A Comparative Study of Gender Sensitivity between English and Bengali

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Abstract

Sexism in English is a much condemned issue now-a-days. As English has established itself to be the international way of communication for political, business, educational, social correspondence all over the world, its multidimensional effect has shaped the spirit of speakers of other languages. The effect of various lexical elements of English language also provoked confusions in the mind of the non-native speakers of English language especially due to sexism.

In Bangladesh, English has been taught for more than 50 years. Therefore, Bangladeshi learners and users of English frequently encounter many predicaments due to sexist components

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in English language as well as cultural differences between Bengali and English. This paper thus seeks to compare the sexist elements in both the languages to find out which language is more gender sensitive.

Keywords: Sexism, gender sensitivity, Bangladesh

Focus of This Paper

Language shapes our philosophy as it is the carrier of thoughts. Therefore, any limitations or negativity in language will surely affect its users. It is not an easy task to handle the underlying effects of language use. Also, the socio-political elements as well as cultural beliefs influence a great deal on making and use of vocabulary. This paper aims at finding out a structural comparison of gender biased lexicon between the English and Bengali language that arouses confusion of diction that Bengali people encounter while using both the languages.

Status of English in Bangladesh

More than 50 years have passed since English has been formally taught in Bangladesh and yet we could not set its formal status in our country. English in Bangladesh is now more than a foreign language but a little less than a second language. As Hasan (2011) states,

> English in Bangladesh is very interesting. From the government point of view Bangla is
> the national-official language of Bangladesh and English is the most important foreign
> language. But in reality English is the second language of the country and in many places
> English is more important than Bangla in Bangladesh. (p.1)

The status of English can be better understood from the following statement:
In reality the English language is necessarily being used in all the sectors of Bangladesh, such as offices, courts, educational institutions, press, and even sometimes in parliament. This is because English is not now only the language of England and the United States, but it is also spoken and studied or read by the largest number of people, and has been recognised as a second / foreign language throughout the world. Despite being a foreign language officially, the English language is indeed enjoying the status of a second

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language, to a limited extent, in the activities of the educated people, particularly in the urban areas of Bangladesh. (Maniruzzaman, 1998, p.6)

Widespread use of English in almost all the sectors has made it indispensible part of our daily life but it has still a long way to go to take a firm place socially and of course at personal level. However, extensive use of English and emergence of globalisation in Bangladesh has spurred many cultural elements into our mindset and thus shaping our thought process according to the western ways of life (as the English wanted 200 years ago). This juxtaposed use of the two languages at the same time without knowing the objectives, has exposed us to a risky cultural dilemma. As a member of a rich vibrant culture it is a duty for us to re-evaluate the position of English and find out the Effects of its cultural elements on our minds.

Sexism/ Gender Sensitivity in Language

Let us first read through the following text from *How to Tell a Businessman from a Businesswoman*:

> A businessman is aggressive; a businesswoman is pushy. A businessman is good on details; she's picky… He follows through; she doesn't know when to quit. He stands firm; she's hard…. His judgments are her prejudices. He is a man of the world; she's been around. He isn't afraid to say what is on his mind; she's mouthy. He exercises authority diligently; she's power mad. He's closemouthed; she's secretive. He climbed the ladder of success; she slept her way to the top.

Sexism in language occurs when we use elements in our expressions by which either the female or male dominates where this should not be the case. The Oxford English Reference Dictionary (1996) defines sexism as "Prejudice or discrimination, esp. against women, on the grounds of sex. As a matter of fact, sexist elements in language were introduced by a presupposition that male and female, in many cases, are not equal" (p.1328).

On the other hand, Trask (2004) has defined sexist language as "a language which, deliberately or unconsciously, is patronising of contemptuous towards one sex, usually women.

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Male dominant society also has prejudiced us by discriminating women in many ways. It is, in fact, a result of our misconception about women" (p.276). According to Nilson (2007), "language and society are interpreted as a chicken and an egg. Language use is the evidence of the values and beliefs of that society. All kinds of unequal, phenomena in the society including sex discrimination are bound to be reflected in language".

English in many ways is infested by sexism. Before the emergence of industrialisation, there was a common belief that men are fit to work outside and women inside. This concept led the people to discriminate women in their thought, work and language. Sociolinguistic researches have shown that the English language favours the masculine gender as opposed to the feminine and rarely the opposite. This leads us to think that sexism mostly happens in favour of the male gender and not the other way round. Lei (2006) asserts "for a long time women have been looked on as 'the weaker sex' in society. Even in English-speaking countries, which holds the claim that 'everyone is created equal', discrimination against women exists. Language simply reflects this social fact" (p.87).

Gender Sensitivity of English Language

Gender sensitivity of English has long been argued by many people even in countries where English is their mother-tongue. It is a serious bruise in a greatly rich body. It clearly exhibits the male dominant philosophy of materialistically developed society. It is a hindrance against social equality. Learners of English have traditionally been taught to use masculine nouns and pronouns in situations where the gender of their subject(s) is unclear or variable, or when a group to which they are referring contains members of both sexes. The alarming thing is that most English language readers no longer understand the word "man" to be synonymous with "people". Moreover, these issues are important for people concerned about issues of social inequality. There is a complex correlation between language use and social reality. If we "remove" female from language, that makes it easier to maintain gender inequality. Professor Kleinman (2000) has argued, "[M]ale-based generics are another indicator—and, more importantly, a reinforcer—of a system in which 'man' in the abstract and men in the flesh are privileged over women" (p.6).

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Comparison of English & Bengali Gender Sensitive Elements

Use of Pronouns

There are certain expressions in English that provokes sexism while the same expressions in Bengali do not. For example, in English the examples are like these: (1) If one wants to climb the Everest, he must find an expert guide. (2) Everyone should perform his duties. In Bengali the meanings of these sentences are: (1) কেউ যদি এভারেস্ট এ উঠতে চায় তাহলে তাকে অবশ্যই একজন গাইড সাথে নিতে হবে।

(2) সবার উচিৎ নিজ নিজ দায়িত্ব পালন করা । In the above sentences the expressions are generally true for everyone but masculine words are used instead of neuter words. Structurally they are correct but semantically they convey underlying sexism. While on the other hand, in Bengali translations of the above sentences neuter pronoun have been used, which is an example of gender sensitivity.

Generic Nouns

'Man' is a masculine word which is sometimes used both to denote male and female and sometimes to replace the word "human". For example, (1) All men must die. (2) Man is a social being. These expressions possess high degree of sexism because these expressions subconsciously lead readers to think that "men" are the representative of human being not "women". To translate into Bengali the above sentences would mean like, (1) সবাই কে মরতে হবে। (2) মানুষ একটি সামাজিক প্রাণী।

It is clearly visible to the reader that the expressions are applicable for all human. There is no underlying sexism in the sentences. Further research on English lexicon also clearly shows that the number of male elements is greater than female elements in the dictionary as He (2010) states:

Survey in the dictionary on the illustrative idioms of man and woman as a quantity observation, derogation of woman is clearly seen. There are totally 33 illustrative idioms for man, of which 15 are with positive meaning, five negative and the rest are neutral

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with five shared by both man and woman in structure and meaning; While in case of woman, there are only 8 illustrative idioms of which five shared with man in structure and meaning, the rest are all derogatory. From this, one can know that in English using "man" or "men" indicates "the human race", they treat man as the center of the society, an embodiment of criterion and totally ignore the existence of woman. (p.334)

Sexism in Semantics

In English, number of derogatory terms for female are greater than that for male. A word may have different meaning when it is collocated with a male term of female term. When applied to women, the same words are likely to narrow and assume sexual connotations. For example: "When you call a man a *pro,* you mean that he is experienced, competent and reliable; when you call a woman a *pro,* you mean she's a prostitute" (Trask, 2004,p.277).

Trask also has remarked that English has only the sex-marked singular pronouns *he* and *she*, and hence a speaker addressing or talking about a mixed group has a problem: "*Somebody has forgotten his umbrella* is sexist, while *Somebody has forgotten his or her umbrella* is almost unbearably clumsy"(p.276).

In Bengali, it is perfectly alright to both the sexes if we say কেউ তার ছাতা ভুলে গেছে । In this case 'তার' means both *he* and *she*. Hence, semantically Bengali expressions are more gender sensitive.

Although, we see many sexist elements in Bengali language as well. For example, the female suffix – ess causes particular problems: a man is a *poet*, while a woman is only a *poetess*. Similarly, in Bengali there are many affixes such as, মহিলা-, -নী, নারী-, প্রমীলা-, which are sexist in practice. In English, Men play *football* and *cricket*, while women play *women's football* and *women's cricket*. Similarly, in Bengali, men play ফুটবল and ক্রিকেট, while women play প্রমীলা- ফুটবল and প্রমীলা- ক্রিকেট। *Sailor* in English practically means a male and *nurse* means a female person. The case is also precisely similar in Bengali.

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Concluding Remarks

It is insulting to a woman to be called a *spinster* or an *old maid,* but it is not insulting to a man to be called a *bachelor*. There is nothing inherently pejorative about the word *spinster*. The connotations reflect the different views society has about an unmarried woman as opposed to an unmarried man. It is not the language that is sexist; it is the society. One sex-neutral pronoun will not guarantee that women will be treated equally with men. Ardehali (1994), in this regard, has ascertained that languages like Persian which already have such pronouns but in such a society where men and women are treated very unequally (p.3003). These issues are deeply related with cultural perspectives; therefore, fall within the arena of sociolinguistics as the study of language in relation to society. Hudson (1996) has showed that cultural concepts, including some of our most important abstract concepts, are learned through language, so language is an important 'instrument of socialisation' (p.105). The same is true of more general 'thought patterns', which may be influenced by the grammatical patterns of the language concerned. These concepts and thought patterns seem to affect our behaviour not only when talking, but also in other activities.

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