

An Overview of Gender and Language Theories

نظرة عامة حول نظريات النوع الاجتماعي واللغة

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Abstract

Gender is connected to behaviour that conveys the individual's social and cultural understanding of self as a man or woman. It is something that is acquired through life according to the social and cultural traits assigned to maleness and femaleness. The main aim of this article is to present and explain the different theories of gender and how it affects the interaction between men and women in the daily life as well as their use of language and power to integrate into society and then maintain their social status.

Keywords: Gender; Language; Behaviour; Power; Social status.

الملخص

يرتبط الجندر (أو النوع الاجتماعي) بالسلوك الذي يعبر عن فهم الفرد لنفسه اجتماعيا وثقافيا سواء كرجل أو كامرأة. وهو خاصية يتم الحصول عليها خلال الحياة وفقا للخصائص الاجتماعية والثقافية المخصصة للذكورة والأنوثة. تهدف هذه المقالة إلى عرض وشرح النظريات المختلفة للجندر وكيف يؤثر على التفاعل بين الرجال والنساء خلال الحياة اليومية، فضلا عن تأثيره على استخدامهم للغة والسلطة من أجل الاندماج في المجتمع ومن ثم المحافظة على وضعهم الاجتماعي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجندر (النوع الاجتماعي)؛ اللغة؛ السلوك؛ السلطة؛ الوضع الاجتماعي.

1. Introduction

The study of social sciences brings different fields together like gender, language, discourse, ideology and politics. These fields intersect and affect each other when conducting a study which gives it a multidisciplinary quality. In terms of the use of language, the words "gender" and "sex" are sometimes confused with each other and used interchangeably. Therefore, the definition of these two terms will clarify their meaning and make a clear distinction between both of them. Moreover, the relationship between gender and language is historically studied by various scholars from different disciplines and schools, which resulted in developing many theories that dealt with the language used by both males and females and the interactions between them in society in order to see the similarities and differences that go along with the use of power to maintain social status and show dominance over others.

2. Definition of Gender

Generally, the notions "gender" and "sex" are considered to have the same meaning and they are used interchangeably in some studies that are related to different social sciences. The definition of sex and gender in "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's Second Sex" by Judith Butler is as follows:

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman - Simone de Beauvoir’s formulation distinguishes sex from gender and suggests that gender is an aspect of identity gradually acquired. The distinction between sex and gender has been crucial to the long-standing feminist effort to debunk the claim that anatomy is destiny; sex is understood to be the invariant, anatomically distinct, and factic aspects of the female body, whereas gender is the cultural meaning and form that body acquires, the variable modes of that body’s acculturation”.

(Butler, 1986:35)

We can see that Simone de Beauvoir explains how she believes a woman is born and exists physically, and expresses that not her physical body that leads her fate as a woman, but it is rather that she is formed and developed by society in which she plays different roles and affects and gets affected by other people. She founds her theory by primarily making a comparison between men and women. She expresses that women have depended on men most of the time, and the two genders have never had similar rights. Indeed, we assert that even in the modern society this still exists with only some differences, for example, men hold most of the higher level jobs, gain higher salaries, and are viewed as the stronger and dominant group in society. Nowadays, despite the fact that women are starting to participate in the affairs of the world, she contends that it is still a world which is dominated by men.

As indicated by de Beauvoir, anatomy and biology do not decide how men and women think or behave nor do they drive us to act in a feminine or masculine way. But, it is our social and cultural habits and conditions that formulate our gender identities and roles. Moreover, societies develop gender patterns and project them through the socialisation process. Starting from our birth, we are prepared to behave and adjust ourselves to how society expects us to act whether males or females.

Therefore, it is clear that gender and sex are different from each other, and that attributing social functions and behaviours to biological differences between men and women is not totally adequate. Moreover, Simone de Beauvoir indicates that gender aspects and specificities are parts of identity which people are not born with, but they acquire them through their lives. These parts of women and men’s identities are gradually developed by the socialisation process that they undergo in society and begins just after birth; in which they learn values, norms, customs and even ideologies that help them as individuals to shape their personalities and obtain the necessary social skills and habits in order to be active members in the social life and participate in the improvement of their lives as well as their society. Therefore, children who go through the same type of socialisation, they intend to share the same social skills, beliefs and expectations; this is what is called a successful socialisation which creates uniformity and harmony in society as a whole. This fact motivates many governments around the world to standardise education and make it obligatory for all children. By controlling the education systems, governments will decide which things are important to be taught to people and how they are taught in order to create a powerful political tool to control society on the one hand, and minimise the number of those who break the laws and commit crimes on the other hand.

Furthermore, the child’s gender is also affected by socialisation in which he/she can learn the appropriate behaviours and attitudes for a given sex. Henslin (1999:76) confirms that *“an important part of socialisation is the learning of culturally defined gender roles”*, which means that each male and female in the society learns his/her behaviours and attitudes based on the social and cultural norms that are embedded in society for a long time. The learning of any appropriate behaviour or attitude takes place with the help of many agents of socialisation. First of all, it starts within the family of the newborn child, and then it extends to his/her friends, school, work and the mass media that exist and broadcast all over the world. Consequently, gender roles are improved by *“countless subtle and not so subtle ways”* (ibid.). In addition to the effects of the socialisation process on gender roles in society, gender identity itself can affect the language used by both males and females. Their language is studied by linguists and sociolinguists through history and they gave multiple theories concerning the differences that exist between males’ and females’ language.

3. Gender and Language Overview

Gender and language studies have changed and evolved greatly from ideas and theories made and imposed by men only, to a feminist point of view which aims at exposing the sexism that exists in language, and further to studies that take into consideration the paradigms of deficit, difference and dominance in language from different perspectives.

The research on the field of language and gender and the theoretical changes that occurred in it, are the outcome of serious world changes that happened due to the actions of the political movements around the world, and therefore this research does not represent only the differences in academic perspectives on the field of gender and language, but also changes through time in the way that gender and language are recognised and how they work in the whole world (Cameron, 2004).

According to Cameron (1995), since 1973, a direct and explicit historical-typological consideration of feminist linguistic approaches would perhaps differentiate between three main models of language and gender: the deficit model, the dominance model and the cultural difference model. Later on, exactly in 1987, Zimmerman and West introduced the performative model in which the idea of 'doing' gender occurred for the first time

¹, then in 1990, it was given the name of 'performative' by Judith Butler in her book Gender Trouble.

3.1. Deficit Model

In the deficit model, females are considered to be speaking and communicating with other people in a very poor way in terms of using vocabularies and new expressions, especially in the professional field, due to their education and socialisation as females (Block, 2002). The main belief of this model is the existence of some inaccuracy in the language per se that is used by a disadvantaged group (females). It analyses the language by seeing men's language as the norm and women's language as a deviant from that norm in different ways. Otto Jespersen is one of the first linguists to write about men's and women's language. In 1922, he wrote a full chapter in his book which was entitled "The Woman" where he claims that women have limited vocabularies and they are easily offended, so they prefer to avoid "coarse and gross expressions" and use more "veiled and indirect expressions". In contrast, he believes that men are the only real innovators who invent and use new terms and expressions, and who participate greatly in the vividness and survival of language:

"Men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are always to content ourselves with women's expressions, and that vigour and vividness count for something. Most boys and many men have a dislike to some words merely because they feel that they are used by everybody and on every occasion: they want to avoid what is commonplace and banal and to replace it by new and fresh expressions, whose very newness imparts to them a flavour of their own."

(Jespersen, 1922:247)

We can notice that Jespersen is trying to include some of the stereotypes about women that were common at that time such as women lacking the ability to create or use new words in their speeches and conversations. According to him, this can harm the language since it would not evolve or establish new vocabulary. However, he claims that boys and men would choose not to use some words only because they are used by everyone else, which gives them the ability to replace these words by fresh ones that bring new features or qualities to the expressions and their meaning. His wrong claims of men being the only innovative gender are mainly derived from the nature and reality of the Western industrialised societies at that time, in which men were holding more positions of power and dominating the social and political spheres. Moreover, we can highly criticise Jespersen's work because he based it greatly on literature and fiction, did not conduct any empirical studies on society and quoted other people who also did not do any studies that can support their claims on the language of men and women.

The deficit theory is also presented by Lakoff in her work on language and women's place in 1973. In her studies, men's language is always accepted as the norm while women's language is regarded as deficient. In her study on verbal hygiene, Cameron (1995) indicates that there is a strong pressure on women by their society to observe and check regularly both the men's and their own speech and correct their mistakes of language production appropriately.

Although the deficit model was followed later by other different models, it is important to realise that there are more studies about the deficit model that were carried out recently (Aslan, 2009). These studies can be seen clearly in the recommendations that are given to people who want to be oriented towards choosing a good career in which they can achieve success and promotion. In 2001, Ellig and Morin wrote a book entitled *What Every Successful Woman Knows* which gives a good example of these studies. The primary objective of this book is to give working women efficient strategies and plans that will make them succeed and even overtake men in their own professional world (Block, 2002). In the part of communication strategies, Ellig and Morin give a piece of advice to women who feel shy and underrepresented in a patriarchal society in order to overcome their fear of speaking out loud and clear, and take advantage of every opportunity to convey their message and express their opinions freely:

"The lesson for successful women seeking the breakthrough to power? Grab the magic marker, move right up to the flipchart, and say what you have to say. Don't wait for acceptance... and don't wait, much less ask, for permission to speak. Just say it."

(Ellig & Morin, 2001:109)

Moreover, the authors advise women who wish to achieve success in their professional lives to adjust their language and their attitude in order to be more direct and assertive. They state that boys learn these skills at an early age in their lives unlike girls:

"...women have been trained since childhood to be less direct... Young girls were traditionally taught to believe that they would get more through coyness than through directness. Women simply gather and process information differently from men. In fact, they approach the whole process of communication in a different way."

(ibid.:109-110)

Apparently, we can see that the authors show a great adherence to the deficit theory, presenting women as weak members of the professional world which requires assertiveness and confidence in order to achieve success. According to them, men develop these skills and abilities naturally early in their lives and if women hope for challenging them and succeed in the world of business, they need actually to adopt, and even follow the steps of men in improving their characteristics and qualities for an effective communication with others. Following their claims, Block (2002) states that:

"...the view of gender is essentialized in that it is about having certain characteristics which are determined by the environment and which are stable throughout one's lifetime. It is also imminently conservative in that it requires that women follow modes of behaviour laid down by men, as opposed to challenging them."

(Block, 2002:51-52)

According to Block, gender has specific features and traits that are related to the environment in which people live and grow up and which do not change during their lives. He claims also that women's success and recognition are highly attached to their following to men's modes of behaviour instead of opposing them. However, we can see clearly that Ellig & Morin and Block are presuming that success in the world of business and life in general can only be reached by adopting men's thinking, behaviour, communication and approach to the world; which is obviously wrong and very biased because it denies completely women's ability to use their own thoughts and other types of communication to succeed in life, in addition to the ignorance of the changes that affect their gender and personalities and the important role of education in shaping one's potential.

Therefore, we can say that the great criticism of the deficit model is related to its lack of concrete evidence for its generalisations and stereotypes about men's and women's language because its scholars did not conduct any research and their ideas are based only on observations. The adherents of this model used also their personal introspection in order to explain some social issues that are related to language in a small section of society that is similar to their own, and thus, we can conclude that their work was more social commentary than empirical analysis.

3.2. Dominance Model

During the 1970s, the dominance theory took over the landscape of the gender studies and many researchers and sociolinguists adopted this model in order to explain how women's language was negatively evaluated because of men's social domination (Bergvall, 1999). Moreover, all the studies that were made about the language use and the structures of gendered language indicated that men dominate women in social interaction and preserve their power over them by using interruptions and overlappings when talking to women, and sometimes even criticising them by using considerable number of words (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004).

Lakoff (1975) claims that women's social insecurity and subordinate status affect greatly their use of words and differentiate their language from that of men. While, the latter enjoy great status and power in most societies, which make them believe that they have the right to dominate their conversations with women and use interruption which is "*a device for exercising power and control in conversation*" (West & Zimmerman, 1983:103). Furthermore, Dale Spender (1982) confirms that language itself embodies structures which sustain the power of men and eventually make them control knowledge:

"It is the men, not women, who control knowledge, and I believe that this is an understanding we should never lose sight of ... it is because men control knowledge that the knowledge we produce can be used against us..."

(Spender, 1982:9)

Here, we can see that Dale Spender claims that men are necessarily controlling knowledge by controlling the use of language as a means of power, and consequently, this knowledge that is produced can be used against women in society to maintain men's patriarchal order. Following the dominance theory, she explains in her works that since men are the authors of dictionaries, they invented a male lexis which is considered as the normative language and any words other than this lexis are just a deviation from the norm. However, her work on men's dominance is not based on empirical studies but on inconclusive research works with a lot of generalisations. She did not include also other dimensions that form language such as ethnicity and class, in addition to ignoring the context of the conversations where men might not be always dominant. Furthermore, Geoffrey Beattie (1982) points out that men's interruptions to women do not reflect necessarily their dominance and power, but they can also reflect their interest and involvement. Therefore, the bias and prejudice of these studies made many scholars feel dissatisfied and urged them to call for non-sexist and unbiased usage of English language (Cooper, 1989; Nichols, 1999).

The dominance model had its beginning quickly because it had already got original roots in feminist linguistics. In this model, women are considered as members of society where they can practise their 'woman-ness' in an ethnomethodological² structure because they are always compromising and negotiating their situation of relative weakness vis-à-vis men (Block, 2002:53). Unlike the deficit model which was more conventional and conservative; the dominance model was, to some extent, radical. Cameron (1995) indicates that the dominance model came as a revolution against the principles of socio-economic hierarchies in various societies all over the world. Its demands were not merely to adjust how individuals were speaking, but to break up the whole social structure that was evolving through time and giving men more power than women (Block, 2002). Yet, when studying social phenomena, the dominance model follows the same objectives as the deficit model and cultural difference model (which will be explained later on). Their main goals regarding the current

structuralist approaches are to reveal and clarify the notions of determinism, clear limits and social security (ibid.).

However, Giddens (1991) points out that the dominance model is not really strong enough to demonstrate and explain the growing of language and gender intricacies in modern societies. Therefore, we can conclude that the main criticism of this model is that men's interruptions to women in mixed-sex conversations do not always mean dominance, and according to a study carried out in courtrooms by William O'Barr and Bowman Atkins (1980), language differences between men and women are not related to gender but to situation-specific authority or power.

3.3. Cultural Difference Model

At the beginning of the 1980s, the cultural difference model came as a challenge to the traditional norms of the dominance model. In this model, the main theory is that men and women belong to different but equal sub-cultures and they use different ways of speaking and communicating with others because they receive different kinds of socialisation since childhood (Block, 2002). Consequently, boys and girls who go through the socialisation process differently, tend to vary in the ways they relate to each other in the same-sex interactions and, therefore, learn to use different communicative methods within the same society (Davis & Skilton-Sylvester, 2004).

The cultural difference model does not look at the differences between men and women negatively like the deficit model. It follows the socially liberal position in which men and women differ but remain equal (Aslan, 2009). Men's speech and communication methods are not superior to women's; but rather they differ from each other, and the relationships between both of them are mostly controversial due to culture clash (Block, 2002). This model believes that the communication breakdowns between men and women happen most of the time because of the misinterpretation of the other group's way of interaction (Tannen, 1993, 1996), and not because of the dominance of men in conversations. Therefore, Tannen (1990) highlights the confusion that happens when differences are ignored:

“Denying real differences can only compound the confusion that is already widespread in this era of shifting and re-forming relationships between women and men. Pretending that women and men are the same hurts women, because the ways they are treated are based on the norms for men.”

(Tannen, 1990:16-17)

We can see that Tannen in her statement is claiming that there are contrasting conversational styles which, if ignored, will cause confusion, harm and blame for ourselves or others in addition to hurting the relationships between men and women. According to her work on patterns of speech in cross-gender communications, she states that gender differences are built into language because boys and girls are brought up essentially in different cultures. Most of the time, women are not only treated based on the norms of men, but they are asked also to change their speech styles to sound like men which will not necessarily solve the problems of misinterpretation and misunderstanding between both sexes, because women who talk exactly like men will always be judged harshly and considered as rude and unfeminine.

Thus, the development of a good communication between men and women requires individuals who are open-minded and ready to accept the cultural differences of the opposite gender. In addition to making both genders come closer in terms of admitting each others' differences in mind and culture, the difference model considers greatly the specificities of women's speech and their unique ways of interaction. Furthermore, many scholars called for gender diversity in which people avoid social stereotypes and learn from each other by sharing their experiences. Therefore, Janet Bing and Victoria Bergvall emphasise on the need to:

“Acknowledge individual differences within and across groups and emphasise diversity rather than dichotomy. By refusing to accept dichotomy and by asking new questions, we can abandon the tired old question ‘How do men and women speak differently?’”

(Bing & Bergvall, 1998:506)

According to Bing and Bergvall, we should acknowledge the differences that exist between men and women in order to reach diversity that helps build and safeguard social relationships, rather than dichotomy that focuses greatly on differences and creates often misconceptions and stereotypes. Therefore, we conclude that the biggest criticism for the cultural difference model is its focus on discussing always the differences between both sexes which not only supports the view that such differences exist, but can create also job discrimination in workplaces especially for women, maintain social stereotypes about men and women and lead to the idea that men and women can have conflicts simply because they have contrasting conversational styles.

3.4. Performative or Social Constructionist Model

This model started with the work of West and Zimmerman in 1987 where they offer a new framework involving sex, sex category and gender, contrary to the traditional definitions of “sex” and “gender” as “biological differences” and “achieved status” respectively. According to them, sex is defined by biological characteristics that are decided by the institutional or social level, but they are not always consistent. Ideally, the members of society are put in sex categories according to their sexual characteristics. This sex categorisation is determined by the individual’s exhibition of belonging to one sex category or another. Moreover, sex categories are constructed under the banner of the cultural assumption that there are two natural sexes in society.

In contrast, gender means that the individual has to conform to the social norms and proper attitudes of a certain sex category (feminine or masculine). Therefore, he/she does not really affiliate with one gender or another by just acting like one, but he/she needs to display it in his/her interactions in order to show the exact sex according to social conventions. This gender display³ is called “doing gender” which is continuously done by individuals and assessed by society to protect the social norms and conventions.

Goffman (1976) asserts that the interactions between human beings in their environment, show strong assumptions between them about the “essential nature” of sex categories that is expressed by them through natural signs. He explains that masculinity and femininity are considered as:

“Prototypes of essential expression – something that can be conveyed fleetingly in any social situation and yet something that strikes at the most basic characterization of the individual. But, of course, when one tries to use the notion that human objects give off natural indexical signs and that some of these expressions can inform us about the essential nature of their producer, matters get complicated.”

(Goffman, 1976:75)

In this statement, we notice that Goffman is talking about the importance of gender expression in social situations which happens during our lives. Since childhood, we learn the ways and rules that we need to follow in order to do our gender correctly and avoid misjudgements by society, since it will always assess the degree to which the signs of our gender embodiment like maleness/femaleness, sexuality, behaviour and dress, fit the normal social expectations of gender expression. According to him, gender expression is provided by perfunctory and conventionalised acts that convey not only our regard for people, but show also our position in an encounter and temporarily shape the terms of contact for that social situation. Moreover, these conventionalised acts are considered as expressive behaviours that prove our “essential natures”.

However, “doing gender” does not mean always to fulfil the normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; but it is to get involved in interactions and social behaviours taking into

consideration the risk of gender assessment. When individuals do gender, this operation is characterised essentially by its specific interactions and institutions, because responsibility is a quality of social relationships and its mode of expression is produced from the institutional field in which those relationships are created. Under those circumstances, can individuals ever stop doing gender? Insofar as a society is divided by fundamental differences between men and women and placement in a sex category is both appropriate and imposed, *“doing gender is unavoidable”* (West & Zimmerman, 1987:145).

Doing gender aims to create differences between boys and girls and men and women, differences that are not based on nature or biology. As soon as the differences are created, they are used to support and confirm the “essentiality” of gender. As far as the arrangement between the sexes is concerned, Goffman (1977) notices the establishment of a set of institutional frameworks through which individuals’ normal and natural sexedness can be performed. Moreover, the material properties of social environment give them one good means for expressing their essential differences. For instance, these properties can be found generally in public places like public bathrooms which apply sex segregation by distinguishing ladies from gentlemen.

Ultimately, West and Zimmerman claim that doing gender is an ongoing activity and routine accomplishment in daily life, because it is something that people do in social interaction with others (Schoepflin, 2011). In this light, doing gender is unavoidable, especially when dealing with the social consequences of sex categories like power and resources which are assigned differently depending on these assessments (West & Zimmerman, 1987). However, doing gender helps also to make these differences look real and natural. Consequently, *“if, in doing gender, men are also doing dominance and women are doing deference”* (West & Zimmerman, 1987:146), then doing gender generates likewise hierarchy and social order. The authors give a brief summary of this process by saying that: *“doing gender furnishes the interactional scaffolding of social structure, along with a built-in mechanism of social control”* (ibid.:147). In order to achieve a real change in society, then, changes are highly required at both levels of sex category and gender. Finally, they emphasise on the powerful ideology of gender that affects the whole social structure:

“Gender is a powerful ideological device, which produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category.”

(ibid.)

West & Zimmerman are clearly insisting on the power of gender in shaping our social orders and hierarchies. Being considered as an ideological tool, gender can affect greatly our choices and limits in life according to our sex. In most cultures, gender differences indicate inequality between both sexes, men’s power and dominance and women’s oppression and submissiveness. However, we can change these negative naturalised differences by changing both the cultural and institutional level of sex category and the interactional level of gender; in addition to reconceptualising gender, not only as an ordinary property of individuals but also as an important dynamic of social orders, which can suggest new perspectives on the whole network of gender relations.

Furthermore, the performative (or social constructionist) model was adopted by sociolinguists due to the limitations of the other paradigms (the deficit, dominance and cultural difference). Gradually, their study of language started to move towards understanding gender as an important component in constructing social identities. Freeman and McElhinny see *“language use as shaping understanding of the social world”* (1996:219) and it participates greatly in forming the social identities and the relationships between individuals in the social world (Davies & Harré, 1990; Fairclough, 1989; Ochs, 1993; Swann, 1993). Ochs (1993) argues that gender is only referred to by a small group of linguistic features. Actually, he further explains that because individuals use language more likely in conversations, social identities are not very much built by language use but they are rather constructed through social interactions. Cameron states that:

“Linguists interested in analyzing the constitution of gender identities /gender relations need to look beyond lexical choice. Analyse who is represented as doing what, to who is and under what circumstances and with what consequences.”

(Cameron, 1990:16)

We can see that Cameron is advising linguists who want to study gender identities and gender relations to improve their methods and enhance their perspectives to include not only the effects of the choice of words on gender, but to analyse also the circumstances and consequences of social interactions between men and women which construct gender identities. Accordingly, the main principle of the social constructionist model is that gender is socially constructed and personally performed. This principle was created by Goodwin (1998) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003). Goodwin carried out an ethnographic study in one community about language and gender, in which he asserts that the primary unit of analysis has to be the activity instead of the separate entities like individuals, genders, groups and cultures.

Thus, according to Freeman and McElhinny (1996), the possibility of studying language as a special and separate entity, can be considered if the concept of activity is used because it allows for better understanding of language as shaping reality and presenting changes and development. The study of language has to change from tackling differences between men and women to situations where both similarities and differences occur in their speech and conversations. This kind of study would help to create a shift at the level of language use in order to understand how and when men and women use language to construct gender differences that are recognised as social categories.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) confirm that there are other parts of social life in which gender constructs exist also, for instance important categories like those including race, class and ethnicity. Therefore, the idea of gender polarisation has now been rejected moving towards what Butler (1993) has coined as ‘gender as a performative social construct’, an idea shared by many feminist researchers such as Bergvall (1996), Cameron (1995, 1996, 1997), Freed (1996, 1999) and Sunderland (2004). In order to understand how gender is performed in society, it is important to observe and investigate one of the tools used which is discourse. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) also indicate that ‘language is the primary tool that people use in constituting their identities’. Likewise, Sunderland supports the theoretical change from ‘social learning’ to ‘social constructionism’ (2004:17). The social constructionist theory of language and gender gives more scope for studying gender than the difference and dominance models, however, Sunderland gives a number of issues that need to be further investigated, specifically the relationship between social construction and gender; and how the construction can provide guarantees that it will go *“beyond words spoken and written”* (ibid.:172).

According to Butler (1990), gender is not acquired by people in a definitive way at an early age in their lives, but it is a continuous achievement⁴ that is constructed and reconstructed through their linguistic practice. Therefore, gender is considered as an unstable phenomenon that is portrayed through the speech and conversations of men and women. Moreover, she confirms that masculinity and femininity are not innate characteristics which individuals have, but they are rather the results of their activities that are performed in social interactions. She asserts that:

“Gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed.”

(Butler, 1990:25)

As far as Butler is concerned, gender is a performance or an act that constructs our identities whether males or females. She does not believe that we have inherent gender identities that force us to perform within restrictive gender binaries, but instead we express our true gender identities by acting in accordance with our inner desires. Therefore, we can say that because gender identities are constituted by language, there is no gender identity that precedes language. We can keep it very simple

by saying that an identity 'does not do' language and discourse, but language and discourse 'do' gender.

Furthermore, Sunderland and Litosseliti (2002) insist on the importance of context in the study of gender which requires a focus on specificity and complexity. Specificity means to examine particular settings in which men and women interact with each other, while complexity indicates the ways where the intersection of gender and other parts of identity occurs, like age, race and status. Neglecting the effects of these valuable aspects of identity is, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992:471) figuratively put it, "to paint with one eye closed" because "speakers are not assembled out of independent modules: part European American, part female, part middle-aged, part feminist, part intellectual." Obviously, we can say that these divisions or separations between different aspects of identity do not exist in reality because they are inseparable elements that construct, as a whole, our identities.

Because the main purpose of the performative model was to cancel the fundamental beliefs that have existed for a long time, "there is less emphasis on cataloguing the differences in the speech of women and men and more interest in analyzing what people accomplish with talk" (Crawford, 2001:244). The idea of gender as a 'performative social construct' made many scholars question the traditional gender divisions and differences between men and women, and moved their interest to the ways in which individuals perform the usual gender identities and sometimes challenge gender norms. By challenging the conventional behaviours and gender differences that exist between men and women, the supporters of the performative model succeeded to breach the rigid barriers between femininity and masculinity which did not tolerate any other place between them. Thus, Janis Bohan (1993:13) suggests that: "none of us is feminine or is masculine or fails to be either of those. In particular contexts, people do feminine; in others, they do masculine." From this statement, we can understand that characteristics like autonomy and dependence, dominance and submissiveness, do not always represent men and women respectively. We have to question the assumption that behaviours are related to gender, because they are not sex specific and can be displayed by both men and women.

One of the characteristics of this model is sensitivity to context which means to look at specific meanings which individuals designate to a group of contextual aspects within different contexts. These particular characteristics needed a methodological tool to investigate the ways that gender and language interact with each other taking into consideration the specificity and complexity of contexts. Consequently, it is important to explore the reasons behind the occurrence of the concept of 'Community of Practice' (henceforth CofP), which has lately gained access to language and gender studies.

In fact, it was Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1995) who established originally the concept of CofP in the field of language and gender studies by studying the linguistic practices and gender identities in Belten High School girls. Such as the concept of gender as 'performative', even though it was not clearly mentioned like that, advocates of the CofP approach as well consider gender as something that is developed through social practice, through individuals' interactions rather than their innate characteristics (Cameron, 2005). Lave and Wenger (1991) define community of practice as:

"Groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly."

(Lave & Wenger, 1991:12)

Accordingly, we can say that the community of practice is formed by a group of people who want to engage in a process of collective learning in a specific area of interest that they all share. By interacting with each other, they learn more about their area of interest, develop their skills and gain more experience. Furthermore, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) emphasise on the role that is played by this concept in society as their article suggests, is to *look locally and think practically*; which means to neglect the traditional assumptions about gender and language studies: that social

relations and different identity features do not really affect the role of gender, and that gender and its specific displays are the same thing in several communities; in other words, this approach joined both specificity and complexity with each other. According to these scholars, the CofP approach is both helpful and appropriate because “*to understand precisely how language interacts with gender (and with other symbolic and social phenomena) requires that we look locally, closely observing linguistic and gender practices in the context of a particular community’s social practices*” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992:464). Consequently, we have to encourage a view of the interaction of language and gender in the daily social practices of some specific local communities, and we need to consider them as jointly constructed in those practices.

The participation of this concept in enriching the diversity of gender and language studies has been greatly acknowledged by many scholars. For example, Holmes and Meyerhoff (1999:180), considered CofP as “*a corrective to an unsatisfactory essentialist approaches to language and gender*”. Therefore, we can say that the greatest advantage of the performative model is its ability to allow the convergence between community of practice approach and language and gender research which helped develop a focus on gender “in its full complexity” as the members of community construct contextually their gender identities through practice; and a focus on the intersection between gender social construction and other social aspects like age, race, status, class and so on (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 1992). Accordingly, we conclude that individuals enrich their social background by using new linguistic patterns as they partake in various CofPs which help them control their own gendered acts, instead of repeating the same rigid linguistic patterns which they have learned in their speech communities.⁵

4. Conclusion

Despite the evolution of gender studies through history, from insisting on the differences between men and women to looking at the diversity of gender research and its relationship with other social parameters, gender differences and inequalities still exist in societies due to social stereotypes that are firmly established in the minds of a large number of people. These inequalities are mostly the outcomes of the socialisation process in male-dominated societies, in which patriarchal oppression often relegates women to minor gender roles and lower social and political positions.

Besides, studying the different theories of gender and language helped, to some extent, shed the light on their historical background and their relationship with the actual social and political problems that seem nowadays very natural due to their recurrence in the daily interactions between people. For instance, the deficit, dominance and cultural difference theories focused greatly on the social differences that exist between men and women neglecting many other elements that can affect their gender identities and language use like race, age, status, class and education, which led to their criticism and rejection by many people.

However, the performative or social constructionist theory succeeded to gather all the specificities and complexities of the interactions of gender and language with other aspects like social environment, context and power. It focused on the diversity created by considering gender as performative which made it fluid and flexible especially when intersecting with communities of practice. Finally, the performative theory can be considered as the most suitable theory for dealing with gender and language intricacies since it is open for change and evolution just like human societies.

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¹ The concept of “doing” gender was the result of the studies done about gender in sociology and its relationship with the general gender studies. The specific term “doing gender” was primarily introduced by West and Zimmerman in their article that bears the same title. It was originally written in 1977 but not published until 1987.

² Douglas W. Maynard and Teddy Kardash (2007) define *ethnomethodology* as: “*an area in sociology originating in the work of Harold Garfinkel. It represents an effort to study the methods in and through which members concertedly produce and assemble the features of everyday life in any actual, concrete, and not hypothetical or theoretically depicted setting*” (Maynard & Kardash, 2007:1483).

³ Goffman (1976) explains *gender display* as follows: “*If gender be defined as the culturally established correlates of sex (whether in consequence of biology or learning), then gender display refers to conventionalized portrayals of these correlates*” (Goffman, 1976:69).

⁴ In support of this idea, Crawford (1995:12) argues that gender should not be considered as “a noun”, which suggests stable and innate characteristics, but as ‘a verb’ which suggests its ongoing construction by the gendered acts of people’s performances in society. Therefore, based on this idea of ‘doing’ gender, the constructionist/performative approach of language and gender started.

⁵ The concept of speech community was adopted as a field of study in linguistic analysis in the 1960s. Its emergence began with the original work of William Labov who studied language variation in New York City. He explained clearly that: “*The speech community is not defined by any marked agreement in the use of language elements, so much as by participation in a set of shared norms; these norms may be observed in overt types of evaluative behavior, and by the uniformity of abstract patterns of variation which are invariant in respect to particular levels of usage*” (Labov, 1972:120-121).