



Gender, Sex and Stereotyping in the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary**

ENCARNACIÓN HIDALGO TENORIO

The analysis of any topic related to language and gender or sex tends to give rise to a range of somewhat diverse material. The core of the problem is not so much the bias of an approach to such a matter (which is obvious and can be easily identified), as how bias itself may organize human beings' experience by means of language in use. There exist well-known cultural stereotypes associated with the male and female conditions, and it is necessary to acknowledge the limitations to the application of many an impressionistic linguistic study on such issues. Taking this into account, the aim of this paper is to look at the way certain aspects of present-day English (a natural-gendered language) are recorded by the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary (1987) in order to assess: 1) the representation of the two sexes; 2) the extent to which some of the dictionary definitions are inaccurate, biased, and/or the result of having ignored changes in society; and, subsequently, 3) possible stereotyping. By describing a corpus extracted from the Collins COBUILD, I also address its representation of Western societies; its editorial board's policy to prevent discrimination in language usage; and its efforts, if any, to avoid conveying the same stereotyped picture of women and men.

1. Introduction

The *Collins COBUILD* web page (<http://www.titania.cobuild.collins.co.uk/catalogue/cob2features.html>) is illustrative of the range of aims and methods developed in the School of English at the University of Birmingham since the early 1980s. It claims that one significant feature of the *COBUILD* team's dictionaries is their presenting analyses 'founded on the real evidence from [their] huge corpus resources'. It highlights how important has been their application of corpus linguistics techniques for the development of an accurate description of the English language. One also reads that this academic stance has fostered the direct observation of facts, rather than the 'mix of impressions, prejudices, unconscious assumptions and idiosyncrasies which shape our intuitions about language'.

On reading the Introduction to the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (1987), we find that this is considered to be new and different from other

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dictionaries, having been compiled by using new techniques and advanced computer technology. Its editor in chief, John Sinclair, says that those new techniques have consisted in the thorough examination of spoken and written English texts, along with all the tools of conventional dictionary makers (i.e. wide reading, experience of English and other dictionaries) (1987: xv). In the process, the team had access to about 20 million words collected from books, magazines, newspapers, conversations, or radio and television broadcasts. The main idea underlying their principles was that '[u]sage cannot be invented, it can only be recorded' (ibid.). The criterion they took into account for selection was frequency of use; and their primary aim was to make 'a reliable description of the central core of the language' (p. xviii), which meant neglecting obsolete, dialectal, or highly technical words.

Although they had a large team working for several years, in the end they were able, according to Sinclair, to be consistent. They tried to avoid extreme or sectarian positions (p. xxi); they opted not to record all the variety but 'a norm of usage which will be accepted as normal by large numbers of people' (p. xx); and they selected examples from actual instances (p. xv). Therefore, the most outstanding characteristic of this dictionary is that it records the facts of English where the evidence is clear, focuses on features that are central and typical, and provides lots of real examples.

It is certain that examples help readers to use any language appropriately; in fact, they can be better than definitions since, when reading them, the user is able to see the word in context. For a native speaker, these may be redundant; for the foreign learner, they are essential. We can infer from this idea that non-native speakers have the chance of enjoying and being exposed to real English when using this type of dictionary. The problem is that it is editors who select one or two real examples from a wide range of instances in the corpus; and it is they who choose what is labelled as the natural usage of words, phrases and grammatical structures.

This dictionary is said to provide a clear and detailed picture of Modern English. It collects evidence about the English that most people read, write, speak, and hear; that is, it shows how English is used in real life. This statement is very appealing. The editors are proud of their approach; they are convinced of its usefulness for present-day scholars. I am also aware of this fact, especially because as a non-native speaker who teaches English language and linguistics, I understand that a dictionary is one of the best means to make my students get closer to English in every possible sense. Dictionaries encapsulate the linguistic tradition of a community of speakers; they register its history and reveal 'the evolution of consciousness' (Barfield 1954: 14); they incorporate all the phenomena that specific society can talk about, feel, ponder, imagine, relish, wish for or despise. In short, this reference book should describe quite efficiently the actual state of English and the sociological profile of the speakers of this language.

1.1. Language in Society

In 1956 Whorf's *Language, Thought and Reality* described the debatable hypothesis of linguistic relativism. Some philosophers and sociologists wondered then whether,

by accepting its weak version, it could also be possible to postulate a situation in which a conscious change of language habits might establish a new worldview (cf. Prentice 1994). They believed that it was possible to apply this hypothesis to their vision of assuming that 'the revolutionary changes ... have been made due not so much to new facts as to new ways of thinking about facts' (Whorf 1956: 220); thus, it would be relatively easy to undermine the deepest roots of 'linguistic mistreatment', to get rid of any social conflict, and to transform our appreciation of the entire Cosmos. This reasoning encouraged many linguists to revise dictionaries, to challenge grammatical prescriptivism, and to promote alternative uses, in other words, to reform a language that in its relation with sex had become a political issue (cf. Graham 1975; Gershuny 1977; Martyna 1980; MacKay 1983; Guentherodt 1984; Kramarae & Treichler 1985; Daly & Caputi 1988; Cooper 1989; Fasold *et al.* 1990; Hellinger 1991; Kramarae 1992; Pauwels 1993; Doyle 1995). What was at stake was the attempt to influence the social structure and the political superstructure by manipulating language (cf. Hodge & Kress 1979: 6). However, Marxist principles had claimed that it must be the economic infrastructure that influences the others. Consequently, it might be accurate to suggest that any change in the economic level of society would provoke the change in the ideological representation of the world, the political structure and, finally, language as a tool for communication. From these two perspectives, different conceptions about language change have appeared. Some consider that a linguistic revolution will mean a social revolution (Feng *et al.* 1990). Others regard the linguistic question as being secondary to the abolition of discriminatory social patterns (cf. Blaubergs 1980: 135). As for my own thesis, I stand for an eclectic view according to which I would confirm that changes in society and in language are complementary; one will reflect the other, while the other will increase an attitude of public awareness encouraging the former.

1.2. Gender and Sex

In languages such as Greek, Latin or Spanish, gender is a grammatical category supported by certain morphosyntactic realizations (e.g. agreement or concord between nouns, determiners, adjectives and past participles). Something similar is found in Old English. There was strict case agreement (e.g. masculine = *se fæder*/the father; feminine = *sēo mōdor*/the mother; neuter = *þæt mægden*/the maiden). Gender was fully grammatical and, therefore, extralinguistic information such as sex did not matter at all (e.g. *wīfmann/hē* = wife/he; *boc/hēo* = book/she). Nevertheless, by the eleventh century grammatical gender distinctions had disappeared; the anaphoric pronouns were now selected according to the sex of the referent (e.g. *wīfmann/hēo* = wife/she). That is called 'natural gender', a lexical-semantic category that is related to the features [+/-animate] and [+/-female] (cf. Goddard 1997: 10–11). All in all, there are still some derivational morphemes marking gender in English, such as '-ess' (*empress*), '-ine' (*heroine*), '-ette' (*usherette*), '-er' (*widower*), '-groom' (*bridegroom*), or 'he-' and 'she-' (*he-goat/she-goat*). Quirk *et al.* (1985: 314) distinguish nine genders depending on the co-occurrence of nouns with relative and

personal pronouns: inanimate and animate, which can be either personal (i.e. male, female, dual, common, collective) or non-personal (i.e. male and female high animal, and low animal). Santana (1994: 333–335), considering the distinction between three referents (i.e. human, animate non-human, inanimate) and two uses (i.e. objective use, subjective use), reduces them to the following: [–personal(ized)] and [+personal(ized)], which can be either (masculin(ized)) or (feminin(ized)) (for further discussion, see Corbett 1991).

Few researchers believe in the power of a sex-biased language (cf. Blaugers 1980). However, at the same time, they fiercely object to any attempt promoted by those who regard a change in language as symptomatic of another corresponding change in the societal structure (cf. Cameron 1992: 99–127; Pauwels 1998: 81–93). Therefore, implicitly or explicitly, they all assume the same idea: the specific linguistic system in its present-day form mirrors and legitimizes a hierarchical order in which there is either no place for women, or, at most, only a secondary one.

It would appear that the question as to how language is used in order to portray females and males continues to be important (for gender-differentiated language use, see Coates 1998). We have to ask in what sense its negative effects could be reduced and to what extent an alternative can be found, a ‘reformed language’ or ‘gender inclusive language’. To make females visible implies certain actions: (a) the use of pronouns with their specific appropriate referent; (b) the preference within the lexicon for lexical items associated with both females and males; and (c) the inclusion of other terms that could be applied to both without restriction. A really significant change would be the second of these options, since this seems to be a straightforward path towards the recognition of women’s access to the public sphere. This would allow for the existence of some pairs of words such as ‘chairman’/‘chair-woman’ and ‘housewife’/‘househusband’ deprived of any pejorative connotations. However, we must bear in mind that, traditionally, the word ‘woman’ and the concept it conveys have been associated almost only with sex and ‘anatomy as destiny’ (Cameron 1997: 32), while the word and the concept ‘man’ have appeared as the natural norm (cf. Sheldon 1997: 226). In some way, this has made people believe that there must be a discourse ‘which allows him to represent himself as non-gendered, and to define women constantly according to their sexual status’ (Black & Coward 1998: 118). We may wonder, then, whether it is preferable to use dual gender or to maintain the distinction between female and male gender as an explicit expression of their allegedly equal treatment; or whether it is more important either to specify the social role or also the sex of the person to whom a particular noun is attached.

Sexism and racism might be defined as social phenomena that continue to exist partly because of the linguistic reproduction of patterns; nevertheless, they can imply rather different linguistic aspects (for further discussion, see Rätzschel 1997). Initial impressions seem to indicate that racist discourse can make use of explicit syntactic structures, especially with transitive complementation, i.e. **Subject + Verb Phrase** (e.g. to hate, to loathe, to dislike, to reject, to want to expel, etc.) + **Direct Object** (e.g. Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, North Africans, Muslims, Bosnians, Kurds, etc.); with intensive relationship, i.e. **Subject** (e.g. Jews, Blacks, Gypsies, North Africans,

Muslims, Bosnians, Kurds, etc.) + **Copulative Verb** (e.g. to be, to seem, to look, to appear, etc.) + **Subject Complement** (e.g. dirty, disgusting, lazy, unreliable, simple-minded, cheaters, etc.); and with some paratactic clauses by extension/addition, i.e. **Clause 1 + but** (e.g. 'They are like us, but ...'), together with specific lexical items with a derogatory sense. Androcentricism, on the other hand, seems to work in subtler ways, so subtly that it is not always conceivable to corroborate its existence, so elusively that I might conclude that it is essentially assumed by and through language (although it could also manifest itself in the same terms as the other). It is as if racism would correlate mainly though not exclusively with the syntagmatic axis, and sexism with the paradigmatic one.

This last remark, intuitive as it may look, is a hypothesis derived from this initial survey of the background. For almost any observant language user, it is evident that some of the lexical items used in certain contexts have a rather sexist slant. Furthermore, a number of other characteristics of such use might be hypothesized:

1. Despite the speaker's own attitudes towards these words, they are endowed with a certain perlocutionary force that in many cases becomes inherent to them.
2. The changes produced in some areas of our social system must be followed by others in the corresponding semantic fields.
3. The English language retains its vestiges of anti-female stereotypes, which, Strainchamp maintains, is a result of 'grammars and dictionaries always made by men' (1971: 241).
4. Such a corpus as the English lexicon may contain features that could convey a sense of mistreatment to any of the sexes.

When Christopher Norris reviews Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and his hypothesis of language as a repertoire of games, he remembers how 'a traditional mistake ... comes of expecting language to relate directly to objects or ideas' (1982: 130). This observation encouraged me to hypothesize an intermediate position that would promote the confirmation of language as the instrument, not the explicit object of manipulation. In other words, language is seen as the reflection of the actual state of things with which, however, it does not maintain a one-to-one mirror relationship. For example, the pair 'spinster'/'bachelor', seen as two different linguistic signs with their specific signifiers and signifieds, can be inserted in their own linguistic spaces thanks to their contrastive relationship; the set of semantic features that define them include one referring to their sex. 'Spinster' is [+ concrete], [+ animate], [+ human], [female], [+ adult] and [+ single]; 'bachelor' is [+ concrete], [+ animate], [+ human], [-female], [+ adult] and [+ single]. It is clearly the feature [female] versus [-female] that marks the difference between these lexical items. However, we all know that there is something else, although both are often used as conscious archaisms and the qualified 'confirmed bachelor' is an implicit sign of the ultimate misogyny: gay masculinity (personal communication, Andrew Blake). For a native speaker the actual sound of one of these words has negative overtones. These so-called negative vibrations make some people laugh at one and not the other. The feature I was referring to is [-probably desired civil status] versus [+ probably desired civil status].

Language must be classified as sexist when used with the intention of conveying some kind of sexual inferiority. Martynuk (1989a: 100) thinks that ‘it seems that sexism is not so much a question of language as a question of language use, that is, of the speaker’s attitude’; under different circumstances, it just repeats some stereotypes. It should be clear, then, that, if language does not correspond directly with the world or ‘the object’, it does not prevent anyone from recognizing the dependence of one on the other, and to some extent, of the latter on the former.

2. Objectives

In previous research (Hidalgo Tenorio 1996, 1997), I observed that English was indeed acquiring new terms that the user could apply equally well to female and male referents, or presented many lexical items that for the first time had a morphologically marked counterpart (e.g. *air assistant, chairperson, president, priest/priestess, postmaster/postmistress*). However, there remained many words that reflected the same stereotyped behavioural patterns and the same traditional assumptions since, for instance, it was only men that were depicted serving in their country’s army, navy, or air force (*serviceman*); or attempting to chase and capture a criminal (*posse*); or following women and children or hiding near their houses in order to scare or harm them (*prowler*). Then, I thought it was time to study the potential sex differentiation discovered in the lexical system of English. And I decided to do it by examining efforts made by the English Department at the University of Birmingham and their *English Language Dictionary* in their attempt ‘to provide a fair representation of contemporary English’ (Sinclair 1987: xv).

The starting point of this research was to look at the way this official record of the lexicon structures reality, and understand how it ‘treats’ women and men. Later, in the light of the examples analysed, I also considered the possibility of evaluating the extent to which the *Collins COBUILD* reflected the state of progressive modification of social structures (cf. Britto 1988). Obviously, the relevance of this intellectual exercise lies in a simple observation: a cursory review of a dictionary is enough to reveal a full network of a potential discriminatory language based on the real discriminatory language use.

3. Method

My decision to use the *Collins COBUILD* (1987) was influenced by certain comments that this reference book, which was said to be based on a detailed analysis of the English of today, was widely popular among students and teachers of English in Spain (personal communication, Leocadio Martín Mingorance and Melissa Waring). I scrutinised all the entries of the dictionary carefully, marking out 820 lexical items out of the 70,000 references covered by this dictionary as being linked to areas traditionally considered male/masculine or female/feminine. Apart from this, other criteria in the selection process included (a) the sex/gender markedness of the words (e.g. *handyman, bunny girl, seamstress*); (b) the deviation from the usual norm (e.g.

househusband); (c) some inconsistency in the definitions (e.g. *Adam's apple*, *prostitute*); or (d) the description of the items giving no hint of the referent's sex, or mentioning both as an example of dual gender (e.g. *agony aunt*, *bartender*, *cameraman*).

I then proceeded to analyse every lexical item according to its lexical features, which should first be [+human] and [+/-female] in any of the meanings of every lemma. This compelled me to choose some words that apparently would not fit in any of the sections I intended to deal with but were meaningful for the final results (e.g. *lion*).

After having organized these lexical items in the different groups described later, I established several semantic zones—some of which had already been described by Martynuk (1989a, 1989b)—into which they could be inserted: 'Work or labour', 'Physical appearance', 'Behavioural patterns' (i.e. sex, lie, potential for destruction), 'Intelligence–lack of intelligence' (i.e. skill and cleverness), 'Social role modified', 'Sexual role modified', 'Soc-sex' or sex in the public domain (i.e. marital status, sex-dependent social roles, economic relations established in sexual terms), 'Social status', 'Modes of address', and 'Derogatory sense'. By carrying out such an analysis, the aim was to see whether those who had constructed the dictionary had followed more or less systematically their own principles concerning language and gender, or represented the world by repeating to some extent familiar stereotypes.

4. Findings

Examples of gender marked by derivational morphemes comprise 29.85% of the data (e.g. '-ess', '-ine', '-groom', '-er', '-ette') and some other lexical items including the lexical feature [+/-female] such as '-man', '-wife', '-woman', '-master', '-mistress', 'he-', 'she-', '-lady', '-lord', 'mother', '-boy-' or '-girl-'. These might make up a large variety of compounds whose main characteristic is the exclusiveness of their referent, whether masculine or feminine (e.g. *blue-eyed boy*, *footman*, *scout-master*, *charwoman*, *fishwife*, *wardrobe mistress*). Of the 820 words of my corpus, 17.5% are organized within this category in morphologically distinguished opposite pairs (e.g. *adulterer/adulteress*, *barman/barmaid*, *confidant/confidante*, *landlord/landlady*, *alumnus/alumna*).

Of the cases, 29.75% have no gender markedness and, to a great extent, reproduce many of the stereotypes to which men and women are socially related (e.g. *adventurer*, *braggart*, *hand*, *baby-minder*, *concubine*, *doll*, *virgin*).

Of the sample, 5.9% offer an appealing profile since, in this case, it is not the lexical item in itself or its definition that establishes the gender to which to associate it, but rather the example used in order to illustrate its meaning (e.g. *amiable*, *broadcaster*, *racist*, *attractiveness*, *childminder*, *to chortle*).

The remaining 34.3% must be described as a representation of what one might call 'reformed language'. This, whatever the suffixes, is said to include both sexes conveyed by the referent of some indefinite pronouns, some collective nouns, the singular 'they', or the phrase 'he or she' found in their definitions (e.g. *voyeur*, *weatherman*, *sovereign*, *son of a bitch*).

Table 1. One-sex-referent lexical items (except for the pairs morphologically marked) (42.1%)

Semantic zones + other fields of classification (marked with *)	%	
	Male 51.8	Female 48.1
Work or labour	30.2	15.1
Physical appearance	7.2	21.1
*Derogatory sense	1.7	11.4
Soc-sex	10.1	23.5
Behavioural patterns		
Sex	12.3	11.4
Lie	6.1	0.6
Destruction	3.9	1.2
Miscellaneous	10.6	1.8
Intelligence-lack of intelligence	3.4	3.6
Social role modified	0.5	2.4
Sexual role modified	2.8	2.4
*Modes of address	7.8	5.4
Social status	6.1	8.4

4.1. One-sex-referent Lexical Items

In the semantic zone 'Work or labour', apart from the 'Division of labour' category established by Martynuk (1989a: 94), which conveys that men's place is reduced to the field of business and women's to the field of the household, I have included other features associated to every gender and to their social role separately (cf. McElhinny 1998: 310). The most important ones shared by the lexical items with a male referent are: 1) a larger range of job possibilities, including religious, military or political hierarchy (e.g. *ex-serviceman*, *bishop*, *statesman*, *stable boy*); 2) authority and responsibility (e.g. *mogul*, *foreman*, *scoutmaster*); 3) exploitation and control of nature—animals, minerals, people (e.g. *cattleman*, *cowboy*, *coalminer*, *oilman*, *pimp*, *procurer*); 4) effort, hardness, strength, danger, and violence (e.g. *navvy*, *gladiator*, *workman*, *lumberjack*, *boxer*); 5) humorous public shows based, in general, on intellectual abilities (e.g. *comedian*, *jester*); 6) outside the private sphere, while supporting its existence (e.g. *coalman*, *bellboy*, *footman*, *mailman*); and, 7) inside the private sphere and in opposition to its socially acceptable female counterpart (e.g. *housemaid*/*houseboy*). This is illustrated in Table 1.

The female-referent words have the following other characteristics: 1) posts frequently ascribed to the private domain that do not involve a great deal of responsibility, but more specificity and simplicity of tasks (e.g. *air hostess*, *wardrobe mistress*, *salesgirl*, *cleaning woman*, *girl Friday*, *housemaid*, *daily*, *wet nurse*); 2) foreseen inconsistency and second-class category (e.g. *flighty*, *starlet*); 3) awareness of the need to improve her status (e.g. *career-girl*, *career-woman*); 4) sex-dependence (e.g. *concubine*, *courtesan*, *geisha*, *harlot*, *prostitute*, *covergirl*, *call-girl*, *protégé*, *tart*, *wench*,

whore); and, 5) public shows based on physical talent (e.g. *stripper, bunny-girl, chorus-girl, belly dancer*).

The data obtained on 'Physical appearance' stress the schematic images of males and females. Those of the former are more concerned with robustness (e.g. *he-man, paunch, beefy, brawny, burly, well built*). As for the female images, these are more prone both to be named after the colour of their hair (e.g. *blonde, brunette*), and to be described in terms of artistic objects (e.g. *pre-Raphaelite, statuesque*). They are more concerned with beauty, whether being present (e.g. *enchantress, curvaceous, beauty, coquette, buxom, petite, stunner, nubile, curvy, seductive, sex object, shapely, voluptuous*), or 'in absentia'. It is not men who are generally criticized for their aspect but women, whose culturally traditional main resource of attraction is to be pleasant-looking. That is how one can understand the existence of such an amount of offensive words referring to women's lack of beauty, youth or body-care; in other words, those that refer to the main stereotyped feminine concerns (e.g. *mannish, blowsy, catty, cow, crone, hag, horsy, trout, floozy*); and, on the other hand, of those others directed against their obsession with physical appearance and its power (e.g. *wanton, vamp*).

The number of lexical items related to the 'Soc-sex' sphere is significant. There are many words that establish the marital status of someone in a different way according to the sex of the referent. Women appear frequently depending on a man living or dead (e.g. *First Lady, war widow, dowager, unescorted*). They are described in terms of the only roles apparently differentiated in their life: one marked by virginity and the other by marriage (e.g. *maiden aunt, née, chaperone, left on the shelf, spinster, virgin, Miss, Mrs*).

Somewhat different results were obtained in the lexical items referring to men. The evidence indicates that men are either accepted or rejected for what they are themselves rather than in relation to other people, especially the other sex (e.g. *Mr*). The cases of 'junior' or 'minor' are exceptions and appropriate examples: something inherent to the man (i.e. his age) allows him to be addressed that way, not a socio-cultural convention such as marriage. Therefore, the number of lexical items of this field will be smaller, conveying a certain aura of exclusiveness and exceptionality (e.g. *family man*), and reduced to their very stereotyped role in courtship (e.g. *admirer, beau, swain, wooer, serenade, to ask for her hand*).

As for the 'Behavioural patterns' field, it is complex to describe the prototype the English language makes males assume. The lexical items referring to them can imply the idea of goodness, politeness, or generosity when they are dealing with their non-equals (e.g. *gallant, gentlemanly*). They may be typified as courageous and brave (in a word, the stereotype of manliness), if dealing with their equals and in opposition to the femininity displayed in the above-mentioned attitude (e.g. *man, virile*). Otherwise, they can look like disgusting, quarrelsome, and violent: in other words, having little to do with females and what they traditionally represent, whilst trying to appear different from other socio-cultural groups (e.g. *bully boy, bounder, braggart, bruiser, brute, bull, dog, lout, yob*). This fact produces certain lexical items that describe men rejecting some specific communities (e.g. *misogynist, sexist*). Together with this, there are some other fundamental features for the full depiction

of male behavioural patterns. These are the following: 1) his degree of potential for destruction, physical rather than moral (e.g. *butcher, cad, hatchet man, hangman, to ravish, to rape, to batter, to violate*); 2) his capacity to deceive and betray, materially rather than emotionally (e.g. *adventurer, confidence man, knave, scoundrel, rascal, smoothie*); and 3) his sexual attitudes, whether perverted and pathological (e.g. *dirty old man, man has his wicked way with a woman, lecher, beast, exhibitionist, to flash, to expose*), unstable and promiscuous (e.g. *lady-killer, Don Juan, philanderer*), publicly satisfying and paid (e.g. *ladies' man, gigolo, stud*), or the opposite scientifically stated (e.g. *impotent*).

Meanwhile, although the behavioural patterns females follow are similar, the values assigned to them are different. The gradient goes from the most extreme shy and delicate attitude to the disapproved nonsensical hysterics and talkativeness (e.g. *coy, dainty, demure, broody, flounce, flibbertigibbet*); from the often depreciated chastity to the immoral and playful contact with sex generally criticized in terms of untidiness (e.g. *virtuous, küttenish, old maiden, fallen woman, slattern*); and from the stereotyped fussiness (e.g. *coquette*) to the intolerable separation from convention (e.g. *virago*). The dissimilarities are evident. In general terms, men's sexual attitudes are not regarded as immoral but rather (if not normal) as sickly. Thus, she is the only one who can be defined as 'loose' or 'fast'; in other words, males and females are judged according to different patterns of sexual behaviour; promiscuity is disapproved of only when a woman is the subject of the action. Furthermore, by looking at two supposedly masculine attributes such as the 'potential for destruction' and 'betrayal', females and males appear more unlike. She will only tend to destroy morally by means of physical attraction (e.g. *siren, vamp*) and to lie with regard to feelings (e.g. he is a cuckold because she cuckolds him).

Within the semantic zone 'Intelligence–lack of intelligence, I included two kinds of achievement potential, one concerned with intellectual ability and another with other diverse skills. Martynuk observes that 'though learning and scholarship would seem to be asexual, the majority of terms naming a person of great knowledge ... are exclusively masculine' (1989a: 96), and the few words referring to women refer to pretensions of knowledge or only manual ability. In my corpus, examples such as *sage, wizard, Oxford man, handyman, superman, bluestocking, needlewoman, seamstress* and *midwife* show this tendency. On the other hand, the treatment of foolishness is more equal, perhaps with a subtle derogatory sexual sense if in relation with males (e.g. *wanker, prick*), and considerably less offensive, according to the pragmatic information provided by the dictionary, if in relation with females (e.g. *chit, dolly bird, flibbertigibbet*). Martynuk (1989a: 96) also talks about a meaningful difference between female and male terms implying folly, the female ones being the most numerous group. As I cannot assess this in the *Collins COBUILD*, could it mean that a 'reformed language' is gaining ground over a more stereotyped version?

In the data based on the use of 'Derogatory' terms, and with respect to men, much depends on the modification of their roles (whether sexual or social). This, in turn, implies the reproduction of feminine behavioural patterns (e.g. *tied to his wife's apron, houseboy, old woman, sissy, dandy, peacock*). Furthermore, these terms also indicate a somewhat obsessive type of behaviour (e.g. *dirty old man, lecher, woman-*

izer), a sort of 'socio-economic-materialistic-lie' attitude (e.g. *adventurer, smoothie*), and the excess in some stereotyped masculine displays (e.g. *macho, yob, prick*), or the contrary (e.g. *poof, puff*). The rest are part of a miscellaneous section which includes different ways of addressing men who are hardly respected, who are disliked, or felt sorry for (e.g. *bleeder, buster*).

With regard to women, definitions tend to show that they are not forgiven if they attempt to change their social status and embrace the characteristics linked to their new situation. That is why a woman who is too bossy and has too high an opinion of herself is referred to as 'Lady Muck'; one who is bad-tempered or mean is 'shrewish'; or another who is also fierce and bad-tempered and in a position of authority is a 'tartar'. Likewise, there is nothing similar to the lexical item 'career girl' to define a man who has a career and wishes to work and progress in his job until he retires; that is something taken for granted in the life of a man! Moreover, women are not excused either if their behaviour does embody the deviation from what is considered culturally natural (e.g. *tomboy, fishwife, hag, trout*), or if it is exaggeratedly feminine (e.g. *old woman*). Nevertheless, the feature most frequently and most severely criticized in women is their sexual attitudes, whether obscene and immoral (e.g. *wanton, broad, fast, hussy, slut, slag, strumpet, trollop*), unexpectedly demanding (e.g. *nympho*), or non-existent and, therefore, unable to play their role in reproduction (e.g. *old maid*).

As for 'Mode of address', in the case of males there are many possible roles and emotional relations with which to engage (e.g. *cock, bud, chap, chum, cobber, gwonor, lad, mate, squire, my dear boy*). In the case of females, the possibilities posited by the *Collins COBUILD* dictionary are reduced to very few terms: 'sister' is an exception addressed by women to other women; and 'lassie', 'girl', 'old/stupid bag' and 'my good woman' are the most usual terms addressed by men to women. The explanation of this is not at all clear. Perhaps, according to this dictionary, woman's social life is not linguistically marked in terms of familiarity and solidarity. In fact, it seems categorized as an experience determined only by their social status, which is sometimes considered either humorously (e.g. *missus*), or childlike (e.g. *love*), and on other occasions, again, in sexual terms (e.g. *skirt, ass, crumpet*).

Since for all the items in the data there is only one possible referent (whether masculine or feminine), it became evident how some roles, some attributes, and some characteristics are peculiarly male or female. Thus, although it is possible to discover in our world some of the concepts I will mention later, in this dictionary I found no 'gas-woman', no 'female barber', 'rapist' or 'suitor', no 'tribeswoman', no 'scout mistress', no 'workwoman', no 'chorus boy', no 'needleman', no 'air host', no 'male debutante', no 'fallen man', no 'virtuous man', and no 'gardening man'. Moreover, something that is the largest size of it that you can get can only be referred to as 'king-sized' but not as 'queen-sized'; and a woman seems not to be able to 'have [linguistically at least] her wicked way with a man', while it is socially meaningless 'to make an honest man' of a man. If language in itself works mainly as a system of reproduction of patterns, at the same time it organizes our perceptions of the world by blocking the insertion of the lexical feature [female] in some words. Thereby, for example, it prevents us from referring to a 'sage' as she, and therefore,

from seeing a woman stand out intellectually; from assigning her the label 'blood sister' and, subsequently, from accepting the existence of that type of relationship between women; or from including females within the referent of the word 'forefathers', and then from paying due attention to the role women have played throughout history. Nevertheless, according to this dictionary, 'cunts', 'arseholes' and 'buggers' are either women or men who are hated or despised, and disliked very much or thought to be stupid.

4.2. *Bias in Sample*

The data collected in order to demonstrate the existence of many dual-gendered lexical items coloured with an explicit reference bias when being exemplified are not enough to confirm that the *Collins COBUILD*'s editorial board has consciously assumed a sexist attitude. Only to look at the enormous quantity of words that not long ago, as Martynuk (1989a, 1989b) points out, had an exclusive male or female referent and currently, according to my own corpus, can be used for both (e.g. *drone, bastard, academic, cadet, chairman, choirmaster, diplomat, enlisted, deputy, executioner, governor, hairdresser*) shows that the *COBUILD* is not a chauvinist mouthpiece at all. Nevertheless, closer study of the sample does reveal another potential source of bias in stereotyping. As mentioned earlier, this dictionary is said to record actual language use but, at the same time, it seems evident that the lexicographer's perspective may have been imposed on the definition of every lexical item and on the selection of the examples used. Sinclair has no qualms about acknowledging that 'there is no doubt whatsoever that [editors] take thousands and thousands of decisions which contain an element of subjective judgement' (1987: xxi). That is why in my corpus the woman is often depicted as 'attractive', 'absent minded and careless', 'cowering in her seat', 'mothering all her lodgers', working as a 'social worker', 'going her own sweet self' or 'chortling to herself with delight'; with the 'grace and poise of a natural model'; as an 'absentee', a 'knitter' or a 'registered childminder'; and as 'educationally subnormal', 'afraid of offending anyone', 'abhorring any form of cruelty', 'cheating on her husband', or 'abandoning herself to grief'. Meanwhile, men are described as 'racist', 'conservative', 'biased, bigoted, boring and, above all, brutal', 'able-bodied' and 'self-made'; with 'big ideas and keen business acumen', 'cracking one of the crucial problems', well deserving 'the accolade of genius', believing 'in manners, decency and sportsmanship', 'administering a huge department', treating women in a 'cavalier' fashion or as a 'toughened' guy, being a 'dictator' in his own house, in action as a 'soldier', 'chasing any other person's heart', 'abandoning' someone he has some responsibility for, learning to trust 'her professionalism more', or typing something out 'in a very professional manner' (cf. Kaye 1989). See Table 2 for illustration.

4.3. *Pairs of Lexical Items with Female and Male Referents*

For many feminists, a suitable response to the question of male chauvinism had a lot to do with the possibility of using different lexical items which could have a referent

Table 2. Bias in sample (5.9%)

Semantic zones	%	
	Male 53.1%	Female 46.9%
Work or labour	23.7	21.7
Physical appearance	3.8	17.4
Behavioural patterns		
Emotion	0	17.4
Sex	3.8	4.3
Destruction	53.8	30.5
Miscellaneous	3.8	0
Intelligence–lack of intelligence	15.4	8.7
Social status	7.7	0

counterpart, so that it would be possible to say that females were no longer invisible under a theoretically generic word (cf. Nissen 1986). Indeed, this is confirmed in my data from the large numbers of pairs that appear morphologically marked with regard to their sex (e.g. *headmaster/headmistress*, *stuntman/stuntwoman*, *headboy/head-girl*, *housefather/housemother*). The fact that many of these are job-related terms may indicate the progressive modification of female and male roles, and how language reflects this situation and can also encourage it. See Table 3 for illustration.

Apart from these findings, here I also saw some interesting cases such as ‘chairman’/‘chairwoman’, ‘adulterer’/‘adulteress’, ‘author’/‘authoress’, ‘prophet’/‘prophetess’, ‘murderer’/‘murderess’, ‘heir’/‘heiress’, ‘Jew’/‘Jewess’ or ‘Negro’/‘Negress’. These make up a pair of pseudo-opposite features in which, according to their definitions, the first component of the couple is dual-gendered, and the second one, explicitly [female]. The question is very simple; although the former refers to ‘someone’, the language user or the hearer alike will necessarily tend to apply the latter, due to the suffix, exclusively to women and, as a consequence, to assume that the supposedly unmarked item is basically masculine. That is how,

Table 3. Pairs of lexical items with male and female referents (17.5%)

Semantic zones + other fields of classification (marked with *)	%	
	Male 43.1	Female 56.9
Work or labour	40.3	45.1
Soc-sex	16.1	17.1
Behavioural patterns	14.5	14.6
Intelligence–lack of intelligence	6.5	6.1
Social status	24.2	19.5
Socio-cultural origin	0	3.2
*Derogatory sense	0	3.2

in the end, we can easily understand that any ‘-man’ compounds convey more a male referent than the generic one dictionaries claim (cf. Todd-Mancillas 1981).

On the other hand, it appears that the apparent euphoria derived from the existence of feminine terms apparently equal to their masculine counterparts may sometimes be groundless (cf. Sunderland 1991). The reason is that some of these should be included in different semantic fields or zones or, at least, be described according to different lexical features. Such is the case of the examples which follow the implication that the masculine term could have (a) an extended application; (b) another, less similar, application; or (c) a different application with some ‘kinship’ connection:

- (a) ‘Lion’ refers to the animal and to the kind of behaviour it is connected with (e.g. strong, powerful, and which other people respect or fear); ‘lioness’, on the contrary, is simply the female lion, a mammal with brownish yellow fur that looks like a big cat and kills and eats other animals. A ‘countryman’ is not only the man who lives in the country rather than in the city, but also the male and female compatriot; the ‘countrywoman’ is only the feminine partner of the man preferring to live outside the town. A ‘procurer’ can sell material goods or human goods, a ‘procuress’ only the latter. A ‘conductor’ is someone who sells tickets on a bus or a train, or who stands in front of an orchestra or choir and conducts them; meanwhile, a ‘conductress’ is the woman who sells tickets on buses. A ‘manager’ is responsible for running a particular section or department of a business or other organization; for the business of a singer, pop group, actor, etc.; or for organizing and training a sports team; as for a ‘manageress’, she is only responsible for running a shop, an office, etc.
- (b) The ‘governor’ controls the public sphere, the ‘governess’ the private one. The ‘drum major’ is in charge of the drummers in a military band; the ‘drum majorette’ marches at the front of that band in a procession. A ‘boy scout’ is a member of the Scout Association; he goes camping and spends a lot of time out of doors; he also learns how to look after himself and to help other people, whereas a ‘girl scout’ belongs to the Girl Guides, an association for girls which teaches them to become disciplined, practical and self-sufficient.
- (c) A ‘crown prince’ is a king-to-be, a ‘crown princess’, the wife of that king-to-be, or herself a queen-to-be; the ‘mayor’ is anyone elected as the head of a town or city, the ‘mayoress’, his wife, a woman friend or relative, never the head.

4.4. Reformed Language

What I have referred to as ‘reformed language’ is the proposal for the efficient application of an ‘androgynous language’ which can assume, overcome and eliminate any discriminatory bias, especially in a domain such as that of job-related lexical items. To a certain extent, this attempts to provide a direct means of recognition of the socio-economic organization of a linguistic group and the instances of alienation suffered by both females and males.

As far as this point is concerned, in his Introduction to the dictionary, Sinclair

Table 4. Reformed language (34.3%)

Semantic zones + other fields of classification (marked with *)	%
Work or labour	48.57
Physical appearance	4.96
Social status	6.38
Socio-cultural origin	1.1
*Derogatory sense	1.77
Behavioural patterns	
Sex	2.5
Lie	5.3
Destruction	3.9
Miscellaneous	16.6
Intelligence–lack of intelligence	6.3
*Modes of address	3.19
Soc-sex	3.19

comments on some of the innovations they put into practice adopting the role of lexicographers interested in a reflection of modern usage. For instance, he says, the dictionary has ‘abandoned the convention whereby *he* was held to refer to both men and women ... [because] it is quite natural in speech; it is a very sensitive matter for those who have pointed out the built-in sexism of English [and] the “singularity” of the indefinite pronouns is not as marked as the singularity of a common count noun’ (1987: xx).

In this section, some words and idioms in my data appear as no longer one-sex-referent terms. Some of these cases occur despite the subconsciously traditional use of these lexical items in connection with males (e.g. *academic, chauffeur, anchor man, huntsman, hellsmen, bartender, guardsman, rifleman, highwayman, overlord, Secretary of State, Prime Minister*); and some others, despite their traditional connection with females (e.g. *air crew, agony aunt, apprentice, chatterbox, chorister, cleaner, matron, jewel, knitter, spokesperson, pearl, home help, treasure, secretary*). There appear others of this type despite the presence of the derivational morpheme ‘-man’, functioning in these cases as a suffix for agentive nouns (e.g. *ambulanceman, batman, cameraman, spaceman*). Others have no morphological or extralinguistic markedness, or seem to be part of an exercise in language planning based on no surface gender marking or on dual-gender marking (e.g. *escapologist, acrobat, astronaut, bartender, commercial traveller, fresher, sales-person, tradespeople*). The rest can emerge somewhat biologically inaccurate (an ‘Adam’s apple’ referring to males and females), or even polemically different in their application: ‘talent’ is a question of intellectual attributes in the case of people in a suspicious general sense, but only of physical qualities in the case of women. Moreover, when one speaks of ‘vital statistics’, it is necessary to distinguish between the ‘vital statistics’ of a woman (i.e. the measurements of her bust, waist and hips) and the ‘vital statistics’ of a country (i.e. the size of a population, and the number of births, deaths, and marriages, etc.). See Table 4 for illustration.

4.5. Some Inconsistencies

It is not difficult to conclude that at first glance the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* is an interesting reflection of the real use of English, stereotyped in some concerns but also in search of new patterns according to which both sexes cannot be excluded from any area of knowledge, any post, or any social role. Nevertheless, I have identified several inconsistencies: certain words that were previously defined as being dual-gendered later on appeared ascribed to one of the sexes; consequently, the stereotype should be retained. This is what happens with several lexical items with a certain derogatory sense, which, although referring to females in the past, should now refer both to women and men, had the definitions in the *COBUILD* been maintained systematically. If a 'strumpet' is a prostitute, and the extra column adds that it is a woman, there is a problem because a 'prostitute' can be 'any person who has sex with men in exchange for money' (*Collins* 1987: 1154). Although it mentions that it is 'especially a woman' (*ibid.*), it also says (when trying to define the different meanings of the verb 'to solicit') that, 'when a prostitute solicits, he or she offers to have sex with someone' (p. 1386). However, things are complicated in one of the examples used to explain the word 'prostitute' because it adds another conflictive term: 'He thought she was a prostitute ... a male prostitute' (p. 1154).

Similar results pertain with some other words for specific professions such as 'stripper'; this refers to a woman who earns money by doing striptease, while 'striptease' is defined as a form of entertainment in which someone takes off their clothes. Likewise, in relation with another stereotyped concept, in this case a masculine one (a question of social recognition), I found the same situation; if a 'peer' is a person who is a member of the nobility, a 'life peer' should be a person who is given a title such as Lady or Lord only to be used during her or his life. However, a 'life peer' is exclusively a man with that kind of honour that he cannot pass on to his eldest son when he dies.

The fact that there are some incoherent definitions only shows that it is not easy to avoid the strong links between the linguistic fact, its actual referent and that from which our subconscious has been nourished. To force a change is worthless without a tacit common agreement. Obviously, language is not an abstraction but social semiosis.

5. Conclusion

These results are not generalizable, based as they are on a selected database. I have simply attempted to describe part of a record of language in use, to study words, and 'the secrets which are hidden in language' as this 'has preserved for us the inner, living history of man's soul' (Barfield 1954: 14).

It is obvious, as Goldsmith points out, that 'the patriarchal hegemony owns the society and has established its power through an ongoing mystification of language' (1980: 181). However, it is also clear, as Buxó Rey (1988: 200) explains, that the elimination of any asymmetry is only possible if we approach objective reality and,

taking it as the appropriate basis, we reconsider all the symbols of our socio-cultural systems. If we claim, then, that language has to change but also has to be put to work to effect that change (cf. Mey 1984: 267), it is because we are looking at the problem of sexism as not exclusively concerned with changing any sexist language use but also with 'changing the prejudices ... the people's consciousness ... [and] the sources of the sexist society' (Martynuk 1989a: 100). Language can be a political tool, a discriminatory instrument, or an uncomplicated means of communication; that is what literature says; but this requires clarification: language is all that and more; language is almost everything in use.

Sinclair states in the Introduction to the *Collins COBUILD* that all the data they used are based on 'hard, measurable evidence' (1987: xv). He adds that, following the tradition of Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* begun by Murray, it uses examples 'of good practice' taken from actual texts 'whenever possible' (ibid.). He claims that it records the way English is used but, at the same time, warns the user that, as 'racist talk is very offensive, and sexist talk irritates some people', the reader had better 'be very careful to avoid those words and phrases' (p. xx). Nevertheless, as he declares, the *COBUILD*, dictionary with some policies 'representative of a number of small steps towards accepting some of the facts of everyday usage', is not a political document which 'is certainly not intended to provoke' by presenting 'senses in an uncontroversial fashion' (pp. xx-xxi).

Thus, one must question whether a dictionary must be an authoritative source of knowledge or a glossary 'with a clear ideological or "consciousness-raising" content' (Hughes 1988: 244); whether it must turn into a social instrument which 'should not appear to foster attitudes of racial prejudice' (ibid.); or whether such matters as 'public decency or sectional interests' (p. 245) must not prevent the editor from including any element of usage, reducing its function to one of mere description. In fact, the question is to what extent a dictionary can involve a linguistic change; or, simply, whether its role in that process must be only one of perpetuation of what is actually supported by textual evidence; in other words, why a dictionary is allowed to repeat values which imply a biased representation of reality, and in what sense it must limit the number of innovations that could arise from certain groups which support a modification of that bias by means of new linguistic procedures (i.e. use of 's/he', 'he and she' and 'they' instead of the generic 'he'; introduction of the suffix '-person' in compounds; and the generalization of '-man' and '-woman', where necessary).

In the case of the *COBUILD* dictionary, there appear simultaneously different trends that are both innovative and somewhat discouraging. As for the semantic zones dealt with here, to a large extent, lexical items are used to refer to females and males in a quite dissimilar way. The terms connected with physical appearance and derogatory sense are more often used referring to women than to men (7.2% versus 21.1%, and 1.7% versus 11.4%). Similarly significant is the fact that, in the section entitled 'Bias in Sample', only 5.9% of the whole corpus included cases of this prejudiced use in which men and women were taken as the appropriate referents of sentences that intended to show any peculiar characterization traditionally ascribed to them. Again, males appear described, in general, according to their work (23.1%)

and their specific stereotyped physical appearance (3.8%) and behaviour (53.8%), and women according to some other stereotyped concepts related to their intelligence or folly (8.7%), appearance (17.4%) and feelings (17.4%). No doubt, this is an issue to look at more carefully in the future. Finally, in the section 'Reformed Language', the linguistic mechanism mentioned earlier is highlighted since in 34.3% of the cases I discovered that tendency, especially in job-related or status-related terms. Nevertheless, a number of the lexical entries are somewhat ambiguous. Some apparently dual-gendered definitions are linked to others conspicuously biased, and many (despite the goals described by the editorial team) are not likely to appear ascribed either to men or to women even when the dictionary could say so, because they are not frequent yet or because they are too archaic to be remembered.

Therefore, I conclude that this dictionary seems to be an example of what is actually happening in English. Society has developed some stereotypes which language usage itself reinforces; language changes, on the other hand, convey new perspectives in society at the same time, and this dictionary reflects these tendencies sometimes. Whilst it is not committed to eliminating any religious, social, racial, or sexual discrimination, as many could have expected, it aims to introduce new lexical items which no longer allow that distinctiveness to remain. In fact, Sinclair admits that 'if [editors] print new uses, the act of printing them in a dictionary seems to make them part of the language' (1987: xxi). In short, it does not imply an attempt either to institutionalize the difference or to avoid what still does exist; it often seems to show language in use, in a peculiarly discriminatory, prescriptive, outdated use.

I am aware that these results cannot be conclusive; that the classificatory labels used can be open to modification; and that this analysis should be followed by others concerned with a profound revision of a less standardized variety, or with other editions (as far as I have been able to have a look at the *Collins* 1999 reprint, I have been pleasantly surprised by some changes), and other dictionaries or materials (for further details on gender in learners' dictionaries, see Hennessy 1993; for further details on sexist language and stereotyping in ELT materials, see Pugsley 1992). However, this research, descriptive as it is, shows that language users, whether the wo/man in the street or any lexicographer, will still have to look up a word in a dictionary remembering that prejudices and stereotypes are mainly unconsciously operative and linguistically stated.

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