

SOCIAL RELATIONS AND SEX STEREOTYPING IN LANGUAGE

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The study of language and sex is now well established with a distinctive subject matter and a number of most valuable findings. Yet, it does not take much to see that feminist research betrays at least one serious failing: a lack of data on possible manifestations of sexism in languages other than English.

The present paper is an attempt at a comparative study of sex differentiations in the lexical systems of English and Russian. Interest here is focused on a politically significant register like stereotyping men and women.

For this purpose all the nouns marked as referring exclusively to males or females were picked out of Chamber's Twentieth Century Dictionary (1964) and S.I. Ozhegov's Dictionary of the Russian Language (1978). On the whole there were found 279 English and 125 Russian sex-marked nouns. Of these 165 English and 92 Russian nouns referred to males and 114 English and 33 Russian nouns – to females. The nouns were classified: 1) according to their positive or negative connotations (table 1) and (2) according to semantic zones, reflecting stereotypic ideas of: a) men's and women's appearance (beauty:ugliness, tidiness:untidiness, moderation:affectation); b) achievement potential (strength:weakness, intelligence:folly, efficiency:inefficiency, activity:passivity); c) Behavioural patterns (chastity:promiscuity, benevolence:malevolence, composure:fussiness); d) division of labour (business:household); e) marital status (married:unmarried) (Table 2).

One of the tasks of this contrastive investigation was to test the results obtained by feminist linguistics, that is why the semantic zones have been designed to provide common ground for the analysis of empirical data.

Table 1. Shares of positive and negative sex-specific evaluations

Emotional colouring	ENGLISH		RUSSIAN	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Positive	7.2%	3.3%	10.4%	0.8%
Negative	51.9%	37.5%	63.2%	25.6%

Table 2. Stereotypic qualities assigned to males and females

Semantic zones	ENGLISH		RUSSIAN	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
APPEARANCE				
Beauty:Ugliness	72%:0.72%	2.16%:0.72%	0. %:0. %	0. %:5.6 %
Tidiness:Untidiness	0. %:0.36%	0. %:1.44%	0. %:0. %	0. %:0.8 %
Moderation:Affectation	0. %:2.5 %	0. %:0.36%	0. %:0.8 %	0. %:0.8 %
ACHIEVEMENT POTENTIAL				
Strength:Weakness	1.8 %:3.6 %	2.16%:0. %	2.4 %:3.2 %	0.8 %:0. %
Potency:Impotence	1.8 %:1.8%		0.8 %:0.8 %	
Intelligence:Folly	1.44%:7.2 %	0.72%:0. %	3.2 %:15.2%	0.8 %:0.8 %
Efficiency:Inefficiency	0. %:2.16%	0. %:0.36%	1.6 %:8.8 %	0.8 %:0.8 %
Activity:Passivity	0. %:3.2 %	0. %:0. %	0. %:4. %	0. %:0. %
BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS				
Chastity:Promiscuity	0. %:8.6 %	1.44%:22.5%	1.6 %:8.8 %	0. %:9.6 %
Benevolence:Malevolence	1.44%:20.7 %	0.72%:6.46%	0. %:16.8%	0. %:4. %
Composure:Fussiness	0. %:0.72%	0. %:0.36%	0. %:0. %	0. %:0.8 %
DIVISION OF LABOUR				
Business:Household	0. %:0.72%	0. %:1.08%	0. %:0. %	0. %:0. %
MARITAL STATUS				
Married:Unmarried	0. %:0.36%	0. %:0.36%	0.8 %:0.8 %	0. %:0.8 %
MISCELLANEOUS				
	0. %:0. %	0. %:0. %	0. %:6.6 %	0. %:0. %

For the same reasons we have not classified the words reflecting sex stereotypes according to their stylistic differentiation despite certain advantages of such classification. Phrases like *a man of the world*, *a woman of pleasure* have not been included although some feminists have done so. The reason is that a lot of such phrases have not reached the status of idioms and are not to be found in the dictionaries. They tend to be speech rather than language phenomena. This means that their inclusion would make the investigation less rigorous.

ENGLISH. Feminist literature provides quite a rich choice of works on stereotyping. The most important arguments put forward by the writers on the subject can be roughly summed up as follows: 1) positive values are associated with males and negative with females (Nilsen (1972:102-109); Spender (1980:16); Strainchamps (1971:240-50)) which is materialized in the fact that female-referring insults significantly outnumber male-referring ones (Bolinger (1980:91,92); Miller and Swift (1979:131)); 2) women's experiences and roles are regarded as having less value (Coates (1985:8); Phillips (1983:135-136)). Many commentators also point out that women's values are focused on their bodies (Stanley 1977:77-84), while men's mental qualities are prized more than anything else (Bolinger 1980:91). Women are described in terms of weakness and passivity, while men are pictured as powerful and enterprising (Phillips 1983:135).

The data we obtained for the English language run somewhat contrary to the first feminist assumption cited above, since the score of male-referring negative characteristics and insults is higher than that of female-referring ones, yet it would only be just to admit that positively coloured words for males outnumber those for females as well (table 1). It seems easy to explain. Men are more visible in language since for centuries they have been more socially exposed than women and participated in a greater number and a greater variety of social situations which could not but be adequately reflected in the lexical system of the language.

The male- and female-referring words constituting the semantic zone APPEARANCE do not display any significant quantitative or stylistic differences.

The male terms designating BEAUTY like *beau*, *adonis* have female counterparts like *belle*, *beauty*, *bellibona*, *peach* (some of which can be also used ironically), the negative part of the opposition, UGLINESS, being represented by only a few words both for men and women: *satyr*, *Quasimodo* - *hag*, *Gorgon*.

The predominantly male noun *sloven* is opposed to female ones like *dowd(y)*, *frump*, *sow*, *Judy* in the group UNTIDINESS (the rest of the terms like *slut*, *slattern*, *drab*, *draggletail*, *trollop*, *bitch*, etc. which are sometimes cited as female words for untidy person were included into the semantic sphere PROMISCUITY, since the notion of untidiness in them is combined with connotations of loose behaviour, moral corruption which make them much stronger insults).

Masculine terms describing AFFECTATION like *dandy*, *dude*, *fop*, *rake*, *smart*, *corinthian*, *puss* used to criticize men taking too much care of their looks prompt that being too showy in appearance is not compatible with the stereotype of manhood. This group is semantically close to a female term *doll* included under AFFECTATION since both also imply the notion of being shallow and silly.

The data on ACHIEVEMENT POTENTIAL supply a bit more contrastive material.

The left-hand member of the semantic opposition STRENGTH: WEAKNESS comprises positive words for men: *cob*, *cock*, *bulldog*, *yeoman*, suggesting vigour and courage, and negatively coloured words for women: *amazon*, *mawther/mawther*, *rounceval*, *virago*, implying unusually great physical strength and size with the exception of *romp* and *tomboy* which can be viewed as relatively favourable stressing high spirit, vigour and boldness equally with boisterousness. The right-hand member of the semantic opposition in question is asymmetric because quite a numerous group of words designating a physically and morally weak man (cf.: *effeminate*, *Jenny*, *Nancy*, *milksop*, *sop*, *sump*, *cissy*, *dastard* also implying cowardice) has no feminine equivalents. Interestingly enough, some of male insults suggesting WEAKNESS are female-associated. The data show that women are stereotypically viewed as physically and emotionally weak creatures but at the same time, unlike men, they are stigmatized not for being weak but for being too strong.

The opposition STRENGTH:WEAKNESS can be supplemented by the minor opposition sexual POTENCY:IMPOTENCY represented by only male-referring words, cf. *bull*, *stud*, *rooster*, *stag*, *stallion* for potency, and *capon*, *gelded*, *ox*, *sprado*, *steer* for impotence.

The data obtained on INTELLIGENCE:FOLLY confirm the observation that

though learning and scholarship would seem to be asexual the majority of terms naming a person of great knowledge and wisdom are exclusively masculine (cf.: *sage, pundit, wizard, savant*) and the few words referring to women have to do with pretensions to knowledge (cf.: *bluestocking, bas-blue*) (Bolinger 1980:91); but on the other hand, it bears a numerous group of male terms implying FOLLY having no female equivalents, cf.: *beetlehead, booby, bull-calf, dolt, humdrum, jay, jerk, oaf, put(t), saphead, scapegrace, tomfool, tomcat, cold, cold-poll, cold-hopper, tom-noody, green-horn, foozle*, the fact that escapes feminist's attention and stands somewhat contrary to the allegation that English abounds in terms questioning women's intelligence (Miller and Swift 1979:131).

The EFFICIENCY box is empty in Table 2. The score of male-referring insults representing INEFFICIENCY is slightly higher than that of female-referring ones. Some male terms suggest the idea of having no importance: *jackstraw*, uselessness in connection with old age: *fogy, duffer, geezer* or inexperience and young age: *colt*. The female-referring insult *nullipara* stresses inability to give birth to a child.

The semantic opposition ACTIVITY:PASSIVITY is represented only by male words denoting an awkward, passive, sometimes lazy person: *bumpkin, lubber, slug, sluggard, drone, swab*.

The semantic zone BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS comprises the bulk of the nouns under study and reveals some lexical gaps.

The data on CHASTITY:PROMISCUITY fully confirm the assertions of many commentators that the English lexicon is asymmetric in this sphere supplying a big stock of words treating women in derogatory sexual terms which significantly differ from the available male words not only in number but also in the force of insult. Male words for PROMISCUITY are much milder than female ones, cf. *womanizer, Don Juan, amorist, Casanova, billy-goat* on the one hand and *hussy, jay, hoyden, slattern, mutton, harlot, trull, whore* on the other. In some male insults the blame is shifted on to women, like in *pimp, souteneur* which come from their association with female prostitutes. The word *cuckold* stigmatises a man who is in fact a victim of his wife's promiscuity. Quite meaningful is the fact that female words for CHASTITY like *chaperon, matron, prude* are deprived of positive connotations implying old age, priggishness. The only word representing CHASTITY which can be viewed as free of negative connotations is *maiden*.

Another asymmetry, though only quantitative, is manifested in the semantic opposition BENEVOLENCE:MALEVOLLENCE where male insults significantly outnumber female ones. Both groups are semantically close implying spitefulness, vulgarity, meanness, violence, etc., cf. *barbarian, blackguard, churly, cad, grobian, knave, plug, caitiff, plugugly, loon, rascal, ruffian, rogue - rascal, brute - flip, shrew, hell-cat, termagant, scold*. Some of the female words here also suggest old age, sexual uselessness, cf.: *crone, witch, beldam(e), harridan*. The left-hand member of the semantic opposition BENEVOLENCE:MALEVOLLENCE comprises male terms like *prud'homme, bawcock, brick, trump* and female ones like *bellona, Griselda*.

The semantic opposition COMPOSURE:FUSSINESS is not represented by any clearly sex-specific words except, perhaps, the word *hen* characterising a fussy female.

The opposition reflecting DIVISION OF LABOUR between the two sexes, viz. BUSINESS:HOUSEHOLD, has an empty left-hand member, while the right-hand one is represented by some female nouns like *apron, petticoat, placket* implying women's activities as a housewife and some male ones like *betty, hen-hussy* stigmatising men for troubling themselves with women's work in the household.

MARRIAGE is a positive marker of social status, therefore normally there are no derogatory words describing a married male or female. On the other hand, being unmarried seems to be a stigma only for a female. The word *bachelor* has no negative connotations whereas *spinster* implies sexlessness and/or frustration and insecurity. That is why an unmarried sexually independent young woman has to be called a *bachelor girl* (Cameron 1985:77).

The data obtained for the discussed semantic zones show that feminist approach to sex stereotyping is somewhat biased. True to say, both men and women are stereotyped but as it seems male and female stereotypes as reflected in the language are opposed not in terms of positive/negative or greater/lesser values associated with the sexes but in terms of sex differences having a physiological basis and reflecting some of the basic dichotomies of social life, the most important of them being the dichotomy between business and intimate patterns of life: men are stigmatised for lack of business qualities like intelligence, physical and moral strength, efficiency, etc. in accordance with their role of PROCURER and women are stigmatised for impure sexual behaviour in accordance with their role of MOTHER.

RUSSIAN. The distribution of Russian male and female words in the semantic zone APPEARANCE follows a little bit different pattern than that of the English ones. Unlike in English there can be found neither male nor female nouns designating a beautiful person and the nouns coming under UGLINESS and UNTIDINESS are exclusively female, cf.: *vydra* (thin, ugly), *kikimora* (ugly), *durnushka* (unattractive, plain, possibly young), *khudyshka* (thin, unattractive), *pigalitsa* (small, unattractive) and *zamarashka* (unattractive, untidy).

The right-hand member of the semantic opposition MODERATION:AFFECTION is represented by a single male term *dendi* (dandy) and a single female one *kukla* (doll).

The Russian data on ACHIEVEMENT POTENTIAL are very much like the English except that in Russian this category is represented more scarcely. Positively coloured male words in STRENGTH like *bogatyр* (very strong, valiant), *zdorovyak* (strong, healthy) are opposed to a derogatory female term *kobyла* (unattractive, physically very strong). Parallel to English, male insults describing WEAKNESS have no female equivalents, cf.: *hilyak* (weak, sloppy), *dochliak* (weak, skinny), *hliupik* (milk-sop), *nytik* (sniveller). And like in English a weak male can be compared to a female: *baba* (weak-spirited milk-sop).

Similar to English the opposition POTENCY:IMPOTENCE is represented by male-referring nouns but their number is smaller: *zherebets* is the Russian equivalent for *stallion* while *impotent* is a self-explanatory borrowing.

The left-hand member of the semantic opposition INTELLIGENCE:FOLLY is represented by positively coloured words for men like *ostroumets* (witty, intelligent), *ostroslov* (witty, with a sharp tongue), *moudrets* (sage), *znatok* (knowledgeable) and

by a pejorative female term *sinii chulok* (blue stocking). Male insults of this semantic group are plenty and fully disparaging, cf.: *pen'*, *balbes*, *bolvan*, *duren'*, *duralei*, *baran* etc, which imply being stupid, unknowingly dull, whereas the only female noun *du-riokha* (silly, incompetent) has the suffix /jɔ:x/ softening the negative meaning and suggesting a what-can-one-expect-of-women tolerance.

EFFICIENCY is described by both male: *mastak*, *umelets* (skilled, clever at crafts) and female: *rukodel'nitsa* (clever at knitting, sewing, etc.) nouns. Like in English male insults constituting INEFFICIENCY outnumber female ones. They also differ in their connotations since the female nouns contain diminutive suffixes like /iʃk/ in *poustishka* (shallow, good for nothing) making them much milder than corresponding nouns of masculine gender, cf.: *vertoprakh*, *lobotrias*, *okhlamon*, *shalopai*, etc. denoting idle, good for nothing people.

Like in English the negative member of the semantic opposition ACTIVITY:PASSIVITY is represented only by male terms: *borov*, *pientiukh*, *tiufiak*, *ivalen'*, *biriuk*, etc. denoting lazy, passive, awkward persons.

The Russian lexical material on BEHAVIOURAL PATTERNS does not reveal any striking gaps in the semantic sphere of PROMISCUITY. But it holds true for Russian as well that, firstly, some male words in PROMISCUITY are mild epithets in comparison with most female ones, cf.: *lovelas*, *babnik*, *volokita*, *don-zhuan* characterizing men as seducers of weak females and *devka*, *potaskuha*, *prostitutka* stigmatising women for loose behaviour; and, secondly, some derogatory male nouns insult men at the expense of women, cf. *sutenyer* (souteneur) or *rogonosets* (cuckold). Unlike in English CHASTITY is represented by the male word *eesousik* which is fully negative and blames men for taking no interest in women and being too pious.

Like in English the right-hand negative member of the semantic opposition BENEVOLENCE:MALEVOLLENCE is also asymmetric in Russian. Male nouns like *vyrodok*, *upyr*, *podonok*, *zhulik*, *hliust* describing anti-social elements outnumber female ones like *gadiuka*, *halda*, *furia* emphasizing the venomous nature of certain females.

The semantic sphere FUSSINESS comprises the only female noun *nasedka* (hen).

The opposition BUSINESS:HOUSEHOLD is practically non-existent in Russian if only Ozhegov's Dictionary is taken into consideration (the dictionary does not, for instance, give the word *striapukha* which in phrases *khorošhaia striapukha*, *plokhaia striapukha* characterizes a woman as a good or bad cook). Rather significant is the fact that there are no words in Russian stigmatising a man for doing household jobs.

The words grouping around MARRIAGE behave in Russian in much the same way, but the word *bobył'* (single, about a man) testifies that for a man to be single can be viewed negatively in Russian, although there is the word *kholostiak*, an exact equivalent of *bachelor*. Another difference is that in Russian *kholostiak* has a feminine gender form *kholostiaschka* (it will be remembered that an independent young female is described in English with the help of the phrase *bachelor girl*).

Earlier we said that being married is normally positive but in certain situations, e.g. from the point of view of a girl looking for a husband, being married is a negative feature. This "possibility" is realised in the Russian word *zhenatik*.

Some male insults which do not come under any of the semantic zones were gathered in MISCELLANEOUS. They are *zhmot*, *krohobor*, *skared* (tight-fisted misers), *degtmaz* (slanderer), *stukach* (informer).

The data discussed suggest that despite minor quantitative differences Western and Russian cultural beliefs of male and female inalienable qualities are reflected in the two languages in basically the same way as well as the dichotomy between the world at large and the family.

Studying the data on sexism in the two languages serving as means of communication for the nations of the two different socio-economic systems with constitutionally different status of women brings about some controversial problems: 1) the correlation between the language sexism and a concrete social reality; 2) language reform and women's liberation.

Discussing these problems we can not escape mentioning "symptomatic" and "casual" approaches to sexist language (Cameron 1985:74,75). The "symptomatic" camp represented first of all by C. Miller and K. Swift who believe that language is a symptom, an effect of women's oppression which can be overcome by a language reform, is strongly criticized by the followers of the "casual" tendency represented by D. Spender who supports the idea that language is a cause of women's oppression rather than a symptom of it and all the words are sexist because their meaning is fixed by men. Both approaches were convincingly refuted by D. Cameron (1985) who having made a number of most valuable remarks on the state of art fails in the end to explain the origins of the forms of oppression she wishes to see abolished.

Holiday (1987:86) suggests that the answer could be found in the theory of historical materialism. Developing K. Marx's thesis about the necessity of distinguishing between the "apparently purposive constructive ability of animals and the genuinely purposive labour of humans" he asserts that it is difficult to see how even the simplest process could be initiated unless those engaged in it have the capacity of speech and comes to the conclusion that "language should be treated as a kind of labour power" (Holiday 1987:89). A. Holiday goes on to say that under conditions of capitalist relations of production men may exercise dominance over large and important regions of language such as the discourse of science the same as it happens with class control over labour power in general (Holiday 1987:89). On the other hand, language as a system of communication can not be controlled by one or other sex or class. In other words, language can be an instrument of manipulation but not the object of manipulation.

Treating the subject of verbal violence against women Cameron (1985:76) remarks that to say that the asymmetry of insult terms reflects reality would be banal and she is certainly right if "reality" stands for the present state of affairs in a society. The lexical system of both English and Russian like any other languages of the world are bound to reflect the historically structured differentiation of male and female roles caused first by the natural ability of women to nurture life in their bodies and then deepened with its growing significance for the inheritance and property and the provision of manpower. Any language must have been more or less sexist so that we can trace the history of patriarchy through the history of its words. But that does not mean that there is a correlation between sexism present in a language and

the position of women in society. The bulk of language units which diachronically had a political value with coming social changes tend to become mere communicative technique synchronically (Abaev 1986:33) though it can be assumed that where the socio-economic causes of women's oppression are still at work certain language units will preserve their political value.

Feminists came to the study of sexism in language on the wave of the political women's liberation movement. There is no problem of women's liberation (in its western sense of breaking through the boundaries of family life) in the Soviet Union where women are employed in every possible sphere of economy, science and culture. Soviet women are rather faced with the opposite problem of "coming back into the families" since the shortage of time of working women has bad effects on their husbands and children. Probably, this explains why the Soviet women, who constitute a social power to be reckoned with, are not bothered by the sexist relics in Russian, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, etc. (and this partially accounts for the lack of linguistic interest in language sexism in the Soviet Union).

It seems that sexism is not so much a question of language as a question of language use, that is of the speaker's attitude. Sex stereotypes as reflected in the language are not sexist in themselves: they can acquire sexist colouring in speech. The problem of intent is well understood by Cameron (1985:78) who regards the incompatibility of the speakers' intents as the main obstacle to reclaiming the meanings of sexist words. In this connection of interest will also be B. Risch's findings that women use such words as *bitch*, *whore*, *slut*, usually thought of as feminine and described in dictionaries as referring to females, to insult men. The speaker's intention can be guided by different factors: psychological, socio-cultural and possibly socio-economic ones like profit, marketing and so on as it is seen in sex-biased job advertisements. If we look at the problem of sexism in this aspect the emphasis shifts from changing the "sexist language" by way of reforms to changing the attitudes, beliefs and prejudices, that is the people's consciousness which means changing the sources of the sexist society.

Of course, it would be wrong to belittle the feminist's work on women's liberation through pressure on government agencies and the media, popularization of research results, organized demands for guidelines and regulations encouraging non-sexist language use because language can be used as a powerful means of social control and all these attempts should be viewed as a step further towards a non-sexist ideology. Yet, practice shows that a real change of relations between women, men and language can be achieved only when it is based on changes in the socio-economic sphere of the life of a certain society.

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