

Content Analysis of Sexist Language Occurrence on Written Discourse of Junior Pre-Service Teachers

Arlene D. Talosa

Cagayan State University, Philippines

enelasolat@gmail.com

Conchita Malenab-Temporal, Ph.D.

Cagayan State University, Philippines

conchita_temporal@yahoo.com

Abstract

Thoughts, perceptions and attitudes are dramatically influenced by language thus, the need for linguistic sensitivity. Language may create either opportunities or boundaries. Thus, this study endeavored to determine the occurrence of sexism on the written discourse of pre-service teachers through content analysis. Specifically, the study evaluated the specific forms of sexist language that are evident in the written discourse of the junior pre-service English teachers along the categories of generic pronouns, generic term man and occupational roles. Thirteen descriptive essays served as corpus of the analysis. Results of the study showed that the most occurred sexist language on the written discourses of the pre-service teachers are generic pronoun he and she, generic word man used as a noun and verb and occupational titles.

Keywords: content analysis, generic pronouns, sexist language, written discourse, occupational roles

Introduction

Thoughts, perceptions and attitudes are powerfully influenced by language and, thus, plays a very crucial role in promoting gender awareness and consciousness. Moreover, language creates categories for thought, as words can create either make or break a relationship in specific and the society in general. Boundaries exist when the words and phrases demean, ignore or stereotype members of either sex or that needlessly call attention to gender.

Accordingly, sexist language is described as the situation when care is taken to express gender-fairness in the language and people nevertheless seem to create biased perceptions where they associate the non-sexist expressions with either a masculine or a feminine gender. Sexist language excludes, trivializes or diminishes either gender.

The sad truth, however, shows that despite efforts made by many professional bodies in sparingly decade to encourage the use of non-sexist language, sexist language use persists across many languages. There already exists a large body of empirical, quantitative and qualitative evidences, showing that the masculine form used as generic yields a cognitive male bias as argued by Stahlberg et al., (2007). Scholars, linguists and researchers reason that sexist language preserves the existing patriarchy. They argue that adoption of non-sexist language advance equality of the sexes, (Kleinman, 2002). Further, sexist language deconstructs unequal power relationships, as posited by Shaw & Hoerber, (2003) as it gives superiority to one sex over the other. Linguists who ventured on sexist and non-sexist language usage revealed that although sexist language could also be used to diminish, trivialize or exclude men, it is women who predominantly bear the brunt of its effects.

While there has been a number of researches validating the fact that sexist language is said to be decreasing in English academic writing, sexist language is still widely used in the popular press and other media and empirical observations reveal that even in classroom settings, the use of sexist language is still prevalent. To note, empirical data shows that junior pre-service English teachers in their written discourses predominantly uses masculine generics to describe people in general.

Sexism does not only materialize through people's actions and behaviors. The language that is widely

used in everyday discourse carries different instances of sexism, and the English language is a prime example of such language. Several forms of linguistic sexism have appeared in a number of instances in the English language, and feminists have been striving to address these traces of linguistic sexism for decades. Irrespective of the forms, language components and the levels in which linguistic sexism surfaces, attempts to address and remedy gender stereotypes in language should be taken seriously to bring about changes in the society to one that affords both genders an equal playing field. This study is therefore intended to investigate if sexist language is evident among junior pre-service English teachers' written language.

Conceptual Framework

Dobrić N. (2018) in the paper, *Language as a Window into Discrimination: A Corpus Linguistic Analysis of Hatred* emphasized that the best way to gain an insight into a society is to observe its language. Discrimination is argued to be present when someone is treated unfavorably due to certain unfounded beliefs, prejudices, and stereotypes. Thus, emphasizing the global need for restructuring language so as not to belittle or denigrate a particular gender is imperative. Societal discrimination is reflected in the amount of discriminatory expressions used in linguistic discourse. The modern society calls for a deviation from these traditional discriminative writing where gender imposes a dichotomy.

The present study is grounded on the Theory of Linguistic Relativity which posits that language is a construct attempt to signify abstract meaning, and any construct will be lacking. The language people use therefore affects not just the messages communicated, but the fundamental ways that people think and act as it embodies interpretation of reality and that these interpretations can influence thought about reality. The interpretation arises from the selection of substantive aspects of experience and their formal arrangement into systems of referential meaning in the verbal code. The study assumes that language does not always act as a natural vehicle as it is one of the most powerful means through which sexist language is perpetrated and reproduced.

Within the academic environment, the use or tolerance of sexist language is a potentially discriminatory practice. While sexist language can affect either men or women, academics generally agree that in English speaking cultures, women suffer most from its deleterious effect. In a previous study conducted by Talosa, 2018, students are generally aware of the use of non-sexist language. The present study therefore assumes that since students are already aware of gender inclusive terms, incidences of sexist language should be controlled in their written discourses. Knowing this ground is better assessed through content analysis. According to Mills (1995) sexism could be analyzed at three levels in a text: at word-level, sentence-level and at discourse-level. For this particular study, features at word-level was chosen for the investigation. While the study only chose word level, investigation of sexist language occurrence looked into how the words are used generically in the sentence level.

Objective of the Study

The study aimed to determine the occurrence of sexism on the written discourse of pre-service teachers.

Specifically, the study sought to find answers on the forms of sexist language that are evident in the written discourse of the junior pre-service English teachers.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

The study was limited to the determination of the occurrence of sexism on the written discourse of junior pre-service teachers at word and sentence level. Only the third year Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English were selected as the respondents of the study.

Related Literature

Sexist language

Language is an indispensable tool for expressing feelings, attitudes and dispositions. Language being the core of humanity can be used to establish relationships or solidarity, even as it can also be make or break a society. It is, therefore, the obligation and responsibility of a linguist to champion the phatic function of language. This point is better appreciated if one considers the words of Teri and Gamble (2002) that "in building relationships, one cannot be overly concerned with himself or herself but must consider the needs and wants of others, since it

is through effective interpersonal, small group, public media and computer-based systems that basic physical and social needs are met”.

In studies on language and gender, Carmen Pérez-Sabater (2013) in her study concluded that English language is sexist as they use lexical choices from a masculine viewpoint. Linguistic representation in this line of thought, is no longer neutral and transparent means of representing reality, but androcentric. The portrayal of men as the norm and women as the appendage or as the exception in language makes the English language sexist. This is importantly deemed true as males in almost all English language is deemed superior over males acting as generic representative of both genders. Nguyễn Văn Khang (2000) argued that sex discrimination in language is evident on categories with male factor showing male dominance in society, where the common example is on the usage of pronouns he/his.

Since the old English period in the history of English literature, 'man' has long been used as a term meant to signify "person" or "human being. Empirical evidences as evident on academic writing reveal that up to this date, the term remained unchanged as it is still used for generalizations for both sexes. The habitual use of "Man" referring to include male and female while Miller and Swift (2001) said that this is time-testedly used, the modern days call for intercultural competence where sensitivity of language now becomes a dire need.

According to the Feminist Toolkit of Mills, sexism could be analyzed at three levels in a text namely at word-level, sentence-level and at discourse-level. She argues for the importance of analyzing texts at a word-level by stating that certain word-uses reflect gender differences. The view of men as the norm in language is evident at word-level by the use of generic words. Pauwels (2003) argues that this kind of language-use makes women invisible. It is more common to visualize a male person when interpreting a word that includes "man" and this might lead to stereotypes of certain occupations (Mills 1995). When masculine words are used generically, they are interpreted as describing a man. effort targeted at making language gender neutral or gender inclusive is therefore of a dire need.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed the qualitative research design. Qualitative research according to Hsieh and Shannon (2005) is a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns. The concept adopted in the context of the study is that of Mills. According to Mills (1995) sexism could be analyzed at three levels in a text: at word-level, sentence-level and at discourse-level. For this particular study, features at word-level have been chosen for the investigation. Yet while word levels were only chosen, the study looked into the usage of the words in a sentence to investigate whether it is used generically.

Locale of the study

The study was conducted at the College of Teacher Education (CTE) of the Cagayan State University, Maura, Aparri, Cagayan for the School year 2017-2018. Cagayan State University-Aparri is one of the satellite campuses of the Cagayan State University situated 2-3 kilometer east of the town proper.

Sources of Data

The study had the sources of the data taken from the written discourse of the junior pre-service teachers. Complete enumeration was used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data gathered. A total of 13 Junior Pre-service English teachers in the College of Teacher Education at Cagayan State University at Aparri Campus as of the present academic year were selected.

Data Gathering Procedure

To gather data, the researchers asked the respondents to write a five paragraph composition about a teacher. Choice of title is open. The theme of analysis is Sexist Language. After which, the researchers coded the form of sexist language that were evident on the pre-service teachers' written discourse and drew inferences on the basis of codes and categories generated. The qualitative elements of the study depended on the investigation

of how these lexical terms are used generically in a sentence.

Data Analysis

The data collected were analyzed with selected features from the toolkit of feminist stylistics. This toolkit was provided by Mills and it can be directed at any text to discover the way gender is represented. Only a few features were selected from feminist stylistics because of the limited size of the study. The features that have been analyzed in the written discourses are the gendered generic pronouns, generic nouns, and occupational nouns in word level.

Result and Discussion

Results of the abstraction apparently revealed that there are evidences of sexist language occurrences on the written discourse of the junior pre-service teachers.

Word level analysis

Gendered Generic Pronoun

The 13 written discourses analyzed showed use of gendered generic words. The pronouns he, his and him were used as referents to noun of no specific gender. Among the gendered generic pronouns, his was found the most reoccurring sexist antecedent to the noun, teacher.

The following are excerpts from the written discourses: (1) *A teacher is expected to be a good role model in all areas of his life.* (2) *Teachers should be innovative and creative in delivering his instruction.* (2) *A good teacher possesses skills necessary to the realization of his work.* (3) *A teacher provides a way to show his students the right path for their bright future.* (4) *A teacher serves as the second parent who gives pieces of advice when he notices changes in his class. Hence, respect is accounted to him.* (5) *He who teaches not from the book but from the heart is an effective teacher;* (6) *he who is a competent teacher exercises students mind to think beyond their knowledge* (7) *The greatest achievement of a teacher is to see his students conquer the world with their own wings and to be a witness of their success that may even surpass his own achievement;*(8) *a teacher is always ready to listen to the noise, ready to comfort the one in despair ready to set aside his personal problems and emotions just to fulfill the promises he oath to accomplish and* (9) *A teacher - he who creates the future and the future of futures, and cultivates the land which will be planted with seeds of professionals.*

Excerpts 1 to 10 made use of masculine pronouns. Excerpt 1, (A teacher...his life) 2 (Teachers...his instruction), 3 (Teacher...his students), 4 (A teacher...he notices...his class), 7, (teacher... his students...his own achievement), 8 (A teacher...his personal problems... he oath) and 9 A teacher...He) used those pronouns to modify teacher.

Excerpt 5 (He... teacher) and 6 (he...teacher) made use of the pronoun He as a subject. His and he were the pronoun-referents to the antecedent-Teacher. Such sentences assume that all teachers are male. Nguyễn Văn Khang (2000) argued that sex discrimination in language might be found in such categories as words with male factor showing male dominance in society, common example is on the use of he/his. If generic pronouns such as he, his, himself and him are used to refer to everyone, this can be seen as the manifestation of sexist language, Nguyen (2016).

It is noteworthy to mention that the usual pattern that makes the pre-service teachers commit generic he is when the subject is stated in the singular and active voice. Following the initial pronoun he, preservice teachers also employed pronouns his and him. This is accounted to pronoun consistency.

Generic She

While the study only categorizes generic he as the usual form of sexist language, generic she was also excessively evident in one written discourse.

Following below are the excerpts:

She is a mother. We spent most of our time with her. (3) *She loves us and cares for us. She manages the classroom. She sees to it that every student is safe, comfortable and happy. And above all, she is more than willing to sacrifice her time, effort, money or food, just to make sure we are well and good. She is a friend. She can be a*

companion we can be with, a shoulder we can lean on. A clown to cheer us up, a playmate we can play with. She can be a hand to help us stand, she is a friend. She is a role model. She does only what is nice. She shows only the proper way. She speaks only the nicest words. She teaches only the best. She does only what is right for she wants us to see and imitate what is upright.

She is a guide. She redirects us when we are astray. She presents us diverge ways, but she lets us choose our path. She unlocks the door, but she lets us enter it on our own. She gives us opportunities, but she lets us discover it. She presents us with challenges, but she never leaves us alone.

She is an inspiration. She is the reason we go to school. She is the one who encourages us to study. She smiles at us even we did wrong. She still accepts us despite our shortcomings. She is proud of our achievements. She is our inspiration.

She brings change. She is the reason why we understood the Laws of Motion. She is the reason why we have solved the Mathematics problems. She is the one who taught us that the plural of ox is oxen. She is the reason of our being patriotic. She taught us cleanliness. She is the reason why we are physically fit. She is the reason why I can read and speak English. She brought us change in our lives

She is a hero. She is not in her suit. She doesn't have any superpowers. She cannot become invisible nor can fly. She doesn't have swords nor spears, but she has a weapon called chalk. She is our hero.

My teacher is my mother. She is also my friend. I look at her as a role model. She guides me to the right path. She inspires me. She has change in my life. She built me my future. She is my hero. She is my teacher.

In the given discourse, *she* was used generically thus, is sexist. The written discourse assumed that all teachers are females. This may be accounted to frequent research findings of feminization in teaching however while there is dominance of female in the education sector, it is still sexist to use *she* and exclude “*he*” as there are also male teachers. This is because a non-sexist pronoun is a pronoun that does not refer either to women or men. It is not connected with any gender. As far as all English personal pronouns are concerned, the gender is not marked in the following pronouns: I, you (singular and plural), it, we, they, so they can be all used with antecedents of any sex. It follows that the only English personal pronouns which are marked for gender are the third person singular pronouns.

Gendered Generic Man

Gendered generic man was also evident on the written discourses of pre-service teachers. Man was used as a masculine noun representative of the two genders. Surprisingly man was also used not only as a noun but also as a verb. Two respondents wrote (1) “*Good teachers know how to man the classroom*”. Excerpt 1 is sexist as man was used to mean “to operate”. *Man* here recognize the masculine. (2) “*Effective teachers lead or man the students well*”; Excerpt 2 is likewise sexist as the verb leads could have already made the sentence gender neutral yet the word “man” is still used as a synonym for lead.

Meanwhile, a discourse mentioned that “*It is even more fulfilling when a teacher sees a once stubborn child who became a man of success and responsibilities crown with various achievements*” such is sexist as man is used to mean “person”. The sentence has a hidden meaning that only those successful and responsible are men. Man used as a person is in the same case evident on these excerpts, (4) Teachers are the most selfless man that ever lived. (5) No one in this world can take away man's persistence to become a hero in their own way and (6) They reconstruct our wrecked life, shields us from unwanted manmade phenomena and light us from our dim path. (7) “*all men born for a reason*” and (8) “*A teacher is an ordinary man with extraordinary roles*”. The usage of man as a generic noun in Excerpt 7 and 8 makes people think that this reason and role is of male human beings only and that women are not involved in the event, so they seem to be excluded. These lexical choices are sexist as man was applied to both sexes but is generally in the masculine form.

Surprisingly, man was also used for “hero” in the excerpt (7) A teacher is indeed a blessing- a cape for every *superman*. Pauwells, 2003 argued in her study that when masculine words are used generically, they are interpreted as describing a man. In the excerpts man, is always representative of person.

Occupational Nouns/ Job Titles

Additionally, words describing occupations traditionally held by males—such as examples of success defined in terms of occupational achievement in traditional male jobs. Occupational references at word-level are

doctor, policeman, businessman and engineer. the following statements are lifted from the pre-service teachers written discourses: (1) *Without teachers, there are no **doctors, policeman, businessman and engineers.*** 2. *Teachers are the reasons behind successful **doctors, businessman and etc.*** (3). *Teachers being the profession that teaches the other profession create the best **engineers and policemen.*** (4) *Even the sun cannot outshine the sparkles every time she sees the **policeman, fireman, businessman and lawyers;*** (5) *A **captain** on a ship filled with **seamen** whose safety lies in his hands and whose happiness depends in his decisions;* (6) *A **pilot** in a plane with passengers whose destination lies ahead;* (7) *They create **policemen** who are in charge of protecting the people, **doctors** who tirelessly work to save lives, **firemen** who keep our houses fire-free, **engineers and carpenters** who make sure our houses are well-built, and **businessmen** who supply goods and services in the market.*(8) *A teacher is a **repairman** of a classroom.* (9) *They cannot be too expressive of their emotions in the public like dance in the disco bar, kiss their dates in the park, nor shout at that annoying waiter in the restaurant and* (10) *Teachers are expected to be good actors.*

The highlighted occupational terms are sexist as they are written in a grammatical gender of masculine form. Such was analyzed because of male-specificity as indicated in the different [job](#) titles (Excerpt 1: *doctors, policeman, businessman and engineers*; (Excerpt 2 *doctors, businessman*); (Excerpt 3. *Engineers, policemen*); Excerpt 4 (*policeman, fireman, businessman and lawyers*); (Excerpt 5. *Captain, seamen*); (Excerpt 6. *Pilot*); (Excerpt 7. *Policemen, doctors, engineers and carpenters, businessmen*) and (Excerpt 8. *Repairman*); (Excerpt 9. *Waiter*) and (Excerpt 10. *Actors*). It can be noted that the word choices for occupations are usually gender-marked with man, thus, are sexist.

The non-sexist equivalent of the said words should be medical practitioner (doctors); police officer (policeman); business person (businessman), fire fighter (fireman), sea fairer or sailor (seaman); maintenance specialist (repairman), police officer (policeman), business person (businessman), server (waiter), sea fairer/ sailor (Seaman), maintenance specialist (repairman, carpenter), server (waiter) and law practitioner (lawyer). Actor, pilot and captain are occupational nouns which are already in the non-sexist form. The sexist term for actor is showman; airman for pilot or flight crew and the sexist term for captain is shipmaster. However, while these occupational titles are already in its non-sexist equivalent, it can be assumed that it referred to males considering the initial choices of words with man following thoughts of parallelism.

Women are no longer excluded from the various working fields that were reserved for males but have entered them and thus need to be considered when referred to as being part of the working force. Said words should be neutralized to make it non-sexist in form. Sczesny, (2015) posited that one strategy to treat men and women symmetrically is through neutralization.

Neutralization is achieved for example by changing or replacing male-masculine form (Policeman) with gender unmarked form (Police Officer). In the framework of neutralization, gender marked terms is replaced by gender indefinite nouns. On the study of Hellinger and Bubman, 2001, neutralization has been recommended especially for natural gender languages and genderless language. Engelberg, 2002 pointed out that it is fairly easy to avoid gender markings in these languages.

Other Findings

It is noteworthy to mention that from the 13 written discourses, there were 4 instances where written discourses avoided the use of generic masculine pronouns and nouns. No incidence of generic pronouns, generic term man and gender markedness in occupational roles were found on the written discourses of 11 Junior Pre-Service teachers. 'he/she' he or she and 'him/her' were used by the Junior Pre-Service teachers. This therefore insinuates that there is indeed an awareness of the problem of sexist language in the College of Teacher Education yet to a minimal extent. It is interesting to note that these written discourses were written by journalist in the campus who employed less occurrence of sexist language. What might account for this? The methodology of the study does not give a definitive answer to this question yet one possible answer is that some of the writers have local training in nonsexist language.

Meanwhile, while the data indicate that the pre-service teachers used two pronouns to represent the gender of a noun, the idea that men are superior and women are secondary is conveyed through the firstness and markedness of word phrases utilized in their written discourses. Looking at the order of feminine and masculine pronouns, there is no evidence of female-before-male orders: her/him and she/ he. The exceeding number of male-

before female orders is 12: his/her, he/she, him/her, his or her, his or hers, him or her, his/her, he/ she, he or she. Findings find support in Hasan and Babaii (2003) where their data revealed that, based on the frequency of occurrence, women suffered most obviously from low visibility. The ratio of females to males in texts was, in fact, 1:1.4 and in illustrations 1:1.6. Obviously making men seem to enjoy a bigger slice of the pie.

The publication manual by American Psychological Association (APA) includes guidelines against sexist language stating that ‘...combination forms such as *he/she* or *(s)he* are awkward and distracting and are not ideal’ (APA, 2012). APA recommends the use of ‘neutral’ words such as *they* as noted by Garnham et al., 2012.

Conclusion

There are manifestations that generic pronouns, generic man and masculine gender marked occupation roles in the pre-service teachers’ written discourse. It is then apparent that pre-service teachers evidently portray through their written discourse the tradition of viewing men as the norm in word level. While actions toward gender-fair languages have primarily focused on making women more salient and reducing the so-called male bias, males can also be stereotyped in language. Cognizant of the veracity that English language is the international language, most widely used in the global arena, it is therefore imperative for language users to demonstrate sensitivity to sexist language. More so, as the modern world calls for intercultural communicative intelligence, so is the need to exhibit critical cognition to linguistic bias terms most specially in the academic setting. The need to de-gender the English language targeted at making language gender neutral or gender inclusive is quite of imminent importance. Teachers around the globe who reinforce students’ learning of English language to make them competent intercultural speakers or skilled language users, should work on giving deliberate reinforcement on the deviation of these stereotypes or sexist structures in the field of language discourse.

Recommendations

1. The Gender and Development (GAD) focal persons should promote awareness-raising campaigns as the preliminary action to establish a good practice in combatting sexist utterances and choices on spoken or written discourses for the advancement of realistic and non-discriminatory portrayal of either sex.
2. Initiatives are highly and urgently needed from teachers to model and encourage students to write, speak, and act without prejudice for better linguistic habit.
3. Future research may attempt to venture on the phenomenological case of “he or she” or “she or he” on students’ written discourses.
4. Another research study on the pre-service teachers’ usage of sexist language on written discourses using larger sampling may be embarked on to validate the findings of the present study.

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About the Authors

Arlene D. Talosa is a faculty of the College of Teacher Education at Cagayan State University Philippines. She is currently taking up her Doctor of Philosophy in Education major in English Language Education at the same university. Her research interests include L2 acquisition, discourse analysis, and sociolinguistics.

Conchita Malenab-Temporal is an Associate Professor of English at Cagayan State University-College of Teacher Education and currently the University Quality Assurance Officer of the same university. She is a Ph.D. degree holder in the field of Language Education. She teaches both in the undergraduate and graduate programs of the University.