

Descriptive Analysis of Sexism Expressions in English Proverbs

Lizhen Liang

Universiti Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Abstract: Gender discrimination has existed in language for a long time, especially in proverbs, which often harbor underlying biases, reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypes and unequal power dynamics. By adopting a descriptive method, this article aims to study existing English proverbs containing sexism, summarize the characteristics of words containing sexism. It intends to improve people's understanding of sexism and generate new insight on sexism in English proverbs.

Keywords: English Proverbs; Gender Discrimination; Stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Language is vital to society because it shapes how we perceive the world and serves as a reflection of cultural rules and values. Proverbs, in particular, are concise and memorable expressions are deeply ingrained in our daily conversations. However, beneath their seemingly harmless exterior, proverbs can often harbor underlying biases, reinforcing and perpetuating stereotypes and unequal power dynamics. As it carries the weight of tradition that they can also perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes and reinforce unequal power dynamics between men and women. Therefore, many researchers are increasingly interested in sexism in language, especially in English proverbs.

However, many researchers agree that there is not enough. Due to the numerous English proverbs, previous analysis cannot cover all of them, so further supplementation and completeness are needed for this research. As researchers Lan and Jingxia (2019) believed that research on sexism in language should be conducted since it reinforces prejudice against women. This will allow individuals to better grasp the issue and establish their own opinions.

2. Literature Review

The term "sexism" describes bias or discrimination related to sex. It frequently alludes to prejudice toward women. Sexism in society is a result of the unequal treatment of the two sexes. The unjust and unreasonable discrimination between the sexes is another definition of sexism. Consequently, sexism is a type of set of values and guidelines that uphold men's superiority over women.

In general, gender language research may be separated into two time periods: prior to and subsequent to the 1860s. The first written account of gender language in the West may be found in Robin Fort's work, which documents the language use of the era. Many academics who were intrigued by gender inequality in language began to appear in the 1970s. R. Lakoff (1975) concluded that 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. Based on that, Anne (1998) explored sexism in a variety of languages and cultures and highlighted how gender discrimination is reflected in sexist behaviors, which portray males as the standard and women as a departure from men.

Later on, a few other researchers joined the study, including D. Cameron, J. Holmes, J. Coates, and others. Their research focused on both gender discrimination against women and men in English objectively and scientifically, reflecting the rule of social and language growth, rather than just studying gender discrimination against women.

Many research have been conducted on the topic of sexism in English proverbs in recent years (Zheng, 2018; Rani & Ranjha, 2020; Yue-ling, 2022). However, most research has focused on the causes and development of gender discrimination in English language, with little attention paid to exploring the underlying ideology. Therefore, this study will supplement more English proverbs containing gender discrimination to fill the research gap and generate more new insights based on *Oxford Dictionary of Proverbs* compiled by Speake.

3. English Proverbs Express Sexism

(1) Criticism of Women's Appearance

Traditionally, some proverbs are often be used to reduce women's value through their physical appearance, which perpetuate the gender stereotypes.

"Beauty fades, but dumb is forever"

This proverb adage denigrates women by suggesting that intelligence is secondary and attractiveness is their major worth. It implies that a woman's declining appearance will only make her standing worse if she lacks intelligence.

"A woman's hair is her crowning glory"

This proverb means that a woman's value or beauty largely depends on her physical features, especially her hair. At the same time, this also expresses that women should pay attention to the beauty of their appearance to realize their value, implying the superficiality and ignorance of women

"All cats are gray in the dark"

This proverb essentially reduces a woman's value to a transient object of interest by implying that her appearance is irrelevant when physical desire is the sole consideration.

"Beauty and brains don't mix"

This proverb perpetuates the notion that women's intelligence and beauty are incompatible by implying that stunning women are unlikely to be intellectual.

"She's more face than substance"

This proverb expresses that a woman may be attractive, but they lack depth or meaningful qualities. It also implies that women only have charm because they are good-looking,

rather than possessing good qualities.

(2) Criticism of Women's Role as Sexual Object

In a patriarchal society, due to the low status of women, they are degraded as sexual objects of men without further productive value. This concept is also reflected in some English proverbs

"Women and wine make men wits weak"

This proverb associates women with vice and filth, likening them to alcohol that makes men addicted and is a temptation that leads men astray.

"Treat 'em mean, keep 'em keen"

This proverb means that men should manipulate women's emotions to maintain their interests and turn them into objects of conquest. It implies that this woman is only a playmate for men and does not have any other practical value other than pleasing men.

"A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them, the better they be"

This is an offensive proverb that compares women equally to animals and trees, objectifying violence against women and defending it. It links women to the property they want to control.

(3) Criticism of Women's Role as Subordinates

Many proverbs imply that women should be submissive or subordinate to men, which reflect the historical view that men are providers, while women are dependents

"The way to a man's heart is through his stomach"

This supports the idea that a woman's worth is determined by her capacity to prepare meals and take care of the home in order to gain a man's approval.

"A good wife and health are a man's best wealth"

This proverb portrays women as assets or properties that contribute to a man's happiness and well-being, rather than independent individuals with agency, reflecting that women do not have independent abilities and their value is to assist men.

"The husband is the head of the wife"

This conventional wisdom upholds a hierarchical structure in which males should lead and women should follow.

"Behind every great man, there is a great woman"

It reduces the woman to a supporting role and only highlights her worth in light of the man's accomplishments.

(4) Criticism of Women's characteristics

Women have often been characterized in a derogatory manner as talkative, troublesome and emotional, which have been manifested in many proverbs.

"Silence is golden, but a woman's silence is priceless"

This proverb perpetuates the notion that women's voices are less attractive or valuable by implying that they should be seen rather than heard.

"Silence is golden, but a woman's tongue is a sword that pierces the soul"

This proverb perpetuates the idea that women are talkative and disruptive by implying that their speech is harmful or hazardous.

"A whistling woman and a crowing hen are neither fit for God nor men"

This proverb suggests that women who express themselves or are vocal in ways that are considered unladylike are unwanted or unnatural.

"Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned"

This expression, which comes from William Congreve's play *The Mourning Bride*, perpetuates the idea that women are illogical or incapable of controlling their emotions by

implying that they are excessively sentimental and vindictive.

(5) Double Standards in Morality and Behavior

Although males can occasionally act in a reckless or disruptive manner, society tolerates them, which has created a double standard. The following proverb reflects this social practice:

"Boys will be boys"

This proverb justifies disobedience or careless behavior among boys or men as normal or expected. It suggests that men are given more freedom to act in certain ways, but women would face criticism for the same actions.

"A man may work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done"

This proverb illustrates the double standard, according to which men's functions are limited to their professional employment while women are expected to do caregiving and household chores regardless of their other obligations.

"A woman's virtue is her greatest treasure"

This proverb highlights the fact that a woman's value is correlated with her virginity or purity, whereas a man's value is not correlated with his sexual behavior.

4. Stereotypes and Ideologies in English Proverbs with Sexism

In most proverbs, women tend to present more negative images, while men do the opposite, indicating a clear ideology of women's lower status and men's superiority over women. A sexist mindset that upholds unequal treatment and expectations between men and women is, therefore, emerged. These proverbs illustrate the deeply rooted universal ideology that actively promotes and maintains current gender inequality.

By embedding gender specific expectations, beliefs, and norms into everyday language and common expressions, these proverbs become tools to reinforce traditional gender roles (Yksel, 1993). The inherent gender bias in this statement not only reflects personal bias, but also represents a broader structure of the ideological community. According to Mohsen and Ahmed (2023), this structure is cultivated, maintained, and perpetuated through discourse—through the stories people tell, the language they use, and the social norms they reinforce.

The repetition of such language and expression ensure that patriarchal values are continuously reinforced and rarely questioned. Proverbs, therefore, are not just harmless sayings but are significant in gender studies for their role in illustrating how language contributes to the broader discursive reproduction of power. They perpetuate dominant gender ideologies by reinforcing discriminatory beliefs, which in turn reinforce existing social biases by stereotyping women as inferior. Stereotypes downplay conflicts and encourage preconceived notions by naturalizing and simplifying complicated concepts (Talbot, 2003). According to Talbot, stereotypes are crucial in upholding power hierarchies since they target weaker groups like women. Moreover, gender ideologies are effective tools of control because they reinforce male supremacy through stereotypes, which women are not always aware of (Rudman & Glick, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Based on the organization of proverbs, five categories of proverbs related to gender discrimination were identified and

discussed. Most English proverbs with gender discrimination are discriminatory towards women, including stereotypes about their appearance, value, and personality. Women are portrayed as worthless, superficial and ignorant, and can only rely on the image of men. Men, on the other hand, have higher social status and abilities, demonstrating the societal ideology of double standards and discrimination against women.

This stereotype and ideology are presented and passed down through words, thanks to proverbs, which are the outcome of common experiences, attitudes, and presumptions, reflect common wisdom. However, language is not static, though. With the evolution of history and society, the sayings things are sexist need to be gradually removed. Therefore more work should be done to achieve true equality between both males and women. As long as the notion of men's equality and women are held, as well as the historical tendency development is adapted to, sexism in language in proverbs in English will eventually become obsolete.

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