Language and Gender: Perpetuating Gender Stereotypes through Language

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine words and expressions that perpetuate stereotypes about women. Despite centuries of progress, gender inequality remains a significant social issue. The struggle for women's equality is ongoing, and there is a need for continued efforts to educate the public about the importance of gender equality. The English lexicon contains terms and expressions that can have a negative connotation for women and this paper aims to point out some of them, while examining the way in which such words and expressions perpetuate existing gender stereotypes. It emphasizes the importance of language in reflecting and shaping societal norms, especially regarding the treatment of women.

Keywords: *stereotypes, gender inequality, gender roles, feminism, lexicon*

1. Introduction

Despite the passage of centuries, gender inequality persists as a significant societal issue. The struggle for women in this field is ongoing, and there is still a considerable distance to travel before the general public is sufficiently educated to recognize the equality of women and men. Patriarchal society has affected the language as well. English is a neutral language, and the gender of words does not exist in the entire lexicon. Nevertheless, some words and expressions may still be perceived as controversial and carry an unpleasant connotation. The casual use of derogatory terms for women can normalize misogyny and contribute to a culture where sexism is accepted as the norm. Languages evolved and were modernised, for example, French is one of the languages that underwent a significant change in vocabulary due to the issue of gender-specific job titles. In the past, occupations were predominantly held by men. French linguistics has influenced the evolution of this aspect of the lexicon, with the majority of occupational names being feminized. This is due to the fact that the majority of jobs are now occupied by women as well. Although French has evolved in this area, it has also retained some exceptions.

Primarily, this is a matter of grammar. However, it is more profound than that, as it is a social problem. To illustrate, if a language or, in the case of French, a dialect, does not use the feminine for jobs, this is indicative of a gender problem and an injustice. A concrete example is the word *author* in Quebec*: une auteure,* Belgium *Une auteur,* France *Un auteur* and in Switzerland *Une autrice.* Therefore, the French that is spoken in other francophone countries that are not France changed the gender of the word. Consequently, the French language spoken in other French-speaking countries that are not France underwent a change in gender for the word. It is notable that these professions were not given the same level of attention as those traditionally practised by men, despite the fact that they are also practised by women in the present day.

In the English lexicon, there are certain words and idioms that have a social impact and an unpleasant meaning for a specific group of people. The group in question is women. I will now proceed to elucidate the structures employed in the majority of cases for women exhibiting the same behavioural traits as men. The distinction between the sexes is that women are evaluated for such conduct, whereas men are regarded as normal for exhibiting such actions. In the first part I will talk about sexism in some languages and attempt to answer the question 'Is English a man-made language?' In the second section of the publication, I will discuss a selection of words, expressions and usual phrases that express negative stereotypes about women. In the last part I will talk about the use of politically correct language.

1.1. Are languages sexist?

The English language contains a plethora of metaphors in its semantic field, such as *chick*, *bunny*, or *kitten*, which describe women as being gentle and helpful, while men are represented by *wolf* or *lion*. The latter represent animals that are powerful, prestigious, and inspire fear or admiration for their power. Furthermore, there are saccharine terms from gastronomy, such as *cookie*, *cupcake*, or *honeybun*. The term used for the bachelor party is *stag night*, while the equivalent for the bachelorette party is *hen night*. The suffix *-ette* is also used for the latter, which expresses something smaller and more insignificant. Additionally, in the English morphology, the male form is typically used when referring to a word that represents a female. One of the most common suffixes is *-ess*, which is used to indicate that women are not equally considered important and that their role in society is being reduced. For example, the terms *waiter/waitress*, *tutor/tutoress*, *poet/poetess*, *auteur/authoress*, and

governor/governess (which refers to a private tutor rather than a political role).

> *It has also been suggested that suffixes like –ess and –ette trivialise and diminish women, and when they refer to occupation such as authoress and poetess, carry connotations of lack of seriousness.* (Holmes 388)

In languages as Romanian or French there are some jobs names that have only the masculine form. In Romanian for example the term *profesoară* is correct if that person is a preuniversity teacher, but if she works in the university space is *asistent universitar*, *lector*, *conferenţiar universitar*, *profesor universitar*, *prodecan* or *decan*. In essence, patriarchal society does not expect much from women, as there is no form for jobs that require more intellectual training. In another fields there are example such as: *paramedic*, *psiholog*, *secretar de stat* or *medic veterinar*. Well, some of them sound playful and frivolous *pictoriţă*, *doctoriţă*, *frizeriţă* or *ospătăriţă* as if they can't be serious. In French there are plenty of examples with the same problem as Romanian when it comes to women holding 'masculine' jobs, for instance *psyhologue*, *architecte*, *vétérinaire* etc.

English is a gender-neutral language, in contrast to other languages such as Romanian, French or German, which have complex grammatical systems based on gender. Nevertheless, there are methods of differentiation that can be employed and it still can be sexist. For instance, in English, terms such as *teacher, judge* or *therapist* are applicable to both genders and the terms *actor/actress*, *hero/heroine* or *king/queen* make a distinction between genders. In English, the root is typically employed to designate the masculine form, which is then suffixed with *–ess, -ette,* and *–in*e to create the feminine forms. Pronouns in English are *she, her, hers* for the feminine form, *he, him, his* for the masculine form, and *they, them, theirs* when the gender is unknown or undetermined. In the case of women, the marital status is indicated in her title *Mrs./Mss.,* but for men is only *Mr.* with no reference to whether they are married or not. For a politically correct language the neutral term Ms. was introduced when addressing a woman, regardless of her marital status.

The English language contains a plethora of pejorative terms that express offences against women, which typically refer to sexual workers or their aspect. For instance*, cow, Jezebel, whore, bitch, tramp* (which has a different meaning when used to describe a man), *airhead, hooker, and bimbo.* These terms reflect social expectations and criticize the appearance and relationships of women. Furthermore, society tends to condemn women for infidelity, yet accepts the same behaviour in men on the grounds that men have

needs and are not emotionally involved in the adulterous relationship. In contrast, women in the same situation are subjected to a plethora of pejorative terms, whereas men are labelled as *cheaters, adulterers, womanisers* or *players*. The circumstances are identical, yet the terms used are not as severe or offensive. Women are and have been much more harshly criticized for their appearance and actions than men, this is also reflected in the lexicon.

> *Linguistics sexism also works in the antagonistic patriarchal culture's depiction of woman as worthless and passive. The stereotypes perpetuated in print culture and visual culture incapacitate women and confine them to their private sphere which poses no threat to the power structures of masculinity.* (Kaplan 30)

1.2. Is English a men's language?

Historically, women have been oppressed for centuries. They've been dominated and subjugated. This has had a profound effect on language. Women are forbidden access to certain language registers, such as religious ceremonial. Exceptions are made for very few religions, if any. They are not even allowed to enter certain areas of churches or to attend specific churches for instance in Orthodox religion. Women were not offered the same opportunities for education as men and didn't have the benefit of the same level of education. Girls in school were instructed in the care of children and how to do household chores. In contrast, boys were instructed in the subjects of science, philosophy and other disciplines at school. Even at the beginning of the last century women struggled to get a PhD or just to attend a university. It was hard for them to survive in an academic environment dominated by men. Nowadays, in most countries, women have the chance to get proper education and higher- education.

> *The relation between men and women in patriarchy is one of domination and subordination. Women are socially conditioned to accept their subordination. Sexual colonialism is practiced with the consent of women in all societies. In spite of gender difference, all writers use androcentric language for their discourses, both creative and critical. Women's use of the male-centred language is parallel to a colonial situation in which the subject people use the language of the colonizer. It is in this sense that Adrienne Rich calls the male-centred language the "oppressor's language" (1971: 39). Women's use of the male-centred language is a sign of their subordination in a patriarchal society.* (Kaplan 67)

English has in its structure a considerable number of masculine forms,

such as pronouns addressed for both genders, terms that are referring only to men or if a term becomes feminine it feels like something is wrong. It feels like women don't belong to the language, or that a gender is worthier than another. This is the effect of a patriarchal society that made its mark on grammar:

> *Grammarians have treated the masculine gender as primary in order of creation and importance, both in the natural world and in sentence. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English grammars set forth the doctrine of the worthiness of the genders, borrowed from Latin, to justify the use of masculine nouns and pronouns to stand for the both sexes. Even today, many linguistics assume that the masculine is the normal, or unmarked, gender and that all English nouns are masculine unless specially marked.* (Baron 97)

2.1. Sexist idioms, phrases and words that induces stereotypes about women

From the beginning, women were not accorded the same status and respect as men. The roots are so deep that people don't realize that it is something unjust. For instance, actions, roles or the use of certain idioms, phrases and words that are commonly employed by speakers. It applies for both genders, but in the case of women, it can be described as internalized misogyny. This is a phenomenon that can be described as a form of sexism without a will, because generations and generations of women have lived in a world dominated by men. In our childhood, we may have been taught in our homes, schools and churches how men and women should behave and what is their role in the society. We may have believed that it was normal for women to be humble and listen to men. We live in a world where a woman is expected to be kind and polite. This should apply to everyone, not only for one gender. This kind of mentality can also be reflected in languages and in the lexicons there are sexist structures that are used daily and induce stereotypes through language. For instance, the term *wife material* is used to describe women who are deemed to be suitable for marriage, capable of performing domestic duties and raising children. This term is typically employed as a compliment, yet in essence, it perpetuates traditional gender roles and expectations. In a marriage, both partners should share equal responsibilities, including the raising of children and the division of tasks. This is in contrast to the traditional gender roles where the wife is expected to bear the majority of the responsibility. The *rationale* behind this gender-specific division of labour is that the man is

the primary breadwinner, while the woman is responsible for domestic duties. However, in contemporary society, women are increasingly engaged in paid employment, contributing to the family income, undertaking domestic tasks and assuming childcare responsibilities outside of work:

> In addition to laundry, cleaning and cooking, women are the primary decision-makers when it comes to home decor in 62% of households. Although there is more equity in some of the other tasks, women are also much more likely than their husbands to care for children on a daily basis, shop for groceries and wash dishes. (Women Still Handle Main Household Tasks in U.S. (gallup.com))
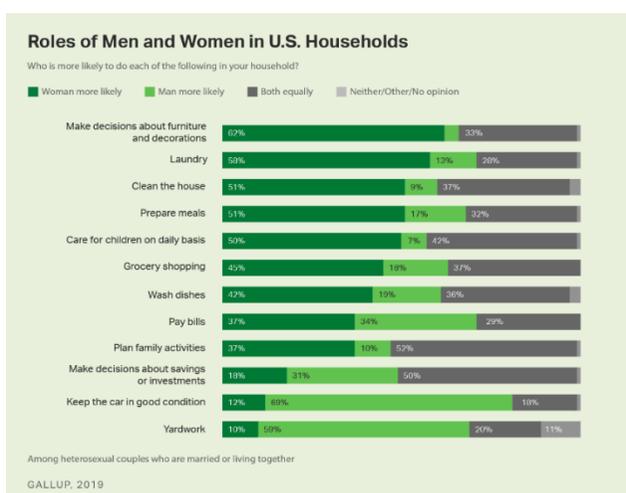

Fig 1: Women Still Handle Main Household Tasks in U.S.[12]

In contemporary society, the majority of countries permit women to pursue their own careers, earn their own income, and own their own property. The pursuit of a political career is inherently unjust when the population of a nation is comprised of an unequal distribution of men and women. It is therefore imperative that the percentage of women in parliament reflect the population ratio of women to men. In reality, however, women are underrepresented in politics. Only a few countries, such as Sweden, Norway and Iceland, have achieved a near fifty percent representation of women in their parliaments, which is a fortunate exception. In other countries, the percentage of women in

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[12] Women Still Handle Main Household Tasks in U.S. (gallup.com) accessed on the 13th of May, 2024.

parliament is significantly lower than it should be, for instance in Eastern European countries such as Romania or Ukraine. Nevertheless, women in politics are frequently derided for their political initiatives and are also perceived as lacking in strength. At times, they are perceived as lacking the emotional stability required to effectively govern a country. This perpetuates the notion that leadership is inherently masculine. Some women politicians are accused of being overly assertive in their roles and are named *bossy.* This term is derived from the word *boss*, which has been affixed with the suffix -*y*. This term is typically employed to describe the behaviour of women. For example, a man is perceived as strong, assertive and confident, whereas a woman is regarded as authoritative, domineering and over-controlling.

2.2. Idioms that express the need to be rescued or maintained by a man

It is possible for idioms to be sexist. Some of these idioms portray women as interested in money, social status, or in need of rescue by a masculine figure. Such terms serve to perpetuate the social status of women.

Trophy wife is a term used when a woman gets married to a man who is rich just because she is young and attractive, thus being valued primarily for her physical appearance rather than her personality, achievements, or capabilities. This term can be linked with *Gold Digger* as well. The phrase objectifies women, suggesting that they need a man to depend on.

Gold Digger is used when a woman is interested in a man for his money only. This idiom is frequently employed to denigrate women for their decisions, despite the nuances of why an individual might prioritize financial stability in a relationship. This practice serves to reinforce misogynistic attitudes and the context of economic inequality and the limited opportunities historically available to women.

The term *Damsel in Distress* is used to describe a woman in distress who requires the assistance of a male figure, often perceived as a hero, to resolve the situation. The term's etymology traces back to the Old French *demoiselle en détresse*. This expression gained popularity during the 20th century, particularly with the advent of comic books. It typically depicts a vulnerable woman who is saved by a male figure, often a hero or antagonist, from a male antagonist:

> *Before the notion of equality gained traction in mainstream society, gender scripts were strictly defined within predictable and stereotypical parameters. When 23*

women are represented, they take on very stereotypical roles; for example, women as needy victims and, conversely, men as protectors and saviors. Disney stories and cartoons are particularly powerful as they exacerbate traditional roles of men and women, i.e. that a woman's worth is proportionate to her beauty and that suffering will ultimately be mitigated when rescued by a handsome prince. (Solis 22-23)

2.3. Words that express women's lack of value over time

The term "hag" is used to describe women who are perceived as old and unattractive due to the societal belief that older women are no longer valuable. For instance, a woman's attractiveness is perceived to decline with age, whereas a man's attractiveness is seen to increase with age. Older women are often regarded as useless and unworthy, while men are still considered valuable and attractive by society for a longer period of time. Such an attitude has a negative impact on women's self-esteem and social perceptions. As a result, women feel unworthy, insecure about their bodies, afraid of ageing.

In the same category, English has other terms such as *old maid* and its synonym *spinster* that are used for women who are older, childless, not married or ever likely to be in a marriage. Such terms are distressing because they perpetuate a stereotype that judges women who do not conform to traditional values of womanhood, namely, marriage and motherhood. A man can remain unmarried and childless for his entire life without being condemned by society.

In the Romanian language the terms *cavaler* is used for a man that is still unmarried and *fată bătrână* for a woman that is in the same situation. The difference is that in the case of men, a word of noble origin is used. While in the case of women, a pejorative phrase is used, suggesting that she is no longer seen as desirable by society.

2.4. Stereotypical phrases

The phrase *You cry like a girl* is used to suggest that women are unable to control their emotions and feelings. In contrast men, are encouraged not to cry or show their vulnerabilities. This suggests that women are weak, cannot control their own emotions and are too vulnerable to be equal to men. Humans are emotional beings, and it is appropriate to express those emotions when the circumstances warrant it, without fear of censure. What society has forgotten about being too emotional is that anger is an emotion as well. When men are aggressive it is allowed and treated as if it is a normal reaction, but no one says that they are too emotional just because they are not seen as weak. Instead,

they are frequently regarded as powerful, but if a woman is experiencing the same emotion, she is viewed as hysterical, overreacting.

The phrase *boys will be boys* implies that a boy's or respectively a man's misbehaviour is part of their male nature. Instead of correcting their actions, they are encouraged to be in this way because it is perceived as normal. Boys and men should be educated because if their actions aren't good, their behaviour shouldn't be accepted. This phrase is employed to convey the idea that certain actions are considered normal and acceptable because gender roles are more favourable and it's in their nature.

3. Politically correct languages

The use of politically correct languages is intended to avoid terms or expressions that are pejorative towards a gender with the objective of promoting equality and respect. Furthermore, it is a means of creating a safe and inclusive space for all. One initial step is the avoidance of gender stereotypes, such as the assumption that *boys will always be boys*, *women are bad drivers*, *women belong only in the kitchen*, *one cries like a girl* or *throws like a girl*. The replacement of traditional gender-inclusive professional titles with gender-neutral versions is an example of this. This can be seen in the use of *chairperson* or *chair* instead of *chairman*, *police officer* instead of *policeman*, and *firefighter* instead of *fireman*. One may attempt to use inclusive language for all people, for example *humanity* or *humankind* instead of *mankind*. In order to adopt a politicised approach, it is necessary to utilise the title *Ms.* instead of *Mrs/Ms*. The title in question offers a neutral and respectful approach to addressing women, regardless of their marital status.

Another illustrative example is the use of a pronoun that can be applied to both genders. In instances where the gender of an individual is uncertain, the pronoun *his* is typically employed instead of *their* that is available for everyone:

> *In the sentence, "the student should bring his identity card," the male pronoun "he" stands for both individual males and individual females. When used as a general referent, the male pronoun includes females as well. This is a convenient and oblique way of making women invisible. Such use of gender-specific terms diminishes the importance of women and blankets them under a male term.* (Kaplan 29)

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be observed that in languages, there exist certain structures that are stereotypical in terms of grammar. It's important to remember that languages can be sexist. This is because women have been oppressed for centuries, and this has had an impact on language. The patriarchal nature of society has had a profound impact on language, giving rise to a sexist linguistic tradition that continues in 21st-century society. The English language is plentiful with expressions and words that are sexist, induce gender stereotypes, and refer only to men in a society where both genders have roles and equality. It is often the case that certain phrases and expressions are used by people in a manner that is not entirely innocent. It is recommended that people's vocabulary should evolve in this direction, and that phrases and words of this kind should be avoided.

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