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Linguistic Sexism

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Fundamentals of Language

Language. This is how we communicate (Matthews & Beaman, 2007). It is not just words but symbols and gestures to express our needs and desires. It also shapes how we think and understand the world around us (Willis & Jozkowski, 2017) by interpreting the symbols people use to interact with each other (Matthews & Beaman, 2007). Matthews and Beaman discuss in their book *Exploring gender in Canada: A multidimensional approach* that these symbols are the foundation of how our children learn and are socialized within their cultures. They state that language theory proposes that our language limits our acuities if we do not understand the meanings of the symbols we use. Moreover, if we do not have words to describe a concept, we will not comprehend what is being said. This is known as linguistic determinism, put forth by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf (1956, as cited in Matthew & Beaman, 2007).

So, by understanding that language shapes how we think, perceive and interact, we may understand more about how language can be gendered, which brings us to linguistic sexism.

Concerns of Linguistic Sexism

Many feminists maintain that language sustains negative perceptions about women as secondary in social status and establishes men's power over them (Weatherall, 2002).
That said, the invisibility and depreciation of females are two main concerns surrounding gendered language (Matthews & Beaman, 2007; Weatherall, 2002). The following patterns of linguistic sexism are central to these concerns—the first four fall under the concern of invisibility.

Patterns of Linguistic Sexism

The first is discussed by Ann Coady (2018) in her article, O*rigin of sexism in language.* Coady states that using the masculine form as generic proposes that men are more worthy than

women and has been consciously constructed through the centuries. An example that supports this is in 1850, a British Act of Parliament introduced the convention that the masculine generic form was the inclusive term for all people (Matthews & Beaman, 2007). This meant that regardless of sex, in all legal documentation, individuals would be referred to as 'he' or 'man.' Had this law been interpreted accordingly, all people would have been included. However, due to the practice's ambiguity, women were excluded; hence, they did not have the right to vote. This resulted in subordination for women and power and privilege for men (Willis & Jozkowski, 2017). In Canada, before 1929, women were not even considered *persons* or *citizens* (Matthews & Beaman, 2007).

A more scientific take on the mechanisms of sexist grammar is presented by Coady (2018) as she explains iconization, fractal recursivity and erasure (which ties into the invisibility issue). Iconization partitions humans into a dichotomy based on gender. The hierarchy that stems from this partitioning is then conveyed onto language through fractal recursivity, thus making masculine the generic form. This results in erasure, where men dominate in the public spheres and women are "erased" and forced into the private spheres.

The following pattern is pronoun sexism, when the gender of the pronoun antecedent is not known, and automatic assumptions are made about the gender of that person. This happens a lot in language about occupations. Take, for instance, doctors and nurses. When they hear doctor, most people immediately think of masculine pronouns (Matthews & Beaman, 2007), and when they hear nurse, they think of feminine pronouns. Making these assumptions, for one, indicates a hierarchy in the prestige of position but also reaffirms inequalities in gender.

Spotlighting is when we add an adjunct to a word, as in lady doctor or male nurse (Matthews & Beaman, 2007; Weatherall, 2002). Even such terms that may seem trivial, like the man bun, mark these individuals as an anomaly and detract from the status that these terms usually hold, once again reinforcing the belief in a disparity of positions between men and women.

Naming conventions are how we address people; they can be titles of respect, titles related to job status and credentials, and they can be personal. However, when it comes to gender, the naming conventions, once again, force a distinction between men and women (Mooney & Evans, 2018). Men are referred to as Mr., whereas women are defined by their relationships or lack thereof, as Miss, Ms., or Mrs. This ultimate asymmetry reflects society's importance on women's status in relation to men. Naming conventions also suggest that a woman take her husband's surname once married (Matthews & Beaman, 2007). This practice stems from men's legal rights

over their wives, depicting them as property and altering their public identity, which has strong patriarchal overtones.

The final two patterns are diminutives and semantic derogation, which highlight the depreciation of females. Simply put, diminutives are when a suffix is added to root words to qualify the word for application to women, such as bachelorette, waitress or heroine (Matthews & Beaman, 2007). The masculine version is considered the standard and reinforces normative gender expectations.

Finally, semantic derogation is a more subtle pattern of linguistic sexism, as it depends on associations and connotations; however, it can be just as damaging as the rest. This is the process where a word's meaning changes over time and eventually adopts a negative connotation (Matthews & Beaman, 2007; Mooney & Evans, 2018). Examples of this are comparing the words bachelor and spinster or master and mistress. Considering how these words are typically used, we can see that spinster and mistress have a negative implication (crazy old cat lady and the other woman). In contrast, bachelor and master have a more positive and influential inference.

The Second Wave of Feminism

These issues of gendered language go back centuries, as demonstrated earlier, but its status in the research realm found its footing during the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s (Finlayson, 2016; Matthews & Beaman, 2007; Weatherall, 2002). Classifying and rectifying linguistic sexism has since been at the forefront of feminist policy. To undermine inequality, changing the conventions of language is a powerful strategy. Feminist campaigns have harnessed language in slogans such as "the personal is political" (Finlayson, 2016, p. 122), "no means no" (Weatherall, 2002, p. 2) and "girls can do anything." The term "herstory" also debuted to allow women to tell history from their perspective (Finlayson, 2016, p. 52) instead of from a man's perspective, as is often the case. The most crucial insights from the second wave are that men's social advantages and power are reflected in language, as are the disadvantages and powerlessness of women. Patterns of linguistic sexism were "both a symptom and a source of fundamental androcentrism" (Braun et al., 2005, as cited in Vergoossen et al., 2020, p. 329). However, despite the great strides and adaptions made by the feminist campaigns, some still offer opposing views.

Opposing Views

In a study completed by Vergoossen et al. (2020), four dimensions of criticism against linguistic sexism were determined: defending the linguistic status quo; sexism and cisgenderism; diminishing the issue and its proponents, and distractor in communications. ‘Defending the status quo’ enveloped arguments such as change is too complicated or unnecessary; word etymology dictates that generic pronouns are improper or that tradition trumps change. This theme mirrors people’s negative attitudes and reluctance toward change. The dimension of ‘sexism and cisgenderism’ highlighted ideologies that only two genders exist, so nonbinary pronouns are pointless. Using gender-neutral pronouns depersonalizes individuals because identifying one's gender is a part of who they are, and knowing a person's gender is compulsory in effective communication. The third dimension, ‘diminishing the issue and its proponents,’ encompassed more hostile perceptions. Some statements suggested that changing the language threatened a person’s freedom of speech and exemplified unjustified coercion. Negative words and sentiments were frequently expressed in this category, and a recurring theme was that “sexist language is a trivial concern” (p. 334). Criticisms under this facet target the people that are advocating for change as well as reform. Furthermore, the final dimension, distractor in communication, demonstrates people's concerns that using generic forms will confuse and distract from communicating effectively and promote ridicule and hostility towards them from those who oppose them.

Conclusion

To conclude, linguistic sexism is vast and complicated; this analysis barely scratches the surface. What was covered, though, were some of the foundations of language, like communication and symbols and the theory of linguistic determinism from Sapir and Whorf. The concerns regarding linguistic sexism, most notably the invisibility and depreciation of women, and the patterns that initiate those concerns and cause damage, such as the masculine form, pronoun sexism, spotlighting, naming conventions, diminutives, and semantic derogation, were also acknowledged. Finally, highlights of the second wave of feminism, focusing on how motives have been directed at rectifying and undermining inequality and four dimensions of opposing views to

the reform of gendered language: defending the status quo, sexism and cisgenderism, diminishing the issue and its proponents, and distractor in communications, were mentioned.

The goal was to bring attention to the critical importance of how language is used in conjunction with gender and the damage it can cause and has caused, and perhaps to elicit some motivation to help irradicate linguistic sexism. Words have power. It is up to us to learn, educate others when we can, and promote the support for inclusivity in language to prevent *anyone* from invisibility or depreciation.

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