

## Words and Women. An eligible bachelor vs. an eligible spinster

### Abstract

*The subject of gender discrimination in language and the relation between language and social structures is well known and widely debated. Nevertheless, everyday experiences show, over and over, the linguistic hierarchy at work when men and women are concerned.*

*This paper has two main parts. The first one concerns the image of women in language and the other one treats the manner in which women usually use the language.*

*Despite the fact that these social unwritten rules and deep rooted preconceptions are, in my opinion, difficult to ignore, the initiative of analyzing such facts represents an important first step in reducing the negative effects of the phenomenon. Obviously, we are aware of the fact that the problem is extremely profound and the imposed usage of certain nondiscriminatory terms represents not a very efficient solution, but, all in all, this analysis is the first phase of a much profound change that hopefully will occur.*

### Introduction.

This paper starts from the assumption that there is a very close relationship between language and social structure: the linguistic variation is generated by and, at the same time, generates social variation. Language appears to be an important factor in the analysis of the social relations among different groups. I am referring here to what Jennifer Coates calls minority and majority groups. The usage of these terms has nothing to do with the number of the group members; instead it deals with the different access to power and control. (Coates 1993: 3-15) I use her affirmation that women are a "minority group" and analyze it from the perspective of the manner in which language, when women are concerned, is used by women and by the other members of the society. The social position of the members of the different groups (minority and majority) can be perceived by analyzing some linguistic aspects, for example the way they speak or their linguistic image.

Even if there were earlier preoccupations concerning language and women's social place, the systematic study of linguistic sexism appears with the second wave of women's movements that started in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Adina Brădeanu presents the main threads of the critical analysis of discourse, analysis that examines the language in order to understand the way in which it contributes to the reproduction of the social structures and relations. These general principles of the critical analysis of discourse highlight the close connection between language and social structure. I believe it is useful to present some of these principles:

- the field of concern of the critical analysis of discourse is represented by the social issues and not by language itself;
- the critical analysis of language studies power at the level of discourse and the power on the discourse

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- the society and the culture are dialectally linked to discourse for they are influenced by discourse, and, at the same time, they compose the discourse;
- the understanding of discourses is not possible without the understanding of the historical context in which the discourse appears and functions;
- the discourse is a form of social behavior;
- the critical analysis of discourse conceptualizes the discourse as a form of social practice and emphasis on the mutual influences of the language and the social structures. (Brȃdeanu, Dragomir, Rovența-Frumuțani, Surughiu 2002: 142)

These principles of discourse critical analysis function also when the relationship between society and language is considered from a feminist perspective.

In my modest attempt to analyze the relation between gender and language, I present two important aspects of the issue: the way women use language and the way language uses women. Both approaches illustrate the preconceptions regarding women.

The language is not a neutral entity. It uses us just as much as we use it. In our linguistic behavior we can find true forms of discrimination towards women. An important direction in the feminist research is the analysis of the social differences from the linguistic perspective. In my paper, I will try to briefly present two aspects of this issue: the image of women in language and women's manner of using the language.

## The image of women in language

The first aspect is women's image in language, referring to the fact that in most of the languages, there is an obvious asymmetry concerning the terms that represent women and those that indicate men.

An interesting study of this phenomenon is done by Anne Pauwels (Pauwels 1998). She maintains that a wide variety of types of discourse has been subjected to analysis of linguistic sexism. Among them, several have a particular importance due to the impact and the influence on mentalities and behavior. A significant category is represented by the education texts, for their central role in the formation of children and for their promotion of gender stereotypes and bias about girls and women – who are usually associated with emotionality, physical aspect, home and family life etc. Law and media texts are also very important in the study of the relationship between language and society, because of the great impact this kind of discourse has. These texts promote stereotyped images of men and women. But, if men's representation contains features that are positively valued (physical strength and force, rationalism, aggression, independence, mastery over other beings and things), women's image, on the other hand, is based on features as dependence, physical beauty, emotionality, sensitivity and caring, features not valued by the patriarchal order.<sup>1</sup>

Pauwels' volume proves that the linguistic sexism is an "international phenomenon". Despite the differences between languages, the author presents a number of common elements in the linguistic representation of women and men across several languages:

- the man is portrayed as the benchmark, as the norm for all human beings;
- the woman's linguistic invisibility, or, when she is visible, her asymmetry in comparison to man;
- the dependence of some terms denoting women on terms denoting men;
- the stereotypical linguistic representation of both sexes: women are primarily

depicted as sexual creatures (e.g. the Madonna - whore polarity) whereas men are more likely to be portrayed as rational beings (Pauwels 1998: 34).

Anne Pauwels also quotes other three main regularities observed by Hellinger across a large variety of European languages. The first regularity is that terms referring to women are always gender-specific, whereas terms referring to men can have two functions: gender specific and generic. The second regularity concerns the semantic asymmetry between the terms referring to women and men, especially those denoting occupations. The third regularity concerns comparisons of women to men; in most instances the feminine is the negative term ("*he cries like a girl*"), meanwhile the masculine is the positive one ("*she is a second Mozart*") (Pauwels 1998: 35).

These features in the linguistic image of the men and women are acting also in Romanian.

Probably the most famous example that comes to support the idea of discrimination through language is represented by the terms *man* and *he* denoting the human species. As I have already mentioned, this situation exists in many languages. But, in Romanian the term *om* (that refers to the *whole human species*) is no longer often used with the meaning of *bărbat* (*male*). Yet, the existence of two different terms for denoting *man* and *male*, gave me the opportunity to observe an example of sexism, when, just having found about a gender study conference, a student said: "*Another conference about women being oppressed by men (om)*". Here, the usage of *om* (with the meaning of *man* and not that of *male*) suggested that women are not human beings, as men are.

Even if in Romanian the trap of *man* is usually avoided, there are many other examples that confirm the patriarchal order that manifests itself in language. Among them, I remind the form of the genitive, who doesn't allow women to possess: the genitive form accords with the object possessed and not with the possessor. Also, the plural form of the third person is the masculine one, when both men and women are concerned. But it is worth mentioning the existence of *ele*, the plural form of the third person, feminine. The masculine linguistic "superiority" is also expressed by the gender concord. When adjectives or verbs refer to several nouns of different gender it is the noun with the masculine gender that will determine the gender concord.

As it was already said, the language illustrates the social structure. There are some rules that act in language and one of the most significant is that corresponding to men being the norm and women being the deviation. This regularity underlined by Pauwels exists also in Romanian. As an example, the terms that denote the persons that have certain professions become problematic when women are concerned. In this case, the feminine term is the diminutive form of the word denoting the man having that occupation. Thus, as Cărtărescu concludes, the practice of a profession by a woman involves, in comparison to a man, a lack, the diminutiveness being in fact a diminution, a reduction of importance. A woman is less than a man that has the same profession (Grünberg, Miroiu 1997: 29-33).

Also, there are professions in which exist many women, but there are no terms to designate them. Even if there are words referring to women performing a certain profession, they are not totally accepted and introduced in the dictionary.

Another interesting example is the usage of the feminine form of a profession to denote an equipment and not a person (*semănător- semănătoare*). (Văcărescu 2004)

This example comes to support the idea that women are usually associated to negative elements (irrationality, weakness) and this preconception emerges at the linguistic

level. This is also the conclusion of an analysis made by Cirkseña and Cuklanz. (Rakow 1992: 18-44) They present five dualisms, very important for the occidental thinking, and they analyze the women's place within the framework of these dualisms. These five dualisms are: reason and emotion, public and private, culture and nature, subject and object, mind and body and the authors' conclusion being that the feminine is always associated to the "inferior" part of these couples.

It is worth mentioning here the linguistic asymmetry that exists between women and men, asymmetry caused by the labels of *sexual woman* and *generic men*. As Pauwels says, "a fundamental characteristic of every definition of 'woman' is her sexual nature (for women, sex is destiny), whereas [...] An important semantic feature in the definition of the word 'man' and its equivalents in other languages is its capacity to represent or stand for the entire human race". (Pauwels 1998: 50) The idea of sexual women is suggested also by the large number of terms or metaphors for prostitutes existing in most languages. The fact that the terms that denote the sexual act present especially the man's perspective, as "something that a man does to a women", suggests also a linguistic image in which women are a sexual object. "The language and discourse of sex and sexual activity is said to be a clear testimony to the fact that it is men who have the power to name and define in language." (Pauwels 1998: 55)

The situations mentioned above: the morphological asymmetry and the lexical gaps (the absence of terms referring to women in certain situations) reflect a social fact and represent an important object for the feminist critics.

I consider that the usage of *man* and *he* to refer to the whole human species, represent, let's say, "basic elements" of our language, elements that are used unconsciously, proving the deep rooting of preconceptions in our way of thinking and speaking. At the same time, I stress the importance of analyzing more complex structures of language, structures that are, I dare say, closer to the plan of conscience, in order to emphasize the discrimination through language.

The importance of such structures is underlined by Steve Duck, who speaks about the role of the metaphors in analyzing the relationships. "The way in which the individuals really experience a feeling or a relation is tightly connected to the language through which they communicate and describe this experience. The terms they use contain the experience, but they also direct it." (Duck 2000: 38) The metaphors don't have only an aesthetic role; they are in fact culturally and personally organized psychological structures, which not only express our thoughts, but also organize our perception, thoughts and action.

The fact that, in expressions such as: "husband/man and wife", "brother and sister", "son and daughter", the man occupies the first position was, in 1551, motivated by Mr. Thomas Willson by the fact that man's superiority must be reflected also in language (Spender 1980: 3-7). Today, even if no one maintains this opinion, the sequence of the terms remains the same. Women are presented in language as second rank or even negative.

To support this idea, I resort to two Romanian expressions used to encourage a person found in a difficult situation, expressions that have almost the same meaning: "*Fii bărbat!*" ("*Be a man!*") and "*Nu fii muier!*" ("*Don't be a woman!*").

It is worth mentioning another linguistic aspect concerning women, the names and the forms of address. These elements are extremely important because they synthesize a conception regarding women, stressing the aspect that is considered essential for them. The superlexicalization of women refers to the fact that there are a lot of terms

that denote women, implying several aspects: dehumanization (*skirt, piece*), vulgarity (*pet, chick*), possession by men (*wife, mistress*). These terms are used in Romanian, next to others that have trivializing connotations, as *cucoană, coană, duduie, duducă, madamă*. Also, the expressions like *sweetie* or *honey* suggest the idea of an object of consumption, while *girl* implies immaturity and irresponsibility.

The two forms of addressing to a woman: *Mrs.* and *Miss* oblige the woman to declare her marital status and, thus, her “sexual availability” and, at the same time, the fact that she is possessed by a man (Flower 1991: 94). The addressing form for men is *Mr.*, irrespective of the marital status. This difference in addressing forms between genders exists in Romanian, too. Moreover, the Romanian *domnișoară* (*Miss*.) is used to question a women’s virginity.

The asymmetry also characterizes the ways men and women address each other. The power relations between the sexes imply non-reciprocal forms of address, that manifest themselves especially in work situations, where it is not unusual for a male boss to address his female subordinate by her first name or even by endearment such as *darling, sweetie, sugar*, etc. “It need no to be said that the female worker cannot reciprocate in similar terms address her male superior” (Pauwels 1998: 62).

The object of some important feminist criticisms is the usage, in the presentation of a woman, of terms that indicate family relations (*mother, wife, daughter*), while, for men are usually used terms related to his activity outside the home (his profession). Women’s identity seems to be constituted in relation to the others, within the borders of the “proper space” for her, i.e. the private space. Thus, the former rules, consciously given up, appear at the linguistic level, proving their powerful influence on our thinking.

It is also important the asymmetry of the same term when it refers to women in comparison to men. For example, the terms *bachelor* and *spinster* have the same definition: persons that are not married. But, if *bachelor* does not have negative connotations, sometimes being even a compliment, the pejorative nuance of *spinster* cannot be denied. Robin Lakoff gives the example of two sentences in order to point out the differences between the terms: “*Mary hopes to meet an eligible bachelor*” and “*Fred hopes to meet an eligible spinster*” proving the abnormality of the association *eligible spinster* (Lakoff 1975: 64). If a *bachelor* is a person that chooses not to get married, a *spinster* doesn’t have the possibility to get married.<sup>2</sup>

These linguistic differences are generated by and, at the same time, generate social variations, often discriminatory ones. The awareness of this fact is the first step towards a less sexist and discriminatory language.

## Women’s language

The second aspect of the analysis of the relation of language and gender is the specific way in which women use language. Men and women use language differently.

On the one hand, for men, the speaking refers strictly to facts, problems and solutions. The masculine communication is characterized by self-imposing, competition, interruption of the interlocutor, assertiveness, by short and well structured sentences. The communication is perceived by men as an opportunity to demolish the others’ discourse.

On the other hand, women are interested in mutual relationships, in communication, cooperation, harmony; the aim of the women’s communication style is the creation and the maintaining of interpersonal relations. Women’s way of speaking implies gen-

uine communication, and not fact reports, as in men's case. Women's communication is cooperative, aiming to sustain the interlocutor and not to challenge her/ him, to add at her/ his discourse or at her/ his argumentation and not to criticize it. Thus, tag-questions, which help the other, preparing the way for his response, are a characteristic for women's discourse.

Besides the interpretation of tag-questions as an encouragement of the interlocutor, there is another way to perceive them, as a need for support, for affirmation, a need that women, as a minority group, have. This example helps us bring up two theories of gender difference in communication: the domination theory and the difference theory. The underlying question for both of them is: what determines the differences in communication between men and women?

The theory that stakes on domination sustains that women's communication is the result of the male social supremacy. The *silence* is the word that characterizes women's linguistic behavior, silence meaning their absence from the public sphere. Male domination is imposed through language and requires a certain way of speaking for women. The patriarchal order allotted to women the private space, restricting them the contact with the public sphere. Also, women had no or very little access to education and culture, their communication manner being shaped by the relationships at home and by the patriarchal rules that imposed them a humble attitude. The characteristics of women's communication style result from their social position in a patriarchal social order, from their uncertainty, from their lack of power and self-esteem.

The difference theory emphasizes the idea that women and men talk differently because they are different. Women's voice is a different one that emerges from a different mind and a different body. So, women appear as a subculture that has its own way of experiencing the world and the interpersonal relationships and has its own means to put them in words (*l'écriture féminine* which is capable of expressing the difference between man and woman). The main objections to this idea refer to the essentialism underlying it, essentialism that denies the importance of other determinants (such as ethnicity, culture, education, social and economic position, etc.) and to its utopian character (Brădeanu, Dragomir, Roventă-Frumușani, Surugiu 2002: 129).

None of these theories can alone offer an acceptable explanation for the difference between the masculine and the feminine communication. Aspects from both of them must be taken into consideration in order to approach such a difficult and delicate issue. The differences between men and women exist and no one can deny their importance in communication, but the role of women's traditional social place cannot be neglected in shaping the feminine discourse.

Women's way of speaking, usually described in negative terms, as emotional, irrational, illogical etc. needs to be re-valued. Thus, new criteria of evaluation will be used. This process has already started, but it evolves slowly because of both women's and men's lack of awareness. Nevertheless, there are situations which show that we can talk about a positive re-valuing of terms that characterize women's discourse. For example, the frequency and the importance of gossip columns in newspapers or the emphasis on the benefits of the cooperative conversational style, as opposed to the competitive one. There are many situations in which a masculine conversational style gives no result, thus being preferred a "more feminine" type of communication (Coates 1993: 3-15).

The assimilation, which is the adoption by women of a masculine language (powerful voice, an assertive style, words and expressions taboo, etc.) should be surpassed. This is a technique that allows women to impose themselves in a male dominated

sphere. But a price must be paid: the specificity of feminine discourse. The positive re-valuing of the feminine communicational traits, traditionally perceived in a negative manner, represents perhaps the beginning of the end of the assimilation.

## Conclusion.

The linguistic variations when gender is concerned stand for a veritable indicator of social unwritten rules and deep rooted preconceptions. As it was already said, women suffer a linguistic discrimination and this fact has a great importance on women's general situation. The mechanisms through which the language acts on our thinking and through which we act on it are impressive and impossible to reveal. Yet, the fact that we become more aware of this phenomenon represents an important step towards a less discriminatory language and, hopefully, society.

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## Notes:

1. Adina Brădeanu has a very interesting study on the bias against women manifested in a Romanian bill that defines the sexual harassment and in an article from a Romanian magazine for women.
2. We must say that in Romanian there is a masculine correspondent for *spinster* (*fecior bătrân*).