‘TO PROPOSE IS HUMAN’: ELIMINATING SEXIST LANGUAGE FROM ENGLISH PROVERBS

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Following Mieder (1989a), Seitel (1981) and Egblewogbe (1980), a proverb may be defined as a short, repeated, witty statement of experience which is used to further a social end. Incidentally, in a wide range of nations and cultures, women-related proverbs seem to be predominantly designed to serve misogynous ends (see, e.g., Mieder 1985 and Yusuf 1994). It has therefore been necessary for fair-minded proverb users and scholars to strive to eliminate sexism in proverbs by, among others, changing them to reflect equitable social trends. Such proverb alteration is possible because, as the Ghanaian Akan proverb cited in Yakah (1989: 153) states, ‘The proverb does not stay at one place, it flies.’

Mieder (1985) shows how proverb flight has taken place in feminist politics and modern advertising with regard to the elimination of sexism. At the same time, Mieder (1985: 277) draws attention to the relative rarity of such equitable proverb transformation, and notes that “much time will still have to pass until all people realise that the proverb ‘All men are created equal’ should in fact be called ‘All people are created equal!’”. It is with proverb change of this sort that the present paper is concerned. Specifically, the paper intends to desex a collection of proverbs in which masculine terms (e.g. man and he) are used to refer to all human beings or a person whose sex is unspecified.

The work is carried out from the background of the belief that such masculine terms ignore women and imply that the male are naturally superior to the female (see, e.g., Henley 1987, Cameron 1985, Spender 1980, Martyna 1980, Cheshire 1985 and Hardman 1993). It is in addition motivated by the preference for

1 It is further noteworthy that this sexist American proverb was rendered in a non-sexist way as “We are all created equal” by United States President Bill Clinton in his inaugural address on January 20, 1997, at the beginning of his second term in office.
such neutral terms as *people* and *person*. Moreover, it is based on the assumption that inclusive expressions like *she or he* and *he or she* are stylistically elegant and the use of *they* as a singular pronoun in some situations is perfectly grammatical (see also Bodine 1975, MacKay 1980, Pauwels 1991 and Mitchell 1994).

The paper is further motivated by the fact that English is an international language, and its non-native users generally tend to depend on the prescriptions of pedagogic grammars, a large proportion of which remains appreciably sexist, ambivalent or insensitive to women-related change in English usage (Sunderland 1992, Randall 1985 and Mitchell 1992). This observation is especially true of proverbs when their characteristic idiomatic or colloquial structure is considered. Therefore, since, as Cochran (1992: 33) rightly puts it, “gender sensitivity is the revolutionary and truly novel linguistic development of our age”, it is necessary for teachers of English to present systematic models of the change.

The data for the work derive from a number of major proverb collections and proverb studies. These sources are indicated in parenthesis in the succeeding paragraphs, and the extent to which the desexing of each proverb alters its rhetorically is specified.

The following proverb is among the twenty-two sexist ones on which the present study is based:

(1) *Man* proposes, God disposes (Mieder 1989a: 19).

First, the proverb could be desexed by replacing *man* with *people* to yield

a. *People* propose, God disposes.’

In this alternative, the rhyming of the original proverb with respect to the ending of both of its clauses with the sounds /-peziz/ is affected by the change of the singular subject of the first clause (i.e., *man*) to a plural one (i.e., *people*). The change necessitates the corresponding change of the singular verb (*proposes*) to the plural one (*propose*) in the first clause of proverb (1a). The loss of the sound /z/ is however compensated for by the enhancement of the alliteration of the first clause of proverb (1a) which results from the repetition of the sound /p/ in *people*. In other words, what is lost in rhyming due to the desexing of the proverb is gained in the fivefold repetition of the sound /p/.

The grammatical contrast between *propose* and *proposes* may, moreover, be seen as complementary to the lexical contrast between *people* and *God*.

Where the rhyming of proverb (1) is preferred to its alliteration by a particular proverb user, the proverb could be desexed as follows:

b. *The human being* proposes, God disposes.’

The proverb could also be desexed through a syntactic inversion of the elements in each of its two clauses as follows:

c. ‘To propose is human, to dispose is divine.’

This rhyming proverb appropriates the syntax of the popular proverb ‘To err is human, to forgive divine.’ Consequently, the Subject(S) + Predicate(P) structure of each of the original proverb’s two clauses is transformed to S + P + C(omplement): that is, *To propose* is S, *is* is P, and *human* is C. The noun *man* is also converted to the adjective *human*, and the word *God* is changed to *divine*.

In addition, the finite verbs *proposes* and *disposes* are converted to the non-finite ones *to propose* and *to dispose*, respectively, and both are nominalised and made the S in the clauses in which they appear.

Another interesting stylistic feature of proverb transformation is revealed by the desexing of the following proverb:

(2) One *man’s* meat is another *man’s* poison (Dundes 1981: 59).

This proverb may be changed to

‘One *person’s* meat is another *person’s* poison.’

Here, the sexist *man* is replaced with the equitable *person*, and the change results in the shift of the alliteration of the proverb from *man’s meat* in the S to *person’s poison* in the C. In other words, the alliteration which is lost in the S is gained in the C.

A slightly different tendency is shown in the desexing of the proverb

(3) Let every *man* skin his own skunks (Mieder 1989a: 41).

This proverb may be changed to

‘Let everyone skin their own skunks.’

In this alternative proverb, *everyone* replaces every *man* and *their* replaces *his*. The change retains the alliteration of the original proverb with regard to the fact that both *man* and *one* end with the sound /n/ which phonetically aligns with the /n/ in *skin*, *own* and *skunks*. However, the replacement of *his* with *their* does not retain the phonetic contiguity existing between /s/ in *skin* and *skunks*, on one hand, and /z/ in *his*, on the other.

With respect to the singular use of *they*, the desexed form of proverb (3) is similar to a possible equitable version of the proverb

(4) If God blesses a *man*, his bitch brings forth pigs (Whiting 1977: 180).

The desexed version would be

‘If God blesses a *person*, their bitch brings forth pigs.’
In the change of his to their, the alliterative relationship which the /zl/ in his contracts with the /zl/ in blesses, brings and pigs, in the original proverb, is not retained.

It is possible to desex the proverb

(5) Every man has his price (Whiting 1977: 134)

by changing it to

‘Every person has a price.’

In this change, the third person singular masculine pronoun his is replaced with the indefinite article a. The alliteration of has, his and price with respect to the sounds /zl/ and /zl/ is undermined by the replacement. This is however compensated for by the repetition of the sound /zl/ in person, has and a and the co-occurrence of the repetition with /ai/ in price.

A similar tendency is noticeable in the change of

(6) A great man has not a great son (Mieder 1989a: 40)

to

‘A great parent has not a great child.’

In the replacement of man with parent and son with child, the loss of the repetition of the sound /ln/ in man and not is replaced with the repetition of the sound /ln/ in parent and not and /l/ in great, parent and not.

As in proverb (6), alliterative compensation occurs in the change of the proverb

(7) Threatened men live long (Simpson 1982: 224)

to

‘Threatened people live long.’

In other words, the loss of the repetition of /ln/ in threatened and men in the original proverb is multiply compensated for by the repetition of /p/ in people, the co-occurrence of /l/ in people and /l/ in live, and the repetition of /l/ in people, live and long. Alliteration is similarly enhanced in the change of

(8) Men are best loved furthest off (Wilson 1970: 48)

to

‘People are best loved furthest off.’

due to the repetition of /p/ in people and /l/ in people and loved.

Men may, as in proverb (8), be changed to people in the proverb

(9) By rogues falling out, honest men get their dues (Mieder 1989a: 178).

This produces the proverb

‘By rogues falling out, honest people get their dues.’

Here, the loss of the repetition of the sound /ln/ in honest and men is replaced with the repetition of /p/ in people. A similar loss of the repetition of /m/ in men and same occurs in the desexing of the proverb

(10) Men are everywhere the same (Mieder 1989a: 40).

The loss is compensated for with the repetition of /p/ in people and the co-occurrence of /l/ in people and /l/ in everywhere in the non-sexist alternative

‘People are everywhere the same.’

The proverb

(11) Many men, many minds (Dundes 1981: 53)

may be desexed by changing it to

‘Many people, many minds.’

This change reduces the elaborate alliteration of the original proverb which inheres in the repetition of /m/ and /ln/ in all of the words of the proverb. The repetition of /p/ in people and the co-occurrence of /l/ in many and /l/ in people does not seem to be able to compensate for this loss, but the equal humanity of both the male and the female which the desexed proverb symbolises is a more important consideration.

The situation is different in the desexing of the proverb


This proverb may be changed to

‘Evil people, evil times.’

In this change, the repetition of the sound /m/ in men and times in the original proverb is replaced with the rhetorical repetition of /l/ in evil and people. The repetition of /p/ in people is similarly significant. The repetition of /m/ in men and times is simply replaced with the repetition of /p/ in people when the proverb
Better men, better times (Whiting 1977: 275) is changed to

'Better people, better times.'

The proverbs that have been considered so far are those in which the sexist word man or men occurs with or without a sexist possessive pronoun (i.e., his) or a sexist noun (i.e., son, as in proverb (6)). From this point on, proverbs which do not include man or men but are sexist by virtue of the presence of the sexist he and his would be desexed and discussed. The first of such proverbs to be considered is

Everyone to his taste (Whiting 1977: 135).

This proverb may be transformed to

'Everyone to their taste.'

The rhetorical co-occurrence of /z/ in his and /s/ in taste in the original proverb is eliminated in the non-sexist version.

The sexist proverb may be desexed to yield

'They give twice that give soon.'

In this non-sexist pluralisation, the repetition of /i/ in he and gives is not replaced, nor is the alliterative co-occurrence of /z/ and /s/ in gives and twice and gives and soon, respectively. Another proverb requiring desexing by pluralisation is

He gives twice that gives soon (Whiting 1977: 175)

Its desexed form would be

'They give twice that give soon.'

In this new proverb, the alliteration which exists in the repetition of /i/ in he and is in the old proverb is eliminated, but a new form of alliteration is produced in the repetition of /iz/ in their and heir and the co-occurrence of /u:/ in fools and /u/ in who. This alliteration results from the replacement of his with their and that with who in the desexed proverb, and is enhanced by the lexical repetition of their.

The following sexist proverb is also worth considering:

He who laughs last laughs best (Dundes 1981: 53).

It may be pluralised to yield

'They who laugh last laugh best.'

In desexing the proverb, the rhetorical repetition of /s/ in laughs, on one hand, and last and best, on the other, is lost. A related thing happens in the change of

He who hesitates is lost (Dundes 1981: 53)

to

'They who hesitate are lost.'

In this case, the alliterative link which the final /s/ in hesitates establishes between the medial /s/ in hesitates and lost is weakened by the replacement of is with are.

Pluralisation may be used to desex the following proverb too:

He that fights and runs away leaves to fight another day (Whiting 1977: 150).

The proverb becomes

'They that fight and run away leave to fight another day.'

In the process of desexing the proverb, loss of alliteration occurs because of the elimination of the co-occurrence of /s/ in fights and /z/ in runs and leaves. This loss is compensated for by the rhetorical repetition of /Ø/ in they and that. The compensatory repetition of this sound occurs also in the change of the sexist proverb

He that is born of a hen must scrape for a living (Whiting 1977: 210)

to the non-sexist one

'They that are born of a hen must scrape for a living.'

The repetition compensates for the loss of the alliteration which results from the repetition of /i/ in he and is in the original proverb. This compensation is complemented by the repetition of the sound /u/ in that, are and a in the desexed proverb.

The replacement of the sexist his with his or her may be used to desex the proverb.
(21) Everyone has a right to a tune on his own fiddle (Mieder 1989b: 22).
The desexing would produce the proverb

‘Everyone has a right to a tune on his or her own fiddle.’

The change enhances the alliteration of the proverb which results from the co-occurrence of the sound /s/ in on and /s:/ in or and the repetition of /h/ in his and her.

Finally, the sexist proverb

(22) He that spits against the wind spits in his own face (Whiting 1977: 485) may be changed to the following non-sexist one:

‘To spit against the wind is to spit in one’s own face.’

Like proverb (1) above, the desexing of this proverb entails syntactic transformation, and it is important to note that the structure of the original proverb is SPA(djunct). That is, *He who spits against the wind* is S, *spits* is P, and *in his own face* is A. However, the structure of the new proverb is SPC. That is, *To spit against the wind* is S, *is* is P, and *to spit in one’s own face* is C. The S of this new proverb is, like its C, a non-finite clause and each of the clauses has the structure PA. That is, *To spit* is P, and *against the wind* is A in the first clause just as *to spit* is P, and *in one’s own face* is A in the second. This parallelism and the phrasal and lexical repetition from which it derives enhance the proverb’s alliteration and syntactic balance.

In the foregoing, models of the elimination of sexist language from English proverbs are presented with the full realisation that differing stylistic preferences and pragmatic considerations may require that the proverbs be desexed in manners different from the models presented. The paper shows that substitution, pluralisation and syntactic transformation are significant strategies, and that the desexing may reduce or boost alliteration, eliminate or retain rhyming, increase lexical contrast and enhance structural balance. In other words, as the new proverbs symbolise gender equity, they generally retain the wit with which proverbs are fundamentally associated. It is therefore hoped that the study would generate increased interest in women-related language change in English proverbs, and that future proverb collections would include only non-sexist variants of the above and related witty sayings. An encouraging occurrence of such non-sexist entry in Mieder (1989c: 54) is ‘Nobody wants to kiss when they are hungry.’

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