

Language matters and gender equality

A Malaysian perspective

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Malaysia, a sovereign nation of 51 years, is now midway through attaining developed nation status by 2020. To achieve this goal, the National Mission, a policy and implementation framework outlining Malaysia's priorities for the 15-year phase to 2020, has been put together. The 9th Malaysia Plan is currently in place, and is charting the nation's development agenda for the first five years of the National Mission (2006–10). Much emphasis has been put on the need to pursue programmes that will enhance the nation's capability to compete at the global level, to strengthen national unity, and to bring about better distribution of income and wealth as well as a higher quality of life. The wellbeing and the harmonious living together of Malaysia's citizens are of the utmost importance in all of this.

Since the quality of the nation's human capital is the most critical element in achieving the National Mission, capital development is a key thrust in the 9th Malaysia Plan. The government's capacity building initiatives include development of knowledgeable, skilled and innovative human capital as a basis of a knowledge-based economy.

Children and young adults are Malaysia's strongest assets in its goal to becoming a progressive and developed nation. Education is therefore paramount. It should act upon improving the wellbeing of all, and it should take on the responsibility as a 'leveller' of society. Investing in human capital development means the harnessing and channelling of efforts to inculcate in children and youth not only the knowledge and skills needed for everyday life and the future workplace, but also progressive thinking and attitudes, and strong moral and ethical values. We need to instil in them an awareness of a world in which both males and females can live harmoniously together, and where both males and females have equal footing (Bahiyah et al., 2008). How can we achieve this? Specifically, in all levels of education, there must be a keen interest in issues relating to language and gender, to understand how, in our society, language permeates in complex and interrelated ways so that it can define gender, organise perceptions of gender, and evaluate gender (Wood, 1997). More importantly, there must be an awareness of how language can reflect, create and sustain gender divisions and inequality in society.

The prevalence of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in everyday life

The prevalence of sexism and sex-role stereotyping is not isolated to Malaysia – since the early 1960s, there have been persuasive

challenges to sexist practices all over the world, in both the public and private domains. Studies show us not only that these practices are prevalent, having persisted through time, but also that they remain problematic. Despite Malaysia's efforts to eliminate all forms of discrimination as ratified in the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), sexism – i.e., prejudice or discrimination based on gender (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003) – occurs in much of our daily lives: in our cultural texts, such as proverbs (see Bahiyah and Hafriza, 1998), words of wisdom and quotations; in all forms of talk in social settings, from politicians in parliament to between friends in the home; in teaching and learning materials in schools and training institutions (Saedah, 1990; Sanda and Mardziah, 2003; Jariah, 2002; and Bahiyah et al., 2008); and in the media, such as advertising, newspaper reports, cinema (Fuziah and Faridah, 2000) and the like. There is also linguistic sexism – how both genders are treated and represented unequally through language (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003) – as well as sex-role stereotyping, i.e., oversimplified opinions, affective attitudes or critical judgements made about a person's role simply because that person is male or female (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003). Relying on such stereotypes may lead us to overlook important particularities of individuals and to perceive them only in terms of what we consider common to a general category (Wood, 1997, p.159).

Linguistic sexism

Miller and Swift's (1981) guide to non-sexist language, as well as Bahiyah (2002, 2003), show us the following pervasive practices in the use of language. To illustrate this, examples – both national and international – are given below.

1. The use of 'man' and 'he' as false generic

- From a Malaysian advertisement related to the Astro Scholarship Award, the caption reads: 'Today, *he's* just an individual. Tomorrow, *he* could create history.' (The Star, 26 April 2009)
- From a Malaysian newspaper headline: 'What is the Malaysian consumer like? Does *he* spend wisely or is *he* taken in by special offers and status symbols?' (The Star, 3 April 1998)
- From a chapter in an encyclopedia entitled 'Man and his Environment', or from a history book with the phrase, 'the common *man*'.

According to many scholars in language and gender studies, generalising from a group to everyone gives privilege to that

particular group and often leaves the other group/gender – here, girls and women – out of the picture.

2. The use of adjectives to describe males and females

- ‘Prominent/successful businessman Tunku Abdullah of Melewar Group’ v. ‘Iron Lady director Maznah Mahmud’.
- ‘Stunning/Leggy Malaysian singer Ning Baizura’ v. ‘Daring Tom Cruise does his own stunts in the movie.’

Feminist critics have commented on the ways that women are more often defined by: physical attributes (e.g., blonde, tall, nymph-like, stunning); age (e.g., young, middle-aged); marital status (e.g., married, spinster, divorced, widow); relationship to the ‘other’ (e.g., wife, girlfriend, partner, mistress); and abnormality of profession/occupation divided along gender line (e.g., ‘woman/female’ guard, officer, IT expert, doctor, nuclear physicist, driver/motorist/racing car driver, pilot/astronaut, etc.) (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003).

Compared to females, males are usually defined by their: accomplishments (Senior Director, University of Malaya graduate, etc.); power (via force, status, authority, expertise); character (daring, brave, etc.); and occupation (guard, officer, IT expert, nuclear physicist, driver/motorist, pilot/astronaut, etc.) (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003).

3. Discriminatory job titles, particularly those ending with the suffix ‘man’

- ‘businessman’, ‘spokesman’, ‘cameraman’, ‘chairman’, etc.

The argument is made that the use of the male term ‘man’ also covers females and thus renders females invisible. Critics also point out the issues of occupational stereotyping, gender role stereotyping and the androcentric assumptions surrounding work (Talbot, 1998, p.216).

4. The use of metaphors

- ‘Black widow (animal metaphor) detained’ (*The Star*, 27 June 2000).
- ‘China doll’ (inanimate object metaphor referring to mainland Chinese actress, Zhang Zi-Yi) (*The Star*, 27 June 2000).
- ‘That Rottweiler’ (animal metaphor, Princess Diana referring to Camilla Parker Bowles).

But note that ‘bitch’ can be inclusive of both males and females especially in specific groups and gangs; ‘chick’ is exclusive to females; and ‘pig’ is exclusive to males (Bahiyah, 2002, 2003).

5. The use of verb forms to describe males and females

- Men *bellow* and women *purr*.
- Men *yell* and women *scream/squeal*.
- Men *get angry* and women *fret*.
- Men *have careers* and women *have jobs*.

Note that the above verb forms such as ‘bellow’ and ‘purr’ comment on largely stereotypical images of the difference between the ways men and women communicate. The last two examples

comment on the largely occupational stereotyping, gender-role stereotyping and the androcentric assumptions surrounding work (Talbot, 1998, p.216). Much debate with regards to this issue centres on the value given to the work done by males and females where jobs done by males are more valued monetarily as compared to those done by females.

6. Non-parallel treatment

According to Miller and Swift (1981), there are several areas pertaining to this. Below, four areas are discussed:

i) Describing women by appearance, but men by achievement

For example:

- Headline on Jerry Hall: ‘A very merry Jerry’ (*Malay Mail*, 6 July 2000). Followed by ‘The sexy supermodel turned actress ... looking leggy, svelte and glossy ... wearing a clinging black dress, revealing a hint of lacy black bra at the low cut neckline ... who seduces the son of her best friend.’
- Headline on Ang Lee: ‘In on the outside’ (*Malay Mail*, 6 July 2000). Followed by: ‘Ang Lee is an unassuming man. A humble, self-deprecating man at times who has just crafted a movie that can rightly be called the first cinematic masterpiece of the new century ... attended the University of Illinois ... After earning his BFA in Theatre, he went on to New York University to earn an MFA in Film Production ... Meticulously observing each world he creates, his movies have the aura of extreme familiarity with its matters ... Soft spoken and polite.’

The first example is with regard to a woman – Jerry Hall – and the second, to a man – Ang Lee. According to Lee (1992), the adjectives employed to describe the woman and the man are based on the premise that a woman is often judged by her appearance whereas a man by his character, achievement and status. Two groups of adjectives can be found in the examples: words that describe physical attributes and words that describe personality. In the case of Jerry Hall, she is defined by the media in terms of her physical appearance and not by talent or qualifications. The alliteration (‘A very merry Jerry’) suggests triviality in the subject matter. The writer highlights Jerry in a manner demeaning to most women. She is objectified by a writer who, through the use of words, brings about the stereotypical perception of the female gender, i.e., that women are highly decorative, sexual and are very much dependent on what others think of their body and appearance. Ang Lee, on the other hand, is portrayed as highly qualified, intelligent and with a pleasant personality.

ii) Describing women by their relationship to men

From the obituary pages of selected Malaysian newspapers (namely the *New Straits Times* and *The Star*), the common practice is that women, even in death, are described by their relationship to men. In many obituaries analysed, a departed woman’s name usually does not stand alone. Most of the time, below it or next to it, in parenthesis, her identity is revealed not as an individual but one who is usually a wife, belonging to someone – a husband – and this is denoted by the use of the prepositional phrase ‘of’. In death, women are usually not recognised by their achievements, skills and accomplishments other than being a wife. Men, on the other

hand, in death, remain as if they were alive; they are not only identified by their individual names but they are also identified by their achievements, accomplishments, professions and skills. For example,

From obituaries of women:

‘Madam/Mrs X (wife of the late Mr X), aged ... passed away peacefully ... (date).’

From obituaries of men:

‘XXX (Name) (retired army/police officer)/(retired chemistry teacher, ACS Kampar)/(Founder of PPKCTM)/(Senior Asst. Director, Ministry of Trade and Consumer Affairs).’

iii) Referring to women as ‘girls’ but giving male figures the adult label ‘men’

- ‘Our karate *men* flex their muscles’ (‘men’ here refers to the 20th Southeast Asian Games men karate team).
- ‘Our *girls* blow chance to qualify for final’ (‘girls’ here refers to our Malaysian women badminton players).
- ‘Sarawak *lass* makes it to semi-final’ (‘lass’ here refers to a national woman swimmer).

In the above examples (taken from headlines in the sports section of Malaysian newspapers), ‘girls’ – also ‘gals’ – and ‘lass’ allude to immaturity. This also points to the fact that, largely, males have dominated the sports world, and it is only recently that females have been accepted in the sports fraternity as legitimate contenders. In serious competitions, girls and women are considered not to have achieved as much as boys and men.

iv) The foregrounding of males

... its Chief operating Officer Ibrahim Abu Bakar and his wife Datuk Sabariah Sabtu, who is TNB Engineers Sdn. Bhd. Managing Director, were also there. (New Straits Times, *Life and Times* caption, 15 February 1999)

Feminist critics have taken exception to the way females are relegated and ‘backgrounded’ so that they become incidental. Note in the above example the use of the conjunction ‘and’ that not only subordinates the clause but also the female/woman despite her social status, indicated by the title ‘Datuk’ and her accomplishment as ‘TNB Engineers Sdn. Bhd. Managing Director’.

The use of words that can diminish, render invisible, make incidental and discriminate one gender or the other should encourage us to think and reflect upon the possible effects of language usage (Goddard and Patterson, 2000). Males and females should be represented fairly to fit in with reality and they should be duly respected in how they are described.

In the 21st century, Malaysian females have achieved great strides in all spheres of life especially in decision-making roles in the public sphere. It is not surprising to find that, in Malaysia, females make up 22.8 per cent of the key civil servants, an indication that Malaysia is fast moving towards its goal of increasing this figure to 30 per cent. The number of women in high-ranking positions in statutory bodies has also increased from 17.8 per cent in 2004 to 21.3 per cent in 2008.

The negative effects of sexism and sex-role stereotyping on young people

Henry, Hamilton and Thorne (in Gundykunst, 1998, p.119) exert that sexism and sex-role stereotyping are manifested mainly through language. If so, what are the negative effects of sexism, linguistic sexism and sex-role stereotyping on children and youths, especially with regards to nation building? The following, taken from Bahiyah Dato’ Hj. Abdul Hamid et al. (2008), are some answers to the question culled from the review of literature.

- Sexism and gender stereotyping mould in the young a sexist mindset, legitimising the ideology that sexism is the natural order of things (see among others Kimmel, 2004; Steward et al., 2003; Smith, 1988).
- Sexism and gender stereotyping lower the self-esteem of children and young adults creating a void that has detrimental effects on self-image, aspirations and motivations of both genders (see among others Kimmel, 2004; Steward et al., 2003; Smith, 1988).
- The unequal treatment of both genders may share a mutually contributory relationship with gender-biased classroom practices where one gender is favoured over the other, making the classroom context disharmonious (Steward et al., 2003; Smith, 1988).
- Gender stereotypes limit both genders to certain modes of behaviour, course of study and career choices thus preventing them from realising their full potential (see among others Kimmel, 2004; Steward et al., 2003; Jariah Mohd. Jan, 2002; Smith, 1988).
- Social ills – e.g., violence, sexual violence, domestic violence and sexual harassment – in the workplace have largely come about because of sexism and gender stereotypes.

Recommendations for intervention

1. Gender sensitisation and language awareness

There should be concerted efforts to raise our awareness and to stimulate change, to show that sexism exists in language use and to highlight how language can diminish, render invisible and discriminate one gender or the other. Also, efforts must be made to show how sexist language and gender stereotyping can shape and limit societal expectations of males and females, curb motivations to pursue individual capabilities and create a cultural context in which one gender is revered over the other. If left unchecked, these negative behaviour patterns and attitudes could become institutionalised and may eventually become part of our social and cultural norms.

The stance taken by the affiliates of the Centre for Gender Research, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, University Kebangsaan Malaysia, with regards to linguistic sexism is not to affect linguistic reform; a move that most scholars have denounced as unproductive. Much of the affiliates’ work in teaching, training and research activities involve consciousness-raising, that is, bringing awareness of a problem to public attention. The assumption underlying consciousness-raising is that before a

behaviour can be changed, there must be awareness that a situation does exist that warrants redress/alteration (van den Bergh, 1987, in Talbot, 1998, p.15). Specific consciousness-raising activities in the classroom have centred on the following:

- Encouraging students to address difficult issues with regards to language and gender, e.g., What is the role of the media in contributing to the sexist depictions of females/women?; How far has masculine bias shaped language and its users?
- Allowing students to adopt the opposite gender point of view about a gendered issue and encouraging students to analyse sources in everyday life that have elements of sexism and sex-role stereotyping.
- Creating a forum from vignettes (see following example).

'A mother and her son were driving on the highway. Suddenly a big lorry crashed into them and the mother was killed instantly. An ambulance rushed the boy to a nearby hospital. As the boy was wheeled into the emergency room, a nurse on duty grasped, "Oh, my God!!! What has happened to my son?"'

Discuss who you think is the nurse.

Or a derivation of the above:

'A father and his daughter were driving home after a school outing. On the way home, their car met with an accident. The father succumbed to the accident and the girl was immediately taken to the hospital where they wheeled her into the operating room. The surgeon looks at the girl and becomes upset, "I can't operate on this child. She is my daughter."'

Who is the surgeon?

2. Tackling language and gender through teacher training programmes

Issues in language and gender including equality issues must be the staple in a gender-inclusive curriculum in pre-service, in-service and post-teacher training (e.g., refresher course) programmes. This will ensure that educationists will thus have awareness of the inequalities in the schooling process, including those in teaching and learning as a prerequisite in promoting gender equality and equity. Educationists must be trained to identify gender stereotypes and elements of sexism in everyday materials/sources and be able to critically review these materials/sources. In so doing, they must also have the ability to empower their students to do likewise. Furthermore, they must be given the methodology and tools to be able to transform gender-biased sources to be gender inclusive in an effort to curb sexism and gender stereotypes. Educationists must also look within themselves to see if they are sexist and ascribe to gender and sex-role stereotyping and to find ways to promote gender balance not only in their behaviours but also in their thinking and attitudes because, if not, these can easily permeate into their teaching and learning and bring about negative effects.

Conclusion

Sexism will cease to disappear from our language and our use of language only when we erase it from our minds (Nilsen, 1994, p.365, quoted in Bahiyah et al., 2008). Studies have concluded

that linguistic reform as an attempt to eliminate linguistic sexism and sex-role stereotyping so that equality of gender is reflected in the language that we speak, read or hear poses more problems than it solves. A more realistic endeavour towards this end is devising small yet strategic and significant steps towards change through consciousness-raising activities that check masculine bias on all levels of our society. Concurring with Nilsen (1994, p.365, quoted in Bahiyah et al., 2008), if sexism begins in our assumptions and expectations, it is a problem that should be solved 'only when a great many people have given it a great deal of thought.'

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