

# Gender Patterns on Facebook: A Sociolinguistic Perspective

Barirah Nazir

Department of English, University of Sargodha

Sargodha, Punjab, Pakistan

Tel: 92-331-702-6808    E-mail: barirahn@yahoo.com

Received: June 4, 2012    Accepted: June 16, 2012    Published: September 1, 2012

doi:10.5296/ijl.v4i3.1899    URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/ijl.v4i3.1899>

## **Abstract**

The research aims at tracing differences and similarities among the way sexes use internet particularly social networking site, Facebook. The differences exist on multiple levels and research shows that even on internet one is not a human being rather a ‘man’ or a ‘woman’. All these have been exhibited through language and the choices they make. The findings show that women are into facebook for maintaining existing relationships by being polite while men are more likely to go for new relations and all.

**Keywords:** Gender, Sociolinguistics, Facebook, Culture, Identity

## 1. Introduction

The fact that surveys have found differences between men and women in Internet use is not in itself surprising. Media exhibit patterns of use that differ between men and women. The general theory that the Internet is somehow "gendered" encompasses many possibilities. Some theorists argue that male values have been institutionalized in the technology through its creators, embedding a cultural association with masculine identity in the technology itself (Wajcman, 1991; Gill and Grint, 1995; Kramarae, 1988; Cockburn, 1985). The present study aims to figure out gender patterns on social networking site Facebook taking Pakistani society as norm. The study is a mixture of sociolinguistic and anthropological research as both language and culture are studied.

With the advent of technology, people have started using internet. This use is not only for business & recreation but also for entertainment. Facebook (see Fig 1) is one such site where in this fast paced world, one can keep in touch with his friends and it is growing like wind. There are more than 400 million active users and people spend over 500 billion minutes per month on Facebook (Facebook: 2009). In recent times, language use is addressed by discourses as diverse as sociology, medicine, culture studies, anthropology, politics, law and science.

The research will look upon the fact that how language is functioning in the social networking site and how linguistic behavior of men is different from women under the premise that men and women have different speech styles (Holmes 1995 & Troennel-Ploetz 1994). It also focuses on investigating the extent to which our social, cultural and linguistic behaviours are being changed due to use of Facebook as it has drastically infiltrated our society and language.



Figure 1. Facebook Logo

## 2. Literature Review

Coley (2006) differentiates between three types of cyber communities. First, there are social networks such as Facebook and MySpace where young people make their profiles with private information, revealing it to their "cyber friends." The main purpose of social networks

is making new friendships or to maintain those that already existed. The second type of cyber community is a chat system, that includes instant messaging (IM). The third type is blogs, personal websites with frequently-updated observations, news, commentaries, and recommended links (Coley, 2006).

Much of the existing academic research on Facebook has focused on identity presentation and privacy concerns (e.g., Gross & Acquisti, 2005; Stutzman, 2006) or on language change. Gender issue is taken up only by very few. Since Mid-1990's there has been growing interest on male linguistic behavior alongside women's because it is believed that focusing exclusively on women is not sufficient. According to Crawford (1995:61), studies ranging from the late 1960 have shown that women are stereotypically easily influenced, submissive, sneaky, tactful, very aware of others feelings, passive, lacking in self-confidence, dependent, unlikely to act as leader and uncomfortable about the process of behaving aggressively. Eckert & McConnell-Ginnet (1994:448) believe that women's language is more standard as compared to men's. To Fishman (1983) women tend to ask more questions. For Lakoff (1975), women's language is rife with such devices as mitigations (sort of, I think) and inessential qualifiers (really happy, so beautiful). She believes that it is part of their learning, imposed by societal norms and in turn it keeps women in their place.

While Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) did not find gender differences in the most popular uses and gratifications for social networking sites (i.e. keeping in touch with friends), they do note several differences in the way men and women use online social networking sites. One finding that is applicable to this study is that women were found to change the appearance of their website more often than men. Although this finding applied to the website as a whole, and not the profile image specifically, it does prompt us to question whether women might create more dynamic identities through their profile images than men.

Perhaps more directly applicable to this study, Siibak (2007) found that female users of the dating site Rate were more likely to display a profile photo of themselves smiling than men (65% versus 24%) and more likely to choose a photograph at a close personal range, showing only the head and shoulders (28% versus 15%). In addition, Siibak reports that women tend to display themselves in more seductive poses and wear clothing that emphasizes their sexuality. However, we cannot automatically expect that these findings will apply to Facebook, an online environment that is significantly different than a dating site in that users are attempting to present an identity that appeals to both genders, with the goal more often being friendship than romantic attachment. Indeed, in Raacke and Bonds-Raacke's study, none of the women and only 16.3% of the men reported using MySpace or Facebook for dating purposes.

One of the primary functions language has is to enable man to describe the world or communicate with other people. In this sense, language is a neutral tool for man to communicate with each other. On the other hand, language reflects, if it does not determine, the thoughts, attitudes, and culture of the people who make and use it. In this sense, language needs to be viewed as a social practice, and many parts of the different language behaviors by women and men will possibly be explained in terms of socialization as well as biological

criteria. Both language and gender are embedded in social practice deriving their meaning from human practices.

Research showed that, in generalizing about sex differences, all cultures set up social norms for the sexes, which go beyond the biological differences, although societies differ in the way traits are assigned to men and women. Lury (1995) also emphasis on the fact that culture is not gender neutral. According to Burman & Parker (1993:1), Language contains the most basic categories that we use to understand ourselves, affecting the way we act as women or as men and reproducing the way we define our cultural identity.

"Sex" is a biological category that serves as a fundamental basis for the differentiation of roles, norms, and expectations in all societies, whereas "gender" is the term used to describe socially constructed categories based on sex (Coates, 1986; Eckert, 1989). Accordingly gender may be the more appropriate term for sociolinguistic discussion than sex, and the current review study considers gender, rather than sex, the main variable for discussion. To Graddol & Swann (1989), gender, unlike sex, is a continuous variable. A person may be more or less feminine or more or less masculine. Femininity refers to female qualities attributed specifically to women and girls while masculinity is male character. Butler (1990) argues that identities are not fixed but achieved through repeated performances of specific acts suggested by culture. Gender has constantly to be re-affirmed and publicly displayed by repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms which define masculinity and femininity.

Electronic communication has blurred the boundaries of spoken and written languages. The boundaries between the two genres are merging to such an extent that a new 'Lingo' is emerging causing distinction between formal and informal language is vanishing. Naughton (1999) tells us that this 'New Lingua' which is emerging has similar effects on society as print, the railways, the telegraph, the automobile, electronic power and television.

### **3. Research Methodology**

In order to carry out the research, 60 profiles were selected randomly out of which 30 are male and 30 female or at least they presented themselves in this way. There is no way out to check gender swapping (Ludlow:1996). The data was collected for a time period of one month. The informants were informed that researcher is conducting a research on Facebook but the specific area was not mentioned. All the participants belong to various areas of Pakistan and are young with age over 20. To ensure that participants did not alter their Facebook profiles as a result of being in the study, the profiles were saved onto a disc before making any mention of Facebook to the participants. These saved profiles served as the stimuli for the current study. Study belongs to the realm of quantitative research.

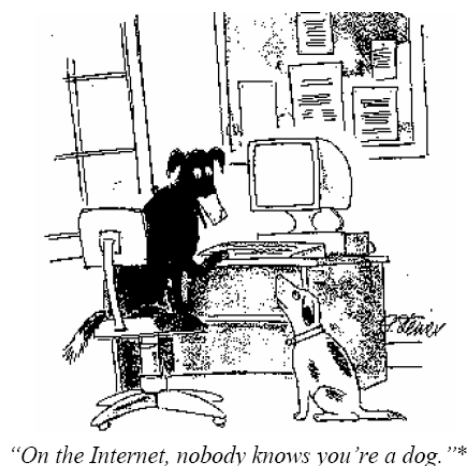


Figure 1. Online Identity

#### 4. Data Analysis

Keeping in view of research topic, different categories were formed which are given below

##### 4.1 Profile Pictures

I have also looked at the choices people make when choosing profile images on Facebook. The results demonstrate that women tend to change their profile image more often and to emphasize friendship in the images they choose to display. Although both men and women are equally likely to display images of family and romantic relationships, the interpretations of such images may vary by gender. The image (see fig 3-7) appears in the upper left-hand corner of a profile page and acts as

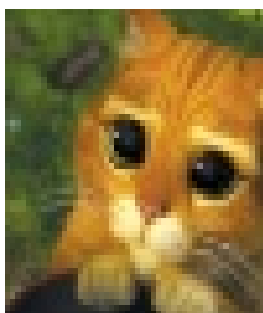


Figure 3. Little Seraphin



Figure 4. Lovely Rose



Figure 2. Tannu  
Badmash



Figure 6. Angelic Demon



Figure 5. Eva Phool



Figure 7. Piyara Bacha

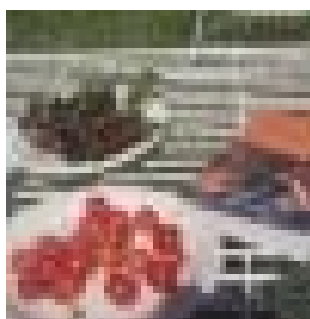


Figure 8. Zain Bukhari



Figure 10. Shahid Hamad



Figure 9. Ahsan Ali

Facebook profile images can be seen as a form of "implicit" identity construction (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008) in which users display personal characteristics through images. I have also observed that women use such pictures that display their shoulders, hands etc. if they are using their own picture. Women do not use their own picture as it is against our cultural norms (though odds are likely to be found) and its culture which is shapping our ideology, while in comparison mostly men do. It relates to the invisibility of women in public sphere and their desire to associate themselves with their ideals as Cinderella, Fairy, Cats etc.

#### 4.2 Profile Identities

Whenever someone opens an account on facebook, s/he has to choose a particular user name that is displayed. It's up to one's own choice which name one acquires. Looking at facebook i.d.'s through gender lens, revealed that its women who, somehow, like to have i.d.'s not on their own names but on nicks and also that they acquire names which symbolize some traits of them. Different names that I noticed in women profiles are:

- ▶ Ravishing Anum
- ▶ Sam Grlz RuLe

- ▶ Little Wish
- ▶ Little Seraphin
- ▶ Lv N Lyf
- ▶ Eva Phool

All this shows the particular mould in which women want to be identified with and perceive them to be. This trend is mostly in girls who are not that much educated or too young (under 20). In contrast, I have just found one instance of such user name (Piyarra Bacha) which showed its gender as male.

#### 4.3 Privacy Issues

Facebook is a site on which users share their personals along with maintaining social reputation. Information about Me is a part of facebook profile in which users give the information about them.

**Current City:**

**Hometown:**

**Sex:**

☒ Show my sex in my profile

**Birthday:**

**Interested In:** ☐ Women

☐ Men

**Looking For:** ☐ Friendship

☐ Dating

☐ A Relationship

☐ Networking

**Political  
Views:**

**Religious  
Views:**

**Bio:**

**Favorite  
Quotations:**

Facebook © 2010

Though both are conscious to maintain their privacies, its mostly men who have given their contact numbers on site. As far as political affiliation are concerned, men display it much more than women who leave it blank.

**About Me** MALE

**Basic Info**

Sex: Male

Birthday: October 4

---

Relationship     Single  
Status:

---

Looking For:     Friendship

---

Political             MLN  
Views:

Religious           Muslim  
Views:

The way a female leaves all information blank and a male gives all for public display certainly speaks volumes about their privacy concerns

#### *4.4 Applications & Groups*

Facebook consists of large number of applications, pages and groups which people use. Interesting thing to note is that the use of applications also vary by gender . Farmville is a game application that is popular in women (and in few men) while games like Mafia Wars, Cricket are popular in men. In groups, girls generally go for those groups related to fashion and studies while men for business related groups, other choices does not differ much. Along with this psychological applications like horoscopes, online psychic are used by women while men tend to go for much bolder issues like ‘lover of the day’, ‘date of the day’ etc.

—



Figure 12. Manly Wars



Figure 11. Girly Games 2



Figure 14. Girly Games



Figure 13. Future Psychic - the way to go girls

#### 4.5 Topics

On facebook, one can update its status by writing on the wall. According to my research, 75% men do not update their status, even if they its not related to their ownself but about the world around them, about motivational stuff or about the political scenario.

While women mostly write about themselves, about their own emotions mainly conveyed through poetry. The limited scope of Pakistani women is also exposed by the topics they select as it mostly revolves around weather, exams, studies, psychology and fashion. While men include other things like business, sports, politics as well.

**M 1.** After Gulmit, Ghulkin has also been turned into an island with no land route to the neighbouring villages....Where are the so called 'saviours' with tall promises????

**F1.** Ey wadah faramosh teri khair ho laikin, ik baat mere maan... tu wadah na kia kr...

[O' Your Hollow promises give me unbearable pain, May you prosper but don't promise ever]

#### 4.6 Emotiocons

According to Crystal (2001), Emotiocons are combinations of keyboard characters designed to show an emotional facial expression. For example the sign :) is used to express joy and good mood while the symbol ;) is used to show winking eye. Research shows that women use emotions much more than men, infact as their role in the society is to maintain face and to keep the conversation going, the use of emotions make it possible.

F1: Hahahaha:D English dept ..... :D

[lolz, English department]

F2: dznt matter:/

[Does not matter]

## 4.7 Language

As far as language is concerned, previous research shows that women either maintain standard language or go for more fashionable variety. Eckfert (2003) claims “women, deprived of access to real power, needed to get closer to mainstream by using symbols of social membership, that is, standard language” (p. 265). Men may speak nonstandard language to express their feeling of freedom and creative power, in which, however, females are not allowed to do so (Spender, 1980). Research shows this that women are much more adaptive to current trend of new language in which boundaries are merging but this phenomenon is not that much visible in young generation in which all no matter to which gender category they belong tend to follow norms of new ‘net linguo’

F 1. *hey lvly.hwx u n stuff ov lyf??? am missing u aalllll. Lub u.*

[Hi, lovely, How are you and stuff of life??? I am missing you all. Love you]

F2. *I Want a lot of rain today..these rains give me comfort,rains make me happy,rains have magical power to make my mood pleasant!...i just want to take a long walk in rain tis moment!*

M 1. *Ur vlcum boi . . . C ya at koleq*

M 2. *EppY BaDaY dUdE!!!*)

# *hAvA BLAsT!!!!:))...*

*ENJOY...!!!*

[Happy Birthday Dude! Have Blast! Enjoy]

Some general features of ‘Netlingo’ as explained by Thurlow et al (2003) are given in the following:

- Word compounds and blends (e.g. facebooking);
- Abbreviations and acronyms (e.g. AH ‘take care’);
- Creative use of punctuation (e.g., .....)
- Stylized spelling (e.g. coooool, **Arouge Malick** for Uroj Malik etc.)
- Phonological aspects of everyday speech in real-life are found in purely text based world of electronic communication. This is done in order to create similarity between speech and writing. Let’s have a look at some examples:

[illegible]

[Pray for me and my papers please]

**F2.** *Yeah(@ da murree trip z delayed;)*

[Yes, the murree trip is delayed]

#### 4.8 Code-switching and Code-Mixing

Code-switching and code-mixing are common features of spoken language. These two features are important because these are present only in spoken language. Code switching means ‘changing back and forth between two language varieties, especially in a single conversation’(Trask:1999). Code-mixing is a common characteristic of speech among bilingual speakers. Hudson (1996) elaborates that the bilingual speakers balance the two languages against each other as a kind of linguistic cocktail- a few words of one language, then a few words of the other, then back to the first for a few more words and so on. Sometimes it is referred to rapid switching, but Holmes (1992) prefers the term ‘metaphorical switching’. According to her code-mixing suggests that the speaker is mixing the codes indiscriminately.

*F1: no way! maza aye ga*

[No way!, it will be fun]

#### 4.9 Phonemic Variations

The virtual phonology has another characteristic feature as it produces strange lexemes comprising of a single letter or symbol. These single letters produce the complete sounds of the words they are used for as 2 stands for Two, Y for yes & why, n for and, v for have etc.

The speakers usually omit last sound [g] while [ŋ] is often replaced with [n] in the words ending with ‘ing’. This clipping occurs due to influence of spoken language e.g. Em dyin [I am dying]

The instances of tag questions and uptalk of which Tannen (1994) talks about are also there, but it is not limited to gender as such.

### 5. Conclusion

Facebook is a popular utility medium and recent interest in language has caused linguists to question this area as well. As we have seen, there are gender related differences (level of language and information display) in terms of choices men & women make. Women were more likely to go to Facebook to maintain existing relationships, pass time and be entertained. On the other hand, men were more likely to go to Facebook to develop new relationships or meet new people.

These choices are culture specific and are inherent in the people reflecting Spair & Whorf’s hypothesis that language reflects the culture of people, while second part of research i.e. Language change focuses on how people are attempting to modify gender, maintaining identities and blurring boundaries. To say that, on virtual world, gender does not matter is not true but its gender that forms identity is also inadequate.

### References

Burman, E., & Parker, I. (1993). *Discourse Analytic Research: Repertoires and Readings of Texts in Action*. London: Routledge.

- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Coates, J. (1986). *Women, Men and Languages: Studies in Language and Linguistics*. London: Longman.
- Cockburn, C. (1985). *Machinery of Dominance: Women, Men and Technical Know-How*, London: Pluto.
- Coley, T. (2006). *Students and Cyber Communities*. University of South Carolina.
- Crawford, M. (1995). *Talking Difference. On Gender and Language*. London: Sage.
- Crystal, D. (2001). *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Eckert, P. (1989). "The whole woman: sex and gender differences in variation." *Language Variation and Change*, 1(3):245–268. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S095439450000017X>
- Eckert, P., & McConnell-Ginet, S. (2003): *Language and Gender*. Cambridge University Press.
- Fishman, P. (1983) Interaction, the work women do. In B.C. Thorne, C. Kramarae and N. Henley (eds) *Language, Gender and Society*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Gill, R., & Grint, K. (1995). The Gender-Technology Relation: Contemporary Theory and Research. In K. Grint and R. Gill (Eds.) *The Gender-Technology Relation: Contemporary Theory and Research* (pp 1-28). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Graddol, D., & Swann, J. (1989). *Gender Voices*. London: Basil Blackwell.
- Gross, R., & Acquisti, A. (2005) Information Revelation and Privacy in Online Social Networks. pp. 71-79. ACM Workshop on Privacy in the Electronic Society (WPES)
- Holmes, J. (1995). *Women, men, and politeness*. Essex, UK: Longman
- Holmes, J. (1992). *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman Inc.
- Hudson, R.A. (1996): *Sociolinguistics* . Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kramarae, C., & Paul, K. (1988) ,ed. *Technology and Women's Voices*. New York: Routledge.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper & Row
- Ludlow, P. (1996). *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Lury, C. (1995). The Rights and Wrongs of Culture: Issues of Theory and Methodology, in B. Skegges (ed.), *Feminist Cultural Theory: Process and Production*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Naughton, J. (1999). *A Brief History of the Future: The Origins of the Internet*. London: Weidenfield and Nicolson.

- Raacke, J., & Bonds-Raacke, J. (2008). MySpace and Facebook: Applying the uses and gratifications theory to exploring friend-networking sites. *Cyber Psychology & Behavior*, 11, 169-174.
- Siibak, A. (2007). Reflections of RL in the virtual world. *Cyberpsychology: Journal of Psychosocial Research on Cyberspace*, 1(1).
- Spender, D. (1980). *Man made language*. London: Routledge: Kegan Paul.
- Stutzman, F. (2006). An Evaluation of Identity-Sharing Behavior in Social Network Communities, *Journal of the International Digital Media and Arts Association*, 3 (1): 10-18.
- Tannen, D. (1994). *Gender and Discourse*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Thurlow, C., Lengel, L., & Tomic, A. (2003). *Computer Mediated Communication: Interaction and the Internet*. London: Sage.
- Trask, R.L. (1999). *The Key Concepts in Language and Linguistics*. New York: Routledge.
- Troemel-Ploetz, S. (1991). Review essay: Selling the apolitical. *Discourse & Society*, 2, 489-502
- Wajcman, J. (1991). *Feminism Confronts Technology*. Cambridge, England: Polity.
- Zhao, S., Grasmuck, S., & Martin, J. (2008). Identity construction on Facebook: Digital empowerment in anchored relationships. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 24, 1816-1836, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.02.012>