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Some Aspects of Gender Bias in the English Language

The article deals with the study of some aspects gender bias in the English language, namely the semantic derogation and the application of the concept "generic man".
gender language, gender bias, semantic derogation, gender stereotypes, cultural stereotypes, perceived meaning

Nowadays, the study of the gender language is one of the prioritized in the science of language. Much of the early research on language and gender devoted a great deal of energy to addressing the issue of "women's language" using long lists of specific linguistic features such as hedging and intensifiers, the use of tag questions, the use of a high rising tone at the end of utterance, etc. These features were believed to be tied to women's subordinate status, and made women seem as if they were tentative, hesitant, lacking in authority, and trivial. Women occupy what might be called a problematic or negative semantic space. Because women are devalued, so is their language. The question of language and gender must address not only the question of how women speak, but also, how women are spoken about. The aim of this article is to look at some aspects of gender bias in the English language: the semantic derogation and the application of the concept "generic man".

Some of the most interesting changes that have taken place in the English language over the last 30 years have been driven by the desire to avoid, if not banish, sexism in the language. This reform movement is noteworthy for its differences from most previous reform movements, which have usually been inspired by a desire for English to be more logical or more efficient in expression. Historically, most proposed language reforms are ignored and end in failure. The few reforms that have become standard include the ban on ain't and the double negative, along with a scattering of "more rational" or simpler spellings like primeval, rime, tenor, and theater.

And unlike other political language reforms, which tend to be limited

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to individual names for ethnic groups, gender reforms involve basic grammatical components like pronouns, basic grammatical rules like pronoun agreement, and basic words like man, father, male and female. Some of these elements have been in the language for over a thousand years. It is not surprising, therefore, that the effort to undo them can often be a difficult and untidy business.

Socialization is the process that molds the biological sexes into gender roles through the complex interaction of language, culture and social structure. As Bonvillain observes, gender is "a social construct" [1: 174] and is, as such, the product of both direct and indirect social and cultural forces, which create norms unique to each culture about what are "normal" characteristics of men and women. In this context, language (or langue) is therefore the underlying socially established system of linguistic units and rules while the produced speech (parole) is the directly spoken everyday language. The latter derives much of its semantic content from the former, like, for example, outdated formulaic expressions that are used on ritualized, formal occasions such as church ceremonies, oaths, or in proverbial sayings and fixed expressions. In analyzing the inherent gender bias in these types of expressions, Bonvillain's points to the existence of "a pervasive, covert ascription of positive and normative qualities to males and negative or secondary ones to females" [1: 205].

It is necessary to define the distinction between gender differences and gender bias. Gender differences refer to the differing styles of speech employed by men and women, such as pronunciation, grammar, intonation, lexical choices, sentence structure, and so on [1: 176-98]. These differences reflect the social and cultural environments of the speakers, and there is great variation as to what is considered "typical" male or female speech, both cross-culturally and within a culture.

Gender bias is defined as the reproduction and reinforcement of negative gender stereotypes which become internalized as negative symbols for both genders through contemporary language (la parole) [1: 198]. Through semantic structures in the linguistic system like English (la langue), gender bias becomes a habitus which is the process of internalizing "the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product" [1: 199]. In other words, the habitus of devaluing women in English is both a historical and cultural process, which is perpetuated through the praxis of semantically reproducing and reinforcing negative stereotypes about women in everyday speech.

Bonvillain's arguments for the existence of gender bias in English are: semantic derogation, focus fronting, diminutive endings in first names, and the application of the concept "generic man" [1: 198-205]. Semantic derogation and the application of the concept "generic man" will be studied in this article.

Semantic derogation can be demonstrated with many different kinds of evidence. Words for women have negative connotations, even where the corresponding male terms designate the same state or condition for men. On the cognitive grammar view, "connotation" is not a distinct (and secondary) level of meaning, but is fully incorporated into the semantic structure of a word [2: 105]. Compare the words bachelor and spinster. Spinster and bachelor both designate unmarried adults, but the female term has negative overtones to it. Such a distinction reflects the importance of society's expectations about marriage, and, more importantly, about marriageable age. A spinster is more than a female bachelor: she is beyond the expected marrying age and therefore seen as rejected and undesirable. Bachelor, on the other hand, tends to have a more favorable connotation; the man has remained unmarried because he has chosen to do so.

These connotations are not just arbitrary facts of usage, but fall out from the domain-based knowledge against which bachelor and spinster are understood [3: 95-97]. The term "domain" is used to refer, very generally, to background knowledge necessary for the understanding of semantic units. In principle, a domain may be any knowledge configuration, ranging from "basic" notions to complex and rather specific knowledge [4: 153], Other writers have used a variety of terms to refer to domains, or to particular kinds of domains. Lakoff [6] introduced the term "Idealised Cognitive Model" (ICM), which focuses on configurations of conventionalized knowledge. First, it has to be noted that the notions of "adulthood" and "unmarried" are themselves complex concepts. Moreover, concerning bachelor, it is not the case that any adult unmarried male can be appropriately called a bachelor. We would not call the Pope a bachelor, nor an unmarried man in an established relationship. The question why the Pope is not called a bachelor is easily answered: the Pope simply is not covered by the idealized model of marriage. What is involved, in characterizing a bachelor as unmarried, is a somewhat idealized and perhaps even outdated view of marriage practices, in particular, the idea that people above a certain age are expected to be married, that men and women can pass the marriageable age without marrying but that they do so

for different reasons - a man he chooses to, a woman, because no man wants to marry her. Thus eligible spinster is almost a contradiction, while eligible bachelor is a normal collocation. As Lakoff put it, the spinster "has had her chance, and been passed by"; she is "old unwanted goods" [7: 32]. Real activates these dormant. Real bachelor highlights the man's irresponsibility. The sentence "Ann's husband is a real bachelor" is not only non-anomalous, it is also quite informative. It tells us quite a lot about Ann's husband, that he is an inveterate womanizer. At the same time real spinster focuses on the woman's sexual unattractiveness.

Some have speculated that the word spinster may be dying out. The original meaning of this word is a woman engaged in spinning. Because these women spinners were often unmarried, this connotation eventually ousted the original meaning and became the primary sense of the word. In the seventeenth century the term spinster became the legal designation of an unmarried woman. It appears to be still in common use in British English, as can be seen in the British National Corpus, where we can find 156 instances in a sample of 100 million words of text. By comparison, the word bachelor occurs 479 times, whereby men and their activities are more talked about than women and theirs.

If anyone has any doubt about the negative connotations of spinster, all they need to do is look at the range of words with which it is used. There are some neutral descriptive adjectives used with the word, such as 66 year old, disabled. But the majority of words collocating with spinster are negative. They include the following: gossipy, nervy, over-made up, ineffective, jealous, eccentric, love-/sex-starved, frustrated, whey-faced, dried-up old, repressed, lonely, prim, cold-hearted, plain Jane, atrocious, and despised. By comparison, the collocations of bachelor are largely descriptive or positive, with the exception of one occurrence of bachelor wimp.

The words bachelor and spinster thus differ in many more ways than just the feature specification male vs. female. No doubt it is the gender bias implicit in the spinster frame that accounts for the relatively infrequent use of the word spinster, as well as the coinage of the expression bachelor girl. The expression attributes to single adult females the same motives for not marrying as to their male counterparts.

This example shows how the meanings of words are constructed and maintained by patterns of collocations. Collocations transmit cultural meanings and stereotypes which have up over time. The problem lies not

with words themselves, but how they are used. Seemingly gender-neutral terms such as aggressive and professional have different connotations when applied to men and women.

These cultural stereotypes about old maids in the marriage market also affect the term maiden, as in maiden horse to refer to a horse that has not won a race. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the figurative usage of the term maiden as sharing the meaning of "yielding no results". Woman who has not caught a man has lost the race. Other figurative uses such as maiden voyage, maiden speech, maiden flight, etc. referring to the first occasion or event of a kind relate to the stereotype that women should be virginal, inexperienced, intact, untried, and fresh.

This sort of bias in the connotations of words for women is far-reaching and applies even to associations of the basic terms man v. woman ox boy v. girl. It is revealing to look at some of the collocations of these basic terms. Words with negative overtones are still more frequently used together with woman/girl than man/boy. Men are more likely to be referred to with positive adjectives such as honest and intelligent, while only women are described as silly and hysterical.

Because the word woman does not share equal status with man, terms referring to women have undergone pejoration. If we examine pairs of gender-marked terms such as lord/lady, baronet/dame, Sir/Madam, master/mistress, king/queen, wizard/witch, we can see how the female terms may start out on an equal footing, but they become devalued over time.

Lord preserves its original meaning, while lady is no longer used exclusively for women of high rank. The use of lady as a polite euphemism for woman is far more common in Britain than in the USA. The term lady is not simply the polite equivalent of gentleman. It can be seen from the fact that lady is used in circumstances where gentleman would not be. We say cleaning lady but not garbage-gentleman. The expression lady of the house is not matched by gentleman of the house, but contrasts instead with man of the world, another indication of the linguistic mapping of the division between the public and private spheres onto male and female. The British National Corpus gives 25 cases of lady of the house, 3 of woman of the house, none of gentleman of the house, and only 8 of man of the house. By contrast, there are 29 occurrences of man of the world, but only 12 of woman of the world.

Baronet still retains its original meaning, but dame is used

derogatorily, especially in American usage. Sir is still used as a title and a form of respect, while a Madame is one who runs a brothel. Likewise, master has not lost its original meaning, but mistress has come to have sexual connotations and no longer refers to the woman who had control over a household. There is a considerable discrepancy between referring to someone as an old master as opposed to an old mistress.

King has also kept its meaning, while queen has developed sexual connotations. Wizard has undergone semantic upgrading; to call a man a wizard is a compliment, but not so for the woman who is branded as a witch.

"Generic man" and the widespread usage of "he" [1:202-5] to mean anyone, male or female, is the most striking evidence for gender bias in modern English. "Man" is gender-biased term that defines the male gender as normative. Research by Wendy Martyna [9] has shown that the average reader's tendency is to imagine a male when reading he or man, even if the rest of the passage is gender-neutral. Therefore, you cannot be sure that your reader will see the woman on the job if you refer to every technician as he, or that your reader will see the woman in the history of man. On the other hand, replacing every he with he or she attracts even more attention to gender and defeats your purpose. There are some other suggestions how to avoid biased language.

1. Write the sentence without pronouns. Try to avoid conditional structures, generally introduced by "if" or "when", which often require the use of pronouns.

Biased Language: If the researcher is the principal investigator, he should place an asterisk after his name.

Gender-fair: Place an asterisk after the name of the principal investigator.

2. Use gender-specific pronouns only to identify a specific gender or a specific person.

Biased Language: Repeat the question for each subject so that he understands it.

Gender-fair: Repeat the question for each male subject so that he fully understands it.

3. Use plural nouns and pronouns if they do not change the meaning of the sentence.

Biased Language: Repeat the question for each subject so that he understands it.

Gender-fair: Repeat the question for all subjects so that they understand it.

4. Use the first- or second-person perspective. Notice in the table below that only the third-person singular is marked for gender.

Biased Language: The driver should take his completed registration form to the clerk's window and pay his license fee.

Gender-fair: You should take your completed registration form to the clerk's window and pay your license fee.

5. Use an article instead of a possessive pronoun as a modifier.

Biased Language: After filling out his class schedule, the student should place it in the registrar's basket.

Gender-fair: After filling out a class schedule, the student should place it in the registrar's basket.

6. Sparingly use the passive voice

Biased Language: If a student wishes to avoid sex bias in his writing, he should examine these alternatives.

Gender-fair: These alternatives should be examined by any student who wishes to avoid sex bias in writing.

7. Use human, person, and their variations: humankind, humanity, human beings, human race, and people.

Biased Language: The effect of drugs has been studied extensively in rats and man.

Gender-fair: The effect drugs has been studied extensively in rats and humans.

8. Use a more descriptive or inclusive compound word: workmen's = workers';

man-sized = sizable, adult-sized; chairman, chairwoman = chair, chairperson, president, convener.

Biased Language: The governor signed the workmen's compensation bill.

Gender-fair: The governor signed the workers' compensation bill.

One more suggestion: though not acceptable in formal writing, a common speech pattern uses a form of they (they, them, their, theirs) as a generic pronoun following everyone, anybody, and other indefinite pronouns, e.g. "Everyone cheered when their team won the game".

It can be stressed, that gender-fair language minimizes unnecessary concern about gender in the subject matter, allowing both a writer and a reader to focus on what people do rather than on which sex they happen to

be.

In conclusion, it can be said that our language and society reflect one another, so it is important for communicators to recognize and respect change in the meaning and acceptability of words. Concern about the use of biased language is part of the increased awareness that the perceived meanings of some words have changed in response to the changing roles of men and women in our society. Any remedy will require change in both society and language.

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