

SEMANTIC CONFIGURATION OF SEXIST IDIOMS: RADIAL NETWORKS AND CULTURAL SCRIPTS

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Rezumat: *Limba engleză are o mare varietate de expresii idiomatice, care sunt utilizate pe scară largă. Există o mulțime de expresii idiomatice în limba engleză care exprimă părtinire în favoarea unui sex și îl discriminează pe celălalt. Cele mai multe dintre ele presupun discriminarea împotriva femeilor. Acest articol își propune să crească gradul de conștientizare despre ce sunt expresiile idiomatice sexiste și de ce trebuie să le evităm. Lucrarea începe cu analiza conceptului de expresie idiomatică și include o examinare detaliată a zece expresii idiomatice sexiste, care sunt adesea folosite în limba engleză. Le-am propus alternative corecte din punct de vedere moral, care nu ar ofensa pe nimeni.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *expresii idiomatice, semnificație imprevizibilă, limbă, cultură, discriminare în baza criteriului de gen, context social, sexism, substrat discriminant.*

1. What is an idiom?

An idiom is a conventional expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the meanings of the words it is built of. It is characterized as formulaic lan-

guage. An idiom's figurative meaning is different from the literal meaning. According to Moon [1998: 3], 'an idiom is a particular lexical collocation or phrasal lexeme, peculiar to a language'. Raymond W. Gibbs [1987] suggests another definition of idiom according to which 'by the term idiom the speaker should learn «dead» metaphors and speech gambits by arbitrarily pairing each phrase some non-literal meaning without any awareness of why these phrases mean what they do'. Trying to define and to analyze the concept of idiom, H. Hulban pointed out that idioms have many tangents with other types of fixed expressions:

The term idiom includes in its broad sense the term phrase. When using idiom in its narrow sense, we will understand only sayings and proverbs that belong to the same literary genre as *aphorism* (a definition, a concise statement of a principle, a percept meant to give food for thought), *maxim* (a philosophical axiom expressing a general truth, or a rule or principle of conduct expressed in a sententious form), *epigram* (a clever and brief expression of thought in verse or prose), and *paradox* (a seemingly contradictory statement, which appears absurd though it is well founded). (...) Sometimes they are nothing other than aphorisms, maxims, etc., which have gained a large circulation and a fixed form.

[Hulban, 2001:10]

Linguistic literature proves that idioms can be found in every language and learning them is an essential step in language proficiency. It is worth mentioning that English is very rich in idiomatic expressions. However, due to their settled structure and rather unpredictable meaning, idioms are often considered difficult to learn. English language has a wide variety of constructions and combinations, which are largely unchangeable and do not always follow the basic rules of grammar.

All English idioms possess basic common features. The most well-known features are pointed out as follows:

1. Non-compositionality: The meaning of an idiom is not the sum of the meanings of its parts. For example, the meaning of kicking the bucket has nothing to do with hitting the buckets.
2. Non-substitutability: A word in an idiom cannot be replaced by a synonym. We cannot say *kick the pail* instead of *kick the bucket*, even if bucket and pail are synonymous.
3. Non-modifiability: An idiom cannot be changed by applying syntactic transformations. The form of the idioms remains the same in any context. For example, *John kicked the green bucket* has nothing to do with death.

Idioms are classified in different ways in different interpretations. R. W. Gibbs [1987] provides a classification of idioms according to the transparency of meaning into *transparent idioms* (idioms that have a close relationship between literal and figurative meanings) and *opaque idioms* (idioms that have an obscure relationship between its literal and figurative meanings). He also classifies idioms according to their modifiability into: *syntactically flexible idioms* (the idioms that retain their figurative meaning even if transformed into the passive form) and *syntactically frozen idioms* (the idioms that cannot be syntactically transformed into the passive).

It should be remarked that the context sometimes helps us understand idioms.

Undoubtedly, with the help of context, it is much easier to understand the figurative meanings of idioms whose literal and idiomatic interpretations are closely linked than to understand idioms whose literal and figurative meanings are not closely related.

Idioms create difficulties in translation. If we translate them word by word, we usually do not keep the meaning of the text. Most often, in order to preserve the meaning, we have to use equivalent idioms from the language in which we translate, which implies the use of words other than those from the original language. Nevertheless, some idioms may be more universally used than others and their metaphorical meaning can be easily deduced, as they are based on conceptual metaphors, such as *life is a journey*. Thus, they can be easily translated.

2. Analysis of sexism:

An important part of linguistics is the study of the many possible relations, intersections and tensions between language and gender. The language of a nation always reflects its mentality, values and culture. The idioms used in a language say a lot about the way of thinking of the nation that speaks this language. Sexism against women can be found easily in the English lexicon. English-speaking countries where the idea of equality is very emphasized and current, do not seem to be a place of gender discrimination. Notwithstanding this, the English language is sexist. Just think about a simple word we use so often: *waiter*. The female waiter is a *waitress*. Even though we are talking about a man and ten women, we use the plural form for the masculine form *waiters*. Nobody really pays attention to this, but it still makes women less important in the mental representation of the society.

Sexism represents (actions based on) the belief that the members of one sex are less intelligent, able, skillful, etc. than the members of the other sex, especially that women are less able than men [Cambridge Dictionary online]. Sexist expressions have their origins in the mentality of the past. The problem is that these expressions do not reflect the mentality of people today, so they do not represent the English speakers. Do we want to say something that does not represent our personality, views and way of thinking?

Some of the most important linguistic changes affecting English since the 1960s have arisen from the way society has come to look differently at the practices and consequences of sexism. (...) There is now a widespread awareness, which was lacking a generation ago, of the ways in which language covertly displays social attitudes towards men and women. The criticisms have been mainly directed at the biases built into English vocabulary and grammar which reflect a traditionally male-orientated view of the world and which have been interpreted as reinforcing the low status of women in society. All the main European languages have been affected, but English more than most, because of the early impact of the feminist movement in the USA. [Crystal, 1995:368] No doubt the feminist movement has stopped the development of this phenomenon. In this regard, some changes have been made to avoid gender discrimination in English. In vocabulary, words of masculine gender which are commonly used to refer to people, both male and female, have been targeted. Thus, 'chairman' becomes 'chair - person' or 'chair' and 'policeman' 'police officer'. Marital status for men is not marked linguistically: 'Mr.' being

neutral as to whether married or not. The introduction of ‘Ms.’ for women (with some success) attempts to equalize in terms of address (Davies 2007: 52). Another change had to be done regarding to the substitution of the sex-neutral nouns with pronouns. There is not an epicene pronoun in English that can be used in this case. Thus, it is preferred the usage of “they” as an alternative generic pronoun.

We will say that language is sexist if this language expresses bias in favor of one sex and discriminates against the other sex. In most cases, men are privileged, and women are discriminated against. It is not good to use expressions that have a negative connotation and can offend someone. Even though some changes have already been made, there are many issues that still need to be carved.

It is important to know which expressions are sexist in order to know how to avoid gender discrimination and to understand how this phenomenon works. In this paper I will focus on the analysis of several well-known sexist idioms, which are, according to the linguist Ronald Carter, special combinations with restricted forms and meanings that cannot be deduced from the literal meanings of the words which make them up [1993:65]. Thus, an idiom should be learned and analyzed as a single unit. We have to know these sexist idioms in order to find non-sexist equivalents and to get use of them. This would mean to find effective solutions to avoid sexism and to take a first step towards reducing gender discrimination in the language and in society. The following idioms are considered sexist:

1. “To wear the pants” (wear the trousers)

According to Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, “to wear the pants” means to be the person in a relationship who is in control and who makes the decisions for both people. This meaning is related to the old ecclesiastical idea that only men can wear pants and women should wear more feminine clothes like skirts. Nowadays it would be weird to tell a woman that she is not allowed to wear pants, because it became a normality. This idiom alludes to the leadership abilities of the men and, respectively, to their absence in the case of women. All people are different and there are a lot of women who can deal with any situation and men who cannot, that’s why it is not correct to use this expression.

2. “To fight like a girl”

This idiom is used more for men. It is hurtful for a man to hear that he fights like a girl and I think that for a girl it is even more hurtful. This idiom is related to the idea that men have more power and they can fight, and women cannot. The fights are stereotypically related to men. It is not always true that women cannot fight or don’t have strength. There are a lot of great fighters that are women. This sounds like an offense for both men and women. We have to avoid using it or to use “be strong” instead of it.

3. “Man up”

This expression is clearly sexist. It is not so nice to say it both for women and men. This idiom can even be used in addressing a woman. It is used to tell someone that they should deal with something more bravely. It alludes that a man is brave and he can deal with everything. Being a man in speaker’s mentality is related to the idea of strength. This means that men can avoid having uncontrolled emotions

as women have and this is not true, because it depends on person. It is not correct to use it because everybody has emotions and the right to express them. In order to encourage someone to deal with a problem we can tell them to be courageous.

4. “Man cannot live by bread alone”

According to Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, this idiom is used to say that people need not just food, but also poetry, art, music, etc. to live happily. People need food for soul, not only for body. The word *men* is used as a collective word, it refers to people in general, it involves the whole humanity. It is not fair to use the word *men* for women too and to include them into this category. It is clearly an allusion to the superiority of the man over the woman. We can use this expression but we have to change it a bit in order to avoid discrimination and to keep the good connotation. For example, we can substitute the word *man* with *people* or *humanity*.

5. “Company man”

This idiom refers to a man who values the company that he works for more than anything else in his life and is willing to do whatever the company needs. The word *man* refers to men and women as well. It comes from the fact that in the past women were not allowed to work so they couldn’t build a career and become dedicated to it. Only men did this, but even if the social context has changed, the idiom remained in the language and is still used nowadays. We can use more general words that would include both genders. It would be better to use the word *person* instead of *man* and, of course, this would be correct for both genders.

6. “Always a bridesmaid, never the bride”

This idiom is used to say about someone who is never the most important person in a situation. It comes from the situation when a woman who goes to other people’s weddings, but is still not married. Because of the stereotyped opinion that women have to be married, they become pressed by society to marry. This is not correct because every woman has to decide by herself if she wants to marry and when she wants to do this. Thus, it can be said that in order to sound correct we should avoid using this idiom, because we cannot tell someone how to live the life.

7. “Boys will be boys”

According to Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, the given idiom is used to emphasize that people should not be surprised when boys or men act in a rough or noisy way because this is a part of the male character. Yet, a bad behavior has no excuse because everyone should know how to behave well in society and it depends mostly on the education rather than on the male or female type of character. And it must be said that we don’t have to blame the gender for someone’s actions.

8. “Don’t worry your pretty little head”

It is used to tell someone not to worry about something. According to Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, it can be used in humorous or offensive ways. Here the expression “pretty little head” refers to the limited mental abilities of women, far inferior to men’s ones, and, at the same time, to the men’s good problem-solving skills. Because of these skills, men can feel superior to women and can consider that women are not able to handle something well. We have to recognize here that there are men who cannot deal with a problem and there are

women who do it very well. That's why, we must point out the fact that a person's ability to do things well doesn't depend on the gender.

9. "As pleased as Punch"

Punch and Judy Shows were one of the most beloved forms of comedic entertainment in the 16th century. The idiom "as pleased as Punch" refers to the male half of this puppeting duo. Now this idiom means "very pleased", though it is not about pleasure at all. We discover that the affection for Mr. Punch is surprising as his main shtick was beating his wife Judy. Researchers prove that this idiom came from the fact that Punch seemed to be very pleased after every murder. Thus, it is necessary to remark that people should try to avoid using this idiom, because violence is not a reason to be pleased.

10. "You guys"

If we try to analyze our everyday speech, we will state that this expression is used so often and probably most of us didn't think that it could be in this list. Sexism consists in the fact that this expression can be addressed not only to a group of boys but it can be said to a group in which there are girls as well. Moreover, it can be said to a group where there are six girls and a boy. Thus, we can see that this expression implies a very clear gender inequality just because the predetermined gender is male. It is considered that it is not correct to use *guys* for everyone, that's why it would be better to use a more general word like *friends* or *people*.

Judging by everything mentioned above we can say that idioms can be a problem for people who are not native speakers. It is difficult to understand them if students don't learn and don't analyze them as a whole instead of taking them as a group of meaningful, separate words. As many famous linguists state, language learners may have difficulties in finding the appropriate translation of idioms, because idioms are culture bound and they reflect the customs, traditions, mentality and folk wisdom of the nation that speaks this language. It must be remarked that in order to get a better understanding of an idiom we have to know the historical tradition and the context in which it is used. As we have discovered behind the sexist idioms there is a historical context of a male-dominated society. This is why, mostly, English sexist idioms involve discrimination of women. Summing up all of the above, we should avoid the use of these idioms, because the social context has changed. Nowadays women are equal to men and it would be correct to find equivalent words or expressions that wouldn't have a discriminating substrate.

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