, old age is viewed as a phase in life when one turns to god or to spiritual pursuits rather than enjoying material comforts or pleasures of senses. This notion of old age as a period of renunciation is applied to both male and female individuals, but in case of female members of social groups it is used as a general criteria to judge whether or not a woman is living up to that ideal image of revered mother or grandmother. As in all stages of her life, a woman receives respect in her old age if she remains within the social definition of good moral conduct. For a widow the chastity and morality aspect becomes even more important since she is expected to lead an exemplary austere life, dedicating herself to other-worldly thoughts and religious activities. With the great reverence attached to motherhood in Indian tradition, a woman in her old age acquires an image of a wise, experienced grandmother, who should be respected almost like a mother goddess. She has nurtured the family and now the younger generation has to pay her back with gratitude. She has been a mother, a wife and has fulfilled all her duties in life. So she deserves respect. She can not be a normal woman with wishes and desires. She can not be lonely and she can not have need for companionship, especially male companionship. Women who have no children or those who are not married can hope to achieve that legitimate place of a 'respected grandmother' only if they give up their individual identity, become part of brother's or brother-in-law's families and spend time in spiritual and religious pursuits.

Since age is equated with wisdom, generally an old woman wields some power in decision making at family level. Even outside her own family she is addressed as *maaji*, *daadi* or *naani* meaning mother or grandmother. Children, especially sons, are taught that '*maa ke charanon main swarg hai*', heaven lies in mother's feet.

The other side of this 'respected grandmother' stereotype is the negative image of the old woman who does not follow social norms, for whom it is said '*budhiya sathiya gayi*' meaning 'the old one has gone insane'. The most disturbing aspect of

the otherwise very positive tradition of respecting the elderly is that, in many cases people tend to overlook the fact that an old woman is also a normal human being with physical needs and desires. An old man showing sexual desires or romantic inclinations is laughed at and is considered naughty, having *rangeen mijaj* or 'colourful tastes' and is generally tolerated as being normal. But an old woman who in any ways shows any need for male companionship is condemned as a fallen woman. For an average Indian old woman, especially if she is a widow, it is next to impossible to express her sexual needs or to think of a relationship or marriage. There is almost zero tolerance for a woman's desires or wishes once she has been categorised as 'grandmother'. Even the way she dresses herself makes her vulnerable to criticism with proverbs like, '*shaukin budhiya chataii ka lehenga*', where *shaukin* means someone who has taste for good things in life. So, such a *shaukin* old woman, who goes to the extent of wearing a skirt made of straws, just to look young, needs to be condemned. Here this expression is used to mean this old woman, who should now be thinking of the 'other world' but is instead still enjoying life. Another similar proverb is '*buddhi ghodi laal lagam*', meaning 'old mare with a red rein', used in a derogatory sense to speak of an old woman who does not behave as she should in her age (see also Section 10.3). An old woman's need for a companion is socially unacceptable since it falls into that area of taboo themes, namely women's sexuality. Whether as a young woman or as an old grandmother, this particular aspect of women's life is strongly controlled by imposing strict definitions of chastity and purity and by severe social condemnation for any deviation in women's behaviour.

8. The problem of giving a name to the man-woman relationship

A man-woman relationship is a subject on which one reads in magazines and newspapers, particularly of the urban cosmopolitan English press variety in India. Of course it is an important topic in many a familial conversation, or among friends and relatives since as in any other society gender relations are an integral part of the social life in India. But man-woman relations before marriage or outside of the marital sanctions are not encouraged. There is less social acceptance of a man-woman friendship. The socially accepted relationship between unrelated male and female members of the same age is mainly that of a brother and sister. So in some

universities, a male student from a senior class becomes a *Bhaiya* ('brother') and a female student from a senior class becomes *Didi* ('elder sister'). Amongst urban youth the word *dost* ('friend') is generally used to refer to both male and female friends. But there is still no semantically equivalent word for girlfriend or boyfriend in Hindi. Instead both these English words have been readily included in the urban vocabulary, since changing lifestyles and social relations demanded words to describe a type of male-female relationship which was taboo earlier. Now giving this relationship a name is also problematic in Hindi for the simple reason that there is no commonly accepted word for a live-in relationship. It is possible to say *woh saath rahte hai* ('they live together') but then this expression could just as well mean the simple living together of anyone, so it needs an elaboration by specifying that the said two persons are living together without marriage. Mentioning that they are living together without marriage gives the whole situation and its expression a tone of breaking the social norms, or of doing something immoral. Most of the vocabulary referring to male-female friendship in Hindi is negative. The equivalent for love, *pyar*, is one alternative that can be used without much negative hidden meaning, but it has a history of being a favourite word in Hindi movies mostly denoting love between a young man and a young woman. So what does one do to talk about a relationship or a feeling which belongs to the banned areas in a speech community? Something which can only be described in negative terms since the social taboo leaves space only for negative lexica.

9. Two ways of overcoming social normative restrictions of Hindi

In my view, there are two ways of getting around limitations imposed by a language.

a) Subverting the meaning

On one of those rare occasion when I hired a *rikshaw*² to reach the university, the *rikshaw-puller*, a man much older to me, addressed me with *Saab* a word loaded with colonial legacy, a word replete with rigid social class differentiation, a word denoting nothing but absolute dichotomy of high versus low social status, a word used to address masters. And most importantly a word used to address only men in such positions. The female equivalent for *Saab* from the colonial times is *Memsaab*, which

is already out of the current vocabulary except for depicting a servant-master relation or is used with pejorative intention to belittle a woman, meaning ‘a haughty little miss’. Now this use of *Saab* made me acutely aware of the way language plays into the hands of its speakers defining territories in social interactions, assigning roles to the language users. Appropriating a gendered word this man had turned it into a gender neutral denotation of social class hierarchy. The word had acquired a new meaning in this context through its use. Whether one reacts to this subversion positively welcoming it as a strategy to overcome the handicap imposed by language or whether one takes it as a negation of the female identity as something that basically can not be in a socially higher position, is debatable. What becomes obvious is the fact that it is the social assumptions behind the language which impart meanings to words depending on the context. The word-meaning congruence is indeed not a one-to-one fixed relation. The final outcome is definitely more than the sum of the parts.

b) Code mixing

The second way of dealing with limitations of a language is the widely studied phenomenon of code mixing, common among fluent bilingual speakers. It can be a part of the broader bilingual conversation strategy of switching between languages in the same speech situation, which is termed as code switching. Code mixing mainly includes mixing two languages or language styles in one utterance, using grammatical conventions of one language on to the other, or just mixing words from another language in specific contexts. In urban north India, English is mixed with Hindi to get the mixed form called Hinglish, which is widely used by educated, urban social groups. Kachru (1984: 186) points out the case of the word *mond* (‘widow’) in Kashmiri language which has traditional negative connotations of a use restricted to abuses and curses. To neutralise such loaded terms speakers employ code mixing as a strategy, as shown later in the examples from transcripts in this paper (cf. Examples 4 and 5, Section 10.3).

10. Some examples showing stereotyped notions on gender

In view of the preceding discussion this section will highlight how gender stereotypes in India get reflected in normal conversations. I will be presenting few examples from the transcripts from audio data collected in 2003 for my research on

oral communication in German as foreign language, in two universities viz. Jawaharlal Nehru University and Delhi University in New Delhi, India. It must be made clear that the aim of this data collection was not a study of stereotypical gender notions. The students belonged to the age group 18 to 20, were in their second year of the Bachelor of Arts course, and came from urban, educated, middle class families. The languages they used are English, Hindi, Hinglish and partly German.

10.1 Purpose behind showing the film

Two groups of these Indian undergraduate students studying German language in the two universities mentioned earlier were separately shown a short film portraying the loneliness in the life of the elderly and their need for companionship. One was an all female group, the other one was a mixed group. The aim was to document how a conversation based on a specific theme would develop if the socio-cultural context is foreign to the students. The focus of this data collection was thus purely on oral communication and use of the foreign language (German) and a gender aspect was not involved at any level. But while analysing these transcripts it became obvious that since the topic of discussion happened to be such, the stereotypical gender notions got expressed in these conversations. During the discussion of more than 90 minutes, students talked about gender stereotypes, old age related stereotypes and the societal pressures at work in India. Although each one of these students was well aware of the double standards used in judging women, through many of their comments they proved to be the products of the same gendered socialisation which they were criticising. In the following section these two aspects will be discussed using the transcripts:

- At the discourse level the speakers use code mixing as strategy to overcome linguistic restrictions of Hindi.
- The views expressed by these students reflect gender stereotyping.

10.2 Context of the film

There were no dialogues in the film, only background music. The film is set in Germany; and the only characters are an old white couple. The story starts with this lady who is very lonely. In the house across the street one old man moves in and the woman starts observing him most of the time from behind the curtains. She then tries

to attract his attention and he seems not to notice it. The woman buys a new dress and gets a new hairstyle. The story develops through a chance encounter in a supermarket, where the man realises that there could be a friendship. In the final scene he goes over to her apartment with flowers, rings the door bell and waits. She hesitantly opens the door just as he sadly turns to go back. The film ends with the protagonists smiling at each other. Most of the scenes in the film depict the woman's loneliness. Both the protagonists are quite old and shown to be leading a secluded life without family or friends.

10.3 Presentation of a few examples

In the course of the discussion the participants found it difficult to express themselves adequately when it came to talking positively about a love relationship using Hindi. The topic of the film did provoke an involved discussion in Hindi, English, Hinglish and a few utterances even in German. For them the situation in the film was quite new and they readily imparted a romantic angle to the story in their interpretation. That precisely was then the most foreign aspect of the film, a romantic relationship between an old woman and an old man.

(In the transcripts: F = female speaker and M = male speaker Overlap with the next speaker is shown with // Commonly used transliteration is used for Hindi and loose translations in English are provided).

(Example:1)

F1: Short and cute love story (laughs)
F2: Es ist ein fantastisch Film...
F3: Es war gut...aber.... es ist nicht so in Indien

So the reaction was: "It is nice, but it is not so in India". Calling the woman *verrückt* (mad) the students decided that the old woman was just waiting to 'catch the man'.

(Example:2)

F4: Die eine Dame...ist.sehr sehr verrückt...(all laugh) Sie will alte Mann lieben.
F5: Die alte Dame war...hinter dem Mann (laughs)

Throughout the discussion the common refrain was how she being a woman could take initiative in starting ‘something like this’. Students used a proverb *buddhi ghodi laal lagaam* (‘old mare with red reins’) to show how Indian society reacts if an old woman tries to act young (see also Section 7).

(Example:3)

F1: usko dar tha ki shayad main jo kar raha hun woh thik nahin hain //isliye..	F1: He was scared, thinking, maybe what I am doing is not right//so..
F3:to usko dar nahi tha? Woh bahot besharam thi? (laughs)	F3: You mean she was not scared?[as if] She was shameless?
F6: Woh sharif tha	F6: He was sharif
F2: woh sharif nahi // thi?	F2: She was not sharif?
F4:Woh bhi sharif thi	F4: She was also sharif

In the above conversation, F3 tries to defend the old woman but uses a word *besharam* (‘shameless’) implying that a woman who is not scared of the society is shameless. The reply to this rhetorical question ‘she was shameless?’ is very interesting. F6 replies saying that the man was *sharif*, a word meaning ‘of good moral character’. It becomes clear here that in the students’ interpretation the old woman’s behaviour is judged as a deviation from the social norms of good moral conduct prescribed for women, whereas the old man is judged positively because he seemed to be scared of society.

Code mixing was used as a strategy whenever the speakers had to mention the love relationship. In the following example the Hindi expression *line maarne lag gayi* is a pejorative phrase used to describe flirtatious activities of young people, meaning something like ‘trying to hook’. But then the same relationship gains some respectability back when expressed in English or German.

(Example:4)

F6: woh akela mila to Line// maarne lag gayi	F6: knowing that he is alone
F5:.....To hua kya? Dono	she started ‘to put a bait to

akele the F1: line kaha....woh....woh //she was in love with him F2:.....Sie war verlobt mit ihm	catch him' F5: So what? Both were alone F1: she was in love with him F2: She was engaged to him
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The German verb form *verlobt* has apparently been confused with *verliebt* since the speakers clearly were talking about 'being in love'. The way students here avoided using Hindi whenever they had to talk in favour of the woman is a continuous pattern through out the transcript of about two hours. One typical interaction was:

(Example:5)

M2: Da sind zwei verliebt (laughs) M1:(laughs) they are falling in love (laughs)

Code mixing was extensively used to replace Hindi expressions during this discussion. Although code mixing is very common in spoken language of university students, in this particular discussion it appears to have been used consciously as a strategy to overcome the restraints of one language. Studies on code mixing focusing on the use of English in Indian languages have shown that "English is (being) used to *neutralize* identities one is reluctant to express by the use of native languages or dialects" (cf. Kachru 1984: 186, emphasis original).

10.4 Stereotypes are here to stay

Every reference in Hindi was either a negative expression like *fasaana*, *chakkar*, *pataana*, etc. (all more or less meaning 'to hook') or some vague wording like *yeh sabkucch*, *yeh jo kaarna us lady ka* ('all this, all these doings of the lady'), where instead of a direct reference just an indirect hint was used to get as semantically close as possible to the expression 'relationship'. But even such efforts had an undercurrent of negative judgement of the lady's conduct.

(Example:6)

M3: they are living alone they need	M3: They are living alone they need
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<p>support</p> <p>M1: yah</p> <p>M4: who will prepare the tea for the old man (laughs)</p> <p>M2: (laughs) you are thinking of old man//</p> <p>M1:woh rahi hogi na//wife to rahi hogi na?</p> <p>M2:.....amm? No, now he is alone</p> <p>M3: ya, he is dead...//he is dead and she is dead</p> <p>M1:.....to isse kya alone hai to //alone hai to/</p> <p>M2:...koi to chahiya ki uske kapde kapde dhoye (laughs)</p> <p>M1: matlab tum vichar kar rahe ho ki koi kaam karne ke liya chahiye //kaam karne ke liye chahiye</p> <p>M3:he was saying ki //nahi nahi... its basically to basically to support each other</p> <p>F1: but why did you interpret that she was looking for a boyfriend, she could have ..amm..//been looking to make a friend, that's it!</p> <p>M3: ...yah a company</p> <p>F2: Everybody wants companionship</p>	<p>support</p> <p>M1: Yah</p> <p>M4: Who will prepare tea for the old man</p> <p>M2: You are thinking of the old man</p> <p>M1: He must be having a wife, or?</p> <p>M2: amm? No, now he is alone</p> <p>M3: Ya, he is dead, he is dead and she is dead</p> <p>M1: So what if alone//...if alone..</p> <p>M2: someone's got to be there to wash his clothes</p> <p>M1: you mean there should be someone to do house work</p> <p>M3: He was saying that its basically to support each other</p> <p>F1: but why did you interpret that she was looking for a boyfriend, she could have ..amm..//been looking to make a friend, that's it!</p> <p>M3: ...yah a company</p> <p>F2: Everybody wants companionship</p>
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In the above conversational piece the female speaker F1 is able to make a differentiation between a boyfriend and a friend, whereas for the male speaker M1 the idea of a woman as a friend can only be related to being a wife, who is supposed to do the 'house work'. The stereotype of wife merely as someone taking care of the man and his needs is criticised at every possible level in India and one would have

assumed this particular notion to have at least become a little milder. But as is obvious from the above exchange, the male speakers reflected the mindset still prevalent when they sympathised with the old man’s need of having someone to take care of him with a blunt observation that “if his wife is dead, he needs someone to wash his clothes, to make tea for him”. This comment coming from urban university students brings out the hollowness of the belief that the urban educated Indian male is gender sensitised. One just needs to scratch the surface for the deep rooted traditional attitudes to become obvious.

10.5 Interpreting motives

The body language and gestures of the woman in the film were interpreted by male students as her efforts to attract the ‘decent old man’. In the film the woman goes to have a hair cut and buys a nice red dress which she then wears, when she knows that the old man will see her from his balcony. There were three interpretations of this behaviour and her body language. One as mentioned above was by the male students and two by female students. Male students read into the behaviour an ulterior motive since they felt that a woman who tries to attract a man can not be looking for a genuine friendship. They specifically mentioned that from her gestures one could judge that she had other intentions.

(Example:7)

M1: thik hai friend banana ke liye kya jarurat tha bal katane ka accha dress karne ka aise friend nahi banneka, jisko friend banna hai woh aisehi banega	M1: alright, to make friends was it necessary to have hair cut, wear nice dress, you can’t make friends like that, one who wants to be friends will become friend without all this
M2: Hmmm this is to attract//	M2: Hmmm this is to attract//
M4:.....to attract...good	M4: to attract...good
M3:.....to attract friendship nahi thi	M3: to attract not for friendship

The first interpretation of a female student also reflects the notion that the partner should be presentable. This student justifies the protagonist’s actions by arguing that everyone wants to be presentable and everyone wishes to have a partner who is presentable. This argument coming from a female student again confirms the

hold of social image on the thinking of these young people. The image of a smart, pleasant, fair, well dressed woman as the ideal, desired by men is created and sold as socially sanctioned mainly through Hindi movies, television and advertising in different media.

(Example:8)

F3: I also feel ki friend banana hota hain to appearance itni matter nahi karti but kahi na kahin we have that feeling that our friend should be a decent girl//	F3: I also feel that appearance does not matter in making friends but somewhere we have that feeling that our friend should be a decent girl//
M1: Wah, amm koi dekhne main kharab ho to uska friend nahi hoga?	M1: You mean someone who is not good looking will not get friends?
M2: I am going to do the same	M2: I am going to do the same
F3: to a certain extent aata hai... chahe matlab he should be at least a...ki presentable probably isiliye she got a haircut ki she should be presentable// that's why	F3: to a certain extent it does matter, may be...I mean he should be at least a...presentable, probably that's why she got a haircut that she should be presentable//that's why

One interesting point in the first sentence of F3 above is that she refers to a common wish that 'our friend should be a decent girl'. Why does she express this wish as common ideal in spite of being a girl herself? The conditioning that the young urban Indian women undergo is so strong that the ideals imposed by the society are unconsciously acquired and accepted as their own ideals. Language and related social norms only help in this process of internalising given images and meanings.

The other interpretation given by another female speaker could be an example of a gender neutral explanation and it was heartening that it came from a female speaker.

(Example:9)

F1: she started enjoying her life you know, in a way she has this incentive to live otherwise she was bored there was no way to live her life anymore .
M3. Is it like entertainment?

M2: She was bored with her life because when she was eating//

F1: Yah, because this man...not only because he is a man...listen, not only because he is a man or the opposite sex that it will drive her crazy or that I have to fall in love or something like that, he came as something... you know some incentive into her life, you know... it brought happiness into her life you know... she wanted to live more and then do... you know... do anything

F2: like a normal person

M2: Yah she was bored with her life//

F1: and its very natural

11. Women as language users

As language users women are said to be less adventurous, preferring to use the prestige varieties and correct language. However such differentiation can not solely be called a gender different language variety; there are other factors involved in such developments, like the social status attached to different pronunciations or to the use of certain sounds. It is true that women are subjected to social pressures to ensure that they use the 'better' language. This pressure is at work to make them abide by the norms of language use. Normally for an effective communicative act, the speakers are supposed to follow Gricean maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner, but for women the standard parameters seem to change. A woman is expected to talk less than necessary, talk in a softer voice, talk only when absolutely necessary and at best not talk at all. Cameron points at this imposition of feminine linguistic norms "For any woman who talks too much, too loudly, too frankly, too authoritatively, the epithet 'unfeminine' is waiting on someone's lips" (cf. Cameron 1992: 210).

The prescriptions of this normative behaviour are imparted to a girl even as she is learning to use a language, in the form of proverbs or phrases. Indian girls are advised not to laugh showing all the teeth, not to let their voices be heard by a neighbour, not to answer back, not to argue, not to ask questions. Remaining within the socially accepted norms sometimes women tend to be using language in a different but positive way than men. The basic premise in this paper remains that the observed gender related differences in the style of language use appear to be more constructs of social contexts and vary depending on other social variables. A female speaker in a socially powerful position would have more similarities with the so called

male style than a socially less powerful male speaker. But having said that there are some common features, which can be ascribed to a more “cooperative” style of speaking (cf. Graddol/Swann 1989: 82). More women seem to be using it than men, which Tannen terms as “rapport speaking”, where the “phatic function seems to override the informational” (cf. Tannen 1994: 210). Women speakers tend to function in a more democratic manner and conversations in all-female groups develop as a combined activity rather than as ‘competing for the floor’ found commonly in an all-male group. Characteristic female strategies are said to be indirectness and politeness, both results of a socialisation which discourages open display of frank, challenging behaviour in women.

Based on earlier researches, Jennifer Coates summarises eight factors mostly found in all-female group interactions. The basic principle identified by Coates (1986: 189) is “more than one speaker may speak at a time, with speakers working collaboratively to produce talk” which portrays the cooperative nature of such exchanges. The eight factors discussed by Coates are: Minimal Responses, Questions, Links between speaker turns, Topic shifts, Self Disclosure, Verbal Aggressiveness, Listening and Simultaneous speech (cf. Coates 1986). Although different culture-specific aspects can change the way these factors are realised in natural conversations, they do outline a basic minimum structure which can be applied to other data as well.

In the discussions amongst university students mentioned above, most of these features were found to be present in women’s speech. Minimal responses of the ‘I am listening’ variety were used extensively in the all-women group, for e.g.:

(Example:10)

F3: because if the family is taking care of them then they// won’t be lonely. F2: they won’t be lonely (pause) hmmm...you think so?
--

while in the mixed group the typical minimal responses of male speakers were of the ‘I agree with you’ type, e.g.:

(Example:11)

M2: Hmmm this is to attract// M4:.....to	M2: Hmmm..this is to attract M4: to attract....good
---	--

attract...good M3:.....to attract friendship nahi thi M2: Hammm Friendship ke liye to itna woh//	M3: to attract...not for friendship M2: Hmmm..for friendship not so much//
--	--

There were few instances of questions being used as a strategy to maintain conversation but they occurred almost equally in both groups. There was no marked variance in this respect between male and female speakers. Links between speaker turns were smoother in the all-female group, compared to the mixed group where typically the female speakers got the turn only at the end or they had to try and squeeze in to get the turn, for e.g.:

(Example:12)

M3: But she can she can directly talk with him M2: She has some hesitation F1: she is trying to but he was// M2:Hesitation F1:Yah she tried to
--

According to earlier research findings topic shifts are slow in all-female conversations (cf. Tannen 1994, Coates 1993). In case of the two student groups, the all-women group did stay on longer on one topic and the next topic often evolved out of the discussion, unlike in the mixed group where the topic shifts were more frequent and more abrupt. Conversation in the mixed group thus developed in bits and pieces, lacking the flow of the all-women group. The all-women group managed to discuss the same topic longer, for example one topic lasted for about more than 25 turns in this group as against most topics lasting not more than 15 turns in the mixed group. There were four instances of self disclosure, all of which came from female speakers. On verbal aggressiveness and listening, the data from these transcripts is not sufficient. There were many instances of simultaneous speech; in fact there were all the three varieties of supportive simultaneous speech, e.g.:

- 1) Completing the utterance of the partner

(Example:13)

F3: Aur jaisa ki usme dikhaya gaya tha, woh Supermarket ka//	F3: And as shown in it, that one in supermarket//
F2:.....Hmm	F2:Hmm
F3:.....usme usme to usko...	F3: In that ..in that, seeing him...
F4:.....usko to dekh ke hi dar gayi	F4: ...seeing him she got scared

2) Contrapuntal talk to support the partner's utterance

(Example:14)

F2: lekin woh thoda ghabrati thi ki samajwale kya kahenge// isliye thoda	F2: But she was a little scared about what community will say// that's why a little
F1:...Society	F1: Society
F4: Society ki parwa thi	F4: Society was the point of concern

3) Repeating part of the sentence

(Example:15)

F4:Hamare yaha bhi hota hai lekin khule main nahi hota	F4: It happens here also but not openly
F6: Khule main nahi hota	F6: Not openly

11.1 Trying to seem less aggressive by using 'we'

In addition to the features mentioned above, in the mixed group the female speakers' participation in discourses featured a fine act of balancing between arguing or self expression and trying not to seem aggressive. They often used generalising statements or tried to create face saving opportunities for other speakers. They were more sensitive to loss of face not only their own but also of the partner. One strategy was the intentional use of 'we' in arguments, shifting the burden of responsibility of the subject to this inclusive 'we' rather than the 'I', which would be considered

impolite or aggressive in Hindi. Of course, one could also just trace this use of ‘we’ as subject to the use of Hindi first person plural ‘hum’ as singular self reference. But if that was the case, then this feature should have been present in the utterances of male speakers as well. Citing an example from a study by Goodwin where organisation of talk in single sex groups of children was analysed, Graddol and Swann observe that, “(...) the girls group was not organized hierarchically and there was minimal negotiation of status. Directives took the form of proposals for a future activity rather than an explicit command. A ‘we’ form was often used, which included the speaker in the proposed activity” (cf. Graddol/Swann 1989: 81). That the ‘we’ was used by female speakers especially in utterances in face threatening situations points to the fact that female speakers were more concerned about playing a ‘mature’ and ‘supportive’ partner. But it was clear that through these supportive arguments female speakers managed to round off many topics very decisively in their favour.

(Example:16)

F1: I think why we found it very strange was because we live in a very different set up and we can not accept that in such a age people are//trying to be friends	F1: I think why we found it very strange was because we live in a very different set up and we can not accept that in such an age people are//trying to be friends
M2: Hmmm wahi baat hai	M2: Hmmm that’s the point
M1: Yah, apne hi context mai maine bola	M1: Yah, I also meant it in our context

Looking at the different styles of collaboration in a conversation event is one way of figuring out in what way gender could affect verbal interactions, but this also calls for caution against reading into such examples to find an exclusive gender related pattern of behaviour. The extension of the social expectation on women’s linguistic behaviour is in tune with the fact that women in India are generally socialized to play a supportive role. There are subtle and not-so-subtle ways of imposing these linguistic norms, which become that much more rigid in case of female language users. In the case of Hindi, notions like women talk too much, or that women cannot be trusted with secrets are common, putting restrictions on linguistic behaviour of women.

12 Conclusion

In sum, language is not a gender neutral instrument of expression nor is it free from socio-cultural prejudices. It contributes to the process of shaping and reshaping of identities by virtue of its own dynamic nature and thereby gets used creatively or gets manipulated to create social distinctions. In theory the two approaches of 'difference' and 'dominance' have brought out the role of language in creating social gender differentiation. It is through using the language that we become gendered members of the speech community. In studying the intertwined relationship between language and construction of gender, the agency remains a point of debate. But looking at language use as one of the varied social practices, it becomes possible to understand the social factors underlying each speech act. As Thorne argues, "Larger structures are instantiated, reproduced, and challenged through the daily practices of social actors, who in turn are constrained and enabled by social structures" (cf. Thorne 2001: 11). The language user as social actor conforms to as well as deviates from the social norms of speaking. She constructs, destroys and redefines her territories and her identity. Gender is one such social identity, "a complexity whose totality is permanently deferred, never fully what it is at any given juncture in time" (cf. Butler 1990: 16). However, societies have tried to fix this ambivalence in gender identity by using compartmentalised instructions for language use separately for men and women. A child internalises her gender identity and in performing it she conforms to the gender stereotype. As literature on gender and languages shows, there is hardly any language in the world that is completely gender neutral and efforts at creating such a language have not borne fruit. That leaves us with the alternative of using whatever languages we have in a best possible way to subvert linguistic gender discrimination. As highlighted in the discussion earlier, the strategies could include using the same language or using code mixing.

For the urban women in India, globalisation meant increased economic equality and exposure to changed lifestyles. On an individual level it also meant redefining gender relations and changing the hierarchy in man-woman relationships. With the economic independence there is a heightened sense of liberation in all spheres of social life, a confidence to fuzz the rigid boundaries of gender roles. With the new films and media celebrating this liberated woman, who is ready to assert her sexual needs, who is ready to explode those long held notions of morality, one would

expect that the changes are not just superficial. But as it soon became obvious in the course of the classroom discussion, the surface changes can not become part of the common vocabulary, for the obvious reason that there is still a vast gap between the screen image of this new woman and the ground reality. Social considerations define the limits of this assertiveness of the women, whereas men are happy to be liberal within the larger frame of the social sanctions. The educated urban woman in India speaks in favour of change and the educated urban male supports her, but one just needs to scratch the surface to see the time tested formulae of gender roles firmly in place. The way the urban woman happily balances this emerging promise of independence with her gendered social identity, makes it necessary to rethink some aspects of looking at gender in a gradually changing, traditional society like India. Although here gender stereotypes are deeply anchored in the social psyche and they remain a valid form of establishing social hierarchies, finding their justification through religion and traditions, challenging the existing notions of linguistic femininity or masculinity will go a long way towards displacing these gender stereotypes.

1 For a discussion on depiction of the death wish for a girl child see: Death Wish for Daughters – Son Preference and Daughter Aversion in Bihari Folk Songs, by Sangeeta Krishna <http://free.freepreech.org/manushi/131/deathwish.html>

2 A tricycle pulled by a man, which can be hired to cover short distances. A common mode of transport in many Indian cities.

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