



A Psycholinguistics Study of Gendered Language and its Impact on Social Cognition and Brain Functions

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ABSTRACT

The current study aims at exploring the impacts of gendered language on brain functions, social cognition, and gender perception. The study is grounded in the Theory of Mind (ToM) propounded by Simon Baron-Cohen. Language is a unique human quality and it has its roots in mind and society as well. Social cognition is an important element of developing the language. Social patterns have great impacts on minds that ultimately form language. Gendered perceptions are crucial to impact the functions of brain because these brain functions ultimately impact the way we speak and express ourselves. Social cognition and brain have deeper ties. The study attempts to explore these ties and discover the deeper realities. The study employed quantitative approach to collect comprehensive and large scale data. The data have been collected through questionnaire. The population comprises both the genders: male and female of different ages. The rationale behind this diversity of population and age groups is to make the data more comprehensive and reliable. A Likert-scale questionnaire has been administered based on 10 questions. The data have been analyzed using SPSS. The frequencies of every question were measured that highlighted the role of gendered language on social cognition and in return on brain functions. The findings suggest that gendered languages have deep impacts on the brain and social cognition. It can create biasness and harmony at the same time. It is the job of the linguists to create awareness in the field. The study has implications for people of different fields.



Key words: Psycholinguistics, Gendered language, Gender perception, Brain Functions, Social Cognition, Mind and Language.

INTRODUCTION

Language has a very important and crucial role in human communication. It serves the best way of interaction. At the same time, it is the reflection of social norms and values. Language is the reflection of both mind and society (Boroditsky, 2001). Mind perceives and produces language. And what is produced and the way it is thought has deep roots in society. There are variety of aspects of language and among different aspects one of the most impotent aspects that has gained increasing attention is psycholinguistics. Gendered language is an important fabric of any society. It determines and reflects the gendered realities of the people of those societies that in return impact the brain functioning of the people (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2002). There are studies that reflect that gender language and the usage pattern impacts the functioning of brain. These language patterns of society make beliefs and convictions of the people that form their behaviours and let them behave in a particular way (Hofstede, 2011). Thus, social cognition and brain functioning have strong ties that effect each other reciprocally.

There has been a high debate on the impacts of gendered language on cognitive control. There is a consensus that gendered language influences cognitive control to a great extent. There are stereotypical perceptions about language (Stahlberg et al., 2007). The interplay of experience of multiple languages plays an important role on the executive functions. When the phenomenon of gendered language is studied in relation with brain, it unveils many important aspects regarding cognitive benefits of speaking more languages (Cameron, 2007).

When we examine the general social situation of different communities and social groups, we realize different language patterns that have been developed based on gender identification and gender realizations (Tannen, 1990). The use of *he* for teacher and doctor for *male* while nurse for *female* and in the educational books, the pronouns used for all officers is *he*. This highlights how the language specifies the pattern of society (Holmes, 2006) that impacts the brain functions because people behave in a particular way according to their roles and importance reflected through grander language (Winter & Stereotypes, 1997). Such an impact, gender language has on brain and social perceptions.

Pakistan is a country with diversity of language and culture. Colonial and imperialistic history of Pakistan has favoured the diverse nature of its population. The Pakistanis are divided into different sections of societies and they have different gender roles that are more varied than other parts of the world. Thus, it becomes interesting to study the gendered language of Pakistani societies and understand the hidden deeper patterns of society in form of gendered languages and its ultimate impacts on brain functioning. The study wants to explore the role and influences of gendered language on social cognition, social perception, and brain functioning to go deeper into the undiscovered areas. It will give new insights to the linguists and the people of different areas.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are:

1. To explore the impact of gendered language on the functions of brain;
2. To find how much does gendered language impact on the social cognition;
3. To discover how much do the people perceive the importance of gendered language.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is a cognitive phenomenon. It is at the same time a cultural and social phenomenon as well. Language mirrors the life and its patterns of a society, a community, a country, and the wider political and social life (Lippi-Green, 1997). At the same time, language shows what are the roles of different people in society. For example, the language of the poor people will be different from the language of the rich people and the language of doctors will be different from the language of the labourers (Cameron, 1998). And the language of the male will be different from the language of the female. This is how the concept of gendered language is developed and evolved (Tannen, 1994).

Gendered language is the language that makes a border line between the people of different genders and sexes. This language mirrors the different roles of different people of society. Gendered language reflects the patterns of society. Social scientists and psycholinguists keep on trying to explore and investigate the impacts and influences of gendered language that are prevalent in society (Gilligan, 1993). Gendered language plays a very crucial role in the functioning of the brain. The people of a society make their beliefs and convictions based on the gendered language. This is how they perceive their own existence (Coates, 2008). The fabric of the brain is influenced by the fabric of society. The gendered language has influenced the brain of women a lot. In different underdeveloped countries, the language is different for men and women. Like *he* is used for all teachers and *he* is used when the indefinite pronouns are used like all, each, and either (Coates, 2015). The language differences are also found in the terms like *poet*, *poetess* and show that the gendered languages have different meanings and perceptions for both male and female. This has made deep influence on the women in these countries for long. And this is the reason, the women face mental issues and psychological problems in these countries (Hardy & Van, 2006). This is how the brain functions according to the perceptions of gendered language and social cognition. The language of the oppressor and oppressed is different and have different terms for both genders (Searle, 1995).

The experiences of the gendered languages influence the cognitive control greatly. The cognitive performances are positively/negatively influenced by these diverse experiences. Gendered language is a globally flourishing and developing phenomenon. The sociolinguistics context plays a pivotal role in exploring gendered language (Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2008). Gendered language influences different cognitive functions (McConnell-Ginet & Eckert, 2003).

Varied research has been undertaken that supports the significant cognitive impacts of Gendered languages.

The use of languages involve not only linguistics and cognitive factors but many other characteristics as well that include sociolinguistics diversity, use of languages, age of acquisition, and social status of the speakers. All these factors play a crucial role in processing and use of different languages simultaneously (Yan et al., 2019). Gendered language plays an important role in different functions of brain. There are different executive functions. Among them two important functions are: inhibitory control and working memory. Inhibitory control is a key aspect of executive function that enables an individual to suppress automatic or habitual responses favouring a goal-oriented and more appropriate action (Bak & Alladi, 2015). Working memory helps us to hold and process information over short periods of time while performing cognitive tasks like following given instructions or solving a problem (Makoni et al., 2022). Inhibitory control and working memory show cognitive flexibility that helps the brain to perform multiple tasks at the same time (Hoang, 2024). The current study has mainly focused on exploring the role of gendered language on social cognition, social perceptions, and brain functioning. The study also wants to investigate the perceptions and opinions of people about the role of gendered language and hope they are influenced by it and how their beliefs and perceptions are formed and developed by it.

Language has a very important and crucial role in human communication; it serves the best way of interaction. At the same time, it is the reflection of social norms and values (Butler & Trouble, 1990). Language is the reflection of both mind and society. Mind perceives and produces language. And what is produced and the way it is thought has deep roots in society (Haertle, 2017). There are variety of aspects of language and among different aspects, one of the most important aspects that has gained increasing attention is psycholinguistics (Jahan, 2023). Gendered language is an important fabric of any society. It determines and reflects the gender realities of the people of that societies (Sanderson, 2018) that in return impact the brain functioning of the people. There are studies that reflect that gender language and the usage pattern impact the functioning of brain (Vigliocco et al., 2005). These language patterns of society make beliefs and convictions of people that form their behaviours and let them behave in a particular way. Thus social cognition and brain functioning have strong ties that effect each other reciprocally.

When we study human cognition closely we understand that language is the pivotal part of human cognition system. It is a matter of debate whether language has biological basis and neural basis (El-Hayeck et al., 2019). In spite of the vast number of studies conducted to explore the vast regions of the brain that are involved in language production, comprehension and processing, it still seems that the field is massively unexplored because generally language is ill defined. In the modern times, by the emergence of developed neuroimaging techniques, the anatomy of the brain is substantially explored and there has been a consistency in the view of language that language is an autonomous cognitive mechanism and it has a strong neural

organization (Hay, 2019). Language is the unique human characteristics and has always followed an evolutionary process. Language is a complex phenomenon and does not follow a linear and straightforward system. It has always appealed the teachers to explore the complexity of language. There are different grounds to study language like sociology, anthropology, neurology, psychology, and many others. Abundance of research has been conducted in all these areas till now. One area that has captured the attention of the linguistic researchers is the exploration of gendered language and cognition. These are brain networks that work in language processing. A case study of brain networks show that the mind of speakers of different language works in different way. The cognitive abilities of monolinguals are different from bilinguals and bilinguals from multilinguals. Various studies have evidently investigated the impact of bilingualism and multilingualism on executive functions and found out that higher level of controlled attention is associated with bilingualism and the same is with inhibition in executive control.

Different studies have found how different gendered languages experiences effect cognitive performance in variety of contexts belonging to sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics (Ochs, 1992). They tested different cognitive tasks like working memory, cognitive flexibility, inhibition, and structural learning. Their study suggested that there is a great influence on the cognitive control by gendered languages (Misersky & Redl, 2020).

There are ample studies that substantially favor the role of gendered language on mental issues if the society has vast boundaries between genders shown through language (Bencherki et al., 2019). It has in return a bad impact on working memory. People with these issues have problems to retain and recall information more efficiently when they are under pressure of gendered languages. They are unable to have strong working memory with constant mental pressure (Alaghbary et al., 2015).

In psycholinguistics, gendered language has been a great interest for psycholinguists and sociolinguistics. It is based on pronoun *you*, *he*, *she*, *they* and occupational titles (Tripp & Munson, 2022). It has long been debated whether the language is same for all the people of society or it is different, if it is different what is the influence of this difference of language on the people of a society (Reeves, 2016). Languages with grammatical gender systems, such as French or German, impose gender distinctions even in inanimate nouns (Malmkjar, 2009). In contrast, natural-gender languages like English reveal biases through occupational titles (e.g., "fireman") or generic pronouns ("he" for an unspecified person) (Coates, 2015). This distinction has significant implications for cognitive and social processes, including the reinforcement of gender stereotypes.

Research in psycholinguistics highlights how gendered language influences cognitive processes. Language and sexuality are interlinked and this interlink impacts brain as well (Cameron & Kulick, 2003). Experimental studies have shown that individuals exposed to gender-neutral language are less likely to activate gendered mental schemas compared to those exposed to gendered forms (Holmes, 2014). For instance, reading texts with masculine generics

leads participants to imagine male figures disproportionately, even when the intended reference is gender-neutral (Kupferberg, 2013).

METHODOLOGY

The study has employed a quantitative data collection approach. The quantitative approach is most suitable here as it allows to collect large scale data. The study aims at discovering the impact of gendered language on social cognition, brain functioning, and social perceptions. It is appropriate to collect data from large population. This is why the quantitative research approach has been used to collect data. The objectives of the study are:

- 1- To explore the impact of gendered language on the functions of brain;
- 2- To find how much does gendered language impact on the social cognition;
- 3- To discover how much do the people perceive the importance of gendered language.

To get these aims and objectives quantitative research approaches best suited.

PARTICIPANTS

The study recruited 100 participants. 50 were male and 50 female. The rationale behind making both genders participants is to make the data more valid and authentic. It also wants to make data more comprehensive. The male and female 100 in number have been selected from varied age groups. This is again important to collect comprehensive and valid data so that the findings of the study can be generalized for the wider population.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

A structured questionnaire was developed as the primary tool for data collection. The questionnaire was designed to measure participants' perceptions, attitudes, and opinions about gendered language and brain functioning. It includes questions based on varied statements about gendered language, brain functions, social cognition, and social perception. The questionnaire is designed carefully and counter-checked from two social psychologists to increase its authenticity and validity. A four-point Likert scale was used for all perception-related questions, ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. This scale allowed for nuanced responses and facilitated statistical analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Following is the questionnaire that was administered during the study to collect that data from 100 participants: male and female from different age groups:

Questionnaire based on Gendered Language and Its Impact on Gender Perception, Social Cognition, and Brain Functions	
Sr No.	STATEMENTS

1	I often encounter gendered language in everyday conversations.
2	I believe gendered language has an impact on how people perceive gender roles.
3	Gender-neutral language would reduce gender bias in communication.
4	When I think of a leader, I typically imagine them as male.
5	I think gendered language shapes children's understanding of gender roles.
6	I have changed my behavior based on someone's gender in a social setting.
7	I believe gendered language affects my perception of a person's personality traits
8	In social situations, I feel compelled to conform to gender expectations
9	The use of gendered language affects how I process information about people or situations.
10	Gendered language influences how I remember people or events
11	Gendered language influences my decision-making in professional or social settings
12	Gendered language influences how I process social interactions and group dynamics.
13	I often feel mentally overwhelmed when dealing with gendered language in social situations.
14	The way gender is described in language affects how I make judgments about others' abilities
15	When I encounter gendered language, I find it difficult to move past gender stereotypes.

Table 1: Statements of the Questionnaire

The collected data has been analyzed using SPSS. The frequencies of each question have been calculated and presented in pie charts so that the opinions, perceptions, and beliefs of the respondents could be analyzed and further the phenomenon of gendered language and social and brain function can be understood. The frequencies of each question and subsequent pie chart have been presented one by one that is discussed as well.

Q 1- I often encounter gendered language in everyday conversations.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	50	50%
Agree	30	30%
Disagree	10	10%
Strongly disagree	10	10%
total	100	100%

Table 2: Gendered Language in Everyday Conversations

Data shows that 80 respondents (80%) showed approval with agree and strongly agree about their perception and experiences of interactions with the gendered language. Majority agreed that they encounter the gendered languages frequently in societies. These people gave strong arguments on this. Gendered language is a great phenomenon of life and it has widespread impacts on life. Following diagram throws ample light on it.

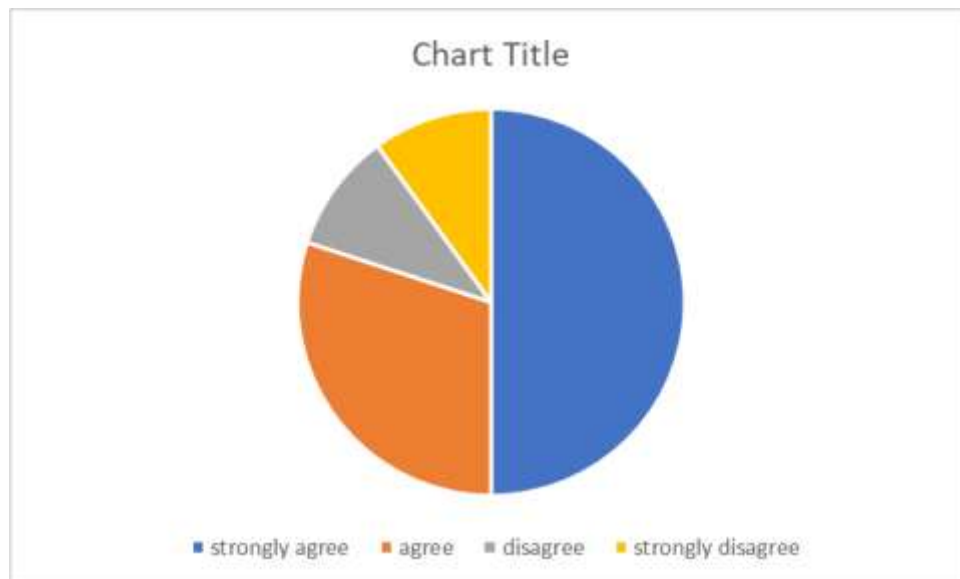


Figure 1: Gendered Language in Everyday Conversations

Q 2- I believe gendered language has an impact on how people perceive gender roles.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	10	10%
Agree	60	60%

Disagree	15	15%
Strongly disagree	15	15%
Total	100	100%

Table 3: Impacts of Gendered Language

Data shows that 70 respondents (70 %) showed positive responses. The Majority of the respondents agree with the statement that gendered language impacts people's perception about life and different gender roles. Gendered language is very much important to reflect the genders' roles. This is gendered language that mirrors social perceptions and dynamics. This language also reinforces the division of society regarding roles that give identity to the people. These roles also determine cognitive processes that are the interplay of mind and language.

Q 3- Gender-neutral language would reduce gender bias in communication.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	23	23%
Agree	45	45%
Disagree	26	26%
Strongly disagree	6	6%
Total	100	100%

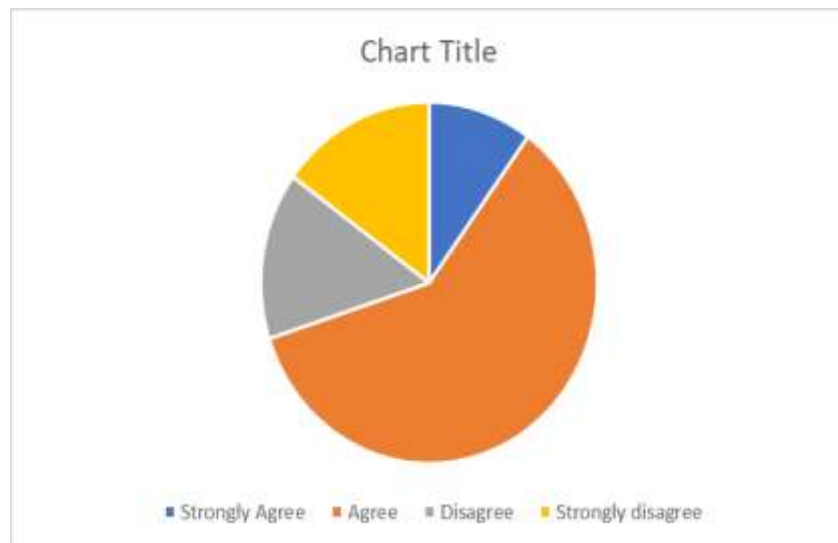


Figure 2: Impacts of Gendered Language

Table 4: Gender-neutral Language

Data shows that 68 respondents (68 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree. Gender-neutral language would reduce gender bias in communication. These respondents are in favor of gender neutral language that can reduce the social pressure and conflicts among people. Many social and cognitive problems can be reduced with this type of language that is the mirror of mind and society. What is spoken indexes what is thought and perceived and what is ultimately believed. This is the reason that psycholinguistics pay special focus on the impact of language on cognition and the superiority of language means that the cognition system is more flexible and the gender that has more superiority through language reflects the supremacy that influences mind.

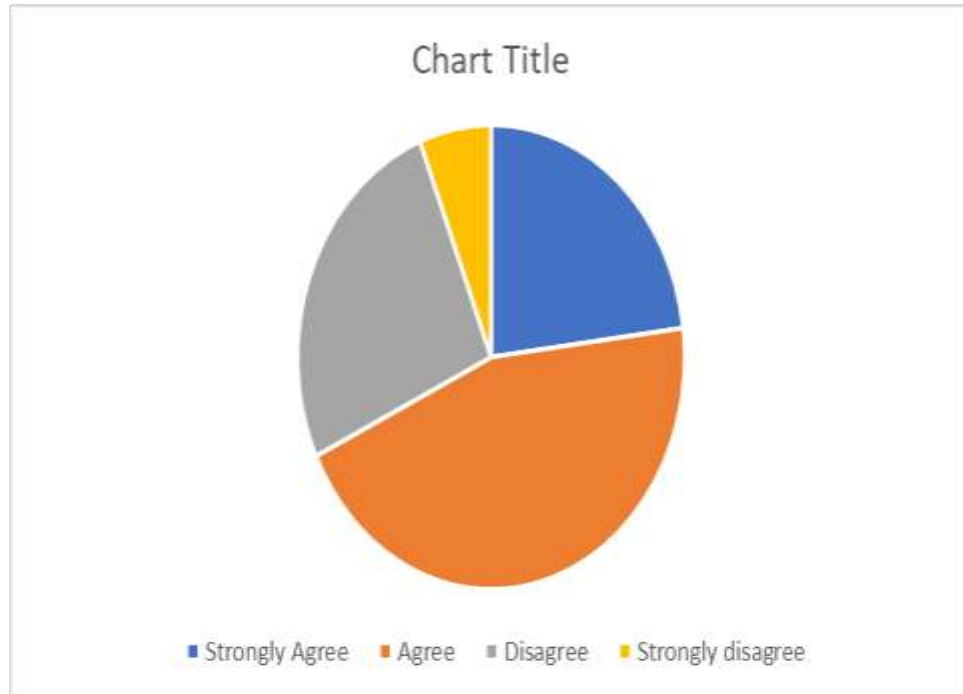


Figure 3: Gender-neutral Language

Q 4- When I think of a leader, I typically imagine them as male.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	34	34%
Agree	45	45%
Disagree	17	17%
Strongly disagree	4	4%
Total	100	100%

Table 5: Thoughts about a Leader

Data indicates that 79 respondents (79%) agreed and strongly agreed when they think of leaders, they typically imagine them as male. Many societies that are male dominated societies have specific roles of gender orientation. Those roles are different in nature and importance. There is a set pattern and perception that the greater roles are assigned to male than the female. This is the reason, the people who are not known, they understand that the bigger role of that society or position is given to male. This also badly impacts cognition and the capabilities of mind because the people with this segregation have stress patterns and anxiety issues. It also impacts their mind and its functioning that impacts their language.

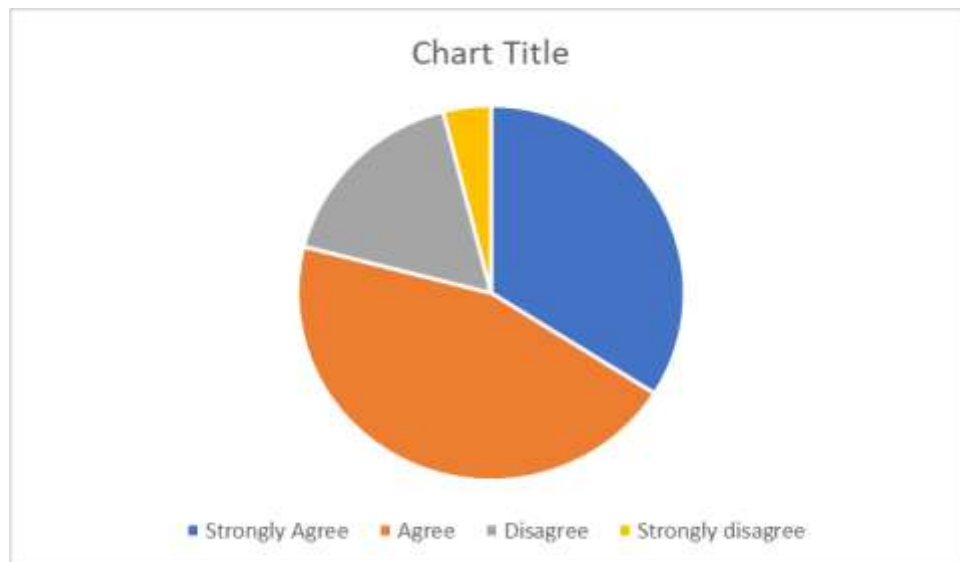


Figure 4: Thoughts about a Leader

Q 5- I think gendered language shapes children's understanding of gender roles.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	22	22%

Agree	42	42%
Disagree	25	25%
Strongly disagree	11	11%
Total	100	100%

Table 6: Gendered Language Shapes Children's Understanding

Data shows that 64 respondents (64 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that gendered language shapes children's understanding about gender roles. These people have a strong opinion that gender language impacts the thoughts of the children as well. From the very beginning, their brain functioning has the imprints that gendered language shapes their identity. They start to create their personalities and beliefs according to that. Thus, the gendered language impacts their brain that impacts their language capabilities as well and hinders their growth.

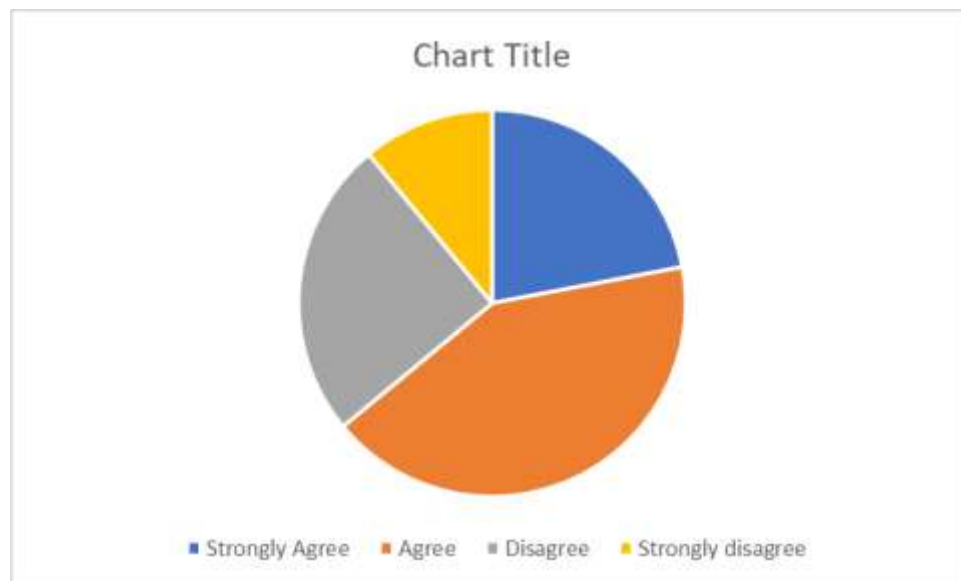


Figure 5: Gendered Language Shapes Children's Understanding

Q 6- I have changed my behavior based on someone's gender in a social setting.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	39	39%
Agree	32	32%
Disagree	22	22%
Strongly disagree	7	6%
Total	100	100%

Table 7: Gender in a Social Setting

Data shows that 71 respondents (71 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that they have changed their behavior based on someone's gender in a social setting. Gendered language is important because it reflects what society is and what people are in the dynamics of that society. What life is and how it is perceived. The people have consent on the importance of gendered language and the way it affects mind and social cognition. Thus the respondents were positive in their opinions and perceptions of gendered language that it can affect their mind and personalities.

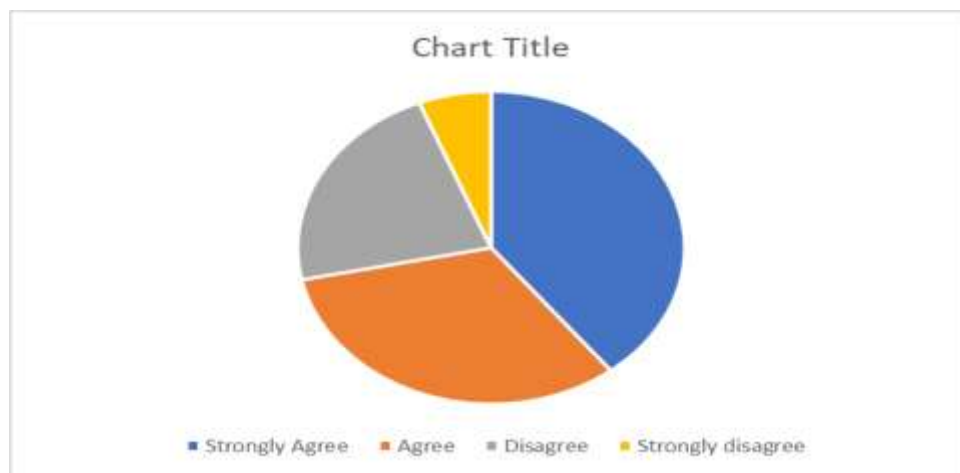


Figure 6: Gender in a Social Setting

Q 7- I believe gendered language affects my perception of a person's personality traits.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	35	35%
Agree	38	38%
Disagree	18	18%
Strongly disagree	8	8%
Total	100	100%

Table 8: Gendered Language and Perception of a Person's Personality

Data shows that 73 respondents (73 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that they believe gendered language affects their perception of a person's personality traits. Brain works with what they think and the way they think. When gendered language sets an environment of differentiation it affects the behaviors and cognitive fiber of the people. Their mind starts to perceive people in different way that is fully dependent on the gender language usage in society.

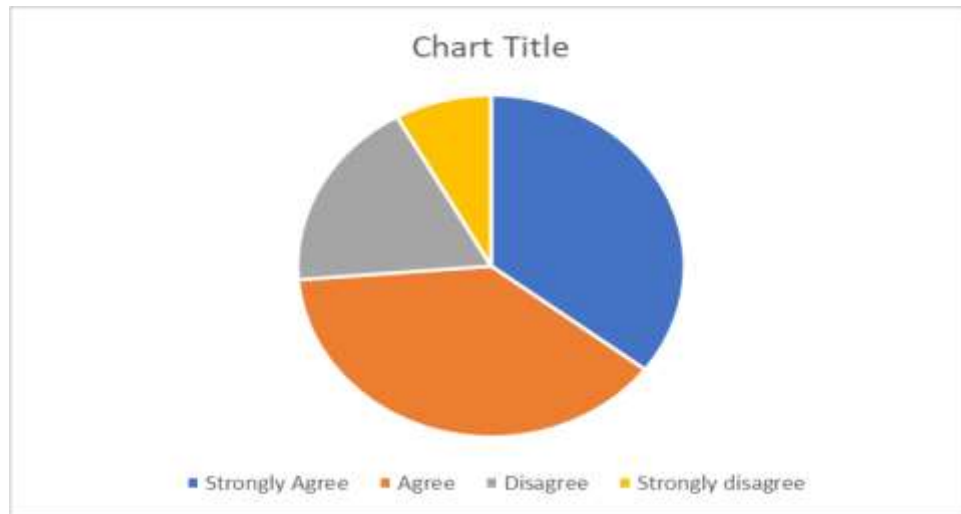


Figure 7: Gendered Language and Perception of a Person's Personality

Q 8-Gendered language influences how I remember people or events.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	24	24%
Agree	32	32%
Disagree	33	33%
Strongly disagree	11	11%
Total	100	100%

Table 9: Gendered Language and Memory

Data shows that 56 respondents (56 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that gendered language influences how they remember people or events. Gendered language plays an important role in memory and decision making. When the people have different tags and labels, it is easy to remember them. As gender language divides that society in different sections and all the sections have different language realization based on their gender.

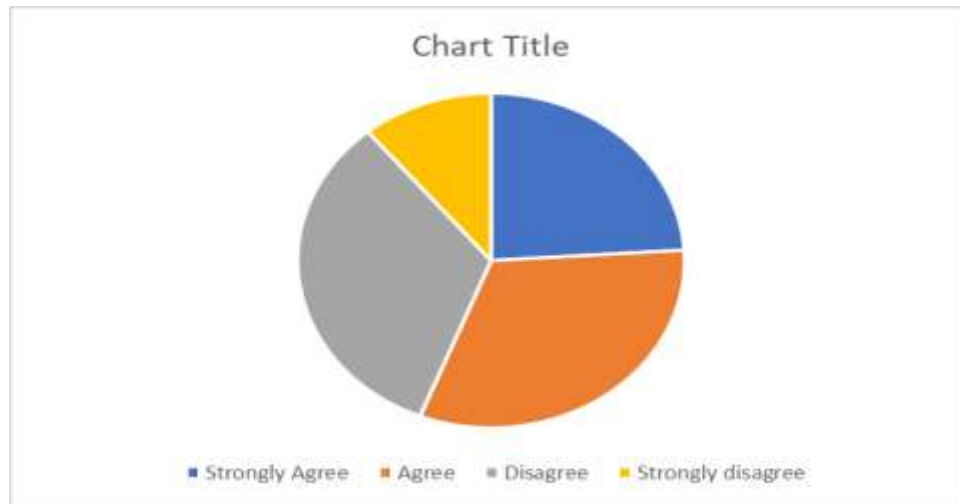


Figure 8: Gendered Language and Memory

Q 9- Gendered language influences my decision-making in professional or social settings.		
	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	23	23%
Agree	43	43%
Disagree	20	20%
Strongly disagree	14	14%
Total	100	100%

Table 10: Gendered Language Influences the decision-making

Data shows that 66 respondents (66 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that gendered language influences their decision-making in professional or social settings. Gendered language influences decision making that is the functioning of brain and it is impacted either negatively or positively by the gendered language. Brain has different functions and every function reflects the personality of an individual. Decision making is a cognitive function that helps an individual to make decisions and decide about their lives and in return about others'

lives. Brain functioning is impacted with the gendered language that is a great phenomenon of modern life as it was of old classical life.

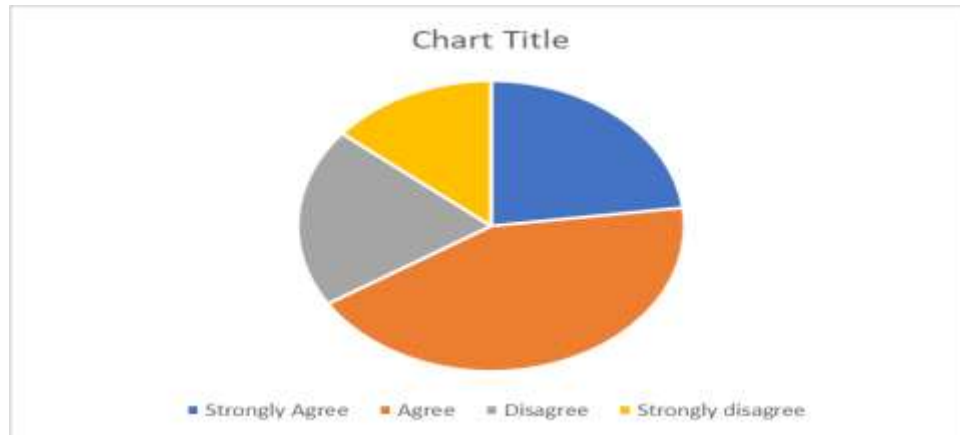


Figure 9: Gendered Language Influences the decision-making

Q 10- I often feel mentally overwhelmed when dealing with gendered language in social situations.

	Frequency	Percent
Strongly Agree	38	38%
Agree	32	32%
Disagree	26	26%
Strongly disagree	2	2%
Total	100	100%

Table 11: Gendered Language in Social Situations

Data shows that 70 respondents (70 %) showed approval with agree and strongly agree that they often feel mentally overwhelmed when dealing with gendered language in social situations. The functioning of brain is impacted by the gendered language because it forms pattern of man’s mind. When we study psycholinguistics deeply, we understand that language is a complicated phenomenon that is impacted with the patterns of mind and to a great extent with social cognition as well. The structures of society form different meanings and

interpretations of language. And this language is stored in mind. It is perceived and produced that is the outcome of social cognition, formed through gendered language.

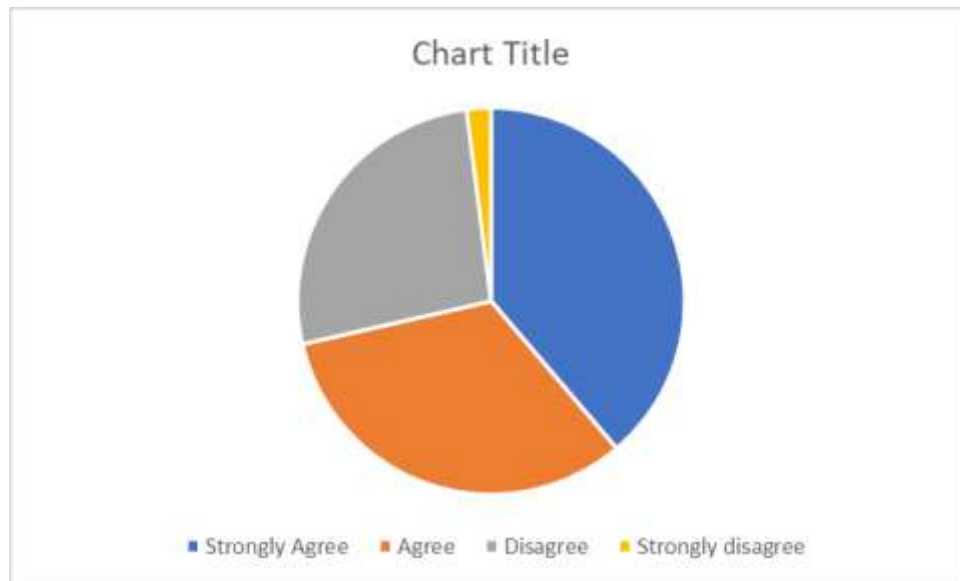


Figure 10: Gendered Language in Social Situations

The data has been analyzed extensively to explore the relationship between gendered language, social cognition, and brain functioning. The data were collected through likert-scale questionnaire and the analysis shows that the respondents were positive in their perceptions, opinions, and beliefs about the impact of gendered language on social cognition, and brain functioning. Gendered language is an important aspect of society. It is deep rooted in the culture of every society. Although, with the spread of education and the empowerment of women, the gendered language is now decreasing and replaced by gender-neutral language. But, still in third world countries and the countries that are underdeveloped, gendered language is in use and there are different labels and tags for men and women. Sometimes, these different labels become the main and the major reason of psychological conflicts of the people. When these people are reflected and known through the language that tell that they are different or sometimes inferior from other people of society, this shatters their fabric of mind and creates distortion in their personalities. This ultimately impacts on their mind and language. We know that psycholinguistics deal with language and brain. The distorted brain will never produce ordered language. It will badly impact the language. Thus, the taboos of gendered language impact the brain functioning in a negative or positive way depending who is oppressed through the gendered language and who is upheld. If one section of society is negatively influenced by gendered language other section on the other hand is positively influenced as well.

This study aimed to investigate how gendered language influences the way individuals process social information, interpret gender roles, and how it may activate distinct neural mechanisms. After conducting an extensive research, the results indicate several important findings that suggest the profound effect of gendered language on cognitive functions and brain activity, especially in the areas related to social cognition, stereotype activation, and processing of gendered information.

The results of the study demonstrate that gendered language plays a critical role in shaping social cognition by influencing how individuals interpret and categorize social information. This aligns with previous research indicating that children and adults alike are more likely to categorize individuals' behaviors and characteristics according to traditional gender roles when exposed to gendered language.

Thus, the study reveals that gendered language plays a vital role in developing social perceptions and cognition that in turn impacts the brain functioning to a great extent. The societies with wide spread use of gendered language face more challenges related to mind and language.

CONCLUSION

The analysis demonstrates that gendered language can positively influence social cognition and gender perception by reinforcing identity, fostering inclusivity, and respecting cultural norms. While challenges remain in balancing tradition with progress, the findings underscore the transformative potential of language in shaping a more equitable society. The study concludes with insights about gendered language, social cognition, and brain functioning. Our societies reflect gendered language that create a line between people of different genders and this specification also reveals their different roles. The data sheds light on important findings that have wider implications and significance. Gendered language is the reality of many societies. At one level it is the source of social recognition and on the other side it is the cause of social segregation. Gendered language shapes the way the people perceive the world and judge their personalities. This judgement influences the patterns of the brain that regulates the language. Thus there is an interplay between language, brain, and society. All reciprocate one another and strengthen or weaken the personality of the person who is influenced by this interplay. We can make judgement that there should be equality in language and the education and social system should promote gendered-neutral language. Thus the study has wider significance for educationists, sociolinguists, and psycholinguists. It is hoped that there will be linguistic equality in future for smooth psychological and sociological frames.

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