

Gendered Language: Does It Influence Our Biases?

UU-UNO Seminar, 12 April 2019

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1. Gendered languages (e.g. German and Romance languages):

- Every noun has a grammatical gender (masculine, feminine, or neuter nouns; note: some languages have more than 3 grammatical genders)
- Pronouns and other grammatically dependent words signal gender:

Une fille intelligente (Fr.)

Una chica inteligente (Sp.)

Una ragazza intelligente (It.)

O fată inteligentă (Rom.)

Ein intelligentes Mädchen (Ger. not feminine but neuter!) *NB: To quote Mark Twain, "In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl."*

2. Natural gender languages (e.g. English, Swedish)

- Nouns are gender-neutral – they do not have grammatical gender
- Personal and possessive pronouns (*she/he; her/him; hers/his*), possessive adjectives (*her/his*), and reflexive pronouns (*himself/herself*) are gender-specific
- A few nouns are specifically masculine or feminine (*actor/actress, waiter/waitress, etc.*)

3. Genderless languages (e.g. Finnish, Turkish, Hungarian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean)

- Neither personal nouns nor pronouns differentiate grammatical gender
- Some lexical items refer to male or female beings (man, woman, girl, boy, father, mother, etc.); and word endings can signal female or male persons (e.g. the Hungarian feminizing suffix *-né*, which is attached to names and means "wife of"; *-nő*, attached to nouns denoting professions (e.g. *orvosnő* = female doctor; *tanárnő* = female teacher)

Gender Biases and Asymmetries across Languages

• Gendered nouns acquiring "feminine" and "masculine" attributes:

Bridge = die Brücke (fem. Ger.). el puente (masc. Sp.); le pont (masc. Fr.)

Patterns of thought ("mental schemas") that dictate "male" and "female" traits (e.g. description of a bridge: beautiful and elegant for German native speakers; strong, dangerous, sturdy for Spanish native speakers)

• Feminine forms as less prestigious or derogatory:

Romanian: *Doamnă ministru* (fem. form of address but masc. form of noun) = Madame minister and not **Doamnă ministră* (fem. address, fem. noun); *Doamnă doctor* = Madame doctor and not **Doamnă doctoriță; profesoară* (fem.) may be used when referring to an educator in high school, lyceum, but not to a university professor (who is *profesor*)

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French: *Madame l'Ambassadeur* (fem. address, masc. noun) designates a female ambassador; *Madame l'Ambassadrice* (fem. address, fem. noun) is referred to an ambassador's wife; also: *Madame Le Directeur*; *Madame Le Ministre*

French: *couturier* (masc.) = fashion designer; *couturière* (fem.) = seamstress, female tailor

English: *governor* – *governess* (strictly a woman employed to teach children in a private household); *master* – *mistress* (originally a neutral counterpart to “mister” or “master,” it is used primarily to refer to the female lover of a man who is married to another woman; often a “kept woman”); *bachelor* – *spinster* (carries pejorative connotations in reference to age and perceived desirability in the marriage)

Polish: *sekretarka* (fem.) = female secretary (personal assistant); *sekretarz* (masc.) = male personal assistant or high governmental function, whether male or female

Hungarian: *titkár* = personal assistant, secretary of an administration (organization), or high governmental function; *titkárnök* = female secretary in an office

- **Masculine forms as “the default”**

Use of masculine generics to refer to prototypical human beings, mixed-sex groups, or persons whose sex is unknown or irrelevant

German: *Der durchschnittliche Arzt verwendet nur 10 Minuten Zeit für jeden Patienten.*
'The average doctor (masc.) spends only ten minutes on each patient (masc.)'

English:

- Generic *he*, *his*, or *him*:

*The department chair must submit **his** budget by the end of the month.*

*As someone grows older, **he** grows more reflective.*

- Generic *man*: *Reason is what distinguishes **man** from other animals.*

mankind = all humanity

man used in job-related terms such as *repairman*, *foreman*, *chairman*, *freshman*, *mailman*, *policeman*, *fisherman*, *sportsman*, *layman*, *anchorman*, *salesman* or in expressions such as *Caution: Men at Work*

Finnish: *mies* = man; ‘mies’ added to job titles and used for both men and women: *laki-mies* = law-man, lawyer. The Speaker of the Finnish Parliament is referred to as *puhemies* – either *herra puhemies* (Mr. Chairman) or *rouva puhemies* (Mrs. or Madame Chairman)

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What gender biases do you observe in these texts? What options are there to make the gender-biased terms more gender-neutral or more gender-inclusive?

- (1) No one is more aware of the essential meaninglessness of moving from one place to another than Lawrence Osborne, and rather than attempt to overcome it by inventing a mission he simply grabs the bull by the horns. "The problem of the modern traveler," he writes on the opening page of *THE NAKED TOURIST: In Search of Adventure and Beauty in the Age of the Airport Mall*, "is that he has nowhere left to go. The entire world is a tourist installation, and the awful taste of simulacrum is continually in his mouth." (*The New York Times*, June 4, 2006)
- (2) At ski areas up and down the jagged peaks of the Sierra Nevada, where California's drought has hit historic proportions and the broader threat of climate change hangs heavy over an industry built on optimism, the man-made snow is flying. (*The New York Times*, November 23, 2014)
- (3) I learned some of the math-specific history of racial exclusion, too, from Dr. Goins's speech at last month's math conference in Baltimore: In 1969, when the leadership of the nearly all-white American Mathematical Society counseled members to reject a resolution to address the shortage of black and Hispanic mathematicians in its ranks, a white mathematician, Lee Lorch, wrote in protest: "Do we care only for those already in the profession? Is the Society willing to accept the present nearly-complete exclusion from our mathematical manpower pool of Black America?" (*The New York Times*, February 20, 2019)
- (4) Renting an apartment in New York City is an exercise in financial exhibitionism. By the time you are offered a lease, your future landlord knows your salary, savings and credit history, down to that unpaid Verizon bill from four years ago. If a past rental dispute ended up in housing court, good luck getting the new apartment, because he probably knows about that, too. (*The New York Times*, September 23, 2016)
- (5) When I worked as a magazine editor, not a month went by that someone didn't propose that we sneak a writer into North Korea. The magazine, it was agreed, would have to distance itself from the project in case something happened to the reporter, but if we could find someone freelance enough and gonzo enough and willing enough to go on his own steam, uninsured — we'd get a bodyguard/translator/photographer, of course, and pay well for the story, if it came in all right — then, you know, wouldn't that be so cool? (*The New York Times*, February 29, 2008)

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Best Practices/Strategies in English

Some strategies that can be applied, when speaking or writing in English, to be more gender-inclusive:

- Use non-discriminatory language (e.g. when referring to or addressing specific individuals, use forms of address and pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity)
- Make gender visible when it is relevant (e.g. using paired forms, that is both feminine and masculine pronouns: *If any employee needs to take time off, s/he (OR he/she OR he or she) should contact the Personnel Department*)
- Do not make gender visible when it is not relevant (e.g. use “they,” “them,” “their,” and “themselves” as singular generics: *As someone grows older, he grows more reflective* → *As someone grows older, they grow more reflective*; or simply pluralize: *In growing older, people grow more reflective*; *As we grow older, we grow more reflective*; or use “who”: *Someone who grows older grows more reflective*; use gender-neutral words: chairperson, mail carrier, police officer, humankind, etc.)

Envisioning your audience is a critical skill in every speaking/writing context. Perhaps the best test for gender-inclusive language is to imagine a diverse group of people listening to you or reading your paper. Would each audience member/reader feel respected?



SYSTEM-WIDE
STRATEGY ON
GENDER
PARITY



The United Nations has recently produced guidelines aimed at helping United Nations staff to communicate in a gender-inclusive way, in the six official languages of the Organization. These guidelines reflect the specificities and unique features of each language, recommending remedies that are tailored to the linguistic context in which staff work, whether in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian or Spanish. Please consult the website <https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/index.shtml> for guidelines, resources, and practical activities to raise awareness of the subject and better understand how to apply the guidelines.