

Gender Issues and Language Articulation; a Brief Look at Pros of Gender Neutral Language Articulation

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ABSTRACT. As with the language articulated by learners—in both oral and written form—the supremacy of a masculine language use is witnessed. This brings to light the fact that gender has been excessively an unobserved factor in the process of language teaching. Although learners are apparently used to forming masculine-centered articulation, non-sexist language, with no doubt, puts them at ease when articulating. This retrospective paper takes account of this crucial aspect; that is to say sexism in language and non-sexist language. This sheds light on the issue that gender identity plays a chief role in the choice of gender reflected in language articulations.

Primitively, sexism in language is studied through a helicopter view on gender specific and gender neutral language. In a conducted research, the latter case was superior by EFL learners.

Finally, providing an insight toward gender identity, gender reflection in oral articulation is taken into account.

Key Words: language articulation, sexism, gender, gender specific language, gender neutral language, gender identity

Sexism in Language;

Sexism in language refers to trivialization and devaluation of one sex against the other; that is, any language articulation—be it oral or written—which turns a blind eye to one sex. This unseen sex is the female in most cases.

The notion of superiority of the male in referring to third person singular, referring to God, giving job titles, taking into account their beliefs and attitudes as those of all males and females, and a lot more has its roots far back in history. This notion has followed to

present time and has been perpetuated as women are referred to as “the weaker sex”. According to Victoria Fromkin *et al.* (2003, pp. 482-486), “Language reflects sexism in society. Language itself is not sexist, just as it is not obscene; but it can connote sexist attitudes as well as attitudes about social taboos and racism.” Intrinsically masculine terms like “men”—meaning human beings—are inclusive of both sexes whereas terms like “women” do not even suggest both sexes. Therefore, using non-sexist language is gaining rising attention although sexist language is an inherent part of our articulation. Put simply, using masculine language is not broadly favored these days. Plus, it is not an incentive to judge non-sexist language possessing a feminist standpoint. Non-sexist language—as the name suggests—aims to minimizing discriminatory articulation—be it feminine or masculine. Also known as biased language, to avoid sexist language does not mean that one should make new coinages and compounds; this could be a rare case.

Here is a list of major types of sexism in language along with fully sexist examples; non-sexist alternatives are elaborated on later.

1. Terms and phrases that rule out women; man-made, person, a perfect man is one who, etc.
2. Masculine pronouns; he, him, etc.
3. Job titles; businessman, chairman, foreman, etc.
4. Feminine suffixes; for instance, -ess, -ette, -trix, and -enne which bring about condescension toward the female; actress, usherette, executrix, and comedienne.

Note: In cases of this sort, generic forms of actor, usher, executor, and comedian are preferred to be used respectively. This is due, first and foremost, to putting into practice “gender neutrality”.

5. Sex-connected terms; lady doctor, he writer, working mothers, etc.
6. Unequal-gender-related language; boys and women, men and wives, etc. and
7. Disparaging terminology; girl, busboy, etc.

All above mentioned sorts of sexist language bring to light the fact that there are several language uses in accordance with the term *gender*. They are *gender specific* and *gender*

neutral language among which the latter is favored by both teachers and learners, and in a larger scale, people in a society. Thus, a to-the-point and vivid demarcation between gender and sex is indispensable.

Focus on gender offers an insight manifesting a set of social, behavioral, functional, and attitudinal dissimilarities attributed to either men or women. Sex, on the other hand, refers to only biological and genital dissimilarities.

Gender Specific and Gender Neutral Articulation;

The articulation of a set of terminology and phrases to the extent that one gender is rendered invisible or marginalized—the female as a general rule—is gender specific articulation. This comprises a prominent trait; the use of *English gender specific pronouns*; put simply, to use singular masculine-linked pronouns when the sex or gender of human referent is unknown.

A comprehensive table of English gender specific pronouns is presented below along with the consequences of the use of them afterward;

Table 1.
English gender specific pronouns

	Subjective Pronouns	Objective Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns	Reflective Pronouns	Possessive Adjectives
Masculine	<i>He</i>	<i>Him</i>	<i>His</i>	<i>Himself</i>	<i>His</i>
Feminine	<i>She</i>	<i>Her</i>	<i>Hers</i>	<i>Herself</i>	<i>Her</i>

Although these pronouns, plus possessive adjectives presented anon, are not intrinsically sexist, they can connote sexism and marginalize either gender. Gender specific language sets ambiguity in motion, reduces the extent of comprehension, and entices disinclination in addressee to follow in either form of verbal or written.

As mentioned earlier, to circumvent sexist or gender specific articulation does not mean to learn a new language or create new terms.

To articulate with fairness toward the gender identified in problematic terms and phrases—albeit apparently unbreakable at first—leads to gender neutral articulation. It

diminishes superfluous concerns about gender providing an insight in the direction of the concept not the sex it happens to. English, as a dynamic language, does have alternatives for sexist terms and phrases. To present an all-inclusive list of sexist terms and their neutral forms together with all strategies to refrain from it is beyond the scope of this paper, but a brief would be while-worthy. This would correspond with previously-declared major types of gender specific articulation from 1 to 7 respectively;

Table 2.
Alternatives for sexist terms

	Sexist Terms	Gender Neutral Alternatives
1.	<i>Man, Person,</i>	<i>One, Human, Human beings</i>
2.	<i>He, Him, His own</i>	<i>S/he, Them, One's own</i>
3.	<i>Foreman, Firewoman</i>	<i>Supervisor, Firefighter</i>
4.	<i>Actress, Usherette, Executrix</i>	<i>Actor, Usher, Executor</i>
5.	<i>Lady doctor, He writer</i>	<i>Doctor, Writer</i>
6.	<i>Boys and women, Men and wives</i>	<i>Men and women, Husbands and wives</i>
7.	<i>Girl, Busboy</i>	<i>Adult female, Waiter's assistant</i>

In addition to what presented in the table, the following are some structural frameworks to be employed to keep aloof from sexist language;

- Inclusive *he or she, s/he, or his or her* do not induce one gender regardless of the other.

Sexist: Every student should hand in *his* report within a week's time.

Neutral: Every student should hand in *his or her* report within a week's time.

- **They**, though as wide-ranging in meaning and neutrality as *s/he*, is normally used in informal articulation; this is not always the case as it *is* used in formal forms like in dictionaries;

Sexist I: If anyone is for camping, *he* should register first.

Neutral 1: If anyone is for camping, *they* should register first.

Sexist 2: Scholar is a person who knows a lot about a particular subject because *he* has studied it in detail.

Neutral 2: As *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines, "Scholar [is] a person who knows a lot about a particular subject because *they* have studied it in detail."

The significance of how teachers use their language in teaching and learning process will be emphasized later.

- *One* is a language economic alternative for *s/he* although it might bring about meaning incomprehension in some cases.

Sexist: A liberal is a *person* who demands freedom.

Neutral: A liberal is *one* who demands freedom.

To measure the range of advocacy of gender specific or that of gender neutral, a written observation was conducted. Results were analyzed thru the measurement of percentages allocated to either form of language.

The Observation;

Participants were 121—including 94 females and 27 males—English learners in intermediate-plus levels ranging in age from 12 to 30. It was conducted in two private language institutes—Iran Zamin and Jahad Daneshqahi—in Zanzan, Iran. In the first part, they were given a 10 questions in which they were supposed to choose a *term* between three; bearing in mind that only one was gender neutral and the other two were gender specific. In the second, some sentences were present—some in need of gender change and some not. Lastly, some sentences to be filled with either *he* or *she*. This final part was to measure gender reflection in written articulation. The questionnaire is presented in the Appendix. The learners were all asked to mark their answers in accordance with

social, cultural, or even individual attributes. Additionally, they had not been explicitly familiarized with the two sort of language articulation in advance.

The results were astonishing. As aforementioned, gender neutral advocacy out-performed that of gender specific—with respect to the kind of the questions and learners reflected lack of any explicit knowledge toward these two language uses.

Table 3

Gender specific and gender neutral advocacy in frame of terms in males and females in part 1 of the observation

Males		Females	
Gender specific advocacy	Gender neutral advocacy	Gender specific advocacy	Gender neutral advocacy
7.407%	92.593%	0%	100%

There were only 2 test papers, both males, in which gender specificity surpassed gender neutrality by no more than two or three.

But ostensibly, gender neutral’s advocacy in frame of terms was not mirrored by similar advocacy in frame of structured sentences. In part two of the test, five sentences was given; only three of them were in need of gender change. The percentages affirmed that learners could not, by far, go beyond terms distinguishing either specificity or neutrality of language (see table 3). Thus, the results had an astounding shift in the second part (see table 4).

Table 4

Gender specific and gender neutral advocacy in frame of sentences in males and females in part 2 of the observation

Males		Females	
Gender specific advocacy	Gender neutral advocacy	Gender specific advocacy	Gender neutral advocacy
52.380%	47.619%	21.276%	78.723%

A comparative look at the numbers present in tables 3 and 4 elucidates that learners’ consciousness of specificity and neutrality in language use rationalizes to an attention-grabbing scope as they come out of the border of terms and step in that of sentences. This

result shift might even have enjoyed instability of $\pm 10\%$ in each part as the learners could have used what they had gained from part one; hence, reliability might not trim down as a result of this instability.

Reminding that it was a written test, the analysis of the last part showed that learners used various forms of gender—male and female—in their written articulation. But on the contrary, when talking about a third person singular of the opposite sex, one tends to reflect his or her gender. This could reasonably be regarded as normal if one regards the role of gender identity.

Gender Identity and Language Articulation;

A baby is born with a sex assigned to him/her and a gender. Sex, as earlier pointed, is biological and genetic apparent in genitals and positioned in chromosomes and hormones soon after the moment of fertilization. This newborn baby, therefore, is viewed as a boy or a girl. Dressing, parental communication styles, toys, emotions, and many more alike attribute him/her to either sex. Thus, the baby grows with a self-perception of being a male or a female; this suggests itself as soon as twenty four months of age. From this age on, children acclimatize to things connected to their own *gender*. This is the very origin of *gender identity*; put simply, how people perceive themselves socially as males or females.

This masculine or feminine self-perception shines brightly in social and communicative aspects of everyday life one of which is language articulation. According to Ebrahimi (2008: p. 3), “According to observations, language articulation embraces two distinct phases: (1) message planning, and (2) message articulation.” As with the first phase, planning a message comprises many unconscious elements closing the eyes to which fails the phase. Gender identity heeds a lot in planning as word choice, expressions, gestures, physical contacts, and speaking styles attributed to either gender. Generalizing this to-a-great-extent-certain hunch to ever-occurring masculine or feminine communications, an idea of possibly intrinsic masculine or feminine speech formation arises in mind. Thus, if given any chances of existence, this idea echoes in oral message articulation especially

when talking about a third person singular. This is, perhaps, stronger in males as traditionally there is a tendency to use masculine related words and pronouns when articulating in general.

Gender identity is the core to find many inherent features of human beings; something without which many human mysteries lie untouched. Hence, it is well thought-of and should not be suppressed. The role of teachers is, however, central regarding language teaching and learning processes. In other words, these elements are tools in hands of a teacher to help learners develop more.

The Role of Teachers;

Teachers, as central in the field, should combine a set of social and class-bound factors to both respect and help gender identity develop and help learners shift from gender specificity to neutrality in language—be it learning or articulating. It can start—and should in better—from teachers.

Inductive teaching embraces generous exemplification and as much elicitation. If the previous includes a vast area of variation, the same could be expected from the latter; this is because learners follow the pattern(s) their teachers do while articulating language. Consequently, a teacher gender specific in articulation might end up having learners gender specific in articulation.

Conclusion;

Sexism in language is the result of masculine supremacy in terminology of a lot of languages. It takes account of pronouns, terms, sexist affixes, etc. Thus, language articulation, in either form of written or oral, can be divided in two categories of gender specific and gender neutral. Although traditionally inherent in our articulation, overusing gender specific language—more than making the audience in the habit of hearing and reading such—may cause reluctance or getting the wrong impression. A major origin in the field is gender identity which plays a crucial role. Children as soon as two years of age perceive themselves belonging to a certain sex and gender according to gender-based

inputs from their whereabouts. This newly originated gender identity grows to become part of their social and communicative trait; that is to say that it reflects in social and articulatory language of the person, chiefly talking about a third person singular; one can call it *gender reflection*.

This comes to a prominent significance in class-bound teaching and learning processes. Teachers are truly central here. Their exemplification and elicitation should enjoy a vast area of variety so that learners could be expected so.

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Appendix 1;

All 121 participants were given this questionnaire and asked to respond to the tests with great care and according to the directions of each section. This questionnaire is provided here for use or betterment.

Participant Information (* means required)

Full Name:

* Sex: Male Female

* Age:

PART 1

Directions: In this part, you are required to choose the word you think fits your own idea based on whatever factor like social, cultural, etc. best.

1. They are
 - a. policemen
 - b. police officers
 - c. policewomen
2. Every should have own identity card.
 - a. one – his
 - b. one – her
 - c. one – their
3. Early used to live in caves.
 - a. men and women
 - b. men
 - c. people
4. put out the fire so fast and saved all.
 - a. Firewomen
 - b. Firefighters
 - c. Firemen

5. The of the GMs denied downturn in financial department.
 - a. chairwoman
 - b. chairman
 - c. chairperson
6. A liberal is a person who wants freedom.
 - a. their
 - b. his
 - c. her
7. She is a
 - a. lady doctor
 - b. female doctor
 - c. doctor
8. My favorite is Henry James.
 - a. man writer
 - b. writer
 - c. he writer
9. A’s job is to observe other workers.
 - a. foreman
 - b. forewoman
 - c. supervisor
10. of our family were all good.
 - a. Ancestors
 - b. Fathers
 - c. Forefathers

PART 2

Directions: In this part, the sentences may be subject to some changes for a more socially accepted betterment. The extent of changes is the matter of your choice.

1. Every student should bring his notebook to class.

.....

2. A reporter should update his or her job everyday.

.....

3. The handicapped child may, at least, be able to feed himself.

.....

4. To this question, s/he might wonder what the response would be.

.....

5. All on the camp ate her own lunch.

.....

PART 3

Directions: In this part, you are required to fill in the blanks with the words you prefer.

1. It was who broke the window.

a. he

b. she

2. I saw cross the street.

a. her

b. him

3. is a really professional artist.

a. She

b. He

4. I think can pass all exams.

a. he – his

b. she – her

5. is my friend and a very nice person.

a. He

b. She