Linguistic Gender-Related Biases

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Linguistic Gender-Related Biases

Bachelor's Thesis

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Linguistic Gender-Related Biases

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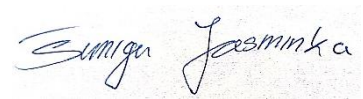

Mentor:

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Rijeka, rujan 2024.

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Jasminka Šumiga

IZJAVA O AUTORSTVU ZAVRŠNOG RADA

Rijeka, rujan 2024.

Contents

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between language and gender, focusing on linguistic gender biases illustrated in English idioms and proverbs. This paper looks at the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, social categorisation, linguistic biases, and sexist language to see how these perpetuate gender stereotypes. The gendered connotations of idiomatic phrases such as "man up," "wear the pants," "cry like a girl," "boys don't cry," "she's one of the boys," and "behind every great man is a great woman" are discussed. A mixed-method approach, which includes both quantitative and qualitative data from university students, demonstrates a high degree of awareness about the sexist connotations of these idioms and the potential harm they do. The findings highlight the relevance of educational initiatives in fostering gender-inclusive language.

Key words: linguistic bias, gender, sexist idioms

1. Introduction

Language is a powerful tool for shaping our beliefs and interactions with others. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis holds that language structure influences cognition and worldview, implying that linguistic distinctions alter thinking processes and behaviours. (Frothingham, 2023). This link is obvious in social categorisation and stereotypes, where language both reflects and reinforces social norms and stereotypes (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017). A specific domain where linguistic bias is frequent is the usage of sexist idioms and proverbs, which often reinforce traditional gender norms (Cacciari & Tabossi, 1993). Expressions such as "man up," "wear the pants," and "cry like a girl" impose gender biases in daily language and creating an unhealthy environment of emotional repression (Wiecha, 2013). This thesis aims to investigate university students' perceptions of these idioms and their consequences, to determine if awareness and education may lead to more gender-inclusive communication. The study examines respondents' familiarity with sexist idiomatic expressions in the English language, their beliefs about the gender-stereotypical and harmful sexist implications of these phrases, and whether they avoid using sexist language. Additionally, it explores whether respondents think that awareness of sexist language can lead to positive change. By addressing these aspects, the research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality and the role of language in shaping social attitudes.

2. Sapir-Whorf hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis predicts that the structure of a person's language shapes and limits their views of the outside world. The theory suggests that language distinction affects thought, perception, and behaviour, resulting in speakers of different languages thinking and acting differently. Culture is defined by the values, customs, and beliefs of a society. Our culture may be considered as a lens through which we perceive the world and develop a shared understanding of what happens around us. We create and use language in response to cultural and social needs. In other words, there is a direct relationship between how we communicate and how we see the world. Our language constrains our thoughts and ideas, shaping our world (Frothingham, 2023).

This is especially true in languages that attribute gender to inanimate objects. Researchers investigated how German and Spanish speakers view different items based on their gender connotations in each language. The research results showed that when describing things referred to as masculine in Spanish, speakers described them as having predominantly male attributes such as "strong." Similarly, German speakers regarded identical items with feminine phrasings in German as effeminate, such as "beautiful" and "elegant." The findings reveal that speakers of each language have established preconceived notions about whether something is feminine or masculine based on how it is categorized in their language, rather than on its attributes or appearance (Frothingham, 2023).

3. Categories, labels, and stereotypes

Grouping individuals into categories is a fundamental, and functional, human tendency. Social categories, and the stereotypes (i.e., the knowledge and expectancies about probable behaviours, features, and traits) we associate with them, help people to make sense of their social world and to gain some predictability. "For instance, when classifying somebody as a nurse, some types of behaviour, characteristics, and traits (e.g., typically female, white coat, cares for ill people, friendly) may be expected, while other types of behaviours and traits (e.g., puts out fires, male, aggressive) are unexpected" (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017, 2). However, the negative implications of depending on social-category stereotypes become greater since they are consensually shared by a large number of individuals. Within the (sub)cultures in which

we reside, we learn which social categories are considered meaningful, and we learn what is expected of individuals belonging to these categories (Bigler & Liben, 2006; Holtgraves & Kashima, 2007; Thompson & Fine, 1999). In day-to-day socializing, prejudice and discrimination may arise when people are stereotyped based on negative information rather than accessible personal information (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017).

Labelling refers to using specific words to denote a social category. The labels we use reflect which set of individuals are singled out as meaningful groups. By using conventional category labels, people continuously confirm and maintain which categories are considered as meaningful for categorisation within a (sub)culture. Cultures commonly have category labels for age groups (e.g., elderly, adolescents), for ethnicity (e.g., Asian, Caucasian), nationality (e.g., Canadian, Dutch), gender (e.g., men, women), and professions (e.g. plumber, professor). The use of category labels has important consequences for impression formation. Once a group is linguistically labelled, it is explicitly defined and distinguished from other groups, and thereby gains in apparent reality. Several studies have shown that even trivial category labels induce perceivers to accentuate perceived similarity among members within the labelled category (i.e., they are all alike) and to exaggerate the differences between categories (e.g., Corneille & Judd, 1999; McGarty & Turner, 1992).

Foroni and Rothbart (2011, 2013), for instance, presented participants with silhouette drawings of female body types, ordered on a continuum from very thin to very large, and had participants estimate their absolute weight and similarity in "personality," "life style," and "body type." The silhouettes were presented in various conditions, in visual groupings, and either with or without a label. Results showed that the presence of a label (compared to no label), even when participants self-generated these, reduced perceived differences between members of the same (labelled) category, while the perceived differences between members of different categories became larger. This shows that once a label is imposed on an aggregate of individuals it obscures our perception of diversity between individual category members. Moreover, the formation of a stereotype becomes more likely when a category label is used. That is, the more a collection of individuals is perceived as a meaningful, coherent group, the more likely perceivers will seek stereotypic characteristics that are considered to be essential to its members (Abelson, Dasgupta, Park & Banaji, 1998; Crawford, Sherman & Hamilton, 2002; Hamilton & Sherman, 1996; Yzerbyt, Corneille & Estrada, 2001). Once such a stereotype is formed, the use of the category label will be enough for recipients to bring this existing stereotype to mind (Dijksterhuis & Van Knippenberg, 1996).

4. Linguistic bias

Language use in connection to stereotypes focuses on characterizing individuals and their behaviour. Stereotypic ideas about the targets of these descriptions manifest as subtle linguistic biases. "A linguistic bias can be defined as a systematic asymmetry in word choice as a function of the social category to which the target belongs" (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017, 1). "Linguistic biases result from, and facilitate the transmission of essentialist beliefs about social categories." (Beukeboom, 2014, 1).

Social categorisation and stereotypes play an important role in social perception, reasoning, and interaction. Although stereotypes provide a useful direction in helping us make sense of our complicated social environment, their usage can lead to bias and discrimination when individuals are treated based on generic stereotypic expectations rather than individualized truths. "When communicating with individuals we have categorized in a given social category, our language may subtly reveal the stereotypic expectancies we have about our conversation partners. It is important to be aware of these stereotype maintaining biases as they play an important role in upholding both benevolent and harmful stereotypes about social categories" (Beukeboom & Burgers, 2017, 1).

5. Sexist language

One area of linguistic bias study is concerned with the labels used to refer to (members of) social categories. Sexist language research is concerned with gender stereotype-induced inequalities in connections to female and male individuals. "In such references a systematic bias in "markedness" has been observed, wherein expectancy inconsistent individuals are more explicitly marked or noted" (Beukeboom, 2014, 2). Particularly, when referring to female and male people in roles or occupations that are inconsistent with the stereotypically expected role for his or her gender, people tend to include a clear indication of the person's sex (e.g., female surgeon, male nurse), whereas this is not the case when the individual's sex fits the respective gender role.

The inclination to proactively identify unexpected gender roles appears to be captured in lexical gaps. In these circumstances, the lexicon includes terminology for stereotypically unexpected gender roles but not for expected ones (Stahlberg et al., 2007). For example, while

the masculine word "family man" exists, there is no female counterpart. Similarly, the term "career woman" has no male equivalent. Taking care of the family appears to be atypical for men but typical for women. On the other hand, having a career is expected for men, but unexpected for women. Thereby, the unexpected positions stand out, but their comparable terms (family woman, career man) appear redundant because they relate to stereotypically anticipated and evident scenarios (Beukeboom, Burgers, 2017).

6. Sexist idioms and proverbs

Language is a crucial instrument for shaping and reflecting cultural norms and values. Idioms and proverbs, as essential components of everyday language, frequently express deeply held views and attitudes. Many English idioms and proverbs foster gender stereotypes and encourage sexist views (Wiecha, 2013). This chapter explores the widespread use and significance of sexist language embedded in English idioms and proverbs, with an emphasis on how these linguistic structures contribute to the maintenance of gender stereotypes. Much of the language we use on a daily basis is made up of mostly fixed, established idioms. Boers and Lindstromberg (2009) estimate that fixed phrases make up almost 50% of English written communication, with an even larger share in spoken conversation. According to Cacciari and Tabossi (1993), idiomatic phrases are often derived from and based on traditions, shared views, and cultural models within a certain speech group. Analysing a speech community's idioms can reveal shared biases and stereotypes among speakers, which are expressed through fixed language. The representation of men and women in idiomatic expressions is an important contributor to these prejudices.

Sexism in language is more than just a reflection of individual prejudices; it is a representation of long-standing power relations (Lakoff, 1973). Idioms like "man up," "boys will be boys," and "wear the pants" are not merely innocent statements, similar to proverbs like "Behind every great man is a great woman". Expressions like this have implications that normalize and perpetuate the idea of male authority over females and subtly perpetuate the notion that women's duties are supporting and secondary to men's accomplishments (Lakoff, 1973).
These language features are widespread, and frequently overlooked, yet they play an important role in developing cultural attitudes about gender roles and expectations. The value of analysing sexist idioms and proverbs stems from their widespread use and subtle effect on everyday

thought and behaviour. These statements are frequently embedded in daily interactions, educational materials, and media, making their influence simultaneously profound and subtle (Wiecha, 2013).

This research tries to understand the deeper implications of these idioms and proverbs, and how much they impact gender attitudes. In the next section of this paper, phrases "Man up", "Wear the pants", "Cry like a girl", "Boys don't cry", "She's one of the boys", and "Behind every great man is a great woman" will be analysed in terms of gender biases and how they affect and maintain gender stereotypes.

6.1. Man up

The term "man up" is an excellent illustration of how language can promote gender stereotypes and discriminatory views. At its root, "man up" is an idiom that encourages people, mainly men, to show courage, bravery, or stoicism in the face of hardship. Cambridge Dictionary defines the phrase "man up" as: used to tell someone that they should deal with something more bravely. Linguistically, the word "man" is used as an action, implying that to "man up" is to embrace the characteristics that are stereotypically associated with males. This phrase implicitly excludes women from possessing or displaying these attributes, reinforcing a binary and hierarchical view of gender features. Culturally, the expression reflects and supports long-held gender norms. Historically, societies have prized masculine attributes such as toughness, emotional suppression, and physical courage while devaluing feminine virtues such as empathy, sensitivity, and emotional expressiveness. By encouraging someone to "man up," the term implicitly devalues these latter attributes, indicating that they are insufficient or inappropriate responses to challenging situations (Vargas, 2019). Psychologically, the phrase may have a huge impact on people, particularly men. It imposes a strict code of behaviour that forbids the display of vulnerability and emotions, leading to a range of negative consequences. Men who internalize this expectation may face greater stress, and unhealthy emotional repression (Pappas, 2019). Addressing the phrase and its meanings entails encouraging other ways of perceiving and showing strength and resilience. Encouraging emotional expressiveness, empathy, and vulnerability as valued attributes for all people, regardless of gender, can assist in breaking down the detrimental preconceptions created by this phrase (Handrick, 2021).

6.2. Wear the pants/trousers

The phrase "wear the pants/trousers" is commonly used to describe someone who wields authority or control in a relationship, typically within a household. This expression has a deep origin in cultural and historical contexts that reflect and reinforce traditional gender norms and power relations. Linguistically, the phrase signifies authority due to the metaphorical association of trousers with male dominance. It indirectly equates power with masculine and subordination with feminine. Culturally speaking, the phrase maintains established gender norms. When someone is described as "wearing the pants" in a relationship, it typically suggests that they are the dominant partner, in control of making decisions (Sunderland, 2020). This can reinforce the notion that men should lead in both public and private settings, whereas women should be subordinate or helpful. Psychologically, the expression "wear the pants" can influence how people see and carry out their roles in relationships. This term, which implies power and control, may place pressure on men to adhere to traditional notions of masculinity. Failure to "wear the pants" can be perceived as a failure to carry out their intended purpose, leading to feelings of inadequacy or insecurity. Depending on the circumstances, the phrase can be empowering or restricting to women. Women who "wear the trousers" may feel validated in their authority and independence, challenging traditional gender stereotypes. On the other hand, they may face social criticism or be regarded as controlling or unfeminine. This contradiction highlights the ongoing struggle between traditional and changing gender roles. Furthermore, LGBTQ+ partnerships may face additional issues because this phrase implicitly presupposes a heterosexual dynamic in which one partner must be dominant. Non-binary and gender-nonconforming people may find the remark especially inappropriate or unpleasant since it reinforces a binary perspective of gender roles. Addressing the connotations of the phrase "wear the pants" entails developing a more nuanced and equal view of power and partnership. Encouraging shared decision-making, mutual respect, and equality in partnerships can assist in dissolving the idiom's suggested conventional power dynamics (Sunderland, 2020). This expression and its analysis are similar to the expression "be the man of the house" because it suggests that the primary authority figure in a home should be male.

6.3. Cry like a girl

The phrase "cry like a girl" uses femininity to imply weakness or excessive emotion. The expression is a derogatory idiom that demonstrates how language may promote gender stereotypes and sexist beliefs. Crying is associated with being a girl, which indirectly devalues femininity and creates a restricted, damaging understanding of appropriate emotional expression based on gender. Linguistically, this phrase is a simile that equates crying with being female. The expression employs "like a girl" in a derogatory sense, implying that crying or, by extension, expressing sensitivity and emotion is fundamentally bad and characteristic of girls. This phrase trivialises the act of crying while also reinforcing the idea that emotional expressiveness is a weakness linked with femininity (Frasca et al., 2022). This supports the notion that certain behaviours and features are gender-specific, and that emotional expression is less important or acceptable when linked to femininity. Psychologically, the statement can have a huge negative impact on people, especially boys and men. It enforces a rigorous code of conduct that restricts emotional expression and vulnerability, resulting in emotional repression and subsequent mental health difficulties. Boys who internalize this message may struggle to express their emotions, seek help, or develop emotional intelligence, all of which are important aspects of psychological well-being (Pappas, 2019). For girls and women, the statement fosters the belief that their inherent emotional expressiveness is a flaw. It can lead to feelings of guilt or inadequacy regarding their emotional responses, perpetuating the notion that they are incapable of dealing with stress or challenging situations. Addressing the connotations of this phrase involves encouraging a more inclusive and balanced view of emotional expression. Encouraging all people, regardless of gender, to express their feelings openly and without shame can help break down the harmful notions promoted by this phrase (Frasca et al., 2022).

6.4. Boys don't cry

This expression reinforces the stereotype that showing emotion is inappropriate for men, indirectly suggesting that emotional expression is a feminine weakness. This phrase, which implies that crying is unacceptable for boys, maintains traditional masculine standards while also contributing to the stigmatisation of emotional weakness. Linguistically, this phrase is a declarative statement that mandates a gender-specific behavioural standard. The term is

categorical and absolute, implying that crying is inconsistent with being a guy. The usage of "don't" establishes a norm or expectation, thereby policing males' emotional behaviour and reinforcing the idea that crying is not manly (Cooper, 2002). Psychologically, the saying can have a substantial detrimental impact on the emotional development and mental health of boys and men (Pappas, 2019). Addressing the connotations of the saying entails fostering a more inclusive and balanced view of emotional expression. Encouraging all people, regardless of gender, to express their feelings freely and without shame can help remove the damaging preconceptions propagated by this phrase (Cooper, 2002).

6.5. She's one of the boys

This expression implies that for a woman to be accepted or respected, she must behave like a man. The statement "she's one of the boys" is a common idiom used to characterize a woman who is welcomed and integrated into a group of males, usually because she engages in behaviours or activities associated with masculinity (Vargas, 2019). While the phrase may be intended to be taken as a compliment, implying that the woman is appreciated and valued by the group, it nevertheless reinforces gender stereotypes and the notion that certain actions are intrinsically masculine and more valuable. (He & Zhang, 2018). Linguistically, this expression contrasts feminine identity with male-dominated environments or activities. The phrase refers to belonging to a male-dominated group, meaning that the woman in question possesses characteristics or engages in actions in line with masculine values. This inclusion is dependent on her meeting these standards, meaning that her acceptance depends on her departure from traditional female roles. This phrase implies that in order to be accepted in male-dominated places, a woman must adapt to these masculine qualities, which marginalize and devalue traditionally feminine behaviours and attributes. Psychologically, the term might have serious implications for women. On the one hand, it may be perceived as empowering since it recognizes a woman's capacity to excel in male-dominated areas. On the other side, it puts pressure on women to adhere to masculine standards in order to achieve acceptance and respect, which may lead to internal conflicts and identity crises (Pappas, 2019). For women who are naturally drawn to male activities or characteristics, the comment may be affirming. However, it may be discriminatory and alienating to women who do not meet this image, maintaining the belief that femininity is less welcoming or acceptable. This can lead to an environment in which women feel pressured to conceal or hide their actual selves to be accepted. Addressing the

connotations of the phrase "she's one of the boys" means advocacy for a more inclusive perspective of gender roles and embracing diverse expressions of identity. This phrase shows how language may reinforce gender stereotypes and perpetuate the notion that certain actions and attributes are inherently masculine. While it may be intended as a compliment, it ultimately communicates that acceptance and respect are dependent upon adhering to masculine norms (He & Zhang, 2018).

6.6. Behind every great man is a great woman

The expression "Behind every great man is a great woman" is frequently used to recognize women's supportive roles in men's triumphs. However, a closer examination indicates that this expression maintains gender prejudice and supports traditional beliefs about the roles of men and women (Abadi, 2015). Linguistically, the phrase employs the preposition "behind" to place the woman in a subordinate or supporting role to the men. The man is "great" and in the forefront, but the woman, while likewise "great," is confined to a less prominent role. This arrangement emphasizes that the woman's efforts are important, but ultimately subordinate to the man's efforts. Culturally, the statement reflects and reinforces traditional gender roles, with men as leaders and achievers and women as supports and caretakers (He & Zhang 2018). Historically, cultures have frequently appreciated and promoted men's public successes while disregarding or downplaying women's contributions. This phrase emphasizes the idea that a woman's primary purpose is to assist and enable a man's achievement, rather than attaining her own independent goals. In many historical circumstances, women's duties were restricted to the home, where their work and contributions were frequently unseen or underestimated. While this term may recognize their overlooked efforts, it undermines appreciation of women's achievements in their own right by implying that a woman's greatness is in her support of a man, and it supports the state of male supremacy in public and professional settings (Sunderland, 2020). Psychologically, the term might have several meanings for both men and women. For women, it may reinforce the sense that their worth and success are based on their relationships with men, especially in supporting roles. This may constrain their ambitions and self-perception, causing girls to undervalue their abilities and accomplishments outside of the context of supporting males. For men, the remark supports the notion that they should be the primary achievers and leaders, with women supporting them. This may reinforce traditional masculine ideals and demands, making it difficult for men to value and engage in more

collaborative or supportive roles. It may also result in an underestimation of the value of emotional intelligence, caring, and other characteristics typically associated with femininity (Pappas, 2019). By maintaining a restricted and heteronormative vision of gender dynamics, it excludes and marginalizes a diverse range of experiences and identities (He & Zhang, 2018).

7. The study

This research explores the complex relationship between gender and language by looking at sexist idioms and gender prejudice in English. The study examines idioms representing men and women, pointing out their implications. The goal of the study is to identify the underlying social norms and gender stereotypes that are represented in these everyday idioms. Through a combination of quantitative analysis and qualitative interpretation, the research investigates how these idioms perpetuate gender bias and influence perceptions of gender stereotypes. By providing an overview of sexist idioms, this study seeks to contribute to the broader efforts of promoting gender equality and raising awareness about the subtle ways in which language can reinforce discriminatory attitudes and behaviours. The idiomatic phrases that were used in the study were; "man up", "wear the pants", "cry like a girl", "boys don't cry", "she's one of the boys" and "behind every great man is a great woman".

7.1. Aims

The primary aim of this research is to examine the existence and extent of gender bias in English idioms. This study aims to investigate how language reflects and reinforces social norms and gender stereotypes. The purpose of this study is to show how women and men are depicted in English idioms based on the implications of idioms relating to women, men, or both genders. The study also attempts to offer a better understanding of how these language expressions impact attitudes about gender roles and support gender bias in everyday communication. By illuminating the subtle yet common ways in which language moulds and perpetuates gendered attitudes, this research ultimately hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on gender equality. The study is guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: Are the respondents familiar with the sexist idiomatic expressions in the English language?

RQ2: Do the respondents think that the sexist idiomatic phrases have gender stereotypical and sexist implications which can be harmful?

RQ3: Do the respondents avoid using sexist language and do they think awareness of it can lead to change?

7.2. Research method

The data were collected my means of a questionnaire, consisting of open- and closed-ended questions. The questionnaire comprised 15 questions. For questions 1-12, there were three options provided as answers the participants chose between, the options were "Yes", "No", and "Unsure." The participants were first asked if they were familiar with each phrase that was included in the study, and then they were asked specific questions regarding their opinion related to the phrase, that is, if they thought the phrases were somehow harmful. Question 13 and 14 included a Likert scale, providing participants with five response options within which they chose the option that they most associated with considering the question. Question 13: "Do you believe that sexist language and idioms can be harmful?" provided participants with five response options: (1) Strongly agree, (2) Agree, (3) Neutral, (4) Disagree, and (5) Strongly disagree. Participants selected the option that they felt best described their opinion regarding the question posed. Question 14: "Do you actively try to avoid using sexist language and idioms in your own speech?" provided participants with five response options ranging from (1) Always, (2) Often, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rarely to (5) Never. Participants selected the option that they most closely associated with their experience. Finally, question 15, in order to gather qualitative insights into participants' personal experiences with gender bias in everyday language use, asked for short answers. This question was designed to elicit a range of perspectives and capture the nuanced views of the participants.

7.3. Participants

The participants of this research were 20 students of different years of English Language and Literature studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Rijeka. Their involvement is pivotal as they bring a range of perspectives and experiences with the language, which is crucial for analysing the understanding and perceptions of gender bias and

sexist idioms. By focusing on this demographic, the study aims to capture the nuances of how young adults, particularly those specializing in English, perceive and interpret gendered language in their academic and social contexts. All the participants of the study were between 18 and 24 years old. Out of 20 participants 2 were male, which is 10%, and the rest (90%) were female. Finally, 95% of the participants are students, while one participant reported to be employed half time.

7.4. Results

All the participants are familiar with the phrase "man up". Also, all of them responded affirmatively when asked if, in their opinion, the phrase "man up" perpetuates the stereotype that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness. The majority (95%) are familiar with the phrase "wear the pants" as a description of someone in a relationship, 5% is not sure. The majority (90%) think the phrase "wear the pants" implies a power dynamic based on gender, 5% do not think that and 5% is not sure. The distribution of responses is summarized in Figure 1.
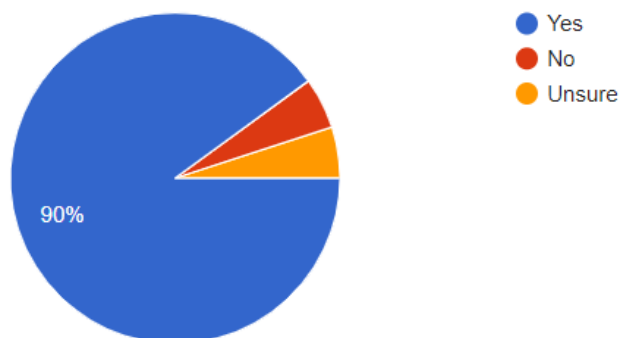

Figure 1: The participants' opinion on whether the phrase "wear the pants" implies a power dynamic based on gender.

All the participants are familiar with the phrase "cry like a girl" and they all agree that the phrase reinforces the stereotype that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness. Identically, all the participant are familiar with the phrase "boys don't cry" and they all agree that it negatively impacts men's mental health by discouraging emotional expression. The majority (90%) of the participants are familiar with the phrase "she's one of the boys", one participant (5%) is not familiar with it, and another one (5%) is not sure what the expression means.

The majority (70%) of the participants believe that the phrase "she's one of the boys" implies that in order to be accepted in male-dominated spaces, a woman must adapt to masculine values, thereby marginalizing and devaluing traditionally feminine behaviours and attributes, 20% are not sure, and 10% do not believe that. The distribution of responses can be seen in Figure 2.
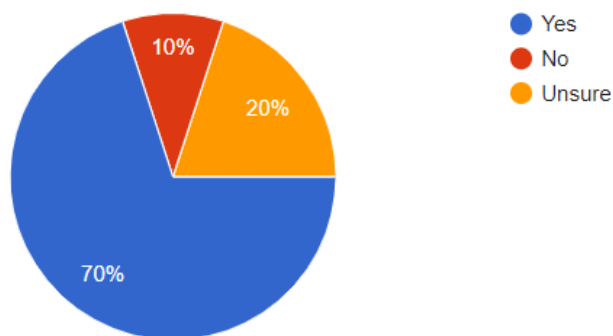

Figure 2: The participants' opinion on whether the phrase "she's one of the boys" implies that in order to be accepted in male-dominated spaces, a woman must adapt to masculine values, thereby marginalizing and devaluing traditionally feminine behaviours and attributes.

All the participants are familiar with the phrase "behind every great man is a great woman". The majority of the participants feel that the abovementioned phrase reflects and reinforces traditional gender roles, with men as leaders and achievers and women as supports and caretakers. Twenty percent do not feel that, and 10% are not sure that is what the phrase implies. The distribution of responses is shown in Figure 3.
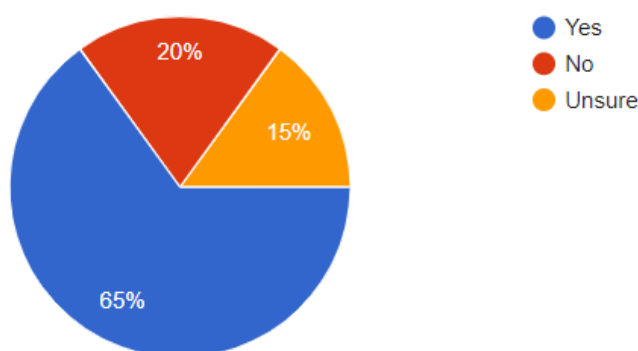

Figure 3: Percentage of participants who feel that the phrase "behind every great man is a great woman" reflects and reinforces traditional gender roles, with men as leaders and achievers and women as supports and caretakers.

During the survey, the participants were asked to express their views on the impact of sexist language and idioms. The majority of the respondents demonstrated a high level of awareness and concern regarding this issue: 45% of the participants strongly agreed that sexist language and idioms can be harmful, while another 40% expressed agreement with this sentiment. A smaller percentage, 5%, remained neutral on the topic, indicating uncertainty or a lack of strong opinion. Ten percent of the participants disagreed that sexist language and idioms are harmful, suggesting a divergence of perspectives among the respondents. This is indicated in Figure 4.
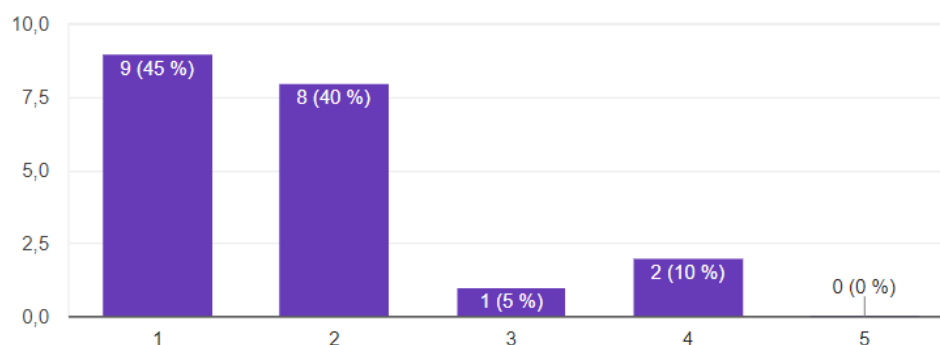

Figure 4: Distribution of responses regarding the participants' belief that sexist language and idioms can be harmful.

The participants were also inquired whether they actively try to avoid using sexist language and idioms in their own speech. The responses unveiled a spectrum of attitudes and behaviours regarding the use of language. A notable 30% of the participants stated that they consistently make a concerted effort to avoid sexist language, reflecting a strong commitment to inclusive speech. Another 30% indicated that they often strive to avoid such language, showcasing a frequent but not constant awareness of their speech patterns. For 35% of the respondents, the approach was more intermittent, as they admitted to sometimes using sexist language or idioms. A minority of 5% acknowledged rarely making an effort to avoid these expressions. This is shown in Figure 5.

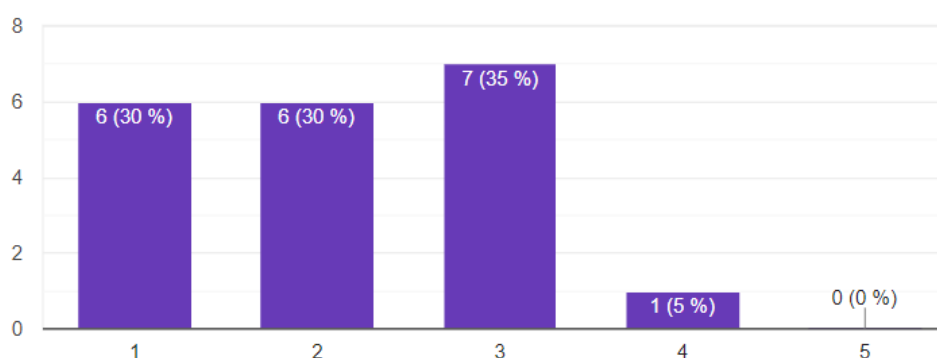(1 - Always, 2 - Often, 3 - Sometimes, 4 - Rarely, 5 - Never)

20 answers

Figure 5: The participants' trying to avoid using sexist language and idioms in their speech.

When asked whether they think awareness and education about sexist language can lead to more gender-inclusive communication, the participants generally address multiple interconnected themes including concerns about stereotypes and sexist language, the harmful effects of sexist idioms, and the critical need for comprehensive education on these issues. Out of the 20 participants surveyed, five (5) responded affirmatively with a simple "yes," underscoring a widespread acknowledgment of the need for educational initiatives targeting these issues. Other participants emphasize the damaging impact that sexist language can have on individuals and society, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and perpetuating inequality. They advocate for increased awareness and education to combat these negative effects, highlighting the importance of inclusive language in fostering a more equitable environment. The participants also highlighted the need and hope for younger generations, noting that they are generally more willing and adaptable to change, especially when provided with good education on the importance of inclusive language and the harmful effects of sexist idioms. Additionally, the participants express concerns about resistance to such education, particularly from older individuals and men. The following responses provide a nuanced view of the participants' perspectives on the challenges and potential solutions related to sexist language and inclusivity. The responses were reviewed and categorized into thematic groups based on recurring ideas and sentiments. The main themes identified were: (1) stereotypes and sexism, (2) lack of knowledge and harmful impact of words, (3) education on inclusive language, and (4) education on the harmful effects of sexist language. The responses were written in their original form. The

following sections present the grouped responses, providing key insights and quotes from participants within each theme.

The section below contains quotes from participants that address the theme of stereotypes and sexism. These statements demonstrate the widespread belief that many idioms reinforce gender stereotypes and promote sexist attitudes. By analysing these replies, we may acquire a better understanding of the participants' perspectives on how language might contribute to and reflect societal prejudices.

> *I think this would be necessary for us* (as) *a society to evolve and grow past the old stereotypes and values of the past.* (P1)
> *Yes, it can be helpful for those who are unaware of this, but I'm not sure it would be successful when speaking to those who already hold firm, sexist views.* (P2)

In the following section there are statements from participants that emphasize the theme of lack of knowledge and the harmful impact of words. These statements demonstrate how a lack of awareness of particular idioms may have detrimental implications since many people are uninformed of the meanings behind the terms they use and frequently do not realize they are spreading sexist language and the seriousness of its impact and implications. By evaluating these reactions, we may better understand how participants perceive sexist language and idiomatic phrases to affect people and society.

> *Yes, because some people probably use that kind of language without thinking that some people are hurt by it or maybe even without knowing what certain words mean.* (P3)
> *Definitely, because most people don't even notice that they use sexist language.* (P12)
> *Yes because many people aren't even aware of what they are saying, they're saying it out of habit and never actually took a minute to reflect what these idioms mean.* (P13)
> *Yes. What we say matters greatly, and it has a bigger impact than we think.* (P8)

In this section there are quotes from the participants that highlight the theme of education on inclusive language. The responses underscore the participants' belief regarding the need for increased awareness and education to promote inclusivity. They emphasize that understanding and using inclusive language is crucial for fostering a more equitable society. However, the participants also express concerns about the resistance to such education from certain groups, particularly older individuals and men. These quotes provide a nuanced view of the participants' perspectives on the benefits of inclusive language and the challenges associated with promoting its acceptance across different demographics.

It is great that people are taking the time to learn about gender-inclusive language. It seems that there is a rise in accepting and using gender-inclusive language among the female population. Women are becoming more aware of their right and their place in the word, the workspace, in academia and in everyday social situations. However, some men are still resistant to change and value the traditional roles placed for both genders. It is extremely important that we continue educating people about gender-inclusive language and the constant changes being made in language and science. That way women can be included and it helps other minorities (the LGBT). (P11)

It depends. I believe that older people, especially male would laugh at this and no education would change their thoughts and opinions. However, younger population is inclined to learn and implement the gender-inclusive communication. The only problem I see in this is people who are very easily offended when not adressed as they had wished. Even though the other person apologised for offending them, they continue to curse that person. In this situation, the person apologising would most definitely hate the very notion of gender-inclusive language and would try to stop it from developing and becoming a part of the everyday speech. (P4)

Yes bc there will be equality between genders. (P9)

Yes, because by heightening one's own awareness of such biases that are omnipresent in spoken language a person should, on average, become more inclusive and careful when expressing themselves. (P14)

This section presents the participants' responses that highlight the theme of education on the harmful effects of sexist language. The responses reveal a strong belief among participants that education can significantly raise awareness about the damage caused by sexist language and idioms. They emphasize that through targeted educational efforts, individuals can become more conscious of the negative impacts of such language, leading to meaningful change in societal attitudes and communication practices. These quotes provide valuable insights into the participants' perspectives on how education can be a powerful tool in combating the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and promoting more respectful and inclusive language.

Yes, it is possible. If more people are aware of the harmful effects of sexist language change is possible. I think parents should be top priority for education on sexist language since they have the most influence on future generations. (P10)

I believe it can if it is done in the right way, if we provide enough information and background to the origins and usage of such idioms and if we give examples of how these idioms could influence the society in the bad way. (P5)

Yes, if more people are educated on sexist language more people would be aware of the damage that kind of language causes - for examples insecurities in boys when people say act like a man or when people say you throw like a girl. (P6)

I think that awareness especially and education would help but mainly and most effectivrly when children are still young. A lot of these phrases and idioms have become a habit for the young adults and older preople and many people never really sat and actually thought about the meaning and the message it ends which is nevertheless,subconciously at least, absorbed anywayy.And I belive that it is very hard to change someones way of expressing because it is an important piece of person's identity and personality. (P7)

8. Discussion

The primary aim of this study was to explore university students' perceptions and attitudes regarding the use of sexist language and idioms, as well as to discover how they feel about educational interventions affecting understanding and use of inclusive language. The findings show that the majority of participants recognize the negative impacts of sexist language and idioms, highlighting the prevalence of gender stereotypes incorporated in everyday expressions.

A prominent theme that emerges from the responses is the harmful impact of sexist language and idioms. Many participants agree that everyday speech reinforces prejudices that may ultimately contribute to gender inequality. This discovery is consistent with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which holds that language modifies our perceptions of the world and influences our behaviour. Idioms like "man up" and "cry like a girl" perpetuate conventional gender stereotypes while also stigmatizing emotional expression, particularly in males. As Beukeboom and Burgers (2017) point out, this linguistic bias consistently reflects and maintains social stereotypes. The unanimous recognition of the harmful effects of these phrases aligns with Pappas (2019), who discusses the psychological impact of rigid gender norms on men's mental health.

The expression "wear the trousers" is also well-known, with 90% of the participants recognizing its connotation of a stereotypical gender-based power dynamic. This finding demonstrates how language may subtly reinforce traditional gender roles, showing men as dominant in relationships and women as subservient. This response is consistent with Sunderland (2020), who states that when someone is regarded as "wearing the pants" in a relationship, this typically indicates that they are the dominant partner in charge of decision-making. Similarly, the phrase "cry like a girl" is interpreted as promoting the stereotype that emotional expressiveness is a sign of weakness, adding to the evidence that language reinforces gender biases. The phrase "boys don't cry" elicit similar responses among the participants, with all agreeing that it has a detrimental influence on men's mental health by suppressing emotional expression. This universal agreement might highlight the ingrained nature of gender stereotypes that inhibit males from displaying vulnerability.

Interestingly, the statement "she's one of the boys" generates a more diverse reaction. While 70% think it implies that women have to embrace masculine ideals to be acceptable in male-dominated environments, 20% are unsure, and 10% disagree. This variation may reflect a more nuanced understanding of gender roles and the changing nature of gender identity in modern society.

The phrase "behind every great man is a great woman" is largely interpreted as maintaining traditional gender roles, with 65% agreeing that it promotes the idea that women are secondary to men's accomplishments. This finding supports feminist arguments that such statements undermine women's autonomous contributions and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. Although 65% of the participants recognize the negative implications of the phrase, 15% are unsure, and 20% do not see it as reinforcing traditional gender roles. This may suggest a degree of resistance or lack of awareness about the subtle ways language can perpetuate sexism. The statistics show a high level of agreement among the participants on the negative impacts of sexist language. When asked if they believe that sexist language and idioms can be harmful, 45% strongly agree and 40% agree, indicating a broad consensus on this topic. This broad agreement may indicate a widespread knowledge of the harmful effects of such language on both individual well-being and societal standards.

Despite this awareness, answers to the question "Do you actively try to avoid using sexist language and idioms in your own speech?" demonstrate varied levels of personal commitment to change. While 30% of the participants claim that they always strive to avoid sexist language, another 30% do so often, and 35% sometimes attempt to. This may suggest that while there is

an understanding grasp of the problem, consistent application in everyday life differs, emphasizing the difficulty of changing ingrained linguistic habits. These findings illustrate the varying degrees of mindfulness and intentionality among participants in their speech practices. The participants regard education about the adverse impacts of sexist language and idioms as possible promoters of change. Many people feel that raising awareness about the harm caused by such words will lead to improved sensitivity and behavioural change. The participants emphasize the need to include this teaching in larger initiatives to promote inclusive language. They observe that younger generations are more adaptive and willing to change, implying that educational activities aimed at these groups might be more beneficial. The hope is that focused education would help younger people understand the necessity of adopting inclusive language and challenging traditional stereotypes.

However, the participants express scepticism about resistance to change, particularly among older generations and some men. This opposition is viewed as a significant obstacle to the broad adoption of inclusive language practices. Participants express worry that entrenched views and long-held practices make it difficult for these groups to recognize the need for change and adjust their language use accordingly.

The study's findings are in line with previous studies on the impact of sexist language. Beukeboom and Burgers (2017) show that linguistic biases contribute to the maintenance of gender stereotypes, and this study offers empirical evidence for this claim in the context of common idioms. This study emphasizes the necessity of ongoing efforts to educate and encourage all members of society to recognize and dissolve sexist language, contributing to the reduction of gender stereotypes and inequities.

Several limitations of the study should be considered. The study's sample size was small and largely female, which may have influenced the findings' generalizability. Furthermore, the participants were university students specializing in English, which may have increased their awareness of language concerns compared to the general public. Future research should try to incorporate a more varied and bigger sample size to improve the reliability of the findings.

The study was carried out in a specific cultural and educational setting, which may have influenced participants' ideas of gender and language. Cultural customs and attitudes about gender roles differ substantially, and findings from one environment may not apply to another. Future studies should involve individuals from a variety of cultural backgrounds to investigate how views of sexist idioms vary between nations. This would offer a deeper understanding of the global impact of gender biased language.

Including a broader spectrum of participants, such as older adults and people with different educational levels, might improve the findings' generalizability. Understanding how various demographic groups perceive and use gender biased language can lead to more specific and successful teaching efforts. In-depth interviews might give more nuanced insights into how people comprehend and respond to sexist idioms. This qualitative method would supplement quantitative data by delving deeper into personal experiences and attitudes. These limitations and suggestions for future research would help to further validate the findings and expand the understanding of the role of sexist language in perpetuating gender stereotypes.

9. Conclusion

This thesis explored the complex relationship between language and gender, emphasizing how linguistic patterns and idiomatic expressions reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The study examines the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, social categorisation, linguistic biases, and the prevalence of sexist language to get a comprehensive knowledge of how language forms and enforces societal norms. The study's findings show that university students are conscious of the negative connotations of sexist idioms such as "man up," "wear the trousers," "cry like a girl," "boys don't cry," "she's one of the boys," and "behind every great man is a great woman." These expressions discreetly but bluntly reinforce gender biases and hinder progress towards gender equality. The findings highlight the pressing need for educational initiatives that promote gender-inclusive language. Educational activities that raise awareness and encourage critical thinking on the usage of sexist language can play an important role in confronting and altering established gender stereotypes. This effort is vital for breaking down negative preconceptions and attaining gender equality. Finally, promoting gender-inclusive language is an important step towards building a more equal and inclusive society. In conclusion, this study emphasizes the prevalence of gender stereotypes in everyday idiomatic phrases, as well as the necessary need for educational initiatives that encourage more inclusive language practices. By increasing awareness and promoting thoughtful reflection on the use of sexist language, we can contribute to promoting gender equality and dismantling harmful stereotypes.

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Appendix

Questionnaire on Gender Bias and Sexist Language in Idioms

This questionnaire aims to explore perceptions and attitudes towards gender bias and sexist language in common idioms. Your responses will help in understanding how these phrases impact social attitudes and reinforce gender stereotypes.

Instructions: Please answer the following questions based on your personal experiences and perceptions. There are no right or wrong answers.

Age:

Under 18
18-24
25-34
35-44
45-54
55-64
65+

Gender:

Male
Female
Prefer not to say

Occupation:

Student
Employed full-time
Employed part-time
Unemployed
Retired
Other

Have you heard the phrase "man up"?

In your opinion, does the phrase "man up" perpetuate the stereotype that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness?

Have you heard the phrase "wear the pants" to describe someone in a relationship?

Do you think the phrase "wear the pants" implies a power dynamic based on gender?

Have you heard the phrase "cry like a girl"?

In your opinion, does the phrase "cry like a girl" perpetuate the stereotype that expressing emotions is a sign of weakness?

Have you heard the phrase "boys don't cry"?

Do you think the phrase "boys don't cry" negatively impacts men's mental health by discouraging emotional expression?

Have you heard the phrase "she's one of the boys"?

Do you believe that the phrase "she's one of the boys" implies that in order to be accepted in male-dominated spaces, a woman must adapt to masculine values, thereby marginalizing and devaluing traditionally feminine behaviours and attributes?"

Have you heard the phrase "behind every great man is a great woman"?

Do you feel the phrase "behind every great man is a great woman" reflects and reinforces traditional gender roles, with men as leaders and achievers and women as supports and caretakers?

Do you believe that sexist language and idioms can be harmful? (1 - Strongly agree, 2 - Agree, 3 - Neutral, 4 - Disagree, 5 - Strongly disagree)

Do you actively try to avoid using sexist language and idioms in your own speech? (1 - Always, 2 - Often, 3 - Sometimes, 4 - Rarely, 5 - Never)

Do you think awareness and education about sexist language can lead to more gender-inclusive communication? Why or why not?