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GENDER ISSUE IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH USAGE

SALAHUDEEN MUSBAHU[1]*, ESTHER BUBA[2], ABUBAKAR YUSUF[3]
Department of English, School of Secondary Education (Languages), Umar Suleiman College of Education Gashu'a, Yobe State. Nigeria.

Corresponding Author:
E-Mail: salahudeenmusbahu@gmail.com
Phone No.: +2347039495705

Abstract

This paper explored the gender issue in contemporary English usage, the issue of gender inequality extended from social, spiritual and economical to cultural (language in particular). We can identify this in our expressions where in some general utterances people uses masculine gender instead of generalization or neutralisation. For instance policeman, manager, administrator etc inconsiderable of the gender of the officer. This issue led some people especially feminists to de-gendering sexism through neologism which some of them exist as form deviance from certain words seen as offensive to women e.g 'shero' for 'hero', 'matriarchy' for 'patriarchy', 'matristic' for 'patristic'. These words are tend to be substitutionary. Therefore, this paper unearth some of these words and how they are used in English conversation and identified some appropriate substitution for such words in contemporary English usage/expressions.

Keywords: Gender, Sexism, De-sexualisation, Language, Neologism, Contemporary

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Introduction

Language, as a tool of social communication is not only limited to sharing information, but also of conveying values. Female gender has been largely undermined not only in social and political processes but also in the language habits that define the totality of human experience in society. It is expedient in contemporary times to ensure a popularly acceptable usage of language in such a way that no party feels unjustified since language has the tendency of representing intentions and perceptions as well as drawing categories of status.

Sexist Language

Sexism is a term used to identify unjust references to or treatment(s) of a particular sex as inferior to the other. Thus, sexist language often showcases the superiority of the male gender over the female. A good example is the English language in which significant aspects of its structure and use (grammatical, semantic, morphological, pragmatic and socio-linguistic) lay bare the assumption that the male are by nature superior to the female. For example, the pronoun he, or the masculine term man, is used characteristically and indiscriminately to refer to both sexes as in the following examples:

- If **anyone** thinks he is capable, let him say so.
- For any **man** to be successful in life, he must be hard working.
- Spoken language is as old as **man**.
- The early **man** was intelligent.
- Sin can be traced to our **forefathers**

Considering the fact that the feminine gender is suppressed in the examples above, the feminist movement has vehemently canvassed for gender-equity in language use. Thus, for a feminist, the examples above would be acceptable only in the following forms:

- If **anyone** thinks **they** are capable, let **them** say so.
- For any **woman/man** to be successful, **they** must be hard working.
- Spoken language is as old as **humanity**.
- The early **humans** were intelligent.

- Sin can be traced to our **forebears**.

The alternatives provided in sentences 6-10 offer us gender-neutral options. A gender-neutral language, as the name suggests, seeks to de-gender or neutralise gender bias in language use. It avoids reference to gender when people or issues relating to them are described. In other words, rather than use gender-specific terms, proponents would always replace such terms or words with their corresponding gender-neutral alternatives.

Language and Sexist Signposts

The label, 'man,' as a generic reference to human beings, is shared by a number of languages which do not have a collective noun that readily demonstrates gender neutrality. To a number of feminists, this depicts the foundation of patriarchy and the arbitrary usurpation of men in representing the human race. For them, the signpost 'man' is a linguistic example of the imperialism of the male person in making woman invisible and silent in society. That this mode of linguistic superimposition on woman has been culturally behaved, though time has made the whole of human existence explained through 'history', an arbitrary account understood by feminists as being determined, authorised and executed by maleness.

In this regard, a number of academic disciplines have been accused of pioneering or continuing the inferiorisation of women through knowledge production. For example, the field of psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, initially emphasised language as a kind of tool that approximates to humanity's quest of fulfilment in desire. According to him (and later given much punch by Jacques Lacan), its structure works through a mechanism in which an assumed form or pattern of male initiative and forcefulness ensures productivity. The explicit gender metaphors deployed by Freud and Lacan were to the effect that women were less significant in comparison to men. Feminist challenges to this kind of academics, particularly championed by scholars like Julia Kristeva, Helen Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Jane Gallop, Mary Daly, Cynthia Chase, Judith Butler, have reconstructed psychoanalysis so as to 'redeem' the image of woman.

An instructive development of the interrogation of language as a mark of patriarchal control in society is the systematic engagement of feminists to 'rewrite' language away from the grip of

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unacceptable male manipulation. Thus, there are approaches by some who strive to allocate positive values to words which (may) denote negative meanings. Mary Daly is known to have given new meanings to words like 'hag', 'crone' and 'spinster' so as to frustrate the sexist stigma they have the tendency of casting on women. The notion of a language or style of writing identifiable with women has also been popular among many feminists. The concept of l'ecriture feminine (a feminine pattern or peculiarity of writing) has also been advanced to signify an alternative tradition of writing that defies the perceived norms and patterns of patriarchal writing dominant in society. Sensitivity to l'ecriture feminine varies among feminists, but most are agreed on the idea that it should challenge the sexist tendencies of language.

De-sexing Sexist Words in English

Activities have been on since the 16th century to eliminate sexism in the English language. It is little wonder then that the 20th and 21st centuries have witnessed remarkable improvements in this respect. With particular reference to English, they range from attempts in neologisms (newly created words) to the restructuring of phrases, clauses and sentence formations. These are crucial since feminists see naming as a social instrument which the male gender has continually utilised to gain control of arbitrary representation. In what follows, we highlight some of such changes to the erstwhile sexist English words, paying particular attention to the gender neutrality method in each sub-section.

De-gendering Sexism through Neologisms

Some neologisms exist as forms of deviance from certain words seen as offensive to women. Such words tend to be substitutionary. Thus, there is the adoption of:

'herstory' for 'history';

'shero' for 'hero':

'matriarchy' for 'patriarchy':

'matristic' for 'patristic.'

Revising Words with Stigmatising Attributes

Some words have been identified as mainly directed at stigmatising women and they have been engaged within the process of linguistic re-dressing of patriarchal violence. Thus, there is the preference of 'sex worker' for 'prostitute'; 'sexually active' for 'whore'; and a 'witch' may be addressed as being 'metaphysically or extra-ordinarily gifted'.

Stylistic or Grammatical Reconstructions There are sentence types redressing of the linguistic violence on women. It is preferable to say:

'The woman had a baby with him', instead of 'The woman had a baby for him.'

- 'Nobody is an island', instead of 'No man is an island.'
- 'Every writer should mind their craft,' instead of 'Every writer should mind his craft.'
- 'Good character befits the social person, instead of 'Good character befits the social man.' Other forms of stylistic or grammatical re-constructions that are not violence-related may include:
- 'A woman's place is in the House... and the Senate' instead of 'A woman's place is in the home'.
- 'To propose is human, to dispose is divine' instead of 'Man proposes, God disposes'.

Deletion of Adjectives that Suggest Female Exclusion

- 'Helen is one of the best pilots around,' instead of 'Helen is one of the best female pilots around'.
- 'She is one of Nigeria's athletes,' instead of 'She is one of Nigeria's female athletes'.

Sexist he/man and the gender-neutral singular *they*

Historical linguistics shows that as far back as the 16th century, at least, the gender-neutral option to resolve sexism in he has always been the singular **they** and its counterparts **them, their** and **themselves** (see The New Oxford Dictionary of English, 2001: 1925). That use, i.e., of **they** as an alternative gender-neutral option, was out of the need to de-sex the more problematic old-fashioned and unacceptable use of **he** to refer indiscriminately to persons of unspecified sex,

particularly because the person may refer to the female gender. Below are dictionary examples of the singular **they** in place of the sexist **he**:

- [It's a case of] **each** to **their** own.
- **An academic** is **someone** who teaches at a college, or who studies as part of **their** job.
- A **person's** belongings are the things that **they** own.
- Ask a friend if **they** could help.
- A **loner** is a **person** who likes to do things on **their** own without other people.
- To chauffeur **someone** somewhere is to drive them there.
- She believes **no person**, no matter how great, should regard **themselves** as superior to the state, even coequal.
- If **someone** has a position in **their** own right, **they** have earned it or obtained it by **themselves** and not because of anyone else.
- **Everyone** needs to feel that **they** matter.
- If **someone** is severely criticised or punished, **they** are criticised or punished a lot.
- If a **customer** comes before I get back, ask **them** to wait
- **Someone** who is egocentric is selfish, thinking only of **themselves**.
- **Everyone** should do what [**they**] consider best.
- If **anyone** telephones, ask for **their** number so I can call **them** back.
- **Anyone** can join if **they** are a resident.

Other alternatives to de-sexing he may include **he/she, s/he** or **he or she**; but these also have their attendant limitations. For example, there are contentions on why **she/he** or **her/him** is not acceptable; any such pairing that does not recognise the male gender first is still unacceptable. For instance, while **Mr** and **Mrs** Smith is acceptable, **Mrs** and **Mr Smith** is not, even in the law court.

De-gendering Sexism in Job Titles

Some 'job-title' words are at present preferred for usage because they attain a politically-correct gender-neutrality of linguistic representation. They included the following words:

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Sexist Term	Gender-neutral Alternative
airline steward, stewardess	flight attendant
foreman	Supervisor
salesman	Salesperson
seamstress	Sewer
signalman	Signaller
watchman	Guard
draftsman	Drafter
junior executive	executive trainee
camera man	camera operator
office girl, boy	office helper
repairman	Repairer
fireman	Firefighter
spokesman	spokesperson
policeman	police officer
chairman	chairperson, chair
housewife	housemanager

(Adapted from Goddard and Patterson, 2000: 74)

Limitations to De-gendering Sexist Language

While attempts at de-gendering the English language by the pro-feminine activists are yielding positive results as reflected in the gender-neutral options highlighted above, certain gender-

sensitive areas/generic words, especially appellations relating to jobs are seemingly impenetrable still, qualifications, or religious discourse.

Academic Degrees and Qualifications

A number of academic qualifications and degrees in English are sexist or discriminatory in nature. However, some of them still defy feminists' penetration. Examples include Bachelor of Arts; Master of Arts, Master of Philosophy (MPhil); Doctoral degree in_____, Profess**or** of _____, etc. The suffix **-or** in **doctor** or **professor** is overtly suggestive of masculinity - a pointer to the fact that the words are still sexist. For the feminist, a female holder of a doctoral degree should be addressed as **Doctor (Mrs)** and not just as **Dr**, while a female professor is **Professor (Mrs)**. But how do we resolve sexism in **Bachelor** and **Masters** degrees? Should their alternatives be **Spinster of Arts** and **Mistress(es) of Arts** respectively, or should we simply regard these as part of the limitations to feminism?

Job Titles

Some job titles are by nature difficult to de-sex. For example, a **police officer** may now be either a **policeman** or a **policewoman**. What would a man in the nursing profession who bags the rank of a Si**ster or Matron** be called? Similarly, a female **priest** is a **priestess**; what is a female pastor called? Furthermore, how can we de-gender the following career titles: lawyer, pharmacist, economist, administrator, computer analyst/programmer, soldier, midwife, surgeon, journalist, beautician, hairdresser, manicurer, pedicurer, chef, farmer, gardener, senator, honourable, teacher, lecturer, engineer, caterer, caretaker, careworker/care assistant, nurse, cook, cleaner, preacher, surveyor, major-general, brigadier- general, colonel, among others?

Religious Discourse

War' against sexism in contemporary English seems to set aside religious discourse as a 'terrain that linguists fear to tread'. Versions of the *Holy Bible* or the *Holy Quran* in English still retain sexist language probably in a bid to stay faithful to the source languages Greek/Hebrew and Arabic respectively from which the holy books were originally translated. So, while feminists may wish to challenge the underlined in the following examples from the Holy Bible and the

Holy Quran respectively, doctrinal issues may come to the fore to bar them from effecting any gender neutrality:

- 'And as it is appointed unto **men** once to die, but after this the judgement'. [KJV] - (Hebrews 9: 27).
- O **mankind**! Eat of that which is lawful and good on earth, and follow not the footsteps of Shaitaan (Satan). Verily, he is to you an open enemy'. (Quran 2: 168)

Conclusion

The contemporary awakening to this global socio-linguistic fact is very much a revolution taking place in the English language and, to a very great extent, in many world languages. The main dividend of this development is that women are becoming more respected as a unique part of humanity and this is affecting a positive change in human relations.

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