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“Linguistic Sexism and Gender Culture in Standard Average European Languages.”

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Abstract

The examination of gender in relation to language is an interdisciplinary endeavor that has been the subject of interest of linguists, sociologists, anthropologists, communication experts, psychologists, and scholars in other disciplines, especially after the 1960s, having as its starting point the feminist movements by the end of that decade. Since then, there has been an ongoing debate on whether language endorses sexism, or sexism contributes to the formation of a language. Both discourse and language reflect social realities governed by hierarchy and dominance and consequently reproduce or perpetuate the network of dominant gender biases and stereotypes.

This paper will focus on the way language functions in favor of dominant groups and on the means that it uses to convey those asymmetric social structures in terms of grammar, syntax, and semantics within the Standard Average European linguistic area. The secondary objective of the paper is to demonstrate the existence of the aforementioned elements in all of the languages in question, despite not being amongst their grouping criteria.

Keywords: linguistic sexism, gender bias, sociolinguistics, eurolinguistics, language reform

Summary (Greek)

Η μελέτη της γλώσσας σε συνάρτηση με το φύλο έχει αποτελέσει το επίκεντρο έρευνας πολλών επιστημονικών τομέων, όπως της γλωσσολογίας, της κοινωνιολογίας, της ψυχολογίας κ.α. Πρόκειται για ένα σχετικά σύγχρονο αντικείμενο, ορμώμενο από τα πρώτα φεμινιστικά κινήματα του 1960 και εξελισσόμενο παράλληλα με την έρευνα περί κοινωνικών ρόλων και ισότητας των φύλων. Καίριο ερώτημα από τότε έως και σήμερα αποτελεί το κατά πόσο η γλώσσα επηρεάζει τον τρόπο σκέψης και τις αντιλήψεις στα πλαίσια μια κοινωνίας ή εάν οι κοινωνικές δομές συντελούν στη διαμόρφωση της γλώσσας όπως την ξέρουμε. Σημείο τομής και στις δύο περιπτώσεις είναι ότι η γλώσσα και η κοινωνία είναι δύο αλληλένδετες έννοιες, που οι δομές της μίας αντικατοπτρίζονται στην άλλη.

Η παρούσα εργασία αποσκοπεί στην εξέταση των γλωσσικών στοιχείων που αναπαράγουν μια ιεραρχική σχέση και μεροληπτική τοποθέτηση υπέρ του ενός φύλου, εντός των πλαισίων της Standard Average European γλωσσικής κοινότητας. Μετά την ανάλυση αυτών των στοιχείων σε μορφολογικό, σημασιολογικό και συντακτικό επίπεδο, μελετάται η αποτελεσματικότητα λύσεων που έχουν προταθεί κατά καιρούς για την καταπολέμηση του γλωσσικού σεξισμού.

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1. Introduction

The term *linguistic sexism* refers to the existence of certain elements in a language that help expressing any sort of bias, inclination or prejudice for or against one sex on the other. Mostly, the bias is in favor of men. According to Graddol and Swann (1989), this discrimination is made on irrelevant grounds, while Atkinson (1993) defines linguistic sexism as not only the range of verbal practices of labeling and referring to women, but also as the language strategies in mixed-sex interaction that denigrate or suppress women as interactants. Moreover, the fact that sexism, in general, refers to attitudes or behaviors that depreciate one sex, according to Ivy and Backlund (1994), entails that linguistic sexism is the verbal communication that conveys those attitudes and behaviors. Consequently, declaring a word, sentence or structure as sexist means that it “creates, promotes, constitutes and exploits any irrelevant or impertinent marking of the distinction between the sexes” (Vetterling-Bruggin, 1981, as cited in Al Ramahi, 2013, p.187), or that it “unnecessarily differentiates between women and men or excludes, trivializes, or diminish either gender” (Parks & Robertson, 1998, p.233).

This dissertation will examine the phenomenon of sexism as a combination of linguistic features that reflect an imbalance in the way sexes are treated. Specifically, this examination appertains to the broader field of sociolinguistics, which is briefly defined in Chapter 2, while the field of application of the study, Standard Average European languages, is also examined in the same chapter, leading to a categorization of the languages in question, based on their gender division system. Chapter 3 aims to identify the causes of the aforementioned imbalance, attributing it to an androcentric world-view. Chapter 4 revolves around the portrayal of language as a reflection of society, as formulated in the ‘linguistic relativity’ hypothesis. Chapter 5 comprises the main body of the research, analyzing several indicators of sexism in morphological, phrasal, semantic

and syntactic level, and culminates in a quantitative analysis of occurrences of ‘male firstness’ in gendered groups across all languages in question. The last chapter concludes to the ongoing language reform as well as previous changes the language has undergone in order to avoid any sort of bias with regards to sex.

2. Theoretical Framework

The subject of the present work concerns the broader field of linguistics, borrowing much from contemporary sciences of gender studies. As a specific subject, the study of linguistic sexism has been a point of interest not only for linguists -especially in the area of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis-, but also for sociologists, and it often has political or even legal implications. So, in order to understand the content of the study, I thought it appropriate to refer to the broader field surrounding it.

2.1. Defining sociolinguistics

Over the years, many scholars have attempted to define exactly what sociolinguistics deal with, but one could argue that these definitions change, as does the notion of society over time. Hudson (1980) attempts to define sociolinguistics as “the study of language in relation to society” (p.105). Thus, the main field of interest is how language interacts with, or to what percentage it is affected by social factors as age, ethnicity, social class or gender for instance. Coulmas (2013) goes further by attributing the way we use specific functions of language in different social contexts to convey social meaning or aspects to our identity, while Trudgill (1974) correlates sociolinguistics with “language as a social and cultural phenomenon” (p.21). Despite being approximate and not exact, they all focus on understanding “who speaks what language to whom and when” (Fishman, 1965, p.67).

Gender research, as a sub-discipline of sociolinguistics that governs the present paper, concerns the documentation of empirical differences between women's and men's speech, the description of women's speech in particular as well as the identification of the role of language in creating and maintaining social inequality between women and men (Kendall & Tannen, 2001).

Tagliamonte (2006) makes a clear distinction between ‘*sociolinguistics*’ and ‘*sociology of language*’, that needs to be mentioned in the context of this paper, explaining that "sociolinguistics tends to put emphasis on language in social context, whereas the sociology of language emphasizes the social interpretation of language" (p.5).

2.2 Field of application

The linguistic field that this paper will focus on and from which I will draw examples is the Standard Average European (abbreviated SAE) linguistic area, hence "a geographical region containing a group of three or more languages that share some structural features as a result of contact rather than a result of accident or inheritance from a common ancestor" (Thomason, 2001, p.99), as proposed by Whorf (1941). According to this theory, SAE languages comprise several linguistic branches that all present the same grammatical or syntactical features, including the Romance, Germanic and Slavo-Baltic branches (Haspelmath, 2001). Despite those secondary branches being universally accepted by linguists worldwide, it was only toward the end of the 20th century that SAE area was picked up on by scholars, as they gained insight in the grammatical properties of the languages of the rest of the world and realized the peculiarity of the European linguistic core in the global context, which justifies Dahl’s definition of SAE as an ‘exotic language’ (Dahl, 1990).

Haspelmath compiles an extensive list of 35 morphosyntactic characteristics which he addresses as ‘*Europeanisms*’ or ‘*euroversals*’¹, that include the ‘*have*’-perfect, definite and indefinite articles, relative clauses with relative pronouns, particles in comparative constructions etc. (Haspelmath, 2001). However, none of the characteristics that will be

¹ By analogy to “linguistic universals”, as presented thoroughly through Chomsky’s theory on Universal Grammar.

analyzed in the second chapter of the paper as indicators of linguistic sexism are classified as unifying elements under this category.

Yet, even amongst those languages, some factors could affect or help interpret the results of this study. Thus, considering Stahlberg, Braun, Irmén and Szczesny's (2007) proposal of distinction between three language types, -genderless², natural gender and grammatical gender languages- we could organize SAE as presented in [Table 1](#). In natural gender languages (e.g. English, Scandinavian language) there is “no grammatical marking of sex, such that most nouns and their dependent linguistic forms as articles, adjectives and pronouns can be used to refer to both males and females, and personal pronouns are the major resource of expressing gender.” (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017, p.2). In grammatical gender languages (e.g. Greek, French, German etc.), nouns are assigned feminine, masculine, common or neutral, and the dependent parts of speech carry grammatical agreement to the gender or the corresponding noun.

Due to time restrictions, lack of resources or insight to specific languages, the languages that will be analyzed for the sake of this dissertation are English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Lithuanian and Greek, so as to represent all secondary branches³ and gender division systems.

² There is no such case of a language that has neither grammatical gender for nouns nor for personal pronouns (e.g. Turkish, Finnish) within SAE languages.

³ Albanian and Hungarian do not belong to a secondary branch but were not chosen due to very small corpus.

	Natural gender languages	Grammatical gender languages		
		Masculine, Feminine & Neuter	Masculine & Feminine	Common & Neuter
Germanic Languages	Afrikaans			
				Danish
				Dutch
	English			
		Faroese		
				Frisian
		German		
		Icelandic		
		Limburgish		
		Low German		
				Norwegian
			Scots	
				Swedish
	Yiddish			
Romance Languages			Catalan*	
			French	
			Italian*	
			Occitan	
			Portuguese*	
		Romanian		
			Sicilian	
			Spanish*	
Balto-Slavic Languages		Belarusian		
		Bulgarian		
		Czech		
			Latvian	
			Lithuanian*	
		Macedonian		
		Polish		
		Serbo-Croatian		
		Slovak		
		Slovene		
		Sorbian		
		Russian		
		Ukrainian		
			Albanian	
		Greek		
	Hungarian			

Table 1. Classification of SAE languages based on their gender division system.

NOTE: Languages marked with an asterisk (*) used to also have a neutral gender that disappeared in the process of language formation and was incorporated in either the feminine or the masculine gender.

3. The origin of sexism in language

Although there has been a lot of research on linguistic structures, aiming to identify the causes of sexism in language, most of them tend to attribute its development to an androcentric world view, neglecting the "social and semiotic processes involved in the historical production and reproduction of this kind of linguistic sexism" (Coady, 2018, p.271). The semiotic processes of iconization, fractal recursivity, and erasure, as proposed by Irvine & Gal (2000), appear to play a significant role in the standardization and the dissemination of the features that will be analyzed in the next chapter. More specifically, iconization is defined as "a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images with which they are linked" (p.37), fractal recursivity as "the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level, for instance, intra-group oppositions projecting outward onto intergroup relations, or vice versa" (p.37), while erasure is defined as "the process by which ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible" (p.37), which will be more apparent in [Chapter 5](#).

4. Language & Cognition

Many feminists have examined the representation of women in language and have argued that language encodes a culture's values, and in this way reflects sexist culture. Yet, as Cameron (1990) suggests, instead of simply portraying language as a reflection of society or as a determining factor in social change, it could rather be seen "as a carrier of ideas and assumptions which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional that we miss their significance" (p.14). On the same wavelength, Whorf lays out the principle of his theory on the relation of the language and thought, often referred to as 'linguistic relativity' or 'Sapir-Whorf hypothesis', on the following quotation:

"It was found that the background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas, but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity, for his analysis of impressions, for the synthesis of his mental stock in trade. Formulation of ideas is not an independent process, strictly rational in the old sense, but is part of a particular grammar, and differs, from slightly to greatly, between different grammars. We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds- and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds" (Whorf, 1956, p.212).

In order to further understand Whorf's association of the background linguistic system of each language as a shaper of ideas, it would be legitimate to first define the notion of relativity in general. According to Hudson (1996), the question of relativity revolves around "the extent that cultures (including languages) differ from one another" (p.87) and on whether they are all "cut to the same mold, reflecting a common underlying humanity" (p.87) or "differ arbitrarily and

unrestrictedly from one another, reflecting the fact that different people live in very different intellectual and physical worlds” (p.87).

Lastly, an interesting remark is being made by Ehrlich and King (1992), whose definition of language entails the element of dominance, stating it is "not a neutral and transparent means of representing social reality, but rather a codification of the perspective of the dominant classes" (p.152), and thus, in contemporary societies, the encoding of an androcentric worldview. Mauss (1923), also, defines language as "the means of expression of collective thought and not the adequate expression of that thought itself" (as cited in Bright, 1966, p.122).

Despite the wide dissemination of the hypothesis, it has often been challenged; many theorists propose a more modest form of the same concept, while some debunk the Whorfian question or label it as pseudoscience (e.g. Pullum, 1991). A more modest approach is proposed by Bloom and Keil, according to which, “the language we learn enables us to perform abstract inferences and helps us carve the external world into distinct categories” (2001, p.364). Slobin (1996) also proposes an influential version of linguistic determinism, suggesting that language affects cognition during the process of encoding our thoughts into words (as cited in Riemer, 2016, p.158), while Wolff and Holmes examine the way in which thought is affected by language after its use, claiming that “the long-term use of a language may direct habitual attention to specific properties of the world, even in nonlinguistic contexts” (2011, p.259). Even Whorf’s later writings tend to argue for the idea that “language can act as a meddler or spotlight” (Wolff & Holmes, 2011, p.261). Arguably the most ardent critic of the linguistic relativity hypothesis is Pinker (2007), whose study rejects Whorf’s claims and propose the theory of conceptual semantics, according to which “word senses are mentally represented as expressions in a richer and more abstract language of thought”(p.150).

Proving or disproving any of the aforementioned theories is yet to be determined, since there are diachronically many researchers arguing both for and against their validity. However, what is generally admitted and important for the present study is what lays in the basis of all those

theories; that language, either perceived as an individual concept or as an interconnected part of culture, interacts and is reflected in the cognitive function, as well as that thoughts have to be communicable to count as thoughts.

5. Indicators of sexism

5.1. Morphological features of sexism

5.1.a Affixion

The internal morphological structure and etymology of words with gendered forms designates a subordinate nature of females, as they are presented as the deviant and inferior group. That can be easily understood by the use of certain affixes used to designate a female form deriving from a male one. In all the gendered languages analyzed, the male form is perceived as the base, with a feminine affix being added. Even in English which does not have a general gender marking system, there are still a few pairs that the female form is differentiated from the male with the addition of an affix for instance in *prince/princess*, *hero/heroine*, *actor/actress* etc. Such an addition, despite being used less and less as described in [Chapter 6](#), according to Khan & Ahmad (2009) indicates the significance of the female-only as an addition to the male. The masculine form is, thus, the unmarked, and tacitly the main one.

What is interesting is the context of those words or the conditions of their usage, since they are mostly used as part of a standardized speech that demonstrates a slow rate of change or evolution. Specifically, across all languages, they are used in legal terminology, for titles of nobility and church dignitaries. Moreover, compounds are made based on the the masculine form, for example, *royaume_{masc}* (kingdom) comes from *roi_{masc}* (king) and not *reine_{fem}* (queen), the same way kingdom comes from king and not a queen.

[Table 2](#) summarizes all the affixes used in the SAE languages.

LANGUAGE	AFFIXES
English	-a, -ette, -ine, -ress, -rix, -she-
French	-e, -trice, -elle, -ette, -ine
Spanish	-a, -ista
Italian	-essa, -trice, -tora, -ista, -cida

German	-e, -tät, -ität, -ung
Dutch	-in, -ege/-egge, -es, -ster
Russian	-ка, -анка, -янка, --истка
Lithuanian	-a, -ė, -is
Greek	-ινα, -ισσα, -εσσα

Table 2 Affixes used for the derivation of feminine forms of nouns.

5.1.b Masculine Generics

As described previously, in natural gender languages (e.g. English) there is no grammatical marking for the majority of nouns, whereas in grammatical gender languages, every noun is assigned to a gender. In both cases, according to Silveira (1980), those languages reproduce the hidden yet consensual norm that the prototypical human being is male. That is easily depicted in masculine forms used as generic forms. In languages with grammatical gender, it is “common and accepted to use masculine nouns to refer to both men and women, or to persons whose gender is irrelevant or unknown” (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017, p.9). For instance, in Greek and Spanish, the masculine plural (e.g. οι δάσκαλοι_{masc}, los profesores_{masc}) is used to describe a sex-unspecified group of people (e.g. teachers). Based on Menegatti and Rubini’s exploration in Italian, this is even more likely to occur when the subjects in question are women in predominantly male, high-status professions, such as *chirurgo*_{masc} (surgeon) or primo ministro_{masc} (prime minister), which represent masculine forms used even when referring exclusively to women. Coady (2018) gives another example in French, where in a sentence like *un homme*_{masc} *et cinq milliards de femmes*_{fem} *sont morts*_{masc} (one man and five billion women died), despite the women clearly outnumbering the men, the past participle of the word die is in the masculine form (*morts*) and not in the feminine (*mortes*).

The importance of classifying the words under specific genders can be highlighted by Kovecses’s exploration on the categorizing of the world (2006), who claims that it’s a process that takes place unconsciously and that is a remarkably fast cognitive process.

In natural gender languages, this practice is reflected in the use of masculine pronouns as generics: while *she* and *her* are used exclusively for females, *he*, *his* and *him* can either be male-specific or express a generic form. Ng (2007), states that masculine generics would be accepted with no particular consequences if they represented males and females with equal likelihood. However, his experimental research demonstrates that “masculine generic does not depict women and men as equal human beings and it makes females invisible in people imagery and memory, thus failing to perform its generic assigned function” (as cited in Menegatti & Rubini, 2017, p.9). That is to say that masculine forms are in principle associated with males in people’s mental representations and behaviors, images and traits attributed to them.

5.1.c Naming

Family names, in most cases of the languages examined, are not gender-marked, and their sexist nature is mostly attributed to the fact that they are inherited from father to children and from husband to wife. However, in some cases, like in Greek and Russian, both men and women use a family name that is gender-specific. Men's family names are mainly in nominal case, e.g. Παπαδόπουλος_{masc}, while for women, as Pavlidou (2006, p.39) points out, family names are indirectly labeled, since they are morphologically labeled for the male and not for the female. The important element in the case of Greek, is that these last names are in the genitive case, indicating a kind of possession. Therefore, the identity of the woman is linked to that of her father, and till quite recently, after her marriage, her dependence was transferred to her husband and this was reflected in the change of her surname (Kondyli & Archakis, 2004). On the other hand, Pavlidou (2006) argues that the use of general possessive may underestimate feminine existence, but at least it makes females visible, since their own last name is distinct from that of men.

5.2. Sexism at a phrasal level

5.2.a Metaphors

The notion of gender in sociocultural context and the implication it has on the metaphors constructed around it has attracted the attention of cognitive scholars during the last decades. Maestre & Lopez Maestre (2015) claim that metaphors contribute to the construction of a world view that “shapes or reinforces those conceptions and views about femininity and masculinity that are considered appropriate, decent, normal and commonsense compared with those that are not” (p.92). Moreover, those conceptions are often the result of an androcentric moral code and suppositions deeply rooted in patriarchal societies, that constantly privilege men and always position women in a lower rank. That can take many forms, as the dehumanization of women, their parallelization with something edible or with their representation within a dipole of prey and hunter. Such an exercise of power, values and entitlements, inequities and privileges are, according to Fairclough (1989), perpetuated through the habitualization, and result to the acceptance of that gendered conditions of existence as natural.

Conceptual metaphors are particularly interesting as cognitive processes, since they also contribute to the transmission of ideologies of gender in a covert, indirect way, which according to Swim & Cohen (1997) is a form of subtle sexism. As mentioned previously, many metaphors entail the association of women with food, as in Spanish *miel* (honey), *pastel* (pie), *melocotón* (peach), in which “desire is hunger and the object of lust is food” (Lakoff, 1987). Furthermore, in many cases women are compared or parallelized to animals, as in the French proverbs *Des femmes et des chevaux il n’y en a point sans défaut* (Women and horses, there isn’t one without faults), *Belle femme, mauvaise tête, bonne mule, mauvaise bête* (Pretty woman, bad head, good mule, bad animal) and *A toute heure chien pisse et femme pleure* (A dog pees and a woman cries all the time). According to Whaley & Antonelli (1983) this reflection of semantic deprecation based on animal imagery expresses “domestication, dominance, property status,

sexual access and the thrill of the hunt” (p.220) depending on the animal and the context, while Tipler & Ruscher (2019) claim that , the focus of female animalizing metaphors is the legitimacy of men’s dominance over women.

5.2.b Proverbs

Given the nature of proverbs as short well-known phrases or sentences, which are usually the reflection of life and also consist a part of language and “a kind of idiom which spread among the folks with popular image and rich significance” (Nakhavaly & Sharifi, 2013, p.195), it comes as no surprise that they are often examined when it comes to gender inequality research. Proverb is a linguistic part that is perceived as one of the most prevalent forms of folk literature. As Shi & Zhang (2017) declare, they not only reflect popular wisdom like social customs and psychological ideas, but also social phenomena, including sexism. They also adduce the case of the Old Testament as the root of sexism, considering Adam’s belief of the woman as “bone of his bones, and flesh of his flesh” is perpetuated in the later social life, in which the male-dominated society remains the mainstream of social development.

Mieder & Dundes (1994) suggest that the essence and the conception of proverbs is based on ‘the wisdom of many’, which highlights the social importance of that particular linguistic feature, while Ray (1989) explains that proverbs are words of men, the husband and the patriarchy. Thus, the sexist element that lies within those proverbs is mostly apparent in those revolving around the appearance of a female, as in the Russian proverb “*Волос длинный а ум короткий*” (long hair, but short wits) that addresses the female inwardness in relation with their physical aspect.

5.3. Sexism at semantic level

The discussion of the asymmetry in the social structure as reproduced in the context and the structure of a language has created the conditions of a more specific discussion on a particular feature of this domination: the association of the masculine with the practical and sensible and the feminine with the irrational.

Hekman (1994), trying to identify the cause of the problem, states that reason and rationality have been defined in exclusively masculine terms since Plato and more particularly since the Enlightenment, with an indicative example being the 'Man of Reason', which is gendered but not generic. Another way that language can demonstrate a bias with regards to gender are words for women that have negative connotations, "even when corresponding terms for men designate the same state or condition" (Romaine, 2000, p.107). Such negative overtones reflect the importance of social expectations about age, marriage, status, sexuality and so on and are usually applied on female terms rather than their male counterparts by certain patterns of collocations.

Collocations pass on societal meanings and conventional ideas that have progressively built up. Romaine (1999) stresses the importance of the context of words by commenting on the ambiguity of English language, which is according to her the reason why its interpretation depends a lot on its context, a factor far more important than gender. In fact, most gender differences in language are attributed to context, since the same words can be defined differently based on the particular context.

More specifically, words for females have negative connotations, despite that not being the case for males. An often-quoted example in English is the pair of *spinster* and *bachelor*, where, despite both words designating unmarried adults, only the female term has a negative connotation, being perceived as rejected, undesirable and beyond the expected age of marriage. So, it becomes clear that social expectations and stereotypes are reflected in this imbalance. On the same wavelength, given that the meanings of words are heavily relied on patterns of

collocations, that convey meanings shaped over time. In French, characterizing a man as *professional*_{masc} is a compliment, while saying that a woman is *professionnelle*_{fem} could mean that she is a prostitute. Thus, the problem is not detected in words themselves, but rather in their use within a sentence. Similarly, expectations on social roles are perpetuated on the way language is structured. For instance, referring to a woman *mothering* her children shifts focus on her nurturing role, but saying that a man fathered a child only draws attention to his biological role in the conception. Moreover, across all languages, there are several collocations with *mother* appointing the deviance of the stereotypical notion of a house-wife mother. Terms like *single mother*, *unwed mother*, *surrogate mother*, *birth mother* linguistically signal some sort of divergence from the prototype of a mother, while on the same hand, there is not masculine counterpart for the same term.

However, according to Ehrlich and King (1992), semantic derogation of women does not only refer to terms characterizing them, but also to the names that a language attaches to activities and events and especially those relating to sex and sexuality. Similarly, Cameron (1992) interprets terms as “penetration, lay, screw, fuck” as a codification of an androcentric worldview, since “penetration from a female perspective would be more appropriately encoded as enclosure, surrounding or engulfing” (as cited in Ehrlich, 2001, p.36). Consequently, language’s role is not to label language in a transparent way, but rather shape or construct our notions of reality.

On a closer examination, compound nouns are also indicative of a system that criticizes female presence, while praising male traits. This semantic disproportion is apparent in many cases of compound nouns in Greek, where female participation in activities is defined as the ‘exception’ of a rule usually defined by male activities, as in *γυναικοκαβγάς* (catfight, fight among women) or in *γυναικοδουλειά* (labor that befits a woman). On the other hand, words deriving from or compound with *man* are not marked or stigmatized accordingly, but they are rather used to

attribute characteristics of bravery, as in *ανδραγάθημα* (heroic achievement of a difficult goal that requires bravery).

Lastly, another important element that seems to affect the asymmetry reproduced by the semantic function of language, seems to be the shortage of terms to describe particular activities or persons. For instance, in none of the renowned dictionaries of modern Greek exists a feminine counterpart for the word *sexist* (e.g. *σεξίστρια* _{fem}), or a masculine one for the word *feminist* (e.g. *φεμινιστής* _{masc}). Such a gap implies the absence of those signifiers and perpetuates the difficulty of the creation of the signified.

5.4. Sexism at syntactic level

The most prominent instance of gender bias with regards to syntax is the “male firstness”, hence the ordering of gendered words and the placement of masculine terms before feminine ones.

5.4.1. Male firstness

According to Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003), the debate about male firstness goes back to the 16th century, when it was proclaimed that males should be mentioned before females, in the sake of a natural order and an evaluative discrimination. This ordering, that according to Pillay & Maistry (2017) “reflects a widespread perception of male supremacy” (p.491), has been conventionalized and accepted until quite recently.

Even though most formatting and style guides (e.g. APA) explicitly denounce the generic masculines that were previously analyzed, as a form of gender-exclusive bias, they do not indicate male firstness in their publication manuals, because they lack “empirical evidence of its existence in academic writing” according to Willis and Jozkowski (2018, p. 139), or because of the practical difficulty to prove any sort of bias in the choice of order between two words. However, the notion of natural order has been denounced by several theorists (Butler, 1990;

Foucault, 1991; Sugino, 1998) who claim that discourse reflects the cultural, political and ideological values of different social groups. Thus, forms that are imposed by the groups in power tend to be valorized and accepted as the norm.

Respectively, though various studies have been conducted to analyze the tendency to use a single order of presentation for all gendered pairs, in favor of one (Willis & Jozkowski, 2018; Amare, 2017; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Porreca, 1984), all of which focused on language, register or genre-specific cases. The following research aims to offer some translingual insight on the way SAE languages structure speech with regards to gendered pairs.

5.4.1.a. Sample

The corpora selected for the research were accessed through the ELEXIS project, funded by the H2020 EU Research Programme, aiming to “set and provide a European lexicographic infrastructure and foster research and cooperation in lexicography and natural language processing”. Given that the focus of the paper is on SAE languages, the corpora were selected to correspond to the branches included in this linguistic family. Thus, web corpora of English, French, Spanish, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Lithuanian and Greek were gathered. Respectively, all the corpora appertain to the same genre, ensuring the cohesion and optimizing the accuracy of the comparative results. While devising the research, I decided to make a clear distinction between the gendered pairs used as direct salutations or vocative addresses and the pairs that emerge as unfeigned, integral part of the text, since the former tends to be a standardized instance of speech or even part of a protocol, when according to Foucault (1966), “woman is predominant because of her of her relationship with a man or because of her outward appearance”.

5.4.1.b. Procedure

For the identification and the numeration of the order of gender, several concordance searches were conducted in the aforementioned corpora via the Sketch Engine platform. A pilot assessment by Willis & Jozkowski (2018) revealed that the most common gendered pairs in contemporary articles are ‘man and woman’, ‘male and female’, and ‘women and men’ in that order. Taking into account Key’s (1975) exploration on ‘Status and Standard/Nonstandard language’, the pairs of ‘lady and gentleman’ and ‘girl and boy’ were also, included as part of the research. The engine provided an accurate number of instances for each pair in every corpus, including both singular and plural forms and regardless of the grammatical case (in the languages that it was applicable). Then, a simple coding manual was used to express those instances in the percentage of masculine term used first, as well as in a female-to-male ratio.

5.4.1.c. Results

In total, 2.241.525 gendered pairs are collected across all nine corpora, 243.497 of which pertain to salutations and vocative addresses, as presented in Table 3.

Languages examined	Size of corpus	Gendered pairs per corpus	Masculine terms first	“Female first”-to-“Male first” ratio
Greek	1.671.692.845			
vocative address		21.287	893 (4,2%)	1:0,04
other		5.363	4529 (85,6%)	1:5,43
English	15.703.895.409			
vocative address		23.120	521 (2,3%)	1:0,02
other		606.574	556.458 (91,7%)	1:5,34
French	5.752.261.039			
vocative address		10.465	422 (4,1%)	1:0,04
other		60.714	47.013 (77,4%)	1:3,43
Spanish	17.553.075.259			
vocative address		8.910	1.023 (11,48%)	1:0,12
other		304.024	233.629 (76,8%)	1:3,31
Italian	4.989.729.171			
vocative address		5.109	1396 (27,3%)	1:0,36
other		118.526	95.367 (80,45%)	1:4,11
German	16.526.335.416			
vocative address		179.372	7.969 (4,4%)	1:0,04
other		558.427	324.571 (58,1%)	1:1,38
Dutch	2.253.777.579			
vocative address		14.491	2.116 (14,6%)	1:0,17
other		60.538	52.438 (86,61%)	1:6,47

Russian	14.553.856.113			
vocative address		3.789	210 (5,54%)	1:0,05
other		256.612	218.939 (85,3%)	1:5,81
Lithuanian	778.151.979			
vocative address		1.364	524 (38,4%)	1:0,62
other		2.840	2.474 (87,1%)	1:6,75

Table 3. Gendered pairs examined, categorized by language.

Firstly, analyzing the instances of vocative addresses, all of the languages examined present the same pattern; the majority of pairs appears to have female first. Lithuanian, which was selected as a representative of Baltic languages, is an interesting case since it has the highest male-first to female-first ratio, with the female-first terms still outnumbering the others.

Many attribute this pattern to the phonetic and metrical properties of "ladies and gentlemen" versus "gentlemen and ladies", for example. However, that could not be the case in all of the languages examined. The reason seems to be more of a matter of gender politics, politeness and a standardized way to address both genders as some sort of protocol. This asymmetry is vividly demonstrated in the following figure.

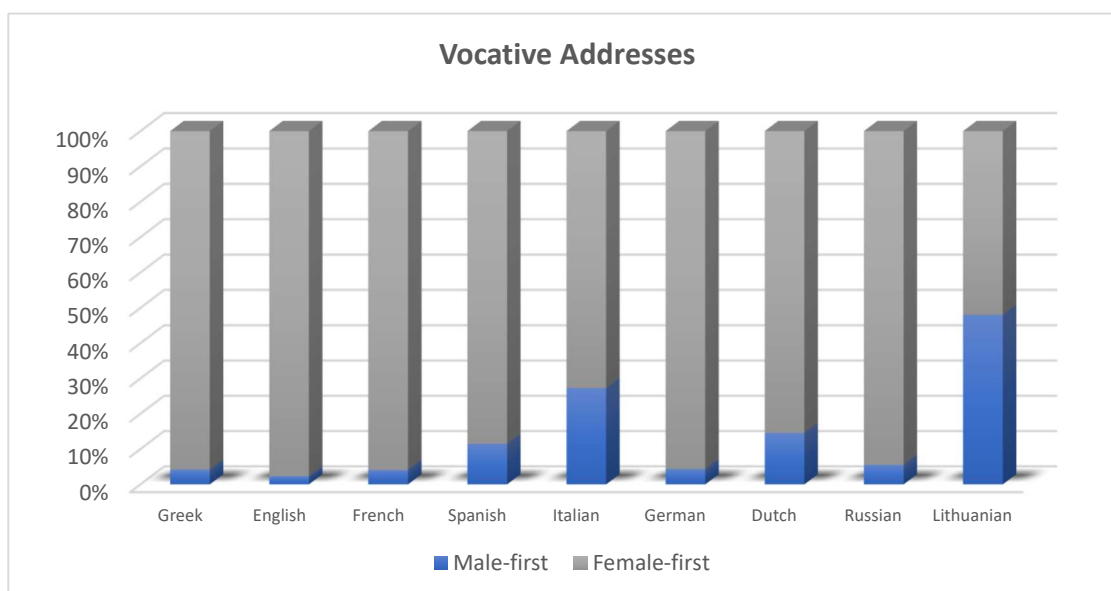


Figure 1. Analogy of the 'male-first' to 'female first' gendered pairs that are used as vocative addresses, categorized by language.

Moving on to the non-vocative gender pairs, it can be noted that there is again a common pattern among all languages, but this time it's the other way around. In all languages, male is always presented first, with the lowest percentage noted in German.

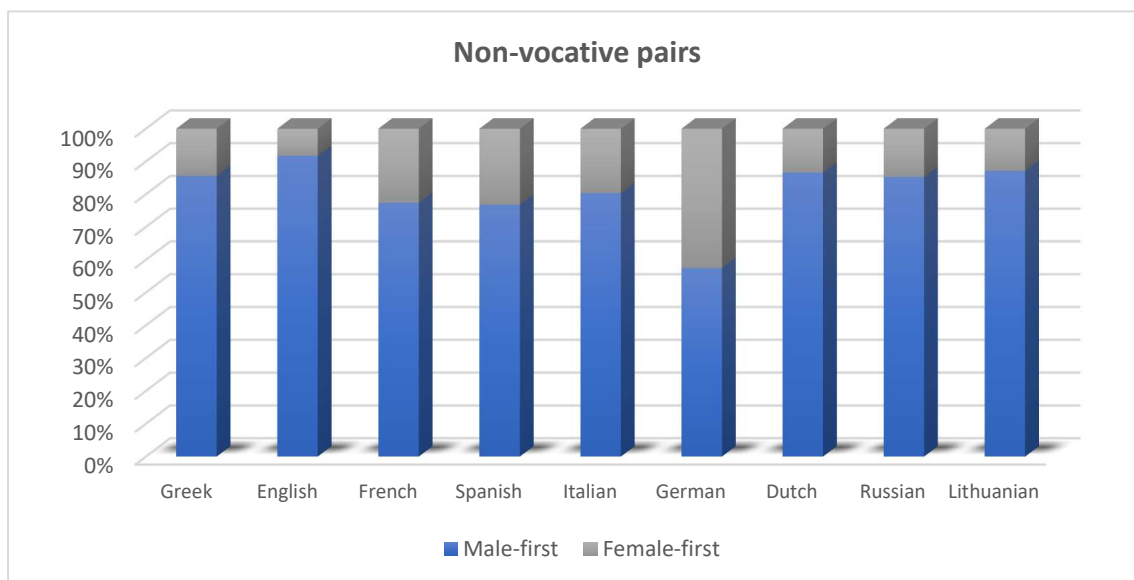


Figure 2. Analogy of the 'male-first' to 'female first' gendered pairs not used as direct salutations or vocative addresses, categorized by language.

Comparing those charts, it is, also, noticed that there is a greater fluctuation among Germanic language (English, Dutch, German) than Romance languages, that tend to be more consistent. That could be a case of different social occurrences, or because of the fact that among Germanic languages, some have distinct grammatical genders, while others are either gender-neutral (English) or the distinction between masculine and feminine has largely disappeared (Dutch). Another, secondary conclusion that could be drawn from those results is that despite male firstness not being one of the common features that classify those languages in the SAE family, it does appear to be another similarity among all of them.

6. Linguistic change & Language Reform

Contending for the necessity of an unbiased and non-sexist language reform, many feminist theorists have presumed that language is not a transparent means of representing social realities, but rather as a vision of reality that is presented through the lens of dominant classes (Gal, 1991). So, extrapolating from that observation, we could say that in order for a non-sexist vocabulary to be implemented, it should be adopted by the wider, mainstream speech community. Labov (1972) makes a similar observation claiming that the spread of such linguistic innovations is determined by the status of the social sub-group leading the change. He also states that women initiate linguistic change, but Milroy (1989) says that the evidence is confusing and conflicting. Problems in formulating an adequate generalization usually arise as a result of other factors, such as whether the change is in the direction of a prestige norm, or the nature of the motivating source of the change, which may be complex.

Crystal (2002), however, comments on the ongoing linguistic change in English language which he attributes to the current awareness of the way in which language identifies social attitudes towards men and women and to the criticisms that have been mainly directed at the biases that lead to unfair sexual discrimination. He also states that “all of the main European languages have been affected, but English more than the most, because of the impact of early American feminism” (Crystal, 1995, p.368, as cited in Davies, 1999, p.51).

The aforementioned changes affect both the vocabulary and the grammar. With regards to the vocabulary, there has been focus on replacing the “*male*” words by neutral, a practice that in some cases has even become a legal requirement. Such instances are the replacement of gender-indicated words as chairman or salesman by sexually neutral words like chairperson and sales assistant respectively. Crystal (2002) mentions, however, that there is a debate as to how far such divisions should go and “whether they should affect traditional idioms such as /man in the street/ and /stone-age man/, or apply to parts of words where the male meaning of man is no

longer dominant, such as manhandle and woman”. Again, instances of when those neutral terms were first introduced show that their neutrality was lost and that they were used often only for women. So, an example by Dubois and Crouch (1987) demonstrates that a woman is a chairperson, but a man is still a chairman.

The vocabulary of marital status has also been affected by the notable introduction of Ms as a neutral alternative to Miss or Mrs. Nevertheless, Fasold’s (1988) research in the dawning of that change, signaled that stylistic guides and manuals disallowed “Ms”, “except in direct quotations, in discussing the term itself, for special effect or only if its known to be the preference of the individual woman in question” (p.190), proving that linguistic changes cannot be implemented but rather adopted overtime. According to Edwards (1979), this demonstrates the difference between cognitive and social problems, since “it is one thing to recognize that language varieties are of equal communicative validity for their users, and it is quite another to assume that dissemination of this fact will rapidly remove social barriers” (p.23).

In grammar, the main focus in natural gender languages has been on the lack of a sex-neutral third-person singular pronoun in English, which becomes a problem when it is used after sex-neutral nouns, such as student, after indefinite pronouns, such as someone, or used to describe persons that do not identify themselves within the male-female binary. Several alternatives have been suggested to avoid this bias, like */He or she/* or, in writing, forms such as *(s)he*, but they are often stylistically awkward and subsequently they have not been adopted. Wayne (2007) comments that these split terms also “retain the signification of sex dichotomy by keeping both pronouns while designating the transgender or intersex subject with an unspeakable level that is impossible to enunciate” (p.88).

More recently, transgender activists have advocated a turn toward non-sexed language and pronouns, that acknowledges and allows for a broader range of sex, gender and sexual expression (Wayne, 2007). Wilchins (2004) pointedly asks “What does gender identification

mean if it doesn't tell us about a person's body, gender expression, and sexual orientation?" (p.131). The answer seems to be found upon the many proposals for brand-new pronouns to be added to the word-stock of English (such as co, mon, heesh, hesh, hir, na, per and po), none of which have achieved any real currency. The linguistic effect of these changes in social attitudes has been far more noticeable in writing than in speech – and in certain kinds of writing, in particular. In the same wavelength, Spender (1980) declares "new symbols will need to be created" (p.162) for the goal of rendering all social groups linguistically visible, rather than "for the purpose of eradicating sex distinctions from language". Key (1975) makes an interesting observation on the 'unsuccessful' introduction of new pronouns, claiming that despite it being "relatively easy to introduce new nouns into the language (e.g. margarine, polyester, astronaut), classes of words such as pronouns remain stable for hundreds of years without significant change" (p.138) and that "it is easier to change usage than to change the list of items being used" (p.138). An instance in informal speech would be the widespread 'they' after words like anyone, but this usage still attracts criticism from those who feel that a plural word should not be made to agree with a singular one.

All in all, general guidelines are being implemented, recommending that authors should avoid any sort of gender bias. According to Crystal (2002), "it will take much longer before we can say whether the changes are having any real impact on the spoken language, with its greater spontaneity" (p.257), since it is unknown how long it takes for spoken language to adapt to social pressure till it becomes an automatic response and given that the future of a language is directly linked to the influence and prestige of its speakers, which no one can predict.

7. Conclusion

All in all, it has become clear that language and society are two communicating vessels that are hard to analyze separately. With regards to the way that language reflects gender, this paper focus on the phenomenon of linguistic sexism, examining different cases and indicators in nine languages that were selected as indicative of the Standard Average European linguistic branch. After setting the framework of the study, the cognitive function of language was analyzed, with a particular reference to the linguistic relativity theory, aiming to prove the significance of linguistic structures on the creation and perpetuation of social inequalities.

Those biases and asymmetries were approached on multiple levels, each time drawing examples from the languages in question. At a morphological level, sexist attitudes were mostly expressed in the form of derivation of feminine terms from masculine ones, as well as in the invisibility of females by the use of masculine generics. The next part of the study concerned the appearance of sexes in relation to their social role in a specific context, designating the social expectations, stigmas and stereotypes projected upon them, especially with the use of metaphors, proverbs or the broader semantic field. The last level of analysis was syntax and included a research on the order male and female terms are presented in the use of language. The results presented a common pattern across all languages in favor of men, with a notable exception being the vocative addresses. A secondary conclusion drawn from this research was that all the “mechanisms” examined were noted in all of the languages in question, despite not being among their grouping criteria under the SAE branch.

Lastly, an exploration of the ways and means used for the eradication of linguistic sexism demonstrated the ongoing language reform. The effectiveness of that reform still remains disputable, but it is apparent that language change is a long-term process that not only evolves the application of grammatical rules, but also the reform of perceptions and mindsets.

8. References

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