

**'TO PROPOSE IS HUMAN': ELIMINATING SEXIST LANGUAGE
FROM ENGLISH PROVERBS**

YISA KEHINDE YUSUF

Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria

Following Mieder (1989a), Seitel (1981) and Egblewogbe (1980), a proverb may be defined as a short, repeated, witty statement of experience which is used to further a social end. Incidentally, in a wide range of nations and cultures, women-related proverbs seem to be predominantly designed to serve misogynous ends (see, e.g., Mieder 1985 and Yusuf 1994). It has therefore been necessary for fair-minded proverb users and scholars to strive to eliminate sexism in proverbs by, among others, changing them to reflect equitable social trends. Such proverb alteration is possible because, as the Ghanaian Akan proverb cited in Yankah (1989: 153) states, 'The proverb does not stay at one place, it flies.'

Mieder (1985) shows how proverb flight has taken place in feminist politics and modern advertising with regard to the elimination of sexism. At the same time, Mieder (1985: 277) draws attention to the relative rarity of such equitable proverb transformation, and notes that "much time will still have to pass until all people realise that the proverb 'All men are created equal' should in fact be called 'All *people* are created equal'". It is with proverb change of this sort that the present paper is concerned. Specifically, the paper intends to desex a collection of proverbs in which masculine terms (e.g. *man* and *he*) are used to refer to all human beings or a person whose sex is unspecified.

The work is carried out from the background of the belief that such masculine terms ignore women and imply that the male are naturally superior to the female (see, e.g., Henley 1987, Cameron 1985, Spender 1980, Martyna 1980, Cheshire 1985 and Hardman 1993). It is in addition motivated by the preference for

¹ It is further noteworthy that this sexist American proverb was rendered in a non-sexist way as "We are all created equal" by United States President Bill Clinton in his inaugural address on January 20, 1997, at the beginning of his second term in office.

such neutral terms as *people* and *person*. Moreover, it is based on the assumption that inclusive expressions like *she or he* and *he or she* are stylistically elegant and the use of *they* as a singular pronoun in some situations is perfectly grammatical (see also Bodine 1975, MacKay 1980, Pauwels 1991 and Mitchell 1994).

The paper is further motivated by the fact that English is an international language, and its non-native users generally tend to depend on the prescriptions of pedagogic grammars, a large proportion of which remains appreciably sexist, ambivalent or insensitive to women-related change in English usage (Sunderland 1992, Randall 1985 and Mitchell 1992). This observation is especially true of proverbs when their characteristic idiomatic or collocational structure is considered. Therefore, since, as Cochran (1992: 33) rightly puts it, "gender sensitivity is the revolutionary and truly novel linguistic development of our age", it is necessary for teachers of English to present systematic models of the change.

The data for the work derive from a number of major proverb collections and proverb studies. These sources are indicated in parenthesis in the succeeding paragraphs, and the extent to which the desexing of each proverb alters it rhetorically is specified.

The following proverb is among the twenty-two sexist ones on which the present study is based:

- (1) *Man* proposes, God disposes (Mieder 1989a: 19).

First, the proverb could be desexed by replacing *man* with *people* to yield

- a. 'People propose, God disposes.'

In this alternative, the rhyming of the original proverb with respect to the ending of both of its clauses with the sounds /-peuziz/ is affected by the change of the singular subject of the first clause (i.e., *man*) to a plural one (i.e., *people*). The change necessitates the corresponding change of the singular verb (*proposes*) to the plural one (*propose*) in the first clause of proverb (1a). The loss of the sound /z/ is however compensated for by the enhancement of the alliteration of the first clause of proverb (1a) which results from the repetition of the sound /p/ in *people*. In other words, what is lost in rhyming due to the desexing of the proverb is gained in the fivefold repetition of the sound /p/. The grammatical contrast between *propose* and *proposes* may, moreover, be seen as complementary to the lexical contrast between *people* and *God*.

Where the rhyming of proverb (1) is preferred to its alliteration by a particular proverb user, the proverb could be desexed as follows:

- b. 'The human being proposes, God disposes.'

The proverb could also be desexed through a syntactic inversion of the elements in each of its two clauses as follows:

- c. 'To propose is human, to dispose is divine.'

This rhyming proverb appropriates the syntax of the popular proverb 'To err is human, to forgive divine.' Consequently, the Subject(S) + Predicator (P) structure of each of the original proverb's two clauses is transformed to S + P + C(omplement): that is, *To propose* is S, *is* is P, and *human* is C. The noun *man* is also converted to the adjective *human*, and the word *God* is changed to *divine*. In addition, the finite verbs *proposes* and *disposes* are converted to the non-finite ones *to propose* and *to dispose*, respectively, and both are nominalised and made the S in the clauses in which they appear.

Another interesting stylistic feature of proverb transformation is revealed by the desexing of the following proverb:

- (2) One *man's* meat is another *man's* poison (Dundes 1981: 59).

This proverb may be changed to

- 'One *person's* meat is another *person's* poison.'

Here, the sexist *man* is replaced with the equitable *person*, and the change results in the shift of the alliteration of the proverb from *man's meat* in the S to *person's poison* in the C. In other words, the alliteration which is lost in the S is gained in the C.

A slightly different tendency is shown in the desexing of the proverb

- (3) Let every *man* skin *his* own skunks (Mieder 1989a: 41).

This proverb may be changed to

- 'Let everyone skin *their* own skunks.'

In this alternative proverb, *everyone* replaces *every man* and *their* replaces *his*. The change retains the alliteration of the original proverb with regard to the fact that both *man* and *one* end with the sound /n/ which phonetically aligns with the /n/ in *skin*, *own* and *skunks*. However, the replacement of *his* with *their* does not retain the phonetic contiguity existing between /s/ in *skin* and *skunks*, on one hand, and /z/ in *his*, on the other.

With respect to the singular use of *they*, the desexed form of proverb (3) is similar to a possible equitable version of the proverb

- (4) If God blesses a *man*, *his* bitch brings forth pigs (Whiting 1977: 180).

The desexed version would be

- 'If God blesses a *person*, *their* bitch brings forth pigs.'

In the change of *his* to *their*, the alliterative relationship which the /z/ in *his* contracts with the /z/ in *blesses*, *brings* and *pigs*, in the original proverb, is not retained.

It is possible to desex the proverb

(5) Every *man* has *his* price (Whiting 1977: 134)

by changing it to

'Every *person* has *a* price.'

In this change, the third person singular masculine pronoun *his* is replaced with the indefinite article *a*. The alliteration of *has*, *his* and *price* with respect to the sounds /z/ and /s/ is undermined by the replacement. This is however compensated for by the repetition of the sound /ə/ in *person*, *has* and *a* and the co-occurrence of the repetition with /ai/ in *price*.

A similar tendency is noticeable in the change of

(6) A great *man* has not a great *son* (Mieder 1989a: 40)

to

'A great *parent* has not a great *child*.'

In the replacement of *man* with *parent* and *son* with *child*, the loss of the repetition of the sound /n/ in *man* and *not* is replaced with the repetition of the sound /n/ in *parent* and *not* and /t/ in *great*, *parent* and *not*.

As in proverb (6), alliterative compensation occurs in the change of the proverb

(7) Threatened *men* live long (Simpson 1982: 224)

to

'Threatened *people* live long.'

In other words, the loss of the repetition of /n/ in *threatened* and *men* in the original proverb is multiply compensated for by the repetition of /p/ in *people*, the co-occurrence of /i:/ in *people* and /i/ in *live*, and the repetition of /l/ in *people*, *live* and *long*. Alliteration is similarly enhanced in the change of

(8) *Men* are best loved furthest off (Wilson 1970: 48)

to

'*People* are best loved furthest off.'

due to the repetition of /p/ in *people* and /l/ in *people* and *loved*.

Men may, as in proverb (8), be changed to *people* in the proverb

(9) By rogues falling out, honest *men* get their dues (Mieder 1989a: 178).

This produces the proverb

'By rogues falling out, honest *people* get their dues.'

Here, the loss of the repetition of the sound /n/ in *honest* and *men* is replaced with the repetition of /p/ in *people*. A similar loss of the repetition of /m/ in *men* and *same* occurs in the desexing of the proverb

(10) *Men* are everywhere the same (Mieder 1989a: 40).

The loss is compensated for with the repetition of /p/ in *people* and the co-occurrence of /i:/ in *people* and /i/ in *everywhere* in the non-sexist alternative

'*People* are everywhere the same.'

The proverb

(11) Many *men*, many minds (Dundes 1981: 53)

may be desexed by changing it to

'Many *people*, many minds.'

This change reduces the elaborate alliteration of the original proverb which inheres in the repetition of /m/ and /n/ in all of the words of the proverb. The repetition of /p/ in *people* and the co-occurrence of /i/ in *many* and /i:/ in *people* does not seem to be able to compensate for this loss, but the equal humanity of both the male and the female which the desexed proverb symbolises is a more important consideration.

The situation is different in the desexing of the proverb

(12) Evil *men*, evil times (Whiting 1977: 276).

This proverb may be changed to

'Evil *people*, evil times.'

In this change, the repetition of the sound /m/ in *men* and *times* in the original proverb is replaced with the rhetorical repetition of /l/ in *evil* and *people*. The repetition of /p/ in *people* is similarly significant. The repetition of /m/ in *men* and *times* is simply replaced with the repetition of /p/ in *people* when the proverb

(13) Better *men*, better times (Whiting 1977: 275)

is changed to

'Better *people*, better times.'

The proverbs that have been considered so far are those in which the sexist word *man* or *men* occurs with or without a sexist possessive pronoun (i.e., *his*) or a sexist noun (i.e., *son*, as in proverb (6)). From this point on, proverbs which do not include *man* or *men* but are sexist by virtue of the presence of the sexist *he* and *his* would be desexed and discussed. The first of such proverbs to be considered is

(14) Everyone to *his* taste (Whiting 1977: 135).

This proverb may be transformed to

'Everyone to *their* taste.'

The rhetorical co-occurrence of /z/ in *his* and /s/ in *taste* in the original proverb is eliminated in the non-sexist version.

The sexist proverb

(15) *He* gives twice that gives soon (Whiting 1977: 175)

may be desexed to yield

'*They* give twice that give soon.'

In this non-sexist pluralisation, the repetition of /i/ in *he* and *gives* is not replaced, nor is the alliterative co-occurrence of /z/ and /s/ in *gives* and *twice* and *gives* and *soon*, respectively. Another proverb requiring desexing by pluralisation is

(16) *He* is a fool that makes *his* doctor *his* heir (Whiting 1977: 162).

Its desexed form would be

'*They* are fools who make *their* doctor *their* heir.'

In this new proverb, the alliteration which exists in the repetition of /i/ in *he* and *is* in the old proverb is eliminated, but a new form of alliteration is produced in the repetition of /iə/ in *their* and *heir* and the co-occurrence of /u:/ in *fools* and /u/ in *who*. This alliteration results from the replacement of *his* with *their* and *that* with *who* in the desexed proverb, and is enhanced by the lexical repetition of *their*.

The following sexist proverb is also worth considering:

(17) *He* who laughs last laughs best (Dundes 1981: 53).

It may be pluralised to yield

'*They* who laugh last laugh best.'

In desexing the proverb, the rhetorical repetition of /s/ in *laughs*, on one hand, and *last* and *best*, on the other, is lost. A related thing happens in the change of

(18) *He* who hesitates is lost (Dundes 1981: 53)

to

'*They* who hesitate are lost.'

In this case, the alliterative link which the final /s/ in *hesitates* establishes between the medial /s/ in *hesitates* and *lost* is weakened by the replacement of *is* with *are*.

Pluralisation may be used to desex the following proverb too:

(19) *He* that fights and runs away leaves to fight another day (Whiting 1977: 150).

The proverb becomes

'*They* that fight and run away leave to fight another day.'

In the process of desexing the proverb, loss of alliteration occurs because of the elimination of the co-occurrence of /s/ in *fights* and /z/ in *runs* and *leaves*. This loss is compensated for by the rhetorical repetition of /ð/ in *they* and *that*. The compensatory repetition of this sound occurs also in the change of the sexist proverb

(20) *He* that is born of a hen must scrape for a living (Whiting 1977: 210)

to the non-sexist one

'*They* that are born of a hen must scrape for a living.'

The repetition compensates for the loss of the alliteration which results from the repetition of /i/ in *he* and *is* in the original proverb. This compensation is complemented by the repetition of the sound /ə/ in *that*, *are* and *a* in the desexed proverb.

The replacement of the sexist *his* with *his* or *her* may be used to desex the proverb

(21) Everyone has a right to a tune on *his* own fiddle (Mieder 1989b: 22).

The desexing would produce the proverb

'Everyone has a right to a tune on *his or her* own fiddle.'

The change enhances the alliteration of the proverb which results from the co-occurrence of the sound /ɔ/ in *on* and /ɔ:/ in *or* and the repetition of /h/ in *his* and *her*.

Finally, the sexist proverb

(22) *He* that spits against the wind spits in *his* own face (Whiting 1977: 485)

may be changed to the following non-sexist one:

'To spit against the wind is to spit in *one's* own face.'

Like proverb (1) above, the desexing of this proverb entails syntactic transformation, and it is important to note that the structure of the original proverb is SPA(djunct). That is, *He who spits against the wind* is S, *spits* is P, and *in his own face* is A. However, the structure of the new proverb is SPC. That is, *To spit against the wind* is S, *is* is P, and *to spit in ones own face* is C. The S of this new proverb is, like its C, a non-finite clause and each of the clauses has the structure PA. That is, *To spit* is P, and *against the wind* is A in the first clause just as *to spit* is P, and *in ones own face* is A in the second. This parallelism and the phrasal and lexical repetition from which it derives enhance the proverb's alliteration and syntactic balance.

In the foregoing, models of the elimination of sexist language from English proverbs are presented with the full realisation that differing stylistic preferences and pragmatic considerations may require that the proverbs be desexed in manners different from the models presented. The paper shows that substitution, pluralisation and syntactic transformation are significant strategies, and that the desexing may reduce or boost alliteration, eliminate or retain rhyming, increase lexical contrast and enhance structural balance. In other words, as the new proverbs symbolise gender equity, they generally retain the wit with which proverbs are fundamentally associated. It is therefore hoped that the study would generate increased interest in women-related language change in English proverbs, and that future proverb collections would include only non-sexist variants of the above and related witty sayings. An encouraging occurrence of such non-sexist entry in Mieder (1989c: 54) is 'Nobody wants to kiss when they are hungry.'

REFERENCES

- Bodine, Ann
1975 "Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: Singular 'they', sex-indefinite 'he', and 'he or she'", *Language in Society* 4: 129-146.
- Cameron, Deborah
1985 *Feminism and linguistic theory*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Cheshire, Jenny
1985 "A question of male bias", *English Today* 1: 22-26.
- Cochran, Effie P.
1992 "Towards degendered English in the ESL classroom: The Medusa syndrome", *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 2,2: 27-35.
- Dundes, Alan
1981 "On the structure of the proverb", in: Wolfgang Mieder – Alan Dundes (eds.), 43-64.
- Egblewogbe, Eustace Y.
1980 "The structure and functions of proverbs in African societies", *Social Education* (October): 516-518.
- Hardman, M.J.
1993 "Gender through the levels", *Women and Language* 16,2: 42-49.
- Henley, Nancy M.
1987 "This new species that seeks a new language: On sexism in language and language change", in: Joyce Penfield (ed.), 3-27.
- MacKay, Donald G.
1980 "On the goals, principles, and procedures for prescriptive grammar: Singular *they*", *Language in Society* 9: 349-367.
- Martyna, Wendy
1980 "Beyond the 'he/man' approach: The case for nonsexist language", *SIGNS: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5,3: 482-493.
- Mieder, Wolfgang
1985 "A proverb a day keeps no chauvinism away", *Proverbium* 2: 273-277.
1989a *American proverbs: A study of texts and contexts*. New York: Peter Lang.
1989b *Yankee wisdom: New England proverbs*. Shelburne, VT.: The New England Press.
1989c *Love: Proverbs of the heart*. Shelburne, VT.: The New England Press.
- Mieder, Wolfgang – Alan Dundes (eds.)
1981 *The wisdom of many: Essays on the proverb*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.
- Mitchell, Felicia
1992 "College English handbooks and pronominal usage guidelines: Mixed reactions to nonsexist language", *Women and Language* 15,2: 37-41.
1994 "Student writing and pronoun reference: A study of inclusive language in practice", *Women and Language* 17,2: 2-5.
- Pauwels, Anne
1991 "Sexism and language planning in English-speaking countries: Some issues and problems", *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 1,2: 17-30.
- Penfield, Joyce (ed.)
1987 *Women and language in transition*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.
- Randall, Phyllis R.
1985 "Sexist language and speech communication texts: Another case of benign neglect", *Communication Education* 34: 128-134.

Seitel, Peter

- 1981 "Proverbs: A social use of metaphor", in: Wolfgang Mieder – Alan Dundes (eds.), 122-139.

Simpson, John A.

- 1982 *The concise Oxford dictionary of proverbs*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Spender, Dale

- 1980 *Man made language*. (2nd edition.) London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sunderland, Jane

- 1992 "Teaching materials and teaching/learning processes: Gender in the language classroom", *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 2,2: 15-26.

Wilson, F.P. (ed.)

- 1970 *The Oxford dictionary of English proverbs*. (3rd edition.) Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Whiting, Bartlett J.

- 1977 *Early American proverbs and proverbial phrases*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Yankah, Kwesi

- 1989 *The proverb in the context of Akan rhetoric: A theory of proverb praxis*. New York: Peter Lang.

Yusuf, Yisa K.

- 1994 "Proverbs and misogyny", *Working Papers on Language, Gender and Sexism* 4,2: 25-45.