

A COMPARATIVE OUTLOOK ON THE MANAGEMENT OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE USE

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***Abstract:** This paper discusses professional and occupational titles in the context of gender-sensitive language, comparing English and Romanian terminology from the perspective of possible constructive changes in two different cultural backgrounds. From the perspective of cognitive theory, language reflects perceptions while reinforcing biases and stereotypes within communities. At the same time, it has the potential to support societal change and constructive evolution if linguistic labellings are properly managed. However, it may not be a constructive solution to enforce formal change merely on a linguistic level, thus enhancing the increasing sensitivity toward issues such as gender sensitivity, ethnic origin, mental impairment. The analysis is aimed at contrastive Romanian and English linguistic units and finding alternative solutions to the management of more inclusive language use.*

***Key words:** gender inclusive language, gender sensitive language, English, Romanian*

INTRODUCTION

The background of this study revolves around conceptual linguistics and cognitive analysis, which highlight the fact that language reflects our mental representations. Moreover, our understanding of the world is constructed and perceived through dualistic lenses, including non-gender-neutral language (‘to be the man for the job’, ‘housewife’, ‘stewardess’, etc.). These linguistic and conceptual patterns are reflective of specific roles and features attributed to men and women, thus underpinning biased or stereotyping stances. Thereby, the way communities manage gender language has the potential to curb or inhibit “the scope of the social, political and economic developments and transformations currently bringing about changes in the division of male and female roles and responsibilities” [32].

Reeves & Baden [20], in their book about the concepts central to gender and development, explained the difference between sex and gender: “Sex refers to the biological characteristics that categorise someone as either female or male; whereas gender refers to the socially determined ideas and practices of what it is to be female or male.”

Back in 1983, the United Nation Organisation (U.N.O.) issued “a compendium of rules and directives on United Nations editorial style, publication policies, procedures and practice” [31], but it was only fifteen years later that it issued an editorial directive on the recommended use of gender-sensitive language (also called non-sexist language) by journalists and writers [30]. On April 16, 2020, they added a link to Guidelines for gender-inclusive language to the United Nations Editorial Manual Online [37]. The purpose of this document – in line with the publications of other international organisations such as Amnesty International or the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – was twofold: “paying maximum attention to the need to use gender-sensitive language when writing in an official capacity; and avoiding sex-specific and potentially discriminatory expressions in written communications”.

Literature also speaks of gender-fair use of language defined as “promoting fair treatment of women and girls, men and boys” [11].

In a book meant to foster gender equality within media organisations, Grizzle [9] makes a clear statement against biased language, derogatory language [18], and sexist language, stereotyped language, and stereotypical language, and militates for gender-sensitive language, non-discriminatory language, and non-judgemental language.

Gender-sensitive language should be observed particularly in formal contexts such as business writing [14], economics [7], education [23], medicine [1], or parliamentarianism [18].

Gender issues have been widely debated in literature, and notions such as gender bias “action against women (or men) based on the perception that the other sex is not equal and does not have the same rights” [39,21,12]; gender discrimination (“any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” [33,12], gender disparity (“difference between men and women in respect to their status, situation, rights, responsibilities and opportunities” [38,12], gender gap (“any disparity between women and men’s condition or position in society” [34,12], gender imbalance, gender imparity, or gender inequality (“lack of female achievement in empowerment, labour market, and reproductive health” [34,12]; [25], have brought about a new gender dimension (“[referring to the] ways in which the situation and needs of, and challenges facing, women and men (and girls and boys) differ, with a view to eliminating inequalities and avoiding their perpetuation, as well as to promoting gender equality within a particular policy, programme or procedure” [40,12], a new gender perspective (“a perspective taking into account gender-based differences when looking at any social phenomenon, policy or process” [40,12], as well as gender awareness / sensitivity (“commitment to recognising male-female social inequalities, in order to redress these through addressing women’s needs and priorities, and to analyse programmes and projects for the differential impacts that they have on women and men” [9,12], an antonym for gender-blindness (“failure to recognize that the roles and responsibilities of men/boys and women/girls are assigned to them in specific social, cultural, economic, and political contexts and backgrounds” [34], and gender responsiveness (“gender awareness / sensitivity doubled by articulation of policies and initiatives which address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of women and men” [9], in which they tackle attributes such as gender-aware [9], or gender-sensitive (“quick to detect or respond to [gender-related issues/topics]” [15]; “policies and programmes that take into account the particularities pertaining to the lives of both women and men, while aiming to eliminate inequalities and promote gender equality, including an equal distribution of resources, therefore addressing and taking into account the gender dimension” [40], gender-blind (“[not able] to recognise that gender is an essential determinant of social outcomes impacting on projects and policies” [12], gender-generic [17], (“not specific [to a gender]” [15], gender-inclusive [17,13], (“of language, deliberately avoiding usages that could be seen as excluding a particular social group, for example avoiding the use of masculine pronouns to cover both men and women” [15], gender-neutral [17], is defined as “relating to people and not especially to men or to women” [3], “not referring to either sex but only to people in general; using words wherever appropriate that are free of reference to gender; relating to, intended for, or common to any gender; noting or relating to a person of neutral gender, neither male or female” [27], “policy, programme or situation that has no differential positive or negative impact in terms of gender relations or equality between women and men” [6], “suitable for, applicable to, or common to both male and female genders; denoting a word or expression that cannot be taken to refer to one gender only” [15], “referring to clothing, behaviours,

thoughts, emotions, [language] and/or relationships which are not regarded as either masculine or feminine” [28], “not referring to either sex but only to people in general” [16], “free of explicit or implicit reference to gender or sex” [27], and gender responsive “being gender aware / sensitive and articulating policies and initiatives which address the different needs, aspirations, capacities and contributions of women and men” [9].

The passage “from gender-negative (where gender inequalities are reinforced to achieve desired development outcomes by using gender norms, roles, and stereotypes that reinforce gender inequalities) to gender-transformative (where gender is central to promoting gender equality and achieving positive development outcomes by transforming unequal gender relations to promote control of resources, decision-making, shared power, and support for women’s empowerment” [12], goes “through gender-neutral (where gender is not considered relevant to development outcome, and gender norms, relations, and roles are not affected – worsened or improved), gender-sensitive (where gender is a means to reach set development goals by addressing access to resources, gender norms, and roles and in so far as needed to reach project goals), and gender-positive (where gender is central to achieving positive development outcomes”, by hanging access to resources, gender norms, and roles a key component of project outcomes) [34].



Figure 1. From gender-negative to gender-transformative

There have also been lasting debates on gender-inclusive classrooms [2], gender-inclusive puberty [19], gender-inclusive translations [17], gender-inclusive urban planning design [26], gender-inclusive workplaces [10,29]; gender-neutral communication and gender-neutral language [35]; inclusive change, inclusive development, inclusive economy, inclusive framework, inclusive growth, inclusive industrialisation, inclusive market, inclusive outcome, inclusive policy, inclusive process, inclusive reform, inclusive transformation [5]; inclusive education and inclusive school [8].

Inclusive language includes gender-neutral language [29] and it represents the object of our corpus-based analysis.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material used in the study was supplied by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia for the English language and by the Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language for the Romanian language.

The method used is the comparative method, a technique consisting in the feature-by-feature comparison of the two languages (English and Romanian), as well as corpus-based analysis. The cognitive-conceptual and constructivist approaches also underlie the discussion in principle.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Gender-related terms are under constant reconsideration, development and transformation [4]. Therefore, the list provided and discussed below is far from being exhaustive (Table 1). The explanation for the large number of names of professions and occupations contain the word man is that “traditionally, man and words derived from it have been used generically to designate any or all of the human race irrespective of sex. In Old English [the English language from the middle of the 5th to the beginning of the 12th century; also, Anglo-Saxon], this was the principal sense of man, which meant ‘a human

being' regardless of sex [...]” [24]. This is the case in many other languages, including Romanian, as deeper realities underlay this linguistic universality.

Nowadays, one does not need to specify that it is a man or a woman because it would mean that the profession in question is usually for men or for women. Are, therefore, banished the terms referring to:

- professions usually practiced by males and containing the words boy (“a male child or youth” [15]), male (“of or denoting the sex that produces gametes, especially spermatozoa, with which a female may be fertilized or inseminated to produce offspring” [15]), man (including men) (“an adult human male” [15]), and master (“a man who has people working for him, especially servants or slaves; a skilled practitioner of a particular art or activity” [15]);
- professions usually practiced by females:
 - words containing the words girl (“a female child” [15]), lady (“a polite or formal way of referring to a woman” [15]), maid (“a female domestic servant” [15]), wife (“a married woman considered in relation to her spouse” [15]), and woman (“an adult human female” [15]);
 - the word masseuse (“a woman who provides massage professionally” [15]) borrowed from French;
 - words derived with the suffix -ess (“female” [24]) because, according to critics, “sexist connotations are implicit in the use of the feminine suffix -ess [...] in that the suffix implies that the denoted roles differ as performed by women and men. In some cases, there may be some legitimacy to such an implication of difference; and for this reason, the acceptability of the suffix may depend on the individual word.” [24]: this is the case for actress, heiress, hostess, seductress, and temptress, for instance.

Table 1.

Professional and occupational titles [36]

| Biased | Neutral | Advice |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| ambadress | ambassador | Avoid the suffix -ess wherever possible. |
| anchorman, anchorwoman | anchor; news anchor | - |
| authoress | author (for both) | Avoid the suffix -ess wherever possible because it is often pejorative or perceived as such.” |
| barman, barmaid | bartender | - |
| businessman | business entrepreneur, business executive, business manager, business person, head of company (plural: business community, business people) | The appropriate term depends on the context. |
| cameraman | camera operator, photographer (plural: camera crew) | - |
| chairman | chair, chairperson, president, presiding officer | chair, chairperson, or president should be used in place of chairman when new bodies are set up or rules of procedure of existing bodies are updated |
| chairmanship | - | Rephrase: He will assume the chairmanship... → He will chair... |
| cleaning lady | cleaner | - |
| congressman, congresswoman | congressional representative, legislator, representative | Use congressman or congresswoman only when intending specific persons.” |
| craftsman | artisan, crafts worker, craftsperson | - |

| | | |
|----------------------|--|---|
| | (plural: craftspeople) | |
| delivery boy | courier, messenger | - |
| doorman | guard, security guard | - |
| fireman | firefighter (plural: fire brigade, fire crew) | - |
| foreman | superintendent, supervisor | - |
| freshman | first-year student | - |
| front man | figurehead, front | - |
| hostess | host | - |
| housewife | consumer, customer, homemaker, shopper | Be specific according to context. Put housewife between quotes if you have to use it. |
| lady lawyer | lawyer | - |
| layman | unordained person | - |
| mailman | letter carrier, mail carrier, postal worker | - |
| male nurse | nurse | Specify sex only if it is relevant to the context. |
| masseuse | massage therapist | - |
| master of ceremonies | convener, emcee, host, moderator | - |
| men of letters | literary figures, scholars, writers | - |
| middleman | intermediary | - |
| midwife | birthing specialist, midwife (for both) | - |
| newsman | correspondent, journalist, reporter | - |
| office boy | clerk, messenger | - |
| ombudsman | mediator, ombud, ombuds, ombudsperson, trouble-shooter, | A woman might prefer to be called ombudswoman. |
| painter | artist | Specify sex only if it is relevant to the context. |
| poetess | poet (for both) | Avoid the suffix -ess wherever possible. |
| policeman | police officer (plural: police) | - |
| postman | letter carrier, mail carrier, postal worker | - |
| repairman | repairer, technician | - |
| sculptress | sculptor | |
| sales girl | sales agent, sales assistant, sales clerk, sales representative, shop assistant, shop worker (plural: sales staff) | - |
| salesman | sales agent, sales assistant, sales clerk, sales representative, shop assistant, shop worker (plural: sales staff) | - |
| seamstress | mender, needle worker, sewer, tailor | - |
| serviceman | service representative | - |
| serviceman | sailor, soldier | - |
| shipmaster | captain, commander | - |
| showman | actor, entertainer, performer | - |
| showmanship | stage presence | - |
| spaceman | astronaut | - |
| spokesman | official, representative, spokesperson | Use spokesman or spokeswoman as appropriate when a specific person is intended. |
| sportsman | athlete | Use sportsman/sportswoman when a specified person is meant. |
| statesman | political leader | Use stateswoman when appropriate. |
| stewardess | flight attendant, steward (for both), (plural: cabin crew) | Avoid the suffix -ess wherever possible. |
| switchman | switch operator | - |
| trash man | trash collector | - |
| waitress | waiter | Avoid the suffix -ess wherever |

| | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------|--|
| | | possible. |
| watchman | guard | - |
| weatherman | meteorologist, weathercaster | - |
| woman doctor | doctor | Specify sex only if sex indication is relevant to the context. |
| woman driver | driver | - |
| woman judge | judge | - |
| woman photographer | photographer | - |
| woman pilot | pilot | - |
| workman | worker | - |

Other examples of gender-biased language are exclusionary terms (manhood, mankind, manpower, etc.), gender stereotypes (women are fragile/vulnerable/sensitive), pronouns (he, she), stereotyping adjectives (ladylike, sportsmanlike, workmanlike, etc.), stereotyping adverbs (brotherly, manfully, manly, etc.), and other stereotyping allusions etc., [42].

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions point to the fact that the degenderisation of language is really happening [23]. However, research shows that, despite all efforts to gender-neutralise language, university students still prefer gendered terms for sex-specific references and reserve gender neutral terms for references to persons of unknown sex [22]. Therefore, in our opinion, this is also true of other social categories, which illustrates either the difficulty of changing language use, or a reaction of rejection from people who have had enough of political correctness in a world where communication rules are changed but nothing changes fundamentally in the way women are treated.

As stated previously, different but relevant outcomes may result from the ways we manage and employ language and correspondingly conceptualize the world, as these are emerging across the planetary culture. More accurate management of such sensitive language as we have discussed above is conducive to an enhanced understanding within diverse communities so that dialogic and plurivocal values may be shared sustainably in the future [41].

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