

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

In their studies of the English language, linguists and feminists have acknowledged that men and women speak different languages. Davidson and Gordon (1979:160) say that women use different adjectives and adverbs, and are more verbose than men.

Several aspects of contemporary English usage seem to reveal prejudicial attitudes demeaning and degrading women while glorifying men, thus apparently reflecting dominant social values (Smith,1985:13). Some quarters suggest that language reflects the weaker position of women. Davidson and Gordon (1979:160) observe that women hedge their statements with qualifiers such as “more or less” or “maybe” and also use “tags” at the end of sentences that consequently make them sound more tentative.

Such views continue to interest linguists and feminists alike and this has led to numerous exploratory studies in the area of language and gender. Graddol and Swann (1989:3) note that the study of language and gender has enjoyed phenomenal growth in the last decade and that it holds out the promise not only of advancing

linguistic and social theory, but also of providing a social critique and a programme of political action aimed at reducing sexual inequality.

Swann (1992) claims that language has predominantly been a feminist issue because words and meanings made available to talk about people tend to marginalize women:

The best known example of this must be the use, in English, of “generic” “he” and “man” to represent both women and men, but feminists have also identified several “lexical gaps” – an absence of words to refer to women’s experiences. When women get into the language, they are often portrayed negatively or in relation to men.

(1992:56)

Besides looking at how women are represented in the English language, feminists and linguists have also been concerned with how women and men use the language. From a very young age, children are taught about social norms, that is, ways of behaviour that include ways of speaking. Young girls, for example, are told to “speak like ladies”. Lakoff (1975:5) observes that if a little girl “talks rough” like a boy, she will normally be ostracised, scolded, or made fun of.

In the present study, this researcher will look at the use of sexism in the mass media, focusing on sexist language found in two local magazines published in Malaysia. Although this researcher has found several studies done on sexism, he notes that such studies have predominantly focused on the use of the English language in countries where English is the native language. Today, the English language plays a crucial role in many countries throughout the world where English is not the native

language. However, this researcher notes that research in such countries is still lacking. As such, it is the intention of this researcher to focus on sexist language used in Malaysia, a country that recognises English as its second language. It is hoped that this research will in a small way contribute to the greater understanding of the impact the English language has in a country where English is the second language.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Jenkins and Kramarae (1981) thought that they were the first women to show concern over sexism in language use and language structure. However, they have since discovered that others have written at length of the phenomenon. For example, Jenkins and Kramarae (1981:12) note that Parson (1913) discusses what she hears as different, stereotypical, and socially respectable speech for women and for men.

Research and documented proof of sexism in language and its negative impact on society dates back to the early 1900s. As we approach the new millennium, we need to be more aware of sexism in language and therefore we need to take the right steps in reducing, if not eradicating, sexism from our repertoire. However, more recent research presented by many linguists and feminists still indicate that sexism in the English language is still widely in use. It is this researcher's intention to study the

existence of sexism as found in the written form, specifically in two local English language magazines.

The English language plays a vital role within the Malaysian community. It pervades all areas of social life in Malaysia, especially in the area that this study is based on - the mass media. The media presently has a tremendous impact on the public at large, as pointed by Davidson and Gordon:

The media are apparently used primarily as sources of entertainment and only to a lesser extent as sources of information. Depending on the medium and the sample, in terms of mere existence, studies find males outnumbering females by at least two-to-one and sometimes by as much as four-to-one. Activities in which males are engaged embrace a wide range, including activities that are stereotypically masculine and those that are not linked to gender. Females are shown in a narrow range of settings and activities; they are restricted basically to activity stereotyped as uniquely feminine and do little that is not sex-typed.

(1979:165)

Davidson and Gordon's (1979) observation suggests that sexist practices do take place in the mass media and it is women who are portrayed unfairly by the media. The widespread existence of sexist practices in the mass media is a reflection of the acceptance of sexism by a particular society. Therefore, the assumption in the present study is that any use of sexist language in the Malaysian mass media is, to a certain extent, a reflection of the attitude of Malaysian readers towards sexist language.

1.2 Research Questions

Researchers to date have documented many gender-based differences, and as significantly, in many cases have failed to support hypothesised differences (Kramarae:1981). Books that have documented such research all point to research carried out in countries where English is the native language. This researcher will base his study on such related studies but will look at the usage of the English language in Malaysia where it is not the native language.

In this exploratory study, this researcher will focus on the existence of sexism in the Malaysian mass media. For this purpose this researcher will study two locally published magazines, namely, *Men's Review* and *Female*. This researcher will focus on specific areas in these magazines that this researcher feels exemplifies the existence of sexism.

This study will answer the following research questions:

1. Do local magazines suggest stereotypical gender based roles for men and women?
2. Is there a greater number of sexist terms used to refer to any particular gender in local magazines?

3. Between the elements of the writer's gender and the gender of the target audience, which of these two elements determines the usage of sexist language in magazine articles?

1.3 Significance of the Study

Ivy and Backlund (1994:3) observe that it is almost impossible to open a magazine or a newspaper these days without coming across someone discussing the "problems that plague the sexes". The purpose of this study is to research how the sexes are discussed, referred to or depicted in the written form, specifically in the two local magazines, namely, *Female* and *Men's Review*.

The two magazines chosen as corpus in the present study are based on the assumption that the target audience is the "upwardly mobile" Malaysian community. By the term "upwardly mobile", this researcher is referring to Malaysians who are educated, possibly with some form of tertiary education and who are in the higher income bracket of Malaysian society. They would also be individuals who are proficient in the English language. They could be career-oriented individuals who are working towards moving up the social ladder.

This working definition is based on several observations. The first is the relatively higher price of the respective magazines, with *Female* costing RM6.00 per issue and *Men's Review* costing RM7.50 per issue (correct at the time of writing this thesis).

The advertisements for designer label clothing and accessories in the magazines also suggest that the publishers of these magazines have the higher income individuals in mind. The articles in the magazines, which range from articles about successful career women to articles about expensive hobbies for successful men, also indicate that the publishers have the more upwardly mobile members of the community in mind.

It is this upwardly mobile Malaysian community that this researcher believes should be especially sensitive towards the need to avoid sexism. The awareness of sexism in this bracket of the Malaysian community will serve as an indication of how aware the Malaysian community at large is of sexism. Sexual language profoundly affects how women and men perceive the sexes as well as how they communicate with one another (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:4). Therefore, writers, editors and publishers of these magazines have an obligation to be aware of the impact that they have on the Malaysian community.

It is this researcher's hope that sexism can be eliminated in the written form, specifically in magazines that influence a large portion of the affluent Malaysian community. Ivy and Backlund (1994:95) suggest that anyone who communicates in a sexist manner, whether unconsciously or otherwise, does in fact hold some form of sexist attitudes. Therefore, understanding what constitutes sexism in language can be the first step in communicating through a medium that is free from such usage.

Eliminating sexist language and practices from oral and written communication is an initial step in the process of freeing the mind from sexist attitudes.

1.4 Rationale of the Study

Thorne and Henley (1975:11) found that the literature on sexual differentiation of speech deals largely with the white, middle - and upper-middle-class segment of the population. Today, the English language no longer belongs solely to this group. There is a far wider community that uses the English language. Strevens (1982:2) says that English is used by a total of some 700 million people for whom it is a foreign language. Thus English is used more by those for whom it is a foreign language than by native speakers (Strevens,1982:20). This being the case, this researcher believes that studies into the usage of the English language among non-native speakers should be increased in order to understand the effect the English language has in non-native cultures.

The impact that the English language has on the Malaysian community continues to be strong even after 40 years of independence. The patriarchal roots of the English language have long been planted in the Malaysian society, which uses the English language for everyday communication. This researcher is interested in discovering how widespread sexist language is within the English speaking community of Malaysia. It would be interesting to see if research into sexism in a country where

English is a second language, draws similar results with research done in countries where English is the native language.

Preliminary research carried out by this researcher indicates that the study of sexism in language in an *ESL* setting, specifically in Malaysia, is lacking and is long overdue. We have to be aware of sexism because sexism is synonymous with inequality. As writers, teachers and parents, we have an obligation now to weigh our words, to examine them, and to use them with greater care (Graham,1975:63). Children of both sexes deserve equal treatment, in life and in language, and we should not offer them anything less.

1.5 Limitations of the Study

Feminists and linguists alike have frequently differed on their opinion of what is and what is not sexist language. A study carried out by Williams and Best (1977) exemplifies how divided linguists and feminists are on determining what ~~is~~ or is not sexist. Anyone could claim that one is reading too much into sexist language. However, one cannot deny that there are terms and practices in the English language which are seen to be sexist. A tolerant society should take the necessary steps to rid itself of a linguistic practice that is seen to be sexist, even if it is only by a small section of our society that finds the practice sexist. For the purpose of this study, this researcher will define a term or a linguistic practice as sexist based upon the views of linguists and feminists who have had their works published.

This researcher will be focusing on two locally published magazines in Malaysia. It would be desirable to focus on magazines that have the widest circulation in Malaysia. However, it is difficult to determine which magazine has the widest circulation as publishers are intent on maintaining a popular image. Reports on circulation are difficult to come by and even if they are revealed, they may not necessarily reflect the actual circulation as magazines are frequently shared amongst friends and office colleagues. Therefore, although this researcher has reason to believe that these magazines have a relatively wide circulation, this researcher's choice of *Female* and *Men's Review* is not based on the fact that they are the most popular magazines in Malaysia. They are instead taken to represent local magazines that have a gender specific audience in mind.