Sexism in English: Embodiment and Language

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Speakers are prone to use the division of male and female as a metaphor for many other aspects of life. The differences in language describing and attributed to males and females illustrates the swirling effects of culture on language and language on culture. As you read this piece, think of the many ways that the language you speak has been shaped by the fact that virtually all living creatures are either male or female.

During the late 1960s, I lived with my husband and three young children in Kabul, Afghanistan. This was before the Russian invasion, the Afghan civil war, and the eventual taking over of the country by the Taliban Islamic movement and its resolve to return the country to a strict Islamic dynasty, in which females are not allowed to attend school or work outside their homes.

But even when we were there and the country was considered moderate rather than extremist, I was shocked to observe how different were the roles assigned to males and females. The Afghan version of the chaderi prescribed for Moslem women was particularly confining. Women in religious families were required to wear it whenever they were outside their family home, with the result being that most of them didn’t venture outside.

The household help we hired were made up of men, because women could not be employed by foreigners. Afghan folk stories and jokes were blatantly sexist, as in this proverb: “If you see an old man, sit down and take a lesson; if you see an old woman, throw a stone.”

But it wasn’t only the native culture that made me question women’s roles, it was also the American community within Afghanistan.

Most of the American women were like myself—wives and mothers whose husbands were either career diplomats, employees of USAID, or college professors who had been recruited to work on various contract teams. We were suddenly bereft of our traditional roles. The local economy provided few jobs for women and certainly none for foreigners; we were isolated from former friends and the social goals we had grown up with. Some of us became alcoholics, others got very good at bridge, while still others searched desperately for ways to contribute either to our families or to the Afghans.

When we returned in the fall of 1969 to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I was surprised to find that many other women were also questioning

The Afghan chadori is particularly confining. The fact that women must put one on whenever they are outside of their homes discourages them from venturing forth.

The expectations they had grown up with. Since I had been an English major when I was in college, I decided that for my part in the feminist movement I could study the English language and see what it could tell me about sexism. I started reading a desk dictionary and making note cards on every entry that seemed to tell something different about male and female. I soon had dog-eared dictionary, along with a collection of note cards filling two shoe boxes.

The first thing I learned was that I couldn't study the language without getting involved in social issues. Language and society are as intertwined as chicken and an egg. The language a culture uses is telltale evidence of the values and beliefs of that culture. And because there is a lag in how fast a language changes—new words can easily be introduced, but it takes a long time for old words and usages to disappear—a careful look at English will reveal attitudes that our ancestors held and that we as a culture are therefore pre-
posed to hold. My note cards revealed three main possibilities. While friends have offered the opinion that I didn't need to read a dictionary to learn such obvious facts, the linguistic evidence lends credibility to the sociological observations.

1. WOMEN ARE SEXY; MEN ARE SUCCESSFUL

First, in American culture a woman is valued for the attractiveness and sexiness of her body, while a man is valued for his physical strength and accomplishments. A woman is sexy. A man is successful.

A persuasive piece of evidence supporting this view are the eponyms—words that have come from someone's name—found in English. I had a two-and-a-half-inch stack of cards taken from men's names but less than a half-inch stack from women's names, and most of those came from Greek mythology. In the words that came into American English since we separated from Britain, there are many eponyms based on the names of famous American men: Bartlett pear, boysenberry, Franklin stove, Ferris wheel, Gatling gun, mason jar, sideburns, sousaphone, Schick test, and Winchester rifle. The only common eponyms that I found taken from American women's names are Alice blue (after Alice Roosevelt Longworth), bloomers (after Amelia Jenks Bloomer), and Mae West jacket (after the buxom actress). Two out of the three feminine eponyms relate closely to a woman's physical anatomy, while the masculine eponyms (except for "sideburns" after General Burnsides) have nothing to do with the namesake's body, but, instead, honor the man for an accomplishment of some kind.

In Greek mythology women played a bigger role than they did in the biblical stories of the Judeo-Christian cultures, and so the names of goddesses are accepted parts of the language in such place names as Pompéia, from the goddess of fruit, and Athens, from Athena, and in such common words as cereal from Ceres, psychology from Psyche, and arachnoid from Arachne. However, there is the same tendency to think of women in relation to sexuality as shown through the eponyms "aphrodisiac" from Aphrodite, the Greek name for the goddess of love and beauty, and "venereal disease" from Venus, the Roman name for Aphrodite.

Another interesting word from Greek mythology is Amazon. According to Greek folk etymology, the a- means "without," as in atypical or amoral, while -mazon comes from "mazos," meaning "breast," as still seen in mastectomy. In the Greek legend, Amazon women cut off their right breasts so they could better shoot their bows. Apparently, the storytellers had a feeling that for women to play the active, "masculine" role the Amazons adopted for themselves, they had to trade in part of their femininity.

This preoccupation with women's breasts is not limited to the Greeks; it's what inspired the definition and the name for "mammals" (from Indo-Euro-
pean "mammæ" for "breasts"). As a volunteer for the University of Wisconsin's Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE), I read a western trapper's diary from the 1830s. I was to make notes of any unusual usages or language patterns. My most interesting finding was that the trapper referred to a range of mountains as "The Teats," a metaphor based on the similarity between the shapes of the mountains and women's breasts. Because today we use the French wording "The Grand Teton," the metaphor isn't as obvious, but I wrote to mapmakers and found the following listings: Nipple Top and Little Nipple Top near Mount Marcy in the Adirondacks; Nipple Mountain in Archuleta County, Colorado; Nipple Butte in Pennington, South Dakota; Squaw Peak in Placer County, California (and many other locations); Maiden's Peak and Squaw Tit (they're the same mountain) in the Cascade Range in Oregon; Mary's Nipple near Salt Lake City, Utah; and Jane Russell Peaks near Stark, New Hampshire.

Except for the movie star Jane Russell, the women being referred to are anonymous—it's only a sexual part of their body that is mentioned. When topographical features are named after men, it's probably not going to be to draw attention to a sexual part of their bodies but instead to honor individuals for an accomplishment.

Going back to what I learned from my dictionary cards, I was surprised to realize how many pairs of words we have in which the feminine word has acquired sexual connotations while the masculine word retains a serious businesslike aura. For example, a callboy is the person who calls actors when it is time for them to go on stage, but a callgirl is a prostitute. Compare sir and madam. Sir is a term of respect, while madam has acquired the specialized meaning of a brothel manager. Something similar has happened to master and mistress. Would you rather have a painting "by an old master" or "by an old mistress"?

It's because the word woman had sexual connotations, as in "She's his woman," that people began avoiding its use, hence such terminology as ladies' room, lady of the house, and girl's school or school for young ladies. Those of us who in the 1970s began asking that speakers use the term woman rather than girl or lady were rejecting the idea that woman is primarily a sexual term.

I found two-hundred pairs of words with masculine and feminine forms; for example, heir-heiress, hero-heroine, steward/stewardess, usher/usherette. In nearly all such pairs, the masculine word is considered the base, with some kind of feminine suffix being added. The masculine form is the one from which compounds are made; for example, from king/queen comes kingdom but not queendom, from sportsman/sportslady comes sportsmanship but not sportsladyship. There is one—and only one—semantic area in which the masculine word is not the base or more powerful word. This is in the area dealing with sex, marriage, and motherhood. When someone refers to a virgin, a listener will probably think of a female unless the speaker specifies male or uses a masculine pronoun. The same is true for prostitute.
In relation to marriage, linguistic evidence shows that weddings are more important to women than to men. A woman cherishes the wedding and is considered a bride for a whole year, but a man is referred to as a groom only on the day of the wedding. The word *bride* appears in *bridal attendant, bridal gown, bridesmaid, bridal shower*, and even *bridegroom*. *Groom* comes from the Middle English *grom*, meaning "man," and in that sense is seldom used outside of the wedding. With most pairs of male/female words, people habitually put the masculine word first: *Mr. and Mrs., his and hers, boys and girls, men and women, kings and queens, brothers and sisters, guys and dolls, and host and hostess*. But it is the bride and groom who are talked about, not the groom and bride.

The importance of marriage to a woman is also shown by the fact that when a marriage ends in death, the woman gets the title of *widow*. A man gets the derived title of *widower*. This term is not used in other phrases or contexts, but widow is seen in *widowhood, widow's peak, and widow's walk*. A widow in a card game is an extra hand of cards, while in typesetting it is a leftover line of type.

Changing cultural ideas bring changes to language, and since I did my dictionary study three decades ago the word *singles* has largely replaced such gender-specific and value-laden terms as *bachelor, old maid, spinster, divorcee, widow, and widower*. In 1970 I wrote that when people hear a man called "a professional," they usually think of him as a doctor or a lawyer, but when people hear a woman referred to as "a professional," they are likely to think of her as a prostitute. That's not as true today because so many women have become doctors and lawyers, it's no longer incongruous to think of women in those professional roles.

Another change that has taken place is in wedding announcements. They used to be sent out from the bride's parents and did not even give the name of the groom's parents. Today, most couples choose to list either all or none of the parents' names. Also it is now much more likely that both the bride and groom's picture will be in the newspaper, while twenty years ago only the bride's picture was published on the "Women's" or the "Society" page. In the weddings I have recently attended, the official has pronounced the couple "husband and wife" instead of the traditional "man and wife," and the bride has been asked if she promises to "love, honor, and cherish," instead of to "love, honor, and obey."

2. WOMEN ARE PASSIVE; MEN ARE ACTIVE

However, other wording in the wedding ceremony relates to a second point that my cards showed, which is that women are expected to play a passive or weak role while men plan an active or strong role. 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. The idea that a bride is something to be handed over from one man to another bothers people because it goes back to the days when a man’s servants, his children, and his wife were all considered to be his property. They were known by his name because they belonged to him, and he was responsible for their actions and their debts.

22 The grammar used in talking or writing about weddings as well as other sexual relationships shows the expectation of men playing the active role. Men wed women while women become brides of men. A man possesses a woman; he deflowers her; he performs; he scores; he takes away her virginity. Although a woman can seduce a man, she cannot offer him her virginity. When talking about virginity, the only way to make the woman the actor in the sentence is to say that “she lost her virginity,” but people lose things by accident rather than by purposeful actions, and so she’s only the grammatical, not the real-life, actor.

23 The reason that women brought the term Ms. into the language to replace Miss and Mrs. relates to this point. Many married women resent being identified in the “Mrs. Husband” form. The dictionary cards showed what appeared to be an attitude on the part of the editors that it was almost indecent to let a respectable woman’s name march unaccompanied across the pages of a dictionary. Women were listed with male names whether or not the male contributed to the woman’s reason for being in the dictionary or whether or not in his own right he was as famous as the woman. For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Woman</th>
<th>Mrs. Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte Brontë</td>
<td>Mrs. Arthur B. Nicholls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amelia Earhart</td>
<td>Mrs. George Palmer Putnam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen Hayes</td>
<td>Mrs. Charles MacArthur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jenny Lind</td>
<td>Mme. Otto Goldschmit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cornelia Otis Skinner</td>
<td>daughter of Otis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dame Edith Sitwell</td>
<td>sister of Osbert and Sacheverell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only a small number of rebels and crusaders got into the dictionary without the benefit of a masculine escort: temperance leaders Frances Elizabeth Caroline Willard and Carry Nation, women’s rights leaders Carrie Chapman Catt and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, birth control educator Margaret Sanger, religious leader Mary Baker Eddy, and slaves Harriet Tubman and Phillis Wheatley.

24 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. As with many arguments about “correct” language usage, this isn’t very logical because Miss is also an abbreviation of Mistress. Feminists hoped to simplify matters by introducing Ms. as an alternative to both Mrs. and Miss, but what
happened is that Ms. largely replaced Miss to become a catch-all business title for women. Many married women still prefer the title Mrs., and some even resent being addressed with the term Ms. As one frustrated newspaper reporter complained, “Before I can write about a woman I have to know not only her marital status but also her political philosophies.” The result of such complications may contribute to the demise of titles, which are already being ignored by many writers who find it more efficient to simply use names; for example, in a business letter: “Dear Joan Garcia,” instead of “Dear Mrs. Joan Garcia,” “Dear Ms. Garcia,” or “Dear Mrs. Louis Garcia.”

Titles given to royalty show how males can be disadvantaged by the assumption that they always play the more powerful role. In British royalty, when a male holds a title, his wife is automatically given the feminine equivalent. But the reverse is not true. For example, a count is a high political officer with a countess being his wife. The same pattern holds true for a duke and a duchess and a king and a queen. But when a female holds the royal title, the man she marries does not automatically acquire the matching title. For example, Queen Elizabeth’s husband has the title of prince rather than king, but when Prince Charles married Diana, she became Princess Diana. If they had stayed married and he had ascended to the throne, then she would have become Queen Diana. The reasoning appears to be that since masculine words are stronger, they are reserved for true heirs and withheld from males coming into the royal family by marriage. If Prince Phillip were called “King Phillip,” British subjects might forget who had inherited the right to rule.

The names that people give their children show the hopes and dreams they have for them, and when we look at the differences between male and female names in a culture, we can see the cumulative expectations of that culture. In our culture girls often have names taken from small, aesthetically pleasing items; for example, Ruby, Jewel, and Pearl. Esther and Stella mean “star,” and Ada means “ornament.” One of the few women’s names that refers to strength is Mildred, and it means “mild strength.” Boys often have names with meanings of power and strength; for example, Neil means “champion”; Martin is from Mars, the God of war; Raymond means “wise protection”; Harold means “chief of the army”; Ira means “vigilant”; Rex means “king”; and Richard means “strong king.”

We see similar differences in food metaphors. Food is a passive substance just sitting there waiting to be eaten. Many people have recognized this and so no longer feel comfortable describing women as “delectable morsels.” However, when I was a teenager, it was considered a compliment to refer to a girl (we didn’t call anyone a “woman” until she was middle-aged) as a cute tomato, a peach, a dish, a cookie, honey, sugar, or sweetie-pie. When being affectionate, women will occasionally call a man honey or sweetie, but in general, food metaphors are used much less often with men than with women. If a man is called “a fruit,” his masculinity is being questioned. But it’s perfectly acceptable to use a food metaphor if the food is heavier and more substantive.
than that used for women. For example, pin-up pictures of women have long been known as "cheesecake," but when Burt Reynolds posed for a nude centerfold the picture was immediately dubbed "beefcake," that is, a hunk of meat. That such sexual references to men have come into the language is another reflection of how society is beginning to lessen the differences between their attitudes toward men and women.

Something similar to the fruit metaphor happens with references to plants. We insult a man by calling him a "pansy," but it wasn't considered particularly insulting to talk about a girl being a wallflower, a clinging vine, or a shrinking violet, or to give girls such names as Ivy, Rose, Lily, Iris, Daisy, Camelia, Heather, and Flora. A positive plant metaphor can be used with a man only if the plant is big and strong; for example, Andrew Jackson's nickname of Old Hickory. Also, the phrases blooming idiots and budding geniuses can be used with either sex, but notice how they are based on the most active thing a plant can do, which is to bloom or bud.

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, beaver, bird, chick, and lamb. In the 1950s we said that boys went "tom catting," but today it's just "catting around," and both boys and girls do it. When the term foxy, meaning that someone was sexy; first became popular it was used only for females, but now someone of either sex can be described as a fox. Some animal metaphors that are used predominantly with men have negative connotations based on the size and/or strength of the animals; for example, beast, bullheaded, jackass, rat, loan shark; and vulture. Negative metaphors used with women are based on smaller animals; for example, social butterfly, mousey, catty, and vixen. The feminine terms connote action, but not the same kind of large scale action as with the masculine terms.

3. WOMEN ARE CONNECTED WITH NEGATIVE CONNOTATIONS; MEN WITH POSITIVE CONNOTATIONS

The final point that my note cards illustrated was how many positive connotations are associated with the concept of masculinity, while there are either trivial or negative connotations connected with the corresponding feminine concept. An example from the animal metaphors makes a good illustration. The word shrew taken from the name of a small but especially vicious animal was defined in my dictionary as "an ill-tempered scolding woman," but the word shrewd taken from the same root was defined as "marked by clever, discerning awareness" and was illustrated with the phrase "a shrewd businessman."

Early in life, children are conditioned to the superiority of the masculine role. As child psychologists point out, little girls have much more freedom to
experiment with sex roles than do little boys. If a little girl acts like a tomboy, most parents have mixed feelings, being at least partially proud. But if their little boy acts like a sissy (derived from sister), they call a psychologist. It’s perfectly acceptable for a little girl to sleep in the crib that was purchased for her brother, to wear his hand-me-down jeans and shirts, and to ride the bicycle that he has outgrown. But few parents would put a boy baby in a white-and-gold crib decorated with frills and lace, and virtually no parents would have their little boy wear his sister’s hand-me-down dresses, nor would they have their son ride a girl’s pink bicycle with a flower-bedecked basket. The proper names given to girls and boys show this same attitude. Girls can have “boy” names—Cris, Craig, Jo, Kelly, Shawn, Teri, Toni, and Sam—but it doesn’t work the other way around. A couple of generations ago, Beverly, Frances, Haze_l, Marion, and Shirley were common boys’ names. As parents gave these names to more and more girls, they fell into disuse for males, and some older men who have these names prefer to go by their initials or by such abbreviated forms as Haze or Shirl.

When a little girl is told to be a lady, she is being told to sit with her knees together and to be quiet and dainty. But when a little boy is told to be a man, he is being told to be noble, strong, and virtuous—to have all the qualities that the speaker looks on as desirable. The concept of manliness has such positive connotations that it used to be a compliment to call someone a he-man, to say that he was doubly a man. Today many people are more ambivalent about this term and respond to it much as they do to the word macho. But calling someone a manly man or a virile man is nearly always meant as a compliment. Virile comes from the Indo-European vir, meaning “man,” which is also the basis of virtuous. Consider the positive connotations of both virile and virtuous with the negative connotations of hysterical. The Greeks took this latter word from their name for uterus (as still seen in hysterectomy). They thought that women were the only ones who experienced uncontrolled emotional outbursts, and so the condition must have something to do with a part of the body that only women have. But how word meanings change is regularly shown at athletic events where thousands of virtuous women sit quietly beside their hysterical husbands.

32 Differences in the connotations between positive male and negative female connotations can be seen in several pairs of words that differ denotatively only in the matter of sex. Bachelor as compared to spinster or old maid has such positive connotations that women try to adopt it by using the term bachelor-girl or bachelorette. Old maid is so negative that it’s the basis for metaphors: pretentious and fussy old men are called “old maids,” as are the leftover kernels of unpopped popcorn and the last card in a popular children’s card game.

34 Patron and matron (Middle English for “father” and “mother”) have such different levels of prestige that women try to borrow the role 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.

When men are doing jobs that women often do, we apparently try to pay the men extra by giving them fancy titles. For example, a male cook is more likely to be called a “chef” while a male seamstress will get the title of “tailor.” The armed forces have a special problem in that they recruit under such slogans as “The Marine Corps builds men!” and “Join the Army! Become a Man.” Once the recruits are enlisted, they find themselves doing much of the work that has been traditionally thought of as “women’s work.” The solution to getting the work done and not insulting anyone’s masculinity was to change the titles as shown below:

- waitress = orderly
- nurse = medic or corpsman
- secretary = clerk-typist
- assistant = adjutant
- dishwasher = KP (kitchen police) or kitchen helper

Compare brave and squaw. Early settlers in America truly admired Indian men and hence named them with a word that carried connotations of youth, vigor, and courage. But for Indian women they used an Algonquin slang term with negative sexual connotations that are almost opposite to those of brave. 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. When witch is used for men, as in witch-doctor, many mainstream speakers feel some carry-over of the negative connotations.

Part of the unattractiveness of both witch and squaw is that they have been used so often to refer to old women, something with which our culture is particularly uncomfortable, just as the Afghans were. Imagine my surprise when I ran across the phrases grandfatherly advice and old wives’ tales and realized that the underlying implication is the same as the Afghan proverb about old men being worth listening to while old women talk only foolishness.

Other terms that show how negatively we view old women as compared to young women are old nag as compared to filly, old crow or old bat as compared to bird, and being catty as compared to being kittenish. There is no matching set of metaphors for men. The chicken metaphor tells the whole story of a woman’s life. In her youth she is a chick. Then she marries and begins feathering her nest. Soon she begins feeling cooped up, so she goes to hen parties where she cackles with her friends. Then she has her brood, begins to henpeck her husband, and finally turns into an old biddy.

I embarked on my study of the dictionary not with the intentions of prescribing language change but simply to see what the language would tell me about
sexism. Nevertheless, I have been both surprised and pleased as I've watched the changes that have occurred over the past three decades. I'm one of those linguists who believes that new language customs will cause a new generation of speakers to grow up with different expectations. This is why I'm happy about people's efforts to use inclusive languages, to say "he or she" or "they" when speaking about individuals whose names they do not know. I'm glad that leading publishers have developed guidelines to help writers use language that is fair to both sexes. I'm glad that most newspapers and magazines list women by their own names instead of only by their husbands' names. And I'm so glad that educated and thoughtful people no longer begin their business letters with "Dear Sir" or "Gentlemen," but instead use a memo form or begin with such salutations as "Dear Colleagues," "Dear Reader," or "Dear committee Members." I'm also glad that such words as poetess, authoress, con­­actress, and aviatrix now sound quaint and old-fashioned and that chairman giving way to chair or head, mailman to mail carrier, clergyman to clergy, and wardress to flight attendant. I was also pleased when the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration bowed to feminist complaints and in the late 1970s began to alternate men's and women's names for hurricanes. However, I wasn't so pleased to discover that the change did not immediately erase sexism from everyone's mind, as shown by a headline about Hurricane avid in a 1979 New York tabloid, "David Rapes Virgin Islands." More recently a similar metaphor appeared in a headline in the Arizona Republic about hurricane Charlie, "Charlie Quits Carolinas, Flirts with Virginia."

What these incidents show is that sexism is not something existing independently in American English or in the particular dictionary that I happened to read. Rather, it exists in people's minds. Language is like an X-ray in probing visible evidence of invisible thoughts. The best thing about people being interested in and discussing sexist language is that as they make conscious decisions about 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. This is good because as a problem that begins in people's assumptions and expectations, it's a problem that will be solved only when a great many people have given it a great deal of thought.

Comprehension

Words to talk about:
- the Taliban Islamic movement
- The Afghan version of the chaderi
- suddenly bereft of our traditional roles
- when topographical features are named