

Language as a Looking Glass: A Glimpse at How Proverbs Reflect Gender Bias

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Abstract Proverbs reflect common and popular knowledge and are an outcome of shared beliefs, assumptions and experiences. As language changes over time, proverbs change and new ones are added, however, it seems that it occurs at a slower pace. This paper analyzes proverbs that reflect many stereotypical perceptions about women and men. These are just a few of many examples of such assumptions that function in different cultures and that are passed from generation to generation. Until recently these have not been questioned, however with the advent of feminist linguistics many unjust stereotypes about women were unveiled and challenged. However, it requires well-informed language users to stop employing the expressions through conscious linguistic choices.

Keywords: *feminist linguistics, proverbs, gender bias, gender stereotypes, gender perceptions*

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1. Introduction

There are many stereotypes and assumptions about men and women, some of them are engrained and deep-rooted in culture but some of them are quite recent. These conventional and oversimplified concepts can be reflected in proverbs, adages, and sayings. They express common experiences and widely held opinions. They can be specific to a culture or be known in various cultures, or they can be borrowed from other linguistic communities. Wolfgang Mieder, a distinguished paremiologist, defines a proverb as “a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” ([1]: 4).

Feminist critique has adopted various approaches as to how to study and denounce unfair and prejudiced perceptions of women. One of them is to demonstrate that they were no longer current or valid due to significant social changes. Other feminist approaches attempt to study what the stereotypical behaviors mean in the light of political and socio-cultural context. Cameron [2] distinguishes “a dominance approach” and “a difference approach.” According to the first one, stereotypical behaviors are a result of a culture in which women are taught and learn to be weak, banal, submissive, superficial, powerless, and lack ambition. Men are dominant and have control over women.

On the other hand, the “difference approach” recognizes that stereotypes might reflect part of the truth about

gender differences and therefore, focuses on the positive aspects of that differentiation in order to promote a female culture that gives preference to co-operation and support over dominance and constant competition.

2. Analysis of English Proverbs

The following analysis of English proverbs about men and women aims to examine how the genders are perceived and described in these short expressions of common knowledge and wisdom, as well as to demonstrate how a significant number of those proverbs depict women in a very unjust, derogatory, and insulting way as a result of male-dominant cultures. The proverbs presented below come from various dictionaries such as The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs [3], A Dictionary of American Proverbs [4] and America’s Popular Proverbs and Sayings [5].

The proverbs examined in this study were chosen because they clearly presented conventional and stereotypical concepts about both genders. Therefore, we did not include the proverbs that use the word man in the sense of mankind. Also excluded were proverbs using the words: girl, lady, boy, gentleman, guy, lassie, lass and other synonyms of man and woman due to the page limitation of this paper. Likewise, proverbs that used words that express male and female roles such as wife/husband, daughter/son, mother/father, etc. were eliminated. A thorough analysis of all gender-related proverbs could make for a literary work of several tomes.

Each proverb presented is followed by the year of the publication of its earliest known written source. Proverbs

for which that information could not be found were not used in this paper as it was deemed crucial to be able to determine the time period and socio-cultural context of the selected proverbs in order to better analyze them.

2.1. English Proverbs about Women

Proverbs on female characteristics are very common in the English language. They can be both positive and negative and unfortunately, those that criticize women are cited much more frequently. Women are culturally perceived as the weaker sex (“A woman is the weaker vessel”). In the proverb “Frailty, thy name is woman” an abstract noun frailty is personified, and a woman’s attribute is given more importance than the woman herself. Women are expected to be gentle, delicate, shy, and not very smart (“Handle with care women and glass,” “Women are wacky, women are vain: they’d rather be pretty than have a good brain”). Women pretend they know less to avoid conflicts with men (“A man thinks he knows but the woman knows better). They change very quickly and constantly like (“A woman is a weathercock,” “Women are always in extremes”).

They cry easily (“Men must work and women must weep”). They talk too much and gossip. (“A woman’s tongue is the last thing about her that dies,” “Tell a woman and you tell the world). It is worth noting that a great number of proverbs criticize women’s talkativeness, and this is probably because a sharp comment can be a very effective weapon that most men fear. Women are also accused of not being able to keep a secret (“The only secret that a woman can keep is that of her age”). They are difficult, intriguing, plotting, argumentative and belligerent (“There was never a conflict without a woman”). They get angry easily and when they are mistreated their anger is greater than hell’s (“Women are like wasps in their anger”, “Hell has no fury like a woman scorned”). They are vengeful and don’t easily allow things to slip from their memory (“Women and elephants never forget”). They are possessive (“Women would be more charming if one could fall into their arms without falling into their hands”), stubborn, inflexible, manipulative, and always want to have their will be done (“Woman will have both her word and her way,” “Man has his will, but woman has her way”). They are a trouble for a man (“Women and dogs cause too much strife”). They are mischievous and deceitful (“A woman knows a bit more than Satan,” “Women in mischief are wiser than men”). Women are bad and evil, they are “devil’s nets”, they are “roots of all evil” and “have no souls”.

Women need attention, complements and praises (“Tell a woman she is fair, and she will soon turn fool,”. Woman’s principal value is her beauty. Youthfulness is an important part of it. Women are judged more harshly by their age and appearance than men (“A man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks”). Women have to be young and beautiful in order to be desired by men. However, a woman who wishes to enhance her beauty is then accused of being vain, easy, or a tempter of men (“A woman and a cherry are painted for their own harm”). A woman is also expected to be always good and virtuous and whenever something opposite is observed, it is strongly criticized, (“There is nothing better than a good

woman and nothing worse than a bad one”). A virtuous woman has to be hard-working and always busy with household chores as “Woman’s work is never done.” A woman who does not remain busy with domestic chores is devalued. (“Woman that loves to be at the window is like a bunch of grapes in the highway. In many proverbs a good woman is presented as the one that takes care of the house and knows that it is her place, the only place that she can be personally fulfilled or more probably the place she can be controlled and dominated by a man. In order to keep a woman in her place, some proverbs even advise men to use violence (“A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be”). After all, all women are the same, no matter their status, and especially in darkness, when they are only needed for sex (“All women look the same after the sun goes down”, A woman’s place is in the hay).

Finally, it appears that woman can be to a man the “greatest blessing” and the “worst plague” (“Woman brings to man both the greatest blessing and the greatest plague”).

Nevertheless, there are a few proverbs that depict women in a positive light such as “Women leave peace behind’em when they go,” “Men build houses: women build homes” “Men get wealth and women keep it,” “A woman has an eye more than a man,” “Behind every great man there is a great woman.” Some proverbs praise their goodness: “If a woman were as little as she is good, a pease-cod would make her a gown and a hood” or even suggest that it is high time to pass the leadership to women “Let the women wear the breeches.”

Here are more examples of the above-mentioned female characteristics in English proverbs.

Weakness

- Handle with care women and glass (1535)
- A woman and a glass are ever in danger (1535)
- A woman is the weaker vessel (64AD)
- Women are strong when they arm themselves with their weaknesses (1948)
- Frailty, thy name is woman (1600)
- Emotional instability and flightiness
- Women are always in extremes (1526)
- Men must work and women must weep (1870)
- As a great pity to see a woman weep as to see a goose go barefoot (1523)
- Women naturally deceive, weep and spin (1386)
- Women laugh when they can, and weep when they will/A woman laughs when she can and cries whenever she wishes (1570)
- A woman either loves or hates in extremes (1526)
- It’s woman’s privilege to change her mind (1748)
- A woman is a weathercock (1518)
- A woman’s mind and winter wind/Winter weather and women’s thoughts (15th century)
- Women are as wavering (changeable) as the wind (1518)

Talkativeness and indiscretion

- The only secret that a woman can keep is that of her age (1732)
- Tell a woman and you tell the world (1700)
- A woman’s strength is in her tongue (1659)
- A woman’s tongue is the last thing about her that dies (1612)
- A women’s tongue wags like a lamb’s tail (1597)

Women and music should never be dated (1773)
 He has a woman's tongue in his head (1616)
 Women will say anything (1611)
 Women are great talkers (1400)
 Where there are women and geese, there is no lack of noise (1492)

Argumentativeness, belligerence and anger

There was never a conflict without a woman (1639)
 Two women in the same house can never agree/ Two women cannot live under the same roof (1417)
 It is better to dwell in the corner of a housetop than with a brawling woman in a wide house (5th century BC)
 Never quarrel with a woman (1875)
 Women are like wasps in their anger (1594)
 Hell has no fury like a woman scorned (1697)
 Stubbornness, manipulation, inflexibility and obstinacy
 Woman will have both her word and her way/ Man has his will, but woman has her way/ Woman must have her way (1733)
 Women will have the last word (1541)
 Women will have their wills/Women must have their wills (1541)
 Women in mischief are wiser than men (1526)
 Women naturally deceive, weep and spin (1386)
 A woman needs but looks on her apron-string to find an excuse (1577)
 Man is the head, but woman turns it (1875)
 Women must have their wills while they live, because they make none when they die. (1602)
 While there is a world, it's a woman that will govern it (1690)
 Who has a woman has an eel by the tail (1576)
 Vengeance and lack of forgiveness
 Women and elephants never forget (1910)
 Women forget injuries but never forget slights (1843)

Man's trouble

Women and dogs cause too much strife/ Women and dogs set men together by ears (1541)
 The woman is the confusion (woe) of man. (10th century)
 Woman's appearance and vanity
 Women are wacky, women are vain: they'd rather be pretty than have a good brain (1940)
 The ugliest woman can come look in the mirror and think she is beautiful (1948)
 A woman's hair is her crowning glory (1948)
 Tell a woman she is fair, and she will soon turn fool (1659)
 A woman that paints puts up a bill that she is to be let (1658)
 A man is as old as he feels, and a woman as old as she looks (1907)
 A woman and a cherry are painted for their own harm (1659)
 Women and hens are lost by gadding (1591)
 One hair of a woman draws a team of horses (1591)
 Tell a woman she's a beauty and the devil will tell her ten times (1734)
 Let no woman's painting breed thy stomach's fainting (1611)
 A woman never forgets her sex. She would rather talk to a man than to an angel any day (1872)

A woman who looks much in the glass spins but little (1623)

Inferiority and lack of distinctiveness

All women and cats are black in darkness (1745)
 All women look the same after the sun goes down (1948)
 Women in state affairs are like monkeys in glass-shops (1659)
 Women's input
 A woman's advice is best at a dead lift (1425)
 A woman's advice is no great thing, but he who won't take it is a fool (1620)
 A woman's answer is never seek (1526)
 Women's counsel is cold (1275)

Woman's place

A woman's place is in the home/Woman's sphere is in the home (1897)
 A woman's place is in the hay (1897)
 A woman that loves to be at the window, is like a bunch of grapes on the highway (1666)
 The more women look in their glass, the less they look to their house (1623)
 A woman's work is never at an end/ A woman's work is never done/ Man works from sun to sun but a woman's work is never done (1570)
 Women naturally deceive, weep and spin (1386)
 Men build houses: women build homes (1938)
 Evil
 Women are necessary evils (1547)
 Women are the devil's net (1520)
 Women are the roots of all evil (1948)
 A woman knows a bit more than Satan (1559)
 Women (Wives and wind) are necessary evils (1651)
 Women have no souls (1566)
Woman as Man's Property
 A worthy woman is the crown of her husband (1948)
 Women, priests and poultry have never enough (1659)
 A woman, a dog, and a walnut tree, the more you beat them the better they be (1581)
 All women may be won (1579)

Other characteristics

If a woman were as little as she is good, a pease-cod would make her a gown and a hood (1591)
 A woman has an eye more than a man (1622)
 Women leave peace behind them when they go (1906)
 Men get wealth and women keep it. (1642)
 Let the woman wear the breeches (1564)
 Behind every great man there's a great woman (1945)
 Once a woman has given you her heart, you can never get rid of the rest of her (1696)
 The woman that deliberates (hesitates) is lost (1659)
 A woman conceals what she knows not (1386)
 Women are saints in church, angels in the street, devils in the kitchen, and apes in bed (1559)
 Women (men) may blush to hear what they were not ashamed to act (do) (1558)
 Women would be more charming if one could fall into their arms without falling into their hands (1929)
 There is nothing better than a good woman and nothing worse than a bad one (1948)
 Woman brings to man the greatest blessing and the greatest plague (1948)

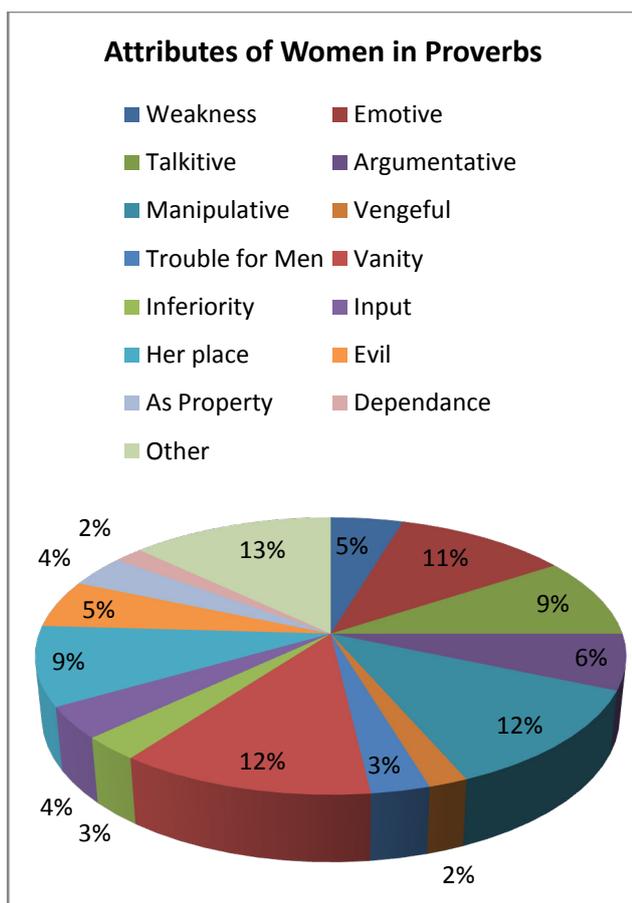


Figure 1. Diversity of women's attributes in English proverbs

2.2. English Proverbs about Men

Your paper must use a page size corresponding to A4 which is 210mm wide and 297mm long. The margins are set as follows: top= 15 mm, bottom= 15 mm, right=17.5 mm, left = 20 mm. Your paper must be in two-column format with a space of 1.93 characters between columns.

There are many English proverbs that talk about men but many of them refer to man as a representative of humankind. There are fewer proverbs that refer to the male gender, and they are less consistent than those about women, in other words, it is easier to identify certain characteristics that are repeated in diverse proverbs about women than about men.

In general, men are supposed to always be brave and strong ("Man or mouse"). They are valued on the basis of simply being a man and they are not to be measured by their height or physical stature ("Men are not to be measured by inches"). Unfortunately, proverbs about women do not defend women as for their appearance or other features (Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses"). Men ought to have money ("A man without money is no man at all") but if they do not, they still have more value than a rich woman ("A man of straw is worth a woman of gold," "A man is a man though he have but a hose on his head"). Men are superior to women. On the scale of good and bad, men are good, the devil is bad and women are somewhere in between which implies that men are better than women ("Man, woman and devil are the three degrees of comparison"). They are self-centered ("A man is a lion for his own cause") and they want to be

always right and do not like admitting their mistakes or age ("Men's years and their faults are always more than they are willing to own"). They are dominant in a relationship with a woman ("You are like a man that sought his mare, and he riding on her"). However, older men, though perhaps less exciting, treat women better than younger men ("It is better to be an old man's sweetheart than young man's slave"). Men are characterized as being unfaithful to their women and plagued with the desire to play around with other women when given half a chance. They lack self-control ("A man among the geese when the gander is away") and act without thinking ("Men may blush to hear what they are not ashamed to act"). They can be unpredictable and dangerous when out of control. When men are out of their head, they behave as wild animals in mating season ("A man without reason is a beast in season"). They are uncommunicative and inscrutable ("Men and melons are hard to know"), therefore, "Men are best loved furthest off." They are immature ("Men are but children of larger growth") and even more so when they get old ("An old man is twice a boy"). On top of that, their mothers are blamed for everything: "Men are what their mothers made them."

There are also various proverbs about men in a marriage: "A man is only half a man without a wife" but he chooses the one that can cook and serve him ("The way to man's heart is through his stomach"). Other proverbs are warnings or offer advice: "Honest men marry soon, wise men not at all," "A man is newly married who tells his wife everything" and "When a man marries his troubles begin; when a man dies, his trouble ends." Consequently, because of the eternal conflict between the genders, longevity in both sexes is precluded ("Every man would live long, but no woman would be old").

Some proverbs that mention men actually refer to women: "Rather a man without money than money without a man" and "You can't live with men; neither can you live without them." They both express dependency and a wrong assumption that a woman cannot be happy and fulfilled without a man.

Here are some more examples of the characteristics mentioned above.

Superiority

Man, woman and devil are the three degrees of comparison (1732)

A man of straw is worth a woman of gold (1591)

Men are not to be measured by inches (1603)

A man is a man though he has but a hose on his head (1386)

You are like a man that sought his mare, and he riding on her (1721)

Man is a hunter; woman is his game (1847)

Infallibility

Men's years and their faults are always more than they are willing to own (1707)

A man thinks he knows, but a woman knows better (1938)

Unfaithfulness and lack of self-control

A man among the geese when the gander is away/ The goose will play when the gander is away (1670)

A man without reason is a beast in season (1659)

Immaturity

Men are but children of larger growth (1678)

An old man is twice a boy (1539)

Marriage

A man is only half a man without a wife (1755)

Honest men marry soon, wise men not at all (1659)

When a man marries his troubles begins; when a man dies, his trouble ends (1843)

A man is newly married who tells his wife everything (1640)

Other characteristics

Man or mouse (1541)

A man is a lion for his own cause (1641)

Men and melons are hard to know (1733)

A man without money is no man at all (1592)

The way to man's heart is through his stomach (1845)

Men are best loved furthest off. (1547)

Men are what their mothers made them (1860)

He will be a man before his mother (1625)

All is well, and the man has his mare again. (1548)

Every man would live long, but no woman would be old (1714)

Men may blush to hear what they are not ashamed to act (1558)

Men seldom make passes at girls who wear glasses (1926)

Women's dependence on men

Rather a man without money than money without a man (1529)

You can't live with men; neither can you live without them (1711)

Proverbs reflect common and popular knowledge and are an outcome of shared beliefs, assumptions and experiences. As language changes over time, proverbs change and new ones are added, however, it seems that it occurs at a slower pace. Cultural behaviors, attitudes, and stereotypes are very difficult to modify. Certain stereotypes expressed in proverbs are completely baseless; others contain a certain degree of truth. Nevertheless, both of them can be better understood and explained if placed into socio-cultural context. Cameron ([2]: 2) points out that feminism "has given new urgency to the old database on <<linguistic determinism>> – the question of how far linguistic structure underpin, as opposed to just reflecting, our perceptions of the world."

In light of the above it is important to mention that among the one hundred thirty-seven proverbs analyzed in this paper only sixteen originated in or were first published in the twentieth century when many social changes took place. The great majority can be dated between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries, a time period when male dominance was very pronounced.

3. Conclusions

Feminist linguists challenged a significant number of unfair and prejudiced conventional concepts of women, some of them deep-rooted in our culture, for example those in the form of proverbs. The feminist "dominance approach" and "difference approach" offer a larger picture and a framework with which to analyze unjust assumptions and promote more positive views of both genders. They challenge harmful stereotypes of women and contribute to raising awareness of this insidious dissemination of prejudice and discrimination. Additionally, Bing and Bergvall [6] suggest that gender similarities should be taken into consideration, as well. It would be interesting to study those in proverbs, too.

It is worth mentioning that Pfaff's [7] research, published in his book, submits that no substantial brain differences between men and women have been found as regards to skills and abilities. He identifies some brain differences related to certain primitive behaviors such as mating, parenting, and aggression. Differences in empathy, leadership, and verbal fluency have been confirmed, however, they have been overestimated and they are the result of socio-cultural context. Therefore, great women leaders are more frequently seen in our times due to important social changes.

Feminist critique promotes linguistic and social advances, and political action. Litosseliti [8] states that language evolution is a product of social, political, and economic changes which include lifestyle change, social expectations, new experiences and challenges. Melier (1986: XI) points out that "while new proverbs are added to our basis stock, older ones may drop out since they no longer reflect newer attitudes." Hopefully, those offensive sexist expressions and discourse practices, as well as sexist proverbs will be eventually out of use and completely forgotten due to civic awareness as well as political and social change. Nevertheless, it requires well-informed language users to stop employing the expressions through conscious linguistic choices.

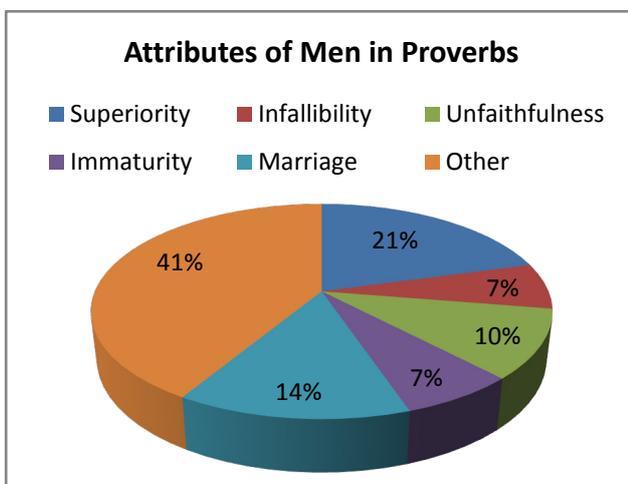


Figure 2. Attributes of men in English proverbs

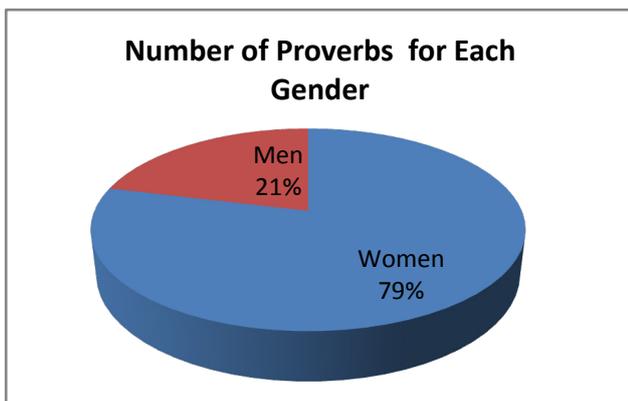


Figure 3. Disparity in the number of proverbs addressing attributes of both genders

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