On the Semantic Imbalance between the Sexes in "Dirty Words" from a Sociolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract:

According to Ruth Wajnryb's two types of semantic imbalance between the sexes and Erving Goffman's "stigma" theory, this paper collects some English "dirty words" relating to both "man" and "woman", analyses them through a sociolinguistic perspective, and then points out that there exists a semantic imbalance between sexes and women are in an inferior place in the semantic field of language. But with the rise of the feminist movement and the development of subjective stigma and universal stigma, this paper also finds that the semantic imbalance between "man" and "woman" has shown a gradual decline.

Keywords: semantic imbalance, stigma, sexes, sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

In both English and Chinese, words in the semantic field of "man" are mostly positive and neuter, such as *guy*, *bloke*, *chap* and *fellow*. While in the semantic field of "woman", words are mostly negative, full of sexual meanings and moral disapproval, such as *bitch*, *cow*, *strumpet*, *battleaxe*, *vamp* and *tramp*. These "dirty words" concerning "woman" are "effective swearing words", for people often use them to release their bad mood. Even when swearing a man, people would prefer to use such kind of "dirty words" relating to "woman" to achieve their verbal violence.

Women are unfairly treated in language field due to a common social psychology of being hated---misogyny. But where did it come from? How do people achieve the verbal violence by using words offensive to women? Can this kind of semantic imbalance be removed from human society? By analyzing specific "dirty words", this paper gives answers to the above questions.

2. Theoretical framework

According to Ruth Wajnryb, there are two types of semantic imbalance between the sexes. One concerns emotional or connotative associations. For example, the word "woman" slips into abuse with greater facility than "man". There is a different feel to "bloody woman driver!" compared to "bloody man driver" or "bloody driver". Somehow, the "woman" gives the abuse just that extra edge. The distaste that many women feel when they are referred to as "ladies" derives from the unarticulated assumption that "lady" is being used euphemistically because "woman" is somehow not-nice. This underlying stigma does not attach to "man" and "gentleman", however, as "man" is capable of standing alone as a strong neutral or positive word. Even until very recently, when feminists pointed out that "man" effectively excluded 50 per cent, it had happily stood for the whole human race.

The second imbalance has to do with the pattern of meaning changes over time. Hughes maps over 100 terms for women, from the start of the thirteenth century to the twentieth. What he finds is that many of the negative words currently applied only to women once had broader meanings, and were applied to both men and women. More important is his finding that it is only when a word started to narrow in application to women exclusively that its negative connotations emerged. Though it may now seem improbable, "harlot" and "wench" were once not gender-specific nor, at that time, pejorative. The linguistic process by which this happens goes by the name of "the semantics of deterioration".

Another theoretical framework of this paper is Erving Goffman's "stigma" theory. In his book *STIGMA: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Erving Goffman first presented the conception *stigma*. "Stigma is a social trait that causes its owner to have an identity, social reputation, or social value that is impaired in everyday communication and social interaction". The stigmatized person is often negatively or insultingly labeled, always considered to have undesirable or infamous social characteristics, and therefore is discriminated and excluded by the public, thus in different extents loses the social identity, reputation and value.

3. Literature review

According to Ruth Wajnryb, "linguists, especially lexicographers, are taxonomic in inclination, which means they love to classify words into sets and subsets, and then stand back and admire how neatly they all work out." Hughes does this with "women words" and comes up with nine categories. There's the diabolical woman in the witch/hag group, which overlaps somewhat with the unnatural, aggressive, manlike woman of the virago/shrew group. There's the woman seen as the super-human, spiritual creature of salvation in the angel/goddess group. And the others: woman as endearing pet (mouse/lamp and other small cuddly creatures as seen annually in the Valentine's Day newspaper advertisements); woman cursed in bestial terms (bitch/cow); woman as available object of delight (dish/tart); woman as object of revulsion (filth/slut); and,

the largest category by far, woman as sexually perverse (whore/harlot) which tails off into the hussy/broad group.

The semantic imbalance across the gender can also be seen when comparing the "dirty words" relating to both "man" and "woman". There is a limited range of words that women can use in swearing at a male, and most of them--- *prick*, *dickhead*, and *arsehole*--- make statements about the target's irritating personality or, at worst, absence of moral fibre.

Besides, stigma is also a type of "swearing" or "dirty words". However, since English is the language of most of the world's linguists, the subsystem of taboos on which swearing is based has been largely ignored or, where analyzed, undertaken in the spirit of fun, and not as a serious endeavor. Just as Goffman put it, "the most conventionalized and perfunctory doings we engage in ... [that] traditionally have been treated by students of modern society as part of the dust of social activity, empty and trivial--- routine formulae-fillers".

Otto Jespersen points out in his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origin* that women are linguistically different from men. Rochefort says that "the men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn". And if a woman were to contravene the rule of not using "man's" language, she would be indicted for sorcery and put to death. Hence, the connexion between a separate women's language and tabu(taboo) is indubitable. There is no doubt that women in all countries are shy of mentioning certain parts of the human body and certain natural functions by the direct and often rude denominations which men, and especially young men, prefer when among themselves. Women will therefore invent innocent and euphemistic words and paraphrases, which sometimes may in the long run come to be looked upon as the plain or blunt names, and therefore in their turn have to be avoided and replaced by more decent words.

4. Specific "Dirty words" and analyses

Women are traditionally hated by the society due to the deeply-rooted psychology of misogyny. It has been postulated that underpinning the dominant archetype of "whore" is the deeply embedded and religiously endowed role model of Eve, the stained-mistress figure who is disobedient, earth-bound, carnal and seductive, with the associations of sin, suffering, guilt and shame. This can also be considered as the root of semantic imbalance between the sexes.

Four-letter word should be one of the commonly used "dirty words" in English swearing world. The composition of the Big Six, as they're affectionately called, varies depending on which authority you're consulting, but generally includes *fuck*, *cunt*, *cock*, *arse*, *shit* and *piss*. They are all one-syllable four-letter words, with bodily functions of the nether regions--- the first three sexual, the others scatological. When relating to sex, it is mostly offensive to women, for women swear less than men. Commonsense suggests that men would swear more than women as swearing has to do with power and men generally have more power. Women are expected to have the capacity for self-restrain while men can lose control with greater impunity. Sexual harassment is, by an large, a by-product of power, and is usually perpetrated by a "powerful" man harassing a "subordinate" woman. Although some powerful women harass men (or other

women) but the number of women in super-ordinate positions is far lower than vice versa, and fewer women harass than men.

Fuck, the most productive dirty word, which stands for the sexual act, is commonly used by both men and women, men in particular. This word could inevitably produce an offensive meaning to women, but not that much. This will be discussed in detail later. But as if the verbal abuse heaped on women through the language of swearing were not enough, men seem to dip into the misogyny arsenal not only when they're directly cursing a woman, or speaking about a woman, but also when their target is a fellow male. "*Son of a bitch*" and *motherfucker* both offer circuitously female pathways towards verbal violence. Why is it not offensive to curse a man via his father or his brother or son? It lacks that particular intriguing force of the effective swearing word.

Unlike *fuck*, *cunt* has never been innocent, at least not for a good number of centuries. Of all the four-letter words, *cunt* is easily the most offensive. Germaine Greer called it "the worst name anyone can be called". *Cunt* seems to be one important exception to the general rule that links intensity with flexibility. It is arguably the most emotionally laden taboo term of English, and yet it has not moved into a verb category. Despite this slight adjectival foray, *cunt* is largely confined to a noun class and, even there, some limitations apply. It can take the plural form (*you bunch of cunts*), but this is nowhere near as frequent as the singular. Confined to noun status, *cunt* is therefore restricted to Hughes's first two test categories--- personal/direct (*you cunt*) and personal by reference(*The cunt!*). It could be that *cunt* has retained its level of venom by remaining largely as a noun. In a sense, there's a reflexive relationship between the limitations, grammatically speaking, of *cunt*, and the emotional intensity it has retained. Perhaps there's a "I diversify, therefore I lose venom" principle quietly in operation here.

Slut, a woman who has many sexual partners, is another four-letter word used by men to insult women, targeting perceived sexual promiscuity or looseness. But this one is not that malicious as *cunt* is.

Cock is a word that insults men. It targets social ineptness, non-caring, self-centredness and meanness, and can be used man-to-man or woman-to-man. Other terms insulting men like *queer*, *wimp*, *pussy*, *stud*, *playboy...* are all swearing words at men's bad personalities, and the most offensive word, *motherfucker*, insulting women as well.

In addition to the above four-letter words, *bitch* is also a "popular" offensive word to women. According to Oxford Dictionary, other than a female dog, *bitch* can also be an offensive way of referring to a woman, especially an unpleasant one. But in ancient times, *bitch* are used to insult both men and women. Today, *bitch* is a specific stigma for women only.

Women might be forgiven for wondering why men direct so much venom in their direction. Certainly this is misogyny, but where did it come from? One notion is that men are essentially ambivalent towards women. On the one hand there's the centrifugal energy that fuels their wish to escape the clutches of the controlling woman (mothers, wives, schoolteachers). On the other hand, there's the testosterone-fueled, rarely abating, centripetal quest for sexual satisfaction.

There is nothing inherent in the female condition to prevent their achieving equality with men in their swearing. Neurologically, anatomically, physically, the equipment is the same. And the same applies to men when it comes to crying. There is nothing innate in the male to make crying more onerous or less

spontaneous. Richard Dooling claims that "because men are congenitally incapable of indulging in good, long cries, swearing provides them with a handy compromise when presented with the... alternatives of running away, crying or fighting". It seems that, cross-cultural differences aside, men seem always to have cried less than women. Swearing (for women) and crying(for men) are similar in that the genders are socialized into socially appropriate behaviors.

From the above analyses, it's easy to see the semantic imbalance between men and women. Women are relatively inferior to men in language field. But this couldn't be the case forever for women are fighting for their rights nowadays. *Bitch* is a stigma for women, but after all, it's a kind of language for women. In 1984, American feminist scholar Joreen Freeman published her *The BITCH Manifesto*. By defining herself as a *bitch*, she changed the word *bitch* into a battle cry, trying to convey to women the idea that "we can change those that once hurt us". By the efforts of the feminist, *bitch* is no longer an insulting stigma for women. The rectification process of *bitch* symbolizes a degree of victory of women's fighting for equal place. This is one of the best examples of subjective stigma, a self-mockery of *bitch*.

The expanded use of *bitch* is called universal stigma, which indicates that *bitch* as a stigma is widely used, especially due to a rapid development of internet. It is started from the netword "green-tea bitch", a "title" from males for some single females, containing a sense of contempt, despise and detest. A "green-tea bitch" is a single girl who has pure and refined look but scheming inner heart, marketing herself by selling sex. Apart from "green-tea bitch", there are "black-tea bitch", "milky-tea bitch" and "Chrysanthemum bitch", in which *bitches* all refer to female, good-looking female in particular. However, the power of network and netizien is quite formidable. There appears "positive-energy bitch", "fitness bitch", "small-video bitch", "red-packet bitch", "Chicken-Soup bitch" and so on. The implications of *bitch* change from "a prostitute" to "people with double face", and even later with a degree of positive meaning. The affection tint of *bitch* is thinning and generalizing.

"Dirty words", like taboos, are progressively purified as they are used. Subjective stigma and universal stigma show a softened attitude towards "dirty words", which reduces the emotional punch of "dirty words", the offensive meaning to women, and further speaking, relieves the semantic imbalance between the sexes.

5. Conclusion

In swearing world, "dirty words" mostly serve as emotional words. They help people release their bad moods and to some extent avoid unnecessary violence, which is also helpful for the stability of the society. Hence, "dirty words" are not completely wrong. The semantic imbalance in "dirty words" between the sexes is mainly produced by people's psychology, not "dirty words" themselves. Although the dirtiest word for insulting a man is achieved by swearing the man's mother, a woman, the stained history of Eve is just there and couldn't be changed. What can be changed is people's mind towards women. More and more feminist movements are proving that women have already started to fight for their equal rights, and more and more successful working women have already proved that women can also make a contribution to the society in their own ways, not only as the accessories for men.

Men and women should be equally treated both socially and linguistically. Besides, swearing is not the end of human beings' culture. Instead, everyone may swear in some helpless situations. The more often the

"dirty words" are used, the purer they will become. However, this is not suggesting that everyone should swear. People must learn to respect the force from the "dirty words".

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