Man And Language In Prehistory: Clues To Gender Conceptualization From Semantic Analysis

Eve Danziger

San Antonio is a village of about 1300 Mopan Mayan speaking people situated in Southern Belize. The population lives in patriarchal nuclear family households, arranged in patrilineal clusters. Subsistence is based on slash and burn cultivation of maize and other food crops, as well as on some cash crop cultivation. Division of labor is based on sex; males work in the fields, occupied with primary agricultural production, while females work in the village, processing raw agricultural products into food. The high degree of economic interdependence between men and women is explicitly acknowledged, and is cited by informants as the basis for mutual cross-gender respect.

In this community a contradiction exists between the ideological and the actual situation with regard to gender: I noted, among both women and men, a remarkable absence of any belief in the inferior capacity or ability of females, as well as of any tendency to trivialize or downgrade female work or the products of female labour. By contrast, in actual fact, women’s activities are almost exclusively restricted to the domestic sphere, and their movements and opportunities quite explicitly curtailed by force. Although women are not answerable to men as such, and although some women enjoy great freedom of movement and variety of activity, the majority of women’s behaviour is controlled by men by virtue of the social fact that wives are answerable to husbands. This is the only social relationship in which gender is specifically linked to power — in other cases, the operative rule is that junior persons are answerable to senior ones, whatever the sex of the two parties.

The primacy of age over sex as an axis of power in the society is clearly illustrated by the way in which seniors, both male and female, control juniors in the initiation and the subsequent maintenance of the authority of husbands over wives. Newlyweds are almost always juniors, and arranged marriage is the rule. I have been told more than once that it is likely to be the new husband’s mother who instructs him to use physical force in order to control his wife.

The situation is one of an ideological recognition of the equality of the sexes coupled with an absence of the realization of such equality. Bound as archaeology is to the realized world, what hope does it have of illuminating such a situation under even the most favourable circumstances of preservation, recovery, and interpretation of material remains?

I propose that turning our attention to language can provide a fruitful avenue of access into the realm of prehistoric ideology. An inherited caution (Boas 1911) with respect to making links between language and other aspects of culture has kept us from exploring this avenue very fully; and some caution is indeed warranted. But anyone who nowadays reacts to the use of the word “Man” to refer to human kind in general (as in the title of this article) has already conceded my point. The boundaries of the semantic categories of a language are reflections of the “habitual thought” lines of the speakers (Whorf 1956:134), and are a guide to “what one needs to know” (Goodenough 1957:167) to identify socially relevant categories within a given culture.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Generic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specific</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. English: Humans.
The possible uses of the word “man” in English can be described (Figure 1) as the intersection of two bivalent axes. One represents the value Specific/Generic, the other represents the value Male/Female. Four cells in the diagram represent the four discrete possibilities of intersection of these axes.

The bottom right hand cell, Specific Female, is occupied by the English word “woman”, and the bottom left hand cell by the English word “man”.

Defenders of the use of the word “man” to mean humanity in general explain that the word includes both male and female individuals, so that both upper cells are occupied equally, obliterating the Male/Female boundary there (Figure 2). Since both left hand cells are also now occupied by the same word, we are justified in eliminating that boundary too, and in allotting an “L-shaped” distribution to the word “man” on this chart.

The “L” shape of the semantic distribution of the

![Figure 2. English, Humans, distribution of “man”.

word “man” means that it occupies the space of a full column AND that of a full row. There is therefore room for doubt as to whether to gloss it ‘horizontally’; generic human with an additional meaning of specific male, or ‘vertically’: human male, extended to cover females in the generic case. Defendants of the “Mankind” usage tend to prefer the first gloss; opponents, the second.

Whatever one’s preferences, the source of disagreement surrounding the use of the word lies in the admission that erasing a line on this semantic diagram involves “erasing” a conceptual boundary at the cognitive level as well. Once this is recognized, we are able to use diagrams such as this for languages other than English, in order to illuminate

![Figure 3. English: Siblings.

conceptual organization in the classification of persons.

The society of the Mopan Maya is a non-stratified one in which kinship relations constitute many of the most important social categories. In order to assign individuals to the social categories possible among consanguines in English, the speaker almost always needs to know the sex of the person to be so assigned (Figure 3). A Mopan speaker does not. It is far more important, in Mopan, to know whether the person referred to is junior or senior (Figure 4).

In English, it makes no difference whether Alter is junior or senior; we could do without the representation of this distinction in our diagram and, by

![Figure 4. Mopan: Siblings.

implication, in our inferences about cognitive salience. In Mopan we always need to know whether Alter is junior or senior, and only if senior, whether male or female. Native Mopan speakers, who speak English, have told me that the lack of specificity as to seniority in English IS cognitively felt; “but
WHICH brother?” they are left asking. Similarly I consistently felt under-informed by the term “its’ iiln.” I would always want to know whether the younger in question was a girl or a boy.

In Mopan, where it is necessary to assign gender, it is the gender of the senior party that must be ascertained even in assigning the junior party to the correct social category. In the “parent/child” case what different. Seniority is once again a primary variable, but where affines are established to be of the same generation, some attention is paid to what we would call “side” of the family. The situation where affinal relatives of the same generation are of opposite sexes is represented in Figure 7. The two terms on the left hand side can be translated exactly as English “husband” and “wife”. But note that ONLY in this case is sex of Alter important. In the complementary case, both male and female Alters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alter is Male</th>
<th>Alter is Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alter is Senior</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alter is Junior</td>
<td>Son</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5. English: Parent/Child.

(Figure 5), English recognizes seniority as a variable equivalent in weight to that of gender. In the Mopan case, however (Figure 6), we note that seniority has priority over gender. (“Sex of Senior” is also, of course, as valid as “sex of Alter” as a parameter in Figure 4. There is in fact no reason EVER to suppose that “sex of Alter” is important in distinguishing among Mopan consanguines.)

Among affines (those related not by birth but by marriage) the operating principles by which individuals are placed in social categories are some-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alter is Male</th>
<th>Alter is Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alter is Spouse</td>
<td>icham</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alter is Not Spouse</td>
<td>mu</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6. Mopan: Parent/Child.

Semantic analysis of terms used to refer to persons in Mopan thus independently illustrates the ideological relation of seniority to gender which was outlined above on the basis of ethnographic observation. This ideological relationship is not reflected in Mopan behaviour, and would therefore be largely inaccessible to conventional archaeological recovery.

The example I have given refers to a current, not a prehistoric, situation. However, reconstructed languages of variable antiquity are available in most parts of the world in which archaeologists work. Although our knowledge of these languages is impoverished, (we rarely have access to information about prehistoric syntax, for example), the kind of information which we do have about them, e.g., specific items of vocabulary within semantic domains, is particularly amenable to the kind of analysis I am suggesting. The concept of gender, ubiquitous as it is in distinguishing among “kinds of
people" in every time and place, is also particularly suited to illumination using this method.

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