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The phenomenon of sexism in the English and Russian languages

Why should we talk about sexism in the modern 21th century when women have already their rights institutionalized and supported by law? Nowadays, we can assert confidently that women have achieved considerable success in the fight for equality, but the repercussions of discrimination against women may reverberate through a language. It seems interesting and challenging to explore this topic in order to identify whether this stereotyped social phenomena or subordinate status of women in society is reflected and preserved in a language. Thus, it would be relevant to perform a linguistic investigation and comparison of morphological and lexical peculiarities of the English and Russian languages.

Unlike Russian and practically any other European language, English does not have gender inherent in most of its words. But some of those words are gendered any way – as we use different words to describe men and women with the same characteristics, this leads to women and men facing double standards. For instance, an adjective "feisty" is a classic example. It is rare to hear a man described as feisty, so many women hear "feisty" as applying a kind of figurative smallness in them and hence a note of condescension. As another clear illustration, female is often described as bubbly or vivacious, while male is described as charismatic. One more example is women are far more likely than men to be described as gossiping. These linguistic features characterize both languages, although Russian has a grammatical gender, whereas English does not.

Until the 1980s, the nouns used in English to describe some occupations were also gendered, such as a fireman, or a stewardess. In America, the activists fought that largely by neutralizing male and female occupational nouns (e.g. a fireman – a firefighter, a stewardess – a flight attendant). This technique has successfully eliminated the awkward combination nouns used to describe women who took on traditionally male jobs, like a woman-doctor and a woman-lawyer. If we use this method in Russian and the word "woman" is affixed to a male-gendered occupational noun, this will make a woman adopting that male profession sound like an oddity or exception (e.g. женщина-врач). This language feminization is challenging because in the Russian language every noun has a gender, and thence most occupation nouns are male. Gaining popularity in Russia, today new words change the endings of male nouns, rendering them grammatically female. Thus, a lawyer (юрист) becomes «a lawyeress» (юристка), and a professor (профессор) would be rendered as "a professoress" (профессорка). Many of these word combinations sound weird and unnatural in Russian, therefore, it will take long for gender-neutral noun formation to become an officially accepted literary language, so the use of feminitives in the Russian language is controversial.

Man and woman as two equal components of any human race are actually may be not equal in the English and Russian lexicon. A well-known example of generic masculine term in English is "man". Man can also refer to the whole race but this usage makes woman invisible. For example: "Man is a social animal". "Women" cannot be employed in reference to men, so this feature treats man as the center of the society, an embodiment of criterion and ignores the existence of woman. In contrast to this, in Russian the word "men" (мужчины) cannot be used in general to replace the word "humanity" (человечество) or "people" (люди).

In English, a feminine noun is always derivative of the masculine one formed by adding a feminine suffix such as -ess. According to many scientific researches, the suffix -ess does not only mark the secondary position of feminine words, but also connotes the relationship between female and male reference to word pairs. As an example, we can compare the pair of "governor and governess". A governor is a ruler of a country, a city and associates with high social status as well as honor and dignity, while a governess is a woman employed to teach young children in their home. Because of gender differentiation, these two words have dramatically different meanings – the masculine which belongs to

a high social class and the feminine one having -ess belongs to a lower social class. In Russian, a pair of nouns "general"(генерал) and "generaless"(генеральша) are really notable. The first noun is masculine, and it means a high rank military officer whereas a female one has nothing to do with the authoritative position, but on the contrary only ironically emphasizes that a woman is married to a general. We can conclude that in both languages the addition of a feminine suffix to masculine human agent nouns usually does more than simply changes the gender reference of a word and often gives the meaning of triviality, of a lower status or dependence to the term.

The Russian classic tales demonstrate stereotypic female characters who do not always have as much ambition and versatile personalities as their modern literary counterparts. For instance, young girls are often represented as modest and compliant homemakers waiting for a rescue by a Prince Charming, and their primary life concern is a profitable marriage. So, these deep-rooted stereotyped traditional roles of a woman have influenced the development of the Russian literature. The American academics have found that the verbs most associated with the pronoun "she" in classic fiction are shivered, wert, murmured, screamed and married. An algorithm used by the scientists who studied classic literature to determine a character`s gender was based only on the English language for descriptions and dialogues. Those predictions were 75% correct for the books written around 1800, but they failed 65% in the books written around 2000. In other words, the vocabulary used to describe women and men is becoming more blurred. So, the gender stereotypes like "feisty" are less common nowadays than they used to be.

Thus, as a specific social phenomenon, sexism is inevitably reflected through the language in both countries, because these languages reflect social attitudes, stereotypes and bias. Studying languages, using new words and expressions every day, we do not just learn a lifeless code to communicate, but we immerse ourselves in the culture of the country and discover countless social phenomena that the language absorbs.

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