DO ENGLISH IDIOMS HOLD WOMEN BACK?

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A connection between gender and language studies exists, as language mirrors social, cultural and gender asymmetries. Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) indicated that language has built a male-centered worldview, while according to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir 1929: 211): "the language is not only a product of a society, but also means of formation of its intellection and mentality". Idioms convey principles of cultures, so they are the main source for gender-linguistic studies. The aim of this paper is to investigate, through corpora and dictionaries, whether idioms bear a sign of gender bias and if the English language has become more neutral.

Key words: gender, language, idioms, culture, corpora

FEMINISM

According to the United Nations, the world population reached 8 billion people on 15th November 2022, while girls and women represent half of this vast population. However, the female population is systematically neglected compared to the male population since it has traditionally been perceived as the "weaker" sex and has been marginalized. De Beauvoir (1953) introduced "the second sex", a term used to portray women in association with men in which "man" takes place upon "woman" as a center of reference. Society is characterized as "post-traditional" by Fairclough (1995), who quotes Giddens (1991), so in modern society, traditions should not be taken for granted, but there must be alternatives. Therefore, there is a criticism towards the fixity of gender categories, that is a fixed label cast on a person since birth with slight or no chances to be altered. The postmodern view of performativity (Butler 2007) considers gender as fluid, negotiable and as an action one performs, so what matters is "what you do rather than are" (Ruberg 2011: 8).

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Gender discrimination is associated to explicit acts of behaving towards individuals or groups in a different way, while gender inequality is a structural and systematic issue that affects numerous aspects of society, such as education, economic resources and equal employment and it is hidden under the everyday spoken **language**. Rosalie Maggio (2015: 12) claimed that "Language both reflects and shapes society. Culture shapes language and then language shapes culture". Language can play a fundamental role on the way gender is viewed in people's minds. Every element of language, like vocabulary, grammar and colloquialisms can be traced back to its historical roots. There are two main frames that Lakoff (1973) identified regarding gender discrimination in language: 1) how women were taught to use language, and 2) how women have been treated in the language. The Lakoff-Whorf hypothesis indicates that language forms people's thought, which in turn forms reality, as people's outlooks towards the world vary depending on the languages they speak (Kay, Kempton 1984). Sapir (1929: 69) suggested that individuals "are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society…the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group". Therefore, as Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) also claimed, social hierarchies of gender are reflected through language and there is constructed a male-centered worldview.

To illustrate this, gendered words, terms, and expressions referring to males may be considered more prominent while the ones related to women may be considered weaker. According to **Markedness theory**, additional markers are often required for feminine nouns, while the masculine ones are considered as "the norm". The rise of feminism in the 20th century as well as the increased research on language and gender have led to a growing call for more **gender-inclusive language**, that is language which is more gender-neutral. This type of language attempts to prevent discrimination between genders by using for example "they" instead of "he" or "she", or gender-neutral titles such as "firefighter", "police officer" instead of "fireman" and "policeman". According to Litosseliti (2021), the most momentous breakthrough in gender-inclusive language occurred during the 1960s and 1980s, when the second wave of feminism stimulated social equality for both sexes and the field of language and gender drew the public attention, while at the same time, feminist linguistics started examining the association between sexist language and gender inequality in society. Another factor that played a significant role was the fact that many women stopped being housewives and entered various and male-dominant professions after World

War II (Mallinson 2017). In this way, the traditional language forms started to be challenged, so the English language modified all new working titles ending with *-woman* instead of *-man* to meet the social needs (Mallinson 2017). Another example is the use of Ms. to refer to women instead of Miss or Mrs., as well as the binary genders, that is using corresponding feminine nouns for masculine nouns, such as *spokesman/spokeswoman, chairman/chairwoman*. The United Nations (2022) website defines gender-inclusive language as "speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes".

GENDER ASYMMETRIES EXAMPLES – RESULTS – CORPORA – DICTIONARIES

In this paper, the lexical structures that are mainly examined are **idioms**, which are figurative expressions and belong to what Hewstone (1987: 107) would call "novel metaphors". They interpret an entity in terms of another from the base metaphorical source to the literal target domains. The representative example usually mentioned when outlining idioms is "to kick the bucket" (e.g. Everaert et al. 1995: 2, Gibbs 1995: 97, Tabossi, Zardon 1995: 273), but, as Prodromou (2008: 46) claims, there is a variety of fixed expressions also qualifying as idioms, ranging from simple commonplace phrases like "I don't know" or "you know" to longer fixed expressions like proverbs or song texts.

The word "**stereotype**" is described as "an exaggerated belief associated with a category", its function being to justify and rationalize human conduct in relation to that category (Hewstone, Giles 1997: 270). As Hewstone and Giles (1997: 270) quoting Lippman (1922: 1) put it, **stereotype** is: "the distinction between the world outside and the pictures in our heads". **Gender stereotypes** are able to shape certain social expectations regarding genders, encouraging or negatively estimating features and qualities of people depending on their biological sex. For instance, the idiom "mummy's boy" reveals a humiliating color just because its structure includes the word "mummy's". Similarly, tearfulness and softness are regarded as attributes of female behavior and are acknowledged as offensive for men. Remarkably, the pair of phraseological units "play the woman" and "play the man" indicates a negative sense when the word "woman" is used, but a positive one when the word "man" is used. What is more, phraseological units of lexical sets referring to females' character and mental abilities indicate invalidating qualities, such as: talkative and petulant (old

cat, common scold), fussiness and recklessness (meddling duchess), while beneficially painted idioms prevail as far as males' qualities are concerned as illustrated by the following examples: honesty and reliability (a man of honor), boldness and endurance (a man of courage, a man of decision, a man of character), and will (master of situation, to play the master, a man of his word). Additionally, a predominating position is attributed to the man in the house (lord and master, master of the house), while at the same time, the woman is supposed to be the wife, the mistress and mother, characteristics that go without saying, while for the man to be the good family man is a separate virtue and a corresponding idiom ("family man") bears a positive shade of value.

Gender asymmetry can be recognized firstly through the number of idioms describing the social status of men, which surpasses four times the quantity of idioms declaring women's status, and secondly, via the fact that "man's" phraseological units related to a man's status are characterized by great thematic variety. This assumption has been proved by many **research studies**, such as the analysis of idioms conducted by Wiecha (2013) that includes gender-related biases listed in the *Dictionary of Idioms* (Fowler 1986), *English Idioms* (Seidl, McMordie 1989), and the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* (Cowie, Mackin, McCaig 2009). Not only idioms using the words "man/men" and "woman/women", but all possible terms referring to gender, like "boy/girl", "lady/lord", "king/queen", "mother/father", "Mr./Mrs.", and so on were taken into consideration. Idioms that do not include such terms but are obviously gender-related in view of their meaning were also considered, like the saying "the hand that rocks the cradle" (rules the world) which is supposed to refer to mothers, as Cowie et al. (1996: 249) indicate in the dictionary entry. The mean ratio of the corresponding dictionary entries in the specific dictionaries of idioms is: 59.6% male-related, 17.7% female-related, and 22.7% related to both genders according to Wiecha's research (2013: 93). It was observed that in all of the three discussed idiom dictionaries lexical entries referring to males are prevalent.

Except for the dictionaries mentioned above, the *British National Corpus* was also analyzed in the same research, since it is a credible source. Specifically, McCarthy (2004: 1) defined a **corpus** as "a collection of written and spoken text, usually stored in a computer database". Corpus linguistics refers to the methodology of using large collections of texts to analyze through statistical methods (Gries 2009). Corpus linguistics analyses are based on evaluating the frequency of occurrence of certain linguistic elements, some elements may occur more frequently compared to others, and whether the frequency of certain elements aligns with the

researcher' expectation (Gries 2009). The results support the same findings, that is the percentage of gender-related idioms seems to be clearly on the side of the male variants. Specifically, according to Wiecha (2013: 96) 4 out of the 18 queried expressions (man of action, dirty old man, whipping boy, and Renaissance man) do not appear in the *British National Corpus* in the female form (i.e., *woman of action, *dirty old woman etc.). Despite the fact that many idioms can be applied to both genders, the corpus results show that most idioms are substantially more frequent in the male form than in the female. This result is also confirmed by Mutlovà's (2009: 59) research who found that "the majority of man-based idioms have evolved a woman-based alternative. Yet, the frequency of use of such alternatives is very low." The proportion of the female variants of all examined idioms in Wiecha's research (2013) is only 13.11%, compared to 86.89% of the male equivalents. Therefore, the results evidently indicate that there is a twofold imbalance in gender-related idioms, as far as their frequency is concerned. What is more, the semantic analysis of the corpus hits' individual use in context revealed that most gender-related idioms can bear either positive or negative connotations, but the handful of neutrally connotated cases are almost entirely male-related. Remarkably, this study (Wiecha 2013) lends further support to the claim that women and men are represented dissimilarly in the English idiomatic language. These conclusions accord with what others have brought to light, not only regarding idiomatic language use but with respect to the English language in general. According to Henley (1987: 5), "women and girls are […] ignored in the language simply by not being the topics of discourse". Additionally, Graham (1975) discovered in his study that schoolbooks presented a proportion of four to one male compared to female references, while Kjellmer's (1986) study of the *Brown and Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen corpora* demonstrated that male pronouns and the words "man/men" were used quite more frequently than the female equivalents. In a more recent study, using the *British National Corpus*, Pearce (2008) also revealed that the words "man/men" are used almost one and a half times more regularly than the words "woman/women".

Another element that plays a major role is the context in which these idiomatic phrases are encountered, since, as Mills (2008: 136) supports, there are two types of sexism: overt, which is clear and straightforward, and indirect, which can be perceived contextually with respect to the interpretation of surrounding utterances. Wiecha's research (2013) carried out a semantic analysis of the connotations of the corpus results, so as to spot possible contextual differences between male-related idioms and female-related ones.

As Čermák (2001: 13) suggests, "idioms are a primary means for the expression of positive and negative attitudes". The data collected for this **study** agree with this claim, since only one of the queried idioms (man/woman of few words) was mostly used in a neutral context, while the other 17 queried expressions, both male and female forms, were primarily used either with positive or negative connotations. The female-related terms tend to be used on either the positive or the negative side of the connotational spectrum, whilst many of the references to men are expressed in a neutral context. These results coordinate with Romaine's (2000: 110) corpus findings according to which words with negative implications compile more often with female than male referents. She deduces that "[w]omen occupy what might be called a problematic or negative semantic space" (Romaine 2000: 103).

Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) examined 30 languages and the results demonstrated that linguistic gender inequality in language is ubiquitous, since in most of them, masculine words are regarded as the norm, whereas feminine words are secondary. Clearly, the use of false generics in English reaches a variety of idiomatic expressions (Hellinger, Bußmann 2015). The following examples support this view: 1) The use of "man" instead of "human" – "Every man for himself" and "A man is known by his friends"; 2) The use of masculine pronouns for hypothetical gender – "Everything comes to him who waits". Using the masculine form to depict all people cross-refers to the traditional gender hierarchy in society, where male is regarded as the superior group and the norm, which leads to women's marginalization and exclusion from public life. This perspective is reflected and reproduced in linguistic structures as well and as Caroline Criado Perez (2019) proclaimed, the male viewpoint promotes a broader socio-cultural problem according to which men's experiences and perspectives are perceived as universal, while those of women are viewed as specialized or niche, which demonstrates that women's views are not respected.

As mentioned before, **markedness theory** suggests that specific structures related to one gender are "marked" compared to those related to the other gender. The assumption which considers male as the norm and female as "the weaker sex" or "the second sex / the extra human" suggests that femininity is connected with weakness, therefore it is typical for the English language for masculine lexical categories to be treated as superb or unmarked, and feminine lexical categories as abnormal, and "marked" (Battistella 1996). Despite the fact that some words that represent professions and identities, such as "president and lawyer", are not specifically marked with respect to gender, they are typically considered to

refer to men. In parallel, some jobs are by definition connected with females, such as "maid" and "nurse". According to Hellinger and Bußmann (2015), stereotypes form the social roles that are considered appropriate for each gender. Nowadays, it is generally accepted that high status professions which require special skills and a high level of education are often assigned to males and in case a woman does the same job, her job title will be marked with "woman" / "lady" / "female", e.g., *spokeswoman/chairwoman*.

In the English phraseological system, the word "woman" is perceived as a conception related to: 1) Appearance: a glamour girl (=a very beautiful girl); (as) red as a cherry = have roses in one's cheeks (=to have red cheeks), which indicates her beauty. 2) Character: mamma's darling (=a beloved son or daughter under mother's care); bitch kitty – a stubborn woman with heavy character. 3) Marital status: a grass widow (=a woman whose husband is far away); born under the rose (=born from illegal relations). 4) Social status: a woman of letters (=a woman-writer); a girl Friday (=a reliable secretary); principal boy (=an actress who performed man's roles); a golden girl (=a very popular girl); between (maid) girl (=a maid who assists a cook). 5) Age: an old girl (=an old single girl); a bit of fluff (=a young girl); a dolly bird (=young and silly girl); old trout (=old scolding woman). It is obvious that in terms of characterization of age marital status is very important in the English culture. 6) Behavior from a moral perspective: a woman of the streets (= a lightminded girl); scarlet lady (=a light-minded wandering woman). 7) Intellect: a woman's reason (=female logics), which bears irony regarding women's intelligence. To sum-up, it is ascertained that maternity is highly estimated as well as qualities of love, selflessness and self-sacrifice, while a negative attitude is observed concerning women's behavior, wife's character (scolding, unsatisfied), women's intellectual abilities and their emotional imbalance.

On the other hand, according to patriarchal notions, a man is the head of a family and he should be identified as far asthe family is concerned, which can be illustrated by the following structures: lord and master, the good man of the house; to wear the pants/trousers. Furthermore, man's beneficial characteristics are power, leadership, managing, financial success, braveness and ownership, which can be depicted through the following phraseological units: lord and master, men in gray suits, a made man (=a person who reached high position himself), a man of mark (=man of high position), great lion (=powerful). Additionally, a man who grants power to his wife is negatively marked as he does not satisfy his typical behavioral norms. Among the most popular phraseological units are those which point at professional activities of men, such as: a boy in buttons (=a

boy working in hotel); a Jack of all trades (=a man of various occupations); a back room boy (=specialist); a man of rank (=a man of high position); a broken man (=robber). Men's appearance is displayed by a large number of units both with positive and negative emotional coloring, like: bald as a coot (=totally bald); admiral of the red (=drunkard with red nose); blue-eyed boy (=women's beloved man). Male personal features are characterized by several phraseological units, such as: (as) gentle as a lamb (=mild as a lamb); mamma's darling (=a beloved son (or daughter) under mother's care); a heart of oak (=brave, courageous man); a tough nut (=firm, resolute); Jack among the maids (=ladies' man). Social status interprets professional qualities: Men's spiritual world involves his intellectual abilities and willfulness: a sharp man, a man of wisdom, a clever Dick (=a clever person), which are antithetical to: a silly billy, a Simple Simon, a proper Charley (=foolish). Another image is the one of a man oppressed and commanded by his wife: a henpecked husband; to be tied to one's wife's apron strings, to live under the cat's foot / paw.

The theory of androcentricity in the English language and the deficiency of female images in speech (see Coates 1986) is illustrated through corpora analysis. There have been found gender-marked idioms related to: 1) Agentive comparative idioms, which indicate sex depending on the type of activities, professions, positions, titles. For instance: live like a king / a lord, work like a navy, swear / talk like a sailor / a trooper, shout / talk like a fishwife. 2) "Zoo- and phytomorphic symbols" typically refer to either male or female referents and they have the ability to convey that characteristic to the whole comparative idiom, such as: (as) big as an elephant, (as) strong as a lion, fight like a tiger, (as) gruff as a bear (masculinity) and (as) silly as a goose, (as) busy as a bee, (as) fair as a rose, (as) fresh as a daisy (femininity). The corpus of this study (Abadi 2015) is taken from the idioms found in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms* 3rd edition and what was revealed was the fact that in some hypo-concepts such as "beautiful, attractive" man is depicted by a small number of comparative idioms, whereas woman is portrayed by a large amount. Contrary to this, the hypo-concept "strong" is supposed to be more proper for males. Baider emphasizes the fact that stereotypes of thought mirror beliefs, attitudes and prejudices which are dominant in a given community (Baider 2013: 1166; Armstrong 1996: 49). Stereotyped comparative idioms intend to outline the image of a human precisely but at the same time to highlight the conventional image of both sexes approved by the community. The results of the corpora analysis demonstrate that positive stereotypes of women have been formed (Nezhelskaya 2018). In particular: 1) "beauty, attractiveness"

which is supposed to be crucial for women: (as) beautiful as a (Dresden) doll /as a princess, (as) pretty as a picture / as paint; 2. "authority", "ubiquity": A woman knows a bit more than Satan; a lover is as sweet as eating raisins; 3) "the keeper of the hearth": lady of the house / mistress of the house / lady of the frying-pan; 4) "mother": mother country / Motherland/ Mother earth / mother tongue / mother's milk (=daily bread, something too necessary). 5) "bossy": the gray mare / woman holding her husband under her heel / wear the breeches (or pants) – rule in the house. 6) "industriousness": (as) busy as a bee / as an ant; the fingers of a housewife do. However, negative characteristics can still be observed regarding the following categories: with reference to 1) above – "appearance": (as) ugly as a witch, look like a wet hen; 7) "volubility": chatter like a magpie; a woman's hair is long, but her tongue is longer; 8) "excessive emotionality": There is no fury like a woman's fury. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned; 9) "excessive fuss": (as) busy as a bee (with two tails) / as a hen on a hot girdle /as a hen with one chicken; 10) "naivety": (as) silly as a goose, behave like a dumb Dora; 11) "obedience": A young woman married to an old man must behave like an old woman; 12) "prodigality": A woman can throw out the window more than a man can bring in at the door; 13) "weeping": It is as great pity to see a woman weep as to see a goose go barefoot. Additionally, there is noted the traditional negative attitude that males have towards women: 14) "way of dressing": look like mutton, dressed (up) as a lamb, look like a scarlet woman; 15) "awkwardness": as awkward as a cow on roller skate. On the other hand, the positive attitude that males have towards women is denoted by a small number of comparative idioms, which is a result of the patriarchal society even if, lately, as it can be observed through the corpus analysis, these comparative idioms have started to appear more often. This occurs mainly due to the socio-cultural changes that promote women's equality, and consequently the language indicates the reassessment of values and the position of women in society (Butler 2007), for instance: a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle (=A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle). Another observation relates to the fact that the male comparative idiomatic stereotypes do not cease highlighting masculine positive traits: "physical structure": (as) strong as a bull / as a lion / as an ox, be built like a castle / like a tank; "boldness and determination" (as) hard as a flint/ as a nut / as a a rock; look like a stone wall; "bravery": (as) bold / brave as a lion, (as) game as a cockerel, fight like a tiger, (as) game as Ned Kelly / (as) obstinate / stubborn as a mule /as an ox / as the devil, as firm / steady as a rock; "diligence": work like a navy / like a slave /ahorse; "intelligence": (as) clever as a devil, (as) wise as Solomon, (as) clever as a

dog; "trustworthiness": a faithful friend is better than gold; better lose a jest than a friend; no doctor like a true friend. As far as the negative masculine stereotypes are concerned, they are related to: "male's subjection to women": behave like a mother's boy / live like under the cat's foot; "superiority": a man doesn't want a woman smarter than he is; "inclination to hard drinks": (as) drunk as a beggar / as a fiddler / as a lord; "indelicacy": (as) gruff as a bear / be like a bull at a gate; "fierceness": (as) fierce as a lion / as a tiger. What is quite positive is the fact that the stereotype that a man should be the holder of power in the family is gradually diminishing in the English mentality, which denotes the weakening of traditional patriarchal concepts in English families thanks to the rapid development of feminism in Europe. As follows from the semantics of phraseological statements, a man must earn the right to be called a man: play the man, write man – to have the right to be called a man (Shakespearean expression). As a result, it can be argued that male marked units mainly form a positive image of a man, whereas feminine ones mostly shape a negative image of women.

CONCLUSION

This paper has yielded some pretty clear, unambiguous results concerning the different ways women and men are represented in English idioms. The different forms of idioms referring to either women or men indicate that women are on the losing end, since they are less frequently talked about, in idiomatic terms at least, and even in these cases, the connotations are more likely to be negative compared to male-related idioms. What is more, additional markers are sometimes needed for feminine nouns, while the masculine ones are accounted as "the norm", according to the Markedness theory. These results illustrate gender asymmetry, as "man's" phraseological units related to a man's status are represented by great thematic variety. In the English phraseological system, the word "woman" is regarded as a notion related to appearance, personality, marital status, social status, age, behavior and mostly with the domestic sphere, while in line with patriarchal notions, a man is the head of a family and he should be identified with power, leadership, managing, financial success, braveness, ownership. In addition, idioms present male as the superior and wise, while females are assigned with inferiority and foolishness.

The gender inequality observed is an issue that impacts several domains, such as education, economy and equal employment and it is hidden under the everyday spoken language. This male-centered worldview affects negatively future generations by establishing gender stereotypes regarding roles and expectations that restrict young people's ambitions and

opportunities. The results mentioned above call for alterations in modern society regarding relationships and identities, which need to be adjusted via an openness that includes more possibilities than the fixed relationships and identities of traditional society. Besides, as Halliday (1978: 2) suggests "people tend to behave in accordance with the stereotypes to which they are consigned". In addition, the rise of feminism in the 20th century has given rise to a promising call for more gender-inclusive language, that is more gender-neutral. Therefore, English idioms have held women back and the role of this research model is to speak up for the female gender which is oppressed by these idioms and argue that the era of male chauvinism should become past since as Mey (2001: 313) has put it, "man-made language is a historical accident and not a natural condition that cannot be changed."

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