

# Gender markers and gender marking with personal dual gender nouns: a corpus study

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Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2014

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*Permanent link / Trajna poveznica:* <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:592543>

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*Download date / Datum preuzimanja:* **2023-06-06**



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**Gender markers and gender marking with personal dual gender nouns: a  
corpus study**

Završni rad

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Osijek, 2014.

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## Summary

This paper is mainly concerned with the grammatical category of gender in the English language. More particularly, it explores gender markers and gender marking along with personal dual gender nouns. It starts with the theoretical analysis of the phenomenon, in which we define gender as a grammatical category of nouns with a three-way distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter, based on the properties of the noun and its referents. We then continue with examining personal masculine nouns and personal feminine nouns, which can be either morphologically unmarked between male and female (*mother* and *father*), or the two gender forms can have a derivational relationship (*bride* and *bridegroom*). In the next part, we focus on personal dual gender nouns, a class that includes a fairly large number of nouns which are neutral for gender, or in other words, may stand for referents of both sexes (*doctor*, *artist*, *lawyer*). We finish the theoretical part with a section about sexual bias in the English language and explore the tendency of the language to reflect societal differences in the typical roles of men and women.

Our corpus study analyses a few personal dual gender nouns chosen from those presented in the results of the corpus studies reported in the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* by Biber et al (1999). We start with analysing a few gender-neutral nouns that end with *-person(s)/-people* (*chairperson*, *spokesperson*), continue with unmarked gender-neutral nouns (*doctor*, *artist*), and finish with the uniquely feminine terms (*charwoman*, *needlewoman*).

**Key words:** gender, gender markers, gender marking, personal dual gender nouns

## 1. Introduction

The aim of the paper is to explore gender marking and, more particularly, gender markers which are used with personal dual gender nouns. This paper will also show the frequency of using dual gender nouns and examine the tendency of using male gender nouns more often than female gender nouns. To explore this theme more clearly, we have chosen three hypothetical statements that are closely related to the expectations of our corpus study.

Hypothesis:

1. *“The dual class is on the increase, but the expectation that a given activity is largely male or female dictates the frequent use of gender markers.”* (Quirk 1985: 315).
2. *“English speakers and writers use far more words ending in –man than in –woman.”* (Biber et al 1999: 313).
3. *“Compounds ending in –person and –people are sometimes used to express dual reference.”* (Biber et al 1999: 314).

The goal is to see whether these hypothetical statements are true or not in view of the examples collected from the Corpus of Contemporary American English. It is also important to emphasise that the results will be corpus-limited and may only serve as a rough indication of overall tendencies.

This paper will start with a theoretical overview of this phenomenon, and it will also include some examples found in grammars. After the theoretical part, it will continue with the analysis of pre-selected examples taken from the Corpus.

## 2. Theoretical overview

### 2.1. Gender in general

As the paper is mainly concerned with personal dual gender nouns and gender markers used along with them, it is important to begin with definitions and brief explanations of those categories.

According to Brdar et al (2007: 95), nouns are traditionally taken to denote beings, ideas, things, etc. But like many others, the authors also insist that morphosyntactic criteria are just as important in the delimitation of nouns as a word class. Thus, for example, Quirk et al (1985: 245) explain that nouns function as the central elements of the noun phrase. The basic noun phrase, therefore, consists of the head noun, which is accompanied by articles or other closed-class determinative elements that can occur before the noun head. Any number of optional modifiers can also be inserted before or after the head.

Nouns can be analysed through different categories, such as number, case, gender, etc. In this section, we will explore gender as one of the most interesting morphosyntactic categories of nouns. We will start with defining the term GENDER. Brdar et al (2007: 60) define gender as a grammatical category of nouns with a three-way distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter. This distinction is based on properties that are related to a large extent to the natural properties of their referents, although they are in part arbitrary. Moreover, Quirk et al (1985: 314) claim that by gender is meant a grammatical classification of nouns, pronouns, or other words in the noun phrase, according to certain meaning-related distinctions, especially a distinction related to the sex of the referent. Buljan, Gradečak-Erdeljić (2013: 104) explain that sex is quite a powerful predictor of grammatical gender categorisation in English. The authors give an example of the noun *ship* (which denotes an

inanimate entity) and explain that it is grammatically neuter (*it*). It is thus said that the nouns in English have mainly natural gender categorisation. Nonetheless, in languages like Croatian, the relationship between grammar and nature is far more complex. For example, a biologically ‘neuter’ (inanimate) noun like *stol* is grammatically masculine, whereas an equally inanimate *stolica* is feminine. There is also an infamous case of a noun in German which denotes a biologically feminine referent coded in neuter: *das Mädchen*. Such languages are said to have a (largely) grammatical gender.

Despite English having little grammatical marking of gender, we typically find quite a few gender categories listed in standard descriptive grammars. This is because English nouns are classified for gender not inflectionally, but semantically, according to their coreferential relations with personal, reflexive, and wh-pronouns (Quirk et al 1985: 314). Biber et al (1999: 311), for instance, listed several gender classes, as seen in the following table.

	example nouns	pronouns
personal/human:		
masculine	<i>Tom, a boy, the man</i>	<i>he</i>
feminine	<i>Sue, a girl, the woman</i>	<i>she</i>
dual	<i>a journalist, the doctor</i>	<i>he, she</i>
non-personal/neuter	<i>a house, the bird</i>	<i>it</i>

**Table 1: Gender classes according to Biber et al (1999: 311)**

But in Quirk et al (1985: 314) we have as many as nine gender categories. The authors explicitly state that “*the patterns of pronouns coreference for singular nouns give us a set of*

nine gender classes.” This is illustrated in the image that follows, taken from *A comprehensive grammar of the English language* (Quirk et al 1985).

Figure 1: Nine gender classes

		GENDER CLASS	EXAMPLE	PRONOUN COREFERENCE
animate	personal	(a) male	<i>brother</i>	<i>who-he</i>
		(b) female	<i>sister</i>	<i>who-she</i>
		(c) dual	<i>doctor</i>	<i>who-he/she</i>
		(d) common	<i>baby</i>	{ <i>who-he/she/it</i> <i>which-it</i> }
	non-personal	(e) collective	<i>family</i>	{ <i>which-it</i> <i>who-they</i> }
		(f) higher male animal	<i>bull</i>	{ <i>which-it</i> <i>(who)-he</i> }
		(g) higher female animal	<i>cow</i>	{ <i>which-it</i> <i>(who)-she</i> }
		(h) lower animal	<i>ant</i>	{ <i>which-it</i> <i>(he/she)</i> }
		(i) inanimate	<i>box</i>	<i>which-it</i>
inanimate				

Although the two tables may be said to be quite different with respect to the number of gender categories proposed, it strikes us as immediately obvious that both of them feature the category of personal dual gender nouns. The personal dual gender class includes a fairly large number of nouns which are neutral for gender, and may stand for referents of both sexes, as some of the examples such as words like *artist, musician, doctor, criminal, linguist, teacher, writer, cook, friend*, etc. may suggest (Buljan, Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013: 102). Quirk et al (1985: 316) explain that if it is felt desirable to give information on the sex of the person, a gender marker may be added, such as *male student/female student*. The authors claim that the dual class is on the increase, but the expectation that a given activity is largely male or female dictates the frequent use of gender markers, thus: *a nurse*, but *a male nurse*; *an engineer*, but *a woman engineer*.

## 2.2. Personal masculine nouns and personal feminine nouns



“Personal male nouns have pronoun coreference with *who-he* and female nouns with *who-she*.” (Quirk et al 1985: 315) These nouns can either be morphologically unmarked between male and female, or the two gender forms can have a derivational relationship.

According to Buljan, Gradečak-Erdeljić (2013: 102), some examples of the first type, morphologically unrelated masculine-feminine counterparts, are: *bachelor* (a man who is not and has never been married) and *spinster* (an unmarried woman, typically an older one); *brother* as opposed to *sister*, *father* and *mother*, *gentleman* and *lady*, *uncle* and *aunt*. Examples of the second type, derivationally related lexemes contrasting in gender, are: *bridegroom* and *bride*, *duke* and *duchess*, *emperor* and *empress*, *god* and *goddess*, *hero* and *heroine*.

Quirk et al (1985: 315) suggest that some male/female pairs denoting kinship have dual gender terms, such as *parent* for *father* and *mother*, and *sibling* for *brother* and *sister*. Also, these authors claim that some optional female forms, such as *poetess* and *authoress* are no longer in normal use, being replaced by the dual gender forms *poet* and *author*.

Also, according to Biber et al (1999: 312), there are lexical pairs with male vs. female denotation, mostly among words for family relationships (*father* – *mother*), social roles (*king* – *queen*), and animals (*bull* – *cow*). The authors also state that the masculine-feminine distinction may be made explicit by formal markers. These are:

1. Gender-specific premodification:

- (1) I am not in the market for a *male nurse*.

2. Compounding with a gender-specific element:

(2) Three teenage youths who attacked a lone *policewoman* were being hunted yesterday.

3. Use of a gender-specific derivational ending:

(3) *Actress* Vanessa Redgrave has arrived in Macedonia.

### 2.3. Personal dual gender

This class includes a fairly large number of nouns which are neutral for gender, or in other words, may stand for referents of both sexes (Buljan, Gradečak-Erdeljić 2013: 102). These may include nouns such as: *artist, foreigner, criminal, enemy, professor, teacher, doctor, speaker, fool, musician, servant*, etc. These nouns, such as *doctor* and *lawyer*, are considered to be neutral because of the traditional and normative reasons (they do not have a morphological marker for the male gender). But, there is an imbalance that comes along with many of these nouns because, for reasons that are more social than linguistic, they are automatically connected with the male gender. This is probably the reason why the more ‘explicitly neutral terms’ that end in *-person(s)/people* appeared in the first place.

Prescriptive grammars also insist that, where no such dual gender nouns are available, the masculine forms, e.g. *chairman*, are to be considered gender-neutral. However, there is a lingering bias towards the male interpretation, which is yet another impetus for the emergence of the compounds in *-person(s)* and *-people* for dual gender reference (Biber et al 1999: 315). According to Buljan, Gradečak-Erdeljić (2013: 102), the use of dual gender nouns, and especially compounds in *-person*, appears to be a natural development due to the fact that more and more professions are becoming open to both sexes. Compounds in *-person* are there to preclude bias associated with the use of masculine forms in dual gender functions. Despite

that, the authors claim that there still seems to be a preference for words in *-man* over those in *-person*.

According to Biber et al (1999: 316), there are only a handful of nouns in *-person* which make notable appearance in the Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus<sup>1</sup>, and these are: *spokesperson*, *chairperson*, *salespeople*, and *townspeople*. The following are some examples of the usage of the personal dual gender noun *spokesperson*, taken from Corpus of Contemporary American English:

(4) A family *spokesperson* told CBS News that the former vice president is doing very well.

(5) Well, I can't claim to be a *spokesperson* for Barack Obama nor will I be, but the point is (...)

(6) Inhibitex officials declined to speak this week, with a *spokesperson* citing the litigation (...)

Aside from these sentences, there are 2065 other examples where the word *spokesperson* is used rather than *spokesman* or *spokeswoman*. But still, *spokesman* is used by far most frequently<sup>2</sup>, i.e. 14120 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, as opposed to *spokeswoman*, which is used 4448 times. All in all, although the noun *spokesperson* is claimed to be one of the few which occurs relatively frequently in language use, the figures given in this paragraph still show that their number fails to outnumber the gender-specific forms, and interestingly, even the feminine *spokeswoman*.

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<sup>1</sup> This corpus was used as the empirical basis for the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English.

<sup>2</sup> We did not analyse the masculine noun *spokesman* at this point to establish how often reference is made to the male person and how often the noun is used in the personal dual gender function. For more on that see page 17.

## 2.4. Sexual bias in English language

According to most grammar books, it appears that the biggest problem associated with the grammatical category of gender is the problem of sexual bias. Quirk et al (1985: 315) explain that many attempts have been made (especially in American English) to introduce sex-neutral forms, such as *s/he* for both *she* and *he*, *wo/man* for both *woman* and *man*, *flight attendant* for *airline hostess*. The problem was the fact that these were written forms only. Some other examples are: *Member of Congress* for *Congressman*, *chairperson* for *chairman*, *mail carrier* for *mailman*, etc.

*“The great difference in the distribution of masculine and feminine terms reflects a continuing sex-bias in English language use and society more generally”* (Biber et al 1999: 313). The authors also suggest that there are two major factors that are associated with these patterns.

First, these patterns reflect societal differences in the typical roles of men and women, where men still hold more positions of power and authority than women. For example, there are more spokesmen, chairmen, businessmen, congressmen, etc., than there are spokeswomen, chairwomen, businesswomen, congresswomen, etc. Because such social roles are of popular interest to speakers and (especially) writers, masculine terms are used more commonly than feminine terms. Also, the authors explain that there is some evidence that speakers and writers simply make reference to men more often than women. There are considerably more references to actors, hosts, stewards, and waiters than there are to actresses, hostesses, stewardesses, and waitresses, even though women fill these roles in society at least as often as men (Biber et al 1999: 314).

Second, the differences in language use reflect a linguistic bias, because masculine terms can often be used as duals, to refer to both men and women, but not vice versa (Biber et al 1999: 314).

In the next sections, we will explore these issues by taking a closer look at corpus studies that the authors of the chosen grammar books have done, and compare the results with our own corpus study. But, before that, a few words about the methodology of our study are in order.

### **3. Methodology**

The main source of data for our corpus study of personal dual gender nouns in authentic language use was the Corpus of Contemporary American English. We chose a few personal dual gender nouns from among those presented in the results of the corpus studies reported in the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* by Biber et al (1999). Next, we performed a series of analytical steps explained below.

First, we divided our search into three different subgroups. The first one included gender-neutral nouns that end in *-person(s)/-people*, and the second one continued with unmarked gender-neutral nouns such as *doctor, lawyer* etc. Finally, although they are gender-specific, we also included in our study uniquely feminine terms because it is our belief that they can shed more light on some of the tendencies observed with the distribution of the first two groups. The nouns we chose for the analysis were: *chairperson, spokesperson, doctor, artist, charwoman, and needlewoman*.

The first step included stating the total number of occurrences of the search items and then the occurrences of the nouns per million words. After that, we analysed the first 100 examples of the nouns in the two dual-gender categories and tried to find out whether the

nouns referred to male or female referents. Next, we narrowed our search to the frequency of usage of nouns with a gender-specific element, and tried to see whether there was a distinction between male and female gender forms within those nouns as well. For example, the analysis of the noun *chairperson* showed us that, besides the difference in the frequency of reference to male and female individuals behind the gender-neutral form, there are also differences in the frequency with which the gender-marked forms *chairman* vs. *chairwoman* were used. Finally, we tried to establish to what extent the male forms are still used in a dual – gender function, i.e. we looked at the number of instances in which the masculine form was used with a feminine referent in mind.

#### **4. Corpus study - personal dual gender nouns**

In this section of the paper, we will try to verify whether the results of a frequency study of dual gender nouns reported in Biber et al (1999) nouns will be confirmed by our own frequency study of the pre-selected nouns in the Corpus of Contemporary American English.

We will start with the few chosen gender-neutral nouns that end with *-person(s)/-people* as one subgroup and then continue with further analysis of some of the unmarked gender-neutral nouns. The last section of our corpus study will deal with uniquely feminine terms in the English language.

##### **4.1. Gender-neutral nouns that end in *-person(s)/-people***

Biber et al (1999: 315) explore the use of compounds ending in *-person(s)* and *-people* as forms used to express dual reference. The authors state that even though mostly recent formations, these compounds are meant to neutralise the bias associated with the use of masculine forms in dual gender functions. Biber et al (1999: 315) demonstrate this with the following examples:

(1) The rally will also be addressed by Amanda Hallaway, *chairperson* of the Youth Committee of the Northern Ireland Congress of Trade Unions.

(2) *Salespersons* by the thousands have been laid off in the recession.

The authors also explore the term *chair* and explain that it is used as a neutral alternative to both *chairman* and *chairperson*:

(3) “Law firms have not come to grips with the issues,” says Geraldine Cotton, *chair* of the 5,500-strong English Association of Women Solicitors.

Biber et al (1999: 315) conclude that the frequency of words ending in *-person(s)/-people* is low compared with corresponding words with *-man* and *-men*. But, according to their findings from Longman Spoken and Written English Corpus, “*the only moderately common terms are: words that are occurring over 20 times per million words – chairperson(s), spokesperson(s); words occurring over 10 times per million words – salespeople, townspeople*” (Biber et al 1999: 316). The authors explain that the low frequency of these dual terms might be due to the fact that the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English Corpus does not contain text where legal requirements might have encouraged such forms, such as advertisements for jobs. Moreover, they state that it seems that equal opportunity legislation may not have much effect on the language generally.

We have chosen two different gender-neutral nouns that end with *-person(s)/-people* for our corpus study to verify whether our results confirm the ones reported by Biber et al (1999). The nouns are *chairperson* and *spokesperson*.

### *Chairperson*

We begin with the noun *chairperson*. It appears 522 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which is 1.12 times per million words. After analysing the first 100 example sentences, we noticed that the noun *chairperson* was used to refer to men and to women roughly equally. Particularly, 42 examples referred to men (5) and 32 examples referred to women (4). The remaining 23 examples were inconclusive because the noun *chairperson* was used in a neutral form, and could have referred to either men or women (6).

Some of the example sentences are:

(4) She is faculty at Towson University, where she serves as *chairperson* of the Reflective Process Working Group (RPWG).

(5) The first *chairperson* was Robert M. Beer, APSA, owner and publisher of the Times-Gazette in Ashland.

(6) The *chairperson* asked if anyone was attending their first meeting. A guy said, “I am. But I should be in a psych ward.”

### **Chairman and chairwoman**

We could argue that, due to the fact that men are still holding the position of chairmen more often than women, it is not unusual that the noun *chairman* should be used much more often than the noun *chairperson*. Moreover, if any kind of ideological correction was needed, it was in the direction of women. The noun *chairman* simply remained what it covertly seems to always have been (male-centered) – despite theoretical pronouncements to the contrary.

According to the figures obtained from COCA, the noun *chairman* appears 32065 times, which is 69.06 times per million word (7), whereas *chairwoman* appears 785 times, which is 1.69 times per million words (8). No matter whether the observed predominance of *chairman* has to do a) with its *morphological* compatibility with male referents, b) with the



*societal* bias in the distribution of social roles (in which case it is not the language itself that is sexist, but society), or c) with its prescriptively ‘gender-neutral’ function, the figures seem to indicate that the morphologically male form does not seem to buckle under the egalitarian pressures towards genuinely neutral forms in *-person*. Some of the examples are:

- (7) Mr. Kaine, then the national Democratic Party *chairman*, was dragged into the race reluctantly after the current Democratic senator, Jim Webb, announced his retirement after a single term.
- (8) And Rosa Toussaint-Ortiz, she is *chairwoman* of the Hispanic/Latino Advisory Committee in Huntsville.

Interestingly, among the examples of the usage of noun *chairman*, we found one example where *chairman* actually refers to a female person:

- (9) Mary Schapiro, *chairman* of the SEC, listed a number of concerns, including that the bill would remove the firewall between research analysts who are supposed to provide objective information about investments and (...)

### **Spokesperson**

Second, we chose the noun *spokesperson*. It appears 2065 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which is 4.45 per million words. The analysis of the first 100 examples gave us interesting results, even though the sample was not large. The noun *spokesperson* referred to men 41 times (10), to women 30 times (11), and there were 29 inconclusive results that we couldn’t decipher from the context (12):

- (10) According to Barry Rosenberg, a *spokesperson* for the show, only those whose behaviour in prison has been exemplary are allowed to participate.

(11) Now a Zumba *spokesperson*, she's been living the active lifestyle - and teaching it to other instructors around the world- ever since she took her first class in 2002.

(12) Rejecting the charge of cartographical chicanery, a Google *spokesperson* told CNN that “it's just simply the case that we don't have a label for every body of water.”

Also, we found an interesting case where two nouns – *spokesperson* and *spokesman* were used in the same sentence. In the first case, the gender-neutral term refers to an entity which is difficult to decipher (*voice of the street*). The second one clearly refers to a male person:

(13) “The voice of the street is a *spokesperson* for itself,” explained SMB *spokesman* Zuhair Salim.

### ***Spokesman and spokeswoman***

We also analysed the occurrences of the nouns *spokesman* and *spokeswoman* in the COCA. The results showed us that the noun *spokesman* appears 14120 times, which is 30.41 times per million words, whereas the noun *spokeswoman* appears 4448 times, which is 9.58 times per million words. Note that the male form is the dominant one, but note too that this is still far more frequent than the occurrence of the compound form in *-person*. Some examples are shown below:

(14) After Ms. Rice's announcement, Scott Gomer, a *spokesman* for ACT Inc., said it was focused on getting photos to high schools.

(15) State Department *spokeswoman* Victoria Nuland said in Washington that the new funds bring total U.S. humanitarian assistance for Syrians to \$33 million.

After analysing the first 100 examples where the noun *spokesman* was used, we did not find any examples related to the female gender, which we would have expected given the prescriptive insistence that the forms in *-man* are gender-neutral. Recall that we found only one example where the noun *chairman* referred to the female gender, as explained in the analysis of the nouns *chairman* and *chairwoman*. Because of this, we can assume that the nouns which end in *-man* are not really used in a gender-neutral form and that this may have triggered the use of the gender-neutral forms in *-person/-people*. No matter how infrequent overall, the genuinely neutral compound form *spokesperson* proved to be genuinely neutral in our database: it did refer to the female gender almost the same number of times as it referred to the male gender.

#### **4.2. Unmarked gender-neutral nouns**

Biber et al (1999: 314) analysed the most common masculine nouns with feminine counterparts ending in *-ess* as well as the occurrences of those nouns per million words. The authors chose the nouns *doctor* (believed to be the masculine *and* the gender-neutral form) and the exclusively feminine form *doctress* and concluded that the noun *doctor* is used far more than its female counterpart. More particularly, *doctress* is used less than 3 times per million words, whereas *doctor* is used 140 times per million words. Thus, we have chosen the noun *doctor* and analysed the frequency of its usage in the Corpus of Contemporary American English to see whether we will get the same results as Biber et al (1999).

#### **Doctor**

The noun *doctor* appears 45952 times in the COCA, with occurrence of 98.96 times per million words. The first 100 examples showed us that the noun *doctor* is mostly used in a

neutral context, without signs of referring either to men or women. Particularly, it referred to men 29 times (16), to women 6 times (17), and it was inconclusive in 65 sentences (18):

(16) When Tom Rossley met Taylor Pratt, an oral surgeon who'd later remove a tumor from his jaw, the tall, handsome *doctor* reminded Rossley of another impressive young man (...)

(17) Another yields a profile of a 1910 *doctor* -- a resolute black woman, Justina Ford -- who was prevented from working in hospitals because of her race (...)

(18) If you give people health insurance and they do not have access to a *doctor* or health care, what difference will it make?

Also, we wanted to see how many times the noun *doctress*, *doctor's* female counterpart appears in COCA, and there were only 4 examples, which is 0.01 times per million words:

(19) On March 1, 1864, Rebecca Lee Crumpler (b. 1833) became the first Black woman to receive a medical degree, the "*Doctress* of Medicine," from the New England Female Medical College in Boston.

Furthermore, we combined gender markers *male* and *female* with the noun *doctor*, and the results showed us that there is only 1 example of the usage of *female doctor* (20), and 18 examples of the usage of *male doctor* (21):

(20) Determine if you prefer a *female* or male *doctor*, and if you want a solo practitioner (...)

(21) In addition to feeling more comfortable about being examined by a woman, I thought she would also understand, better than a *male doctor*, my feelings about a female problem.

To explore it in more detail, we also tried to combine words *man/men* and *woman/women* with the noun *doctor*. There were not any examples of the collocation *man doctor*, but there were 47 examples of the collocation *woman doctor*, which arguably signals that in popular perception the noun *doctor* usually conjurs up the image of a man. In that case, there would simply be no need to emphasize the male identity by adding a gender marker. By contrast, if there is a need to stress that the doctor is female, the gender marker will certainly be added:

- (22) We are beginning to look at a *woman doctor* as a concept that is intrinsically different from a male doctor.

Even though our results are similar to the ones reported by Biber et al (1999), it is important to emphasize that our results and conclusions are informal and require a more comprehensive corpus study of the listed nouns.

### Artist

We decided to analyse another unmarked gender-neutral noun to explore this phenomenon further. We chose the noun *artist*. It appears 32581 times in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which is 70.17 occurrences per million words. The sample was large, so we decided to analyse the first 100 examples to see whether the noun *artist* referred to a male or a female person. The results were the following – *artist* was used to refer to a male person 26 times, to a female person 9 times, and the rest of the examples were inconclusive:

- (23) Word had spread quickly about an extraordinary photo-realist painting by the Italian-born *artist* Rudolf Stingel.

- (24) Alan Robbins daughter, *artist* Shana Robbins, and her photographer husband, Alex Martinez, will live in the other half of the space.

(25) Designing such a system is challenging because there is a trade-off between allowing the *artist* to draw in a natural manner.

The analysis showed us that the noun *artist* really is used in a gender-neutral form, but there are still more examples where it referred to the male rather than female gender. Since most of the examples were inconclusive, we also combined gender markers *male* and *female* with the noun *artist* to check if the neutral term is more prone to denoting a male person. The results were the following: the collocation *male artist* appeared 27 times, which is 0.06 occurrences per million words, and the number for the collocation *female artist* was slightly larger – it appeared 60 times, which is 0.13 occurrences per million words:

(26) Elton John, named best British *male artist* 11 years ago, is again nominated in the same category.

(27) The country's most famous *female artist* began her career as an art teacher in the Texas Panhandle.

We can say that the notion of the noun *artist* appears to be connected to male gender more than to the female gender. This is evident in the second part of the analysis of the mentioned noun, where there are far more examples of adding a gender marker for a feminine identity, whereas this is not the case with the male gender. Nevertheless, it is important to note that these results are also informal and require a more detailed analysis of a larger sample.

### 4.3. Uniquely feminine terms

In this part, we will shortly represent feminine terms that are used to denote only female gender and thus do not have a parallel term ending in *-man*. Even though they are not gender-neutral forms, they still give us further insight about the issues we are analysing.

We will start with the quote by Biber et al (1999: 313): “*Only seven words ending in –woman have no parallel term ending in –man: beggarwoman, catwoman, charwoman, ghostwoman, needlewoman, slavewoman, sweeperwoman.*” The quote is not only interesting, but also provocative. The authors make a point that it is worth noting that the uniquely feminine terms tend to refer to social roles of lesser status than most masculine terms. Thus, five of the seven feminine words with no masculine equivalent have meanings that are derogatory or denote menial social roles: *beggarwoman, charwoman, ghostwoman, slavewoman, and sweeperwoman*. In addition, the authors explain that many of the terms in feminine/masculine word pairs are not in fact equivalent. Instead, the feminine term often denotes a lesser social role or something with a negative overtone compared with the masculine term. A similar tendency seems to be shown by the items in the following table:

<b>Feminine term</b>	<b>Masculine term</b>
<i>spinster</i>	<i>bachelor</i>
<i>governess</i>	<i>governor</i>
<i>mayoress</i> <i>(the wife of a mayor)</i>	<i>mayor</i>
<i>mistress</i>	<i>master</i>
<i>tigress</i>	<i>tiger</i>
<i>witch</i>	<i>wizard</i>

**Table 2: Feminine terms that denote a negative overtone compared with the masculine term**

### **Charwoman and needlewoman**

In light of the above examples, we chose the nouns *charwoman* and *needlewoman* and checked whether they appear in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. We found

that the noun *charwoman* occurs 16 times in the COCA, which is 0.03 times per million words. The term is associated with a woman employed to clean houses or offices, and is thus a good example of association with menial work and a lesser social role. The example is:

- (28) Just because Odessa is larger than life and has this so-called learning disability, you, like some sort of superstitious medieval *charwoman*, think she's possessed of evil spirits.

The next noun, *needlewoman*, appears 4 times in the COCA, which is 0.01 times per million words. The term refers to a woman or a girl who has particular sewing skills or who sews for a living:

- (29) These seem the attributes of the genteel *needlewoman*, rather than the purely functional tools of the seamstress-for-hire.

### **Charman and needleman**

We also wanted to check whether the terms *charman* and *needleman*, the assumed male counterparts of the nouns *charwoman* and *needlewoman*, appear in the Corpus of Contemporary American English. The results showed us that there are 96 examples of the noun *needleman*, which is 0.21 occurrences per million words. Moreover, the noun *charman* appears 16 times in the COCA, which is 0.03 occurrences per million words.

At first this may strike one as a shocking result. However, the examples were in all cases associated with the surname of a person (see examples below), and thus do not challenge Biber et al's or our findings for these specific nouns. The male counterparts of the nouns explored above simply do not exist in the conventional repertoire of English:



(30) Here with me now is an attorney who specializes in debt collection. Welcome  
Joann *Needleman*. How are you doing?

(31) Bob *Charman* from the NEC can tell you more about that future.

## 5. Conclusion

The corpus study we have done and the examination of grammar books about the grammatical category of gender along with personal dual gender nouns have shown us that these categories are important for the English language and are also quite interesting to explore.

Personal dual gender nouns have a function of representing neutral gender but are still quite affected by the society and how it perceives men and women. Thus, gender markers are widely used in both writing and speech, despite attempts of including dual gender nouns to avoid that kind of bias.

Our corpus study has confirmed Biber et al's (1999) finding that the 'new' gender-neutral forms, i.e those in *-person* are still relatively infrequent and insignificant compared to their morphologically gendered counterparts. This seems to suggest that gender is a significant contrastive category which we feel is important to explicitly code in our verbal encounters. For that we use the gender-specific forms (i.e. those in *-man* and *-woman*).

We also observed that the forms in *-man* are more frequent than those in *-woman* (with the exception of those in the section about uniquely feminine terms). Whether this is because the forms in *-man* are traditionally regarded as neutral and should thus be used with referents of both sexes, or because society simply has more males in the associated social functions than women, is a larger question that could only be addressed with a more extensive and careful corpus analysis and sociolinguistic analysis. However, our figures seem to indicate, albeit not conclusively, that the forms in *-man* fail to live up to their 'gender-neutral' role. When it was possible to identify the sex of the referents of our nouns in the corpus, our data showed overwhelmingly that the nouns in *-man* referred to men almost exclusively. If

they were indeed neutral, we would expect to have found more cases where reference was made to females.

Given the results of our study, we can agree that language is perhaps a bit slow in accommodating the egalitarian pressures from outside the language itself. However, we must also be careful not to attribute this to the inherently 'sexist' nature of language (as can often be heard outside professional linguistic circles). Language is the product of its speakers and it is only in this indirect way that language can bear the stigma of sexism. It is in this spirit that we conclude this paper with the following quote from Biber et al (1999:312): *“However, gender is not a simple reflection of reality; rather it is to some extent a matter of convention and speaker choice and special strategies can be used to avoid gender-specific reference at all.”*

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Corpora used:

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