

## EXPRESSION OF GENDER CONCEPTS IN THE SEMANTIC SYSTEM OF ENGLISH PHRASEOLOGICAL UNITS

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### Abstract

This article examines the expression of gender concepts in the semantic system of English phraseological units. It explores how idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions encode culturally established perceptions of masculinity and femininity, reflecting and reinforcing social norms and stereotypes. Drawing on sociolinguistic and cognitive approaches, the study analyzes metaphorical and evaluative meanings embedded in phraseology. Gendered expressions are semantically classified according to representations of masculinity, femininity, and stereotype-reinforcing evaluation.

### Keywords

gender, phraseological units, semantic analysis, gender stereotypes, linguistic worldview, sociolinguistics, gender representation.

The concept of gender in the semantic system of English has captured most linguists' attention as it contributes to a broader comprehension of how language shapes perceptions of gender roles and identities. While sex is the biological trait of a reproducing organism in producing gametes of one of two different sizes or shapes – male or female gametes, gender is the range of social, psychological, cultural, and behavioral aspects of being a man (or boy), woman (or girl), or portraying a third gender<sup>67</sup>. In this regard, language does not merely reflect social reality but actively participates in constructing and reinforcing gendered meanings. The linguistic choices speakers make – whether consciously or unconsciously – often encode cultural expectations about masculinity and femininity, thereby shaping how individuals perceive themselves and others within a gendered social framework. Vocabulary, metaphor, and especially phraseological units function as carriers of collective cultural experience, preserving historically established attitudes toward gender roles and behavioral norms.

<sup>67</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gender> 18.02.2026

From a sociolinguistic perspective, gender is manifested in language through patterns of evaluation, categorization, and representation. Idiomatic expressions, proverbs, and fixed phrases frequently embed stereotypes about men and women, presenting them as natural or self-evident truths. For example, many phraseological units associate men with strength, authority, and rationality, while women are often linked to emotionality, beauty, or domesticity. Such linguistic patterns do not simply describe reality; they also contribute to maintaining social hierarchies by normalizing particular models of gendered behavior.

Scholars have long emphasized this reciprocal relationship between language and gender. *Robin Lakoff*, for instance, demonstrated that linguistic structures may reflect and perpetuate gender inequality through patterns of evaluation and politeness norms<sup>68</sup>. Similarly, *Judith Butler* argued that gender is performative, meaning it is continuously produced and reproduced through repeated social and linguistic practices<sup>69</sup>. From this perspective, phraseological units can be seen as one of the mechanisms through which gender is symbolically performed and transmitted across generations. Therefore, the study of gender expression in English phraseology provides valuable insight into how cultural knowledge about gender becomes linguistically fixed and socially reproduced. By examining the semantic structure of phraseological units, researchers can uncover implicit value judgments, stereotypes, and ideological assumptions embedded in everyday language use. This makes phraseology an important domain for understanding how language both mirrors and shapes gendered social reality.

The study of gender in language is grounded in the understanding that linguistic structures do not merely reflect reality but actively participate in shaping social meaning. Gender, as a social and cultural construct, is expressed, negotiated, and reproduced through language. One of the most stable and culturally loaded components of language is phraseology – idioms, proverbs, and fixed expressions that preserve collective experience and shared value systems. Because phraseological units are conventionalized and transmitted across generations, they function as repositories of cultural knowledge, including socially established perceptions of masculinity and femininity. Thus, the analysis of phraseology provides an effective lens for examining how gendered meanings become linguistically encoded and socially normalized. The theoretical support comes from cognitive linguistics, particularly the conceptual metaphor theory developed by *George Lakoff*. According to this approach, abstract concepts are often understood

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<sup>68</sup> Lakoff, Robin. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

<sup>69</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

through metaphorical mappings grounded in everyday experience<sup>70</sup>. Gender is frequently conceptualized through metaphorical models that associate masculinity and femininity with culturally salient domains such as power, emotion, nature, or social hierarchy. Phraseological units often preserve these metaphorical associations, making them key linguistic sites where gendered conceptual structures become visible. In addition, sociolinguistic research highlights differences in communicative practices associated with gender. Taken together, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that phraseology operates at the intersection of language, cognition, and culture. By encoding metaphorical meanings, reflecting communicative norms, and shaping conceptual frameworks, phraseological units serve as powerful linguistic mechanisms through which gender is represented, interpreted, and socially reproduced.

When examined from a gender perspective, phraseological units often reveal implicit assumptions about masculinity and femininity, reflecting social expectations, evaluative attitudes, and stereotypical representations. The semantic classification of gendered phraseological units makes it possible to identify the dominant conceptual features associated with men and women and to observe how language encodes and preserves these cultural models.

For analytical purposes, gendered phraseological units may be grouped into several semantic categories depending on the type of gender representation they convey.

#### a) Phraseological units expressing masculinity

A large number of English phraseological units associate masculinity with strength, authority, rationality, independence, and leadership. These expressions reflect traditional cultural models that present men as powerful, decisive, and socially dominant. For example, expressions such as “**wear the pants (in the family)**” indicate *authority and control, reinforcing the idea that decision-making power is typically associated with men*. Similarly, “**a man of steel**” metaphorically emphasizes *emotional toughness and physical strength, presenting resilience as a defining masculine quality*<sup>71</sup>.

#### b) Phraseological units expressing femininity

In contrast, phraseological units associated with femininity often emphasize emotionality, beauty, vulnerability, and domestic roles. These semantic features reflect historically rooted social expectations concerning women’s behavior and social function. One of the most widespread semantic domains is beauty and physical appearance. Expressions such as “**the fair sex**” and “**as pretty as a picture**”

<sup>70</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

<sup>71</sup> Rosamund Moon. *Fixed Expressions and Idioms in English: A Corpus-Based Approach*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

foreground aesthetic qualities as defining features of femininity. These idioms imply *that female identity is closely tied to attractiveness and visual appeal.*

Emotional sensitivity is another prominent semantic feature. The phrase **“a woman’s touch”** suggests *gentleness, care, and refinement, reinforcing the association between femininity and nurturing qualities.* Similarly, **“maternal instinct”** is frequently used metaphorically *to describe natural emotional responsiveness and protective behavior.*

### c) Evaluative and stereotype-reinforcing phraseological units

A third semantic group includes phraseological units that explicitly evaluate gender behavior or reinforce gender stereotypes. These expressions often carry strong positive or negative connotations and function as linguistic tools of social judgment. Some idioms reinforce negative stereotypes about women. For instance, **“old wives’ tale”** refers to a belief considered irrational or unscientific, implicitly associating women with superstition or unreliability. Likewise, **“catty remarks”** are often associated with female communication styles, suggesting pettiness or hostility.

Some phraseological units function as social regulation mechanisms, praising behavior that aligns with gender expectations and criticizing behavior that contradicts them. In this way, language becomes a means of enforcing normative gender roles through everyday communication. The semantic classification of gendered phraseological units reveals that language systematically organizes gender representations around culturally significant conceptual domains. Masculinity is typically associated with strength, authority, and rational control, while femininity is linked to beauty, emotion, nurturing, and dependence. Evaluative phraseological units further reinforce these patterns by attaching positive or negative judgments to gendered behavior.

By preserving and transmitting these meanings, phraseological units function not only as linguistic expressions but also as cultural mechanisms that shape and maintain gender stereotypes within the semantic structure of English.

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