

## Theorizing Gender in Language and Gender Studies: A Reflection on Some Conceptualizations of Gender

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**Abstract:** Gender was introduced as an object of study mainly by feminist researchers in the and 60s and 70s and since then, several works have offered, in varying degrees, insight into the concept of gender and the complex relationship it is assumed to have with language. In this paper, we examine some conceptualizations of gender, highlighting their major postulations, criticisms against them and their major contributions to research on language and gender. After reviewing the different theoretical perspectives on gender, we align with the social constructionist viewpoint because it offers a more productive way of viewing of, and analyzing gender than other approaches.

**Keywords:** Gender, gender theory, essentialism, social constructionist.

### INTRODUCTION

The term “gender” has become ubiquitous within linguistics and other areas of social sciences and it has been understood in different ways in the past few decades. In this study, we present an overview and a critique of at least four major ways in which the concept has been theorized by researchers working within different research traditions and fields. These are: (1) gender is biological; (2) gender is socially learned; (3) gender is a social structure and; (4) gender is an activity. In what follows, we discuss each of these assumptions in some detail. Note that there may be other theoretical assumptions about gender but, we limit my discussion to these particular ones, which seem to represent the major ways in which gender has been theorized in language and gender research in the past four decades.

### Theoretical Assumptions about Gender

#### Gender is Biological

From an essentialist point of view, gender is innate, static and binary. Gender is assumed to be innate because biological endowments are seen as innate in an individual. It is static because it is seen as a “fixed trait, an „essence“ that resides in male and female selves” [1], which cannot be removed or changed (except through medical technological procedure). And, it is binary because human beings are often born with particular sex organs and hormones that identify them as either male or female. It is thus assumed that a person’s gender follows directly from their biological sex. So, an individual born with vagina is categorized as female, and is expected to grow up to be a woman, who should behave in particular ways considered appropriate for persons with same biological sex. And, a person born with penis is considered male, and is expected to grow up to be a man who should behave in a particular manner considered appropriate for persons with same biological sex. In this binary way of theorizing gender,

one’s genitals are considered as the determinants of his or her gender. Thus, gender becomes a polite term for “biological sex.”

The categories male and female are understood as homogenous, universal and in strict complementary distribution. The gender of an individual is, therefore, assumed to either be male or female, and persons with mixed sex manifestations are seen as abnormal human beings [2]. This rigid categorization of gender is tacitly assumed to follow certain assumed natural order of things, which often resulted in branding one sex category as marked and the other as unmarked. Thus, everything about gender within this view collapsed into sex. It is claimed that an individual’s sex naturally dictates his or her gendered behaviour and role in society. And, based on this assumption, sex difference theorists [3-5] claim that men and women use language in different ways because of their perceived biological differences.

However, this understanding of gender as an attribute of a person, which is used to characterize him or her as essentially “a pregendered substance or “core” called the person, denoting a universal capacity” [6] appears to be problematic in many ways. First, it limits our understanding of gender to the physical constructs that are imposed upon these perceived biological differences between men and women. In the last two decades, research in the field of language and gender has revealed that gender is a social and cultural construct rather than a fixed trait. Thus it is suggested that, a good theorization of gender should transcend physical identification of people’s biology or sex. Second, this (essentialist) understanding of gender cannot account for the gender of transgender individuals because of its strict categorization of gender into two categories. Third, a focus on sex differences seems to legitimize a dualistic view of gender, which

may limit our understanding of the concept. Finally, gender is certainly not universal and static. It varies from culture to culture. In other words, people have different gender roles in different societies. For example, the cultural roles being played by women in Nigeria may be different from the ones women play in Europe or United States for instance. This leads us to the second theoretical assumption, which claims that gender is socially learned.

### **Gender is socially learned**

This view shifts the focus from the assumption that gender is biological to conceptualizing it as product of the environment, something individuals learn from the society. This approach focuses on how sex-role socialization creates gendered selves, which as Risman [9] observes, “provide the motivations for individuals to fill their socially appropriate roles” in society. This view is said to have its root in the work of Simone de Beauvoir, who in her classic book: “The second sex” claims that “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman” [7], which implies that gender is socially learned rather than, a biological attribute.

Researchers [5, 8] who shared this view believe that men and women assume unitary gender roles and identities because of the differential socialization patterns, to which they are exposed and subjected to from childhood. According to Risman [9], “men and women act differently because girls and boys are raised to be different kinds of creatures”. For example, in traditional Nigerian society, girls tended to stay with the mother at home and boys follow their father to the farm or work place which is usually outside the home environment. This pattern of socialization, as feminist psychoanalysts [10] would argue, is capable of developing nurturant personality in girls because being the same sex as the mother, who in many cultures, is the primary care-taker of children, can create an ability to nurture in girls that is unlikely to develop in boys because their same-sex parent is less involved in their care.

In a study of heterosexual family, Chodorow [10] notices that many mothers relate to their boy and girl infants differently, fusing identities with their daughters while relating to their sons as separate [9]. Similarly, feminist psychoanalysis studies have shown also that parents use more diminutives [11] and inner state words [12] when speaking to girls than boys. Thus, with this kind of differential treatment, these researchers conclude that there is high tendency for boys and girls to eventually learn to play different gender roles in society, which as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet [13] point out, can result in people acquiring characteristics that are perceived as masculine and feminine in particular cultures.

Although these studies offer significant insight into the theorization of gender as a learned behaviour,

one problem with this view is that it assumed a continuity of behavioural style and/or gendered self throughout life, an assumption challenged by researchers such as Risman [14, 9, 15, 16] and Gerson [17], for it does not take into consideration that “individuals not only change over their lifetimes, they also change from moment to moment” [9]. Thus the claim that if a person is socialized to be a boy, he will grow up to display masculinity trait is untenable because, often boys grow up to become unmasculine men. For example, in northern Nigeria a group of men called *`yan daudu* tend to behave like women, even though they might have been taught to behave like men at childhood. The view also fails to recognize that being a man or a woman, as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet argue, “is not a stable state but an ongoing accomplishment, something that is actively done both by the individual so categorized and by those who interact with it in the various communities to which it belong” in real-life situations [13].

Another problem with this theory of gender is that it assumes that socialization is the same for all boys and girls in all cultures. Thus, it cannot account for variation in the way individuals of same biological sex category are exposed to different patterns of socialization in different families, communities and cultures.

### **Gender is a social structure**

Closely tied to the view that gender is socially learned is the assumption that gender is a creation of society and culture. However, while the understanding of gender as socially learned focused on the process of learning how to behave in a gendered way in society. The theorization of gender as a social structure and construct is informed by the way the social structure in society is seen as capable of influencing or limiting our perception of our gendered selves. Proponents of this view [9, 15, 16, 18] claim that gender is rooted in and expressed through institutions such as religion, media and other social systems in society, through the different values, roles and expectations they give individuals based on their sex category. This, they further argue, creates gender differences that manifest in for instance, the way workplaces are sometimes gendered, with certain units or departments dominated by workers, who belong to particular sex category. The fact that in many cultures men and women still fill different positions even in formal organizations points to the deep entrenchment of gender as a social construct, a social structure in society.

The gender structure in society seems to exist as a social force, which operates independently of an individual’s volition. In a study of heterosexual family in the United States, Risman [9] observes that “even when men and women do not desire to live gendered lives or to support male dominance, they often find themselves compelled to do so by the logic of gendered

choices". This is believed to be dictated by the societal gender structure, which as Johnson, Greaves, & Repta [19] note, tends to privilege men more than women. We build on this notion of gender as social structure to argue that the dominant gender ideology in society can influence and constrain how individuals may construct their gender identity. We observe that sometimes a speaker/writer was trying to negate, criticize or even deny particular gender constructions but in the process ended up evoking certain gender stereotypes, perhaps unintentionally.

Thus, this understanding of gender emphasizes that while a person's gendered behaviour or action can be seen as a function of their own volition, the ability to choose or perform a particular gendered act is often constrained by the gender structure or the dominant gender ideology in society. This restriction or influence, according to Risman [16], has consequences for analysis of gender at three levels, namely: (i) how individuals come to construct or project gendered selves; (ii) the cultural expectations they face; and (iii) the institutional constraints or regulations that influence one's gendered behaviour or action .

A key assumption of this view of gender is that every culture has a gender structure which may be embedded in traditional or modern gender ideologies and practices, or a combination of both. One major advantage of this conceptualization is that it places gender in the same "analytical plane" as other concepts such as economics and politics, where the focus has often been on how their structure affects both the individual and the society in which he or she lives.

However, the problem we have with this theorization of gender is that it seems to downplay the role of human agency in creating, sustaining and modifying the social structure. It places too much emphasis on the way the gender structure in society creates and shapes an individual's gendered behaviour and actions. Much as we agree that gender social structure in society can act on individuals; individuals can also act on it. This recursiveness does not seem to be given the attention it deserves in this theorization of gender. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet [20] observe: "While social structure [...] provide[s] constraints, it is people who decide just how constrained they will allow themselves to be".

### **Gender is an activity**

The idea that gender is activity dominates many recent linguistic research into the language and gender field. According to this view, gender is an activity an individual continually "does" through discourse and other social practices. Judith Butler, a key proponent of this view, postulates that gender is the "repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a

natural sort of being" [6]. This view can be seen as embodying a poststructuralist perspective. Research within this (poststructuralist) tradition leads to a radical shift in thinking about the ontological status of gender, to seeing it as something that can be enacted or performed rather than, a possession or set of behaviours imposed upon individuals by the society. Much of the research within this paradigm has its roots in the works of West and Zimmerman [21] and Butler [6, 22]. It also seems to draw on Garfinkel's [23] work on the social production of gender. His research shows "how membership in a sex category is sustained across a variety of practical circumstances and contingencies, at the same time preserving the sense that such membership is natural, normal fact of life" [24]. Influenced by Garfinkel's work, West and Zimmermann in 1987 coined the term "doing gender" to refer to the idea that gender is something individuals do, not something they are. They argue that gender is an activity one continually "does".

Furthermore, West and Zimmerman [21] conceptualize the terms "sex", "sex category" and "gender" in a way that emphasizes the importance of the performative link between gender and human body. They observe that a person's sex is mainly determined through their biological endowments usually at birth. On the other hand, they view sex category as a proxy for sex but one that depends upon performing gender appropriately for it to be accepted as such. According to these gender theorists, sex category does not always match with an individual's biological sex, as it is often established through "required identificatory displays" [21]. These displays, West and Zimmerman (ibid) further observe, involves doing gender through using sex-specific clothing, dressing and hairstyles, and mannerisms. The point here is that to claim a sex category one has to do gender.

West and Zimmerman's [21] doing gender viewpoint seems similar at least in its deconstructionist tendency to Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990, 1999). They both appear to share a focus on the creation of gender by the activity of an individual. However, they seem to differ on the ontology of the possibility of gendered self, outside the domain of the discursive. While West and Zimmermann [21] presume that some version of gendered self comes to temporarily exist, Butler [6, 22] deconstructs the possibility of temporary self, outside of discourse realm. From Butler's perspective, as Risman [16] observes, "the self is more imaginary figment than constructed, even temporary, self-identity". Butler's work, as we will show in part 3, has expanded the discussion of "doing gender" in a more critical way, becoming an influential perspective in theorizing gender in recent years.

In the field of language and gender, this understanding of gender as performance, Holmes [25] notes, has shifted the focus of inquiry from "women

talk like this” and “men talk like this”, towards a “focus on the process of gendering, the on-going accomplishment of gender, as well as the dynamism and fluidity of the process”. However, despite the significant insight that this theorization of gender has offered and the huge influence it has had on current scholarship into the field of language and gender, we pick a number of loopholes with its theoretical perspective. The first problem we see is that a focus on gender as an activity seems to accord individuals lots of agency in their construction and/or enactment of gender in discourse and downplays the role of gender social structure, dominant gender ideologies and practices in society. Yet, as we observe, certain social forces in society tend to influence and constrain how individuals may construct or enact their gender. Moreover, the notion of gender as an activity seems to suggest that analysts should focus on situations where gender is malleable, and this as Mcelhinny [26] observes, is capable of diverting “focus from continuing patterns of exclusion, subordination, normalization, and discrimination” usually embedded in discourses on gender. In yet another critic of this theorization of gender, Edwards [27] argues that the idea of “construction” embedded in the view means that gender identities are “only” constructions rather than real and this, she argues, is in itself a reiteration of essentialism, which the view intends to replace.

### **Constructionist approach to analyzing gender**

In the field of language and gender, most contemporary researchers adopt constructionist framework for viewing of, and analyzing gender. In this (constructionist) approach, gender is treated as a fluid accomplishment. Social constructionists see gender as a social construct, something that can be constituted in discourse. As Speer and Stokoe [28] argue, gender is “a socially constructed belief systems”, and which language serves as the place where such systems are created, sustained and sometimes challenged. Thus, from a constructionist point of view, gender is conceptualized as something that can be seen as “an effect of language use, rather than a determinant of different uses of language” [29]. In this sense, a person’s sense of self is seen as something that is socially constructed rather than a pre-given attribute, which implies that one’s gender identity is not a fixed trait or something that resides permanently in them but, a continuous process of presentation and representation of the self mainly through discursive practices. From this viewpoint, men and women are taken as being constituted as masculine and feminine subjects in their production and reproduction of selves and other people in discourse.

Much of constructionist-informed work on the subject of language and gender regards language as a “site” for the cultural production and reproduction of social identities. In this regard, poststructuralist thinkers [30] have been deeply influential for gender and

language researchers working within this (constructionist) framework. Foucault [30] presents “language as a „site” for the construction and contestation of social meanings” [31], making it the place where people’s sense of selves (or, in this context gender identities are constructed). Researchers in the field of language and gender working within poststructuralist tradition avoid bipolar categorization of gender, along with its essentialist framework of analysis. Thus in this view, gender is theorized as a fluid social construct that can be enacted or performed through language and other social practices. Central to constructionist approach is the assumption that gender can “best be analysed at the level of discourse” [32]. Gender is thus theorized as something that can be discursively constituted.

In social constructionist paradigm, the focus of analysis (of gender) shifts away from relating linguistic variables with demographic ones, and away from essentialist claims that men and women talk differently to-wards, as Holmes [25] observes, a “focus on the process of gendering, the on-going accomplishment of gender, as the dynamism and fluidity of the process”. Thus, analyses progress by treating gender as a performance, or as Bucholtz [33] puts it, an accomplishment which is “shaped moment by moment through the details of discourse”.

There are now numerous studies on the subject of “gender and language” conducted within social constructionist paradigm. Notable among these works include Butler [6, 34, 35, 22, 36], West & Zimmerman [21], Bergvall [37], Charteris-Black and Seale [38], and Eckert & McConnell-Ginet [39, 13, 20]. However, due to space limitation and the need to give reasonable treatment to the subject, we cannot discuss all the studies, here. We therefore restrict my review to Judith Butler’s [6, 22] work. This is because, most recent research on gender and language has drawn upon the work of Butler, particularly her theory of performativity of gender to examine the ways through which gender can be constructed through discursive practices. Thus, her work has been deeply influential for the present study. Note that in the course of discussing Butler’s [6, 22] landmark work, references would be made to some of her later works, which have built on her notion of gender performativity.

### **Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble [6]**

Celebrated for her revolutionary ideas, Judith Butler’s seminal work *Gender Trouble* [6, 22] has helped to challenge and reshape our ideas about gender identity. In this highly influential research, Butler promulgates the theory of gender performativity, which claims that gender is a “performance” (we shall return to this concept later). Drawing largely on the work of Foucault [30] and other poststructuralist thinkers, she challenges the predominant argument that sex and gender are two distinct categories, belonging to

different “realms” (with sex linked to biology and gender related to culture). That (essentialist) approach, she argues, treats masculine and feminine gender as natural manifestations of male and female sex, reinforcing a binary view of gender. In essentialist framework, people are rigidly grouped into two distinct categories: male and female, leaving no room for one to choose, challenge or resist particular gender identities. Butler [6] argues that the fact that one can say that I feel more or less like particular (gendered) person shows that one can form and choose their own individual gender identity that suits them at particular contexts and times.

For Butler [22], a distinction between “sex” and “gender” is not relevant as both categories are not natural but socially constituted elements. As she says, “this construct called „sex“ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” [22]. From this view, she smashes the ontological status of “sex” and “gender”, arguing that the categories “male/female” and “man/woman” are political categories rather than, natural ones. She thus prefers poststructuralist approaches that “understand gender as a relation among socially constituted subjects in specifiable contexts” [22] and hence, she rejects the system of categorization of people from a biological or cultural point of view. This, as we stated earlier, leads Butler to come up with the theory of gender performativity, which sells the idea that gender is a “doing, an incessant activity performed” (Butler, 2004: 1). According to Butler, gender is something that can be constructed through repetition of gendered acts and may vary according context. In other words, gender is something one “does” to present and represent self at particular contexts and times rather than, a fixed attribute or something that resides permanently in male and female human beings. She points out that: “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; [...] identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” [22], implying that an individual’s gender is what one “does” with their body rather than, what the society assumes about one’s body. Thus, for Butler, a person’s gender identity should not be taken as a signification or an expression of their “inner” self, rather it should be understood as a dramatic effect, rather than the cause of their gendered performance in particular contexts. As she maintains, “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be.” In this sense, she adds, “gender is always a doing, though not a doing by subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (Butler, *ibid*). Individual persons are therefore, in Butler’s view, what they do rather than who they are assumed to be.

However, we find it difficult to believe Butler that “sex” and “gender” are not distinct categories. If both sex and gender are social construct, as she claims,

does this mean that our bodies do not matter anymore? Where do we then place our different biological (genital) differences? It thus seems that here Butler misses out the basis of nature, which includes: physicalness (of human body), feelings, sensuousness, sex drive or urge and other physical experiences informed by our different biological make-up. On the other hand, our sex can be seen as social construct if we take into account that we use language to communicate our understanding or perception of anatomic view of the human body. In that, biological discourses on human body can be seen as the constructs.

Furthermore, Butler argues that one’s gender identity is not something that can be created in isolation by them as an individual. As she says: “one does not “do” one’s gender alone. One is always doing with or for another” [36]. Drawing on Althusser’s [40] notion of interpellation, Butler describes the process whereby individuals come to be made to recognize themselves as particular types of persons with particular values, outlooks and desires.

Although the notion of performativity is what seems to resonate with many researchers (in the field of gender and language), this concept appears to just be a heuristic Butler introduces in order to achieve her underlying goal, which is to advance the concept of feminism in a broad sense. This explains why she questions whether the intent of having a feminist politics based on assumed common shared characteristics and interests for all women is practical and useful, given that treating women as sharing a common identity may take feminists back to the essentialist view of gender. An approach that involves, Butler [22] maintains, “an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations”, may not only be unproductive but also, appears to be a contradiction of feminists’ core goals. She thus points out that such an approach even if it was conceived with emancipatory goals in mind, can have negative effects because, it cannot fit everyone and may thus end up excluding persons, who do not fit within its framework. As she suggests:

*Without the compulsory expectation that feminist actions must be instituted from some stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity, those actions might well get a quicker start and seem more congenial to a number of “women” for whom the meaning of the category is permanently moot [22].*

The point Butler is making here is that any attempt at labelling an entire group or even a whole community of people based on an unstable, “fluid” trait will include and exclude others, as it may not recognize and respect individual (idiosyncratic) differences. Consequently, she problematizes the concept of women in relation to heteronormativity by asking the following pertaining questions: “Is the construction of the

category of women as a coherent and stable subject an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations? [. . .] To what extent does the category of women achieve stability and coherence only in the context of the heterosexual matrix?" [6]. She thus suggests that what the understanding of the category "woman" can achieve within heteronormative framework may politically be unproductive, as it has the tendency of recycling male–female dualism, which may in turn reinforce female subordination in society. She thus asks feminist researchers to "open up" to conceptions of the term "woman" beyond those with "heteronormative" inclinations.

Finally, Butler's theoretical perspective is widely celebrated for challenging the essentialist notion of gender and its introduction of a more productive way of understanding gender identity, which has had (still continues to have) significant impact on much contemporary work within the gender and language field. We must thank her for introducing a poststructuralist approach to language and gender studies. Poststructuralist approach has liberated gender from any stable notion of "inner" sexed identity, from any fixed attributions of identity, except if they are formed and created in discourse. Moreover, the fact that coverage of contemporary theories on gender can be considered inadequate or even incomplete without referencing Butler's landmark work, *Gender Trouble* [6, 22] speaks to its initial and ongoing significance.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have examined some important theoretical assumptions about gender. While none of the views reviewed has remained uncontested, the social constructionist perspective appears to offer a more productive way of viewing of, and analyzing gender than other theoretical approaches. The present study aligns itself with this (constructionist) approach to theorizing gender. This is because it remains singularly suitable for the linguistic analysis of gender, as it sees language as a site for the construction and contestation of social reality (or, gender in this context).

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