

GENDER AND MEANING : A SEMANTIC ANALYSIS ACROSS LANGUAGES

Deswita Fitriani Samosir¹, Bernieke Anggita Ristia Damanik²
Universitas HKBP Nommensen Pematangsiantar, Indonesia
deswitasamosir@gmail.com¹, bernieke.damanik@uhn.ac.id²

Abstract

This study explores the semantic dimensions of gender across multiple languages to uncover how gender influences meaning in linguistic structures and communication. By conducting a comparative semantic analysis, this research examines how grammatical gender, lexical choices, and pragmatic usage shape and reflect societal gender roles in different linguistic contexts. The study analyzes languages with diverse gender systems, including grammatical gender languages (Spanish, German, Arabic), natural gender languages (English), and gender-neutral languages (Finnish, Turkish). The findings reveal that gendered semantics vary significantly across languages but consistently impact meaning construction, social identity, and cultural communication norms. This paper contributes to a deeper understanding of language as a social tool influenced by gender and highlights implications for linguistics, gender studies, and intercultural communication.

Keywords: Gender, Semantic Analysis, Language, Grammatical Gender, Cross-Cultural Communication, Meaning Construction

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INTRODUCTION

A. Background

Language is not merely a tool for communication but also a medium through which social realities—including gender identities—are constructed and conveyed. Linguists such as Deborah Cameron (1992) and Robin Lakoff (1975) have long emphasized that language is imbued with gender biases, which may not always be overt but are embedded in grammatical structures, lexical choices, and pragmatic strategies. The study of language and gender has shown that how we use and interpret language is deeply influenced by cultural values, social hierarchies, and gender roles prevailing in specific societies. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003) argue, gender is not merely a biological category but a social construct that is mediated through language. In this sense, language does not simply reflect gender differences but actively participates in creating and reinforcing them. A semantic approach to gendered language is essential to understand how meaning is shaped and transmitted through different linguistic systems, particularly in relation to gendered categories.

According to Anna Wierzbicka (1992), semantic analysis allows researchers to explore how gender meanings are encoded across languages—both explicitly in grammatical forms and implicitly through lexical connotation and discourse strategies. Languages with grammatical gender systems such as Spanish, German, and Arabic systematically mark gender through nouns, adjectives, and pronouns. This contrasts with natural gender languages like English, or gender-neutral languages such as Finnish and Turkish, which do not rely heavily on gender markings in grammar.

The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis (Sapir, 1921; Whorf, 1956) posits that the structure of a language can influence its speakers' worldview. Consequently, linguistic gender systems may lead to different conceptualizations of gender across cultures, affecting not only linguistic production and comprehension but also social identity and communicative norms. This hypothesis supports the notion that language shapes thought, including notions of gender. This study adopts a comparative semantic analysis framework to identify how gender categories operate across distinct language systems. It focuses on the ways gender influences meaning construction—both grammatically and pragmatically—and how this, in turn, reflects and shapes gender roles in society. By analyzing languages with diverse gender typologies—grammatical gender, natural gender, and gender neutrality—this research seeks to uncover both universal and language-specific semantic patterns.

As emphasized by Holmes and Meyerhoff (2003), understanding the intersection between language and gender is crucial in an increasingly globalized world where intercultural communication is inevitable. Therefore, the findings of this research are expected to make significant contributions to the fields of linguistics, gender studies, and intercultural communication. Beyond theoretical insights, this study offers practical implications for language education, translation studies, and the formulation of gender-inclusive language policies. Language serves as a mirror of society, encoding and perpetuating cultural values, norms, and identities. Gender, as a crucial social construct, deeply intersects with language, affecting not only vocabulary and grammar but also the ways in which meanings are formed and interpreted. Semantics—the study of meaning—provides a framework to understand how language represents gender, revealing subtle or overt biases, stereotypes, and cultural assumptions embedded within linguistic structures.

Languages encode gender differently: some assign grammatical gender to nouns and pronouns, such as in Spanish and Arabic; others, like English, employ natural gender mostly for pronouns, and some languages, like Finnish and Turkish, are largely gender-neutral in grammatical terms. This diversity influences not just how gender is marked linguistically, but also how meaning is constructed and communicated across social contexts. Understanding how gender and meaning intertwine is essential, especially in an increasingly globalized world where cross-cultural communication is frequent. Insights into gendered semantics can inform efforts to foster inclusive language practices and challenge gender biases embedded in language.

B. Research Problem

While prior research has addressed aspects of gendered language in specific languages, there remains a lack of comprehensive, cross-linguistic semantic analyses exploring how gender influences meaning on a broader scale. Questions persist about the mechanisms through which gender shapes semantic fields, how cultural differences mediate these meanings, and what implications these patterns hold for social interaction and communication.

C. Research Objective

This study aims to:

1. Conduct a semantic analysis of gender across languages with varying gender systems.
2. Identify patterns in meaning construction influenced by gender.
3. Examine cultural variations and commonalities in gendered language use.
4. Provide theoretical insights into the role of gender in semantic frameworks.

METHOD

A. Research Design

he research employs a qualitative, comparative semantic analysis framework. It combines data collection from multilingual corpora and existing linguistic resources, followed by semantic field analysis and discourse interpretation. This approach allows the examination of lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic levels of gender-related meaning.

B. Research Object

The objects of this study are selected languages representing distinct gender marking systems:

- Spanish, German, Arabic (grammatical gender)
- English (natural gender)
- Finnish, Turkish (gender-neutral)

C. Research Subject

The subjects consist of:

- Gendered lexical items (nouns, adjectives, pronouns)
- Morphosyntactic gender markers
- Gendered discourse contexts (e.g., occupational terms, social interactions)

DATA ANALYSIS

A. Gender

According to the FAO (1997), gender refers to the relationships between men and women, encompassing both how these are perceived and how they manifest materially. Gender is not biologically determined by the physical differences between males and females, but is instead a product of social construction. It plays a central role in shaping society, influencing key processes such as production, reproduction, consumption, and distribution.

Despite this definition, gender is frequently misunderstood as focusing solely on the promotion of women. However, as the FAO highlights, gender concerns not only women but also the interactions and dynamics between men and women. This includes their respective roles, their access to and control over resources, the division of labor, and their individual needs and interests. Gender relations impact numerous aspects of life, including household security, family well-being, decision-making, and productivity (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

In both linguistic and social terms, gender is expressed in language through features such as noun classes, pronouns, and vocabulary with gendered meanings. In languages with grammatical gender, nouns are classified as masculine, feminine, or neuter, which influences agreement and meaning. On a pragmatic level, speech acts can convey gendered meanings depending on the social roles and expectations associated with gender.

Gender roles refer to society's definition of what it means to be male or female. These roles differ across cultures, social classes, age groups, and historical periods. Responsibilities and expectations linked to gender are shaped by factors such as household composition, access to resources, the effects of the global economy, and local conditions like the environment (FAO, 1997). Gender relations describe how societies or cultures define the rights, roles, and identities of men and women in relation to each other (Bravo-Baumann, 2000).

B. Meaning

Meaning in this context is not merely lexical denotation but includes connotation, presupposition, and pragmatic inference related to gender. For example, words like "doctor" versus "nurse" carry implicit gender expectations, influencing social perception. Semantic shifts over time toward more neutral or inclusive terms demonstrate the dynamic relationship between language and gender ideology.

C. Semantic

Semantic analysis here involves exploring relationships such as synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, and semantic fields, focusing on how gender alters these relationships. The study examines how gender impacts semantic roles (agent, patient) and thematic roles within sentences, as well as metaphorical extensions linked to gender.

Semantics is the discipline that focuses on the meaning of language. It explores what meaning entails, how words come to have meaning, and how the meaning of a sentence or complex phrase depends on the meaning of its individual parts. A key concept in this field is the distinction between sense and reference. Sense refers to the concepts and ideas tied to a linguistic expression, while reference points to the actual entity or object in the real world that the expression denotes. Semantics differs from syntax, which concerns the rules for constructing grammatically correct sentences, and from pragmatics, which studies how language is used in context during communication.

Lexical semantics is a subfield of semantics that investigates the meanings of individual words, including whether words have one or multiple meanings and the types of relationships they have with other words. Phrasal semantics examines the meaning of whole sentences, focusing on how arranging words in different ways can generate new meanings a concept known as compositionality. Formal semantics applies logical and mathematical tools to precisely model how language relates to meaning. Cognitive semantics, on the other hand, views meaning through a psychological lens and assumes a strong connection between linguistic ability and the mental structures people use to comprehend the world. Other semantic branches include conceptual semantics, computational semantics, and cultural semantics.

Theories of meaning offer broad explanations of what meaning is and how expressions come to possess it. Referential theories hold that an expression's meaning lies in the real-world object it refers to. Ideational theories connect meaning to mental representations—ideas that arise in the minds of language users. Causal theories suggest that meaning is shaped by chains of causes and effects, and behaviorist semantics explains this in terms of stimuli and responses. Other approaches include truth-conditional semantics, verificationist theories, the use theory, and inferentialist semantics.

The examination of semantic issues dates back to ancient times but did not become a distinct academic field until the 19th century. Today, semantics is closely related to fields like formal logic, computer science, and psychology.

Although semantics became formally recognized as a separate field in the 19th century, its roots stretch back to ancient philosophical and logical discussions. In ancient Greece, the philosopher Plato (427–347 BCE) explored how names relate to objects in his dialogue *Cratylus*. This work debated two main views: naturalism, which argues that names are inherently tied to things, and conventionalism, which holds that naming arises from agreed-upon usage among language communities. Aristotle (384–322 BCE), in his work *On Interpretation*, introduced key conceptual distinctions that deeply influenced later semantic theories. He proposed an early version of the semantic triangle, suggesting that spoken and written language evokes mental concepts, which in turn refer to real-world objects through resemblance. He believed that while spoken words vary across cultures, the underlying mental concepts are universal.

The Stoics built upon these earlier ideas and developed an advanced theory of language informed by logic. They distinguished different word types based on their semantic and syntactic functions—such as proper names, common nouns, and verbs—and analyzed distinctions between various speech acts, including declarations, commands, and prohibitions.

D. Language

Languages vary in how they encode gender some have obligatory gender marking, others optional, and some none at all. This affects lexical choice, syntactic structure, and discourse patterns, revealing cultural priorities and gender ideologies. This cross-linguistic comparison sheds light on universal versus culture-specific semantic phenomena.

There have been numerous definitions of language throughout history. According to Henry Sweet, a British phonetician and language expert, "Language is the expression of ideas using speech sounds arranged into words, which are then organized into sentences, mirroring the way ideas form into thoughts." Meanwhile, American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager described language as "a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used by a social group for cooperation." Each brief definition of language makes certain assumptions and raises further questions. For instance, Sweet's definition arguably emphasizes "thought" too heavily, while Bloch and Trager's relies on a specific but valid interpretation of the term "arbitrary."

As outlined, language is unique to the human species. Although animals can also communicate through sounds or other behaviors the defining characteristic of human language is its limitless creativity and productivity. Humans can convey an unlimited range of meanings, with no area of human experience considered fundamentally impossible to express. However, sometimes we must adjust our language to account for new concepts or discoveries. In contrast, animal communication systems are generally narrow and limited in what they can express.

One unique trait of human language is displaced reference the ability to talk about things that are not present in time or space. This feature is mostly absent in animal communication, with the notable exception of bees. Bees can use a system of specific movements, often called bee dances, near their hive to communicate information to others about the location and quality of food sources. However, these bee dances are restricted to communicating only about food and do not extend to other topics, showing the limited scope of their communicative abilities compared to human language.

E. Cross-Cultural Communication

Gendered meanings influence intercultural communication by shaping expectations, politeness strategies, and interpretations. Misunderstandings may arise when gender markers and associated meanings differ between languages and cultures. Awareness of these semantic differences is crucial for effective communication in multilingual and multicultural settings.

Cross-cultural communication is a discipline that explores how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact, both in similar and different ways, and how they attempt to understand and convey messages across cultural boundaries. A closely related area is intercultural communication. Cross-cultural communication focuses on comparing various cultures. In this context, differences between cultures are recognized and accepted, potentially leading to changes at the individual level, though not necessarily resulting in broader societal shifts. In multicultural societies, one culture is often regarded as the dominant or "standard" culture, against which others are evaluated or contrasted.

Key theories in the field of cross-cultural communication draw heavily from research on cultural value differences, particularly the contributions of Edward T. Hall, Richard

D. Lewis, Geert Hofstede, and Fons Trompenaars. Clifford Geertz also made significant contributions to this area. Furthermore, Jussi V. Koivisto developed a model on cultural crossings within globally operating organizations, building upon this foundational research. These theoretical frameworks have been applied to various areas of communication, including business, management (e.g., Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner), and marketing (e.g., Marieke de Mooij, Stephan Dahl). Additionally, several educational initiatives have been successful in applying these theories to real-world cross-cultural contexts.

However, these theories have faced criticism, especially from scholars in management studies. Critics such as Nigel Holden argue that the underlying concept of culture stems from outdated 19th-century anthropological models and tends to focus on culture as something static and essentialized. Peter W. Cardon has also criticized the way Hofstede’s cultural dimensions are often presented uncritically in academic textbooks as objective truths. As a result, there is a growing movement toward understanding cross-cultural interdependence, rather than merely comparing cultural differences and similarities. Increasingly, cross-cultural management is viewed as a branch of knowledge management.

While there is ongoing academic debate regarding the practical applications of cross-cultural teams, a meta-analysis conducted by Günter Stahl, Martha Maznevski, Andreas Voigt, and Karsten Jonsen reviewed research on multicultural groups. Their findings indicate that while cultural diversity may lead to challenges such as task-related conflicts and reduced social cohesion, it also brings benefits like greater creativity and enhanced team satisfaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Theoretical Design Features

Semantic Feature	Spanish (Grammatical Gender)	English (Natural Gender)	Finnish (Gender Neutral)	Arabic (Grammatical & Social Gender)
Gender marking on nouns	Mandatory (amigo/amiga)	Limited, mostly natural (actor/actress)	None	Mandatory with social gender distinction
Pronoun system	Gender-specific (él/ella)	Gender-specific (he/she)	Gender-neutral (hän)	Gender-specific with formal and informal forms
Occupational terms	Gendered suffixes (profesor/profesora)	Mostly neutral, some gendered forms (waiter/waitress)	Neutral	Gendered, with cultural implications
Semantic connotations	Strong gender associations	Mixed, shifting toward neutrality	Minimal gender connotation	Strongly gendered, linked to social roles
Semantic evolution	Increasing use of gender-inclusive forms	Growing use of gender-neutral pronouns	Consistently gender-neutral	Emerging inclusive terminology debates

The table demonstrates that grammatical gender languages encode gender at multiple linguistic levels, significantly influencing meaning and social interpretation. English shows a

transition, with gender-neutral language gaining prominence amid traditional gender-specific usage. Finnish, as a gender-neutral language, offers a contrasting model where gender does not influence semantic structures, highlighting the role of language in shaping gender perception. Arabic exhibits complex interactions between grammatical gender and cultural gender norms, reflecting deep-rooted societal roles.

These findings emphasize that gender is not only a grammatical feature but a semantic and sociocultural phenomenon embedded in language use. The interplay of language, gender, and meaning shapes communication patterns and social realities.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that gender deeply influences semantic structures and meaning across diverse languages. The manifestation of gender varies from explicit grammatical marking to subtle lexical and pragmatic connotations, reflecting and shaping social identities and cultural norms. Understanding these semantic patterns enriches linguistic theory and provides critical insights into the role of language in constructing gendered realities.

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