Analysis of Sexist Vocabulary and Countermeasures in English-speaking Countries from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

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Abstract: As an significant tool for communicating and disseminating information, language could not only symbolize general literacy of individuals, but also reflect the socio-cultural profile. With the awakening of females in English countries, some sexism words, especially those which discriminate against women are concerned. This paper is going to take sexist vocabulary as an entry point, systematically analyse the features of composition and semantics, then explore the socio-cultural reasons behind and the countermeasures to eliminate linguistic discrimination. The author hopes to give suggestions to those who are willing to transform gender inequality in modern society, contributing to achieving gender equality.

Keywords: Linguistics Sexism, Sociolinguistics, Lexicon

1. Introduction

As a significant tool for communicating and disseminating information, language could not only symbolize general literacy of individuals, but also reflect the socio-cultural profile. With the awakening of females in English countries, some sexism words, especially those which discriminate against women are concerned. This paper is going to take sexist vocabulary as an entry point, systematically analyse the features of composition and semantics, then explore the socio-cultural reasons behind and the countermeasures to eliminate linguistic discrimination. The author hopes to give suggestions to those who are willing to transform gender inequality in modern society, contributing to achieving gender equality.

Language has its functions as a medium for people to transmit information and communicate. More broadly, behind the language, not only can it reflect the speaker's value system, but also the trend of the society and so on. As what Marxism thought, language is a product of society and develops as society develops]. This statement implies that, the sexism language couldn't be compiled and disseminated by a single person. Instead, a large mass base and centuries of sedimentation have led to an increasing number of words, sentences and proverbs, which indicate the attitudes of the whole society towards different genders.[1]

Defines sexism as considering one gender owns higher status than another. This definition infers that people use gender as a classification which is directly linked to the division of social resources

and the distribution of power. Based on this mindset, the person with male sexuality should take the so-called important responsibilities of hunting and social administration while the person with female sexuality is expected to have a social division as householder and the subordinate of male. This stereotype also appears in linguistics, giving a definition of linguistic sexism as the intentional or unintentional disadvantage of a particular gender, mainly women. For example, males are commonly educated to speak loudly and powerfully, and to be more forthright, proactive and adaptable in content; whereas females are taught to speak in a low voice, with kindness and gentleness, and their language is usually more euphemistic and uncertain than male's.

In response to the phenomenon of linguistic sexism, this paper will take the vocabulary with sexual discrimination as an entry point, inducts and analyses the features, then discusses the current situation and countermeasures to eliminate these words through tracing back the reasons in the aspects of religious beliefs, cultural backgrounds and social division of labour. The author intends to let audience tell whether the words are with bias or not, and try to avoid using them in daily life, attaining Linguistic purification.

2. Feature of sexism vocabulary

2.1. Difference in morphology

J.Greenberg proposed theories of "marked" and "unmarked", refining the Markedness Theory in linguistic. He takes the perspective that, based on the distinctive feature, some words unmarked, while the opposite words are marked. In terms of gender markedness, the female form is considered marked and needs to be specified, while the male form is usually considered unmarked and can refer to both males and females in general. This markedness can be seen in the lexical composition, i.e. feminine nouns are often formed by adding suffixes to masculine nouns. This suggests that words denoting females in this part of English are usually variants of words denoting males. These words are usually found in words denoting positions such as: author and authoress, mayor and mayoress.[2]

If we induce the word patterns, we could conclude that the following affixes occur with a high probability of indicating female identity: the most commonly seeing suffix is "-ess", symbolizing female identity, gender, or a specific occupation, such as manageress, mayoress, poetess, enchantress; the suffix "-ette" derives from old french nouns affix for female, such as farmette and usherette. What should be noted is that, even though some words shape in feminine forms, they are still replaced by "male words"on some occasions . For example, although poet and poetess refer to male or female poets respectively, there is no such award as "Poetess Laureate", even if the recipient of the honour is a woman.[3]

2.2. Semantics of vocabulary

In English, some adjectives express different emotional colours when they are used to describe different genders. Most of these words have positive connotations when describing men, while having negative, sexual connotations when used to modify women's behaviour. For example, the word "dominating" is mostly used to describe males with leadership ability and responsibility, but when used to describe female's characteristics, it may be perceived as being overly forceful or trying to control others. There are also words with similar meanings but represent different genders. For instance, about two words "bachelor" and "spinster", although they ostensibly denote a male and a female of marriageable age, respectively, it is generally more socially acceptable for a male to be unmarried at an elder age than for a female to be unmarried under the same conditions. For example, the word "bachelor" not only have no ironic implication, but also its homophonic and heterophonic meanings even denote those who have obtained the first university degree, possessing

with a certain degree of glorious colours; whereas, females who are unmarried in their thirties are labelled as "leftover women", which are highly derogatory.[4]

Additionally, there are also some metaphors whose original meaning is related to animals and whose derived meaning is to modify males or females who have artificially defined characteristics similar to those of animals. Generally, most male animal words in English are positive in terms of courage and strength, while animal words that are used as metaphors for females contain pejorative semantic features such as weakness and vulnerability. Take the word "lion" as an example, it originally refers to a large and powerful animal, and its derivation means powerful and honourable values, also used to indicate leadership in the male. The original meaning of bitch is female dog, but its derivation is often used to insult women. [5]

3. Reasons cause linguistic sexism

3.1. Socio-cultural factors

In English-speaking countries, religious culture has always had an intrinsic influence on human thought and social development. In the Bible, God first made Adam, a male, then pulled out a rib from Adam's body, which was how god created Eve, a female. This chronology and the ways men and women was created illustrates that women are subordinate and derivative of men, in the biblical view. With the wide spread of Christianity, this religious value of male status being superior to female has been recognised by the society, bringing deep influence on the mainstream values of English-speaking societies, and exacerbating the devaluation of women and feminine vocabulary.[6]

In addition to religious culture, the western "patriarchal" mindset has also affected the status of women in politics, economy and education areas. For instance, men are more dominant than women in society, and they can achieve things and gain prestige through their own effort, while women's social status depends on marriage. Such thoughts have also been accepted and passed on in the English language, causing severe sexism in the language.[7]

3.2. Factors of the division of labour

Linguistic inequality also derives from differences of social division of labor. When people mention men's occupation, they always come up with high-paid and socially respectable positions immediately, such as doctors, lawyers, commercial management; while women's biological sex always let people combine them with virtuous and meek position, such as homemakers, nannies and secretaries. In the last century, many female writers such as The Bronte Sisters, Mary Anne Evans, etc. published their works with male pseudonyms because the mainstream perception of the society is that males are creative and can create outstanding works. If great masterpieces come from a female hand, people tend to doubt their source. For example, Mary Shelley's works "the modern Prometheus" was wracked by people because they don't believe such a masterpiece is produced by a woman. Thus, gender stereotypes lead to stereotypes about the allocation of social roles between men and women, and also affect the way people communicate with people of different genders.[8]

4. Current situation and countermeasures

4.1. Current situation gender equality movement

In linguistic sexism, speakers usually elevate male's statue Intentionally, ignoring female's right of speech, thus results in mental images and representations that lead to greater gender differences. However, with the rise of the feminist movement, the harsh situation for women has improved.

Especially since 1970s, feminists have started focusing on "sexism in language". Many years later, women's voices are expanding as women from different areas continue to hold campaigns for social status, economic independence and self-rights. Take social division as an example, nowadays, the conventional mindset has been broken. Specifically, there are more and more fathers take care of their children at home, compared with mothers take this responsibilities all the time in the past. Before deciding who to continue working and who to stay at home as a homemaker, parents compare various aspects such as their positions, salaries, and psychology. Another example comes from 2024 Paris Olympics, in which the image of slogan is based on Marianne, French goddess of liberty. These messages all convey the great triumph for the gender equality movement on a global scale, which directly announce to the world, that females are as indispensable as males , females are as respectable as males. The rise in the status of women has also been reflected in the language, as we have noticed that people are increasingly avoiding the use of the word "he" to refer to everything; they tend to use the plural form "he or she".

Although the circumstance of linguistic sexism has been improved, domestic researches through this area are still scattered and fragmented nowadays with a huge potential. Meanwhile, new concerns for sexism has occurred, as well as new approaches to researching gender bias and new strategies to combat it.

4.2. Countermeasures of eliminating linguistic sexism

How to eliminate sexism in English language? To solve this problem, we pay much attention to our oral expressions, since oral communication is the most direct and powerful medium for transmitting gender equality. More or less, sometimes what we speak could be impressed by sexism language with a long history.

First, we should use neuter words instead of "male vocabulary" and female suffix, as well as the use of words that are degrading to females or that have relevant derived meanings. For example, we can use words like "people", "individuals" instead using "men" when we are going to refer to a group or people all over the world; in non-specific communication contexts, we should try to be objective and avoid words with a strong emotional orientation, thus reducing the use of animal words.

In General, the elimination of linguistic sexism depends on the efforts of all sectors of society. We should understand the culture and social etiquette of English-speaking countries, identifying whether synonyms possess with hidden meanings. After eliminating gender-biased words, we can create and update new words to enrich the vocabulary of gender equality, so as to give a positive influence to the society.

5. Conclusion

Using appropriate vocabulary could demonstrate respect for personal identity, promoting a more equal and inclusive social environment. The formation of linguistic sexism is a long process, which reflects the prejudice and unfriendliness of women in the world and the long history of the unequal status of men and women. After the rise of feminism, the problem of gender inequality in language has been improved to a certain degree. Whereas, we still have a long way to go to change the deep-rooted idea of "men are superior to women". We should learn about the cultural backgrounds of different ethnic groups, and pay attention to the way we express ourselves in language, so as to contribute to the elimination of language discrimination.

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