



Sexist Language Reflected in Iranian EFL Students' Paragraph Writing

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Abstract: In many EFL classes, students are taught to write paragraphs when they are at intermediate or higher levels. However, the paragraphs written by the learners are not without sexist linguistic features. The existence of such features may stem from the dominance of male role in the areas of politics, education, economy, etc throughout the history of the world in general and the Middle East in particular. In this article, different linguistic features of EFL learners reflecting the sexist features of the text are investigated. To do so, a number of feminist views on language as well as a few principles of discourse analysis are considered. Finally the latent ideologies reflected in the learners' paragraphs are disclosed.

Key Words: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Ideology, Sexist Language.

1. Introduction

The idea of the relationship between language and cognition is not without history. In their hypotheses which later came to be known as linguistic relativity and linguistic determinism, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf proposed that the differences in the structures of different languages are in line with nonlinguistic cognitive differences. In other words, a person's cognition and world view can be highly influenced by the linguistic structures used by that person. Nevertheless, the strong version of the hypotheses has been disproved.

With the eclipse of the idea of linguistic relativity-determinism, researchers tend to favor the belief that language and cognition are relatively independent but related. All languages of the world consist of a set of grammatical rules and features including phonological, morphological, and syntactic rules used for communication. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the linguistic rules and features are always used to create utterances that reflect the realization of some known or expected realities in the world. As an example, we can see that a sentence like "My father is a homemaker" or "My father is doing the housework" may not meet the expected reality of the one who decodes the sentence. This is to say that the process of understanding utterances does not merely depend on decoding the grammatical features; it also relies heavily on ideological knowledge, shared understanding, and common knowledge.

Goddard and Patterson (2001) maintained that new ways of thinking are obtained through the acquisition of a language. The idea suggests that the processes of encoding and decoding linguistic data are not only linguistic but also ideological, social, and cultural. Similarly, Wood (2005) pointed out that a person's cognitive data are organized by means of language and a person's cultural views are expressed through language.

Learners of English as a foreign language tend to compose paragraphs based on their culturally-constructed sexist views. According to M. S. Haque and M.H Khan (2004), the bias may not be noticed due to the fact that the learners are accustomed to such highly conventionalized views, so readers and writers belonging to the same cultural community may take the texts for granted without questioning them. Haque and Khan (2004), then, went on to indicate the fact that the linguistic data which reflect the viewpoints of the encoder belong to a certain cultural community is influenced by those who dominate the community. The process, whereby the hegemonic power of the dominant individuals is conventionalized in

a society in such a way that it becomes the accepted norm of the society is called "order of hegemony."

On the other hand Essed (1991) has pointed out that the ideology of the dominant group could be shown in the individuals' routine actions including their language use in a not very abusive manner and thus may be taken for granted in the same way as forms of racism and sexism were in their lives. Furthermore, Spender (1980) referred to a phenomenon which is called "language trap", in which "the dominant group in this case the - in this case males- who have created the world, invented the categories, constructed sexism, and developed a language trap which is in their interest." (p. 142)

Because of the relatively high amount of time spent in their own cultural community, EFL learners are expected to be the recipients of values, ideas, and knowledge through communication with whom they believe as authoritative and reliable sources of information; thus the present study aims at pinpointing the sexist language forms and features found in EFL students exposed in Iranian culture.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Sexist language

Sexist language refers to the representation of gender, especially male, in a language. The examples of sexist language are the use of masculine pronouns such as *he* and *him* to include both genders, the existence of words like *man* to refer to human-beings, and such job titles as policeman, and mailman to name a few. Moreover, the existence of two feminine titles *Miss* and *Mrs.* as opposed to the masculine title *Mr.* are considered as an instance of sexist language by many feminist reformers because the women are not defined in their own right, but in terms of their relationship to a man.

In his research, Verdell (1985) investigated the way different features of the English language are used for sexual discrimination ranging from the use of pronouns to the description of women based on their looks rather than their achievements. Moreover, Lakoff (1987) maintains that women experience discrimination not only in how they learn to use language, but also in how their language behaves toward them. In most languages female words are derogatorily used to treat women as weak, fragile, immature, and vulnerable. As Sheldon (1990, p. 4) has put it, "our language reflects sexist, male-centered attitudes that perpetuate trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience." This in turn will lead to the subordination women in action as well as at the level of language. In his book *The Feminist Critique of Language*, Cameron (1990) maintained that "sexism is not merely reflected, but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters" (p.14).

However, there is not a unanimous view between feminist reformers as to what is sexist language defined and how it should be treated, yet it was suggested that the linguistic innovations be developed to substitute the linguistic features of sexism. For example, it was suggested that the generic use of such masculine pronouns as "he", "him" and "his" used to include female individuals should be avoided, and the pronouns should be replaced by "they" or "he/she". Likewise, it has been recommended that words denoting sexual bias be replaced by more neutral ones. For instance, words like "chairman/chairwoman" or "policeman/policewoman" ought to be replaced by their sexually neutral counterparts (i.e. "chairperson" and "police officer" respectively).

On the other hand, other feminist reformers have been critical of the above-mentioned context-free approach thus supporting a more fluid, context-sensitive approach to treating the meanings of the sexist features of language. As Cameron (1992) said, "we cannot simply change a word's meaning in community by *fiat*"(1992, p. 110). In line with this approach, Speer and Potter (2000, 2002) have supported the notion that some apparently derogatory words can in fact carry non-derogatory, neutral, or even benevolent meanings under certain circumstances and in certain contexts.

Finally, some discourse analysts, while not denying the context-dependency of the meanings of linguistic features, tend to favor "Linguistic relativity." The proponents of this approach maintain that the sexist meanings are not created by words or individuals but in the social and political contexts in which the language is used. Therefore, the meaning is a matter not only of individual but of social relations embedded in political structures (McConnell-Ginet, 1998). From this

point of views the efforts of feminist reformers of language will sometime fail because "terms initially introduced to be non-sexist and neutral may lose their neutrality in the mouths of a sexist speech community and/or culture" (Ehrlich & King, 1994, p. 59).

2.2. Ideology

The term ideology is relevant to reality or the interpretation and reconstruction of reality from a certain point of view. Thus, one may expect conflicts between subjective and objective realities. Subjective reality means certain people's beliefs while objective reality refers to the definition of reality from a neutral point of view. This disagreement might bring about a further conflict if subjective reality is taken to mean objective reality. Bucholtz (2003) believed that ideology means the idea that a social groups takes for granted so much that it is seldom questioned, which is even used as a guide for routine practices.

On the other hand, Fairclough (1992) has defined ideology as the definition of reality including the physical world, social relations, and social identities, which is constructed into different facets of forms and meanings of discursive practices, and which leads to producing, interpreting, and trans-forming the relations of domination. He also said "conventions are routinely drawn upon in discourse embody ideological assumptions which come to be taken as mere 'common sense' and which contribute to sustaining existing power relations." Ideologies which come to be ritualized and accustomed end up being the foundation of background knowledge which will be tapped into at the suitable time and place. Fairclough also used the term memory's resources (MR) to refer to the display of knowledge drawn upon in an interactional exchange. Fairclough stated that this is knowledge "which people have in their heads and draw when they produce or interpret texts including their knowledge of language, representation of the natural and social worlds they inhabit values, beliefs, assumptions and so on" (p. 24). Moreover, Gee (1999) believed "when we speak or write we always take a particular perspective on what the world in like."

In all levels of language, the ideological beliefs and knowledge can be observed including lexical, morphological, and syntactic levels. In other words, linguistic choices at all linguistic levels are represented by ideological assumptions. As a result, it is expected that the students' paragraph writing may reflect the common ideological belief about women as subordinate to men.

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Discourse is the extension of grammar beyond the sentence level, and it reflects importance of the context over structure (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). It deals with language organization beyond the level of sentence and states that meaning is negotiated through interaction. Discourse competence is therefore, the ability to link sentences in stretches of discourse and to make "a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances" (Brown, 2001, p. 380). There has been a need to research linguistic areas in which the issues of the power relations and the discriminations based on race, gender, and social class are analyzed in order to resolve such issues. As Van Dijk (2001) mentioned, within the area of discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis has the most political stance because of its viewpoints about social discrimination.

Wodak (2001) believed that Critical Discourse Analysis attempts to withstand inequalities "as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized, and so on by language use." On the other hand, Fowler (1991) refers to CDA as an attempt to uncover the ideological beliefs which are latent and invisible due to the habitualization of language use. Also, Mills (2004) defined CDA as the studies of "the impact of systematic choices of particular language items or grammatical construction within a text."

It could, therefore, be concluded that doing research on how women are stereotyped in society also entails investigating the power relations between men and women, and as Van Dijk (2003) said, in CDA social power is represented as control. Thus, it is supposed that those who enjoy power try to control those who don't. This kind of power is latent inside the texts and utterances that habitualize stereotyping, which in turn contributes to the formation of common sense.

This common sense causes the individual to receive the linguistic data containing discriminatory overtones as if they were neutral. By the same token, Fairclough (2001) recommends that "critical consciousness" is what the CDA researchers need to be after in such a way that those subjected to inequality and discrimination will do something about recreating and reconstructing the environment.

2.4. Related studies

Concerning the issue of language and gender as well as the effects on sexist bias in texts, a number of research studies were conducted. For example, Tahriri and Moradpour (2014) investigated the *Top Notch Series* regarding the manifestation of gender using a CDA model. To achieve their research objective, they studied three major features of gender representation using Fairclough's (2001) model, namely relations, positions, and content. It was shown that the two genders, male and female, were equally manifested throughout the series. The results also revealed capitalism was the ideology used in gender representation. Similarly, Keshavarz and Malek (2009) conducted a study on gender representation and ILI (Iran Language Institute) and *True to Life* course books considering the issues of social relations, subject positions, and contents. The results of the study suggested that the two series of course books included equal gender status among the participants. The results also indicated that the major themes covered in the two groups of course books were friends, occupational, and commercial positions. Moreover, Stockdale (2006) analyzed *Impact Values* to evaluate gender representation in the series. To do so, the issues pertaining to gender bias were taken into consideration including visibility, firstness, nouns and pronouns in addition to discourse roles. The findings indicated a significant bias in favor of males. Finally, Amerian and Esmaeeli attempted to find gender representation in *American Headway Student Textbooks* in relation to eight factors: female and male's characters, female and male's social roles, female and male's domestic roles, female and male's semantic roles, female and male's titles, female and male's appearance, masculine generic construction, and activities females and males are engaged in, and the pictorial representation of the two genders. It was explored that the textbooks consists of two kinds of sexism : overt sexism and covert sexism with the overt sexism being defined as the obvious discrimination against females, and the covert one being the instrumental use of females for advertising and selling a product. Like Tahriri and Moradpour (2014), it was concluded that the latent ideology behind the series is capitalism economy.

2.5. Research question

Regarding the research topic, the following research question was raised: What are the ways sexist language could be reflected in Iranian EFL students' paragraph writing?

3. Methodology

In an attempt to explore the sexist bias, a number of paragraphs were selected to be included in the study. The paragraphs were used as the sources for analysis, and were written by intermediate students who were learning English in Islamic Azad University of Qazvin. The paragraphs were selected and analyzed with regard to certain aspects of sexist bias. The aspects selected for the purpose of analysis were the imbalance in power distribution, and the obscurity of women roles. In order to perform a linguistic analysis, a selection of the views adopted by feminists, along with some principles of Critical Discourse Analysis, was utilized. The views and principles were then used to reveal the latent ideologies of the text.

4. Result and Analysis

4.1. The imbalance in power distribution

Needless to say, the linguistic features used by a language user, as well as the array of those linguistic features, reflect the language user's ideological worldview. Such a view can be easily seen in students' paragraph writing in which the females are portrayed as helpless, subordinate beings while the men are described as more powerful. For example, the following excerpt from a paragraph composed by one of the students shows the view, according to which females are expected to possess the so-called pink-collar jobs while men are supposed to have such dominant positions as managerial

jobs:

"...for example, a manager should treat his secretary with respect, specially (*sic*) when he is talking to her in front of the clients..."

Here the use of "he" and "his" to refer to the manager and "her" to refer to the secretary shows the conscious or unconscious image of women as subjected to the male dominance needing good behavior on the part of the male manager.

On the other hand, some students have treated women as object-like creatures manipulated by men. To clarify the point, the following selection written by a student wanting to illustrate how a good manager should treat his subordinates could be considered:

".... for example, my friend Amir who got a wife two years ago has a happy life now because he does not let his wife to feel lonely by treating his wife and his mother equally..."

In this example, there are some points to be considered: first of all, the use of "got a wife" instead of "got married", which might have been the literal translation of the Persian equivalent [zæn gereftæn= to get a wife] illustrates the view that a woman is something to be gotten like inanimate objects. On the other hand, in the statement "he does not let his wife feel lonely", the use of "let" which is normally utilized to give permission clearly conveys the assumption that the husband is in the position to permit his wife to do or feel something. The view presupposing inequality in power of male and female individuals can also be noticed in the phrase saying "by treating his wife and mother equally", yet there is another issue to be considered in this seemingly simple phrase. The issue is going to be discussed in the following part.

4.2. The obscurity of women roles

One of the basic integral components of critical discourse analysis of texts is to investigate the lack of equal distribution of power between the two genders. Sometimes linguistic features are used to conceal women from the scene. In the example mentioned above, it is supposed that it is men who are expected to treat their mothers and wives equally thus assuming a passive role on the wives' and mothers' role. Furthermore, the statement "...my friend Amir who got a wife two years ago has a happy life now" presupposed the husband's happy life without any indication of the wife's life after marriage. As a result, the wife's contribution and shared role are totally ignored.

As a further example, the following statement chosen from another student-made paragraph could be considered:

"A good manager should act like a good father of a family: he should be a leader who cares about his subordinates like the father of a family"

In this example, the choice of the noun "father", the possessive adjective "his" as well as the subjective pronoun "he" shows the writer's latent view that a father, and not a mother of a family, is the leader of the family. Similarly, the comment given by the student indicates the assumption that the mother, in addition to other members of a family is the subordinate member of the family. It has to be mentioned that this view presupposes the hierarchical structure of a family. Further, the absence of any noun or pronoun to refer to the female member of the family, especially the mother could be regarded as another piece of evidence of the conscious or unconscious attempt, on the part of the writer, to obscure the female role.

Finally, the issue of the obscurity of the female roles can also be witnessed by comparing a woman with lack of achievement with a seemingly successful man, and underestimating a woman's accomplishment as a result. This can be seen in the following statement written by a learner:

"A good manager should be hardworking and should not just give orders to others. For example, not only my father makes decisions (*sic*) for the family, he is also the breadwinner providing the family with money, food, clothing, etc. while my mother does such household chores as cleaning, washing, cooking and so on."

In the above example, focusing on a man achievement is implied. Nevertheless, the order of the statements about the male and the female roles also suggests that the greater accomplishment is achieved by the male parent. Moreover, the utilization of the ideas of "providing the family with money, food, clothing, etc" as opposed to doing "such household chores as cleaning, washing, cooking and so on." implies the male attempts in providing the necessary materials for the family while the woman merely uses the materials for doing the housework.

It can be concluded that the sense of masculine achievement rather than feminine achievement is presupposed as the norm. This is reflected in a number of paragraphs composed by a number of Iranian learners of English as a Foreign Language. On the one hand, male people are considered as managers, breadwinners, and leaders, and on the other the female individuals are regarded to be secretaries and homemakers.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

In accordance with the research question, the ways in which sexist language and bias could be represented in Iranian EFL students' paragraph writing was investigated. To do so, it was attempted to find two aspects of sexist views in the paragraphs written by Iranian learners of English as a second language.

The sexist views observed in the Iranian EFL students' paragraph writing is, in fact, the product of conscious or unconscious stereotypical views about male and female genders. The linguistic features of sexism appearing in the learner-made paragraphs show the male dominant beliefs underlying the texts. In the present study, the existence of imbalance regarding the distribution of power between males and females has been revealed. Moreover, it was shown that the female role was made invisible by investigating the paragraphs composed by the EFL learners.

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