

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **2.0 Introduction**

Language and its relationship with gender has been the focus of discussions among linguists and feminists for some time now. In their studies on language and gender, they have extensively documented the existence of linguistic sexism. As a broad umbrella term, “linguistic sexism” covers a wide and diverse range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labelled and referred to, but also how realised language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants (Atkinson, 1993:403).

In this chapter, this researcher will discuss the definition of sexism and sexist language, the different forms of sexist language and the various linguistic practices that are deemed as sexist in the English language by researchers in the field. The influence of sexism in the mass media in moulding social thoughts will also be discussed.

#### **2.1 Sexism and Sexist Language: A Working Definition**

Spendier (1985) identifies the English language as a “man-made” language that contributes to gender inequality. She also suggests that women have successfully

been kept in a lowly position because English developed in a patriarchal society. Spender (1983:408) suggests that men have shaped language to their own advantage, that is, to legitimate their own primacy and to create a world in which they are the central figures.

On the issue of linguistic imbalance, several feminists and linguists concur with Spender. Kramarae (1981:1) says that women are not as free or able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. Cameron (1985:5) says that women struggle to reinterpret their experience because language itself does not guarantee communication, and many women actually feel inhibited by the inadequacy of words.

Before going further, the terms *sexism* and *sexist language* will be defined and discussed.

### 2.1.1 Sexism

Graddol and Swann (1989) define *sexism* as:

Any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds. Although according to this definition, discrimination may take place against women or men, in practice, discrimination against women has been seen as more serious, and has most concerned those who oppose sexism.

(1989:96)

Cameron (1985:84) suggests that the best known aspect of *sexism* in language is what feminists and linguists call *he/man language*: the use of male pronouns as generic or unspecified terms, and the use of *man* and *mankind* to mean the whole human race. As members of the dominant group, having ascertained that their male identity is constant, males are not required to modify their understanding when they confront forms of the *he/man language* but women on the other hand have to constantly look for clues as to whether or not they are included in the *he/man language* (Spender:1993). Clearly the effects of *he/man language* are considerable with enormous ramifications for the inequality of the sexes.

### 2.1.2 Sexist Language

Ivy and Backlund (1994) note that the term *sexist language* is related to the term *sexism* in the following way:

*Sexism* is attitudes and/or behaviour that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other. From this definition, it follows that ***sexist language*** would be verbal communication that conveys those differential attitudes or behaviours.

(1994:72)

Although Ivy and Backlund (1994) state that sexist language involves verbal communication, they provide examples of the occurrence of sexist language in both the verbal and written form. Therefore, this researcher will take their definition of sexist language to encompass both the verbal and the written form.

Cameron (1985:72) defines sexist language as a language that contains a lexicon and a grammatical structure that excludes, insults or trivialises women. Disagreements about what is and what is not sexist are common. One may disagree about whether discrimination has taken place, or whether it has been made on relevant grounds (Graddol and Swann,1989:96). Ivy and Backlund (1994:72) agree on this point saying that it is fairly easy to define sexist language, but it is tougher to label something said or written as sexist. The definitions given so far refer to a wide range of social practices that discriminate against women or men. Although this researcher will be looking at the broader issue of sexism, he will be paying particular attention to the role of language in promoting sexism.

If sexism is a practice of denigrating or discriminating one sex over another, then language is a powerful tool for this practice. In discussing sexist practices in the English language, it must be understood that English is a patriarchal language. Spender (1985) describes patriarchy as a self-perpetuating society based on the belief that the male is a superior sex. This belief is repeatedly stressed in many ways within the English language. For example, in using terms such as “lady doctor” and “career girl”, the message appears to be that the typical adult person and the typical worker is male and that being female is atypical (Basow,1992:142). On concluding about sexist language, Ivy and Backlund (1994:73) say it best when they say the existence of sexist language is not the fault of anyone alive; however, we do not have to live with sexist language just because it is there.



## 2.2 Forms of Sexist Language

Having defined sexist language, it is important that we are able to identify the various forms that sexist language takes.

### 2.2.1 The Pronoun Problem

The generic masculine pronoun *he* (and its derivatives *his*, *him* and *himself*) are frequently used in reference to all persons, both female and male. Ivy and Backlund (1994:74) cite several studies (Cole, Hill and Dayley:1983; Hamilton:1988; Mackay:1980; Moulton, Robinson and Elias:1978; Todd-Mancillas:1981) conducted since the 1970s which have shown evidence that the generic *he* is not generic at all but instead conjures up masculine images. Coates (1986:23) claims that the superiority of the male is unabashedly prescribed for linguistic usage and exemplifies her stand by giving the following three sentences as examples:

1. Someone knocked at the door but *they* had gone when I got downstairs.
2. Someone knocked at the door but *he or she* had gone when I got downstairs.
3. Someone knocked at the door but *he* had gone when I got downstairs.

According to Coates (1986:23), prescriptive grammarians would only consider the last sentence as “correct”, whilst finding the first sentence as “incorrect” and the second “clumsy”.

Ivy and Backlund (1994) cite other studies (Briene and Lanktree:1983; Brooks:1983; Ivy:1986 and Stericker:1981) which suggest that the exclusive usage of the generic masculine pronoun could likely lead to the following:

1. It maintains sex-based perceptions.
2. It shapes people's attitudes about careers that are "appropriate" for one sex but not the other.
3. It causes some women to believe that certain jobs and roles aren't attainable.
4. It contributes to the belief that men deserve higher status in society than women do.

(1994:75)

Clearly, the usage of the masculine pronoun only encourages the practice of placing the male form foremost in our minds.

### **2.2.2. Man-Linked Terminology**

Basow (1992) contends that the most striking way of ignoring females via language is by using the masculine gender to refer to human beings in general. Examples of such terms include "chairman", "best man for the job", "mankind" and "the working man". The usage of the masculine generic frequently leads to confusion. For

instance, the word *man* and the derivative pronouns *his* and *him* in the following quote may or may not refer to all persons, female and male:

A *man* should stop *his* ears  
against paralysing terror and  
run the race that is set before  
*him* with a single mind.

*Robert Louis Stevenson*

Even though a woman reading the above quotation may have to ponder if she is included in Stevenson's words of wisdom, she would not be forgiven if she understood a notice on a door to an exclusive club which read "Men Only" to mean all persons male and female. She is constantly required to decipher a code that is rarely of concern to men.

Even though linguists have proven that the word *man* did originally suggest a generic form similar to the term *human*, the problem is that *man* has developed to mean *male* persons, not *all* persons (Ivy and Backlund:1994). Experiments in linguistics reveal that when faced with generic *man*, women consciously exclude themselves from the reference (Cameron,1985:84). Therefore, the continued usage of man-linked terminology only advances the symbol of *man* at the expense of women (Spender:1985).

### 2.2.3 Feminine Suffixes

Ivy and Backlund (1994:80) suggest that the use of suffixes draw attention to the sex of the person being referred to when it is not in fact necessary. They contend that the use of suffixes only leads to the practice of stereotyping women. Miller and Swift (1988) offer an explanation related to the use of French and Latin suffixes:

When French or Latin feminine-gender suffixes like *-ess* and *-trix* are attached to words to designate women, even if the addition is intended as a courtesy, the basic form acquires a predominantly masculine sense with the unavoidable implication that the feminine-gender form represents a non-standard variation. Once again the male is identified as the norm, the female as an aberration.

(1988:135)

Although suffixes are commonly used in the English language to signal gender such as in the term “princess” and “actress”, feminists contend that it is merely a tool to imply that maleness is the norm. Feminists suggest that in terms such as “actor” and “actress”, the masculine term is sometimes taken to be generic and instances such as these can only lead to confusion.

### 2.2.4. Derogatory Terms

There are many derogatory terms for human beings. Using animal, food and plant terms as labels for men and women can be interpreted as demeaning and sexist (Ivy and Backlund,1994:81). Appendix A lists such terms. Lakoff (1975:31) observes

that animal names may be applied to both men and women but the animal names used in reference to women are nearly always sexual in nature.

Some linguists argue that animal, food and plant terms such as *chick* and *tart* are terms of endearment but feminists reject this argument and suggest that such terms are only acceptable in certain contexts and within certain relationships - those in which two people's feeling and regard for each other are mutually understood (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:82). Therefore, the usage of a term such as "chick" to refer to women in general is both demeaning and insulting.

### **2.2.5 Sexual Language**

Language can be used in a sexist manner to identify persons as sexual partners and to describe sexual acts between women and men (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:84). Cameron (1985:76) notes that taboo words tend to refer to women's bodies rather than men's. She also notes that while there are terms that refer to women as sexual prey (*ass*, *tail*, *crumpet* and *skirt*), no such terms exist for men. Some quarters of society believe that sexual language is a male domain. Strainchamps (1972:359) relates the difficulty she faced in publishing a piece of her writing on expletive language simply because the language used in her writing was supposedly not the kind of language that women used. The assumption is that some words, especially words seen as sexually expletive, is a taboo subject for women. However, feminists

and linguists such as Ivy and Backlund (1994:84) note that women do use terms that imply sexual promiscuity (slut, easy, etc.).

Although these researchers disagree on who more frequently uses sexual language, they all agree that women more often than men are thought of, talked about, and communicated to in this way (Ivy and Backlund,1994:84). This is yet another reason why many feminists and linguists view sexist language as a feminine issue.

## **2.3 Sexist Linguistic Practices**

Having looked at the different forms of sexist language, we should also take note of certain sexist linguistic practices that linguists and feminists have identified in the English language.

### **2.3.1 The Order of Terms**

The convention of placing males first whenever reference is made to people of both sexes is a deeply embedded habit in writing and speech that can only be broken by a conscious effort (Miller and Swift,1988:116).

If masculine terms precede feminine terms occasionally, it would not be seen as a problem. However, when such a practice becomes a pattern and is accepted as the

norm, then it encourages the idea that men take precedence over women. Miller and Swift (1988) say:

People come up with all sorts of reasons why in word pairs males almost always come first: *men and women*, *male and female*, *his and hers*, *boys and girls*, *guys and dolls*, etc. Some linguists theorize that it is easier to say a single syllable word like *men* than a two-syllable word like *women*, and that we tend to put the single syllable word first as a result. (1988:117)

Although there may be some substance to such a theory, the fact remains that too often, the female form comes in second. While the theory remains true for word pairs such as “men and women”, it does not hold true for terms such as “husbands and wives” and “Adam and Eve” (Miller and Swift:1988). Therefore, feminists maintain that this practice of placing males before females is indeed a sexist linguistic practice.

### 2.3.2 Parallel Construction

Although parallel construction refers to the use of gender-fair parallel terms when referring to men and women, linguists and feminists alike contend that such terms are not parallel but are instead sexist.

Miller and Swift (1988:102) discuss the widely used phrase “man and wife”. They observe that, in Western societies while a man’s status as a person remains in tact after marriage, a woman is relegated to the role of wife. From then on, she is referred to based on her relationship to a man.

Cameron (1985) observes that terms take on a negative connotation when they become associated with women. Cameron (1985:77) gives examples of semantic non-equivalence in terms such as *governor* (powerful, ruler) and *governess* (poor woman looking after children); *master* (competent or powerful man) and *mistress* (sexual and economic dependent); *tramp* (homeless man) and *tramp* (prostitute woman). Similarly, Basow (1992:142) notes that while terms such as *dame* and *madam* have double meanings, their male counterparts, *lord* and *sir*, do not. For example, the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (1987) defines the term "madam" as a "respectful form of address to a woman" as well as a "woman who manages a brothel."

### 2.3.3 References to Relationships

Ivy and Backlund (1994:89) observe that women more often than men are identified, introduced and talked to based on their relationship to men. Lakoff (1975:34) provides the following sentences to support this view:

1. Mary is John's widow.
2. \* John is Mary's widower.

Lakoff (1975) notes that the term "widow" commonly occurs with a possessive preceding it, in this case, the name of the woman's late husband. Although he is dead, she is still defined by her relationship to him but the widower is no longer



defined in terms of his wife (Lakoff,1975:34). In other words, while men maintain their identity, women are reduced to a role they play in relation to a man even after the death of their spouse.

#### **2.3.4 Titles and Salutations**

Lakoff (1975:36) maintains that there is a lack of parallelism in men's and women's titles. Miller and Swift (1988:124) note that the titles such as *Miss.* and *Mrs.* began to be used to distinguish between single women and married women during the late eighteenth century. However, although these terms developed to differentiate between women who were married and those who were single, no such parallel developed to differentiate men. A man can be married, single, divorced or widowed and yet have the same title.

Spender (1985:27) suggests that the practice of labelling women as married or single serves supremely sexist ends because it conveniently signals who is 'fair game' from the male point of view. This practice appears to suggest that women are objects to be possessed.

### 2.3.5 Euphemisms and Insults

The English language has a large repertoire of sexist expressions made up of metaphors or euphemisms that are used to substitute other terms (refer to Appendix B). Ivy and Backlund (1994:93) suggest that such masculine and feminine expressions be avoided as their usage communicates exclusivity of one sex in a given situation.

Lakoff's (1975) observations on the use of the term *lady* and *girl* as euphemisms for the word *woman* are especially insightful. Lakoff (1975:23) contends that if the terms *woman* and *lady* are used interchangeably in a sentence, the use of the latter tends to carry with it overtones of chivalry; thus implying that a "lady" is helpless, and cannot do things for herself. Adjectives that may be negatively connoted by the term *lady* include frivolous, scatterbrained, frail, sugary sweet, fluttery, insincere, demure, hyperpolite, helpless, flatterable, immature, and frigid (sexually repressed or inactive) (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:92).

In recalling youth, frivolity and immaturity, *girl* brings to mind irresponsibility (Lakoff, 1975:25). Ivy and Backlund (1994:92) also note that when males are called *guys*, females are usually called *girls* rather than *gals*. One might argue that men are sometimes referred to as *boys* as in "a night out with the boys". However feminists contend that the situations in which women are referred to as *girls* far outnumber the ones in which men are referred to as *boys*. As the term *girl* brings with it such

negative connotations, this is yet another example that explains why sexism is a feminist issue.

Miller and Swift (1988:84) suggest that the female terms (such as *lady* and *girl*) have “psychic overtones”; of immaturity and dependence in the case of *girl*; of conformity and decorum in the case of *lady*.

Ivy and Backlund (1994) also make an interesting point on insult terms. They note that even derogatory terms that are used on men, are in some way associated with women:

*A bastard* by definition, describes a child who doesn't know who his or her father is. The implication is that the mother was possibly someone who 'slept around' thus suggesting that the mother figure is really the person at fault. If a man is called a “son of a bitch”, it can be more of an indictment of the mother than the son, because the term *bitch* is used more often to demean a woman than to describe a female dog.

(1994: 94)

The implication here is that even when men coin terms to insult men, they are in actual fact insulting women. When a man is called a “bastard” or a “son of a bitch”, it is his mother who is being insulted.

### **2.3.6. Active Man and Passive Woman**

Besides sexually demeaning terminology, there is also sexual language that describes sexual activity between women and men. Cameron (1985) notes that when

coining terminology, only the male point of view is taken into account. She draws attention to terms related to sex and sexuality in which most words related to sexual acts make it into something men do to women (Cameron,1985:81). The main emphasis is on verbs and the effect of these verbs on the roles that women and men take during sexual activity.

In describing sexual activity with words such as “poke” and “screw”, the emphasis has been on the part which males have played (Spender:1985). The implication of all this, according to Spender (1985:178), is that like many other activities, there are no words for sexual behaviour which encode the experience from the female perspective. Women are again the muted group because the English language does not provide them with a way to relate their experience from a female perspective (Spender:1985). If it is true that women are unable to express their thoughts and emotions using the English language, then this is certainly an indication of linguistic imbalance.

## **2.4 Sexism in the Mass Media**

No one can deny the powerful impact the mass media has in our daily lives. It is an effective communicative tool and can serve to reflect certain attitudes and preconceived notions present in a particular society. The media is also known to influence our thoughts and behaviour. Sexism in the mass media is well documented. Basow (1992:158) notes, for example, that in children's shows, male

characters are more likely to be aggressive, constructive, direct, and helpful while females are more likely to be shown as deferent and as being punished for a high level of activity.

The media affects the way we communicate in a society. In what he calls the Agenda-Setting Theory, Bittner (1989) as cited in Ivy and Backlund (1994:107) explains that it is quite possible that female and male consumers of the mass media may be allowing the media to set an agenda for what should be most important to them. In other words, a false dichotomy is created.

The language that men and women are represented to use in movies, television, novels and magazines serves as a yard stick which advocates the kind of language that is acceptable for women in society. Whether we are conscious of this or not, the media has successfully dictated stereotypical roles for the sexes. Basow (1992) notes that even college students and older adults may be affected by the gender messages on television. For example, several studies have indicated that viewing women and men in non-traditional as opposed to traditional roles in television has been found to improve women college students' self-confidence, independence of judgement, and achievement aspirations (Basow,1992:163). There is no denying that the mass media today plays an important role in moulding social thoughts.

## **2.5. Parallel Studies on Sexist Language.**

In this section, this researcher will discuss two studies done in the past that are related to the study of sexism. These studies are especially important as they relate closely to the present study. The first study looks at the use of adjectives that stereotypically describe women while the second study focuses on how women are depicted and referred to in Norwegian newspapers.

### **2.5.1 Sex Stereotypes and Trait Favourability.**

The first of these two studies entitled "Sex Stereotypes and Trait Favourability on the Adjective Check List" was published in the *Educational and Psychological Measurement Journal* (Volume 37). The researchers, Williams and Best (1977:101-110), based their study on an earlier study conducted by Williams and Bennett (1975:327-337).

Williams and Best (1977) attempt to find evidence in support of the belief that the traits comprising the male stereotype are generally more favourably evaluated than those comprising the female stereotype. Like the study carried out by Williams and Bennett (1975), Williams and Best (1977) based their study on an Adjective Check List Manual developed by Gough and Heilbrun (1965) which contained a list of 300 adjectives associated with traits attributable to men and women. (Appendix C lists some of these traits.)

Williams and Best (1977) concluded that unlike previous findings, their findings did not support the belief that the traits comprising the male stereotype are generally more favourably evaluated than those comprising the female stereotype. They suggest possible reasons for the difference in results. The first possible reason could be that the earlier finding was accurate but that recent changes in attitudes toward men and women have eliminated the former differential evaluation of the male and female stereotypes. The second possible reason they provide is that previous researchers may have been guilty of not attending to all of the relevant traits, but instead focused on traits which conformed to their preconceived ideas of positive male traits and negative female traits.

Williams and Best (1977) also dispute the suggestion of feminist researchers whom they accuse of labelling positive female traits as seemingly “negative”. Williams and Best (1977:109) suggest that “while one may find the description of women as affectionate, considerate, gentle, and patient to be inconsistent with one’s view of the ‘ideal woman’, the fact remains that such traits are favourable human characteristics when judged apart from any reference to sex stereotypes.”

In essence, this study reveals that that the researchers disagree with feminists about the labelling of some female traits as negative.

### **2.5.2 Women in Norwegian Papers in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.**

This study dealt with women as portrayed linguistically in Norwegian newspapers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Swan (1992:37-53) suggested that printed publications for the masses, in this case the newspaper, was a very good source for studies of contemporary language. Although this study involved the Norwegian language, interestingly the areas discussed were similar to discussions on sexism in the English language. Swan (1992) discusses specific linguistic changes which includes suffixes, the use of titles and lexical innovations in Norwegian. Specifically, the study discusses the potential loss of feminine suffixes and the creation of new terms for women and women's occupations. Swan (1992) states that her investigation was based on newspaper language because this language is assumed to reflect on-going changes in everyday language. However, she also notes that the newspapers may also influence language users and in fact help promote the introduction and propagation of various "new" forms.

In her study, Swan (1992) looks at selected newspaper writing in three periods of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1911 - 1913, 1945 - 1946 and 1989 - present). As this was a temporal study, Swan (1992) explains linguistic change in terms of social changes, and specifically in terms of sex role changes. Swan's (1992) exploratory study into sexist language in the media revealed some noteworthy features of sexism in newspapers.



During the first period (1911 -1913), Swan (1992) notes that Norwegian newspapers always used feminine suffixes (*-inne* and *-ske* chief among them) when referring to women. This made women visible as a marked category. It was found that newspapers abounded in items that focused on the markedness of women in a different way, such as in the headline:

“48 persons arrested last night, 5 were women”

(Source:Swan,1992:41).

The second period (1945-1946) was just after the German occupation of Norway (1940 - 1945). Swan looked at the coining of new lexical elements in reference to women who married German soldiers or had German lovers. The lexical elements were predominantly obscene. Examples include:

- |                               |   |  |
|-------------------------------|---|--|
| <i>tyskertos/hore / jente</i> | - | German slut/whore/girl                   |
| <i>tyskerunge</i>             | - | German kid (child of a German soldier)   |
| <i>Hitlersklie</i>            | - | Hitler slide (very obscene, about women) |

Swan (1992) notes that the attitude of the journalists towards women during the Nazi occupation was far sharper than that towards men.

Swan refers to the third period (1989 - present) as a time when Norway appears to be a feminist paradise if compared to many other countries. Norway has a very high percentage of women in parliament and government. However, Swan (1992:42)

notes that the manner in which Norwegian newspapers record activities and doings of women and men, does not reflect the real, actual proportion of women in Norwegian society. In one typical paper, for example, only nineteen (19) out of the fifty-five (55) items classified as news or culture were about women and it was only in two of these that the women were really newsmakers. Although Swan's research indicates a proportional misrepresentation of women, she finds that sexist vocabulary and formulations are not used in the present period. She concludes, "I think it is fair to say that the papers as well as official (and educated) Norway are making an effort to use unobjectionable language" (1992:43).

## **2.6 Summary**

In this chapter, the definitions of terms that will continually appear in the rest of this thesis were explained. In addition, the various forms that sexism takes were also outlined because this researcher will attempt to identify these forms in his own corpus. The two parallel studies that were discussed in the final part of this chapter serve as a guide for this researcher's own study.