

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

#### 5.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, answers to the research questions set out in the first chapter will be discussed. Since sexism in language is the main concern of the present study, some alternatives to sexist language will be provided as well. Recommendations for further research will also be presented.

#### 5.1 Research Questions Revisited

It was the aim of the present study to determine if two local magazines, *Men's Review* and *Female*, contained elements of sexism. Three research questions were designed in order to determine this. These research questions will be given again in the following subsections to facilitate discussion.

In analyzing the data, this researcher found that the five sections of the analysis (as discussed in the previous chapter) answered the research questions that were set out. An analysis of the questionnaire that was used to gather data for the second and third research questions, was also found to provide answers to the first research question. Therefore, this researcher will discuss answers to the second and third research questions before discussing the first research question.

**Research Question 2: Is there a greater number of sexist terms used to refer to any particular gender in local magazines?**

The present study revealed that there were more sexist terms for women than there were for men in the two local magazines. This is supported by the findings revealed by the analysis of the terms used to refer to women and men found in the cover pages, the tables of content and selected articles over a period of six months. It was found that a consistent pattern existed in which women were more frequently referred to with sexist terminology than were men. From a list of terms administered to respondents in a questionnaire, forty-one (41 out of 50) terms of reference for women were identified as having a negative connotation as opposed to only thirty-five (35 out of 47) terms for men.

The usage of terms such as “Sarong Party Girls” and “Cyberfloozzy” that were found in these magazines serve as an indication that the local mass media uses a wide array of sexist terms that are available to them. In fact, the term “Cyberfloozzy” that was coined as the title of a regular article in *Female*, serves as an example of how the Malaysian mass media is contributing to the already large pool of sexist terms in the English language repertoire.

Another interesting finding was that some terms (such as “lady” and “girl”) that have been defined as sexist by feminists, were not thought of as having a negative connotation by the respondents in the present study. This finding suggests that

contemporary usage of terms such as “girl” and “lady” have taken on a neutral or even positive connotation even though they have been defined as sexist by western feminists. In the present study, only 12% and 25% of the respondents considered the term “lady” and “girl” as having a negative connotation, respectively.

Sexist terms are a form of sexist language and sexist language is verbal communication that forms sexist attitudes (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:72). It is this attitude that is referred to as sexism. Therefore, the usage of sexist terms in the corpus strongly suggests the presence of sexism in these two local magazines.

**Research Question 3: Between the element 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?**

In the present study, the analysis of answers by respondents to the second part of the questionnaire revealed that writers in the two magazines appeared to write differently when they had a gender-specific audience in mind. It was the general opinion of the respondents that male writers were more sexist than female writers. However, many sentences that the respondents identified as “sexist” (3 on the Richter scale) and “very sexist” (4 on the Richter scale) and as having been written by men, were in actual fact written by women for *Men’s Review*. The respondents

probably identified those sentences as such because of the usage of words and phrases that contained strong sexual innuendo. Therefore, it is apparent that the female writers in *Men's Review* also used sexist language to cater for the target audience of the magazine.

The data revealed that language containing sexual slang was largely reserved for the male audience. This suggests that such language is considered to be exclusive to the male audience. The conclusion here is that the gender of the target audience appears to play a vital role in determining the usage of sexist language by the writers. When an article was targeted at a male audience, both male and female writers readily used language containing sexual slang. On the other hand, when an article was written for a female audience, both female and male writers had a tendency to be more sensitive and careful in their choice of language.

The usage of sexist language by the writers of these two local magazines encourages "attitudes and behaviour that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other" (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:72). For example, the usage of terms referring to the female anatomy may encourage the practice of thinking of women as mere sexual objects and this in turn may instill sexist attitudes among the readers.



**Research Question 1: Do local magazines suggest stereotypical gender-based roles for men and women?**

The data revealed that the two local magazines in the present study performed an agenda-setting function. The magazines were found to suggest topics that should be of concern to an individual, based on the gender of that particular person. For example, articles concerning cosmetics, beauty care and fashion made up almost half (45.1%) of all articles in a typical publication of *Female* while articles related to entertainment, outdoor activities and machines made up 44.7% of all articles in a typical publication of *Men's Review*. The suggestion appears to be that women would need to work hard to look good while men would be interested in typically "macho" activities such as four-wheel drive expeditions and yachting. Therefore, the magazines used as corpus in the present study appear to set the roles that ought to be played by men and women. In doing so, these magazines seem to be suggesting that women and men be stereotyped based on gender differences.

When discussing the common issue of male-female relationships, both magazines appeared to suggest that the issue was primarily of concern to women. While *Female* published articles that dealt seriously with the issue of male-female relationships, *Men's Review* approached the issue on a lighter note by repeatedly injecting the element of humour into the articles. The articles appeared to stereotype women and men into roles they should play in dealing with male-female relationships. The two magazines in the present study seemed to suggest that women need to take this issue seriously while men could take a light-hearted

approach. This layout appeared to conform to observations by feminists such as Kramarae (1981) who note that men steer clear of topics that are related intimately to them. In this way, the two magazines seemed to suggest stereotypical ways for women and men to approach the issue of male-female relationships even though it is of equal importance and of concern to both genders.

The analysis of the two magazines also revealed that men and women were portrayed along stereotypical lines. When articles on celebrities were compared, it was found that the way the female and male celebrities were portrayed was totally different in terms of description, visual presentation and length of articles.

Firstly, it was found that the articles on female celebrities were demeaning whilst the ones on the male celebrities were exalting. The female celebrities were generally referred to in terms of their physical traits possibly suggesting that they were nothing more than sexual objects. This style of describing the female celebrities was consistent in every issue of *Men's Review* over the six-month period of study. The articles on the male celebrities on the other hand, focused on a wide array of issues that included their careers, their achievements and their plans for the future. For example, as pointed out in Chapter Four, one male celebrity was said to have the makings of a future American President because he had a degree in Political Science.

Secondly, the pictures that accompanied the articles were another indication of stereotyping. The female celebrities were pictured scantily dressed in the six issues

of *Men's Review* that was examined. This implied that their role could be merely to visually entertain the predominantly male audience of *Men's Review*. In contrast, the male celebrities were pictured in generally conservative attire.

Thirdly, a word count of every article on celebrities in the six-month period of study in both *Men's Review* and *Female* revealed a clear contrast in terms of the length of articles. Articles on female celebrities in *Men's Review* were far shorter than the articles on the male celebrities in *Female*. Even though the articles on the female celebrities were barely a paragraph in length, full-page pictures always accompanied them. In contrast, the articles on male celebrities in *Female*, were much longer with greater emphasis on issues such as their careers, their achievements and their plans for the future.

Although it may have been unintentional, both *Female* and *Men's Review* appeared to be working together in promoting a style of portraying male and female celebrities that put the male celebrities on pedestals while treating the female celebrities as though their sole purpose was to be visually entertaining to men.

The analysis of the questionnaire was also found to provide evidence of gender-based stereotyping in both magazines. The data revealed that more terms with a negative connotation were used to refer to women than to men. The data also revealed that sexist terms were used more commonly when the target audience was predominantly male. The data revealed that both female and male writers in *Men's*

*Review* used language that was generally identified by the respondents as sexist. This shows an attitude in which men are stereotypically associated with the usage of sexist terms or sexist language. The data reveals a consistent pattern in which the writers, both male and female, reserved the usage of sexist terms of reference and language that consisted of strong sexual innuendo for a male audience. This is yet another example of stereotyping women and men along the lines of language use.

## **5.2 Alternatives for Sexist Language**

Having outlined what is sexist language and sexist linguistic practices, it is evident that all users of English are to a certain extent guilty of promoting the continued usage of sexism in language. Strainchamps (1972:348) is of the opinion that English is the most masculine of all languages. Sexism in language is detrimental to communication. As users of the English language, we must take the necessary measures to contain the spread of sexism via the English language.

Feminists are currently at the forefront of this war against sexism since it is women who are frequently the victim. Over the years, books and articles have been published providing what feminists call “alternatives” to sexist language and sexist linguistic practices. This researcher has also discovered that the internet is a good source that provides guidelines to non-sexist language. Appendix G provides examples of some guidelines for non-sexist language that was downloaded from the internet. This is a good indication that it is not difficult to find alternatives to sexist

language today. As the present study is critical of the usage of sexist language, this researcher feels that it is necessary to discuss the alternatives to discriminatory language practices. In the following subsections, this researcher will briefly discuss some guidelines that have been published on non-sexist language.

### 5.2.1 Alternatives to the Pronoun Problem

The pronouns *he*, *his* and *him* are frequently used to refer to all persons male or female. For example, in the sentence "Everyone should do his best", *his* could refer to all people, male and female. Alternatively, it could refer to only male persons. Research has shown that more often than not, the male image comes to mind when the "*he*" pronoun is used (Ivy and Backlund, 1994:74). Feminists have come up with alternatives. Miller and Swift (1988:47) suggest the usage of the pronoun "*they*" as a singular pronoun. They contend that the usage of "*they*" as a singular pronoun is fairly common and quote its usage by several famous writers:

" I shouldn't like to punish anyone, even if they'd done me wrong."

(George Eliot)

" It's enough to drive anyone out of their senses"

(George Bernard Shaw)

Another suggestion is to use "she or he", "he/she" or "s/he" but the problem with this practice is that it could be tiresome to repeat the phrase "she or he" over and over again (Ivy and Backlund,1994:76). Miller and Swift (1988:55) suggest rewording a sentence to allow for the usage of the pronoun "you" or the indefinite pronoun "one".

Just as such alternatives are suggested, other linguists oppose them. According to most grammarians and style manuals, a singular subject of a sentence followed by a plural pronoun is a non-grammatical construction (Ivy and Backlund,1994:77). This researcher believes that we should not be held back by such prescriptive views. If it has been determined that the language is flawed, the logical step is to remedy the situation. If users of the language are willing to accept these suggested modifications to language, prescriptive views should not hinder such progress.

### **5.2.2 Alternatives to Man-Linked Terminology**

There are countless terms in the English language to which the term "man" is linked. According to Ivy and Backlund (1994:77), although the term "man" was at one time a true generic used to refer to both men and women, this is no longer the case. The language has evolved and "man" now brings to mind the term "male". Therefore feminists suggest that it is unfair to use man-linked terminology as such usage would neglect the opposite sex. Appendix H lists examples of man-linked terminology and suggested alternatives.

### 5.2.3 Alternatives to Feminine Suffixes

The usage of suffixes like *-ette*, *-ess*, *-enne* or *-trix* to form a feminine version suggest that women are a subset of men (Ivy and Backlund, 1994: 80). Some suggest that feminists are taking their argument too far by such suggestions. However, the fact remains that there is a consistent pattern by which terms for women have roots in terms for men. In his own survey, this researcher discovered that none of the respondents to the questionnaire felt that the term "princess" (refer to Table 4.4 on p.85) was offensive even though this term is derived from the term "prince". This is probably because we have no other alternative to this term. Feminists suggest that the original term be used to refer to both sexes, for example, the use of the term "actor" to refer to both male and female actors. Appendix I lists some suggestions.

### 5.2.4 Alternatives to the Order of Terms

When language is put under the microscope, one finds that male terms are almost always first and female terms second (Ivy and Backlund, 1994: 86). Feminists say that this practice suggests women are men's subordinates and as such should come in second. The best solution that should please both women and men would be to alternate the order of terms.

Many feminist writers have turned the tables and have made a conscious effort to always place the female term before the male term. This is visible in works by

Spender (1985) and Ivy and Backlund (1994). This researcher feels that such a practice merely takes sexism to the other extreme whereby men become the subordinates of women. The best practice would be to alternate the order and this is something that this researcher has made an effort to do throughout this dissertation.

### **5.2.5 Alternatives to Euphemisms**

Linguists and feminists suggest that euphemisms are dominated by male images or by images that demean women.

The English language contains numerous expressions about the sexes that seemingly go unnoticed but that form subtly sexist patterns. These are usually in the form of metaphors or euphemisms - more comfortable substitutes for other terms.

(Ivy and Backlund, 1994: 92)

Although euphemisms and metaphors that contain sexist patterns are widely used even today, feminists and linguists contend that we should consider other alternatives. The alternatives given in Appendix B to some common masculine and feminine expressions, serve as an indication that there are options which we can pursue in order to reduce sexism in language.

### **5.3 Recommendations for Further Research**

Research in the field of language and gender is still relatively limited in countries where English is not the native language. In looking for related literature before the



commencement of the present study, this researcher had difficulty in locating a similar study that was based in a country where English was not the native language. English continues to play a crucial role in many of these countries and as such, this researcher feels that more research needs to be done in the field of language and gender. This researcher feels that the study of sexism in language is especially important as communication between women and men occurs all the time. Language, in particular the English language, is being used as a tool to discriminate against women. Societies all over the world have succeeded in fighting discrimination which is based on the colour of one's skin. Yet, discrimination against women still goes largely unnoticed. This researcher believes that further research in this field is vital if we are to stop the use of language as a tool for discrimination.

This researcher has focused specifically on local magazines. Parallel studies could be carried out to determine the usage of sexist language in other forms of the mass media such as the local newspapers. Newspapers would obviously have a far greater influence than magazines since it would have a larger readership. Local television programs in English (such as "Kopitiam", a local comedy series currently being aired on Malaysian television) would also be a good source of study. Such studies would help to determine how much sexism the Malaysian public is exposed to via the mass media. Studies such as these could then help the media watchdogs take the necessary steps to curtail the widespread use of sexist language in the mass media.

Another area worth focusing on is the education system. The present study has shown that sexist language and sexist linguistic practices do exist in the Malaysian mass media. As our nation is currently placing a lot on the importance of acquiring a good command of English, it would be interesting to see how much sexism our children are exposed to in schools through their English language lessons. This researcher suggests a study on English textbooks used in schools. U'Ren (1972) notes that textbooks are to a certain extent, encouraging the usage of sexist language:

The child of a minority race can now expect to find successful representatives of his own people in the more up-to-date textbooks, and thus he is taught that ability does not depend upon skin colour. Unfortunately, whereas racial biases are disappearing, sexual biases are not.

(U'Ren, 1972:318)

These are but some of the areas that researchers could delve into and in so doing, contribute to efforts to rid ourselves of sexism in language.

#### 5.4 Summary

The analysis of the corpus revealed that there were more negative terms of reference for women than there were for men. The present study also found that there was greater usage of sexist language when the writer, either male or female, had a male audience in mind. Therefore, it was the gender of the audience and not the gender of the writer that determined the usage of sexist language. The qualitative analysis of the corpus and an analysis of the questionnaire revealed that both magazines encouraged the practice of stereotyping, much to the disadvantage of women. These

findings strongly point to the presence of sexism in the two magazines selected as corpus in the present study.

The findings of the present study have implications on the use of English in Malaysia. The English language is a vital tool for a progressive nation like Malaysia. However, it is a language that has its roots in a patriarchal society and because of this, it is flawed to a certain degree. The English language discriminates against women, and in some rare cases, it even discriminates against men. The English speaking world must first recognise these flaws and then take corrective measures to mend these flaws. No society can claim itself to be a progressive society if the language being used in that society becomes the very tool that discriminates a particular group of people.

The present study shows that sexism exists in the two local magazines used as corpus and this strongly provides evidence that discrimination is taking place within our society. This researcher believes that the root of the problem with regards to sexism in language, is attitude. Even female writers were found to write in a sexist manner when they had a male audience in mind. They chose to write in a way that conforms to stereotypical ideas of how men are thought to communicate.

Writers who communicate to the masses should be taking the lead in communicating in a non-sexist manner. We can be free of sexism in our communication if we all make a conscious effort to use the alternative forms of non-sexist language that are

available to us. The choice is ours to make. It is not our fault that the English language is the way it is. However, it is within our ability to identify what is inappropriate and in doing so, take the necessary steps to set it right.