

Movement of Anti-Sexism in English

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Abstract

Sexist language is language that states inequality of one sex over another. In most cases, the bias is in favor of men and against women. This paper briefly discusses forms of sexism that present within English language. Due to the credits of women's movement in Western Countries in the 70s, some anti-sexism developments in English language are also briefly discussed.

Keywords: sexism in English, sexist language, anti-sexism movement

Introduction

For generations, people have thought women as dependent, inferior and subordinated social economically, politically and culturally because of our patriarchal society. Men have utilized their physical advantages to have the upper hand in economy and become more and more important in social economy. They are considered as the center in the social development as well as in the family. Women, on the other hand, due to a long-stereotyped impression, are responsible for domestic situations, stay at home, not allow to work outside, remain powerless, and being dependent on men.

What is sexism? A definition from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, sexism is "unfair or unreasonable discrimination between the sexes; unreasonable maintaining of traditional sexual roles (eg that men are strong and women are weak); the discrimination that one group to another, especially male to female." Also Collins Cobuild English-Chinese Language Dictionary has defined sexism as "the idea or belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent or less capable than those of the other sex, and that certain jobs or activities are suitable for women and others are suitable for men; often used by women expressing disapproval." From the definitions that have shown above, women have experienced sexual discrimination in every aspect, including the language we use daily. Language is a social phenomenon, being a part of the society, and closely correlated to the social

development. Due to the traditional language practices, sexism usually refers to linguistic biases for women. Language is unquestionably indicated the superior status of men, but inferior one for women.

Does language we use daily indicate any biases against women? This paper briefly discusses forms of sexism that present within English language. Moreover, due to the credits of women's movement in Western Countries in the 70s, some anti-sexism developments in English language are also briefly discussed.

Evidences of Sexism in English language

In a patriarchal society, men are considered the center for the human species. Their thoughts and beliefs are viewed as fully representing those of all human beings. Same principles apply to language in terms of morphology, syntax, and semantics.

In morphological speaking, the English language has a gender marking practice in words, which treat women and men unequally. One of the most obvious evidences of the sexism in English language is the derivational morpheme or affixes, which treat women as a deviation from men. The female term is seen as the marked term, whereas the male as the unmarked one. There are a range of affixes used to refer to women, such as '-man', '-ess', '-ette' in occupational nouns and job title, asymmetrical naming practices, and stereotyped images of women. Examples are listed as below:

<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>
actor	actress
god	goddess
host	hostess
heir	heiress
hero	heroine
man	woman
prince	princess
steward	stewardess
waiter	waitress

English sometimes expresses its masculine aspects in compound words by adding '-man' at the end of the words such as chairman, businessman, fireman, fisherman, policeman, postman, salesman, and spokesman. Those indicate that males are the center of the society. These jobs are undoubtedly taken by males and women are completely excluded.

In syntactical speaking, generic pronouns, such as he, his, him, himself, are pronouns used specifically refer to males and generically and commonly refer to human beings in general. When such terms are used generically, misinterpretation can result to the English language learners and females are unintentionally ignored. Again,

women's linguistic status is often dependent on men by referring women to a dependent, inferior position. Generic noun such as 'man' also shows a linguistic version of the social inequality by not only referring to male human being but also referring to the whole human race. Example sentence like 'all men are equal' again makes women invisible. Sexism in language is also illustrated in word order. When men and women are presented together, usually words indicating male sex are put in front of female one. It is easy to find word order pairs in newspaper, magazines as well as in speech, such as male and female, husband and wife, father and mother, and so on.

In semantically speaking, language has a tendency to degrade women. Words become negative or derogatory when shifting into the feminine phase, while male one has remained the same and neutral. For example, 'governess' can mean a lover or a house wife, whereas 'governor' remains the same as referring to a person appointed to govern a state or province. Others like 'hostess,' 'mistress,' 'tramp,' 'women in the street,' 'she is a professional' are likely to indicate that she is a prostitute, which show a lower social status of women. Word like 'queen' is also used as a term for 'a gay or homosexual man.' Metaphors about women are often negative. People often use some words such as chick (young women), kitten (lovely and young girl), cat (disgusting women), dragon (irritable women), mother (old woman) and so on.

Evidences above have shown that language is unquestionably indicated the superior status of men, but inferior one for women. Women are dependent and subordinate to men socially and economically. Due to the various women's movement in Western Countries in the 70s, some anti-sexism developments in English language are briefly discussed in the next section.

Anti-Sexism in English Language

Language simply reflects our social aspect of life. Women have experienced inequality treatment linguistically. However, due to their greater status-consciousness, the women's movement in western countries in the 70's organized by feminists to reduce sexual discrimination and stereotyping has led to various efforts to influence and change languages and linguistic behavior. Women's social status has been improved as well as in the area of English language. Ways are trying to improve the inequality situation morphologically and syntactically.

In morphological speaking, many occupational nouns and job titles end with '-man', which are ambiguous the presence of women in such professions and positions. There are various approaches for replacing '-man' compounds. For example, the use of a gender-neutral term such as 'police officer' instead of 'policeman', or of the '-person' alternative such as 'spokesperson' instead of 'spokesman.' A list of the

most frequently used as follow:

- Businessman → business executive / manager / owner, entrepreneur
- Chairman → chair, chairperson, coordinator, leader, moderator, president
- Fireman → firefighter
- Fisherman → fisher, fishing licensee
- Handyman → handyperson, repairer, maintenance worker
- Policeman → police officer
- Postman → mail carrier / deliverer, postal delivery officer, postal worker
- Salesman → sales agent / representative, salesperson, shop assistant / attendant
- Spokesman → advocate, official, representative, speaker, spokesperson
- Sportsman → athlete, player, sportsperson
- Weatherman → meteorologist, weather presenter, weather reporter / forecaster
- Workman → worker, employee

Other derivatives of ‘-man’ compounds should also be avoided. It is recommended that women are made more visible in language by avoiding the use of ‘male-specific’ words in the generic sense. Here are some suggestions:

- Mankind → humanity, humankind, human species, human race, people, individual(s), human beings, person(s)
- Manhood → adulthood
- Manpower → human resources, labor, labor force, personnel, staff, workforce
- Manmade → artificial, constructed, fabricated, handmade, synthetic

In syntactical speaking, the use of ‘man’ should also be avoided in linguistic usage when the speakers clearly intend the expression to include both women and men. Expressions such as ‘the best man for the job’ or ‘man of the year’ 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’ → change ‘the man’ to ‘the average citizen,’ ‘the average person,’ ‘an ordinary person,’ ‘ordinary people;’
- ‘the best man for the job’ → change ‘man’ to ‘candidate,’ ‘applicant,’ ‘person;’
- ‘man of the year’ → change ‘man’ to ‘citizen,’ ‘employee.’

Also there are approaches for replacing generic pronouns such as ‘he,’ ‘him,’ or ‘his’ without altering the meanings of the message. Here are some tips:

1. Use plural

2. Use 'he or she,' 'she or he' or 's/he'
3. Rephrase the sentence and use another pronoun or change into the second person, for example, 'you,' or 'we'
4. Rephrase the sentence to avoid pronouns such as changing the sentence into the passive voice

Conclusion

For generations, women have been in a position as dependent, inferior and subordinated to men socially, economically, and linguistically, whereas men are in a superior place. This paper has presented evidences of sexism in English language and indicated some anti-sexism movement in terms of morphology and syntax. More can be examined in an analysis of dictionary usage for the further interests.

As we know, during the process of socialization, language formed and changed. Children have learned their appropriate behaviors through role models, mass media, textbooks and educational schools. More research can be conducted in the areas of analyzing school textbook usages. The language transformation can be realistic beginning at birth and on the basis of the social reform.

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