

# A Semiotic Analysis Of Linguistic Transvestism Via Female-Centered Sexism

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**ABSTRACT:** Pakistan is a multilingual country known for its male-centered social and cultural structure. Apparently, men seem to be the superordinate stakeholders and women form only a subordinate fraction but the cultural scenario is rapidly changing. Women are no more the domesticated part of society. They are working side by side with males. The Pakistanis are gender-conscious and tend to stereotype almost everything including language, foods, drinks, colors, dresses even professions. Hence, there are professional fields which are believed to befit only for men and those thought to be suitable only for women. It is considered derogatory for men to work in female-related fields. The phenomenon is creating an interesting picture on the linguistic canvas. In the female-related professions where men are working, a new communication style is emerging which seems to be an absolute joie de vivre for the males as it is accompanied by economic payoff. These men have a double-edged gender identity. The diversion in their communication style is responsible for the linguistic changes aforementioned. This article delves into the contemporary culture of Pakistan to find out what is happening in the professional settings where men are working in the stereotypically female-related professions.

**Keywords:** transvestism, habitus, cultural capital, sexism, female-chauvinism, men as the brokers of change, hybridization

## Introduction

Language is a unique human possession. Its primary function is communication but secondarily, it also performs numerous social functions. One of them is establishing the speaker's social identity be it one's regional identity, ethnic affiliation, gender identity or religious ties; language plays a pivotal role in all types of identity formation.

The Pakistanis are polyglots and most of them use at least three languages at a time switching back and forth between English, Urdu and a regional language. This code switching is a staple part of the overall daily Pakistani communication. Another common practice is naturalization of English expressions in the Pakistani setting which gives them culture-specific orientations. This is done with linguistic as well as paralinguistic features. An English expression used in the Pakistani speech might have special

interpretations, for example, a speech in American accent, with lots of hissing in the production of sibilants is a mark of being fashionable and culturally sophisticated and stereotyped as a feature of women's speech only.

Language use is also gender-specific. Generally speaking, the Pakistani society is patriarchal in nature and hierarchical in structure. Males are the dominant social group and a typical 'male' speech involves special linguistic and non-linguistic discursive practices.

## Features of the Archetypal Male Pakistani Speech

The males frequently exhibit some features in order to maintain the status quo. These features are both linguistic and non-linguistic. Among the linguistic elements, there are some interesting prosodic features which partly form the 'strong' male Pakistani speech. They

include: use of a high intonation, strong stress patterns and high pitch of voice. The linguistic features include: mispronouncing certain words especially in English and in Urdu (through vowel epenthesis and metathesis) in order to personalize and individualize them. Though it is a common practice in Pakistan, it also varies across genders. The males prefer 'zabar' vowel epenthesis in the consonant clusters coming at the initial position of words (as 'zabar' is associated with dominance and toughness e.g. words like school, stand, smile become aschool, astand, asmile). This is to give a 'strong', male kick to the expression. Contrarily, the female speakers prefer 'zeir' vowel epenthesis (and 'zeir' is associated with delicacy and refinement. So the same words might be heard as ischool, istand and ismile). The non-linguistic features of the typical male communication include looking into the eyes of the interlocutor and avoiding explanations. One's gender identity is established right at the start of the word; it is only celebrated afterwards!

The absence of the features mentioned above portrays a speech to be sophisticated, typical of the 'soft', refined people. It might not be approved as strong and fit for a Pakistani male as softness is considered to be a female attribute that symbolizes fragility and hence femininity. Its presence in the male speech weakens the image. Such speech is believed to be devoid of the traditional masculinity associated with the Pakistani males. The males, thus, practice two things in their speech: They not only explicitly exhibit the male features in their speech but also avoid the features of women's weak language, if they want to maintain their superiority in the hierarchy and sound 'normal'. Any slippage in the process causes the gender identity to become hodgepodge.

### **Features of Women's Language in Pakistan**

Women being the secondary group in the social hierarchy also exhibit some features which distinguish their speech from the male speech. These features can be analyzed through the criteria provided by Robin Lakoff in 1975. Lakoff said that women's language is 'linguistically submerged' as they are

regularly treated as 'sex objects'.

Little boys and girls from the very start, develop two very different ways of speaking as most children under the age of five are under the dominant influence of their mother or a mother substitute. And this is the reason why all boys and girls first learn women's language. However, as time goes by, differences start emerging resulting in two different forms of speech: a male speech and a female speech. Lakoff identified certain characteristics of the female speech, which she named as "women's weak language". She described these features to include hedges, empty adjectives, question tags, fall-rise tone etc. To her, women's language shows up in lexical items as well as in syntactic rules.

Lakoff's research was situated as it was based on the English society which is monolingual and hierarchically organized. She only focused on the linguistic features of the female speech. Her interpretations cannot be generalized but parallels can be drawn between Pakistan and England in terms of speech as the Pakistani society is also hierarchically organized but in Pakistan, the features of 'weak' female speech are quite different as the Pakistanis are multilinguals. The Pakistani female speech is more complicated as these features vary across the languages between which their speech is switched. Moreover, this involves linguistic as well as non-linguistic features. In the male Pakistani speech, any trace of 'female' features effeminates speech and if a grown-up man uses women's language, he is likely to be given certain negative labels such as homosexual, pervert or weak.

## Background and Rationale for the Study

The concept of genderlects has been numerously explored by different linguists. They usually investigate the typical features of the male or female speech in a society. In Pakistan, gender identity is a very sensitive issue. Both the males and the females need to emphasize their gender affiliation not only through their language use but also through body language. Women are especially under scrutiny. These days, women are more into working outside the confines of homes. They are working in almost every field. The researcher has noticed that in the so-called men's domain the dichotomy between the male and the female speech is not prominent but interestingly, this is not so with the men's speech working in the females' domain. Generally, the female specific fields are: the fashion industry including fields such as make-up, hair styling and dress designing. Theoretically speaking, the features of the Pakistani female speech exist but practically, they are difficult to detect in the women's speech who are working in the male-dominated professional settings and it is very hard to demarcate the male and female speech.

In the females-related professions, however, the situation is quite different and the males working alongside their female counterparts exhibit certain features of speech which are not a part of the 'strong' male speech. This article focuses on the linguistic and non-linguistic communicative skills of such professionals who are successful in the female related professions.

The features of women's speech are expected only in the female speech and if any hint of them is found in the male speech, the result is catastrophe. They can put a male's gender identity at stake. But interestingly, the leading and the most successful men in the Pakistani fashion industry not only exhibit these features but also cherish them. This article investigates the reasons why they are doing this.

## Research Questions

- Why do men working in females-related professions use women's

'weak' language?

- How do they do that ?
- What is the pay-off?

## Literature Review

Everyone has multiplicity of social identities. Each one of us interacts with different people during different hours of the day and this makes him/her acquire identities and qualities that are almost unthinkable in an out-group context. Some of these practices are exhibited explicitly and intentionally as they ensure existence and survival as if not explicitly displayed, one might get ostracized. This causes different communities of practice (Wenger & Trayner, 2015). In order to ensure one's group membership, one has to regularly and continuously display these shared, discursive practices otherwise the group might disown that member. A certain level of commitment is required from all members of each social group to remain in that domain. It is always the members of a social group or the community that decides which practices to value and which ones to avoid as they establish the community's social image. These practices include material as well as non-material things ranging from dressing style, makeup and hairdo to speaking style, intonation patterns, preference of a particular pronoun, body language, facial expressions, walking style etc. All the practitioners in one community of practice share them and a continuous, regular (sometimes conscious and sometimes unconscious) practice establishes the group's identity as a whole.

All the material and non-material things that one acquires from the social group of which s/he is a part, have 'symbolic significance' as they help achieve certain objectives (Burke, Crowley & Girvin, 2001). This gives rise to a specific 'social style' of speaking including a particular patois, intonation and pronunciation patterns which give hints of one's membership of a particular social group. Halliday uses the term 'set of semiotic systems' for enlisting all those features (Halloran, 2017).

The power of the dominant group is integrated in norms and habits and takes the form of what Gramsci (1971) calls 'hegemony'. Sexism is one such example of group domination. Power is not always exercised coercively; it can also take a particular form of sexism. Access to a specific form of powerful discourse of the dominant group or the 'elite', is itself a power resource (Van Dijk, 2008). Thus, using a particular form of sexist language serves as a source of gaining power and sharing this power with the group establishes solidarity among the group members. If the members of that group value their membership and own it, they exhibit it explicitly and if they are ashamed of it, they avoid displaying and disclosing it and a particular social identity becomes visible in one particular domain. This type of learning is situated (Li, Grimshaw, Neilsen, Judd, Coyte & Graham, 2009). According to Cox (2015), such situated learning is acquired through informal interactions with the group members. And a continuous practice sets them as a group norm from which the group sets and gets feelings of solidarity (Sebeok, 1960). Solidarity can also be achieved through an informal language use as the use of formal language creates distance and is used to establish power relationships (Anonymous, 2017). Addressing, for example, with first name is a mark of solidarity whereas addressing someone with surname or a title is a mark of power (Mallipa, 2012). Similarly, kinship terms, vocatives and nicknames are also markers of solidarity (Salifu, 2010). Rise-fall intonation pattern is generally associated with women's speech (Matthiessen, 2014) as it is indicative of tentativeness whereas men are believed to use a flat, monotone which is considered factual and objective.

In Pakistan, males being the dominant social group are 'empowered' to establish power relationship and women are expected to behave in a particular submissive, lady-like way. They are also not supposed to establish power relationships especially with their male counterparts and if they do, the result is social failure. All a woman can do is establish a solidarity relationship within her group (Kommentar, 2012). Men can establish a

power or a solidarity relationship with their female counterparts but not vice versa.

Language and thought pattern have long been discussed by theorists from different disciplines. The famous psychologist Vygotsky discussed in detail how language and thought start developing on separate planes and during maturation become synchronized (Vygotsky, 1962). Humbolt talked about the idea of language having a controlling and shaping effect over the thought pattern of the speaker and it was seconded by Sapir and Whorf in their concept of strong version of linguistic determinism (Burke et al., 2001). Their ideas have been categorized as 'strong' and 'weak' with the former stating that they are strongly linked together whereas the latter says that they are weakly linked together (Chandler, 1994). Whorf also said that language that we speak not only follows intelligent, rational thinking but is also guided by an internal 'system of natural logic' for which Bourdieu uses the term habitus (Burke et al., 2001) and Urban (1981) calls a 'habitual thought'. Later, the concept of mentalese was generated, which is explained as an abstract 'language of thought' that follows its own rules and regulations (Gaynor, 1995). Steven Pinker (1994) discussed the same idea through his concept of language instinct which seems to be 'a natural drive' to speak. In this article, it will be explored how the Pakistani males acquire their habitus or the natural drive to speak, especially in a professional setting stereotyped as women's domain.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital provides the theoretical lens for this study through which the communication patterns of five successful Pakistani males working in the females-related professional settings have been scrutinized.

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital stands for the shared possessions of one particular social class ranging from material things (such as clothing, eating) to non-material things (such as manners or habits, postures, tastes). This results in behaving and acting in a specific way which differentiates a group from others and establishes their

collective identity (Bourdieu, 2016). Prolonged interaction within the group sharing the same cultural capital engenders a strong in-group feeling which eventually creates solidarity. Bourdieu also recognizes different forms of cultural capital. The speaking style valued within the group is an example of embodied cultural capital whereas the style of clothing and dressing form objectified cultural capital and the use of certain titles, addressing styles can be termed as institutionalized cultural capital. Over time, practicing and exchanging the same cultural capital with the members of one's social class, one develops a specific thinking pattern which provides the mould in which all thoughts are cast before they become vocal. Bourdieu uses the term habitus for such unique thinking pattern.

Apparently acquisition of cultural capital seems to take place unconsciously. One is likely to imagine that thinking pattern is something that can never develop on the conscious plane, yet interestingly, it is not so (Bourdieu as cited in Richardson, 1986). There is a unified linguistic market dominated by one successful social group which determines what type of cultural capital is in demand in the market (as cited in Burke et al., 2001). And this causes a change in the 'naturally' acquired habitus.

### Methodology

Five successful Pakistani males working in the female-related professions were selected namely: Wajid khan, Tariq Amin, Hassan Sheheryar Yasin (HSY), Tony Navaid Rashid and Waqar Hussain. All of them are successful professionals working as makeup artists or hair stylists, dress designers and fashion photographers. They also epitomize the features that the researcher wanted to explore. For close analyses of their speeches, their TV appearances have been selected as the data. All the links for these videos have been provided in the references. The researcher downloaded the videos of their TV appearances and closely

studied them. The selection of these videos was based on one specific rationale: It should reveal the linguistic and paralinguistic features of their speech patterns. This meant selecting longer pieces of conversations. The researcher also wanted to explore whether the communication patterns of the research participants fluctuated or remained the same while talking to both genders. It can be checked from these videos that the research participants were talking to both males and females and their communication patterns remained the same.

Semiotic analyses were carried out because they approach signs in linguistic as well as non-linguistic forms. It involves analysis of vocabulary, objects, gestures, even dressing style and hair-cut. The rationale for the data collection method was that video recordings are available online and the reader can easily approach them anytime.

The features studied include: evaluative adjectives, particles, color terms, question tags, addressing style, expletives (swear terms) and intonation patterns. Systematic observations were used for further refining the interpretations. The linguistic analyses focused on the vocabulary used and prosodic features exhibited in the speech. The categories designed for the linguistic analyses included: hedges, question tags, swear words, empty adjectives, specific pronouns/ways of addressing and fall-rise patterns of speech. The non-linguistic analyses were done by studying body language of the research participants and the features studied were: moving eyes/ brows, shrugging shoulders, moving hands and moving fingers in hair. The linguistic features under each category are detailed in the table below. The expressions in Urdu and Arabic appear in the Roman script and have been italicized and their English translations appear in parentheses. The key of letters from Urdu and Arabic to the Roman alphabet has been provided in the Appendix provided in the end.

**Table I:**

-	-	-	-
-	-	-	-

Hedges	pata hai (you know), to keya hota hai (what happens is), itni (so much) <u>deykhain</u> (yousee), because, keya boltey hain (what do we call it), hoon (I see), <u>achaa</u> (ok), jo (which), to (then), to phir naan (then), haan (yes), naan (no), naeen (no), kiyonkey (because), keya hai key (the thing is), is liey (that's why), magar (but), hain (ok), agar (if), leykin (but), ok, so, exactly, actually, definitely, of course, I mean, obviously,
	really, I think, well, usually, you know, what I mean, insha Allah (God willing), mashaAllah (God bless) bas (only), I don't think, and, I feel, kind of, absolutely, I hope, whynot, bye bye, I don't know, basically, lovely, bilkul (exactly), that's why
Question Tags	hai naan (isn't it?), theek hai (alright), wohi waali baat (it's the same as)
Swear Words	I swear, qasam sey (I swear), O my God
Empty Adjectives/Words	peyari (beautiful, female), peyara (beautiful, male), stylish, cute, <u>khoo</u> bsorat (beautiful), haseen (sleek), <u>kuch</u> (a little bit), beautiful, elegant, cool, <u>achaa</u> (good, male), <u>achi</u> (good, female), shehzadi (princess), <u>thora</u> sa (a little bit, male), <u>thori</u> si ( a little bit, female), halka sa (a small amount, male), halki si (a small amount, female), itni (this much, female), shukria (thank you), keya keh sakta hoon (what can I say?), sorry, nice, it's ok, thank you, very kind of you, thank you so much, sort of, lovely, fun,funny, ooh, aah, ouch, hi, ji (yes), maza (fun), hey
Pronouns/Way of Addressing	yaar (buddy), tum (you), tu (you), aap aao (you come)

The total duration of conversation for each research participant that has been studied is given below:

**Table II:**

Research Participant	No. of Videos Studied	Communication Time
Wajid Khan	4	1 hour, 51 minutes, 25 seconds
Tariq Amin	4	1 hour, 6 minutes, 36 seconds
HSY	2	1 hour, 23 minutes, 11 seconds
Tony Navaid Rashid	4	36 minutes, 10 seconds
Waqar Hussain	1	1 hour, 33 minutes, 59 seconds

The rationale behind using this method was that because of videos, the researcher could easily observe their body language and facial expressions along with their language use as both of these were to be studied. Plus the researcher had the advantage of repeating the stuff as many times as she wanted and a control over the videos also helped in analyzing the subtleties of their communication patterns. The videos were scrutinized to discover which linguistic and non-linguistic features of the 'typical' male Pakistani speech were present or absent. Table III below presents the linguistic and prosodic features noticed in the

communication of the participants whereas Table IV presents the non-linguistic features of the same.

All the data have been tabulated for the convenience of the reader and analyses follow each table. The speech features have been mentioned first and against each research participant's name, the frequency of occurrence of that feature has been mentioned. This not only helps to economize on space but also aids the reader in making comparison and in drawing conclusions.

### Statistics

**Table III:**

	Hedges	Question Tags	Swear Words	Empty Words/Adjectives	Pronouns/Ways of Addressing	Fall-Rise Tone
Wajid Khan	238	33	04	33	09	11
Tariq Amin	96	05	0	39	04	01
HSY	160	02	0	59	84	40
Tony Navaid Rashid	103	0	0	24	16	70
Waqar Hussain	214	69	0	23	10	99

### Analysis

All the features mentioned in Table III are a

part of female discourse. All of them indicate tentativeness, lack of assertiveness, informality and ultimately, solidarity. It has

also been discussed above that in the Pakistani society, men consciously avoid such features to avoid negative labels. Their presence in the male discourse indicates that they do not happen haphazardly rather they are included consciously and even made prominent as their frequency in the male discourse clearly exhibits. This is to emphasize their group membership to their particular female-dominated community of practice. The inclusion of these features is to establish solidarity within the female group and their repetition is to emphasize group affiliation. These males are not ashamed of the fact that their discourse does not come under the heading 'male'. The use of rise-fall intonation is associated with women's discourse and is an indicator of emotionality and expressivity.

These males need to co-exist with their female counterparts and a collective identity has to be established which is evident from the discursive practices within the group. The use of specific pronouns and ways of addressing partly forms the institutionalized cultural capital which is a group norm. Hence, the economic success and strength of the relatively weaker members orients the socially stronger members to go for what is need of the hour. The female-related professional settings work as a unified linguistic market and men working in these fields mould their speech according to the market demands to enjoy the fruits of success. They do that deliberately. Hence, these males acquire this habitus on a conscious plane.

**Table IV:**

	<b>Moving Eyes/Brows</b>	<b>Shrugging Shoulders</b>	<b>Moving Hands</b>	<b>Moving Fingers in Hair</b>
Wajid Khan	60	18	290	0
Tariq Amin	161	13	106	0
HSY	75	13	106	0
Tony Navaid Rashid	176	0	190	05
Waqar Hussain	113	11	79	0

### **Analysis**

In Pakistan, excessive use of body language and the above mentioned non-linguistic features are associated with 'weakness' and hence with women. Their presence in the male discourse is not haphazard but planned. It actually becomes an indispensable feature of their discourse and eventually ensures professional success.

### **Overall Semiotic Analysis**

The males whose cultural capital is under scrutiny also exhibit some ancillary features

which have not been mentioned in tables above. They include emotional expressivity, which is associated with women and is treated as a symbol of 'weakness'. And when it comes to a masculine image, wearing floral prints, bright-colored and gaudy outfits, jewelry, gait without an upright posture even straight, long hair and speaking in a refined, sophisticated manner with an American accent are looked upon as womanish. Also if the sibilants are accompanied by a lot of hiss, this makes the speech sound extra feminine. Though the use of first name is a mark of solidarity but the use of a nickname, especially in the professional

settings weakens one's public persona but it can be seen that at least two of the research participants Hassan Sheheryar Yasin and Navaid Rashid use their nicknames as the hallmark of their profession. Hassan Sheheryar Yasin loves to be called HSY or Sheru and Navaid Rashid wants to be called Tony. The features of the 'weak' females' discourse are submerged in women's talk. They are not considered weak but delicate when adopted by these men. They become highlighted in men's talk as a result of the conscious makeover provided by these males. It can be seen that Wajid Khan is wearing red shoes in one of the videos. He also embraces the female TV host and kisses on both of her cheeks when he comes on the stage. In another video he can be seen wearing red shirt and red shoes. Tariq Amin can also be seen wearing chains, earrings, bracelets, rings with red and green color stones and an orange shirt. He also embraces the woman he meets and kisses on both of her cheeks when she enters. HSY can also be seen wearing a printed shirt, shaking hands with the female host, giving flying kisses to his mother and talks about being an emotional person many times. He also tells the female host how he once cried bitterly when he felt utterly disappointed. Similarly, Tony Navaid Rashid can be seen shaking his head and moving fingers in his long, straight, silky hair all the time while conversing. He can also be seen wearing a fancy ring in his finger with colorful stones and an embroidered shirt. All these men can also be seen wearing make-up on their faces and having plucked eye brows and shaved arms.

All these features are a part of the objectified cultural capital possessed by these men. The way they have been made prominent and actually celebrated shows that the males displaying them are not doing so on an unconscious plane. These men own their group membership in the female community of practice but as a result, their cultural capital acquires a hybrid identity. In order to manifest it clearly, they exaggerate the features of the female cultural capital, caricaturing it, often appearing grotesque from a male's point of view.

## Conclusion

Gender is not a biological category; it is a social construct and is enacted through certain linguistic and non-linguistic practices. Hence, the same person can exhibit maleness and femaleness in two different contexts depending on what s/he is aiming at. A man, for example, seeking status will avoid using women's 'weak' language as it symbolizes weakness. The same man seeking approval and success among women might be found using emotional expressions as a token of solidarity. This is exactly what the males in this study exhibit through their discourse. The women's 'weak' language provides an unseen mould where their 'strong' male speech is set before it is uttered. The patois hence acquired shapes their habitus.

There are underpinnings for the women's 'weak' language to be 'strong' and influential as it has a shaping and molding effect. Keeping in mind the subtle development in language use discussed above, it can be extrapolated that a brand-new sociolect is about to emerge in Pakistan. The latency in the males' communication patterns working in the females-related fields is the harbinger of a unique sociolect. It is a female-centered language use by males, an anomalous sexist language. Sexism is generally described as language use that marginalizes female speech but the emerging sexist language use in Pakistan centralizes female speech and pushes away the male speech towards the periphery. Traditionally, certain derogation, weakness and powerlessness have been attached with women's language and sexism in language enhances the males' position but in this case, sexism strengthens the position of females. These men devalue the male discourse and foreground the women's discourse instead. They exaggerate the apparently innocuous features of women's language in order to exhibit their group membership and deliberately tone down their expression in order to sound delicate. The makeover done to the male speech in a female setting definitely involves artistic bravura. The result is toning up of the so-called 'weak' women's language.

The female-centered, 'weak' language use by the males is an unprecedented form of linguistic transvestism. It is never used by

women anywhere in Pakistan. Through visual display and linguistic choices people exhibit their social affiliation, ties and group membership. They are both picked from the social semiotic system of which they are a part. And this is how culture gets reflected. These linguistic transvestites 'do culture' in order to exhibit their in-group feeling.

Men working with women in the females-related professional settings deliberately effeminate their speech and paradoxically gain empowerment. This might sound odd or appear cryptic but these men are guided by the inner system of natural logic which might not be rational but guarantees professional success.

Men appear to be the real brokers of change in this newly emerging scenario as they consciously adopt and empower women's 'weak' language. This male discourse is attired like females. Maybe, a part of the unwritten charter of men's language! This 'weak' language of men is their somewhat bizarre modus operandi to work in specific professional settings.

Gender identity is celebrated in a very subtle manner when it comes to women but it becomes very 'loud' and bold when it comes to men especially to men discussed in this article. This is because these men 'acquire' this gender identity. It is not something naturally given to them so, they make their female group membership explicit. This results in exaggerating and caricaturing the female discourse producing a somewhat grotty male discourse.

This communication style is a new form of hybridization as it lies somewhere between the male and the female discourse. It sounds outlandish in that it is decorated with the features of female discourse but is coined and produced by males. This realization is the harbinger of a unique neologism.

There is one interesting serendipitous discovery: Males are the dominant, sturdy group in the Pakistani society. They can afford to 'transvestite' their communication style in the professional settings but the same phenomenon *mutatis mutandis* for women is socially not acceptable and can lead to

obfuscation.

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