

GENDER BIAS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

ZINNIA BHATTACHARYA

Abstract: George Orwell once said, "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." It certainly intends that language has power that allows us to make sense out of the reality we live in. The world is both reflected and constructed through language as it is the most powerful medium. Neil Armstrong's first words from the moon were heard all over the Earth. He uttered memorable sentence: "That's one small step for a **man**, one giant leap for mankind." If he had used the word '**person**' in place of '**man**' here, it would have been literally more representative of the whole human race than a specific gender. It would have been "That's one small step for a person, one giant leap for humankind."

Gender bias in English language cannot be overlooked. A language, with its consistent conscious/unconscious use, can help to reinforce the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. "Sexist" language often suggests an inbuilt male dominance and superiority in many fields of life. For instance, pronouns used for male; **he**, **his** and **him** are used automatically even though the sex of the person may not be known. For example, "A student asked **his** tutor about **his** book".

At workplace there is likelihood to associate certain jobs with men or women. For example, a doctor or surgeon is generally considered to be a man but a nurse is expected to be a woman. In addition, job names often include reference to the sex of the person: "The **chairman** cannot vote." "He is a *male* nurse" "I have *woman* director." As a result, the use of such words tends to strengthen the idea that it is not normal for women to be in professional, highly-paid, technical and manual jobs. Also, that it is not natural for a man to work in such a caring (and generally poorly-paid) role as that of a nurse. Therefore, every word has its own gender specific reference that is bias in its nature.

Keywords: Sexism in Language, Gender Bias, Dictionaries.

Introduction: Dictionaries have a major role to play in eradicating the bias. Dictionaries are intended to reflect the language as we use. Recently Oxford Dictionary faced criticism regarding its use of gender biased language. The backlash started after Canadian anthropologist Michael Oman-Reagan tweeted at Oxford University Press, which publishes the Dictionaries, with a suggestion that they change the example associated with the word "rabid" [1]. The word defined as "having or proceeding from an extreme or fanatical support or belief in something," Oxford used the phrase "rabid feminist" to illustrate proper use of the adjective. Oman-Reagan has also pointed out other instances of what he deemed "explicitly sexist usage examples." For example, the word "psyche," is explained with the phrase "I will never really fathom the female spirit," while the word "nagging" is accompanied by the usage example "a nagging wife." However, the words like "research" and "doctor" use the male pronoun in their example phrases; "He was made a Doctor of Divinity." and the word "housework" is illustrated with the female pronoun; "She still does all the housework."

Though Oxford Dictionaries initially gave a flippant response to Oman-Reagan's criticism, a spokesperson for Oxford University Press said that the publishers would review the examples brought to light by Oman-Reagan when "rabid" became the most popular search term on the Dictionaries' website. "We apologise for the offence that these comments caused," the statement read. "The example sentences

we use are taken from a huge variety of different sources and do not represent the views or opinions of Oxford University Press. That said, we are now reviewing the example sentence for 'rabid' to ensure that it reflects current usage."

"The image of the 'rabid feminist' is one conjured and promoted most often by people who don't like feminists," wrote poet and author Nordette Adams in a blog post about Oxford's use of the term. Adams's post was written a year and a half ago, suggesting that Oxford has been relying on this particular usage example for quite some time. Therefore, it must be understood that dictionaries are not only describing language, they also prescribe and shape the way language and meaning is produced and standardized, whether that is the intention of a publisher or not. Being the primary source of word-knowledge it is the prime responsibility of the respective publishers not to convey a wrong notion or bias ideas to their readers and users.

As a result, people on different social media and platforms, e.g. Twitter, expressed that they would like to know more about how the editorial decisions are made to choose one example over another. Evidently, when they include "rabid feminism" they are actually choosing that example sentence from possible sentences, so why that one? Why are they choosing particular sentences which support sexist stereotypes? Why do they choose to use gendered examples for words that are not about gender, like nagging, grating, housework, doctor, rabid, etc?

When Oxford edits and selects example sentences reproducing sexist stereotypes, they are making implicit, prescriptive statements about gender and language. If Oxford or any other dictionary in that case believes that it is important to tell users that the word “shrill” has historically been applied primarily to women’s voices, they should say that clearly, not cover it up and hide it in a usage example. There are examples of Oxford doing this explicitly with other words, like “sexism” where they say “typically against women.” Audre Lorde, a feminist poet and thinker, recognises this potential when she says,

“For those of us who write it is necessary to scrutinise not only the truth of what we speak, but the truth of the language by which we speak it.”

This particularly holds true for lexicographers. Sexism, that conceals itself beneath the surface of dictionaries, has been a topic of discussion for the feminists and linguists since at least the nineteen-sixties. The question of how to eradicate it is bound up in a broader debate about the role of lexicography: Should dictionaries be prescriptive, establishing a standard of usage, or should they be descriptive, reflecting usage as it exists in the world? In the opinion of editors, their consent is the latter. As the University of Oxford linguist Deborah Cameron puts it, when Oxford Dictionaries says its examples “come from real-world use,” it’s suggesting that “the sexism is in the world, and we just describe it.” This reasoning turns out not to hold up in the case of “rabid feminist,” though: Oxford tweeted that when its lexicographers searched their corpus—the archive of linguistic data, drawn from books, newspapers, and other writing, from which most dictionaries select example sentences—they found that combinations like “rabid fan” and “rabid supporter” were more commonly used; therefore, linguists told that the entry might warrant adjusting for reasons of accuracy as well as sensitivity. The solution is not so obvious when it comes to words such as “housework” and “shrill,” or in other cases where Oxford’s corpus may confirm that the most representative usage is, indeed, a sexist one. To address these larger patterns, dictionary editors—and readers—must decide whether it’s possible to hold up a mirror to language without sanctioning its ugly side.

Lexicographers say that the words and meanings they add to the dictionary have already been validated by the public’s use, but, to the public, a word’s inclusion in the dictionary is the thing that legitimizes it. Sarah Shulist, a linguistic anthropologist at MacEwan University, suggests that if the corpus shows gendered usage for a word, like “shrill,” lexicographers can choose to reflect that fact, but they should mark it as derogatory instead of presenting it without comment. Merriam-Webster, the editor-at-large, Peter Sokolowski, said, terms with

feminine endings must have their own entries and be defined on their own terms: a “waiter” is “a man who serves food or drinks,” a “waitress” should be defined as “a woman who serves food or drinks” rather than as “a female waiter.”

Katherine Connor Martin, Head of Content creation at Oxford Dictionaries, says “We need to know that the dictionary, as an institution, has a cultural power beyond the sum of its parts.” Therefore, the sheer size of a dictionary such as the O.E.D.—means that the vast majority of entries will go for years or decades without being formally re-examined. Dictionaries set standards for usage, which people take seriously. So, if they are to include offensive definitions or examples, the editors must make clear that they are controversial, and that the dictionary doesn’t endorse them. A simple declaration may increase the trust regarding dictionaries among the users.

Linguists have long observed that words referring to women undergo the process of ‘pejoration’ more often than those referring to men. David Shariatmadari, editor and writer for *The Guardian* in London, cited eight more sexist examples in English Language [2]:

Mistress: The female equivalent of “master”, and thus, “a woman having control or authority” – in particular one who employs servants or attendants. It came into English with this meaning from French after the Norman Conquest. From the 17th century onwards, it was used to mean “a woman other than his wife with whom a man has a long-lasting sexual relationship”.

Hussy: This once neutral term meant the female head of a household. From the 17th century onwards, however, it began to mean “a disreputable woman of improper behaviour”. That’s its only meaning now.

Madam: The female equivalent of “sir”, a woman of high rank, is still used in formal contexts as a mode of address. From the late 18th century it was also used to mean “a conceited or precocious girl or young woman; a hussy, a minx”, alternatively, a kept mistress or prostitute, and finally, from the late 19th century, the female manager of a brothel.

Governess: It meant, from the 15th century onwards, “a woman who holds or exercises authority over a place, institution, or group of people”. Compare it with “governor”. Over time it drastically narrowed in scope and fell in status, coming to mean “a woman responsible for the care, supervision, or direction of a person, typically a child or young lady”.

Spinster: This occupational term originally meant simply someone, usually a woman but possibly a man, who spun yarn or thread. Since a woman without a husband might have to rely on spinning as a source of income, the term became associated with unmarried women, eventually becoming the legal way to refer to one. The more loaded use of it to refer

to “a woman still unmarried; esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid” begins in the early 18th century.

Courtesan: One of the most dramatic shifts in meaning, from the female equivalent of “courtier” – someone who attends the court of a monarch – to a form of prostitute, which is now its only meaning.

Wench: A 13th-century word meaning a female infant or a young unmarried woman quickly acquired negative connotations: from the late 14th century, in Langland and Chaucer it is used to mean “a wanton woman; a mistress”.

Tart: Collins dictionary says that this is a 19th-century contraction of “sweetheart”, a term of endearment, particularly to women. From 1887, however, it is attested as meaning “a female of immoral character; a prostitute”.

Thinking about the male equivalents of some of these words throws their sexism into sharp relief. Master for mistress; sir for madam; governor for governess; bachelor for spinster; courtier for courtesan – whereas the male list speaks of power and high status, the female list has a very different set of connotations. These are of either subordinate status or sexual service to men. The crucial thing to remember is that at one time, they were simply equivalents.

The 1971 edition of Britannica Junior Encyclopedia says: “Man is the highest form of life on earth. He must invent most of his behaviour, because he lacks the instincts of lower animals...Most of the things he learns have been handed down from his ancestors by language and symbols rather than by biological inheritance”. This statement projects the patriarchy in our society. It explains why Eve was made from Adam’s rib instead of the other way round. In the media women are still often described through external or superficial concerns, which reflect a sexist view of women as decorative objects and extensions of men, but not exactly real people.

A woman poet is given the label of poetess instead of poet. A woman who piloted a plane was denied full status as an aviator by being called an aviatrix. The implication is clear, as the derivatives were obtained by means of the lion- lioness archetype. Gender-specific words emphasize a person’s sex when it is not necessary or sometimes even objectionable to do so. An understanding of the difference between sex and gender is critical to the use of bias-free language.

References:

1. Oman-Reagan, M. “Sexism in the Oxford Dictionary of English”. *Space +Anthropology*, 2016.
2. Shariatmadari D, “Eight words that reveal the sexism at the heart of the English language”, *The Guardian*, January 27, 2016
3. Dr.M.Latha, Rajyalaxmi Yesireddy, *Fourth World Literature The Displacement Of The Aboriginal*

According to Rosalie Maggio, “sex is biological, while gender is cultural, that is, our notions of “masculine” tell us how we expect men to behave and our notions of “feminine” tell us how we expect women to behave. Words like manly / womanly, unfeminine / unmasculine, tomboy / sissy have nothing to do with the person’s sex; they are culturally acquired, subjective concepts about character traits and expected behaviours that may vary from one place to another as well as from one individual to another.

Alan Richman, an American journalist and food writer, described the decor of a restaurant as “The room is as ornate, startling, joyous, and ridiculous as a blonde popping out of a birthday cake.” Comparing a restaurant to an exotic dancer did not go down well in history and it is the most controversial thing Richman has ever done. The practice of comparing food to women is, rather, an extremely popular rhetorical device among food writers and restaurant critics. Woman metaphors in food writing are the way to reinforce the objectification of women. Food is a passive substance just waiting to be eaten. Three decades ago it was considered a compliment to refer to a girl as a “cute tomato, a peach, a dish, a cookie or sweetie pie”. On the other hand, if a man was called a fruit, his masculinity was being questioned. Something similar to the fruit metaphor happens with references to plants. English seems to feel absolutely convenient describing a girl as a wallflower, a clinging vine, or a shrinking violet. However, we insult a man by calling him a pansy. In the bird kingdom women are referred to as doves or hens, while men are eagles.

The objective in this article was to analyze the pervasive gender bias present within the English language as well as changes already introduced or being introduced by attentive language users with a view to make alterations to the existing scenario. Language carries certain biases within it because of the historical circumstances surrounding its development and the ways people have used it. Dominant groups within cultures have often used language to maintain their positions and prevent others from coming to power. The power relations within the English language are revealed in its gender biases. One of the main arguments against androcentric English and disparagement of women in language is that discrimination against women is promoted through sexist language.

- People In Alexis Wright's *Carpentaria*; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 135-137
4. Anderson L.V., "Hey Food Writers, Stop Comparing Food to Women", *Slate*, August 8, 2013
 5. Caplan-Bricker, N. "Should Dictionaries Do More to Confront Sexism?", *The New Yorker*. Feb 23, 2016. Print.
 6. Emer O'Toole. "A dictionary entry citing 'rabid feminist' doesn't just reflect prejudice, it reinforces it". *The Guardian*.
 7. Jodonytė E, Morkienė, P. "On Sexist Attitudes in English". *Kabu Studijos*. ISSN 1648-2824. 2001. Nr. 1 (48-51)
 8. Lei, X. "Sexism in Language". *Journal of Language and Linguistics*. Volume 5 No 1 2006 ISSN 1475-8989 (87-94). Print.
 9. Nelson. C. "Oxford apologizes for 'flippant' tweet about 'rabid feminist'". *The Daily Dot* , January 25, 2016.
 10. G. Kalpana Devi, Dr. G. Mohana Charyulu, *Stream Of Consciousness Technique: A Study Of Character Paro In The Novel Of Namita Gokhale's "Paro: Dreams Of Passion"* ; English Studies International Research Journal : Volume 3 Issue 2 (2015) Issn 2347-3479, Pg 142-144

Zinnia Bhattacharya, Research Scholar
The English & Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad