

An Analysis on Gender Dynamics of (Para) linguistic Features Used by a Selected Sample of Social Network Users in Sri Lanka

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Upeksha Jayasuriya^{1(*)}

¹*Department of Languages, General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Sri Lanka*

(*) E.mail: upekshajayasuriya@gmail.com

Online platforms can be considered as an ideal canvas to explore the interplay between language and gender. In view of that, this study attempts to reconceptualise gender from a social constructivist perspective, with the expectation that the study of online discourse can contribute to evaluate the impracticality of understanding gender in dualistic terms of male and female. Accordingly, it focuses on investigating what gender-based (para)linguistic features may be found in Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) and whether there exists a difference in the manner women and men use (para)linguistic features in public and private platforms. Therefore, this study takes a Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis approach in analysing 160 language samples/chat history from Facebook, WhatsApp and Viber, authored by 20 participants who are a selection of Sri Lankan social network users, aged 20-35 years. Further, follow-up interviews were conducted with the same sample to elicit reasons behind certain usage of (para)linguistic devices. The findings challenge the binary categorization and typicality attributed to discursive features of language used by females and males as language samples did not at all times possessed features of Typically Female and Typically Male discursive binaries ascribed by previous researchers. The mere deviance in discourse and strategies used by participants in private and public online platforms, destabilized conventional notions about men's and women's discursive styles in virtual spaces while questioning the fixity of gender. It further invited gender to be perceived as a plural, with a range of femininities and masculinities performed in context-appropriate ways. Finally, the findings highlighted that, besides gender, the context and the relationship between interlocutors were considered to be pivotal in shaping online discursive practices.

Keywords: Gender binaries, (para) linguistic features, online discourses, femininities, masculinities