



THE ROLE OF GENDER AND SEXIST LANGUAGE

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Interlingua, Volume 2, Special Issue 1, September 2020

ISSN 2562-7821

Abstract

Sexist language is frequently used in the workplace to exclude, trivialize or diminish men or women (Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Parks & Robertson, 2004). This study explores how sexist language is used in words, phrases or expressions and what attitudes are implied based on the analysis of a news report *How Trump talks about women and does it matter*. The findings reveal that markedness and dehumanization are two strategies that are frequently used in sexist language. Men and women's self-esteem, image and professional ability are negatively influenced by sexist language. Further suggestions are provided to help people decrease the use of sexist language.

Keywords: sexist language; markedness; dehumanization

Sexist language refers to the use of words, phrases, or expressions that unnecessarily make distinctions between men or women to exclude, trivialize or diminish them (Parks & Robertson, 2004). Previous studies show that although both men and women can be the target of sexist language, women suffer from it more (ibid). The present study focuses on analyzing sexist language and the attitudes such language reflects based on a news report *How Trump talks about women – and does it matter?* The characteristics of sexist language and the attitudes reflected in this sexist language will be revealed. The first two sections will introduce the two characteristics and further illustrate the attitudes. The third section will demonstrate the negative influence of sexist language and some strategies that can be used to decrease the use of sexist language. The last section is the conclusion to summarize the whole paper.

Markedness in sexist language

The concept of markedness was first proposed by the linguists in the 20th century; it entails that certain aspects of language are marked while others are not (Battistella, 1996). In Chomsky's universal grammar, for example, the marked aspects of language refer to those that need additional evidence to deduce (ibid). In this study, markedness will be defined as an unnecessary emphasis on the female gender. It is a kind of strategy that President Trump intentionally used to diminish women. In an interview, he referred to his career diplomat Marie Yovanovitch not by her name but as "the woman". The female gender is marked through this expression. President Trump ignored that Marie Yovanovitch was an individual and a professional ambassador with her own personalities and characteristics. What he stressed was her gender – female. When the female gender is pointed out and marked, all the stereotypes of women tend to be unconsciously stimulated by this markedness. For example, President Trump also mentioned that his male staff complained of working with women since men had to be nice because of the female gender. This comment reinforces common gender stereotypes that men should be kind to women, and they should also take care of women even in the workplace (Prasad, 2019). This sexist language is used when a certain group of people is marked, and the stereotypes of these people are emphasized. This report about President Trump's comments on women show that it is often women rather than men who are marked in the workplace.

This markedness of female gender in the workplace reveals people's, especially men's, attitudes towards women. They think that women with power at work violate the roles and traditional expectations of women (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). Traditionally, women should depend on men for their income and be in charge of taking care of children in the home. When this traditional expectation is not fulfilled, men may use sexist language to imply that women have lower social status (Tipler & Ruscher, 2017). Douglas and Sutton's study (2014) also indicated that men were more supportive of sexist language than women because men wanted to maintain a higher social status by using sexist language. They further used two concepts – social dominance orientation and levels of system justification to explain why men prefer to use sexist language. Social dominance orientation reflects a preference of existing social hierarchies, and levels of system justification indicates that people justify the social systems since they depend on it to gain wealth and security. Research findings demonstrate that men tend to use sexist language since they want to maintain their existing high social status and therefore justify this unequal status between men and women (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). These findings also reveal the underlying reasons why President Trump marked female gender in his speech. He and his staff, as male politicians, wanted to maintain their high social status and wealth and also gain security.

Dehumanization in sexist language

Dehumanization is another type of sexist language. It refers to the “denial of a person’s human uniqueness, agency and competence” (Tipler & Ruscher, 2017, p. 2). Dehumanizing a certain group of people can make them be perceived as less human and consequently result in their objectification. Previous studies indicate that when women’s appearance rather than their intellect or personalities is emphasized, women are objectified (Heflick & Goldenberg, 2009). In this report, President Trump not only marked women but also dehumanized and objectified them through his various comments on women’s appearance. His past comments on women include “Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?”, “Goofy Elizabeth Warren, one of the least productive US Senators, has a nasty mouth”, “You could see there was blood coming out of her (journalist Megyan Kelly) eyes. Blood coming out of her wherever”. He even made comments on his daughter, Ivanka Trump, by using expressions like “a nice figure”. He attacked women’s faces, mouths and eyes and made negative connections between their appearance and professional ability. Even when he praised Ivanka Trump’s “nice figure”, he also put too much emphasis on women’s appearance and suggested that women used their sexuality to obtain dominance over men. It seems that President Trump tends to trivialize women as sexual objects without any respect.

Previous research also demonstrated that when women were dehumanized or objectified as sexual objects, they were more likely to receive prejudicial beliefs like traditional roles for women in society (Tipler & Ruscher, 2017). These prejudicial beliefs suggest that women are inferior to men, and women’s power is illegitimate. In President Trump’s speech, he tried to transmit the message that those women’s power at work should not be accepted by the whole society since they are still subordinates of men. He once made comments on his adviser Kellyanne Conway by connecting her husband to her. “She must have done some bad things to him because that guy’s crazy”. This kind of connection between husband and wife is unnecessary and harmful to the image of women. Furthermore, it positions women as subordinate.

Opposition to sexist language and promotion of gender-fair language

Sexist language in President Trump’s speech is used to exclude, trivialize and diminish women. It is a weapon that is detrimental to women’s self-esteem, image and professional ability. As illustrated above, sexist language can be identified when women as a group are unnecessarily marked, and their appearance rather than professional ability is emphasized. Previous research shows that when women are exposed to sexist language, they may perform unsatisfactorily on certain tasks possibly due to the self-fulfilling effect (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). The negative influence of sexist language may also appear at the emotional and attitudinal level. Women may change their attitudes towards themselves, towards women in general and towards differences of social status between men and women (Douglas & Sutton, 2014). It is necessary to make men and women realize the negative influence of sexist language and promote the use of gender-fair language.

Research has indicated how gender-fair language can be promoted (Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015). Koeser and Szeny (2014) illustrated how arguments can be used to persuade people to use more gender-fair language. They found that participants changed their attitudes towards gender-fair language and supported the use of it when participants read argumentative texts on the promotion of gender-fair language. Likewise, Tipler and Ruscher (2017) proposed a

semantic retraining program to encourage people to use gender-fair language. It aims at training people to repeatedly deny the use of stereotypic expression, such as bad female drivers, and use counter-stereotypic expression, such as good female drivers. Scholars tend to emphasize the importance of raising people's awareness about gender-fair language and practicing using it in daily life (Koeser & Sczesny, 2014; Tipler & Ruscher, 2017).

The promotion of gender-fair language is not easy; changing people's attitudes seems more difficult. Previous studies reveal that using gender-fair language may have side-effects in the short period (Formanowicz et al., 2013; Horvath et al., 2016). For example, participants evaluated less favorably on female job titles compared to male job titles (Formanowicz et al., 2013); using German or Italian feminine-masculine words pairs decreased the estimated salaries of the typically feminine professions (Horvath et al., 2016). However, scholars also pointed out that although using gender-fair language may have some side-effects in the short term, these negative effects are likely to diminish over time (Sendén, Bäck & Lindqvist, 2015). When gender-fair language is used more often, people may not think that it is strange and will gradually get used to it.

Conclusion

This study analyzed the characteristics of sexist language, the attitudes it reflected and its negative influence. The analysis demonstrated that markedness and dehumanization were frequently used in sexist language to mark a certain gender group, stimulate the stereotypes associated with this gender and objectify this group of people. Using sexist language will do harm to people's self-esteem, image and professional ability. In order to decrease the use of it, people's awareness of using gender-fair language should be raised. More gender-fair words or phrases need to be created and promoted to diminish the side-effects of gender stereotypes.

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