

Lexicographical Evolution: Tracing the Semantic Development of Gender-related Terminology in English Dictionaries

გენდერული ტერმინოლოგიის სემანტიკური განვითარება ინგლისურ ლექსიკონებში

ნინო რევაშაშვილი

თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტი

Nino Revazashvili

Tbilisi State University

ანოტაცია

სტატია იკვლევს ხუთი მნიშვნელოვანი გენდერული ტერმინის — თანასწორობა, დისკრიმინაცია, პატრიარქატი, ფემინიზმი და მიზოგინია — სემანტიკურ ევოლუციას. კვლევა ეფუძნება ამ ტერმინების განმარტებებს ისტორიულ ლექსიკონებში (Samuel Johnson's 1755 Dictionary of the English Language, Noah Webster's 1828 An American Dictionary of the English Language), the comprehensive Oxford English Dictionary (OED) და თანამედროვე სპეციალიზებულ რესურსს (the UN Women Training Centre's Glossary of Gender Equality), ეს კვლევა მიყვება სემანტიკური კომპონენტების ცვლილებას და ამ ტერმინების გენდერულ ჩარჩოში ყოფნა ან არყოფნას. შედეგები აჩვენებს აშკარა ტრანექტორიას: ადრეული ლექსიკოგრაფიული განმარტებები ამ ტერმინებს ხშირად ნეიტრალურად და არაგენდერული კუთხით წარმოაჩენდნენ, რაც იმდროინდელ საზოგადოებრივ ნორმებს ასახავდა, როცა გენდერული უთანასწორობა დიდწილად შეესწავლელი იყო. მეორეს მხრივ, თანამედროვე განმარტებები — განსაკუთრებით სპეციალიზებულ ლექსიკონებში, ამ ტერმინებს ღიად აყენებენ გენდერულ ჩარჩოებში და ადამიანის უფლებების დისკურსში, ხოლო OED ხშირად ასახავს შუალედურ ევოლუციურ ეტაპებს. ეს დიაქრონული ანალიზი ასკვნის, რომ შერჩეული გენდერული ტერმინები დროთა განმავლობაში უფრო სპეციფიკური და გენდერულად გაცნობიერებული მნიშვნელობებით დამკვიდრდნენ, რაც ასახავს საზოგადოების ცვალებად დამოკიდებულებებსა და გენდერული თანასწორობის დისკურსის განვითარებას.

საკვანძო სიტყვები: გენდერის ტერმინოლოგია, სემანტიკური ევოლუცია, განმარტებითი ლექსიკონი

Keywords: gender terminology, semantic evolution, explanatory dictionary

1. Introduction: Scope, Rationale and Methodological Framework

This research article explores the semantic evolution of five gender-related terms—equality, discrimination, patriarchy, feminism, and misogyny - by analyzing their definitions in five dictionaries spanning diverse periods. The dictionaries examined include Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), Noah Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), and the *UN Women Training Centre's Glossary of Gender Equality*. The selected terms were chosen based on their prominence in gender studies literature and frequency in gender equality discourse, as well as in feminist theory and human rights discourse. The chosen dictionaries were selected to represent significant historical stages in English lexicography (Johnson 1755, Webster 1828, OED ongoing), a modern specialized gender glossary (UN Women).

Methodologically, definitions from each dictionary were compared for each term. The analysis focused on changes in semantic components and the presence or absence of gendered framing. Discrimination based on gender has been a prevalent issue throughout history, with women facing barriers to education, employment, and political participation. Despite progress towards gender equality, it persists in many forms today. This paper provides a detailed review of gender-related terms from the past until now and demonstrates how gender-related terms have acquired more specific meanings over time.

Gender-related terms have been defined in both early and modern dictionaries, among dictionaries exploring gender-related terms. Nowadays, gender-related terms have become the subject of exploration in glossaries. One is the *UN Women Training Centre's Glossary*, an online tool that provides concepts and definitions from a gender perspective.

2. The Shifting Definitions of Key Gender Terms

2.1. Equality: From General Likeness to a Gendered Human Right

Our discussion opens with an exploration of the word *equality*. As stated by Samuel Johnson's dictionary, the word *equality* (1755) is defined as: 1. Likeness of any quantities compared, 2. The same degree of dignity, 3. Evenness, uniformity, constant tenour, equability. From a closer examination, we will find out that there is no even implication about the gender point of view. In Samuel Johnson's dictionary, the word equality doesn't convey the meaning it conveys today. Similarly, in Noah Webster's 1828 dictionary, it is "*An agreement of things in dimensions, quantity, or quality; likeness; similarity in regard to two things compared. We speak of the equality of two or more tracts of land, of two bodies in length, breadth, or thickness, of virtues or vices.*" 1. The same degree of dignity or claims as the equality of men in the scale of being, the equality of nobles of the same rank, and the equality of rights. 2.

Evenness; uniformity; sameness in state or continued course; as an equality of temper or constitution. 3. Evenness; plainness; uniformity; as an equality of surface.

It is interesting to note that, unlike Johnson, he mentions equality of rights but does not specify the issue of gender (equality of rights).

According to the OED, the first known use of the word **equality** was in the 14th century. Still, from the point of gender, the term **sexual equality** (1797) was added to the dictionary: *“The condition or fact of having the same rights and advantages as others, regardless of gender.”* (OED). The UN Glossary of Gender Equality (2011-2025) illustrates the word **equality** concerning gender and provides the collocation - **gender equality**. According to the glossary, **Gender equality** (Equality between women and men): *“refers to the equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities of women and men, and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same, but that women’s and men’s rights, responsibilities, and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs, and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups of women and men. Gender equality is not a women’s issue but should concern and fully engage men as well as women. Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people-centered development.”* Early definitions of these terms demonstrated that the word **equality** was disconnected from the human rights discourse, and the absence of a gender frame was not accidental. These dictionaries reflected social norms, where gender inequality was an unquestionable norm. Even though the 18th century was influenced by early feminist thoughts and growing emphasis on individual rights, the conceptualization of gender equality was still excluded from society and vocabulary, which is confirmed by the above-mentioned definitions of the word **equality**.

2.2. Patriarchy: From Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction to a System of Male Dominance

The word **patriarchy** has also changed in meaning. This term previously referred to religion and church, *“Christian Church. A patriarchal province”* (1561, OED). However, the term has become very prevalent; in today’s world, this term refers to *“The predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms favoring men”* (OED). Based on Johnson’s dictionary (1773), it is: *“Jurisdiction of a patriarch; patriarchate”*. Noah Webster’s definition of the term is identical to Johnson’s: *“The jurisdiction of a patriarch; a patriarchate”*. However, the term originally referred to religion and church or societal structure in which the father or male held authority over the family or tribe. *“A form of social organization in which the father or oldest male is the head of the family”* OED (a1626).

Today, the term has begun to be used more broadly to describe the system in which men hold power and superiority in every structure, including family, politics, and the economy. The term **patriarchy**, in a broader sense, appeared in the 20th century: *“The predominance of men in positions of power and influence in society, with cultural values and norms favoring men”*

(OED, 1970). *The UN Women Training Centre's Glossary (2011-2025)* provides the following definition: “*This term refers to a traditional form of organizing society, which often lies at the root of gender inequality. According to this kind of social system, men, or what is considered masculine, are accorded more importance than women, or what is considered feminine. Traditionally, societies have been organized in such a way that property, residence, and descent, as well as decision-making regarding most areas of life, have been the domain of men. This is often based on appeals to biological reasoning (women are more naturally suited to be caregivers, for example) and continues to underlie many kinds of gender discrimination.*”

2.3. Discrimination: From Neutral Distinction to Gender-Based Injustice

Shifting focus to the term **discrimination**, Johnson (1773) provides the word **discrimination**: 1. The state of being distinguished from other persons or things; 2. The act of distinguishing one from another; distinction; difference put. 3. The marks of distinction. OED (1669) defined the word **sexual discrimination** (Chiefly Biology): a. differentiation or distinction between the sexes; b. Discrimination against a person, typically a woman, on the grounds of sex.

By Noah Webster (1828), **Discrimination** is: 1. The act of distinguishing is the act of making or observing a difference; the distinction is the discrimination between right and wrong. 2. The state of being distinguished. 3. Mark of distinction.

The UN Glossary of Gender Equality (2011-2025) illustrates the word **discrimination** concerning gender and provides the collocation - **gender discrimination**: “*Any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.*”

The word **discrimination** underwent significant semantic changes, from the distinction between right and wrong to a marker of injustice, as stated by the OED and the UN Glossary.

2.4. Feminism: From "Feminine Quality" to Advocacy for gender equality

The next term to be examined is **feminism**. The first known use of **feminism** was in the 19th century. The term **feminism** was first used by the French philosopher Charles Fourier in 1837 in his work *La Théorie des Quatre Mouvements (The Theory of the Four Movements)*. Charles Fourier was a feminist thinker and supported women's rights.

According to the OED, this term was first used in 1841, however, in the feminine sense: “*Feminine quality or character; femininity. Now rare.*” “*Feminism - Advocacy of equality of the sexes and the establishment of the political, social, and economic rights of the female sex*” (1895); This was the period when the term started to be used in a more comprehensive framework to advocate for equality of the sexes and establish the rights of the female sex.

One of the limitations that is evident during the research is the absence of the word *feminism* in *The UN Glossary of Gender Equality*, which is quite paradoxical and raises questions, since the glossary itself is feminist.

2.5. Misogyny: Expanding from "Hatred of Women" to Systemic Prejudice

One of the prevalent gender-related terms is *misogyny*, examples of which are violence against women, femicide, sexual harassment, or psychological violence aimed at controlling women. "*Misogyny may be distinguished from the closely related word sexism, which signifies discrimination based on sex (although it most frequently refers to discrimination against women)*" (Merriam-Webster, 1847). According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, *Misogyny* is "*hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women.*" *Misogyny* is defined very narrowly in older dictionaries. Johnson's dictionary (1755) defines the word *misogyny* as: "*Hatred of women.*" Similarly, Webster echoes that misogyny is "*Hatred of the female sex.*" However, it is now understood more broadly, not just hatred, but also discrimination and prejudice (Merriam-Webster, 2025).

3. Conclusion

The primary aim of this research has been to illustrate that, across the examined dictionaries, earlier dictionaries tend to define the selected terms in neutral, non-gendered terms, whereas contemporary sources, particularly *The UN Glossary*, contextualize these definitions within explicit gendered frameworks. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) serves as an intermediary resource, illustrating the semantic evolution between traditional and modern frameworks. In contrast, unlike earlier sources, *the UN Women Glossary* offers definitions that reflect the framework of contemporary gender discourse.

Dictionaries stand as the centre of society. This means that societal values are reflected in dictionaries, which explains the neutral, non-gendered terms in the earlier dictionaries, due to the fact that perspectives on gender equality have not been shaped in the past centuries, however, this attitude changed in recent decades. According to Rufus Gouws: "*What should be learned from the past, and this applies to both printed and electronic dictionaries, is to conscientiously avoid similar traps and mistakes, especially in cases where what are now seen as mistakes were then regarded as the proper way of doing things. ... In these new endeavours, we as lexicographers are still bound to make mistakes in the future, but we have to restrict ourselves to making only new mistakes*" (Gouws, 2011, p.45, as cited in Müller-Spitzer, 2023).

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ავტორის შესახებ:

ნინო რევაშაშვილი არის თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტის, ჰუმანიტარულ მეცნიერებათა ფაკულტეტის, ლექსიკოგრაფიის მოდულის პირველი კურსის მაგისტრანტი. დაასრულა თბილისის სახელმწიფო უნივერსიტეტის ინგლისური ფილოლოგიის საბაკალავრო პროგრამა. ასწავლის ინგლისურ ენას ინგლისური ენის ცენტრში, აქვს სკოლაში მუშაობის გამოცდილება. მისი კვლევის ინტერესი მოიცავს გენდერული ტერმინოლოგიის სემანტიკურ კვლევას თანამედროვე და ისტორიულ ლექსიკოგრაფიულ წყაროებში.

About the author:

Nino Revazashvili is a first-year Master's degree student in the Lexicography module at the Faculty of Humanities, Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Philology from the same university. She currently teaches English at an English language center and has also taught at a school. Her research interests include the semantic development of gender-related terminology in modern and historical lexicographic sources.

E-mail: ninorevazashvili00@gmail.com

სამადლობელი:

ავტორი მადლობას უხდის ქალბატონ მარიამ ქებურიას - კვლევის პროცესში გაწეული დახმარებისთვის და რჩევებისთვის. ასევე მადლობას უხდის ქალბატონ მარინე მახათაძეს და ნატო ფერაძეს - მათმა პროფესიულმა მხარდაჭერამ და ჩართულობამ დიდი წვლილი შეიტანა ნაშრომის დახვეწასა და გამოქვეყნებაში.

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