

# Teacher Appropriated as Bricoleur: Neutralizing Gendering Through Language

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## Abstract

Language is an invincible tool and a mighty weapon that mankind has been bestowed with. Among the numerous professions that man has set his mark on, teaching is considered preeminent thanks to its potential to create and recreate the diverse fields of study that it encompasses. Moreover, along with imparting knowledge, teaching is revered as a noble and ennobling vocation that helps mould young minds, transforming a primitive, instinct-driven species into civilized citizens of the world. Beyond the cliched stereotypical norms, teachers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have the onerous task and unrivalled opportunity to become prophets and propagators of equality by exercising a genderless language in the classroom. The stigma towards any gender and the scornful attitude towards the queer can be altered and sublimated most effectively when a person steps on to this world. This paper attempts to envisage a novel role for teachers in breaking gender binaries and accepting everyone as equal and normal by adopting a genderless language. This study believes that this goal can be best achieved when the teacher dons the hat of a bricoleur, neutralizing the gendering that has become entrenched in human language.

**Keywords:** Gender binary, Bricolage, Linguisticity, Masculinity, teacher, performance, classroom

## 1. Introduction

Teachers are considered to be social reformers because they mould a miniature society in the classroom. They can disseminate values and innovative ideas in solving social issues. Apart from teaching the subject, teachers are capable of instilling the right perspective towards life. Every student thinks differently based on their individual and subjective upbringing. In a classroom, which treats students equally irrespective of class, caste and gender, a good teacher can redefine the absurd notions prevailing in the society. One such vexing question is that of gender.

Gender is a problematic and baffling concept. It is a social construction based on one's social performance. Russell treats gender as "a performed, socially emergent phenomenon" (2021, p. 43). It needs to be neutralized in consideration to the existence of a multitude of genders which are incapable of conforming to the mainstream genders. Within the masculine-feminine genders, masculinity reigns over femininity. Milani asserts that "[m]asculinity is never in the singular, but is instead a set of performances that one carries out by employing linguistic and other meaning-making resources within normative constraints about how a man should sound, appear and behave" (2015, p.10). When masculinity sets some standards, whatever is not masculine will be attributed to the feminine. Anything that transcends or escapes the binaries created by a dualistic human consciousness is prey to this skewed attribution. In the case of gender, this phenomenon of attributing the best to the masculine

and the rest to the feminine attains queer proportions; it is at its menacing worst in the case of genders which are not accepted in the mainstream society.

## 2. Background and Context

As gender is sociologically-constructed and to be performed in the society, everyone puts on a mask irrespective of the 'original' gender identity one is born with and one lives up to. Judith Butler's idea of 'Gender Performativity' is quite significant in analysing the question of gender. Gender is perceived as a concept which needs to be performed in the society, and thus establishes its existence. "A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or 'core' called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation or language" (1990, p.10). She affirms that "the limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. This is not to say that any and all gendered possibilities are open, but that the boundaries of analysis suggest the limits of a discursively conditioned experience. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender" (1990, p.13)

Moreover, gender is power-specific. The dominant gender gains power not only linguistically but also psychologically. This power-centric gender delegates work for the other genders and opts for the prestigious job roles. Russell asserts that "... in spite of their generalized cultural privilege, men are typically removed from domination in arenas such as the home and childrearing, a foreclosure that is accomplished in part through language and discourse". When the socially and linguistically powerful gender attributes certain job roles to the powerless, it becomes right and mundane. "Such complexifications suggest that power and hierarchical gender orders are not straightforwardly accomplished, nor can their effects be simplistically understood as positive and negative, dominating and dominated, and so forth. Rather, both ends of the gender hierarchy are constrained by in linguistic performances born from and borne upon the unequal distribution of power-as-potential" (2021, p. 44). This deeply ingrained nexus between language and gender needs to be re-examined and addressed.

Language is a mighty tool for social reformation and it is a reiterative performance. In order to affect a paradigm shift in the societal attitudes and attributes pertaining to gender, linguistic approach should also be transformed. It is language which feeds the dominating gender to retain its status. It is not surprising either that it is the very same language that renders other genders meek and powerless. "The linguistic performances give shape and form to men, real or imagined, becoming or having already become, who believe in or strive toward a form of masculinity that distinguishes not only between men and women, but between different archetypes of men, asserting that these divisions and the characteristics that bind them are grounded in biology, evolution, neurology, and psychology. They realize men who claim to be inclusive and to value all, including nonconforming or subordinated men and importantly and very explicitly women, but whose iterative self-realization and self-positioning within the gendered orders defies this assertion in ways that remain half stated or entirely unspoken, and are thus difficult to apprehend" (Russell, 2021, p. 66).

There was a time when female authors were forced to write and publish under male pseudonyms. Many emulated male mannerisms and performances in society especially in writing assuming that masculinity is the dominant and better gender. The bandwagon of masculinity as the ideal gender infects the growth and existence of other genders and dissipates toxicity. "... male toxicity intersects with other identities and their indices, especially race and ethnicity, has become increasingly and

frustratingly evident. The rhizomatic, intersectional nature of gender imbalances and inequalities cannot be ignored, as individuals and groups are never simply “male” or “female,” but are inscribed in a host of socially constructed and emergent identities” (Lazar, 2005, p. 36). Linguistic performance is considered to be the hallmark of gender confirmation. Within language, one can perceive predominance of certain pronouns, adjectives and salutations.

### 3. Gender Neutrality in Language

This paper advocates and exhorts gender neutrality in language use. It may sound clichéd to say that this gendering is the offshoot of a male-dominated, patriarchal system. However, focusing on the ‘male’ in the system is to miss the point altogether. For, as the numerous post-structuralist deliberations since the 1960s have clearly taught us, it doesn’t really matter which side of the binary we are in. What matters is whether we are in a binary. To do away with the mode of thinking in terms of binaries is what Derridian Deconstruction calls for. In a richly evocative passage in *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida tells us: “It goes without saying that these effects do not suffice to annul the necessity for a ‘change of terrain’. . . A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once” (Derrida, 1972, p.73). This is exactly the argument this paper wishes to put forward.

The argument for neutralising the gendering implicit in our use of language is never an attempt to suggest that only men use language in an oppressive and patronising fashion. The same gendered language, albeit serious attention to its import or meaning, is employed by other genders too. So long as ignorance is bliss, this gendering might pass scrutiny. However, this shouldn’t be so, for, it is not always within the spaces occupied by the academic intelligentsia that a gendered language bares its fangs. Rather, it is among the same unwitting and naïve common populace, the ignorant multitude, that the consequences of a gendered language are felt most vigorously. Hence it is of greater relevance that people realise the flaws inherent in the language that they use, often with scant attention to its implicit connotations.

Gender-neutral language employs an unbiased approach towards understanding and addressing genders equally. Gender-neutral language is also called gender - inclusive language. Human language is funny, sometimes cruelly so; language becomes a tool of oppression and subjugation at the expense of the marginalised genders. Language offers instances where male gender encompasses all genders. For instance, “man” represents the whole of humanity. Rather than using man/ woman, “human” is usually the inclusive term, yes, in a patriarchal system. When it comes to some job titles like author, actor, chairman, postman, etc, in spite of using authoress, actress, chairperson and postwoman is being considered as normal and familiar. While there are feminine epicenes are also prevalent. For instance, nurse, air hostess, homemaker etc. But neutrality is attainable only by breaking all the existing binaries.

Honorifics is another stigma with regard to gender identity. Generally speaking, honorifics is considered to be prefixing one’s name. For instance, “Mr”, “Mrs”, “Ms” are gender-specific salutations. Particularly “Mrs” and “Ms” unravel the marital status of a woman, which is not at all applicable for the male counterpart. These days “Ms” is considered to be accepted salutation. On the other hand, we have “Dr” “Lt” “Prof.” etc which are quite gender- neutral. Gender neutral pronouns like “he” and “she” distinguishes gender at the same time exclude the other genders. He/she could be substituted with “one” while using singular and they/their in plural contexts. Gender is not merely biological but a socio- cultural entity. “This body of scholarship establishes a basis from which further works critiqued the presumptive internal mechanisms of gendered language, contributing to a further

troubling of the gender binary itself” (Russell, 2021, p. 43). Gendered language needs to be genderless or gender-neutral aids to blur the existing gender binary of male and female. The more the language become gendered the less the scope to bring about neutralization and equality in society.

The seeds of gender neutrality can be implanted from school level, so that the equality will take shoots in the higher levels. In this act of injecting this intellectual and humane manure of equality, teacher’s role is central. In a classroom scenario, the teacher can bring about lot of changes in the perception of students of different genders. A teacher has a role in inculcating students that all genders are normal and different. For this language can be used as a medium in indirectly conveying the veiled fact of gender neutrality. A study by David J. Corson delineates: “When language competencies revealed in the school setting itself are examined, girls do have a measure of superiority over boys. In accounting for this it is difficult to say if it is girls’ socialisation, or any inherited language competence as a group, or a combination of both factors that gives them this superiority” (1992, p. 239). But this stark reality is unknown to many. When the submissive gender has more competencies in language acquisition, if teachers dissipate the concepts of gender neutrality especially by employing gender-neutral language, it will be deeply imprinted in the minds of students who are not masculine. This will enhance confidence and sense of equality in going forward to attain their dreams and share a dignified status in the society. “Cross-cultural studies of gender and language confirm that language plays a very diverse role in the social construction of gender. At the same time studies of language socialisation confirm that the effects of socialisation through language appear very early in children’s lives” (David, 1992, p. 229).

#### **4. Teacher’s Role**

A teacher can act as a “bricoleur” in amalgamating the existing gender stereotypes into a unified mould through language. It changes one’s attitude to gender identities and performances. “The idea of bricolage produces a new way to talk about, and think about, systems and structures without falling into the trap of trying to build a new stable system out of the ruins of a deconstructed one. It provides a way to think without establishing a new center, a privileged reference, an origin, a truth. It also inspires creativity and originality, making possible new ways of putting things together” (Mambrol, 2016).

Through language a teacher is capable of breaking the age-old gender stereotypes and binaries. Motschenbacher construes:

Even if identities that lie outside gender norms are to be constructed linguistically, they are most of the times still conceptually rooted in gender-binary discursive structures. Terms like intersexuality (‘between the two’), transsexuality (‘from one to the other’), androgynous (‘male-female’) or bisexual (‘both’) compare the respective identities to normative gender binarism and accordingly support rather than challenge dominant discourses. Children find it relatively easy to construct themselves as girl or boy as there are certain normative discourses that tell them how to behave as a girl or a boy. If a child wanted to be something else (a situation which is very unlikely due to discursive socialisation in early childhood), say, for example, a ‘birl’, it would have a hard time, simply because there are no dominant discourses that tell the child how to adequately be a birl and an identity outside gender binarism is highly stigmatised. Children will usually opt for a strategy of the least resistance and will take over dominant discursive structures. Immediately after birth, children are confronted with gendered subject positions. (Motschenbacher, 2010, p.14)

Gender is an institution created by society and got established in such a way. Bonnie McElhinny in her essay “Theorizing Gender in Sociolinguistics and Linguistic Anthropology” asserts that “gender is a way of allocating access to different forms of work and other resources. To focus on gender in activities alone may be to focus on the gender of individuals, but to lose the sight of the gender of institutions” (2003, p.31).

A classroom being a mini-model of the society can have students of different biological, sociological and psychological performances. “In a poststructuralist approach, the basic assumption is that a plurality of femininities, masculinities, or androgynities can be (linguistically) performed. These may vary interpersonally and intrapersonally” (Motschenbacher, 2010, p. 126). Judith Butler affirms that, “The linguistic evocation of gender identities is possible because individual performances are embedded in an infinite history of continuing citation and re-citation, in which they have achieved the status of hegemonic discourses that defy the notion of a specific personal origin” (1990, p. 199).

### **5. Practical ways to implement gender equality in the classroom**

1. A teacher can prepare teaching materials freed from gender stereotyping. Teaching materials, particularly the audio-visual aids can bring great impact in the young minds. So, an inclusive curriculum is beneficial in acquiring this goal.
2. Can attempt to break the conventional gender-specific job roles by highlighting the need and will of a person to become what one wants to become, rather than conforming to the societal expectations.
3. Adopt an objective approach in treating students instead of using gender-specific pronouns. This will create a utopian ambience in the classroom.
4. Evade the key assumptions of the society while pinpointing the characteristics of every gender. For instance, ‘girls should not go outside in the midnight’, ‘boys should not cry’, ‘transgenders are ominous’ etc. A teacher who is civilized and wise enough in knowing the ways of the world should transgress the mundane traditional misconceptions, so that students will start emulating their teacher.
5. Ensure all genders share the same space comfortably and are involving in healthy discussions.
6. Separate seats, lines, playgrounds for boys and girls should be abandoned. Familiarity to all genders in a closer perspective will lessen the curiosity and mystery embedded in every genders. This will gradually lead to social equity.
7. Encourage everyone to work as a team irrespective of gender, class, colour and caste. This will help them in adapting to any life situation and become active team players.
8. Coordinate awareness campaigns to break the gender-bias, societal taboos, and cultural misinterpretations.
9. Mitigate the gender biases in the classroom by recognizing the fact that differences are marked by diversity, not by status. This will motivate the students in celebrating diversity.
10. Open a platform for discussion to address the issues confronted by every genders thereby making everyone aware of it and can suggest solutions.
11. Introduce health education and sex education in the classroom. This will enable students to know facts as they are rather than assuming.

The aforementioned steps can be adopted in making a gender-neutral classroom by the right use of gender-neutral language. Teaching to transgress the traditional misconceptions is a worth- mentioning service from the part of the teachers, because they can create an inclusive society.

## 6. Conclusion

Gender neutral language or gender-fair language will work as panacea to recuperate from all the prevailing wounds of bias and ill-treatment. A teacher can act as an agency of change in bringing social equity to students. In this endeavour, a teacher can perform as a torch-bearer in awakening the emerging society to accept all the genders as how they are, to find normalcy in everything and to respect everyone irrespective of all differences. The teacher can be the ultimate bricoleur in neutralizing the gendered language into a genderless language for the welfare of humanity.

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