Honey-pies and sugar-plums

Gender and the names we call each other

Introduction

Consider the following words and decide whether they are mainly used to refer to men, mainly to refer to women, or used equally to refer to either men or women. Tick the boxes to show your opinion, then compare with other people’s. What do you notice? Can you see any patterns?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Refers mainly to males</th>
<th>Refers mainly to females</th>
<th>Refers equally to either males or females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bitch</td>
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<tr>
<td>chick</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>cow</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>crumpet</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>honey</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kitten</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>old biddy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>stud</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>sugar</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>sweetie</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>tart</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>wolf</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Further investigation

Over the page is an account of some of the semantic ways in which the English language can be regarded as sexist, i.e. representing women in such a way as to make social inequalities between men and women seem natural. This is from a popular and accessible text book, *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics* (1992) by Janet Holmes.

Read the short extract and complete these tasks:
- Summarise the key ideas in brief bullet points
- Discuss the extent to which you think these points are valid
- What additional evidence would you need to be convinced of their validity?
Further investigation: the Janet Holmes (1992) extract

There are a number of ways in which it has been suggested that the English language discriminates against women. Most obviously, perhaps, in the semantic area: the English metaphors available to describe women include an extraordinarily high number of derogatory images compared to those used to describe men.

Animal imagery is one example where the images of women seem considerably less positive than those for men. Consider the negativity of bitch, old biddy, and cow, compared to stud and wolf. Animal imagery which refers to men often has at least some positive component (such as williness or sexual prowess). Birds are widely regarded as feather-brained and flighty! Even the more positive chick and kitten are sweet but helpless pets.

Women may also be described or referred to in terms of food imagery, which is equally insulting. Saccharine terms, such as sugar, sweetie, honey, are mainly, though not exclusively, used for addressing women. Less complimentary terms such as crumpet and tart, however, are restricted to female referents. They illustrate a common evolutionary pattern in the meanings of words referring to women. Terms which were originally neutral or affectionate eventually acquire negative connotations as they increasingly refer only to women, and as their meanings focus on women as sexual objects. By contrast there appears to be little food imagery which is appropriate for referring only to men.

Your own investigation

Now work in small groups to complete an investigation into one or more aspect of gendered name-calling based on your discussion of this extract. Either complete one of the mini-investigations outlined on the next few pages, adapt one of them, or devise a relevant one yourself. When you have finished, give a formal presentation of your investigation.
Are there more derogatory metaphors available to describe women than men?

Methodology
Complete a simple survey by asking respondents to record what derogatory terms they would use to name a man, and those they would use to name a woman. Collate a simple list of terms mentioned by the survey respondents. Before you start, however, you need to develop this methodology, by making and justifying carefully the following decisions:

• How many participants are you going to ask to complete the task? Bear in mind that you need to keep the project manageable.
• How are you going to ensure that your sample is as representative of the population as possible given the small-scale nature of the investigation?
• Will other factors such as age affect your data? How will you control these?
• What factors will you need to control in order to make the data comparable? (Tip: think about where and when you might ask people to do the task, and under what conditions.)
• How can you ensure that your data collection is ethical?
• How are you going to capture the data to ensure it is kept pure?
• What other limitations might there be, and how might you overcome them?

When you have made your plans and improvements, collect your data.

Findings and analysis
• Examine the data carefully and see what you find. Use your imagination and your knowledge of the language frameworks to help you decide on an appropriate analytical approach.
• Is it just a question of numerical analysis, or are there other issues at stake in the data you have collected?

Conclusions
Review your findings as objectively as possible and consider these questions:
• What conclusions can you draw from your detailed analysis? (Tip: these will quite probably be tentative.)
• To what extent can you answer the question the investigation set out to explore?
• What theories and concepts about language and/or society might be helpful in explaining these conclusions?
• How do these conclusions compare with those of other studies and accounts, including that by Janet Holmes?

Evaluation
Finally, consider how this mini-investigation could be improved:
• What worked well? What didn’t?
• How could the project be developed?
How significant are the metaphors used to describe women that Janet Holmes identifies in her account of sexist language?

Methodology
Take the 10 terms for women identified by Holmes as significant markers of sexist language. Go to the British National Corpus at [http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookuup.html](http://sara.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/lookuup.html). This is a 100 million word body of spoken (10% of the total) and written (90%) modern English, collected from a wide range of sources including regional and national newspapers, text books and popular novels, letters, memos, essays, and conversation.

You can use the free version of the corpus online at the address above. This will give you 50 “hits”, occurrences of the word selected at random from the corpus. Analyse the hits for each word, and record the number of times out of the 50 the word is clearly used in a sexist sense to describe women. Show this as a percentage. For example, if the word “tart” is used in this sexist manner 14 times out of 50 hits, the percentage would be 28%. The idea here is that the higher the frequency of use as a sexist term to describe women, the more significant the metaphor is.

Findings and analysis
- Examine the data carefully and see what you find. It might be helpful to show your findings visually, using charts.
- Is there anything significant about the uses of the word that are not sexist descriptions of women? Are any of them being used of men?

Conclusions
Review your findings as objectively as possible and consider these questions:
- What conclusions can you draw from your detailed analysis? (Tip: these will quite probably be tentative.)
- To what extent can you answer the question the investigation set out to explore?
- What theories and concepts about language and/or society might be helpful in explaining these conclusions?
- How do these conclusions compare with those of other studies and accounts, including that by Janet Holmes?

Evaluation
Finally, consider how this mini-investigation could be improved:
- What worked well? What didn’t?
- How could the project be developed?
What do the Oxford English Dictionary entries for some of the words identified by Janet Holmes have to tell us about language and gender?

Methodology
Use the online edition of the Oxford English Dictionary to look up the 12 words identified as significant by Janet Holmes in her account of sexist language. Decide which present the most interesting perspectives on language change with regard to gendered patterns of name-calling. Select at least 3 words for close analysis.

Findings and analysis
- Examine the data provided by the OED carefully and see what you find.
- Are there patterns of language change to be observed? Interesting comparisons in the development of words and their meanings? Look carefully at the sources of the citations and their dates, indeed all of the detailed information given. What do you observe?

Conclusions
Review your findings as objectively as possible and consider these questions:
- What conclusions can you draw from your detailed analysis? (Tip: these will quite probably be tentative.)
- To what extent can you answer the question the investigation set out to explore?
- What theories and concepts about language and/or society might be helpful in explaining these conclusions?
- How do these conclusions compare with those of other studies and accounts, including that by Janet Holmes?

Evaluation
Finally, consider how this mini-investigation could be improved:
- What worked well? What didn’t?
- How could the project be developed?
Is there any difference in the metaphors of approbation available to describe women and men?

Methodology
Complete a simple survey by asking respondents to record what terms of approbation they would use to name a man, and those they would use to name a woman. Collate a simple list of terms mentioned by the survey respondents. Before you start, however, you need to develop this methodology, by making and justifying carefully the following decisions:

- How many participants are you going to ask to complete the task? Bear in mind that you need to keep the project manageable.
- How are you going to ensure that your sample is as representative of the population as possible given the small scale nature of the investigation?
- Will other factors such as age affect your data? How will you control these?
- What factors will you need to control in order to make the data comparable? (Tip: think about where and when you might ask people to do the task, and under what conditions.)
- How can you ensure that your data collection is ethical?
- How are you going to capture the data to ensure it is kept pure?
- What other limitations might there be, and how might you overcome them?

When you have made your plans and improvements, collect your data.

Findings and analysis
- Examine the data carefully and see what you find. Use your imagination and your knowledge of the language frameworks to help you decide on an appropriate analytical approach.
- Is it just a question of numerical analysis, or are there other issues at stake in the data you have collected? Think about semantics, morphology and perhaps etymology.

Conclusions
Review your findings as objectively as possible and consider these questions:

- What conclusions can you draw from your detailed analysis? (Tip: these will quite probably be tentative.)
- To what extent can you answer the question the investigation set out to explore?
- What theories and concepts about language and/or society might be helpful in explaining these conclusions?
- How do these conclusions compare with those of other studies and accounts, including that by Janet Holmes?

Evaluation
Finally, consider how this mini-investigation could be improved:

- What worked well? What didn’t?
- How could the project be developed?