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Descriptions of *Woman* and *Man* in Present-Day English

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"What are little girls made of?
Sugar and spice and all things nice. That's what little girls are made of!
What are little boys made of?
Frogs and snails and puppy dogs' tails. That's what little boys are made of!"

In their *Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing*, Miller and Swift (1981: 4) observe that "[e]very language reflects the prejudices of the society in which it evolved." Thus, when we speak about women and men, the language we use will reflect our perceptions of what it means to be female or male in the society where that language is spoken and the cultural values that are attached to these gender roles. Studies of the representation of gender in the English language have found differences both in the English language as a system, i.e. as a resource for people to draw on when speaking and writing, and in the way the English language is used. As for gender differences in the English language as a system, there are, for instance, gaps in the lexicon where no words exist to express certain concepts. For example, there is no female equivalent of *virility* (Swann 1992: 37), and no male word for an extra-marital lover (Cheshire1985: 22). Furthermore, when pairs of female and male words (cf. *mistress* and *master, governess* and *governor*) do exist, they are not always entirely parallel in meaning (Graddol & Swann 1991: 113). As for gender differences reflected in language usage, there is, for instance, a tendency for the male word in male and female word pairs (e.g. *actor* and *actress*, etc.) to be treated as the norm and the female word as the marked variant (Graddol & Swann 1991:100). There is also a difference in the frequency of male and female pronouns in written English, which suggests that women may be paid less attention than men in English writing (Kjellmer 1986).

Another aspect of language usage where some of the cultural values attached to female and male gender may be reflected is the choice of descriptive words which are used to premodify female and male words. The adjectives (and also nouns and participles) used to premodify words referring to women and men represent the characteristics which speakers and writers consider to be useful when describing, classifying, identifying, evaluating or distinguishing between women and men. The types of characteristics these premodifiers represent are thus indicative of the features which, according to the norms and values of that society, are perceived as relevant and worth drawing attention to in descriptions of women and men. If we assume, then, that the words used frequently to describe female and male words in English reflect some of the features commonly associated with women and men in an English-speaking society, differences in these features may also reflect different cultural values associated with female and male gender.

In this study the premodifiers of the most common female and male word pair in English, *man* and *woman*, have been investigated in a large corpus of present-day English, the Cobuild corpus. The Cobuild corpus is part of the Bank of English, an open-ended collection of texts to which new texts are constantly being added. It consists of 50 million words of written and spoken material in British, American and Australian English chiefly from the early 1990s. The written material is from fiction and nonfiction books, brochures, leaflets, personal letters, junk mail, weekly and monthly magazines, and two newspapers, *The Times* and *Today*. The spoken material is from informal conversations, telephone calls, lectures, radio broadcasts, and interviews. Using the collocation listings function it is possible to select the words which occur in certain positions relative to the query word and order them according to their frequency of occurrence in the corpus. This study has used this function to examine the premodifiers that occurred in the position immediately to the left of *woman* (and its plural form, *women*) and *man* (and its plural form, *men*), respectively. Two rank lists were made of the top 100 most frequent premodifiers in these positions in the corpus. Only the words which usually function as premodifiers when placed in front of a noun, i.e. adjectives, and nouns and participles, have been counted, and determiners, adverbs, verbs and proper names, etc. have been removed from the list.

Before presenting the two rank lists, some problems involved in investigating frequencies of this kind must be mentioned. First, *man* and *men* may be used in a generic sense to refer to humanity in general. To exclude these generic uses from the statistics would, however, involve examining each single occurrence of *man* and *men* in the corpus[1]. However, a very rough

[1] There are 32.209 occurrences of *man,* 19.906 occurrences of *men,* 14.147 occurrences of *woman,* and 22.995 occurrences of *women* in the corpus.

assessment of the frequency of generic *man* and *men* in the corpus showed that this generic usage is not very frequent. (Every 100th instance of *man* and *men*, was examined and it was found that only 26, i.e. 5% of these 520 examples were generic[2].)   Second, the frequency of individual lexical items in the corpus is, of course, strongly influenced by the subject matter of the texts in which they occur and this, in turn, by the sources from which the texts have been selected. Thus, although a 50 million word corpus is a very large collection of English material, the extent to which the frequencies found here can be regarded as representative of the English which is spoken and written today is still very much restricted by the selection of data. The conclusions which we draw from these frequencies must, of course, be seen in the light of these limitations, and treated only as indicative of tendencies in general.

The two lists of the 100 most frequent premodifiers of *woman/women* and *man/men* in the Cobuild Corpus are presented, in rank order of frequency, as follows. (The words which are not found in both lists have been marked in bold print. For convenience, these will be referred to in the following discussion as the 'female' and 'male' words, respectively, and the words which are the same in both lists will be referred to as the 'shared' words.)

A. *woman/women*

1. young 2. old **3. pregnant** 4. black 5. American 6. British **7. Asian** 8. Australian **9. beautiful** 10. white 11. working 12. married **13. pretty** 14. elderly 15. poor 16. little 17. single 18. class 19. aged **20. career 21. western 22. attractive 23. Muslim** 24. local 25. good 26. professional 27. new 28. real 29. strong 30. modern 31. dead **32. African 33. menopausal** 34. top **35. aboriginal 36. Indian 37. French 38. English** 39. naked 40. ordinary 41. haired 42. different **43. successful** 44. big 45. intelligent 46. looking 47. fat **48. independent 49. battered** 50. average 51. tall 52. powerful **53. healthy 54. educated 55. mature 56. Christian 57. German 58. dressed** 59. nice **60. feminine 61. remarkable 62. Chinese 63. adult 64. village** 65. rich 66. grown **67. divorced 68. sexy 69. unmarried 70. European 71. contemporary 72. Catholic 73. infertile** 74. wild **75. rural 76. Jewish** 77. famous **78. active 79. gorgeous 80. Japanese 81. Russian 82. blonde 83. perfect 84. conservative 85. Italian 86. peasant 87. stupid 88. silly** 89. wise **90. ambitious** 91. wealthy **92. cleaning** 93. wrong **94. normal 95. ideal 96. religious 97. glamorous 98. confident 99. medieval 100. disabled**

B. *man/ men*

1. young 2. old **3. gay** 4. white 5. black 6. rich 7. good 8. big 9. dead 10.

[2] It has been claimed that generic *man* tends to engender male images only (Moulton 1981). This has been shown by the fact that people sometimes let slip the fact that they actually have males in mind (Schneider & Hacker 1973).

married **11. best 12. great** 13. new **14. blind** 15. working 16. little 17. poor 18. wise 19. aged **20. hard 21. security** 22. American **23. right 24. armed** 25. nice 26. grown **27. family** 28. fat 29. strong **30. common 31. enlisted** 32. ordinary **33. right-hand 34. action** 35. real 36. top 37. class **38. military** 39. British 40. tall 41. local 42. modern 43. elderly **44. leading 45. holy** 46. looking 47. wild **48. innocent** 49. single **50. wanted 51. free** 52. wealthy 53. average **54. honest** 55. powerful **56. brave 57. fast 58. hit 59. midfield** 60. different **61. front 62. sick 63. business 64. middle 65. happy 66. dangerous** 67. haired **68. Renaissance 69. key 70. strange 71. con 72. mystery 73. handsome 74. medicine** 75. professional **76. large 77. marketing** 78. wrong **79. decent 80. bearded 81. fighting 82. funny 83. odd 84. fine** 85. naked **86. bisexual 87. masked 88. violent** 89. Australian **90. evil** 91. famous **92. small 93. lucky** 94. intelligent **95. forgotten 96. main 97. marked 98. bad 99. tax 100. injured**

A comparison of the two lists shows that almost half of the words (43 altogether) are shared. There appear thus to be many similarities in the way women and men are frequently described in the corpus. The shared words denote features such as age: *young, old,* (which top the rank list of premodifiers of both *woman* and *man*) *aged, elderly* and *grown,* class: *-class, rich, poor, wealthy,* marital state: *married, single,* appearance: *fat, tall, big,* occupation: *working, professional,* some aspects of race, origin and nationality: *white, black, local, British,* and evaluation in general: *good, nice, ordinary, different, strong,* and *intelligent.*

If we turn to the female and male words and compare the chief types of features they represent, we find first, as might be expected, that they differ in that there are female words to do with specifically female concerns, such as female gender in general: *feminine,* female physiological matters: *menopausal,* and reproduction: *infertile* and *pregnant* (which is the 3rd most frequent premodifier of *woman/women* in the corpus). Among the male words, on the other hand, we find two words concerned with sexual activity: *gay* and *bisexual. Gay* is one of the most frequent premodifiers of *man/men* in the corpus (the 3rd most frequent). The majority (71%) of the occurrences of *gay* are in the British magazines subcorpus (which includes gay publications). This seems to indicate that a great deal of attention was being paid to gay issues in the British popular press in the early 1990s.

Both the female and male words include words which describe appearance. These differ, however, in that most of the female words focus chiefly on the attractiveness of a woman's appearance: *beautiful, pretty, attractive, sexy, gorgeous, blonde,* and *glamorous,* and reflect the tendency in society to assess women in terms of their physical attractiveness. The male words, on the other hand, include only one such word: *handsome.* Instead, there are male words describing size: *large* and *small* and, in further contrast to the female image of the "fairer sex", a large number of words which are as-

sociated with aggression. Several of these are concerned with danger and violence: *dangerous, violent, fighting, injured,* with military matters: *enlisted, military,* with criminal activity and the upkeep of law and order: *armed, wanted, masked, con, hit, marked, security,* with sport: *midfield,* and with courage, toughness and action in general: *brave, free, hard, action, fast.* There is only one female word concerned with violence. This is *battered,* which represents a victim of violence. The male words also contain a number of words denoting moral evaluation: *innocent, honest, decent, evil, bad.* This suggests that men tend to be evaluated more frequently on a moral plane than women, and is probably a consequence of the fact that men are generally more frequently described as being involved in criminal and violence-related activities than women.

When it comes to describing women and men in terms of their occupational status, the male words contain more words for various types of occupations: *business, marketing, front, middle, tax, holy, medicine,* than the female words. This reflects both the fact that traditionally it has been more usual for men to be employed in occupations outside the home than women and the fact that *man* is the unmarked choice when referring to people of various professions. One exception, where the unmarked choice is *woman* not *man,* is the low status profession, *cleaning.* This is the only female word for an occupation.

A large proportion of both the female and male words denote evaluation in general. The male words include *great, fine, common, strange, funny, odd, mystery, Renaissance,* and also several words which indicate the prominent rank of individuals: *best, main, leading, key, right-hand.* The female words include *remarkable, perfect, normal* and *ideal.* It is interesting to note that the female words also include some words to do with professional success: *career, ambitious,* and some words to do with self-confidence: *confident, independent,* and competence: *successful,* or the lack of it: *stupid, silly.* The high frequency of these words in the corpus could be explained by the fact that women are becoming increasingly more active in a professional capacity outside the home. As this is a relatively recent development in modern society and therefore generally very much present in people's awareness, women are frequently assessed as to where they stand in relation to this social change, i.e. in terms of their success at being independent and as to whether they can be assigned to the category of career women, ambitious women, etc. or not. The word *career* (which is the 20th most frequent premodifier of *woman/women* in the corpus), does not, in contrast, occur in front of *man/men* at all in the corpus and is not normally associated in this way with *man/men* (*?He's a career man*). This is because it is generally taken for granted that men have careers and therefore not an important feature in their description. The opposite is found in the usage of the word *family.* This is the 27th most frequent premodifier of *man/men* in the corpus (*He's a family man*), but does not occur at all in front of *woman/*

women in the corpus, and is not normally associated with women at all (*?She's a family woman*). Again, this is chiefly because it is generally taken for granted that women are interested in their families. This converse relation in the usage of *career* and *family* to premodify *woman/women* and *man/men* in the corpus reflects contrasting traditional stereotype roles of women and men. It also illustrates the point made by Kjellmer (1990:143) that we are most interested in discussing features which are marked, i.e. which are irregular and deviant from the norm. In this case, then, two features which tend to be newsworthy when describing women and men in English today are whether the former have a career and the latter are interested in family life.

Finally, perhaps the most striking difference between the female and male words is the large proportion of female words for certain categories of people, such as ethnic groups: *aboriginal, African, Indian, French, English, German, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, Italian, Asian, European, western, rural, village, peasant,* religious denominations: *Muslim, Christian, Catholic, Jewish, religious* and other classifying properties such as *contemporary, medieval* and *conservative.* In contrast, there are no premodifiers at all (apart from some shared words) which describe men in terms of ethnic or religious groups. One reason for this is that many of these premodifiers have related nouns, e.g. *an Italian, a peasant,* whose unmarked gender is male and therefore combinations such as *an Italian man, a peasant man,* are usually unnecessary. In contrast, female gender is marked and therefore usually referred to by combinations of premodifier and *woman,* e.g. *an Italian woman, a peasant woman.* A further reason for the high frequency of these premodifiers could be that women are described more frequently than men in categorial terms as members of various groups in society. There are also more female words for marital status: *divorced, unmarried,* which suggests that women are described more frequently than men in terms of their relationship to members of the opposite sex.

To conclude, then, this study of the 100 most frequent premodifiers of *woman/women* and *man/men* in the Cobuild corpus has presented a rather depressing confirmation of the prejudices expressed in the old children's rhyme quoted above. Women and men tend to be described to a great extent in terms of traditional female and male stereotypes where women are frequently associated with attractive appearance and men with aggressive behaviour. Furthermore, judging by the very high frequency of categorial premodifiers of *woman/women* and the few premodifiers representing occupations, there is still a tendency for women to be less visible as individuals in society than men. Nevertheless, changing gender roles are evident, firstly in that both sexes are frequently described as *working* and *professional* and as *strong, top* and *powerful,* etc., and secondly in that women are frequently described as *confident, ambitious* and *successful, career* women.

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M Current Research

Two new doctoral dissertations in English linguistics from Lund University:

Carita Paradis. 1997. *Degree modifiers of adjectives in spoken British English,* Lund Studies in English 92.

The thesis investigates a set of degree modifiers of adjectives common in spoken British English. It describes the use of these modifiers in authentic speech in terms of frequency, collocability and intonation. The study also explores the semantic constraints that govern the relationship between degree modifiers and adjectives and maintains that the choice of degree modifier is predictable and depends on the type of the gradability of the adjective that is modified. Further, it explores the constraints that govern the intonation of degree modifiers.

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Jean Hudson. 1998. *Perspectives on Fixedness,* Lund studies in English 94.

The thesis is about the process whereby orthographic words group together and congeal into fixed expressions. The discussion focuses on realization, conceptualization and discourse. That is to say, at the level of realization it explores methods of ascertaining degrees of fixedness in expressions. At the level of conceptualization it explores the relationship between salience of component parts and fixedness of the phrase. At the level of discourse, reinterpretation and reanalysis are seen as motivating processes in the evolution of expressions.

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MONICA MALM

Union Street:
Thoughts on Mothering

Pat Barker, Booker Prize winner in 1995, has written several novels about urban life in northern England. She was born in 1943 and returned north after some time in London where she studied at the London School of Economics. After having taught history and politics she began her literary career in 1982, portraying women of the working-class. Her first novel, *Union Street,* consists of seven independent stories from the same neighbourhood, each using a different woman as focalizer. A short quote from this novel will be the starting point of the following essay discussion.

A couple of unidentified mothers chat in the local hospital after having given birth to their most recent children:

> 'My husband's first wife only had a girl. You watch, when she finds out about [the new son] she'll be dead jealous.'
> 'Me Mam said if it was a girl I hadn't to bring it home. "Don't bring it round here if it's got a crack in it," she says.' (134-5)

The two women in the maternity ward casually convey their ambiguous feelings about how society values the female sex; in just a few lines the above passage displays the internal struggle that society (in this case a working-class community of northern England) forces upon women. The statement by the first mother tells us that what is of greatest importance to her is giving birth to a son. By her son's birth she can raise her own status, not simply as mother but as the *mother of a man.* Borrowing some existentialist terminology from Simone de Beauvoir, the son can, in simply being born, transcend his mother's existence; the mothers of sons are closer to having a transcendent existence than the mother's who only carry on the female immanence by having daughters. Society makes women competitors in a game where conceiving and bearing masculinity is what really matters. The children's common father seems to have nothing to do with it; conceiving boys is made an entirely female feat.

When the initial speaker says that her husband's former wife "only had a girl" she implies that this was a second-rate baby; the word "only" in this context signifies that the child is incomplete. In a wider perspective it also shows lack of respect for women in general and an absence of pride in being one. As Ullaliina Lehtinen illustrates in her explication of a text by Victoria Benedictsson: "All is shame with a woman, as she is nothing by