

【第6回大会基調講演】

**Gender Discrimination in the Korean Language**  
**Han, Heungsik**

Abstract

Since the middle of the 70s, the relationship between language and gender has been a major focus within the women's movement. In this paper, I examined some androcentric linguistic behavior which discriminating toward woman in Korean language. Such sexist or 'man-made' language affected and originated from a traditional patriarchal society and its socio-political attitude, ignoring women as subordinated beings from their birth, providing justification men's predominance over women. This kind of thinking is accepted as social value and naturally expressed in language, as Cameron has already said: 'In the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist.'

Men and women who are obsessed with the discrimination tend to depreciate themselves as well as others. So I try to sensitize people to the androcentric features of the language and to prove the negative results against men and woman of using sexism language. We should fight for not only equal rights in the social sphere, but also demand gender equity in the language which yield changes in thinking and eventually will bring changes in society. So I suggested resisting patriarchal language behavior in every day of life, for which we mainly have to list sex-biased words to be avoided and publish guidelines for a gender-equal use of language and propose gender-neutral usages for making the Korean language gender-equal.

1. Introduction

Language, in both written and visual forms, is essential like the air which is necessary to lead our absolute existence. The contents of language one uses daily contain not only basic information, but also one's social status, cultural level, and ideological characteristics. That means that sexual discrimination of our society is best reflected through our language. Also, the language that we use sustains the discrimination. The women's conspicuous effort on this discrimination is not of much help to improve the

society's cultural low standard of women. The optimistic view that we can crush this inequality by improving laws and rules that are holding down women's rights must be wrong. The wall of our society's understanding and custom is too high to be destroyed. The best example can be "sexually discriminatory language." Language as the social and cultural representative of a group, reflects the members' conscious and unconscious thinking system.

Recent studies of women attempt to analyze these problems within speech because our language shows sexual inequality and contents of holding women down.<sup>1)</sup>

In this paper, I will examine the discriminatory expressions in Korean language how women's images, characteristics and abilities are influenced by them and to mention the solution for resisting man-made cultural standards and social prohibitions on women's life.

## 2. Types of language expression with sexual discrimination

Generally speaking, language is not only a tool to provide information, but also medium to convey major social control methods in the socialization process. The expressions women easily get emotional about are usually taming them to the man-centered social system, which is generally regarded as standards. If one deviates from such standards, this person is immediately criticized because those expressions are consciously internalized and formalized. These examples show that our language is media to control something away from the standards.

### 2-1. Expressions of limiting women's role and area in our society

'Limiting women's role and area' implies that women should keep within the traditional boundary of their lives. "Doing housework is for a woman," is a good example.

Such expressions as "This is what a female should do," "All women needs to do is housework," "Why do you female even participate in ancestral rites?" "Why do you still work when you're even married?" are often used in our daily lives. Even though there are some expressions limiting men's boundary, but for women they are used to limit their social roles and working areas. As an unusual case, mothers-in-law use this man-centered-language to their daughters-in-law. Nowadays the recognition of

our society to a woman is changed and her economical achievement has dramatically increased.<sup>2)</sup> But still woman's area is generally bounded in housework.

## 2-2. Expressions of thinking female is not a public being

As good examples for such expressions when calling woman, there are "Ya(hey)," "Neo(you)," "00 Yang(嬢)," and so on,<sup>3)</sup> which are quite impolite and quite different from when someone calls a man, one may say "00 Ssi(氏)," "Dangsin" "00 Seonseng(先生)".

In the past, working place was a place where women stopped by before marriage; therefore these callings were mainly focused on not-married women. Of course, such callings are slowly diminishing because women find life-long jobs after graduating from colleges.

But as you feel, still women are degraded in public and moreover, they are even sexually harassed. For instance, even though there was no problem about names in the workplace, during drinking parties, the case becomes different. During these parties, these women employers are even called as "Seksi(hostesses)." <sup>4)</sup> This expression is almost amounts to sexual harassments.

## 2-3. Expressions degrading women

As for types of expressions degrading women, there are expressions emphasizing women's inferiority complex, expressions degrading women as an unfortunate person, expressions reflecting women as a lower state than men, negative expressions about appearance, and so on.

### 2-3-1. Expressions emphasizing women's inferiority complex

There are a lot of expressions emphasizing women's inferiority complex. After the system of employing both sexes with equal conditions, many companies turned out to debase women's ability more often. "If a crow-tit tries to walk like a stork, it will break its legs. Tailor your ambitions to the measure of your abilities" is a Korean proverb stating that crow-tit (representing women) cannot be equal as the stork (representing men).

Housewives say that they often heard of saying that "What did you do when you were home?"; "Stupid!" which is usually used when the husband has a higher academic degree than that of the wife. But then, when the

husband and wife had the same degree or if the wife had a better skill of speech, husbands criticize her by saying "I don't like a clever woman." Therefore, when women get out of the boundary made for them, they are the targets to criticize toward.

#### 2-3-2. Expressions degrading women as a bad luck

Calling a person a bad luck is a great debasement toward any living creature. It is symbolic and a moral taboo. But to women it happens. To take an example, an expression of a man finding a woman driving a car, was "What is that women doing up in front of me? What a bad luck! Do you want to kill yourself?" Even though they say that it has been decreased greatly, but expressions like "Today's such an unlucky day because the first call this morning was from a female" is still being used. Even taking one step further, there are now a lot of sayings made by men counting all of the women as one to rule over and saying "How dare does the woman..."; "How dare... to men..."; "As a simple female employee..."

#### 2-3-3. Expressions describing women with a lower personality than men

Expressions describing women with a lower personality than men are related to the thoughts in the expressions above, "the expressions degrading women as a bad luck." These expressions are more widely applied to housewives rather than carrier women. The idea that a husband tries to keep his wife behind himself leads to complain his wife by saying "Don't try to play the same role." Also, such an expression was said to be by her mother-in-law. Although the mother-in-law is also a female, since she is a woman who gave birth her husband, so she behaves herself as a man like her husband.

#### 2-3-4. Negative expressions about appearance

Expressions about appearances are usually spoken out. However, standards on women's appearances didn't change a bit and even became slowly getting worse. "Why don't you wear make-up?"; "I bet it'll cost a lot for all the plastic surgeries you'll need" are used because a female person didn't wear make-up and there are also many negative expressions about wearing too much make-up. Moreover, there are more criticism on ones' physical

appearance like "Hey, stop eating, you pig!"; "What did you do while other kids were growing up?"

### 3. The effects of sexually discriminatory language

First, the women humble themselves. Languages that were used to lower women are repeated and reinforced, therefore the women take it in and think of themselves as "I'm a lacking criminal." <sup>5)</sup>

Second, they ideologically think about being a "docile, obeying woman." When they stay quietly behind their husbands, they are seen as good women, therefore, they try to become 'docile, obeying woman' to become other women's role model. Also, being a quiet and reticent person is seen as the best way instead of expressing themselves.

Third, lack of confidence in verbal expression can be seen. In women's expression, there are lots of repeated words. Also, they speak in ambiguous ways such as "well and maybe"

Fourth, they maintain a contradicting, double-faced attitude.

Fifth, women fear to adapt to social changes due to lack of confidence and limit themselves to home activities.<sup>6)</sup>

Sixth, when the women try to find out solutions to any problem, they would resort to indirect ways first instead of direct ones.

### 4. Discriminatory language and socio-cultural backgrounds

Our social habits and common ideas that control our conscious world contribute to form sexually discriminatory language. We can summarize the backgrounds of such common ideas related to the languages as follows.

#### 4-1. Social common ideas

First, it is a habit to ignore groups of women. That was possible because there never were any conflicts when ignoring a woman's identity. It seems there is a typical idea of a woman. If any woman steps over that idea, she is faced with much criticism. Second, although it is a problem that can be proposed as a sexual discrimination, we tend to turn it into a personal problem out of private relationship. This is the result of our tendency to think about a social problem in a personal way. Third, although a problem arises, we think the environment, not each person, caused the problem. This tendency to evade the problem also contributes to sexual discrimination. This

is from the idea "Something better is better," and the idea "The weak had better go away."

#### 4-2. Patriarch ideology

Next, the key factors for the reproduction of sexual discrimination are Confucianism and the patriarch ideology. First, the structure of our language came from Confucianism, making generation and sexual ranks. Normally, a husband is 3 to 4 years older than his wife, therefore it contributes to use sexual discriminatory words. So to speak, even if the husband uses sexually discriminating language to his wife, the wife who was taught not to argue against people that are older than herself, and especially not to argue with her husband, just takes it in. Wives are reminded to "keep quiet for at least 3 years." It continues on to the marriage life nowadays.<sup>7)</sup>

Second, languages produced in a patriarchal society are naturally composed of male-centered languages. In the process, female languages are limited and banned. Female's dialogue is regarded as mindless chatting and nagging, and therefore they are kept under control not to let the female's talking be heard.<sup>8)</sup> It resulted in the idea that women are not able to participate in public talks. These steps repeat to reproduce sexual discrimination.

Third, since the former society was one where labor was specified very clearly, but nowadays women started to participate in social and economic activities leading to the prominence of the sexually discriminating society. So, these women-restraining expressions led to many conflicts nowadays.<sup>9)</sup>

#### 5. Conclusion

It is true that many idioms and expressions insulting women have been decreased. But the male supremacy mind still prevails in our subconscious mind. So, there are still many sexual discriminating languages and expressions in our society.

A human's cognition cannot be easily controlled by one's will. The new generation grows up in the former generation's experiences and culture and inherits their culture. We can say that our language is not used by our will, but trying to match the language our future generation uses.

Our society established standards and codes only for men, and women were considered their belongings or possessions. Also sexual

discrimination was a tool for keeping the society a male-centered one. In other words, our society made and reinforced sexual discriminating languages to keep the society a male-centered one.

Therefore, to change our language, the men and women must unite to change their language and stop using sexually discriminatory language. We must find and recognize nondiscriminatory languages and change them into gender-free languages. We have to list sex-biased words to be avoided and proposed gender-neutral usages.<sup>10)</sup>

Also, above all, we must realize equality between man and woman and work to make a society where a woman can find their ways dignified. The answer to all the problems is when both sexes stand in equal positions and in harmony, therefore I believe the shortcut to escaping sexual discrimination is to pursuit harmony and equality between both sexes by using gender-free, nondiscriminatory languages.

### Notes

- 1) About recent studies on language and gender in Korea, see, Kim, Hye-Sook(2004). About gender in cyber space, see **References (b)** below.
- 2) Economically active women are increased rapidly in Korea. See Table 1 below.
- 3) But if she is in the department store, she is so politely called "Samonim."
- 4) "Seksi" is traditional Korean term, meaning "Bride." Now sometimes its meaning close to 'bar-girl'. For example, "Seksijip" is "Hostess serving bar." There is no relation to 'sexy' in English.
- 5) For example, "What other thing women know? Women know nothing."
- 6) Even in wedding ceremony, bride should be guided by man-guardian and handed to the bridegroom, while he enters in alone.
- 7) It is also said "God Age for Marriage" in Korea, which is 27 years old for man and 24 years old for woman. In traditional wedding ceremony, a bridegroom bows 2 times to his bride. But a bride should bow double - 4 times-to him.
- 8) "When three women gather, dishes can speak."; "When three women gather, dishes should be crushed."

- 9) Working women burden double. They have to do their job and look after housework. On the other hand, housewives have to hear her husband asking, "Did you ever earn money?" and hurting her mind by her social and economic inferiority compared with working wives. We call it "super woman syndrome."
- 10) For example see, 佐々木瑞枝(2000, 2003), 『女と男の日本語辞典(上, 下)』(東京堂出版), and, Rosalie Maggio(1991), Dictionary of Bias-Free Usage: A Guide to Nondiscriminatory Language (Phoenix, Oryx Press) are two of many guides to nonsexist language use.

### References (a)

- Kim, Hye-Sook (2004), 'The Changes of Address Forms between Korean Husbands and Wives according to the Relationship History', The Socio-linguistic Journal of Korea, 12(2).
- Choi, Yong-Son (2001), 'A Critical Overview of a Study on Language and Gender', The Socio-linguistic Journal of Korea, 9(2).
- Min, Hyun-Sik(1997), 'A Study on the Socio-linguistic Features of Men's and Women's Language in Korean', The Socio-linguistic Journal of Korea, 5(2).
- Lee, Duk-Ho(1997), 'Language and Sex': Research Situation and Future Tasks with Special Regard to Women's Language', The Socio-linguistic Journal of Korea, 5(1).

### References (b)

- Song, Kyong-Sook(2003), 'Dynamics of Gender, Men and Women, in Korean and English Cyber Communication', The Socio-linguistic Journal of Korea, 11(2).
- Song, Kyong-Sook(2002), 'The Cooperative Principles and Politeness Principles in Computer-Mediated Communication: English Internet Relay Chat', NKA Journal[The New Korean Association of English Language and Literature] 44(2).

Table 1

year	1963	1973	1983	1993	2004
Economically Active Population* (Female)	2,835,000	4,200,000	5,814,000	7,924,000	9,668,000
increase rate	1.00	1.48	2.05	2.80	3.41

\* Pop. 15 years old and over [Ref. Korea National Statistical Office]