

Gendered Linguistics: A Gymnastics to make the Queer Non-existent

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ABSTRACT

While learning the English language, the students are usually made aware of the masculine, feminine, common, and neuter genders. The stress is on the masculine and feminine genders among four genders. Common and neuter genders are kept behind the curtain of oblivion. This strategy is employed to facilitate the perpetuation of heterosexual hegemony in linguistics and society, to keep the queer individuals silenced, marginalized, and voiceless. As a result, queer people find it challenging to incorporate themselves into masculine or feminine genders. This research attempts a detailed search in the novels of the queer writer and activist Sarah Schulman to expose gender-related issues that queers encounter in using gender in linguistics and communication. A survey is done to draw a clear picture of the problem on fifty college students. This research expects to analyse the paradigm shift in the usage of gender from exclusive linguistics to inclusive linguistics.

Keywords: Communication, Feminine, Gendered Linguistics, Masculine, Queer

1. Introduction

English has been taught as a second language in most Indian states, including Tamil Nadu. Undergraduates in this state must take the “Communicative English” course, where they study the language. They will study gender and how it is employed, one of the grammatical topics that will be taught as part of their curriculum. The researcher observed that students in Communicative English lessons on gender could not identify genders other than male and female. It was discovered while the researcher was teaching classes on gender. While reading a few of the books by queer author Sarah Schulman, the researcher discovered that the author intentionally avoids using masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns in the dialogues for the characters in the novels by using names and euphemisms instead. Giffney states, “Queer theory is an exercise of discourse analysis. It

takes very seriously the significance of words and the power of language” (7). So, these two events form the root of writing this research paper. This paper aims to expose how heteronormative hegemony makes queer people voiceless by affirming the linguistic dominance of masculine and feminine genders and by suppressing the rise of terms that enable queer people to speak on their own in society. The study is substantiated by surveying fifty students from a college in Tamil Nadu. It envisions linguistics that is inclusive, not exclusive.

2. Purpose/Objectives

The purpose of this study is to highlight how heterosexual hegemony uses the masculine and feminine genders in linguistics to maintain heteronormativity in society and to keep queer people, who do not identify with either gender and lack a language of their own in linguistics

and literature, dumb. The main objectives of the research are the following. First, it explores the dominance of masculine and feminine genders in third-person personal pronouns and present the meaning of gender in linguistics. Then, it depicts the lack of terms to refer to genderless queer people. It suggests a few pronouns that can be used for all, irrespective of the gender they belong to. Surveying fifty students in a Tamil Nadu college portrays students' ignorance of genders other than masculine and feminine. Third, it culls out examples from the novels of Sarah Schulman to exhibit the inadequacy of linguistics in providing terms related to queer people who are neither masculine nor feminine. Finally, it indicates the need for a paradigm shift in linguistics that is not exclusive but inclusive.

3. Methodology and Approach

This research employs a qualitative approach and survey method. Joseph Dorairaj states, "Qualitative research is interpretative and largely subjective" (4). It interprets the terms and euphemisms used by Sarah Schulman in her novels to expose the folly of giving too much importance to masculine and feminine genders. It also aims to deconstruct the mansion of linguistics built on the pillars of masculine and feminine genders by heterosexual hegemony to reconstruct a mansion of linguistic inclusivity under the roof of which the dignity of human beings is respected and accepted irrespective of their socially constructed genders.

A survey research method is a quantitative approach that asks a pool of respondents a series of survey questions to collect information from those respondents. For the researcher's research, a questionnaire was given to fifty students at one of the autonomous colleges in Tamil Nadu. The subjects of this study are undergraduate students who are enrolled in a variety of disciplines. The

students attending this college were chosen using a sampling method known as convenience sampling. The group of fifty students was chosen at random for the sample. The current study uses a structured questionnaire with open-ended questions to collect data. There are two sections to the questionnaire. The purpose of the first exercise was to test the student's capacity to distinguish between genders other than masculine and feminine. In the second section, they were generally questioned about their knowledge of queer individuals and the terminology used to refer to them. The students were allowed to respond to the questions in either English or Tamil, whatever language was most comfortable for them. In addition to the survey, in-person communication and group discussions were employed. The students' tasks in their regular classes were also examined to see how well they understood queer individuals and the terminology used to describe them.

4. Findings

All the objectives are met in this research. In linguistics, the term 'gender' refers to language that inherently prefers one particular sex or social gender over another. There are four genders: masculine, feminine, common, and neutral. In contrast to the feminine gender, which refers to female figures or female members of a species, the masculine gender refers to terms for male figures or male members of a species. Neuter nouns refer to entities with no gender, whereas common gender refers to individuals of a species that do not specifically identify the gender. Heterosexual hegemony hides the usage of common and neuter genders in the river of Lethe and propagates the use of masculine and feminine genders to keep the queer people voiceless.

It explores the dominance of masculine and feminine genders in third-person personal

pronouns. Pronouns refer to individuals in a linguistic sense by taking the place of proper nouns like names. A pronoun denotes a person's gender. According to the convention, *he* is used to referring to males, while *she* is used to referring to females. There is no gender-neutral third-

person singular personal pronoun in the English language. However, *they* have recently acquired a lot of popularity. The issue with using *they* as a third-person singular personal pronoun is inconsistent with the grammatical rules; is or are, was or were, has or have.

Table 1: Third-Person Personal Pronouns

Third –Person Personal Pronouns					
Number	Subjective	Objective	Possessive Adjective	Possessive	Reflexive
Singular	He	Him	His	His	Himself
	She	Her	Her	Hers	Herself
	It	It	Its	Its	Itself
Plural	They	Them	Their	Theirs	Themselves

Table 1 depicts the lack of terms to refer to genderless queer people. It vividly shows the lack of terms to refer to the queer individual in third-person personal pronouns and portrays the conflict in using *they* as third-person personal pronouns to refer to a queer individual as it creates chaos in the usage of grammar related to singular and plural pronouns.

It suggests a few pronouns in third-person personal pronouns that can be used for all, irrespective of the gender they belong to. However, as *he* in the third-person personal pronoun refers to things related to male sex or gender and *she* refers to things related to female sex and gender, *He* and *She* cannot be used to

refer to things that refer to queer people in third-person personal pronoun who do not align with male gender or female gender. Nicholas speaks of those who advocate for gender-neutral pronouns as follows;

We organize our encounters with others around two binary genders. Yet if our binary system of gender is inadequate, so is our language... There are those who advocate gender-neutral language or pronouns to designate gender other than female or male, such as the pronoun 'they' used in the singular. Others prefer new pronouns like *hir* and *ze*. Although it's sure to throw copyeditors for a temporary loop, using this kind of language might help the gender spectrum emerge more clearly. (10)

Table 2: Probable Gender-Neutral Personal Pronouns

Probable Gender -Neutral Personal Pronouns				
Subjective	Objective	Possessive Adjective	Possessive	Reflexive
Ze	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself
Ze	Zir	Zir	Zirs	Zirself
Xe	Xem	Xir	Xirs	Xirself

Table 2 portrays the pronouns that can be used as gender-neutral personal pronouns. For example, *Ze/Xe* can be used as gender-neutral personal pronouns instead of *he* and *she*. The chart given above is the description of the use of gender-neutral pronouns in the third person.

5. Analysis and Interpretation

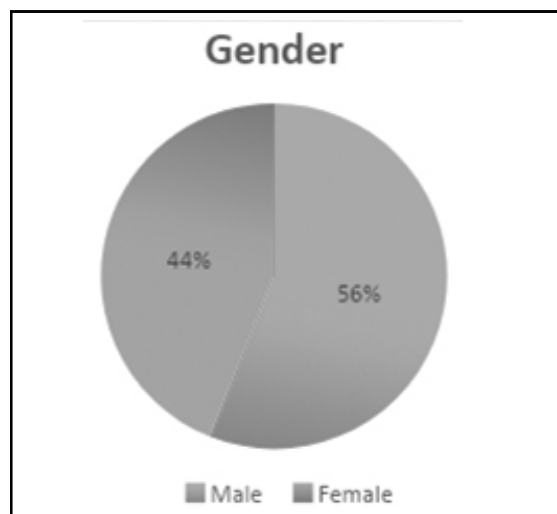
By surveying fifty students at an autonomous college in Tamil Nadu, the researcher illustrates how ignorant students are about genders other than the masculine and feminine. After collecting data through surveys, the student's replies were analyzed. Their interpretations were then used to understand better queer persons' challenges in the language and socio-cultural spheres.

Demographic Details of the Students

Table 3: Gender-Wise Classification of the Students

Sl. No	Gender	Frequency	Percentage
1	Male	28	56%
2	Female	22	44%
	Total	50	100

Figure 1: Gender-Wise Classification of the Respondents

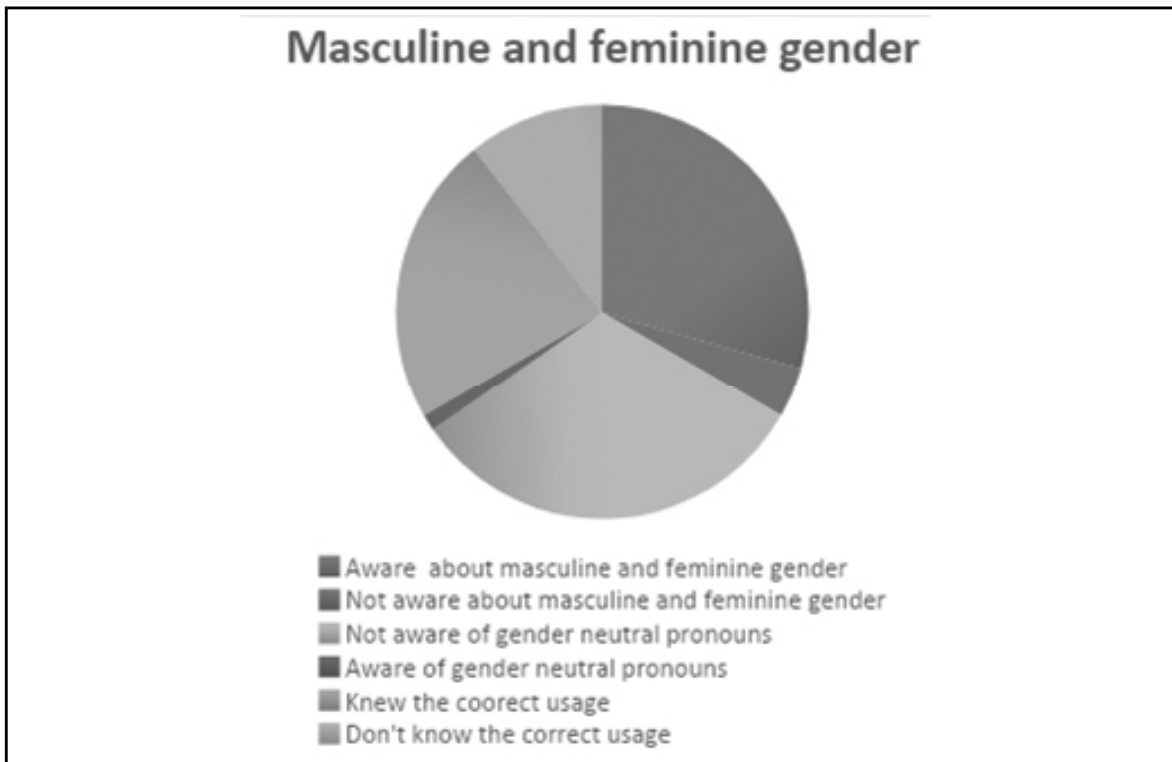


The respondents consist of 28 males and 22 females. Among the respondents, 56% were males, and 44% were females.

Table 4: Masculine, Feminine, and Gender-Neutral Pronouns

Sl.No:	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Aware of masculine and feminine gender	44	88%
2	Not aware of masculine and feminine genders	6	12%
	Total	50	100
3	Not aware of gender-neutral pronouns	48	96%
4	Aware of gender-neutral pronouns	2	4 %
	Total	50	100
5	Knew the correct usage of masculine and feminine gender	34	68 %
6	Didn't know about the correct usage of masculine and feminine gender	16	32 %
	Total	50	100

Figure 2: Masculine, Feminine, and Gender-Neutral Pronouns



No student knew how to refer to a queer person using third-person personal pronouns. Forty-four out of the fifty students were familiar with pronouns about the masculine and feminine genders but unfamiliar with pronouns referring to gender neutrality. Most students struggled to correctly identify common, neutral, and gender-neutral personal pronouns while speaking in the third person. Two students were aware of third-person gender-neutral pronouns, although not in depth. Students appropriately utilised the masculine and feminine genders in about 68 percent of cases. The gender-neutral personal pronoun used in the third person was the one that was used the least. The students, who could identify third-person gender-neutral personal pronouns, came from urban areas and had easy access to the internet when they were young. Students' lack of knowledge regarding queer

persons and gender-neutral personal pronouns can be attributed to a lack of introduction to queer people in sex education and restricted access to and usage of the internet and social media in rural regions.

It culls out examples from the novels of Sarah Schulman to exhibit the inadequacy of linguistics in providing terms related to queer people or who are neither masculine nor feminine. Society does not have linguistics that is apt and adequate to utilise when dealing with queer people. Michaela Koch labels queer linguistics "as the socio-linguistic study of language use without discourse to identity categories" (15). Some gender-queer persons prefer the gender-neutral pronouns *ze*, *sie*, and *hir*, or the singular pronoun *them*, while others prefer the traditional binary pronouns *he* or *she*. However, others who identify as gender-

queer choose to use only their name and refrain from using any pronouns. Straight individuals sometimes struggle to grasp the specific terminology used by the queer community.

An instance could be from Schulman's *People In Trouble* "Get together was her euphemism for making love" (19). In her work, *Rat Bohemia* also, there is an allusion to queer language. "We do exist. We can mourn. We do have a language" (160). Queer was once used as a derogatory epithet to refer to homosexuality. However, as time moved on its wheels, the term queer lost "some of its negative meaning potentials and came to be used as a positive umbrella term for all non-heterosexual identities" (Motschenbacher and Stegu 520). Motschenbacher and Stegu underline that "language is involved in the construction of sexual practices in the wider sense, ranging from courtship behaviour and flirting, love letters and dating advertisements, to the verbalization of sexual activities in erotic text" (526).

Finally, it indicated the need to have linguistics that is not exclusive but inclusive. When one employs inclusive language, prejudices, slang, and idioms that stigmatize certain racial, gender, socio-economic, and ability-based groups of people are avoided. Inclusive linguistics helps one connect with a broader range of readers as speaking and writing in an inclusive style makes everyone understand and comfortable. Those who think about gender and people who do not identify with gender applaud the usage of inclusive language.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The research findings can be summed up in one sentence: the undergraduate students confront problems in identifying and using third-person gender-neutral personal pronouns, and Sarah Schulman advocates the usage of third-person gender neuter pronouns. The knowledge about

queer people and the usage of third-person gender neuter personal pronouns in communication is a need of the time as more and more people are 'coming out' of the closet and declaring themselves as queer people. This study recommends that the sex education in the schools has to be SOGEISC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression, and Identity and Sex Characteristics) which would help the students to know about genders other than males and females and equip the students to use third-person gender-neutral personal pronouns in linguistics and communication vigilantly. The proper use of gender neuter personal pronouns signals an educated community and inclusivity of the person who speaks. A lesson on diverse genders and the pronouns that can be used to refer to these genders can be included in the syllabus of the graduation curriculum. The libraries of colleges should contain not only the literary works that perpetuate the masculine and feminine genders by heterosexual authors but also the literature of queer writers like Sarah Schulman and other queer writers and activists. Access to the internet is to be made available to the students as social media plays a vital role in spreading awareness about queer individuals and queer terms. Teachers can act as torchbearers who can dispel the darkness of linguistics of exclusivity where the individual is accepted and respected based on the gender they belong to and who can spread light that would brighten the world with linguistics of inclusivity where every human being's dignity is accepted and respected as human beings irrespective of the genders that they belong to.

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