

On Sexist Attitudes in English

Edita Jodonytė, Palmina Morkienė

Abstract. This paper deals with a few aspects of the English language, which are conducive to forming negative and discriminatory attitudes towards women. The authors believe that language, culture and the development of society are closely interrelated. Language may reflect and shape society by embodying and disseminating relations of power. Dominant groups within cultures have created biases in language that disparage and belittle certain groups within society, one of the groups being women. This in-built discrimination can be obvious, as seen in the so-called pairs of words *buddy / sissy*, *callboy / callgirl*, where the female words acquire a clearly negative meaning, or in food, plant and bird metaphors, where women are treated as decorative and delicious objects or silly creatures. It may also be more subtly disguised, as illustrated by the generalized use of the nouns *man* and *mankind* or the pronouns *he* or *his*. The use of masculine pronouns for people in general is an example of a linguistic mechanism that operates to keep women invisible or secondary in status to men.

Changes occurring within and beyond the language are discussed. Thus, due to women's rights advocates significant steps have been taken towards creating consensus against sexist language. More and more conscientious speakers of English try to use gender-free language.

Introduction

The needs and conditions of the English-speaking world have made English an effective and sensitive international medium of communication. The amazing versatility of English has been proven in a number of contexts. Despite this fact and the adaptability of the English language to new words, concepts and usages, many speakers of English, in individual countries and worldwide alike, find it difficult to resist the **male centeredness** inherent in this language.

Our *objective* in this article was to analyze the pervasive gender bias present within the English language as well as changes already introduced or being introduced by conscientious language users with a view to make amendments to the status quo. We have studied a number of sources, covering a period of nearly three decades and have found that a minor language revolution has been taking place as a result of the demands of women's rights advocates and because of a quickly evolving consensus against sexist language. We have arrived at the conclusion that conscientious students, teachers and ordinary users of this language should get acquainted with the trends to better adapt to the new environment in English. Use of a **gender –neutral form** of English is considered to be instrumental in achieving this aim.

Findings: Biases within English

The more we learn about language and how it works, the clearer it becomes that our language shapes our perceptions of the world. Because we all have the same set of physical organs for perceiving reality, it seems as though reality should be the same for all of us. But we perfectly well know that it is not so; and language, it seems, makes a lot of the difference. Our language, in fact, acts as a filter, heightening certain perceptions, dimming others, and totally excluding some of the others. Therefore,

language can be manipulated to create particular impressions. Language carries certain **biases** within it because of the historical circumstances surrounding its development and the ways people have used it. Dominant groups within cultures have often used language to maintain their positions and prevent others from coming to power. The power relations within the English language are revealed in its **gender biases**, the majority of which rest on the traditional sexual division of labor as well as on the cultural assumption of male superiority. Since language is both denotative and connotative, these gender biases imply (and often project) **constructions of women as unequal to men**. Language both reflects and shapes society. We are all victims of our unconscious biases hidden within language. The calling of attention to sex discrimination contained within English has served to raise society's awareness of the problem of built-in biases in language. One of the main arguments against male-centered English and disparagement of women in language is that discrimination against women is promoted through sexist language.

A textbook on American government that uses male pronouns for the president, even when not referring to a specific individual (e. g., "a president may cast his veto"), reflects the fact that all American presidents have been men. Furthermore, it shapes a society in which the idea of a female president seems to be incongruous. When the speaker says "man" and means "human being", but the audience understands it as "grown-up male human" it is just an example of communication gone wrong.

A particular feature of English is the fact, that except for words referring to females by definition (mother, sister, actress) and words for occupations traditionally held by females (nurse, secretary), it **defines everyone as male**. The hypothetical person ("If a man can walk 9 miles in two hours..."), the average person ("the man in the street") and the active person ("the man on the move") are male. The

assumption seems to be that unless identified otherwise, people in general are male. It is a semantic mechanism that keeps women invisible; *man* and *mankind* represent everyone: "All men must die", says the Dictionary of English Language and Culture. "What about women?" we may ask, because even though *man* may mean *human being*, *men* does not mean *women*. The pronoun *he* in generalized use refers to either sex. Semantically speaking, woman is not one with the species of man, but a distinct subspecies. The 1971 edition of Britannica Junior Encyclopedia says: "Man is the highest form of life on earth. He must invent most of his behavior, because he lacks the instincts of lower animals...Most of the things he learns have been handed down from his ancestors by language and symbols rather than by biological inheritance".

This statement explains a lot, considering that for the last five thousand years society has been patriarchal. It explains why Eve was made from Adam's rib instead of the other way round. According to Casey Miller, it also explains the origin of the so-called Adam-rib words like *female* and *woman*. What is more, it helps us understand, why, when it is necessary to mention a woman, the language makes her a subspecies, distinctly different from man. In "The politics of pronouns" Alastair Pennycook (1994: 173) argues that "**pronouns** are deeply embedded in naming people and groups and are always political in the sense that they always **imply relations of power**".

Casey Miller and Kate Swift speak of oppression by language. "When language oppresses", they say, "it does so by any means that disparage and belittle", (1992: 220).

This disparagement through language and other symbols begins at home (also called a man's castle) where a man and his wife (not husband and wife, or man and woman) live with their children. It is reinforced by religious training, the educational system, the press, government, commerce and the law. Researchers studying the same baby described its cries as "anger" when they were told it was a boy and as "fear" when they were told it was a girl. Early in life, children are conditioned to the superiority of the masculine role. When a little girl is told to be a lady, she is being told to sit with her knees together, be quiet and dainty. But when a little boy is told to be a boy, he is told to be strong, noble and virtuous. Some long-standing conventions of the news media used to disparage women by identifying her sex at the beginning of the story, usually in the headline or its equivalent. If the story was about some achievement, the implication was: "pretty good for a woman". The media used to have a special and extensive vocabulary to avoid the constant repetition of the word "woman". Such headlines as "Grandmother wins Nobel prize", "Blonde hijacks plane", "Housewife to run for congress", conveyed the kind of information that would be ludicrous in comparable headlines if the subjects were men. In the media women are still often described through external or superficial concerns, which reflects a sexist view of women as decorative objects and extensions of men, but not exactly real people.

One of the ways English has been manipulated to disparage women is the addition of feminine endings to

non-sexual words. In this way a woman who aspired to be a poet was excluded from the company of real poets by the label *poetess*. A woman who piloted a plane was denied full status as an aviator by being called an *aviatrix*. The implication is clearly cut, as the derivatives were obtained by means of the lion- lioness paradigm. **Gender-specific** words emphasize a person's sex when it is not necessary or sometimes even objectionable to do so. An understanding of the difference between sex and gender is critical to the use of **bias-free language**.

According to Rosalie Maggio, "sex is biological, while gender is cultural, that is, our notions of "masculine" tell us how we expect men to behave and our notions of "feminine" tell us how we expect women to behave. Words like manly / womanly, unfeminine / unmasculine, tomboy / sissy have nothing to do with the person's sex; they are culturally acquired, subjective concepts about character traits and expected behaviours that may vary from one place to another as well as from one individual to another.

It may be culturally unusual for a man to be a secretary, but it is not biologically impossible. To say "A secretary has to be very accurate. *She* also needs to have good communication skills" means to assume all secretaries are women and is sexist because the issue is gender, not sex. Gender describes an individual's personal, legal and social status without reference to genetic sex. In other words, **gender is a subjective cultural attitude**. Sex is an objective biological fact. Sex is a constant, while gender varies according to the culture.

This difference between sex and gender is a matter of the utmost importance as much sexist language arises from cultural determinations of what a man or a woman "ought" to be. According to Miller and Swift, sexist language is any language that expresses stereotyped attitudes and expressions (1992: 220). Sexist language promotes and maintains attitudes that stereotype people according to gender while assuming that the male is the norm of the significant gender. Once a society decides, for example, that to be a woman means to do this, while to be a man means to do that, a lot of stereotypes appear. When people make up lists of "masculine" and "feminine" traits and expectations they almost always end up making assumptions that have nothing to do with innate differences between the sexes. A case in point: the way you button your coat, like most sex-differentiated customs, has nothing to do with real differences but a lot to do with what society wants you to feel about yourself as a male or a female person.

Certain sex-linked words depend for their meanings on **cultural stereotypes**: feminine / masculine, manly / womanly, motherly/fatherly and so on. What a person understands by these words varies from culture to culture, sometimes even within a culture. Thus, because words depend for their meanings on interpretations of stereotypical behaviour or characteristics, they may be grossly inaccurate when used to describe individuals.

Disparagement of women can be illustrated by the so-called pairs of words. Inside these pairs most feminine words have acquired **negative connotations** while the male ones are defined through a broad range of positive

attributes like strength, courage, directness and independence. Compare “a manly determination to face what comes” with “that painting was a waste of time, if not downright womanly”, “a masculine love of sports “with” a womanlike lack of promptness”, or “a virile literary style “with” “womanish tears”. What is more, male associated words are frequently applied to females to describe something that is incongruous like in “a mannish voice” or presumably commendable as in “she had a masculine mind”, or in “she took it like a man”. In contrast, female-associated words become totally **derogatory** when applied to males, and are sometimes abusive to females as well. Words derived from “sister “ and “brother” provide a good example, for whereas “*sissy*” conveys the message that sisters are expected to be timid and cowardly, “*buddy*” makes it clear that brothers are friendly people.

Differences in the connotations between positive male and negative female words can be seen in several pairs of words that, as far as denotation is concerned, differ only in the matter of sex. Sometimes they are rather troublesome for the following reasons:

1. Certain words are used as parallel pairs, but are in fact asymmetrical, as, for example, cameraman / cameragirl, mermaid / merman, makeup girl / makeup man, wizard / witch. The worst offender in this category is man / wife. The correct pairs are man/woman and wife / husband.
2. Other words are so unequivalent, that few people confuse them as pairs, but it is informative to study them, knowing that once they used to be equals: governor / governess, patron / matron, master / mistress, buddy / sissy, hubby / hussy, dog / bitch, call boy / call girl, bachelor / spinster, a man on the street / a woman of the street. Very often the feminine words acquire sexual connotations, while the masculine words retain a serious businesslike aura, compare *callgirl* and *callboy*. A study of these pairs of words shows that words associated primarily with women become discounted and devalued.

When men are doing jobs that women often do, they are apparently paid extra by being given fancy titles, e.g., a male cook is likely to be called a chef, while a male seamstress will get the title of a tailor and a dishwasher in the army becomes a KP (kitchen police}.

Society’s attitude towards females and males is also reflected in metaphors, e.g., food, plant or animal/bird metaphors.

Food is a passive substance just waiting to be eaten. Three decades ago it was considered a compliment to refer to a girl as a “cute tomato, a peach, a dish, a cookie or sweetie pie”. On the other hand, if a man was called a fruit, his masculinity was being questioned.

Something similar to the fruit metaphor happens with references to plants. English seems to feel absolutely convenient describing a girl as a wallflower, a clinging vine, or a shrinking violet. However, we insult a man by calling him a pansy.

In the bird kingdom women are referred to as doves or hens, while men are eagles.

The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a woman’s life. In her youth she is a *chick*. Then she marries *and begins to feather her nest*. *Soon she starts feeling cooped up, so she goes to hen parties* where she *cackles* with her friends. Then she *has her brood* and begins to *henpeck her husband*. No male counterpart of the story has been found.

Conclusions

In conclusion we may say that some positive changes have been taking place for a considerable length of time as people are becoming more aware of the language they use. In recognition of the power of language to subjugate groups of people, most reputed dictionaries and guides to writing in English published in the last 10 years discourage the use of words and statements that suggest bias or prejudice toward any group, including women. More specialized books on style and composition such as the Modern Language Association’s handbook for Writers of Research Papers offers a list of reliable guides to writing in **nonsexist language**. The MLA Handbook, for example, gives its own clear guideline of what constitutes sexually discriminatory language and its reasonable alternative, e.g.

1. Conscientious writers no longer use the pronoun *he* to refer to someone of unspecified sex, such as a doctor or an executive. To avoid this use of *he*, they recast sentences into the plural, specify the sex of an individual under discussion, and occasionally, if all the above fail, they use *he or she*.
2. Careful users also avoid designating sex with suffixes like -man and -ess and substitute nonsexist terms (1988:34). Thus, instead of “The average American drinks his coffee black”, a conscientious user of language will say “The average American drinks black coffee” or “Most Americans drink their coffee black”.

Thoughtful editors have begun to **repudiate** some of the **old usages**. Words like “blonde,” “vivacious,” “pert,” “dimpled,” and “cute” were dumped by the *Washington Post* as early as in 1970.

Sex specific and **value-laden** words as “bachelor”, “old maid”, “spinster”, “divorcee” have been replaced by the inclusive “single”. When a woman is referred to as a “professional” no one tends to think of her as a prostitute, which was the case only two decades ago. Even the traditional wording of the wedding ceremony is being changed. Many church officials now pronounce the couple “husband and wife” instead of the old “man and wife”. Words like “chairman”, “clergyman”, “fireman” and “stewardess” are giving way to “chairperson” or “head”, “clergy”, “firefighter” and “flight attendant”. These are but a few to mention.

It would be noteworthy to mention the fact that up to the 1970s hurricanes were given exclusively female names, which can serve as one more example of negative connotations connected with women. Due to the pressure from the feminist movement, however, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has started alternating male and female names for hurricanes. Food for thought to illustrate our above statement about the role of language in shaping society: in May 2000 Israel protested against a South American typhoon being called Israel, as it

thought this could be damaging to the country's image domestically and abroad.

But because there is a lag in how fast a language changes - new words can be introduced with no difficulty, but it takes a long time for old words to disappear - speakers of English are forced to constantly revise and update their knowledge of the language and its usage.

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Edita Jodonytė, Palmina Morkienė

Apie lytinę diskriminaciją anglų kalboje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami kai kurie anglų kalbos reiškiniai, atspindintys neigiamą ar diskriminuojantį požiūrį į moteris. Autorės mano, kad kalba, kultūra bei visuomenės raida yra be galo glaudžiai susiję dalykai. Kalba atspindi visuomenės ypatumus, pokyčius, naujai susidariusius santykius, t.y. parodo istorinę raidą ir *status quo*. Antra vertus, kalba turi ir visuomenės formavimo funkciją. Pastarąją dažniausiai realizuoja tos visuomeninės grupės, kurios toje visuomenėje turi ekonominę ar politinę valdžią. Valdžią turintys visuomenės atstovai kalbos pagalba formuoja neigiamus stereotipus apie vieną ar kitą visuomenės grupę - tai gali būti kitos rasės, kito tikėjimo, arba netgi kitos lyties žmonės. Kadangi pastaruosius keletą tūkstantmečių žmonijos raidai didžiulę įtaką darė patriarchatas, kalboje sutinkame reiškinių, kurie atspindi istoriškai susiklosčiusį menkinantį ar netgi akivaizdžiai neigiamą požiūrį į moterį. Turėdamos omenyje didžiulę anglų kaip pasaulinės kalbos įtaką visiems ja vienaip ar kitaip bendraujantiems, autorės norėjo parodyti šias gana nepageidaujamas dabartiniame demokratinėje pasaulyje kalbines atgyvenas, o taip pat tai, kas kas vyksta pačioje kalboje bei už jos ribų, keičiant *status quo*.

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The authors

Edita Jodonytė, M.Ed, assistant lecturer.

Academic interests: education science and needs analysis.

Address: Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Centre of Foreign Languages, 43 Gedimino str., LT-3000, Kaunas, Lithuania.

E-mail: edija@vandenis.sc-uni.ktu.lt.

Palmina Morkienė, senior assistant lecturer.

Academic interests: teaching grammar and idiomatic English.

Address: Kaunas University of Technology, Faculty of Humanities, Centre of Foreign Languages, 43 Gedimino str., LT-3000, Kaunas, Lithuania.

