

SEXISM IN LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the various forms of sexism that exist within languages. Over the years sexism has been weaved into the language system so subtly that people end up submitting to sexist views without even realizing it. Many a time have people laughed at jokes that are sexist and used proverbs reflecting attitudes that patriarchal systems have enforced over the years. Thus, considering a nurse to be only female and an astronaut to be male is something quite common. Even in social mixed sex conversations, women often fail to gain the floor. Thus this paper attempts to throw light on the obvious that people usually fail to see. It tries to show the different levels at which sexism exists in the language system (morphological, phrasal, and semantic). The paper focuses on Bengali and English: two languages from different parent groups. English is a Germanic language and Bengali an Indo-Aryan language which is a branch of the Indo- Iranian languages. Examples of these two different languages show how sexism has spread its domains and infiltrated all languages; whether they belong to the same parent language or not.

Introduction

Women have come a long way from the days of being inferior and powerless. We have seen many women's movements taking place in the past years which have helped change our views and women's position in society. However, in the midst of all these changes one thing remains quite constant: sexism in language. As the origin of languages remains enshrouded in historical mists, the question lies whether or not languages force us to unconsciously incline towards sexist views. Are women discriminated against in the domains of language? According to Dale Spender,

It is men who have made the world which women must inhabit, and if women are to begin to make their own world, it is necessary that they understand some of the ways in which such creation is accomplished. That means exploring the relationship of language and reality (138).

Language is a system of symbols that we use to communicate with each other. It is a vehicle of ideas and reality that we have accepted and followed without much questioning. However these

ideas have been influenced greatly by reality constructed by the dominant male group. Historically it has always been dominant male group that have enjoyed societal power that have played a key role in forming and reforming the structures, categories and meanings. "Women have largely been excluded from the work of producing forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and realized" says Dorothy Smith, a Canadian sociologist (qtd. in Spender 143). Women have largely been deprived of the opportunity to participate in the contribution of forms needed to express their own experience or to define and raise social consciousness about their situation and concerns. They were excluded from the process of reforming language or active language planning. In history, there have been several instances of men arguing not only for their superiority but also for this superiority to be reflected in the structure of language. Thomas Wilson, an English diplomat and judge, and a courtier at the court of Elizabeth I in 1553 insisted that the natural place of man was ahead of woman and that it should be reflected in the structure of language. Wilson's audience was all male. They appreciated the logic and accepted it. (Spender 147)

Spender also mentions Joshua Poole, a scholarly grammarian, who believed that the male gender was the worthier gender and should thus take “pride of place”. None of his male colleagues disputed it (Spender 147). Similarly, Spender focuses on *Eighty Eight Grammatical Rules*, 1746, by John Kirby, where Rule Number Twenty One stated that the male gender was more comprehensive than the female gender. Kirby believed that it was legitimate to encode this personal belief in the structure of language for all to comply with. Rule Number Twenty One was handed down to a world of male grammarians who in their own way promoted the centrality of men. (Spender 148).

Based on the Rule, many nineteenth century grammarians resented the use of the term *they* as a reference instead of *he* when the sex of the person was unknown. For example “Whoever wants to swim has to take their swimsuits along with them.” Thus these male grammarians secured the 1850 Act of Parliament which legally stated that the masculine includes the feminine (thus enabling “he” to be written instead of “he or she”), unless expressly indicated otherwise. (Spender 150) Thus, it can be said that language can be used by male groups to dominate or patronize. An in-depth analysis of language will clearly reveal these attitudes.

History of sexism in Bengali is an area that has not been looked into much. Perhaps one of the reasons is that Bengali is a language that is held in an extremely high esteem by its speakers; in Bengalidesh the right to speak in Bengali was earned after a protracted struggle that ended in a nine month long war. However despite these factors, sexism has not left Bengali alone; it has rather seeped into this language system as well.

2.0 Methodology

This study was conducted using two methods:

1. Literature review

Several books were reviewed including a book in Bengali titled *Shomaj Bhasha Biggyan* by Dr. Rajib Humayun. This book is one of the few that has an entire chapter dedicated to gender and Bengali language. A number of examples were taken from this book for this paper.

Among books on English language are Dale Spender’s *Man made Language* (1980) where Spender articulates a theory of the male control over the English language and the way women have been systematically silenced through the forms of language, the conventions of male and female speech, the exclusion of women from print culture and the patriarchal structures at the heart of the gatekeeping process.

The next book is *Feminist Stylistics* by Sara Mills (1995). This is a ground breaking book which examines such issues as sexism, political correctness, agency and meaning. This book provides a very thorough analysis of feminist linguistics.

American Proverbs about Women by Lois Kerschen (1990) is another book that has been reviewed. This book provides a wide and varied range of sexist proverbs that truly reflects the extent of sexism in language. Among the other books are *Sociolinguistics* by Roland Wardhaugh (1992).

Empirical Analysis

Several surveys were conducted on the topic of ‘Alignment of male and female terms’ and ‘Occupational Lexis.’

Ten subjects were chosen randomly. All of the subjects are bilingual where their first language is Bengali and the second/ foreign language is English.

Questionnaires were set and used to conduct the surveys. In one of the questionnaires designed to test the domain of ‘occupational lexis’ the subjects were provided with the following question:

Decide whether the following words are male, female or male or female. Write them into the correct column:

niece, prince, policeman, guard, editor, mother, secretary, pilot, brother, uncle, duke, secretary, leader, interviewer, reporter, astronaut, saleswoman, soldier, nurse, doctor, scientist, chef.

The data gathered have been presented in the form of bar graphs.

In another questionnaire made to test the concept of 'alignment of male and female terms' the subjects were given a set of grammatically correct Bengali and English sentences. Four such sets were made in which each pair of sets had the same sentences but had the order of the male and female term altered. One subject received only one set. A sample from the questionnaire:

Set A:

1. Mrs. and Mr. Rahman are having dinner.
2. The boys and girls are playing in the field.
3. মেয়ে-ছেলেরা বাগানে ফুল কুড়াচ্ছে।

Set B:

1. Mr. and Mrs. Rahman are having dinner.
2. The girls and boys are playing in the field.
3. ছেলে-মেয়েরা বাগানে ফুল কুড়াচ্ছে।

Then they were asked to rate the sentences as follows:

A= The sentence is absolutely fine

B= Something is strange

C= Not sure

D= The sentence is definitely wrong

The data of this survey have also been presented using bar graphs.

3.0 Literature Review

Sexism terminologically can be defined as a set of attitudes and behaviors towards people that judge or belittle them on the basis of their gender. Sexism comes in many different forms, such as blatant, covert, and subtle sexism (Benokraitis & Feagin 2000). Blatant sexism is defined as obviously unequal and unfair treatment of women relative to men, whereas covert sexism is defined as unequal and as an unfair treatment of women that is recognized but purposefully hidden from view. In comparison to these two forms, subtle sexism represents unequal and unfair treatment of women that is not recognized by many people because it is perceived to be normative, and therefore does not appear unusual. (Swim 2004)

Sexist language is an example of subtle sexism in that it consists of speech that reinforces and perpetuates gender stereotypes and status differences between women and men (Swim 2004) Sara Mills takes a fresh and critical look at sexism in language and argues that even in feminist circles it has become a problematic concept. Drawing on conversational and textual data collected over the

past ten years, and with reference to recent research carried out in a range of different academic disciplines, Mills speaks along the lines of Benokraitis & Feagin and suggests two forms of sexism overt and indirect. Overt sexism is clear and unambiguous, while indirect sexism can only be understood contextually in relation to the interpretation of surrounding utterances. Indirect sexism is extremely common and thus she believes that we need new ways to challenge and analyze its use in language.

Dale Spender discusses David Spencer's view on sexism in language and suggests that according to Spencer, the edifice of male supremacy has been assembled in every aspect of language from its structure to its function of use. It is the male that has constructed language with little or no contribution from women. A semantic rule which can be seen functional in the language is that of the male-as-norm. Spencer states that while this rule operates people are required to classify the world on the premise that the standard or normal human being is a male one and when there is but one standard, then those who are not of it are allocated to a category of deviation. Hence the status of the female is derived from that of the male (Spender 147).

Male pronouns serve as general terms that include both the male and female. The term *mankind* is used to refer to both men and women. However when Thomas Jefferson wrote in the US Declaration of Independence that "all men are created equal" and "governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," he was not using *men* as a general term to include women. His use of the word *men* was precise because at the time women could not vote. (Kaufman10)

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, male pronouns were not used to refer to both males and females. The pronoun *they* was used to refer to people of either sex even if the referent was a singular noun, as shown by Lord Chesterfield's statement in 1759 as quoted by Spender: "If a person is born of a gloomy temper...they cannot help it." By the eighteenth century, grammarians (males) created the rule designating the male pronouns as the general term, and it wasn't until the nineteenth century that the rule was applied widely, after the act of Parliament in Britain in 1850 sanctioned its use. (Spender 150)

Language is not a transparent carrier of meanings, but it is a medium which imposes its own constraints on the meaning which is constructed. Language is seen very much as a social phenomenon. Mills mentions several critical linguists including Hodge and Kress who have shown that meaning does not simply reside in a text but is the result of the process of negotiations and a set of relations between the social system within which the text is produced and consumed, the writer and the reader. They go on to show that this process of using language to define oneself can have effects on the language system as a whole and ultimately on the way that society is structured (Mills 9).

Language can reflect sexism in society. Language itself may not be sexist, while it can connote sexist attitudes. Words of a language are not intrinsically good or bad but reflect individual or societal values. Hence the words people use to refer to certain individuals or groups reflect their individual nonlinguistic attitudes and may also reflect the culture and views of society. One speaker may use a word with positive connotations while another speaker may select a different word with negative connotations to refer to the same person. For example, the same individual may be referred to as a *girl* by one group and as a *chick* by another.

Another example of sexist views expressed through language is proverbs. Lois Kerschen points out that, proverbs in America have originated as a part of folklore¹. He adds that one of the functions of folklore is that of a propaganda, as folklore is the perpetuation of tradition. The stories, proverbs, and other forms are a legacy of the customs, beliefs, and practices of one generation to the next. If one wants to explore the historical image of women in oral tradition, proverbs are an ideal subject since while being brief, they are perhaps the best indicators of attitudes and beliefs of any of the forms of folklore (Kerschen 2).

Noted folklore author Alan Dundes has provided the following characteristics concerning male-female images from American folklore:

1. Boys are discussed first and discussed in terms of strength and largeness
2. Girls are associated with sweet foodstuff, smallness, and a playful nature.
3. Domestic servitude, as in homemaking and housekeeping is defined for women.
4. Women are passive.

5. Women are expected to marry. The penalty for not doing so is to be the butt of cruel sayings and games about old maids.
6. The female path is that of love, marriage, and childbearing, not in careers like doctors, lawyer, Indian chief (Kerschen 2).

There is a current feminist criticism which justly maintains that consciousness - raising does not remove males from the influential positions in society nor does it provide women with equitable wages. (Spender, 6) Too much emphasis in scrutinizing language and discovering sexism embedded in it gives rise to extreme political correctness. A deeper variant of these arguments involves the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which suggestion that our language shapes our thought processes and that in order to eliminate sexism we would do well to eliminate "sexist" forms from our language. Some people dismiss the effectiveness of such a suggestion, viewing 'non-sexist language' as irrelevant window-dressing which merely hides sexist attitudes rather than changing them (Spender 6).

People may use sexist language for a variety of reasons. They may do so because it is traditional, it is ingrained in current written and spoken language and can be difficult to change, they lack knowledge about what constitutes sexist language, they do not believe that such language is sexist, or they are attempting to protect established social hierarchies (Swim 2004).

4.0. Analysing Sexism at Various Linguistic Levels

Sexism exists at various linguistic levels. The levels that this paper will concentrate on are morphological level, phrasal, and semantic. Under the morphological level there is inflection which concentrates on how a feminine word in a pair is formed by adding an *affix* to the masculine base word. Then comes the generic terms where it is shown how male terms are used neutrally. Under alignment of male and female terms it is shown how the male term always comes before the female term. Occupational Lexis delves in the denotation linked with given occupations. Sexism and naming looks at how women are addressed through names and titles.

The next level that this paper concentrates on is the phrasal level. Under this topic different types of metaphors, similes and proverbs will be analyzed.

Sexism at the semantic level looks at how many pairs of terms differentiated by sex alone have over time gained different connotations.

4.1 Sexism at the morphological/lexical level

4.1.1 Inflection/affixation

A close look at the internal structure of words will reveal that many pairs of words with masculine and feminine forms reflect a view of women as the deviant or subordinate group. In nearly all such pairs, the masculine word is considered the base, with some kind of a feminine word or affix being added.

In English there are about 200 or more such pairs, a few examples being heir - heiress, hero - heroine, steward - stewardess, usher - usherette, lion - lioness, prince - princess, actor - actress. Certainly, it is not difficult to see how the attachment of the feminine suffixes '-ess' and '-ette' to *prince* and *usher* respectively to form feminine words indicates the significance of the female only as an addition to the male.

The male form is the unmarked form, and therefore, it is argued, implicitly the main form.

The masculine form is the one from which compounds are made, e.g., from king - queen comes kingdom but not queendom, from sportsman - sports lady comes sportsmanship but not sportsladyship.

In Bengali there is a wide range of suffixes added to the male form to signal the female.

Table 1: Suffixes added in Bengali with the male form to signal the female term.

Suffix	Pairs of masculine and feminine words
আ	মুখ-মুখা, বৃদ্ধ-বৃদ্ধা
ঈ	ছাত্র-ছাত্রী, কুমার-কুমারী, নর্তক-নর্তকী, নদ-নদী
আনী	চাকর-চাকরানী, মেথর-মেথরানী
ইনী	নাগ-নাগিনী
নি	কামার-কামারিনি, জেলে-জেলেনি, বাঘ-বাঘিনি
ন	নাতি-নাতিন, ঠাকুর-ঠাকুরন
আইন	বেয়াই-বেয়াইন, হুজুর-হুজুরাইন
ত-ত্রি	দাতা-দাত্রি, ধাতা-ধাত্রি, অভিনেতা-অভিনেত্রি

4.1.2 Generic terms

Generic structures provide further evidence to show the sexism encoded in the language. Words like 'generic' *he* and *man* can be said to render women invisible. Even when a context is clearly

specified as gender-neutral (e.g. describing a student in a co-educational institution), male terms used 'neutrally' induce people to think of males.

Words such as chairman, salesman, and mankind are just a few examples. It is amazing to see how even sociolinguists was insensitive to its use until recently.

Here is a list of sexist terms and how they may be avoided

Table 2: Sexist terms and their alternatives.

To be avoided	To be preferred
Mankind	Humanity, human beings, human race, people, humankind, humans
Man's achievements	Human achievements, our achievements
The best man for the job	The best person (or candidate) for the job
Man-made	artificial, manufactured, constructed
Manpower	Workers, workforce, staff, labor, human resources
Man	People, humankind, men and women, women and men, individuals, human beings, person, the individual
Man the desk	Staff the desk, be at the desk
Chairman	Chairperson, Chair

Even in religion we see the use of the male pronoun to refer to God. *I love God and he loves me*. However, in Bengali, gender neutral pronouns *তুমি*, and *তিনি* exist, as do words like *মানুষ*, an inclusive term unlike the English man or mankind. However Bengali is not void of the so called generic terms. Words like *ছেলেধরা*, *ছেলেবেলা*, *ছেলেখেলা*, *ছেলেমানুষি*, *প্রথম পুরুষ*, *দ্বিতীয় পুরুষ*, *তৃতীয় পুরুষ* ...

5.1.3 Alignment of male and female terms

The belief that males come first in the natural order can be seen in the alignment of male and female terms. This can be seen both in English and Bengali, where the male term comes before the

female term. *Mr. and Mrs., boys and girls, brother and sister* are just a few of the many examples in English.

The only time, however, the female comes before the male is in situations regarding marriage and sex, e.g. *bride and groom, prostitute and male prostitute*. Another example is *ladies and gentlemen*.

Examples in Bengali are ছাত্র-ছাত্রী, দাদা-দাদি, ভাই-বোন, রাজা-রানী, স্বামী-স্ত্রী, নাতি-নাতিনি etc.

The author of the paper conducted a survey to check the concept of alignment of male and female terms in people. The subjects were given a set of grammatically correct Bengali and English sentences. Four such sets were made in which each pair of sets had the same sentences but had the order of the male and female term altered. Example of the questionnaires:

Set A:

- 1) Mrs. and Mr. Rahman are having dinner.
- 2) The boys and girls are playing in the field.
- 3) মেয়ে-ছেলেরা বাগানে ফুল কুড়াচ্ছে।
- 4) এই বিদ্যালয়ের ছাত্র-ছাত্রীরা বেশ মেধাবী।
- 5) My father and mother are going to Spain on a holiday.
- 6) আমার নাতি-নাতিনিরা বড়ো হয়ে যাচ্ছে।

Set B:

- 1) Mr. and Mrs. Rahman are having dinner.
- 2) The girls and boys are playing in the field.
- 3) ছেলে-মেয়েরা বাগানে ফুল কুড়াচ্ছে।
- 4) এই বিদ্যালয়ের ছাত্রী-ছাত্ররা বেশ মেধাবী।
- 5) My mother and father are going to Spain on a holiday
- 6) আমার নাতিনি-নাতিরা বড়ো হয়ে যাচ্ছে।

Then they were asked to rate the sentences as follows:

A= The sentence is absolutely fine

B= Something is strange

C= Not sure or

D= The sentence is definitely wrong

Hypothesis: The male term is always placed before the female term and people perceive this to be the natural order of alignment.

Number of subjects: Ten (Bilingual)

Method used: Questionnaire

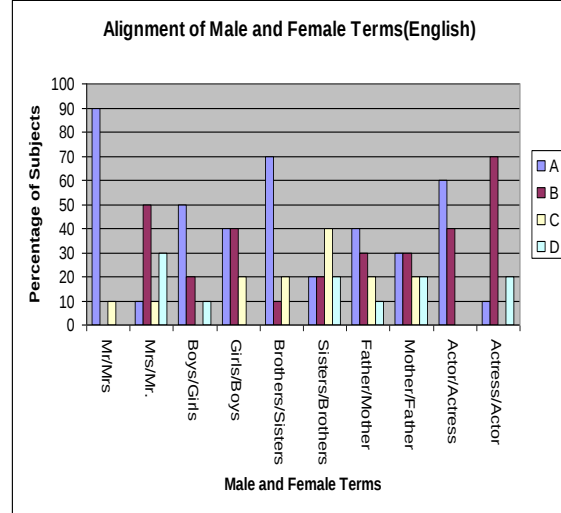


Figure:1 Alignment of male and female terms in English

From this bar chart it can be said that every time the usual order of male before female was reversed, the percentage of A fell drastically and that of B, C and D increased. For example the percentage of A in the sentence having the order brothers-sisters is 70. However when the order is reversed in another sentence i.e. to Sisters-Brothers, the percentage of A drops to 20. The percentage of C increases from 20 to 40 percent and that of D increases from a 0 to 20 percent.

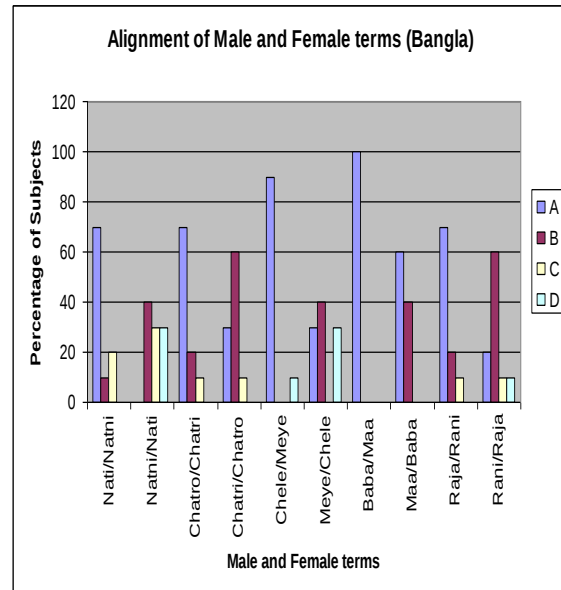


Figure:2 Alignment of male and female terms in Bengali
The same can be said for Bengali male and female terms. For মা-বাবা not only did the percentage of A

drop from a 100 percent to 60 percent, 40 percent of the people rated it with a B.

This shows that people do consider the natural order of alignment of male and female terms to be male before female. The same can be said for Bengali male and female terms. For মা-বাবা not only did the percentage of A drop from a 100 percent to 60 percent, 40 percent of the people rated it with a B. This shows that people do consider the natural order of alignment of male and female terms to be male before female.

5.1.4.Occupational Lexis

There are many nouns that denote workers in a given occupation. People assume someone's gender because of its association with that word. In some cases they may seem gender-neutral like teacher and social-worker, but others like doctor, nurse, and astronaut may have gender neutral denotation but no gender neutral connotation. This will be reflected in forms such as male nurse.

The author conducted a survey to check whether people are aware that certain terms like nurse, astronaut, policeman, কবি, কবিরাজ etc are for both male and female i.e. have gender neutral denotation. A list of words was given and the subjects were asked to allocate the words under any of the three headings- male, female, male and female. The words were *policeman, guard, editor, mother, secretary, pilot, brother, uncle, secretary, leader, interviewer, reporter, astronaut, saleswoman, soldier, nurse, doctor, scientist* and *chef*.

Hypothesis: People are aware of the gender neutral denotations of words.

Number of Subjects: Ten (Bilingual)

Method: Questionnaire

From the bar graph it can be observed that except for nurse and policeman, people are aware that words like guard, pilot, secretary etc are used to refer to both male and female.

Another survey was conducted following the previous one where the connotations of such words were tested. An interview was carried out where the bilingual subjects were asked to point out the gender of the image they visualize upon hearing the specific words: policeman, guard, secretary, pilot,

leader, reporter, astronaut, soldier, doctor, scientist, nurse, কবি, কবিরাজ, ডাক্তার, শিক্ষক, মুক্তিযোদ্ধা.

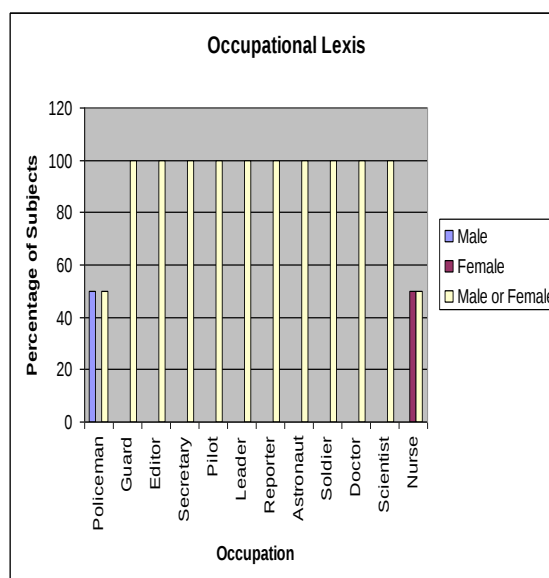


Figure 3: Occupational Lexis (English)

Hypothesis: Despite being aware of the gender neutral denotation of certain words, people apply the gender biased connotations.

Number of Subjects: Ten (Bilingual)

Method: Questionnaire

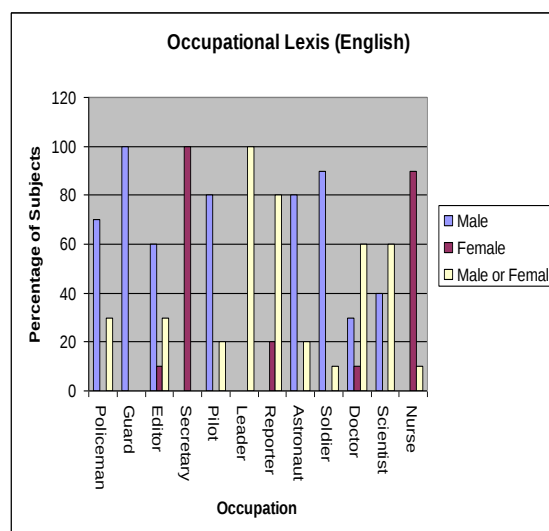


Figure 4: People's perception of Occupational Lexis (English)

When asked to visualize, the perception of respondents changed radically. Previously they had agreed that the words mentioned above are used to refer to both men and women but this time the

scenario was quite different. Occupations like secretary and nurse were dominantly female whereas guards, pilots, astronauts, policemen, soldiers were mostly male. There were a few exceptions such as doctor, scientist, reporter and leader.

In case of Bengali the results were almost similar. The data have been presented in the graph below.

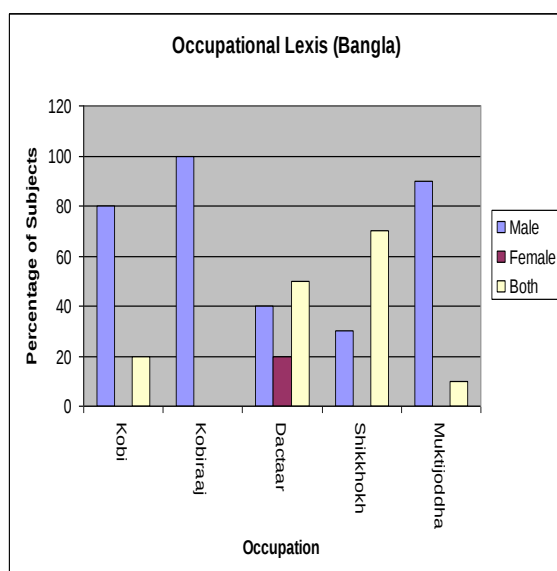


Figure: 4 People's perception of Occupational Lexis (Bengali)

Gender neutral terms like কবি, কবিরাজ, ডাক্তার, শিক্ষক, মুক্তিযোদ্ধা were predominantly visualized as male.

5.1.5 Sexism and Naming

Married women resent being identified only under their husband's names. Etiquette books used to teach that if a woman had Mrs. in front of her name, then the husband's name should follow because Mrs. is an abbreviated form of Mistress and a woman couldn't be a mistress of herself. Feminists hoped to simplify matters by introducing Ms. as an alternative to Mrs. and Miss.

In some European countries women are known by their father's name rather than that of their husband- for example Anna Karenina in Russia or Sveinbjorg Sigurdardittir in Iceland. Is it a better convention than taking up the husband's name or merely a different kind of sexism?

Currently many women are changing their names and instead of taking the name of either their father

or their husband they are coining new, autonomous names for themselves; for example, Cheris Kramer has become Cheris Kramarae, Julia Stanley has become Julia Penelope- there are almost countless examples of this change. A common practice has become that of taking the first name of a close female friend or relative – such as mother- as the new family name (for example, Elizabeth Saarah, Janet Robyn)

In Bengali, girls are often given names without any last names. They are names such as Fatema Akhter, Umme Kulsum etc.

6.0 Sexism at the phrasal level

6.1 Metaphors and Similes

Women are passive and men are active. The metaphors available to describe women include an astonishing high number of derogatory images compared to those available for men.

Animal Imagery

In the English language, males *roar*, *growl*, or *bellow* whereas females *squeal*, *shriek* or *purr*. Animal metaphors also illustrate the different expectations for males and females. Men are referred to as studs, bucks, and wolves while women are referred to with such metaphors as kitten, bunny, chick, and lamb. Some animal metaphors that are used predominantly with men have negative connotations based on the size and/or strength of the animals, e.g., beast, bullheaded, jackass, rat, loan shark, and vulture. Negative metaphors used with women are based on smaller animals, e.g., social butterfly, mousy, catty, and vixen. The feminine terms connote action, but not the same kind of large scale action as with the masculine terms.

Unlike English not too many animal imageries discriminatory to women in Bengali were found, and a significant number of the imageries are neutral referring to both men and women such as শিয়াল (cunning), গাধা-গাধি (where both the terms are disapproving in terms of intelligence), কুত্তা (a slang).

The only form of sexism is revealed through certain metaphors where women are specifically associated with small animals lacking strength,

such as small birds. Men are associated with animals with strength such as বাঘ (courageous).

Food Metaphors

Another example of passive and active is in relation to the differences in food metaphors. Food, of course, is a passive substance just waiting to be eaten. Thus, names like peach, cookie, a dish, sugar, or sweetie-pie are often used as nicknames for woman. In Bengali saccharine terms such as মিষ্টি are used for females.

Miscellaneous/ Other Metaphors

Bengali is a language where a lot of emphasis is placed on the facial features of a woman. This can be seen encoded in the Bengali language through similes. There are several similes comparing the facial features of a woman to non-human things. For example: আপেলের মত গাল, evwkui মত নাক, মূলার মত দাঁত, হরিণের মত চোখ. A lot of emphasis is also put on a woman's voice, e.g. মধুর মত. This exposes reality and thought. When a man is asked to describe his ideal woman, he describes her with such similes. There is little reference to her intelligence.

6.2 Marriage and Language

The grammar used in talking or writing about weddings shows the expectation of men playing „an active role. Men wed women while women become brides of men. In the traditional ceremony, the official asks, “Who gives the bride away?” and the father answers, “I do.” Some fathers answer, “Her mother and I do,” but that doesn't solve the problem inherent in the question that a bride is something to be handed over.

In Bengali there exists a similar situation. When talking about the wedding to be held of a man we say “মানিক বিয়ে করেছে” and in the case of a woman we say “তার বিয়ে হয়েছে।” When a man is going to get married he says “বিয়ে করব” and a woman says “বিয়ে বসব” The man plays the active role.

6.3 Proverbs

There are many formal records of culture that compose the heritage of people. One such record is

folklore. Folklore or “voice of the folk” is an oral tradition in sounds, stories, myths, legends, riddles, rhymes, jokes, games, sayings, proverbs but it is also dances, crafts etc. Folklore is a collection of beliefs, customs and practices of people and thus an expression of its culture.

The nature of proverbs is such that, while they are brief, they are perhaps the best indicators of attitudes and beliefs of any of the other forms. Therefore if one wants to explore the historical image of women in oral tradition, proverbs are an ideal subject.

Proverbs about women tend to reflect the old habit of setting ‘us’ against ‘them’, not in terms of culture but in terms of sexual embodiment.

Since proverbs are a good indicator of attitudes and beliefs, they are used by modern psychologists as part of their diagnostic testing material. Proverbs have been used to test for personality traits, attitude, schizophrenia, depression, cerebral disease, abstracting function and cognition.

There are proverbs about women referring to and defining the ideal shape and significance of almost every part of her body ranging from the head to the foot. Schipper provides a list of such proverbs from different languages.

- *Women and candle, twist their necks if you want them at their best.* (Spanish)
- *Beauty you have got, my daughter, and intelligence I will buy for you* (Ladino, Morocco)
- *A woman has the shape of an angel, the heart of a snake, and the brains of an ass.* (German)
- *A house's beauty is in (the use of) water and a broom; a girl's, in her eyes and eyebrows.* (Persian)
- *If it is the beauty of her lips, it is beauty of her sex.* (Bisa)
- *A hairy man's rich, a hairy wife's a bitch.* (English)
- *A woman is like the merino sheep- she is judged by her backside.* (Sotho, Lesotho/ South Africa)
- *Look for someone who has short feet, because one who has long feet is your fellow-male.* (Malawi) (39- 63)

There are many proverbs that define the characteristics of a woman. Proverbs provide a

long list of characteristics for women: They are slow, gentle, bashful, never satisfied, vivacious, affectionate, curious, pale, mysterious, stubborn etc. Kerschen provides us a list:

There are two kinds of women: those who take what you are and those who take what you have. (New Jersey, North California).

A woman's tears are a fountain of craft. (English; Pacific Northwest).

Maids want nothing but husbands, and then they want everything.

An opinion formed by a woman is inflexible; the fact is not half so stubborn.

There are many other proverbs about women under different categories. One such category is 'Widows.' Women were considered to be murderers of their spouses for reasons of economic profit and inheritance. Schipper thus comes up with examples:

- *Never marry a widow unless her [first] husband was hanged.* (English, UK/USA).
- *A woman who buries a husband does not mind burying another one.* (French)
- *The man who marries a widow should expect to suffer a few deaths in the family.* (Spanish, Mexico).
- *You flirted with the widow, but do you know what killed her husband? [Warning not to marry a widow too quickly.]* (Bassar, Togo).

A widow is associated with the power of death, simply because death has visited her house and seized her husband. In proverbs no such observations about widowers exist, and hardly any concerning a widow's cheerfulness after the death of a husband (Schipper 120).

Another very common category among proverbs is mothers-in-law versus daughters-in-law. As much as mothers are adorned and praised, mothers-in-law are detested in proverbs, and they do not like their daughters-in-law either. Once again Schipper gives examples:

- *Who counts on his mother-in-law's soup, will go to sleep without dinner.* (Creole, Dominican Republic).

- *Never rely on the glory of a morning or on the smiles of your mother-in-law.* (Japanese).
- *Friendship between mother-in-law and daughters-in-law only goes as deep as the teeth [of the smile].* (Portuguese, Brazil).
- *The tail of a pike is always black; nowhere in the world will you find a good mother-in-law.* (Bengali, Bangladesh).

In proverbs, mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law quarrel at the slightest provocation. Living together 'is like introducing a pestilence in the house' as a Thai proverb puts it.

- *The daughter-in-law has taken the oath to love her mother-in-law on the day when charcoal turns white.* (Arabic, Morocco)
- *Where a hundred soldiers fit, a mother-in-law with her daughter-in-law doesn't.* (Estonian) (Schipper 142)

Women are most severely denounced in these Bengali proverbs; for instance, *ঝি জাব্দা শিলে, বউ জাব্দা কিলে* / *jhi jobdo shile, bou jobdo kile* (teach your maid-servant a lesson by giving her a tough tool to use and teach your daughter-in-law with your fist, meaning maid-servants should be given hard tasks and a daughter-in-law a beating), *শাশুরি মালা সকালে, খেয়ে দেয়ে সময় থাকে তো কাঁদব আমি বিকেলে* / *shashuri mala sokale, khey deye somoy thake to kadbo ami bikale* (my mother-in-law died in the morning and I'll try to weep over her if I have time at the day's end, meaning indifference on the part of a wife to her mother-in-law), *ননদিনি রায়বাগিনি, দান্দিয়ে আছে কাল-শাপিনী* / *nonodini raybaghini, dandiye achhe kal-shapini* (my husband's sister is like a tigress, standing like a venomous snake, referring to the rivalry between the wife and the husband's sister), *শ্বশুরবাড়ী মধুর হাড়ী, তিন দিন পর ঝাটার বাড়ি* / *shashurbari madhur hari, tin din por jhatar bari* (a father-in-law's house is most hospitable, but only for three days, meaning fish and visitors smell in three days), *দুই সতঃনর ঘর, খোদাই রক্ষা কর* / *dui sotiner ghor, khodai rakkha kor* (Only God can save the family of a man with co-wives), etc. (Bengalipedia)

7.0 Sexism at the semantic level

7.1 Connotations

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, the structure of a particular language influences the habitual thought of its speakers. Different language patterns yield different patterns of thought. It is language which constructs our reality.

Examples supporting this hypothesis would be : The word for *key* in German(*Türschlüssel*) is masculine, so German speakers think of them as hard, heavy, jagged, metal, serrated and useful; but *key* is feminine in Spanish(*llave*), so Spanish speakers describe them as golden, intricate, little, lovely, shiny and tiny. Also, the word for *bridge* in German(*Brücke*) is feminine, so German speakers describe bridges as beautiful, elegant, fragile, peaceful, pretty and slender; but bridges are masculine in Spanish(*punte*), so they are big, dangerous, long, strong, sturdy and towering.

The idea that linguistic structure influences the cognition of language users has bearings on the fields of anthropological linguistics, psychology, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, cognitive science, linguistic anthropology, sociology of language and philosophy of language, and it has been the subject of extensive studies in all of these fields. The idea of linguistic influences on thought has also captivated the minds of authors and creative artists inspiring numerous ideas in literature, in the creation of artificial languages and even forms of therapy such as neuro-linguistic programming.

The idea was first expressed clearly in the German national romantic thought of the early 19th century where language was seen as the expression of the spirit of a nation, as put particularly by Wilhelm von Humboldt. It was later embraced by figures in the incipient school of American anthropology such as Franz Boas and Edward Sapir. Sapir's student Benjamin Lee Whorf added observations of how he perceived these linguistic differences to have consequences in human cognition and behaviour. Whorf has since been seen as the primary proponent of the principle of linguistic relativity.

When there is a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist. It is by this means that sexism can be perpetuated and reinforced as new objects and events, new data, have sexist interpretations projected upon them. It is because of this many pairs of terms differentiated by sex

alone have over time gained different connotations.

Table 3: Pairs of Male and Female terms

Male	Female
Master	Mistress
Governor	Governess
Courtier	Courtesan
Sir	Madam
Host	Hostess
Bachelor	Spinster
Priest	Priestess
Patron	Matron

In all of these terms the female-specific term is used to refer to someone of lower status and frequently having an overlaid sexual connotation. “Patron” and “matron” have such different levels of prestige that women try to borrow the more positive masculine connotations with the word patroness, literally “female father.” Such a peculiar term came about because of the high prestige attached to patron in such phrases as a patron of the arts or a patron saint. “Matron” is more apt to be used in talking about a woman in charge of a jail or a public restroom. (Mills, 84)

The terms “master” and “sir” still have retained their associations of power and prestige, but their female terms have acquired sexual and non-prestigious meaning. “Bachelor” (as compared to “spinster” or “old maid”) has such positive connotations that women try to adopt them by using the term bachelor-girl or bachelorette. Priest-Priestess are equivalent terms without the same connotations. “Priest” refers to someone who has power and status within the established church, whereas “priestess” refers to someone who organizes religious ceremonies in a cult outside the Christian faith. It has fairly negative connotations for most people. (Mills 84)

A callboy is the person who calls actors when it is time to go on stage and a call girl is a prostitute. If a man has a client he is a businessman and if a woman has a client she is a prostitute. If a man is a pro he is competent but if a woman is pro it is interpreted as a promiscuous woman. Wizard and witch contrast almost as much. The masculine wizard implies skill and wisdom combined with magic, while the feminine witch implies evil intentions combined with magic.

Language is at once the expression of a culture and a part of it. Just as changes in language may be understood by an examination of the social and historical context in which it is used, so may social attitudes be illuminated by a study of language change. (Mills 12)

8.0 Limitations of the study

In contrast to the data that was available for English, the resources for Bengali were very limited. Thus the examples provided in English are far greater in number than those in Bengali. Time was also a constraint. The research was carried out within a specific period. It is also a small scale research. Thus the sample size for the different surveys conducted was also small. Hence it is difficult to generalize findings based on such a small scale study. A large scale research could have offered a clearer view of sexism in language and how people perceive it.

Conclusion

This paper reveals the extent of sexism involved in language and how history as well as people, at present time, is playing a role in establishing or perpetuating it.

In this research the number of examples of sexism found in Bengali was much less than that of English. One of the reasons could be that Bengali has not been studied extensively in this respect.

Although sexism appears to be deeply integrated within different linguistic levels, a conscious effort for reformation in order to use inclusive language can be found amongst the educated and conscientious members of society. For example, In English it is now the norm to say 'he' or 'she' or 'they' when speaking about individuals whose names are not known. Leading publishers have developed guidelines to help writers use language that is fair to both sexes, and most newspapers and magazines list women by their own names instead of their husbands' names. Another example can be found in business letters whereby the salutation, which was customarily "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen," is now replaced with "Dear Colleagues," "Dear Reader," or "Dear Committee Members." Similarly titles such as chairman, mailman etc. are giving way to chair or head, mailman to mail carrier, clergyman to clergy etc.

However, in order to change sexist language it is not enough to reform the language-use of the individual; the change has to be at an institutional level. Feminists have thus attempted to influence institutions to adopt policies concerning sexism, often as part of an overall equal opportunities policy. Many institutions, such as educational establishments, publishing houses and organizations like the British Sociological Association, have developed gender-free or anti-sexist language policies, which advocate that care be taken to avoid sexist usage in documents. However, whilst changes have happened in the type of language which is used to describe women or the relative merits of either sex within these institutions, it is clear that such policies are not being adhered to in many documents and interactions. It is very difficult to attempt to formulate a policy which is sufficiently flexible and yet sufficiently limited in order to define sexist language and it is also very difficult to impose a policy on language-use.

Reformations such as these although linguistic, have a great sociological impact whereby when people are forced to make conscientious decisions regarding what pronouns they will use, what jokes they will tell or laugh at, how they will write their names, or how they will begin their letters, they are forced to think about the underlying issue of sexism, leading them to address a problem that begins with people's assumptions and expectations and hence is a problem that can be solved only when a great many people have given it a great deal of thought.

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