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LINGUISTIC INEQUALITIES AND GENDER: ISSUES AND BEST PRACTICES

A LINGUIST POINT OF VIEW – ISABELLA CHIARI



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GENDER IN LANGUAGE STRUCTURES

PERVASIVENES OF STRATEGIES

GUIDELINES

Categories of gender-discriminatory language

There are three broad categories under which much gender-discriminatory language falls:

- 1 | **Stereotypes: assigning gender when gender is unknown or irrelevant as a result of stereotypes.**
- 2 | **Invisibility and omission: language which casts the male as the generic norm and keeps women from being visible in public life.**
- 3 | **Subordination and trivialisation: language which paints one gender, often women, as inferior, or belittles them.**



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GENDER IN LANGUAGE

- **Masculine generic** (in words and in grammar) - I. GENERIC USE OF THE MASCULINE GENDER
 - The traditional grammatical convention in most grammatical gender languages is that for groups combining both sexes, the masculine gender is used as the 'inclusive' or 'generic' form, whereas the feminine is 'exclusive', i.e. referring to women only. This generic or neutralizing use of the masculine gender has often been perceived as discriminating against women.
- **Pairing order**
- **Lexical gender words** (e.g., *woman, father, male, female*)
 - In addition, the use in many languages of the word 'man' in a wide range of idiomatic expressions which refer to both men and women, such as manpower, layman, man-made, statesmen, committee of wise men, should be discouraged. With increased awareness, such expressions can usually be made gender-neutral.
- 2. NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS
- **Gender neutral words**
- **Grammatical gender**



GENDER IN LANGUAGE

- Referring to *a woman and a man* or to *a man and a woman* is not perceived as being the same, and the resulting biased representations – toward the first person mentioned – have been well documented (Hegarty et al., 2016).
- There are some universal features such as the existence of **lexical gender words** (e.g., *woman, father, male, female*) or the possibility of combining lexical gender elements with other nouns (as in English **girlfriend, male teacher**).



GRAMMATICAL GENDER

- Most research on grammatical gender and gender representations has reflected the extent to which formal features of a language, such as the existence and number of grammatical gender categories (i.e., gender marking of pronouns, and/or nouns), may contribute to (biased) gender-related representations.
- In gendered (e.g., French, German) and semi-gendered languages (e.g., English, for which this feature only applies to pronouns), the masculine form tends to be used either specifically – referring exclusively to men – or in a so-called generic way – when there are female and male referents, or when the gender of referents is unknown or irrelevant. (Gygax et al. 2019)
- Interestingly, the dual meaning of masculine forms is often grounded in historical androcentric (and sexist) pressures
- According to a recent typological sample, they occur in **40% of the world's languages possess grammatical gender distinctions** (Corbett, 2013a). From those, **75% have a gender distinction based on sex.**
- This distinction is relevant for research of the way gender distinction affects our representation of women and men.



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3 TYPES OF LANGUAGES : DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

1. Natural gender languages

- English
- personal nouns are mostly gender neutral and don't classify inanimate nouns according to different genders
 - Most personal nouns behave similarly, meaning that they are not specified for sex or gender identity (e.g. child, people, individual, person)
- there are personal pronouns specific to each gender
 - (e.g., my child – she, your teacher – he).

2. Grammatical gender languages

- German, Italian, Arabic
- every noun (human and inanimate) has a grammatical gender
 - It. figlio (m. son), figlia (m. daughter), sole (m. sun), luna (f. moon)
 - Ger. der Sohn (m) die Tochter (f), die Sonne (f) der Mond (m)
 - Ar. الابن (m) الابنة (f) - الشمس (f) القمر (m)
- the gender of personal pronouns usually matches the reference noun
- These nouns control agreement of various other lexical categories such as determiners, adjectives or pronouns.

3. Genderless languages

- Turkish
- most human nouns as well as pronouns are generally unspecified for gender
 - Tur. Öğretmen (teacher), kişi (person) güneş (sun), ay (moon)
 - O (he/she)
- The structure of these languages
- do not enforce the use of gender-marked forms, even though this information can be conveyed by lexical means, such as the Turkish erkek “man or male” or kız “girl.”



MORE ON GRAMMAR AND GENDER

- **Gender assignment** is mostly semantically **arbitrary** for inanimate nouns, whereas the grammatical gender of human nouns shows considerable correspondence with the **sex** of the referent (or gender identity). In some cases, the grammatical gender of nouns denoting human referents is different from their lexical gender (German **das Mädchen** n.n. “the girl,”))
- In other cases, nouns denoting humans may be used to refer to women and men (French **la personne** n.f. “the person,” **l’individu** n.m. “the individual”). – Italian – Arabic
- In a language such as Italian, some feminine/female forms (names as well as nouns) are morphologically derived from masculine/male (e.g., **poeta** n.m. > **poetessa** n.f., “poet”), sometime the feminine bears derogatory connotations.



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MORE ON GRAMMAR AND GENDER

- **Masculine-male generics:** masculine word forms are not used specifically to refer to male referents, but may be used with the intention to generically refer to (groups of) individuals whose referential/biological gender is irrelevant or unknown. It. **studenti** (m) Ger. **die Studenten** (inherent), Ar. **الطلاب** (m)
- **Asymmetries:** address terms may not be symmetrical between women and men
- (e.g., in English, the potentially sexist distinction between **Mrs** and **Miss** for women, while only one form, **Mr.**, exists for men)
- (e.g., in Italian the lack of corresponding forms for **medico** n.m., “medical doctor” or **sage-femme** n.f., “midwife.” Other asymmetries, for example, can be found in morphology, semantic connotations related to masculine feminine equivalent forms, or in various types of derogatory meanings attached to certain forms.



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LANGUAGE POLICIES

BEST PRACTICES AND EXAMPLES

THE EU

- Many countries have pledged themselves to an equal treatment of women and men (e.g., the member states of the European Union and associated states in the Treaty of Lisbon- European Commission, 2007), and the use of GFL is widely recommended.
- But the implementation of GFL has reached different stages in different countries and speech communities.
- UNESCO's position in favor of GFL is described in their gender equality guidelines: “This development indicated a growing awareness that language does not merely reflect the way we think: it also shapes our thinking. If words and expressions that imply that women are inferior to men are constantly used, that assumption of inferiority tends to become part of our mindset; hence the need to adjust our language when our ideas evolve” (UNESCO, 2011, p. 4).
- The document not only became the most widely recognized international standard for GFL, it also regulates language use in internal documents and publications of UNESCO.
- Similar guidelines for publications were issued by the European Commission (2008), referring to all working languages of the European Union (EU). Yet, the standards promoted by UNESCO and the EU do not regulate language use in the different countries and are not considered mandatory within their member states.



EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

- In 2008, the European Parliament was one of the first international organisations to adopt multilingual guidelines on gender-neutral language.
 - Gender-neutral language is a generic term covering the use of non-sexist language, inclusive language or gender-fair language. The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex or social gender is the norm. Using gender-fair and inclusive language also helps reduce gender stereotyping, promotes social change and contributes to achieving gender equality.
- International and European institutions (such as the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the International Labour Organisation, the European Parliament and the European Commission), professional associations, universities, major news agencies and publications have adopted guidelines for the non-sexist use of language, either as separate documents or as specific recommendations included in their style guides.
- The way in which the principle of gender sensitivity in language is reflected in a text also depends heavily on the type and register of the text involved.



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I. GENERIC USE OF THE MASCULINE GENDER

- If the gender of the person is relevant to the point being made, or when referring to individual persons, gender-specific terms should be used, in particular in grammatical gender languages (e.g. 'la haute représentante de l'Union pour les affaires étrangères et la politique de sécurité').
- Generally speaking, a person's own wishes as to how he or she would like to be addressed or referred to, should be respected (e.g. 'Madame le Président' or 'Madame la Présidente').



2. NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

- When referring to functions in Parliament's texts, generic terms are used in natural gender languages and in genderless languages, while the masculine form may be used by way of exception in grammatical gender languages (e.g. 'chaque député ne peut soutenir qu'une candidature').
- If the gender of the person is relevant to the point being made, or when referring to individual persons, gender-specific terms should be used, in particular in grammatical gender languages (e.g. 'la haute représentante de l'Union pour les affaires étrangères et la politique de sécurité').
- Generally speaking, a person's own wishes as to how he or she would like to be addressed or referred to, should be respected (e.g. 'Madame le Président' or 'Madame la Présidente').



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3. USE OF TITLES

- In some languages (for example French and German), titles such as ‘Madame’, ‘Mademoiselle’, ‘Frau’ or ‘Fräulein’ originally indicated the marital status of the woman to whom the title applied. This has changed over the years and the use of those titles no longer reflects such status. Administrative practice is following this trend. The title ‘Mademoiselle’ is for example progressively being deleted from administrative forms in French-speaking countries, leaving only the choice between ‘Madame’ and ‘Monsieur’.
- In Parliament’s texts, titles such as ‘Monsieur’, ‘Frau’, ‘Ms’, etc. are most often simply dropped in favour of the person's **full name**.



GUIDELINES

- **Avoid the generic use of 'man' and its derivatives**
 - Alternatives: humanity (for mankind), staff (for manpower), a French person (for Frenchman)/the French or French people (for Frenchmen), synthetic or artificial (for manmade), advisory panel (for committee of wise men), political leaders (for statesmen).
- **Avoid GENERIC USE OF 'HE', 'HIS', ETC.**
 - Use plural forms ('officials shall carry out their duties ...')
 - Use the imperative ('please send your CV to ...')
 - Omit the pronoun altogether ('an official's salary is dependent on his length of service')
 - Use the passive ('the relevant documents should be sent to ...')
 - If none of the above strategies work, use **'he or she'**, but do so sparingly and avoid repeating it more than once in the same sentence.



GUIDELINES

- Titles

- Use 'Mr' for a man; 'Ms' for a woman, avoiding 'Miss' and 'Mrs', unless it is known that the person referred to specifically wants to be referred to by one of those titles; use 'Dr' for both genders (in the sense both of 'medical doctor' and 'Ph.D.');
- use 'Professor' (abbreviation: 'Prof.') for both genders.



OTHER STRATEGIES TOWARDS GENDER NEUTRALITY (INCLUSIVE)

- **Gender Neutral Pronoun:**

- En. An applicant may submit *their* complaint

- **Using Plural Nouns:**

- En. Employees may apply only if *they*

- **Pronoun Deletion:**

- En. An official's leave entitlement depends on ~~his~~ age

- **Change the possessive pronoun “his” to “a” or “the”:**

- En. The candidate must submit ~~his~~ *an* application.

- **Use the relative pronoun “ who ” instead of “if he:**

- En. Priority will be given to an applicant if ~~he~~ *who* fulfils... / Priority will be given to an applicant *to those who* fulfil...



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GUIDELINES

Guiding questions for choosing between gender-neutral language and gender-sensitive language:

- 1 Will mentioning gender shed light on key aspects of the issue you are discussing?**
If so, use gender-sensitive language. If not, use gender-neutral language.
- 2 Are you referring to people in general or a specific group?**
If you are mentioning people in general, it may be acceptable to use gender-neutral language (in some cases), whereas if you are mentioning a specific group it is usually relevant to discuss gender.
- 3 Are you explicitly aiming to be inclusive to those of a non-binary gender?**
If so, you may wish to opt for gender-neutral language (particularly the third person plural: "they", "them", etc.) or else to use gendersensitive language that includes this group, making use of inclusive new terms such as "zhe" or "e".



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GUIDELINES

Key principles for inclusive language use

You should aim to follow these principles if you wish to make your language inclusive and transformative:



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- 1 | **Recognise and challenge stereotypes.**
- 2 | **Be inclusive and avoid omission and making others invisible.**
- 3 | **Be respectful and avoid trivialisation and subordination.**



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TEST

Preamble

Precarious employment is arguably man's greatest challenge in the modern age. Michland is still recovering from the effects of the recent economic crisis, but the benefits have not been equally shared amongst her citizens. Although unemployment has started to fall, the rise of low-pay, insecure jobs is threatening the ability of families to make ends meet. More and more families are facing poverty and insecurity, through no fault of their own. This development is wreaking havoc on workers from all occupations – from builders and policemen through to teachers and even waitresses.

On 1 November 2000, a spokesman for the President stated:

"The failures of the last government have left many families struggling. Our social inclusion strategy embodies the virile action needed to overcome the spectre of precarious employment and give everyone a decent chance in life"

This strategy aims to ensure that:

- Every employee has sufficient income and social protection to protect himself from poverty;
- There are adequate measures to support the work-life balance of women;
- Early years interventions are in place for parents and children at risk of poverty;
- Boys and girls everywhere have access to a decent education, regardless of their income.



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SPEAK UP



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TEST

Preamble

Gendering of an inanimate object (country).

Casting the male as generic and focusing only on the experiences of men and boys.

Precarious employment is arguably **man's** greatest challenge in the modern age. Michland is still recovering from the effects of the recent economic crisis, but the **its** have not been equally shared amongst **her** citizens. Although unemployment has started to fall, the rise of low-pay, insecure jobs is threatening the ability of families to make ends meet. More and more families are facing poverty and precarity, through no fault of their own. This development is wreaking havoc on workers from all occupations – from builders and policemen through to teachers and even waitresses.

Gendered occupation is being used even though not all waiting staff are women.

Not necessary to gender this occupation, as gender is irrelevant.

Gendered occupation is being used even though not all police officers are men.

In November 2000, **a spokesman** for the President stated: "The failures of the last government have left many families struggling. Our social inclusion strategy embodies the **virile** action needed to overcome the spectre of precarious employment and give everyone a decent chance in life"

Gendered adjective.

Clear gender bias – reflects notion that all employees are men.

- This strategy aims to ensure that:
- Every employee has sufficient income and social protection to **protect himself** from poverty;
 - There are adequate measures to support the work-life balance of **women**;
 - Early years interventions are in place for parents and children at risk of poverty;
 - **Boys and girls** everywhere have access to a decent education and income.

It is positive that the strategy includes specific measures to support women, but the rationale behind these measures needs to be clear to



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TEST

Preamble

Precarious employment is arguably **humanity's** greatest challenge in the modern age. Michland is still recovering from the effects of the recent economic crisis, but the benefits have not been equally shared amongst **its** citizens. Although unemployment has started to fall, the rise of low-pay, insecure jobs is threatening the ability of families to make ends meet. More and more families are facing poverty and insecurity, through no fault of their own. This development is wreaking havoc on workers from all occupations – from builders and **police officers** through to teachers and even **waiting staff**.

On 1 November 2000, a **spokesperson** for the President stated:

*“The failures of the last government have left many families struggling. Our social inclusion strategy embodies the **strong** action needed to overcome the spectre of precarious employment and give everyone a decent chance in life”*

This strategy aims to ensure that:

- **All employees** have sufficient income and social protection to protect **themselves** from poverty;
- There are adequate measures to support the reconciliation of family and professional responsibilities of **parents with young children, and particularly to support new mothers, who continue to bear the majority of caring responsibilities**;
- Early years interventions are in place for parents and children at risk of poverty;
- **Girls and boys** everywhere have access to a decent education, regardless of their income.



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SPEAK UP

THE ROLE OF DISSEMINATION, AWARENESS EDUCATION

- School and education are of particular importance for the implementation of GFL. In most countries there are few official GFL guidelines for authors of educational materials ([Eurydice, 2009](#)) and regulations concerning schoolbooks exist only in certain countries (e.g., Germany, Ireland, or Iceland).
- Similarly, only a few countries require schoolbooks to be officially evaluated or approved. In the UK, for example, educational authorities do not monitor teaching materials and schools choose them autonomously.



USING GENDER-FAIR OR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- Involves equally all member of the target audience (of any kind of communication)
- In order to tackle gender inequality, we must look at the way we communicate.
- Using gender-sensitive language can:
 - Make it easier to see important differences between the needs of women and men;
 - Challenge unconscious assumptions people have about gender roles in society;
 - Lay the foundation for greater gender equality throughout society;
 - Raise awareness of how language affects our behaviour;
 - Make people more comfortable with expressing themselves and behaving in ways that were once not considered 'typical' of their gender.
- Promotes values of inclusion and diversity
- Reduces stereotyping roles related to gender
- Remember there is **lexicon!**



AND EUROPE

- In the multilingual environment of the European Parliament, the principles of gender neutrality in language and gender-inclusive language require the use of different strategies in the various official languages, depending on the grammatical typology of each language. (GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE in the European Parliament)

- <https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-sensitive-communication/overview>



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REFERENCES

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- [Hamilton writing guide for avoiding sexist language](#)
- [APA guidelines for nonsexist use of language](#)
- [Tasmanian Department of Education guidelines for inclusive language](#)
- [MIT editorial style guide](#)
- [NCTE guidelines for gender-fair use of language](#)
- [Rider University Inclusive Language Guide: Definition & Examples](#)

