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JILID 2

SEXIST LANGUAGE DETERMINANTS IN TWO LOCAL MAGAZINES

Ramesh Nair

Universiti Teknologi MARA Kampus Alor Gajah, 78000 Alor Gajah, Melaka.

ABSTRACT

The English language is regarded by many as a catalyst for development in many developing countries. Though this is true, it is a language that has its roots in a patriarchal society and because of this, it is flawed to a certain degree. Feminists and linguists alike have long argued that the English language discriminates against women, specifically, with the usage of sexist language. No society can claim itself to be progressive if the language being used in that society becomes the very tool that discriminates against a particular group of people. This study analyses the usage of sexist language by writers in two local magazines. Selected sentences written by female and male writers for a gender specific audience were presented to respondents in a questionnaire. Data gathered from the analysis of the questionnaires were used to investigate what determined the usage of sexist language in the corpus. The analysis revealed that it was the gender of the target audience rather than the writer's gender that determined the usage of sexist language. In addition, the analysis also revealed that language defined as sexist by western feminist were not regarded as such by the respondents.

Keyword: *Sexism, Sexist Language*

INTRODUCTION

As a broad umbrella term, "linguistic sexism" covers a wide and diverse range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labelled and referred to, but also how realised language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants (Atkinson,1993:403). Spender (1985) identifies the English language as a "man-made" language that contributes to gender inequality. She also suggests that women have successfully been kept in a lowly position because English developed in a patriarchal society. Spender (1983:408) suggests that men have shaped language to their own advantage, that is, to legitimate their own primacy and to create a world in which they are the central figures.

Swann (1992) claims that language has predominantly been a feminist issue because words and meanings made available to talk about people tend to marginalize women. In the present study, the researcher will look at sexism in the mass media, focusing on sexist language found in two local magazines published in Malaysia. Although the researcher has found several studies done on sexism, he notes that such studies have predominantly focused on the use of the English language in countries where English is the native language. Today, the English language plays a crucial role in many countries throughout the world where English is not the native language. However, the researcher notes that research in such countries is still lacking. As such, it is the intention of this researcher to focus on sexist language used in Malaysia, a country that recognises English as its second language.

Before going further, the term *sexism* and *sexist language* will be defined and discussed. Graddol and Swann (1989:96) define **sexism** as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds. Ivy and Backlund (1994:72) note that the if *sexism* is attitudes and/or behaviour that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other, then it follows that **sexist language** would be verbal communication that conveys those differential attitudes or behaviours. Similarly, Cameron (1985:72) defines *sexist language* as a language that contains a lexicon and a grammatical structure that excludes, insults or trivialises women.

Having defined sexist language, it is important that we are able to identify the various forms that sexist language takes. Although linguists and feminists like Basow (1992), Cameron (1985) and Lakoff (1975) provide extensive examples of sexist language, the researcher will focus on just a few categories that are directly linked to the present study.

i.   **Man-linked terminology**: Using the masculine gender to refer to human beings in general.
         Examples: *chairman, best man for the job, mankind* and *the working man.*
ii.   **Feminine Suffixes**:   Suffixes draw attention to the sex of the person being referred to when it is not in fact necessary.
         Examples: *actress, waitress, hostess* and *authoress.*

iii.	**Derogatory Terms**:	Using animal, food and plant terms as labels for men and women.
	Examples:	*chick, tart, bird* and *crumpet.*
iv.	**Sexual Language**:	Words that tend to refer to women's bodies and terms that refer to women as sexual prey.
	Examples:	*skirt, slut* and *easy*
v.	**Euphemisms and Insults**:	Lakoff (1975:23) contends that the terms *lady* tends to carry with it overtones of chivalry; thus implying that a "lady" is helpless, and cannot do things for herself.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The purpose of this study is to determine the existence of sexist language in the mass media. Therefore, the researcher has to decide on the form of media that would provide the best indications of this. The selected media has to be a form that allows the researcher to focus on the use of the English language as a tool for promoting sexism.

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 sexist language. The magazines chosen as corpus for the present study will be referred to as *FM* and *MR* from this point onwards. *FM* is a locally published English language magazine that is targeted at a female audience while *MR* is targeted at a male audience. These magazines are segmented along the lines of gender, with each magazine having a gender specific audience in mind. To avoid temporal bias, this researcher focused on the publication of *FM* and *MR* for the same length of time, over a six-month period.

The present study answers the following research question:

1. Between the elements of the writer's gender and the gender of the target audience, which of these two elements determines the usage of sexist language in magazine articles?

The researcher wanted to analyse the usage of sexist language by the writers of the articles when they had a gender specific audience in mind. To answer this question, the researcher listed twenty (20) sentences in a questionnaire that were taken from selected articles in *FM* and *MR*. Of the twenty (20) sentences that were quoted in the questionnaire, ten (10) sentences were written by women and ten (10) were written by men. Each of the twenty (20) sentences selected by the researcher had some form of sexist element contained within them.

Of the twenty (20) sentences that were quoted in the questionnaire, two (2) examples are provided below together with the researcher's comments on why they are regarded as containing sexist elements. Selected words are underlined for emphasis.

1. **Once you've successfully <u>acquired</u> a woman, <u>maintenance</u> is usually a matter of continuing to apply the techniques of acquisition.**

   (MR, January 1998:16)

   Considered to be sexist because:
   The woman is portrayed as an object to be "acquired" and "maintained" by man. Basow (1992) defines this practice as depersonalisation.

2. **If you want boys to like you, you must behave like a <u>lady</u>.**

   (FM, January 1998:90)

   Considered to be sexist because:
   Linguists and feminists have suggested that the term "lady" is an example of a euphemism that is sexist because it carries psychic overtones of conformity and decorum (Miller and Swift, 1988:84).

In the questionnaire, the respondents had to first decide if a male or a female writer most likely wrote each sentence. They then had to read each sentence again and decide how sexist each sentence was. They had to make their decision based on a four-point scale, with the responses being "Non-sexist", "Quite sexist", "Sexist" and "Very Sexist".

The questionnaires were distributed to forty (40) respondents, twenty (20) women and twenty (20) men. All forty (40) respondents were either English language instructors or post-graduate students pursuing their Master's in English as a Second Language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The result of the survey is tabulated in Table 1. Table 1 lists the twenty (20) sentences that were identified by the forty (40) respondents as having been written by a female or male writer.

Table 1. Respondents' identification of the writer's sex and the degree of sexism of selected sentences

Sentence	Respondent's Answer				Degree of Sexism							
	Female Writer		Male Writer		Non Sexist		Quite Sexist		Sexist		Very Sexist	
	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)
S1 Fw in F	32	80%	8	20%	29	72.5%	9	22.5%	2	5%		
S2 Mw in MR	2	5%	38	95	8	20%			24	60%	8	20%
S3 Mw in F	4	10%	36	90%			6	15%	14	35%	20	50%
S4 Fw in MR	5	12.5%	35	87.5%					15	37.5%	25	62.5%
S5 Mw in MR	7	17.5%	33	82.5%			10	25%	17	42.5%	13	32.5%
S6 Fw in F	32	80%	8	20%	24	60%	16	40%				
S7 Mw in F	36	90%	4	10%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		
S8 Fw in MR	6	15%	34	85%			3	7.5%	13	32.5%	24	60%
S9 Mw in MR	7	17.5%	33	82.5%			8	20%	12	30%	20	50%
S10 Fw in F	24	60%	16	40%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		
S11 Fw in MR	13	32.5%	27	67.5%	20	50%	16	40%	4	10%		
S12 Fw in F	40	100%	0	0%	40	100%						
S13 Mw in MR	0	0%	40	100%					8	20%	32	80%
S14 Mw in F	37	92.5%	3	7.5%	17	42.5%	23	57.5%				
S15 Fw in MR	9	22.5%	31	77.5%			4	10%	16	40%	20	50%
S16 Fw in F	40	100%	0	0%	22	55%	14	35%	4	10%		
S17 Mw in MR	8	20%	32	80%			7	17.5%	24	60%	9	22.5%
S18 Fw in MR	8	20%	32	80%			23	57.5%	13	32.5%	4	10%
S19 Mw in F	23	57.5%	17	42.5%	20	50%	15	37.5%	5	12.5%		
S20 Mw in F	36	90%	4	10%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		

Key:

Freq.   - Frequency
S#   - Sentence number as appearing in the questionnaire
Fw in F   - Female Writer in *FM*
Fw in MR - Female Writer in *MR*
Mw in F   - Male Writer in *FM*
Mw in MR - Male Writer in *MR*

Table 1 shows how the respondents evaluated each sentence in terms of the degree of sexism. Although every sentence contains some form of sexist element as defined by linguists and feminists, Table 1 clearly shows that many respondents did not view all the sentences as sexist. More than 50% of the respondents identified **S1, S6, S7, S10** and **S20** as non-sexist. Terms of reference for women that were contained in these sentences included "bitchy" (**S1**), "lady" (**S6**), "girls" (**S7**) and "underhanded cow" (**S10**). **S20** was a sentence that referred to a man as a "dishy hunk".

The first possible reason for this could be that the respondents are unaware about terms that should be regarded as sexist. However, the ability of the respondents to identify other sentences in the questionnaire as "sexist" (3 on the Richter scale) and "very sexist" (4 on the Richter scale) indicates that the respondents are able to identify sexist elements in those sentences. As terms of reference such as "bitch" and "hunk" are used with increasing frequency in the mass media, it may be possible that these terms are beginning to be viewed as generally common terms of reference.

A second possible reason could be that Asians do not share the same views as western feminists on what should be regarded as sexist. The data reveals a difference in how the respondents, in this case Asians, view certain terms of reference as compared to western feminists. For example, 60% of the respondents did not find the term "lady" (as used in **S6**) derogatory even though western feminists such as Lakoff (1975) advocate that it is. As the term "lady" is frequently used to refer to women without any intention of offending them, this term is generally accepted as a non-sexist term of reference.

The researcher also noticed a pattern in the way the respondents identified the degree of sexism of the individual sentences. To explain this pattern, the researcher has broken the sentences into two categories based on the magazines in which the sentences appeared. This is presented in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2. Respondents' identification of the writer's sex and the degree of sexism of selected sentences from *FM*

Sentence	Respondent's Answer				Degree of Sexism							
	Female Writer		Male Writer		Non Sexist		Quite Sexist		Sexist		Very Sexist	
	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)
S1 Fw in F	32	80%	8	20%	29	72.5%	9	22.5%	2	5%		
S6 Fw in F	32	80%	8	20%	24	60%	16	40%				
S10 Fw in F	24	60%	16	40%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		
S12 Fw in F	40	100%	0	0%	40	100%						
S16 Fw in F	40	100%	0	0%	22	55%	14	35%	4	10%		
S3 Mw in F	4	10%	36	90%			6	15%	14	35%	20	50%
S7 Mw in F	36	90%	4	10%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		
S14 Mw in F	37	92.5%	3	7.5%	17	42.5%	23	57.5%				
S19 Mw in F	23	57.5%	17	42.5%	20	50%	15	37.5%	5	12.5%		
S20 Mw in F	36	90%	4	10%	24	60%	12	30%	4	10%		

Key:

Freq.	- Frequency
S#	- Sentence number as appearing in questionnaire
Fw in F	- Female Writer in *FM*
Mw in F	- Male Writer in *FM*

Table 2 shows that with the exception of **S3**, the majority of the respondents felt that all the sentences taken from *FM*, were written by a female writer. Interestingly, the respondents identified these sentences to be either "non-sexist" (1 on the Richter scale) or "quite sexist" (2 on the Richter scale). In the case of **S3**, the majority of the respondents identified the writer correctly as being a male writer. This is probably because the sentence contains a crude reference to the female anatomy. Sentence **S3** was identified by the majority of the respondents as being "sexist" (3 on the Richter scale) or "very sexist" (4 on the Richter scale). Table 2 also shows that more than 50% of the respondents identified every sentence (with the exception of **S3**) as having been written by a female writer. The pattern that appears here is one in which sentences that are thought to be either "non-sexist" or "quite sexist" by the majority of the respondents, was thought to be written by a female writer.

In the case of male writers writing in *FM*, the respondents identified sentences **S7, S14, S19** and **S20** as having been written by a female writer. In every case, the majority of the respondents felt that the sentences were either "non-sexist" or "quite sexist". A possible reason why respondents thought that female writers wrote these sentences could be because these sentences did not involve the use of language that may have been offensive to the respondents. For example in sentence **S19**, the term "girls" used to refer to "women" was apparently not considered offensive by the respondents although feminists such as Lakoff (1975:25) contend that this term brings to mind frivolity, immaturity and irresponsibility. Again, it appears as though the respondents and feminists disagree on what should be regarded as sexist. It is possible that because terms, such as "girls" is widely used to refer to "women", it is no longer regarded as offensive to do so.

Table 3 shows the respondents' identification of the writer's sex and the degree of sexism of sentences taken from *MR*. The data in Table 3 appears to conform to the pattern that has been established in Table 2.

Table 3. Respondents' identification of the writer's sex and the degree of sexism of
sentences from *MR*

Sentence	Respondent's Answer				Degree of Sexism							
	Female Writer		Male Writer		Non Sexist		Quite Sexist		Sexist		Very Sexist	
	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Freq.	(%)	Fre.	(%)	Freq.	(%)
S4 Fw in MR	5	12.5%	35	87.5%					15	37.5%	25	62.5%
S8 Fw in MR	6	15%	34	85%			3	7.5%	13	32.5%	24	60%
S11 Fw in MR	13	32.5%	27	67.5%	20	50%	16	40%	4	10%		
S15 Fw in MR	9	22.5%	31	77.5%			4	10%	16	40%	20	50%
S18 Fw in MR	8	20%	32	80%			23	57.5%	13	32.5%	4	10%
S2 Mw in MR	2	5%	38	95	8	20%			24	60%	8	20%
S5 Mw in MR	7	17.5%	33	82.5%			10	25%	17	42.5%	13	32.5%
S9 Mw in MR	7	17.5%	33	82.5%			8	20%	12	30%	20	50%
S13 Mw in MR	0	0%	40	100%					8	20%	32	80%
S17 Mw in MR	8	20%	32	80%			7	17.5%	24	60%	9	22.5%

Key:

Freq.   - Frequency

S#   - Sentence number as appearing in questionnaire

Fw in MR   - Female Writer in *MR*

Mw in MR - Male Writer in *MR*

Table 3 shows that the majority of the respondents identified the writers of all the sentences as being male. Similarly, Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents identified all the writers of sentences taken from *FM* (with the exception of S3) as female. This pattern seems to indicate that the use of sexist language in both magazines was generally different based on the target audience of the respective magazines. This difference does not seem to be caused by the gender of the writer as even sentences that were written by men in *FM* was thought to be written by women.

The analysis of Table 3 reveals that all sentences that were written by a female writer in *MR* (sentences S4, S8, S11, S15 and S18) were identified by the majority of the respondents as being written by a male writer. In every case, the majority of the respondents also felt that the sentences were either "sexist" (3 on the Richter scale) or "very sexist" (4 on the Richter scale). In fact, Table 3 shows more than 80% of the respondents thought that sentences S4 and S8 were written by a male writer when they were in actual fact written by a woman. The writers of these sentences were probably thought to be male because of the sexual innuendo in both sentences. The first sentence contained the word "sod" which is defined in the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1987) as a vulgar term of abuse. The reference in the second sentence to a part of the female anatomy may have seemed sexual in nature to the respondents and so the respondents assumed that it was written by a man.

The female writers in *MR* were found to use a considerable amount of sexual slang when the target audience was supposed to be predominantly male. It appears that the use of language that involved sexual slang and that was more strongly worded, was thought to be suitable for a male audience. Even the female writers used sexual slang when they had a male audience in mind.

The only exception to the pattern was S11:

Before your reputation with the **babes** plunges to even lower depths, I'd strongly advise you throwing your trademark moves out of the window and starting afresh.

[Emphasis by researcher]

Although 67.5% of the respondents felt that S11 was written by a man, 90% of them felt that the sentence was either "nonsexist" or "quite sexist". Interestingly, although S11 contained the word "babe", the majority of the respondents did not seem to be offended by the usage of such a term. This was probably because this term has become a widely used term in magazines such as *MR* and even *FM*. The researcher believes that when such terms are widely used in the media, people at large begin to get accustomed to them and therefore do not see them any longer, as offensive. Therefore, even though feminists advocate that "babe" is a sexist term, the respondents do not seem to share the same sentiments.

The results of this analysis show that writers in these magazines used sexist language in their writing. However, the use of sexist language was not determined by the gender of the writer. The data indicates that the usage of sexist language was caused by the gender of the audience in the writer's mind. It appears that writers thought the language used to communicate with either a female audience or a male audience would have to be different. Hence, the writers for the different magazines used an exclusive choice of words for a particular gender based audience.

In the present study, the analysis of answers by respondents to the questionnaire reveal that writers in the two magazines appeared to write differently when they had a gender-specific audience in mind. It was the general opinion of the respondents that male writers were more sexist than female writers. However, many sentences that the respondents identified as "sexist" (3 on the Richter scale) and "very sexist" (4 on the Richter scale) and as having been written by men, were in actual fact written by women for *MR*. The respondents probably identified those sentences as such because of the usage of words and phrases that contained strong sexual innuendo. Therefore, it is apparent that the female writers in *MR* also used sexist language to cater for the target audience of the magazine.

The data revealed that language containing sexual slang was largely reserved for the male audience. This suggests that such language is considered to be exclusive to the male audience. The conclusion here is that the gender of the target audience appears to play a vital role in determining the usage of sexist language by the writers. When an article was targeted at a male audience, both male and female writers readily used

language containing sexual slang. On the other hand, when an article was written for a female audience, both female and male writers had a tendency to be more sensitive and careful in their choice of language.

The present study reveals that sexist language is used in the Malaysian mass media, specifically in the two local magazines used as corpus. The widespread use of sexist language that denigrates women in particular must be addressed. Writers who communicate to the masses should be taking the lead in communicating in a non-sexist manner. The researcher believes that the root of the problem, with regards to the use of sexist language, is attitude. Besides identifying forms of sexist language, feminists and linguists alike have published books that provide guidelines on using alternative forms of non-sexist language (Miller and Swift, 1988; Ivy and Backlund, 1994). We can be free of sexism in our communication if we all make a conscious effort to use this alternative non-sexist language that is available to us. The choice is ours to make. It is not our fault that the English language is the way it is. However, it is within our ability to identify what is inappropriate and in doing so, take the necessary steps to set it right.

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