The present paper focuses not on how language is used in texts to describe, constitute or change the world, but on how the world is reflected in the linguistic system itself. More specifically, it examines how the vocabulary of the Modern Greek language represents men and women, and reflects relations of power and sexism. Although the problem is not new (see Thorne & Henley 1975 and Thorne, Kramarae & Henley 1983 for annotated references), there has never been a thorough study of the vocabulary of a language with grammatical gender, like Greek. And despite the fact that electronic corpora are exploited in the examination of linguistic sexism (see, e.g., Graham 1975, Romaine 2001), to my knowledge, there are no studies on the lexical representation of social gender on the basis of electronic dictionaries.

The research reported here has been based on a recent dictionary of Modern Greek (Λεξικό της Κοινής Νεοελληνικής, 1998), and has concentrated on the nouns that this dictionary contains. Though the dictionary is not commercially available in electronic form, I had electronically access to the subset that was of interest for the project, i.e. the nouns. About 28,000 nouns were codified for grammatical gender and semantic content (what kind of reference the noun has; if it refers to a person, what is this person’s sex; is there evaluation involved, and so on). The codification and statistical processing of the data was carried out by two students, A. Alvanooudi and E. Karafoti. In the first stage, where all nouns — and not only the ones denoting humans — were codified, a third student, N. Kotitsa, also participated.

The results confirm, among others, one of the fundamental claims of feminist linguists, namely the invisibility of women in language: although the feminine nouns are almost twice as many as the masculine ones, when it comes to human reference, this proportion is reversed. In other words, the Greek vocabulary is male-dominated — as is Greek society itself. Other results, however, are not quite so impressive, as reported from other studies concerned with (parts of) the vocabulary of the English language. Some explanations for this discrepancy are offered and possible consequences for our understanding of the relationship between language and the world are discussed.

References


