

Linguistic Asymmetries of Sexism in English

XIAO Jiecun

Linyi University, Linyi, China

All sorts of linguistic sexist phenomena still exist widely in the English language. They are not only a manifestation of sexual discrimination in language, but also a reflection of politicized language, a cultural stereotype, a power ideology, a social attitude, and a cognitive pattern in language system. Although the situation of sexist attitude has been alleviated due to the movement of women's emancipation, the sexism in the English language is not completely eliminated just because of morphological asymmetry and semantic asymmetry. So, there are still needs for both the reformation of language and the change of public perception and evaluation, which will push the neutral language to develop in an unavoidable trend.

Keywords: sexism, morphological asymmetry, semantic asymmetry

Introduction

In the human community, although about half of its members are female, an androcentric language is used for both sexes. In other words, the language is centered on the male portion of the population. This androcentric bias in language leads to a linguistic sexism.

With the re-springing up of the movement of women's emancipation, English circle sets off an animated discussion on the linguistic sexism, which extends over the whole language system, benefiting considerably from the wide use of the mass media. Corresponding with the transformation, a kind of awareness to be equal in social life, political activity, and academic study is enhanced among women groups. In addition, a professional training in a strict system gives them enhancement and ability to do a deep going re-consideration on the traditional linguistic, which is a manifest that the prepared working of the academical accumulation has been finished off. Meanwhile, American press, such as the New York and Washington Post, starts a special column in which a public talk is carrying on the facet of sorts of sexist phenomenon and information of language itself. This leads the public to ponder over the question deeply and formally. The study of the English sexism gets a full of vitality with the promotion of two elements above mentioned. The sexual difference in our study is not just focused on the ground of biology, but mainly on a kind of culture construction in which the relation of language and sex is not single or level but is in a certain condition filled with mutual activities.

Linguistic Features of Sexism in English

As asymmetric phenomena are presented when we put words with the sexist color into our study from the total amount and semantic changes, it is absolutely not the result of arbitrariness or random factors in the process

of handing down and speaking the certain language, but manifests a kind of oppress, a culture oppress. That is to say, as a strong and powerful group, male is the oppressor, and the female, the oppressed. The statement of semantic usage is not an ample evidence for its production, since it involves with the influence of elements, such as political discourse, power ideology, male chauvinism, cultural stereotype, sex role, social psychology, and cognitive pattern. It is the direct reflection of mode of thinking falling into a certain pattern from the patriarchal view. And, it is also the immediate outcome of the “double standard” of powerful utterance. In addition, it particularly is the display of sexual characteristic in the inner part of mass organization and the symbolic result of authentication of social identity. In a social view, it is the vivid portray of man’s superiority to woman in psychology and a derived product of social gender schematic process.

There are a lot of linguistic features of sexism in the English language. The topic is approached from the linguistic asymmetries, which include the following aspects: morphological asymmetry and semantic asymmetry.

Morphological Asymmetry

In morphological systems, nouns are assigned a gender on the basis of a morphological feature, e.g., noun inflections or derivations. The English language has gender marking practice in human agent nouns, which treat women and men differently; they are discriminatory practice in that they often make women invisible, treat them as secondary, or have a trivializing effect on the linguistic portrayal of women. The view that women’s status not only depends on that of men but as well secondary to it is linked to the derivative nature of many of female human agent nouns from male ones. The terms describing women are often derived from masculine ones by adding a “feminine” suffix to the “masculine” base, as follows:

(1) *-es*: e.g., *waitress*, *sculptress*, *authoress*, etc. Sometimes, this usage is conducive to highlighting the achievement women get still in a vague place when referring to the male character, such as *manageress*, *poetess*. The following are examples. We could call a person a general manager, but never name a woman a general manageress. In England, the supreme glory that goes to the poet with outstanding fulfillment is named poet laureate. But, we do not name it poetess laureate when a poetess gets the honor. We all know the word *hostess* still works widely, but when it appears in the expression of bar hostess, the meaning of this word is leveled into a lower status. Let alone the use of words, such as *Negroess*, *Jewess*, and *Quakeress*. Reducing of meaning being apparent is just because of the self-discrimination of *Negro*, *Jew*, and *Quaker*.

(2) *-tte*: The affix has three leveled meanings. First, it refers to something that has minor-size or small-scale, e.g., *cigarette* and *kitchenette*. Second, it has the meaning that the nature of the object is artificial, e.g., *leatherette*; and that women and their auxiliary, e.g., *majorette*, *usherette*, and *jayue-ette*. The third meaning is extended from the above two, which stresses women’s weakness and subordination to men. All these usages fail to describe an equal image to men’s influence by their sexual color.

(3) *-ine*: It has seldom seen in English except the made-up of heroine.

(4) *-trix*: e.g., *aviatrix* (which is not used frequently). We can find these affixes in legal vocabulary, like *executrix*, *testatrix*, and some expression to express the behavior of exertion and bear of maltreatment. All these usages indicate the irregularity of female character.

(5) *-en*: Originally, it refers to the weak, like *chicken*, but when revolving with sex, *maiden* is a good example to reveal the hidden meaning of discrimination throwing the element from the career itself.

To sum up, the five affixes are added to male vocabulary and as the reference of female, which manifests women's subordinated place from the inner structure of the process of making words. Additionally, there exists a relation of the loss of balance. On the other hand, if we start with the inner implication, a denouncing meaning emerges into our sight. However, some male affixes, like *-er* and *-man* are in common use with commendatory meanings, which occupy a large-scale ground in English affixes. Of course, *gunman*, *killer*, *robber*, etc., still have the tendency of violence. Therefore, from this we can see that in English the trend of belittling males is still far behind that of females.

In English different pronouns for both sexes are used when we refer to a third person: *he* and *she*. It cannot be said that these distinctions are a sign for sexism. However, it is true that these uses open the door to certain forms of sexism. And, the problem comes to existence in the neutral use of the male characters. We know that the word "man" is used to refer to a general humanity and the pronoun "he" to refer a third person whether it is a man or a woman. For linguists, these uses are formulated as the markedness of woman and unmarkedness of man. The woman is marked because we can use "woman" and "she" when we refer to female only, but the neutral usage of "woman" or of "she" is impossible. In linguistics, markedness refers to the way words are changed or added to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning.

Semantic Asymmetry

Forms of naming and address are used to express social relations between people. The issue of address provides the elaborate resource for the linguistic realization of social relations. Usually two parameters are distinguished to characterize the systems of address in languages, which express social relations between people: They are the parameters of power and solidarity. The lexical asymmetry found in the ways of addressing men and women can be linked to the social inequalities that exist between sexes in patriarchal societies.

The act of naming and addressing has great symbolic value in most societies. The fact, the act of naming, is a predominantly male prerogative in patriarchal societies and naming conventions for women in such societies reflects contributes to and perpetuates the social inequalities between the sexes.

The act of naming a newly-born baby is an important event marked by various kinds of traditions and rituals. Most communities attach great importance to distinguish the child's sex when choosing a name. One baby-naming book specifically recommends parents to choose a name that identifies the child's sex. Names, which can be used for either sex, are rare and usually marked for sex by different spellings, e.g., *Lesley/Leslie*. What make things worse, once a name is used for girls, it loses popularity as a boy's name, e.g., *Beverley*, *Gayle*, and *Shirley*.

Besides making the sex of the child, personal names for boys often reflect stereotyped features of femininity and masculinity prevail, in a particular culture or society. For example, boys are often given names associated with strength, power, and heroism whereas girls have names reflecting grace and other "feminine" virtues.

An interesting fact about first names in English is that almost all men's names function only as personal names, while many women bear names, which also refer to some object or abstract quality. So, women may be named after virtues: faith, hope, charity, patience, prudence, chastity; or vegetation: *Rose*, *Lily*, *Flora*, *Ivy*, *Daisy*, and *Olive*; or calendar units: *April*, *June*, and *Spring*; or minerals: *Pearl*, *Ruby*, *Jade*, and *Crystal*, which stress beauty and elegance. However, men may be named after strength, powerfulness, wealth or bravery, such as *Avery* (brave), *Harold* (general), *Neill* (champion), and *Nero* (strong).

In society, “only men have names” in that, their names are permanent and they have “accepted the permanency of their names as one of the rights of being male”. Practically it means that women’s family names do not count and that there is one mere device for making women invisible. Fathers pass their names on to their sons and the existence of daughters can be denied. When in the absence of male heir, it is said that a family “die out” one other direct result of this practice has been to facilitate the development of history as the story of the male line.

Another naming practice, which treats women different from men, concerns with courtesy titles or honorifics. The English language distinguishes women’s courtesy titles on the basis of marital status, but not those of men. This discriminatory practice is said to mark the availability of women in terms of marriage (sex) and reinforces the view that a woman is the property of a man, either her father or her husband. The use of titles is also asymmetrical: *women*→*Miss/Mrs./Ms.*, and *man*→*Mr.*

An adult male can be assumed to use the title *Mr.* before his family name, unless he has another title *Dr.* or *judge*. However, an adult woman (who does not use another title such as *Dr.* or *judge*) may use one of the three titles: *Miss*, *Mrs.*, or *Ms.* Thus any woman who gives her preferred title on a form is revealing far more information about herself than a man does. *Miss* reveals she is unmarried or chooses to present herself as such. *Mrs.* indicates that she is married. The use of *Ms.* is often interpreted to mean “unmarried, and slightly ashamed of the fact”. As one writer reports, after four attempts to convince a travel agent that she is not *Miss* or *Mrs.* but *Ms.*, she finally responds with “Oh, I’m not married either, but it doesn’t bother me”. If you choose not to tell the world your marital status by selecting *Ms.*, some people will assume you are divorced, and others will assume you are a feminist. In other words, the use of *Ms.*, if you have the choice of using *miss* or *Mrs.*, can seem to carry the information about your political opinions. Therefore, not only do two of the titles that women use reveal marital status, but also all three titles can appear to carry information about the user’s political affiliations. This is not a situation men face!

Why should a woman’s title change with her marital status, but a man’s title stay the same? Does not this imply that a woman’s place is in the home? Of not, why does not a man’s title (*Mr.*) designate his marital status?

In English, words like “man” and its equivalents often have a dual meaning: It denotes the male of the human species and allegedly refers to the human species in general. Feminist language critics have commented that this dual meaning of “man” has the effect of establishing “man” as the linguistic norm of de-emphasizing the fact that “man” like “woman” has the semantic feature of sexual being and of reducing women to the status of “depend other”. In addition, they have shown that this duality of meaning leads to semantic confusion or to a deliberate or unconscious (depending on one’s point of view) portrayal of humanity as “male”.

The semantic meaning of some title words is related to gender change during the process of English evolution. But what is worth to pay attention here is that the semantic meaning of words concerns with the female who are specially belittled, e.g., *man/woman*, *boy/girl*, *gentleman/lady*, *master/mistress*, *bachelor/spinster*, etc. Among these words in pairs, words that refer to women are unexceptionally covered with some sort of derogation whereas meanings of words, which refer to the male almost, remain the same. Besides, this belittlement somehow or other relates to sex and amorousness. It seems that no matter where the female are and what kind of position they hold, they always play the lascivious role. Taking *master/mistress* and *bachelor/spinster* for example, except

for “single female” which the word *mistress* means, it also holds strong sexist color, referring to female who is old, ugly, and without passion, while besides different kinds of males which the words *master* and *bachelor* refer to, in the area of education they also have the meaning that one goes further to study after getting a bachelor’s degree and receives a postgraduate degree and one has received the first or lowest degree given by university. They are as well the symbol of culture and superior education. In addition, when the words mentioned above appear by pairs, their word order as well reflects the trend of regarding men as superior to women. For example, *man and woman, boys and girls, husband and wife*, except for “ladies and gentlemen”, all the others appear with female behind male, representing female’s subordinate status. What’s more, we use different words to describe the same qualities between men and women when we use them together, e.g., *cautious men and timid women, ambitious men and aggressive women*, etc. All these have become stable usage of vulgarism. Describing the same qualities with different words provides the effect that men are superior to women.

Taking the difference of sex in English to consideration, different words are used to describe the same behavior. The use of these words directly reveals the objective existence of sexual discrimination, like *gossip, chatter, prattle, gabble, and nag*. They all allocate with female who is talkative, the talk is usually something boring without any practical value, and the bias is obvious, though scientific survey shows that in fact men are more inclined to control the conversation and usually talk more than women. However, the words mentioned above are seldom arranged in pairs with the male subject. When we need to describe such situation as that of men, we exclusively choose the word talk.

Homosexual is a comparatively serious social phenomenon appeared these years. Different from that in China, it has become a quite open topic in western countries. A male homosexual is called “a gay” while a female one is called “a lesbian”. Going textual research from the origin of word it is read in *Webster’s New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* that *lesbian* evolves from the word *lesbos*, which is the name of the island on which poetess Mytilene has lived. Mytilene is famous for her writing affection between women. The word *lesbian* is neutral from the point of etymology. However, in this dictionary, *lesbian* even has the meaning of amorousness, lecher in addition to its meaning of female homosexual, from which we see that from the point-view of semantic meaning of the word *lesbian*, female homosexual is still considered a bad different species. On the other hand, the original meaning of the word *gay* is “full of joy, expressing happiness, bright and colorful”, which has gradually evolved into the reference of man who falls in homosexual love. From this, the publics seemingly regard gay men as somebody with joy and brightness. On the contrary, we hardly associate *lesbian* with something of beauty and enjoyment. What is worse, *gay* is not only referring to the homosexual men, but also is able to cover the meaning of homosexual women, just like men are superior to women. For instance, the government decrees involving with homosexual are usually named as “gay rights” rather than “lesbian rights”. The phenomena of using male words to contain the meaning of women ones have got to every branch of society. These traditional words are still popular nowadays; meanwhile, newly made ups continuously appear in the language.

In western countries, old women get even more discriminations in language using. The following listed words are used to express the state of much older males, representing the basic social concept especially for the very old females: *hag, crone, witch, warhorse, biddy, and beldam*. To our surprise, we can hardly find out the words with similar semantic meaning, especially for old men in English.

Conclusion

In conclusion, language change is seen to lag behind social change, severely hindering the linguistic reflection of social change, to introduce and adopt linguistic changes, which promote the idea that women in the workforce are equal with men. It is indeed an effective way to bring linguistic onto a level with social reality.

An approach from men's studies, theory started with the whole life process of the male, observed the male individuals' and communities' roles changing in society. As a result, they found that under the pressure from various sides, the male suffered even more than that of the female. From this, they made a conclusion: same to the female, the society as well produced great sexual role constrained towards the male. In such opinion, the male are usually the covert prey of the concealed sexism in language, negative stereotypes of the male, which are insulting, dehumanizing, and potentially dangerous. Therefore, this is easy to induce the masculinization and evil. If this schooling spreads widely and becomes ordinary, the male chauvinists will realize that they should make self-examination, that they should respect the otherness of the society, that they should make positive efforts to push the reform of language, and that they should eliminate sexism in their ideology and valuation. Thereafter, the word sexism in language along with in society will be outdated and neutral language will become unavoidable trend.

Confronting with so complicated situation, it is necessary for our language doer to attach importance to the linguistic sexism problem. Combing with the basic regular-pattern of linguistic development along with the studying from the scientific research angle, we must try to achieve our aim of diminishing linguistic sexism, pure language and push the linguistic reform to some certain extent. Obviously, during this linguistic reform we face two hard tasks: on one hand, to evoke the public perception and improve women's social status; on the other hand, we should implement effective methods to clear sexism in language.

References

- Bai, X. H. (2000). *Gender language, culture and pragmatics*. Changsha: Hunan Education Press.
- Baron, D. (1986). *Grammar and gender*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Carolyn, J. (1995). *Non-sexual language*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Publishing House.
- Chen, R. D. (2001). *Ethics of language*. Beijing: Peking University Press.
- Coulmas, F. (2001). *A handbook of sociolinguistics*. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Dai, W. D. (1983). Analysis of gender differences in speech. *Journal of Foreign Languages*, 6(6), 24-28.
- Holmes, J. (1992). *An introduction to sociolinguistics*. London: Longman.
- Liu, L. Q. (2004). *Gender and media communication*. Beijing: Communication University of China Press.
- Sapir, E. (1949). *Selected writings in language, culture and personality*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sun, R. J. (1997). *Gender and differences*. Nanjing: Jiangsu Education Press.
- Zhao, R. H. (2003). *Language and gender, sociology of spoken language*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.