

## Ideological Undercurrents in the Semantic Notion of “Working Mothers”

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**Abstract:** Now commonly used, the term “working mothers” is a problematic linguistic construction. On the surface, the term may appear liberatory because it names the circumstances of many women’s lives. In this paper, I go beneath the surface to explore this term from linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural perspectives, demonstrating how it perpetuates sexism, classism, and racism. Through its structure and use, the meaning of “working mothers” depends on setting “working” in opposition to “mothering” and also establishes a new linguistic code for (a) the lack of parity between women and men and (b) the privileging of paid employment as a choice rather than a necessity for women who are mothers.

One morning not long ago on my drive to the university, I passed a billboard that immediately clarified an uneasy feeling I had been mulling over for some time. The billboard advertised an on-line shopping service called *Shoplinc.com*, a grocery and errand service available in many of the northeastern states. The billboard ad, which contained a visual icon of a speeding shopping cart and *Shoplinc.com* at the bottom, read as follows:

*Wanted...*

*Teachers, Lawyers, Computer Programmers,  
Doctors, Nurses, Secretaries, Accountants  
(aka Mothers)*

The unease I had felt before seeing this billboard came from a tension implied in the term *working mothers*; this billboard ad, without using the term exactly, made the clear connection between the roles of demanding work outside the home and mothering. The connection was possible because the ad engaged an already established discourse of gender that normalizes paradox in the cultural constructions of *woman*, *work*, and *mother*. *Shoplinc.com* was being positioned by hailing the identity of a particular spectator, that of *working mothers*. The term entered the lexicon of U.S. English easily, likely because it served as a ready sign for a circumstance in want of a public label. Yet just as any label engages a frame of social meanings, this one carries with it a perpetuation of conventional gender ideologies. The tension in the term, and thus in the billboard for *Shoplinc.com*, exists through juxtaposing (a) the ready acceptance of the concept by those women who feel grateful to be acknowledged in a public way with (b) an iterative symbolic diminution of mothering as work and bracketing of women as primary parents.

The billboard display dramatically demonstrated the way in which advertising powerfully taps into ideological codes—in this case, ideological codes that give public definition to the meaning of gender—and then uses those

definitions to hail the identities of potential consumers. The verbiage on the billboard did not stop after the list of professional classifications, nor did it hail *Parents* in the “aka” line. The vernacular “aka” tag was used to hail the identity category of *Mothers* engaged in professional and white collar work and to then associate that identity with a type of domestic-oriented shopping, i.e., the internet grocery cart. More so than in many ads, this one hailed its intended audience explicitly. Who was “Wanted?” Mothers: mothers as grocery shoppers, mothers as professional and white-collar workers, and the union of the two. By not hailing mothers in general, parents in general, or—more simply—busy adults, the ad cements the paradox that mothering as a primary activity is NOT work and that parenting is women’s domain and not men’s.

I learned years ago in English classes that a paradox is a statement that seems self-contradictory. The lesson was that writers, especially poets, skillfully crafted paradoxical sentences to tug new meanings out of more ordinary semantic associations. In this sense, paradoxes are thought to be creative and productive of new insights. Paradoxes can, however, also work to conceal or to mask certain meanings, whether intentionally or not. When this happens, the contradictions need to be tugged from the paradoxical terms, which may not at first appear paradoxical at all. The *Shoplinc.com* billboard was, if not poetic, then paradoxical. Why would shoppers be defined with a term as restrictive as *mothers*? Why not an “aka” operational definition of *women*, which would be more inclusive because it could appeal to a broad spectrum including women in traditional domestic/family roles as well as single professional women? And why not men, either specifically hailed or included in a term such as *busy parents*? These options were likely considered when a branding strategy for *Shoplinc.com* was developed. For whatever reasons they were rejected, the branding choice exploited the currency of a term with paradoxical meanings. What ideas were already packed into the term *working mothers* to render it so exploitable to the advertiser? What did the term’s meaning reveal about contradictions under the surface of news reports, magazine articles, and census data on topics such as two-earner households, the greater presence of women in fields traditionally populated by men, single mothers, and so forth? What paradoxes are created and maintained by the iterative positioning of *working mothers* as a discrete social identity?

To answer these questions and to delve into the paradoxical nature of the phrase *working mothers*, I will explore linguistic, sociolinguistic, and cultural components of the coupling of these two words in their current context. With this as background, I will show how the paradoxical term *working mothers* functions as a signifier to represent

ideological codes entailing not only the sexism apparent in the language but also broader discourses that construct classism and racism. These analysis aim to expose a range of meanings for *working mothers* radically different from the generally understood meaning of the term as a progressive, liberatory, and helpful characterization of women.

From linguistic and cultural perspectives, *working mothers* invites several paradoxical interpretations. Paradoxes in language use occur when contradictory interpretations are possible either because the linguistic elements contradict each other ("heavy weightlessness") or the context for language use produces a contradiction (commanding another person to "Be assertive!"). In either case, the expression (a) makes an assertion but also (b) asserts something about its own assertion that creates the contradiction (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967).

### "Working Mothers" as a Linguistic Construction

Linguistically, the term *working mothers* is in the form of an **adj + n** construction. As such, the role of *mother* stabilizes the term by anchoring it with noun-ness. *Mother* in this sense is primary to the term's meaning. The adjectival connection of *working* functions as a linguistic modifier. This linguistic structure creates the first level of paradox because it sets the parameters of definition through syntactic relationships. The structure itself leads to ambiguity at best, but it also suggests contradictory meanings as the two linguistic elements work together to guide meaning. Using the **adj + n** syntactic structure, a paradoxical definition is set in motion in the form of a semantic antinomy (Watzlawick *et al.*, 1967) in which the meaning of the two elements in *working mothers* cannot be balanced. In the linguistic structure of **adj + n**, the adjective comments about the noun and is subordinate to it. The implication here is that mothers do not necessarily work. An adjective, thus, is needed to establish a subset of mothers who do work, just as the adjective "barking" would establish a subcategory of "dogs" to clarify that only certain dogs are to be included in the term.

The basic syntactic structure of **adj + n** provides the framework for more complex linguistic analysis related to paradox. In one of her most durable insights about gender and language, Robin Lakoff (1975) pointed out the embedded linguistic sexism in terms that lexically appear to have balanced semantic meanings but are, in use, imbalanced (i.e., different in not just kind but in worth, status, or evaluation) in meaning. Classic examples include *master-mistress*, *lady-gentleman*, *spinster-bachelor*. Extending this argument to the level of the multi-word term, the same point can be made about linguistic sexism. *Working mother* is a term well understood in American English, but we would rarely if ever hear the balanced term of *working father*. The assumption is that, of course, fathers work! The **adj + n** structure for *working mother* uses the modifier to call attention to something that marks *Women and Language*, Volume XXIV, No. 2, Page 22

mothers in a particular way, but such syntactic marking is not necessary for *fathers* because *work* is understood to encompass those wage-earning activities engaged in outside the domestic and parental sphere. If fathers do not work outside the home (or in jobs inside the home that are demarcated from home life), their existence—even in this new century—still requires explanation. If they both (a) work in conventional arrangements where they leave the home for certain hours of the day and (b) actively parent by participating in the daily routine of child care and management, then they likely get described more elaborately than with a term such as *working father*. They might be termed *active fathers* or *involved parents*; they *help out*, *spend time with their kids*, and so forth. Linguistically, then, *working mothers* are mothers who in addition to being mothers (that is, NOT working) are also working; they exist without a parallel term in U.S. English to describe males. More will be said in the next section about the ideological import of linguistically setting *mother* as primary without the modification of *working*.

The noun-verb relations for the terms *mother* and *father* offer one key to understanding the non-parallelism of the *working mother-working father* pair. Julia Penelope's (1990) parsing of the semantic relations of the syntactic elements shows the complexity of non-parallelism:

As a verb, *father* denotes the act of fertilization, implying no responsibility toward a child on the part of the male parent. Semantically, it refers only to a momentary spasm, yet the adverb *fatherly*, to describe men as nurturers, has the same descriptive range as *motherly*. The verb *mother* describes the actions said to inhere in the noun: (1) 'to give birth to', 'to be the mother of', (2) 'to create', 'to care for', (3) 'to watch over, nourish, and protect', and (4) 'to love'. Unlike *father*, *mother* doesn't describe the act of conceiving. (p. 188)

From this explanation, "she mothered the boy" would mean that she watched over, nourished, and protected him; but "he fathered the boy" would mean that he contributed the sperm to fertilize the egg. As verbs, then, *to mother* and *to father* exhibit non-parallel relations. The semantic range of the latter is much more restricted than the former.

### "Working Mothers" as a Sociolinguistic, Cultural Construction

Language as a cultural resource sets the terms for conducting and making sense of daily life. Conventionally, the field of sociolinguistics extends linguistics to the study of language-in-use, of language as contextually meaningful. Because social context draws from cultural ideas and beliefs, unpacking the sociolinguistic interpretation of *working mothers* requires cultural

critique. Meaning, thus, hinges on how language is used in context, and the creation and understanding of context hinges on cultural patterns. The billboard as a cultural artifact communicates with clarity if those who pass by understand from its context that the hailed addressee and referent is to a category labeled *working mothers*; such understanding would be likely for anyone familiar with mainstream U.S. culture. Moreover, the billboard's language relies on its relationship to another commonly understood label: *working women*, whose origination in U.S. English does, in fact, symbolize a change in the status of (at least some) women. From a sociolinguistic perspective, *working women* emerged in the 1960s as a lexical category to refer to liberated women, and *working mothers* likely developed as a derivative subcategory. The main category and subcategory both stipulate work as separate from being a woman or from doing womanhood. Yet, the ad uses one gender-laden term (*working mothers*) rather than another (*working women*) to hail the consumer for whom this internet shopping and errand service is targeted. The meaning here can be stated as follows:

- If you are a woman, then you may or may not be working.
- To be working is to be doing wage-earning activity but not domestic activity.
- If you are engaged in domestic activity, then you are not working and, therefore, you do not need assistance with your shopping, which is defined as non-work activity performed only by women. **BUT**
- If you are working [in wage-earning activity] and also a mother, then your status as a working person legitimizes your need for assistance with your shopping activity, which you must continue to do along with your mothering activity, even though they are not work activity, because men who have been working all along do not perform this non-work activity.

The paradoxes abound in the stipulations and negations of what counts as work.

As used in context, the syntax of *working mothers* can, then, be exploited to set up a tension between mothering and working. Consider several examples.

1. A newspaper headline reads, "**Working mothers losing sleep, deferring chores to compensate**" (Salmon, 2000). The article reports on sociological research, and the first two-thirds of the text emphasizes the condition of mothers who work. They deal with the stress of the two roles by "taking it out of their own hides" and making accommodations such as "they also don't vacuum as much" (p. A1). Toward the end of the article, we learn that the study is broad based and looks at "how Americans use their time

now compared with years ago" (p. A3). At this point, the emphasis shifts to **parents**, yet there is no explicit mention of fathers.

2. A newspaper headline announces, "**Study says working mothers don't cause children harm**" (Kong, 1999). The article explores the guilt that mothers have when they leave their children, but leads with the reassurance that "mothers who work outside of the home during the first three years of their children's lives do not harm their youngsters' behavior, mental development, or self-esteem" (p. A1). How reassuring! The article says nothing about harm to children related to absent *working fathers*, leaving us to presume that the research upon which it is based did not deal with fathers. This article even normalizes the paradoxical condition captured in the term *working mothers* by describing *mothers* (not fathers or parents) who work and put their children in daycare with the phrase "almost as American as motherhood and apple pie" (p. B4).
3. In a colorful Hewlett Packard advertisement for printer supplies, a display of beautifully wrapped birthday gifts for a child carries the lead, "look what a busy mom printed on her HP DeskJet printer" (Hewlett Packard, 1998). Reading further, we learn that this mother is "working": "You wouldn't think a hard-working mom with twins would have time to plan a homemade birthday party."
4. A web site named "Working Moms [sic] Refuge" contains features and advice on a broad range of issues—family, career, news, and—yes—recipes. On the December 14, 2000 posting, the main topic was titled "Daycare Dilemmas" with the lead reading, "How to handle a nanny who thinks she's more like another parent." There is a section called "Dad's Voice" but it is not prominently displayed on the site, nor (once again) is the site itself focused on working *parents* rather than *mothers*. The link for that section takes you to a list of items focusing predominantly on "at home dads."

All of these examples show how the term *working mother* occurs in context to reinforce the basic syntactic structure that subordinates working to mothering and stipulates mothering as non-work. In context, the term has become almost fixed in meaning. In this respect, the semantic nature of the term has developed specific associations with other concepts and their naming in communicative context. Culturally, what develops when ideas coalesce through usage of specific words and their associated terms are semantic notions. Semantic notions are ideas that have meaning stability at the abstract level within a cultural context. This type of semantic meaning develops at the level of pragmatics, but once anchored, becomes a strong connection between language symbol and "ideational meaning" (Johnson, 2000, p. 36). Thus, although there may be some liberatory surface to the term

*working mothers* because it recognizes the tensions, pressures, stresses, and demands of work and home, of professional and domestic, of public and private life, its deeper meaning in the context of the word pair evokes contradictions and sharp contrasts with any idea that might be termed *working fathers*. The label *working mothers* not only belies a paradoxical syntactic structure and meaning but also perpetuates an inconsistency, stress, and paradox between mothering and working because of the established power of the term to name (1) a condition of mothering and (2) a category of the role of mother.

Despite appearances to the contrary, the semantic notion of *working mothers*, as it has developed meaning through the ordinary processes of language-in-use, functions to support traditional, dominant ideology regarding gender. The contextual linking of the adjective *working* to mothers also has an exclusive meaning that is essential to the paradox. The term as used implies that when mothers are employed, their role as mothers weakens or diminishes. Thus, if women consider working for wages to be an elevating experience or an experience marking them as professionally equivalent to men, then doing so detracts from mothering. Women are told they have equal opportunity to work and to be successful, yet they also are told that doing so can detract from mothering should they be in that role. Thus the paradoxical dilemma: women should work for wages and (possibly) for professional satisfaction with no gender barriers before them, but if they are mothers, their "work" takes away from their "non-work" roles as mothers. Again, working for wages is set against mothering. By implication, women should be "working" and women should be "mothering," but they cannot do both. The semantic notions clash, yet also structure the code for traditional, dominant gender ideology. These ideas are cultural productions and, thus, part of the evolving cultural linguistics of sex and gender.

The analysis thus far shows how the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of *working mothers* contain aspects of ideology placing women in a paradoxical situation, especially in contrast with men. Now well-established communicative currency, *working mothers* engages an insidious sexism through its everyday usage. There is, however, more to the analysis than what is revealed by inspecting only the polarized, sexist nature of the term. The term carries messages about class and race, which intensify the deeply conservative undercurrents to the progressive image of women pursuing careers and raising children.

### **Classism and "Working Mothers"**

Packed into the term *working mothers* is the idea that a mother has the option to work or not to work. Embedded in the semantic notion that has evolved for this term is a discourse about choice. For example, the lead sentence in a *Ladies Home Journal* article (Konig, 1999) reveals the assumption of either-or choice regarding work: "Whether *Women and Language*, Volume XXIV, No. 2, Page 24

to stay home with her children or continue working is one of the most critical, and often most wrenching, decisions a woman will ever make." In a similar vein, it is not uncommon to hear college women express their interest in "working and then taking some time out for a family." What, then, is a mother who works for pay out of necessity and who does not have the option of this "wrenching" choice or of "time out"? Is she a mother in all the nounness that the word implies? Or is she left to see herself excluded from this term's optional element?

As a relatively new term, *working mothers* carries a classist meaning deeply encoded into long standing ideas about the separation of public and private domains. Kathy Ferguson's (1984) important analysis of how the theory and practice of bureaucracy depend on a sharp contrast between private and public exposes the cultural polarity between "working" and "mothering." Her description of how two terms are used is instructive.

"Private" ...refer[s] to the set of discursive and institutional practices of domestic life, the realm of personal intimacy, household labor, and reproduction within families, kin relations, or friendship networks. "Public" refers to the outside world of paid labor, of government, and of those institutions of communication, transportation, leisure, culture, and so forth, that are rooted outside the home, in the larger world of strangers. (p. 8)

Even outside the technical context of bureaucratically organized work processes, the force of cultural practices packed into conventional semantic notions creates a polarity between (a) work as public or directed beyond the personal and (b) domestic activity as private and individual and, therefore, not relevant to work. In this construction, private activity can involve chores and responsibilities, but not real work. Each domain is gender linked, men to public and women to private. It is only by linking women and mothering to privacy that conceptual clarity for the term *working mother* is possible: mothering is both a site outside the domain of work and a process of iterative activities defined in contrast to work. The term *working mother* resonates only through a prior meaning that detaches mothering and mothers from the definition of work upon which bureaucracy depends. This type of semantic separation privileges certain social classes--indeed, is socioeconomically specific. When women who are mothers must of necessity "work" in the public domain, two identity negations occur: (1) their mothering is not acknowledged as work (also the case for privileged women who do not "work" in the public domain), and (2) the totality of mothering work and "working" is not recognized (not the case for privileged women who do not "work" in the public domain).

In cases where a woman engaged in mothering performs wage-earning activities in the private domain,

she likely bears the burden of falling outside the prevailing ideologies stipulating definitions for workers and for mothers (because she displaces—read “neglects”—her private domain activities away from intimates). This would be the case for both those women who earn wages through housecleaning and those who are “homeworkers” performing tedious piecework tasks in their homes for pay (see, for example, Mohanty, 1994). Thus, *working mother*—a seemingly small linguistic construction confounds sexism with classism.

Working class women have been working all along, unaided by public attention to their circumstances; they are, moreover, excluded from many usages of the term because their experiences arise from necessity and not option. It is bad enough that women of greater economic means scurry about to piece together domestic “non-work” in the limited time left-over after “work,” sometimes even going to the extremes of hiding this labor from their “public work” lest they be thought of as less committed to their jobs and professions than are their male counterparts. For these women, *shoplink.com* represents a commercial salve to cover the deeper injuries of sexism. For women of lesser economic means, such commercial salves and other messages directed to “working mothers” make their social condition invisible through sexist and classist semantics because they are not options at all.

Workforce facts indeed point to the reality missed by the semantic slippage of *woman* into an overly inclusive category. A study by the U.S. Census Bureau (see Roylance, 2000) reported that in 1998, 59 percent of mothers with infants had “gone back to work” (meaning work for wages outside the domestic sphere); to be included in the 59 percent represents, however, either choice or necessity depending on one’s social class. The adverb “back” (as in “going back to work”) implies that work and mothering are back-and-forth/either-or, rather than simultaneous. Women of certain classes may opt to be either *mothers* or *working mothers*, but the reality is that women of other classes can only be *working mothers*—or wage-earning workers with children. For the former group, the term represents a potential contradiction, but for the latter group, the term represents a redundancy. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1997) puts it slightly differently, when she labels the boundaries between work and home/family for working class women as “fluid” (p. 5). Her analysis of Third World Women and their exploitation as “homeworkers” will be discussed in the next section on racism.

### Racism in “Working Mothers”

Like many other terms in American English, *working mothers* belies an ideology that presumes a Eurowhite interpretation. The term was coined and came into popular usage mainly in relation to those employed mothers who were privileged by race and likely by education. Newscasts, talk shows, and magazine articles frequently

report on the “growing number of working mothers....” This construction is one of quantity, that is, more-less, greater-fewer. If we return to the basic linguistic structure of the term, the anchoring noun of *mother* does not imply one who works outside the home. If there are currently more working mothers, who was working and mothering when there were less? We know with certainty that race is systematically part of the answer to this question. It is this idea that taints the term with racism and, indeed, makes it anomalous in the context of certain racial and ethnic circumstances in the United States.

The term *working mothers* points to a special case of mothers. In the African American experience especially, to work for wages outside one’s own home and to mother do not constitute a special case but, rather, typify a condition of living grounded in historical circumstances. In this context, the linguistic construction rings wrong. Consider Marsha Houston [Stanback’s] (1985) explanation some years ago about the hiatus between black women and many middle-class white women’s lives: “It is important to remember that both black men and women were brought to the United States as workers .... The black woman’s heritage from slavery—and its aftermath of poverty and racism—is a tradition of work outside the home ... her tradition of working a ‘second shift’—of historically operating in both the domestic and public spheres” (p. 181). This heritage does not negate the tensions between work outside the home and work inside the home, but the issues differ and the meanings lodged in the term make sense differently because of cultural patterns arising from the African American experience in the U.S.

Another sense in which the term *working mother* is racist has to do with what the term means in the context of family structure. Semantically, the term depends on cultural ideas and practices regarding the nuclear family. Ideologically, the nuclear family as middle class normative practice contains only one mother. The semantic notion that has developed for *working mother* conjures up images of the solitary woman, frazzled by working at her job or profession and meeting the demands of her home and children (and possibly her husband as well). She’s grocery shopping, planning and preparing meals, tending to house chores, dropping off/picking up clothes at the dry cleaner, trying to find her list for the drug store, turning in the videos so there won’t be a late fine, chauffeuring kids to their dental appointments, activities, and play dates (or arranging rides for them), and trying to preserve a moment for herself—perhaps to read a magazine, take a bath, do her nails. This, surely, is a life style, but only a particular type of life style.

In contrast to the cultural practice of lodging childcare with the mother role in the nuclear family, African American traditions include “othermothers”—women kin as well as those who take on the role of kin. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) draws on the insights and case studies of many who have documented othermothering as a cultural resource, making the point that moving the mothering

function beyond the blood mother not only addresses real needs for collective parenting but also fosters ideas about the family directly counter to middle class norms for the nuclear family:

The resiliency of women-centered family networks illustrates how traditional cultural values—namely, the African origins of community-based childcare—can help people cope with and resist oppression. By continuing community-based child care, African-American women challenge one fundamental assumption underlying the capitalist system itself: that children are “private property” and can be disposed of as such. (p. 122)

Pointing to the racism inherent in the ideology undergirding the interpretation of *working mothers* does not deny unmet needs for childcare and domestic assistance. These needs overwhelm many women. But to be the kind of mother spoken to in many usages of *working mother* is to hold up a lens to mothering that places certain cultural practices and economic circumstances entirely out of the viewing range.

Even where economic circumstances are not at issue, the significance of how mothering is understood and communicated can carry racist messages. A middle class African American woman who is—in the tradition of African American women—working for wages, but in this case in a profession, may be a participant in othermothering because of its value as a cultural practice that creates community bonds.

### The Work of “Working Mothers”

Most people, but especially women, have a good understanding that *working mothers* represents a life circumstance in which time is scarce, chores many, and roles often conflicting. The semantic notions packed into the term capture at least one version of what could be described as “real life” (which is also a semantic construction whose meaning is build up in the context of language-in-use that metaphorically reifies time). One estimate of the difference between women and men in time spent on “family business” (child care, shopping, errands, housework, cooking) puts women at twice the number of hours per week than men: 35.1 hours compared to men’s 17.4 hours (Shapiro, 1997). An argument can be made for the importance of naming the burdens and tensions faced by women who have primary responsibility for their children and home and work outside the home for wages: the name makes the circumstances much more public than they would otherwise be. Yet, the particular name given to the circumstances carries elements of meaning that frame the circumstances being named. To many, *working women* feels right as a term because it opens up the legitimacy of resources, networks of support, and recognition from

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others. Through its structure and use, however, the term both creates the kind of contradictions exposed here and establishes in new ways the lack of parity between women and men.

What linguistic options could we implement? Terms such as *working parents* and *parenting workers* would be simple replacements to overcome the sexism of *working women*. But neither addresses the racism and classism contained in the term. Specifying work for wages with the word “employment” would also clarify the referent for a particular type of work. Although an improvement because mothering is uncoupled from the “not work” category of activities, this term could easily lead to a sexist nonparallelism between “employed mother” and “employed father.” Another option would be to stretch farther linguistically and abandon both the noun base and the imbalance in syntactic components within the term by moving to a verb adjunct structure without a gender marker. The result could be *working/parenting* or *works/parents*: “They are working/parenting” or “She/he works/parents.” Yet, these too define parenting as different from work. Perhaps “jobbing/parenting” or “employed parent” (but not “employed mother”) would do the semantic work needed.

### Coming to Terms with Work and Gender

Even if the handy *working mothers* remains with us, we should be cautious about where, with whom, and about whom that term is used. Our goal should be to soften and not to strengthen traditional gender ideology. The danger in any use of the term will always be its “sound bite” character, which reduces complex meaning potential to a one-size-fits-all semantics. The term *working mother* has become easy shorthand for a cultural theme of great reach and significance. The term is simple and, thus, seemingly helpful, but in that simplicity lies the problem with all sound bites. Borrowing ideas from Jeffrey Scheuer’s (1999) provocative analysis of television and the American mind, the kind of simplification characteristic of the television medium and of sound bites in general “promotes, and epitomizes, political conservatism” (p. 10). The combination of linguistic structure, sociolinguistic usage, and U. S. cultural history combine to make *working mothers* a dangerous semantic notion rife with concatenated, politically conservative ideological undercurrents that normalize paradox. Language as our dynamic, symbolic resource for representing experience should speak in less sexist, classist, and racist ways of the daily, holistic lived experience. Many changes have been made in U.S. English to remedy the dominant force of gender ideology, which makes it especially important not to support new linguistic inventions that undermine the larger project and encode new versions of old sexist ideas in our cultural discourses—discourses that not only anchor daily experience but also facilitate projections into the future.

A recent example of how media frame the issues discussed in this paper makes blatantly clear why the paradoxical construction *working mothers* should be abandoned. An article in the June 4, 2001 issue of *Time* linked “Moms and Guilt” in the headline (Dickinson, 2001). The author began the article with a graphic description of what “adults” face in raising children: “spit-up stains, poopy diapers, homework assignments, soccer games ... circles under the eyes and, *for those of us who work, bucketloads of guilt*” (p. 80, emphasis added). Dickinson engages the paradox of defining child rearing as NOT working, but this is not the worst of the ideological baggage she carries in her message to *working moms*. Even though the message is that moms should not feel guilty, Dickinson’s entreaty about the next generation is laced with sexism:

We who feel guilty about working, even if we love our jobs, teach our kids that working is somehow a bad thing. Since most of our daughters will probably grow up to be working mothers, this is hardly the way to send them into the world. (p. 80)

The power of guilt to anguish *working mothers* may well be commonly experienced as a sexist force not generally part of men’s lives, but the *Time* writer sees its impact on daughters who will be “working mothers,” and not on sons. How might the article have been different? One possibility would be to focus on stresses faced by adults with children as they struggle with the many demands in their lives. The ideas lodged in a semantic notion such as *working mothers* will only dissipate to the extent that the sound bite recedes and is replaced by discourse free of the sexism, classism, and racism lurking in terms often thought to be progressive verbal currency.

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