

## INTRODUCING "LANGUAGE AND GENDER"

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The concept of "gender" has recently been gaining increased public attention in Mongolia. Gender equality has been introduced into state policy through the "National Program on Gender Equality" (Government Resolution No. 274 of 30.12.2002) and, more recently, the 2011 Law on Gender Equality, accompanied by the establishment of a "National Committee for Gender" (see <http://gender.gov.mn>). Yet the discussion of "gender equality" in Mongolian public discourse tends to focus on economic and social rights, as opposed to the forms of difference that are more deeply embedded in cultural practices—including differences that are systematically created and reinforced by language and speech. In this context I will look at some international research in the area of "Language and Gender", and briefly discuss how this research might be of value in inspiring new research in Mongolia.

The English loan word "gender" (Russian: "гендер", Mongolian: "жэндэр") describes male-female difference, but refers specifically to social roles rather than biological difference. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines gender as "the socially constructed roles, behaviour, activities and attributes that a particular society considers appropriate for men and women" (World Health Organization 2010a; see also World Health Organization 2010b), noting the distinction between terms such as "male" and "female" (Mongolian: "эр", "эм") which describe sex categories, and "masculine" and "feminine" (эрийн, эмийн) which describe gender categories. Use of the term "gender" as a synonym for "sex" is recorded as far back as the 14th century, but usage in the sense of "gender role" and "gender identity" is traced to the 1960s (Oxford English Dictionary, "gender [n.]", 3). The latter usage was popularized by feminist scholars, who attempted to show that many male or female characteristics considered to be "essential" are in fact shaped by culture, but—because we do not have language terms to distinguish between biological (sex) and cultural (gender) difference—are grouped conceptually into the same category as biological traits. More recently, following the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (Fourth World Conference On Women 1995), the United Nations and its related organizations (including the WHO, UNDP, and World Bank) have adopted an official policy of "gender mainstreaming", a strategy for promoting equality between men and women ("gender equality") (United Nations 2001). It is in this context that the term "gender" has come to be discussed in Mongolia in the past decade.

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Outside the Gender and Development field, the term "gender" is not specifically limited to the cultural categories of "male" and "female", but can also include other, more locally-specific "third gender" categories. These include the "hijras" of South Asia, who consider themselves androgynous and sometimes have special religious roles within society (Nanda 1999); or the "two-spirit persons" (formerly "berdache") in North American aboriginal groups, who are believed to have both a male and a female spirit inhabiting the same body, and who perform both masculine and feminine gender roles (Jacobs et al. 1997). The negotiation of labels and terms describing such identities is very clearly a linguistic exercise, and thus of interest to linguistic anthropologists, but falls outside the scope of current research on "language and gender", being addressed instead by scholars of sexuality.

### **"Women's language"**

"Language and Gender" is an area of linguistic study that examines the ways in which gender is created or shaped by language. Studies of men and women's speech patterns were pioneered by feminist linguist Robin Lakoff, an associate of Noam Chomsky, who linked the patterns of speech used by American women to gendered expectations about what is "appropriate" for women to say—and by extension, what women should think and how they should behave. Lakoff argued that women are expected to "talk like a lady", avoiding serious topics or strong expressions of personal opinion; but by speaking in this way, women represent themselves as less capable than men of holding positions of power, since their avoidance of strong statements implies a lack of intelligence or education (Lakoff 1973:48; see also Lakoff 2004). Contemporary linguists are critical of Lakoff's absolutist interpretation of gender categories, but her work set the terms of ongoing research into gendered aspects of lexicon and syntax. In the space below I will discuss a few of the major aspects of difference, perceived or real, between men's and women's speech. These differences fall generally into the following categories: (1) quantity of speech, (2) lexicon, and (3) syntax.

Folk wisdom in many cultures suggests that women and men's speech is quite different; in particular, women in many cultures are perceived as being more talkative than men. For example, women are described as talkative in the Chinese proverb "Three women together make a theatrical performance", the Hebrew proverb "Women are nine times more talkative than men", and the English proverb "A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail" (Sunderland 2006:2). In one survey, the Japanese proverb "When three women get together, it is noisy" referring to the talkativeness of women, was shown to be widely regarded as true by both Japanese men and women (Storm 1992). Similar beliefs exist among Mongolians, as expressed in descriptive phrases such as "gossippy woman" or "talkative like an old woman" (Bayansan 2002a:93). Despite earlier linguistic estimates that women speak almost three times as much as men, however, a recent study conducted in the United States and in Mexico, in which 396 men and women's speech was recorded over several days, revealed that there was no statistical difference in the number of words per day spoken by men and by women; both spoke an average of 16-thousand words each day (Mehl et al. 2007).

Significant actual variation in the speech of men and women has been demonstrated by linguists. Rayson et al. analysed the 100-million-word British National Corpus, which included audio recordings of everyday conversations made by research subjects equipped with portable recording devices, to identify the lexical characteristics of male and female speech (Rayson et al. 1997; see also Argamon et al. 2003 for a similar analysis of written texts from the same corpus). The results of this analysis provided several significant conclusions: men

used far more vulgar words (notably "fucking" and "fuck") and more number terms ("hundred", "two", "three", "a", "four", "number", "one") than women; men used more nouns (indicated by the heavy use of "the" and "of"), whereas women used more pronouns ("she", "me", "her", "I"); and women used a far greater number of family terms ("grandma", "mother", "father", "sister", "auntie", "daughter"). These findings suggest a general male tendency towards "objectivizing" speech, demonstrated in the greater use of impersonal nouns, numbers, and swear words, coupled with assertive tendencies exemplified by the swear words and terms of assent ("yeah", "aye", "right"); conversely, women appear to exhibit relatively subjectively oriented speech, demonstrated in the higher number of personal pronouns, reported speech ("said"), and markers of personal feelings ("cos", "oh").

Although these findings are in some ways specific to the British sample—as evidenced by a number of British dialect terms on the list (e.g., "aye", "quid" [colloquial for British pound], and "lovely")—the indication of significant lexical differences between male and female speech points to the potential value of similar gender analysis using corpus analysis methods on other cultural samples. In the Mongolian case, possible similarities might include the generally male use of vulgar words and expressions or assertive terms (e.g., "яг", "зөв"), or the potentially greater use by women of informal interjections (сүл үг) or words expressing "feminine" characteristics such as beauty (e.g., "гоё", "сайхан", "хөөрхөн"). Nonetheless, without the support of concrete data concerning actual language use by Mongolian men and women, it is difficult to assert the existence of such differences or to reach specific conclusions about their potential cause and nature.

An additional area of interest is the evolving use of gendered language in online chat rooms and social networks, many of which are anonymous or use pseudonyms. Recent findings have suggested that the predominantly male use of swear words may be eroded as women adopt more vulgar speech in some contexts—such as on British My Space online social network pages—but that these developments can be culturally-specific (Thelwall 2008). Other findings suggest that women in online medical forums may use emotional forms of communication, whereas men use informational communication styles (Seale 2006). The evolving nature of gendered language, rooted in communications between men and women, suggests that we need to be cautious about assuming a "dual-culture model" in which men and women are understood to be distinct groups with fixed and homogeneous ways of speaking and thinking (Eckert and Mc Connell-Ginet 1992).

Considerable research has also addressed differences in women and men's speech inflexion and intonation, notably evident in the predominantly female use of "tag questions", or questions asked at the end of a sentence to seek approval from the listener. Lakoff argued that the use of tag words is a particularly "feminine" form of speech, which allows women to express opinions or observations in a non-assertive way—for instance, "Sure is hot here, isn't it?", or "The way prices are rising is horrendous, isn't it?" (Lakoff 2004) Although the much greater use of tag questions by English-speaking women than men has been confirmed by subsequent research, Lakoff's interpretation of this pattern as reflecting women's lack of certainty has been challenged by more recent linguists, who point out that tag questions can serve a variety of functions—such as referential, facilitative, or softening—and may reflect women's supportiveness or powerlessness rather than what Lakoff presumed to be their tentativeness (see Talbot 2010).

### Language reform: Gender-neutral (non-sexist) language

A second major area of interest for language and gender specialists is attempts to change language, by introducing gender-neutral terms to replace words that privilege men or exclude women. Such efforts are, by their nature, language-specific; the following examples from English have been taken from the Canadian Department of Justice list of official "gender-neutral" terms that should be used in government documents and laws: chairman → chairperson, fireman → firefighter, waiter/waitress → server, and cameraman → camera operator (Canada 2008).

Changes to language reflecting evolving gender roles are not limited to simple terminology, but can also be seen in new grammatical forms. In English, for example, the gendered pronouns "he", "his", and "himself" were until recently used as indefinite pronouns (i.e., to denote a person whose gender was unknown); these have now widely been replaced—even in official government documents and laws—by the third-person pronouns "they", "their", and "themselves", which would formerly have been considered grammatically incorrect (see British Columbia Law Institute 1998; Baranowski 2002), although several centuries ago such usage would have been acceptable (Bodine 1975). For example, sentence (1) below is now rewritten in the form of sentence (2):

1. If a student misses an exam due to illness, **he** must get a certificate from **his** doctor.
2. If a student misses an exam due to illness, **they** must get a certificate from **their** doctor.

Nonetheless, use of the singular "they" in English is not universally considered "correct"; many authors prefer the formulas "he or she" or "s/he" in place of the indefinite pronoun, although such strategies can be cumbersome. Others have proposed new, gender-neutral indefinite pronouns for English—for example, Spivak's pronouns, which drop the initial "th" from third-person pronouns to create a new indefinite pronoun: he → ey, him → eir, his → eirs, and himself → eirself (see Spivak 1990:xv; Danet 1998:141). Published neologisms such as Spivak's raise a question of interest to linguists and linguistic anthropologists, however, insofar as they have not widely caught on: what is it that allows some language reforms to succeed while others do not? Pauwels discusses several different feminist strategies that have produced, or attempted to produce, (English) language change, which might be of use in addressing this question (Pauwels 2003): (1) "linguistic disruption", which involves subverting male-centric terms or conventions (as with inversions such as "herstory" for "history", or "womyn" for "women") to draw attention to sexist language and male domination; (2) "gender-neutralization", which aims to replace existing, sexist forms with gender-neutral equivalents (e.g., use of "they" for "he"); and (3) "gender-specification" (or "feminization"), which involves making gender referents explicit in language (e.g., use of "he or she" for "he").

### Mongolian language and gender

Most of the language and gender research, to date, has focused on English language use, and thus may not entirely reflect the situations in other languages and cultures. Attempts to create non-sexist language do not have a true parallel in Mongolia, since the Mongolian language has no gendered nouns or pronouns; additionally, Mongolian terms designating specific positions are rarely gender-specific, perhaps the only notable exception being лам/гэлэнмаа—although some gender-specific loan words have entered Mongolian through

Russian (бармен [barman], бизнесмен [businessman]). This could lead to the hypothesis that Mongolian language—and by extension patterns of thought—are more "egalitarian" than some other languages. Nonetheless, Mongolian has gendered semantic clusters that are not necessarily identical to those found in other languages. Specifically, the Mongolian language may convey gendered understandings through its unique use of compound terms (хоршоо үг). Thus the Mongolian "эр" corresponds, depending on its context, to the English biological sex term "male" ("эр хүйс") or to the English gender term "masculine" ("эр хүн", "эрийн"). This conflation of "male" and "masculine" is evident in compound terms such as "эр бие [male/masculine body]", "эр бяр [male/masculine muscularity]", "эр чадал [male/masculine strength]", and "эр зориг [male/masculine courage]", as well as in adjective terms such as "эрийн гурван наадам [the three men's sports]" or "эр муутай [non-masculine]". As J. Bayansan has noted, there are also many examples of gender role typing in Mongolian proverbs and other linguistic practices—such as the designation of a man's wife as "тогооны хүн [pot-person]" or "тогооны бариул [pothandle]", referencing the woman's perceived role as household cook (Bayansan 2002a:97), or in the various folk sayings honouring the mother (Bayansan 2002b). A particularly rich area of gendered language use is contemporary Mongolians' selection of children's name elements, which often denote overtly masculine or feminine qualities, such as strength in the case of males (e.g., бар [strong], төмөр [iron]) or beauty in the case of females (e.g., цэцэг [flower], роо [beauty]). Given the increasing acceptance of gender as an area of importance in social research, further research in these areas seems warranted and likely valuable both to linguists and to social scientists more generally.



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