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Prijediplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i
književnosti

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Rodno osjetljivi jezik

Završni rad

Mentor: izv. prof. dr. sc. Tanja Gradečak

Osijek, 2024

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Gendered Language

BA Thesis

Supervisor: Tanja Gradečak, Associate Professor

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between sex, gender and language as prevalent ideas in linguistics that started mainly in 20th century. It deals with understanding the particularities of the gender and sex on the grammatical level and how favouring one gender over another through language and grammar has a real-life consequence for women in society that range from the private to the professional sphere. It recognises that language shapes the perception of reality through evoking of Sapir – Whorf hypothesis and how negative stereotypes and biases are evoked through rampant sexism and discrimination directed at women. Through several studies provided it shows that personal perception of a person will vary depending on what kind of language is used to describe a person. Not only that it recognises how English language marks one gender over another and with it brings certain connotations that are mostly negative and have equally negative impact on how one gender will be perceived. This paper sheds light on the work of feminist linguists that have recognised androcentricity present in language through which can be seen that language is controlled and created by men and in turn decided to fight against the patriarchal oppression and set norms through proposing the usage of gender-neutral language. Through examples of studies and research provided in this paper it can be seen how various groups of people mark women and men with certain attributes that are based solely on their biases and perception. Negative stereotypes are mostly attributed to women and through them perpetuate sexism and sexist language. To conclude this paper deals with how negative ramifications of gendered language and its usage were dealt with and recognised in linguistics.

Key words: gender, sex, language, bias, stereotype, sexism, discrimination, feminism, gender – neutral language

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1.Introduction

Language and gender are tightly connected and have been a focal point of researchers and linguists alike for many years. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, sociolinguists and feminists started noticing the pattern of behaviour and societal impact of language being used differently for women and men and how gendered language influences discrimination of one gender over another. Thus this paper will observe and focus on the development of the idea of gendered language, mainly throughout the 20th century and its beginnings of criticising and recognising it as an issue that had a big impact on how gender was understood and subsequently treated.

In the first part, this paper will examine gendered language, its presence in grammar through linguistic gender, classifying types of gender language, it will introduce the concept of asymmetries in language and how gender is marked. It will describe the concept of androcentricity in language and the usage of masculine generics as a part of gendered language. Following that it will examine how gendered language manifests itself in social gender and how through language is dependent on thought which will be explained through Sapir - Whorf hypothesis and after that it will closely inspect how social gender encounters sexist and stereotyped language which codifies and marks them. Next part will introduce research conducted by Sarrasin et al. (2012) regarding attitudes toward gender – neutral and inclusive language and how students react and recognize what sexist language and outcomes of that research.

In the final part of my paper, I will shed light on the harmful ramifications of gendered language and how they manifest themselves in the workplace and how gendered language codes and marks women and contributes to the social inequality they face as workers.

2. Gender languages and linguistic gender

Gendered language is concerned with gender and how it is reflected in language. In some languages, sex and gender are used interchangeably. This section will discuss connection between sex, gender, and the language.

According to the author Sally McConnell-Ginet (2011), sex is the factor which separates humans and with them other animals in two categories or classes: male and female. Their distinction lies in “reproductive potential” which in turn affects sexuality, sexual identity and matters of sexual desire and activity. She differentiates sex and gender by qualifying gender to be “complex of social, cultural, and psychological phenomena attached to sex, a usage common in the behavioural and social sciences. Gender in this technical sense is a grammatically significant classification of nouns that has implications for various agreement phenomena.” (p. 38)

Biological sex is therefore one of the key components in linguistics for providing a differentiation between genders. In gendered language, it plays a significant role and is the one that includes not just a distinction between “maleness” and “femaleness”, but also “gender belief system” and stereotypes that come with it. In turn, linguistic structures contribute to and maintain gender belief systems. These gender belief systems are also a source of what the linguists call “asymmetries” which show treatment and representation of sexes or genders in the language. (Stahlberg et al 2007)

Gender languages are classified as grammatical gender languages, natural gender languages and genderless languages. Grammatical gender languages are the ones that show a clear distinction between sexes or genders. A noun, personal pronoun or other grammatical form will correspond to the gender and will receive a classification; feminine, masculine, or neuter. Nouns showing animacy will show a clear distinction between feminine and masculine. At times animacy will clash with the article or gender classification, but those are rare instances. Such languages where these distinctions are visible usually belong to Germanic, Slavic, Romance, Indo – Aryan etc. languages. English is a natural gender language, which means, unlike grammatical gender language there is no overt way of telling gender and nouns do not have assigned gender of masculine, feminine, or neuter. There is, however, an extralinguistic element of animacy and with

it sex and humanness as well. These three elements correspond to who will carry a label of gender - female or male. (ibid)

3. Asymmetries

3.1. Gender Markedness

In natural gender languages, where there is no clear telling of gender only through nouns, there is a way of “marking” a noun for femaleness either referring to a female person and making it explicit or marking it biologically feminine. Human nouns are not the only ones marked by the pronouns she, as there are inanimate objects like boats, cars, ships, and hurricanes that are feminine. (Romaine, 1998 p. 66, Spender, 1980)

According to Tannen to be “marked” is a staple in linguistic theory that signifies how language modifies the original meaning of a word when adding an element which does not carry meaning on its own unlike unmarked which stays unchanged, and its meaning is taken for granted or normal. She explains that there is no such thing as an “unmarked woman” and the suffixes that are added to the nouns to mark a female gender (-ette, -ess) are not just female marking but markings of shallowness which erase any sort of serious connotations and add sexual undertones. (1994, p. 109)

Another example is female agentive for male adjacent occupations that are “marked” and “deviant” category while the masculine agentive instead of neutral is accepted as generic (“steward” in comparison with “stewardess”). Masculine form is generic and taken for granted while feminine is special, or possesses derogatory connotations through added suffixes such as – *ette* or - *ess* (Conners, 1971)

For Mrs. and miss, there is no male version of these titles because marital status is something deemed to be more relevant to women rather than to men. Expressions like “virgin,” “a working mother” or “career woman” are other examples that do not have male equivalents. (Stahlberg et al, 2007) Similarly as Romaine (1999: 98) comments on asymmetries present in the parenting realm where there are no equivalents of single or unmarried mothers for men. “Single father” was not an existing expression due to lack of stigma related to such fathers. Today however, with the changing of times this is widely used and accepted term.

Romaine's (1998) research found 155 explicit female markings for occupations as well. Titles connected with the occupation of the doctor resulted in special marking as "female doctor", "lady doctor" unlike with "male doctor" specification where only fourteen instances were found. Inequalities or asymmetries were visible in rankings of jobs as well. She writes that occupations that are lower rank or status which are supposed to be gender neutral like "secretary" and "teacher," in English they are a mark of gender and pronouns used for them are "she" "her". In contrast with high-ranking positions or occupations like before mentioned "doctor" or "lawyer", prototypically male occupations, as previously for them male pronouns "he" "him" were used when the people were not aware of the sex of the person with that occupation. Even occupational titles consist of a word "man" in them: policeman fireman, etc.

The only instances which include male words to be marked are when original form is female like bride and widow, male equivalents for these words are "bridegroom" and "widower" with added marking of suffix *-er*: (Romaine, 1998)

3.2. Masculine Generics and Androcentricity in Language

Another example of asymmetries that are a part of linguistic gender is the usage of masculine generics. Masculine generics have a double purpose to denote both male persons or a group of people whose sex is not known or is irrelevant. This way they equate maleness with humanness. (Stahlberg et al 2007)

The usage of generic pronouns "he" is more likely to evoke image of a male in comparison to other pronouns like "she" or "they." The notion that the generic pronoun "he" is based on gender bias is apparent as early as 18th century where the masculine was "more worthy than the feminine" and there was a natural order which favoured the masculine as superior and feminine as inferior. This type of gender bias stems from prescriptive rules of grammar. (Coates, 2014)

The generic masculine "he" was for grammarians considered sex – indefinite, but feminist scholars have criticised that notion of "he" cannot represent the female gender through exclusion. The substitute for the generic "he" was proposed by feminists and activists to be "they" and among the first ones to suggest it was Bodine (1975) in her work "Man Made Language". Although it must be noted that the pronoun "they" was part of the English language for centuries and used by many literary figures like Jane Austen and most remarkably William Shakespeare (Balhorn, 2004), still

there has been resistance from both education and publishing organisations. Even though many 19th century scholars have recognised social implications behind the “sex – indefinite he”, some scholars tried to use the “oneness of man and woman to justify their usage of the generic masculine form for both sexes (Curme, 1931, p. 551, as cited in Bodine, 1975, p. 138). Some authors, on the other hand, like McCawley imply that using the phrases “he and she” to be equally sexist as women are then regarded as a special category of beings in comparison to the “he” to be sex – indefinite with no overt overtones of masculine when used in sex unspecified context. (McCawley 1974, p. 103 as cited in Bodine 1975, p. 138)

Feminist linguists have therefore argued that usage of generic “he” to refer to all people puts male gender at “a certain advantage and furthers the patriarchal system in society and reflects both history of male domination and active perpetuation of it” (Sniezek & Jazwinski, 1986 as cited in Gastil, J., 1990) General or universal nouns like “people”, “human”, “individual” or “person” or even “animal” are believed to be universally male. Since the prototypical human being is male, there is no need to overtly mark the noun for masculine as it is generic just as the pronoun “he.” (Stahlberg et al. 2007)

The inherent usage of “he” was recognised to invoke male bias in many languages and early female linguists like Lakoff (1972) have believed there would be no use in replacing the generic “he” in English language, but some researchers disagree, considering there has been a decrease of usage of the generic “he” with many now opting for the gender-neutral pronoun “they”. Interestingly, the hypothesis that the usage of pronoun “he” evokes male bias has changed over two times in an experiment conducted by Noll et al. (2018, as cited in Redl, 2020: 2). They asked the participants of the experiment to respond in male or female definitional nouns for segments “aunt” and “uncle”, and after reading a sentence that contained the masculine generic “he” or singular “they” (e.g., “A speaker should avoid reading a prepared speech, even if he/they will be nervous and want to get the wording exactly”). The first experiment found there was no male bias, but after repeating the experiment fifteen years later they found a “facilitation effect for male probes after sentences featuring generic “he,” hinting a male bias.” They conclude that the usage of generic “he” has decreased, but the male bias has increased. (Redl, Theresa, et al., 2020)

Psychologists Allen McConnell and Russell Fazio (1996) conducted similar experiment. It dealt with how gendered marked language influences perception of other person’s personal attributes.

The experiment presented participants with three vignettes that centred around description of an executive position in corporate setting and “involved give – and - take process to reach a compromise agreement with an opposing party.” The content of vignettes varied in titles, “*Chairman of the Board of Directors* – man suffix condition and *Chair of the Board of Directors* – no suffix condition or *Chairperson of the Board of Directors* – person suffix condition.” The results showed that title suffixes had influence on judgement of personality of an executive, which resulted in description of “chairman” as “stereotypically masculine” - rational, assertive etc. and less as feminine - caring, emotional etc. Assessment of the title “Chairperson” was more “stereotypically feminine” than masculine. (Chew, Kelley – Chew, 2007, pp. 651 - 652)

The reason why this occurs is explained by McConell and Fazio (1996) who suggest that chairperson is tied to a specific “personality type” tied to a certain political side or as they claim “feminine”. When the gender is not known as in the “chairperson” this is also where people’s personal attitudes and feelings will dictate how the noun will be described. As for the “chairman” it is more logical to assume, since it holds the noun “man” inside it, the reason why it is described with stereotypically masculine traits. (Chew, Kelley – Chew, 2007)

It is safe to assume that in this case people’s personal biases influence how a title will be perceived. As Chew and Kelley – Chew suggest, sometimes it is as straightforward and logical to assume that because there is a “man” in “chairman” it would automatically be connected to masculine traits, but perhaps because it also suggests authority which is also typically expected of men is why it was given masculine traits. While “chairperson” because it could be both a man or a woman it could be hypothesised that “person” is tied with usually how people perceive someone’s character (or as McConell and Fazio claim a “personality type”) or “chairperson” was characterised as feminine due to the gender inclusive language that is becoming more prevalent today.

4. Social Gender

4.1. Sapir - Whorf Hypothesis

The correlation between language and thought has been focus of two researchers Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir who were responsible for researchers and linguists who assembled their theories and coined it the as the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis or as it became later referred to as linguistic relativity. “The hypothesis suggests that a speaker’s native language determines his or her perception of reality.”¹(Henley, 1989, as cited in Crawford, 1995) It does not determine just the perception of reality it determines relationship between culture and language (Wardhaugh, 2011)

One of the main problems of Sapir – Whorf hypothesis is the speaker’s ability to make distinctions and classification of them. Where some languages have broader vocabulary and terms for certain things, others do not. This brings about an advantage, or disadvantage to speakers of these languages, as one will be able to communicate better than the other and draw better classifications as well. “These can pertain to shape, number, substance, etc. which are subtle and pervasive.” Wardhaugh (2011, p. 224) explains that these distinctions are the ones that limit or broaden one’s perception which in turn enables them to form a certain worldview. The extent of vocabulary will bring difference in thinking, which is why each culture, based on their language has a unique way of viewing and experiencing the world. One must note that Whorf himself stated that “language is not neutral nor is it only a vehicle which carries ideas, but shaper of ideas and a programme for mental activity” (Whorf, 1975 as cited in Wardhaugh, 2011). With that Spender (1980) concludes that humans are not capable of “describing universe in an impartial way, first they must have a classification system, but paradoxically that classification system and language will enable them to see certain arbitrary things”. Spender believes these classifications are constructed so that people view the world through them but fail to recognize inconsistency of world with said categories. (pp. 139 - 141) Worldview and how the reality is experienced are not the only elements that pertain to language as it also shapes attitudes, social values and thought pattern of society. Therefore, the language itself is the one who can make any “social inequality visible or invisible.” (Romaine, 1998)

¹ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333732400_CHAPTER_15_Gender_and_Language

Language can be recognized as a tool of establishing power dynamics as well. The more educated and involved with language are the ones that control it, and it has been known that for many centuries that men were the ones who received more education and held higher positions as well as authority in academia and creation of language. Those who are in power then have a higher advantage of constructing world and reality to suit their means and influence the system of beliefs which in turn becomes harder to challenge. Their superiority will equal to authority and something as “natural” and “objective” and in turn they become central figures while those who are excluded from them are put on the sidelines and are exploited. (Spender, 1980, p. 143) Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1978 as cited in Spender, 1980, p. 143) states “historically males have talked to males and encoded (false) principals in language, thought and reality”.

4.2. Sexist Language and Linguistic Sexism

Definition of sexist language is “any language that is supposed to include all people, but unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender – this can be either males or females.” (Nneka Umera-Okeke, 2012 p. 3) In linguistics sexism manifests itself through verbal practices, labelling and referring to women as well as ways they get silenced through series of actions when they are taking part in mixed sex interactions. (Atkinson, 1936, as cited in Nneka Umera-Okeke 2012 p. 4) Sexism in accordance with the Sapir – Whorf hypothesis is in and of itself tied to the attitudes and/ or behaviours that serve to “denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other.” (Ivy and Backlund 1994: 72, as cited in Nneka Umera-Okeke, 2012 p. 4)

Sexism in the 1970s and 1980 for feminists, was “a language that discriminated against women by representing them negatively or that assume that activities associated with women were trivial”. Sexist language came in both areas of private and professional lives of women. Particularly the usage of “girl” for an adult woman or “lady,” adding “girl” to any type of profession that most women occupied. Example: “weathergirl” or “lollipop lady.” The feminists of the second wave fought against gender markedness (previously discussed) and urged for different titles that would include both men and women and erase the sexist division between the sexes. Their alternatives included “chairperson” or “convenor” for “chairman” and Ms. Instead of “Mrs.” or “Miss” to avoid referring to woman’s marital status as the table under suggest. (Sunderland, 2006 p. 12)

<i>Alternative item</i>	<i>Intended to replace</i>	<i>Reason</i>
<i>Ms</i>	<i>Miss/Mrs</i>	to achieve equivalence with <i>Mr</i> and to end the practice of women being 'defined' by their marital status
<i>chairperson</i> <i>spokesperson</i> <i>barperson</i>	<i>chairman</i> <i>spokesman</i> <i>barman</i> (especially as referents for women)	to put an end to the 'think male' phenomenon, and the 'rendering invisible' of women
<i>s/he, 'singular they'</i>	'generic <i>he</i> '	as above

Table 1: alternative items meant to replace gender marked titles

Furthermore, Romaine (1998, p. 126) suggests the asymmetries in expression “Ladies and Gentlemen” is sexist as well because the term “lady” is unequal to that of a “gentleman”. There is no viable equivalent of usage of the “gentlemen” in any other context except for fixed situations or expressions, unlike the “lady” which is an addition to a title of a job, there is a “cleaning lady”, but no “garbage – gentleman”. The term carries all sorts of pejorative meanings and linguists have found that the label “lady” is not equal to “ma’am,” especially in American English. While “ma’am” usually evokes respect and title, “lady” oftentimes occurs in sarcastic context. Other examples include expressions like “man of the world” in comparison with “woman of the world,” “man of the world” has positive idiomatic meaning as Cambridge dictionary defines it as “someone who has a lot of experience of life and can deal with most situations”² unlike “woman of the world” or “town” which is a title for a prostitute.

Bebout L. (1995) has hypothesised and proved that “lady” is an expression different than “woman”. “Lady” relates to triviality and humour, and “woman” carries implication of an “unmarked term for “adult female””. The term “girl” has similar connotations. “Girl” is immature and marked for lack of sexuality just as the term “lady.” “Lady” differentiated through her behaviour as she does not behave as a “woman” does, hence the expression “act like a lady.” Bebout states that “ladies” “have desirable qualities that women do not”. (p. 166) As previously discussed, female marked occupations belong to lower paying ones and the term “lady” was researched and hypothesised by many authors in past to prove that “lady” is associated with “lower

² <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/man-of-the-world>

status occupations or lower social status and more trivial activities that require lower level of competence” (Lerner 1976, p. 296; Hill p. 1986, p. 92; Moely and Kreicker 1984, p. 352; Korsmeyer 1977, p. 145 as cited in Bebout, 1995, p. 166) While “lady” was found to be marked for “lower status occupations” so did “woman” and the term “female” started to be associated with “higher status occupations” (Bebout, 1995, p. 167) Unlike “lady” and “woman”, “gentleman” and “man” differentiation did not prove any disparities in how they are perceived or what type of occupation they had nor how they were sexually perceived.

Sexism has negative effects on women as Swim et al. (as cited in Kelley – Chew, 2007: 650) note it increases “traditional gender role stereotyping, demeaning and derogatory comments and behaviours and sexual objectification.”

5. Sexist language and gender stereotypes

Sexism and stereotyping are related though mental process of categorisation and typing into Sapir – Whorf hypothesis they are influenced by reality constructed through language. According to Spender “reality is constructed and sustained primarily through talk, those who control the talk are also able to control reality.” (1980 p. 119) This relates to the gendered language dichotomy and belief there is women’s and men’s language and that language itself is controlled by men.

5.1. Women’s language

The phenomenon of differentiation between women’s and men’s language introduced by Robin Lakoff in 1975 includes a set of behavioural patterns of speech which show how men and women speak differently. She introduces a concept of “talking like a lady” as a part of women’s language in grammars. She recognizes women’s language to include usage of concise “discrimination in naming colours” in comparison with men. Her examples include: “beige, mauve, aquamarine, lavender, ecru” (Lakoff, 1975, p. 49)

Noticing different colours is not the only difference, when it comes to women’s language. Women are more likely to use the following patterns: hedging or usage of phrases “I guess”, “sort of” etc. these types of expressions or hedges are used to avoid using “strong statements” and prevent being part of a disagreement. Women are more polite and because of their politeness they “leave a decision open, not impose their mind, or view, or claims, on anyone else” (Lakoff, 1975, p. 56). They use tag – questions which provide a “polite statement and does not force agreement of belief

on addressee”. (Ibid) Usage of emotional emphasis through intonation and adverbs “so”, “very”, “really”, etc. Another aspect are empty words or empty adjectives used to sound more friendly but do not add anything of meaning. Usage of correct grammar and pronunciation with extended vocabulary in comparison with men who use slang words and colloquial expressions. Women’s speech is characterized with lack of humour, usage of direct quotations and making declarations with interrogative intonation. Women are also more prone to avoid cursing or use “soft profanity” like “oh dear”, “fudge”, “goodness” (Lakoff, 1975)

Lakoff’s ideas of women’s language must be taken with reservation, as her approach has been criticized by many linguists for reinforcing negative stereotypes regarding women with varying evidence to support her claims. Despite her being a feminist, she called women’s language “deficient” and “weak” and made it a point that something is wrong in a way women speak when she introduced the deficit approach. (De Marco, 2012, pp. 86 – 87) Lakoff’s concept of women’s language introduces problematic of general stereotyping of women and how they use language and how language itself can be applied to them. (Cameron, 1986, p. 34)

5.2. Sexist gender stereotypes

It is said that gender stereotyping begins as the young age and children learn to process and interpret the world around them, including sex differences learn how to gender stereotype. Once they come to recognition that there are male and female gender, they begin the process of associating numerous gender attributes to each gender which in turn determines the model of behaviour that is socially suitable for their and other’s gender.³

Calefato (1997, pp. 69 – 73) explains stereotypes as they pertain to social setting and people to be “verbal expressions, images that stick to the person, social group, as well as a behaviour, a feeling, a value without being filtered through logical reasoning.” Stereotypes are unchanged and taken for granted by majority of people because they send implicit messages through language and establish a fixed place in human mind. They are seldom challenged and turn harmful when used to form a certain social framework. (De Marco, 2012, pp. 91 – 92)

³https://www.blackwellpublishing.com/content/bpl_images/content_store/sample_chapter/9781405118668/9781405118668_4_002.pdf

When it comes to gender stereotypes they are divided in prescriptive and descriptive. According to Anne M. Koenig (2018) they are a mixture of expectations and beliefs how a certain gender must behave. For women, they are expected to be warm, nurturing and avoid asserting dominance whilst men are agentic and must avoid exhibiting weakness. Violations of prescriptive beliefs or stereotypes cause a severe, usually negative reaction whilst violation of descriptive ones invokes a sense of surprise, Descriptive stereotypes can cause discrimination and prejudice when violating expected behaviour with a role that is supposed to be played. Prescriptive stereotypes are more severe in nature as they can lead to backlash, outrage or penalties.

Example for women, because of their biology and lasting role as mothers and “stereotypical association with childcare” and childrearing, they are nurturing and warm, but also, some studies found, “less competent and agentic than men”. (Romaine, 1999, Bye, et al., 2022)

There are series of words that are only reserved for women with negative connotations attached to them. These connotations are used when corresponding intelligence level to a woman’s hair colour. For example, “blond” a hair colour is not the same as “blonde” or a type of woman who is “dizzy, flighty, or not terribly intelligent”. The phrase “blonde moment” signifies a person that is stupid or has a mental block. The phrase itself is sexist and stereotypes a woman because a mistake had been made. “She is such a blonde bimbo” equates woman’s appearance with her stupidity and depicts visible bias. (De Marco, 2012, p. 84)

Women’s roles as mothers also come with a set of demeaning and abusive connotations. They are found in male vocabulary in derogatory context discussed by Romaine (1999, p. 99). English language has plenty words regarding sexually promiscuous woman than that of a promiscuous man, especially since there have been 200 words found for such women, but only 20 for men. (Stanley J. 1977 as cited in Romaine 1998) Romaine found that majority of derogatory terms aimed at men stemmed from degradation of women in their roles as mothers. Derogatory words like “mother – fucker”, “bastard”, “son of a bitch”, as she puts it these words are insulting when used for men because they are “female words”.

The label “spinster” for women carries a whole set of negative connotations similarly to mothers, they are desexualised and used as a derogatory name for certain type of woman who does not fit the norm of what a woman should be. “Spinster” used to be a term for a woman which engages in an activity of spinning, but later the word “degenerated”, because said women were often

unmarried and thus spinster became a label for an unmarried woman in 17th century England. In American English “spinster” carries set of connotations like: “gossipy, nervy, over-made up, ineffective, jealous, eccentric, love-/sex-starved, frustrated, whey-faced, dried-up old, repressed, lonely, prim, cold-hearted, plain Jane, atrocious” Unlike men and the label “bachelor” connotations are more positive and descriptive. (Romaine, 2001, p. 159) It can be concluded that spinster serves as a type of woman who is physically unattractive, old, and single because she cannot get a husband, unlike a type of man who is a bachelor who is viewed in positive light and even considered attractive due to his status as a single man

5. 3. Attitudes toward gender neutral and inclusive language

Gender neutral language and usage of gender-neutral language presents itself as challenging of preexisting and established standards and conventions that shape and influence the stereotypical view through which gender is perceived. Gender neutral language include alternative terms like “Mx”, “Xe” and singular “they” or “them” to grasp and include all gender identities. According to Mallinson et al. using gender neutral language promotes equity and advances “social progress of all genders” (2020)⁴

Gender inclusive language itself carries a set of not just social but psychological mechanisms. Meaning language is used to create systems of powers, social categorizations and hierarchies which in turn construct how gender will be communicated. According to Sczesny “gender-inclusive language use has emphasized the gender-related belief systems that can lead to people to adopt certain language forms”. She gives example of female and male college students who had more positive attitudes when it came to gender equality through usage of gender - neutral expressions for occupations like “flight attendant” instead of “stewardess” (Sczesny et al. 2015, p. 944)

Research by Rubin, Greene, and Schneider (1994) conducted an experiment of college students who had to respond to a letter in fictional university’s call for mandatory drug testing. The experiment showed that male participants or those who had “stronger masculine gender role orientation” (Sczesny et al. 2015) were more likely to use gender exclusive language. Another

⁴ <https://scholars.org/contribution/what-gender-inclusive-language-and-why-does-it>

experiment done by Jacobson and Insko's in 1985 linked sexist attitudes to language. The participants of the experiment had to choose a pronoun or a noun like *he, she, he/she, the lawyer, the client* and the experiment showed that participants higher on sexist thought chose less frequently non – sexist pronouns. Sczesny concludes that men score higher on “instrumentality and sexist attitudes as well as using more masculine generic pronouns than women” (2015, p. 944)

Based on these results attitudes from mainly men show to be negative when it comes to gender neutral language and there is clear resistance against inclusivity and neutrality in language.

Research and experiment conducted by Sarrasin et al. (2012) on 446 students that were English, Swiss and French speakers who had to fill out a questionnaire which comprised of Swim et al.'s Modern Sexism Scale of Swim et al. (2001) and the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory of Glick and Fiske (1996) in which they assess attitudes towards gender – neutral language. Modern Sexism Scale comprised of “eight items that investigate denial of continual discrimination and antagonism towards women's demands” while Ambivalent Sexism Inventory consisted of hostile and benevolent sexism scale to create an ambivalent sexism inventory. Hostile sexism comprised of hostile attitudes towards women in form of expressions like “*Once a woman gets a man to commit to her, she usually tries to put him on a tight leash*” and benevolent sexism example was found in a sentence example of how students perceived women as adorable and weak or in need of being protected, example sentence “*Men should be willing to sacrifice their own well-being in order to provide financially for the women in their lives*”. Other parts of questionnaire were concerned with “Attitudes toward gender related language reforms (AGLR)” and “Recognition of sexist language (RSL)” in which four sentences that contained: examples of sexist language like using masculine noun when mentioning a mixed group of people, generic masculine pronoun “he” when talking about a person whose gender they do not know and “a marked male noun when referring to a woman”. The results showed that sexist attitudes for male students were “slightly more negative while female students had more positive attitudes toward gender related language reforms.” (Ibid) Researchers hypothesized that “modern sexism predicated indicators of attitudes toward gender – neutral language” and found that Swiss and English students had more sexist attitudes and more negative attitudes when it came to gender – related language reforms and failed to recognise clear examples of sexist language. They also found there was a connection between hostile sexism and negative attitudes toward gender – related language reforms, but no connection between “hostile

sexism and recognition of sexist language”. (Ibid) They also found that benevolent sexism held more positive viewpoint of gender – related language reforms in both Swiss and French but not in English speaking students.

6. Gendered language in workplace

In this section I will aim to explain how gendered language and beliefs attached to gender permeates through stereotypes and harm women through usage of gendered expressions that are derogatory and insulting towards women and how they impact them in the workplace.

Gendered language impacts women in a harmful way through the roles they decide to take on or avoid taking on. For example, women are discouraged from taking on leadership roles. As leadership has been frequently associated with men or as a masculine trait, men have occupied leadership roles throughout history and up to this day, many political, military or corporate leaders are men. Due to that fact, women are less likely to achieve a higher rank or even worse, attempt to achieve them. Eagly et al. (2002) describe this issue as a phenomenon called “glass ceiling” which serves as an obstacle based on prejudice and discrimination which prevents or excludes women’s participation in higher ranked leadership positions.

The higher the social rank and power the higher workplace rank will be and the lower social rank the lower workplace rank with the higher rank usually attributed to men and lower one to women.

Not only that, but the language also used in job advertisements for example showed how much language influences men’s and women’s choices to apply for a job. Gaucher et al. (2011) found that women will apply less to a traditional masculine job like electrician, plumber, engineer or computer programmer. They also found that male – dominated professions were marked with adjectives like “dominant”, “competent” or “leader” which resulted in women applying less for jobs that contained these adjectives in job advertisements.

Gendered language will find a way to present itself in the way women are coded in the workplace as well. For example, any woman who exerts authority and some form of power will be called “bossy” or “assertive”. There is no gendered example for men who act the same way which shows that there is a clear double standard or asymmetry not just in society and workplace but in language as well. As early as 1882 in Oxford English Dictionary women who occupied manager positions have been called bossy: “There was a lady manager, and she was dreadfully bossy.” Being called

“bossy” continued in the 20th century when women started to get accused of “stealing jobs from men” and when there was an increase of women in workplace in throughout 1970s during the women’s rights movement. (Sandberg, Chavez, 2014 as cited in Clerkin et al., 2015) It was also found that women workers branded as “bossy” were evaluated as less successful in their careers, not popular and unlikeable which results in their reputations in workplace being severely damaged.

Many workplaces function in a hierarchical structure which often favour social power structures that put men on higher positions and women on lower position. Women are more likely to face discrimination and be victims of both hostile and benevolent sexism. (Stamarski, Son Hing, 2015) That can be explained through the fact that men have been stereotypically thought of as breadwinners, successful and well-paid while women are associated with domestic roles such as homemaking, child rearing and, when working, lower paid occupations, therefore sexist language directed at them will be seen as “positive” but only because the employer or coworkers view them in “paternalistic” way. (Ibid) It does not help that stereotypes which mark women as “warm” or “maternal” also contribute to women being seen as less competent. (Bye et al., 2022)

Women who are mothers returning to workplace after maternity leave are often at professional disadvantage as well, making it hard for them to find a job and pursue a career after having children. This does not happen to men who are called “family man” and are praised for getting married and having children and receive bonuses unlike women who face discrimination, are not as employable and being a “mother” is an ending to their careers as they know it and if they choose to work, it is part – time or lower paid jobs in order to care for their children. Women are more likely to be less paid than men because they decided to have children and had to take a break from working and when they return to work, they face discrimination from their employers with higher penalties if the woman is married as well. (Budig, England, 2001)

7. Conclusion

To conclude this paper, it can be said that gendered language is a pervasive issue that has impacted, and despite new usage of gender-neutral language, still impacts women. It is one of the harmful ways patriarchal systems mark women through language and gives men advantage in various spheres from that of the private to the public ones, which cannot be said the same for the language used for women.

Gendered language was recognised for its ramifications by feminists and linguists alike who urged for changes in the language use and the role gender has on the women and men. It can be said that English language despite it not being marked for sex, manages to mark women differently than men and due to that fabricate how women should be treated based on their behaviour or appearance in comparison with men who are the status quo of the language and power in society. This is the reason behind why challenging language that favours one sex or gender, or any group of people is of essential importance which linguists and feminists recognized and made an effort to study and see why people stereotype and tend to be biased when talking about gender.

Discussing language in its connection to gender will always remain a prominent topic of discussion and research as long as there will be sexism and misogyny respectively. Unfortunately, women are not the only ones impacted by gendered language as there are many other gender identities facing discrimination and linguistic violence at the side of patriarchy, but it can be said that women were and still are a part of the most marginalised group of people in the patriarchal systems today and due to the language directed towards them find themselves disadvantaged at both personal and professional level.

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