

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN NEWS DURING THE TIMES OF THE CORONA PANDEMIC: CONTENT ANALYSIS OF TAMIL NEWSPAPERS FOR GENDER BIAS

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Abstract

Language is a cultural phenomenon and it reflects all the shades of the social establishment and its provincial manifestations of the collective consciousness. Any language use is bound to obey the framework that prevails in within the establishment. It also encompasses the use of language in information industries such as mass media, especially in newspapers where the use of language is direct and predominant. Gender bias is also one of the provincial manifestations and as such newspapers are bound to reflect the phenomenon as it prevails in the language of a society. Numerous studies conducted to identify and study the gender bias present in newspapers throw light on this topic. This research paper is one such attempt to identify and study gender bias that prevails in Tamil newspapers during the times of the Corona Pandemic 2020. The study manually analyzes news stories published in the five best Tamil newspapers in the context of gender representation and the subsequent prevalence of gender bias in the content and the language. The results show that there are a few commonly identified forms of gender bias in Tamil news stories in keeping with gender bias that exists in English newspapers. However, the study also reveals that there are a few unique gender bias forms that prevail in the Tamil news stories that merit scholarly investigation. The paper testifies the scope for further research in this area in order to encourage the practice of writing gender neutral news stories.

Key words

Gender bias, Corona Pandemic, Newspaper, media, Tamil Newspapers

Introduction

Language is a cultural phenomenon and it is bound to represent all the realities of the society that embraces the culture in order to execute its functional role effectively. Representation of gender and the various semantic and pragmatic aspects scaffolding it also reflects the fundamental nature of the society: any language is gender biased if its users function in a socially-biased establishment viz. patriarchy. Such bias permeates and percolates into the use of the language in all records from an individual's everyday speech to a representative mass communication instrument viz. news stories (MacArthur, Cundiff & Mehl 2020). "Since gendered and sexist language was first addressed by early feminists, growing attention has been paid in the media, in schools and academia and in theology to the harmful and often unintentionally negative effects of biased, gendered and non-inclusive language" (Toward Communication Free of Gender Bias, 2020).

The seepage of gender bias through language and expression is intrinsically subtle in otherwise a neutral medium such as newspaper, which proclaims as well as strives to remain neutral, that only a meticulous analysis could reveal such biases, much to the shock and chagrin of the unconscious user. Sometimes, the perceived degree and quantity of prejudices can also turn out to be exaggerated by advocates who have a vested interest in conveniently blanketing cultural practices to gain mileage for a particular cause. Therefore, scholarly research is required in analyzing the use of language in a neutral mass medium such as newspapers in order to identify and highlight anomalies viz. gender-biased language use. This paper aims at analyzing the content of news stories related the Corona pandemic published in five of the most popular Tamil dailies during the corona pandemic of 2020. The paper will first frame a few parameters defining gender-bias in the context of language use in Tamil newspapers. The study will analyze the content of the news stories to identify gender bias if any based on the set parameters. The results will be analyzed using simple statistical tools.

Gender bias in newspapers

"When men and women are treated differently, in a way that is unfair," There is gender bias, says Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. 'Unfair treatment' based on gender is the key in identifying gender bias in a situation. Gender bias as it prevails in all walks of life, it is also common in the mass media industry. "Male dominance in global media is well documented, and has been for many decades. Both in newsrooms and in news, men are leaders—they make more money, get more bylines, spend more time on-camera, and are quoted far more often than women—by a ratio of about

3:1” (Lafrance, 2016). Besides the ratio of representation, there is gender bias that manifests in language use both covertly and overtly. Such gender bias can be observed in the description, profiling, and interacting with people for news information. News writing, especially in newspapers focus on men and women with preconceived prejudices reflecting the popular conceptions of the society on gender. While language use exhibits intrinsic cultural queues concerning gender bias, the focus of the news story and the pictures that accompany them explicitly reflect the mindset of the society. On the other hand, there is proven research that highlights how news media is capable of shaping public perception on various issues including gender sensitization (Allan, 1998). In this context, studies on the presence of gender bias focus and language use in news stories become significant in identifying gender bias elements in order to rectify them to impact social perception in the near future.

The gender bias that prevails in the mass media industry cannot be solely attributed to the news writers though they have a major part of play in perpetuating the gender bias attitudes and actions in the society. “Few Journalists try to make their words choices offensive or demeaning to anybody. Most are proud of their efforts to keep up with developments and attitudes of the day, making certain, especially, that their words are fair in all respects to women, the elderly, the handicapped and members of all races as well as to individuals and their groups” (Botts, 1994). These journalists fall victim to gender biased societies and its cultural practices including linguistic communication. Mass media informs to the society but it informs of the society. Therefore, the colour of the social establishment both black and white and myriad hues in between are bound to be represented in spite of the upholding of the moral and ethical responsibility of telling the story with a balanced viewpoint. The task becomes challenging when the fact remains that the journalist has to use the very language the society uses that is the cultural manifestation of the social establishment itself. The journalist who writes the story is thus doubly handicapped (Botts, 1994). Any representation or misrepresentation by the journalists should therefore be viewed from beyond the simple act of reporting a news event as it happens. However, there is no excuse for the journalist in taking Umbridge in the social vagaries of time and place; a true journalist should make his redoubt the moral and ethical grounds of journalism, his profession.

Gender bias prevails in newspapers in the form of representation and treatment: Women are not represented in equal proportion as that of men in news stories. Women are not presented more in pictures as well. (Martinson, Cochrane, Ryan, Corrigan T, Bawdon F, 2012) Media industry is dominated by men and there is a greater inequality in the number of news stories written by men to that of women (Burke C, Mazzarella SR, 2008). Women are less mentioned in news content when compared to men. News content cites a greater number of men experts when compared to women experts in substantiating information and opinion (Ross K, Carter C, 2011; Macharia S, O’Connor D, Ndangam L, 2010). “Feminist news media researchers have long contended that masculine news values shape journalists' quotidian decisions about what is newsworthy. As a result, it is argued, topics and issues traditionally regarded as primarily of interest and relevance to women are routinely marginalized in the news, while men's views and voices are given privileged space. When women do show up in the news, it is often as "eye candy," thus reinforcing women's value as sources of visual pleasure rather than residing in the content of their views” (Jia, Lansdall-Welfare et al, 2016).

A large scale automated data-driven study on gender bias in English online newspapers conducted by Jia, Lansdall-Welfare, Sudhahar, Carter, & Cristianini in 2016 that studied 2,353,652 news stories over a period of six months highlight the following outcomes: 1) Men are represented and presented more than women in news stories, and 2) Women appear more in pictures than in text. Any research can safely extrapolate and incorporate these studies in spite of language especially in post-colonial countries where the news media industry closely models the western system.

Gender Bias in News Language

Language is “a system of systems” including but not limited to its primary function of information communication. Language is spoken by a community and as such it reflects their culture. A Language is usually perceived as a defined corpus of speech rules developed and used by a particular community. But, a language should also be considered as the cultural manifestation of the community (Duranti 2003). Therefore, a journalist, in writing a news story, should be aware of the pitfalls created by a culturally biased social establishment, for the bias would invariably percolate into their expressions without their knowledge (Botts 1994).

Botts (1994) lists out ways in which gender bias language use can be avoided. Careful inferences from his suggestions can allow the reader to enumerate the ways in which news language can be biased against women:

1. Identifying a person involved in the news as woman
2. Identifying a woman through her relationship to a man

3. Focus on the dress or appearance of a woman in the news
4. Treating achievements by women as world wonders
5. Indicating a woman's marital status without its true significance
6. The use of masculine pronouns for generic denotations
7. The use of demeaning expressions describing women
8. The use of titles for women with the view to creating unnecessary attention

A research conducted in observing gender bias in language use as it prevails in the media industry in general and newspapers in particular can consider the parameters suggested by Jack Botts (1994) as a basis for subjectively or objectively analysing the content of the news stories. In fact, this research aims at conducting such a content analysis based on the suggestions given by Botts. The language used in media especially in newspapers should be gender neutral because of the impact it has on the people of a community. It plays a vital role in instigating social change in language use. Media largely influences people especially the younger generation to write in a gender neutral language. (Harrigan & Lucic 1988). This reflects the significance of the present study.

Aim of the study

This study aims to manually analyze the content of news stories published during the times of corona pandemic and the subsequent lockdown. The focus will be on identifying instances of gender bias based on a set of parameters framed from the review of literature related to gender bias in newspapers. News stories published in five Tamil dailies, viz. Dinathanthi, Dinakaran, Dinamalar, Hindu Tamil, and, Dinamaniover a period of seven days, were taken for the study. The manual analysis is quantified using simple tables presenting percentages.

Methodology

The study has followed the quantitative method of research in collecting and interpreting data. Content analysis in its numerous manifestations is frequently used in print media studies (Greer, 2003; Jamel, 2014; Soothill, Francis, Pearson & Ackerley, 2002) Five popular Tamil newspapers that are published daily as morning editions were chosen for the study. News stories published under the pages assigned for the district of Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu were considered for the study. News stories published over a period of seven days, one week were taken for the study, standard practice in conducting small scale research on newspapers (Lacyet *al*, 2001; Krippendorff 2009; Miller 2019).

The news stories collected were subjected to content analysis firstly to identify news about the Corona Pandemic. This selection was based on the following parameters:

- News about corona - the disease
- News about corona – its impact
- News about corona - State Measures
- News about Corona – Public involvement

The study exclusively focused on news related to the Corona Pandemic of 2020 in India. News stories unrelated to the pandemic were not brought under the study. News stories related to Corona that were segregated from other news stories were then analysed for gender biased language based on the parameters derived from Botts (1994). A list of words given in the appendix (Table 1) were included in the content analysis to identify their presence. The presence of the words in the content of the news stories would suggest gender bias language use as per the established parameters. A news story was considered of written with the use of language that is gender bias when the content of the story contained any or all of the listed words in any part of the news story. The absence of the words present in the list would indicate that the news story is free of gender bias language.

As part of the methodology, in the context of intercoder reliability, Dr. A. S. Mohanagiri M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., a scholar in English language and literature was involved in validating the subjective content analysis of gender bias language present in the news stories. The scholar was asked to cross verify the analysis conducted by the research scholar as part of the data collection and data analysis process.

Nature of the samples

All the news stories published in the Coimbatore page of the five chosen newspapers were tabulated with the page numbers on which they were printed. These news stories were then segregated into news stories that are related to Corona and news stories that are not related to Corona. All the news stories that were not related to Corona were not taken for further content analysis as the scope of this study is to analyse the content of news stories that are related to Corona pandemic. The news stories related to the Corona pandemic were then subjected to subjective analysis by the

research scholar in order to identify the presence or the absence of the listed words and their derivatives. News stories that contained any or all of the words present in the list were marked as news stories that have gender bias language and were grouped under one column. The news stories related to Corona, if they did not contain any of the word given in the list, were then marked as news stories that do not have gender bias language.

All the data collected were tabulated into tables that reflect the study. Percentages were obtained and the tables presented in the appendix give a clear picture about the presence or absence of gender bias language use in writing news stories related to the Corona pandemic during the times of Corona in 2020. The table shows the relationship among the total number of news stories, news stories related to Corona, and news stories related to Corona that have gender bias in language use. The data obtained were analysed and the results are given below.

Data Analysis and results

The news stories were subjected to meticulous manual content analysis based on the set parameters. Both general and individualized comments and conclusions were arrived after the analysis of the chosen samples. Generalizations were made based on percentages, and individual features of the news stories in context of gender representations are made as additional observations by the researchers. The results of the data analysis are presented below as tables in the appendixes and descriptions are based on the tables.

Gender bias Language in news stories published in Tamil dailies during the times of Corona Pandemic 2020. A total of 2227 news stories were gathered for the study. These news stories belong to five newspapers – Tamil Dailies – published in a week from April 1, 2020 to April 7, 2020 (from Wednesday to Tuesday). This comprised an average of 318 news stories daily and about 64 news stories per paper. The newspaper with the highest number of news stories is Dinamalar with 655 stories in total and the lowest number belongs to Dinathanthi with 304 stories. Of all the stories, 2020 news stories were identified as stories related to Corona pandemic. This amounts to about 90% - ranging between 93.8% being the highest and 87.8% being the lowest. This is understandable, given the extraordinary situation of a pandemic on hand.

All the 2020 news stories related to the Corona pandemic were subjected to content analysis. The news stories were analysed for the presence or absence of gender bias language with the words given in Table 1.

S. No.	Word class	Tamil words	English equivalents
1.	Words denoting gender	பெண்போலீஸ், மகளிர்குழுக்கள்	Woman
2.	Words indicating relationship with men	மனைவி, மகள், காதலி	Wife, daughter, lady lover
3.	Derogatory terms	விபச்சாரி, கள்ளக்காதலி, வைப்பாடி	Prostitute, concubine
4.	Words indicating marital status	செல்வி, திருமதி, கன்னி	Mrs, Ms

Table 1: Words denoting Gender bias language based on Botts (1994) suggestions

Of the 2020 stories, 29 news stories in total were found to contain gender bias language and about 1991 stories were free of any bias. This amounts to about 1.44% of the total news stories related to the Corona pandemic. Mucchi-Faina (2005) pointed out that most of the linguistic codes acquiesce with the feminist critic and advised abolishing the masculine generic. Mucchi-Faina also mentioned that using “Miss” and Mrs” are examples of this habit which is very much evidence. Washington Post’s manual forbid Ms ‘except in direct citations for special affect (Ehrlich & King, 1992). Use of these types of words are indicates the increasing presence of women which clearly shows that there is no neutral position taken.

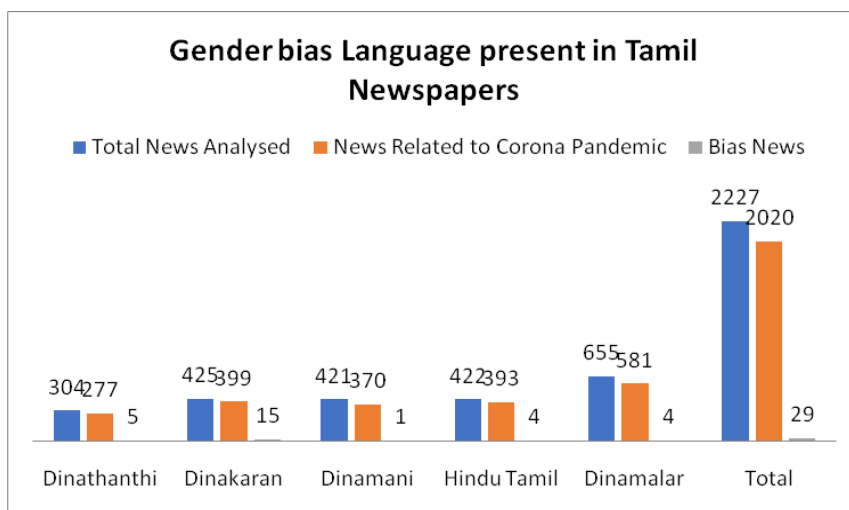


Figure 1: Gender bias language present in Tamil Newspaper

Figure 1 shows the number of news stories with gender bias language for all the five newspapers. While Dinathanthi, out of 277 news stories, had five stories with gender bias language, Dinakaran had 15 stories with gender bias language out of 399 stories. Dinamani had one story with gender bias language out of 370 stories, and Hindu Tamil had four stories with gender bias language out of 393 stories. Dinamalar had four stories with gender bias language out of 583 total stories related to the corona pandemic.

The study shows that, on an average, barring Dinamani which had one story and Dinakaran which had 15 stories, all the other newspapers had about four news stories related to the corona pandemic containing gender bias language. Dinakaran is the newspaper with the highest number of stories with gender bias vocabulary with about 3.75% of its stories related to the corona pandemic containing gender bias language.

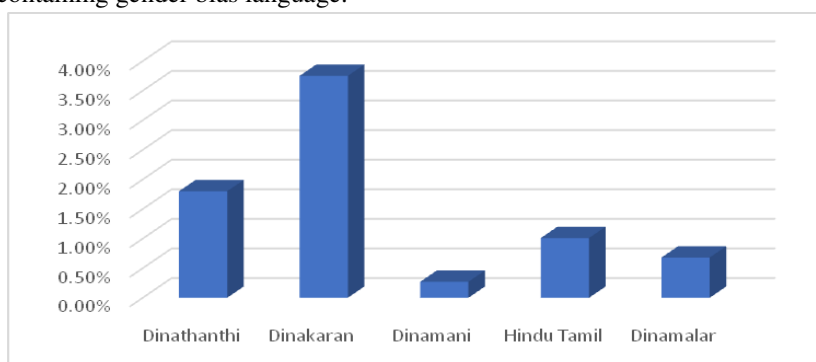
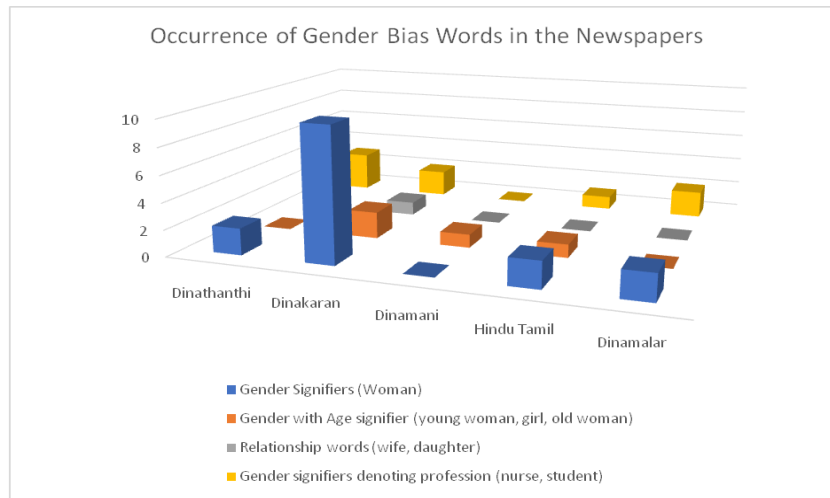


Figure 2: Percentage of News Stories with Gender bias words in relation to News Stories related to Corona

Figure 2 shows the percentage of news stories with biased language. It is very much evident that Dinamani has the lowest number of news stories, i.e. 0.27% of the stories related to the corona pandemic with gender bias language. Hindu Tamil had 1.01% and Dinamalar had 0.68% as the percentage of their news stories related to the corona pandemic with gender bias language. Dinathanthi had 1.80% of its news stories with gender bias language in relation to the stories related to the corona pandemic. With the exception of Dinakaran, all the other four newspapers have a percentage of less than two. They stand at an average of 0.85% of stories with gender bias language. This indicates that one news story out of 118 news stories published in the four newspapers contain gender bias language. This is in relation to news stories related to the corona pandemic.

The use of the gender signifier word, ‘woman’ as in ‘woman police’ appears to be the primary form of language use that indicates gender bias. This gender signifier has the highest frequency in terms of occurrence of at least once in a news story (Figure 3). There is also the use of relationship words such as ‘wife’ in the news stories that cause the language to be gender bias. 16 stories out of the 29 news stories that had gender bias language contained words signifying the gender of the person especially woman. This amounts to about 55% of the total stories with biased language. Most of the news stories had used the word ‘woman’ as an adjective to distinguish the feminine gender. This correlates to the first

suggestion made by Botts. “Don’t identify a person as a woman in a story unless you would identify a person in a similar position as a man.” (Botts 1994 p. 149).



Four news stories, i.e. about 14% had used words denoting the age of a woman viz. ‘young woman’, ‘girl’, ‘old woman’, and so on. the only news story that had gender bias language published by Dinamani had a word denoting a woman with reference to her age. One out of the 29 stories had the use of the word denoting the relationship of a woman with a man which emphasises on the second suggestion made by Botts. “Women have their own identities. Don’t identify a woman through her relationship to a man unless that relationship itself is news” (Botts 1994 p. 149). About eight stories out of the 29 stories with biased language had used words indicating professions of women. It amounts to about 27% of the total news stories with gender bias language. This is in line with the previous suggestion made by Botts in indicating the nature of bias towards women.

Findings

- About 1.44% of the news stories related to the Corona Pandemic contain gender bias language use.
- Dinakaran stands out among the five newspapers with the highest gender bias language use with 3.75% of its Corona related news stories containing gender bias words.
- Dinamani has the lowest number of news stories, i.e. one story with the use of gender bias language.
- The use of gender denoting nouns and adjectives predominate the form of gender bias language use with about 55% of the total stories with gender bias language use containing such vocabulary.
- The use of words denoting age, status, and profession of women continue to appear in news stories published in Tamil newspapers.

Conclusion

This study is significant in highlighting the similarities and unique features of Tamil news stories as they are published in newspapers in relation to international news stories especially English. The nature and type of language use in the context of prevalent gender bias in newspaper stands evidence to Botts (1994) suggestions and categorisations. The study highlights the similarities of gender bias that is prevalent among all news stories in the context of gender bias vocabulary. Tamil news stories have a unique gender bias issue in the use of vocabulary and the pragmatics of the language in relation to its culture. This in turn indicates that the writers of Tamil news stories require a comprehensive awareness programmes in gender sensitisation in the context of language use. Large scale studies with significantly increased number of samples can elaborate and probably substantiate the findings of this study, thereby extending the scope of research under this topic.

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