

Language is a remarkable gift given to us by nature, which sets apart human beings from other species on the planet. We are so accustomed to a world of spoken and written language that we are seldom aware of the remarkable progress we have been able to achieve for which language is one of the vital reasons. The power of a language is not restricted only to its characters as a mode of communication through which thoughts and emotions of people are expressed; it has a much larger role to play. Societal attitudes, views, customs and norms are mirrored in the vocabulary of people.

Languages differ in structure and format, even those that belong to the same group. Indian languages can be classified into four groups, Indo-European or Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Austric and Sino-Tibetan. Most Indians speak languages from the first two groups. Sanskrit is a language of the Indo Aryan or the Indo-European language group. A number of languages, especially languages spoken in the northern part of the country such as Marathi, Hindi and Gujarati, have their origin in Sanskrit. Marathi is the southernmost language of the Indo Aryan branch of the Indo European group of languages.

One of the peculiarities of Sanskrit driven languages is attributing gender to objects and things other than human beings. In this groups of languages, gender is attributed not only to human beings but also to animals, birds and plants. In most languages of the Dravidian group i. e. Tamil, Tulu or Kannada, inanimate objects including plants and flowers are attributed a neutral gender (*napunsakling*). In fact, there is no natural distinction with regard to gender for these kinds of objects. Therefore, it is societal attitudes, preconceptions and biases regarding

## Atha to Lingajigysa Gender Bias in Language

○ Vrushali Dehadroy

femininity and masculinity, which guide the grammatical rules of ascribing *strilinga* (feminine gender), *pullinga* (masculine gender) or *napunsakalinga* (neuter gender) to these objects.

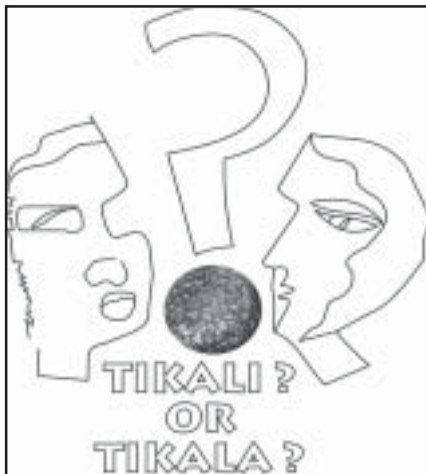
The study of standard Marathi shows that different criteria such as size, social and economic value or combinations of these criteria are used in attributing gender to inanimate objects including plants. In Marathi, *to*, *ti* and *te* are pronouns which are equivalent to the pronoun 'that' used in English. The pronoun *to* is used to signify masculine gender, *ti* for the feminine gender and *te* for the neuter gender. One can give a long list of simple words, which are used in day-to-day colloquial Marathi, which would reveal the gender bias of the language. Some traits are considered to be invariable parts of male or female personality. If an object is believed to

possess a masculine or feminine characteristic, it is connected with the appropriate gender.

Here are a few examples in which size is the criterion for deciding gender. A thick book is called '*to grantha*' in Marathi for which the masculine gender is used whereas a small booklet which is free of cost or has a nominal price is called '*ti pustica*'. A big container is called '*to daba*' whereas a small container used for holding pickle is called '*ti dabi*'. An elegantly designed bungalow or flat having an area of several thousand square feet is identified with the masculine gender whereas a humble hut of a poor person is *ti zopadi*.

In the following examples, both the words of a pair are of the same category but for the first word masculine gender is applied and for the second word the feminine gender. *khadu-pencil* (chalk-pencil), *wadaga-wati* (big bowl-small bowl), *samudra-nadi* (sea-river), *khila-chuk* (big knell-small knell), *donger-tekadi* (mountain-hill), *rasta-paywat* (road-path), *natak-natika* (play-playlet), *thala-thali* (big plate-small plate), *takya-ushi* (large pillow-small pillow), *dhol-dholki* (big and small drum).

All heavy vehicles like trucks or tractors, which are big in size as well as have higher engine capacity, are associated with the masculine gender. All small vehicles like bicycles, sunny or scooty are identified with the



feminine gender. An amusing aspect of this phenomenon is that most of these vehicles do not have equivalent words in Marathi. In English, all these vehicles are referred by the pronoun 'it', that is, *napunsaklinga* but when these words enter the courtyard of Marathi, they lose their neutrality and develop either a masculine or feminine identity.

Another criterion used for attributing gender is the 'economic value' of the object. Generally speaking, expensive objects are bigger in size. Therefore, some of the examples from the above list can be requoted like *thala-thali*, *daba-dabi*, *wadga-wati*, etc. In addition to these examples, other examples can be given in which economic value is the only decisive criterion. An expensive and elegant sari which is generally worn at the time of an important occasion like a wedding, is identified as *to shaloo*, but a daily - use sari is referred as *ti sadi*. A crown of a king embedded with precious gems and jewels is *to mukut* and a cap worn by a layman is a *ti topi*. Gender is also identified with social status or worth.—*Mahavidyala-Shala* (college - school), *boot-chappal*, *sone-chandi* (gold-silver) In the case of jewellery, heavy and bulky looking items are *pulingi* for example *tode*, *goth*, *bajubanda*, *tnmani*, and lightweight items are given the feminine gender.

Thus masculinity or femininity is connected to the object's relative size and economic value. A bigger or more expensive object is identified with either the masculine or the feminine gender but a smaller object is always tied to the feminine gender.

According to popular belief, women are fragile and vulnerable by nature. Even flowers are made to follow the rule of gender identification. Bigger and longer lasting flowers such as the rose, marigold and lotus are *pulingi* or *napunsakalingi*. But to delicate flowers like the jasmine, the feminine gender is applied.

In childhood, a woman is believed to be dependent on her father; in youth, her husband is considered to be her supporting pillar. The son is her walking stick when she is in the autumn of her life. Society expects her to be incapable of tracing her path alone, without man's support. Such beliefs are reflected in many common metaphors. A woman is often compared to creepers (*vel*), which again is *strilingi*. A family head is always considered banyan tree,



*watwriksha* that offers shelter to birds, animals and human beings as well. So a tree is always *pulingi*. Even in English literature, particularly in poetry, such metaphors are used. Moon, earth and river are identified with feminine qualities whereas the

sea is believed to possess masculine characteristics.

In the case of some objects, *pulingi* usage did not exist. They were generally attributed feminine gender due to smaller size. But when the same objects are larger a *pulingi* format of that word is imposed. A *bindi* that is '*tikali*' is normally attributed the feminine gender. If a girl wears a slightly bigger *bindi*, it is referred to as *tikala* and not *tikali*. If a person is holding an abnormally big bag, viewers exclaim at her carrying such a big *pishawa*.

These examples show that generally the female gender is attributed to objects that have a lower rank from the societal point of view. Even though two objects are from the same category, or serve the same function, the smaller object or the object having a lower market value is identified with the female gender. Similarly objects, which are soft, fragile and delicate, are always *strilingi*, that is, of the feminine gender. On the other hand, bigger, higher priced and socially valued objects have the right of being identified with either *pulingi*, that is, the masculine gender or the *napunsakalinga*. This lingual peculiarity represents masculine dominance and its all-pervasive nature in every aspect of social and cultural life.

Women are generally considered fragile, vulnerable, dependant, weak etc. due to which their social status, value and reputation are invariably lower than those of men. Such beliefs and stereotypes get reflected in language.

Even though sincere attempts are being made to bring equality between the genders, is it likely that the gender-biased nature of our languages will also change with changing times? □

**The author is a Lecturer, Indian Institute of Pune. Her research interests include education of deprived sections and gender related issues.**