

A WORD-LEVEL ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST LANGUAGE IN MARILYN FRENCH'S DEBUT NOVEL "THE WOMEN'S ROOM"*

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Abstract

This research deals with a word-level analysis of feminist language used by an American feminist author Marilyn French in her debut novel 'The Women's Room'. The objectives of this research are to explore words with negative connotations for women together with specific types of sexist language use they belong to, and to find out which type of sexist language use is the most dominant in the novel. The investigation was conducted based on Mills' (1995) feminist stylistic analysis at the level of the word, focusing the area of sexism and meaning. The findings showed that of all types of sexist language use, words with negative connotations for women occurred most in 'Naming and Androcentrism'. The research proved the existence of sexism in the English language as some words used for women found in the novel have identifiable negative connotations and the sense of devaluation.

Keywords: feminist language sexist language feminist stylistic analysis naming and androcentrism

Introduction

One of the main interests of feminists who argue about inequalities between men and women is language and gender. Gender has effects on the actions of human beings, the way the world treats them, and also the language used by humans and the language used about humans (Talbot, 1998). The English language has been literally man made (Spender, 1985). Feminist linguists who have initiated the study about language and gender argue that sexism has existed in the English language. *Sexist language* is that "the speaker's conscious or unconscious use of language, which may alienate females (and males), and which may lead to establishment of an environment which is not conducive to communication and effective social interactions" (Mills, 1995). Mills also describes that the English language has lexical gaps which lead to sexism and also has words with negative connotations for women. Therefore, it is interesting to study feminist language used by feminist authors who assume that the English language favours men over women. This research aims to make a word-level analysis of feminist language used by an American feminist author Marilyn French in her debut novel "The Women's Room". The focus of this research is only on words with negative connotations for women, including address terms for women in which negative connotations exist.

In fact, feminists use language maximally with care to avoid sexism. Making an analysis of the language used by a feminist author in her novel to prove the inevitable existence of sexism is an inspiring work. 'The Women's Room' is Marilyn French's well-known novel that portrays the white middle-class American women's life experiences, their sufferings in society and their bitter feelings towards men. It has been recognized as a book that changes lives of women. Lexical items with negative connotations in the novel, along with their specific types of sexist language use, are worth investigating as what particular effects are achieved through these less obvious forms of sexism in language can be traced.

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The adopted theory for the research

The adopted theory for this research is Mills' (1995) feminist stylistic analysis at the level of the word. Mills (1995) defines feminist stylistics as "a form of politically motivated stylistics whose aim is to develop an awareness on the way gender is handled in texts." The focus of this word-level study is only on words with identifiable negative connotations for women found in the novel.

Concerned with sexism and meaning, specific types of sexist language use to be investigated at the word level are Naming and Androcentrism, the Semantic Derogation of Women, Endearments and Diminutives, and Female Experience: Euphemism and Taboo.

Naming and Androcentrism

"Our languages are sexist; that is, they represent or 'name' the world from a masculine view point and in accordance with stereotypical beliefs about the sexes" (Cameron, 1990, cited in Mills, 1995). Mills describes that the existence of a strong androcentric bias can be seen in terms used to describe female genitalia and sexual activity.

Mills also discusses that naming also informs the lives of women. There are differential codes for naming men and women themselves. Women have to reveal their marital status with the use of such terms as 'Miss' and 'Mrs' when males are not marked in a similar way.

The semantic derogation of women

Mills discusses that sexist meanings occur in some words used for women in the English language. She describes that some gender-specific terms in English have semantic derogation of women. She reiterates the view of Schultz (1990) which claims "that once a word becomes associated with women, it will begin to lose any positive quality that it originally had."

Mills agrees that certain terms referring to women actually indicate lower status for women and furthermore, convey negative sexual connotations which are offensive to them. According to Mills, there are also gender-specific terms which have a strong sense of derogation towards women in contrast with available terms for men.

Endearments and diminutives

Mills (1995) explains that in the English language, some endearment terms used by men to refer to their female partners with affection can also be used to demean. Terms such as 'my bird', 'my chick' appear to be endearments, but they imply an equivalence between women and cute small animals. Other endearment terms 'honey', 'sweetie', 'sweetheart', 'sugar', 'cheesecake' imply the referent 'something good to eat, available for consumption'.

Mills claims that these endearment terms represent an intimate form used between people of equal status to show solidarity and affection. But, they are also usable between those who regard themselves to be in a hierarchical relationship.

Female Experience: Euphemism and taboo

Mills (1995) emphasizes that the use of euphemisms in expressing some common experience in women's lives can be seen in the English language. She claims that many areas of women's lives are surrounded by linguistic taboos.

Menstruation in many cultures is a tabooed subject surrounded with special rituals and language-use. There are a full range of euphemistic terms to avoid mentioning it directly (Holder, 1989, cited in Mills, 1995). Words such as 'flow' or 'moisture' and also the term 'period' (monthly flow of blood) are used euphemistically to avoid mentioning menstruation directly. When menstruation needs to be mentioned in the public sphere, for example, in women's toilets, euphemistic terms such as 'tampons', 'towels' or 'sanitary towels', or 'sanitary napkins' or 'sanitary pads', and 'feminine requisites' etc. are used.

Women have to suffer the miserable female bodily experience of menstruation by nature, but there is no male bodily experience which needs to be treated using euphemistic terms (Mills, 1995).

Materials and Methods

The material used for this research is an American feminist author Marilyn French's debut novel 'The Women's Room', first published in 1977, which had great influence on women in her time. The adopted theory for this research is Mills' (1995) feminist stylistic analysis at the level of the word in the area of sexism and meaning. The focus of this study was only concerned with words in which negative connotations for women are rooted.

In collecting data, sexist words with negative connotations for women documented by feminists (including address terms that were used to demean women) found in the novel were collected. Then they were put into the table, classifying into different related types of sexist language use discussed by Mills (1995). Whenever a sexist word with a negative connotation appeared in the novel, it was counted as one. Words with negative descriptions for women in each type of sexist language use were counted to find out which type had the greatest number, and frequency percentage of types of sexist language use found in the novel was calculated. After that, the interpretation for some prominent words with negative connotations for women found in the novel was given. Finally, how these words have effect on the meaning of the novel was discussed.

Findings

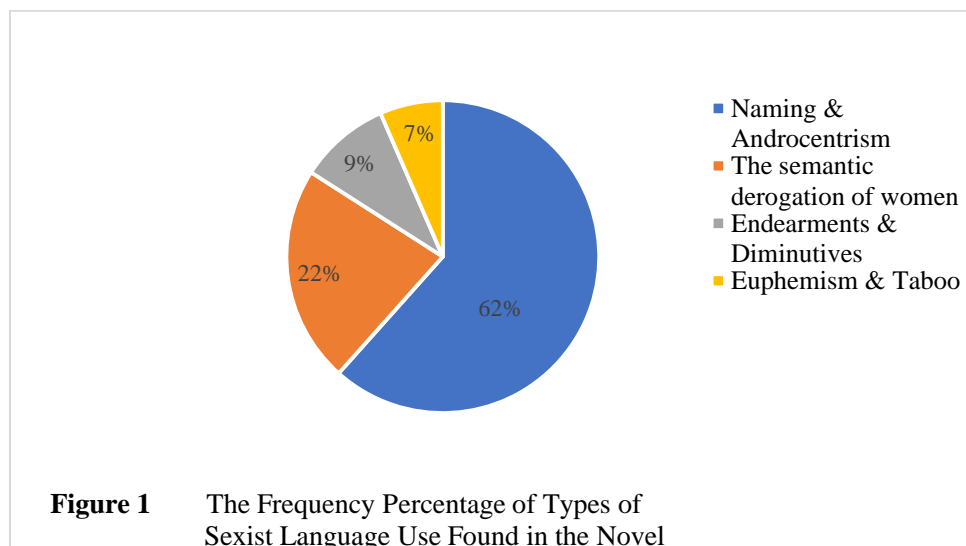
Based on Mills' (1995) discussion about sexism and meaning, words with negative connotations used for women were categorized into four specific types of sexist language use: Naming and Androcentrism, Semantic Derogation of Women, Endearments and Diminutives and Female Experience: Euphemisms and Taboo. The following table shows words with negative connotations for women and specific types of sexist language use they belong to.

Table 1 Sexist words with negative connotations for women and types of sexist language use found in the novel

Sr. no	Naming & Androcentrism	frequency	Sr. no	The semantic derogation of women	frequency	Sr. no	Endearments & Diminutives	frequency	Sr. no	Euphemism & Taboo	frequency
1.	cunt (pages) 2, 31, 131(2), 233, 316(2), 374, 431(2), 432, 456(3), 457(3), 468	18	1.	whore(s) (pages) 8(2), 90,126, 161,197, 213, 215, 223(2), 238(2), 254, 430, 431, 432(2), 434	18	1.	honey (pages) 44(3),150, 509	5	1.	sanitary napkins *euphemism (pages) 11, 14, 48, 424	4
2.	Mrs (pages) 10(4), 12, 15, 16,19(2), 21(3), 22 (3), 26(2), 39, 51(3),52(4), 99,102,155, 171, 254(2), 382, 383(4), 385(3), 386, 388, 389, 390(3), 391, 392(3), 393	50	2.	slut (pages) 35, 37,126, 150, 161, 254, 431, 432,	8	2.	sweetheart (pages) 52, 371, 503, 504	4	2.	fluidities *euphemism (page) 15	1
3.	vagina (pages) 136, 456	2	3.	girl (pages) 91, 462	2	3.	sweetie (page) 175	1	3.	smelly substance (page) 21	1
4.	screw (ing) (pages) 46, 90, 136, 138,183,196, 214, 215, 223(2),432(3), 487	14	4.	laundress (page) 239	1	4.	baby (page) 461(2)	2	4.	menstrual blood *taboo (page) 315	1
5.	pussy (page) 119	1	5.	cow (page) 254	1	5.	chick (page) 468	1	5.	clotty blood *taboo (page) 315	1
			6.	pig (page) 254	1				6.	period *euphemism (pages) 42, 419	2
		85			31			13			10

Feminists believe that language favours males, sometimes meaning seems to work in a different way for males and females. The connotations of the terms ingrained in words for women play an important role in considering whether language use is sexist or not. After

studying individual words in French's novel "The Women's Room" focusing on words with negative connotations for women and types of sexist language use they belong to, the following results were found. First, it was found that the most dominant type of sexist language use in the novel was *naming and androcentrism*. Naming in the English language was found to be androcentric (reflecting the world's view which is male-oriented.). The terms 'pussy', 'vagina' and 'cunt' that refer to female genitalia found in the novel were proof of androcentric naming. In describing sexual activities, the use of the term 'screw' that presents the sex act from the male perspective was found. Moreover, the frequent address term 'Mrs' that refers to married women highlighted the long-lasting tradition of identifying women with their relationship to men. The second prevalent type of sexist language use found in the novel was *the semantic derogation of women*. 'The feminine term is often negative or derogatory, whereas the masculine term is often positive or at least non-judgemental' (Doyle, 1995). The terms 'slut', 'whore' and 'laundress' appeared in the novel as derogatory terms for women's sexuality. Lakoff (2004) claims that derogatory terms for women are very often overtly sexual. Moreover, other terms like 'pig' and 'cow' that referred to women's stupidity and their lack of attractiveness to men, and the term 'girls' with the connotation of sexual availability were also found in the novel. Next, the use of endearment and diminutive terms for women that can also have negative connotations was also present in the novel. But, their frequency of occurrence was low and this specific type of sexist language use in the novel was not dominant. Of all types of sexist language use found in the novel, the type 'euphemism and taboo' associated with the negative connotation of women's bodily experience 'menstruation' was the least dominant in the novel. The following pie chart shows the frequency percentage of all types of sexist language use found in the novel.



Discussion

The findings showed that words with sexually debased meanings which can be defined as sexist language items occurred in the area of 'naming and androcentrism' most. As feminists claim, naming in the English language is proved to be sexist. In the novel 'The Women's Room', the presence of the term 'Mrs' was noticeable. Armed by the title of Mrs, some women think they are safer and stronger in the world. In fact, under the title Mrs, their own identities are hidden and invisible. In the novel, the main woman character's mother was introduced to the reader with the title "Mrs (Ward)" whenever she appeared in the novel. Her Christian name, as

well as her surname, was not described even once throughout the novel. This term demeans and diminishes women with the negative connotation 'property of some man'.

Moreover, Mills describes that the English language has lexical gaps in the semantic field of women's genitals as there are no informal non offensive words for describing them. Even the clinical term 'vagina' is derived from the Latin for 'sheath' – a place to keep a sword. Androcentric naming can clearly be seen in this case. The most colloquial term 'cunt' for female genitalia that is described as 'taboo' and 'offensive' in dictionaries came into sight of the readers of the novel as the word of insult to women used by men. In the novel, this term was also used when sexuality was described and women also used this term abusively to refer to themselves with anger and dislike. This term does not have a male equivalent and is the only word that should not be allowed to be heard (Mills, 1995). It was also found that the taboo and slang 'pussy' for female genitalia was used by a man in the novel when he talked about dirty jokes. These sexualized terms are documented by feminists that they cause offences to women as they are viewed from a male perspective. On the other hand, the terms 'penis' and 'prick' used in the novel to refer to the male sex organ are not described as offensive terms in the dictionaries. Moreover, Mills discusses that there are non-offensive joking terms available for male genitalia in the English language (For example, 'willy' and 'John Thomas') while there are not such terms for female genitalia.

Women are not under the protection of the semantic association and under the semantic rule. Male terms remain with their original positive meanings whereas most female terms exist with sexually debased meanings (Spender, 1985). Mills noted that gender-specific terms for women have a strong sense of derogation towards them compared with available gender-specific terms for men. The gender-specific terms 'slut' and 'whore' used to describe females in relation to sexual activity are semantically derogatory. These terms are also taboos that convey negative sexual connotations. In the novel, these terms were used by men when they accused their women partners of having sex with a lot of different people. In the eyes of men, women with many sexual partners were miserable, disgusting and unforgivable. Women were blamed, insulted and devalued by men with these sexist terms 'slut' and 'whore' that have negative connotative meanings. According to Mills (1995), in the English language, the terms available for men who have many sexual partners such as 'Casanova, Jack the lad and stud' have an element of boastfulness about them and improve the man's reputation rather than diminish it. In society, men with many sexual partners are considered to be impressive and they are the ones who are sexually attractive, but women in this case are considered to be degradable ones for their promiscuous sexual behavior.

Moreover, the use of lexical item 'girl' in the novel demonstrated the use of language in a sexist way. The fact that whether the term 'girl' is sexist or not depends on the context. For example, **"Hey, girls," one said. 'Wanna have a good time? We can show you a real good time.'** In this extract from the novel, the presence of negative connotation in the term 'girl' is dominant. A middle-aged woman and her grown-up daughter were verbally insulted by two young men while they were walking along the sidewalk. The two women were sexually harassed in public by being addressed with the term 'girls', demeaning them as available sexual objects for men. In the oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (new 9th edition), one meaning of the term 'girl' is glossed as an offensive term for a young woman. The term 'girl' referring to a female

over sixteen is assumed to be sexist and unacceptable by feminists. But, whether this term is sexist or non-sexist should be concerned with the context it appears in and not with the age.

Next, the term 'laundress', which originally refers to a female position within a household, is said to have a sexual connotation. In tracing the etymology of this term, it was discovered that this term refers to the exclusive designation of a housekeeper or caretaker of bachelor chambers in the Temple. The source of this meaning is concerned with the Crusades. During the Crusades, many women of the town accompanied the Knights Templars for the purpose of washing their linen in their journey to the Holy Land. Later they were forced to act as mistresses to the Knights ([https; // www. Definitions. net](https://www.Definitions.net)). So, the term 'laundress' connotes 'a woman who has to fulfill the sexual desire of men apart from her duties of washing and ironing'. The term 'laundress' occurred in the novel once. **"She counted the years, counted what he would have had to pay a housekeeper, nurse, laundress, chauffeur, prostitute – for that is what she felt, now, to have been her most painful role – and presented Norm with the bill."** In the novel, the main woman character was filed to divorce by her unscrupulous husband after fifteen years of their marriage. For her consent to the acrimonious divorce, she claimed the cost for her physical toil and pains in taking different roles in her married life. One of the roles she took during her marriage was that of a laundress. The presence of sexual connotation in the term 'laundress' was not apparent in the context, but the sense of semantic derogation was clearly noted. Moreover, the devalued womanhood in society was apparent in this context.

Feminists claim that the endearment terms such as 'sweetheart', 'sweetie, and 'honey' which are applied more frequently to women than to men reproduce asymmetric patriarchal power relations. They can also be used to women with the implied meaning 'something good to eat, available for consumption' (Mills, 1995). In the novel, it was recognized that men used endearment terms to women with genuine affection. It was found that men used these terms more frequently than women. These intimate forms were used more frequently between equals to signal affection, except in one particular context in which a father used the term 'honey' to address his daughter.

For women, talking about their cursed bodily experience of menstruation is not easy and comfortable, especially in the public sphere as it seems to bring a feeling of dirtiness, embarrassment and shame. Euphemistic terms were used in the novel to avoid the direct reference to menstruation. The terms 'sanitary napkin', 'period', 'smelly substance', and 'fluidities' were used by the women characters to avoid the harsh and blunt term 'menstruation'. In many cultures, it is embarrassing and shameful for women to talk about menstruation openly as it is the taboo subject and talking about this in public seems to be socially inappropriate. Behind these euphemistic terms, negative image of menstrual blood can be seen. The direct reference to menstruation with the negative connotation 'dirtiness' and 'being impure' was rarely used in the novel, except once when a woman character in the novel bitterly talked about men's negative attitudes towards menstruation. Men, different from women who are victims by nature, never have such kind of bodily experience that needs to be kept secret.

Through the word level analysis of the feminist language used in the novel with the focus on words with negative connotations, the existence of sexism in the English language can be traced. Offensive terms for women unavoidably appeared even in the language used by a feminist author as they are deeply embedded in the language used in society. It can be asserted that society and tradition truly favoured men in the semantic field of language, too. The presence of

words with negative connotations in the novel made the readers notice women condition and women suffering in male dominated society. Devalued women's experience in society could clearly be visualized through the use of negative terms for women in the novel. Language is part of culture. Terms with sexist meanings for women in language inform the readers about culture in society where discrimination against women occurs. Devaluation of womanhood French wants to portray in the novel can be detected based on the connotations of negative terms for women. These negative terms with sexually debased meanings play an important role to make the meaning of the novel more effective.

Conclusion

In analysing the language used by a feminist author Marilyn French in her debut novel, words with sexist meanings were inevitably found. The use of words with negative connotations that devalue women could be traced based on four different types of sexist language use. It can be concluded that the English language is biased in favour of the male. Even naming is androcentric. It was also found in the novel that for some terms with derogatory meanings for women, there are no equivalent terms for men. Even when there are derogatory male terms such as 'bastard' and 'lecher', they have less negative meanings. Moreover, the meanings of some terms referring to women have embarrassing sexual connotations. Language can be said to be male centred. Because of social inequity, lexical disparity occurred. Moreover, it might also be assumed that women's devaluation in society leads to women's devaluation in language. Words with negative descriptions for women documented by feminists seem to be deeply rooted in everyday language. The meanings of these lexical items are socially constructed by people in the patriarchal society based on social beliefs about women. As Mills argues, specific types of sexist language use in the novel can present and perpetuate a particular view of women. The elimination of sexist words with negative connotations is not a simple and easy problem because 'the problem lies not in the words but in the semantic rule which governs their positive or negative connotations (Spender, 1985). As long as society is patriarchal, sexism is inevitable in different aspects of human life. Nowadays, gender inequality is one of the most serious global issues. More and more women in the world have become aware of gender problems in different situations. Feminist linguists attempt to highlight the existence of sexism in the language. It is hoped that this investigation of sexist words with negative connotations for women in a literary text of a feminist author will enable those who are interested in feminist literature to have awareness of gender bias in the language and to have a great insight into the relation between language and gender.

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