Gender Differences and Discrimination in Lexicon

Xiaoran Li[*]

School of Foreign Language and Literature, Zhejiang University of Technology, Hangzhou, China
[*]Corresponding author. Email: 925081891@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Language implies a common kind of cognitive organization as the very existence of a communicative level of structure. It reflects the value system of society indicating cultural thinking and conditions of interaction and transmission.Gender differences and discrimination consequently behave as a crucial topic in linguistics. However, gender inequalities in lexical selection and word formation lack systematic research and classification. In this paper, we aim to explore the connotation of gender issues on the lexical level to analyze the difference. We will also focus on how language prejudice affects our lives under a patriarchal society.

Keywords: *lexicon, gender differences, discrimination, suffix, polysemy*

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender discrimination in language mainly stems from the difference in gender cognition caused by the division of roles and social status. Men are generally considered to be strong and able to take on the primary responsibility for supporting their families. While women are seen as weak dependents. They are responsible for domestic affairs and child-raising under conventional rules. Therefore, men occupy a dominant position, and women are solidified in a subordinate position. The influence of social status is also reflected in the fact that men and women are constantly shaped and endowed with two different life experiences. For example, it is widely acknowledged that women are responsible for doing domestic chores while men do physically-oriented things, such as gardening, repairing a car, or fixing up a bike [1].

Language places women in the position of disadvantaged groups during the period of word-formation. According to the difference theory, there is an obvious gender difference in the language due to the different subculture backgrounds of males and females [2]. For example, during the 17 century, when the Europeans set up on the American land, they first encountered the different vocabularies of male and female speech among the Carib Indians. they reported that the different sexes used different languages [3]. Then the discrimination inevitably emerges in language practice due to cultural and historical factors. Males are thought to be in a higher position so gender differences in language use will strengthen males' position in society.

The higher the status of the individual speaker, the more powerful their language [4].

Analysis on this topic will contribute to eliminating the discriminatory usage in the lexicon and establishing the correct gender values. In traditional Chinese and Western cultures, women often exist as male vassals, and they play the role of reproductive tools or housewives. They help men achieve their ultimate goal by sacrificing their emotional value and even their dignity. The differences in Gender words are the miniature of such social problems. Jesperson once introduces the appearance and characters of female languages in his book with one independent chapter, including using the euphemism, completing the switch of topic and empty. In the book Growth and Structure of English Language, Jesperson points out that English is the most masculine language which females are familiar with. In another word, lexical selections in conversation and derogatory terms towards women all crystallize gender differences [5].

2. LEXICAL RESEARCH ON GENDER DIFFERENCES

The male speaking structure is viewed as a criterion while the female speaking structure is viewed as deviation and intention. It implies that females indeed is imperfection in existence in society. Besides, research shows that "the defection of female language is the result of role socialization" [6]. During the word- formation process, language absorbs gender cues from prejudice

towards women. This phenomenon passively places women on a more vulnerable level.

It is not difficult to find that the sexism in English vocabulary also hides in characters when we study the Chinese-Tibetan language system. Under the laws "three obediences and four virtues" in ancient China, many characters are used to demonstrate women's humble social status. Women have to serve their husband, take care of their children and do housework. They are unable to take part in social activities and politics [7]. Pictograph is the base of Chinese character conformation. For example, "女" looks like a woman going down on her knees. Relevant contents always represent a low status when we open the dictionary. We always use men to refer to humankind, which shows the generalization of male language. This phenomenon creates privilege for men and marginalization of women. Even the term "female" is originated from the word "male". If someone describes something related to a female, Chinese characters and English words are usually supplemented with a prefix or suffix denoting female. English adds a female affix to a word, and Chinese adds "女" before the character.

2.1. Suffix

The use of negative suffix embodies linguistic sexism. Following the Markedness Theory proposed by linguist J. Greenberry, most nouns denoting masculinity are unmarked, while feminine nouns are often formed by adding suffixes to masculine nouns [8]. It means that female nouns are often derived from male nouns by adding suffixes. This word- formation itself contains a male-centered implication and manifests sexism. Therefore, the process is viewed as "negative".

Modern feminists seek absolute fairness in language expression and ensure all vocabulary in general. At the same time, they also specifically request that female words should not have obvious gender suffixes. For example, words suffixed with "-ess" like poetess, authoress, should be carefully chosen to ensure that gender awareness is diluted in lexical expression. Such practice reflects the concept of complete gender equality in language expression in their opinion. Meanwhile, suffix matters the relationship between gender and occupation. The choice of employer for the personnel department cannot be determined by gender. There is no direct correlation between gender and occupation, so it is necessary to eliminate people's traditional sexist notions. We will introduce two suffixes to further explain relevant thoughts.

2.1.1. Suffix: -ess

Ex. hostess, stewardess, waitress, goddess

These words are suffixed by a feminine suffix. Formed by "-ess", it gives the impression that women are

subordinate to men.

Furthermore, these feminine suffixed words might not necessarily be used on all occasions. Taking "poet/poetess" into consideration, we know that "poetess" refers to the female poets. However, "Poet Laureate", the highest honor awarded to poets in the UK, can only be represented as "Poet Laureate". Even the award winner is female, there is no phrase like "Poetess Laureate".

2.1.2. Suffix: -ette

The suffix "-ette" has three meanings: "small size", "commodity imitation", "women and its auxiliary status". The third meaning is derived from the former ones. It highlights the weakness and subordination of women. In addition, some female names are also formed by adding the suffix "-ette" directly to the male name, such as "Bernadette".

2.2. Polysemy

It is quite common that many English words are polysemous. Although most vocabularies are used neutrally and positively, some are still employed to demean or humiliate women. In English, animal words (1), terms of endearment (2), and daily life vocabularies (3) are used to belittle women with their implied meanings. Virtually, some adjectives and proverbs (4) are specifically designed to degrade women. Sometimes when the same adjective is adopted to describe a man, it always conveys positive and affirmative meanings. But when it is used to describe a woman, the word contains more negative meanings as the example (5) shows.

Ex. (1) Bitch: It means a female dog, but when applied to a scolding context, it becomes a reference to a slut and bad woman; Cat: It can also refer to a woman with a vicious heart.

Ex. (2) Lady, Madam: Both are used as honorific for women, but they also denote mistress under some contexts.

Ex. (3) Crumpet: It means both bread and slut; Tar: It means both fruit pie and slut.

Ex. (4) Women have long hair and short wit (女人头发长，见识短).

Frailty, your name is a woman (This is a famous line from Shakespeare).

Ex. (5) Jack is imposing (Jack is a majestic man).

Mary is imposing (Mary is a cold and indifferent woman).

2.3. Lexical selection in conversation

In general, women are inclined to use typical feminine words such as nicknames, weak expletives,

descriptive words, exaggerated adjectives, and degree adverbs. Females are prone to call their intimate friends "honey", "sweetie" to show their amiable and approachability. Furthermore, as Lakoff pointed out, women are not expected to use strong expletives, such as "damn" or "shit", but are encouraged to substitute weaker ones like "oh, my god" or "fudge" [9]. The direct consequence entailed by such expression is that women are prevented from venting their feelings. That exactly explains why women are fond of employing descriptive but empty words that contain no meaning like Example (6). Additionally, as women tend to be more sensitive and emotional, exaggerated adjectives and degree adverbs shown in Example (7) are used more frequently compared with that of men.

Ex. (6) adorable, charming, divine, lovely, terrific, etc.

Ex. (7) indeed, quite, definitely, totally; You're so annoying!; It's unbearable.

Moreover, differences in vocabulary choice between the sexes are associated with aesthetics. As we know, the application of vocabulary of visual color is very important in that it can make the language more vivid. Women are better users of these kinds of words in that they love beauty, and they like dressing up to make themselves more beautiful [10].

In other languages, men and women also adopt their respective conventional lexicon for expression. In Japanese, some words are used exclusively for men while some can only be used by women. For example, the usage of the first personal pronoun あたし (me) and the second person pronoun あなた (you) are confined to women, while men express おれ (me), ぼく (me) and おまえ (you), きみ (you) respectively. Another example is that women tend to add final auxiliaries such as …わ，…の，…ね，…よ after verbs, while men are prone to add final auxiliaries such as …だ，…ぞ [11].

3. SUPPLEMENTARY ANALYSIS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN LANGUAGE

3.1. Religion

Religion plays a critical role in gender discrimination. Because religious books have a profound impact on the formation of the western value system. The prevailing view is that women cannot be independent. They are just accessories for men. The majority of people in English-speaking countries follow Christianity. People exposed to Christian culture are very clear about their belief in human origin. That is the story of Adam and Eve: God created Adam, but Eve was created from a rib in Adam's body. Additionally, in the Bible, men are the main power for society while women are depicted as the root of all evils. These myths consciously belittle and discriminate

against the identity of females which forms westerners' preconceived negative views on women. Women's humble lowly status is not achieved overnight, but male sovereign deeply for a long time. Due to the profound influence of the religious culture, the gender discrimination of ideological bias against women is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people [12].

3.2. Tendency

On the whole, gender discrimination in the language has been gradually weakened with the development of our society. Gender discrimination in language is not invariable from the beginning of its formation. Continuously changing with the social environment, it has undergone several revolutions.

In the 1960s, feminism prevailed in the United States. Later in the 1970s, the term "gender" emerged based on gender restriction. In that exact social and cultural background, there was a clear division of labor between men and women, which also reflects gender expectations and norms of behavior between genders.

From the perspective of language development, the mixture of male words and female words, in a sense, had been frowned upon by society for a long time. However, in the 1990s, the reform of English vocabulary resulted in the comprehensive use of male words and female words. That's to say, those words originally only used to describe one particular gender were suitable for different genders.

Since the 20th century, with the joint effort of feminists, linguists, and the public, gender discrimination in English has been greatly weakened and the characteristic of neutralization has gradually come out. People try to avoid using male pronouns to weaken the generalization of male words. The linguistic boundaries between men and women are gradually blurred.

4. CONCLUSION

Linguistic sexism is closely related to all aspects of society. It is a reflection of specific social psychology and cultural tradition. With the awakening of female consciousness and the development of the feminist movement, discrimination in language was changed to some extent. But from the lexicon level, there is still internal discrimination in word formation and lexical selection. Full gender equality still has a long way to go.

REFERENCES

[1] Handoyo Puji Widodo, Tariq Elyas. "Introduction to Gender in Language Education." Sexuality Culture 24(2020): 1019-1027.

[2] Ma Zhixin. "A Literature Review on the Study of the Gender Differences in Language." Proceedings of 2016 2nd International Conference on Economics,

Management Engineering and Education Technology (ICEMEET 2016). Ed. Atlantis Press, 2016. 661-664.

[3] Yule, G.. "The Study of Language." Science 10.256(2010): 324-324.

[4] Wolfson, N.. "Perspectives: Sociolinguistics and TESOL." Newbun House Publishers(1989).

[5] Jesperson, Otto. "Language: it's nature, development and origin." London: Allen & Unwin, 1922.

[6] Lakoff, R.. "YOU SAY WHAT YOU ARE: ACCEPTABILITY AND GENDER-RELATED LANGUAGE." Dialect & Language Variation (1986):403-414.

[7] Dong Jinyu. "Study on Gender Differences in Language Under the Sociolinguistics." Canadian Social Science 10.3(2014): 92-96.

[8] Li Fuyin. "Signs of gender differences in English." The Journal of the Ocean University of China: Social science edition 04(1996): 95-99.

[9] Lakoff, R.. "Language and Woman's Place." Language in Society 2.1(1973):45-79.

[10] Cong Feixue. "The Analysis of Gender Differences in Language Use." The 9th Northeast Asia International Symposium on Language, Literature and Translation Invitation. Ed. The American Scholars Press,Inc, 2020. 329-333.

[11] Wei Zhiqiang. "Differences in language use between men and women." Language Teaching and Research 3(1983):6.

[12] Wang Huiying, Feng Yuxuan. "Sexism in English Language." New documentary 18(2021): 67-69.