

Understanding of Sexism in English Vocabulary in Chinese Context

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Abstract

Sexism has existed since ancient times, and it is also a long-standing topic in academia. Language itself has no emotional meaning, but as a carrier of culture, it will doubtlessly reflect the phenomenon, and English is no exception. There are many examples of sexism in English vocabulary. This paper studies the sexism in English vocabulary and the understanding of these expressions in Chinese context. First of all, as Chinese users, the author briefly introduces the concept of linguistic sexism. Then the author concretely studies the manifestations of sexism in English vocabulary when these expressions come to Chinese language users and learners; in the end the author comes up with some suggestions about the ways of correctly understanding the linguistic sexism from the above studies and materials in Chinese context. Through the study of the author finds that the existence of sexism is still an indisputable fact, and is still seen in vocabulary everywhere. This phenomenon is partly due to the deep-rootedness of the idea of male superiority. And this phenomenon can be easily understood by Chinese users and learners. As China is a male-dominated country people hold the view that women are inferior to men. So the understanding of Chinese users and learners give hints to the cultural inclination of the nation.

Key words: Vocabulary; Sexism; Chinese context; Word formation; Meaning

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INTRODUCTION

Sexism is a gender-based discrimination. It refers to the discrimination of one sex member to another sex member, including discrimination against women, as well as discrimination against men. But it usually refers to discrimination against women. In Western society, religion has a far-reaching impact on people's thinking. And the most representative thing is the Bible, which was regarded as the guidance of spirit. Its doctrine penetrates in all sectors of society, and influence throughout the philosophy, politics, economy, system, ethics, law, literature, art and all aspects of people's daily life. It is such a far-reaching classic work that also mentions something belittling women. There is no doubt that this will give people the idea of sexism. In China, from an ancient time, people could see sexism in language. This sexism also reflects the fact that the society discriminates against women, or that in social status, women have become less common than men. This is the inevitable result of the supremacy of the patriarchal society.

All in all, sexism is embodied in the form of language, but rooted in society and culture. As a problem of human society, both in the East and the West, sexism has a profound cultural and social impact. It has been linked to stereotypes and gender roles, and may include the belief that one sex or gender is intrinsically superior to another.

This subject has become a hot topic among many linguists since the last century. Globally, since the 1970s, the study of language and gender relations has entered a

period of systematic research, and the study of sexism in language, especially in the vocabulary, has also evolved considerably. With the deepening of research, people are increasingly aware of the importance of correctly understanding sexism in vocabulary. After a lot of research, those linguists indicate that English language centers on men and derogates women no matter ancient or nowadays. What is worth celebrating is that people began to take action in the situation since the last century. Feminism is a social movement for women in Europe and the United States to fight for equal rights with men citizens. Woman's struggles to make equality between men and women in politics, law, employment, education and many other areas have been a certain realization. All these changes help the Chinese users and learners understand English languages more easily.

This paper will be divided into three parts to study this subject. In the first part, the author introduces the linguistic sexism that understood by Chinese users and learners. In the second part, the author briefly refers to the characteristics of English vocabulary that the Chinese users and learners should be to learn. In the last part, the author gives some advice for the Chinese users and learners to better understand the sexism in English vocabulary.

1. LINGUISTIC BACKGROUNDER OF SEXISM IN ENGLISH

Sexism means the gender differences, and it is decided by historical background, social role and cultural consciousness and so on. People know that language itself has no sexism, but as a product of social life, it conveys people's ideas and social custom. So human's feelings will usually be added to language. That's why people will say that language can reflect sexism. So it can be said that linguistic sexism refers to a kind of discrimination based on language, especially refers to men discrimination against women. To be honest, people have been aware of its existence long ago. But before the middle of the twentieth century, people were still perceptual and vague about it. In the West, the feminist movement in the twentieth century deepened people's understanding of gender differences in language, stimulated people to study language sexism, and ultimately eliminate the language of sexism and determination.

Linguistic Sexism is reflected both in Chinese and in English. It can be seen in many aspects of daily life. In Chinese, sexism is mainly reflected in the relative title and social appellation. In English, the most primitive record of sexism can be derived from the Bible: a woman is a rib of a man, which means women are men's derivatives. And the fall of mankind and human's being expelled from Eden are because Eve, a woman, was lured to eat the forbidden fruit, which makes God angry.

2. SEXISM IN ENGLISH VOCABULARY

2.1 Sexism in Word-Formation

Linguistic sexism mostly manifests in nouns. Linguists J Greenberg finds in his Murkinness Theory that when men and women use different nouns, almost all the words related with men are unmarked, while the words related with women are marked.

2.1.1 Single Words

In English, linguistic sexism is mainly reflected in suffixes. People know that there are plenty of words in English specially aiming at women, which are composed by so-called women affixes and the roots extracted from men words. Such as the examples shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Examples of Suffixes in Words

Suffix	Male	Female
-ess	Prince	Princess
	Host	Hostess
	Governor	Governess
-ette	Usher	Usherette
	Famer	Famerette
	Undergraduate	Undergraduette
-trix	Aviator	Aviatrrix
	Executor	Executrix
	Administrator	Administratrix
-ine	Hero	Heroine
	Margrave	Margravine

This is part of the manifestations that man and woman words' differences in suffixes. Readers can see that firstly, woman words need to rely on man words which indicates that women need to rely on men; secondly, all these suffixes have a negative meaning, such as "-ette", which has the meaning of small and little. This so called feminine affix means that a woman word is a derivative of a man word.

When it refers to Chinese, it is also easy to find examples that can show sexism. As we all know, Chinese words are ideograms so Chinese users can infer their meanings through the use of them. They can also discern the makers' discrimination against women through the information the words convey. For example, the word "女" (which means female, lady, woman, girl, etc.) as a photographic character, looks like a semi-possessed person, symbolizing that women are in a position to be ruled. In addition, many words with the word "女" can also show the serious discrimination and insults against women. Just as the examples shown in Table 2.

From the above examples, it can be easy to be seen that all the words with "女" are derogatory terms and show negative meanings. This reflects the unequal treatment that women have suffered in the society from the ancient times to the present. Therefore, we can regard these as the manifestation of sexism in Chinese words.

Table 2
Examples of Words With “女”

Word	Meaning
奴	person who is the legal property of another and is forced to obey them
奸	guilty of or involving betrayal or deception
妒	feeling or showing envy of someone or their achievements and advantages
婪	having or showing an intense and selfish desire for something, especially wealth or power

All in all, according to this, readers can learn that in most people’s opinion, women are men’s appendage and are the secondary. They are subordinated to men. This is a kind of discrimination and women are not an independent entity.

2.1.2 Compound Words

In English vocabulary, there is another word-formation other than adding affixes that is compound words which means a word is made up of two or more separate words. Referring to this, people may firstly think of “history—her story”. In English, when a compound word is related to linguistic sexism, it is mainly divided into two cases: One is the compound words with the “-man” affix, the other is the compound words about the occupation and identity. The following examples are the first kind of compound words.

Table 3
Examples of Sexism in English Compound Words

Existent / common used	Inexistent / rare used
Kingdom	Queendom
Kinsman	Kinswoman
Sportsmanship	Sportswomanship
Forefather	Foremother
Manmade	Womanmade
Manpower	Womanpower
Statesman	Stateswoman
Chairman	Chairwoman

What’s more, for the occupations of higher social status like president, scientist, lawyer, doctors, judge and the occupations with strong men association such as pilot and sailor are used to refer to the man in general. When they are used to describe woman, they will usually be added “lady”, “woman”, “girl” or “female” in front of them. This is also applied in Chinese words, such as the words “女老板 (female boss)”, “女市长 (mayoress)” and so on. Only in some rare cases, especially in some lower occupations, before women nouns there will be a man term to describe men, such as “man nurse” and “man secretary”. Since in the traditional knowledge, these kind of professional terms are women occupations.

From the above words, Chinese users can get this information. Although the society is created in the labor of both woman and man, but because men who occupy a dominant position in the production of labor and other social activities so it is difficult for women to have a place in this “patriarchal society”. The phenomenon can explain to some extent why the language is always biased towards

men (Huang, 2003).

2.2 Sexism in Word-Meanings

The study of the meanings of language is the category of semantics. Semantics aims to study the meanings of language units, especially words and sentences. Vocabulary is the most meaningful and the smallest unit in language which can be used independently. So the lexical semantics occupies a very important position in linguistics. As Chinese learners and users, it is important to study these meanings.

2.2.1 Over Generalization

Generalization of words mainly means that man words generalization. And man words generalization refers to this kind of language phenomenon. When under the circumstance of an absence of a clear gender, Chinese learners and users find that people usually use the words referring to man to represent both men and women.

The most common used generalized words in English are mainly Noun and Pronoun. The most obvious issue that costs a lot of time, efforts, and ink is the use of masculine pronoun “he” as the generic pronoun. For example, a film called *Let Each One Go Where He May*, or sentence like “Somebody has lost his wallet here”, and in Chinese, this can reflected in the word “他”, which is used in most of the situations when the speaker do not know the sexual of a person. In addition, the use of “man” to refer to both man and woman, such as the famous sentence “All men are created equal”. What’s more, there are also many words that reflect this kind of phenomenon, like “manpower”, “mankind” and “freshman” and so on. To Chinese users and learners, these sentences and words, without exception, all use masculine expression to represent both man and woman. But when people use the woman word, they can only refer to women.

2.2.2 Extended Meanings

For Chinese users and learners, there are many words in English which have their own general meanings, but when in some special context, they have some other extended meanings, such as associative meanings and emotive meanings. Associative meanings mean that when you hear or read these words, you will immediately think of something else. It is affected by the social environment and moral fashion. The associative meanings of many words reflect the social discrimination against women, among which the most common is the association of women and animals or plants (Yang, 2007). Here are some of typical examples:

Table 4
Examples of Extended Meaning

Vocabulary	General meaning	Extended meaning
Bitch	母狗	贱人; 泼妇
Hen	母鸡	爱管闲事的女人
Biddy	小鸡	长舌妇
Mouse	老鼠	胆小的女人
Cow	母牛	子女多的女人
Crone	老母羊	干瘪的丑老太婆
Goose	鹅	呆头呆脑的女人
Cat	猫	包藏祸心的女人
Peach	桃子	漂亮的女人
Cherry	樱花	处女

These are some expressions with associative meanings.

Table 5
Examples of Extended Meanings in Chinese Words

Words	General meanings	Extended meanings in English	Extended meanings in Chinese
Hen	母鸡	爱管闲事的女人	事妈
Cat	猫	包藏祸心的女人	心机婊
Peach	桃子	漂亮的女人	靓妹
Cow	母牛	子女多的女人	母猪

It can be seen that the sexism in English vocabulary influences the use and development of Chinese language and makes some new expressions appear in Chinese vocabulary, and it is obvious that all the above words are used to describe women and are negative words. Nowadays, Chinese users and learners gradually accept and understand these new expressions and use them widely.

2.3 Sexism in the Use of Vocabulary

The same word will show different meanings in different language backgrounds or contexts. So it is very important for Chinese users and learners to study words and consider their contexts and backgrounds at the same time.

2.3.1 Word Order

When there are several words appearing at the same time, there will always be a sequence. In general, the factors that determine the order of the parallel words are multifaceted. But Chinese users and learners find that often a word with significant semantic or cultural dominant side is in the first place. Thus, in male-dominated society, the order in which men are in front of women reflects the social discrimination against women. It is easy to find man-women word order pairs in English and Chinese, such as: man and women, husband and wife, father and mother, son and daughter, brother and sister, boys and girls, his and hers, host and hostess, king and queen, Adam and Eve, 男女, 夫妻, 父母, and so on (Bai, 2000). Such a language phenomenon seems to appear as unquestionably natural as to be widely understood as a

In addition, there are still some associations of women and food, as well as the association of women and things. For example, people use “doll”, a kind of toy, to describe such women as beautiful but stupid, or use “cookie” to refer to cute lady. Chinese users and learners can also find that in Chinese, there are “女人花 (which compare woman as flowers)”, “母老虎 (which compare woman as a tiger)” and so on.

From the above examples, it is obvious that women are compared to food, animals and things for man to play, which reflects the lower social status of women, and women are attached to men, for men tasting.

In the historical evolution of language use, the sexism in English vocabulary influenced the use of Chinese words, and the best evidence would be the coinage of equivalent terms as shown in Table 5.

language norm. We can see, in both English and Chinese languages, men are introduced first before introducing women. The language structure illustrates two cultures exist sexist ideas, but to varying degrees this tube concept only. So Chinese users and learners say linguistic sexism is a deep-rooted phenomenon.

There is an exception “ladies and gentlemen”, a common appellation in many speeches. It follows a sequence of “woman—man”, which does not mean that women are in superior position, but means women are weak and need the protection from man. All Chinese users and learners can understand in this way: It is just a courtesy expression.

2.3.2 Word Collocation

There are some words in English which are one meaning when linked to men, while they are completely different when they are linked to women. We can firstly see some examples:

Table 6
Examples of Sexism in Word Collocation

Words	Phrase	Meaning
Tramp	A tramp man	流浪汉
	A tramp woman	娼妓; 荡妇
Loose ³	A loose man	言行不严谨的男人
	A loose woman	荡妇
Imposing	An imposing man	有魅力的男人; 逃亡者
	An imposing woman	傲慢, 专横的女人
Call	A callboy	剧院中招呼演员候场的人
	A callgirl	用电话召唤的妓女

Obviously, a word, when collocated with the man, conveys a neutral or praise meaning. But when collocated with the woman, it usually conveys a derogatory meaning. There is a visual comparison made by Chinese users and learners: if people say a woman mannish, it means she looks or behaves like a man, and it is a neutral expression. But if people say a man womanish, it means he is weak and not strong enough, and it is a derogatory expression. It is the same as “娘炮”, “伪娘” and “女汉子” in Chinese language.

The other situation is about vocabulary in the whole structure of the sentence. Some corresponding words like “widow and widower”. People tend to say “she is his widow”, but they almost never say “he is her widower”. The two sentences are both syntactically correct, but the Chinese users and learners usually choose the first one. Which is the same as “遗孀” in Chinese. Almost all the Chinese users and learners know the word “遗孀”, but very few of them know what people should call the man whose wife has been died. This shows, to some extent, when people create some words, they try to avoid sexism. But because of some deep-rooted ideas, Chinese users and learners can still find the performance of language sexism in vocabulary applications.

3. THE WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING THE SEXISM IN LANGUAGE USE

3.1 The Training of Awareness

The purpose of studying linguistic sexism is to understand and accept such phenomenon. People have made many efforts to improve women’s status since the last century, and the status of women in marriage has also improved. One of the obvious changes is in wedding ceremony. The priest will ask the bride “Are you willing to love, honor and cherish your husband” nowadays rather than “Are you willing to love, honor and obey your husband”. The expression “husband and wife” is more widely accepted than “man and wife”. And in Chinese, there are less and less use of “贱内”, “拙荆”, “拙妻”, and so on. This shows that many people begin to face women’s social status squarely. The purpose of this kind of study lies in the training of people’s awareness of understanding the using of discriminatory vocabulary. This awareness of Chinese users and learners is the mental preparation of the action of sexism understanding.

3.2 The Specific Methods

For Chinese users and learners, the right view of sexism is the best way to understand the linguistic sexism. To understand the use of discriminatory words, Chinese users and learners must firstly know which words are those kinds of words. During the author’s study of this subject,

some specific methods are found to understand linguistic sexism.

In people’s daily life, a man’s title never shows his marital status, while a woman is called “Miss” or “Mrs.” depending on her marital status. So people creates “Ms” to be a woman’s new title, which is applicable to all women whether getting married or not. So Chinese users and learners choose to use Ms instead of Miss or Mrs.. And in Chinese, people choose to use “女士” rather than “小姐” or “夫人” when they need to call a woman.

The second is about the pronoun. Chinese users and learners used to choose some words referring to man to represent both man and woman. And now language users and learners can use “she or he”, “someone”, “the one”, “他/她” and so on in some gender-unclear situation. For example, ELT magazine, which has subscribers all over the world, makes requests for their contribution as the following: “‘he or she’ can be used only if the gender is specified, otherwise you should use ‘he or she’, or use plural form like ‘students’ or ‘teachers’”.

The third is about some nouns. For some cases which do not refer man or woman in particularly, Chinese users and learners should try to use synonyms instead of words with “-woman”, “-girl” and so on. For example, Chinese users and learners can choose “chairperson” to replace “chairman” and “birth attendant” to replace “midwife”.

Although the individual’s strength is unable to change the sexism in language which was formed by long-term accumulation, but as long as people have full understanding to them and try to avoid use this kind of words, it will be able to play a positive role in the healthy development of language.

CONCLUSION

Language is produced with the emergence of human society. It is a symbol of social conventions, and directly reflects the social life, especially the foundation of language—the vocabulary which is so sensitive to the changes of social life. The formation of language is a long historical process, closely linked with a country or a regional cultural custom and historical background. And language is just a communicative tool.

Linguistic Sexism is a true representation of social sexism, and its roots are not in the language itself, but in the history, culture, social role and the inequality of social status. So in order to better understand the linguistic sexism, language users should also start from social life.

From the above analysis, sexism still exists and is still reflected in the language, especially in many daily expressions. This shows that today’s society is still male-centered to some extent, which reflects the deep-seated

concept of men superiority. To truly eliminate this sexism from the language, it is necessary to change people's thinking pattern.

The study of linguistic sexism has important theoretical and practical significance. Understanding the phenomenon of gender discrimination in language can provide reference materials for Chinese users and learners to understand language, culture, thinking and national mentality, and improve their understanding of language and culture.

At the same time, understanding the gender discrimination in the Chinese and English languages can avoid misunderstandings between the sexes, make the two sexes coexist peacefully, and help build a harmonious language environment and social environment.

Understanding the phenomenon of gender discrimination will also be conducive to promoting China's language reform and helping to formulate language policies. Meanwhile, it can also provide Chinese users and learners with standardized language use standards, avoid the use of gender discrimination, and reduce misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication.

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