Illustration

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SEXISM AND LANGUAGE

Over the last hundred years, American anthropologists have travelled to the corners of the earth to study primitive cultures. They either became linguists themselves or they took linguists with them to help in learning and analyzing languages. Even if the culture was one that no longer existed, they were interested in learning its language because besides being tools of communication, the vocabulary and structure of a language tell much about the values held by its speakers.

However, the culture need not be primitive, nor do the people making observations need to be anthropologists and linguists. Anyone living in the United States who listens with a keen ear or reads with a perceptive eye can come up with startling new insights about the way American English reflects our values.

Animal Terms for People—Mirrors of the Double Standard

If we look at just one semantic area of English, that of animal terms in relation to people, we can uncover some interesting insights into how our culture views males and females. References to identical animals can have negative connotations when related to a female, but positive or neutral connotations when related to a male. For example, a shrew has come to mean "a scolding, nagging, evil-tempered woman," while shrewd means "keen-witted, clever, or sharp in practical affairs; astute...businessman, etc." (Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 1964).

A lucky dog or a gay dog may be a very interesting fellow, but when a woman is a dog, she is unattractive, and when she's a bitch she's the personification of whatever is undesirable in the mind of the speaker. When a man is self-confident, he may be described as cocksure or even cocky, but in a woman this some self-confidence is likely to result in her being called a cocky bitch, which is not only a mixed metaphor, but also probably the most insulting animal metaphor we have. Bitch has taken on such negative connotations—children are taught it is a swear word—that in everyday American English, speakers are hesitant to call a female dog a bitch. Most of us feel that we would be insulting the dog. When we want to insult a man by comparing him to a dog, we call him a son of a bitch, which quite literally is an insult to his mother rather than to him.

If the female is called a vixen (a female fox), the dictionary says this means she is "an ill-tempered, shrewish, or malicious woman." The female seems both to attract and to hold on longer to animal metaphors with negative connotations. A vampire was originally a corpse that came alive to suck the blood of living persons. The word acquired the general meaning of an unscrupulous person such as a blackmailer and then, the specialized meaning of "a beautiful but unscrupulous woman who seduces
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men and leads them to their ruin." From this latter meaning we get the word vamp. The popularity of this term and of the name vampire bat may contribute to the idea that a female being is referred to in a phrase such as the old bat.

Other animal metaphors do not have definitely derogatory connotations for the female, but they do seem to indicate frivolity or unimportance, as in social butterfly and flapper. Look at the differences between the connotations of participating in a hen party and in a bull session. Male metaphors, even when they are negative in connotation, still relate to strength and conquest. Metaphors related to aggressive sex roles, for example, buck, stag, wolf and stud, will undoubtedly remain attached to males. Perhaps one of the reasons that in the late sixties it was so shocking to hear policemen called pigs was that the connotations of pig are very different from the other animal metaphors we usually apply to males.

When I was living in Afghanistan, I was surprised at the cruelty and unfairness of a proverb that said, "When you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; when you see an old woman, throw a stone." In looking at Afghan folk literature, I found that young girls were pictured as delightful and enticing, middle-aged women were sometimes interesting but more often just tolerable, while old women were always grotesque and villainous. Probably the reason for the negative connotation of old age in women is that women are valued for their bodies while men are valued for their accomplishments and their wisdom. Bodies deteriorate with age but wisdom and accomplishments grow greater.

When we returned home from Afghanistan, I was shocked to discover that we have remnants of this same attitude in America. We see it in our animal metaphors. If both the animal and the woman are young, the connotation is positive, but if the animal and the woman are old, the connotation is negative. Hugh Hefner might never have made it to the big time if he had called his girls rabbits instead of bunnies. He probably chose bunny because he wanted something close to, but not quite so obvious as kitten or cat—the all-time winners for connoting female sexuality. Also bunny, as in the skiers' snow bunny, already had some of the connotations Hefner wanted. Compare the connotations of filly to old nag; bird to old crow or old bat; and lamb to crone (apparently related to the early modern Dutch kronje, old ewe but now withered old woman).

Probably the most striking examples of the contrast between young and old women are animal metaphors relating to cats and chickens. A young girl is encouraged to be kittenish, but not catty. And though most of us wouldn't mind living next door to a sex kitten, we wouldn't want to live next door to a cat house. Parents might name their daughter Kitty but not Puss or Pussy, which used to be a fairly common nickname for girls. It has now developed such sexual connotations that it is used mostly for humor, as in the James Bond movie featuring Pussy Galore and her flying felines.

In the chicken metaphors, a young girl is a chick. When she gets old enough she marries and soon begins feeling cooped up. To relieve the boredom she goes to hen parties and cackles with her friends. Eventually she has her brood, begins to henpeck her husband, and finally turns into an old biddy.

How English Glorifies Maleness

Throughout the ages physical strength has been very important, and because men are physically stronger than women, they have been valued more. Only now in the machine age, when the difference in strength between males and females pales into
insignificance in comparison to the strength of earth-moving machinery, airplanes, and guns, males no longer have such an inherent advantage. Today a man of intellect is more valued than a physical laborer, and since women can compete intellectually with men, their value is on the rise. But language lags far behind cultural changes, so the language still reflects this emphasis on the importance of being male. For example, when we want to compliment a male, all we need to do is stress the fact that he is male by saying he is a he-man, or he is manly, or he is virile. Both virile and virtuous come from the Latin vir, meaning man.

The command or encouragement that males receive in sentences like “Be a man!” implies that to be a man is to be honorable, strong, righteous, and whatever else the speaker thinks desirable. But in contrast to this, a girl is never told to be a woman. And when she is told to be a lady, she is simply being encouraged to “act feminine,” which means sitting with her knees together, walking gracefully, and talking softly.

The armed forces, particularly the Marines, use the positive masculine connotation as part of their recruitment psychology. They promote the idea that to join the Marines (or the Army, Navy, or Air Force) guarantees that you will become a man. But this brings up a problem, because much of the work that is necessary to keep a large organization running is what is traditionally thought of as women’s work. Now, how can the Marines ask someone who has signed up for a man-sized job to do women’s work? Since they can’t, they euphemize and give the jobs titles that either are more prestigious or, at least, don’t make people think of females. Waitresses are called orderlies, secretaries are called clerk-typists, nurses are called medics, assistants are called adjutants, and cleaning up an area is called policing the area. The same kind of word glorification is used in civilian life to bolster a man’s ego when he is doing such tasks as cooking and sewing. For example, a chef has higher prestige than a cook and a tailor has higher prestige than a seamstress.

Little girls learn early in life that the boy’s role is one to be envied and emulated. Child psychologists have pointed out that experimenting with the role of the opposite sex is much more acceptable for little girls than it is for little boys. For example, girls are free to dress in boys’ clothes, but certainly not the other way around. Most parents are amused if they have a daughter who is a tomboy, but they are genuinely distressed if they have a son who is a sissy. The names we give to young children reflect this same attitude. It is all right for girls to have boys’ names, but pity the boy who has a girl’s name! Because parents keep giving boys’ names to girls, the number of acceptable boys’ names keeps shrinking. Currently popular names for girls include Jo, Kelly, Teri, Chris, Pat, Shawn, Toni, and Sam (short for Samantha). Evelyn, Carroll, Gayle, Hazel, Lynn, Beverley, Marion, Francis, and Shirley once were acceptable names for males. But as they were given to females, they became less and less acceptable. Today, men who are stuck with them self-consciously go by their initials or by abbreviated forms such as Haze, Shirt, Frank, or Ev. And they seldom pass these names on to their sons.

Many common words have come into the language from people’s names. These lexical items again show the importance of maleness compared to the triviality of the feminine activities being described. Words derived from the names of women include Melba toast, named for the Australian singer Dame Nellie Melba; Sally Lunn cakes, named after an eighteenth-century woman who first made them; pompadour, a hair style named after Madame Pompadour, and the word maudlin, as in maudlin sentiment, from Mary Magdaiene, who was often portrayed by artists as displaying exaggerated sorrow.
There are trivial items named after men—*teddy bear* after Theodore Roosevelt and *sideburns* after General Burnside—but most words that come from men’s names relate to significant inventions or developments. These include *pasteurization* after Louis Pasteur, *sousaphone* after John Philip Sousa, *mason jar* after John L. Mason, *boysenberry* after Rudolph Boysen, *pullman car* after George M. Pullman, *braille* after Louis Braille, *franklin stove* after Benjamin Franklin, *diesel engine* after Rudolf Diesel, *ferris wheel* after George W. G. Ferris, and the verb *to lynch* after William Lynch, who was a vigilante captain in Virginia in 1780.

The latter is an example of a whole set of English words dealing with violence. These words have strongly negative connotations. From research using free association and semantic differentials, with university students as subjects, James Ney concluded that English reflects both an anti-male and an anti-female bias because these biases exist in the culture (*Etc.: A Review of General Semantics*, March 1976, pp. 67–76). The students consistently marked as masculine such words as *killer, murderer, robber, attacker, fighter, stabber, rapist, assassin, gang, hood, arsonist, criminal, hijacker, villain,* and *bully,* even though most of these words contain nothing to specify that they are masculine. An example of bias against males, Ney observed, is the absence in English of a pejorative term for women equivalent to *rapist.* Outcomes of his free-association test indicated that if “English speakers want to call a man something bad, there seems to be a large vocabulary available to them but if they want to use a term which is good to describe a male, there is a small vocabulary available. The reverse is true for women.”

Certainly we do not always think positively about males; witness such words as *jerk,* *creep,* *crumb,* *slob,* *fink,* and *jackass.* But much of what determines our positive and negative feelings relates to the roles people play. We have very negative feelings toward someone who is hurting us or threatening us or in some way making our lives miserable. To be able to do this, the person has to have power over us and this power usually belongs to males.

On the other hand, when someone helps us or makes our life more pleasant, we have positive feelings toward that person or that role. *Mother* is one of the positive female terms in English, and we see such extensions of it as *Mother Nature, Mother Earth, mother lode, mother superior,* etc. But even though a word like *mother* is positive it is still not a word of power. In the minds of English speakers being female and being powerless or passive are so closely related that we use the terms *feminine* and *lady* either to mean female or to describe a certain kind of quiet and unobtrusive behavior.

**Words Labelling Women as Things**

Because of our expectations of passivity, we like to compare females to items that people acquire for their pleasure. For example, in a...commercial for the television show *Happy Days,* one of the characters announced that in the coming season they were going to have not only “cars, motorcycles, and girls,” but also a band. Another example of this kind of thinking is the comparison of females to food since food is something we all enjoy, even though it is extremely passive. We describe females as such delectable morsels as a *dish,* a *cookie,* a *tart,* *cheesecake, sugar and spice,* a *cute tomato,* *honey,* a *sharp cookie,* and *sweetie pie.* We say a particular girl has a *peaches*
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and cream complexion or "she looks good enough to eat." And parents give their daughters such names as Candy and Cherry.

Other pleasurable items that we compare females to are toys. Young girls are called little dolls or China dolls, while older girls—if they are attractive—are simply called dolls. We might say about a woman, “She's pretty as a picture,” or “She's a fashion plate.” And we might compare a girl to a plant by saying she is a clinging vine, a shrinking violet, or a wallflower. And we might name our daughters after plants such as Rose, Lily, Ivy, Daisy, Iris, and Petunia. Compare these names to boys' names such as Martin which means warlike, Ernest which means resolute fighter, Nicholas which means victory, Val which means strong or valiant, and Leo which means lion. We would be very hesitant to give a boy the name of something as passive as a flower although we might say about a man that he is a late-bloomer. This is making a comparison between a man and the most active thing a plant can do, which is to bloom. The only other familiar plant metaphor used for a man is the insulting pansy, implying that he is like a woman.

Questions for Close Reading

1. What is the selection's thesis? Locate the sentence(s) in which Nilsen states her main idea. If she doesn’t state the thesis explicitly, express it in your own words.

2. According to Nilsen, what do animal metaphors usually imply when used to describe women? What do male animal metaphors usually imply?

3. Why, according to Nilsen, do some professions have different names depending on whether the job is performed by a male or a female? What is suggested by the existence of two different terms for the same occupation?

4. When positive terms are used for women, what personality characteristics do such terms suggest? Why are words connoting violence most often applied to men?

5. Refer to your dictionary as needed to define the following words used in the selection: unscrupulous (paragraph 5), enticing (7), connotation (8), virile (11), lexical (15), maudlin (15), and vigilante (16).

Questions About the Writer’s Craft

1. The pattern. Why does Nilsen use so many examples to illustrate each type of sexism in the English language? What point of view is she trying to anticipate and counteract?

2. What three main sexist motifs in English does Nilsen examine? How does she signal her movement from one motif to the next?

3. Other patterns. Why do you think Nilsen begins by discussing animal terms for humans? What effect does placing this section first have on the reader?