

# Vietnamese Discriminatory Language

Mark Le

La Trobe University, Australia

## Prejudice and Discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination exist in many societies. These two concepts are closely related as prejudice manifests our views and attitudes towards others and discrimination is normally the behaviour or action we take as a result of our prejudice. In a society where social divisions are clearly marked, it is also a breeding ground for prejudice and discrimination. Division easily leads to discrimination. Division can be based on gender, religion, profession, education, and politics. However, it is important not to be confused between diversity and division. Diversity indicates a sense of dynamic interaction whereas division creates isolation, inequity, and in many cases, brutality.

Prejudice and discrimination can play an active part in our daily social interaction and we may not be aware of their existence and impact as they are deeply rooted in our thinking and feeling. How many of us would accept that we are sometimes prejudiced against others? The real problem is that we are not aware of their existence because prejudice and discrimination have been institutionalised and firmly entrenched in our society and culture that we tend not to question them unless we or our close ones become victims of prejudice and discrimination.

In the past decade, the contribution of critical research and feminism has generated interesting debates on social issues relating to social equity, social discourses, and empowerment. Discriminatory language has been critically examined. Leo (1996) borrowed the phrase 'violence of the tongue' from Martin Luther King to designate the destructive power of discriminatory language. English has been 'reformed' to ensure that victims of the violent tongue can be protected. This is the main reason why non-discriminatory language is introduced.

The rationale underlying the advocacy of non-discriminatory language is that prejudice and discrimination have permeated our language so deeply that the language itself is the instrument used to reinforce the institutionalisation of prejudice and discrimination. It paints a picture of 'false reality' about the nature of human beings and their worth. It distorts social reality and coherence. Some would even claim that there is a causal link between language and world-view. Such a link provides the basis for the so-called Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which stresses the powerful impact of language on human perception. One of the solutions to prejudice and discrimination is to be critical of discriminatory language and to introduce non-discriminatory language in various institutions, particularly in formal publications and official communication. A new social context requires a new consciousness, particularly linguistic consciousness. For instance, the image of an 'air-hostess' of yesteryear does not represent the current role and image of a flight attendant. The word 'China man' means more than 'a man from China' and the word 'mistress' can conjure up specific images about the relationship between men and women. The pronoun 'he' should not be used generically to include male and female.

## **Views on Vietnamese Discriminatory Language**

Our recent search on Vietnamese discriminatory language in research publications in print and on the Internet has been rather disappointing. There are a number of factors accounting for the lack of interest and action in tackling discriminatory language in Vietnamese.

First, it is assumed by some that discriminatory language does not exist in Vietnamese (contrary to the position taken in this paper). Several examples are given to support this view. Women still keep their surnames after marriage. Vietnamese has the words 'đât me' (motherland) and 'quê cha đât tổ' (fatherland) to refer to the native land, birthplace, home, and the nation. Elderly people are well respected in society as they have an important role to play. They are also certain privileges attached to seniority. This is not discrimination against young people.

Second, Vietnamese people do not take discriminatory language seriously. This could be true for a number of reasons. For some, communication is too serious to be taken seriously. The influence of Taoism can be seen in this attitude, as Taoism does not favour human intervention in life. Everything has its own reason. To intervene is to put one's way against the others. This could create havoc instead of harmony. Whichever way we attempt to construct or reconstruct language, it does not fundamentally solve human problems as the real problem is with the mind, not the language itself.

Third, Confucianism has permeated deeply the Vietnamese culture and its language. As the relationship between culture and language is so profoundly interwoven that it is impossible to challenge a language without challenging its culture. Confucianism is an important foundation on which the Vietnamese culture is based. It has a great impact in Vietnamese education, literature, social organisation, and human conduct. Social roles are normally defined on the basis of gender, age, profession, and authority. Individuals are positioned in a hierarchy of power and responsibility. In this context, it requires individual to adhere to 'đanh chính ngôn thuận' (right words and appropriate expression).

Fourth, for some people, as a developing nation, Vietnam has many urgent problems such as transportation, national self-reliance, and access to education etc. which require national sacrifice and social harmony. Issues such as sexist language and language reform are not serious enough to receive urgent action, according to this pragmatic view.

## **Sexist Language in Vietnamese**

Discriminatory language in Vietnamese can be grouped on the basis of gender, profession, region, physical appearance, and ethnicity. According to Gordon (1993), women have traditionally been seen as linguistic conservatives, while men have been viewed as linguistic outlaws and innovators. Debate over this issue has been central to the feminist-inspired sociolinguistics of the last twenty years. For some, language has come to be defined as a resource, full access to which has been historically denied to

women. More specifically, men have been granted license to violate the rules of conventional speech while women, as part of their subordination, have been required to tow the linguistic straight and narrow. Lakoff (1973) suggested that sexism in our society is often reflected in our language. Language has been defined as sexist when it stereotypes by sex-role (Pepitone-Arreola-Rockwell, 1981) and is not related to inherent biological differences.

## **Proverbs and folk sayings**

As discussed previously, Confucianism maintains a distinction between male and female in society. Each is assigned different images and roles to play in a family and a wider community. This has created a profound influence on people's attitudes towards male and female individuals. Vietnamese proverbs and popular sayings are the best source for studying discriminatory language. Proverbs reflects wisdom passed from generation to generation. They are constantly used by Vietnamese people at home, in school, and in the community as social norm to teach morality. The following discussion of some Vietnamese proverbs to show that somehow this kind of 'wisdom' tends to discriminate against women. Such proverbs are used and sometimes abused to maintain the 'harmony' of a male-dominating society.

Con khong cha nhu nha khong noc

(Children without fathers are like a house without a roof ridge)

Though there are many themes praising the dedication, sacrifice and love of a mother, there are no similar proverbs which emphasise the pivotal role of the mother. The term 'noi tuong' (domestic chief) is rather ambiguous. It could be interpreted as domestic leader who is in control of house chores.

Tai gia tong phu, xuat gia tong phu, phu tu tong tu.

(At home, serving the father, upon marriage serving the husband, after the death of the husband serving the children)

This Confucian doctrine is still in the minds of many Vietnamese people but not in their practice. It is no longer applicable to the current social context in which women are searching for independence and identity. Divorce and remarriage have become a familiar social phenomenon.

Con gai muoi hai ben nuoc, trong nho, nuoc chiu.

(Girls are like twelve ferry-landings, if the water at her ferry-landing is clean, she is lucky, if it is not, she has to accept it)

A girl's destiny depends on how lucky she is with her marriage. She has no power to change it. Arranged marriage could be a safe way for women to avoid 'unlucky ferry landing'. However, it deprives women an opportunity to make their own decision and place their destinies in the hands of men.

Than em nhu ngon lieu dao, phat pho truoc gio biet vao tay ai.

(A girl's life is like a willow tree branch, it is blown in the wind and does not know where it lands)

Women are treated like objects for adoption. Her future is decided by 'the hands of men'.

Day con tu thuo con tho,

day vo tu thuo bo vo moi ve.

(teach your children when they are two or three,

teach your wife when she, still very innocent, first joins the family)

When a woman is 'adopted' into a marriage, she is treated as a child who needs to be taught by her husband to become a 'good wife'.

Dan ong nam the bay thiep,

con gai chinh chuyen mot chong

(Man can have five wives and seven mistresses

A virtuous girl has only one husband.)

While men are admired for having many wives and mistresses, women are expected to serve her husband throughout her life.

Dan ong mieng rong thi sang

Dan ba mieng rong tan hoang cua nha.

(A man with a big mouth is very elegant

A woman with a big mouth is destructive to the family)

The discrimination against women occurs in many aspects: physical appearance, eating manner, laughing etc.

Nam thuc nhu ho, nu thuc nhu mieu.

(Man eats like a tiger, woman eats like a cat)

Dan ba chua noi da cuoi,

Chong ra cua truoc dat ngay trai vao.

(Women laugh before talking

Getting another man at the rear door as soon as the husband leaves the front door)

The proverbs and folk sayings given above state a number of things about women:

Women's fates are held in the hands of men.

Men and women are judged differently on the same behaviour and physical appearance (positive for men and negative for women).

Women need to be taught by men to be good wives.

Women's roles are to serve men.

## **Jokes**

There are many Vietnamese jokes ridiculing men who are afraid of their wives. However, there are no such jokes about women who are afraid of their husbands. This indicates the norm that wives are 'expected' to be afraid of their husbands; whereas it is ridiculous for men to be afraid of their wives. If so, he is treated as a fool.

Women are expected to play a passive role in decision making process. In many jokes and stories, they are often portrayed as weak, afraid, gentle and attractive. The following joke supports this view.

In the middle of the night, while a woman was lying in bed, she heard an intruder walking quietly into her house. She got hold of a bottle and hit the intruder on the head and he became unconscious. When the police arrived, they discovered that the intruder was indeed the most dangerous burglar in the city. A police officer congratulated her and commended her for her bravery. But she looked at him and cried: "I did not know that he was a burglar. I thought he was my unfaithful husband coming home late".

## **Addressing**

Addressing between husband and wife in Vietnamese indicates a hierarchy of power in a marriage relationship. The word 'anh' literally means older brother and 'chi' means older sister. They are used by younger siblings to address their older ones respectively. However, in marriage a wife often addresses her husband as 'anh' as a form of respect but the husband never addresses his wife as 'chi' even if she is older than he. It is interesting to observe that when a man and a woman first meet, the woman addresses the man as 'anh' and the man addresses the woman as 'chi'. When they become lovers, 'anh' is still used but 'chi' starts to disappear in their addressing and is replaced by 'em' (younger or lower in status). The language shift signals a relationship and power shift. Nowadays there is a tendency among young couples to address each other by their given names as seen in some Western cultures.

## **Presupposition**

Presupposition indicates a proposition, idea, view that underlies a surface structure. For instance, the question 'how small is your house' carries the presupposition that your house is small; whereas the question 'how big is your house' does not carry the presupposition that the house is big. Similarly, the sentence 'He is a man but he can cook very well' implies the presupposition that men are not good at cooking and this is an exception (expressed in the word 'but').

Presupposition in language can reveal interesting insights about our perception of others and attitudes towards them. Vietnamese has many expressions which carry the stereotyping of women and men in society. For examples

Dan ong ma lam chuyen

(He is a man but so talkative)

Presupposition: Men are not talkative. Only women are.

Anh ta lam nham nhu mot mu dan ba.

(He talks aimlessly like a woman)

Presupposition: only women behave like that.

Chuyen dan ba hoi dau ma lo cho met.

(It is woman story/business, don't waste your energy)

Presupposition: Woman business is trivial.

Presupposition and metaphor underlying discrimination against women can be easily found in Vietnamese texts written in different genres. Presupposition and metaphor are readily encoded in such genres and they are a rich source for studying discriminatory language in Vietnamese.

## **Discriminatory Language in English and Vietnamese**

It should be said at the beginning that discriminatory language exists in both English and Vietnamese and there are many features of discriminatory language that English and Vietnamese share. However, the striking difference is not in linguistic units but more on moral teaching embedded in stereotypical expressions about men and women. Due to the strong influence of Confucianism, Vietnamese women are stereotyped and expected by men to behave as 'good daughter', 'good wife' and 'good woman'. This kind of stereotyping is abundantly seen in proverbs, popular sayings, jokes, and fables.

There are terms in English and Vietnamese which degrade women and their roles in society. For instance,

English: Friday girl, tea-lady, mistress, girls in the office.

Vietnamese: thi met (plain woman), may mu ban thit (female butchers)

In English, a female 'marker' is added to mark the semantic feature 'female', for instance, host/hostess, director/directress; whereas this type of marking does not exist in Vietnamese. Words such as 'nu' (female) and 'nam' (male) are used in front of a noun to mark gender difference, for instance 'nam ca si' (male singer), 'nu ca si' (female singer).

In English there are generic terms which are used to refer both to man and person such as mankind, chairman, nine-man team. In Vietnamese, the word 'nguai' (person) is used in front of a noun for both sexes. While 'his' is often generically in English as in 'a teacher should look after his students', Vietnamese tends to delete the pronoun and the sentence becomes 'a teacher should look after students'.

## Conclusion

Almost every text is encoded with our attitudes and worldviews. The encoding is clearly marked in discriminatory language. It occurs at two levels: intentional and unintentional. The former refers to a deliberate attempt to treat females as inferior. This occurs in many societies in which women are discriminated against and their attempts to change their social images and to obtain some balance of power tend to be counteracted with opposition and condemnation. At the unintentional level, prejudice and discrimination have been deeply entrenched in language that we tend not to recognise them or to accept them as 'natural'. In this regard, language is no longer a tool for us to do what we want, we are at the mercy of language unless we, women and man, earnestly want to embark on a joint journey of social justice which requires a great deal of soul searching.

## References

Carroll, J. B. (Ed.). (1956). *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Gordon, Michael. (1993). Sexual slang and gender. *Women and Language*, Fall 1993 v16 n2, pp.16-22

Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society*, n1, pp.45-80.

Leo, John (1996). Who's for a little tongue violence? *U.S. News & World Report*, April 15, 1996 v120 n15 p23

Pepitone-Arreola-Rockwell, F. (1981). Delusions of gender language. *Psychotherapy Theory, Research, and Practice*, n18, pp.147-149.