LINGUISTIC CONSTRUCTION OF FEMININITY IN BOLLYWOOD ITEM SONGS

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Abstract
This study investigates the linguistic construction of femininity in Bollywood item songs and its impact on the cognitive and emotional perceptions of young female audiences. Grounded in Lera Boroditsky's Linguistic Relativity Theory, the research explores how language shapes thoughts and social realities related to gender identity. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire distributed among female respondents aged 21–35 years. The findings reveal that while item song lyrics often reinforce traditional stereotypes and objectification, they also present elements of empowerment and independence. The study highlights the dual role of language in both maintaining and challenging societal norms, emphasizing the importance of critically analyzing media content that influences perceptions of femininity and womanhood.
Keywords: Perception of womanhood, empowerment of women, traditional stereotypes and objectification

Introduction
Psycholinguistics is the field of linguistics that focuses primarily on how language affects the cognition of people and also highlights that what are psychological impacts of language used in any particular context. *Psycholinguistics explores the relationship between language and the human mind, focusing on how people understand, produce, and acquire language.* (Aitchison 2008)**.** Psycholinguistics is closely related to neurolinguistics, which studies how language functions in the brain, and sociolinguistics, which examines language in social contexts. Linguistic Relativity is one of the aspects of psycholinguistics. Linguistic relativity suggests how language shapes thoughts and affects the cognitive perceptions of people. Linguistic relativity is also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. It is the idea that language influences how people think and perceive the world. It suggests that the language we speak affects how we categorize and think about reality. *Linguistic relativity, also known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, suggests that the language one speaks affects how one thinks, but modern research finds that while language influences thought, it does not completely determine it.* **(**Steven Pinker 1994). Linguistic relativity suggests that language influences the way people perceive and interpret the world around them. The structure and vocabulary of a language shape thought patterns, affecting how individuals categorize experiences and understand concepts. This idea highlights the connection between

language and cognition, emphasizing that different linguistic systems can lead to variations in perception and worldview.

An "item" song is a term commonly used in Indian cinema, particularly in Bollywood, to refer to a catchy, upbeat song that is often featured in a film to attract attention. These songs typically showcase a glamorous dance performance, often by a popular actress or dancer, and are designed to be entertaining and engaging, serving as a highlight of the film. *Item songs function as hypersexualized visual and lyrical content in mainstream Indian cinema, reflecting patriarchal constructs while also offering a space for female performers to assert agency within the entertainment* industry (Paromita Chakravarti 2019). This research aims to highlight the psycholinguistic impacts of the language used in Bollywood item songs and also tries to explore how female audiences (aged 21-35) years perceive such songs.

This paper is intended to highlight the possible perceptions of female audiences after listening to the item songs and what they think about the female represented in the item number or song. This research proposes a unique concept contrasting with the common narratives that represent that females are always being objectified in the item songs. Researchers have tried to shift the focus from the concept of being objectified to the idea that females represented in item songs are sexually liberated females and are the sole female workers in the male-dominated field. In the article, *Item Songs of Bollywood; The Politics of Gender and Identity and Sexual Objectification,* Defency, J., Prohit(2019) analyzed the connection between item songs and the Theory of Sexual Objectification by use of Psychoanalysis and Social and Behavioral theories. He states that media is a strong factor in constructing ideologies and sociocultural contexts that objectify women. People easily identify and make such songs trending that can be a threat to females as it posits offensive language and disrespectful behavior toward women. Prohit tries to draw attention towards the check and balance of content.

The researcher has analyzed the item songs *"Nain Matakka" "Aaj ki Raat" and "Tilasmi Bahen"* in which females are represented as item numbers. By exploring these songs, the researcher aims to examine the psycholinguistic impacts of the language used in these songs and also to identify how the language of these songs affects the perception of the female audience about the girl presented in item songs.

1.1 The Significance of the research:

This study explores the psycholinguistic impacts of Bollywood item songs on young female audiences through the lens of Linguistic Relativity. Item songs have always been explored for their visual portrayal of women, but their linguistic influence on gender specifically female perception remains underexplored. By examining how language in item songs shapes notions of femininity, self-worth, and social roles, this research will highlight the role of linguistic structures in reinforcing or challenging societal norms. Grounded in Lera Boroditsky's theory, this research investigates whether item songs merely reflect cultural ideologies or actively shape them. This study shifts the focus from visual objectification to linguistic representation, offering insights into media studies, psycholinguistics, and gender studies.

1.2 Research Objectives:

1. To examine the linguistic structures used in Bollywood item songs that influence the cognitive and emotional responses of young female audiences, shaping their self-perception and identity.
2. To analyze whether the gendered language in Bollywood item songs reinforces objectification and traditional gender stereotypes or encourages resistance against these portrayals.

1.4 Research Questions:

1. What are the linguistic structures used in Bollywood item songs that influence the cognitive and emotional responses of young female audiences, shaping their self-perception and identity?
2. How gendered language in Bollywood item songs do reinforces objectification and traditional gender stereotypes or encourages resistance against these portrayals?

1.5 Delimitations:

This study analyzes the linguistic structures used in Bollywood item songs and their psycholinguistic impacts on young female audiences (21-35 years) through Lera Broditsky's linguistic relativity theory with main focus on how language shapes thoughts and objects. It excludes visual representation and instead examines how lyrics influence responses related to femininity and gender identity. This research is limited to a qualitative ananlysis of selected Hindi-language item songs (*Nain Matakka, Aaj ki Raat, and Tilasmi Bahen*) without mking findings generalized to all Bollywood songs or even audiences. This research also only analyzes the psycholinguistic impacts through the lens of Linguistic Relativity and does not cover other linguistic or media theories, regional or international music industries, or socio-political perspectives on female representation.

Literature Review

In this chapter, the researcher reviews the articles related to the Bollywood item songs. The researcher has attempted to explore the perspectives of the different researchers that what are their subjective points about the item songs and the language used in them. In addition the researcher also highlights the basic thought of researchers about the females represented in item songs that either they are objectified or represented as sexually liberated females.

Kabir, M., R., (July, 2020) argues that songs serves as a major representation of culture and traditions either it is Bollywood, Tollywood or Dhallywood. Item songs are basically erotic representation full of vulgar phrases that contribute to the objectification of women (Kabir, 2020). Kabir (2020) gave example of of popular item songs from 2010-2017. He examined that main emphasis of such songs is on women's body parts and explained that how objectification is done both in visually and auditory ways because of the normalization of such songs and objectification in everyday life.

Aksari I et al.(2022) investigated item songs qualitatively and argued that such songs being also included in cinema gives the negative representation of women highlighting the ideology that how females are being objectified in the patriarchal society. On one hand, the world is talking about women empowerment but on the other hand, women are still being used as an object to please men specifically in item songs (Aksari et al., 2022). The research concludes that females are used as a product to be sold that gives benefit either to producers or to the cinema.

Kamble, C., and Kumar, S., Biswal (June, 2022) in the article, "Portrayal of Women in Bollywood item songs" explored that how women's bodies have been used and abused on silver screen. The

research aims to elaborate the male gaze and finds out how male gaze is manifested through item songs. History of item songs originated from Tawaif and it still continues in the form of item songs. Filmmakers use to sell out the illusion of sexual and textual pleasure as the Indian cinema has evolved over tome but still the women's bodies are passive objects for male gaze to linger upon for pleasure.

Mathur A. (August, 2022) explores in her article, "Bollywood Item Numbers: Objectifying Women in Indian Cinema" the different ways of objectification of women in India by analyzing Bollywood rap and item songs. There may be visual or behavioral sexual objectification (Mathur, 2022). Results were concluded by the content analysis of 201 songs. She claims in her findings that obscene words and loud remarks about women are the major component of item songs and are now normalized in a way that most of the females do not even realize that they are being objectified. She argued that there is a need for directors, producers and lyrics composers to review the content of movie and songs where the women are presented as sex objects not a person.

Tariq. M., and Safdar, A., (Sep, 2024) analyzed the impact of item songs in Hindi films on the psychological well-being of young women in Pakistan by surveying 150 female participants aged 17–30 years using 20 closed-ended questions. Findings concluded that participants admire the self-confidence of the item girl portrayed and also have an ideology about item girls that they are confident women and also avoid watching such songs with families. Findings also highlight that participants feel confident after watching item girls in songs as the item girls are sole female workers in multiple co-workers.

However, this research focuses on the language that is used in item songs that builds perceptions of the female audience about the item girl presented in item songs. Furthermore, the research will also highlight that either the language used in item songs makes female audience feel objectified or sexually liberated modern women.

Theoretical Framework

Lera Boroditsky's theory on linguistic relativity builds upon the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which suggests that language shapes the way people think and perceive the world. Originally introduced by Edward Sapir and later expanded by his student Benjamin Lee Whorf in the early 20th century, this idea proposed that the structure of a language influences how its speakers understand reality. Boroditsky took this concept further in the early 2000s by providing experimental evidence from cognitive science and neurolinguistics. Her research showed that language doesn't just influence thought rather it actively shapes how people interpret objects, space, time, and even social identities. By shifting linguistic relativity from a theoretical idea to a testable concept, Boroditsky played a key role in modern psycholinguistics. Her work has sparked debates among cognitive scientists, with some, like Steven Pinker, arguing that thought exists independently of language, while others, such as John Lucy, have expanded on her findings, focusing on the cultural impact of linguistic relativity. Despite differing opinions, Boroditsky's research remains influential in understanding how deeply language is connected to human cognition and perception.

This qualitative study is based on Lera Boroditsky's (2001) expansion of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, particularly focusing on two key tenets; language shapes thoughts and language shapes objects. Boroditsky (2001) argues that linguistic structures do more than convey meaning rather they actively shape how individuals perceive reality, form thoughts, and construct social norms. Applying this to Bollywood item songs, this study examines how the language in these songs influences the cognitive and emotional responses of young female audiences. Specifically,

it explores whether repeated exposure to gendered language in item songs affects how women think about themselves, their identity, and their role in society.

The idea that language shapes thoughts suggests that the recurring themes and linguistic patterns in item songs may influence how young women internalize concepts of femininity, self-worth, and gender roles. The metaphor-laden, sensory-driven lyrics of these songs may subtly reinforce certain perceptions, leading audiences to either accept or challenge traditional gender norms. If language determines thought, then the portrayal of women as objects of desire in item songs may impact how female listeners conceptualize their identity and agency. This study investigates whether such linguistic reinforcement strengthens objectification or fosters resistance against stereotypical gender portrayals.

Moreover, the tenet that language shapes objects implies that language not only describes reality but also constructs it. In the context of Bollywood, item songs frequently associate femininity with attractiveness, seduction, and male validation, transforming women into linguistic objects that exist within a predefined framework of desirability. These representations may influence how female audiences view themselves and how they believe society perceives them. This research critically examines whether item songs contribute to shaping real-world gender perceptions and whether women conform to or reject these portrayals. By applying Boroditsky's (2001) insights, this study seeks to determine whether the language in item songs merely mirrors societal attitudes or actively reinforces and shapes them, ultimately influencing how young women think about themselves and their place in contemporary society.

Research Methodology:

The research aims to analyze the item songs under linguistic analysis specifically focusing on the psycholinguistic impacts of item songs on female audience ranging between 21-35 years. The data will be collected through the survey/questionnaire. The population sample would be random to only focus on the language that how women represented in item songs are perceived by the female audience. The data would be analyzed qualitatively with the help of "Likert Scale" developed by Rensis Likert in 1932. Likert scale is designed to measure attitudes, opinions, and perception by asking respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with a given statement (Likert, 1932). According to Joshi, Kale, Chandel, and Pal (2015), the Likert Scale is an effective tool for measuring latent constructs that cannot be directly observed, such as attitudes and beliefs. The research results will highlight how language uage effects the thoughts and either item songs' langugae is empowering women or not. The research will also highlight the perceptions of female audiences regarding item songs.

Analysis and Findings

This portion deals with the analyss of the responses given by 50 respondents. The researcher has analysed the responses and have tried to combine the results to give the clarification. Analysis is based on two sections of questionnaire, first section deals with the language influence on thoughts. The other section deals with the language influence on empowerment or objectification.

Language influence on thoughts

In this section, the responses show that how deliberately used language in the itm songs affect the thoughts of female audiences and also the impact of the language used on their thinking process.

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	The language used in Bollywood item songs influences my thoughts about modern femininity.	23.8%	57.1%	4.8%	14.3%	0%
2.	Lyrics in item songs make me believe that being bold is essential for a woman's identity.	14.3%	23.8%	23.8%	33.3%	4.8%
3.	Item song lyrics shape my perception of what confidence in women should look like.	9.5%	33.3%	28.6%	23.8%	4.8%
4.	The way women are described in item songs impacts my views on their societal roles.	23.8%	38.1%	19%	9.5%	9.5%
5.	Repeated exposure to item song lyrics changes the way I think about beauty standards for women.	20%	30%	35%	5%	10%
6.	The linguistic choices in item songs normalize the idea that female worth is linked to physical appearance.	28.6%	42.9%	9.5%	9.5%	9.5%
7.	Listening to item songs affects my opinion on what it means to be an empowered woman.	19%	23.8%	23.8%	28.6%	4.8%
8.	The metaphors and descriptive words in item songs influence my thinking about female independence.	0%	52.4%	19%	23.8%	4.8%
9.	I consider the language in	19%	61.9%	19%	0%	0%

	item songs as shaping how femininity is constructed in society.					
10.	The use of certain phrases in item songs reinforces my beliefs about how women should behave in social settings.	4.8%	57.1%	23.8%	9.5%	4.8%

This table represents the results of the section one of the questionnaire. The results obtained from the first section of the questionnaire, which focused on the influence of language in Bollywood item songs on thoughts related to femininity, reveal significant insights. A majority of respondents (57.1%) agreed that the language used in item songs influences their thoughts about modern femininity, while 23.8% strongly agreed with this idea, indicating a general consensus that such lyrics shape perceptions of womanhood. When asked whether item song lyrics promote boldness as essential to female identity, responses were more varied, with 33.3% disagreeing and 23.8% each either agreeing or remaining neutral, suggesting a divided perception on the matter. Regarding the role of lyrics in shaping ideas of female confidence, 33.3% agreed, but a notable portion (28.6%) remained neutral, showing mixed views.

The influence of item song descriptions on views of women's societal roles was recognized by 38.1% of participants, while 23.8% strongly agreed, reinforcing the idea that gender roles are influenced by such linguistic portrayals. Furthermore, 30% of respondents agreed that repeated exposure to item songs affects their thoughts on beauty standards, though 35% remained neutral, indicating a lack of strong alignment. However, a significant number (42.9%) agreed that linguistic choices in item songs normalize the idea that female worth is linked to physical appearance, with 28.6% strongly agreeing, showing a notable concern with objectification through language.

The effect of item songs on perceptions of female empowerment also showed divergence, as 28.6% disagreed while 23.8% agreed, highlighting a complex relationship between empowerment and lyrical representation. Additionally, 52.4% of respondents agreed that metaphors and descriptive words influence their thinking about female independence, suggesting that figurative language plays a subtle but powerful role in shaping perceptions. When asked whether item songs shape societal constructions of femininity, 61.9% agreed, reflecting a clear recognition of the impact of song language on gender identity formation. Finally, 57.1% agreed that specific phrases in item songs reinforce beliefs about appropriate female behavior in society, showing that lyrical language may subtly guide social expectations of women.

Language influence on Objextification or Empowerment

In this section, responses show how purposely used language leads to either objectification or empowerment and what kind of impacts such lyrics have on the concepts of objectification and empowerment.

	Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	The language in item songs objectifies women by focusing excessively on their physical features.	42.9%	38.1%	19%	0%	0%

2.	Item song lyrics promote the idea that women are meant to attract male attention.	28.6%	42.9%	23.8%	0%	4.8%
3.	The descriptive language in item songs portrays women as independent and self-reliant.	9.5%	28.6%	33.3%	23.8%	4.8%
4.	Lyrics in item songs make me feel that female sexuality is being presented as a source of power.	33.3%	47.6%	14.3%	4.8%	0%
5.	The language in these songs encourages resistance against traditional stereotypes of women.	23.8%	52.4%	23.8%	0%	0%
6.	Item song lyrics reinforce the belief that women are to be viewed as objects of desire.	42.9%	28.6%	23.8%	4.8%	0%
7.	The linguistic expressions in item songs convey that women control their own desires and choices.	14.3%	52.4%	33.3%	0%	0%
8.	The portrayal of women through language in item songs affects how I perceive female social roles.	4.8%	42.9%	33.3%	14.4%	4.8%
9.	Item song lyrics promote outdated gender stereotypes about women.	14.3%	23.8%	42.9%	14.3%	4.8%
10.	Language in item songs shapes the societal view	4.8%	38.1%	38.1%	14.3%	4.8%

that women can be both bold and respectable.					

The second portion of the questionnaire, which explored the role of language in Bollywood item songs in terms of objectification and empowerment, yielded insightful results. A considerable proportion of respondents (42.9%) strongly agreed that the language in item songs objectifies women by excessively focusing on their physical features, while 38.1% agreed with this notion, indicating a strong consensus that item songs contribute to the objectification of women. Similarly, 42.9% agreed and 28.6% strongly agreed that item song lyrics promote the idea that women are primarily meant to attract male attention, reinforcing the perception of item songs as vehicles of gender stereotyping.

On the other hand, when asked whether item songs portray women as independent and self-reliant, responses were more mixed; 33.3% remained neutral, 28.6% agreed, while 23.8% disagreed, suggesting uncertainty among respondents regarding the empowering aspects of these songs. However, 47.6% agreed and 33.3% strongly agreed that item song lyrics present female sexuality as a source of power, indicating that some respondents perceive these songs as offering a form of sexual agency to women.

Interestingly, a significant portion (52.4%) agreed that the language of item songs encourages resistance against traditional stereotypes, with 23.8% strongly agreeing, suggesting that item songs may simultaneously challenge outdated gender roles in some ways. Conversely, when addressing the reinforcement of the belief that women are to be viewed as objects of desire, 42.9% strongly agreed and 28.6% agreed, showing that objectification remains a dominant theme perceived by the audience.

In relation to female agency, 52.4% agreed that item song lyrics convey that women control their own desires and choices, while 33.3% remained neutral, indicating moderate acceptance of this notion. Regarding the impact on perceptions of female social roles, 42.9% agreed, but 33.3% remained neutral, suggesting that the influence of such songs on broader social perceptions may not be uniformly felt. Furthermore, 42.9% of respondents remained neutral when asked if item songs promote outdated gender stereotypes, showing uncertainty or ambivalence toward this aspect. Lastly, when questioned whether item song language shapes the view that women can be both bold and respectable, 38.1% each either agreed or remained neutral, reflecting a balanced split in opinions on whether item songs can simultaneously portray boldness and respectability in women.

Findings:

The analysis of the first research question shows a strong connection to Lera Boroditsky's Linguistic Relativity Theory, which suggests that language has the power to shape human thought. Most respondents (57.1% agreed and 23.8% strongly agreed) believed that the words and phrases used in Bollywood item songs affect how they think about modern femininity. This supports the idea that language in these songs is not neutral but plays an active role in shaping the way young women see themselves and others in society.

The results further reveal that the impact of language on confidence and boldness is not straightforward, as some respondents felt influenced by the lyrics while others remained neutral or disagreed. This shows that while language structures guide thoughts (as Boroditsky suggests), personal beliefs and cultural background may also shape how these messages are received. Interestingly, more than half of the participants (52.4%) agreed that the figurative and descriptive language in item songs impacts their views on female independence, showing that linguistic

elements help form ideas about women's freedom and self-expression. Similarly, the belief of 61.9% of respondents that the language of these songs defines femininity in society clearly reflects Boroditsky's point that language helps build the categories through which people understand social identities like gender.

The findings for the second research question also support Boroditsky's second principle—that language shapes how people see the world, including their understanding of gender roles. A high percentage of respondents (42.9% strongly agreed and 38.1% agreed) felt that the language in item songs turns women into objects by focusing too much on their physical appearance. This shows that language does not only describe reality but also creates and reinforces social ideas about women, as Boroditsky's theory claims.

At the same time, some results suggest that the language in item songs may allow for resistance against these old stereotypes. About 52.4% of participants agreed that the lyrics offer a chance to challenge traditional views of women, meaning that language could also promote empowerment alongside objectification. This supports the idea that language can shape both restrictive and liberating ways of thinking about gender.

Neutral responses regarding stereotypes and the idea of being both bold and respectable show that not all listeners interpret the language in the same way. This reflects Boroditsky's view that language can shape multiple realities depending on how people understand and process it. Overall, these results confirm that the words used in item songs are not simply for entertainment; they help shape and sometimes challenge social views about femininity and the role of women in society.

To sum up, the findings indicate that the language used in Bollywood item songs plays an important role in shaping how young women think about and understand femininity. The lyrics contribute both to the reinforcement of traditional gender roles and to offering new, empowering images of women. This dual impact supports Boroditsky's view that language shapes not only thoughts but also perceptions of social reality. Overall, the study shows that linguistic choices in item songs strongly influence the audience's ideas about female identity.

Conclusion

In summary, this study has shown that the language found in Bollywood item songs greatly impacts how young women view and understand femininity, beauty, confidence, and their societal roles. The results indicate that the lyrics of these songs serve not just as entertainment but play a significant role in shaping beliefs and notions about femininity in modern society. On one side, the language characteristics of item songs were discovered to strengthen conventional gender stereotypes by concentrating heavily on looks and desirability, thereby promoting the objectification of women. Conversely, specific aspects of these songs were recognized by participants as fostering empowerment, courage, and self-expression, suggesting that these lyrics have the potential to contest traditional gender norms and present alternative depictions of femininity. These findings are consistent with Lera Boroditsky's Linguistic Relativity Theory, highlighting that language influences both thoughts and social realities by shaping how people comprehend and interpret their surroundings. The research emphasizes the influence of linguistic frameworks in molding female identity through media and stresses the significance of scrutinizing song lyrics, as they significantly affect young women's self-image and views on their societal roles.

Recommendations

In future research, scholars might investigate how item songs influence male viewers to better understand the way this language affects their views on women and gender roles. Comparative

studies of Bollywood and other film industries may yield more profound understanding of cultural distinctions in how femininity is linguistically constructed. In addition, qualitative techniques like interviews or focus group discussions may reveal the personal experiences and deeper insights of female listeners, providing a more comprehensive understanding than survey data.

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