

A Tale of Two Trends: The Characteristics of Linguistic Sexism in the Era of Social Media and Its Effects on Gender Equity

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Abstract: This paper introduced the manifestations and formation of traditional linguistic sexism in the English world, elaborated on the new characteristics of linguistic sexism in the era of social media, and analyzed the effects of social media on linguistic sexism and gender equity. In general, social media makes gender equality present two trends. On the new characteristics, social media has reshaped linguistic sexism deeply in two ways: one is the anonymity of social media that has changed the traditional communication mechanism and incited hostile linguistic sexism; the other is social media's openness and interactivity that has increased the risk of linguistic sexism as well as the quarrel over gender issues. On the prospect of gender equity in the era of social media, this paper concluded two effects: one is the promotion of gender equity awareness, and the other is the risk of group polarization of attitudes towards gender issues.

Keywords: Linguistic sexism, Social media, Gender equity, Feminism

1. Introduction

This paper is endowed with distinctive value in that it takes the influence of the internet into account. In the era of social media, the internet occupies a remarkable position in people's daily interaction, which is rather different from the past period when people have to rely on traditional tangible media (such as newspapers, letters, etc.) and face-to-face communications for mind-exchanging. Since the internet nowadays has been prevailing throughout society, wording spread by online communities could go viral in a flash and thus impose an enormous impact on people's conception of society. This paper generally articulates linguistic sexism in the English world. It would introduce the manifestations and formation of linguistic sexism, as well as its new characteristic in the era of social media. After that, this paper will elaborate on the effects that social media have on feminist movements, which include both positive effects and obstacles that might impede gender equity triggered by linguistic sexism. This paper reveals neglected sexism from a little-considered perspective, providing a prediction of the trend of anti-sexism in the future. It also demonstrates the status quo of sexism in the current online community with its various appearance and existing cases, offering worthwhile value to scholars who will devote themselves to the related topic.

2. Traditional Manifestations and Background of Linguistic Sexism

Linguistic sexism has usually defined as discrimination based on sex, which is deeply rooted in typical society, culture, history and psychology, and—different from sexist behavior—is reflected in the language. Granted, linguistic sexism as a concept can refer to the discrimination against both men and women, but it is women that are usually the main victims who suffer from it due to the fact that women are always a disadvantaged group in real life. Therefore, when mentioning this concept, this article will focus only on the discrimination against women.

2.1. The Manifestations of Traditional Linguistic Sexism

There are a lot of forms of sex discrimination such as word-formation patterns, word meanings, proverbs, etc., which will be elaborated in the following part.

The first is word-formation patterns. Among a lot of pairs of corresponding words representing men and women respectively, the vast majority of words related to men have no marks, while those words related to women have marks, and the ‘marks’ mentioned here are mostly produced by adding suffixes after those ‘male words’. For example, actor vs. actress, manager vs. manageress, etc. On the one hand, in terms of these words’ status, this words-formation rule implies ‘male words’ are always primary and important while ‘female words’ are secondary and insignificant. What’s more, many suffixes used to describe women have discriminatory meanings in themselves. For instance, in words like usherette, libertine and administratrix, the suffixes ‘-ette’, ‘-ine’, ‘-trix’ have similar meanings: small and weak [1]. On the other hand, in terms of word frequency, as is known to most people, ‘male words’ are used much more frequently than ‘female words’, especially among the pronouns.

The second is word meanings. When referring to men and women with the same characteristics, people tend to use words with different emotional meanings, and those words used to describe women often have negative meanings: a man who has never married is called ‘bachelor’ while a woman who has never married is called ‘spinster’. However, the difference between these two words is never only about sex but also about sentiment. The word ‘bachelor’ is more used to describe a man who has comfortable living conditions and prefers to be single, while ‘spinster’ implies that the single woman is old and does not appeal to other men. Similarly, ‘governor’ refers to a powerful person while ‘governess’ is more like a maid.

Another is proverbs. There are plenty of proverbs and sayings that express sexism and they can be divided into two categories. One is about the problem of generic pronouns: idioms like ‘Man proposes, God disposes’ may seem nothing special to a male because he himself is a ‘man’. However, it will really make those ‘women’ feel uncomfortable due to the absence of females. If this kind of linguistic sexism is euphemistic, the other category may appear sharp and unacceptable: either the idioms like ‘A man of straw is worth a woman of gold’ or the quotations of famous people such as Shakespeare’s ‘Frailty, the name is woman’ and Nietzsche’s ‘Woman was God’s second mistake’ will directly express discrimination against women. More seriously, many of these sayings come from positive characters or influential people, which may exert an imperceptible influence on people’s thinking, especially for the younger generation [2].

2.2. The Forming of Linguistic Sexism

Economic inequality and the socialization of biological differences are one of the most important roots of linguistic sexism. Just as the examples of linguistic sexism in word formation patterns and word meanings, there has been a long-term difference between men and women in career choice and in the division of labor, which constitutes the path dependence pattern of economic and social status for men and women.

In the traditional division of labor, the occupations with higher social status were more occupied by men instead of women, so women's work was attached to less importance. In the conventional mode of production, men had more advantages in physical strength than women, so society tended to form discrimination against women. What's more, even today, when the importance of physical labor is decreasing, the biological difference between men and women still plays an important role in gender discrimination. It is because women have to—usually inevitably—reduce their working hours due to pregnancy, which brings 'damage' to the economic performance of employers. Due to the fact that there is a high moral hazard to reducing the employment of women directly, for this reason, many employers have fabricated the so-called reasons like 'women have weaker competitiveness', which also constitutes an important part of gender discrimination in language. In this way, men are more likely to enjoy more opportunities to obtain higher family and social status by using their career, property and other advantages, while women are reduced to a secondary position.

Apart from that, another reason for linguistic sexism lies in the historical and cultural tradition. Just as the East Asian cultural circle is deeply influenced by the norm 'husband guides wife' advocated by traditional Confucianism, religion has also shaped the concept of discrimination against women in western countries. Such concept of male domination and female subordination has been passed down from generation to generation, during which this kind of discrimination has been further transformed into a stereotype of women: since women were marginalized in the society and their families, they could only make up for it in other ways. For instance, women are often constrained by relevant regulations in their speech and behavior. Women must pay special attention to their own words, tone, manner and body language when they speak in daily life. Only by doing so can they win the recognition and affirmation of others. In this way, elegance and obedience become the characteristics and even the norms of women's speech, which reflects the sexism in language [3].

It should be noted that although what have been mentioned above are the main manifestations and reasons of linguistic sexism in the pre-internet era, they are still important and should not be neglected because they can show the most stable characteristics of linguistic sexism. Based on these findings, this article will next focus on how the revolution of means of communication has had a great impact on linguistic sexism since the Internet era (especially the social media era), and try to reveal more profound social and political roots.

3. Linguistic Sexism in Social-Media Era

Linguistic sexism has been deeply shaped by social media due to at least two reasons: one is the anonymity of social media that has changed the traditional communication mechanism and incited hostile linguistic sexism; the other is social media's openness and interactivity that has increased the risk of linguistic sexism as well as the quarrel over gender issues.

3.1. Linguistic Sexism under Anonymity

Thanks to the development of feminist theory, the existing works have contributed a lot to a more comprehensive understanding of sexism. It has been theorized that sexism can be divided into at least two main categories, namely hostile sexism and benevolent sexism [4]. Hostile sexism refers to those malicious words towards women and extreme discrimination against women [5], while benevolent sexism involves outwardly positive, but still damaging beliefs about women. To be specific, hostile sexism is always related to a greater tolerance of sexual harassment and it tends to regard women as sexual objects; benevolent sexism usually looks friendly but actually shows prejudice against women such as 'women need to be cherished and protected' [6].

In fact, most of the linguistic sexism in the previous chapter belongs to benevolent sexism with euphemistic gender prejudice, such as the words and sayings which reflect the social norms and moral principles to be followed by women. Sometimes they are unintentional offenses. At the same time, in traditional interpersonal communication, there is not so much hostile or malicious sexism. It is because face-to-face communications or contact with acquaintances are based on the principle of mutual respect, in which people rarely deliberately use malicious words to express discrimination against women.

With such psychological inertia, many feminists once thought that the Internet might provide a relatively equal communication platform for men and women, which could promote gender equality and change the inferior position of women in the mass media. However, to their disappointment, the anonymity of the Internet provided more space for hostile sexism.

In real life, most men prefer to restrain their contempt for women due to their social status and the pressure of public opinion, while the Internet, with its concealment of real names, provides shelter for them. Just as scholars like Suler and Jesse Fox said, the lack of connection with users' identity may encourage them to take anti-social actions because they believe that their online behavior does not represent their offline identity, which creates a 'dissociative imagination' [7]. Since the user maintains a different identity online, they may tend to, consciously or unconsciously, regard the online world as a unique sphere where they can say and do something bad without bearing consequences [8]. Therefore, on social media, some male users' discriminatory comments on women are more direct, violent and malicious than those in a real-life situation.

3.2. Linguistic Sexism with Openness and Interactivity

In addition to the problems caused by anonymity, the openness and interactivity of social media have also given greater room for linguistic sexism.

According to Barak's study, passive or indirect sexual harassment in cyberspace may be as harmful as direct harassment [9]. The concept of ambient sexism indicates that if sexist attitudes and behaviors are widespread in an environment, whether an individual is the direct target of sexism or not, such an atmosphere will have a negative impact. It implies that women's mental health may be influenced in an environment full of sexist attitudes and behaviors, which is even similar to direct sexual harassment [10].

The immediacy and openness of social media have greatly increased the speed and scope of news dissemination. At the same time, compared with traditional paper media, social media is inevitably inferior in objectivity, seriousness and rationality. Especially under the pressure brought by the battle for subscribers, some users in social media are motivated to regard women as consumer goods and entertainment in order to pursue economic benefits in business operations without humanistic care. A typical example is that after the incident of sexual assault against women, some media release and post information with sexual allusions, such as highlighting the details of the sexual assault like 'naked' in the title or hashtag, so as to attract the attention of social media users, among which most—if not all—are male users.

In addition, in a society where patriarchal ideology is rampant when women pursue self-realization through their own abilities, they are often denied by discrimination from society, such as being stigmatized that they get something in exchange for sex. When women in social media share good living conditions, there are often malicious comments and discrimination against women like 'this woman must achieve this through sexual services'. In this process, the negative impact of traditional linguistic sexism—such as 'professional' refers to the professional ability of males, but involves females' access to social resources through sex—will be infinitely expanded through the openness and interactivity of social media. This will undoubtedly arouse women's discomfort, disgust and even resentment, and sometimes it may provide an emotional basis for

women's collective protest. In the view of feminists, this fully reflects the mechanism that men make vent to their own feelings by depreciating women, and that men take women as the object of sex to confirm male's superiority.

Women's sensitivity and attention to gender bias are significantly higher than men's, and women are more active to spread female consciousness and argue with extreme patriarchal thinking as well as hostile sexism. News and reports on gender discrimination tend to make women feel isolated and helpless. Granted, women can set up discussion groups and topics on social media like Twitter to discuss together, which can attract women with common experiences to join, create a sense of concern, and contribute to women's comfort and happiness. However, compared with the incalculable and indescribable linguistic discrimination on social media, short-term happiness is obviously not enough. Therefore, in the view of feminists, the establishment of women's rights as cognitive subjects can not be realized by simply seeking women's independence as individuals. In other words, women's rights must be realized by negating the culture and ideology that justifies male domination. This means that women should not be satisfied with personal independence, but influence more women and men to resist patriarchal ideology until this concept and consciousness are internalized into most citizens.

The above analysis and examples show that linguistic sexism is closely related to and deeply affected by the development of the Internet and social media, which is not only based on traditional linguistic sexism but also shows many new characteristics and trends. Next, this paper will elaborate on how linguistic sexism in the social-media era affects the feminist movement and female rights.

4. The Effects of Social Media on Feminist Movements

On the positive side, there is no doubt that feminists and people concerned about women's rights have promoted the dissemination of gender equality awareness through the use of social media. From this perspective, social media has made contributions to safeguarding the rights of women who are originally in a disadvantaged position, which marks the social civilization and progress. However, on the other side, things may be not going so well as expected.

4.1. Positive Effects: The Awareness of Women's Rights

Social media can not only promote the spread of feminist theory, but also empower the concept of gender equality to have an impact in both reality and theory. Taking the development of social sciences as an example, Hugo Dobson reviewed the participation of women in formal and informal global governance forums through case studies of G8 and G20. On the one hand, he affirmed the important role played by women in these forums, and on the other hand, he criticized the existing order and norms that still limit women to 'spouses' and 'etiquette roles' [11]. Bexell pointed out in his research on public-private partnerships (PPP) in global governance that PPP to promote women's empowerment will not challenge the gender structure of the global economy, although they may improve the economic situation of individual women in the short term [12]. The emergence of these research results can not be separated from the attention and expectation of social media for women's rights and interests. At the same time, it promotes the dissemination of feminist academic achievements and enriches the theoretical basis for promoting gender equality and reducing gender discrimination.

In addition to the theoretical contribution, social media also provides great convenience for online collective action, where women can resort to the group for comfort and courage, and strive for agenda setting in social media with the collective power. The case of #MeToo in the following

points out that, individuals may be afraid of slut shaming in reality, but collective action on the Internet has changed this situation.

The concept of ‘metoo’ related to gender issues first appeared in 2006 and was proposed by Tarana Burke, a female social worker, on MySpace. It was because a 13-year-old girl once told her that she had been sexually assaulted. However, Burke did not know how to respond, so she could only respond to the girl with the ‘me too’ because of her own experience of being sexually assaulted, and hoped these two words can unite other young girls with the same experience. Unfortunately, Burke’s experience did not have a large-scale impact because the media technology then was not as developed as today. However, 11 years later, when social media was widely used, actress Alyssa Milano was inspired by Burke and encouraged others to use #metoo as a hashtag on Twitter as much as possible: ‘if you have been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet’.

Since then, #metoo has become an anti-sexual-harassment label and slogan, and a social movement against sexual harassment has been launched in the United States. Its purpose is to appeal to all women who have been sexually assaulted to stand up and write about their experiences on social media and attach the hashtag #metoo to arouse social attention. The results show that from the perspective of gaining attention, this movement has achieved great success: once silent victims have come forward to publicly accuse the harassers, and many sexual abuse cases have been exposed, making people who commit sexual crimes condemned at least socially and morally. Although online activism has been criticized as ‘slacktivism’, Morozov pointed out that the positive psychological consequences of online action may motivate future collective action [13]. In addition to calling for the protection of women’s rights and interests, the movement has unearthed many examples of men as victims, making society realize that not only women are sexually assaulted, but both men and women are at risk. This is undoubtedly a positive result of promoting women’s rights and social progress.

4.2. Negative Effects: Framing and Group Polarization

Although it can be said that the feminist movement in the social media era has achieved success in gaining attention, it is obvious that feminists have not achieved the results they want in gaining more recognition and support. Moreover, things seem to be moving in the opposite direction: the group polarization on gender issues is becoming more and more intense.

The online collective action platform provided by social media has indeed inspired the courage of feminists, but at the same time, it has also provided a strong framing capability for gender issues. ‘Framing’, as a communication term, refers to the process in which the audience defines a specific social and political issue through media sources. This definition process defines which issues are related to the given issue [14]. The framework can influence the public’s evaluation and judgment of controversial issues by providing a dominant perspective on a topic. It will highlight a certain aspect or content of the topic through the selective description and imply what factors the topic is related to, so as to drive people to explain and evaluate a topic or issue [15]. When using framing theory to analyze the feminist movement in the social media era, people will find that gender issues are just like a basket: in the view of some radical feminists, a lot of words, actions or systems can be put into it, and then get criticized for offending women.

This is particularly evident in terms of linguistic sexism. The previous chapter mentioned the difference between hostile sexism and benevolent sexism and pointed out that the latter is not necessarily malicious. For example, someone (male or female) may say ‘women should be educated and protected’ because he/she has been influenced by traditional concepts and gender stereotypes, and he/she is likely to express kind intentions of respecting women. However, when framing is

abused, the person who said this may be soon responded by ‘get out of here, you sexist’ on Twitter or Facebook.

According to the existing literature, although it seems that the majority of discrimination against women comes from men, sex itself is not the direct cause of sexism. Through a cross-cultural study on sexist attitudes, Kunst and other scholars found that individual sexist differences only partially overlap with sex, and the ideology of different dimensions is the direct cause of different sexism [16]. From this perspective, in order to gain support for gender equality, the strategy of feminists should be to unite people with similar positions, win the understanding of the centrists, and criticize and educate hostile sexists. However, on social media, many people choose to abuse the framework or even make undifferentiated attacks against the opposite sex, which will easily make those who are in the middle or benevolent sexism feel puzzled and wronged. When this emotion gradually accumulates and spreads to the point of outburst, it is easy to erupt—it must be emphasized here that this outburst is theoretically only at the individual level, but do not forget the anonymity and interactivity of social media, which is likely to turn this individual level psychological activity into anti-feminism and hostile sexism movement, thus causing group polarization in gender issues. As it can be seen on social media today, the number of statements supporting feminism is gradually increasing, but that is at the cost of the increase of hostile and even extreme sexism.

Geiselberger once commented that the changes in social structure caused by the actions of different classes have created a situation where people choose either ‘progressive neoliberalism’ or ‘reactionary populism’. The original two-dimensional division has disappeared, leaving us with only one or the other [17]. The past decade has seen the rapid development of gender issues in the social media era, but it also warns us to avoid falling into such a polarization trap: people either choose ‘progressive feminism’ or ‘reactionary anti-feminism’.

5. Conclusion

This paper introduced the manifestations and formation of traditional linguistic sexism in the English world, elaborated on the new characteristics of linguistic sexism in the era of social media, and analyzed the effects of social media on linguistic sexism and gender equity. In general, social media makes gender equality present two trends.

On the new characteristics, social media has reshaped linguistic sexism deeply in two ways: one is the anonymity of social media that has changed the traditional communication mechanism and incited hostile linguistic sexism; the other is social media’s openness and interactivity that has increased the risk of linguistic sexism as well as the quarrel over gender issues. On the prospect of gender equity in the era of social media, this paper concluded two effects: one is the promotion of gender equity awareness, and the other is the risk of group polarization of attitudes towards gender issues. Admittedly, given that this paper is focusing more on linguistic sexism against females, it to some extent underestimates the fetters imposed on males when linguistic sexism occurs. Nevertheless, this paper could still provide social scientists with worthwhile data and perspectives in future research, as it compiles developed theories concluded in previous achievements and puts forward its own insight.

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