

# Grammatical Gender in Story Texts: Interaction of Linguistic Structure, Culture and Cognition

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## Abstract

*This paper is based on textbook analysis to explore the interaction of a specific grammatical component-grammatical gender-with the socio-cultural notions of gender and anthropomorphism in children's literature. The language under study is Hindi, which has a two-gender system. Numerous studies (e.g. Boroditsky, Schmidt and Phillips, 2003; Basetti, 2014) have shown that grammatical gender colors speakers' perception of nouns. For the present study, Hindi textbooks of classes I-III used in government schools across India were analysed. The objective was to investigate the tools of personification used for animal characters, in particular gender assignment via cues related to physical attributes or social addresses. It was found that despite the logical possibility of representing both sexes for almost all animal species (using proper names and other means), a significant percentage of assigned gender correlated with the default grammatical gender of the animals. In one instance, the teachers' instructions also followed this mapping. Additionally, the ratio of grammatically masculine to feminine animals was 2:1. Analysis of gender-marking cues other than agreement indicates that grammatical gender affects the speakers' perceptions of animal characters. Given the dominant presence of animal characters in children's literature, such an effect, combined with the skewed representational ratio between the two genders can accentuate the marginal representation of feminine gender even in imagined constructions such as a story. In my paper I have tried to present a possible alternative to this.*

**Key words:** Grammatical gender, Linguistic relativity, Animal characters, Story texts, Skewed representation

## Introduction

The term “gender” in linguistic description originated from “genus” or “kind” (Corbett, 2006), and is used to refer to nominal categorization on a number of bases ranging from animacy (nouns being animate or inanimate) to biological sex. There are languages in the world which have more than twenty categories of nouns (or “genders”), while others such as Bangla do not manifest any such nominal categorization. Languages with “natural” gender categorize nouns in correspondence with their naturally existing biological sex (that is masculine/feminine/neuter

corresponding with biologically male/female/neither). Languages with “grammatical” gender, on the other hand, mostly categorize all non-human referents (animals and inanimate objects) on an arbitrary basis into masculine, feminine and/or neuter (debates regarding the arbitrariness of grammatical gender are still on), although there is a high correlation between the biological sex of humans and their grammatical gender.

Hindi is a two-gender language in which all nouns are treated as either masculine or feminine. However, for us humans, gender has a semantic basis, i.e. it corresponds with the biological sex.

In animals, although there are instances of semantic pairs such as *chuuha-chuhiya* (male and female rat), all species have a default grammatical gender which is used in most instances unless there is a special context which requires the “marked” gender to be specified. So, *chuuha* (masculine) is the default grammatical gender that governs the gender-marking on the verb, adjective, genitive, etc., attached to the noun.

Informal approaches to linguistic analysis, grammatical gender, like any other morpho-syntactic component, is taken as a “purely” structural component. But recent studies in cognitive linguistic frameworks have shown that a large component of any human language—not only its use but also its structures—is grounded in the cultural-cognitive processes involved in language-use (Diessel & Hilpert, 2016). Experimental studies based on languages where grammatical gender is contrasted (Boroditsky, Phillips & Schmidt, 2003; Saalbach, Imai & Schalk, 2012; Pavlidou & Alvanoudi, 2013) have repeatedly shown (with exceptions) that speakers are affected by the presence of grammatical gender. Further, gender assignment tasks also show a positive correlation with grammatical gender.

An important finding across these studies is that the impact of grammatical gender on cognition is strongest in the case of “animals” (Bassetti, 2014). This finding is especially relevant for the present study as it is based on the same semantic class. Almost all languages of the world have stories with animal characters. This anthropomorphism serves several purposes, as outlined by Bruke & Copenhaver (2004), such as allowing an emotional distance from a painful or emotionally disturbing situation. For young readers, animal characters are a lot more than mere animals. Their deep association and

identification with animal characters is what gives such texts widespread appeal and an indispensable place in children’s literature. Hence, what goes into the characterization of these animal characters assumes tremendous relevance, socially, psychologically and pedagogically.

According to linguistic relativity hypothesis, “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages.” (Whorf, 1956). In broader terms, the structure of a language can impose certain kinds of usages and characterizations in encoding information and experience that may differ considerably from the way another language encodes the same information and experience. In this paper, I will explore what kind of specific characterization (if any) grammatical gender imposes on animal characters in Hindi texts.

### **Characterization of Animal Characters in Hindi Texts**

For the purpose of this study, I analysed the NCERT Hindi textbooks of classes I to III to see if genderization was used to personify the characters. The aim of the study was to explore whether the assumed gender of animal characters in story texts, as assessed by cues other than the usual syntactic marking like kinship terms as address, correlates with the grammatical gender of the animal species.

The coding of relevant information was done on the basis of the correlation between the animals’ projected/assigned gender and grammatical gender. If the two genders correlated, the usual syntactic agreement was termed “unmarked”; additional cues in the form of social addresses, physical features, etc., were coded as “marked”. Two specific texts have been discussed here separately.

The textbook had the following animal characters belonging to two gender categories:

Table 1

Details of Gender Assignment to Animal Characters in Hindi Textbooks of Grades I-III

Grade	Grammatically Masculine Animals			Grammatically Feminine Animals		
	According to GG		Opposite to GG	According to GG		Opposite to GG
	Marked	Unmarked		Marked	Unmarked	
I	3	11	0	2	4	1
II	5	6	1	1	3	0
III	6	2	0	3	3	0
Total	14	19	1	6	10	1

Note: GG- Grammatical Gender

Masculine: mouse (6), bear (2), monkey (3), lion (3), tiger (1), parrot (1), horse (1), dog (1), elephant (2), leopard (1), tortoise (1), snake (1), camel (1), crow (1), wolf (1), offspring of various animals (a total of 7 offspring across 4 species)

Assigned grammatically feminine- mouse (1)

Feminine: cat (5), spider (2), squirrel (1), fox (3), butterfly (2), housefly (2), cuckoo (1)

Assigned grammatically masculine- goat (1)

The following observations were made on the basis of these findings:

1. Most texts have an overwhelming number of grammatically masculine animals. The average masculine: feminine ratio is 2:1 (33 masculine compared to 16 feminine characters). If one looks at the range of masculine and feminine animals, the ratio is even more skewed as there are 19 grammatically masculine animals (including animal offspring shown as males) as opposed to 7 grammatically feminine animals.
2. There is a very high correlation (96 per cent) between the grammatical and assumed gender. Only 2 out of a total of 51 animal characters were portrayed as belonging to a gender opposite to that of the default (grammatical) gender. Counter-intuitive gender representations included feminine “mouse” and masculine “goat”.
3. The additional cues that mark gender apart from normal syntactic agreement mostly included social addresses and kinship terms. Of a total of 51 cues, there were 18 instances of gender-marked social addresses and 2 instances where physical features (moustache) were used to mark gender.
4. Additional genderization was rendered by the use of adjectives. Generally taken as a part of syntactic agreement, the adjectives nonetheless served to create an additional gendered image of the animal character. Examples of adjectives include *nanha* (little, masc.), *bechara* (poor fellow, masc.), *chhota* (small, masc.). Clearer gendered use could be seen in addresses such as ‘*Are o!*’ (for males) and ‘*Ari*’ (for females).
5. The two texts presented a case where the entire discourse was constructed on the premise that a grammatically masculine animal was male and a grammatically feminine animal was female. This is

analogous to a human world situation right down to the culturally-defined stereotypical behavior of males and females. This is evident from the summary of the first text (*Billi Kaise Rehne aai Manushya ke Sang*, class II):

A cat lives with her “cousin brother” lion and she is unhappy because she has to do a lot of housework. She also prepares food for the “lion”, but he usually eats up all the food. Once, when the “lion” falls sick and other animals visit him, he “orders” the “sister” to prepare food for them. Since there is no fire at home, he orders her to run to a nearby human dwelling to bring fire. When she reaches there, the kids start pampering her because they find her “soft” and “silky”. She feels so good that she is delayed in getting the fire. When she returns late with the fire, lion is extremely angry and growls at her and the cat runs back to human dwellings.

The “maleness” of the lion and the “femaleness” of the cat are constructed using not only the address terms *bhaiya* and *behen* (brother and sister), but also through accompanying visuals (dress, facial expressions, etc.). The dialogues also show a power hierarchy in statements/dialogues such as, Lion: “It’s time for my meal and you haven’t laid it out yet?” and Cat: “Will just do it brother!” The overall plot is entrenched in the positioning of male and female roles in terms of the work distribution, authority and even the physical features of the female, who is described as being “soft”, “little one”, etc.

The second text is a popular story “*Bandar-Baant*” (class III) in which, two cats fight over a loaf of bread. A monkey intervenes to “decide” on the matter and on the pretext of dividing the bread equally between the cats, eats it all up bit by bit.

Apart from the fact that the cats have been portrayed as females (they address each other as *behen*) and the monkey as male (addressed by the cats as *saahab* implying Sir), the overall plot echoes the subtle power positions in the male-female interactions in our society. In such interactions, the male usually has the authority to intervene and to pass a judgment, and often tricks the “dumb” females. The two cats, instead of fighting it out between themselves, prefer the intervention of a male who will “decide” who the bread belongs to. Later, though the cats realize that they have been tricked, are portrayed as helplessly looking on. The most surprising part though, is that the instructions to enact the story clearly state that a 7-8-year-old boy can play the role of the monkey and two girls aged 5-6 years can play the roles of the cats, complete with gender-specific dresses. This clearly shows the gendered cognition of book-writers, who are supposedly native Hindi speakers.

### **Interaction of “Grammatical” Gender with “Sociological” Gender and its Mapping with “Biological” Sex**

It is clear from the above analysis that there is a direct correlation between the gender assigned to the animal characters and their grammatical gender. This is even more relevant considering that this is the only semantic class, logically and factually, in which either of the two genders can be placed in most situations. In addition to the gender-marked sentences necessitated by the grammar of Hindi, one finds additional cues of assumed gender. These range from nouns appended with social addresses and explicit gender-specific physical features such as a moustache, to entire texts constructed analogous to the male-female equations in human society, with grammatical gender providing the basis for gender assignment. It is interesting to note how a small, supposedly “naïve” structural element

of a language can affect the perception of even adult native speakers (book-writers), when they specify roles for male and female children oblivious to the mapping of grammatical gender and biological sex. Such unconscious language use has been attributed to “habitual language use patterns induced by linguistic structure” by several scholars including Gumperz & Levinson (1996) and is in line with the linguistic relativity hypothesis.

The other major point brought out by the analysis is the skewed representation of the sexes (or genders); there were half the number and range of feminine animals as compared to masculine animals (although the overall distribution itself is skewed). This has been addressed by scholars such as McCabe et al. (2011), who term the under-representation of females as a symbolic *annihilation*, that is a conspicuous ‘absence’ of females in linguistic and non-linguistic representations. Others such as Lakoff (1973) and Wodak (2015) talk about the *androcentricity* of English texts. Hindi provides an additional tool in the form of grammatical gender, which further adds to the re-production and expansion of the human world gender-divide and hierarchy maintenance to include the animal world and imagined discourses.

### Can something be Done?

The above analysis shows that linguistic categorization of animal species as generic masculine and feminine forces a gender-skewed representation. One alternative to this may be to use more proper names than common names for animals. This can be accompanied by gender-neutral visuals. For instance, instead of a lion/tiger being represented as default masculine (grammatically), or a squirrel/sparrow being represented as default feminine, some of these characters may be assigned names typically representative of the opposite gender. In fact, the popularity of animal characters in

children’s stories comes as a much-needed aid here, because this is the only semantic class (except humans) that has both male and female counterparts. Hence the names of the characters can be from both genders, and alternate sentence-structures can be employed for this. The classic story “*Gillu Gilehri*” by Mahadevi Varma, although meant for older readers, deserves a special mention here as it is based on a squirrel (grammatically feminine in Hindi) who is given a masculine name by the author. The storyline follows it up with a corresponding sentence-structure, even though the feminine form is used for other squirrels. Another such story of contemporary times is “*Roopa Haathi*”, in which the author assigns a feminine name to an elephant (grammatically masculine in Hindi).

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