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Ripple Effects: The Case of Gender-Inclusive Language

ABSTRACT: *The current study investigated whether the change toward more gender-inclusive English that is taking place in Inner Circle countries is also gaining acceptance for English usage in an Outer Circle country: Singapore. Data for the study came principally from a questionnaire completed by students at a Singapore junior college and from writing scripts of students at the same college. Results suggest that gender-inclusive English was viewed favourably by many students. Perhaps even more tellingly, gender-inclusive forms appeared in many students' writing. Thus, it appears that a ripple effect has occurred, in which changes in Inner Circle countries and in their varieties of English have been a factor in changes in Outer Circle forms.*

Introduction

English has spread from those Inner Circle countries (Kachru 1995, 1997) where it is spoken as a native language by the majority of the population, e.g., New Zealand, to Outer Circle countries, which are former colonies of Inner Circle countries and where English has long played a major role, e.g., Sri Lanka, and to Expanding Circle countries, where English is a foreign language, but is now playing a greater role as a major vehicle of globalization, e.g, Brazil.

The English of the Inner Circle countries has a key impact on the development of the English language elsewhere. However, this Inner Circle English is, like all living language varieties, in a constant state of change. These changes in Inner Circle English have a potential ripple effect on English elsewhere. This article reports a descriptive study which investigated the possibility of such a ripple effect from one change in Inner Circle English - the shift toward more gender-inclusive usage - and the presence of this change in the English of 17- and 18-year-old students in an Outer Circle country in Southeast Asia, Singapore.

Gender-inclusive English

The term gender-inclusive means that both females and males are explicitly "included" in the language used. Terms similar to gender-inclusive are gender-neutral, sex-fair, nonsexist, and gender-free

(Treichler and Frank 1989). These terms contrast with gender-exclusive language in which words referring to one sex are used generically to refer to both sexes. Over the past approximately 30 years, Inner Circle countries have seen a partial shift away from gender-exclusive usage (e.g. American Psychological Association Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education 1975), which had been dominant for at least the past 200 years, toward gender-inclusive. Crystal (1995: 368) described this shift and the reasons behind it:

There is now a widespread awareness, which was lacking a generation ago, of the way in which language covertly displays social attitudes towards men and women. The criticisms have been mainly directed at the biases built into English vocabulary and grammar which reflect a traditionally male-oriented view of the world, and which have been interpreted as reinforcing the low status of women in society. All of the main European languages have been effected, but English more than most, because of the early impact of the feminist movement in the USA.

By the 1990s, this shift had gained further institutionalized support. For instance, on the front cover of the Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1995) in addition to boasting that their

dictionary is the newest, biggest, and best, the publishers also advertise that it features nonsexist guidelines.

The present study investigated two aspects of this trend toward gender-inclusive English:

1. The shift in grammar away from the use of gender-exclusive *generic he* (Bodine 1975, Pennycook 1994), e.g., "An architect should keep his clients informed", to gender-inclusive forms, e.g., "Architects should keep their clients informed" or "An architect should keep her or his clients informed";
2. The shift in vocabulary away from the use of gender-exclusive *generic man* (Sunderland 1991), e.g., "Man has lived on the planet for over a million years", to gender-inclusive forms, e.g., "Humans/People have lived on the planet for over a million years".

The shift toward gender-inclusive English appears to have begun and gone furthest in Inner Circle countries. These countries have experienced political, economic, and social changes which led to and were impacted by this language change. In some institutions in these countries, gender-inclusive language has become the standard to which all writing must conform. For example, in the 1970s organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of

English (NCTE), of the United States, and publishers such as Scott, Foresman and McGraw-Hill adopted guidelines advocating gender-inclusive language (Nilsen 1987). Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) cited several studies which indicated that this change has also occurred in individual's use of English in the U.S.

However, change is not a linear process. For instance, Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) reported more resistance to gender-inclusive English among U.S. university students than among older people. Further, they also found that change was not evenly distributed; females were more likely than males to use gender-inclusive English. Indeed, their study demonstrates that language variation is both diachronic (over time) and synchronic (at one particular point in time).

English in Singapore

Singapore has developed its own indigenized variety of English (Tay 1993). As the English which develops in Outer and Expanding Circle countries reflects the linguistic and cultural situation of those countries (Kachru 1995), it may be asked whether the conditions which led to the shift toward gender-inclusive English in Inner Circle countries are also present in Singapore and elsewhere. Such an analysis is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, the present study was restricted to examining the presence or absence of

gender-inclusive English in the writing of a group of Singaporean junior college students. The researchers are aware of no previous studies of this issue.

Singapore is an Outer Circle country. A former British colony, this multi-lingual nation now has English as one of its four official languages, the medium of instruction from the first year of schooling, and its main lingua franca (Cheah 1996). The large majority of Singaporeans are not native speakers of English, and the government has generally succeeded in helping people maintain proficiency in one of the other three official languages: Chinese, Malay, and Tamil.

Changes in labour and educational patterns which have occurred in Inner Circle countries, such as greater work force participation by women, more women in prestige occupations, and higher levels of educational attainment by women, are also present in Singapore (Arumainathan 1973, Lau 1993). Such social changes are believed to correlate with language change (Wolfson 1989).

Despite these changes, Singapore's prestige English language newspaper, the *Straits Times* and its Sunday edition the *Sunday Times*, use gender-exclusive English. For instance, the following headline appeared on page 33 of the *Sunday Times* of 16 August 1998 "Killer Floods in China: Nature's Fury, Man's Folly",

and the following sentence appeared on page 7 of a 15 August, 1998 *Straits Times* supplement on Singapore secondary schools, "Once a child receives a fee subsidy, this assistance will be given until he finishes secondary school" (emphasis added). This policy was confirmed by the paper's editor (Fong, personal communication, 20 August 1998). Further, a *Straits Times* columnist (Tan 1995: 7, cited in Gupta & Chew 1995) referring to similar efforts at language reform, this time in support of people with disabilities, spoke out against what he called "the style of the politically correct in the West", fearing that it would impoverish the English language, curb freedom of expression, and have no effect because "sticks and stones can break my bones but words can never hurt me".

The major television network in Singapore, the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), does not have a stated policy on the issue of gender-exclusive/gender-inclusive English. People whom we talked to there stated that it was left to the discretion of those involved in a particular programme. One person involved in training at TCS indicated that she had not been very aware of the issue until while recently doing a masters degree it was brought to her attention by her lecturers.

Purpose of the study

This study aimed to provide information on the following questions:

1. What are the opinions of Singapore junior college students and their teachers on the issue of the use of gender-inclusive English? Do these opinions differ according to the sex of the students?
2. What percentage of Singapore junior college students use gender-inclusive English in their writing?

Methods

Participants

Participants in the study were students at a Singapore junior college and four of their English and Literature teachers. In Singapore, students who do well on the Cambridge O-Level exam taken at about age 16 are eligible to attend junior college. These two-year institutions prepare students for the Cambridge A-Level exam which is a key criterion for university admission. Both the O-Level and A-Level are external exams for all major school subjects, including English.

Writing scripts from 181 students (93 female and 88 male) were examined, while 258 students (141 female and 117 male) completed a questionnaire on their views and practices regarding gender-inclusive English. The former group were chosen based on

the essay topics they had chosen, as will be further explained in the section on data collection. The latter group of students were gathered by the third author based on having a free slot in their class schedule on the day data were collected. As the questionnaires were done anonymously, it was not possible to know if some of the students whose writing was examined had also completed the questionnaire. Six students, four females and two males, were interviewed. They had been selected by the third author, a teacher at the college, as representing a random sample of students. Four teachers were also interviewed, two females and two males. Three were Singaporean and one was British. They were selected by the third author to represent a cross-section of experienced teachers at the college. Their teaching experience ranged from 7-20 years.

Materials

The 15-item questionnaire (Appendix 1) was an adaptation of one used by Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) to collect data on the views and practices regarding gender-exclusive/inclusive English of students at a U.S. university. The questionnaire used in the present study had two sections. The first was designed to provide data on students' awareness of the issue, practices at their previous and current educational institutions, their views on the fairness of

gender-exclusive English, and their level of concern about the issue. The second section of the questionnaire provided demographic data on students' sex and the level of educational attainment of their father and mother.

The interview questions for the students were open-ended ones designed to probe deeper into the issues raised in the questionnaire. The teachers were asked open-ended questions about their own awareness of the issue, whether they mentioned the topic in their classes, whether they graded gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive differently, which form they thought students used most, and which form students were exposed to in their reading.

Data collection

Data were collected in three ways: the questionnaire completed by students, the interviews with students and teachers, and the students' writing. Students completed the questionnaire in a large lecture hall with guidance from the first author. They were told not to write their names on the questionnaire and assured that it was not connected to their grades. The first author then gave them a two-minute introduction to the topic, after which he went through each item, explaining it and giving students time to complete it before proceeding to the next item. After the questionnaires were completed, he gave students a 35-minute presentation on the larger

issue of language variation and change. The presentation was done in order to thank the college for allowing the research to be conducted and to educate students on the issue. The presenter did not state his own views and practices on the issue - he supports and uses gender-inclusive usage but believes people should make their own informed decisions - until the end of the presentation, i.e., long after the questionnaires had been collected.

After the presentation, interviews were conducted with the six students in groups of three in an open area on the campus. The interviews lasted about 15 minutes. The four teachers, none of whom had attended the presentation, were interviewed individually in a study room in the college library. Each interview lasted between 10-15 minutes.

As part of their preparation for the 'A' level exam, each student wrote a practice essay in response to one of 12 writing prompts similar to those which appear on the exam. This was done before the questionnaire data were collected. Afterward, writing scripts for three of the prompts were chosen for analysis, as these prompts seemed to generate many instances of third-person singular, an area in which writers often have to choose between gender exclusive/inclusive forms. The topics of these three prompts were: the meaning of love, the problems faced by teenagers, and

whether or not it is worthwhile for a country to spend its time and money to train athletes for international competition. The typical script was approximately 633 words long, based on nine randomly selected scripts.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were obtained for the questions in section one of the questionnaire. Then, data on respondents' sex from section two of the questionnaire were used to run Chi-square tests to see if significant differences existed between females and males in their responses to items four and five of section one: whether they used gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive more frequently, and whether they believed gender-exclusive English is unfair to females, respectively. In item 4, responses indicating "I don't remember" were dropped from the chi-square calculation. A significance level of .05 was used for all inferential statistics in the study. Data from the interviews were combined with those from the questionnaire to better understand student behaviours in their essay writing, to which we now turn.

The writing scripts were coded into one of six categories based on the presence of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive forms in the essays. The categories were: (1) gender-exclusive only; (2) gender-inclusive only; (3) mixed gender-exclusive and

gender-inclusive, more gender-exclusive; (4) mixed, more gender-inclusive; (5) mixed, equal number of instances of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive; (6) no explicit gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive. The coding was done by the first and second authors who first met to discuss randomly selected scripts. Inter-rater agreement, established by coding 8 scripts together and extensive discussion, was 100%. The first two authors then divided the rest of the scripts and coded them. While coding, any instances about which coding was questionable were noted for later discussion.

Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) had coded the use of plural forms, e.g., "Architects should keep their clients informed" (Category 6 above) as instances of gender-inclusive. While the researchers in the current study believe that this is one of the best ways to implement gender-inclusive, it was not coded as such in this study because it was not possible to unambiguously see it in this way.

The resulting coding of students' writing on the practice exam was analyzed using descriptive statistics to see:

1. how many students were in each category;
2. how many used explicitly gender-inclusive forms (combining categories 2-5).

To see if the writing of females and males differed in terms of the

use of explicit gender-exclusive/inclusive forms, a chi-square test was conducted comparing the frequency of people of each sex in category 1 and those in a combination of categories 2-5.

Results

Questionnaires

Descriptive statistics from the student questionnaires will be presented first (see Table 1), followed by inferential statistics. Not all the 258 students responded to every questionnaire item.

Approximately half the students had heard of the issue of language and gender (Item 1). As to whether gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive English had been taught at their primary and secondary schools (Item 2), of those students who could remember the issue arising, 31% indicated gender-exclusive, 6% gender-inclusive, and 35% said either was acceptable. At the junior college where they were currently studying, of those who could remember, the percentage of students indicating that gender-exclusive was taught (Item 3), fell to 19%, while 6% indicated gender-inclusive, and 40% said either was acceptable. As to their own writing (Item 4), 61% reported using gender-exclusive, 29% gender-inclusive, and 10% stated that they could not remember. When asked if gender-exclusive was unfair to females (Item 5), 65% replied that it was not and 35% that it was.

Table 1 Past Experiences, Current Practices, and Views

(percentages appear in parentheses)

Questionnaire Item	Female	Male	Total
1. Heard of the issue of language and gender			
a. Yes	75 (29)	54 (21)	129 (50)
b. No	66 (26)	63 (24)	129 (50)
2. Primary and secondary school teachers' policy			
a. Generally taught G-E	48 (18)	33 (13)	81 (31)
b. Generally taught G-I	9 (3)	6 (2)	15 (6)
c. Generally said either was acceptable	47 (18)	44 (17)	91 (35)
d. I don't remember	36 (14)	38 (15)	74 (28)
3. Junior college teachers' policy			
a. Generally taught G-E	25 (10)	23 (9)	48 (19)
b. Generally taught G-I	9 (4)	7 (3)	16 (6)
c. Generally said either was	58 (23)	46 (18)	104 (40)

acceptable			90 (35)
d. I don't remember	49 (19)	41 (16)	
4. In your own writing, which do you use more frequently?			
a. Gender-exclusive	89 (34)	68 (26)	157 (61)
b. Gender-inclusive	45 (17)	30 (12)	75 (29)
c. I don't remember	7 (3)	19 (7)	26 (10)
5. Do you believe that Gender-exclusive English is unfair to females?			
a. Yes	64 (25)	25 (10)	89 (35)
b. No	77 (30)	91 (35)	168 (65)

Chi-square analyses of responses to questionnaire item 4 showed no significant difference in the number of females and males reporting use of gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive English in their writing ($\chi^2=.23$). However, on item 5 significantly more females indicated that they felt gender-exclusive English was unfair to females ($\chi^2=15.98$).

Interviews

In their interviews, the six students gave several reasons why some of them preferred gender-exclusive English: it is the conventional way, teachers had told them to use it, alternatives were unfamiliar or clumsy, e.g., "An architect should keep his or her clients informed" meant extra words and effort, and gender-exclusive was not wrong. On the other hand, one male who used gender-inclusive stated that he has asked one of his secondary school teachers about which to use. After being told it was optional, he elected to use gender-inclusive because he saw it as fairer. All students seemed to feel that the language people heard and saw did not have much impact on their thought or action.

In their interviews, the four teachers stated that they were all aware of the issue of gender-exclusive/inclusive English. Not surprisingly, the British interviewee became familiar with the general issue of language and gender the earliest, in the 1970s in his home country. He now makes a conscious effort to use gender-inclusive. One Singaporean stated that he first became aware of the issue in 1987 while working on a Ministry of Education project to write history textbooks. A British consultant changed "mankind" to "humanity", creating a good deal of discussion, after which this teacher decided to use gender-inclusive. Thus, from these two

teachers we see examples of the ripple effect being delivered in person.

One female teacher noted that students were exposed to a lot of gender-inclusive English, as they read periodicals from the U.S. The effect of these periodicals would constitute a less personal, but perhaps more powerful for being more pervasive, form of ripple effect from an Inner Circle country. The teachers felt their students used more gender-exclusive, but all accepted either gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive forms, with the exception of singular forms of "they", e.g. "An architect should keep their clients informed". However, there was less unanimity as to the teachers' own language use. Perhaps surprisingly, the two males used more gender-inclusive than did the two females.

Writing scripts

Table 2 below shows the coding of the writing scripts into the six categories by sex of the writer. The difference between females and males was not significant. When categories 2-5, the categories which involve at least some use of explicit gender-inclusive English, are combined, it can be seen that more than half the students were using at least some gender-inclusive forms in their writing, not to mention the fact that category 6, into which 17% of students fell, can also be counted as gender-inclusive. Results of the chi-square

test showed no significant difference in the use of gender-exclusive/inclusive forms between females and males ($\chi^2=1.92$).

Table 2 Coding Of Students' Writing Scripts (percentages appear in parentheses)

Category	Female	Male	Total
1. Gender-exclusive only	21 (12)	28 (15)	49 (27)
2. Gender-inclusive only	12 (7)	16 (9)	28 (15)
3. Mixed, more gender-exclusive	24 (13)	20 (11)	44 (24)
4. Mixed, more gender-inclusive	16 (9)	10 (6)	26 (14)
5. Mixed, equal number of instances of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive	4 (2)	0 (0)	4 (2)
6. No explicit gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive	11 (6)	19 (10)	30 (17)
Totals	88 (49)	93 (51)	181

Discussion

The research questions

This study began with two research questions:

1. What are the opinions of Singapore junior college students and their teachers on the issue of the use of gender-inclusive English? Do these opinions differ according to the sex of the students?
2. What percentage of Singapore junior college students use gender-inclusive English in their writing?

As to the first part of the first research question, based on data from the current study it appears that among the students and teachers at this Singapore junior college gender-inclusive English was widely, but certainly not unanimously, acceptable. On the second part of the first research question, female students tended to view gender-inclusive language more favourably than males did.

As to the second research questions, almost 50% of students' writing contained at least one instance of explicit gender-inclusive English, and only 27% contained only gender-exclusive forms. There were no significant differences between sexes in their reported and observed use of gender-exclusive/inclusive forms in writing. Thus, a significant percentage of student participants not only accepted the use of gender-exclusive English

but actually used it themselves.

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that gender-inclusive forms are present in the English of some members of an important segment of Singaporeans, as junior college students constitute a major portion of the country's future leaders. Further evidence of the incomplete transition to gender-inclusive in Singapore English comes from no less than Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who in an address to university students about his party's election manifesto was quoted in a local newspaper as saying:

In Singapore 21, every Singaporean can dream. More than that, he or she can fulfil his or her dream. Not just the 5Cs ... but the non-materialistic aspects of life too! And everyone can be the best he is capable of (Ng 1996: 3) (emphasis added).

Lack of previous studies makes it difficult to speculate on whether the data in this study represent a trend toward greater use of gender-inclusive English in Singapore, but given the trend internationally, at least in Inner Circle countries, it may be reasonable to suggest that gender-inclusive usage has increased and will continue increasing. This is in line with a study of the views and practices of 35 Asian second language educationists,

mostly from Southeast Asia, on gender-exclusive/inclusive English (Jacobs, Zhuo, Jocson, Ong, & Austria 1996).

The apparent presence of a ripple effect as a change in Inner Circle countries spreads to an Outer Circle country could be attributed to the power of Inner Circle media and to a tendency of Outer Circle countries to look to the Inner Circle for usage norms. At the same time, explanations should also be sought in socio-economic changes that have occurred in Singapore, e.g., the changes, noted above, in female labour and education patterns.

Future research

Topics which future researchers may wish to investigate include the following.

1. Whether similar changes are taking place in the English of other Outer Circle countries, in the English of Expanding Circle countries, as well as in other languages (Gomard 1995).
Toward this end, researchers might wish to replicate the present study.
2. The interaction in bilinguals and multilinguals of related changes in their various languages.
3. Situational variation in use of gender-exclusive/inclusive (Rubin, Greene, and Schnieder 1994).
4. Changes in teaching methods and materials which may affect

student use of different language forms.

An example of the latter idea are studies of the treatment of female and male characters in Singapore primary school textbooks (Gupta & Lee 1989, Ong forthcoming).

Language and society

One point that stood out from the interviews of the six students was the seeming rejection, even by those who supported the use of gender-inclusive English, of the Whorfian Hypothesis (Whorf 1956) that language plays a powerful role in shaping thinking. One possible explanation of this is that, as all these students were bi- if not multilingual, they may feel less emotional connection to English, seeing it merely as a vehicle for accomplishing tasks rather than as an integral part of their being. Nevertheless, perhaps the role of language in society is an area that educators might wish to stress more, as research suggests that gender-exclusive language does indeed effect people's thinking (e.g., McConnell & Fazio 1996) and especially as social constructionist views (Halliday 1978) of language gain greater prominence.

In this social constructivist vein, Cheah (1996: 218), speaking about English, stated that, "[B]eyond its instrumental value, the language has also become an important part of being a Singaporean. ... In fact, English is now closely associated with the

forging of a new Singaporean identity." Students need to consider the relation between the language choices they make, e.g., using gender-exclusive or gender-inclusive, and the place of females and males in Singapore society.

Freed (1995) noted a trend in the 1990s toward cross-cultural perspectives on the interaction of language and gender. This trend recognizes that gender "is a societal construct that interacts with language as well as with numerous other social, psychological, and political factors in ways that are still poorly understood" (Freed 1995: 9). Perhaps, more could be done to move the broader public toward such a view of language as a living, varying organism and away from one which sees language as fixed and varieties of language as good or bad, portents of success or failure. With such a view, the waves caused by the ripple effects of social and language change will not catch the public unaware.

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APPENDIX 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

In recent years, concern has arisen that females may be excluded when words such as "mankind", "chairman", and "he" are used to refer to both males and females. Some people believe that this is an important issue and changes should be made in English. Other people, however, feel that no changes are needed and/or that it is not an important issue.

We would appreciate your honest responses about this topic. This questionnaire is purely for research purposes and will not affect your marks in any way. Do not write your name on this questionnaire.

Thank you very much for your help.

Definitions **Gender-exclusive** refers to language in which words specifically referring to males only are used to include both males and females, e.g., fireman, chairman, he/his (*A student should be paid for his work*).

Gender-inclusive refers to language in which both men and women are included, e.g., firefighter, chairperson, he/she or their (*A student should be paid for his/her or their work*).

SECTION 1

Please circle the appropriate response.

- 1 Have you heard about the issue of language and gender before?
- a Yes
b No

Comments _____

- 2 What has been the typical policy of your past teachers at primary and secondary school concerning the issue of Gender-exclusive

and Gender-inclusive English?

- a Generally taught Gender-exclusive
- b Generally taught Gender-inclusive
- c Generally said either was acceptable
- d I don't remember the issue ever came up

Comments _____

3 What has been the typical policy of your past teachers at Junior College concerning the issue of Gender-exclusive and Gender-inclusive English?

- a Generally taught Gender-exclusive
- b Generally taught Gender-inclusive
- c Generally said either was acceptable
- d I don't remember the issue ever came up

Comments _____

4 In your own writing, which do you use more frequently?

- a Gender-exclusive
- b Gender-inclusive
- c I don't remember

Why? _____

5 Do you believe that Gender-exclusive English is unfair to females?
Please select one answer - Yes or No

- a Yes

Why do you believe this?

b No

Why do you believe this?

SECTION 2

1 Sex Female_____ Male_____