

# Sexism and Political Correctness

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## Abstract

Sexism has throughout history affected women more specifically in patriarchal societies where the misogynist discourses are prevailing. Sexism is expressed in different ways and in different contexts among which language is part and parcel. From 1970s, the sexist language has been feminists' great interest studying and pointing out its manifestations and suggesting what and how could individuals speak politically correct. This paper will mainly deal with sexism and its manifestations in language. Second, it will examine the feminists' attempts to ban its use throughout societies where the patriarchal systems are deeply rooted. Third, it will also treat discourse social relations that point out how language is socially constructed and the way discourse is embedded in social practices. Fourth, the paper will examine the politically correct language obstructions and why it was refuted by many. Finally, through this paper, an examination of the very differences distinguishing between what is politically correct and politically incorrect.

**Key words:** sexism, political correctness, political incorrectness, misogynist discourse, explicit sexist language, implicit sexist language

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## Introduction

In the 1970s, Language and Gender as two distinct fields of research have been feminists' main concerns. Gender use in language has been one of the main controversial fields of research upon which distinct theoretical framework has taken place (Hellinger, M and Pauwels, A. 2007 651). Following the direct explicit and indirect implicit sexist language utilized and widely spread throughout social beliefs and traditions, feminists' work has been tentatively dealing with the discourse social relationships to understand the origins after the linguistic sexist use. Second, their mainly objective targeted making a language reform: suggesting politically correct words and sentence structures that could widely be accepted. Fatima Sadiqi (2003 1) argues that Gender is strongly related to Language and that language is understood within social context. Language and Gender are two universal phenomena that are intersected. Language is manmade: Grammar and vocabulary are made by men. Manmade refers to the phallic culture's gendered beliefs. Language can be defined as a tool through which ideologies such as racism, sexism, feminism, or patriotism are observed and studied (Hardaker, Claire. McGlashan, Mark. 2016 85). Therefore, the grammatical chunks language users communicate in daily life are no more innocent because they serve patriarchal purposes that aim at demeaning and degrading women so that they remain under men's control. Women's roles are socially reduced to being obedient wives, attractive and devoted to their husbands (James, Deborah. 1998 406). Language can then be defined as blank slate where already existing gendered beliefs are put in form of language structures. Based on theoretical framework, this paper will question the following: Is the sexist language an outcome of already existing social beliefs? Is language a social construct? Does political correctness totally differ from political incorrectness? Was political correctness obstructed by social norms and rules?

### 1. Sexism and its representations in language

#### 1.1. Phonetic and phonological sexist gender aspects

Monique Adriana Johanna Biemans (2000 7) discusses the differences seen between males' and females' speech by cultural norms. The latter consider females' speech as diverting from the males' one that is regarded as the standard. Women are seen as a degrading copy of men (Sadiqi, Fatima. 2003 4). Such cultural view according to Monique Biemans is the cause behind regarding women's speech as weak. Their speech is culturally interpreted as powerless because of their sex, but has nothing to do with biological factors. Women's organs were always seen as less important than those of men. However, the fact is that they are only different.

The minus importance that is perceived by the cultural norms results from stereotyped cultural social interpretations (Bergvall, L Victoria., Bin, Janet M., Freed, Alice F. (EDS). 1996 19). Women's average pitch is higher than men, but the causes behind women's higher decibels are manifested in having smaller larynx compared to those of men, and for anatomical reasons, the females' pitch can surpass 170 Hz, in contrast to males' average pitch that does not exceed 140 Hz. Therefore, the gender differences in speech cannot be determined only by gender social factors, but also by biological anatomical characteristics (Biemans, Adriana. 2000 10 – 11). Women's voice is regarded as "shrill" and that denotes its unpleasantness (Mills, Sara. 2008 44). Women's language and speech are described as powerless or sloppy more specifically when they produce the phoneme /t/ at the end of words, but women's intentions behind such production is to show learnedness (Benor, Sarah. 2001 12 – 15).

### 1.2. Derogatory sexist gender sexual vocabulary

Women with masculine characteristics are highly stigmatized: an authoritative woman is seen as a "bitch", a physically violent woman is regarded as "badass", and a responsible obedient woman as a "slut". However, when men adopt feminine characteristics: physically soft or weak, they are highly discredited as "fag", "pussy" and "wimp" (Schippers, M. 2007 96). Research has depicted that collocations that carry negative evaluations about women such as describing them as weak, shameful, are mostly used within social beliefs and attitudes (Hardaker, Claire. McGlashan, Mark. 2016 88). Men address women with the term "whore" as men themselves cannot be addressed so (Gowing, Laura. 1993 4). The derogatory sexual terms used to insult women are deeply rooted in societies where patriarchal systems are prevailing so much so that the insults are addressed not only to women, but also to their children and sons like, "your mother is a whore", "son of a bitch" or "son of a whore" (Berowa, Annie and Jennibella, Ella. 2019 166). Romaine (2001 159) studied the British National Corpus for the word "spinster" which is negatively associated with sexist descriptions such as: gossipy, jealous and sex-starved. Research has revealed certain terms whose sexist meaning is context related: Mills (2008 149) argues that there are some words which do not appear to be sexist unless used in contexts where its negative collocations raise, and she illustrated her view using the term "mum" that is not sexist, but the duties carried over it are controversial.

### 1.3. Syntactic sexist gender aspects

Societies, where the patriarchal system is prevailing, use the generic "he" to refer to a woman in higher professions which introduces the idea that responsibility and seriousness that are needed in high positions are provided only in men (Cameron, Deborah. 2024 97). For conservatives, "they" fails to match the gender features of a referent when they are already determined or specified when the referent is a proper name like "Thomas" [+ MASC] or "Janet" [+ FEM]. However, for "they" to be adopted as a singular pronoun is to eradicate the fact that referents that carry proper names are not grammatically related to gender features (Bjorkman, M. 2017 11). Another aspect where gender and syntax emerge is in the use of passivized sentences as in (she was raped) that dismiss or aim at hiding the name of the rapist as he is a man (Cameron, Deborah. 2024 161). Passivized sentences as agentless are mostly used when describing wrong actions committed by men to hide their names.

## 2. Feminists attempts to ban the sexist language used against women

Feminists argue that the reform cannot take place if it doesn't find its way towards not only changing language use, but also changing the social beliefs and structures. The language itself is affected by updating social moves through institutional practices (Mills, Sara. 2008 17). Women's inclusion at the institutional level in higher professions despite men's disagreement, mitigates the linguistic reform to be established. Feminists' attempts to ban the sexist language has gone through the third wave that focused on linguistic concerns: the way women use language and how society transmits gender inequalities through language (Mills, Sara. 2008 20 – 23). Fairclough argues that language change and its relation to culture has to be well understood (Fairclough, N. 2003 18): he acknowledges that discourse is embedded in social practices through, 1) discourses: the social practices are situated in multifaceted social practice. 2) genres: can be defined as the way interviews, conversations, and lectures take place. 3) styles: exist through many ways in leadership or management (Fairclough, N. 2003 23). For this reason, language reform was seen as far from being achieved as it goes against social traditions and customs (Hellinger, M. and Pauwels, A. 2007 654). The political correctness itself stands as one aspect of social practices (Talbot, M. 2007 759): its establishment within society is contingent upon societal endorsement.

## 3. Political correctness

The sexist language can also be manifested in the male-oriented professions use in the public sphere as such "policeman", "craftsman", and "fisherman" that ostracize women from their opportunities in the public sphere. Such terms however could have been used otherwise like "craftsperson", "police officer" or "fisher"

(Mills, Sara. 2008 50). Many attempts were made to deny the sexist language which was then labelled as “the male chauvinist pig” or the political correctness which reveal a great awareness towards the sexist language effect on the social cultural beliefs as a whole (Mills, S. 2008 98). Such attempts did not deeply change or attain a politically correct language, but rather fell in the opposite direction that under-estimate women’s skills in higher professions. Mills (2008 59) argues that terms that end in suffixes like “ette” or “ess” in feminizing male-oriented professions are seen like diminutives, therefore belittling women’s capacities in higher professions. The sexist linguistic expressions occur in the social attitudes and practices as “she is a second Einstein” or “he plays like a girl”. The social beliefs attribute smartness to males, but stupidity and foolishness to females (Hellinger, M and Pauwels, A. 2007 653). The political correctness has also focused on syntactic aspects that are exemplified in the substitution of the masculine “he” by the singular “they” in women’s professional work (Mills, S. 2008 14). The singular “they” is what feminists have reacted on when referring to both genders or when the gender is not important or unknown. For instance, sentences like: a) “Anyone can play this game if they like” (mixed-sex distributive), b) “someone has put their pen on my desk” (unknown sex), or c) “Either Jilian or John should do their homework” (mixed-sex disjunctive) witness the use of the singular “they” instead of “he”. Such view goes against the traditional grammarians’ conception that the use of “he” is what is believed to be grammatical (Bodine, Ann. 1975 13 – 131). Braun (1997 5) has acknowledged the use of the generic “he” in such contexts is referred to as “MAN” (Male as Norm Principle): such a term describes the man as the norm, but women are only secondary in societies with androcentric values.

#### 4. Political correctness obstructions

Many opposed political correctness use. Van Dijk stated the elite’s use of the gender-free language hides their attentive sexist discourse (1995 9). Further, research pointed out that language reform cannot take place as gendered terms like /moħami/ (lawyer) in Arabic or /wz:r/ (minister) are utilized when the gender in unnecessary or not known are deeply rooted in social beliefs (Hellinger, M and Pauwels, A. 2007 653 – 660). The political correctness is embedded in feminists’ and anti-racists’ concerns through which they fight against sexist languages, yet the language reform cannot just happen without a deep understanding of how culture is shaped within language (Fairclough, N. (2003) 21 – 22). Mills has argued that accusing someone as being sexist is misunderstood as it seems like offending or attacking someone’s attitudes or personal beliefs which stands against being accepted or grasped in the way it should be (2008 12 – 13).

Language and social structures are intersected as language shapes and forms the social attitudes, and if the reform is made at the institutional level, will attain a great impact on society as a whole (Mills, S. 2008 18). Nevertheless, the political correctness known as (pc) to take place has to go through two salient things: 1) women’s inclusion in higher professions, 2) feminists’ campaigns: the feminist campaigns have gone through three waves, and the third feminist wave focused on linguistic concerns: the way women use language and how society transmits gender inequalities through language. Their concerns were both local and made at the institutional level. They argue that if the political correctness takes place at the local level, its impact will be established in society as a whole (Mills, S. 2008 20 – 23 – 30). On the other hand, Fairclough argues that a correct understanding of language and its relationship to social practices will pave the way towards establishing a politically correct language: he states that the relationship is interpreted through discourses that are understood through the way interactions occur, genres that determine the way social conversations and lectures take place, and styles that exist through the many ways in leadership and management (Fairclough, N. 2003 22 – 23). He argues that discourses are understood in the way things are like how interactions occur (2003 23). Individuals’ attitudes within social context are governed by cultural conventions and norms (Cameron, Deborah. 1994 24).

In U.K, the term political correctness has been used as a way of criticizing various political targets, particularly Labour Party under Tony Blair (Johnson, S., Culpeper, J. and Suhr, S. 2003 38). Its use has been used in the negative sense: it has been emerged as a title that implies criticism (Talbot, M. 2007 754). Also, in 2004, the political correctness term has been negatively utilized in a Radio 4 Programme when William Hague, the former conservative leader considered the political correctness a threat to the British people safety (Talbot, M. 2007 755). Cameron Deborah (1994 22) has acknowledged the reactions against the political correctness term is that, 1) it distorts the word meaning, 2) it belittles the world of politics through its focus on language rather than dealing with realistic concerns. Correspondingly, Bramson (2006 1) claims that the linguistic reform is a matter that has to be dealt with semantically as it has nothing to do with politics.

#### 5. Political incorrectness

Mills (2008 111) describes political incorrectness as an indirect (implicit) way of offensiveness, that shouldn’t be confused with racism. In contrast to the sexist language that is direct and explicit, the political incorrectness according to her, at least occurs in humorous and hilarious contexts. The political incorrectness is,

in fact, embedded in humour like in the use of jokes. The latter are not made innocently, but rather carry gendered stereotypes, and men are more invited to make fun of the jokes about women which, in fact, need to be corrected (Sunderland. 2007 213 – 214). Girls are unlikely to laugh at jokes about men. They, in general, do not naturally dispose in favor of their own sex (Kotthoff. 2000 59). The humorous contexts about women show a sexist language used against them: women are always portrayed as selfish, and their utterances mean the opposite of what they intend to do, but men are regarded as direct (Crawford. 1995 146).

### 5.1. Humour (Jokes)

Mills (2008 142) confirms her receipt of jokes about men and women at work and which they describe women as selfish, but men as admirers of sex and football. Sunderland (2007 219) suggests a range of positions to be done as part of the “Nexus Practice” once the ironical jokes are received: 1) checking the messages, 2) carefully reading them, 3) subjecting the jokes to intellectual critique, 4) changing the women’s object position (the one laughed at) by the subject position, and describe them as simply “silly”. Likewise, Mills (2008 144) argues that the media plays an important role in representing gendered beliefs and stereotypes, she exemplified with the British Television Programme “Men behaving badly” represent women as “Totty”: a term used to describe childish behaviours. Another example provided in her study about media’s use of “jokes” as a tool that transmits gendered messages is the example of the sexist media discourse, by DJ Chris Moyles, on Radio, who describes females as “cow”, “tart”, and “dippy”, but when was criticized, he argued that the objective behind such use of terms is laugh at sexist usage in general which is not convincing according to Mills (Mills, Sara. 2008 145). The jokes are psychologically understood as the speaker’s desire to make the other person laugh. Freud (1905 143) argues that the individual’s use of jokes is strongly associated with laughter that comes out of it, and that is made at the level of the other person’s desire to hear the joke. The sexist messages carried in the use of jokes are therefore intended to create stereotyped gender images about women and to make social individuals laugh at.

### 5.2. Presuppositions

Presuppositions in sexist language are what is intended to mean by saying something. Sexist implications carried in indirect sexist language can be more than the direct one. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003 91) argues that the implications carried in words are believed to be based on sexism and that the indirect sexist language carries gender ideologies more than explicit messages. Mills (2008 146) argues that prepositions in sexism can be illustrated in the following: a message addressed to women about whether they finished gossiping. Such a question carries sexist messages in its ties, 1) trivializing women’s talk, 2) women are more likely to gossip than men, 3) women’s talk is stereotypically described as gossip. Cameron Deborah (2006 41) argues that presuppositions can also be used in ads to transmit gender messages, she argues that advertisers do not feel embarrassed when using sexist language in ads as they know that if challenged as sexist, it will be interpreted as only one’s personal reading of the ad, but doesn’t represent the view of the majority. Presuppositions are then tools through which sexist linguistic terms are transmitted in jokes with the aim of creating gendered social images that categorise women as inferior social beings.

## Conclusion

Studying Gender and Language which sexism is part and parcel are of great importance in research that leads to understanding the emergence of political correctness as a new term in the 1970s. The introduction of the term at the university and at the level of the social life in general brings into existence the prerequisite eradication of all forms of sexism in Language be it phonetically, phonologically or syntactically represented. Sexism has then been divided into two types: the direct, and the indirect sexist language use. The direct sexism has then been identified as an explicit form of language use. Mills (2008 45) identified its use phonetically as “feisty” that socially and culturally denotes the negatively perception of women’s high pitch, phonologically represented in women’s production of the phoneme /t/ that is perceived as “sloppy” (Benor, Sarah. 2001 12), and syntactically illustrated in the use of the generic “he” in contexts where the gender is not known or not important to mention (Hellinger and Bussmann, H. eds. 2001 11). However, the indirect sexism is implicitly disseminated in jokes (irony) or through presuppositions.

The sexist occurrences in language brought political correctness into introduction. The term has been first meant to reform the language communicated in daily use although have been criticized by many as drawing strict boundaries and limits individuals’ freedom in speech. Political correctness was then utilized in the wrong way in many fields including the world of politics, but then was criticised as a term that has nothing to do with political affairs as its birth was first meant to bring about changes in language with the objective of eliminating and

eradicating sexist linguistic terms manifested in language use. Political correctness then, aimed at refining phonetic sexist aspects: that women's voice is simply different from men's for anatomical reasons, phonologically: girls' production of phonemes like /t/ is to show learnedness, and syntactic sexist gender aspects in refining the generic "he" with the singular "they".

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