

Clearing the ground: Basic concepts and issues in gender and language variation

Key terms used in this section:

- sex
- gender
- exclusive
- preferential
- constitutive
- reflective

1. Sex vs. Gender:

Sex refers to the biological distinction between females and males whereas gender refers to the socio-cultural distinction between women and men.

2. Exclusive vs. Preferential features:

Mayerhoff (2006) notes that, across gender, variants can be divided into two main categories-exclusive and preferential. Nevertheless, it is the latter which became the focus of many variationist studies.

a. Exclusive gender features:

- Exclusive features are those which are **only** used by speakers of a particular sex. E.g, **kinship** terminology: aunty, aunt or auntie refer to a female person (Mayerhoff, 2006)
- In Moari, sibling words convey some information about the referent and the speaker. For instance, “**teina**” says that the referent is **younger** than the speaker, and that both are of the same gender. (Meryhoff, 2006)

- **Direct indexing:** Teina, he, she, his, and her are **Direct Index** of gender. That is, they carry a semantic identity (female of male) in them. (Meryhoff, 2006).

b. Preferential Gender features:

- As noted, preferential forms were and continue to be the focus of many sociolinguistic works (Eckert, 2008; Labov, 1963; Trudgill, 1974)
- Features distributed across the groups but it is frequently used by one group more than the other. For instance, neologisms, slang, or swear words are more likely to be used by men than by women.

3. Reflexive Vs. constitutive features:

- The link between speech forms and their social meanings, it has been believed, is not only reflective, echoing the social identities and socio-demographic backgrounds, but also constructive, in a sense that speakers may actively manipulate variants to construct their own social identities (Eckert, 2008). With respect to gender, women, for instance, may deliberately employ some speech forms to express their femaleness and feminism along some other social stances.