

## The Cultural Side of Sexism in Persian

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**Abstract.** From a sociolinguistic point of view, in the present article, after considering “sexism” in Persian with providing some related data from the language, the cultural reasons for sexism in Persian were explored based on Whorfian hypothesis that the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one in a way that the culture of the people finds reflection in the language they employ. To do so, the cultural variables causing sexism in Persian were investigated through questionnaire including multiple choice questions related to the linguistic data which were gathered through recording Persian speakers’ conversations in the real world. This article was ended by a conclusion that sexism in Persian is mostly cultural.

**Keywords:** Persian, sexism, Whorfian hypothesis, culture

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Sexism in Persian

The term "sexism" was coined in the 1960s, probably by analogy with the term racism, to describe "discrimination within a social system on the basis of sexual membership". Sexism makes sense within a historically hierarchical relationship between men and women, when one is the norm, and the other marked as "other" or "inferior", and in relation to a wide range social practices where women (and in some cases men) are exploited, manipulated, or constrained because of their sex (Litosseliti, 2006: 13). Therefore, sexist languages represent men and women unequally, as if members of one sex were somehow less completely human, less complex, and had fewer rights than members of the other sex (Thomas & Waring, 1999: 65). For example, those who claim that English is sexist refer to following cases:

\* "He" is used as the unmarked third-person singular pronoun.

\* "Man" and "mankind" are used to refer to human race.

\* The use of title is asymmetrical:

women            Miss/Mrs./Ms.

men                Mr.

Persian is also sexist in the sense that some ways of using this language are sexist, such as following examples:

\* In the lexicon of Persian /mard/ "man"/baradar/ "brother", /pesar/ "son", and /baba/ "father" are used as general terms to refer to human race; in a way that there are no corresponding female vocabularies in the lexicon of Persian.

\* Certain words with unpleasant meaning have no male equivalents, e.g., /bive/ "divorcee", /pi:rdoXtar/ "old maid", and /zanzalil/ "hen pecked", etc.

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\* Certain adjectives with less favorable meanings are used as being feminine, e.g., /Xale zanaki/ and /Xale Xanbadzi/, "womanlike", /zanvar/ "womanish", etc.

\* Certain male adjectives, with positive meaning and with no female equivalents are used as general terms to refer to both sexes, such as:

/dāvanmard / and /mard / "generous", etc.

\* Women holding certain positions are describes in terms of men, e.g.,

/polise zan/ "police woman", /ranande zan/ "lady driver", /futbaliste zan / "lady footballer", etc.

\* The use of title is asymmetrical:

women	/duzi-/ /Xanom/	"Miss"- "Mrs."
men	/aGa/	"Mr."

It means that the use of title for women contains marital information but this isn't so for men.

\* There are pairs of terms in the morphological system of Persian where the unmarked form is male, and the marked form is female:

/ʃahid/	/ʃahide/	"martyr"
/ʔahed/	/ʔahede/	"witness"
/ʔaʔer/	/ʔaʔere/	"poet"
/maʔuG/	/maʔuGe/	"beloved"
/marhum/	/marhume/	"dead"

\* Some metaphorical statements are also sexist in Persian:

/az zan kamtar am/ "I'm lower than a woman."  
from woman lower be-1<sup>st</sup>-single

This expression is used by men to mention that they are not weak and low like women.

/be darde ammat miXore/ "It is useless. / It has no value."  
to pain your aunt eat- 3<sup>rd</sup>- single

This expression is used by both men and women in order to refer to a useless thing.

/boro mesle zan beʔin tu Xune/ "You are useless like a woman!"  
go like woman sit in home

When a man wants to name another man weak and useless he uses this expression unrespectfully.

As these examples show, the discrimination between two sexes within the social system of Iran is reflected in the use of the language.

## 1.2 The Whorfian hypothesis

It is generally agreed that the claim that the structure of a language influences how its speakers view the universe is associated with the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Lee Whorf. The claim is referred to as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis or the Whorfian hypothesis which is used in this article.

Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they were inextricably related so that you could not understand or appreciate the one without a knowledge of the other (Wardhaugh, 1986:212). The following quotation reveals his views on the matter (Sapir, 1929:207):

"The fact of the matter is that the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group ... We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation."

Whorf believed that the relationship between language and culture is a deterministic one. Based on this claim, the culture of a people would be reflected in the language they utilize due to this fact that they value certain things and do them in a certain way; therefore they come to use their language in ways that reflects what they value and what they do. In this view, cultural requirements certainly influence how a language is used and perhaps determine why specific bits and pieces are the way they are (Wardhaugh, 1986:212).

This article aims at expounding this fact that based on Whorfian hypothesis sexism in Persian is cultural.

## 2. Research hypothesis

In the present paper, an attempt is made to argue that sexism in Persian is cultural.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1 Data gathering

The linguistic data referring to this fact that Persian is a sexist language are gathered through recording the real conversations of native Persian speakers occurred in different linguistic as well as physical contexts.

### 3.2 Participants and questionnaire

To illustrate the cultural reasons for sexism in Persian 500 participants answered a questionnaire including 50 multiple choice questions about different aspects of sexism in Persian. In order to test different social variables, these participants were men in different range of age. They were both educated and non-educated with variant jobs and social positions in the society.

## 4. The cultural reasons for Persian being a sexist language

As it was explained before the participants answered 50 multiple choice questions which asked them about the reason that they use the words, expressions, and sentences in a sexist way. The participants had to choose from four answers one of which was a cultural reason.

The investigation of 3 typical questions is as below (the answer which is a cultural reason is **bold**):

a) Which title is the best one to refer to an “aged unmarried girl”?

- a. unmarried
- b. old maid
- c. girl
- d. woman

This diagram shows the percent of answers to the question:

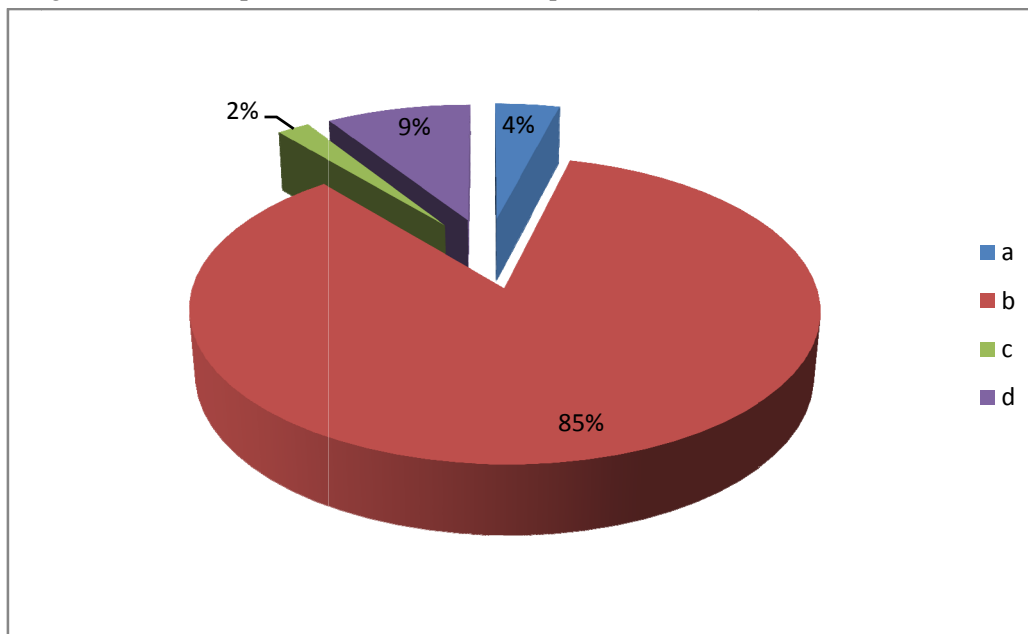


Figure 1: the percent of answers to question 1

More than 80% of men chose (b) as the correct answer. It is believed culturally by the Iranian people that being unmarried is dramatically bad for a girl in all dimensions. Such girls would not have a normal social

position because of this belief. Therefore, the concept being used to refer to them is socially negative because of the speakers' cultural thought.

The second question was:

b) Who do you call as a "womanlike" person?

- a. a woman
- b. a bad woman
- c. anyone who is talkative, weak, sensitive and ... like a woman
- d. a special group of women

The percent of answers to this question is showed in this diagram:

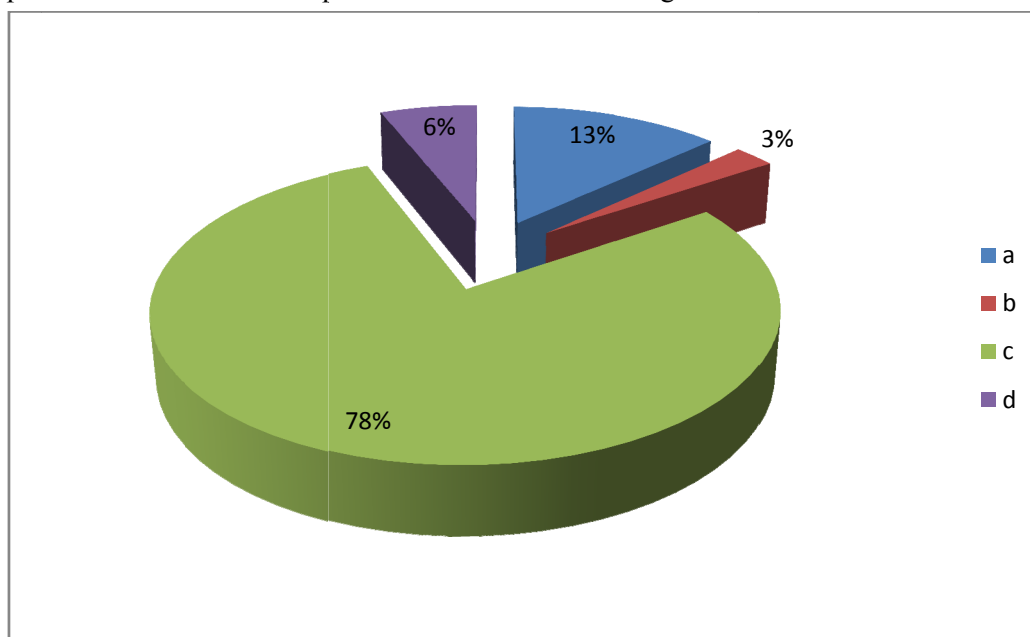


Figure 2: the percent of answers to question 2

Iranian people - even women - believe that to behave like a woman is a negative manner in the society; as a consequence 78% of men chose (c).

The third question was:

b) Which sex is manifested in your mind instead of "person" in the sentence: "I saw a zealous person"?

- a. a man
- b. a woman
- c. a man or a woman
- d. I don't know

The percent of answers to the third question is showed in this diagram:

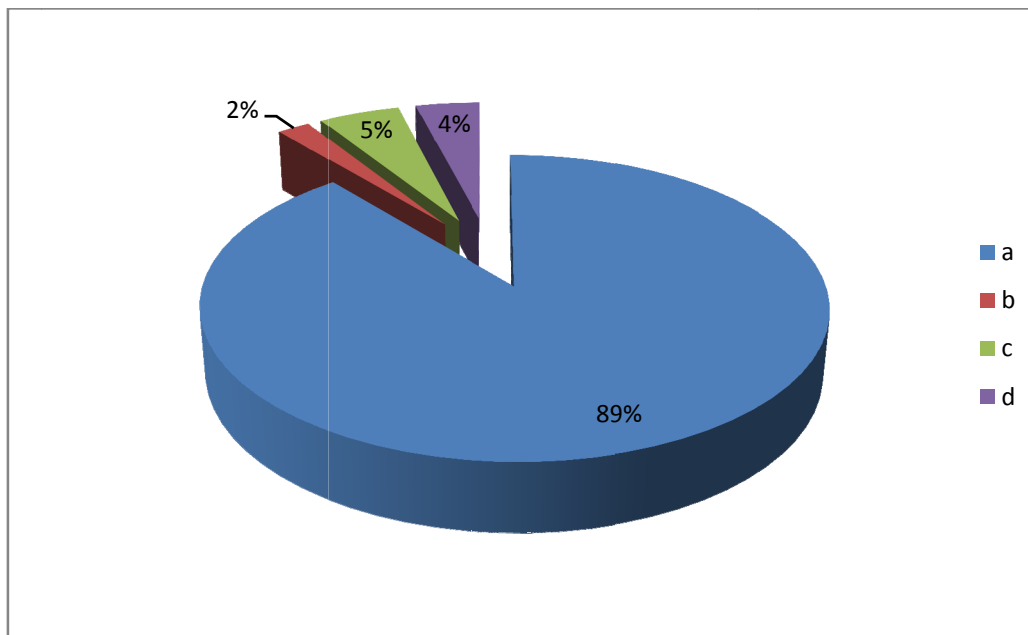


Figure 3: the percent of answers to question 3

It is a general belief in Iran that "being zealous" - as a positive adjective - is only men's characteristics, in other words "being zealous" is a property which is related only to men. As a result 89% of men chose (a) as the correct answer.

The answers to the rest of the questions were also in this way; it means that more than 70% of men's answers were cultural. On the other hand, different social variables such as age, education, job, and social position didn't have influence on the men's answer.

The results of the investigation of the participants' answers show that the reason why Persian is a sexist language is mostly cultural; and this fact means that the research hypothesis is confirmed. Moreover because, words and expressions do not have equal values in terms of the social status of their referents, men and women are treated very differently in the cultural systems that languages perpetuate. Thus, sexism in Persian is a cultural matter which is conveyed through utilizing language as Kravchenko (2002) and Luchjenbrers (2003) have mentioned that "sexism" is the result of the relationship between language and culture. On the other hand, the Whorfian hypothesis that the culture of the people finds reflection in the language they employ is true for sexism in Persian because culture, it may be said, has a powerful influence on sexism in Persian.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings revealed that the sexist beliefs and thoughts of Persian speakers about men and women are reflected in their language as a consequence, culture plays a key role in sexism in Persian; therefore the Whorfian hypothesis that the culture of the people would be reflected in the language they employ is true for sexism in Persian.

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