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## Cross-cultural semantic equivalence of some gender-related words

### Summary

This paper explores similarities and differences between two cultures, English and Serbian, in terms of connotative equivalence of some gender-related words. In both languages there exist myriad pairs of words that historically differentiated male and female gender only, but which, over time, have unexplainably gained different connotations. Usually the semantic change can be seen in words describing women; words which once used to be neutral or positive have acquired negative and/or sexual connotations. The well-known example of *bachelor* and *spinster* (*neženja* and *usedelica* in Serbian) is just one among many. Based on the male/female pairs of words analysed in these two languages, the paper examines the following: (1) whether it is possible that in both cultures such words (un)intentionally carry the same derogatory and pejorative meanings, (2) whether semantic derogation equally applies to male and female words, and (3) whether and how often the connotation changes to negative when words refer to women. Finally, it addresses the issue of potential semantic derogation when using different job titles for men and women in both languages.

**Key words:** cultural studies, semantic equivalence, negative connotation, gender-related words

## Medkulturna semantična vrednost nekaterih besed, pogojenih s spolom

### Povzetek

V članku ugotavljamo podobnosti in razlike med dvema kulturama, angleško in srbsko, na primeru konotativne enakovrednosti nekaterih besed, ki so vezane na določen spol. V obeh jezikih obstaja veliko besednih parov, ki so se včasih razlikovale glede na moški oziroma ženski spol, vendar so sčasoma pridobile različne konotacije. Običajno se te semantične spremembe najbolje kažejo v besedah, ki opisujejo ženske; besede, ki so nekoč imele neutralni ali pa pozitivni pomen, so sčasoma dobile negativne in/ali seksualne konotacije. Dober zgled za to sta besedi *bachelor* in *spinster* (*neženja* in *usedelica* v srščini). Na temelju analize moških in ženskih parov besed v obeh jezikih, smo ugotavljali (1) če v obeh kulturah te besede nenamena pridobijo slabšalne pomene, (2) če semantična slabšava v enaki meri zadeva besede moškega in ženskega spola, in (3) če ter kako pogosto se negativna konotacija pojavi pri besedah ženskega spola. Na koncu obravnavamo tudi potencialne semantične slabšave različnih nazivov ženskega in moškega spola v obeh jezikih.

**Ključne besede:** kulturne študije, semantična enakovrednost, negativna konotacija, na spol vezane besede

# Cross-cultural semantic equivalence of some gender-related words

## 1. Introduction

In accordance with the definition, meanings of words can be denotative or connotative. Denotation refers to the literal meaning of the word, whereas connotation presents ‘the set of associations implied by a word in addition to its literal meaning’ (The American Heritage Dictionary 2000). Allan (2007, 1047) defines connotations as ‘pragmatic effects that arise from encyclopaedic knowledge about its reference and also from experiences, beliefs, and prejudices about the contexts in which the expression is typically used’. He also points out the fact that to identify the connotations of a term is to identify the community attitude towards it, as words in different languages can have the same or different connotations. In other words, connotations may be universally understood, or may vary between speech communities and be significant only to a certain group independently of sense, denotation and reference. Taking this point of view, it will be of great importance and also of great interest to ascertain to what extent two languages of different origin (Germanic vs. Slavic language) and two different cultures (Anglo-Saxon vs. Balkan culture) share the same connotations, either positive or negative – that is, whether connotations overlap and give rise to the same associations.

This paper explores similarities and differences between two cultures, English and Serbian, in terms of connotative equivalence of some gender-related words. In both languages there exist myriad pairs of words that historically differentiated male and female gender only, but which, over time, have unexplainably gained different connotations. Usually the semantic change can be seen in words describing women – words, which once used to be neutral or positive, have acquired negative and/or sexual connotations.

The term semantic derogation, documented in Schulz (1990), is a change of meaning, i.e. the replacement of a neutral sense by a negative or pejorative one. It refers to words that convey negative, derogatory or sexual connotations. Interestingly enough, usually words pertaining to women acquire negative overtones and over time become trivialised, degraded and denigrated, whilst the male counterpart remains unmarked, carrying neutral or positive connotation (*master/mistress, bachelor/spinster, madam/sir*, to name just a few).

## 2. Corpus

This paper presents mini corpus-based research with around 50 examples to examine the existence of gender imbalance in English and Serbian. The instrument for gathering the data was collecting the pairs of words referring to men and women in two languages, and then consulting dictionaries which were enormously helpful due to their objectiveness, since they provide information on language use and connotation.

Based on the male/female pairs of words analysed in these two languages, the paper examines the following: (1) whether it is possible that in both cultures such words (un)intentionally carry the same derogatory and pejorative meanings, (2) whether semantic derogation equally applies to male and female words, and (3) whether and how often the connotation changes to negative when words refer to women. Finally, it addresses the issue of potential semantic derogation when using different job titles for men and women in both languages.

### 3. Words with neutral connotation for both female and male terms

There are many such pairs of words in which no particular negative meaning is attached to either the male or female term. Let us start with those pairs of words referring to both genders which are unmarked lexemes, without either positive or negative connotation:

English	Serbian
<i>mother/father</i>	<i>majka/otac</i>
<i>daughter/son</i>	<i>kćerka/sin</i>
<i>sister/brother</i>	<i>sestra/brat</i>
<i>aunt/uncle</i>	<i>ujna, strina, tetka/ujak, stric, teča</i>
<i>niece/nephew</i>	<i>nećaka/nećak</i>
<i>bride/bridegroom</i>	<i>mlada, nevesta/mladoženja, ženik</i>

However, although supposedly neutral, some of these words may carry a positive connotation, such as *mother/majka*, which can also mean ‘nurturer’ and ‘protector’. Besides, the pair *kćerka/sin* is subject to further analysis. According to Šipka (1999), there are instances of deliberate generalisation instead of specification in order to further invisibility and degradation of women, as in the example *Imam tri sina i dijete* (*I have three sons and a child*). As this example also belongs to the sphere of socio-cultural prejudices in some nations, let us turn to another one, presented in the table:

ENGLISH			SERBIAN		
	sister	brother		sestra	brat
mother's	<i>aunt</i>	<i>uncle</i>	majčin(a)	<b><i>tetka</i></b>	<b><i>ujak</i></b>
father's	<i>aunt</i>	<i>uncle</i>	očev(a)	<b><i>tetka</i></b>	<b><i>stric</i></b>

Once again generalisation is encountered. In English, one word is used for both mother's and father's sister (*aunt*), and one word for mother's and father's brother (*uncle*); whilst in Serbian, for mother's and father's sister the word *tetka* is used, but we distinguish between *ujak*, a mother's brother, and *stric*, a father's brother. In other words, the word *tetka* does not reveal any other information, apart from the person being female. There are words in Serbian like *ujna* and *strina*, but they are defined in relation to the male relative (being their wives), rather than

immediate relatives. This leads us to the conclusion that even neutral and everyday concepts are asymmetrically treated across languages and speech communities.

## 4. Semantic non-equivalence between female and male terms

Lexical asymmetries can be instantly observed in both languages after considering two ostensibly matching words, *man* and *woman* (in Serbian *muškarac* and *žena*). These words should have opposite but equivalent meanings, but semantic imbalance emerges once one consults dictionary definitions. Positive masculine values are being brave, strong, confident and powerful, while positive feminine values are being gentle, delicate, pretty and caring. However, regarding negative values and implication, it becomes clear that manliness is always seen as strength, whereas womanliness can also have extremely negative connotations and denote weakness. In addition, apart from the primary meaning of being an adult female person, *woman* can be an offensive word for a wife or a girlfriend, and another meaning of both *woman* and *žena* is a female person who cleans somebody's house, possibly implying what is expected to be the main and predominant role of women and making them once again inferior to the corresponding terms *man/muškarac*.

There exist many other male/female equivalents which show this asymmetry too, i.e. pairs of terms that were historically differentiated by sex alone, but which, over time, have gained different connotations. Male terms are almost always relatively neutral and descriptive, unlike feminine terms, which have derogatory implications. Some examples in English include: *Mrs*, *Miss/Mr*, *mistress/master*, *governess/governor*, *spinster/bachelor*, *hostess/host*, *lady/gentleman*, *dame/knight*, *bride/(bride)groom*, *madam/sir*, *queen/king*, *princess/prince*, *matron/patron*, *wife/husband*, *authoress/author*, *fishwife/fisherman*, *lady/lord*, *courtesan/courtier* etc. In this paper the classification of examples will be made in relation to: (1) marital status, (2) sexual behaviour, (3) intellect, and (4) job titles.

### 4.1 Marital status

Socially acquired attributes and patterns of behaviour as well as conceptualisation of male and female roles vary according to societies and eras; nevertheless they always convey norms to be fulfilled as well as models to be followed by their members (Fontecha and Catalán 2003, 772). As the majority of societies have been mostly governed by men, so are the patterns and norms of behaviour dictated by them.

Let us consider the table which illustrates the basic notions of both married and unmarried individuals:

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
verb	<i>to marry sb</i>	<i>oženiti se+inst</i>	<i>udati se za+acc</i>
man	woman	muškarac	žena
<i>husband</i> (OE <i>householder</i> )		<i>muž</i>	<i>žena</i>
	<i>wife</i> (OE <i>woman</i> )	<i>suprug</i>	<i>supruga</i>
		<i>supružnik</i>	<i>supružnica</i>
	<i>spouse (both)</i>		<i>bračni drug</i>
( <i>eternal</i> ) <i>bachelor</i> (+)	<i>spinster</i> (-)	( <i>večiti</i> ) <i>neženja</i> (+)	<i>neudata</i> (n)
	<i>old maid</i> (-)	( <i>stariji</i> ) <i>momak</i> (n/+)	<i>usedelica</i> (-)
	<i>bachelorette?</i>	<i>samac</i> (-)	<i>singl devojka</i> (n)
			<i>gospodica</i> (n/-)
			<i>baba devojka</i> (-)
			<i>matora devojka</i> (-)

To start with, the English verb *to marry* is used for both men and women, but in Serbian there are two verbs with different patterns – for men, the verb *oženiti se+instrumental* is used, and for women, *udati se za+accusative*. As Šipka (1999) explains, the verb *oženiti se* followed by the instrumental case suggests that a man is an active participant, whereas a woman is his instrument. The verb *udati se* somewhat carries the notion of passivity as if the woman gives herself (the prefix *u-* is followed by the verb *dati* ‘to give’), and the prepositional phrase *za+* the accusative case is most commonly used to show the purpose of something (e.g. *čerkica za zube, peškir za plažu*). Furthermore, the word *wife* in Old English meant ‘woman’, and *husband* had the meaning of ‘householder’, and in Serbian *žena* is used both for an adult female person and a spouse, as if the language itself suggests her main role – to be somebody’s wife. The general word encompassing both in English is *spouse*, whilst in Serbian there is the noun phrase *bračni drug*, where the noun *drug* is of grammatical masculine gender.

If we compare the meaning of word pairs such as *bachelor* and *spinster*, it is quite obvious that the qualities associated with the male word are more positive, as *spinster* implies not only unmarried but unmarriageable, and there is no such equivalent loaded with the negative connotation to describe a single man. As can be seen from the table, words pertaining to men carry neutral (n) or positive (+) meaning, while a negative (-) one seems to be reserved for the words which refer to women. For the 1970s TV show *The Dating Game*, the term *bachelorette* was preferred for the unmarried female contestants, and the word has since come into common usage. Although more acceptable, this term is far from being perfect, as it is formed by adding -ette, the French diminutive suffix, to the word *bachelor*, again suggesting gender inequality.

Moreover, the wording appears to treat women only as an appendage of the masculine, dependent upon men and lacking their own identity, since words for women are usually somehow defined as belonging to men. As Pauwels (2003, 553) suggests, ‘the core of this semantic asymmetry is that woman is a sexual being dependent on man, whereas man is simply defined as a human being whose existence does not need reference to woman’. Savić (1998) also emphasises that the wife is property of man, without her own identity, named in relation to the male person with whom she decided to live together.



Consider the following pairs *king/queen* (Serbian, *kralj/kraljica*) and *prince/princess* (Serbian, *princ/princeza*). The female terms in both languages, apart from their primary meanings of being a ruler (*queen/kraljica*) and being a daughter of the king (*princes/princeza*), have an additional meaning, defined as ‘being a wife of’. Thus, female identities are expressed in relation to males. Some other examples in Serbian, similar to the previously mentioned ones, which additionally point out the fact that a female term is derived from a masculine one, i.e. out of men’s function, include: *domaćin/domaćica*, *vlasnik/vlasnica*, *gospodar/gospodarica*, *gazda/gazdarica*.

Interestingly enough, when it comes to titles, another instance of inequality can be noticed. In English the unmarked title for women *Ms*, as opposed to *Mrs* and *Miss*, was introduced as the answer to a growing need of having an equivalent for *Mr*, the unmarked title for men. In Serbian, there are two titles: *gospođa* (*Mrs*) and *gospođica* (*Miss*), both clearly indicating woman’s marital status, whereas the meaning of the word *gospodin* (*Mr*.) is not related to marriage, and can refer to both a married and single man.

## 4.2 Sexual behaviour

Another apparent difference between male and female terms is seen in words which describe sexual behaviour. In both English and Serbian, there is a surplus of negative words to refer to a sexually active woman in comparison to a sexually active man. The table below shows that most of the terms referring to women are offensive and insulting: in English – *whore*, *prostitute*, *man-eater*, *playgirl* and many other slang words, or in Serbian – *kurva*, *prostitutka*, *laka žena* etc. The equivalents for men tend to carry positive connotations: in English – *Casanova*, *Romeo*, *playboy*, *gigolo*, or in Serbian – *kazanova*, *romeo*, *plejboj*, *bonvivan*, *žigolo* etc.

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
Casanova, Romeo (+)	whore, prostitute (-)	kazanova, romeo (+)	kurva, prostitutka (-)
lothario (+)	man-eater(-)	ženskaroš (-)	kurva, laka žena (-)
lady-killer(-)			
Casanova (+)		zavodnik (+)	koketa (-)
seducer (-)			zavodnica (-)
Don Juan, player (n/+)	prostitute (-)	Don Žuan, bonvivan (+)	prostitutka (-)
playboy (+)	playgirl (+)	plejboj (+)	zabavljačica (-)
		zabavljač (n)	
gigolo (+)	prostitute (-)	žigolo (+)	prostitutka (-)
?	courtesan (-)	?	kurtizana (-)
		sponzor (+)	sponzoruša (-)

Schulz (1975) highlights the practice of semantic derogation, which constantly reinforces the ‘generic man’ and ‘sexual woman’ portrayal (Pauwels 2003, 553). Moore emphasises the findings of Julia Stanley, who claims that in a large lexicon of terms for males, 26 are non-standard nouns that denote promiscuous men, some of which have approving connotation (*stallion*, *stud*). In a smaller list of nouns for women are 220 which denote promiscuity, all with disapproving connotation.

## 4.3 Intellect

Another instance of gender inequality concerns words which describe intelligent individuals. In English there exists the word *intellectual* to refer to an intelligent and well-educated person. However, *bluestockings*, intellectual, literary or learned women, represents an example of semantic degeneration. This term was first used in the 1750s to refer to women and men in London who gathered for conversation, and later became a term of abuse, with connotations of 'snob' and 'misfit' (Haegle 2000). There is no adequate and pejoratively coloured counterpart for men. In Serbian, there is the word *intelektualac* for men, carrying neutral and positive connotation; for women there is *učena žena* (neutral) and *intelektualka* (ironic). An even more striking example is the complete absence in English and Serbian of any term specifically reserved for male that has the meaning 'good-looking but stupid'. A strongly pejorative word *bimbo* and *ćurkica* is used for women, while the male equivalent *himbo* has not passed into common use, and Serbian *glupan* pertains only to an unintelligent man without any connotation to his appearance. Furthermore, while *specialist* and *expert* in English refer to both genders, in Serbian the word *stručnjak*, which is of grammatical masculine gender, has no pair which would clearly indicate that the person in question is female.

## 4.4 Job titles

The results of the research concerning job titles used in job advertisements in one Serbian newspaper have already been discussed and analysed (Lazović 2007), and thus for the sake of brevity, in this paper only potential problems when using different job titles for men and women in both languages will be outlined.

Potential problems in English are as follows:

### (a) *-man* in compounds

There are many compounds that describe occupations in English that are formed with *-man* as the second element: words such as *councilman*, *deliveryman*, *fireman*, *foreman*, *postman*, *chairman* etc. Earlier they were used indiscriminately for both genders, but this is no longer the case. In the area of job titles, more inclusive terms have substituted these in order to avoid the traditional secondary status of women (e.g. *spokesperson* instead of *spokesman*, *business executive* instead of *businessman*, *police officer* instead of *policeman* and so on).

### (b) diminutive suffixes *-ess/-ette*

Besides the problematic *-man* in compounds, the suffixes *-ess* and *-ette* (the latter is not productive anymore) for forming feminine nouns are also marked for gender and hence inappropriate. During the nineteenth century, there was a tendency, due to the influence of Latin, to form feminine nouns with the suffix *-ess* along with masculine nouns with *-or*. However, this tendency ceased to be productive, though some such words are still in use: waiter – *waitress*, steward – *stewardess*, sculptor – *sculptress* or actor – *actress*. Another suffix, *-ette*, followed the same pattern and was used for 'a number of words that referred to women who occupied positions once reserved for men, such as *chauffeur* and *sailor*, but of these only *usherette* and *drum majorette* have survived' (The American Heritage Book of English Usage 1996). In all the abovementioned terms, the use

of the feminine suffixes is often considered sexist, since the underlying assumption would be that the unmarked or neutral form reserved for men represents the standard or the norm, whereas a woman in that role is unexpected, and that is obviously not the case. In addition, *-ette* is the French diminutive suffix and may carry an additional implication that women doing the same job are less important or less respected. Instead, the male-biased terms are replaced by gender-neutral neologisms (*flight attendant* for *steward/stewardess* or *server/waitstaff* for *waiter/waitress*) or by unmarked *-er/-or* forms (many actresses now prefer the term *actor* for their profession, hoping to make the term gender-neutral through common usage, as there is no gender-neutral alternative).

#### (c) stereotypical prejudice

Going through all this trouble about changing or modifying job titles would be pointless if the stereotypes about typical job-holders were not taken into consideration. Even today there exist such gendered stereotypes which are imposed partly by the language itself and partly by society. It is understood that, for example, all lawyers, surgeons, pilots or mechanics are men, whereas all teachers, nurses, cashiers or receptionists are women. One of the most obvious explanations for the existence of stereotypes is the generalisation due to the number of either men or women performing that particular job. Also, in the past, certain jobs were reserved for a certain gender, and although genders became equal over time, stereotypes have remained. How can this problem be solved? Indeed, in the final account, can it be solved? Introducing the gender modifiers *male/female* (also possible *woman/lady*) before a job title is one option. Thus, to avoid confusion and ambiguity, phrases like *male nurse*, *male model*, *female/lady doctor* or *female/woman judge* are used. However, despite the fact that sometimes such modifiers need to be used due to the stereotypes and wrongful prejudice which can hardly be changed (doctors are men, unless otherwise stated), they unnecessarily draw attention to the 'strangeness' of a man or a woman doing a particular job. They are marked as if they were gender-specific because of the terms *male/female*, but have to be used when the gender is relevant. Moreover, a one-word gender-neutral job title is substituted with a two-word gender-specific one, and this represents the main drawback of using these modifiers.

Also, even though the term *homemaker* was coined to replace gender-specific *housewife* or theoretically possible *house husband*, even today most homemakers are women, hence the well-known prejudice that women do housework is reinforced.

#### (d) inequality in meaning

In some examples inequality in meaning between male/female pairs as well as the hierarchy of their jobs is evident, as if assuming the impossibility of women occupying certain positions of power that are seemingly reserved for men. Here are several examples with translations into Serbian in brackets: *governor* (*vladar, predsednik*) and *governess* (*guvernanta, kućna pomoćnica*), *sir* (*gospodin, ser*) and *madam* (*vlasnica javne kuće*), *host* (*domaćin*) and *hostess* (*hostesa, dama koja zabavlja goste*), *master* (*gospodar, učitelj*) and *mistress* (*ljubavnica, gospodarica/učiteljica*<sup>1</sup>). In addition, *hostess* and *mistress* imply certain kinds of sexual behaviour, and *madam* which used to be simply a polite form of address for women, is now also an appellation for the head of a house of prostitution.

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<sup>1</sup> Both these meanings are old-fashioned, and not in common use.



It is essential to point out what is to be avoided in English: first, using different words for men and women who perform the same job, and second, using a masculine noun to encompass both.

Potential problems in Serbian are:

(a) suffixes *-ka/-ica*

The feminine job titles in Serbian are derived from the primary masculine term by adding the suffixes *-ka*, *-ica*, *-kinja* (the most frequent ones) to the word in question (for example, doktor – *doktorka* / *doktorica*),<sup>2</sup> so some feminists believe that these job titles are not equal to the masculine ones because they are secondary forms, as they are derived from the primary masculine forms. This is the case even if traditionally these jobs were, and still are, performed more often by women (*maneken* – *manekenka*, *bolničar* – *bolničarka*, etc.).

Another problem with these suffixes is that, as Klajn (2002, 133) suggests, the earlier *-ka* indicated the wife of the central person, as opposed to *-ica*, which was used for a woman doing a particular job. The examples given are *učiteljica* vs. *učiteljka*, *profesorica* vs. *profesorka*, hence the word *ministarka* is even today associated with the wife of a minister, though more and more it denotes a female minister.

Also, the difference between the words *domaćin* and *domaćica* ought to be emphasised. While *domaćin* is equivalent to a host, the head of the family, *domaćica* is considered to be the same as housewife. Above all, in recent research conducted in Serbia not one man stated that his occupation involves housework, and there is no such word in Serbian to describe a man doing household chores, whereas 13% of women declared to be housewives (B92 2008).

(b) occupation vs. object

In Wikipedia it is stated that ‘some masculine nouns signify an occupation, while the corresponding feminine nouns refer to objects.’ For instance, the masculine noun *govornik* means *male speaker*, while the cognate feminine noun *govornica* is *speaker’s platform*, or the masculine *trener* means *male coach*, while the feminine word *trenerka* means *tracksuit*. Similarly, the masculine noun *poslanik* is a *Member of Parliament* or *MP*, whereas *poslanica* is an *epistle*. It is undoubtedly true that Serbian favours masculine gender when denoting persons by their occupation, partly as a consequence of the patriarchal tradition, where the professional ‘norm’ was historically a man. Besides, there are many words without a female counterpart, so male terms are used to encompass women as well (e.g. *inženjer*, *rektor*, *prevodilac*), although women during the past few decades have gained access to higher education and accompanying social and political power. Hence, it is of great importance that new terminology follows all these changes in society and hierarchy.

In Serbian, the absence of words denoting women in a variety of professions and occupations is obvious, so there is an urgent need to use feminine forms to make them visible in language since women are constantly entering more professions (*premijer* – *premijerka*, *menadžer* – *menadžerka*, *fotoreporter* – *fotoreporterka*, *diler* – *dilerka*, *milicioner* – *milicionerka*, *policajac* – *policajka*, *šoumen* – *šoumenka*, *voditelj* – *voditeljka*, *izveštač* – *izveštačica*, *biograf* – *biografkinja* etc.)

<sup>2</sup> One of the few exceptions to this rule is a recent anglicism *bebisiterka*, out of which masculine *bebisiter* is formed by back-formation.

To conclude, as Pauwels (2003, 558) emphasised, 'making women visible in all occupations and professions through systematic use of feminine occupational forms is seen to achieve social effectiveness', since it is better to be named and visible in language, even if there are some connotations of triviality carried by feminine suffixes.

## 5. Conclusion

In the past, most (if not all) world languages were male-dominated and male-centred, including English and Serbian. Languages reflect the society and culture in a way that the socially acquired and acceptable patterns and norms of behaviour for both men and women are reflected in them. Since the influence of patriarchal society is omnipresent, it comes as no surprise that the world is dominated and ruled by men, and the norms of behaviour are dictated by them. Consequently, 'the attributes assigned to each of the sexes in the gender metaphor are highly androcentric since men are taken as the norm of reference' (Fontecha and Catalán 2003, 772).

As was underscored throughout this paper, both English and Serbian maintain a system of hierarchy favouring men's domination and devaluing women and highlighting their subordination. Women are usually seen as inferior to men, morally, spiritually and intellectually, and the language itself has a significant impact on the way people are perceived and the level of respect they are given. Female words are most often marked associatively as they can carry additional derogatory implication.

The analysis in this paper has confirmed that languages are more likely to marginalise women. It has also revealed the more or less expected results concerning male/female pairs of words. Two cultures and two languages do in most cases share the same negative connotations and stereotypes of words referring to women, and hence both language discrimination and semantic imbalance are once again brought to light. It has been proven that regardless of society and language, feminine words seem to be conceptualised either neutrally or negatively, whereas their corresponding male counterparts are conceptualised either with neutral or positive connotations. Unfortunately, in the minds of the users of both languages words which describe women develop more negative evaluation, at the same time stereotyping or dismissing women. As Schulz (1990, 141) pointed out, the term for the female is more likely to become pejorative, more likely to acquire sexual suggestions, and less likely to be transferable to a male. It would be interesting to speculate why this might be so and analyse it further, but that is beyond the intended scope of this paper.

Although sexism in language can apply to both sexes, in practice, as most scholars have noted, it refers to the negative connotations and negative stereotypes conveyed by words or statements referring to women (Fontecha and Catalán 2003, 772). There is no perfect solution to this problem. Gender-related questions have to be first raised and discussed, and later solved, but this is likely to happen only when the gradual change in the attitudes towards women take place, and a more balanced representation of women and men in language becomes an imperative. Until then, feminist language activists are to stay dissatisfied with the current situation which is far from being encouraging, and to hope that gender-related linguistic problems will receive more attention in the foreseeable future.

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