

GENDER-MEANING PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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Abstract: This paper explores phraseological units that convey gender-related meanings in the English language. It analyzes how idiomatic expressions reflect and reinforce societal perceptions of gender roles, identities, and stereotypes. The study categorizes phraseological units into those that explicitly reference gender, those that imply traditional gender roles, and those with gender-coded meanings despite neutral language. It also addresses evolving expressions influenced by gender-inclusive discourse. By examining both historical and contemporary usage, the paper highlights the linguistic mechanisms through which gender ideologies are perpetuated or challenged in everyday speech.

Keywords: Gender, phraseological units, idioms, gender roles, stereotypes, language and gender, gender identity, figurative language, sociolinguistics, inclusive language

Introduction

Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of the social and cultural values of a community. Phraseological units—fixed expressions such as idioms, proverbs, and colloquial phrases—often carry meanings that go beyond the literal, embedding historical, cultural, and ideological assumptions. Among these, gender-meaning phraseological units are particularly revealing, as they reflect and perpetuate societal views on gender roles, identities, and expectations. Expressions like “*man up*,” “*old wives’ tale*,” and “*wear the pants in the family*” serve not only as common linguistic tools but also as vehicles of implicit gender ideologies. This study aims to examine how gender is encoded in phraseological units in the English language. It explores how such expressions contribute to the construction of masculinity and femininity, reinforce traditional stereotypes, or, conversely, challenge binary gender norms. By analyzing a range of idiomatic expressions across various contexts, this paper seeks to shed light on the relationship between language and gender, revealing the often overlooked power of idioms in shaping and reflecting social norms.[1,67]

Language plays a significant role in shaping perceptions of gender, and phraseological units—commonly used idioms and expressions—are key vehicles for reinforcing or

challenging gender norms. These fixed expressions often encode stereotypes about masculinity and femininity, making them a powerful reflection of societal attitudes.

Some idioms explicitly reference gender, such as “*man up*” and “*old wives’ tale*.” “*Man up*” implies that toughness and emotional resilience are male traits, marginalizing emotional expression. Similarly, “*old wives’ tale*” dismisses women’s knowledge as outdated or irrational, reinforcing the stereotype that women are less rational than men.

Other idioms reflect traditional gender roles, such as “*wear the pants in the family*” and “*trophy wife*.” The former implies that men should be in control, while the latter objectifies women, reducing them to symbols of status and beauty rather than valued partners.

Many idioms, while not explicitly gendered, carry implicit bias. For example, “*ballsy*” associates bravery with male anatomy, and “*throw like a girl*” insults a person’s ability by associating it with femininity, which is seen as weaker.[2,112]

However, newer expressions like “*be your authentic self*” reflect evolving attitudes towards inclusivity, promoting freedom of expression and challenging traditional gender norms.

Some idioms contain direct references to gender, making their meaning and implications clearly gendered. These expressions often reflect stereotypical expectations of men and women.

“Old wives’ tale” – Refers to a belief or superstition considered outdated or unscientific, often dismissing women’s traditional knowledge as irrational.

“Man up” – Implies that courage, toughness, and emotional suppression are inherently male traits; reinforces the idea that men should not show vulnerability.

“Boys will be boys” – Excuses aggressive or irresponsible male behavior as natural and inevitable, often used to avoid accountability.[3]

These expressions reinforce traditional gender norms by explicitly associating certain behaviors, traits, or levels of credibility with either men or women. The language used helps normalize inequality by framing it as culturally or biologically justified.

Even without direct reference to gender, many idioms support the traditional division of labor or social expectations for men and women.

“Wear the pants in the relationship” – Suggests that the person with decision-making power is the dominant figure, traditionally assumed to be the man.

“Trophy wife” – Describes a young, attractive wife perceived more as a status symbol than a partner; objectifies women and ties their value to appearance.

“Henpecked husband” – Implies a man is dominated or nagged by his wife, presenting female assertiveness negatively.[5,14] These phraseological units reflect longstanding societal norms where masculinity is tied to authority and femininity to subservience or superficial value. They often ridicule deviations from these roles.

Modern sociolinguistics has begun challenging traditional phraseological norms by promoting gender-inclusive and non-binary-friendly expressions.

- **“Be your authentic self”** – Encourages individuals to express their true identity, often used in discussions of gender identity and expression.
- **“Break the binary”** – Challenges the idea of fixed gender categories, promoting inclusion of non-binary and gender-diverse individuals.
- **“Partner” instead of “husband/wife”** – A more inclusive term that avoids assuming the gender of a person's significant other.[5,15]

These newer expressions represent a conscious effort to make language more inclusive and reflective of diverse gender identities. They illustrate how language evolves alongside cultural shifts in gender understanding.

Language serves not only as a tool for communication but also as a mirror of societal norms and values. This study of gender-meaning phraseological units reveals the deep-rooted ways in which gender ideologies are embedded in everyday expressions. From idioms that explicitly reference gender, such as *“man up”* or *“old wives’ tale,”* to those that subtly reinforce stereotypes through metaphor and implication, such as *“throw like a girl”* or *“wear the pants,”* these expressions reflect long-standing assumptions about masculinity, femininity, and power dynamics.

The analysis demonstrates that many phraseological units perpetuate traditional gender roles, reinforcing binaries and limiting societal perceptions of what it means to be a man or a woman. However, the emergence of inclusive and evolving expressions—such as *“be your authentic self”* and the use of gender-neutral terms like *“partner”*—shows a shift toward greater awareness and sensitivity in language use. This evolution suggests that phraseology, like society itself, is capable of change.

In conclusion, understanding gender in phraseological units is essential for raising linguistic and social awareness. By critically examining the language we use, we can challenge outdated norms, promote gender equality, and contribute to a more inclusive linguistic environment. Future research could explore cross-cultural comparisons or investigate how gender-inclusive language is being adopted in different dialects and professional fields.

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