Sexism in Language

Xiaolan Lei
Northwest Polytechnic University, Xi'an, China

Abstract

Sexist language is language that expresses bias in favor of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner. In most cases, the bias is in favor of men and against women. This paper firstly discusses sexist language from two typical aspects: sexism in words and sexism in proverbs. Then it emphasizes that owing to Women's Liberation Movement in Western Countries, women's social status has been bettered, and such supermasculine phenomenon in English is being alleviated accordingly. In order to illustrate the two issues clearly, many interesting examples are given.

I. Introduction

Sexist language is language that expresses bias in favor of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner. In most cases the bias is in favor of men and against women. The existence of sexist language is due to sexism in society. As a social phenomenon, language is closely related to social attitudes. In the past, women are supposed to stay at home, remaining powerless and generally subordinate to man, whereas men are considered as the center both in the family and society. In a word, for a long time women have been looked on as "the weaker sex" in society. Even in English-speaking countries, which hold the claim that "every one is created equal", discrimination against women exists. Language simply reflects this social fact. However, because of their greater status-consciousness, the movement amongst feminists to reduce sexual discrimination and sex-role stereotyping has led to a number of conscious attempts to influence and change languages and linguistic behavior. The problem is that the language which we have inherited were all developed in the Bad Old Days, so the question is whether they force us all to think along the old lines without realizing it. Does language discriminate against women? More precisely, do the ways in which languages allow us to refer to males and females discriminate against females? This paper will first explore the answer to this question from such aspects as sexism in words, sexism in proverbs. Then it will show us the non-discriminatory portrayal of the sexes.

II. Sexism in English

1. Sexism in words

In society, men are considered the norm for the human species: their characteristics, thoughts, beliefs and actions are viewed as fully representing those of all humans, male and female. This practice can make women invisible in language or altogether excludes them. It can also lead to their portrayal as deviations from this 'male = human' norm. Women's linguistic status is often dependent on or derives from that of

men, which is represented as autonomous. By relegating women to a dependent, subordinate position, sexist language prevents the portrayal of women and men as different but equal human beings.

1.1. Common forms of sexism in English include the use of 'man' and 'he / him / his' as generics—that is, nouns and pronouns referring to both men and women—the use of suffixes *-man*, *-ette*, *-ess*, *-trix* in occupational nouns and job titles, asymmetrical naming practices, and stereotyped images of women and men as well as descriptions of (mainly) women which trivialise or denigrate them and their status.

1.1.1. English does not possess a third person singular pronoun which is gender-neutral. Instead the 'masculine' pronouns 'he', 'him' and 'his' are generally used to refer to both men and women. This is confusing and inaccurate and, as well, makes women invisible. Consider the following examples:

All men are mortal,

Julia is a man

Therefore, Julia is mortal.

Like other animals, <u>man</u> <u>nourishes</u> <u>his</u> <u>baby</u> <u>with</u> <u>milk.</u>

We want to hire <u>the</u> <u>best</u> <u>men</u> we can get for the job.

  In example 1), the underlined sentence sounds absurd, since everybody knows Julia is a girl's name. In example 2), the underlined part sounds more ridiculous and it's obviously contradictory to the common sense. In example 3), the problem is that we can't know the exact sex of the persons they want to hire. They may want only girls, or both sexes, but they simply use "man" here.

1.1.2. In English language, there are many words, which are clearly male-orientated in that they contain the element "—man" while they can in fact apply to both sexes, For example:

chairman   congressman   councilman

newsman   foreman   freshman

Policeman   salesman   mailman

1.1.3. Sexism in language is also showed in that the noun of feminine gender can only be obtained by adding a certain bound morpheme to the noun. For example:

MALE	FEMALE	MALE	FEMALE
Man	woman	manager	manageress
Prince	princess	god	goddess
author	authoress	mayor	mayoress
count	countess	shepherd	shepherdess
host	hostess	steward	stewardess
poet	poetess	usher	usherette
heir	heiress	sailor	sailorette
hero	heroine	conduct	conductette

1.2. Some English words, especially the name of some professions, are basically of common gender, namely, they can be applied to both sexes. However, people usually will habitually associate them only with male. Consequently, we have to add "woman" before those names if we want to refer to female of those professions. For example:

COMMON GENDER	FEMALE
Doctor	woman doctor
Professor	woman professor
Engineer	woman engineer
Lawyer	lady lawyer
Reporter	girl reporter

The above examples obviously reflect people's deep-rooted discrimination against women, that is, women have to be dependent on men and are even just some appendages of man.

1.3. One tendency involves words that are clearly restricted in reference to one sex or the other, with female words tending to have less favorable meanings. A classic pair is master and mistress, where the male meaning is 'good' and the female is 'bad'; specifically, a mistress but not a master is a partner for extra-marital sex. Some other examples are as follows:

1). The word "master" means "host" while the feminine word "mistress" has the surface meaning "hostess". But actually its connotative meaning is "lover", "woman who depends on man" In the following sentence " He grew tired of his wife and went out for a mistress" Here we will sure know that "mistress " cannot be his wife.

2). The word "governor" refers to "a person appointed to govern a province or state, whereas the word "governess" just means 'nurse maid".

3). The word "professional" refers to a person qualified or employed in one of the professions. When we say "he is a professional", he may be thought to be a boxer, whereas when we say "she is a professional", she is likely a prostitute.

4). When "tramp" refers to male, it means that the man is homeless, he goes from place to place and does no regular work. While when it refers to a female, it also indicates that she is a prostitute.5).The word *shrew* taken from the name of a small but especially vicious animal is defined in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* as an "bad-tempered, scolding woman," but the word *shrewd* taken from the same root is defined as "having, showing, sound judgment and common sense." and illustrated with the phrase "a shrewd businessman."

6). "The man in the street" and " The woman in the street" is in the same situation, yet the former one just shows that the man is an ordinary person, the latter one can indicates that she is a prostitute.

Such sexual use of the female word is typical. North American English has no fewer than 220 words for a sexually promiscuous woman, but only twenty for sexually promiscuous men, and London school children had a rich vocabulary of insult terms for girls, all related to sexual behavior, but very few specifically for boys.

1.4. Some English words show the lower social status of women. Some example are quite clear, such as the English distinction between Mrs and Miss which is not paralleled by a pair of male titles showing whether or not the bearer is married. This implies (unfairly) that it is more important for a woman than for a man to show whether they are married.

Stereotyped images of men and women are based on oversimplified generalizations of what women and men should be and how they should behave. Such images are often not only inaccurate but also severely hamper the representation of the changing roles of the sexes in society.

Some examples of such language are given below: a man and his wife, man and wife, John's widow. In expressions such as these, women are described and defined in terms of their relationship to men. Men, however, are hardly ever described in terms of their relationship to women.

In the following sentences, women are primarily described in terms of their physical appearance. This concentration on physical attributes to the exclusion of other features seldom occurs in the description of men. Male and female stereotyping occurs frequently in relation to occupations and gender roles. Women who are employed outside the home are still described in terms of being the 'wife of', 'mother of' or 'daughter of'. Portrayals of men in their professional roles seldom describe them

as 'father of', 'husband of' and the like.

2. Sexism in proverbs

Proverbs are certain condensation of one language. Therefore the sexism can be reflected perfectly in proverbs. In an English proverb, "He who follows his wife's advice will never see the face of god." We can clearly feel the wicked underlines by which men stretch their prejudice towards women. But this is not the end, we have something even worse, like:

1). A neck without a head, buttocks without a hole and a girl without shame are not worth admiring or marrying.

2). A woman has even cheated the devil.

3). A woman is like a lemon; you squeeze her and throw her away.

4). Seven women in their right senses are surpassed by a mad man..

5). Women have got long hair and short sense.

6). A woman's tongue cracks bones.

Not only in English, but also in many other languages, women are the victims of evil-intentioned jokes or proverbs. Afghan jokes and folklore are blatantly sexist, such as this proverb: 'If you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; if you see an old woman, throw a stone.'

III. Non-discriminatory portrayal of the sexes

Owing to the Women's Liberation Movement in Western Countries, women's social status has been bettered, and such supermasculine phenomenon in language is being alleviated accordingly. Yet there are two key problems here: one is how to directly eliminate the sexist words in language; the other is how to eliminate the sexism resulted from the use of the use of 'man' and 'he / him / his' as generics.

1. Titles and some naming practices

   Naming practices for women and men are often asymmetrical. Inequality is implied, for instance, in cases where a woman's title is not mentioned but a man's is; where a woman is addressed simply by her first name but a man is addressed by his title, first name and surname; and in some salutations, directed to a man and a woman, when the woman is not addressed. Other practices also can create the impression that women merit less respect or less serious consideration than men do, such as when endearments are used to address women in situations that do not justify such words .

'Mr', 'Ms', 'Mrs', 'Miss'

Use of the title 'Mr' before a person's name merely identifies that person as a male adult. The titles 'Mrs' and 'Miss', however, not only identify the person addressed as a woman but also make known her marital status. The title 'Ms' was introduced so that a woman is not required to reveal her marital status and so that people writing to or addressing a woman are not required to guess it by using 'Miss' or 'Mrs'. 'Ms' should be used for a woman whose title preference is unknown. It should be followed by the woman's own name, or if she prefers, her spouse's name. Any given names or initials used in connection with the title 'Ms' are invariably the woman's and not those of her spouse. 'Ms' is the same whether singular or plural. The pronunciation of 'Ms' varies somewhat but *The Macquarie Dictionary* recommends 'mz'.

It is important that, where a woman's preferred title is known (whether Ms, Mrs or Miss), her right to be known by that title be respected. *Other titles*

Many women have gained professional and academic titles previously associated mainly with men. It is therefore important not to assume that all holders of titles such as *Dr*, *Professor* and *Captain* are men and therefore address them as 'Sir' or refer to them as 'he' or 'him'. *Salutations in correspondence*

Letters, notes, reports and the like are frequently addressed to a person or persons

about whose title, surname, first name or sex the writer knows very little. It is no longer acceptable to use the salutation 'Dear Sir' or 'Dear Sirs' in such cases. Here are some alternatives:

Dear Sir Dear Sir / Madam; Dear Sir or Madam Dear Madam / Sir; Dear Madam or Sir

Dear Principal Dear Householder

Dear Officer Dear Customer

Dear Colleague Dear Subscriber

Dear Sirs Dear Gentlemen and Ladies Dear Ladies and Gentlemen

Dear Mackenzie Pty Ltd (in case of a company) Dear People (informal)

Dear Mr Benetti Dear R. Benetti (sex unknown) Dear Mr / Ms Benetti

Dear Mrs Braun Dear Ms Braun (if title preference unknown)

It is also acceptable to address reports and references to 'To whom it may concern' if the recipient is unknown to the writer. The use of the person's first name and surname only in salutations, e.g. 'Dear Pat Koutsoukis', has become acceptable in cases where the person's title (and / or sex) is unknown.

When one is replying to correspondence signed jointly by a man and a woman, both persons should be acknowledged in the salutation in the order and form in which their names appear in the correspondence.

2. Alternatives for 'man'

2.1 It is recommended that women are made more visible in language by avoiding the use of 'male-specific' and 'male-identified' words in the generic sense. namely,

man (generic sense) humans, human race, human beings, human species, humanity, humankind *o r* women and men, person(s), man and woman, individual(s), people(s), etc.

2.2. The use of 'man' should also be avoided in idioms and phrases when the author or speaker clearly intends the expression to include both women and men. Expressions such as 'the best man for the job' or 'the man on the land' not only make women's presence and achievements in the workforce invisible but can also lead to discrimination. Alternatives for some common expressions are suggested below:

"the man in the street".---- the average citizen, the average person, an ordinary person, ordinary people;

 "the best man for the job"---- the best candidate or applicant, person for the job, the best man or woman for the job;

"man to man"_----- person to person.

"man of the year"---- 'citizen of the year' or 'employee of the year'.

In gender-specific contexts expressions such as 'man to man', 'woman to woman','one-woman show' ,'one-man show' are appropriate.

2.3. Occupational nouns and job titles

Occupational nouns and job titles ending in -*man* obscure the presence of women in such professions and positions. There are various strategies for replacing –*man* compounds. For example, the use of an existing gender-neutral term (*police officer* instead of *policeman*), or of the -*person* alternative (*layperson* instead of *layman*) or the explicit naming of both sexes (*sportsmen* and *women* instead of *sportsmen*) are some of the possibilities. It is, of course, acceptable to use the -*man* compound to refer to a man occupying the position if a woman in such a position is referred to by a -*woman* compound (*spokeswoman* for a woman and *spokesman* for a man). However, the practice of referring to a man by means of the –*man* compound and to a woman by means of the -*person* compound is discriminatory.

Here is a list of the most frequently used alternatives:

businessman ---business executive, business manager, business owner, business person, entrepreneur, financier, investor, proprietor

cattleman--- cattle breeder, cattle owner, cattle producer, cattle raiser, cattle worker, farmer

chairman--- the chair, chairperson, convener, coordinator, discussion leader, head (of) … , leader, moderator, person chairing a meeting, person in the chair, president, presiding officer

clergyman--- member of the clergy Depending on the denomination, other terms may include 'priest', 'pastor', 'ecclesiastic' etc.

craftsman ---artisan (artist), craftworker, technician

draftsman--- artist, designer, drafter, drafting technician, drawer

fireman --- firefighter boiler attendant, fire tender, stoker (railways, marine etc.)

fisherman--- fisher, fishing licensee (e.g. for legal purposes), angler

foreman --- supervisor, work supervisor, leading hand

groundsman--- groundsperson (if specific duties, e.g. gardener, landscaper)

handyman--- handyperson, do-it-yourselfer, maintenance worker, repairer

kinsman--- kin, relation, relative

layman--- layperson, non-expert (amateur), non-specialist, non-professional

laymen--- laypeople, laypersons, lay community, laity

milkman--- milkdeliverer, milk supplier, 'milko' (informal)

policeman--- member of the police, police officer (term indicating rank)

postman--- letter carrier, mail carrier, mail deliverer, postal delivery officer, postal worker, 'postie' (informal)

salesman--- sales agent, sales associate, sales attendant, salesperson, sales representative, salesworker, shop assistant, shop attendant

spokesman --- advocate, offical, representative, (person) speaking on behalf of … , speaker, spokesperson

sportsman--- athlete, player, sports competitor, sportsperson

statesman--- leader, state leader

stockman--- stockrider, stockworker, station hand, farm hand

storeman--- storeperson, stores officer, storeworker

tradesman--- tradesperson (trader)

tradesmen--- tradespeople

weatherman--- meteorologist, weather presenter, weather reporter (weather forecaster, weather bureau)(Do not use *weathergirl* if the forecaster is a woman.)

Workman--- worker, employee, working person

Other derivatives of *-man* compounds should also be avoided. Here are some suggestions:

Sportsmanlike--- fair, sporting

Sportsmanship--- fair play

Statesmanlike--- authoritative, diplomatic, experienced in … , skilful, tactful

Salesmanship--- sale(s), skill(s), sales technique, vendorship

Mankind--- humanity, humankind, human species, human race, people

Manhood--- (generic) adulthood

man-hour(s)--- labour hours, working hours, work hours

manhole--- access hole, sewer hole, utility hole

manpower--- human resources, labour, labour force, personnel, staff, staffing, workforce

manmade--- artificial, constructed, fabricated, handmade, hand crafted

machine-made manufactured, synthetic

3. Alternatives for 'he', 'him' and 'his'

There are many ways of replacing the 'he / him / his' pronouns without distorting the message or compromising style or readability. Here are some major strategies:

– recast the sentence in the plural
– leave out the pronoun
– repeat the noun
– use 'he or she', 'she or he' or in writing 's/he'
– recast the sentence and use another pronoun, for example, 'you', or 'we'
– recast the sentence to avoid pronouns

In speech it is common practice (however, considered ungrammatical) to use the pronoun 'they' as in: 'If a student wants to get a practice test, they should come to my office between 2 and 4 p.m. today'.

4. Occupational nouns and job titles which refer exclusively to women should also be avoided. Often these have been derived from male job titles by adding such suffixes as *-ette*, *-ess* and *-trix*. This practice reinforces the view that women's status is dependent on, or derived from, that of men. Job titles like 'girl friday' and 'salesgirl' trivialise the work women do. Here are some examples:

cleaning lady--- woman cleaner (house cleaner, office cleaner)

camera girl--- camera operator (*see also* 'cameraman' for other alternatives)

career girl ---professional, executive (or be specific about the profession)

salesgirl--- sales assistant, shop assistant, saleswoman

tea lady--- tea attendant

matron (nursing)--- director of nursing

Women should be shown as participating equally with men. Generic terms, for example :'doctor', 'lawyer' and 'nurse', should be assumed to apply equally to a man and a woman.

Expressions such as 'male nurse', 'woman doctor', 'lady lawyer', 'woman reporter' and 'female astronaut' should therefore be avoided in contexts where the reference to a person's sex is irrelevant. If gender specification is necessary, the use of the adjectives 'female' and 'male' before the gender-neutral noun is to be preferred.

5. Stereotyped images describing women and men

Here are some strategies for positive portrayal of both women and men: – Use the words 'man', 'woman', 'girl', 'boy', 'gentleman' and 'lady' in a parallel manner. Referring to adult women as 'girls' in a context where male adults are described as 'men' is inappropriate. It implies, among other things, that women are not considered fully grown up.

The use of endearments for women and men is acceptable in some situations, usually informal and private. In public situations, however, women are also often addressed by such words as *dear(ie)*, *darl'*, *darling*, *sweetie*, *love* and so on. This treatment is not generally extended to men. The practice of using endearments for women who are unknown to the speaker or in situations that do not call for such intimacy should be avoided as it is condescending and sometimes insulting to women.

If women and men have similar characters, parallel language should be used to describe them. Avoid the use of stereotyped generalizations about men's and women's characters and patterns of behaviour. For instance, if a man and woman each have a determined and strong attitude, do not describe him as 'forceful' and her as 'pushy'.

Portray and describe both women and men in a variety of roles and occupations. Take care in the descriptions of people whose main or sole occupation consists in doing unpaid work in the home. They should not be described as a 'woman / man who

does not work'. Their work should not be depicted as unimportant or worthless. Terms such as 'working mother' and 'working wife' should be used with care because they may imply that non-wage-earning women do not work. – Expressions such as 'the weaker sex', 'the fair sex', 'he acted like an old woman' and 'old wives tales' should be avoided as they are belittling and insulting to women. Sometimes it is implied that women are naturally less competent than men. – When describing a couple (man and woman), treat both partners as equals. If mentioning women and men together, do not always list the man first but try to alternate the order in which men and women are described.

IV. Conclusion

All in all, sexism in language is a social problem, since it is the reflection of human beings' thoughts. As we know, language is a comparatively stable system. Much of its reduction in sexist language appears to be taking place as an unconscious reflection of social and attitudinal changes. Therefore, to eliminate the sexist language, we should above all eliminate the concept of prejudice in human beings thoughts. Only by this way can we be free of sexism both in language and the society forever. We agree with what Rosalie Maggio says : "It is also necessary to acknowledge that there can be no solution to the problem of sexism in society on the level of language alone .Using the word 'secretary' inclusively , for example, does not change the fact that only 1.6% of American secretaries are men .Using director instead of directress does not mean a woman will necessarily enjoy the same opportunities today a man might ."(Maggio,1989).

References

Hu Zhuanglin, 2001, *Linguistics: A Course Book* (second edition), Beijing University Press

John Lyons, 1970, *Lingustic Semantics: An Introduction,* Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press & Cambridge University Press

Nilson, Alleen Pace and Haig Bosmajian, H Lee Gershung, Julia P Stanley, *Sexism and Language,* iuinois, NCTE,1977

Peter Trudgill, 1983, *Sociolinguistics: An Introduction to Language and Society*, Penguin Books

Wardhaugh, Ronald, 1986, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics,* Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Xue Yan, 2001, *A Retrospective in the English Language*, Journal of Lanzhou Railway University.