

The Analysis of Sexism in English Proverbs

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Abstract—The proverb is summarized and refined by human through many years of social practice beings. As a social variant, it reflects the social customs and cultural values. It is not difficult to see this kind of phenomenon in the English proverb because of the widespread discrimination against women in human culture. Through studying the development trend of sexism in English proverbs, the paper analyses these phenomena from the five aspects—personality, behavior, intelligence, marriage and social status. And then the paper probes into the causes of sexism from three aspects: historical reasons, cultural origin and social factors. The proper comprehension of the sexism in English proverbs not only helps to improve the students' ability of using English, but also avoids the intercultural conflicts caused by improper using of English proverbs in the foreign exchanges.

Index Terms—English proverbs, sexism, root cause analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

The proverb is the product of specific culture and concept, describing as “living fossil of language”. The feudal consciousness of “man is superior to woman” reflected in English proverb incisively and vividly (Fromkin, V & R. Rodman, 1983). As a result, the English proverb has further strengthened the cultural pattern of gender, enhancing the social status and superiority of men, and reducing the self-consciousness of women. Therefore, exploring the status of women through the English proverbs will have extensive representation and powerful persuasion.

Generally speaking, the study of gender language can be divided into two periods: before and after 1860s. In the west, the earliest record of gender language is in *Histoire Naturelleet Moraledes lies Antillet* wrote by Robin Fort, recording the language usage at that time. In the 1970s, a large number of scholars studying gender discrimination in language emerged. *The Woman and the Language*, attracting many scholars researched the gender and the language from other perspectives. *Women Changing Language*, the article of Anne Pauwels in 1998, has examined the works of sexism in several languages and societies. It emphasizes the fact that sexist practices reflect a reality of gender discrimination: men as the norm, women as a deviation of male.

Influenced by western scholars, Chinese exports realized the phenomenon of sexism in language, and began to have related researches until the New Culture Movement. In the early period, Chinese scholars mainly focused on gender differences, studying the men and women's language particularly from pronunciation, tone, syntax, vocabulary and other superficial aspects. Until the 2000, the research direction began to turn to sexism in English proverbs. In *the Sexism of the English Proverbs*, Yang Qing, a teacher of Guilin College, identifies several causes of sexism in English proverbs and points out that this phenomenon is the direct reflection of women's social status in every period (Yang & Yu, 2003). Cheng Haiyan, in her paper-*the Sexism Phenomenon in English Proverbs and Its Roots*, presents the phenomenon of sexism in English proverbs based on feminism and also explores the roots of it from the perspective of Sociolinguistics.

The purposes of paper are to make people aware of the discrimination against women in the language, to remind people to eliminate sexism in language, ultimately contributing to the harmonious development of society and language, and to provide a valuable basis for further research. The proper comprehension of the sexism in English proverbs not only helps to improve the students' ability of using English and to avoid the intercultural conflicts caused by improper using of English proverbs in the foreign exchanges, but also lays the foundation for noticing and improving this phenomenon in the future.

Language is the carrier of culture and the tool of human thinking. English proverbs reflect people's values in English speaking countries. If we want to succeed in English communication, we should pay attention to sexism in English proverbs, which gradually reduces and eliminates with the improvement of the society and people's in-depth understanding. If students communicate with foreigners by using the sexist language on books, which will inevitably lead to misunderstanding or even conflict because of offending others. Hence, as English teachers, the most important thing is to let students understand that English proverb, as a special kind of English idioms, is used to express meaningful, valuable and educational advice through simple, concise and witty expression. As for English learners, mastering English proverbs can not only grasp the essence of English, but also learn the moral standards of people's life and know the development trend of English.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Definition of Proverb

Proverbs are fixed statements, using simple and popular words to reflect the profound truth, and are the summaries of general experience in daily life (Trank, 1983). The proverb is the crystallization of human wisdom and the embodiment of language, which is hailed as a “national mirror” or “the living fossil of language”. The content of proverbs includes all aspects of social life. In the certain sense, as an important component of language, proverbs have become an encyclopedia for people to understand their lives and to regularize their behavior. It not only reflects the culture of human beings and the customs of life, but also contains the record of the discrimination against women in human civilization.

B. Definition of Sexism

Sexism, according to the new Oxford Dictionary of English, means “prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex.” It, according to Webster Ninth New College Dictionary, means prejudice or discrimination based on sex. Especially: discrimination against women (William, 1952).

C. Development Trend of Sexism in English Proverbs

As is known to all, the happening of major historical and political events and the appearance of great inventions and new beliefs will make language (including proverb) produce a corresponding impact and change.

The conservative Christian emphasized husband's personal interests and efforts, and thought that the main mission of women was to take care of the family and children, which undoubtedly played a significant role in gender differences. The industrial revolution of eighteenth century brought about great changes in people's values. Human began to observe and understand all aspects of life by using the scientific methods instead of religious beliefs. Today, it is difficult for young people to blindly accept the ideas in the *Bible*, and the traditional opinion of gender difference has faced with challenges.

Over the years, women become more and more dissatisfied toward the unfair treatment they are suffering. In the 1860s to 70s, the feminist movement ran to a high-tide period in the United States, and women fought for enjoying equal rights in education, work, social security and many other aspects with men. Many women began to become financially independent and to share household spending with their husbands. The status of women has gradually improved, but the discrimination against women still existed. Now only a part of profession opens the doors for women, and women are less likely to be promoted than men. It still needs unremitting efforts of several generations to liberate women. The extinction of unequal words and expressions between men and women will also take a long time to put an end.

However, with the progress of social civilization degree and the improvement of women's status, certain words and expressions are no longer adapted to the development trend of the times, and people begin to despise taboo words and expressions which implicit the inequality between men and women. In uncertain circumstances, people try to avoid using positive third person singular, and attempt to use neutral words or other words to replace them. For example, camera man-camera operator; Congressman-member of Congress; housewife-housemaker; Spokesman-Spokesperson.

What will happen to the sexist language in English proverbs and what kind of changes they will have? Proverbs that have the connotation of belittling women will gradually withdraw from the stage of history. Facing the new world, people will accumulate new experiences in the daily life and then form new proverbs after a long period of practice. Nowadays, because women enjoy equal rights with men and people forbid sexism in language, the proverbs which are formed or will be formed will have fewer and fewer traces of belittling women.

III. MANIFESTATIONS OF SEXISM IN ENGLISH PROVERBS

As an important part of English language, English proverbs can reflect the culture, life, customs and thinking methods of a particular society in a certain period. Sexism in language is also reflected in the proverbs, and we will take a look at some examples from the following five aspects.

A. Personality

1. Weakness

Woman made of glass. (女人是玻璃做的.)

Woman is made to weep. (女子生性好哭.)

It is no more pity to see a woman weep than to see a goose go bare foot. (女人哭如鹅光脚走路, 根本不值得可怜.)

The first proverb regards the woman as glass. As we all know, the glass is glittering and translucent, which can be beautiful decorations in most cases. In the eyes of men, these characteristics are in line with the nature of women. In fact, saying in this way is a little bit overgeneralization. Certainly, some women are likely to pretend to be weak in order to live in a comfortable way. Do you think it is only the fault of women? If the man doesn't play a powerhouse in society and is proud of being the umbrella of the woman, it deserves to be considered seriously that whether those weak women will be able to become independent. In other two examples, women seem like crying. Men think that

women seek sympathy and assistance by their tears. However, sometimes they just give vent to bad emotions. The different patterns of thinking lead to misunderstanding so the emergence of proverbs above seems well-reasoned.

The proverbs above are inclined to represent women's weakness by tears and fragile glass, which can be explained from a physical and social perspective. From the physiological point of view, woman's nervous system is not as stable as men, and their emotions are easy to be influenced by special physiological conditions. As for social aspect, the weakness of women seems to be natural, because in the eyes of the human, women are born with weakness (Zhang & Liu, 2005). French female writer George Sand, in one of her works, wrote: "men always have an innate conceit, and they are willing to protect women's weakness rather than to praise women's bravery." Women in this case, are willing to rely on the protection of men, but they often very frustrated, because men are often not as strong as they show. It makes women secretly cry who delicate in emotion, while the men mock them instead without reflecting whether their strength is powerful or not.

2. Vanity

Tell a woman she is fair and she will soon turn fool. (跟女人讲她长得漂亮, 很快她就会晕头转向.)

Every woman would rather be beautiful than good. (女人爱美不重德.)

The more women look in their glass, the less they look to their house. (女人成天照镜子, 无心照管家务事.)

These examples above all mention the fact that women pursue beauty, but is it the cause of other defects? No one is perfect, so it is normal for women to have disadvantages. What's more, men have too. The problem is that people regard the pursuit of beauty is the source of evil. Therefore, it is necessary for people to eliminate this prejudice in order to reduce the sexism in language.

These proverbs often emphasize women's virtue but depreciate their beauty at the same time. In fact, men pay attention to the appearance of a woman. When choosing a mate, men prefer women who perform well in both the hall and the kitchen. It is said that the smell of an onion from the mouth of the lovely is sweeter than that of a rose in the hand of the ugly for the most of men. The standards of men choosing spouse are always gentle and beautiful, which makes women in a passive position. Therefore, they have to do everything possible to take men's fancy in order to obtain the favor and protection of them.

3. Evil

Women are the snares of Satan. (女人是撒旦设下的陷阱.)

Women are the devil's nets. (女人是万恶之源.)

There is no devil so bad as a she - devil. (恶魔当中女人最坏.)

There is a woman in it. (此事必有女人在捣鬼.)

Nothing agrees worse than a lady's heart and beggar's purse. (女人的心和乞丐的钱包一样, 糟糕透顶.)

The woman is compared to the trap of Satan, the root of all evils, the worst devil and so on in these proverbs, which are extremely terrible things in people's minds. The status of women can be easily seen by describing women as these kinds of objects.

These proverbs are full of sexism. God felt that it was a great mistake to make a woman, and that she was the root of all evil, because Eve violated God's injunction, tempting Adam to eat the apple. God drove them out of the Garden of Eden, and imposed pain on mankind. In order to punish Eve, God let her have to obey her husband. In ancient Greek mythology, Jose created the beautiful Pandora, gave her a box full of evil, and told her not to open it. But in the end, Pandora broke her promise, opening the box and spreading the evil around the world. These arguments compare women to the most terrible things in the world (Dong, 2004). The woman is portrayed as a difficult, dangerous person and troublemaker in some English proverbs.

B. Behavior

Three women and a goose make a market. (三个女人一只鹅, 市场里面闹哄哄.)

Husbands are in heaven whose wives scold not. (老婆不唠叨, 丈夫就像生活在天堂里.)

A woman's tongue wags like a lamb's tail. (女人饶舌如同羔羊摆尾.)

Many women, many words; Many geese, many turds. (鹅的屎多, 女人的话多.)

When people talk about women, we can find out that women are often mentioned in the same breath with animals. Goose, a kind of bird, is often associated with women. Generally speaking, "talkative" goose who walks along the village with shouting just like those who live in groups loving chatter and slander. According to physiological research, woman's cranial capacity of language is much larger than men, so it is not a defect for them to communicate with people. As for nagging, it is a way for women to vent their dissatisfaction. However, men don't understand this demand of women, don't listen to their voices but blame them blindly.

C. Intelligence

Long hair, short wit. (女人头发长, 见识短.)

Women have no soul. (女人没灵魂.)

When an ass climbs a ladder, we may find wisdom in women. (毛驴登梯时, 女人有才智.)

A woman's advice is never to seek. (女人的建议一文不值.)

These proverbs present that women only have long hair without knowledge and soul, and it is impossible to look forward to some meaningful statements and useful advice from women. They suggest that there is no wisdom on women, and only men have right to master the knowledge and it is controlled by them (Lin, 2015). It seems to highlight the men's social status and great contributions in opposite ways.

In British history, women had less opportunity to receive formal education than men. Until the Victorian era (1837-1901), some universities began to accept a small number of girls. But the expectations of people for them also had the obvious difference with men. At that time, women were expected to learn the skills of mastering housework, and to cultivate the qualities of kindness, gentleness, piety and dependence. However, man was expected to become the master of his family. Ironically, it was society that deprived equal rights of women to receive education. Mankind, in turn, believed that women were ignorant. On the one hand, men preached "ignorance is women's virtue" (Hu & Wei, 1998). On the other hand, when the women observed all rules and regulations, they still complained "Long hair, short wit". In fact, these contradictory remarks reflected that men needed women's ignorance to show their excellence. Sometimes, women pretended to be foolish to satisfy the men's self-esteem and received recognition and protection of them.

D. Marriage

Daughters and dead fish are not keeping wares. (女大不中留, 鱼死不能存.)

Marry your son when you will, your daughter when you can. (娶媳不忙, 嫁女宜速.)

A fair face is half a portion. (姿色颜, 嫁妆半.)

He that marries for wealth sells his liberty. (娶得富家女, 自由受限制.)

Marry a wife of thine own degree. (娶妻, 应与己般配.)

These proverbs reflect the ingrained idea in marriage that "man is superior to woman" and the tendency of commercialization of women. In the male-centered society, the woman's appearance was not only the basis of wealth but also the commodity which could be bought and sold. It shows that women were regarded as dolls under that occasion. Even if a woman had a great family background, she still was questioned by the male. In order to maintain his dignity, man preferred to choose his wife who has the same background with him.

E. Social Status

A man of straw is worth of a woman of gold. (稻草男儿抵得上金玉女子.)

Man, woman and devil are three degrees of comparison. (男人, 女人和魔鬼, 三个等级分贵贱.)

The proverbs above are full of male chauvinism and reflect women's social status of oppression and bullying. The wife is only an article of clothing of her husband which can be worn or thrown, even if the poor man is better than woman. People even believe that women are not the members of human beings at all, and they are just the creature higher than devil. The *Bible* says that God created the man who is the first creature, the source of all things, and the master of the world, while woman is made of a rib from man. It can be seen that God placed the man in a dominant position, and the woman was attached to man when creating human beings. Engels revealed in his book *the Origin of Family, Private Ownership and Country*: the husband has mastered power at home, but the wife was diminished and became a slave of her husband's desire and a simple tool for children. It is not difficult to see that the status of women is so humble.

IV. CAUSES OF SEXISM IN ENGLISH PROVERBS

Language is a part of culture and plays an important role in culture. It is influenced by culture and reflects the cultural and historical features of a nation. The phenomenon of sexism in language is a true representation of social sexism, which is not rooted in the language itself, but has profound historical, cultural and social roots.

A. Historical Roots

As for the establishment of matriarchal clan, Morgan, the founder of American cultural anthropology and the representative of classical evolutionary school (1956), pointed out in *Ancient Society*: "clan-the society which is made up of female ancestors, their children and the children of these female offspring. When emerging amount of properties, the social pattern transformed to regard man as the standard". In matriarchal clan, it was the woman who mastered the economic power so that they had power to lay down the law. Therefore, woman was in ruling position at that time. However, in the late period of the matriarchal clan, the men were strong enough to take control of the economic lifeline with the emergence of a lot of properties, and women became the subject of being governed. It was the historical turning point of women's status. From then on, women were always at the bottom of society, suffering from discrimination, oppression and humiliation in the patriarchal clan, slave society, feudal society and capitalist society.

In the long river of history, the men firmly grasped the chips of women from primitive society to western capitalist society, and the discrimination against women finally became a solid mountain by depositing through many years. Despite Montesquieu, one of the most important representatives of the French Enlightenment in eighteenth Century, indicated in *the Spirit of Law*: "women are going forward gradually, and their position has been

improved in civilized nation comparing with the ancient time.” However, the qualifiers of weakness and lowliness not easily disappeared, because the sexism in people’s minds was already deep-rooted. Although women were striving for higher social status constantly after awakening; the women’s liberation movement was happening vigorously; women played increasingly more important role in society, there was a difficult and lengthy way to completely change their social status. Therefore, the sexism in English proverbs would still survive.

B. Cultural Roots

The cultural roots of English proverbs include: the Greek (Roman) mythology and the more influential literary works (such as Shakespeare's plays), and there are many sexists among them.

1. From the Greek Mythology

The grey mare is the better horse.

The proverb means that “老婆管丈夫或妻胜其夫”. People thought that grey horse in Flanders is good at pulling the car than the British, so the proverb said like that. It seems that there is no sexism in this proverb, but if we understand the background information, we will conduct the different result. In fact, in the origin of it, the author just said “the grey mare will prove the better horse”. The use of “prove” reflects the resistant aspiration of discriminatory women, suggesting their position from opposite perspective.

2. From the Shakespeare's Plays

Frailty, thy name is woman. (脆弱啊, 你的名字是女人.)

This proverb stems from a famous monologue in *Hamlet*, talking about Hamlet’s mother married his uncle Claudius about two months after his father's death. Looking at his mother, as the queen of the country, she still puts her hope of happiness and own destiny in marrying a husband, which also contains a number of bloods and tears of a woman in the class society. Here the remarkable gender discrimination can be seen.

C. Social Roots

Proverbs are widely used in all aspects of social life, and the content of sexism is everywhere. These contents can basically be divided into several aspects, and each has its deep social roots, or ideas, or emotional factors, or life differences, or women's own reasons.

1. Different Social Divisions of Labor

In the traditional western culture, women are considered to be unable to work out. The only place women can and should stay is the house, and their social division of labor is to do housework and take care of children. As a vulnerable group in society, the value of women can only be reflected through their marriage. This kind of social pattern between male and female not only prevents women’s opportunities to display their talents, but also makes them become the accessories of men, losing the speaking right at home (Yan, 2003). Because men need to go out to work and support their families, many words are filled with the color of masculinism. For example, the English word “history” can be understood as “his-story”. But for women, they stay at home and to do some trifles of no great importance in men’s eyes. Therefore, words associated with household chores are often used to describe women, which are also the reflection of gender discrimination in English proverbs, such as “The foot on the cradle and the land on the distaff is a sigh of a good wife.

2. Patriarchal Ideology

With the development of society, the contribution of women becomes weaker than men, so they gradually are ignored. Later, this kind of neglect develops into scorn or even blind worship-the worship of the male gender, and the discrimination against women is obvious at the same time. Chauvinism is popular no matter in the east or in the west. There is the saying of “九个姑娘不如一个跛腿男儿” in Chinese, and it is the same in English proverbs. For example, “A bad woman is worse than a bad man.” In the small family, comparing the position of husband and wife, the discrimination is more prominent in proverbs such as “If the husband be not at home, there is nobody.” In addition, “Men make houses, women make homes” and “In the husband wisdom, in the wife gentleness” in English and “男主外, 女主内” in Chinese different in approach but equally satisfactory in result. They all suggest that man is the dominator of the world, while the mission of woman is to serve the man.

3. Chastity

It is the man who destroys and pays much attention to woman's chastity. Women not only are forced to bear the physical and psychological damage from men, but also bear the blame from the society. The essence of it is the low social status of woman who is regarded as a vassal of man.

Beauty and chastity seldom agree. (美貌与贞操常不相容.)

Glasses and lasses are brittle ware. (玻璃易碎, 姑娘易毁.)

They are typical examples of describing beautiful women without chastity.

Public hold the different opinions about infidelity for male and female. Men will show off themselves to others when they have an affair, and the other men will admire them. Traditionally, the infidelity of men can be forgiven. The French writer Troia said in the *Paris Dream*: “the disloyalty of men is the natural requirement, whereas the infidelity of women is the depraved performance.” Many men find lovers outside, but suspect their wives in reverse. Nothing is more ridiculous than this!

Who has a fair wife needs more than two eyes. (老婆长得漂亮得多长一只眼睛.)

Ask the mother if the child be not like the father. (孩子长得不像爸要问妈.)

V. CONCLUSION

The phenomena of sexism in English proverbs vividly reflect the lower social status of women, the contempt towards women and the prejudice against women. Although the evolution of language is based on the internal principle of language, its objective is to meet the needs of the society. The development of social production, the revolution of social system and the change of human thought all contribute to the emergence and change of language (Yang, 1987). Owing to the progress of the social civilization and the emergence of some outstanding women, the traditional opinions toward women are gradually changing, women's status has improved and some proverbs with discrimination have faded out of people's vision. In the end, when the idea of gender discrimination and the unfair phenomena between male and female completely disappear in the society, the sexism in English proverbs will withdraw from the historical stage.

Although the paper shows the sexism in English proverbs clearly and reveals the underlying roots of this phenomenon. However, there are some shortcomings: the examples are limited to obtain the conclusions; maybe many other factors can also lead to the sexism in English proverbs and so on. Besides, further research needs to be conducted to figure out the measures of improving this situation in order to make the equity between men and women come true.

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