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Is a doctor a (wo)man? Some remarks on sexist language use in English and Greek

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Abstract

In the present paper I discuss the forms of language sexism which appear in English and Greek placing emphasis on professional nominal forms. More specifically, the focus of the paper is on (a) speakers' attitudes regarding the status of sexism in the society and its reflection on language and (b) the differences between languages with different forms of gender morphological marking, i.e. English and Greek, respectively. I will argue that sexism is a gradient notion, it is more evident in languages with gender discrimination and it seems to be a topic that needs to be incorporated on language teaching.

Keywords: sexism, racist use of language, language sexism, professional sexism, sexism in education, gender sexism



Introduction

Sexism is defined as a set of prejudices and behaviors which stem from the arbitrary and, consequently, non-equal ideology regarding human discrimination based on gender (De Beauvoir 1949 [1972], Cixous 1997, Pavlidou 2006). In this context, the distinction between sexes and genders is vital. The term *sex* is primarily biologically marked, whereas *gender* is determined by social, cultural, psychological, financial factors (McConnell-Ginet 1988, Stinson 2000, Tan 2020). Put differently, masculinity and femininity are clearly distinguished in terms of biology, whereas the terms *sex* and *gender* occupy the edges of a continuum and are variably perceived depending on social and cultural contexts (Bornstein 1995, Piercey 2000, Turner 2008). The latter 'unstable' definition of *sex* and *gender* has forced the establishment of the term *gender identity* (Stoller 1964, Tan 2020). According to *gender identity* the perception of *gender* is determined by a person's experience and their attitudes regarding the traits of *gender*. Given the above, Butler (1986, 1990) argued that genders are in reality constructed.

Gender discrimination has led to the establishment of *social stereotypes* (Lakoff 1973, Piercey 2000, Nneka 2012, Kogidou 2014, Tan 2020). Stereotypes are massively determined by the 'axiom' that one of the two genders is biologically, ethically, mentally superior to the other. Such attitudes allow negative discriminations against the 'inferior' gender. According to Woodington (2010), stereotypes are arbitrary generalizations which depend on experience, ideologies and interactive human personalities. In other words, stereotypes are mental constructions which emerge during preschool age and are shaped as solid principles which determine development and learning. Stereotypes are strong and often intransigent leading to the reinforcement of the status quo of the strong classes (Woodington 2010).

Gender is placed in the center of sociolinguistic attention. Within the framework of Universal Grammar (UG) language is seen as a purified system remote from extra-linguistic factors which may affect it. Therefore, UG is not interested in how language is realized by different genders. However, sociolinguistic studies speakers' linguistic behavior on the basis of extra-linguistic parameters like *gender*, *age*, *social class* and *educational level* (Lakoff 1973, Trudgill 1972, Pavlidou 2006, Nneka 2012, Sarri-Hasan 2018). Trudgill (1972), for example, argues that women's language is the product of their social stratification (see also Lakoff 1973). Put differently, social stratification largely formulates language use.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 discusses different forms of sexism, while section 3 focuses on language sexism. Section 4 presents the outcomes of various studies on language sexism in English and Greek, i.e., two languages with different gender markings, therefore, different depictions of language sexism. Finally, section 5 closes the paper.

Forms of sexism

Sexism exists in direct and indirect ways; however, it tends to appear mostly in covered verbal communication. According to Butler (1990), women's conscious attempts to tumble sexism through language often find obstacles in prevailing ideologies.

A first and usual form of sexism is *sexism at home* which refers to the traditional discrimination of genders based on their roles. According to these roles, men are mostly involved in outside-of-home tasks, including livelihood work, while women are restricted to home and family care, without her efforts being recognized (cf. Lakoff 1973, Hartmann 1982). The most easily recognizable form of sexism outside of home is *sexism at work* which is manifested in low wages and high rates of unemployment for women, limited access to positions of responsibility and decision centers, hostile working environments, sexual harassment, releases or discriminations against pregnant women, acts of hate, all kinds of abuse, non-existing support to motherhood (cf. Lakoff 1973, Hakim 1979, Rubin 2008). Another place where sexism appears is the military services and positions of hierarchy.

Other forms of sexism appear in religion, science, sexual and human rights and education (Lakoff 1973, Martinou 2018). More specifically, women are often stigmatized as inferior human beings, sinful and dirty, not allowed to enter sanctuaries. Science and education are frequently affected by patriarchal prejudices. The latter define specific scientific fields addressed to women. Finally, as far as women's sexual rights are concerned, the exploitation of female sexuality is considered natural and naturally prone to patriarchal behaviors (Manouselis 2014).

In most social contexts, mass media play a crucial role in the formation of a sexist society (Hudson 1996, Nneka 2012). Speech in advertisements, comics, cinema, public documents is male-dominated. In Greece, for example, the news is full of terms attributed to men (Mantzaridis 2017), while female forms are almost non-existing in public speech (Meniki 2002, Kaouni 2020). The intensifying sexist phenomena have led to the compilation of guidelines for the use of public speech and administration documents at a scientific level (Tsokalidou 1996) as well as at an authoritative and institutional level in Greece (Gasouka & Georgallidou 2014, Moshovakou & Chadziantoniou 2018) and Cyprus (Gasouka et al. 2016, Pilavaki 2016).

Language sexism

Language sexism is the most prominent and obvious form of sexism and takes the shape of racist use of language since speakers seem to select specific linguistic structures to refer to men and women resulting in the production of stereotypes. Hudson (1996) argues that language reflects sex discrimination in the speech of language users. In most places of the world, the problem of language sexism has been raised through the promotion of the feminist movement and the entry of women in the workforce and science (Cameron 1990, Walter 1999, Liodzis 2015, Kun 2022).

English is a language in which gender discrimination is attested both at a morphological/ morpho-syntactic and semantic level. In other words, gender discrimination is not restricted to how morphology or syntax shape language, i.e. by means of gender – dependent derivational/ inflectional paradigms, but also through speakers' attitudes, social stereotypes and the ideologies that are salient in society (Hudson 1996) (see also 4.2. below).

Greek has a complex morphological system which has distinct inflectional endings for the three grammatical genders, masculine, feminine and neutral. Therefore, the use of masculine professional names even when reference is made to women renders (language) sexism very obvious (Pavlidou 2006). In a period of intense social diglossia in Greece, Triantafyllidis (1963) suggests the use of feminine forms when reference is made to women. However, as it will be discussed later, native speakers do not seem to adopt this suggestion.

Studies on language sexism

In the following sections, I will present the main outcomes of studies that have been conducted on English and Greek language sexism, respectively.

Language sexism in English

As already mentioned in 3 above, gender discrimination and language sexism are depicted in morphology but also reflected in social contexts. More specifically, gender discrimination is depicted in male forms which undergo suffixation for female forms to be created (data in 1) (cf. Katamba 1993, Piercey 2000, He 2010, Nneka 2012, Coady 2018, Kun 2022).

1. Masc.: waiter – Fem.: waitress
Masc.: prince – Fem.: princess
Masc.: god – Fem.: goddess

However, there are cases, as those representatively presented in (2), in which female forms are not at all existent (cf. Katamba 1993, Piercey 2000, He 2010, Nneka 2012, Coady 2018, Kun 2022).

2. Masc.: dancer – Fem.: ∅
Masc.: Cook – Fem.: ∅
Masc.: dentist – Fem.: ∅
Masc.: surgeon – Fem.: ∅

In addition, compounding seems to favor male language in English. The first compound constituent in the data in (3) is a masculine form, whereas the equivalent form in a feminine first compound constituent is grammatically non-acceptable (cf. Katamba 1993, Piercey 2000, He 2010, Nneka 2012, Coady 2018, Kun 2022).

3. Masc.: Kingdom – Fem.: *queendom
Masc.: House wife – Fem.: *houseman
Masc.: Freshman – Fem.: *freshwoman
Masc.: Forefather – Fem.: *foremother

Finally, social contexts often circumscribe gender discrimination and define sexist use of language. The data in (4) reveal that masculine forms either carry positive connotations (while feminine forms carry negative connotations) or are more inclusive (cf. Katamba 1993, Piercey 2000, He 2010, Nneka 2012, Coady 2018, Kun 2022).

4. Masc.: easy (straightforward) – Fem.: easy (Lascivious)
Masc.: cold (steady, calm) – Fem.: cold (social withdrawal)
Masc.: Man (also human kind) – Fem.: woman
Masc.: dog (all dogs) – Fem.: bitch (only women)

To my knowledge, there are no further psycholinguistic or sociolinguistic studies assessing language attitudes or the intuition of native speakers of English regarding language sexism. I assume that this is due to the fact that language sexism is not morphologically overt.

Language sexism in Greek

Greek is a morphologically transparent language, i.e. it has distinct four-case (nominative, genitive, accusative, vocative) word/ inflectional paradigms corresponding to the three genders, masculine, feminine and neutral (see Table 1). It is important to note that speakers of Greek have been struggling for almost ten centuries between the use of archaic Greek, also known as Katharevousa, and vernacular Greek. This mixed linguistic condition was imposed by the fact that archaic Greek was the official/ state language as well as the language of education, while vernacular Greek was the language of everyday life. This state of diglossia was officially ended by law in 1976, but Katharevousa is still attested in official state documents.

The first extended study on language sexism was conducted by Pavlidou (1984, 1985). The sample of the study consisted of a) high school pupils, b) University students and c) native speakers of Greek who had completed their circular or university education. A questionnaire was distributed to the participants. The results showed that the participants' language instinct was differentiated depending on the grammatical/ inflectional ending they used. According to Pavlidou (1984, 1985), the participants' linguistic be-

Tab. 1 Representative nominal inflectional paradigms in Greek

	masculine	feminine	neutral
Inflectional paradigms/ singular			
Nom	O Kal-os (= fine)	I kal-i	To kal-o
Gen	Tou kal-ou	Tis kal-is	Tou kal-ou
Acc	Ton kal-o	Tin kal-i	To kal-o
Voc	(kal-e)	(kal-i)	(Kal-o)
Inflectional paradigms/ Plural			
Nom	Oi kal-oi	Oi kal-es	Ta kal-a
Gen	Ton kal-on	ton kal-on	Ton kal-on
Acc	Tous kal-ous	Tis kal-es	Ta kal-a
Voc	(kal-oi)	(kal-es)	(kal-a)

havior was affected by their educational level. More specifically, the higher education the participants received, the more archaic/ fossilized language they used. In other words, masculine forms were also used to refer to females. It is worth mentioning that high school boys were willing to use feminine professional nominals compared to girls who appeared to be more conservative regarding their linguistic choices.

Pavlidou (2006) carried out two more repetitions of her study. In the first repetition, University students who (had) attended Sociolinguistics classes conducted the research and distributed questionnaires to high school students. The outcomes of this first repetition were not different from the first study. In the second repetition, students of linguistics were interviewed. Here, linguistic choices were driven by the student's familial environment as well as their study area. Again, female students preferred to use archaic masculine forms when referring to females. However, male and female natural sciences students were more comfortable to use feminine forms compared to male and female students of the humanities. It seems that not much changed in the 2006 study as opposed to the 1984 and 1985 studies. Makri-Tsilipakou (1995) and Alvanoudi (2012) reached similar research outcomes.

The need for additional data was fired by a public dialogue on the use of the female title for the first female president of the Greek Republic who was elected in 2020. Kaplanis (2020) and Tzakosta (2020) underline that the use of the masculine term *Proedros the Ellinikis Dimokratias* (= president of the Greek Republic) instead of the feminine form '*Proedrina/ Proedri tis Ellinikis Dimokratias*' maintains the already existing social/ gender stereotypes. Aims of an ongoing study on language sexism (Tzakosta et al. in prep.) is to explore the factors which affect the formation of feminine nouns, placing special focus on professional nominals. The study is realized in three phases.

In phase 1, which has already been completed, feminine professional nominals of the *Reverse Dictionary of Modern Greek* (Anastasiadi- Symeonidi 2002) were listed. 2400 male professional nominals were listed ending in *-os, -eas, is, -as*. Only 40,25% of these masculine nominals (966) also had their feminine equivalent. Feminine forms existed for non-high-status, non-leading and/ or manual professions only.

During phase 2, a questionnaire was distributed to 9 groups of participants (i.e., native speakers, pupils of primary and secondary education, University students, bilingual speakers in Greek and another language, Greek second language learners, native speakers of Greek diagnosed with language disorders) and has been adapted accordingly. The questionnaire consists of 6 sections with closed and open questions. The latter were not addressed to preschool children. Here I will present the data drawn from the

groups of native speakers (N=447). As already mentioned, the focus of the study is not placed on how gender, age, educational level affect language choices, but on whether and – if yes, how - social or linguistic factors determine speakers' linguistic behavior.

The first major outcome is that the data support previous research according to which high status professions were expressed by masculine nominals only (Fragoudaki 1989, Makri-Tsilipakou 1995, Charis 1999). Actually, low rates of emergence of feminine forms for professions like '*giatros - doctor*' and '*chirurgos - surgeon*' certify that the higher the status, the risk or the responsibility of the profession the lower the rates of emergence of feminine forms. Moreover, professional nouns formed with loan inflectional endings, like the Turkish '*-dzis*' (*taksidzis - taxi driver*) form feminine forms easily compared to *nous/* endings of Greek origin. We assume that native speakers of Greek find loan inflectional endings more appropriate for the formation of low-status feminine professional forms. However, this assumption needs to be verified by additional data. It is notable that the participants 'could see' women perform manly professions, but prefer not to use feminine forms for these professions (89%). The participants provided a range of answers in order to justify their negative attitudes. Some representative claims are the following:

- "Feminine words often have negative meaning"
- "Some feminine forms cannot exist due to euphony reasons"
- "Not all women can perform all professions"
- "A profession does not necessarily need gender discrimination. This could actually be considered as a sexist behaviour"
- "The history of language does not allow the use of feminine forms. Human rights were only recently acknowledged and this happens only on paper"
- "Gender discrimination is sexism"
- "Gender discrimination violates language instinct"
- "It is not easy to pronounce feminine words."

Discussion & conclusion

The data discussed above reveal that speakers' attitudes regarding the use of professional nominals are circumscribed by linguistic and extralinguistic criteria. The use of a) loanwords for the formation of low-status feminine professional names and b) lexemes of archaic origin for the formation of high-status masculine professional names as well as issues related to accent, euphony and language instinct are classified as linguistic criteria which determine the formation of professional names. On the other hand, speakers' educational level, age and gender are classified as extra-linguistic criteria which determine language use. It appears that women are more conservative concerning the use of feminine professional forms, an outcome that could lead us to argue that women's speech is more sexist than men's because it is more prone to social and familial stereotypes. There is more to be said about this in the future (Tzakosta et al. in prep.).

The data also display that there are 6 distinct levels of language sexism. In other words, sexist use of language is spread on a continuum between two extremes (fig. 1). Fig. 1 depicts that language sexism ranges from absolute stereotypical linguistic behaviors (level 1) to language performance transpired by speakers' conscious knowledge of the grammatical and acceptable language uses (cf. Tzakosta 2022).

Given the data presented here, we claim that morphological transparency, i.e., the use of 'appropriate' form per gender, is essential for the establishment of democratic speech. Therefore, the inclusion of sexism and language sexism in education and language teaching is very important (Tsiakalos 1995, Kogidou 2014, Pavlidou et al. 2004, 2015, Iordanidou & Mandzari 2005, Katsouda & Trapalis 2012) so that students of all levels of education realize a) that language is a system consisted of (diachronically salient) rules

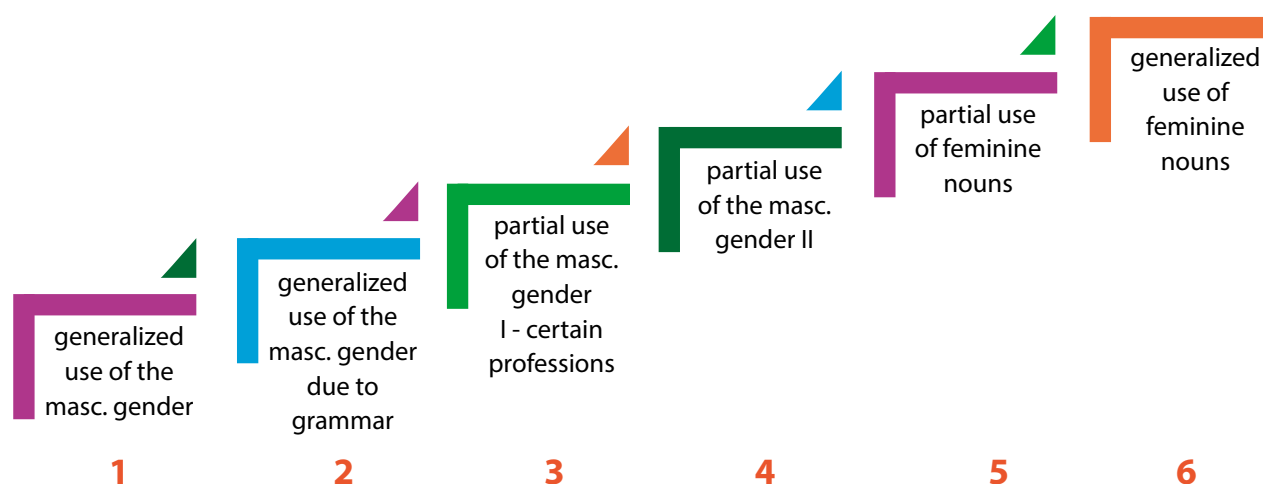


Fig. 1 Levels of language sexism

and principles which is set in use by different groups of users resulting in change, refresh and continuous productivity and b) the constant conflict between grammatically correct structures and acceptable structures so that they understand that structural variation and freedom of language use and the notion of 'error' could be a driving force of language teaching.

Bionote

Marina Tzakosta is full professor of language development and pedagogy of the preschool child at the faculty of Education of the University of Crete. Her research focuses on morphophonological development of first and second languages (including dialects), language disorders, language learning and teaching. She is interested in the mutual interaction of grammar and social context in language production and use. She is currently working on loanword adaptation and language sexism.

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