

Adams and Ware on “Sexism and the English Language”

Language is a “social mirror” on the organization and dynamics of society. We can learn about our gender system by looking at how we refer to women. In addition, language reinforces the social constructions embedded in them.

Words that refer to women are often “sexually weighted.” Neutral terms, e.g., “hussy,” “tart,” become sexualized. Also, English has many more words for describing female sexuality than male sexuality.

“Linguists generally agree that an elaborate vocabulary on a given topic in a language means that this topic is of particular concern or importance to a particular group or to the society as a whole. What, then, can we conclude from the fact that English has so many terms describing women in specifically sexual ways, including its slang terminology, which is largely considered a male creation?⁷ Is it that a woman’s sexuality is considered the most salient aspect of her being, rivaling or even outweighing her humanity in importance? Furthermore, why are so many of these terms pejorative? Is it due to the well-known “sex is dirty” attitude that is characteristic of our culture? If this is true it leaves women in the position of having the essence of their existence defined in terms of something that is considered unclean and distasteful. The implications of this are sobering at best.”

Gendered language often trivializes women, e.g., there are many words for stupid and superficial women.

“The English language also has a tendency to define women as a sort of male appendage. A woman’s linguistic existence is in many cases expressed in essentially male terms, from a male point of view, or with male interests in mind.” E.g., male generic language.

There are also differences in how men and women use language, e.g., using “proper” English, tag questions, interruptions, reinforcement. However, research is often inconsistent on these patterns.