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Sexist Language: Terms of Reference for Women and Men

Ramesh Nair

This study analyses the usage of various terms of reference for women and men in two local English language magazines. The magazines were selected to represent local magazines that have a gender specific audience in mind. This study is specifically aimed at identifying terms of reference that are sexist. A questionnaire was posed to investigate how respondents viewed terms of reference which western feminists and linguists consider sexist. The analysis reveals that more sexist terms are used to refer to women than to men. Interestingly, the analysis also shows that the respondents did not concur with western feminists on what should be regarded as sexist language.

Rationale of the Study

Thorne and Henley (1975) found that the literature on sexual differentiation of speech deals largely with the white, middle- and upper-middle-class segment of the population. Today, the English language no longer belongs solely to this group. There is a far wider community that uses the English language. Strevens (1982) says that English is used by a total of some 700 million people for whom it is a foreign language. Thus, English is used more by those for whom it is a foreign language than by native speakers (Strevens, 1982). This being the case, this researcher believes that studies into the usage of the English language among non-native speakers should be increased in order to understand the effect the English language has on non-native cultures.

The impact that the English language has on the Malaysian community continues to be strong even after 40 years of independence. The patriarchal roots of the English language have long been planted in the Malaysian society, which uses the English language for everyday communication. This researcher is interested in discovering how widespread sexist language is within the English speaking community of

Malaysia. It would be interesting to see if research into sexism in a country where English is a second language, draws similar results with research done in countries where English is the native language.

Statement of the Problem

Research and documented proof of sexism in language and its negative impact on society dates back to the early 1900s. In the new millennium, we need to be more aware of sexism in language and consequently take the right steps in reducing, if not eradicating sexism from our repertoire. However, more recent research presented by many linguists and feminists still indicate that sexism in the English language is still widely in use. It is this researcher's intention to study the existence of sexism as found in the written form, especially in two local English language magazines.

Research Questions

This study will answer the following research questions:

1. Are there a greater number of sexist terms used to refer to any particular gender in local magazines?
2. Does the English speaking community in an ESL setting concur with western feminists on what should be regarded as sexist terminology?

Significance of the Study

The purpose of this study is to research how the sexes are referred to or depicted in the written form, specifically in two local English language magazines. These magazines will be referred to as *FM* and *MR* in the rest of this paper. *FM* is targeted at a female audience while *MR* is targeted at a male audience.

The findings of the present study hope to serve as an indication of how aware the Malaysian community at large is of sexism. Sexual language profoundly affects how women and men perceive the sexes as well as how they communicate with one another (Ivy and Backlund, 1994). Therefore, writers, editors and publishers of these magazines in particular, have an obligation to be aware of the impact that they have on the

Malaysian community. Eliminating sexist language and practices from oral and written communication is an initial step in the process of freeing the mind from sexist attitudes.

Literature Review

Sexism and Sexist Language: A Working Definition

Before going further, the term *sexism* and *sexist language* will be defined and discussed.

Graddol and Swann (1989) define *sexism* as:

Any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds. Although according to this definition, discrimination may take place against women or men, in practice, discrimination against women has been seen as more serious, and has most concerned those who oppose sexism.

(1989: 96)

Ivy and Backlund (1994) note that the term *sexist language* is related to the term *sexism* in the following way:

Sexism is attitudes and/or behaviour that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other. From this definition, it follows that *sexist language* would be verbal communication that conveys those differential attitudes or behaviours.

(1994: 72)

Although Ivy and Backlund (1994) state that sexist language involves verbal communication, they provide examples of the occurrence of sexist language in both the verbal and written form. Therefore, this researcher will take their definition of sexist language to encompass both the verbal and the written form.

Cameron (1985) defines sexist language as a language that contains a lexicon and a grammatical structure that excludes, insults or trivialises women. Disagreements about what is and what is not sexist are common. One may disagree about whether discrimination has taken place, or whether it has been made on relevant grounds (Graddol and Swann, 1989). Ivy and Backlund (1994) agree on this point saying that it is fairly easy to define sexist language, but it is tougher to label something said or written as sexist.

Forms of Sexist Language

Having defined sexist language, it is important that we are able to identify the various forms that sexist language takes. Although there are numerous forms of sexist language, this researcher will focus on the forms that are specifically related to terms of reference for women and men.

Feminine Suffixes

Ivy and Backlund (1994) suggest that the use of suffixes draw attention to the sex of the person being referred to when it is not in fact necessary. They contend that the use of suffixes only leads to the practice of stereotyping women. Miller and Swift (1988) offer an explanation related to the use of French and Latin suffixes:

When French or Latin feminine-gender suffixes like *-ess* and *-trix* are attached to words to designate women, even if the addition is intended as a courtesy, the basic form acquires a predominantly masculine sense with the unavoidable implication that the feminine-gender form represents a non-standard variation. Once again the male is identified as the norm, the female as an aberration.

(1988: 135)

Although suffixes are commonly used in the English language to signal gender such as in the term “princess” and “actress”, feminists contend that it is merely a tool to imply that maleness is the norm. Feminists suggest that in terms such as “actor” and “actress”, the masculine term is sometimes taken to be generic and instances such as these can only lead to confusion.

Derogatory Terms

There are many derogatory terms for human beings. Using animal, food and plant terms as labels for men and women can be interpreted as demeaning and sexist (Ivy and Backlund, 1994). Lakoff (1975) observes that animal names may be applied to both men and women but the animal names used in reference to women are nearly always sexual in nature.

Some linguists argue that animal, food and plant terms such as *chick* and *tart* are terms of endearment but feminists reject this argument and suggest that such terms are only acceptable in certain contexts and within certain relationships – those in which two people’s feeling and regard for each other are mutually understood (Ivy and Backlund, 1994).

Therefore, the usage of a term such as “chick” to refer to women in general is both demeaning and insulting.

Sexual Language

Cameron (1985) notes that taboo words tend to refer to women’s bodies rather than men’s. She also notes that while there are terms that refer to women as sexual prey (*tail, crumpet* and *skirt*), no such terms exist for men. Some quarters of society believe that sexual language is a male domain. Strainchamps (1972) relates the difficulty she faced in publishing a piece of her writing on expletive language simply because the language used in her writing was supposedly not the kind of language that women used. The assumption is that some words, especially words seen as sexually expletive, is a taboo subject for women.

Euphemisms and Insults

The English language has a large repertoire of sexist expressions made up of metaphors or euphemisms that are used to substitute other terms. Ivy and Backlund (1994) suggest that such masculine and feminine expressions be avoided as their usage communicates exclusivity of one sex in a given situation.

Lakoff’s (1975) observations on the use of the term *lady* and *girl* as euphemisms for the word *woman* are especially insightful. Lakoff (1975) contends that if the terms *woman* and *lady* are used interchangeably in a sentence, the use of the latter tends to carry with it overtones of chivalry; thus implying that a “lady” is helpless, and cannot do things for herself.

Corpus

The basic assumption for the present study is that magazines are appropriate as a source for the study of contemporary language, with specific focus on the study of sexism in language. This assumption is based on two reasons. Firstly, according to Basow (1992), gender stereotypes abound in magazines because the market for magazines is so segmented.

The magazines chosen as corpus for the present study are segmented along the lines of gender, with each magazine having a gender-specific audience in mind. Secondly, according to a survey, the print media has a

profound impact on the Malaysian public. The survey reported in *Asiaweek* (January 15, 1999) indicates the literacy rate in Malaysia is as high as 89.3%. This is a good indication that the print media can have a particularly strong influence on the Malaysian society.

In this study, the population would be all local magazines with either a female or a male audience in mind. This researcher narrowed down this population to two specific magazines, namely *FM* and *MR*. However, it would not be possible to research every publication of these magazines. Therefore, this researcher looked at the publication of *MR* and *FM* for a six-month period. To avoid temporal bias, this researcher focused on the publication of *FM* and *MR* for the same length of time, that is, from October 1997 to March 1998.

Method

The *FM* and *MR* magazines published from October 1997 to March 1998 were analysed. As it was not viable to look at every section of both magazines for a six-month period, this researcher had to narrow down further specific sections that he wanted to research.

The analysis involved the listing down of all terms that were used to refer to a particular woman or man, or to women and men in general. These were terms that were found on the cover page and the table of contents of each magazine. The reason for carrying out this step was because the cover page and the table of contents are the first sections of a magazine that a reader would come into contact with. This researcher assumes that publishers and editors would generally word these sections in a way that would make the magazine desirable for further reading.

The list of the female and male terms of reference was then presented to respondents via a questionnaire. The respondents were asked to determine if they felt the terms had a positive connotation, a negative connotation or if they felt that the term was neutral. If a respondent identified a particular term as having a negative connotation, the implication was that the term was offensive when used on a woman or man. Therefore, this researcher assumes that a term identified as having a negative connotation is a sexist terminology.

This researcher did not ask the respondents to identify a term as sexist or non-sexist because Graddol and Swann (1989) and Ivy and Backlund (1994) have already concluded that it is not easy to categorize a term as being sexist, especially if it is taken out of context.

By asking the respondents to identify terms as having a positive or a negative connotation, this researcher hoped to discover if the respondents agreed with feminists and linguists on what is and what is not sexist terminology.

Frequency counts and corresponding percentages were obtained. The data was then presented in tables and analyzed. Findings and conclusions were gleaned from the data.

Pilot Test

This researcher personally administered the questionnaire to a sample of ten (10) respondents. All respondents were pursuing their post-graduate studies at the time this pilot test was administered. This researcher selected these respondents because he believed that they were in a better position to identify any possible flaws in the questionnaire and therefore would be able to provide constructive criticism.

The respondents were asked to pay particular attention to the instructions and the layout of the questionnaire. This researcher also used this pilot test to estimate the length of time that would be taken to complete the questionnaire.

As a result of the pilot test, suggestions given by the respondents were taken into consideration. For the final questionnaire, some instructions were rephrased and some amendments were made to the layout.

Instrumentation

The respondents' questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, the respondents had to briefly complete the section with some personal particulars. This section merely required the respondents to identify their sex, age and educational background.

In the following part, the respondents had to decide if the terminology presented to them had a negative or a positive connotation when used on a woman or on a man. All these terms were terms that this researcher identified in his analysis of the cover page, the table of contents and the selected articles. The questionnaires were given to each respondent personally and were collected back immediately after completion.

Respondents

The questionnaires were distributed to forty (40) respondents, twenty (20) women and twenty (20) men. All respondents have some form of tertiary education. It is this researcher's assumption that this group of individuals would be most aware of sexism. Therefore, their responses were taken as a reflection of the educated Malaysian's perception of sexism in language.

All respondents were people who use English widely, either in their homes or in their working environment. It was important to have respondents who possessed a fairly good command of the English language because of the nature of this questionnaire that included terms of reference reflecting contemporary usage of English. The comprehension of words and phrases in this questionnaire demanded a fairly good command of English.

Result and Discussion

Table 11.1 lists a total of 47 terms that were used to refer to men and 50 terms that were used to refer to women. The table shows the opinion of forty (40) respondents on the connotation that each term carries. Terms were listed according to the number of respondents who felt that the term was negative. Terms that were thought of as having a negative connotation by the largest number of respondents were listed first. The findings show forty-one (41) terms referring to women were considered as negative by at least one respondent. In contrast, only thirty-five (35) terms referring to men were considered to be negative by at least one respondent. This is an indication that there were more offensive terms for women than there were for men.

It is interesting to note that although some terms were identified by some respondents as being negative, these very terms were identified as being neutral or even positive by other respondents. This includes terms such as "A Little Local Flavour", "Sarong Party Girl" and "Blond Bombshell". This indicates that a term of reference that was regarded as offensive by one respondent, was seen to be perfectly acceptable by another. This is an indication of how divided people can be in regarding a term as sexist or otherwise.

A total of 13% of the respondents found the term "Blond Bombshell" to have a positive connotation and 20% of them found the term "Babe"

Table 11.1: Respondents' opinion on the connotation that each term has

When referring to a man:	Connotation			When referring to a woman:	Connotation		
	positive	neutral	negative		positive	neutral	negative
Bastard			100%	Bimbo			100%
Feminist rat			100%	Bitch			100%
Fly-on-the-wall			100%	Cyberfloozzy			100%
Fool			100%	Ditz-head			100%
Fruit bat			100%	Dumb blonde			100%
Idiot			100%	Dummy			100%
Moron			100%	Hot and cold running amah			100%
Neanderthal			100%	Idiot			100%
Nerd			100%	An appendage		7%	93%
Piss Artist		7%	93%	Female species		7%	93%
Geek God		12%	88%	A little local flavour	8%	4%	88%
Kidno		12%	88%	Sarong Party Girl	5%	7%	88%
Madman		13%	87%	Blond bombshell	13%		87%
Boyo		15%	85%	Lesbian		13%	87%
Beefheart	40%		60%	Creature		15%	85%
Boy		45%	55%	Dusky little maiden	10%	5%	85%
Menfolk		50%	50%	Thug		15%	85%
Sexual Barbarian	40%	18%	42%	Baby	7%	10%	83%
Old chap	30%	30%	40%	Ego stroker		22%	78%
Pedigree chum	25%	38%	37%	Kitchen Goddess	12%	10%	78%
Bloke		65%	35%	Fry by night	10%	15%	75%
Rogue	40%	30%	30%	Attention seeker		30%	70%
Big burly man	13%	62%	25%	Babe	20%	10%	70%
Dreamboat	75%		25%	Mysteries of the universe	25%	13%	62%
Hunter	50%	25%	25%	Belle	25%	25%	50%
King of Slick	75%		25%	Millenium Ms.	30%	40%	30%
Mat Salleh	13%	62%	25%	Sweet young thing	58%	12%	30%
Sweet Baboo	62%	15%	23%	Cover Girl	13%	62%	25%
Babe Magnet	70%	12%	18%	Girl		75%	25%
Cowboy	40%	62%	18%	Model Mum	38%	37%	25%
Godfather	40%	42%	18%	Supermodel	60%	15%	25%
Dude	23%	62%	15%	Saviour	68%	12%	20%
Guy		85%	15%	Social butterfly	40%	42%	18%
Stallion	87%		13%	Oriental women	23%	62%	15%
Male teller		88%	12%	Actress		88%	12%
Boyfriend	45%	55%		Female teller		88%	12%
Buddy	40%	60%		Lady	63%	25%	12%
Father		100%		Wife		88%	12%
Grandad		100%		Pretty local girl	75%	15%	10%
Hero	75%	25%		Goddess	93%		7%
Hubby		100%		Movie Queen	75%	20%	5%
Husband		100%		Daughter		100%	
Man/Men		100%		Female		100%	
Prince	15%	85%		Girlfriend	25%	75%	
Protagonist	55%	45%		Grandmother		100%	
SNAG*	75%	25%		Princess	14%	90%	
Wizard	75%	25%		Star	70%	30%	
				Superstar	20%	80%	
				Wizard	75%	25%	
				Woman/Women		100%	

* SNAG - Sensitive New Age Guy

to have a positive connotation. A possible reason for the acceptance of terms such as “Blond Bombshell” and “Babe” by some respondents could be because of the widespread use of these terms. When people see the frequent usage of such terms in published works such as magazines and novels, they begin to assume that it is acceptable to use

them. Some may even be misled into thinking that women might be flattered when they are referred to by such terms.

Some interesting variations were also observed between what the respondents deemed as derogatory and what have been documented as sexist by other researchers. Two good examples are the term “girl” and “lady”. Feminists such as Lakoff (1975) and Miller and Swift (1988) contend that the term “girl” and “lady” are euphemisms that bring to mind frivolity, immaturity and conformity.

However, only 25% of the respondents felt that the term “girl” was negative and only 12% felt that the term “lady” was negative. In fact, 63% of the respondents felt that the term “lady” had a positive connotation. This indicates a difference of opinion between the respondents of the present study and Western feminists. A possible reason for this could be the widespread use of these terms by speakers of English today. As these terms are commonly used without the intention of offending women, most respondents do not see them as being offensive.

Based on the preliminary findings, this researcher then picked out terms that at least 70% of the respondents felt had either a negative, positive or neutral connotation. This was then tabulated and presented in Tables 11.2 and 11.3.

Table 11.2: Terms referring to men which were identified by at least 70% of the respondents

Positive:	%	Neutral:	%	Negative:	%
Stallion	87	Man/Men	100	Bastard	100
Hero	75	Husband	100	Feminist Rat	100
Wizard	75	Hubby	100	Fly-on-the-Wall	100
Dreamboat	75	Grandad	100	Fool	100
SNAG*	75	Father	100	Fruit Bat	100
King of Slick	75	Male teller	88	Idiot	100
Babe Magnet	70	Prince	85	Moron	100
		Guy	85	Neanderthal	100
				Nerd	100
				Piss Artist	90
				Geek God	88
				Kiddo	88
				Madman	87
				Boyo	85
7 out of 47 Terms	14.9	8 out of 47 Terms	17	14 out of 47 Terms	29.8

* Sensitive New Age Guy

Table 11.3: Terms referring to women which at least 70% of the respondents thought as either positive, negative or neutral

Positive	%	Negative	%	Neutral	%
Goddess	93	Bimbo	100	Daughter	100
Wizard	75	Bitch	100	Female	100
Movie Queen	75	Cyberfloozy	100	Grandmother	100
Pretty Local Girl	75	Ditz-head	100	Woman/Women	100
Star	70	Dumb blonde	100	Princess	90
		Dummy	100	Wife	88
		Hot and Cold Running Amah	100	Actress	88
		Idiot	100	Female Teller	88
		An appendage	93	Superstar	80
		Female Species	93	Girlfriend	75
		A Little Local Flavour	88	Girl	75
		Sarong Party Girls	88		
		Blond Bombshell	87		
		Lesbian	87		
		Creature	85		
		Dusky little maiden	85		
		Thing	85		
		Baby	83		
		Ego stroker	78		
		Kitchen Goddess	78		
		Fry by night	75		
		Attention Seeker	70		
		Babe	70		
5 out of 50 Terms	10	23 out of 50 Terms	46	11 out of 50 Terms	22

Table 11.2 shows that out of the forty-seven (47) terms used to identify men in both *MR* and *FM*, only seven (14.9%) were thought to carry a positive connotation by at least 70% of the respondents. In contrast, twice as many terms (29.8%) were identified as having a negative connotation. In addition, 100% of the respondents identified nine (9) terms of reference for men as having a negative connotation. This reveals that these magazines appear to promote the usage of terms of reference that are largely thought to be offensive.

Table 11.3 shows that only five (10%) terms of reference for women were thought to carry a positive connotation by at least 70% of the respondents. In contrast twenty-three (46%) terms of reference for women were thought to carry a negative connotation. Therefore, almost 50% of all terms of reference used to refer to women in *MR* and *FM* were thought to be offensive by the respondents.

Basow (1992) says that using animal terms to refer to people is a form of deprecation. The data in Tables 11.2 and 11.3 reveal that this is not necessarily the case. Table 11.3 shows that 100% of the respondents agreed that the term “bitch” had a negative connotation when used to refer to a woman. However, Table 11.2 indicates that 87% of the respondents felt that the term “stallion” carried a positive connotation when used to refer to a man. It appears that even animal terms were somehow seen to carry a more positive connotation by the respondents when used to refer to a man. Clearly, the term “stallion” that is sexist, according to definitions given by Basow (1992) and Ivy and Backlund (1994), was not thought of as being sexist by the majority of the respondents surveyed in the present study.

A possible reason for this could be the ideas that these terms evoked in the minds of the respondents. The respondents most probably associated the term “stallion” with the symbol of strength and virility. Furthermore, the stallion is a symbol of one of the Lunar Years of the Chinese calendar and this could be a possible reason why the respondents viewed this term as positive. On the other hand, the term “bitch” has no such association and was therefore regarded as very insulting.

This analysis also revealed that there were a fairly large number of terms for men that the respondents felt were negative. Table 11.2 shows that the majority of the respondents identified 29.8% of terms referring to men as being negative. Nevertheless, the number of derogatory terms for women was still much greater with Table 11.3 showing 46% of terms used to refer to women as having a negative connotation.

Another interesting fact that this analysis reveals is that sexist language appears to be growing to accommodate elements of Asian culture. The best proof for this was the usage of the term “Sarong Party Girl” which was found in both *FM* and *MR*. The coinage of this term has its roots in Asian culture as the “Sarong” is defined in the *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary* (1987) as the national garment of Malays. This term was used in both magazines to refer to local women who frequently patronize popular nightspots in the city.

As the English language continues to be widely used in many Asian societies such as in the Malaysian society, this researcher feels that it is highly probable that more such terms may be coined to accommodate the non-native speakers of English. In this way, non-native speakers of English may actually be contributing to the pool of sexist terms that already exists in the English language.

Another term that supports this researcher's observation is the term "Cyberfloozy" that was found in *FM* magazine. This term is actually the title of a regular article that appeared in this magazine. The articles touched on issues related to computers and the Internet. This researcher is puzzled as to why a magazine that has a female audience in mind would want to use the term "floozy" at all. According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1987), "floozy" is defined as a "slovenly woman, especially a prostitute." One would assume that having a regular article on computers in a female magazine is something positive that should be encouraged especially in a time when our nation is striving to become the frontrunner in Information Technology in this region.

Conclusion

The present study reveals that there are more sexist terms for women than there are for men in the two local magazines. This is supported by the findings revealed by the analysis of the terms used to refer to women and men found in the cover pages and the tables of content over a period of six months. It was found that a consistent pattern existed in which women were more frequently referred to with sexist terminology than were men.

The usage of terms such as "Sarong Party Girls" and "Cyberfloozy" that were found in these magazines serve as an indication that the local mass media uses a wide array of sexist terms that are available to them. In fact, the term "Cyberfloozy" that was coined as the title of a regular article in *FM*, serves as an example of how the Malaysian mass media is contributing to the already large pool of sexist terms in the English language repertoire.

Another interesting finding was that some terms (such as "lady" and "girl") that have been defined as sexist by feminists, were not thought of as having a negative connotation by the respondents in the present study. This finding suggests that contemporary usage of terms such as "girl" and "lady" has taken on a neutral or even positive connotation even though such terms have been defined as sexist by western feminists.

Sexist terms are a form of sexist language and sexist language is verbal communication that forms sexist attitudes (Ivy and Backlund, 1994). Therefore, the usage of sexist terms in the corpus strongly suggests the presence of sexism in these two local magazines.

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