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LINGUISTIC INEQUALITIES AND GENDER: ISSUES AND BEST PRACTICES

A LINGUIST POINT OF VIEW – ISABELLA CHIARI

WHY LANGUAGE IS RELEVANT?

- The way we perceive women and men in society is partly grounded in the way we **SPEAK** or **WRITE** about these two groups. With language we **BUILD** representations.
- Cross-linguistic comparisons will remain useful for documenting the effect of language on thought (and on social constructs)
- Most cross-linguistic comparisons of grammatical gender effects on mental representations have documented interesting variations.





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GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE OR INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

TWO PERSPECTIVES: ONE BACKGROUND

GENDER AND SEX

- The **WORLD HEALTH ORGANISATION** summarises the difference between sex and gender in the following way:
- **SEX** refers to “the different **biological and physiological** characteristics of males and females, such as reproductive organs, chromosomes, hormones, etc.”
- **GENDER** refers to "the **socially** constructed characteristics of women and men – such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men. It varies from society to society and can be changed.
 - The concept of gender includes five important elements: relational, hierarchical, historical, contextual and institutional. While most people are born either male or female, they are taught appropriate norms and behaviours – including how they should interact with others of the same or opposite sex within households, communities and work places. When individuals or groups do not “fit” established gender norms they often face stigma, discriminatory practices or social exclusion – all of which adversely affect health
- And then we have **GRAMMATICAL GENDER**



TWO VIEWS OF THE ISSUE

GENDER-FAIR LANGUAGE

- This approach reflects the assumption that language, here gender-fair language, is a tool to **influence** people's gendered perception of reality.
 - Grammatical gender languages (e.g., French, German, Dutch, Spanish, Italian, Arabic,) suggest that they are perceived in a less gender-typed manner when they are described in gender-fair language, more specifically in pair forms.
 - Languages less gendered (e.g. English, Turkish)

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- The inclusive language approach is broader and includes issues such as: gender, disability, sexual orientation, race, age, diverse vulnerable groups.
- The Guidelines for Inclusive Language, published by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), open_in_new define inclusive language as **language that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.”**



GENDER FAIR LANGUAGE

- Gender-fair language (GFL) aims at reducing gender stereotyping and discrimination.
- Two principle strategies have been employed to make languages gender-fair and to treat women and men symmetrically: **neutralization** and **feminization**. (Sczesny et al 2016)
 - **Neutralization** is achieved, for example, by replacing male-masculine forms (policeman) with gender-unmarked forms (police officer)
 - **Feminization** relies on the use of feminine forms to make female referents visible (i.e., the applicant... **he or she** instead of the applicant... he).



GENDER FAIR LANGUAGE

- Feminist scholars have promoted gender-fair language for over half a century. In the 1970s, feminists considered the generic use of masculine pronouns and masculine occupational titles problematic and “both a symptom and a source of fundamental androcentrism” (Braun et al. 2005, p. 3).
 - Empirical studies have shown that masculine generics are androcentric because they more readily evoke mental images of men
 - Furthermore, masculine generics influence attitudes and behavior, especially among women. For example, women were less motivated to apply for a job when masculine generics were used in a job advertisement
- To counter the negative effects of masculine generics, many languages have introduced gender-fair alternatives to masculine generics throughout the late twentieth century



GENDER FAIR LANGUAGE

- Linguistic gender asymmetries are ubiquitous.
- An almost universal and fundamental asymmetry lies in the use of masculine generics.
 - In English, for example, generic **he** can be used when gender is irrelevant (e.g., the user... he) and in German, masculine role nouns serve as labels for mixed gender groups (e.g., **einige Lehrer**, masc.pl 'several teachers' for a group of male and female teachers).
- Thus, **masculine forms** not only designate men but also **mixed-gender groups or referents** whose gender is unknown or unspecified (see Stahlberg et al., 2007).
- **Feminine forms**, on the other hand, do not function generically but refer to **women only** (Hellinger and Bußmann, 2001).



NEUTRALIZATION

- Gender-marked terms are replaced by gender-indefinite nouns (English *policeman* by *police officer*).
- In grammatical gender languages, gender-differentiated forms are replaced, for instance, **forms with invariant grammatical gender** which refer to female as well as male persons;
 - e.g., German *Staatsoberhaupt*, neut. 'head of state' or *Fachkraft*, fem. 'expert' in German).
- Neutralization has been recommended especially for natural gender languages and genderless languages as it is fairly easy to avoid gender markings in these languages.
- Thus, neither generic he nor the combination he/she, but “singular they is the dominant pronoun in modern written British English.
- However, despite its use, singular they has never been endorsed by institutions of the English language, such as major dictionaries and style guides (although many style guides now reject generic he...)” (Paterson, 2014, p. 2).



FEMINIZATION

- In contrast, feminization is based on the explicit inclusion of women.
- Thus, masculine generics are replaced by **feminine-masculine word pairs**
 - (e.g., German Elektri~~ker~~innen und Elektri~~ker~~ ‘[female and male] electricians’; Polish nauczycielki i nauczyciele ‘[female and male] teachers’) or abbreviated forms with slashes (e.g., German Elektri~~ker~~/in; Polish nauczyciel/ka) or brackets (e.g., Elektri~~ker~~[in]; nauczyciel[ka]).
- Feminization has been recommended for grammatical gender languages such as German, Spanish, Czech, and Italian usually in combination with neutralizing in order to avoid overly complex sentence structures.



FEMINIZATION

- However, feminization is not always advantageous for women.
- The Italian feminine suffix **-essa**, for example, has a slightly **derogatory connotation** (e.g., Marcato and Thüne, 2002).
 - Accordingly, a woman introduced as **professoressa** ‘female professor’ was perceived as less persuasive than a man or than a woman referred to with the masculine form **professore** (Mucchi-Faina, 2005).
 - Masculine terms used in reference to a female jobholder were associated with higher status than feminine job titles with **-essa** (Merkel et al., 2012).



LINGUISTIC ASYMMETRIES

- The latest findings are more comprehensive and indicate how **linguistic asymmetries may facilitate (unintended) forms of social discrimination** (Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Stahlberg et al., 2007).
 - For example, adult women were reluctant to apply to gender-biased job advertisements (e.g., English job titles ending in -man) and were more interested in the same job when the advertisement had an unbiased form (Bem and Bem, 1973).



MASCULINE FORMS

- Regardless of language structure and of the ease of implementing GFL ([Bußmann and Hellinger, 2003](#)), a consistent finding is that **speakers do not understand masculine forms as referring to both genders** equally but that they interpret them in a male-biased way. This underscores the importance of implementing GFL in everyday language and of using it consistently, so that speakers take up this usage in their own texts and utterances.



INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- The Guidelines for Inclusive Language, published by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), [open_in_new](#) define inclusive language as **language that “acknowledges diversity, conveys respect to all people, is sensitive to differences, and promotes equal opportunities.”**
- Understanding the **psychological** mechanisms behind gender-inclusive language use is important because interpersonal communication contributes to gender **stereotyping** via written words, spoken utterances, and the mass media.
- As a tool of social practice, language functions as a device not only for transferring information but also for expressing social categorizations and hierarchies.
- *Person-centered language* and *person-first language* are other terms that fall under the inclusive language umbrella.



INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

- The way people communicate sends subtle messages that can have a powerful effect.
- “We want to reevaluate the terms we use even when we don’t think we’re using them in a way to discriminate against people,” “We need to ask ourselves, ‘Are we conveying messages we aren’t even aware of?’”
- People carry out their gender ideologies by making deliberate decisions to use gender-inclusive language, Cralley and Ruscher (2005) found that **non-sexist men** used **gender-inclusive language** primarily when they were not cognitively busy with another task. Thus, such language use appeared to require **explicit, intentional decision** making.

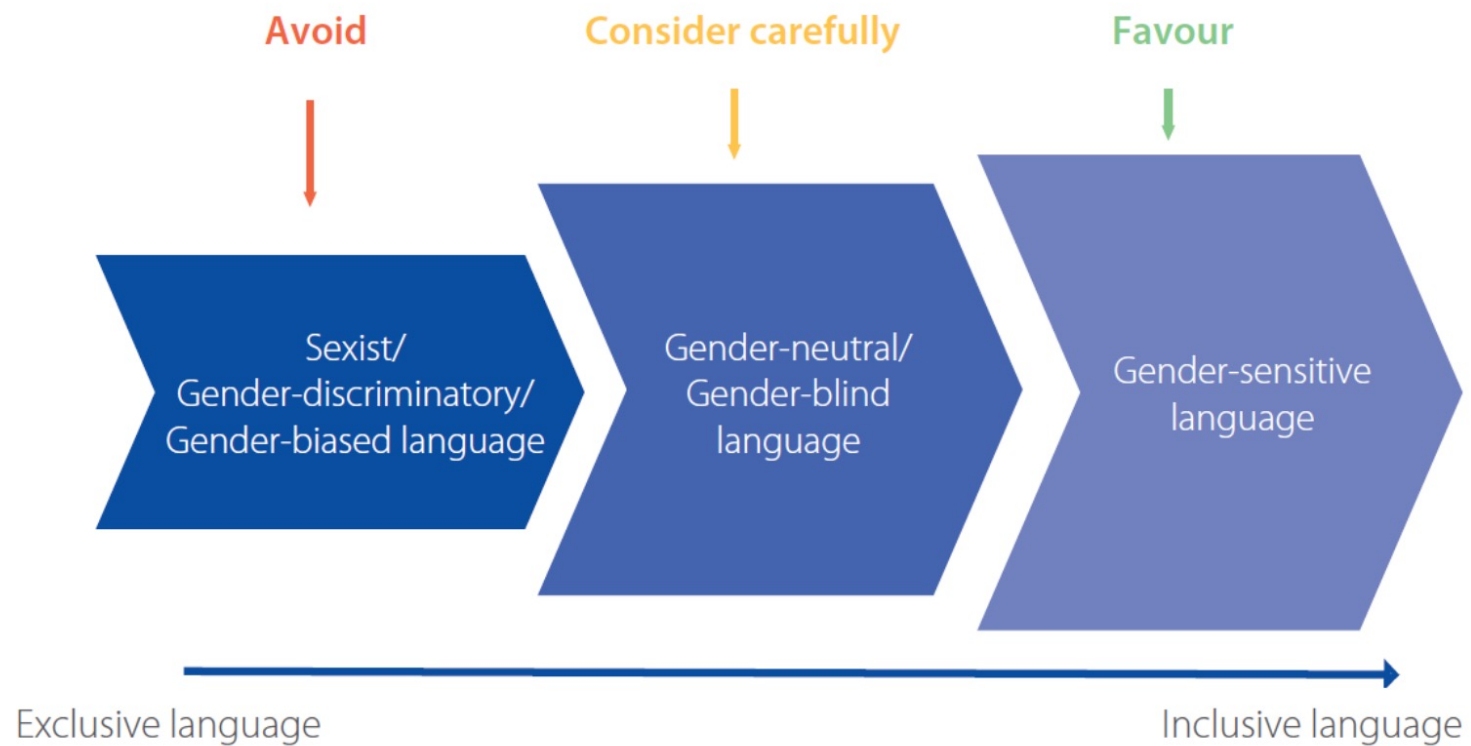


INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE AND TIME

- **Habits** form as people repeatedly perform the same behavior and learn associations between the behavior and recurring features of the context, including physical location, time of day, and preceding actions in a sequence.
- Regardless of their origins, once habits have formed, they tend to be brought to mind automatically and to be performed with minimal input from intentions and attitudes
- People with stronger sexist beliefs had **less** favorable attitudes toward using gender-inclusive language (and believed that others disapprove them).
- Given these attitudes and norms, they formed less favorable intentions to use gender-inclusive language. As a result of these deliberate decisions, they used such language forms **less often** on the behavioral measure.
- Thus, gender ideologies directed future speech patterns by influencing individual's **explicit decisions**.



INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE



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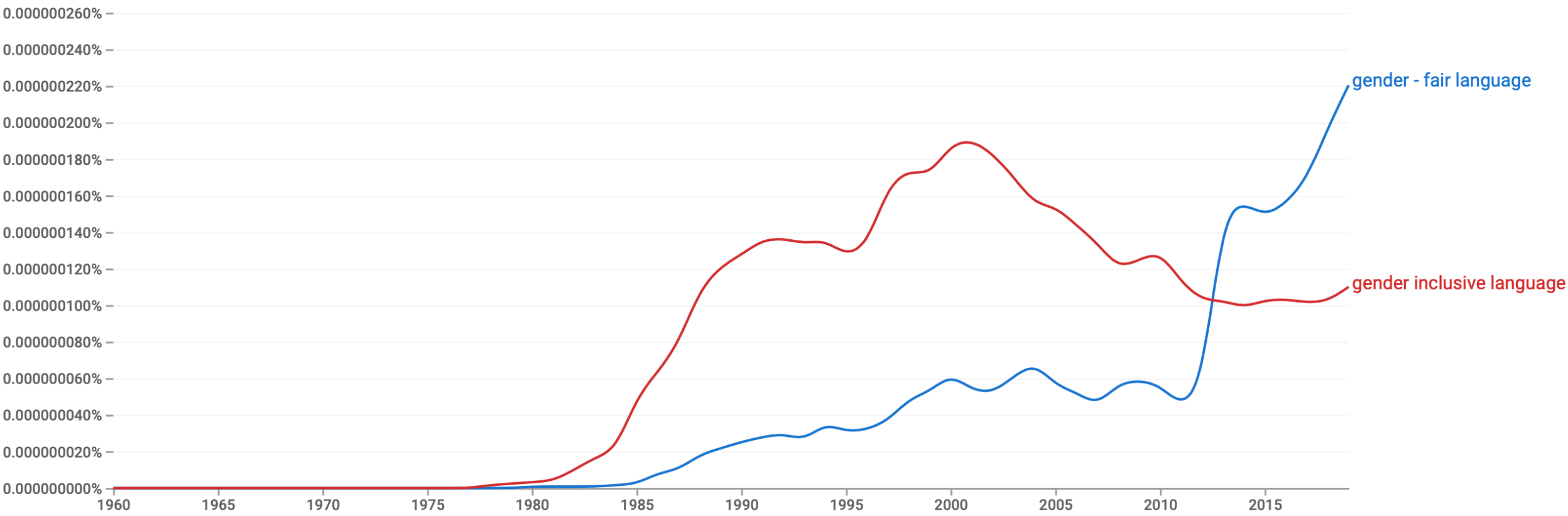
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SPEAK UP

gender-fair language,gender inclusive language

1960 - 2019 English (2019) Case-Insensitive Smoothing



(click on line/label for focus)



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GENDER IN LANGUAGE AND ATTITUDES

PERVASIVENES OF STRATEGIES

GENDER EQUALITY. LANGUAGE AND ATTITUDES

- The way gender is encoded in a language may be associated with societal **gender equality** ([Stahlberg et al., 2007](#)).
- Countries with grammatical gender languages were found to reach lower levels of social gender equality than countries with natural gender languages or genderless languages.
- This suggests that a **higher visibility of gender asymmetries** is accompanied by societal gender **inequalities**.
- Research has consistently revealed that masculine generics evoke a *male bias in mental representations* and make readers or listeners think more of male than female exemplars of a person category ([Stahlberg et al., 2007](#)).



MEASURING MENTAL REPRESENTATION AND GENDER

- Effects of linguistic forms on mental representations were measured with the help of various experimental methodologies, for instance,
 - (1) completing sentences with different pronouns and nouns (e.g., he, she, he/she, the lawyer, the client);
 - (2) writing stories about fictitious people following an introductory sentence in the masculine or in gender-fair wording;
 - (3) naming female or male representatives (e.g., favorite musician) in response to either masculine nouns or combinations of feminine and masculine forms;
 - (4) estimating the proportion of women and men in certain roles (e.g., participants at a congress of nutritionists versus geophysicists);
 - (5) measuring reading time as an indicator of fit between sentences about social groups denoted by nouns with different grammatical gender and sentences that contained a reference to the social group that qualified the group members as female, male, or neither one;
 - (6) measuring reaction times when classifying gender-related (e.g., she, he) or neutral pronouns (e.g., it, me) as female or male after perceiving gender-related (e.g., mother, father, nurse, doctor) or gender-neutral primes (e.g., parent, student; Banaji and Hardin, 1996).



REJECTING GFL

- Apart from language structures and country-specific aspects, there are a number of factors that make individuals **use or reject GFL**. One major factor is the novelty of gender-fair forms, which conflicts with speakers' linguistic habits (Blaubergs, 1980).
- As long as this is the case, people may experience GFL as irritating, and consequentially may refrain from using it. This could explain why negative effects of GFL have been found especially in the initial phases of language reform such as, for instance, in English in the 1990s, and in Italian and Polish in the beginning of the 21st century.
- Another factor for individual speakers' use of GFL might be speakers' gender: women could be expected to hold more favorable attitudes toward GFL than men and they might be more inclined to use it in their own speech. However, research findings on this point are mixed.
 - While in some studies men rejected GFL more than women did (e.g., [Parks and Robertson, 2004](#); [Douglas and Sutton, 2014](#)), other studies found no gender difference in attitudes toward GFL (e.g., [Sczesny et al., 2015](#)).
- Gender differences were mediated by participants' attitudes toward women, which were, in turn, driven by more comprehensive ideologies that justified the social gender hierarchy (i.e., gender-specific system justification and social dominance orientation; [Douglas and Sutton, 2014](#)).



REJECTING GFL

- Gender-fair language strategies often face resistance.
- Past research has discerned several arguments that are used against adopting gender-fair language.
- Blaubergs analyzed a sample of arguments in newspapers articles, scientific journals and other media, and established eight categories of arguments:
 - Cross-Cultural
 - Language Is a Trivial Concern,
 - Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion
 - Sexist Language Is Not Sexist
 - Word Etymology, Appeal to Authority
 - Change Is Too Difficult, Inconvenient
 - Impractical or Whatever (hereafter shortened to Change Is Too Difficult)
 - It Would Destroy Historical Authenticity and Literary Works (hereafter shortened to Historical Authenticity).



REJECTING GFL

- The most common way of pairing gendered pronoun forms is “he or she” (Willis and Jozkowski 2017). Gendered pronouns can also be paired as “he/she,” “s/he,” “he (she),” or they can be alternated throughout a text. Critiques of paired pronoun forms include awkwardness in use, that constructions like “s/he” cannot be said out loud, and that there are no comparable grammatical case forms, such as “his or hers».
- Even organizations that deter the generic use of “he,” such as the American Psychological Association, discourage the repeated use of paired forms stating that “the repetition can become tiresome” and that forms such as he/she or (s)he are “awkward and distracting” (American Psychological Association 2009, p. 74).



REJECTING GFL

- Paired forms also suffer from an androcentric effect called “male firstness” (Willis and Jozkowski 2017) because “he or she” is more common than “she or he.”
- **Male firstness** has also been documented for personal names
- In addition, **paired forms** emphasize gender as a **dichotomy** by explicitly denoting gender as constituting the binary categories woman (she) or man (he), excluding individuals with nonbinary gender identities
- In this way, **gender-neutral pronouns** are different from paired language reforms because they make nonbinary identities visible in language and decrease the dichotomous perceptions of gender.



I. DEFENDING THE LINGUISTIC STATUS QUO

- The first dimension captures a variety of categories that justify the current linguistic norm and the preference to keep the current linguistic system unchanged.
- This dimension included four categories:
 - (a) Change Is Too Difficult or Unnecessary,
 - (b) Appeal to Authority,
 - (c) Word Etymology,
 - (d) Tradition.



I. DEFENDING THE LINGUISTIC STATUS QUO

Defending Linguistic Status Quo

Change Is too Difficult and Unnecessary

Participants provide arguments to keep language unchanged

The current linguistic term is too deeply rooted in the language, the suggested change is too devious, or breaking a language habit is too difficult to justify implementing the change.

“It doesn’t feel natural to use it, neither in writing or speaking.”

“It is somewhat unnecessary.”

“I think that in everyday language she/he is too deeply rooted for [hen] to become ‘common’ language.”

“There are other words.”

“Personally, I prefer to avoid using *hen* by reformulating the text



I. DEFENDING THE LINGUISTIC STATUS QUO

Appeal to Authority

Authorities in the field of language, such as linguists or dictionaries but also teachers and family members, have a final say in what is the correct way to use language.

Word Etymology

The original meaning of the word is the real meaning of the word, regardless of modern interpretations.

Tradition

Language is the way it is and has been this way a long time, and it should remain unaltered.

without using he/she.

“Write Swedish correctly instead.”

“It is confusing because it has an unclear definition.”

“The word *hen* was initially used to describe the gender identity of a person who didn’t consider themselves to be male or female.

Thus, *hen* is not a gender-neutral word, but rather the opposite....

That is why I think it feels wrong to use *hen*.”

“For example, Santa has traditionally been a ‘he.’ I don’t see a reason to change that.”



2. SEXISM AND CISGENDERISM

- The second dimension represents beliefs about gender and the implications of the language reform. The term “cisgenderism” was added to sexism and refers to the ideology that condemns people’s own designations of their genders and bodies.
- In past taxonomies, criticism of gender-fair language included classical and hostile forms of sexism (e.g., “men are superior to women”).
- These forms of sexism were absent in the current sample, but we found similar hostility against people with non-binary identities.
- Trans identities were explicitly or implicitly neglected in the content of the comments (“I don’t see that a few hurt people should change language”). In other types of comments, the existence of people outside the binary system was neglected.
- The new category Gender Identification Is Important emerged from comments focusing on the importance to use gender labels in communication about others and concerns that gender-neutral pronouns lead to depersonalization.



2. SEXISM AND CISGENDERISM

| | |
|--|--|
| Sexism and Cisgenderism | Participants indicate gender hierarchies where cisgender identities or men are considered of greater importance. |
| Sexism and Cisgenderism Are Acceptable | Men are superior to women, so it is acceptable if language reflects this. In this study, we expanded this category with: there are only two genders, and ultimately everyone belongs to one of the two; there are differences between women and men, and language should reflect this. |
| Gender Identification Is Important | New category. Gender-neutral language is impersonal and objectifying; the wishes of those that want to be referred to with a gendered pronoun must be respected; gender is important for one's identity; gender is important in communication. |

Reason to change that:

- “I really don't like it, because I think that men should be men and women, women, so we can turn each other on, play the game with each other. Without it, life would be very boring.”
- “There is only two, he and she”
- “The person talked about becomes some sort of object that you don't feel you can relate to. Impersonal, weird, distanced.”



SEXISM AND GFL

- Language use has been viewed as associated with speakers' *sexist attitudes*, so much so that the use of sexist language has been regarded as an example of subtle sexism (Swim et al., 2004).
- Modern sexism, for instance, is a view that denies that women are still discriminated against and disapproves of policies promoting gender equality (Swim et al., 1995).
- In fact, participants with modern sexist beliefs were found to use more traditional, gender-unfair language (Swim et al., 2004).
- Correspondingly, speakers with **stronger sexist attitudes** toward women used gender-fair pronouns **less frequently** than speakers with less sexist attitudes (Jacobson and Insko, 1985).
- Speakers with **progressive gender role perceptions**, on the other hand, exhibited a tendency to **avoid sexist language** when writing an essay (McMinn et al., 1991).



SEXISM AND GFL

- Sexist speakers do not avoid GFL just because they are reluctant to change their linguistic habits, they deliberately employ a form of language that treats males as the norm and makes women less visible.
- Establishing GFL habits via teaching and practicing current linguistic standards (e.g., Duden; [Kunkel-Razum, 2004](#)) is a promising approach which should follow the initial phase of GFL implementation and may reduce political controversies. In this sense, a prevalence of GFL in the media could also promote the use of GFL by individual speakers.
- Male speakers increased their use of gender-fair forms only when their attention was drawn to GFL forms.
- Moreover GFL is more frequent and more accepted when it is backed by official regulations and when the use of biased language is sanctioned in some way. The relationship between policy-making and social change is surely bidirectional.



3. DIMINISHING THE ISSUE AND ITS PROPONENTS

- The third dimension includes disparaging reactions to both gender-fair language and the people advocating for its use.
 - (a) Hostility and Ridicule
 - (b) Freedom of Speech/Unjustified Coercion
 - (c) Sexist Language Is a Trivial Concern
 - (d) Sexist Language Is Not Sexist
- Common to these categories is the opinion that sexist language is a non-issue and that proponents of genderfair language miss the larger picture of gender equality.
- The largest category within this dimension, Hostility and Ridicule, contains comments that undermine linguistic change by being hostile or diminishing:
 - “It is totally ridiculous to use that word,”
 - “It’s frivolous,” and “Seriously, I get irritated.”
- Clearly negative words were common in this category
 - (e.g., ugly, nonsense, annoying, stupid, fussy).



3. DIMINISHING THE ISSUE AND ITS PROPONENTS

- The third category Sexist Language Is a Trivial Concern included arguments that express the idea that a word does not make a difference or that there are other more important steps to reach gender equality. The fourth category Sexist Language Is Not Sexist similarly included arguments that denied that sexist language negatively affects anyone. An example of such a comment is:
 - “[Using gendered language] does not necessarily mean that certain characteristics or attributes are forced on a person.”

Diminishing the Issue and Its Proponents

Hostility and Ridicule

Participants devalue or ridicule the word or the proponents of the reform

The topic of sexist language is ridiculous and potentially harmful.
Proponents of gender-fair language are malicious.

“I personally don’t want to be labeled with *nen*.”

“Reminds me of *höna* [hen in English]”
“It is ugly”



3. DIMINISHING THE ISSUE AND ITS PROPONENTS

Freedom of Speech/
Unjustified Coercion

The proponents of linguistic change attempt to control or censure freedom of speech through, for example, publication guidelines.

Sexist Language Is a Trivial
Concern

People should focus on more important forms of societal injustice than language, for example, on the “real” physical and economic oppression of women.

Sexist Language Is Not Sexist

Sexist language is not sexist when there is no intention to be sexist. When words are perceived as sexist, the bias is not in the language used by the speaker, but in the person listening.

“It is just a ridiculous and childish expression.”

“There is a queer feminist, politically correct agenda behind it

that tries to erase gender. And this *hen* is one way.”

“It feels like an unpleasant and authoritarian imposition from above.”

“I don’t think a word leads feminism forward.”

“The problem is not in the words “he” and “she” but in the perceptions of women. There we need change.”

“If I had to describe a construction worker, I think of a man, and then I would have said ‘he.’ But I don’t think this is something demeaning toward women or that this means that women can’t be or aren’t allowed to be construction workers. It just feels more natural.”



4. DISTRACTOR IN COMMUNICATION

- This category is similar to comments that diminish the issue and its proponents because it contains a “shoot the messenger” attitude. The difference is that the participants express concern that they themselves might become the target of hostility and ridicule
 - “I don’t want to use it at work during for example a presentation because there are many that have strong opinions about the word and I don’t want it to take the attention from the rest of the presentation.”

Distractor in Communication Participants indicate that using *hen* takes attention from the message

New category. The word is too loaded; it is too much of a statement; it detracts from the message; when using it, it may invite hostility from opponents of gender-neutral language.

workers. It just feels more natural.

“I don’t use the word because there are such strong opinions about it. Whether the opinions are positive or negative, the person gets stuck on the use of the word *hen* and it takes focus from the rest you’re trying to say/write.”

“*Hen* becomes a statement by a person instead of fitting in naturally.”



PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

- **Public discussions** over policies also enhance public awareness for GFL (see above the singular pronouns *they* in English and *hen* in Swedish).
- Speakers may employ GFL when writing official texts, for instance, but not when talking or writing to friends. Moreover, attitudes, norms, and intentions concerning GFL in general seem to be only moderately favorable.
- **Gender-fair language** use by teachers, parents, or the media may thus contribute to an attenuation of adolescents' gender related stereotypes about occupations and roles.



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