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# Introduction.

## Reflections on Gender in Language

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by

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“Language is not a side-issue or a luxury, but  
an essential part of the struggle for liberation”.  
Deborah Cameron (1992)

The search for bias-free language has been embraced by many international organizations in multilingual and multicultural contexts. While also dealing with issues such as disabilities, race, and age, in recent years considerable focus has been paid to gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds as reflected in the use of language

Numerous guidelines for the adoption of gender-neutral language have been drawn up and implemented at the international and national level. International and European institutions (such as the World Health Organisation, UNESCO, the European Parliament, and the European Commission), professional associations, institutions of higher education, and publishers have increasingly adopted recommendations for the non-sexist use of language.

In 2018, the European Parliament, for example, published specific guidelines regarding gender-neutral language as a means of reinforcing its commitment to gender equality and non-discrimination on gender grounds. The European Parliament’s aim is not to provide prescriptive rules, but rather to “encourage the administrative services to give due consideration to the issue of gender sensitivity in language whenever writing, translating or interpreting” (European Parliament 2018, p. 4). The guidelines recognise that different approaches are required to take into account different linguistic and cultural aspects, and the grammatical typology of individual languages. The strategy embraced by the European Parliament is to work towards a “neutral and unobtrusive” bias-free language within the multilingual working environment of the Parliament (European Parliament 2018, p. 9).

Examples of other language guidelines include the NATO Gender-Inclusive Language Manual<sup>1</sup> published by the Office of NATO Secretary General’s Special

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Representative for Women, Peace and Security; the United Nations Guidelines for Gender-Inclusive Language<sup>2</sup>, produced in the six official languages of the United Nations (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish); UNESCO Guidelines for Gender-Neutral Language<sup>3</sup>, just to mention a few. All of these documents have the aim of supporting gender equality through language use in multicultural and multilingual contexts.

Not only are international organisations exploring the issue of gender and language, publishers and editors of international journals are also increasingly aware of the need for greater attention to language policy. For example, Elsevier, which publishes in English, as part of its broader commitment to Diversity and Inclusion, has published guidelines on the use of inclusive language which proposes that discrimination on the grounds of “age, gender, race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, disability, or health condition” must be avoided, and inclusive language is to be used throughout<sup>4</sup>.

The key link between gender and language education is gradually being explored in research published in dedicated academic journals such as *Gender and Education*, or the *Journal of Women and Gender in Higher Education*, in addition to the considerable number of articles on gender and language that are published in international academic journals, such as, for example, *TESOL Quarterly*, the *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, and the *Journal of Pragmatics*. Higher education and research are unquestionably critical instruments for empowerment and social change.

Research and practice show how there are two main strategies currently adopted to achieve gender-fair language: *neutralization* for natural gender languages (such as English, which have very few gender markers, mainly pronouns and possessives), with the adoption of male equivalents, now considered neutral; and *feminization* for grammatical gender languages (such as Italian, French and Spanish in which personal and inanimate nouns are classified for gender), with the creation of female equivalents for virtually all functions of masculine gender. In addition, all these languages are attempting to face the need for more gender-inclusive language with the proposal of neologisms, and alternative terms and symbols.

The issue of seeking gender equality in language seems to be particularly complex where grammatical gender languages are involved. Not only are the national academies (*Académie française*, *Real Academia Española*, *Accademia della Crusca*) reluctant to accept change, but recent studies have suggested that from the perspective of gender fairness or gender equality, where grammatical gender languages are spoken, there is actually less gender equality, whereas countries where natural gender languages are spoken seem to demonstrate greater gender equality. See, for example, the work by Jennifer Prewitt-Freilino, T. Andrew Caswell and

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nato.int/210514-GIL-Manual\\_en](https://www.nato.int/210514-GIL-Manual_en).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001149/114950mo.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.elsevier.com/assets/Use-of-Inclusive-Language-pdf.pdf>.

Emmi K. Laakso 2012; Elisa Merkel, Anne Maass and Laura Frommelt 2012; Sabine Sczesny, Magda Formanowicz and Franziska Moser 2016; Benjamin D. Wasserman and Allyson J. Weseley 2009.

It is to be hoped that initiatives focusing on different languages, from individual countries as well as from international institutions and bodies, will give greater recognition to the importance of the role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes. The use of gender-neutral language is a powerful method for helping to promote gender equality and remove gender bias, although the underlying social and political issues remain complex and problematic.

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As an academic journal dedicated to dealing with women's perspectives, DEP has for some time been reflecting on the issue of gender-neutral language. We publish in four languages: Italian, English, French, and Spanish. What guidelines should we be using to be as accurate and inclusive as possible? Is there justification for editors to intervene with an author's style? Is this interference or possibly even censorship?

To help us in this debate, we are publishing a set of essays in each of the four languages used for publication in DEP in which linguists discuss the issue of gender-neutral language in their language of expertise.

Giuliana Giusti explores the issue of inclusiveness in Italian, arguing in favour of an increased official feminization of references to women. She proposes the use of unmarked feminine forms in contexts where this is already acceptable. In addition, she examines the use of alternative symbols such as \*, to avoid generic masculine, and singular *schwa* (ə) and plural *long schwa* (ɜ) to deal with the issue of inclusive Italian.

Geraldine Ludbrook sets out a historical survey of how the political and social issues underlying English are being dealt with, especially in formal written contexts. She identifies various attempts that have been made to effect linguistic change in order to overcome gender bias, from the feminist activism of the 1960s and 1970s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and the new language needs required to respond to calls for inclusive English.

In two separate articles, published in English and in Spanish, Ben Papadopoulos examines gender-inclusive Spanish and the use of gender-inclusive morphemes and personal pronouns (*x*, *e* / *ellx*, *elle*). These proposals have not met with approval from language academies, although their use continues to spread. Ben focuses attention on the language gap for genderqueer speakers, and the ongoing debate and search for innovative proposals.

Scott Gunther writes on the linguistic reforms that have been put forward to obtain gender-neutral or gender-inclusive language in French, comparing the political and social situation in France and Quebec. Scott, too, discusses feminization, and the reduction of gender markers through gender-neutral personal pronouns. In addition, he discusses the issue of "cognitive cost" of linguistic intervention, in other words the mental effort required to accept gender-neutral French. He explores the different impacts of language reform in Quebec and France, emphasizing that not

only language issues but also broader social forces play an important role in language development.

We hope that these short essays might generate thought-provoking debate that will help writers, editors, and publishers acquire a greater awareness of the various complicated and difficult issues currently being explored, and will lead to a more principled use of language that better meets the needs of today's increasingly complex society.

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