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Sexual Discrimination in Italian and Chinese

ZHANG Haihong^{[a],*}^[a]Italian Department, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

As an important communicative tool and a mirror of culture, language inevitably reflects social customs and conventions. Sexual discrimination is a phenomenon that typified most patriarchal societies. This discrimination, as it is reflected in the Italian and Chinese language use, can be found in markedness, word order, semantics, appellation, occupation, etc..

Key words: Sexual discrimination; Markedness; Word order; Semantics; Appellation; Occupation

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INTRODUCTION

Language is a component of culture and imposes on it great impact; and vice versa, it is significantly influenced by culture, depicting the history of a nation and its culture. "The social function of language determines its role as a communicative vehicle among all citizens. In other words, language is available by all people irrespective of class" (Qi, 2007, p.11). Language itself, therefore, is inclusive in terms of gender in social life. However, as "the products of humans' thinking and perception are preserved, presented and passed down in forms of words and sentences" (Ibid., p.8), language tells what our ancestors experienced in labour and everyday life, and its use inevitably reflects social customs and conventions.

Anthropological study shows that feminist submission to males is a prevalent phenomenon in whatever types of society, of which sexual discrimination in language is the epitome. *Sabatini Coletti*, an Italian dictionary, gives its definition of sexual discrimination (*sessismo*)—"unfair treatment towards either sex group, especially females" (Coletti, 2005, p.2458).

Italy and China both boast a long history of civilization. The glamorous conventions and cultures in both countries are inherited in the form of language. At the same time, however, sexual discrimination is embodied in both Italian and Chinese, with the influence imposed by male superiority over females. The termination of sexual discrimination in language is the focus of sexual discrimination studies in sociolinguistics, but the fact is that a problem of language is also a problem of science, the development and changes of which observe its own rules. It is a necessity to know about the characteristics of sexual discrimination in a language before knowing how to eliminate it. Therefore, this essay is aimed to discuss sexual discrimination in Italian and Chinese and how the two cultures influence this language phenomenon from the perspectives of markedness, word order, semantics, appellation and occupation.

1. MARKEDNESS AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

Nikolai Trubetzkoy and Roman Jakobson, members of the Prague school, put forward the Markedness Theory in 1930s. Initially, Trubetzkoy applied the marked and unmarked oppositions to phonological analysis and then Jakobson extended the application of markedness from phonology to morphology. Following them many linguists, including Noam Chomsky, Joseph Greenberg, Thomas Givon and William Croft, made other explorations of the Theory on a more thorough and comprehensive level. Greenberg notes that unmarked terms are neutral

elements of meanings and usages that convey regular, common and general meanings; on the contrary, marked terms are uncommon, distinctive elements that connect to specific meanings. Markedness is further subdivided into morphological markedness, distributional markedness and semantic markedness.

Morphological markedness is defined through the absence or presence of certain features or marks. In Italian, most of the feminine nouns related to humans and animals are derivations of their masculine forms, as shown in word pairs “*studente*” and “*studentessa*”, “*professore*” and “*professoressa*”, “*attore*” and “*attrice*”, “*editore*” and “*editrice*”, “*leone*” and “*leonessa*”. The same principle applies to the use of Chinese. If special requirements are demanded to point out the sex, characters like “女” or “母”, which mean female, should be added before their respective masculine words, such as “女班长” (a female monitor) and “母狮子” (a lioness). Therefore, the female nouns in Italian and the morphological markedness indicating a female identity in Chinese put themselves in a subordinate position. This linguistic phenomenon can be viewed as a form of sexual discrimination in language.

Distributional markedness refers to the quantitative imbalance between marked terms and unmarked ones, with the former ones more widely distributed than the latter in most cases. From this perspective, masculine nouns in Italian are unmarked and general in meaning, the plural forms of which can be used in situations where females are presented and where the two genders are included. Thus, they are more frequently used than the plural forms of feminine nouns, which only occur in situations where males are excluded. For instance, in word pairs *studenti/studentesse* and *professori/professoresse*, *studenti* and *professori* refers to either male students/professors or a group with male and female students/professors mixed, while *studentesse* and *professoresse* respectively indicates a single-sex group of female students/professors. Similar phenomena are pervasively shattered in the use of Chinese. “学生们” (students) can be used to refer to male students or a mixed group of both genders, but “女学生们”, with an additional character “女”, represents the exclusive presence of female students. From the above analysis, it can be detected that the identity of females has the propensity to be neglected in generics.

Semantic markedness means that a semantically marked term is more specific in meaning than its semantically unmarked form. In semantics, unmarked terms deliver a more general meaning compared to its marked form. The human-oriented nouns in Italy have their semantic basis in gender, with masculine nouns referring to men, and feminine ones women in most cases. Meanwhile, masculine terms are also used in indication of the concept of human beings, namely their occupations

or their existence as social beings regardless of sex. It can also be found that semantic markedness often corresponds to distributional markedness. As masculine nouns are semantically unmarked, it has a more wide-ranging distribution in meaning. On the contrary, feminine ones have a limited semantic distribution. Masculine nouns used to represent females are commonly seen in language use. For example, Berlusconi’s administration, former government of Italy, used “*il presidente*”, a masculine form, rather than its feminine one *la presidente* or *la presidentessa* in the nomination of the President of Senate Ine Pivetti. Furthermore, although some feminine terms are morphologically derived from their masculine forms, it finally becomes the appellations of the spouse of males, as shown in word pair *ambasciatore/ambasciatrice*. The reason for this is, before feminist movements, women in Italy have few chances to become ambassadors, so the feminine form of *ambasciatore* is used to refer to the wife of a man who works as an ambassador. It is evident, from another perspective, of women’s submissive and discriminated position in Italian society. In the same manner, both masculine personal nouns and masculine nouns in Chinese can concern female inclusions, while female personal nouns and female nouns are male-exclusive. Personal nouns “他” and “她”, namely he/him and she/her, morphologically distinct from each other. In their use, however, “他” is preferred in situations where the gender is uncertain or both sexes are mentioned. Examples like “如果一个人想要成功, 那他就必须付出努力” (If a man wants to succeed, he must work hard) are often seen.

2. WORD ORDER AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

In both Italy and China, it has been long accepted that males precede females in the word order because of the deep-rooted thinking that men were the worthier sex. Sociolinguistically, the thinking that men were the worthier sex is noticeable in the abundant culture that human society has created over the past several thousand years. The sex order in the structure of a morpheme reflects the positions of both sexes. In a male-dominated society, the conception of social structure and the social cognition of the citizens tend to favour male dominance. This kind of cognitive structure in the long run leads to a stable psychological tendency, which imposes effects on word order. Psycholinguistically, constituents placed in first have the propensity to appeal more attention and be memorized. Cognitively, significant information is highly positioned.

In Italian language, for example, expressions such as “*fratelli e sorelle*” (brothers and sisters) and “*padre e madre*” (father and mother) have become norms that people are accustomed to follow. In 1987, the Italian

government released *Il sessismo nella lingua Italiana*, a report written by Alma Sabatini, in an attempt to get rid of sexism in the Italian language. It is advised in the report that the use of both “*fratelli e sorelle*” and “*sorelle e fratelli*” should be acceptable (Sabatini, 1993, p.104). Though grammatically correct, the changed word-order seems to be violating the norms and causes uneasiness.

Similarly, there are plenty of expressions that put men first in the Chinese language, especially when men and women are both mentioned. Examples are like “男女” (male and female), “夫妻” (husband and wife), “父母” (father and mother), “夫唱妇随” (a husband should have a supportive wife submitting to him), “男尊女卑” (men are superior than women), “男耕女织” (men tilling the farm and women weaving), “男婚女嫁” (a man should take a wife and a woman a husband), “生儿育女” (bearing sons and daughters), “善男信女” (devout men and women), “男盗女娼” (males behave like thieves and females prostitutes) and “男大当婚女大当嫁” (men and women should get married when they come of age). Rules are more restrictive with these words in terms of word order. As it is the outcome of conventional practices, users are not allowed to any modification; otherwise, it would be viewed by scholars of grammar as grammatical errors. This kind of word ordering reflects the social value that women are subordinate to men.

3. SEMANTICS AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

The change of semantics in language is commonly seen, and factors that lead to the change are arbitrary. Despite the unsystematic and irregular changes, sociolinguists discovered that “a commendatory term could turn into a neutral one and even a derogatory one when used to describe the underprivileged due to the cultural influence” (Yang, 2005, p.237). In language expressions, a number of words that have metaphoric meanings can reflect the mentality, history, geography and customs of the people speaking the language. There is a massive amount of words that are used as metaphors to diminish the personality or appearance of women.

In the Italian language, for instance, “*oca*” (goose) refers to a foolish and lunatic woman, “*cagna*” means a slutty one, and “*bambola*” a brainless and superficial one. In the Chinese language, characters whose radicals are “女” (female) often have negative meanings. It is roughly calculated by *Cihai* (a large-scale Chinese dictionary and encyclopaedia) that the number of characters with “female” radicals is 257, 100 of which are either commendatory or derogatory. Among the 100 words, 35 have derogatory implications, accounting for over 35% and 18% have mixed implications. It is natural that there are women who have moral flaws, but “female” radicals also appear in words like “嫖” (visiting prostitutes) that

describe behaviour conducted by men, which apparently displays social prejudice against women.

Furthermore, asymmetry in terms of word forms is another sign of sexual discrimination in language. In both the Italian and Chinese language, words related to females may have derogatory meaning, while those relevant to males, if any, tend to be neutral. For example, “*zitello*” refers to a bachelor above the normal age for marriage, while “*zitella*” means an old maid or spinster, implying that the woman has a bad temper and is difficult to get along well with.

4. APPELLATION AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

A culture can be explicitly demonstrated by the forms, structures and use of the language representing it. The appellation in a language system, once connected with the social status, age and gender of the persons speaking the language, is no longer confined to its designative meaning and becomes enriched with social dimensions. (Yang, 2005, p.238)

As is often the case, sexual discrimination can be detected in the appellations of different languages. The Italian language that places men in a superior position is no exception. The way Italians address females reveals their bias against women.

In the past, an Italian woman might be addressed by her first name “*Maria*” rather than her surname “*Verdi*”. If she was called by her surname, “*la*” would be added. Although this way of addressing women has become outdated, it still appears in some official documents today. As for men, they were called by their surnames such as “*Bianchi*” or a combination of their first and last names like “*Pietro Bianchi*”. Upon marrying, women take their husbands’ surnames, so the plural forms of their husbands’ surnames can refer to the couple or the entire family including their children, but theirs fail to play the same role. Moreover, appellations such as “*signore*” (Mr.), “*signora*” (Mrs) and “*signorina*” (Miss) reveal the idea of sexual discrimination. When a man is addressed, his marriage status is not taken into account, while that of a woman is considered when she is named, which shows the inequality in language expressions.

In China, Han people have their names composed of surname and given name. In ancient times, male patriarchs, either father or grandfather, had the right to name their children and grandchildren. At that time, men had their given names and surnames whereas women were not only deprived of the right to name their descendants, but the right to have their own names. Some women were addressed by their surnames such as “Ms Zhang” or “Ms Lee”. After they got married, their husbands’ surnames were added before theirs such as “Mrs. Lee Zhang” or “Mrs. Wang Lee” when people named them. Apart from that, young women could be addressed in accordance

with their seniority within their family such as “the eldest (sister)” or “the second eldest (sister)” with their real names missing. Even in modern China, children are still named after their fathers’ surnames. This tradition remains almost unchanged with few exceptions in practice. If married, women would be called in public “Madam Lee” or “Mrs Wang”.

Form of address is an important part of a nation’s culture and to some extent reflects the characteristics of the nation. Sexual discrimination in forms of address in Italian and Chinese is objective. Preference for either sex to a large degree gives expression to social culture systems that are ethics-oriented. In Italy and China, the feudal age had long been ended, but some words and expressions that feature the feudal colour are still frequently used in modern Italy and China due to the slow development of language itself. This phenomenon on one hand reflects the continuity of languages and on the other shows the solidity and vitality of traditional cultures.

5. OCCUPATION AND SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination against women exists in both Italian and Chinese. As mentioned in the markedness section, in the great amount of Italian nouns that indicate occupation, the female form in most cases are derived from its male form, such as *pittore-pittrice* (female artist), *infermiere-infermiera* (female nurse), *commesso-commessa* (female salesclerk), etc.. In addition, words like *ingegnere* (engineer), *console* (consul) and *avvocato* (attorney), which indicate higher social positions, tend to be connected with males, whereas further explanations are needed for female indication, such as *il console Sig.ra Rossi*.

Similarly, in ancient China, women were confined to the house and undertook heavy household responsibility of nursing parents-in-law, bearing and educating children and taking care of the house. There was no such thing as occupation for women, who were then absolutely subordinate to men. Although in modern China “women hold up half the sky” and they are devoted to various domains, discriminative phenomena are still commonly seen. For example, in a news title “Chinese Writer Wins the Nobel Prize in Literature”, the writer referred to must be a man rather than a woman; otherwise, extra explanation would be added to specify the gender of the

writer. Another example is “Chinese female scientist Tu Youyou, William C. Campbell and Satoshi Ōmura share this year’s Nobel Prize in Psychology or Medicine”. Additional to these, in some major conferences, female representatives or female nominees for high-level committees are pointed out with a “女 (female)” following their names. The reason lies in a social consensus that all prestigious experts and important officials should be male. Once there is any female among them, she must be pointed out as an exception. From such comparison between the traditional occupation that men and women were respectively involved, it can be seen that sexual discrimination is deep-rooted in language.

Language is a mirror, reflecting a society’s culture together with its other aspects. “Sexual discrimination in language is a linguistic problem, but still more of a social problem.” (Yang, 2005, p.226) Sexual discrimination in the Italian and Chinese language is a reflection of the inequality between men and women. Directly linked with the status of women in society and throughout the history, it has been imprinted on languages as a result of patriarchy-authority of fathers, husbands and men in the long course of history. Therefore, theoretically, “to eliminate the sexual discrimination in language usage, it requires the demolition of discriminative acts against women in real life. The premise is to create an equal society where men and women are entitled to the same rights.” (Ibid.) From the perspective of sociology, however, the existence of power, as an abstract concept, is an absolute reality in the society. On the contrary, the idea of equality is a social anticipation. Apart from that, linguistically, elimination of discrimination against women in grammar or semantic system would be a lengthy and arduous journey, because any change in language, especially in the grammatical level, demands a long and steady process.

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