



A CURA DI  
**DORA FARACI,  
GIOVANNI IAMARTINO,  
LUCILLA LOPRIORE,  
MARTINA NIED CURCIO,  
SERENELLA ZANOTTI**

WHEN I USE A WORD,  
IT MEANS JUST  
WHAT I CHOOSE IT TO MEAN  
- NEITHER MORE NOR LESS

STUDIES IN HONOUR  
OF STEFANIA NUCCORINI



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**XENIA. STUDI LINGUISTICI, LETTERARI E INTERCULTURALI**

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Silvia Pettini\*

*The ‘Social’ Dimension of Online Lexicography:  
Gender, Dictionaries and Users*

ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates gender representation in the definitions and usage examples of a selected group of words in the Oxford Dictionary of English, hosted on the portal Lexico.com and licensed for use to technology giants like Google, Apple and Microsoft. The rationale behind this case study lies in two recent controversies which, blaming Oxford University Press for linguistic sexism, eventually prompted the publisher to revise thousands of entries. In this light, this paper aims to promote a debate about the current relationship between gender, Internet lexicography and users, while spotlighting the role online platforms may play as a new form of dictionary criticism.

KEYWORDS: Dictionary criticism, Gender, Online lexicography, Sexism

1. *Introduction*

According to Norri (2019: 866), “issues of gender present an increasing challenge to lexicographers”: indeed, the definitions and example sentences cited in some dictionaries have been often criticised for showing gender bias and enhancing stereotyped images of men and women, disregarding that neutrality is “a requirement that may at times clash with the actual use of the word in corpora”.

A dictionary is generally perceived as a neuter and neutral work, as authoritative and objective records of the language, “as an immaculate arbiter of truth – timeless, authorless, faultless, sexless, certainly not *sexist*” (Russell, 2018:14, original emphasis). Yet, in recent years, ‘sexist’ has been precisely the accusation frequently made against one of the most prestigious English dictionary publishers, Oxford University Press (OUP hereafter), by some online dictionary users who, thanks to the lobbying power of social media and online petition platforms, have eventually contributed to the revision of thousands of words considered biased (Flood, 2020). Two controversies in particular hit the headlines and targeted the so-called “powered by Oxford” content, which means the content OUP license to giant search engines like Google, Yahoo

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and Bing, and global technology companies like Apple and Microsoft, and which corresponds to the content hosted on the dictionary portal Lexico.com (Ferrett & Dollinger, 2021). The latter, previously known as Oxforddictionaries.com, was OUP's new domain for their free online version of the Oxford Dictionary of English and the Oxford Thesaurus of English from June 2019 to August 26, 2022, the day on which the Lexico.com website was inexplicably closed.

This tension between online dictionary makers and users, which testifies to the increasing sensibility regarding the language of gender in the current cultural moment, is the rationale behind the present paper, whose main objective is to foster a debate about gender and online lexicography, while showing the role online platforms may play as a new form of dictionary criticism. For this purpose, the Oxford Dictionary of English, the default "UK dictionary" on Lexico.com, has been selected as a case study to investigate gender representation in the definitions and example sentences of a selected group of words borrowed from Norri (2019) and related to personal characteristics and gender roles.

## *2. On Gender and Dictionaries*

In descriptive corpus-based lexicography, the empirical question of meaning reflects the Wittgensteinian axiom that the meaning of a word is its use in the language, and since "any language cannot but mirror its speech community's ideology – its values and dominant attitudes, its stereotypes and taboos", lexicographers cannot but record that ideology as reflected in language usage (Iamartino, 2020: 37-38). Of special interest in this sense are all those entries belonging to sensitive issues in a given culture and historical period: political and social ideas, religious faith, ethnicity, age, sex and gender (Iamartino, 2020: 36). As regards the latter, as Pinnavaia remarks (2014: 219), "while male gender does not seem to be an issue, female gender does".

«As a matter of fact, since the beginnings of dictionary-making in early modern Europe and until quite recently, dictionaries have always been full of entries, words, definitions, examples, and comments that display the contemporary attitude – at best patronizing, at worst derogatory – of the cultural and social elite, of course a male one, towards women.» (Iamartino, 2010: 95)

After all, the very concept of sexism is gendered also in dictionary definitions and examples. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English (Lexico, 2020), for instance, '*Sexism*' means "Prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, *typically against women*, on the basis of sex" (emphasis added) and is indeed interestingly illustrated in "Sexism in language is an offensive reminder of the way the culture sees women". Consequently, it comes as no surprise that research on the relationship between gender issues and lexicography has mainly focused on women, the female, 'gentle', 'fair' or 'fairer' sex.

Dictionaries have been devoted academic attention from a gender-critical perspective since the 1970s, when the women's rights movement prompted scholars to evidence lexicographical bias in dictionary representations of men, women, and gender roles, which not only recorded but also endorsed or reinforced sex-role stereotypes prevalent in the English language in definitions and examples under neutral headwords (Russell, 2018: 30-31). In particular, the works by Gershuny (1974, 1975, 1977, 1980) and Graham (1975) paved the way in this research line and provided systematic analyses of mainstream dictionaries to show a quantitative and qualitative bias in women depiction: definitions and illustrative quotations featuring female persons were infrequent and almost always negative, as opposed to an overabundance of masculine nouns and pronouns exhibiting «the culturally desirable traits of assertiveness, competence, dominance, and strength» (Gershuny, 1975: 938-939).

Scholarship of the 1980s, 1990s and after largely confirmed previous findings: mainstream dictionaries were perpetuating androcentrism and sexism by containing discriminatory gender stereotypes in both definitions and examples (see Braun & Kitzinger, 2001; Brewer, 2009a, 2009b; Fournier & Russell, 1992; Hidalgo-Tenorio, 2000; Prechter, 1999; Whitcut, 1984). Some studies also showed that dictionaries tended to underrepresent terminology with strong associations to femininity or feminism (Connor-Martin, 2005; Mugglestone, 2013; Steinmetz, 1995), or to omit women speakers and writers from dictionary corpora (Baigent *et al.*, 2005; Brewer, 2009b, 2012a, 2012b; Cameron, 1992, 2015).

In the age of online lexicography, dictionary criticism is no longer only a scholarly prerogative; social media technologies allow users to publicly express their concerns and directly interact with dictionary makers who, like other commercial enterprises, tend to be responsive to users' needs for the sake of their reputation, yet within the confines of their descriptive evidence-based approach. In this sense, as discussed in

the introduction, OUP is a case in point.

### 3. #SexistDictionary

In 2016, a Twitter storm broke out after the anthropologist Michael Oman-Reagan noticed that ‘*Rabid*’, defined by his MacBook’s dictionary as “Having or proceeding from an extreme or fanatical support of or belief in something”, contained the primary example phrase “A rabid feminist” (Flood, 2016). By digging deeper into the dictionary, whose content is licensed from OUP, Oman-Reagan (2016) also highlighted other, in his view, explicitly sexist usage examples for entries like ‘*Shrill*’ in “The rising shrill of women’s voices”, ‘*Psyche*’ in “I will never really fathom the female psyche”, ‘*Promiscuous*’ in “She’s a wild, promiscuous, good-time girl”, and ‘*Nagging*’ in “A nagging wife”. Moreover, Oman-Reagan (2016) observed gendered examples related to occupation: while the sentence given for ‘*Housework*’ was “She still does all the housework”, ‘*Research*’ was illustrated with “He prefaces his study with a useful summary of his own researches”. Online conversations using the hashtag #OxfordSexism exploded on social networks, and media outlets throughout the English-speaking world began to report the story. The issue went viral and promoted an intense debate which was not about a few words, but rather about sexism in language and dictionary linguistic authority as perceived by users (Cameron, 2016).

A few years later, OUP was once again the target of a controversy which questioned their representation of gender. In June 2019 a petition on Change.org was launched by the marketing manager Maria Beatrice Giovanardi, to call on the publisher to change the entry for ‘*Woman*’ on Lexico.com. According to the petition (Giovanardi, 2019a), the entry contained illustrative examples which reinforce outdated sexist themes, including: a woman is subordinate to men, as in “Male fisherfolk who take their catch home for the little woman to gut”; a woman is a sex object, as in “Ms September will embody the professional, intelligent yet sexy career woman”; and, thus, woman is not equal to man. Indeed, as claimed by the campaigner, the definition of ‘*Man*’ was much more exhaustive than that of ‘*Woman*’, with 25 examples as opposed to only five, and almost universally positive. Moreover, the petition condemned

the many derogatory synonyms provided for woman, such as “bitch, besom, piece, bit, mare, baggage, wench, petticoat, frail, bird, bint, biddy, filly” (Giovanardi, 2019a). On the contrary, the most disparaging synonyms for ‘*Man*’ were “bozo” and “geezer” (Saner, 2019).

Although the campaigner later examined several online dictionaries and observed similar results (Giovanardi, 2019b), she decided to target OUP in her petition because as well as being an indisputably reputable source, and yet, in her view, the most biased, they have got a remarkable market advantage: “powered by Oxford” dictionary content is extremely widespread and this cannot but influence the way women are talked about, according to Giovanardi (2019a). Nearly 35,000 people have signed the petition so far, including influential linguists, academics, and women’s rights activists who gather around the hashtags #IAmNotABitch and #SexistDictionary and ask to (a) eliminate all definitions and examples that discriminate against and patronize women; (b) enlarge the dictionary’s entry for ‘*Woman*’; (c) include examples representative of sex and gender minorities (Giovanardi, 2019a).

In response, the head of lexical content strategy for OUP, Katherine Connor-Martin (2020), published a blog post a month later where she welcomed feedback from the public and announced an ongoing corpus-based revision. Indeed, after “a very extensive project” examining “thousands and thousands of examples”, OUP editors have reworked around 500 entries which “unnecessarily perpetuate sexist stereotypes” and new editorial standards and practices have been established for the selection of examples (Connor-Martin cit. in Flood, 2020). With respect to the two controversies mentioned above, on Lexico.com ‘*Rabid*’ is no longer a feminist but a ‘fan base’, a ‘nagging’ wife has become ‘nagging parents’, and housework and research have turned into first-person activity and group work respectively. As regards ‘*Woman*’, OUP has expanded coverage of the word, with more examples and idiomatic phrases, and has adjusted the number of and the labelling on its synonyms to make it clear which terms are derogatory and offensive (Flood, 2020).

#### 4. Gender in “powered by Oxford” definitions and examples

As Flood (2020) reports, OUP revision has mainly affected definitions and examples of words concerning appearance, sexuality, personal characteristics, and concepts of gender roles, semantic areas which are here exemplified by ‘*Adventurer*’, ‘*Bastard*’, ‘*Brute*’, ‘*Divorcee*’, ‘*Hero*’, ‘*Looker*’, ‘*Lover*’, ‘*Redhead*’, ‘*Sex object*’ and ‘*Sissy*’, the ten headwords borrowed from Norri (2019: 877-882) and examined in the following paragraphs. Although Norri’s work focusses on definitions in learners’ dictionaries from a diachronic perspective, the group of words he selected represents a semantically relevant sample to extend the research to example sentences and, above all, to online general-purpose dictionaries, as Norri himself suggests (2019: 868).

As regards the descriptions provided, there is a high level of agreement in most of these entries, where the gender-neutral ‘person’ appears in almost all the definitions. Remarkable symmetries can be found in the phrasing which either premodifies or postmodifies the noun. For example, similarly worded are the descriptions used for ‘*Adventurer*’ meaning “A person who enjoys or seeks adventure”, and also “A person willing to take risks or use dishonest methods for personal gain”, and ‘*Hero*’, meaning “A person who is admired for their courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities”. Postmodification also affects ‘*Redhead*’, described as “A person with reddish hair”, while premodification is used to define ‘*Divorcee*’ as “A divorced person” and many other headwords, as will emerge in the analysis. The only exception, yet still gender-neutral, to the use of ‘person’ in definitions is found in ‘*Lover*’ meaning “A partner in a sexual or romantic relationship outside marriage”. More importantly, except for ‘*Sissy*’, where the presence of “effeminate” may be read as gendered information, all definitions do not make any explicit reference to men or women.

With respect to the primary examples, i.e. those appearing immediately below the definition and above the extra examples available in drop-down menus for each sense, the gender profile of these words exhibits greater variation. Out of a total of thirteen illustrative sentences associated to the senses under scrutiny, five entries present an openly gendered referent, of which four are male (‘*Bastard*’, ‘*Brute*’, ‘*Lover*’ and ‘*Sissy*’) and one is female (‘*Looker*’). For this reason, these headwords will be examined first and in more detail in the following

paragraphs, including the analysis of the about 20 extra examples provided for each word sense, in order to outline the overall treatment of gender reference in the dictionary entries.

For this research '*Bastard*' was analysed only in the sense "An unpleasant or despicable person". This meaning, labelled as derogatory, mostly lacks explicit gender reference in the examples the dictionary provides the reader. Out of 20 illustrative sentences, 15 are neutral due to the very frequent use of a plural form. Nevertheless, when referential gender is specified, bastards are always men in the remaining five examples (25%), including the primary one: "He lied to me, the bastard!". According to Norri (2019: 885), although the strong male association of the word was first observed in the 1980s and 1990s and later challenged by corpus evidence in 2000s, showing that bastard was no longer a male-gender exclusive term of abuse, the current number of female referents in corpora of informal English is still insignificant as opposed to male occurrences, which may support the gendered association of the slur under scrutiny.

The treatment of '*Brute*', which has been examined in the senses "A savagely violent person or animal" and "A cruel or insensitive person", the latter being labelled as informal, is similar to that of '*Bastard*'. Excluding the four instances where the referent is non-human, the first sense presents 15 illustrative sentences out of which ten frame the word usage as gender-neutral (67%), as in (1), while five (33%) explicitly describe men as brutes, as interestingly happens in (2) and also in the primary example: "He was a cold-blooded brute". The tendency towards male gender specification is confirmed by the examples offered for the second sense: cruel and insensitive people, defined as brutes, are male in four instances out of five (80%), as in (3).

- (1). Traffic jitters and frustration turned nice people into bullies and brutes.
- (2). We cannot ourselves contribute to the stereotype that portrays these men as savage brutes unable to resolve their differences in a peaceful manner.
- (3). He's a brute, an offense to human decency.

The first definition of '*Lover*' is "A partner in a sexual or romantic relationship outside marriage", meaning that no gender information is

included in the description. Moreover, the gender of the referent can be interpreted as neutral in the primary example, “I think she had a secret lover”, although the presence of a female subject might, on the one hand, allude to a male lover and favour a heteronormative reading and, on the other, depict women as those more inclined to cheat on their partner, regardless of the partner’s sex and gender identity. The latter interpretation is reasonable in eight extra examples out of 22, as in (4), together with other three sentences in which a woman explicitly cheats on her husband with a male lover, as in (5), which means 50% of instances in total.

(4). It is not at all clear what motivated her in her relations with her lovers.

(5). If a husband catches his wife’s lover in a wardrobe, can he kill him?

In other words, the majority of illustrative sentences for ‘*Lover*’ in this sense lack explicit reference to men or women. Gender-neutral referents represent 77% of occurrences (16 examples) and include both examples like those mentioned above and properly gender-neutral occurrences, as in (6). Indeed, gender-specificity clearly manifests itself in a very few cases (23%), of which three refer to men (14%), as in (5), and two refer to women (9%). As concerns female lovers in particular, it is worth mentioning that one instance explicitly deals with female homosexuality, as in (7).

(6). They had been lovers for years.

(7). She’s going to see her parents to tell them she’s moving out to stay with her lesbian lover.

Mostly gender-neutral are also the sentences offered to illustrate the usage of ‘*Lover*’ meaning “A person who likes or enjoys a specified thing”: 18 instances (82%) out of a total of 22. However, when the gender of the referent is defined, lovers are always men as happens in the primary example: “He was a great lover of cats”.

According to the dictionary, ‘*Sissy*’ is informal and derogatory and means “A person regarded as effeminate or cowardly”. As previously discussed, although the phrasing “a person” makes this definition in line with the other words examined, ‘*Effeminate*’ reduces its gender neutrality. ‘*Effeminate*’ is indeed a derogatory adjective “(of a man)

having characteristics regarded as typical of a woman; unmanly". Nevertheless, this association is openly made only in the primary example, "He would hate the other boys to think he was a sissy", and in other two sentences out of a total of 11 instances, meaning that 73% of examples do not make explicit reference to male gender. However, it is possible to speculate that the dictionary user might read the sentences as gender-specific on the basis of the definition and of the contribution of co-textual material, as in (8), which relates to qualities believed to be untypical of men or boys, such as weakness, fearfulness and irresoluteness, as in (9).

(8). If we're not macho thugs, we're ineffectual sissies.

(9). I screamed like a sissy when I was trapped with all those spiders.

For this study, *'Looker'* has been examined in the sense "A very attractive person" which, in line with the other entries examined, is described as neutral. However, the word, labelled as informal, presents 20 illustrative examples whose analysis seems to suggest a clear tendency towards the association between this lexeme and female beauty, when it comes to gender reference. This is immediately apparent in the primary example "She was a real looker, good for the eyes". This association is even clearer in the synonyms provided by the Oxford Thesaurus of English hosted on Lexico.com, including "beautiful woman", "goddess", "Venus", "siren", "enchantress", and "seductress", among others. Gender specificity emerges in 14 example sentences, out of which ten refer to women or girls, that is 50% of the total. "Sure she's quite the looker", "The girl was a real looker", "I don't doubt your mother is a looker" are some excerpts of the usage examples which revolve around women's physical attractiveness, with the male gaze being directed at the female body.

*'Sex object'* is another lexeme whose association with the female gender is remarkable. Although the definition is gender-neutral, "A person regarded by another only in terms of their sexual attractiveness or availability", as neutral is the plural form in the primary example, "Does pornography turn people into sex objects?", out of a total of 18 illustrative sentences, unspecified referents are only five (28%), as shown in (10), as opposed to 13 instances of either male or female reference. In particular, 11 examples cast women as sex objects, as in (11), especially in relation to men, as in (12), representing 61% of the



usage the dictionary has selected for its users.

- (10). I get the impression I'm more or less a sex object.
- (11). Maybe she is a shallow sexy sex object with no depth.
- (12). The reason he wants to see strippers is because it's a way for him to look at a woman as just a sex object.

As regards the two examples with male referents (11%), it is interesting to mention that one seems to reinforce the long-standing stereotype of women as sex objects by implying a binary opposition, as example (13) illustrates.

- (13). It offers a quick peek at what happens when the man becomes the sex object.

The analysis of the remaining four words presents comparable results in terms of gender specification, with little variation concerning the gender slightly associated with each lexeme. Gender-neutral referents abound in most usage sentences, be they primary or extra examples, with percentages ranging between 80% and 90%. For example, if mentioned, referential gender is always male for '*Adventurer*' in both senses (17%) and always female for '*Divorcee*' (16%), a '*Redhead*' can be either sex (5% each), while a '*Hero*' is more male (14%) than female (5%).

As a short digression, as concerns marked feminine forms, which were deliberately excluded from the analysis, it is worth mentioning that the primary example for '*Heroine*' is "She was a true feminist heroine", as feminist are 20% of referents in usage sentences illustrating "A woman admired for her courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities".

## 5. Conclusions

«The era of internet lexicography confronts lexicographers with challenges and opportunities to enhance the quality of the lexicographic practice and to produce dictionaries that help in satisfying the lexicographic" and, one might suggest, sociocultural needs of their users.» (Gouws, 2018: 215).

Gender issues do represent one of these challenges and opportunities. This seems to be particularly true in the case of the free and almost ubiquitous “powered by Oxford” dictionary content. Thanks to partnerships with global search engines and dominant operating systems, the market-leading position of Oxford University Press inevitably makes them more prone to criticism, not to mention the role online platforms, social networks in particular, may play in potential ‘wars on words’.

The tension between online dictionary makers and users, expressed in the two controversies referred to in this paper, sheds new light on their current relationship, as far as sensitive issues like gender are concerned.

The dominant view of a dictionary as arbiter of truth seems to revolve around the notion of a neutral, outside observer. Users seem to perceive dictionaries as ‘extrasocial’, that is unaffected by the society’s ideology. It is, however, impossible for any text to exist outside of society, as both its creation and its use involve real people rooted in real cultural contexts. Definitions and example sentences emerge from these roots and reflect language as used, what lexicographers perceive to be typical and representative or, one might add, ‘normal’. Nevertheless, although dictionaries are true representations of the real world, the selection of online examples has an undeniable impact. This especially concerns the primary usage sentences of “powered by Oxford” dictionary content, the ones displayed first across the Web and operating systems, whose power to define the boundaries of ‘normality’, relative to their quantity, is clearly disproportionate.

Although within the limitations of a small-scale case study, the analysis presented in this paper demonstrates a clear tendency to opt for neutrality in both dictionary definitions and examples in “powered by Oxford” content. Indeed, if descriptions are quite expectedly always neutral, out of a total of 234 illustrative sentences, 70% of examples do not make any explicit gender reference. However, the difference between the two sexes or gender identities in terms of representation still slightly favours men over women, respectively referred to in 18% and 12% of instances. Given the focus on linguistic sexism, ‘typically’ against women, it is worth underlining that the majority of female referents (9%) occur in only two contentious entries, namely ‘*Looker*’, meaning “A very attractive person”, and ‘*Sex object*’, but results have shown that female-gendered associations can be found also in words like ‘*Lover*’, where half of the examples depict women as unfaithful partners, and ‘*Sissy*’ where qualities stereotypically believed to be characteristic of

women such as weakness, fearfulness and irresoluteness serve as the background to disparagingly regard a man or a boy as ‘effeminate’, longstanding stereotypes which corpus-based dictionaries, as a mirror of society, possibly cannot but record.

Nevertheless, the tension resulting from users’ expectations about dictionaries’ linguistic authority and about their role in society represents an original and powerful form of criticism, which may also lead to systematic online dictionary revision. In this sense, OUP’s commitment to re-examine thousands of entries is worthy of note and of further investigation, since it embodies an initiative aimed to address these issues in lexicographical practice by acknowledging the present-day emphasis on awareness and sensitivity towards gender equality.

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