

A Diachronic Study of Sexism in English: Exploring the Impact of the Feminist Movement on Gendered Language

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Abstract

This paper conducts a diachronic study of sexism in the English language, exploring how the feminist movement has influenced and transformed gendered linguistic practices over time. By examining the historical evolution of sexism in English, the study highlights the various ways in which language has perpetuated gender biases, including the markedness of female-related words, semantic pejoration, and asymmetrical word choices and collocations. The paper also delves into the feminist movement's efforts to challenge and reform these linguistic practices, from the introduction of gender-neutral terms and titles to the creation of new pronouns. Despite significant resistance, feminist linguistic reforms have made considerable strides in promoting gender equality in language. The study concludes that these reforms have not only addressed inherent sexism but have also opened up new possibilities for thinking about gender and identity, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable society.

Keywords

sexism; English; feminist movement; gendered language

1. Introduction

Sexism in language has been a topic of academic research for an extended period, with early feminist linguists highlighting how the English language mirrors and reinforces patriarchal social hierarchies. From word selection to sentence construction, language has functioned as a crucial mechanism in maintaining gender-specific roles. The relationship between language and gender remains a central concern within sociolinguistics, which investigates how linguistic behavior is shaped by sociocultural influences. Although sociolinguistics did not emerge as a formal discipline until the late 1960s, concerns about the link between language and gender were raised much earlier. In the 18th century, Welsh linguist Rowland Jones examined the linguistic distinctions between men and women, asserting that the key to

understanding language was found in the Old Testament. Based on his research, Jones concluded that women were inherently inferior to men and that linguistic inequalities were entirely justified. Similar to Jones, many other early scholars approached these issues with a factual and unquestioning attitude.

Since the early 20th century, particularly with the feminist movement that began in the United States in the 1960s and spread internationally, there has been a shift in perspectives regarding the intersection of language and gender. The feminist movement has played a pivotal role in challenging and transforming gendered language practices in English. The rise of feminism, especially throughout the 20th century, marked a significant shift in the way language was critiqued and reformed. For instance, Robin Lakoff [1]’s work *Language and Women’s Place* had a profound and direct impact on the field of language and gender, positioning her as a pioneering figure in this area. The significance of Lakoff’s book cannot be overstated, as it sparked widespread scholarly interest in the connection between language and gender.

Since the 1980s, feminist perspectives have continued to fuel research on how women and men utilize language differently, examining the extent of these variations. A feminist approach in linguistics and language studies has also led to a critical reassessment of prior studies and interpretations of gendered language use. Language, according to many feminist scholars, is seen as a potent tool of patriarchal power. For example, feminist scholar Dale Spender referred to the English language as “man-made” and argued that it plays a central role in the oppression of women [2]. Feminists contend that language actively contributes to the formation of social identities, suggesting that language “speaks” individuals into gendered roles—both masculine and feminine.

Feminism as a social movement striving for the liberation of women and the equality of the sexes has itself been a rich source of data for linguistic study. This social movement has not only given rise to new expressions, coinages and phrases which have an important influence on the structure of vocabularies, but also has engaged in a program of language planning in order to eliminate the gender bias found in the structures and uses of many languages.

This paper explores how sexism manifested itself in English and how feminist activism has influenced the linguistic practices surrounding sexism in English over time. By analyzing the historical evolution of sexism in English, this paper argues that feminist activism has not only brought attention to these biases but has also contributed to the gradual transformation of gendered linguistic forms in both public discourse and everyday language.

The research question is as follows: How and to what extent has the feminist movement shaped the ways in which sexism is reflected in English? This paper aims to examine the linguistic structures and lexicon that have historically reflected gender bias, and how these have evolved under the influence of feminist ideologies in a diachronic manner.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Sexism

According to the Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary [3], sexism is defined as "prejudice or discrimination based on sex, especially discrimination against women." In contrast, the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English [4] describes it as "unfair or unreasonable discrimination between the sexes; unreasonable maintenance of traditional gender roles (e.g., that men are strong and women are weak)".

In essence, sexism represents a system of beliefs and practices that reinforce the superiority of men over women. Widely perceived as "natural" by many, sexism permeates various social relationships and institutions, influencing everything from household dynamics to professional choices. The feminist movement, particularly within English-speaking nations, has sought to challenge and transform the structures that support and perpetuate sexism in society. One such structure is language.

Sexism in language refers to the use of language that reflects or perpetuates gender-based discrimination. Sexist language is defined as "words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender" [5]. While theoretically, sexist language could negatively impact both men and women, empirical studies in English-speaking societies suggest that the majority of negative consequences disproportionately affect women. The concern regarding the harmful effects of sexist language is rooted in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which posits a connection between language and culture [6].

2.2. Feminist Movement

In the Genesis, the Lord created the first woman, Eve, from Adam's rib, declaring, "Woman, you are a rib of man, and you shall be dependent on him." For centuries, the man neglected the woman, but eventually, she realized she no longer wished to be merely a rib, but to be an equal human being like the man. This realization marked the beginning of women's emancipation [7]. On January 1, 1948, a group of working women in the streets of Paris, led by Thersigne de Merieourt, joined forces in the Bastille, catalyzing a significant impact on language through the feminist movement. The feminist movement can be divided into three distinct phases: The first phase, spanning from the 18th century until the end of World War II, primarily focused on advocating for women's external rights and interests [7]. In the United Kingdom, the birthplace of the feminist movement, Walston's publication *The Women's Rights Champion* helped elevate the movement to new heights. In the United States, although the movement emerged later, it grew powerful under the leadership of Susan B. Anthony, the "female Napoleon", culminating in the establishment of International Women's Day on March 8 in the USA [8].

The second phase, from the post-war period to the early 1970s, emphasized international cooperation among women's groups, often in collaboration with the United Nations [7]. A key moment was the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, which served as both a manifesto for the U.S. women's movement and a collective voice for women worldwide [8]. This period saw a shift in cultural perceptions, moving away from Shakespeare's famous saying, "O woman, thy name is weak", and challenging the notion that "women are but wombs".

The third phase, from the 1970s to the present, has seen the development of women's studies that engage with the cultural aspects of women's lives through transnational research [7]. This period has involved critiques of the patriarchal cultural systems that have dominated gender relations for over 2,000 years, aiming to establish a female-centered cultural narrative. The ongoing effort seeks to further enrich and advance human civilization.

As Thorne and Henley [6] note, "The women's freedom movement brought the study of feminism to the forefront and opened the way for its acceptance and legitimization". Since then, sexism has become a central issue in modern linguistic studies, remaining a key topic of research today. Reviewing previous studies, sexism in language is primarily addressed in four areas. First, the study of semantic ambiguity caused by the use of masculine nouns and personal pronouns, as explored in MacKay and Fulkerson [9]'s empirical research, which examined how subjects interpret masculine generic terms. Second, the analysis of the linguistic convention of placing masculine modifiers before feminine nouns [10]. Third, the examination of the semantic subordination of women, as seen in Lakoff [1]'s research, which found that job titles associated with women were often inferior to those of men. Fourth, the study of forms of address, with Holmes [11] noting that "Mrs." is the most commonly used female antecedent. Additionally, Biber [12] conducted a comprehensive analysis of sexism from a corpus linguistics perspective, concluding that English contains more terms referring to men than women [13].

3. Sexism in English

Gender is a fundamental social distinction, and in English, this distinction is reflected not only in vocabulary but also in the structure and usage of the language [14]. Linguistic practices in English subtly reinforce societal gender roles by assigning different personal names, address forms, pronouns, and even adjectives to men and women [15]. For instance, women are often described using adjectives such as "pretty", while men are more frequently characterized as "handsome". These conventions compel English speakers to attend to gender, even when it is not immediately relevant. This section explores the various ways sexism manifests in English, including the markedness of female-related words, semantic pejoration, and the asymmetry in word choices and collocations.

3.1. Markedness of Female-related Words

In English, there is a clear dichotomy between masculine and feminine terms, where masculine terms are considered “neutral” or “unmarked”, and feminine terms are “marked”. This linguistic pattern reinforces the idea that male-related terms are the default or norm, while female-related terms are deviations. For example, in pairs like “dog” and “bitch”, or “lion” and “lioness”, the masculine term is regarded as the neutral reference, while the feminine counterpart often carries a suffix such as -ess, -ette, or -trix. These suffixes not only highlight the subordinate position of women but also frequently carry a diminutive or pejorative connotation, suggesting inferiority [16].

There are approximately two hundred such gendered word pairs in English (e.g., “hero” and “heroine”, “actor” and “actress”). In nearly all such pairs, the masculine word is considered the base, with some kind of a feminine suffix being added. The suffixes like -ess, -ette, -trix, -en, and -ine are all attached to the masculine words. The structure itself shows the subordinate position of females and the imbalance of the relationship between males and females. Furthermore, the meanings of the suffixes carry pejoration to some extent. Although their uses differentiate females from males to make them as opposite groups, the female-related words are not equal to their corresponding masculine-related ones in meaning, which abases these words’ meanings to a deeper degree and manifests the worse inclination of sexism.

3.2. Semantic Pejoration of Female-related Words

Another way sexism is encoded in English is through the semantic pejoration of words when used to describe women. A term that is neutral or even positive when referring to a man often becomes derogatory when used to describe a woman. For example, while a “secretary” may be seen as a professional position for both men and women, a “male secretary” is often viewed as competent, whereas a “female secretary” may be stereotyped as someone who performs menial tasks for an individual. Similarly, a “pirate” refers to a person engaging in illegal activities at sea, but a “female pirate” is often depicted as an immoral woman, involved in adultery.

Such differences in meaning are also evident in expressions like “tramp” and “loose”. When applied to male, these terms may simply refer to someone who is homeless or carefree, but when used to describe female, they often imply promiscuity or moral decline. Furthermore, professional terms like “doctor” or “lawyer” are associated with men, while the term “professional” applied to women might suggest sexual availability. These examples illustrate the gendered bias inherent in the English language, where behaviors or qualities are evaluated differently based on gender.

A passage from *How to Tell a Businessman from a Businesswoman* further emphasizes this point, illustrating how the same behaviors are described using positive terms for men and negative terms for women: “A businessman is aggressive; a businesswoman is pushy. A businessman is good on details; she is picky...” This stark contrast in evaluation reflects the societal double standards that often penalize women for behaviors that are lauded in men.

3.3. Semantic Dissymmetry

There are often-noticed overtones that are associated with sex-paired words. These words are supposedly semantically equivalent, except that one refers to men and the other to women. Many terms of this sort have worse connotations associated with the woman's term than the corresponding man's term. Lakoff [1] cites numerous examples, like widower and widow, governor and governess, patron and matron, sir and madam, and clearly establishes her point that so-called equivalent words referring to men and women do have quite different associations in English. It will be of help to compare and contrast some pairs of such words and discuss some female-related words in details.

3.4. Word Order and Gender Bias

An often-overlooked manifestation of sexism in English is the order in which gendered terms are presented. In many instances, when both male and female terms are used, the masculine term is placed first. For example, in pairs like "men and women", "husband and wife", and "king and queen", the masculine term typically precedes the feminine one. This order is not accidental but may reflect underlying societal beliefs about male superiority, with the masculine term seen as the default or primary reference. Some linguists argue that this ordering follows a broader linguistic tendency to place positive or superior terms before their negative or inferior counterparts (e.g., good-bad, rich-poor). The sequence man-woman may thus implicitly reinforce the idea that men are more important or valued than women.

3.5. Address Forms and Gendered Social Roles

Address forms and naming conventions also reflect and reinforce gender inequalities. While men are often addressed by their professional titles or social status (e.g., "Mr. Smith" or "Dr. Jones"), women are more frequently addressed based on their relationships with men (e.g., "Mrs. Smith" or "Miss Jones"). This distinction highlights the patriarchal structure of society, where women's identities are often defined in relation to men. These address forms are the parameters of power and solidarity and can be linked to the social inequalities that exist between the sexes in patriarchal societies. Furthermore, the act of naming has great symbolic value in most societies. All these practices, like personal names and family names, honorific titles, professional terms, terms of endearment, metaphors related with people, indicated that men are named according to their social status in society, whereas women are named according to their relationship with the man or the men in their lives.

Additionally, forms of address such as "lady" and "gentleman" are used to convey social expectations of behavior, with women often being assigned titles that imply delicacy or subordination, while men are associated with authority and dominance.

3.6. Sexism in Idioms and Proverbs

Sexism in English is also evident in idiomatic expressions and proverbs, which often reflect deeply ingrained cultural attitudes toward gender. For instance, many proverbs perpetuate negative stereotypes about women, portraying them as gossipy, weak, jealous, or vain. The frequent use of masculine terms in proverbs (“He who laughs last, laughs best”, “A man is known by the company he keeps”) further underscores the marginalization of women in linguistic and cultural representations. These proverbs contribute to a cultural narrative that views women as lesser or subordinate to men, reinforcing traditional gender roles and stereotypes.

To sum, in English, it is man, his characteristics and activities, rather than woman and her features that are taken as the norm for linguistic expressions and language practices, which take woman invisible and secondary in linguistic representation.

4. The Feminist Movement and its Impact on Sexism in English

The feminist movement has played a pivotal role in challenging and transforming the gendered linguistic practices in English. Over the past few decades, feminist activists and linguists have worked tirelessly to address the inherent sexism in language, advocating for changes that promote gender equality. Women in the United States have been particularly active in the anti-sexist movement launched by feminist activists, who have sought to dispel the inferiority complex of women in traditional patriarchal cultures and to reject the patriarchal culture that has dominated the world for 2000 years, and who have been deeply aware of the importance of language modification and the elimination of sexism for the emancipation of women, and who have done their utmost to carry out linguistic reforms to eliminate the sexism of language that has been inherited for a long period of time. The U.S. publishing industry has promulgated rules for the use of non-sexist language. The Department of Labor has changed 3,000 occupational terms, and the Department of Education is no exception, making changes in curricula, textbooks, and other areas in an effort to portray women correctly. This section will explore the historical evolution of feminist linguistic reforms, the resistance they have encountered, and the broader implications of these changes. By examining key historical moments and the linguistic shifts they inspired, we can better understand how the feminist movement has shaped the English language over time.

4.1. Feminist Reforms in Language: A Historical Perspective

4.1.1. Early Feminist Critique and the Emergence of Linguistic Awareness

The feminist movement’s engagement with language can be traced back to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when early feminists began to critique the ways in which language perpetuated gender inequality. One of the earliest documented efforts to address linguistic sexism was the push for women’s suffrage in the late 19th century. During this period, suffragists like Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton in the United States, and Emmeline Pankhurst in the United Kingdom, not

only fought for women's right to vote but also challenged the language used to describe women's roles in society. For example, the term "suffragette," originally a derogatory term coined by the press, was reclaimed by activists as a badge of honor, symbolizing women's fight for political equality.

This early feminist activism laid the groundwork for a more systematic critique of language in the mid-20th century. In the 1960s and 1970s, the second wave of feminism brought renewed attention to the ways in which language reinforced patriarchal structures. Robin Lakoff [1]'s seminal work, *Language and Woman's Place*, was one of the first comprehensive studies to examine how language marginalized women. Lakoff argued that women's speech was often characterized by hesitancy, politeness, and a lack of authority, reflecting their subordinate social status. Her work sparked a wave of linguistic research into gender and language, leading to a greater awareness of the need for linguistic reform.

4.1.2. Introduction of New Words and Promotion of Gender-neutral Language

The feminist movement of the 1970s and 1980s led to the creation of new words and terms that reflected a more inclusive and equitable view of gender. One of the most significant linguistic innovations of this period was the introduction of the title "Ms." as a neutral alternative to "Miss" and "Mrs." The term "Ms." first gained widespread attention in the early 1970s, when it was popularized by feminist activists and publications such as *Ms. Magazine*, founded by Gloria Steinem in 1972. The adoption of "Ms." allowed women to be addressed without reference to their marital status, challenging the traditional view that a woman's identity was defined by her relationship to a man. Most interestingly, pn is an abbreviation for person, which is now often placed in front of the names of men and women in place of addresses like Miss, Mr., and Mrs. For instance, Pn. H. W. Fowler. Other new words include: feminist wordsmith, male chauvinist, space woman, astronautess, womanaut.

In addition to "Ms.", the feminist movement introduced a range of new terms that reflected the changing social landscape. Words such as "sexism," "male chauvinist", and "gender-neutral language" entered the lexicon, providing a vocabulary for discussing and challenging gender inequality. These terms were not merely linguistic innovations; they were tools for social change, enabling feminists to articulate their critique of patriarchal structures and advocate for gender equality. For example, the term "sexist language" has become a key concept in sociolinguistics, enabling scholars to analyze and critique the ways in which language perpetuates gender bias.

The promotion of gender-neutral language was another key aspect of feminist linguistic reform. In the 1980s and 1990s, feminists began to advocate for the use of gender-neutral terms in professional and public contexts. For example, the term "firefighter" replaced "fireman", and "police officer" replaced "policeman". These changes were not merely cosmetic; they reflected a broader societal shift towards recognizing and valuing the contributions of all genders in various professions. The

use of gender-neutral language was particularly influential in academic and professional settings, where it became a marker of inclusivity and respect. That is to say, in some years later, pairs like hero-heroine, duke-duchess, master-mistress may disappear. Instead, neutral words commonly used nowadays are: humanity instead of mankind, police officer instead of policeman, camera operator instead of cameraman, supervisor instead of foreman, firefighter instead of fireman, leader instead of statesman, mail carrier instead of mailman, flight attendant instead of stewardess, homemaker instead of housewife, customer's representative instead of saleslady.

The use of gender-neutral language is not merely a superficial change; it has profound implications for how we perceive gender roles. By replacing gendered terms with neutral ones, feminists have challenged the traditional binary view of gender and opened up space for more inclusive representations. For instance, the term "chairperson" has largely replaced "chairman", reflecting a shift towards gender equality in leadership roles.

4.1.3. Use of the Suffix "-person" and the Challenges to Gendered Occupational Titles

The suffix "-person" emerged as a key tool in the feminist effort to eliminate sexism from occupational titles. In the 1970s and 1980s, feminists began to advocate for the use of "-person" as a gender-neutral alternative to "-man" in terms such as "chairperson", "mailperson", and "salesperson". This linguistic reform was part of a broader effort to challenge the male bias inherent in many occupational titles and to acknowledge the presence and contributions of women and non-binary individuals in these roles.

The adoption of "-person" was not without controversy. Critics argued that it was unnecessary and awkward, and that it undermined the natural evolution of language. However, feminists countered that the use of "-person" was a necessary step towards achieving gender equality in language and society. Over time, the suffix "-person" gained widespread acceptance, particularly in professional and academic settings, where it became a standard part of the lexicon.

4.1.4. Creation of New Neutral Singular Personal Pronouns

One of the most challenging aspects of linguistic reform has been addressing the gendered nature of personal pronouns in English. Traditional pronouns such as "he" and "she" reinforce the gender binary and exclude non-binary individuals. In response, feminists and linguists have proposed a variety of gender-neutral pronouns, such as "ve", "vis", "ver" (Varda One), "co", "cos", "co", "coself", "xe", "xen", and "tey". These new pronouns aim to provide a more inclusive way of referring to individuals without making assumptions about their gender. While the adoption of these pronouns has been slow, they have gained traction in certain communities, particularly among LGBTQ+ activists and allies. The use of gender-neutral pronouns is seen as a way to challenge the traditional gender norms embedded in language and to create a

more inclusive linguistic environment.

4.2. Resistance to Feminist Linguistic Reforms

4.2.1. Cultural and Political Resistance

Despite the progress made by feminist linguistic reforms, there has been significant resistance, particularly from more conservative sectors of society. Critics argue that gender-neutral language undermines traditional values and disrupts the natural evolution of language. Some view these changes as unnecessary or even culturally alienating, claiming that they impose a politically correct agenda on language use.

This resistance is often rooted in a broader cultural and political backlash against feminism. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, conservative commentators and politicians frequently criticized feminist linguistic reforms as part of a larger effort to erase gender distinctions altogether. This backlash was particularly evident in debates over the use of gender-neutral pronouns, which some viewed as an attack on the fundamental structure of the English language.

4.2.2. Challenges in Changing Deep-seated Language Patterns

Changing deeply ingrained language patterns is a formidable challenge, particularly in institutions such as media, education, and politics, where gendered language persists in subtle ways. Language norms are deeply embedded in cultural practices and are resistant to change, even in the face of feminist critique.

For example, despite the widespread adoption of gender-neutral terms in many professional settings, traditional gendered language continues to dominate in everyday speech. This persistence is partly due to the fact that language is a social practice, and changing it requires not only individual effort but also collective action. Moreover, the media often reinforces traditional gender norms through the use of gendered language, making it difficult for feminist linguistic reforms to gain widespread acceptance.

4.3. Recent Feminist Movement and their Linguistic Impact

4.3.1. The #MeToo Movement and its Influence on Language

The #MeToo movement, which gained global prominence in 2017, has had a significant impact on the way society discusses issues of sexual harassment and assault. The movement, which was initially popularized by activist Tarana Burke in 2006, gained widespread attention following allegations against Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein. The hashtag #MeToo became a rallying cry for survivors of sexual violence, and it has since sparked a global conversation about power dynamics, consent, and gender inequality.

The #MeToo movement has also influenced language use, particularly in terms of how we talk about sexual violence and gender relations. Terms such as “sexual har-

assment”, “consent”, and “toxic masculinity” have become more prominent in public discourse, reflecting a greater awareness of the issues raised by the movement. Additionally, the movement has led to a reevaluation of the language used to describe survivors of sexual violence, with a shift towards more empowering and respectful terminology.

4.3.2. The Rise of Non-binary Pronouns in Contemporary Feminist Movements

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of non-binary gender identities, and this has had a significant impact on language use. The use of gender-neutral pronouns such as “they/them” has become more common, particularly among younger generations and within LGBTQ+ communities. This shift reflects a broader cultural movement towards greater inclusivity and recognition of diverse gender identities.

For example, in 2019, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary named “they” as its Word of the Year, citing its increasing use as a singular pronoun for non-binary individuals. This recognition by a major dictionary reflects the growing acceptance of gender-neutral language in mainstream society. Additionally, many universities and corporations have adopted policies that encourage the use of gender-neutral pronouns, further normalizing their use in professional and academic settings.

4.3.3. Broader Implication of Feminist Linguistic Reforms

The feminist movement's impact on the English language extends beyond the introduction of new words and the promotion of gender-neutral terms. These linguistic reforms have broader implications for how we understand and enact gender in society. By challenging the sexist assumptions embedded in language, feminists have opened up new possibilities for thinking about gender and identity.

For example, the use of gender-neutral language has the potential to disrupt traditional gender roles and create a more inclusive society. By recognizing and valuing the contributions of all genders, these linguistic changes challenge the patriarchal structures that have historically marginalized women and non-binary individuals. In this way, feminist linguistic reforms are not just about changing words; they are about changing the way we think about and relate to one another.

5. Conclusion

The feminist movement has had a profound impact on the English language, challenging and transforming the ways in which gender is represented and enacted through language. From the introduction of new words and the promotion of gender-neutral terms to the creation of new pronouns, feminists have made significant strides in addressing the inherent sexism in language. However, these reforms have also faced significant resistance, particularly from more conservative sectors of society. Despite these challenges, the feminist movement's linguistic reforms have

opened up new possibilities for thinking about gender and identity, paving the way for a more inclusive and equitable society.

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