

## Original Paper

# A Related Study between Language and Gender

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Received: May 17, 2024

Accepted: June 29, 2024

Online Published: July 16, 2024

doi:10.22158/eltls.v6n4p86

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/eltls.v6n4p86>

### Abstract

*Nowadays as we all know, English is one of the most widely used languages in the world and Chinese is also the language that is used by most population in the world. They have different historical development trajectories and choose different written systems. English and Chinese are both important representatives of Eastern and Western cultures. If you conduct comparative study of these two languages, it is helpful to understand the essential features of the language and reveal the deep structure of the Eastern and Western cultures. Studying gender discrimination in English and Chinese languages comprehensively and systematically, which is contrasting the similarities and differences between languages and cultures of English and Chinese, can provide a reference for understanding language, culture, thinking and national psychology. It can also improve the understanding of languages and cultures.*

### Keywords

*gender discrimination, feminist, language and culture*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 About Language and Gender

Gender is the reflection of language in special social and cultural awareness. It can give expression to how citizens live a well life. Also it shows social concepts with many different people. As a word gender is now becoming a common circumstance in today's society.

Actually language is meant to understand and describe this world as a tool of communication. As is known to all it can reflect many different national cultures and history factually. Thus sexism about language is gradually formed.

What is gender? Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary, OALECD says it is "the unfair treatment of the people, especially women, because of their sex." Let's look it up in another

dictionary *Webster Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*. It says gender is “prejudice or discrimination based on sex; esp: discrimination against women” (*Webster Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1983*). A Danish linguist Otto Jespersen who specialized in the grammar of the English language once said English was the most masculine language which he had learnt. Whatever any language, the “sexism” couldn’t be ignored by the world.

### 1.2 A Brief Introduction of Feminism

Feminism is a corresponding translation of the English feminism in Chinese, which is a relatively new word. In the 1890s, the word was transformed into English by French. It was interesting that the earliest examples of the word are derogatory in the Oxford English Dictionary. In the early days, people even created “womanism” to take place of “feminism” in order to avoid using “feminism”. And in England, feminism was usually a derogatory term until the 1960s. American feminist Estelle Freedman pointed out that few women flaunt themselves as feminists. Women were once again organized in the 1960s and 1970s, and the movement was claimed to be the “women's liberation”. This word came from the Negro movement, the Third World Movement and the student movement. All were referred to as the “Women's lib”. Since this period, the word “feminism” was gradually accepted by the public.

#### 1.2.1 Development of Feminism

Feminism has a long religious root. European Reformation in the 16th century has led to an increasing number of women getting education. In the late 16th century, more and more women began to care about their own. Meanwhile their arguments were more consistent and more aggressive. In 1589, the British writer Jane Anger's only surviving work *Jane Anger on the protection of women* came out, criticizing the men's doctrine at that time and emphasizing Eve was better than Adam because Eve was the second forming people. Therefore, it was more perfect. This was called “England's earliest feminist” by many historians. (Margaret Waters, 2008, p. 16)

The initial feminist movements was often called for “the first wave”. At about the end of the 19th century, the first focus of the debate at that time was that gender was required to include equality between men and women, which meant the equality of both sexes. People also asked for citizenship and political rights, which were against the aristocratic privilege, stressing that men and women were not different in intelligence and ability. One of the most important goals was to fight for political rights, which was often referred to as the “feminist movement”.

The feminism after 1960 was called “the second wave of feminism”. Generally speaking, it was from the 1960s to the 1970s. It is believed that the earliest feminism was originated in the United States. This movement lasted until the 1980s. The tone was to eliminate the differences between both sexes and regard these kinds of differences as a gender relationship in the female complex and the basis of men in fact, require all areas to open to the public, and so on.

### 1.3 Research Theoretical Sources

#### 1.3.1 Feminist Thoughts

Feminism is derived from the West which is understood as a social theory and political movement with predominantly female experience as a source and motive. The term feminism first appeared in France, meaning that women were liberated and then spread to Anglo-American and became popular. With the May 4th Movement developed, it came to China and was defined as feminist. Feminists began to realize that there is a gender relationship and gender power issues so the feminist movement is on the analysis of why men and women are unequal and other issues about men and women of the power structure. Meanwhile people recognize that stressing the importance of women's rights is not enough.

### 1.3.2 Sociolinguistics

British linguist Han Lide thought that the language symbol system is a part of the social symbol system. In the mid-1960s, sociolinguistics formed and became popular as the form of linguistics and sociology in the United States. Statistical survey method commonly used by social linguistics was borrowed to analyze the characteristics of the language of the crowd, human gender, age, occupation, urban and rural and other factors. Such differences in language are gradually reflected. Sociolinguistics takes the speech phenomenon as a phenomenon of language variation.

### 1.4 Significance and Purpose of the Study

Chinese is the language spoken by the largest number of people in the world and English is the one which is most widely used in the world. Now it is a “phallocentric” society and as a human being, especially female, we should improve our ideology. Only if we weaken the thinking of gender and change women’s social status at the root, could phenomenon of sexism be changeable, even being removed. It is helpful for us to learn language by way of understanding phenomenon of sexism.

The main purpose of gender linguistics research is to examine the relationship between gender and gender culture. Language identifies, evaluates, provides and displays the gender. The language symbol reflects the differences and status of the sexes. The language distinguishes between sexes and makes different provision which is meant to show unmarked sign of male and marked sign of female in English. So that while people are communicating, the speaker's different gender identities also label their language with a gender label.

There are many angles to observe gender culture, such as literature, sociology, demography, history, philosophy and so on. The development of linguistics provides a new perspective for human observation of gender culture. Some scholars, through the analysis of gender culture in English language, pointed out that the English language embodies and symbolizes the gender culture of Anglo-American culture, mainly as follows: male is always associated with the image of positive meaning, and female are always connected with unimportant; men are often associated with the image of a strong success, while women are associated with the image of a weak loser.

## 2. Cases about Sexism in English and Chinese

### 2.1 Sexism in Advertisement

CCTV has once reported an advertisement about lozenges—a pure girl said: “Do you want to know the taste of kissing?” Immediately the man replied: “Yes. I really want to know.” And the girl said in shy: “What are you thinking of? I mean it is ‘clear mouth’ instead of ‘kiss’.”

With the development of commodity economy, advertising is one of the most effective approaches in order to shape the corporate images. Advertising is a kind of publicity to meet a specific need by a certain form of media, which is open to the public to deliver much information to the public. Advertising is used for stimulating consumers to achieve the consumer’s attention to buy things or other expected goals through the media target audience. And advertising makes full use of the “beauty” effect in order to attract the attention of consumers. What is more, people even use some provocative or sexy languages in the advertisement. These slogans, to a certain extent, meet people's needs for the beauty as well as people's emotional needs. Meanwhile it also meets the needs of women's self-realization. The use of language skills is precisely an effective means of engendering gender discrimination in order to pursue the benefits of goods. On the basis of the economy of beauty, the demands of the sex become a hot issue.

Enterprises need to establish the corporate image, shape the brand and exploit the market by giving the products both intrinsic value and external quality. Products displayed by the advertisement should think of both enterprises and consumers and should not be biased and mislead consumers. The advertisement language uses the special parts of women to express the product or use the so-called “pornography” to attract consumers in order to focus on the female’s body parts as a foothold. This kind of advertisement which has a bad impact on society and has a clear bias on the women shows that the exhausted advertising creativity. This is irresponsible both for society and business. Its essence is the negation and insults of women's independent personality and it is the reality of feudal ideology.

## 2.2 Sexism in Proverbs

It is not strange that there is one famous sentence in William Shakespeare’s work *Hamlet*. It says “Frailty, your name is woman.” Its Chinese meaning is “软弱啊，你的名字是女人。” It seems nothing improper in the translation. But when we perpend it, we find the great Shakespeare had made a serious mistake—he just showed his despise about female. Why is “frailty” on behalf of “woman”? Maybe his subconsciousness of this thought existed earlier.

In China there is an old saying “嫁出去的女儿，泼出去的水。” From its literal meaning we can learn that people compare daughters who have already got married to water which has been poured away. It seems like strange. In China traditional people think sons are better than daughters. That’s why many families have a lot of children in old society so that they want a son to carry on the family line. On the contrary daughters were thought to be a tool of continuity of a clan.

## 2.3 Sexism in Daily Life

During our daily life, phenomenon of sexism is much more than what we think. Usually it reflects in that language takes male as a standard. Women change their Family names into their husbands' after marriage, like Marie Curie, Sonia Gandhi and so on. The difference may be ambiguous in English. We call them “居里夫人” and “甘地夫人” in Chinese. What makes people feel funny is that Marie Curie is famous for her achievement in science but is only called husband's name. In ancient times it was a common sense. This situation is gradually getting better in the contemporary society.

Another common example is in China. Many large-scale conferences are held in today's life. Whether a company's meeting or National People's Congress, if conventioneer is a female, the scutcheon in front of her would be labeled both the name and gender. It is mostly because the number of female representative present at the meeting seems to be in the minority. However it gives full expression that the world doesn't put male and female at the same level.

### 3. Histories of Gender in English and Chinese

#### 3.1 In English

The first person in English refers to “I” (the first person singular), “we” (the first person plural), “you” (the second person singular), “you” (the second person plural). The words of “he” “she” “it” are the third person singular pronouns. They replace the words singulars and uncountable nouns like “Tom”, “my friend”, “water”. “They” is the third person plural pronoun. It takes the place of plural words like “my friends”, “books” and so on. But in English the word “she” appears in the late time of history.

In Anglo-Saxon people used “he” instead of “she”. *A History of English* which is written by Li Funing pointed out in chapter three that pronoun form “he” means the masculine pronoun in the singular “he”, the negative singular pronoun “she” and the plural pronoun “they” in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Old English. Until the 13th century the Northern dialect of Anglo-Saxon, the third person negative singular pronouns nominative “she” didn't show up.

If anybody [anyone] comes, ask him [them] to wait.

In Modern English “he” or “him” usually refer to persons whose gender is unknown. E.g.:

If a person had so much money, he would do it in another way.

For “anybody”, “everybody”, “nobody”, “anyone”, “someone”, “everyone”, “no one” such unidentified pronouns of unknown sex, they can be represented by singular “he”, “him” or plural “they” “them”. It is formal to use singulars and it is oral to use plurals. E.g.,:

If anybody[anyone] comes, ask him[them] to wait.

Using “man” can substitute mankind.eg:

a man among men

Also “man” substitutes humanity.e.g.:

A man cannot spin and weave at the same time.

A man is as old as he feels.

However “woman” only represents female.eg:

a woman with a past

There is a woman in it.

### 3.2 In Chinese

Before the modern China, there was no tradition of distinguishing from male, female and the third person singular. No one seemed that there was necessity to change the condition for thousands years. With the rise of the Vernacular Movement, western languages, especially English, gradually played an important role. At the beginning people translated “she” into “that woman” because there was no word relative to “she” in Chinese. As we all know, “she” is a usual word in our daily lives. But if we translate “she” into “that woman”, it looked like a long and tedious article. It feels uncomfortable while reading. Later people borrowed “伊 (yi)” which could be used in Wu dialect to express women in the third person singular accordingly. This became a trend in late Qing Dynasty and the May 4<sup>th</sup> Movement. Modern writers like Lu Xun and Zhou Zuoren habitually indicated females specially in “伊 (yi)”.

Actually in 1917 Liu Bannong put forward an advice that people should create a new word relative to “she”. Before 1920 he offered the suggestion unofficially but he didn’t publish an article about this advice definitely. Nevertheless Zhou Zuoren wrote an article which published in *New Youth* on August 5<sup>th</sup> in 1918. He mentioned Liu Bannong’s advice about “she”. He said it was inconvenient for Chinese people that there were no third person pronouns and nouns in China. So someone should come up with this recommendation clearly.

In ancient Chinese prose people used to put “之 (zhi)” as the third person of objects. Later with the rise of writings in the vernacular, the word “他 (ta)” appeared as the third person pronoun. It can be on behalf of males and also represent females and everything. But at that time the feudal conservative attacked and opposed “她”. However it received recognition and compliment by the masses and it was widely used. Many kinds of dictionaries included this word. At that time this event became sensational news in the cultural event.

Liu Bannong created the word “她” to stop the situation before, which was in confusion phenomena of the third person in written form. This purifies and enriches Chinese languages. Lu Xun spoke highly of Liu Bannong’s creativity and commented that this creation was a “battle”.

## 4. Similarities and Differences between English and Chinese in Sexism

### 4.1 Similarities

The phenomenon of gender discrimination in English and Chinese reflects the social gender stereotypes of the traditional moral values—the male and female are reflected in both cultures. Social organizations should be seen as hierarchical combinations of various power relations. In this system, men usually have priority and women do not. Both Chinese and English languages reflect a similar hierarchical culture. This reflects that the male in the community is with centralized control. In contrast, the semantics of the terms of the feminine words are more discriminatory, defamatory, belittling and vulgar.

This discriminatory phenomenon in the use of language reflects the fact that social discrimination against women has become a norm.

#### *4.2 Differences*

Both English and Chinese languages have neither the same context nor the same language system. English is phonetic text and Chinese is ideographic text. However, there is gender discrimination in both cultures. English and Chinese reflect the different manifestations of gender discrimination in the following areas:

1. Chinese characters reflect the importance of women in the relationship of the family and the continuation of the family. Although the gender roles of women are similar in both cultures, Chinese characters can reflect the social customs more directly and more clearly.
2. In English, a male-like word with a -man component is called a positive form and a female term becomes a negative form correspondingly. Negative forms of vocabulary can usually use the negative suffix to form a table of female words, sometimes containing meaning of "tiny". Chinese, not using affixes to form a new word, indicates gender identity mainly by adding additional words.
3. There are a lot of female characters in Chinese to show the identity and characteristics of women, depicting the beautiful appearance of women.
4. Some Chinese characters, for example "properly married" and so on, have a clear discrimination against women at the beginning of the word, and this historical trail is not very clear with the progress of society. Many gender discrimination words, such as “妾，嫔，妃”，are no longer widely used in today's real world.
5. Sex discrimination in English is more direct and there are many words that directly indicate discrimination against women.

### **5. Language and Others**

Lakoff Robin found that women were sexually discriminated in two ways: on the one hand, they were taught how to use Language; on the other hand they were taught how people treat women when they use language. In her view, many factors like social attitudes, changes in thinking consciousness will affect the state of language and people's attitudes towards society include women's attitudes and views. So in the language distraction, these factors should be included. In Fasold's example, women in nature are essential and unmarked, which is exactly contradictory with human society. The opposite is truly about the description of sex. Therefore language analysis should be combined with social and cultural backgrounds. We need to understand the relationship between language and social culture.

#### *5.1 Language and Society*

In a certain sense, the language is a mirror of the society. This view has been widely recognized in the sociolinguistics and cultural studies. Wardhaugh claims that language and society may have the following relationships.

First, the social structure may affect or determine the structure or behavior of the language. Some evidences can be used to support the idea—the age-level phenomenon is that it is different between younger and older children when they speak, which is also not the same between the children's speaking and adults'. Research shows that the language variants of speakers reflect their areas, social groups or ethnic origin, and possibly even their sex; another researches have shown that the speaker's particular way of speaking, the choice of words, and even the rules which is used in conversation are largely determined by certain social needs in fact.

The second possible relationship between language and society is directly opposite to the first: language composition or behavior may affect or determine the social structure. This view is always based on the Wolf hypothesis and many people think that language, rather than the speaker, can show gender discrimination.

There may be a third between language and society—the two affect each other. This view is a variant because the interaction between the two is essentially dialectical, which is a Marxist view proposed by Dittmar. He considers speech action and social behavior to be in a state of mutual influence. And the material condition of survival is a very important factor in this relationship.

The fourth possibility is that there is no relationship between the language structure and the social structure, which is independent with each other. Even if there is a relationship between the two, it is still difficult to clearly identify for the current relationship between our language and social understanding. In fact, this is Chomsky's view. He tends to fundamentally develop an isolated linguistics to distinguish it from other types of linguistics. He believes it both reasonable and realistic.

## *5.2 Language and Culture*

Understanding the interaction between language and culture can explain the diversity of languages. On the one hand, it turns out that culture affects the structure and content of language. Then the diversity of languages must be into cultural diversity in a certain extend. On the other hand, culture and language may be interdependent—language features and structures may affect other aspects of culture.

### *5.2.1 The influence of Culture on Language*

Vocabulary reflects the impact of language on culture. The performance of cultural characteristics expresses a unique personality experience, events or objects of the word may. Research can fully prove this point. That is to say the words in the language reflect the daily changes and differences in society. Important content of social environment or cultural in the language will be highlighted too.

### *5.2.2 The impact of Language on Culture*

The view that culture affects the language is generally recognized by the word. But on the contrary that language affects culture is unlike what everyone thinks. What Sapir and Wolf proposed is that language itself is a force. It can affect people in the real world to how to understand and imagine the objective reality.

Whorf once wrote: "... The language system of each language is not just an expression of the language system. The thought of the tool itself is also the formation the thought which personal psychological



activities of the guide reflected in the brain and the analysis of business thinking is not an independent process. It is always connected with grammar. People who use different grammar will have more or less different ways of thinking.

Carol Ember and Melvin Ember have noticed that Chinese kindergarten students have better performance in doing math than foreign kindergarten students. As a result, the number of Chinese students does not rely too much on fingers as American students like.

In summary, language culture and society are inseparable and closely linked with each other. When we discuss the gender phenomenon of language, social and cultural factors should be considered, especially in the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

## **6. The Historical and Cultural Origins of Sex Discrimination in English and Chinese**

### *6.1 Historical Roots*

Women in the matriarchal society had a glorious history. In this social period which economic production capacity was in the hands of women, women were in a dominant position in the community. But in the period of patriarchal society, economic production capacity gradually began to be mastered in the hands of men and women's status was in a subsidiary position. In the white male-dominated society, the language of English is male-centered. It rejected and belittled women. Chinese is deeply influenced by the feudal system so that the relationship between men and women became a master-and-slave relationship.

### *6.2 Cultural Roots*

Language, which is used as people's ideas and expression of thinking, must be more or less reflected the specific period of people's social culture and ideas. In Western culture, people's thinking got a very far-reaching impact by the "Bible". According to the *Bible*, Eve is derived from a rib of Adam. "God made man " has become the basis of the theory of language origin, which began to lay the dominant position of men. Chinese culture is mainly influenced by Confucianism, and the phenomenon of male superiority was recorded in the historical data of the Warring States period. Confucius, the ancestor of Confucianism, said, "Only women and villains are difficult to support." Confucianism emphasizes women to obey men, making women's thoughts unanimously tied.

## **7. Ways to Eliminate Gender Discrimination in Language**

### *7.1 Eliminating some Misunderstanding of Sex Discrimination Language*

There are two misunderstandings in society. One is that people should establish a community where women are as the center and the second is to confuse gender discrimination and gender differences. These two misunderstandings have become an obstacle in the process of trying to eliminate the language of discrimination, which may lead to a more serious problem rather than a solution.

### *7.2 Equal Language Strategy*

In the process of use of language, we should try to use a neutral language or non-sex discrimination language. But linguists agree that language itself is not discriminatory. Some language strategies are effective in changing gender discrimination in language and will become more effective as society changes because society is the root of gender discrimination. Therefore, the use of language strategies at the same time to take the appropriate social measures can really eliminate the language of gender discrimination.

## **8. Research Prospects and Future Direction**

Traditional linguistics regards language as a communication tool. This tool does not serve the whole people equally, and show different cultural and social consciousness for men and women. Thus, the language is a cultural phenomenon, reflecting the cultural value to us. It is also the cultural cohesion, which is a self-contained system of special culture.

The universal phenomenon of gender discrimination in different cultures is not only a symbolic expression but also a cultural stereotype, a social mentality and a cognitive model in the language system. It is not only a linguistic problem but also needs to combine language and culture research, exploring the relationship between language and thinking and revealing the use of language in the sub-cultural phenomenon. It has a far-reaching social significance in our lives.

The problem of gender discrimination in language is put forward after the scholars put forward the Sapir-Wolf hypothesis, which involves the relationship between the grammatical and semantic categories of the linguistic system and the thinking mode of the speaker. "Strong Theory" is a different type of language to determine the speaker's thinking and perception, that is, to determine their understanding of the different ways of the world. Wolf himself called this view "linguistic relativity principle" (language theory of relativity). "Weak Theory" holds that different types of language may have different effects on the way the speaker knows the world under certain conditions.

This thesis is just a tentative study with its limitations. The study focuses on the phenomenon of sex discrimination which is reflected in the word formation. Language can reflect ideas, but specific words can never fully express all the connotations of thought. Therefore, the conclusions of this outcome cannot be summed up too much. In fact, men and women's names and titles are different in China. These aspects may also prejudice against men. In the future, we need to discuss this kind of gender discrimination in Chinese. The dictionary has the characteristics of recording fixed language expression, which can reveal the prejudice against women in language. However, this relatively static research method may not be able to quickly keep up with the development of society changes. In addition, there is a large number of male language "discrimination" in modern English language composition and this phenomenon has aroused public debate. The thesis deals with female sex discrimination, and its conclusions are limited to this range.

## 9. Conclusion

In reality, facts that men and women are not equal or women's ability is lower than men's are not caused by gender, but by the acquired environment. It is the results of traditional culture, social custom constraints and the construction of traditional culture.

Social change is a basis which can eliminate gender discrimination in language. In Western countries, society and culture have a profound impact on gender discrimination in language. Meanwhile these factors affect the culture too. That is to say the culture is dynamic and always has a great change. Compared with the development of culture, language changes are relatively slow and uniform. Sex discrimination in language is a social phenomenon, which is a reflection of gender discrimination in society. Social change is the foundation in our daily life. The gender discrimination in language does not have a fixed pattern. It is affected by social and cultural influence and will change with the development of society and change.

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