

## Sexism in English Appellations

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**Abstract:** Nowadays, sexism is still very common in English. In the patriarchal society, the status of women gradually declined, making them become male accessories. Therefore, the social roles of men and women have changed dramatically due to the different division of labor. With the long development of society, people's consciousness has gradually changed, but gender differences still exist in our society. This essay aims to analyze and discuss this problem from many aspects and suggest some ways to prevent the sexism from happening.

### 1. Introduction

Appellation is the title that reflects the identity and role of a specific person in a specific interpersonal relationship in human society. This kind of appellation always reflects the relationship between people in a certain social culture or specific language environment. One can always has multiple social identities and roles in society. People has their names, but names are just general terms of addressing which do not include social identities and roles they play. Usually, it can be divided into kinship appellations and social appellations. According to *Merriam-Webster's New College Dictionary* (1987, p.1709), "sexism" is defined as prejudice or discrimination based on gender differences, especially targeting at women. Sexism in appellations exists in various cultures, and there is no exception in western countries. In our daily life, it is very commonplace to have ranges of nonreciprocal appellations and implicit discrimination in the way people calling woman. During the process of exploring the causes of this problem, the causes of this phenomena can be roughly classified into the following parts: the traditional thinking mode in patriarchal society, the double-standard feature of authoritative discourse, and the constraint of social stereotype. Through the analysis of the situation and combination of reality from social and historical factors, sexism can be controlled when people into hopefully, sexism can be weaken to some extent.

### 2. Gender Discrimination in English Appellations

It is inevitable that in our daily life there exist some gender discriminations in the way they call each other. This paper will discuss it from the following points.

#### 2.1 Gender Discrimination in Names

Despite names seem to be just a way for people to distinguish each other, there are many meanings in a person's name. In fact, the forms and connotations of names are closely related to the society and the culture of a period of time. It can not only reflect the customs, beliefs, history, but also show aspirations of a nation. Therefore, it can manifests certain social conceptions and expectations specifically. However, due to the differences that exist between men and women, people have diverse emphasis in naming boys and girls. When it comes to boys, people used to think about names that include expectations of power, status, and masculine characteristics as their parents expected. For example: "Abraham" means the father of all men; "Brian" means a powerful leader or a person of noble birth; "Carl" means a great man in leadership.

When giving names to girls, most people tend to focus on the appearance of women and ignore

the moral cultivation for them. In ancient China, there was even a famous saying-"Lack of talent in a woman is a virtue." It can be seen that people generally do not have equal views on women as they do on men. Most of female names focus on the beauty outside, for example: "Bella" represents beauty; "Jennifer" represents an attractive woman; "Abby" remind people of a cute little woman.

## 2.2 Gender Discrimination in Social Appellations

Addressing terms between members of society are called social appellations. In social contact with others, it is necessary to address each other in this way, which is different from that between relatives and friends, because social appellations involves social ranks, positions, circles and so on. With the development of social civilization and economic progress, the social appellations of women have changed a lot. Owing to the different division of labor in our society, social appellations have caused discrimination against women, which is difficult to be eliminated.

In English culture, sexism is first reflected in faith. In the *Bible*, God created the first man in the Garden of Eden, then he created the woman to be a company of the man so that he would not be too lonely. So he took a rib from the man to make the woman. However, the woman could not resist the temptation of the devil and enticed men into eating the forbidden fruit together. It can be seen that the image of women at that time was that they were not only subsidiaries to men, but also fools who were gullible. The subordination of women to men is also reflected in the fact that women traditionally take their husband's last name when they get married and keep it as their given name or they add their husband's last name to their own. In some western countries, taking husband's surname is legally required when a couple get married. Only when they get divorced, the court may allow women to restore their own family name <sup>[1]</sup>. Although the feminist movements began to sprout after 1972, only a few women kept their original surnames after marriage, which did not make significant impacts after all. This custom evolved in society and was carried on for centuries. What's surprising is that taking husband's name is accepted by a lot of women themselves. Sociologists have many explanations for why most women in modern American society still adhere to the tradition and change their surname after marriage. The most important reason is the deep-rooted influence of tradition. A study established by Laurie Scheuble and David Johnson, sociologists at Penn State University, found that about one-tenth of the people think that a woman who get married without her husband's last name is a sign of lacking of commitment to marriage, and about half think the law should continue to require women to take their husband's last name after marriage. According to the New York Times, about 17 percent of married women kept using their husband's name in the 1970s, this number went down to 14 percent in the 1980s, but the trend has increased from 18 percent in the 1990s to 19 percent in the 2000s, later 22 percent in 2010s<sup>[2]</sup>.

Generally, Mr. Followed by surname is used to address men with respect regardless of age or marital status. What's different is that when addressing women, Miss means unmarried women and Mrs. followed by husband's surname means married women. Thus, what can be seen is that women, whether married or unmarried, are subordinate to men and lose their privacy of marriage at the very beginning. For example, the scientist called as Madame Curie took her husband's surname, but her real name is actually Marie Skłodowska, which was rarely known by others. It can also be seen that women need to have the traditional concept of obeying father when young, following husband after getting married", which undoubtedly reflects the idea that women are regarded as the appendages of men.

## 2.3 Gender Discrimination in Job Titles

The formation of gender discrimination in occupation is influenced by traditional cultural, social and historical factors, as well as the different roles that men and women play. It seems that men are doomed to dominate society in eastern and the western countries. They often occupy important positions in the society and can influence the development of the society to a large degree. However, women are responsible for becoming good wives and great mothers. Men and women had equivalent titles only in low-class occupations at that time, such as waiter and waitress. Many job

titles end up with the suffix "-man", which can refer to men in a profession specifically or people in this profession generally. However, this kind of addressing form ignores the importance of women and also expresses contempt for women. What's more, women are not contained in some senior positions, which only referred to men at first, such as doctor, lawyer, etc. If women had the opportunities to obtain these positions, some labels, such as "female", "woman", "lady", should be added to those titles in order to fit women. For example: woman doctor, woman lawyer, etc.

Even now there are some job titles ending up with suffix "-man" which have no corresponding titles for women. It is said that in daily interpersonal communications, male professors are called with titles "Professor", plus his surname, while female professors are called Mrs. /Miss <sup>[3]</sup>. However, the title of female professors is ignored, which indicates social discrimination against women. It can be seen that people generally have the cognition of worships to men, therefore, the feminine abilities were not recognized by society.

## 2.4 Gender Discrimination in Semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics that studies the meaning of language. It includes lexical meaning and sentence structure. From the perspective of semantics, this paper analyzes the causes of gender discrimination from the following points.

### 2.4.1. Unequivalence of Male and Female Address Terms

In English appellations, many words related to men are positive and laudatory, but when it comes to women, it often derives negative and derogatory meanings. "Man" was used to modified males, as well as the mankind generally. In addition, the extended meanings of the word are mostly optimistic.

For example:

- the word "manly" means masculine or strong;
- the word "manful" means brave and decisive.

"Woman", on the other hand, only indicates female. It can show that female is kind and considerate, but also fragile and shallow. "Hysteria" is a state of extreme excitement, fear or anger in which a person, or a group of people, loses control of their emotions and starts to cry or laugh (From: <http://dict.youdao.com/>) in the English language, but from the root of hysteria, "hystera", which means woman's sexual organ - the uterus in Greek, it is obvious that women are looked down upon.

The word "King" is used to describe the male ruler of an state that has a royal family or a person, an animal or a thing that is thought to be the best or most important of a particular type, such as the "King of Thailand", "the King of Comedy". In addition to the original meaning of the female ruler of an state that has a royal family, however, the word also has pejorative meaning, which means " a male homosexual who dresses and speaks rather like a woman". This phenomenon fully reflects the social situation that the status of women is lower than that of men. To some extent, the change in language reflects the passive social status of women.

### 2.4.2. Belittlement of Female Appellations

With the development of culture, because the differences between man and women and lower positions of women, women are regarded as "second sex" and "weaker sex". In the society, men and women should have been equal, but at present, there are far more direct and inconsiderate insults to women than to men, such as "minx" which means a girl or young woman who is clever at getting what she wants, and does not show respect (*Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, 7th Edition, p.1281), "concubine" which means a woman who lives with a man, often in addition to his wife or wives, but who is less important than they are (*Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, 7th Edition, p.410). There are also many derogatory terms in the English language, which often contain abusive or sexual connotations. A very common phenomenon is the metaphorical comparison of women to animals, which is often derogatory. For example, "cat" means a wicked, sophisticated woman; "cow" means a stupid, lazy woman; pig means a slut.

One way to describe women is compared them to inanimate objects, and often in a derogatory sense, like "tart" which means dissolute woman. Another way of describing women is compare women to plants and fruit which is good-looking on the surface but easy to corrupt inside, but it is male's definitions of what a woman should be like that require to be good-looking, beautiful, delicate, although the appearance is charming, it would wither like flowers one day. This reflects the stereotypes of women made by men, or in other word, men despise women to some extent and ignore the real status of women in society.

#### 2.4.3. *Degradation of Female Address Terms*

The meaning of English words has changed in the long course of development and evolution. Vocabularies related to men are basically maintain their original meanings, which are still positive. On the contrary, most of the words that refer to women, regardless of positive or negative in the past, now at least have some kind of negative connotations, or have completely become insults toward women. The word "Bluestocking" was originally used to refer to literati, which derived from the literati club founded by Elizabeth Montagu in 1750<sup>[4]</sup>, when learned people wore blue stockings to attend the assembly. But now the term is used to mock women who think themselves arty and well-read but actually not good-looking and smart. The word "Mistress" means the female head of a house, especially one who employed servants, but now this word can mean a woman that he is having a regular sexual relationship with and who is not his wife.

#### 2.4.4. *Gender Discrimination in Proverbs*

Proverbs are the summary of a nation's experience and wisdom, which can reflect a nation's history, social conceptions and life experience. In the western society, the problem of gender discrimination has existed since ancient times, which had a profound impact on the culture. From the proverbs, it can be seen that people still have different ideas towards men and women in English-speaking countries. There are many proverbs about women in English, but most of them degrade woman's social status and indicate that they are inferior to men in family, showing weakness in their characteristics and traditional requirements women required to achieve. For example, "Women will say anything. " directly demeans women as mindless chatterbox. Even Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet* that "Frailty thy name is woman. " which could also show that people thought women are weak and can only rely on men.

### **3. Causes for Gender Discrimination in English Appellations**

Through further exploration, address discrimination can also be classified as the following points.

#### **3.1 Direct Reflection of the Stereotyped Thinking Mode of Patriarchy Culture**

The human society transformed into a patriarchal society gradually, the social division of labor began to change and men started to undertake most of the production activities, especially after western countries entered the industrialized society when machines replaced manual workshops and traditional family work. Women had no choice but to stay at home and men began to hold the economic power and be the rulers of the outside world. For one thing, men became the main bread earner, leading to the decline of the status of women in production and life. Women, for another, were restricted to support families and bear children, so the idea of male dominance became entrenched. The most direct manifestation of this idea in language was the expansion of the word categories that represent masculine characteristics. Many words began to appear with "gender markers", which were added to words that used to describe men. Male in English means the physiological sex that produces sperm, and female derived from it with a prefix "fe-", but the prefix "fe-" means faithful and lower than<sup>[5]</sup>. It can be seen from the formation of the word that female was required to be loyal to and inferior to male. Therefore, the word "man" can be used to describe the all human being, but "woman" could not.

### **3.2 Direct Product of the "Double Standard" of Authoritative Discourse**

In western countries, due to different cultural values, moral values and interpersonal relations, the use of address forms for different genders is also quite different. Generally speaking, when people communicate, social status plays a decisive role in determining the appellations. In other words, the relationship between the two parties in communication is either "authority" or "equality". Both parties in an equal relationship will use reciprocal appellations in communication, using first names or more intimate terms. However, when the relationship between the two parties in communication is "authority", the two parties will adopt nonreciprocal communication mode, that is, using title and respectful words to address the one who has higher position. At this time, the address terms used by the higher status party are the signs of power, which is the authoritative discourse. In both sexes, it can be seen that men are thought to be more noble and have higher status. When addressing men, it is necessary to use salutation to express respect, while women do not be treated fairly as men.

### **3.3 Concrete Manifestation of "Gender Role" within the Community**

Gender roles are nothing but a set of behavioral norms corresponding to one's own gender that was acquired through imitation in the process of socialization. They are the products under the influence of social environment <sup>[6]</sup>. It is generally believed that women only need to take charge of housework, and women have to give up the opportunity to pursue career, namely, because men are responsible for work and women are responsible for family. For thousands of years, people gradually got used to the idea that men are superior to women. Even some women themselves have come to accept the idea voluntarily. Once there is a woman who does not conform to this rule, even if she is hardworking and has a strong ability, it will still be difficult for her to struggle to be recognized by man in her career. and even cause others to doubt the success of her efforts in the society. On the contrary, people tend to be more tolerant toward housewives, because they are dutifully attached to men.

This shows that the traditional division of roles is still existing in people's minds. The effect of mass media is also a powerful factor in the socialization of gender roles. Films, television, videos, books, magazines and others all consciously or unconsciously emphasize the traditional gender image. In movies and TV series, there are more good wives and loving mothers who devote to love and make men indulge in love of the beautiful passionate woman. In literary works, even famous world-class writers depict the images of men and women as traditional pattern of roles in society. In far-reaching advertisements, women are presented as seductive sex objects to attract customers, regardless of their connection with the product, they are portrayed as house workers who are ecstatic at finding a new washing powder to launder their husband's dirty shirts. Advertisements legitimize the stereotypical roles of women. The long-term socialization of traditional gender roles has formed the huge social and psychological differences between men and women, and all these become the excuse that men are strong and women are not only weak and are inferior to men, but also must follow the traditional division of labor. Imagining that the pioneers of woman's liberation struggled to achieve gender equality and woman's liberation, while our next generation will still accept the socialized gender roles and be cultivated under the old conception of strong men and weak women, so as to form the old idea of gender discrimination again, sexism will be difficult to eradicate.

### **3.4 Results of Symbolization of "Social Identity" Authentication**

From the moment of birth, society has defined different social roles and positions for men and women. For example, men are expected to be strong, independent and to be successful. But people want the female to be family-oriented and gentle. This kind of role expectation influences their later life to a great extent, and the influence is different between men and women, as well as the roles of husband and wife. As mentioned above, whether in western society or in China, marriage has a greater impact on women than men, and the degree of role change is also greater than that of men.

The result is that men often play the leading role, while women play the supporting role. The social status of men is much higher than that of women. Female social status is subordinated to their family. Marriage makes a woman subordinate to her husband, and she will directly change with her husband's career and social status. It is because of woman's attachment to marriage and their high expectations for marriage which make them feel that they are in low status after marriage, so that it's impossible for them to control their own destiny. Social linguists believe that this discrimination against women is due to the fact that women have been regarded as commodities and property in western societies. It makes people feel that women are nothing more than the prey of male society, part of the private property of men, whose commodity value is no different from the livestock the men owns.

In patriarchal societies, female identity is inherently defined by gender characteristics: women need to pay attention to such trivial things as family, beauty and dressing, and this definition made by men tag that conceptions to women through ways like social media. The public formulate their standards of beauty from the perspective of men, making women transferred into the beautiful appearance just as men want, and the image of women was gradually materialized as a symbol of material enjoyment. Such logic exerts a subtle influence on people's values and ways of thinking through social media and other means. All the time, women themselves are unconsciously influenced by them and actively cater to the requirements of men about beauty, while the idea that women are attached to men gradually rooted deeply in male's mind, thus deepening the inherent stereotypes between the sexes.

#### **4. How to Weaken the Gender Discrimination in English Appellations**

Due to the efforts of feminists to change sexism for a long time, sexist words in English have attracted people's attention. People began to be careful about wording. Here are some ways that can help us avoid the gender discrimination.

##### **4.1 Promoting New Words Extensive**

With the progress of our age, the feminist movements and the in-depth promotion of female liberation are gradually launched nationwide, new solutions emerge in the society, that is, to create feminine words opposite to masculine words. For example, the word containing the affix "-man" can be changed to "-woman" to generate female-specific words corresponding to gender markers. In this way, women get the respect they deserve. For example: sportsman – sportswoman; Salesman – saleswoman; Businessman – businesswoman.

##### **4.2 Advocating Neutral Words**

Feminists strongly advocate fairness in language and tried to use neutral words, such as "people" and "human being". When describing a job, try to use neutral words that are not marked by gender, such as officer, worker, employee, etc. Only if more and more people use such gender-free references can this phenomenon be weakened. When addressing women, try to use words like Ms., madam, lady, which do not clearly indicate the private issues about their woman's marital status, more importantly these words are equivalent to Mr. and Sir, which can greatly help to reduce the phenomenon of gender discrimination.

##### **4.3 Using the Affix "-person"**

Since 1974, some western publishing bureaus have been advocating "fair treatment of gender", which has gradually been highly valued by individuals, government departments, a large number of universities and the mass media. Some academic organizations have also been actively promoting the English language revolution. The American Society of Anthropology passed a resolution in 1973 that required its members to be fully aware that the use of "man" as a common noun was ideologically confusing. The American Library Association decided in 1975 to avoid sexist

language in all future publications and official documents. In 1976, catalogers in the United States launched a campaign to correct sexist language in all catalogs and subject headings. People consciously advocate to avoid using words containing the affix "- man" which has obvious gender mark, and changed it into affix "- person" without gender markers, such as use "chairman" instead of "chairperson", "spokesman" instead of "spokesperson", and pay attention to use in everyday use.

#### **4.4 Creating New Neuter Singular Personal Pronouns**

To solve the problem of gender bias in personal pronouns, we can also use "he or she" and "one" instead of using the ambiguous sex reference. This can greatly avoid sexism in conversation or writing. Try to avoid the use of gender labels in the conversation, and do our best to stick to it, so that these words with the same emotional connotation will take the place of sexist words, eventually sexism can be largely avoided as expected.

### **5. Conclusion**

Appellations are both linguistic and cultural phenomenon. However, they are not immutable, because as a reflection of the ideology of a particular society in pragmatic habits, the form and meaning of appellations will change with the development of people's ideology. With the development of society, the new trend of thinking brought by feminism makes women gradually realize their own value. Driven by this thought, women begin to get involved in society more, participate in social activities, strive for equal social status. The efforts of women themselves make the society recognize women again. But new ways of appellations should not be neglected. In order to eliminate sexism in language, it is necessary to eradicate that in the society first. Therefore, it is imperative to reconstruct the new gender role relationship; after all, it is nothing special that there are differences between men and women. The goal of reconstructing new gender roles is no need to be achieved immediately and also it is impossible to be changed overnight, but we should not hesitate to remove the part that erasing and repressing human nature and to practice flexible roles. That is to say, the last criteria for judging people is gender. With the gradual realization of modernization and the advent of the information age, man's physical advantages will gradually weaken or even disappear, and the differences between the sexes will certainly be abolished.

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