

Becca Tuck
Dr. Jeanne Bohannon
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Introduction

Although much progress has been made towards gender equality, sexist language is still abundant throughout people's communications with one another on a daily basis. Sexist language is language that attempts to discriminate based on a person's gender, in particular women. This language phenomenon is important because it affects people's communications on a daily basis. From specific words to idioms to questions, sexist language can be found in many facets of our communication.

Studying the relationship between gender and language helps to provide insight on gender equality in society as a whole. Throughout this paper, I will examine several examples of sexist language and investigate how this language phenomenon impacts the way people communicate with one another. I will also discuss the many social movements taking place that aim to end the usage of sexist language or change the way we communicate to better reflect gender equality.

Body

Sexist language is still very prominent in today's society, despite some changes to make language less gender specific. Titles such as chairman and weatherman are now commonly referred to as chairperson and weather person. While changes like these are good, there is still much room for improvement. Some sexist language is so subtle that many people do not even realize it is indeed sexist. Language cannot change if people do not realize there is something to change in the first place. Most people realize chairman is gender specific, but how about words such as manpower, man-made, or mankind? People probably would not think twice about exclaiming "oh man." As Sheryl Kleinman puts it in her essay "Why Language Matters," the word man is the "anchor" in the English language, not woman. This is a problem because language reflects gender roles in society. If "man" is more important in the English language, then this is a reflection of men being more important in society. Sexist language is another way for society to "reinforce" a male-dominant system (Kleinman, 300). It is not a coincidence that "man" became the root of many words we use today. This phenomenon emerged as a reflection of the male-dominant society, but society is changing, as should our language.

Sexist language goes beyond words that contain "man" in them. Many common phrases used today have sexist undertones. For example, the phrase "like a girl" is generally used to describe an action that is done poorly or weakly. This phrase is sexist because it implies women are the less capable gender. Always, a feminine product company, began their "Like a Girl" campaign in 2014. In their campaign video, young girls are asked to throw and fight like a girl,

to which they respond with deliberate, powerful motions. The campaign aims to empower women by changing the meaning of the phrase “like a girl.” Another example is the phrase “wearing the pants,” which refers to being in a leadership or dominant role. This phrase originates from a time period where only men wore pants, so “wearing the pants” equates leadership roles with manly roles. Lastly, the phrase “man up” is commonly used to encourage someone to act tougher or stronger. The sexist undertones in this phrase are quite obvious, and it is easy to see that this phrase associates toughness with only one gender. These are just a few examples of sexist language being used today. Many people, including women, use these phrases without realizing they have said something sexist. This is a testament to just how deeply rooted sexism is in our language. Sexist language is so commonplace that people do not even recognize it at times.

The phenomenon of sexist language is deeply embedded in the way we communicate. Women’s use of apologies is another example of how gender roles have crept into our communications. In the *Psychological Science* journal article “Why Women Apologize More Than Men,” researchers report that women tend to communicate apologies more frequently than men because men have a “lower threshold” for what constitutes an apology. Women can often be heard starting a simple question or assertion with the word “sorry,” even when there is nothing to be apologetic about. This is another example of our use of language reinforcing a male-dominated hierarchy. Gender linguist Deborah Tannen reports that men more so than women recognize that an apology “weakens their position” (Tam, 1). Women using apologetic language before asserting themselves are perpetuating a system that puts men in the top position and women below. Pantene, a shampoo company, released a video on YouTube entitled “Not Sorry.” The video, which shows women apologizing in ordinary situations, garnered over 15 million views. Pantene encourages women to “shine strong” and decrease the use of apologetic language.

Gender plays a role in our conversations as well. A study in the *American Sociological Review* was conducted on interruptions in group discussions. Interruption involves a person taking their turn to speak before another speaker is finished. The concept of interruption is associated with “dominance, power, and status” (Smith-Lovin and Brody, 430). The study showed that men are twice as likely to interrupt a woman than a man. In contrast, women interrupt men and women at the same rate. Men alter the way they communicate based on the status characteristic of gender, while women are less likely to see any difference between genders. Men see gender as something that warrants a change in the way they communicate. This communication in group study is important to study because it reflects gender inequalities in a broader setting. Displaying conversational dominance via interrupting is a reflection of men’s perception about which gender dominates in society.

Gender inequality can be seen in language when describing similar activities by men and women. One example of this is in the term “bossy.” The “Ban Bossy” social media campaign explains why bossy is a problem: “When a little boy asserts himself, he’s called a leader, yet

when a little girl does the same thing, she risks being branded bossy.” As stated previously, language is a reflection of society. If a word like “bossy” is the norm to describe assertive girls, then there are still people who feel it is a negative thing for girls to assert themselves. Language reveals how much work we have yet to do in regards to gender equality. Former Secretary of State and potential 2016 Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton is a very public victim of sexist language. Volunteers for Hillary Clinton claim the media unfairly labels her using negative language, which would not be the case if she was the opposite gender. Clinton is an opinionated and assertive woman who is often labeled as “overconfident,” “calculating,” “polarizing,” and “entitled” (Miller, 1). The traits Clinton exhibits would not be questioned, perhaps would even be praised, if she were a man. Gender inequality is still very present in the media, but campaigns like “Ban Bossy” and that of the Hillary Clinton volunteers are trying to change this.

The last thing I am investigating in this paper is the way in which people alter their conversation topics based on gender. From sports to politics to Hollywood, women are noticing the questions being asked to them are different than those asked to men. When Eugenie Bouchard, a young up-and-coming tennis player, made history at the Australian Open, she was asked, “If you could date anyone in the world, who would you date?”. Sarah Palin, 2008 Republican Vice Presidential candidate, was asked if she was neglecting her child rearing duties by running for Vice President. Hollywood actresses, up for awards in ground breaking films, are asked, “Who are you wearing?”. The conversation changes to dating, child rearing, and fashion when someone is a woman. Gender alters the topics people communicate about, which shows there is still gender inequality in society. In 2015, many of us saw the “Ask Her More” campaign during the Oscars that took off on social media. The campaign received endorsements from many top celebrities such as Reese Witherspoon. People wanted actresses to be asked more in-depth questions and have the questions focus on the actresses’ achievements, not their fashion. For example, questions like “What accomplishment are you most proud of?” and “What potential do film characters have to change the world?” are more appropriate questions, as they focus on gender neutral aspects of an actress's career.

Conclusion

Overall, it is apparent that gender and language are very connected. A male-dominated hierarchy has heavily influenced language throughout history, and language has not kept up with the changing social structures. Men and women are becoming more equal, yet the way we communicate still reflects major gaps between the genders. Many campaigns across social media platforms are helping to close these gaps in language.

Works Cited

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