

A Sociolinguistic Study of Linguistic Sexism in English Proverbs

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Abstract: Linguistic sexism exists in almost every aspect of social and cultural life. In recent years, it has become an important research object. Previous studies have covered the topic of linguistic sexism, but the reasons still need to be further studied. Therefore, through sociolinguistic study, the proverbs about appearance and inwardness of female, as well as the proverbs contrasting male and female in the aspects of social status, age, behavior and marriage are illustrated. The paper will show the linguistic sexism in English proverbs, analyze the reasons and propose its development tendency.

Keywords: sociolinguistics, proverb, linguistic sexism, female

INTRODUCTION

With the development of sociolinguistics and the rise of feminism in the United States, linguistic sexism has become one of the focuses in sociolinguistic study. The publication of *Language and Woman's Place* written by Robin Lakoff [1] in 1975 was a major breakthrough for the study of language and gender in the field of linguistics. She believed "women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them." Since then, scholars like D.Zimmerman [2], C.West [2], and P.Fishman [3] concentrated on the differences of language and gender from various aspects, and proposed dominance theory, politeness theory and other theories. Since 1980s, scholars were increasingly turning from the study of gender differences to sexism.

Proverb is a part of language and one of the most common types of folk literature. It reflects social customs and human psychological ideas. As Bacon says, proverbs can reflect a nation's creativity, wisdom and spirit. However, researchers of proverbs believe that it is difficult to give an exact definition of proverb. Archer Taylor, who has been regarded as the "undisputed pope of paremiology" points out that proverb is wisdom and it belongs to all the people at a speech in Swarthmore College in 1962 [4]. He advocates that proverb is created by individuals and is used in a certain circumstance. W. Mieder and A. Dundes [5] propose that the origin and essence of proverb is "the wisdom of many".

In real life, proverb does not only reflect people's wisdom, but social phenomena, including sexism. Bible can be treated as the root of sexism. In the Old Testament, God takes a rib from Adam and uses it to make a woman. Adam believes the woman is bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh. In the later social life, male-dominated society remains the mainstream of social development, and sexism is reflected in various levels of social life. With the rise of feminism, the term "sexism" comes into being. In the field of language, Noor Sanauddin defines linguistic sexism as the element in language, which can show sex prejudice [6]. In broad sense, linguistic sexism refers to the prejudice and discrimination a gender has to the other; in narrow sense, sexism refers to the sexual discrimination reflected or expressed by male to female. The paper will utilize examples of proverbs about appearance and inwardness of female, as well as the proverbs contrasting male and female from the narrow sense, and explore the reasons.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

In the course of social and historical development, since the patrilineal society, men have been dominant in society; correspondently, women are discriminated in social status, marriage and many other aspects. Among those, linguistic sexism highlights sexism in human life. The paper will apply examples of proverbs describing female and contrasting male and female from appearance to inwardness and from individual to the whole.

Linguistic sexism can be shown in English proverbs that describe appearance of female. In the proverbs “Beauty is power; a smile is its sword” and “A nice wife and a back door rob the house”, the beautiful appearance of female is considered as disaster. In the proverb “When the candles are out, all women are fair”, the appearance of women was mercilessly satirized and the beauty of women was completely denied. The above proverbs express the contempt for femininity and character, through which the beauty of female are connected with misfortune. In daily life, the original evaluation of a person is usually made from the appearance. Therefore, above contempt of female appearance is the beginning of belittlement of female.

Besides the appearance of female, linguistic sexism is also shown in English proverbs describing inwardness of female. On the basis of “judging people solely by their appearance”, there are some proverbs attacking inwardness of female.

In the proverb, “Long hair, short wit”, female appearance is related to their inwardness. It claims that female is doomed not to be as wise as male. In the proverb, “Beauty and folly are often companions”, female beautiful appearance is not appreciated, but is regarded as symbol of wisdom. In the above proverbs, the beauty of female is oppressed. In the proverbs like, “women have fear, but no inwardness”, “Maids want nothing but husbands, but when they have them they want everything”, and “Women are the devil’s nets”, female images are described as those who are lack of wisdom and courage, skittish and greedy. The proverbs, which even directly point out that women will bring disaster, reflect discrimination against women’s inwardness from different aspects and obliterate their good quality. These views should be abandoned.

Linguistic sexism embodied in the English proverbs that only describe female emphasizes the vulnerableness of female; while the English proverbs contrasting male and female directly belittle female to raise male. The proverb, “Man, woman and devil are three degrees of comparison” claims that male should have higher social status than female, and that female is only better than devil. In the aspect of age, the proverb, “A man is as old as he feels, a woman as old as she looks” indicates the advantages of male over female and humbleness of female. In the aspect of behavior, the proverb, “Words are women, deeds are men” attributes the good spirit of working in earnest to male and blames the statement of female. In the aspect of marriage, the proverb, “Marry you son when you will, you daughter when you can” reflects the superiority of male in marriage. In this proverb, female is considered as the passive and vulnerable power.

Unlike the previous description of female alone, the above proverbs include the description of both male and female with clear complimentary and derogatory sense. Through contrast, male and female are completely divided from the perspectives of social status, age, behavior and marriage. It is believed that male is definitely better than female, which embodies the raise of male and discrimination against female. The English proverbs that only describe female are the implicit manifestations of the social status, and those that contrast male and female are the explicit reflections of their social status.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Although the above proverbs are slightly different in terms of specific objects and contents, they all give full expression to the relatively lower social status of female. Linguistic sexism does not only exist in proverbs, but in other linguistic forms, and even in every aspect of social life. Besides in English, this phenomenon also exists in many other countries. However, the term linguistic sexism is developed with western feminist. Therefore, on the basis of analysis on linguistic sexism in English proverbs, the reasons of linguistic sexism in the West are further analyzed.

The historical reasons are as follows. During the development of human society, both the number and length of patrilineal society surpass that of matriarchal society. Under the harsh natural environment, due to the superiority of men in physical strength, men always do the work such as hunting and farming. Compared with men, women are more responsible for housework for the responsibility of reproduction and other physiological reasons. With time passing by, the mode of work and life is gradually determined. Since then, the division of labor for men and women remains stable. Even in modern society, the work of women is inferior to that of men.

Division of labor in early history decides that men enjoy high social status. After entering patrilineal society, gender inequality with men as center is institutionalized. Sexism toward women begins to appear. For example, the proverb “It is sad house when the hen crows for louder than the cock.” is the typical illustration of linguistic sexism in terms of work. Ever since, the sexism from division of labor or on work extends to more fields of social life. Thus linguistic sexism in terms of various aspects is formed.

Besides the historical reasons, cultural and psychological reasons also play an important role. Culture is a complex, which includes literature, art, religion, morality, customs and other social elements. Zhou Wei and Zhou Minquan [7] propose that the two different language stereotypes of men and women form the collision of two kinds of cultural, which are usually

restricted by the mainstream social culture. Therefore, there are cultural reasons for linguistic sexism. From the perspective of culture, sexism mainly is from literature and religion. The origin of western discrimination toward women is the Bible. In the form of literature, Bible is the religious classic for Judaism and Christianity. In the Bible, Eve comes from the rib of Adam and is bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh. In this sense, women are not only accessory, but the root of all evil. The proverb, "Women are the devil's nets." is a best example for this. Another reason from the perspective of culture is Pandora in the western mythology, who is regarded as the maker of disasters. Pandora opens the box that contains all kinds of disasters and causes the evils in the world. The above cultural roots shape the negative female image. The image reflects conventions of western culture and provided evidence for sexism.

Another factor is the low level of education for women in a men-dominated society. Women have little social contact with other. Therefore, in the psychological notion of people, women are naturally connected with the stereotypes, like lack of knowledge and thought. Women are also considered as vulnerable group. As Shakespeare writes in Hamlet, "Frailty, the name is woman", women are believed inferior to men. Sometimes, even women themselves would have the sense of inferiority and agree that men are superior to women psychologically.

Development Tendency of Linguistic Sexism in English Proverb

On the one hand, language is the reflection of society, and linguistic sexism in English proverb is the reflection of discrimination in society. Sexism, which is caused by historical, cultural and psychological reasons, is inevitable. On the other hand, with the progress of society, opportunity of education for women increases, difference of division of labor for men and women decreases, and social status for men and women tends to be equal. Therefore, the English proverbs that demean or even discriminate women will be reduced. Instead, some proverbs may disappear, some words associated only with women may be replaced and the proverbs praising female may be added.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic sexism in English proverbs has profound historical origins. It reflects the social status of women. However, language is not stationary. With the development of society and history, the proverbs that contain sexism must be gradually eliminated. There should be more efforts to realize real equality between men and women. As long as the idea of equality of men and women is held and the trend of historical development is conformed to, linguistic sexism in English proverbs will fade and even disappear.

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