**Sexism in Arabic Language**

Sexism is the prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. Arabic is a grammatically gendered language, so some may interpret its grammar as being ‘sexist’. Understanding and addressing sexism in the Arabic language is crucial for promoting gender equality and understanding social structures in Arab societies. This sexism is evident in linguistic structures such as the use of feminine (marked) forms and pluralization patterns.

Feminine Marked Forms

Unmarked terms are unchanged, so they are often referred to as the 'default' or generic term. Marked terms are derived from unmarked terms by affixation, the addition of prefixes and suffixes to words. In Arabic, the feminine forms are often marked or derived from masculine unmarked forms. Common suffixes used to derive them include the ‘ta marbouta’(ة), such as converting “male student” (طالب) to “female student” (طالبة). Another inflectional suffix is the ‘Alif at-tanith al-maqsurah’(ى). It is commonly used for adjectives to indicate the gender of their noun; for example, converting “thirsty boy” (ولد عطشان) to “thirsty girl” (بنت عطشى). This marking pattern signifies a linguistic hierarchy where the masculine is considered the default form. It also reinforces the perception of femininity as secondary or derivative, contributing to the marginalization of women.

Pluralization Patterns

Another form of sexism in Arabic is the language’s pluralization patterns. To convert singular masculine nouns to plural, the suffix ‘-oon’ (-ون) or ‘-een’ (-ين) is added. For example, the plural of “male teacher” ( معلم) is “male teachers” (معلمون). To pluralize feminine nouns, the suffix ‘-at’ (ات-) is added. Therefore, the plural of “female teacher” (معلمة ) is “female teachers” (معلمات). Other rules exist for irregular pluralization, but these rules are irrelevant to the argument.

The sexism is highlighted when joining male and female nouns in the Arabic language. The rule is that the male plural form takes precedence. For example, 10 male teachers are termed (10 معلمين), while 10 female teachers are termed (10 معلمات). However, 10 male teachers and 10 female teachers can be joined collectively and termed 20 male teachers in Arabic (20 معلمين). Even if the number of female nouns is significantly higher than the number of male nouns, the male plural dominates. For example, 1 million female teachers and 1 male teacher are still termed (معلمين), following the male plural. Some languages, such as the English Language, avoid this sexism by refraining from combining male and female nouns into a singular term. For example, 10 princes and 10 princesses cannot be addressed as 20 princes. However, one could argue that in Arabic, using the male plural is a mere convention rather than an intentional act of sexism. Arabic lacks a distinct plural form for mixed-gender groups, leading to the default use of the masculine plural, which could have just as easily been the female plural.

Evolution of Arabic Language

The Arabic language serves as a mirror reflecting the values, beliefs, and social structures of a society. Given its ancient origins and development during periods when patriarchal norms predominated, it is unsurprising that Arabic contains examples of sexist grammar and syntax. These linguistic features reflect historical attitudes towards gender and highlight the influence of patriarchal systems on language formation. However, it's important to clarify that these features do not inherently brand the language as sexist; instead, they reflect the sexist societal norms during the language's inception.

In a language, words are generally created out of necessity for their usage. For that reason, when Arabic was created, words were only created for roles that befit a male or female. Roles of power or physical labor were typically associated with male-oriented terms, while caregiving roles were associated with female-oriented terms.

During ancient times, the term “housewife” (ربة بيت) was prevalent with no male counterpart. There was no Arabic equivalent for househusband since the women were the ones expected to provide care; the role of a househusband did not exist. Similarly, professions like "carpenter" (نجار) lacked female equivalents, reflecting the male dominance in physically demanding occupations. Additionally, positions of authority, such as "president" (رئيس) and "deputy" (نائب), were exclusively described using masculine nouns, as women were seldom granted such authoritative roles in ancient societies.

Modern Arab societies are shifting away from patriarchal systems and sexist gender stereotypes. This societal evolution is mirrored in the Arabic language, which is expanding its vocabulary to reflect gender inclusivity. Previously male-dominated fields now feature terms representing female roles within them. For instance, the term "engineer" (مهندس) now has a female counterpart, “female engineer” (مهندسة). Other words which lack female equivalents are being repurposed to encompass both genders, such as “male judge” (قاضي) to refer to both male and female judges. This serves to mitigate instances of sexism within the language.

Desexing the Arabic Language

A solution to eliminating sexism in the Arabic language is to desex the Arabic language. However, The notion of desexing Arabic risks erasing our history and cultural milestones. Stripping away gender-specific linguistic features risks losing valuable insights into the societal norms and gender dynamics that have shaped Arab culture over centuries. In fact, the genderism in the Arabic language is vital to representing the only two genders, male and female, which have been prevalent in Arab societies. Instead of desexing Arabic, efforts should focus on promoting inclusive language reforms that address instances of sexism while preserving the language's cultural heritage and reflecting evolving societal attitudes towards gender equality.