

Universal and National-Cultural in The Explicit and Implicit Expression of Gender in English Paremiological Units

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Abstract: This study explores how gender is expressed both explicitly and implicitly in English paremiological units, particularly proverbs and sayings. Drawing on contemporary gender linguistics and an anthropocentric approach, the research views language as a reflection of socially and culturally constructed gender roles. Proverbs are treated as stable cultural artifacts that preserve traditional values, moral judgments and stereotypes accumulated over generations. The analysis reveals that English proverbs often reflect gender asymmetry, with a noticeable tendency toward male-centered perspectives rooted in historical and patriarchal social structures. At the same time, these linguistic units demonstrate both universal patterns of gender representation and culturally specific features shaped by the English-speaking context. Special attention is given to the ways gender is encoded through lexical choices, semantic nuances, and metaphorical associations. By combining qualitative interpretation with elements of linguistic statistical analysis, the study highlights how proverbs contribute to the construction and transmission of gender norms. Ultimately, the findings suggest that English paremiological units function as a complex intersection of language, culture, and ideology, preserving both enduring stereotypes and culturally specific understandings of gender relations.

Keywords: Gender, anthropocentric, manifestation of gender in language, male, female, masculine, feminine, neuter gender, explicit expression, implicit expression, paremiological unit, paroemia, proverb, saying.

Introduction: The study of gender roles occupies a significant place in modern linguistic research. The relevance of gender studies from an anthropocentric perspective is primarily due to their close connection with such fields of knowledge as history, sociology, philosophy, psycholinguistics, and sociolinguistics, as well as the study of the verbal and nonverbal speech behavior of men and women as a living, dynamic process influenced by socio-cultural changes in modern society. Meanwhile, the linguistic stock of paremiological units, particularly proverbs and sayings, is static, varying within verbal or grammatical forms, but not semantics.

Since proverbs and sayings retain the semantic charge

of edification, instructiveness, and moral messages embedded in their semantics tens, hundreds, and perhaps thousands of years ago, the semantics of a paroemia can be metaphorically compared to an insect frozen in amber, whose form is fixed in time. Undoubtedly, an analysis of paremiological units from a gender perspective allows us to draw conclusions about the undeniable anthropocentrism of paroemia in general and English paroemia in particular (Samarina, Shibkova, Gubarina, 2015, p. 162), both from the standpoint of universality and from the standpoint of national-cultural specificity.

A priori, gender studies put forward specific goals, such as describing and explaining the manifestation of gender in language and attributing specific values to

men and women; studying differences in male and female verbal behavior, focusing on the specificity of male and female speech patterns; studying the linguistic construction of gender in various types of discourse; and examining and analyzing verbal dominance in the communicative behavior of men and women, which reflects not only the social status of the speakers but also the characteristics of their speech, as well as differences in strategies and tactics of verbal behavior that enable them to assume a dominant communicative position within verbal interactions.

As for proverbs and sayings, the male gender is stereotypically dominant in them, as they are a legacy of patriarchal times, and their meaning implies a concentrated clot of wisdom, a "correctness" accepted as a constant by previous generations. In English, we see a reflection of these stereotypes in the close relationship between the concepts of "man" and "God" (Korolenko, 2004, p. 13). Extralinguistic factors indicate that the stereotyping of male and female roles in society goes back centuries. For example, scientists at Cambridge University, using AI to study fragments of Babylonian cuneiform tablets dating from the 7th to 2nd centuries BC, discovered that in ancient Babylon, there existed a popular hymn, the text of which was repeatedly copied by Babylonian schoolchildren as schoolwork. In addition to praising deities, the Euphrates River, and Babylon itself, the texts mention that men cared for orphans, and women were prudent <...> and especially virtuous, but, in contrast to the active role of men in protecting the helpless, the main virtue praised in women is devotion and prudence (Source: Literary texts from the Sippar library V: A hymn in praise of Babylon and the Babylonians <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/iraq/article/literary-texts-from-the-sippar-library-v-a-hymn-in-praise-of-babylon-and-the-babylonians/B477D54E6554CA35718880339B3736CD>)

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the Women's Liberation Movement, which began in the United States and later spread to Europe and other parts of the world, spurred cross-cultural research on gender ideologies [Lomotey, Chachu, 2020, p. 71]. That is, the struggle to change patriarchal norms, including language, is only about 70 years old. This is quite a short period of time by historical standards, considering that the tendency to

stereotype gender roles dates back to the BC era. Nevertheless, the study and analysis of gendered verbalization in paremiological units allow us to trace how the subordinate position of women was reflected in linguistic formulations in the past.

In modern English, pronouns serve as the primary means of indicating gender. P. Ten Hacken, who compared the principles of gender categories using Latin, German, French, Dutch, and English, writes that English possesses not only a rudimentary system of gender categories but also a "semantic motivation" that allows neutral nouns to be assigned masculine or feminine genders depending on the context. Considering this, the Dutch researcher considers the use of the terms "masculine/feminine/neutral gender" in English unjustified, proposing the terms "she-gender," "he-gender," and "it-gender" as more fully reflecting the nuances of gender categorization in English [Ten Hacken, 1998, pp. 19, 28]. P. ten Hacken's assertions can be illustrated by the proverb "There is no devil so bad as a she-devil," which is semantically negative in relation to women. The pronoun she, combined with the gender-neutral noun devil, forms the feminine word—she-devil/female devil. Replacing the pronoun she with the pronoun he shifts the gender emphasis through semantic motivation.

Several European languages use the same lexical unit for the concepts of "man" and "person." In particular, the word "man" has these meanings in English [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2000]; that is, the use of "man" in English is characterized by the expanded semantics of its generic concept. This, in turn, can complicate the analysis of proverbs for androcentrism when the context lacks references to the opposite sex. For example, in the following proverbs: Dead men tell no tales; Man cannot live by bread alone; One man's loss is another man's gain; One man's meat is another man's poison.

Thus, the noun "man," without context or a personal pronoun, is not a complete marker of the proverb's androcentrism; this linguistic nuance, inherent in English proverbs, requires clarification for non-native speakers of English. In the above examples, national and cultural specificity is reflected in linguistic nuance, despite the proverbs' universal semantics.

METHODOLOGY

In modern English, there is a growing trend toward neutralizing the concept of “man/men” using the neutral nouns “person” and “people.” Time will tell how justified this trend is; a 2022 study from New York University, conducted using AI that analyzed over 630 billion words on the internet, found a predominance of the masculine gender over the feminine in the use of “person” and “people.” (Are "Person" or "People" Gender-Neutral Concepts? / NewStudy Finds Male Tilt in Analysis of Billions of Words (Are the Concepts "Person" or "People" Gender-Neutral? A New Study Finds Male Bias in Analysis of Billions of Words) <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2022/april/are--person--or--people-gender-neutral-concepts--new-study-find.html>)

In modern philology, increasing attention is being paid to the use of statistics to identify common principles underlying various linguistic phenomena and revealing the logic of their intra-systemic connections. The search for characteristics that clearly reflect and generalize various types of distributions for the purpose of their subsequent analysis and comparison is one of the most pressing tasks in modern statistics in general, and linguistic statistics in particular. Linguistic statistical analysis of proverbs within the framework of the paremiological minimum (which contains 380 paremiological units) prepared for the work, allows us to identify (similarity) (universality) in the verbalization of anthropocentrism by speakers of the English language by counting specific lexical groups that underlie a particular proverb or saying. Research analysis is mainly based on monolingual English dictionary and online resources English Proverbs (dictionary of English proverbs) [English-4life.com.ua/poslovit/poslovit.html](https://4life.com.ua/poslovit/poslovit.html); Skyeng English Language School: <https://skyeng.ru/articles/anglijskie-poslovicy-i-pogovorki/>.

DISCUSSION

Gender asymmetry in the English language manifests itself not only in the nuances of the use of the noun “man” to mean “male” and “person”; in a historical and social context, gender asymmetry is historically determined by the pan-Christian European paradigm, which, in Catholicism, Protestantism, Orthodoxy, and their offshoots, explains the creation of woman from a man’s rib and as a mate for man, i.e. The very

emergence of the female gender was traditionally perceived as secondary to that of men. As Professor Benedicta Lomotey points out, misogyny in Spanish and other European proverbs traces back to Judeo-Christian religious thought. <...> In the Middle Ages, they served as moral codes of conduct, regulating social behavior through the gender ideologies they perpetuated [Lomotey, Chachu, 2020, p. 71].

However, it would be inappropriate to assert the exclusive subordination and dependence of women living in the English-speaking area based solely on an analysis of paremiological units. Gender stereotypes in English are the topic of a separate study, and they are related not only to linguistics. Britain has given world history not only the suffragette movement—the struggle for women's suffrage—but also numerous historical female figures and rulers who wielded significant power and influence, beginning with the leader of the 1st century AD. Boudicca’s anti-Roman Celtic rebellion, to Queen Elizabeth II (1926-2022), to theoretically suggest the possibility of greater rights and freedoms for women in the British Isles, as opposed to women in Catholic countries (Spain, Italy, France, etc.). Thanks to the paroemias and the meanings preserved in them, we can confidently state the undeniable influence of the Christian model of male and female social roles on the language and consciousness of the English people, as well as on the formation of gender stereotypes in English language and consciousness in general. The Christian model of society recognized (and recognizes) only two genders – male and female – and dictated a specific life role for each: man – husband, father, provider, warrior; woman – wife, mother, keeper of the hearth, housewife, ensuring the continuation of the family line. In the combination of "marriage and family," these roles are intended to ensure an ideal balance in society, consistent with Christian ideals and values. This is a universal feature of Western European culture. The national-cultural aspect can be traced in the way each European nation expresses these ideals, values, and stereotypes in proverbs, using linguistic tools.

In English, this is explicitly expressed in the following proverbs: A man without a wife is but half a man; A man’s greatest treasure is his wife – she is a gift from the Lord; Men should be fullest care they cause women to weep, for God counts their tears.

In these examples, there is a clear, respectful attitude toward the female gender, explicitly expressed through the phrases “greatest treasure” and “gift from the Lord.” The meaning of the proverbs suggests that spouses represent an essential half for each other, that is, a man and a woman are truly whole only when they are in a marital relationship sanctified by God and the Church. Nevertheless, English folk wisdom, developed over millennia without religious overtones, acknowledges that psychological incompatibility does not guarantee a happy marriage; marital relations can be a kind of lottery, and not only in arranged marriages. This is explicitly reflected in the proverb: “Lots of men get women, but few get wives.”

Society's views on family were shaped by the economic, moral, and even climatic conditions of its existence; by the understanding that, within the family, only through the joint efforts of husband and wife was it possible to survive, run a full-fledged household, and ensure the existence of the social unit. This wisdom, developed through the practical observation of generations of people on the character traits, behavior, speech and behavioral tactics, and emotional manifestations of men and women, undoubtedly predates Christian doctrine, which only spread to Britain in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. For example, English proverbs state: A man's best fortune, or his worst, is his wife; The wife is the key to the house; A man without a wife is like a fork without a knife.

The value of a mentally and psychologically healthy married relationship is reinforced in the proverb through the explicit use of the noun “wife” through contrast (best - worst); reinforcement through comparison (without ... without), and a metaphorical equating to a potentially significant material object – a house key.

This view of marital union – through the psychological and physical compatibility of the relationships of men and women in the union – is characteristic of many cultures, even polygamous ones. That is, the ideal family and ideal marital relationships are a harmony that must be strived for, regardless of the prevailing religious worldview and accepted moral and ethical norms in society. Therefore, the perception of gender relations in English proverbs and sayings is universal, regardless of the explicit or implicit expression of national and cultural nuances, even when considering

similarities to paremiological units from another language and culture. This not only stereotypes socially regulated behavior for men and women, but also a millennia-old worldview of the ideal family, the importance of respect, kindness, responsibility, and compatibility in marital relationships. For example: “A kind wife makes a faithful husband” and its variation “A good husband makes a good wife” – a wife's good and faithful attitude toward her husband serves as a guarantee of a good attitude and fidelity in return. This is explicitly conveyed through the pairing of the nouns “wife” and “husband,” accompanied by positive adjectives (kind, faithful, good).

Another example: A true wife is her husband's better half. A wife is a vital and essential part of her husband's life and personality, implying a deep emotional connection and partnership. The proverb suggests that spouses are two halves of a whole, complementing each other and working together to create a stronger, more complete whole—the family. A worthy woman is the crown of her husband is another clear example for the explicit realization of gender relations by means of the proverb in the English language which means having a wife whose behavior and lifestyle meet the requirements accepted.

A light wife makes a heavy husband is an interesting example of a paroemia that has been misinterpreted by some scholars. This proverb is originally an aphorism, as it is a quotation from Portia to her husband Bassanio from Shakespeare's play *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 5, Scene 1 <https://www.litcharts.com/shakescleare/shakespeare-translations/the-merchant-of-venice/act-5-scene-1>), and is also a variation of the proverb “A light purse makes a heavy heart.” Taken out of context, the phrase is difficult to convey in translation, suggesting the following variations: A woman of lighter weight has a husband of greater weight. A woman is rich, and her husband is poor. A woman of lighter character can cause her husband much trouble. While in the original, Bassanio compliments Portia, comparing her to the sun, which implies the heroine's belief in a deep emotional connection and partnership between a man and a woman. However, some researchers, without considering the meaning of the original aphorism, mistakenly characterize this proverb as the opinion of the English consciousness that, whether a person

marries well or not, he sooner or later regrets his choice [Karabekova, Alimkulova, 2024, p. 165].

It should be noted that all of the aforementioned proverbs are based on the agreement of two nouns – husband and wife (or man and woman) – as integral elements of a union, combined with adjectives with positive connotations. The dominance of the male gender over the female is evident in examples in which gender is reflected separately from the pair, i.e., in proverbs about only a woman or only a man. It is precisely in these examples that the dominance of the male gender over the female in proverbs allows us to generalize the semantic principles by which gender stereotypes are manifested. For example, A.V. Kirilina (1999, p. 91) notes the formulation based on the principle of qualitative opposition (positive-negative), that is, the presence of characteristics in one gender that are absent in the other. As a rule, this is often done by positively characterizing the abilities of one gender (men) and negatively characterizing the qualities of the other gender (women). Proverbs illustrate this as follows: Women are wacky, women are vain, they'd rather be pretty than have a good brain; Women are the devil's net; Women are the root of all evil; Women are the snares of Satan.

Three of the above proverbs show clear signs of Christian influence, explicitly expressed through the phrases "devil's net," "root of all evil", and "snares of Satan". This perception of women correlates with the biblical Old Testament myth of Eve's expulsion from Paradise, tempted by the devil for violating God's prohibition against eating apples.

Thus, the guilt of the ancestress was extended to the entire female sex, a fact preserved in proverbs. This contrasts with men, who are generally described condescendingly in proverbs, for example: Men gossip as much as women do, but not so meanly. So, the negative tendency toward gossip is, to be fair, also recognized in men, but at the same time, the proverb attempts to justify or present men in a more favorable light compared to women through the use of an antithetical construction with the conjunction "but...". Women are characterized negatively much more often than men. For example: Women can tolerate everything except each other; Women have nine measures of talk; Women have tears at command; A man is as old as he feels, and a woman is as old as she

looks.

Proverbs explicitly use characteristics such as emotionality, physical appearance, and so on as negative descriptions, presenting them as negatively charged qualities inherent only to the female gender.

RESULTS

The calculation of the proverbs, which represent lexemes from the lexical-semantic groups, related to the person himself/herself, his/her family environment and social connections, as well as the work of his thinking, fantasy and metaphorical associations, allowed us to combine them into the following 10 groups: "Person" (human), "Body", "Intelligence", "Positive / Negative qualities", "Terms of kinship/marriage", "Social connections/roles", "Zoonyms / ornithonyms, etc.", "Emotions, feelings, properties", "Supernatural" and "Other". Linguistic statistical analysis shows that the highest number of proverbs belonging to the "Other" group is 125 out of 380 English paremiological minimum, which comprises 32,9% of all proverbs under consideration. A significant part of anthropocentric proverbs is represented by the group "person" (human) consisting of 112 (29.5 %) units which can be stated as major group having more than 100 paroemias together with "Other" group. "Zoonyms / ornithonyms, etc." group (30 (7.9%)) can be singled out among the minor groups which contain fewer than 30 units where "Terms of kinship/marriage" group has 27 (7.1%) proverbs and sayings, "Emotions, feelings, properties" includes 25 paremiological units which comprises 6.6%, the group "Body" consists of 22 (5.8%) units. The microgroups "Positive/Negative qualities" and "Supernatural" have slight difference with 15 (3.9%) and 13 (3.4%) respectively. "Social connections/ roles" group consists 11 (2.9%) whereas the group "Intellect" only comprises 4 (1.1%) paremiological units.

CONCLUSION

Thus, the verbalization of gender in proverbs and gender in the modern sense are phenomena that stem from the anthropocentric nature of language and resist a one-sided interpretation. Gender in English paremiological units represents a set of stereotypes and behavioral models proposed by society historically, accepted by members of society for both male and female, and considering manifestations of the

dominance of one gender over the other, including through explicit and implicit, universal and nationally specific representations. This linguistic construct within the European and, in particular, English linguistic space is subject to the influence of mainstream trends that seriously affect linguistic norms and cultural codes. Therefore, the universal and national-cultural aspects of explicit and implicit gender expression in English proverbs are characterized by the deep history of English language development, which is dependent on regional, political, and life realities, and by the static and dynamic aspects of their functioning. This has left an indelible mark on English proverbs. Proverbs and sayings demonstrate the dual functioning of the universal and the English national-cultural, which characterizes the specific features of gender relations between men and women, both in general and in the context of their interactions in the family and society.

Summarizing the above, it is possible to conclude that the universal and English national-cultural aspects are expressed both explicitly and implicitly in the analyzed paremiological units in English. Moreover, the explicit and implicit expression of gender aspects through the linguistic and verbal capabilities of the English language shapes the concepts and corresponding proverbs of English national culture, encompassing universal humanities.

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