An Analysis of Sexism in Morphology and Semantics of English

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Abstract：

Language as a medium of vital importance for human communication reflects thinking patterns, attitudes and social culture. With the springing-up of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and the development of sociolinguistics, linguists paid more attention to the research of the relationship between language and gender. Sexism, especially the discrimination against females, has become one of the most heatedly-discussed topics in this field. This paper aims to explore the manifestations of sexual discrimination in morphology and semantics based on the research results at home and abroad. Moreover, by using comprehensive analysis methods, this thesis is going to analyze the causes of this phenomenon from the aspects of society and culture. In addition, the author intends to discuss the strategies from the linguistics perspective to eliminate sexual discrimination in English so as to enhance people's consciousness of gender equality.

Keywords: sexual discrimination, morphology, semantics, cause, avoiding strategy

1. Introduction
1.1 The Significance and Purpose
Sexism, as a social phenomenon which is the belief or attitude that one sex is paramount or superior to the other, is reflected not only in every aspect of social life but also in language. Undoubtedly, language is the mirror of sexual discrimination, especially the discrimination against females. With

the springing up of the women's liberation movement in the late 1960s and the development of sociolinguistics, the linguists paid more attention to the research of the relationship between language and gender and attached much greater importance to the language which is unfavorable to females.

The aim of this paper is to explore the manifestations of sexual discrimination in morphology and semantics. Besides, based on the theory of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, this thesis is going to analyze the causes of this phenomenon from the perspectives of society and culture. Finally, the author intends to discuss the strategies from a linguistic perspective to eliminate sexual discrimination in English to enhance people's understanding of gender equality.

1.2 Literature Review

According to Man Made Language (1980), Dale Spender believes that English is man-made, one of the essential factors of women's oppression. In other words, language is not neutral but biased towards the male who always dominates society as well as language. As a result of long-term historical reasons, men's language is regarded as the standard language, while women just work as the appurtenance. For example, there is a convention in many countries that unmarried women are named after their fathers, while after marriage, they need to name after their husbands. In Women Changing Language (1998), the author thoroughly analyzed the phenomenon of sexism in different societies and several languages. Apparently, this reflects a universal reality of sexual discrimination in the global range. "Men as the norm (generic use of masculine terms), women as a deviation from this male norm" (Pauwels, 1998, p. 32).

As R. A. Hudson argues in the book Sociolinguistics (1996), language itself does not exist but reflects the sex discrimination of language users. Actually, gender discrimination against females in the language is by no means restricted to those isolated words and syntax forms. It is more of personal attitudes and social situations than a mere linguistic phenomenon.

Many linguists cling to the belief that there exists a significant difference between males and females in using languages. They will choose different ways to give their voice and express their thoughts. For instance, women tend to use a soft tone instead of using offensive diction; be gentle and euphemistic. The work Words and Women (Miller & Swift, 1975), which mainly discusses the words used by the female and their linguistic manifestations, demonstrates much evidence of the traits of female language. Moreover, it is noticeable that the distinctive characteristics of women's language and their lower social status are deep-rooted, as Robin Lakoff (1957, p. 4) claims that "Women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways, which should be realized by all of us. At first, in the way they are taught to use language and treats them in general way". We can come to the conclusion that there is a long way to go to eliminate sexism in language, which requires joint efforts from both males and females.

1.3 The Research Questions and Research Method

This paper is going to analyze three research questions as follows:

First, how does sexual discrimination display in the morphology and semantics?

Second, what factors result in the phenomenon of sexual discrimination, and how do these factors contribute to this phenomenon? Third, how can we eliminate sexual discrimination from the linguistic perspective?

The primary research method is literature review. Based on the existing data, which come from scholarly articles, books on the subject, thesis and research papers, the author endeavors to have a further analysis. Other methods such as comparison, statistics, description and explanation are also employed to obtain the results.

2. Theoretical Basis: Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

There has existed a consistent controversy-- the relationship between thought and language for a long period of time. As we all know, language is mainly utilized by human beings in communication, which has a pretty close and complex connection with human beings' thoughts. Meanwhile, people′s thoughts manipulate language use and are reflected by the language we speak. Consequently, this paper is based on the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, which has a significant influence on the western linguistic field since the first half of the 20th century. According to this hypothesis, we human beings not only live in an objective world but a subjective one that are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for society (Edward Sapir, 1929). As a result, different language structures, especially syntax, will inevitably have an effect on people's thinking patterns so that different language users may have distinctive experiences and perspectives of the world. So, in the long run, language influences and restricts our thoughts on social affairs rather than just being controlled by it. For instance, there are more than ten words to describe different kinds of snow in Eskimos. Because of their unique language, the local people have a particular perception and understanding of the snow, even of the world. That is to say, to a large extent, people's thoughts are controlled and restricted by the language in return.

"The world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions that has to be organized by our minds--and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds" (B. L.Whorf, 1956, pp. 86-87).

Whorf raised two principles for the relationship between language and thought: one is linguistic determinism (strong version) that linguistic structure determines the cognitive structure, namely that learning a language determines and changes the way a person thinks and the way a person how to behave. The other is linguistic relativity (weak version) that the resulting cognitive systems are different in speakers of different languages; as it were, language can influence and reflect social reality to some extent.

Consequently, according to linguistic relativity, which was accepted by the majority of linguists and scholars, sexist language can reflect the social situation and has a significant effect on people's thinking mode of sexism and their awareness of gender equality. That is the reason why linguists endeavor to eliminate sexism, this social phenomenon, in terms of linguistic perspective. By using some linguistic strategies, such as avoiding using sexist language, they hope to gradually refresh people's conventional thinking and to change the situation of sexism step by step.

3. The Manifestation of Sexism in English
3.1 Sexism in Morphology
In English, there are many ways for word formation, such as affixation, conversion, compounding, back-formation, blending, etc. Compounding and affixation are two major ways to form new words, from which we can analyze sexism in English.

3.1.1 Affix.
Linguistic asymmetry is a common phenomenon in English word formation, which refers to the word that can only be used by males without the female form. Because the historical reason, English lexis is male-centered, so the majority of masculine terms are unmarked, which can refer to both male and female. However, its counterpart for the female is marked, which is only owned by females to describe their features. Generally speaking, the marked feminine words derive from unmarked masculine words plus bound morphemes, namely suffixes. Consequently, there is evidence to prove that the feminine word is the attachment to the masculine one; the female is the appurtenance of the male.

(1)-ess:	waiter-- waitress		poet-- poetess
	manger-- manageress		author-- authoress
	prince-- princess		God-- Goddess

Sometimes, the use of these marked words can emphasize the contribution made by the female, but the roles and the characteristics presented by these words are not of equal importance to males. For example, we tend to say "a general manager", but we rarely say "a general manageress", which seems to obey the norm and convention. In Britain, the highest honor for both outstanding poet and poetess is "Poet Laureate". Even though the laureate may be a female, it is impossible to award her as "Poetess Laureate" because "poetess" indicates that the female is inherently inferior to the male. Not to mention words like "Negress" and "Jewess" which are derogatory in meaning. So suffix "-ess" just exacerbates the prejudice and discrimination against females.

(2)	-ette: usher-- usherette		farmer-- farmerette
	jockey-- jockette		conqueror-- coquette
	major-- majorette		

The suffix "-ette" has three implications: first, it refers to the small size, such as cigarette,

kitchenette (small kitchen) and statuette (small statue). Second, it means something artificial and unnatural, such as leatherette, flannelette. Third, it indicates females and the subordinate position, such as usherette, majorette. The third intended meaning is extended by the first two superficial meanings, implying the weakness and function of subordination of females. It is evident that "-ette" expresses a strong sexist point of view--males and females are not equal.

There is an exception in the field of sex and marriage that the feminine word is unmarked, while the counterpart is marked. For instance:

(1) She is Peter′s widow.

(2) He is Lily′s widower.

Only the first expression is accepted even if the second one does not commit any grammatical mistakes, but it does not consistent with the social convention. It is common for men to remarry after the death of their wife, while it is also common for women to remain single after the death of their husbands. As a result, "widower" is marked, which is not frequently used by people in social life. According to this example, we can realize the oppression and discrimination against females from another aspect.

In the light of the Bible, men create the world, who are on behalf of the right, social status and authority, whereas women are just one rib of the men, functioning as ornament and decoration. Gradually, women have become the second sex, a kind of attachment to men as a result of social and cultural factors. This phenomenon is reflected a lot in the word formation: As female is the appurtenance of the male,   feminine words are comprised of masculine words combing suffixes. As for these suffixes, although they distinguish male from female, the derogatory meaning demonstrates the imbalance between male and female, the restriction of women′s human rights and the oppression of women's voices.

3.1.2 Compounding.

Compounding refers to combining two or more individual words together in order to generate a new word. Many words associated with professions are gender-neutral, which can be used to refer to both males and females. However, when we talk about them, we unconsciously associate them with only one sex, such as chairman, doctor, lawyer, professor, and engineer. The historical factors result in the fact that males monopolize these professions with high authority and social status only for a very long period, and women can just do some menial jobs. However, the female's profession has to add another word indicating sex to form a compound word so as to express the same meaning, like Madam chairman, female doctor, woman lawyer, female engineer.

What is more, many compound words exist comprised of "man". For example, "mankind", "manpower", and "man-made". As we all know, "man" can not only refer to the male but also the whole human being. Society is created by both sexes; nevertheless, we use "manpower" to refer to the labor force, which ignores the essential role and great contribution of females. Furthermore,

expressions like〝spokesman〞,〝businessman〞,〝freshman〞, and〝policeman〞also illustrate the unfairness to the females. Even though the newcomer is a female, we do not have an expression like "freshwoman".

The roots of many sexist compound words are masculine terms. For example,〝Kingdom〞is ruled by the king or queen, but even the kingdom under the reins of Elizabeth II, we do not accept the expression-- the United Queendom, but the United Kingdom; ancestors are called forefathers instead of foremothers; the leader is called father figure rather than a mother figure. These compound words, to some extent, reflect the dominance of males in the English-spoken countries, for women were in a disadvantageous situation in their careers in the past, which is the reason why females have to withstand the injustice.

3.2 Sexism in Semantics

From matriarchal society to patriarchal society, the role of males and females has experienced plenty of changes. Men become the dominance of society in the field of politics and economy, while women come back home, doing the housework every day as men's appurtenance. Because the female is constantly subjected to the male, in possession of low social status, we can find a number of words commending males and insulting females semantically.

3.2.1 Semantic change of feminine words.

Initially, some words can only refer to females who are well-educated and possess a relatively high social status. However, as time passes, these words are popularized by the public; all females can use these words no matter which class they belong to. Meanwhile, the counterpart of the male has no change at all. We take "lady" (corresponding to a gentleman) as an example, whose definition is women belonging to the upper class who have good manners and claim to social position. In contemporary English, "lady" can be seen as the euphemistic form of "woman", referring to all females in general. On account of this generalized phenomenon, "lady" and "man" has become a couple of conjugated words. In Britain, we can address a female shop assistant as a saleslady corresponding to a salesman. Nonetheless, this appellation made "lady" lose the original meaning of nobility, from a fair lady to an ordinary woman, whereas the corresponding "gentleman" maintains its original meaning of dignity without the form of "sales gentleman".

In old English, both "governor" and "governess" refer to the head of a particular territory. The title of Elizabeth I-- the supreme majesty and governess of all persons is an appropriate example to support this fact. However, the meaning of "governess" has changed into tutor or mistress, containing an insulting attitude to some degree. "Mister" and "mistress" refer to gentleman and lady respectively in the past, but "mistress" tends to mean a woman having a steady sexual relationship with a married man more often nowadays.

3.2.2 Derogatory sense of feminine words.

The unfairness to females can be found in English language use easily, for the masculine words can cover two sexes together, while the corresponding feminine words cannot. For example,

Man (male or human beings)--- woman (only female)

He (he or he and he)--- she (only she)

Dog(all dogs)--- bitch(female dog only)

Fox(male and female fox)---vixen (female fox only)

Animals are always used to describe people's characteristics and personalities in slang where female words tend to be derogatory while male words are on the contrary. Here comes an example: when it comes to "cat", its connotative meaning is an evil-minded woman; "bitch" refers to not only a female dog but also a prostitute. Conversely, "fox" is used to modify males in order to illustrate their intelligence and tact, expressing a respectable attitude and commendatory meaning.

A couple of conjugated words like "bachelor" and "spinster" are one of the most typical examples to demonstrate the semantic discrimination against females. According to the definition from a dictionary, bachelor refers to an unmarried man; spinster refers to a woman who remains single after the usual age for marrying or seems unlikely to marry. Obviously, the word "spinster" referring to the old virgin who is no longer young and difficult to get married, conveys an insulting point of view, whereas "bachelor" is totally different, for all the males reaching the age for marriage are called "bachelor". So, "bachelor" is a neutral word without any sexist bias and prejudice. Even the same word, modifying men and women at the same time can express different connotative meanings. Their meanings are positive for men, but if they refer to women, their meanings are usually derogatory. For example：

Tom is easy. (He is straightforward and easygoing.)

Amy is easy. (She is lascivious.)

Mike is cold. (He is steady and calm.)

Lily is cold. (She is social withdrawal.)

Peter is professional. (He achieves some accomplishments in a particular field.)

Helen is professional. (She is a professional prostitute.)

Jimmy is a tramp. (He is a person with no home or job who travels from place to place, usually asking people in the street for food and money.)

Cindy is a tramp. (She is a woman who has many sexual partners.)

4. The Causes of Sexism in Linguistics

4.1 Social Factor

Language, as an essential tool for human communication, has a close relationship with our society. Thus, it is necessary to take social factors into consideration when we analyze the cause of sexism. In terms of the social division of labor and social status, males and females have substantial

differences, resulting in women's low social status and restricted rights in social life. After entering the patriarchal society, the development of productivity enabled men to possess and control relatively more resources so as to occupy the dominant position in the economy. In contemporary society, income is not only a scale to measure people's wealth, but also an important indicator of people's social status. However, due to the prejudice against females, the majority of people tend to believe that woman is too naive to do those work, being devoid of high intelligence. As a result, women are more likely to do some work such as nurses, babysitters, and housewives, which contain low technical factors and less demand for labor so that the wage of women on average is lower 30%-50% than men even doing the same kind of work. Due to their weakness in the field of economics, they cannot totally obtain real power in family and society to get rid of the inferiority of men. As we all know, the economy determines politics. Lacking economic power, women stayed far away from the political stage without any voice for their political life. Instead, they had to dedicate themselves to their husbands, children, and families, restricted to set their stereotyped social image as sexual partners, housewives, and tools for reproduction.

Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution, the new emerging factories were in great demand of labor forces, so numerous women walked out of from homes and participated in social work. As women became increasingly active in the commercial economy, their social status improved more or less accordingly. However, even though their competence could be compared with the men, they are considered as half the labor force for physical reasons. Thus, it is impossible for women to earn the same salary as men even though they are doing the same work.

4.2 Cultural Factor

Language is culturally transmitted. In western countries, Holy Bible and Greek mythology play a crucial role in the field of culture, for beliefs, values and religions all can be traced back to them. In Bible, God creates everything, and his son Jesus saves the world. The first male figure created by God is Adam, while Eve, the first female figure in the world, is made by one rib of Adam. Therefore people tend to hold the belief that women are just accessories to men. Moreover, Eve, on behalf of women, took the forbidden fruit, leaving an impression to people that women are characterized as simple-minded and irresistible to tempt.

In Greek mythology, the majority of male gods are authoritative and dominating, whereas most female gods tend to be negative. For instance, Medea killed her children in order to have revenge on her husband; Pandora opened the box which contained all the evils of the world. These evils then escaped from the box and spread all over the world. Due to this, Pandora's box is extended to symbolize disaster and misfortune. Influenced by such cultural awareness, several words and slang are created to despise women in English. One positive and influential figure in the Bible we can find is Maria, the mother of Jesus Christ, whose main responsibilities are to do housework and reproduce new lives. On the stark contrary, nearly all these influential figures are male gods. In

other words, Bible can be regarded as a book of men.

Furthermore, the education inequality between males and females is one of the primary reasons women face discrimination after entering the workplace. Actually, the main reason is that women have few opportunities to access education, particularly higher education. In the past, some western countries only allowed women to accept some respects of education because women's comprehensive quality and competitive power were lower than the males in general. Therefore, women are devoid of "weapons" and competence to fight the sexist discrimination against themselves.

5. Solutions to Eliminate Sexism in English

With the development of our society and the enhancement of women's social status, they began to appeal for equal rights with men in the field of economics, politics and social activities. Influenced by the feminine movement in the 1960s, more and more females walked out of home, received higher education and possessed political voice gradually. They aimed to transform the male-dominated situation, to eliminate the sexual discrimination in language. We are going to talk about the strategies to solve this issue from the linguistic perspective as follows：

（1）We are supposed to use these neuter words, such as person, people, human, and human beings, instead of using words like man, mankind to refer to people. For example, all men are equally treated in front of the law. → All people are equally treated in front of the law. The great civilization of mankind was shaped by the masses. → Great civilization of humankind was built by the masses.

（2）Avoid using the compound words comprised of the word "man" to cover both sexes. If the person's sex is already known, we are supposed to use "man" to refer to males and "woman" to refer to females respectively, such as spokeswoman, chairwoman, and saleswoman. If the sex is not known yet, the neuter words can substitute the unclear sex in order to avoid inevitable awkwardness, like salesman or saleswoman → sales person, fireman→ firefighter.

（3）We should not put emphasis on the sex especially, such as using the modifier "woman" and "madam", and avoid using sexist affixes, like -ess, -ette—for example, woman professor→ professor, poetess→ poet. If the sex must be clarified, we had better choose "male" and "female" to modify. Like woman polite→ female polite.

（4）We are supposed to use the terms he or she, his or her, him or her to substitute he, his and him to refer to both sexes. For instance: If a person commits mistakes, he will be punished. → If a person commits mistakes, he or she will be punished. A good parent should care about the growth of his children. → A good parent should care about the growth of his or her children. You need to follow the teacher carefully and give him your response in time. → You need to follow the teacher carefully and give him or her your response in time.

（5）As for some professions with stereotyped impressions in people's minds, we have already

linked them with definite sex. For example, when it comes to the profession like nurses, secretaries or kindergarten teachers, it is inevitable for us to associate them with females so that we will use "she" naturally. Similarly, politicians, lawyers and scientists are considered typical jobs for males, so we tend to use "he" to refer to them. In order to solve this problem, we can use "they" to replace "she" or " he". For instance, the scientist...he...→ the scientists... they...

（6）We need to pay attention to using the appellation that discriminates against women, like little woman, better half, the fair sex. Also, some sayings with conventional bias should be avoided, such as cautious men and timid women, ambitious men and aggressive women.

6. Conclusion

This paper introduces the theoretical basis -- relativity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, demonstrates the specific manifestations from dimensions of morphology and semantics, and traces back to the social and cultural causes to analyze the essence of sexism. Finally, it endeavors to propose some tactics to eliminate this problem in English from a linguistic perspective in order to refresh people′s awareness of gender equality. As a matter of fact, the sexual discrimination against females we discuss in the field of language is a social issue in essence, which is the reflection of people′s thinking patterns. In this man-dominated society, women are shouldering the responsibilities to transform people′s traditional sexist attitude towards themselves, prove that they can perform as well as men in both intelligence and competence and strive for their human rights, social status as well as voices in any field. Only women who possess such awareness and become stronger can fight for their rights to eliminate sexism in languages. To realize real gender equality is a long way to go, so everyone, no matter male or female, is supposed to bear this value in mind and make every effort to undertake this mission in order to establish a harmonious society.

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