
SEXIST LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH TEXTBOOKS

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore the status of sexism in textbooks. A qualitative inquiry is made into (a) sex-linked job possibilities, (b) sex-based activity types, (c) stereotyped sex roles (d) firstness and (e) masculine generic conception. Sexist language in English is evident in the use of third person pronouns and terms that identify occupation. It is suggested that sexism seems to mirror the discrimination to the disadvantage of women in society.

Keywords: sexist language, English textbooks

A. INTRODUCTION

Sexist practices contribute to ignoring women or men or to stereotyping either sex; sexism is not a matter of intention but of effect. Sexist language is one example of the way a culture or society conveys its values from one group to another and from one generation to the next (Holmes, 2008:305).

Language is not merely a means of communicating information. It is an important means of establishing and maintaining social relationship with members of the community. Sex-based linguistic variation is a prime example of the sort of social function that is fulfilled by language. Sex differences are a fact of sociolinguistic life and it is not unexpected that they are reflected in language. There exist forms of language which are appropriate for use by men and other forms which women use. These differences depend not only on the sex of the addresser, but also on the sex of the addressee. Sex-linked linguistic variation involves the differential use of certain status-marking forms by sex (Fasold, 1990: 115).

Sexism in language has been declared to be wrong for this century as an obstruction to clear communication in speaking and writing. A great deal has been published to aid speakers and writers in their avoidance of sexist language. Most teachers of composition become proficient at identifying and correcting offensive language. Some manuals persuade a careful editing for sexist terminology and several computer aids have been produced to identify sexist language. As feminist concerns become evident, speakers and writers are finding ways to avoid sexism.

Language conveys attitudes. Sexist attitudes stereotype a person according to gender rather than individual quality. Sexist language encodes attitudes to women and men. The study of sexist language is concerned with the way language expresses negative and positive stereotypes of women and men.

A major issue in sociolinguistic has been the relationship between sex and language and how it is represented. Sociolinguists have shown a great interest in sex/language relationship with respect to the presence or absence in a few languages of linguistic forms that are used by speakers of one sex or the other. Much research on language and sex correlates has been concerned with the role language plays in locating and maintaining women in a disadvantageous position in society (Macaulay and Brice, 1997:94).

Feminists claimed that English is a sexist language. It may seem odd that a language rather than its speakers are sexist. Sexism involves behavior which maintains social inequalities between women and men. There are a number of ways that English discriminates against women.

Sex-linked sociolinguistic variations presents a system of beliefs about the features of social life that can be understood from a women-centered perspective and that can be

considered critical in its approach. It seeks (a) to see the sociolinguistic life from the points of women in the social life and (b) to produce a better social world for women.

It is assumed that sexism is unconscious and mirrors the unfair sex discrimination to the disadvantage of women in society. It is asserted that once educators and practitioners gain awareness of sex bias in the linguistic manifestations in textbooks of a male-dominated society, they attempt to use sex-neutral terms in order to reduce the bias in the portrayal of women. It seems that for an effective combat against sex bias, sex-neutral use of language should be supported by systematic programs aimed at the public.

B. DISCUSSION

A qualitative look into sex-linked job indicates that the occupational capacities in which women are appeared to be restricted to occupations such as *maid* and *teacher*, in few cases including a job such as *doctor* or *teacher*. The latter is a *doctor* of same sex examining her *female patient* in a hospital establishing in students the ideology of sex division. Men enjoy a diversity of jobs such as *athlete, butcher, cook, hunter, lifeguard, and scholar*.

An inquiry into sex-related activity types reveals that females are pushed into indoor passive activities such as *making the bed, sitting in the classroom, watching a movie*, etc. Many textbooks portray males in the outdoor active roles of *driving the bus, going to the movies, riding bicycle, swimming*.

Another sexism in the textbooks is the pushing of women towards stereotypical roles such as *cleaning the garage, mopping the floor, serving food, setting the dinner table, and taking care of children*.

Few examples of firstness are observed. Given two nouns paired for sex, such as *boys and girls, brother and sister, uncle and aunt*, the masculine word always come first.

There appears confusion over masculine generic conception in texts and illustrations. Generic items are intended to include both sexes. They do not work the way they are supposed to. They reflect males as the default or unmarked sex. Everyone is a male, unless specified otherwise. Pronouns such as *I, you, and we* which can be perceived as female or male subjects are illustrated by and associated with pictures portraying men. Parts of the human body or objects that are not restricted to one sex such as *arm, hands, hats, shoes*, etc. are presented in association with the pictures of men's arm, shoes, hands, and so on. Overall, sexist textbooks present students with an unfair and inexcusable picture of women.

Examination of the treatment of women in textbooks reveals that in every category of this study, women appear less visible than men. Evidence is found that English is taught through the presentation of male-orientated topics. A closer look at the data demonstrates that male firstness is widespread, females are visible in indoor passive activities, and are placed in traditional stereotypical roles.

It is remarkable that teachers use materials which are loaded with a lot of male-as-norm elements and are filled with the unfair and inexcusable language of a male-dominated society. It is assumed that recognition of a problem is the first step towards solving it. When one becomes conscious of the sex bias in materials s/he can get on with the business of making the text less biased by using sex-neutral terms.

It is suggested that attempts to portray females in textbooks in current use through one-sided role, overt remark, and/or omissions like other cultural aspects of a foreign language learning have been made at a conscious level of knowledge. Language plays an involuntary social function in our life and twisted with culture that it is difficult to stand back and take an objective look at one's language. That is the reason why sexist status has not been made less painful which encourage authors to minimize sexist language in their publications.

It is suggested that change will not come soon, and any attempts to force a linguistic change in the absence of its corresponding social change seem to be unworkable and pointless. Because images are fixed in our minds to allow us to express nonsexist attitudes and for another, sexist values represented in language seem to reflect the unfair and unreasonable sex discrimination and power relationship to the disadvantage of women in society. It is reasonable if one assumes that to 'unsex' English a sociopolitical change with egalitarian causes seems unavoidable. Until this happens, no one will be immune.

What to do about the problem is not apparent. The satisfactory solution may be a critical pedagogy: critical pedagogy is an approach to teaching and curriculum informed by critical social theory that "seeks to understand and critique the historical and sociopolitical context of

schooling and to develop pedagogical practices that aim not only to change the nature of schooling, but also the wider society" (Pennycook, 1990:24). It is concerned about how language can effect personal and social change. In other words, "it results from personal and social choices that reflect a desire to understand both the word and the world and to act upon these choices."

In second language classrooms, "language can become a primary medium by which this may occur" (Crookes and Lehner, 1998:327). Fairclough (1992:4) has argued that language teachers need to adopt a way towards traditional sociolinguistic studies which tend to describe what happens in a speech community as appropriate. Language classrooms can provide a forum for critical analysis in which both students and teachers can question issues of language, power, discrimination, etc. The problem is that many language teachers believe in leaving their social ideologies outside the classroom. There are few teachers who feel compelled to be neutral on the subject of sexism.

C. CONCLUSION

It should be emphasized that in this study we examined the problem of sexism in textbooks. Further research on textbooks may give us indications of how we rank them on scales from the least to the most sexist texts. We may choose those textbooks that have enough qualities to make up for their efficiencies, i.e., those that can be judged to be avoiding sexist usage and considered the least sexist textbooks.

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