

Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education,
vol. 9, no. 2, pp. 40–48, 2018

Sustainability in English Academic Writing: The Binary Dilemma on Pronoun Utilization

Erdogan Bada
Cukurova University, Adana, Turkey

Bilal Genc
Inonu University, Malatya, Turkey

Abstract

Discussion on sexism regarding language focuses on how women are discriminated against in our daily language and in academic writing. Although we are against any kind of discrimination, when it comes to dealing with this phenomenon in language and language use, we should be more careful. Language is not only a symbolic means whereby humans interact, it is also a product of human intellectual activity imbued with various experiences of our past and recent ancestors. Thus, it is also a reflection of our society's conceptual system through which we interpret physical and mental phenomena. In this paper, we have analyzed views regarding sexism and language; tried to display how improving the so-called injustices in language would result in some dire situations which may have never been foreseen. We finally put forth our own solutions to overcome the problems of sexism in academic writing.

Keywords: sustainability, sexism, academic writing, truth, gender, language use.

Introduction

This article does not deal with *Man* or *man*. By all means, it agrees with almost anything stated by Miller and Swift (2001) in their work on non-sexist language, and most parts of the guidelines proposed by the American Psychological Association in this issue. However, interference in historical change of the language, as most of us know, may go to the extreme, which in the end, may result in complications in writing, and we particularly mean academic writing. Such that, we begin to see the individual losing identity; the *student* becomes neither 'he' nor 'she', and this goes for almost any profession, and yet we all know the very person we are referring to, from a binary perspective, is either a 'he' or a 'she', since even a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) would prefer either. We refrain from making such a reference for fear of offending the other sex, and by doing so, in our opinion, we repudiate, neutralize, and even, in the long run, obliterate the existence of each as an individual, utterly unique in a universe where singularity rules and, as the physical world shows us, no two entities are identical to each other.

In a viva, a member of the examining committee, referring to Prof. Dr. Elaine Tarone, to our surprise then, used the masculine pronoun, and this passed unnoticed until the session came to an end. This may seem to be a trivial incidence, yet at a larger scale, one can imagine thousands of such cases reserved not only to the spoken but the written language as well. Numerous scientific articles published in prestigious journals annually are abundant with such mishaps. Who is to blame: the reviewers who are now facing an incredible number of writers with unfamiliar names from different nationalities across the globe? The existence of unisex names in the English speaking world, where 'Chris' is either a male or a female? Or, the guideline developers who *push* writers to go 'non-sexist' depriving them of the opportunity to express their genders? The problem exists, and alas is exacerbating. Unless something is done about it, the reader will have no clue of the author's gender whose work he reads, and will probably commit the sin of ignorance by referring to 'Alex', 'Morgan', 'Tracy', etc., as either 'he' or 'she', both in speaking and in writing.

Methodology

Somekh et al. (2005) differentiate between pure, action and applied research methods. To them pure research is 'intended to lead to theoretical development: there may, or may not, be any practical implications of this. Results are disseminated through academic media' (p. 11). In line with the definition above we tried to conduct a pure research and as with the publication manual writers we aimed to guide potential authors on a certain aspect of the writing process giving specific alternatives regarding the word choice to reduce bias in language. Thus this study is of a theoretical and conceptual nature.

Sexism in Language and Education

The key words sexist language produces nearly 4.380.000 results in Google; however, when the search is conducted using quotation marks, the figure is reduced down to around 270.000. At first sight, those of us looking at this figure might be tempted to view this figure as minutiae as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. This figure, however, is quite misleading if one would wish to comprehend the magnitude of the issue. Despite its relatively small representation in the virtual realm, sexist language use or the challenge against the use of sexist language is one of the hottest issues among researchers in the academic world as well as it is among lay people.

The issue of how to refer to people whose gender does not become clear through the use of such pronouns as *anyone*, *someone*, etc. has had a long history in the English language. Among the three alternative forms which existed in English for a sex-indefinite referent ('he' or 'she', 'they', and 'he'), past and present prescriptive and descriptive grammarians of English reveal differing tendencies. Generally, one of the three alternatives has been selected as 'correct' while the other two have been proscribed without any rational, objective basis for this choice. So it appears that the choice of the grammarians has been dictated by an androcentric world-view; linguistically, human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise (Bodine, 1975).

As sensational as the claims of Bodine are, they are supported by some empirical findings. For example, Gastil (1990) investigated the propensity of the generic *he* to evoke images of males relative to *he/she* and the plural *they*. The researcher had some

undergraduates read sentences aloud and verbally describe the images that came to their minds. Not surprisingly, the author found that *he* evokes a disproportionate number of male images and that while the plural *they* functions as a generic pronoun for both males and females, males may comprehend *he/she* in a manner similar to *he*.

When we wonder how people (mainly women) have become so frustrated with the way genders are represented within the language system, we also come into grips with the motivations underlying the efforts urging a change not only in our linguistic system, but also, at least as we believe, the way we perceive reality and convey it through language. Pauwels (2003) identifies three sources of motivation among this multitude of opinions and views regarding to change sexist practices: (1) a desire to expose the sexist nature of the current language system; (2) a desire to create a language which can express reality from a woman's perspective; or (3) a desire to amend the present language system to achieve a symmetrical and equitable representation of *women* and *men*.

As far as our discussion is concerned, the first source of motivation does not render any problems; the second and the third, however, have their potential threats in a number of ways. For one thing, trying to create a language which can express reality from a woman's perspective rather than from a man's perspective will only cause new misrepresentations in the language which many women complain most of the languages of the world are afflicted with. For another, the conceptual system reflected in a language is the product of several thousand years of humanity. For example, the Turkish language does not have any articles indicating gender or the third person singular pronoun in Turkish can refer to *males*, *females* and/or non-living organisms which are in most languages labelled as neutral nouns. Then, should we, as speakers of Turkish, try to find or invent any new category in pronouns in which there would be three third person pronouns to refer to the three types of nouns. To give another example, most nouns that refer to occupations or animals in Turkish are gender free; therefore, Turkish speakers use *male* or *female* as an attributive adjective to refer to the gender of a person who performs a particular job, or to refer to a particular animal.

Lakoff (1973) in her discussion on 'woman's language' which means both language restricted in use to women and language descriptive of women alone deplores the fact how woman's language submerges a woman's personal identity, by denying her the means of expressing herself strongly and how strong expression of feeling is avoided, expression of uncertainty is favoured, and types of utterances which are deemed trivial regarding to a subject matter are elaborated in woman's language.

From a feminist perspective, Lillian (2007) draws our attention to the difference as to how, on one hand, sexist discourse, and on the other, how racist, classist and homophobic discourses have been treated for the last three decades during which those four discourse types have been well documented. To Lillian, while racist and homophobic discourses constitute hate speech, but, with the exception of a few very specific forms of discourse (rapists' narratives, some anti-abortion discourse, and most notably, pornography), sexist discourse has either been ignored in discussions of hate speech or else dismissed as not instantiating hate speech. Lillian is frustrated by the fact that even feminist scholars are reluctant to categorize sexist discourse as hate speech. She believes the reason underlying this difference between how sexist and other discriminating discourses have been treated is that sexism has been rendered 'invisible' both by the dominant patriarchy and, ironically, by third-wave feminism itself. The figure which we quoted at the beginning of this section also seems to support Lillian's position.

Although Strunk and White (2005) make a strong case for the use of *he* as a generic pronoun arguing that *he* as a pronoun used for both genders is simple and practical, and that it is rooted in the very beginnings of the English language, many writers find the use of this generic pronoun rather limiting or offensive. Therefore, for Strunk and White, substituting *he* or *she* in its place is the logical thing to do if it works; yet, most often it does not, “if only because repetition makes it sound boring or silly” (p. 89). While the argument is as hot as ever, we in this study offer another alternative for the use of generic and non-generic pronouns for those who feel discomfort and a pertaining negative effect on his intrinsic motivation when teaching English.

1. Where the work has one author:
 - a. If author is male, pronoun is ‘he’.
 - b. If author is female, pronoun is ‘she’.
2. Where the work has two authors:
 - a. If first author is male, pronoun is ‘he’.
 - b. If first author is female, pronoun is ‘she’.
3. Where the work has two or more authors of the same gender:
 - a. If all authors are males, pronoun is ‘he’.
 - b. If all authors are females, pronoun is ‘she’.
4. Where the work has more than two authors of different genders:
 - a. If majority number of authors is males, pronoun is ‘he’.
 - b. If majority number of authors is females, pronoun is ‘she’.

Sexist language, that is expressing bias in favour of one sex (which is mostly a bias for males) and treating the other sex discriminately affect not only our daily discourses but also classroom environments. Nearly all countries around the world have racial and gender related problems. One such country in the world which is notorious with race problems is undoubtedly the United States. In an article published by Rakow (1991) it is stated how white males are dissatisfied in a classroom setting:

Not surprisingly, however, it is white males who most object to being decentered in the classroom. The introduction of discourses that place women and racial minorities as subjects and that permit the possibility for women and racial minorities in the classroom to speak in their own discourses is both a new experience and a threatening one for many white males.... While it is true that others in the classroom may also be more comfortable with a dominant discourse, it is generally white males who are accorded the powerful subject position in that discourse to act on it aggressively. If the teacher is a woman, the attempt may be made to relocate her as the sexist object of this discourse, thereby negating her authority as a professor in academic discourse. Several examples illustrate how this occurs (p. 11).

The quotation above has implication for all nations in which women generally occupy a secondary place in the society; in which women suffer from several societal sicknesses; they are tortured or even murdered. If people of the world could cause change in their languages in favour of women, these changes may result in much better living conditions all across the globe. Language is not only a medium in human thinking ability, it influences our mental makeup to such a great extent that even a slight change in it will in turn trigger changes in how our minds are function which will in turn impact the way women are treated in all cultures.

In a quite distant setting yet on a similar topic as Rakow's study, in Estonia Kuurme and Kasemaa (2015) investigated the perceived advantages of being a girl and being a boy with the participation of students from secondary schools. In line with various other international studies two of their findings draw our attention:

- Girls are more oriented towards the norms that are based on the dominant discourse of what is suitable for girls. Studying well is one of these norms.
- The breaking of norms is more acceptable for boys, and sometimes it is even something boys are expected to do.

Egne (2014) wondered why the number of girls in Ethiopia majoring in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) is far smaller than that of boys. The researcher found that since girls do not have inadequate preliminary knowledge and academic preparation, they are less interested in those majors, their poor self-concept and the persistent effects of socio-cultural gender stereotypes, the existence of science educational experiences that do not welcome women are also other factors leading to girls' underrepresentation in those majors in Ethiopia.

Women in English are discriminated against not only in terms of semantics but also in terms of syntax. Besides derogating and belittling vocabulary in English, the syntactical forms also reveal gender discrimination. Chen (2016) citing two concrete examples from newspapers in which two murderers are mentioned, argues that when a woman commits a murder she is also the subject of the headline but when a man commits a murder he is instantly moved from the subject position. Thereby, women's image is more likely to be damaged while men's is inclined to be protected revealing an imbalanced power between men and women

Not only language as used in academic writing or other daily writing such as newspapers journals, columns, etc, pictures are also means through which we communicate consciously or unconsciously gender stereotypes. Carried out in a Spanish context, Romera's study analyzes, from a multimodal perspective, posters hung on walls in secondary schools and a university over a period of several months. The researcher discovers, as most of us would expect, that although the linguistic messages used in these posters avoid any reference to gender, images continue to represent classical stereotypes in a subtle and an inexplicit way. Images depict daily life activities, unexceptional and apparently without gender ideology. However, they still associate gender with classical roles (Romera, 2015). In a newspaper article published by the Guardian on March 24, 2015 we were informed that the official dictionary of the Swedish language would introduce a gender-neutral pronoun in April, 2018 and "hen" would be added to "han" (he) and "hon" (she) as one of 13,000 new words in the latest edition of the Swedish Academy's SAOL ("Sweden adds gender-neutral pronoun to dictionary," 2015).

Unlike Romera's synchronic perspective, Balhorn (2004) carried out a diachronic study regarding the use of generic *they* in English. Balhorn argues that there is sound evidence showing the widespread use generic *they* preceding the years of 20th century which, he believes, is an indication that the common use of *they* resulted from internal developments in the language rather than from external and social ones as implied in several other works. For example, two recent researchers argue that in spoken English the use of *they* with singular, generic antecedent is more common than *he* in both formal and familiar contexts (Matossian 1997; Newman 1997; ctd. in Balhorn, 2004). Balhorn attributes the rise of *they* to the loss of grammatical gender and rise of natural gender which took place in Old English and early Middle English periods of the history of the

English language. Yet in order to avert criticisms from feminist circles, Balhorns also endorses the fact that socio-cultural factors involved in the rise of generic *they*, and that social realities affect the language as a whole, particularly the lexicon.

Non-Sexism and Truth

Feminism in language or advocates of non-sexism in language tries to achieve an equal representation for both men and women in a language. Thus, linguistics plays a significant part of political activities aiming at improving women's conditions at work, at home, or in social life. The motivation for equal representation in language comes from the weaker version of Sapir – Whorf hypothesis which argues that language shapes and reflects social reality (Pauwels, 2003).

We believe that truth of a statement is its conformity with fact or reality. We also believe that our languages reflect the physical and mental phenomena objectively, that is, our symbols used in communication can truly convey to us the nature of concrete and abstract entities. The following assumptions about language, meaning, truth and understanding are generally considered by several Western objectivist philosophers and linguists (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980):

- Truth is a matter of fitting words to the world.
- A theory of meaning for natural language is based on a theory of truth, independent of the way people understand and use language.
- Meaning is objective and disembodied, independent of human understanding.
- Sentences are abstract objects with inherent structures.
- The meaning of a sentence can be obtained from the meanings of its parts and the structure of the sentence.
- Communication is a matter of a speaker's transmitting a message with a fixed meaning to a hearer.
- How a person understands a sentence, and what it means *to him*, is a function of the objective meaning of the sentence and what the person believes about the world and about the context in which the sentence is uttered.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980), however, suggest that in particular Western culture is under the heavy influence of myth of objectivism which underlies the most prevalent controversies in Western culture. They also argue that the meaning of a sentence is given in terms of a conceptual structure and most of the conceptual structure of a natural language is metaphorical in nature. The conceptual structure is grounded in physical and cultural experience as are conventional metaphors. Meaning, therefore, is never disembodied or objective, and is always grounded in the acquisition and use of a conceptual system. Moreover, truth is always given relative to a conceptual system and the metaphors that structure it. Truth is therefore not absolute or objective but is based on understanding. Thus, sentences do not have inherent, objectively given meanings, and communication cannot be merely the transmission of such meanings.

Wittgenstein also investigated the nature of thought, language and world. As we know thoughts are psychological entities and language is the way we communicate these entities using some perceptible signs either sensed by ears (the acoustic signals coming from another person's mouth) or written symbols on a page. Wittgenstein, however, abandoned one of his earlier arguments in his *Tractatus* where he wrote: "A proposition is the description of a state of things" and later he judged that a proposition

is the description of a state of mind. 'The meaning of language, taken not as a theoretical possibility of communication but as actually communicating information from one person to others, is not to be discovered by an objective analysis of the rules of semantics and syntax at work in a discourse, but by investigation of the explicit or implicit, conscious or unconscious intention of the speaker' (Tavard, 1975: p. 710). If our sentences reflect our state of mind, what could be said about a certain state of mind which avoids using referential forms which do not indicate gender: could such a person be the ideal language user or should we believe that the person exhibits some deficiencies in his thinking? Most importantly, when gender disappears in language use, we will be deprived of one of the essential criteria in determining the truth value of any proposition. When a proposition has two possible truth values, that is when the language user hears or reads a gender free referential form, the utterance will have more than possible interpretations which would result in more confusions.

In its worst condition, the idea or the utopian idea of genderless rhetoric will turn out to be a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy which claims that people react not only to the situations they are in, but also, and often primarily, to the way they perceive the situations and to the meaning they assign to their perceptions. Therefore, their behaviour is determined in part by their perception and the meaning they ascribe to the situations they are in, rather than by the situations themselves. As with the Merton's (1968) example then when rumours begin about the bankruptcy of a national bank which has some liquid assets and most of its assets are invested in various ventures such as consumer credits, mortgage, etc., the bank is doomed to go bankrupt; we will be living in a community where gender differences become obsolete.

If our natural languages represent truth subjectively, that is to say, even if we discuss an issue objectively we are conveying some truth in a distorted way, then what would happen if we insist on using a non-sexist language in our academic and daily discourse? Therefore, when we avoid vocabulary indicating sex, are we going to live in a world which has become more peaceful due to the abandoning sex discrimination, or are we going to live with some distorted reality which will cause in the end to diminish the natural differences between sexes?

For ages, thinkers have been occupied with the question of the relation between language and thought. Based on observations and discussions on the relationship between language and thought during childhood or adulthood, we can now argue that language development and thought processes have a symbiotic relationship. Thus, the way we express ourselves in written or oral forms, and the way we see how others express themselves in written and oral forms will certainly affect the way how we think, how we understand and grasp reality, which reminds us of the famous aphorism of Wittgenstein: "the limits of my language are the limits of my world". With the solution offered above we, in this paper, have tried to open new horizons and expand the limits of our world through seeing other possible ways of referring to people.

Conclusion

Famous philosopher of linguistics, Wittgenstein argues that logical and mathematical truths are true no matter what may happen to be the case because 'Mathematical truth is not discovered, it is invented' (Rodych, 1997:196). When we remember that truth is the property of sentences, assertions, beliefs, thoughts, or propositions that agree with

the facts, we also remind ourselves that the business of a factual assertion is to make a definite claim about the state of the world, and so its truth or falsity depends on whether the world is as it says it is. For example, when we refer to an author named “Morgan” with the pronoun she, and we make a definite claim and if Morgan is a female our claim becomes true and if not our claim becomes false. As Stern (1995) draws our attention unlike factual assertion logical truths are constructed in such a way that they rule nothing out and so are compatible with whatever is the case. For instance, when referring to the author “Morgan” we use both male and female pronouns simultaneously as in “s/he” then there is no need to check the sex of the author for no conceivable gender type can falsify a logical truth. Just as the logical structure of a truth of logic guarantees its truth, so the logical structure of a contingent proposition, in our case it is referring to a single author using either female and male pronoun, ensures that it is either true or false, depending on whether or not the gender of the author is as it says it is. Although the above-mentioned solution by the researchers of this paper to the problem of referring to various numbers of people from both sexes does not seem to be a logical truth, we believe, it should turn out to be a very practical way of reference both in academic and non-academic discourses.

As a final remark, we should ask ourselves the question to endorse McConnell-Ginet’s (2006) argument who finds some conceptually problematic aspect in feminist discussions of language: feminists attribute potency to language and they also believe that linguistic forms themselves have real import for society and culture. However, we should always be reminded of the fact that just as society and culture do affect language, no doubt, it is also the other way round. This reciprocity has always been the case. Therefore, dealing with forms only in language is analogous to killing the mosquitoes without draining the swamp.

The most significant implication that can be drawn from this study is that it probably does concern all academic writers producing scientific work in the English language. With the recommendations made by the researchers, potential authors would be able to employ sustainable language i.e. pronouns, all through their work without having to vacillate between different forms of this grammatical unit due to the effect deriving from *imposition* of ‘pundits’ from academia. Therefore, we believe that with this work, we were able to introduce sustainability, a term long reserved for economics and politics mostly, into the field of language in academic writing.

References

- Balhorn, M. (2004). The rise of epicene *They*. *Journal of English Linguistics*, 32(2), 79–104.
- Bodine, A. (1975). Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular ‘they’, sex-indefinite ‘he’, and ‘he or she’. *Language in Society*, 4(2), 129–146.
- Chen, Z. (2016). Critical discourse analysis of sexism in English language. Proceedings of 2016 2nd International Conference on Humanities and Social Science Research (ICHSSR 2016). Retrieved from <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/ichssr-16/25861703>
- Egne, R. M. (2014). Gender equality in public higher education Institutions of Ethiopia: The Case of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 5, 3–21.

- Gastil, J. (1990). Generic pronouns and sexist language: The oxymoronic character of masculine generics. *Sex Roles*, 23(11–12), 629–643.
- Kuurme, T., & Kasemaa, G. (2015). Gender advantages and gender normality in the views of Estonian secondary school students. *Discourse and Communication for Sustainable Education*, 6, 72–85.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors we live by*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, R. (1973). Language and woman's place. *Language in Society*, 2(1), 45–80.
- Lillian, D. L. (2007). A thorn by any other name: sexist discourse as hate speech. *Discourse and Society*, 18(6), 719–740.
- Matossian, L. A. (1997). *Burglars, babysitters, and persons: A sociolinguistic study of generic pronoun usage in Philadelphia and Minneapolis* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1059&context=ircs_reports
- McConnell-Ginet, S. (2006). The origins of sexist language in discourse. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 433(1), 123–135.
- Merton, R. K. (1968). *Social theory and social structure*. New York: The Free Press.
- Miller, C., & Swift, K. (1981). *The Handbook of non-sexist writing*. London: The Women's Press
- Newman, M. (1997). *Epicene pronouns: The linguistics of a prescriptive problem*. New York: Garland.
- Pauwels, A. (2003). Linguistic sexism and feminist linguistic activism. In J. Holmes & M. Meyerhoff (Eds.), *The handbook of language and gender* (pp. 550–570). Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Rakow, L. F. (1991). Gender and race in the classroom: Teaching way out of line. *Feminist Teacher*, 6 (1), 10–13.
- Rodych, V. (1997). Wittgenstein on mathematical meaningfulness, decidability, and application. *Notre Dame Journal of Formal Logic*, 38 (2), 195–225.
- Romera, M. (2015). The transmission of gender stereotypes in the discourse of public educational spaces. *Discourse & Society*, 26 (2), 205–229.
- Somekh, B., Burman, E., Delamont, S., Meyer, J., Payne, M., & Thorpe, R. (2005). Research communities in the social sciences. In B. Somekh & C. Lewin (Eds.) *Research methods in the social sciences* (pp. 1–13). London: Sage Publications.
- Stern, D. G. (1995). *Wittgenstein on mind and language*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Strunk, W., & White, E. B. (2005). *The elements of style*. New York: The Penguin Press.
- Sweden adds gender-neutral pronoun to dictionary (2015, March 24). The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/24/sweden-adds-gender-neutral-pronoun-to-dictionary>
- Tavard, G. H. (1975). Sexist Language in Theology? *Theological Studies*, 36, 700–724.

Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Assoc. Prof. Dr. Bilal Genc, Inonu University Education Faculty ELT Department, Turkey. E-mail: bilal.genc@inonu.edu.tr