# THE MYTH OF NEUTRAL LANGUAGE OR CONVEYING GENDER ATTITUDES THROUGH LANGUAGE

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*Abstract: We are doing and displaying gender from the very moment we are born. "Given names, with which we become enduringly associated within a few days of birth, efficiently reinforce the male-female dichotomy in our society." (P.M.Smith)*

*Language reflects the thoughts, attitudes and beliefs of the people who use it. In its essence, gender is inherently a communicative process. Because we construct and enact gender largely through discourse, language plays a crucial part in displaying ourselves as gendered beings and very often reflects the sexist nature of a society.*

*The present paper aims to point out that there is no such thing as gender-neutral or objective language. Language creates images of men and women and shapes our perceptions, offering a glimpse into women's place and the way in which they are perceived in a particular society.*

***Keywords: language, gender, stereotypes, sexist, discourse***

Ludwig Wittgenstein once said that "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", underlying the crucial role played by language in one's existence. Language reflects the thoughts, attitudes and culture of the people who use it; a rich vocabulary on a certain topic denotes increased interest in that area, the presence of negative or positive connotations for the same denoted concept betrays prejudicial feelings about the subject discussed, the existence of taboos reveal people's fears and superstitions. In a nutshell, language tells us a lot about the people using it.

Gender is a pervasive feature of our everyday life; all around us we see different displays of gender, be it in the way we get dressed, in the way we behave, in the way we talk etc. Suzanne Romaine (1999) argues that we are doing and displaying gender from the very moments we are born." Our biological sex is determined at birth by factors beyond our control, yet being born male or female is probably the most important feature of our lives."[1] Gender is one of the axes around which our world revolves and through which we encode our own experiences.

We construct and represent reality through language; that is why language is essential in communicating the idea of gender. We form mental representations of men and women and we articulate them through language. Thus language plays a crucial role in displaying ourselves as gendered persons and very often reflects the sexist nature of a society. Language creates images

[1] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p.1



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of men and women and shapes our perceptions. Language is not simply a reflection of the speaker's thoughts, but - as Sapir and Whorf suggested[2] - language actually shapes thoughts by naming certain things and letting others go nameless.

Being born male or female defines us from the moment we set foot in this world. When we hear of a baby being born, the first thing we ask is whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Even first names are chosen above all to reflect a child's sex. As P.M. Smith[3] pointed out "Given names… with which we become enduringly associated within a few days of birth, efficiently reinforce the male-female dichotomy within our society." Almost every official form that we need to fill out requires us to say whether we are male or female. Thus in everything we do we communicate our gender.

In its essence, gender is a communicative process. Not only do we communicate gender in these ways, but we also 'do' it with our words."[4] When we read in newspapers about scientists, most of us still have mental images of men, even though there are nowadays women scientists. Or when a headline informs us that "Doctor seduced patient" we automatically assume that the doctor is male and the patient, female.[5]

Linguistic representation offers a glimpse into women's place in society and it is meanwhile a means of keeping women in their place. There is no such thing as objective language. As Dwight Bolinger[6] pointed out, language is a loaded weapon, because words are not harmless gatherings of letters but they have the power to influence our thinking. "No particular language or way of speaking has a privileged view of the world as it 'really' is. The world is not simply the way it is, but what we make of it through language. The domains of experience that are important to cultures get grammaticalized into languages. All languages give names to concepts of cultural importance and mark certain categories in their grammars, such as male versus female, one versus more than one, past versus future, and so forth."[7]

The claim that language is sexist is by no means new. If our world is represented and given meaning through language and language is "man-made"[8], then it means that everything that was written in the field of history, philosophy, religion, law, literature etc. is nothing but males' perception and organization of the world.

Sex and gender are actually marked in language. These range from differences in vocabulary, to differences in linguistic forms (phonology, syntax etc.), to whole communicative styles, such as politeness, directness and silence.

The conventional approach to meaning within linguistics is that we use language to describe the world, but we use it to do much more than that. There is no such thing as neutral or

[2]Sapir, Edward. 1929. "The status of linguistics as a science", *Language* **5** (4): 207
[3] cited in Pearson, J.C, West, R.L. & Turner, L.H. (1995) *Gender and Communication*. McGraw Hill, New York p.8.
[4] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p 2.
[5]*Ibidem*
[6] Bolinger,D. (1980).Language:The Loaded Weapon. London:Longman
[7] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p 20
[8] Spender, D. (1980) Man Made Language. London : Routledge&Kegan Paul



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objective language. Words clearly have the power to influence our thinking. The world is not simply the way it is, but what we make of it through language.

The oldest example of male/female dichotomy in language is that of gender. Gender has given rise to numerous controversies among grammarians, linguists, feminists etc. From the historical point of view, linguists have traced the origins of grammatical gender in the Indo-European languages. The use of the notions *masculine, feminine andneuter* to refer to classes of nouns, goes back a long time. "The grammatical term "gender" is derived from the Latin word genus, which meant race or kind and had nothing to do with sex. Yet Protagoras was so convinced that sex was inherent in the classification of things that he argues that Greek *peleks* (helmet) should not belong to the feminine gender, but should be changed to masculine. Here we can see how sex and gender begin to enter discussions of grammar" [9]

Furthermore, in the nineteenth century, the German grammarian Jakob Grimm considered gender as a sort of metaphorical extension of sex to the rest of the world. Thus things denoted by masculine nouns were in his opinion larger, more inflexible, quicker, creative etc., while things denoted by feminine nouns were characterized as smaller, softer, receptive, passive etc. Dale Spender argues with the componential analysts' division of words into [+ male] and [- male], thus relegating women to the position of the other, as deviant from the norm. This reflects a distorted world view according to which women represent the second sex and language does nothing but reflect this point of view. Therefore semantics divides the world into two categories: plus male, which represents everything that is positive, and minus male which represents the lack of these qualities and is consequently negative.

In some languages gender is a central grammatical category, while in others it is absent. Thus, not all languages are sexist in the same degree; languages vary in the amount of sexism they display. In languages such as French, German, Spanish etc. the grammatical category of gender affects not only the nouns it denotes, but also the articles, the pronouns and the adjectives that determine that noun. By comparison, English is said to have natural gender: nouns denoted by the personal pronoun "he" are biologically masculine in the real world. There are very few gender distinctions when it comes to the English noun category "Where they are made, the connection between the biological category of "sex" and the grammatical category of "gender" is very close, insofar as natural sex distinctions determine English gender distinctions." [10]

Nevertheless, a neutral, objective language is but a myth. Dwight Bolinger[11] explored in his book "Language: the Loaded Weapon" the wide variety of ways in which the English language provides a way of encoding experience which could be regarded as loaded, that is manipulating or displaying different attitudes and stereotypes. He argues that English is a language made by men for men in order to represent their point of view and perpetuate it. In this view of the world, women are seen as deviant and deficient and made invisible.

[9] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p 67
[10] Quirk,R.,Greenbaum, S., Leeach,G., Svartvik,J. (1978) A Grammar of Contemporary English, London : Longman p.187
[11] Bolinger, Dwight. 1980. *Language: the Loaded Weapon*. Longman Publishing Group



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Language conveys attitudes. Sexist stereotypes or attitudes define a person according to his/her gender, rather than to his/her own merits. Sexist language encodes such stereotyped attitudes to men and women, though it might seem a bit strange to suggest that a language is sexist and not its users. English is not a gender-marked language. But gender is not the only way in which a language can be sexist or can perpetuate sexual stereotypes.

From the semantic point of view, feminists consider no coincidence that there are a lot of positive terms related to men and a lot of negative terms related to women, which – on top of everything – have no 'male' correspondent. Regardless of their origin, initial use etc., words used to refer to women acquire a pejorative meaning. This is what Schultz[12] calls the semantic derogation of women. Even if in the beginning the word had a positive meaning, when it comes to refer to women it acquires a pejorative meaning, which means that sexism does not lie in the word itself, but in its users. It is the case of words like: spinster, divorcee etc. or the gender marked pairs lard/lady, master/mistress, baronet/dame etc. "Discrepancies in grammatical forms reflect the tendency for men to be active subjects and women to be passive objects, or simply not mentioned at all"[13]

Historians and grammarians have used the terms mankind, man-made, man as a generic term, including women too. Generic 'man' refers to the practice of using the word 'man' to refer to all human beings. The use of words like man, mankind etc. have made women feel insignificant, left out, invisible in a world of men.

A second area of concern is represented by generic pronouns. Pronouns serve as a major linguistic expression of gender in English. The use of masculine pronouns to refer to both male and female referents is another abusive use of grammatical forms.

e.g. *Everyone must leave his paper on the desk.*

Densmore [14] considers that by its use of generic pronouns like 'he', 'him', 'his', 'himself' the English language is androcentric, male-centered and sexist. Murray [15] sarcastically states that due to the use of such generic pronouns, it appears that all persons are male until proven otherwise. Not to mention that in most context generic pronouns are ambiguous, exclusive, unequal and define women as deviant.

A more elegant replacement of the gender-marked possessive pronouns "his" would be the plural" their" as in:

e.g. *Everyone must leave their paper on the desk*.

But some grammarians argue that the use of the plural form is ungrammatical because a singular antecedent requires a singular pronoun to agree with it.

[12]Schulz, Muriel (1975). 'The Semantic Derogation of Women', in Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley (eds), *Language and Sex : Difference and Dominance*, Newburry House, Rowley, Mass
[13] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p 92
[14] cited in Pearson, J.C, West, R.L. & Turner, L.H. (1995) *Gender and Communication*, McGraw Hill, New York p.75
[15]cited in Pearson, J.C, West, R.L. & Turner, L.H. (1995) *Gender and Communication*, McGraw Hill, New York p.75



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The use of masculine generics is often associated with masculine stereotypes, for instance jobs perceived to be masculine or feminine by excellence. If people were asked to complete the following statement, by using a personal pronoun: 'Before the judge can reach a final decision……' or 'After the nurse finished the rounds, ……', I am sure that most of them would chose a masculine pronoun for the first case and a feminine pronoun for the latter.

There are other practices that differentiate between men and women. Name-calling is another instance in which language contributes to social inequalities between men and women. Each individual must be formally addressed as either masculine (Mr.) or feminine (Mrs./Miss). The woman's marital status is coded but not the man's, reflecting the expectation that a woman's identity depends on her husband. This practice has been frowned on by feminists since it deprived women of their name and individuality, rendering them invisible and subordinate.

As a solution for this imbalance, the term Ms. Has been suggested, thus challenging the practice of women being listed and identified only in relationship with their man.

There are many other ways in which English is said to discriminate against women. Another productive category of names applied to women and men that are abusive are animal terms. People may be referred to by using animal names, suggesting that they have some of the features of the respective animal. Those referring to women might be considered derogatory in comparison to those used to refer to men. (*feminine* - chick, brood, bitch, bunny, fox, kitten; *masculin*e – stud, wolf).

Women may also be described or referred to in terms of food imagery, which is equally insulting and de-personalizing: (sweetie, sugar, honey (bun), pumpkin, cheesecake, cookie, cupcake, sweetie pie etc.) All these terms have become condescending exactly because they are used only with women. By contrast there appears to be little food imagery which is appropriate for referring only to men.

"Language has helped to gender the way we think about space: men's space is public, in the workplace, whereas women's place is private and in the home" [16] This reality is encoded in expressions such as working *mother, businessman,housewife* etc. The term housewife, often used as a euphemism to refer to women, binds women irrefutably to the house, as if they weren't allowed to have a life outside home. There has been a persistent mis-recognition of women's work, encoded in language by the dichotomy "housework" and "work", implying that what women do at home is less than work, it doesn't produce profit, is almost invisible, it isn't paid, so it doesn't count as work. This is what Ivan Illich[17] (1982) called "shadow work".

Feminists' attempts to make English fairer to both sexes have won a few battles. The prevalence of Ms. and the tendency to avoid generic *he* have been the first two successful attempts to de-sex the English language since the eighteenth century.

[16] Romaine, Suzanne.1999 *Communicating Gender*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates,p12
[17] Illich,Ivan. (1982) Gender. New York : Pantheon Books



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All these linguistic imbalances have brought to light real-life situations, so instead of trying to change the linguistic forms that mirror social reality, we should try to change the situations that led to it, that is, instead of going after the symptoms, we should go after the causes. "Social change creates language change, not the reverse."[18]

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