

A CONTRASTIVE STUDY  
OF MALE AND FEMALE OCCUPATIONAL TERMS  
IN ENGLISH AND RUSSIAN

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ENGLISH

Exposing sexism in the language system feminists focus on occupational terms as a politically most significant lexical field. When it comes to demonstration of actual manifestations of sexism in this sphere forms with the suffix *-man* together with formal marking involving either the derivational suffixes *-ess/-ette* or the prefixal units *woman/lady/female* are sure to be mentioned.

Forms involving the suffix *-man* serve good examples of sexist lexics in view of the experimental data reporting that most informants tend to interpret generically used *man* as referring only to males (Schneider and Hacker 1973) even if some linguistic authorities still insist that *man* is a universal term clearly understood to mean 'person'. It cannot be said that any of the feminist alternatives (*-person*, *-woman*) solves the problem. Even among linguists working on language sexism there is much variation in the interpretation of *-person*. Some authors claim that it is frequently regarded as equivalent to feminine (Coates 1985:9) while others argue that it frequently exhibits preferential male interpretation (Herbert and Nykiel-Herbert 1986:53). The suffix *-woman* is said to attain a "peculiar odour ...even in the humblest of context" (Cameron 1985:89).

To have a closer view of the problem we have undertaken a brief survey of the British press and have checked out the instances of *-man*, *-person*, *-woman*. On about 1200 pages of the "Guardian" and the "Observer" taken at random the share of terms involving the suffix *-woman* against those with *-man* referring to females is 1 to 2. In some of the examples the suffix *-woman* can be thought as used ironically:

Ms Richardson is the party's spokeswoman on women. Her job is to be in permanent state of dissatisfaction about the condition of women.

(Guardian, 7 Oct., 1988)

The approximately equal sample from the "Morning Star" yielded no *-man* terms referring to females, the suffix *-woman* was employed instead. All of the examples can be considered stylistically neutral. A few occupational nouns with *-person* which were registered referred to both males and females:

Labour Party spokesperson on Northern Ireland, Peter Archer, said...  
(Morning Star, 7 March, 1987)

A Core spokesperson [Jean Emery] said ...  
(Morning Star, 9 Dec., 1988)

There has also been found an instance of *chair* referring to a female:

June Ward, chair of the ILEA finance sub-committee, said yesterday...  
(Morning Star, 28 Jan., 1988)

which is an interesting fact to notice since this abbreviation never occurred in more than a hundred cases when male chairpersons were mentioned.

It is obvious that the choice of the suffix and the stylistic colouring attached to it largely depends on the speaker's (writer's) attitudes which of course undermines the feminists' idea of "sex-neutral" language units which the most insightful of them do not fail to understand, saying that "in the mouths of sexists language can always be sexist" (Cameron 1985:90). But what seems to be a still more bitter pill for feminists is that the majority of English speakers do not see occupational terms with *-man* as sexist. A good proof of it is a great deal of confusion among feminists themselves who often fall into the trap of using the *-man* suffix forgetting about its "perverse sexist nature". A number of such examples is supplied by Bosmajian (1974:94), only it gives the author more comfort to treat them as another manifestation of "the pervasiveness of linguistic male predominance". Thus she recollects hearing a woman discussing child-adoption regulations, who remarked "the women at the adoption agency acted as middle-men" and also quotes the feminist magazine "Aphra" that gave its readers the following information about one of its contributors: "Bernice Abbott is to have a one-man show at the Museum of Art this winter".

On the other hand in their striving for achieving self-identity feminists are sometimes ready to go to the extremes as is the case with Ellen Cooperman's petition to change her name to Cooperperson on the grounds that "Cooperman reflects the pervasiveness of linguistic predominance" (Cooperperson 1976:26) which is unsound because a proper name does not have any definite referent at all.

Of course, viewed diachronically, forms like those containing the *-man* suffix mirror the historically structured patriarchal order and are therefore sexist. But feminists tend to exaggerate their impact at the synchronic level since to an average speaker they are merely means of communicative technique not in the least suggestive of any political value. The feminists' efforts to impart a new life to them and expose their properties of propaganda techniques are often spent in vain. The best results they achieve are often nothing but a gesture of politeness from speakers/writers who state that using the suffix *-man* they do not intend to insult anybody and go on using it since it is a practice they are used to.

The problem of gender-marking with the help of woman/lady/female involves not less argument and controversy. The greater part of feminists view these markers as a highly politically-charged means of teaching women "their place, along with other lesser breeds" (Bolinger 1973:54) by marking their "anomalous position" in the semantic space "already occupied by the male sex" (Stanley 1977:67). Herbert and Nykiel-Herbert report that this view is not shared by some feminists who rather approve of such markers stating that all the unmarked terms only contribute to the invisibility of women in society (1986:55).

Many commentators point out the fact that the corresponding male specific marker occurs with only a limited inventory of professional terms, cf.: male nurse, male secretary, male prostitute, male whore, etc. It is quite obvious that the choice of professional names to be used with female and male-specific markers strikingly differs in terms of most devalued: most prestigious, which is very telling and feminists don't fail to make good use of it drawing attention to another evidence of English being male-oriented.

Yet, it does not seem reasonable to attach the sexist label to the locutions of the *female doctor* type so boldly. It is only fair to admit that to a great extent this use is governed by communicative laws. According to our data, 8 out of 10 professional terms refer to females without any markers, cf.: Agatha Christie as a television writer; the home of a magnificent decorative sculptor Anna Thornhill; no woman has yet become a judge of the Court of Appeal; with Ms Jo Richardson, MP for Barking, as deputy; her coach, Mrs Judith Russo, etc. In those cases where the markers do occur they more often than not turn out to be the only means to signalize the sex of the person in question:

Police said it was possible that a woman teacher died in the fire.  
(Guardian, 7 Febr., 1973)

Another possible source of female-specific markers' use is the communicative necessity to draw attention to the female sex of the professional in question as something unusual:

Dr. Dizzy Lee Ray, a 58-year old professor of zoology, was appointed by President Nixon today as the first woman head of the US Atomic Energy Commission, Reuter reports.

(Guardian, 7 Febr. 1973)

Discussing the problem of putting the words *woman/lady/female* before the names of prestigious occupations Bosmajian (1974:98) claims that it leads to the acceptance of the idea that unless the identifying female term is present the professional is a man and, secondly, that the sexual is emphasized over the professional. There might be an objection that not at all rare are cases where male-specific markers are used side by side with female-specific ones to identify the sexes, respectively, but it prompts neither of the two ideas:

...another summoned a woman barrister to his room and ordered her to change her hairstyle... A male barrister said ...

(Observer, 29 Jan., 1984)

Yet, it should be admitted that prefixing prestige occupations terms with female-specific markers occurs far more often. The reason for it is that speakers tend to stereotypically think of doctors, lawyers, judges as men not women (Martyna 1978:31) so the female-specific marker is used to refer to a female professional. But this practice does not spring from the sexist nature of English as most feminists tend to think, and is caused by the necessity to avoid miscommunication. As to the suggestion of sex emphasis attached to the units of *female doctor* type it is far too subjective. Some speakers might feel such emphasis others do not.

There is more ground for derivatives with *-ess*, *-ette* to be labelled sexist since they can carry trivialising, demeaning connotations offending women. Vivid enough is the example from a "Guardian" article about an anti-racist South-African woman writer who was called "writer" or "novelist" by the contributor of the article and "authoress" in the quotations from her reactionary opponents:

They conclude their introduction: "the authoress exploits the black/white dichotomy in South Africa for political ends. The negative is stressed; the positive is ignored."

(Observer, 23 March, 1980)

Oddly enough, there are examples of the negatively charged derivatives used by feminists themselves against their opponents. Thus a feminist author arguing with a woman poet urging women to give up their career ambitions for the sake of motherhood ironically calls her "poetess":

"...as a germ quickened by spring, the infant opens the folding doors of the little heart, and puts forward the thought, the preference, the affection..." wrote poetess Lydia Sigourney.

(Guardian, 25 Jan. 1983)

It should be noticed though that cases of stylistically neutral derivatives occur more often. Some feminist authors ignore the difference between the negatively charged *authoress*, *poetess*, etc. and the relics of the old English grammatical gender system like *actress* or *waitress*, which are stylistically neutral, and attack them all.

#### RUSSIAN

Some writers on the subject of feminism, particularly those advocating the elimination of all sex marking in language, point to current Russian as "a language that has eliminated/reduced sexism in the professional vocabulary" (Herbert and Nykiel-Herbert (1986:81)). As a proof works by Panov (1968) are usually first to be cited (see also Mučnik 1963) since it is explicitly stated there that in Russian (the data go back almost 25 years) the tendency to use "unmarked terms" for sex reference triumphed over the tendency to use separate male and female terms and even traditional female reference titles were replaced by sex-neutral ones. It is also stated that this process is nearly accomplished in the plural (Panov 1968:213).

Some of these claims seem rather questionable in view of the data received in our pilot study of current Russian use. Over 5000 occurrences of professional terms

referring to women were registered in current Soviet press. In the singular 60.1% were found in the masculine. Of them 50.8% have no feminine alternatives of the same stylistic register, 9.3% admit feminine derivatives. 39.9% occurred in the feminine. Of them 37.7% have both forms, 2.2% do not admit masculine forms.

50.8% account for the occurrences of terms of mostly foreign origin naming prestigious occupations like *advocat* (lawyer), *arxitektor* (architect), *psixiatr* (psychiatrist), *agronom* (agronomist), *regisser* (producer), etc. Feminine forms for such terms could not be found all through the history of Russian beginning with the late 19th century period when women began to enter professional life which brought the need to refer to female professionals. The fact is well reflected in the Dal' dictionary, one of the most reliable sources. As to the appearance of lots of odd derivatives like *aviatorka* (female pilot), *pedagogička* (female teacher) etc. marked with female-specific suffix in the first years after the October Revolution of 1917, this process can hardly be regarded as a tendency since it was more like one of the temporary effects of revolutionary zeal which no sphere of culture and science escaped. This linguistic process was rather limited in duration: the innovations were not accepted as norm and dropped out of educated speech within a few decades though some of them still function in colloquial highly informal Russian, cf.: *vračixa* (female doctor), *administratorša* (female reception clerk), *diktorša* (female announcer), *directorša* (headmistress), etc.

At the same time in early post revolutionary years there was observed a considerable influx of new feminine derivatives formed according to already existing productive word-building models with feminine suffixes like *-ka*: *traktoristka* (female tractor driver), *kosmonavtka* (female cosmonaut), *legkoatletka* (female athlete); *-tsa*: *letčitsa* (female pilot), *kranovščitsa* (female crane operator), *montažnitsa* (female fitter), *izdatelnitsa* (female publisher), etc. They have made their way into current Russian and are widely spread. In our data only 9.3% of the terms having both masculine and feminine forms were found in the masculine form. Most frequently occurring pairs are: *učitel-učitel'nitsa* (teacher), *pisatel-pisatel'nitsa* (writer), *vospitatel-vospitatelnitsa* (educator), *delegat-delegatka* (delegate), *korrespondent-korrespondentka* (correspondent). Both forms are practically interchangeable in most syntactic contexts. The female-specific suffixes generally do not bring about any negative stylistic colouring. Yet, for some speakers, especially intellectuals, the masculine form appears more formal and may be more prestigious, particularly of occupational terms related to art, literature, etc. Thus forms like *poetessa* (female poet), *pisatel'nitsa* (female writer), *xudožnitsa* (female painter) are said to imply trivialising, demeaning connotations underestimating women's contribution. At the same time these female-specific terms are widely used in press in contexts excluding any possibility of ironical or downgrading interpretation.

The group of terms never occurring in the masculine unites the names of less prestigious occupations: *niania* (baby sitter), *sidelka* (nurse), *mašinistka* (typist), etc. It is significant that their frequency of occurrence comes to only 2.2% of the total number of cases while terms occurring only in the masculine account for 50.8% of cases. These quantitative and qualitative differences are very telling with regard to the problem of language sexism.

In the plural only 9.1% of professional terms referring to females were marked masculine. Of them 6.3% do not admit feminine forms at all. 91.9% were found in

the feminine. Of them 81.8% occur only in the feminine. This is absolutely contrary to Panov's claim that the process of replacing sex-specific terms with sex-neutral is nearly over in the plural.

The existence of professional terms admitting no feminine derivatives brings about the problem of verbal agreement and adjectival concord. Panov (1968:202) and Mučnik (1963:78-82) noticed a strong tendency in Russian towards sex-determined concord though they had to admit that with adjectives the tendency was somewhat weaker. At the same time, the fact that sex-determined concord was most frequent among younger speakers permitted them to conclude that the tendency was going to increase over time.

According to our data the tendency towards sex-determined concord is rather prominent with verbs and here the cases of grammatical concord can be regarded as an exceptional and occasional phenomenon: the ratio of grammatical concord against sex-determined concord here is 1 to 35. Quite the reverse situation is to be observed with adjectives where instances of sex-determined concord can be viewed only as exceptions.

One can turn to Greenberg's universals (1963:74) for explanations of the fact but communication explanation seems not less relevant. The cases of sex-determined adjectival concord may occur where the adjectives are the only means of identifying the sex of the professional, which are very rare. The job is well done by proper nouns, verbs, participles and the context itself, so there seem to be no prospects for any radical shifts towards sex-determined concord here in the future.

The data received do not give the least ground to talk of any triumph of "sex-neutral" use in current Russian. First, since there is no systematic sex-determined adjectival concord with the terms admitting no feminine derivatives they cannot be treated as words of neutral gender (Aksenov 1984:21). Secondly, the use of the single occupational term for both sexes does not in any way affect the field or professional lexics where female derivatives are easily formed, the use of a masculine term in such cases is only occasional and sometimes stylistically governed. If there is a need to talk about tendencies it seems more relevant to concentrate on the change of stereotypes caused by social changes since terms previously interpreted as referring only to males now expand to accommodate females.

A few words should be also said about Russian locutions like *ženščina-vrač* (female doctor). The word *ženščina* here performs functions similar to those of derivational suffixes and it usually goes with words admitting only the masculine form to identify the sex of the referent. Another possible reason for their use is making emphasis on the female sex of the speaker. It should be however admitted that sometimes though fairly rare this marker occurs with feminine gender words.

#### CONCLUSION

Due to the inflectional nature of Russian there is more ground to think that the Russian forms are more marked for masculine gender than the English ones. On the other hand, Russian has more resources for marking professional terms for feminine gender and there actually exists a system of parallel terms for most of the

trades and professions. The most significant exception is the names of prestigious professions but here the obstacle to the formation of adequate feminine equivalents is probably their foreign origin. Yet these difficulties can be overcome in Russian by means of feminine inflection of the verb and occasionally of the adjective though purists still frown upon this latter use. Therefore, there does not seem to be any urgent communication need for the creation of female-specific terms here because the number of cases where for the purposes of communication the term should be marked for feminine gender to avoid miscommunication is relatively small.

Judging by the data quoted above, by feminists' standards, Russian should rather be listed as a sexist language than as an example of the elimination of sexism. Feminists' compliments to Russian probably come from their simplistic view of the relations between language and social phenomena. Language is rather sluggish compared with social development and even revolutionary events cannot revolutionize a language overnight. Moreover, the language system does not always provide opportunities for this or that innovation or change. On the other hand, social attitudinal stereotypes are rather persistent and do not easily lend themselves to change. Russian, like English or any other language of the world, is sexist from its inception since it reflects patriarchal social order which reigned for centuries. But an average user does not probably feel it at all. So it seems that sexism exists only for a group of militant feminists and, on the other hand, for their opponents.

It is obvious that the attempts of the feminists at reforming a specific language will remain a sort of intellectual exercise until and unless there is enough social urgency and awareness to alert lay language users.

Besides, it should be stressed again that some of the feminist attempts at language reforms go contrary to the laws of language development. Up to now normalization of language has (to a lesser or greater degree) been based on actual usage. The feminists would wish to impose new norms exclusively from above through an elite group of language-conscious and socially conscious people under conditions where there is no reciprocal effort from below, so their prospects are rather doubtful.

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