ZUBAIR, Shirin & CAMPAGNI , Elisabetta & LATIF-KHAN , Hamna

Sexism and its (Dis)Content: Contestations and Re-appropriation of Language and Semiotics by Women and Transgender persons in Pakistan

Sociolinguists argue that within a speech community, different social and cultural groups, as well as different age groups and genders, have different explanatory theories about different things. Such theories are rooted in the practices of the sociocultural group to which the speaker belongs and in the practices of socio-culturally defined groups of people. Gee (1999) refers to them as cultural models. Cultural models may also be signalled by proverbs and metaphors (Zubair, 2007). One's identity or self-image is created through the use of language. One learns one's role in life, including one's place in the power structure, from the way one talks and is talked to. Verbal behaviour also reflects the role of women in the power structure. Hussain (1994) observes: "Language, which is both the tool and the site of this power struggle, becomes the means through which meaning is made and ideological hegemony established." Within any language, words are connected to a storyline or have a complete or partial description to it which is considered as a cultural model. Such words have various meanings or possible connotations based on peculiar social or traditional setting and social groups. These cultural models posit how men and women are talked about, constructed in social languages and positioned by the dominant discourses (Gee, 1999; Zubair, 2007). We also draw on the framework of linguistic landscape by Leeman and Modan (2009) who proposed a contextulaized historical approach that emphasizes the importance of considering how the signs came to be and what they mean in a given context. This approach is used as a method to explore how language use in the public space represents ethnic groups, reflects conflicts and ambivalences, expresses statehood and projects ideologies and socio-cultural identities.

In the light of the theoretical frameworks outlined above, this paper attempts to capture the conflicts and ambivalences surrounding the use of sexist language and discourses in contemporary Pakistan by focusing firstly on the political rhetoric of Pakistani politicians through citing instances of sexist language and discourses used, promoted and reinforced through public platforms including social media networks such as twitter, public speeches , press conferences and talk shows on the media channels. We use qualitative research methods including discursive interviews with photo elicitation, analysis of discourse and visuals. We then cite from the interviews of transgender persons to highlight their take on how they experience and negotiate sexism as the words used to label them in Pakistani languages (*heejra, khusra*) are pejorative. The research aims to capture the conflicting attitudes of these groups towards the crucial issue of rampant sexism in society and thus hopes to fill the research gap in the area of Pakistani languages and how they are used to reinforce and/or renegotiate/reclaim the public discourses by women activists and transgender persons. Lastly, the data from women's marches (popularly known as *Aurat* march in Pakistan) posters and slogans (e.g. *main awara, main bad-chalan* (Yes , I am a lose woman, I am a slut!) suggests not only a reclaiming of such epithets, it also legitimizes and paves the need for a language reform movement in Pakistan. The re-appropriation and reclamation of popular cultural discourse both textual and visual has been on the *Aurat March's* agenda as a subversive tool since its onset. For example, art visuals and the digital art accompanying the Aurat March, both employ semiotic-disruption as a tool to reclaim popular cultural signs of the sub-continent and attempt to re-appropriate them as images working for women and by women rather than signifiers working against their discourse of dissent.

A practical attempt was witnessed during the Aurat marches of 2018-22, when some gender equity activists and younger generation representatives, similar to the Western feminists' language reform movement in the 1980s for symmetrical representation -- tried to rewrite such cultural

norms and old proverbs with new twists, changing such proverbs to fit new realities e.g. *mera jism meri marzi* (my body my choice); *tu kare to stud main karun to slut* (if you do it you're a stud, but if I do it I am a slut); *lo theek se baith gayee* (see I am sitting properly); h*um gunehgar aurtain* (we sinful women). In a similar vein, common cultural signifiers of a typical sub-continental marriage: flower jewellery (*gajjray*), bangles (*chooriyan*), *khussay*, *chunri* and *dholak* were re-imagined by the *Aurat* March 2022 and incorporated in its thematic-design scheme (digital and otherwise), converting an event of female resistance into a celebration, similar in visuals to a traditional Pakistani wedding but very dissenting in purpose. T*he Aurat* March Lahore's '*Feminist dholki*' (drumming) themed fundraisers rewrote several popular *tappay* (traditional Punjabi wedding songs) to openly voice their discontent with the indigenous patriarchal norms, carrying out a linguistic subversion at the very core of the Punjabi speech conventions.

We argue that a language reform movement is in the making in contemporary Pakistani society through re-appropriation of linguistic signs and cultural signifiers. Finally, our analysis also draws on interviews with some activist trans and khwaja sara (trans gender) people to explore how the pursuit of a gender-inclusive language must counter multiple ambivalent narratives and derogatory vocabularies used by several actors in Pakistani society. While challenging these, we argue that the transgendered people are reclaiming their space for an expression of non-binary existence through the re-appropriation of an indigenous vocabulary which celebrates the community. The growing activism of khwaja sara people has acquired a new dimension since the passing of Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act in 2018, leading to a new political recognition for the community. The attempt to linguistically re-define transgendered people within the constitution (written in English) has been significant as it shifted to an institutionalized level the translation process between English and indigenous inclusive vocabularies, negotiating between their correspondences and differences.

References

Gee, James Paul (1999*). An Introduction to Discourse Analysis: Theory and Method*. New York London: Routledge.

Hussain, N. (1994). "Women as objects and women as subjects within fundamentalist discourse". In: Khan, Nighat Said & Saigol, Rubina & Zia, Afiya (eds.):. Locating the Self: perspectives on women and multiple identities. Lahore: Asr Publications, pp 34-55.

Leeman, Jennifer & Modan, Gabriela (2009). "Commodified language in Chinatown: A contextualized approach to linguistic landscape". *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 13(3), pp. 332–362.

Zubair, S. (2007) "Silent birds: Metaphorical constructions of literacy and gender identity in women's talk". *Discourse Studies* (9: 6), pp. 766-783.

Contact

Professor Shirin Zubair (Independent scholar)
Currently Senior Research Fellow
Polish Institute of Advanced Studies
Warsaw , Poland
Shirin_zubair@hotmail.com

Elisabetta Campagni
PhD Candidate in Asian and African Studies
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

International PhD Program in partnership with Heidelberg University
elisabetta.campagni@unive.it

Hamna Latif-Khan
MPhil Scholar in English
Kinnaird College for Women
Lahore, Pakistan
whoopingpanda@gmail.com