Bulletin of the *Transilvania* University of Braşov
Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies • Vol. 10 (59) No. 1 – 2017

Diachronic gender demeaning of women naming

Cristina Silvia VÂLCEA[1]

This piece of research is meant to highlight the divergent evolution of the paired words referring to men and women, which concluded in a constantly neutral connotation of the masculine words and in some demeaning connotations for the feminine words. Without attempting at providing explanations for this phenomenon, the article is only meant to increase awareness on the different evolution of the words referring to men and women as a key element of the social representation of the two genders.

Keywords*: demeaning, diachrony, paired words*

1. Introduction

If synchronicity analyzes a topic in "the absence of a time element in linguistic description" (Trask 2000, 287), exploring all the possible interpretations in the context, the diachronic approach offers the possibility to analyze changes that concepts or words suffer in time due to various reasons, or as Saussure (1977, 57) put it "diachronic study implies not examining language, but a series of events that modify it". Conceptually speaking, both approaches offer countless possibilities for analysis, which represent instantaneous or alongside images of the topics under analysis. Maybe yet, diachrony, more than synchrony, reveals the changes that occurred along the way by highlighting the factors responsible and their further evolution. Diachrony is therefore at its best when it deals with the evolution of words as it easily clarifies the evolution of the meaning of a word, as it focuses on the events that might have influenced its evolution and it might hint at possible future evolutions.

In the context of diachrony, I believe it is appropriate to take into consideration the topic of gender differences that can be illustrated by the semantic evolution of pairs referring to both men and women. In fact, I hypothesize that the evolution of words referring to men is different from that of the words designating women in the sense that they preserved their initial meaning unlike the words designating women that suffered tremendous demeaning changes in time. At times,

[1] Transilvania University of Braşov, cristina.valcea@unitbv.ro

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)

the changes are so important that the initial meaning, though still in use, suffers further semantic connotations that greatly demean the initial meaning.

Although gender studies are a relatively new domain that theorized and exemplified gender differences in a number of situations characteristic to the 20th century, it has been demonstrated by historical linguistics that the evolution of words referring to women has drastically changed over time into derogatory names, whereas their masculine equivalents maintained the initial connotations which were indicators of superior status. For one, historical linguistics (Bynon, 1977) aims at studying the evolution of languages and at identifying the factors that triggered the changes. Political, social, financial or sexual criteria powerfully influenced the semantic changes that words underwent in hundreds of years. That words change in time has been clearly pointed out, but something that still needs clarifying is why some words change meaning in time, whereas others maintain the same meaning. And this question is brought about in the particular case of masculine – feminine pairs of words which have undergone such a divergent evolution to the point of having some linguists, Lakoff (1975), claim that the socially demeaning position of women on the one hand and the socially positive position of men has eventually led to this situation.

As such, Lakoff (1975) mentions the frequent meanings that are associated with sex-paired words. These words are supposed to be semantically equivalent, with the only exception that one refers to men and the other to women. For example, Robin Lakoff considers the case of the word "lady" as opposed to "gentleman", as if "woman" were an unpleasant term that had to be avoided. Many other similar words have negative connotations associated with the feminine term rather than the corresponding masculine term. In the same line, a bachelor and a spinster are both unmarried but significant differences have been noticed between them. Thus, a bachelor is seen as probably being unmarried by choice and living a happy and perhaps somewhat libertine life, while a spinster is associated to the image of an old and unappealing woman whose life is unfulfilled due exactly to her failure to marry. Another pair that Lakoff analyzed is that of the governor-governess where she considers that "a governor wields considerable power as the executive of a political administrative unit whereas a governess takes care of small children while being employed by their wealthy parents". Furthermore, Lakoff's attention was drawn by the pair witch-warlock where the main difference, besides evilness, is ugliness which is associated to the female counterpart: "Both a witch and a warlock possess evil supernatural power, but no one would think of indicating that some man they know is ugly and ill-tempered by calling him an old warlock", as it happens in the case of witch".

Quite often, there is an imputation of sexual immorality to referents of the feminine group, whereas men carry very general, usually favorable implications: "A madam might be the manager of a brothel, but you would never call a pimp a sir. A master is an individual with great ability in some skilled endeavor you would never use

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)

the word as mistress is used to refer to someone's regular partner in adultery" (Lakoff, 1975). In fact, there are many more words for prostitutes than there are for their customers. Schultz (1975) draws up a list with more than 500 English terms for prostitute, but only 65 for whoremongers, which indicates that blame is placed on women offering their bodies for men's pleasure and their own financial security without any moral implication for men in general and for the whoremongers in particular.

Given the long evolution of words and the absence of consistent old studies of languages in general and of English in particular, when studying the evolution of word semantics dictionaries are the best tools that could facilitate the identification of word changes and of the centuries when a further change took place. When researching on the topic of my paper I have made use of the following on-line dictionaries: Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary (2010), Farlex Trivia Dictionary (2012), American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2016), Collins Thesaurus of the English Language – Complete and Unabridged 2nd Edition, HarperCollins Publishers (2002).

In order to prove the divergent evolution of masculine and feminine words I have chosen a number of paired words (masculine and their feminine counterparts) in whose evolution I have noticed great divergences in terms of meaning. The pairs that I have selected for my study are: mister – mistress, governor – governess, courtier – courtesan, sir – madam, bachelor – spinster.

2. Analysis

I. *mister – mistress*

The Online Dictionary of Etymology states that *mister* was used as a title of courtesy in the 15th century, whereas in the 17th century it was still in use but „with a tinge of rudeness". Though some sort of change existed 'with a tinge of rudeness', it mostly preserved the initial meaning of the word, in the sense that it referred to a man of high status being equivalent to *master*. On the other hand, *mistress*, from the initial meaning of female teacher or governess in the 14th century to which the meaning of a woman in control of a household was added, evolved to indicate an unmarried woman who was sexually involved with a married man. Moreover, other dictionaries (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary, 2010) mention the fact that besides sexual intercourse, their relationship was motivated financially as the woman needed to be paid for her sexual services. She is simultaneously associated to the idea of a "kept woman", which hints not only at her job (being a prostitute), but also at her financial status (being dependable on the money she earns by prostituting). The feminine counterpart has suffered great changes from teacher and housewife to prostitute paid in exchange of her services.

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)

The word *mistress* is generally associated to words in the same semantic family: "doll", "doxy", "fancy woman" (Farlex Trivia Dictionary, 2012)

II. *governor – governess*

The meaning of *governor* has changed over time within the limit of the category administrator or ruler. If initially, in the 13th century, it was used to refer to someone who would be a personal keeper, in the 15th century it started to be used as "one who governs or rules". The same positive connotation of the word *governor* is maintained today when *governors* are heads of provinces or institutions and their power is substantial. On the other hand, *governess* was initially used as "female ruler", but then its use was changed to refer to "the one who has charge of a young man's education and activities, a tutor". It is believed that the change took place under the influence of French that used the term in this sense. Though being a *governess* is not something bad in itself, by comparison to the male counterpart that preserved the initial meaning, the *governess* loses the ruling attribute that confers status and power to whomever is in such a position to a lower status related to education and training.

III. *courtier – courtesan*

The third pair that I have identified is *courtier – courtesan*. The masculine word *courtier* was used in the 13th century to designate someone who is often "in attendance at the court of a king or other royal personage" (Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary, 2010). Given the character of some of the *courtiers*, the very name came to be associated to the concept of an "adulator" as someone who flatters other people excessively. But, irrespective of how flattering his language or behavior, a *courtier* was still someone important at the court, a respected person who might have enjoyed a superior status. On the other hand, *courtesan* was in the beginning associated to the idea of a female living at the court. Nevertheless, the sense evolved afterwards in a different direction which generalized by associating the concept of *courtesan* to the idea of prostitution. Actually, the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2016) argues that the *courtesan* is "a woman prostitute, especially one whose clients are members of a royal court or men of high social standing". Given the fact that the *courtesan* would live at the court, she is supposed to offer her services to rich and influential courtiers, which means that by comparison to other words indicating prostitutes, *courtesan* also indicates the quality of the men she would sell her services to. Another specification not to be neglected is that her services were not free of charge, which means that she could only live out of prostitution. Most dictionaries offer many synonyms for courtesan, such as: mistress, prostitute, whore, kept woman,

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)

harlot, paramour, scarlet woman, hetaera, demimondaine, lady of easy virtue, lady of pleasure, lady of the night.

IV. *sir – madam*

The Online Etymology Dictionary mentions *sir* for the first time in the 13th century when it was used to refer to a knight or baronet as a title of honor. The same dictionary mentions the fact that the term became "generalized as a respectful form of address" in the 14th century; yet, in the 15th century it grew to be used "as a salutation at the beginning of letters". Thus, throughout centuries the meaning of *sir* did not greatly evolve in terms of meaning and use. Contrarily, originally a French word, *madam* indicated a title of respect for a woman of rank which was preserved until the 19th century when *madam* started to be associated to the manageress and female owner of a brothel according to the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2016. Though the meaning of *madam* changed only in recent times, it is nevertheless significant to notice the tremendous change of meaning that it suffers. The *madam* is the one in charge of a brothel who controls the activity, who offers the services of the women working for her to men interested in sexual pleasure. The semantic gap between the respectful calling addressed to a lady and the owner of a brothel illustrates the entire demeaning tendency of feminine calling names.

V. *bachelor – spinster*

A pair which hints at the marital status of both men and women has attracted the attention of many researchers (see Lakoff above) for the blatant unbalance between the semantic connotations between the two words. To begin with, according to the Online Etymology Dictionary *bachelor* meant in the 13th century a "young man" or a "young knight", which at the beginning of the 14th century gained an additional meaning of "unmarried". For a man, the status of *bachelor* is a superior one, because he has the freedom to do whatever he wants, thus escaping the proverbial feminine control and nagging. His being single is a choice which does not bring him any pity on the part of the others. Maybe surprising, the word *spinster* initially, in the 14th century, designated a woman whose job was to spin the thread with the mention that that woman may not have been married. From around 1600 the word started to designate a woman "still unmarried and beyond the usual age for it" (Online Etymology Dictionary). The modern demeaning meaning of *spinster* results from the fact that the masculine word has got a feminine counterpart „bachelorette" which is not preferred, although the first dictionary entrance defines bachelorette as an unmarried woman. It is nevertheless fair to add that bachelorette is a new word that entered English in the 19th century. Yet, in the following centuries bachelorette was dispreferred when referring to an unmarried woman, as *spinster* seemed to have

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)

gained greater influence. Thus, to be a *spinster* is socially seen as a negative feature as it is associated to the idea of a "forced" single status. Therefore, being a *spinster* is interpreted as being unworthy of being with someone due to a number of reasons detrimental to women: being ugly, poor, orphan, etc. In order to better emphasize the unbalance between the public perception of the two words it is noteworthy the voluntary character of the singlehood in the case of men and the involuntary character in the case of women who would like to observe the social norm, but who can't.

3. Conclusions

As the examples above have illustrated, the masculine and the feminine paired words have undergone different directions in the evolution of their meaning. The words referring to men have in most cases preserved their initial meaning with small changes which represent mere variations of the social and political status men enjoyed. Contrarily, the words referring to women have suffered demeaning which varied from a social inferior status "governess" to marginal social categories as "prostitutes" and "spinsters" who do not fall into the socially acceptable categories.

References

Bynon, Theodora. 1977. *Historical Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fasold, Ralph. 1997. *The Sociolinguistics of Language*. New Jersey: Blackwell.

Robin, Lakoff. 1975. *Language and Women's Place*. New York: Harper and Row.

Romaine, Suzanne. 2000. *Language in Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916. *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. C. Bally and A. Sechehaye, with the collaboration of A. Riedlinger, Lausanne and Paris: Payot; transl. W. Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977.

Schultz, Muriel. 1975. *The Semantic Derogation of Woman*. New York: Thorne and Henley.

Trask, Robert Larry. 2000. *The Dictionary of Historical and Comparative Linguistics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

***. 2002. *Collins Thesaurus of the English Language – Complete and Unabridged*, 2nd Edition. Harper Collins Publishers.

***. 2010. *Random House Kernerman Webster's College Dictionary*.

***. 2012. *Farlex Trivia Dictionary*.

***. 2016. *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*.

Online Etymology Dictionary http://etymonline.com

BDD-A27298 © 2017 Transilvania University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 13:13:59 UTC)