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Sexual discrimination by means of language

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The role of women within a society was often debated and questioned. Throughout time, women were referred to by means of their looks and their companionship towards men. Few people were able to accept a woman in a leading position, without regarding this with scepticism. Their role was mainly reduced to household and children and their psychological and psychic qualities were most of the times left aside. In the Romanian society this phenomenon is still present, although to a lesser extent.

Key-words: *woman, discrimination, language, role, Romanian society, terminology, means of addressing.*

1. Introduction

From the beginning of civilization, the role of women set the basis for many discussions and controversies. Although there are cultures where she was considered the only one capable to make decisions related to that country and have leading positions, in the other areas the situation was reversed.

The woman was considered the representative of the beautiful sex; she was admired for her physical characteristics. This perception lead to her perception as muse as far as art is concerned, mother to her children, if we were to think of the ideal of beauty from the Renaissance time.

Mostly, these things are triggered from religion and its spread. The female figure is closely put in relation with the original sin and therefore she has the "quality" of temptation. Over time, a reluctant approach was observed when it comes to women's capacity to be leaders, which is often questioned or frowned upon. Despite the fact that some of these prejudices were dismissed in many cultures, in others the context has not changed. Reminiscences of some ideas are still valid, even though they are not as stressed as before.

Thus, through this article I intend to debate a phenomenon of gender discrimination within the Romanian culture, by means of language and language use. It can be identified at various levels. The reference here is to the manner in which the image of women, in media at least, is associated to the one of a powerful

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man or, by focusing some of her physical characteristics, rather than her qualities or aptitudes. A distinction must be however made from the beginning.

When it comes to sexual discrimination by means of language the debate reaches the distinction between "sexist language" or "sexist use" (Vâlcea, 2007:8). To answer this question, one must take into account the delimitation made by Ferdinand de Saussure between "language" and "speech" (Saussure, 1998:35). The language, as he defines it, is abstract whereas speech represents its actual use, and its variations (*Idem*). People choose how they want to use language. Therefore, in the case of discrimination, the *use* of language is sexist, not the language *per se*.

However, the sketched image is not always clear. Often it is presented from the standpointof housewife to the one of companion for a businessman. Rarely the woman is perceived as having and maintaining a successful career.

The dictionary definition (The Penguin English Dictionary, 2007:363) as far as discrimination is concerned, is 'a prejudicial treatment, e.g. on the grounds of race or sex'. The liveliest form of discrimination present is realized by means of language. From this statement the debate evolves to the identification of sexist languages. Romanian is a proper example in this case. Moreover, this tendency is encountered in a manipulative tool such as mass-media.

1.1. Theoretical framework

A four months study named Altfem was conducted by a Romanian association and observed the way in which women are presented in the Romanian mass-media. Several newspapers and TV shows (*Happy Hour*, *Acces Direct*, *O dată-n viață*, *Schimb de mame*, *Sinteza Zilei*, *Adevărul*, *Jurnalul Național* and *Libertatea*) were taken into account in order to obtain pertinent results concerning the matter. Surprisingly or not, what the researchers have noticed is how women tend to be illustrated either as helpers for the successful career of a man or an owned object with limited liberty and rights. In TV shows, they were seldom invited and only if they worked in media, belonging to a models agency or accompanying a famous man.

Moreover several commercials were debated. The conclusion they draw was that women are only put in relation to household activities or with their families. Their goal appears to be keeping their husbands and families happy: 'În publicitate, acțiunile personajelor din reclame sunt foarte diferite în funcție de sex. Cele mai multe acțiuni ale femeilor sunt de natură casnică, activități zilnice în care ajută bărbatul sau familia, în general, să se simtă mai bine.'[2]

[2] 'In advertising the characters' actions vary according to their sex. Many of the activities that women have, referred to household, daily activities designed to improve the way in which the man or the family in general feels.' (personal translation) - http://www.capital.ro/detalii-articole/stiri/femei-discriminare-mass-media-stereotipuri-152561.html - consulted in the 20th of December 2012, 12:00

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The Altfem study was meant to raise people's awareness towards the way in which a silent movement of antifeminism is notable in the Romanian society. This, however, is only one example; much discrimination is related to the manner in which men address women in point of language.

From this study, I have added a number of four other magazines from Romania that I have analyzed in order to obtain a clear overview. These are *The One, Click* and *Cancan,* two of them being tabloids. In short, I have analyzed their articles for three weeks and I dealt with the image of women, means of addressing and the names they receive.

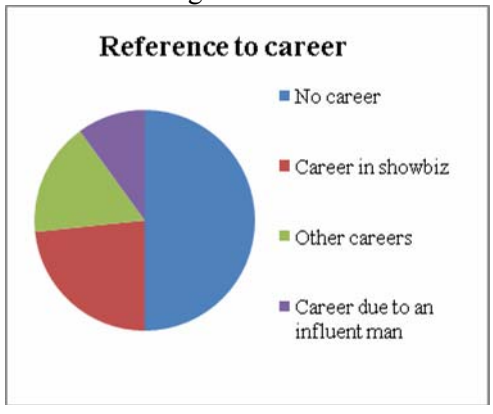
In addition to that, I have selected some articles that refer to women and I intended to identify a pattern from the organization of the texts. The criteria chosen were: subject, terminology used in descriptions and the frequency of some appellatives.

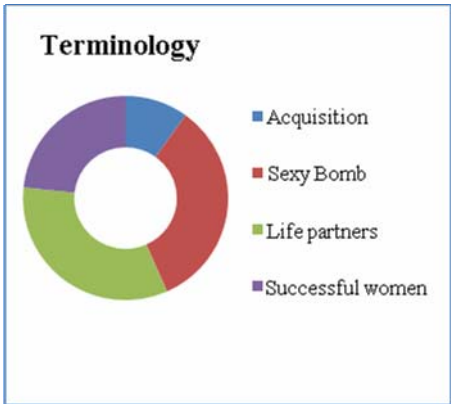
The results can, to some extent, be furthermore developed considering the status of tabloids that two of the publications have. The research aimed at raising the awareness towards a phenomenon that should not exist and I did not have the intention to denigrate any form of media. I have only reported a concrete situation from the Romanian society.

The content analysis that I have made reflects the description of women from the chosen sources from a statistical point of view and not an in-depth analysis of the message.

When I have decided on these three magazines I looked at their rating because it provided information about their audience. This showed how many people share the promoted ideas and mentalities. Another important aspect was represented by their views and commentaries from their online format. The data collected were easy to obtain from the magazines' online format, and also due to the topics approached and read by most of the people for their novelty.

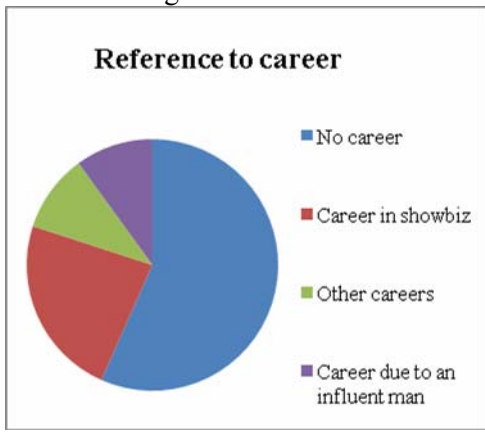
1.The *Click* Magazine

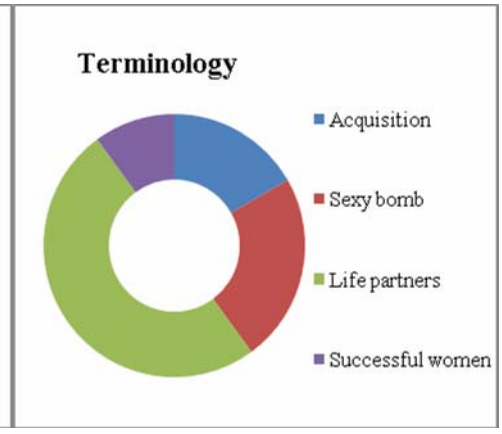




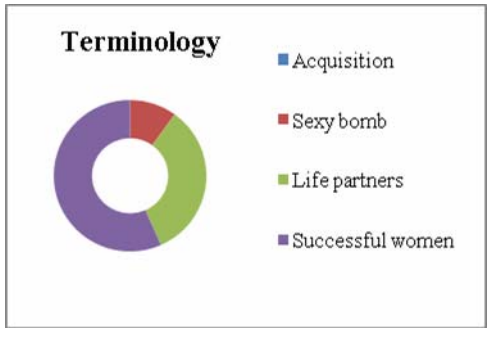
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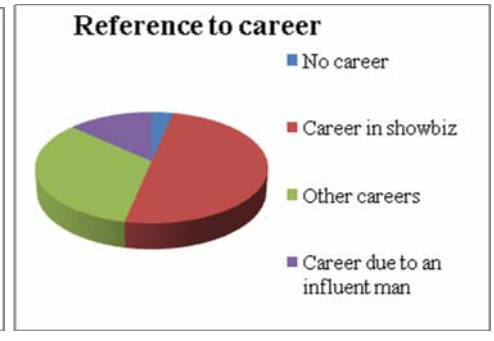
2.*Cancan* Magazine





3.*The One* Magazine





There is a notable difference between the first two magazines and the latter one. The first two often call women “acquisitions” and/or “sexy bombs” when they are put in relation to their life partner. Even the lifestyle column is filled with make-up ideas that are appreciated by the opposite sex. The words used in descriptions refer to their physical characteristics of women and their role as wives and mothers. Their career is confined to the area of showbiz and they are addressed to by means of pronouns, as their actual name is avoided.

An interesting case is encountered in the third magazine. Being a magazine for women, this purpose is reached at each column’s level. Often, pieces of advice are encountered and they refer to careers, the accomplishment of dreams and the achievement of a certain independence. The language used is somehow neutral and to some extent standardized in order to avoid any connotations when defining a powerful and successful woman. According to this source, the appearance of a woman is a mere accessory and it does not define her judgement and skills.

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The results of the analysis indicate a silent antifeminism movement, almost misogynistic, in the Romanian society. This aspect is encountered in mass-media, prejudices and the linguistic terms used in some cases.

The woman does not have a clear status in the chosen magazines. Often, her image is related to an influent man. She is portrayed as a companion for her husband, or lover, and her purpose is to get rich without working honestly. The most predominant description is however represented by the quality of wife, housewife, and mother.

Yet, the third magazine is completely different. The standardized language indicates a certain degree of respect allotted to women and their careers. The pieces of advice provided are intended to raise their self-esteem in a "men's world", and also to increase their ambition and determination in achieving a successful career and a high target.

The discussion concerning the gender differences by means of language was subjected to many researches from various cultural communities and gave birth to countless controversies. Two of the most significant are illustrated in what follows.

In a study from 1999, *New Generalizations and Explanations in Language and Gender Research*, conducted by Penelope Eckert and Sally Mcconnell-Ginet the tendency that each of the two sexes has in speaking is highlighted. The authors stress the idea that the male vocabulary denotes power, whereas women who use the same terminology are considered "sluts". (Eckert & Mcconnell-Ginet 1999, 193).

Other differences in terms of the language used by men and women are notable in the case of the generally accepted prejudices. These were studied by Jennifer Coates and they were included and presented clearly in the paper *Women, Men and Language* "Gender differences in communicative competence are part of folk knowledge [...] we all grow up to believe that women talk more than men, that women 'gossip', that men swear more than women, that women are more polite and so on." (Coates 1993, 107).

All these three research works establish the theoretical framework for what is going to be debated next, *i.e.* although many discussions were carried in order to obtain the equality as far as human rights are concerned, and also to create a social status, the representatives of the beautiful sex are still regarded with scepticism in relation to their career.

1.2. The development of the phenomenon

Sexism is a form of discrimination based on the distinction between the two sexes. Sexism by means of language is a manifestation of the general concept according to which the manner of addressing and not only induces a certain prejudice or wrong idea.

Moreover there are variables that must be taken into account when it comes to gender discrimination. The degree of education indicates many things related to a person. Should a woman have a higher degree is an indicator of a raised self-esteem

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and a powerful personality, in contrast to a woman who was brought up believing that she is ought to be a shadow for her husband. On the other hand, men who had access to higher education tend to treat women as equals without taking them for granted. The situations shown, however, are not absolute; numerous variations may appear in everyday life.

In order to provide examples, here are some means of addressing encountered especially in the countryside: *Fă!*, *Țață!*, *Muiere!*, *Fomeie!*, *Gaițo!*. They indicate the lack of respect for the opposite sex and the association of the woman with gossiping, a statement made above.

Workplace is another indicator of the role that a woman has within a society. The shared prejudice is that a female should narrow her choices in terms of two major "qualities" that typically, some say, belong to her: mother and wife. Therefore they are 'encouraged' to deal with activities that involve caring for others, tutoring or assisting. Women that have succeeded in filling a more important position are believed to have done that by means of unfair ways and not because of their capacity.

Within the same context, an aspect of the past must be considered. For a very long time, women could not write or publish books. The only way out was the use of a male penname in order to have access to the literary field. A cogent example for this subject is represented by the novels published by the Brontë Sisters.

As far as language is concerned, another issue must be taken into account. The Romanian grammatical norm does not yet recognise the names of occupations in the feminine form. The rule still obliges the use of the masculine, e.g. doamna doctor, doamna profesor. Although in speech there are some hybrid variants, they are not sufficient in order to make an official document. This situation was valid for the French culture as well until 2005, when feminine nouns denoting occupations were introduced in the linguistic norm.

The entourage can change attitudes and behaviours. The tendency is to be accepted in certain groups due to the pressure, and therefore the personality and individuality are lost. This is notable since adolescence's years. Boys seem to act unnatural around girls in order to get their attention and in totally different ways when they are accompanied by the group that they belong to.

Age must not be disregarded. The best example in this respect is represented by the differences in point of mentalities due to what we know as the generation gap. Elder people refer to the "peaceful" age when women were supposed to care for their homes and husbands. Yet, although not completely, the modern society encourages the equality of rights and responsibilities for both men and women.

Relevant for the Romanian case are also the social and geographical environments. The communist experience has designated men as far as decisions and guidance are concerned. The woman is a mere companion, without the right of expressing her opinions. Even in the present time, there are places were old sayings make the law, e.g. „femeia stă la cratiță", „nevasta ideală: mută, surdă, chioară",

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„femeia e păcătoasă”[3]. Another practice is encountered in some places from Moldavia where the woman is supposed to walk with her head leaning forward, behind her husband. The social and geographical contexts include also the addressing manners that we have discussed above.

The religious aspect sets in many communities the status of women. Many of them do not have access to the decisions that their husbands make. Sometimes, religion dictates a certain dress code, and in modern society, the dressing style is a part of the personality's expression.

Still, all these variables are inevitably submitted to language, which remains the most important instrument in promoting the sexual discrimination. In order to sustain this idea, I shall refer to several sayings embedded in the cultural framework.

Maybe the most common one is the dichotomy between the *weak sex/beautiful sex* and *tough sex*. These identification formulas are present in most of the cultures and are kept in modern society. It is obvious that the woman is approached in terms of sensitivity and aestheticism, in opposition to the power and domination expressed by the man. The woman is regarded as being vulnerable and subjected to external influences, fact that affects her image in leading positions.

Another saying belongs to the Latin satirist Iuvenal: "Nulla fere causa est, in qua non femina litem moverit" ("There is now misjudgement whose cause is not a woman")[4]. In other words, the author believes that each negative aspect or happening is due to the interference of a woman. Starting from Eva's original sin, the females are considered the generators of difficult situations. This mentality was later on taken into account in Alexandre Dumas's novel, where the author expressed through the voice of his character, Sartine: Cherchez la femme! (*Dicționar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre* 2007, 65). The implicature in this statement is that in order to identify the source of the problem, one must search the woman who created it.

The Romanian literature and the universal one as well are filled with female characters who crave for a man's love or who rely on their help and support. Love is the most accessible instrument in manipulating and highlighting the vulnerability of a woman. Shakespeare equates the idea of "weakness", "fickleness" with "woman" in his play, "Hamlet": "Frailty, thy name is woman" (*Dicționar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre* 2007, 135). The line indicates the lack of confidence in the woman's power, but also her interpretation as being weak, her behaviour depending only on emotions.

That is why the woman is perceived as a person who should not be trusted due to her unstable temper and personality. The most common saying in this respect is provided in musical area belonging to the Duke of Mantua, in *Rigoletto*: "La donna è mobile" ("The woman is constantly changing")[5]. This expression indicates that in the case of women, the absolute is off-limits, because the woman can easily change her

[3] "the woman's place is in the kitchen", "the ideal wife: mute, deaf and blind", "the woman is a sinner"
[4] Dicționar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre, 2007:66
[5] Dicționar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre, 2007:185

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behaviour, opinions and states of mind. Victor Hugo noted the same idea by stating that: "Souvent femme varie". (*Dicţionar de cuvinte, expresii, citate celebre* 2007, 316).

In other contexts, some of the sayings were used as a piece of advice for the men who would have sacrificed their purpose for a passing love. In other words, no woman "deserves" the effort of giving up ideals.

2. Conclusions

As shown the image of women in the Romanian society is still covered by prejudices and mentalities that hardly change. There are numerous factors which contribute to the phenomenon of antifeminism, not to mention the reticence displayed by some people upon this matter. The focus, in most of the cases, is still on the physical appearance and other features are disregarded, or accompanied by lack of trust. Media remains an important instrument in propagating most of the ideas that increase the process.

To sum up, the presented aspects express the spreading of this phenomenon in the Romanian culture, even though, as pointed above, it is not a singular case. Despite the awareness raised by these studies, they are still insufficient in order to change mentalities that lingered for centuries. And these will be inevitably transmitted within families by means of home schooling.

However, one thing is certain; the productivity of language will lead in the future to the identification of those words which will suppress the gender discrimination. The receptivity will be founded on the vast power that speech, as an instrument, has.

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