

Gender Stereotypes in the English-Chinese Dictionary: A Case Study on Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English

Shu-Fang Ni

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Da-Yeh University

Abstract

English has been called the man-made language which contains linguistic sexism in its vocabulary, grammar, and semantics (Maggio, 1987). Research on language and sex has confirmed that males have some advantages over words in the English language. According to Spender (1985), sexism in language enhances the position of males, and males have control over the production of cultural forms through language. Many researchers have tried to find out the gender stereotypes in English newspaper, magazines, TV commercials and soap operas, and literature. But little research is done in the area of the dictionary. Dictionary is supposed to be objective and accurate; however, gender stereotypes still can be found in its word explanations and exemplary sentences.

This study investigates the gender stereotypes found in the exemplary sentences in the English-Chinese dictionary. A quantitative content analysis and a qualitative inquiry were performed to examine the data. The illustrative sentences from ten letters (A, B, C, I, J, K, W, X, Y, and Z) in a dictionary are collected, analyzed, and categorized. The results show that sentences with masculine words outnumbered sentences with feminine words by nearly 4 to 1. In addition, the stereotypes for both genders are demonstrated with selected exemplary sentences. The results show that women are often stereotyped as weak, sick, and emotional; whereas men are described as wise, brave, and successful. However, males are also stereotyped as alcoholics and criminals. In the future, both genders need to be equally presented in an unstereotyped dictionary.

Keyword: linguistic sexism, dictionary, gender stereotype

通訊作者. Tel.: 04-8511888 轉 6015

E-mail address: shufang@mail.dyu.edu.tw

I. Background

English has been called the man-made language which contains linguistic sexism in its vocabulary, grammar, and semantics, etc. For example, suffixes, -ess, -ette, and -trix, are used as "feminine" endings to classify females and males, such as, actress/actor, farmerette/farmer, executrix/executor (Maggio, 1987). In addition, words which represent the female are lacking. There are words, like "policeman", "fireman", but there are no "policewoman" and "firewoman." Another problem is the genetic "he" which people often use to include female and make although the word, "she", exists in English. The examples above show that the male is the norm and the female is an invisible sub-category. Thus, linguistic sexism occurs in the English language.

"Language uses us as much as we use language" (Lakoff, 1975, p. 3). The language itself restricts the thoughts and behaviors of both sexes. A girl might never think she can be a policeman when she reads "policeman" all the time. On the other hand, people's knowledge shapes the language. In other words, people's thought governs the language they use. People usually possess the traditional images of some occupations, such as, a medical doctor. Sentence, "the doctor's wife cried hot tears", is more likely to be adopted than sentence, "the doctor's

husband cried hot tears." So, the linguistic stereotype results from both the man-made language itself and people's traditional knowledge.

Sexism operates in many fields of English discourse. The verbal stereotypes of masculinity and femininity classify female as being emotional, fragile, and passive; while male as being rational, strong, and aggressive. In other words, men could be interpreted as positive and superior; whereas women as negative and inferior. Emotional man and rational woman seem unnatural. These stereotypes can be found easily in TV programs, newspapers, literature, textbooks, and dictionaries which influence people's life and ways of thinking almost everyday and everywhere.

Dictionary is supposed to be objective and accurate; however, gender stereotypes still can be found in its word explanations and exemplary sentences. Gershuny (1977) proposes that dictionaries are the perpetrators of sexist tradition. She also asserts that the dictionary, one of the most popular authoritative documents, has echoes the culture's biases and prejudices in the guise of neutral descriptive linguistics. The dictionary re-emphasizes the traditional images of both genders, especially the female. Users of a gender-biased dictionary root the stereotypes in mind gradually and unconsciously.

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zines, TV commercials and soap operas, and children literature. But little research is done in the area of the dictionary.

In her study of the sexist semantics, Gershuny (1973) collected sample from *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1966). There are three findings in her research. Firstly, sentences with solely masculine words outnumbered sentences with solely feminine words by 3 to 1. Secondly, both male and females are stereotyped in the sentences. Finally, males are stereotyped about 65% and female about 75% of the time each appears.

Kaye (1989) proposed that, in the examples the dictionary cited, woman is portrayed as an emotional loudmouthed incompetent creature, dependent on male support. She also says that EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers should be conscious about the examples they cite in the classroom because those examples might build up picture of stereotyped male and female.

II. Research Questions and Method

The purpose of this study is to find out the empirical evidence of the gender stereotypes in the dictionary through collection and analysis of its illustrative sentences. Two types of analysis were performed to examine the data. First, a quantitative content analysis was carried out in order to answer the first research question. Secondly, a

qualitative inquiry was made in order to answer the second research question. The two research questions are listed below:

1. Does the dictionary use more masculine nouns and pronouns than feminine nouns and pronouns in the illustrative sentences?
2. What are the stereotypes of both genders in the illustrative sentences in the dictionary?

The data of this research are collected from sentences and phrases in *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (the revised third edition, 1988). The author collected the sentences and phrases which contained the third person nouns and pronouns and then classified them into the following three categories: (1) example with masculine nouns/pronouns, (2) example with feminine nouns/pronouns, and (3) example with both. Only the examples in ten letters (A, B, C, I, J, K, W, X, Y, and Z) out of the total 26 letters are investigated.

III. Results and Discussion

A. Research Question 1: Does the dictionary use more masculine nouns and pronouns than feminine nouns and pronouns in the illustrative sentences?

The author collects 2128 phrases and sentences, each containing at least one word of the third person singular. Among them, 1593 use masculine words, 421 examples use feminine words; while only 124 exam-

ples use both masculine and feminine words. Obviously, sentences with masculine words outnumbered sentences with feminine words by nearly 4 to 1 (3.78:1). Table 1 illustrates the results.

The findings suggest that the status of females is ignored in the examples cited in the dictionary. Seventy-five percent of the examples uses males as the subjects or objectives; while only twenty percent of the sample uses female words. The editors of

the dictionary tend to use masculine "he" as the norm in examples. Feminine words are used only in specific occasions when the word is assumed to be connected with female characteristics and occupations. For instance, examples under the word, "cry", use more feminine nouns and pronouns than the masculine ones. The use of generic "he" unconsciously implies the invisibility and unimportance of the feminine.

Table 1. Numbers, percentages, and ratio of the samples using solely masculine words, samples using solely feminine words, as well as those using both.

	a: Masculine	b: Feminine	c: Both	Total
Numbers	1593	421	124	2128
Percentage	75%	20%	5%	100%
Ratio (a:b:c)	15	4	1	
Ratio (a:b)	3.78	1		

B. Research Question 2: What are the stereotypes of both genders in the illustrative sentences in the dictionary?

Both men and women are found being stereotyped in the illustrative sentences in the dictionary, but the data tend to indicate that females are stereotyped in a negative way more frequently than the males. The following discussion is divided into three sections: (1) the stereotypes of women, (2) the stereotypes of men, and (3) the relationship between both genders. The examples cited are the most typical ones.

1. The stereotypes of women:

The data show that females are often associated with the following topics:

a. Marriage: In this category, most examples are concerned with the parental agreements for women's marriage. As sentences 1-5 show, women are not free in the matter of marriage. The status of women is low in marriage, as shown in sentences 6-8. The words being illustrated by the dictionary are shown in italics.

- (1) She is not free to follow her own *inclinations*, even in the matter of marriage.
- (2) She married without the *knowledge* of

her parents.

- (3) Her parents refused their *consents* to the marriage.
- (4) Her parents will never *acquiesce* in such an unsuitable marriage.
- (5) She was married *against* her will.
- (6) Was she *anybody* before her marriage?
- (7) She married *above* her station.
- (8) I can't *imagine* marrying a girl of that sort.
- (9) *Whichever* of the sisters you choose to marry, you will have a good wife.

b. Weakness, illness, and fear: In the dictionary, women are often described as weak (examples 10-12), ill (examples 13-18), timid (examples 19-22), and shy (examples 23-24).

- (10) His deeply *wronged* wife deserves our help and sympathy.
- (11) A poor *browbeaten* little woman.
- (12) With a look of *appeal* on her face.
- (13) Several girls fainted in the heat but they were soon *brought* round.
- (14) Ten years of *child-bearing* exhausted her strength.
- (15) She was *ill* with anxiety.
- (16) She *inclines* toward melancholia.
- (17) She *broke* down when she heard the news, but quickly recovered.
- (18) If these anxieties continue she will become a nervous *wreck*.
- (19) She says that the sight of snakes makes her flesh *crawl*.
- (20) The sight of the cold, damp prison cell, with rats running about, made her flesh

creep.

- (21) We tried to *assure* the nervous old lady that flying was safe.
- (22) She couldn't *bring* herself to speak about the matter.
- (23) A cover-up for her shyness.
- (24) Her cheeks were *burning* with shame.

c. Being emotional: In the dictionary, women are often associated with emotional situations. The following sentence comparisons show that the females are emotional while men are strong. The two sentences are cited as examples under the word, "course", in the dictionary. The gender differences are shown from the comparison of the two sentences. In example 25, women are crying; men are strong.

- (25) Tears *curled* down her cheeks.
(The blood *curled* through his veins).

The same situations appear in the following two sentence comparisons. The gender differences in each comparison are underlined.

- (26) The sad news *brought* tears to her eyes.
(His writings bring him \$ 5000 a year).
- (26) Her voice was *choked* with shobs.
(Anger *choked* his words).
- (27) Her face was *bathed* in tears.
(He was *bathed* in sweat).

The other examples in this category are listed below:

- (28) She *wept* over her sad fate.
- (29) She was *crying* over her misfortunes.
- (30) She was *waiting* for her lost child.

(31) Her eyes were *clouded* with tears.

(32) She was in a state of *agitation*.

(33) Her cheeks were *wet* with tears.

d. Acting and cunning: Women are described as people who love playing tricks or acting. Over half of the examples under the word, "act", uses the feminine words. One particular sentence is, "She's not really crying; she's only *acting* in order to gain your sympathy". In addition, the sentences under the word, "bewitch", are associated with the females. For example:

(34) The old woman *bewitched* the cows so that they gave no milk.

(35) She danced so well that she *bewitched* all the young men.

(36) She smiled at him *bewitchingly*.

e. Domestic and fashion contexts: Females are associated with the domestic roles as mothers (example 37), and housekeepers (example 38). Fashion and appearance are also two frequent contexts for females (as shown in examples 39-41). Comparisons of the two sentences explain the point here.

(37) She is *wrapped* up in her children.

(He is *wrapped* up in his work/studies).

(38) She was *beating* the carpet.

(He was *beating* a drum).

(39) If you have agreed to give a number of lectures, help to pay your brother's school expenses and give your sister \$1000 a year for clothes, you have quite a lot of *commitments*.

(40) A girl with a neat *waist-line*.

(41) Her *crowning* glory is her hair.

2. The stereotypes of men:

The images of men in the dictionary are more positive, except the fact that they are frequently either described as criminals, alcoholics or associated with delinquency (see examples 42-50). On the positive side, they are intelligent, brave, and successful (examples 51-56).

(42) He *woke* to find himself in prison.

(43) He is *wanted* by the police.

(44) A *warrant* is out for his arrest.

(45) I *judged*, from his manner, that he was guilty.

(46) He was found guilty on all *counts*.

(47) He *confessed* that he has stolen the money.

(48) The prisoner refused to *confess* his crime.

(49) On his own *confession* he has taken part in the robbery.

(50) When *confronted* with the evidence of his guilt, he confessed at once.

(51) He is remarkable for both his *intelligence* and his skill.

(52) He's *cleverer* than I gave him *credit* for.

(53) It was *brave* of him to enter the burning building.

(54) He rushed forward in *contempt* of danger.

(55) His success was due to *industry* and thrift.

(56) Hard work was the *corner* stone of his

success.

3. The relationship between women and men:

The sentences using both gender words show a vivid picture of the unfriendly relationship between the two genders. The rivalry between husband and wife appeared with the highest frequency in this category. In the family, husband means power that dominates wife (examples 57-64). Wives are always in miserable conditions (examples 65-72). The second frequent context is the relationship between father and daughter (examples 73-76). Either as husbands or fathers, males always possesses the dominant power. In addition, the relationship between mother and son is lacking in this category. Obviously, the role of mother is not as important as father's; or worse, mother is treated as daughter who must be submissive to father. This kind of stereotyped relationship reveals the sexism of the dictionary semantics.

- (57) She was *afraid* of waking her husband.
- (58) Her husband *balked* at the expense of the plans she has made.
- (59) He was *annoyed* with his wife because the dinner was badly cooked.
- (60) Mr. Pigge sometimes *condescends* to help his wife with the housework.
- (61) He *allows* his wife \$1000 a year for clothes.
- (62) His ingratitude *cuts* her to the heart.
- (63) He frightened her *into* submission.
- (64) He has never shown much *considera-*

tion for his wife's feelings.

- (65) The cruel man *abandoned* his wife and child.
- (66) He's a real *bastard*, leaving his wife in that way.
- (67) He *works* his wife too hard.
- (68) When he spoke, she had an unpleasant *insight* into what life would be like as his wife.
- (69) She was always *worrying* her husband for more money.
- (70) She *importuned* her husband for more money.
- (71) A woman has had a *civilizing* influence upon her husband.
- (72) Many rough man has been *civilized* by his wife.
- (73) Anne's father would not *consent* to her marrying a foreigner.
- (74) Her father will never *approve* of her marriage to you.
- (75) Her father *advised* her against marrying in haste.
- (76) Mary's father has *agreed* to her marrying John.

C. Significance of the Study:

Given the findings discussed above, the present study confirmed the prior relevant studies and yielded some new findings. The result that was consistent with previous studies was the invisibility and stereotypes of women in the English language. Based on the frequency of occurrence, one previous

study on gender stereotype in EFL/ESL textbooks found that the ratio of males to females in texts was 1.4:1 (Ansary & Babaii, 2003). However, in the present study that focused on the illustrative sentences in an EFL dictionary, the ratio of males to females was nearly 4:1, which was a lot larger than the previous findings. This finding confirmed the invisibility of women in the English language. In addition, the stereotypes of women found in this study add to the understanding of female stereotypes in the English language.

The new findings in the study included the negative stereotype of men and the misrepresented relationship between the two genders. The previous studies tended to present the negative stereotype of women; however, the present study found that men were also negatively presented in the EFL dictionary. The results of this study revealed that men were associated with crime, alcoholism, and delinquency in the Chinese-English dictionary although they were also given the images of being intelligent, brave, and successful. Another interesting finding was the misrepresentation of the relationship between the two genders. Either as a husband or father, males always possess the dominant power. Only the relationship between husband and wife and the relationship between father and daughter were found in the collected sentences in this study. The relationship between mother and son was lacking in the data. This new find-

ing will add the body of knowledge on sex and language in sociolinguistics.

IV. Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that gender stereotype does exist in the illustrative sentences of the dictionary indicated above. Problems of the semantic sexism are found. First, the dictionary uses more masculine words, in the total number, than the feminine words in the sentences or phrases given. The problem of genetic "he", thus, exists. Secondly, women are frequently stereotyped in an inferior way. The stereotyped characteristics of the female genders are weakness, illness, timidness, shyness, emotional, cunning, and the marriage victims. Their world is domestic. On the other hand, men are stereotyped in a more positive way. They are often associated with intelligence, braveness, and success. The only one negative side of men's image is that they are described as alcoholics and criminals. Stereotyped relationship also exists in the sentences using both gender words, such as, husband-wife and father-daughter relationships.

The questions of whether language influences thought or vice versa remain unanswered. Since dictionary is one of the most public tools and language influences peoples' thought about the world, the dictionary editors should pay attention to the problem of gender stereotype when provid-

ing sentences in the dictionary. They do not have to stereotype and label both genders in order to explain the meaning of each word in the dictionary. A nonsexist dictionary should not only use masculine and feminine nouns and pronouns equally but also create un-stereotyped new contexts for both genders in the illustrative sentences and phrases. In addition, since the English-Chinese dictionary is for the EFL learners, a gender-biased dictionary should be avoided in order to prevent the learners from shaping misunderstanding of the target culture.

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英漢字典中的性別角色定型： 以“牛津高級英英英漢雙解辭典”為例

倪淑芳

大葉大學英美語文學系助理教授

摘要

英語曾被稱為男性語言 (man-made language)，其單字、文法、語意上均含有語言性別歧視 (Maggio, 1987)。語言與性別方面的相關研究指出男性在英語字上佔有優勢，Spender (1985) 亦指出語言性別歧視將影響文化模式的形成。相關研究多著重於英文報紙、雜誌、電視廣告、戲劇、文學，但字典上的語言性別歧視之研究卻極為缺乏。

本文主要探討英漢字典中兩性角色如何被定型。此研究應用量化的內容分析法和質化研究法來分析資料。資料來自英漢字典中十個字母下的例句，經整理、分析及歸類，結果顯示：例句中使用男性的辭句為使用女性辭句的四倍；另外例句中女性通常被描寫為弱、病、情緒化，男性則常被定型為酗酒、罪犯等負面形象，然而也被描寫為智慧、勇敢、成功的。未來在字典的例句中，兩性的形象應更平等且正面的呈現出來。

關鍵字：語言性別歧視、字典、角色定型

通訊作者. Tel.: 04-8511888 轉 6015

E-mail address: shufang@mail.dyu.edu.tw