

Analysis of Sexism in English and Chinese Proverbs

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Since language and gender research has gradually become a heated topic for linguists, according to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, some linguists argue that language is sexually discriminatory against women. Language is the most crucial tool for human communication, which reflects ideology and culture of language users. Moreover, proverbs, as the essence of language, can better reflect the connotation of social culture. Therefore, it is more representative to study linguistic sexism in proverbs. Under the light of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in sociolinguistics, this paper uses comparative methods to present sexism in English and Chinese proverbs from six aspects, such as women's social status, speech, wisdom, temper, vices, and marriage. Based on our analysis, we find that the emergence and prevalence of sexism in English and Chinese proverbs roots from social and historical aspects. Hopefully our research will make people recognize sexism in language and avoid discriminatory language practices.

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1. Introduction

In the 1970s, sociolinguists began to study sexism in English and systematically discussed the characteristics of women's language. In the 1970s, linguists such as Lakoff, Zimmerman, Thorne, Trudgill, Henley, West and Bolinger in the 1980s made further researches on sexism. Moreover, they further discussed the causes of sexism in language. British scholar R. Lakoff (1975, p. 2) pointed out, "Women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language and in the general way language use treats them." From the 1980s to the 1990s, linguists basically did further research on previous results. Later, some new scholars began to join the research, namely, D. Cameron, J. Holmes, J. Coates, etc. What's more, their research was not confined to the study of female gender discrimination, but concentrated on both the discrimination against women and against men in English objectively and scientifically, which reflects the rule of social and linguistic development.

In China, linguistics focused on the study of gender differences in the early days. They mainly investigated the differences of language use between men and women from phonetics, intonation, vocabulary, and syntactic structure. Inspired by the western feminist movement, Chinese scholars gradually shifted their focus to the study of linguistic sexism, and explored the causes of sexism based on their own national conditions. For example, Qin Xiubai (1996) made an analysis of sexism based on the field of history, society and culture; Kong Qingcheng (1993) objectively analyzed the discrimination between men and women in English and Chinese; Zhuang Hecheng (1990) and Gao Xiuxue (2018) analyzed and described sexism in English from different perspectives.

The horizons of sexism studies are wider than ever before, allowing us to be more comprehensive at a higher level to accurately grasp the relationship between language use and gender differences.

Proverbs, as a decisive part of language, reflect certain social culture which contains sexism. Moreover, as a bane of human society, sexism still exists in the East and the West. Owing to these reasons, a comparative analysis on sexism between English and Chinese in proverbs has been chosen as the research topic.

2. Theoretical Basis

Sapir and Whorf paid full attention to the relationship between language and culture, and reasoned out a theoretical basis for the study of sexism. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis was mainly put forward by Whorf, but was influenced by his teacher Sapir, which can be concluded as follows: language is not only the product of society, but can also influence people's thought and mental construction, i.e. people are affected by language when observing and explaining the world. For example, if one wants to call a female relative, in Chinese, it has the following expression: “三姑”, “二姨”, “二舅妈”, “大表姨” and so on. While in English, there is only one word “aunt”. This is because Chinese makes their users more sensitive to kinship, but English is not. In sum, language can influence people's thought and mental construction.

3. An Analysis of Sexism Manifested in Proverbs

English and Chinese proverbs have a long history recording the experience and wisdom of labouring people in different times. Furthermore, their sources are extremely wide, from literary works to folklore, from religious beliefs to natural phenomena. Therefore, it is more widely representative to study linguistic sexism from proverbs. Next, comparative methods will be used to present sexism in English and Chinese proverbs from six aspects, such as women's social status, speech, wisdom, temper, vices, and marriage.

3.1 Women's Social Status

Hu Tianbin (1998) believed that “woman's social status have never been important and always been passive, and feudal ethics such as the three obediences, i.e. obedience to the father before marriage, the husband after marriage, the son after husband's death and the four virtues, i.e. morality, proper speech, modest manner, diligent work in old China have kept women in slavery for a long time.” Among Chinese proverbs, the following proverbs reflect women's low status:

夫贵妻荣，母凭子贵。
兄弟如手足，妻子如衣服。
在家从父，出嫁从夫，夫死从子。
打老婆，骂老婆，手里无钱买老婆。

English proverbs in this regard reflect discrimination against women in religion. Dong Xiaobo (2003) argued that in the Anglo-American society where Christianity prevails, the female subordinate status has been determined in *Genesis*: God first created Adam who was male, and Adam has since been regarded as the ancestor of mankind. Animals and women were created for man's helpers. This thought reflects that women play a reckless and passive gender role in society. In English proverbs there are the following proverbs:

A fair woman without virtue is like palled wine.
A horse, a wife and a sword may be showed but not lent.

All women may be won.

A man of straw is worthy of a woman of gold.

The above Chinese and English proverbs full of chauvinism reflect that the husband only treats his wife as his own property and compares her to horses, swords, and fine wine. In addition, the linguist Nilsen (1982) cited an example to illustrate the status of women in American culture and their image in people's minds: a picnic notice in the Department of English at Indiana University wrote: "Good food! Delicious women!" Nilsen also said that comparing women to delicious food was commonplace in English, which just revealed the reckless and passive position of women in British and American society. In English and Chinese, there are many proverbs that compare women to food and drinks, such as "a fair woman without virtue is like palled wine" in English and "秀色可餐" in Chinese. They all reflect the low social status of women, just like the food on the plate, serving as reckless and passive roles.

From the perspective of social history, from the moment human beings stepped into the patrilineal society, taking men as the center has become a common feature of human society. Women's humble status has made them discriminated in both the East and the West. According to Wang Dechun, Yang Suying, Huang Yueyuan (2003), the thought that man is superior to woman always exists in people's thoughts and it is always demonstrated in language. For a long time, women's unequal status in society has caused language discrimination against women.

3.2 Women's Speech

Speaking of women's speech, Jespersen (1905) once gave an example: "There is a sharp proverb in Italy which means 'words are women, deeds are men'." Women's wordy behaviour seems to have become common in many cultures around the world. In Chinese words such as "饶舌", "好说话", "长舌妇" are very common, and there are many examples of such discrimination against women in Chinese proverbs, such as:

三个女人一台戏。

妇女们嘴长，男人们手长。

三个老太婆，赛过敲鼓锣。

小姑多，舌头多；大姑多，婆婆多。

English proverbs also portray women's wordless behavior harshly:

Many women, many words; many geese, many turds.

Where there are women and geese, there wants no noise.

A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike.

From the above proverbs, when commenting on women's speech, especially in English proverbs, we can find that geese are often associated with women, because a goose shouts loudly along the side roads, just like those chatterers existing in both men and women. However, there are only a lot of proverbs to describe female chatterers, while there is no proverb to describe male chatterers, which fully reflects the discrimination against women in proverbs.

3.3 Women's Wisdom

In the history of various countries, women were once deprived of equal access to education and were not allowed to be as smart and capable as men. Conversely, it was always believed that women had no knowledge

and lacked the talent to learn. There are many examples in English and Chinese proverbs that belittle the ignorance of women. There are the following examples in Chinese proverbs:

女子无材便是德。
女人头发长，见识短。
男子痴，一时迷；女子痴，没药医。

There are the following examples in English proverbs:

Long hairs and short wit.
When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women.
Women in state affairs are like monkeys in glass shops.

The above English and Chinese proverbs slander women's lack of wisdom and ignorance. On the one hand, men advocate that too much learning does not become a virtuous woman, but when women follow this rule, they scold women for their long hair and short knowledge. On the other hand, men not only blame women for their lack of ideas and abilities, but also criticize them for their damaging the prestige of men. In fact, such kind of contradictory thought of men shows that men need women's ignorance to set off their erudition and meet their sense of superiority.

3.4 Women's Temper

In Chinese culture, the idea that women are narrow-minded, changeable and envious exist for a long time. In *A Dream in Red Mansions*, there are many references to the changeable and capricious temperament of women. Chinese proverbs of this kind can be shown by the following examples:

女人心，海底针。
十个女人九个妒。
女人是水做的。

Shakespeare once said: "Frailty, thy name is woman." It is a typical characteristic of weak women that they tend to weep. There are many proverbs emphasizing women's fragile tempers, especially in English:

Woman is made to weep.
Glasses and lasses are brittle ware.
A woman's mind and winter wind change often.

From the above proverbs, we can see that people like to use tears and fragile glass to refer to women's sentimentality, and use wind and weather to metaphorize their elusive personality characteristics. And we can explain it from physiological and social perspectives. From a physiological point of view, the nervous system of women is less stable than that of men, and their emotions are susceptible to physiological conditions. From a social point of view, the weakness of women seems natural, because in the eyes of people, women are born to be weak.

3.5 Women's Vices

In English and Chinese, there are many proverbs used to describe women's vices, especially in English proverbs. They all portray women as a vicious and troubling culprit, which contains sexism obviously. Let's look at the following examples:

Women are the snares of Stan.
 A nice wife and a back door rob the house.
 Nothing agrees worse than a lady's heart and beggar's purse.

Similarly, there are many examples in Chinese proverbs:

红颜祸水。
 最毒不过妇人心。
 唯女子与小人难养。
 女人上屋屋要坍，女人下船船要翻。

The sexism in these proverbs is clear at a glance. In *Bible*, Eve tempted Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, which violated God's ban. Therefore, God feels that making a woman is a great mistake and she is the source of all evil. In old China, women were in an oppressed and enslaved position, and they had no right to ask for help regardless of national affairs or family planning, because it's a taboo of Chinese people to let women manage affairs in politics or a family. In short, both Chinese and English proverbs portray a woman as a vicious and troubling culprit, and this is enough to reflect discrimination against women.

3.6 Marriage

Marriage is a part of culture, while proverbs are the product of culture. In terms of marriage, the phenomenon of discrimination against women in English and Chinese proverbs is every common. Since ancient times, many Chinese have advocated that girls should marry as soon as possible at a certain age, otherwise trouble may arise. Such Chinese proverbs are as follows:

养儿防老，养女赔钱。
 木大做柱梁，女大做填房。
 女大不中留，留来留去结冤仇。

Similarly, there are some proverbs about women's marriage in English:

Daughters and dead fish are no keeping wares.
 A woman of no birth may marry into the purple.
 He that marries for wealth sells his liberty.
 Marry a wife of thine own degree.

The above proverbs not only reflect the deep-rooted patriarchal thought but also the tendency to commercialize women in English and Chinese culture. Most Chinese people have always thought that no offspring is the worst one of the three ways unfilial to parents, and it is a waste of food at home and heavy burden on the family to adopt a daughter who is only a temporary member of the family. When she gets to the age of marriage, she should marry someone as soon as possible. In addition, in the male-centered view of marriage, it is an essential condition for a talented man to marry a good-looking woman, which can be seen that taking appearance as a standard to measure the value of women shows that in the society dominated by men, women are placed in the tragic status of dolls.

In short, through the analysis of Chinese and English proverbs describing women, we can see that in the past, both in the East and the West, discrimination against women still exists, which is a commonality of humans in the historical development process.

4. Causes of Sexism in English and Chinese Proverbs

The emergence and long-term existence of sexism in English and Chinese proverbs are not accidental, but have deep social and historical roots. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, language are essentially possessed by social factors and communicative function, which changes with the development of society. Thus, as a folk language, the generation and spread of proverbs naturally follow this rule, and exist as a response to social phenomena. On the whole, proverbs have the function of literary understanding and instruction in content, and are full of philosophy and morality, so most proverbs are positive. However, in the long history of human from the patrilineal society to the capitalist society, both the East and the West have experienced a long social form of private ownership, such as slavery and feudalism. In the history, women's social status has always been low, and gender equality has not been fully realized so far, so the concept of men's superiority over women still exists in English and Chinese proverbs.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing and discussing sexism in English and Chinese proverbs from six different aspects above, it can be seen that linguistic sexism as a social phenomenon is common in various aspects of English and Chinese proverbs, reflecting the long history of women's low social status. The phenomenon of sexism reflected in English and Chinese proverbs has a long history, whose appearance and long-term existence are not determined by the natural attributes of the language itself, but have deep social and historical roots.

In order to eliminate sexism in language, it is necessary to eradicate the concept of gender discrimination and the social phenomenon of inequality between men and women. With the development of society and the continuous improvement of women's social status, sexism in language has gained more and more attention. The democratic concept of equality between men and women has become more and more popular, and those proverbs that discriminate against women have gradually faded out. One day, those proverbs carrying gender inequality will eventually be replaced by some proverbs that praise women, such as "women hold up half the sky" and other well-known proverbs.

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