

THE GENDER ASPECT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE. SHOULD WE TEACH GENDER NEUTRALITY IN THE CLASSROOM?

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ABSTRACT

Aim. This article is aimed at the study of different aspects of gender linguistics in the English language, namely, the grammatical category of gender, gender vocabulary and phraseology, male and female differences in using language, the problem of gender neutrality teaching in English.

Methods. The article is based on the study and review of research works in the fields of cultural studies, linguistics, and sociology. The paper summarises the current state of understanding on the topic and makes contribution to the field.

Results. In this paper the grammatical gender of English is studied, examples of lexical units, phraseology, proverbs, and sayings are given, and differences in speech between men and women are described, forms of gender-neutral English are presented. The results of research clearly show that in the past English used not to be a gender-neutral language. Nowadays, we can observe that changes in cultural views influenced by feminism in the English-speaking countries have led to changes in the language itself.

Conclusions. English has become one of the first languages in the world in which gender neutrality has become predominant. We think since gender-neutrality is highly valued in the English-speaking society, it must be taught to learners of English in different countries since the primary aim of learning a foreign language is communication which always includes a cultural component.

Keywords: gender linguistics, grammatical gender, vocabulary and phraseology, speech, gender-neutral phrases



INTRODUCTION

According to the Bolshaya Rossiyskaya Encyclopedia (Barchunova, 2022), gender linguistics is a branch of linguistics which studies the process of the reflection of differences between genders in language and speech. It is necessary to note that interest in the study of gender representation in linguistics was observed as early as the 17th century, when researchers paid attention for the first time to differences in the linguistic behaviour of men and women. At first, the term *gender* was used in English linguistics to denote gender in grammar, and was later spread to social studies in the 1960s and 1970s, having been influenced by feminism. The term received general understanding in the 1950s in the works of John Mani: the psychologist introduced the terms *gender*, *gender identity* and *gender role*. It was by the American psychiatrist Robert Stoller (1968, as cited in Barchunova, 2022), in whose work *Sex and gender* that the term received its theoretical formation. One of the first researchers who paid attention to this term was Ann Oakley (1972, as cited in Barchunova, 2022) in her study *Sex, gender and society*.

The difference between the terms *sex* and *gender* is that *gender* refers to the social role defining the behaviour of a human in society and how this behaviour is perceived by other members of society. In psychology, the term *gender* is used in a wider sense as any psychological and behavioural peculiarities associated with masculine or feminine features. Meanwhile, the term *sex* refers to the assignment of a person to a certain biological class (Grigoryeva, 2022).

Gender linguistics has seen a rapid development in recent decades worldwide. Many researchers, Anna Beloedova et al. (2017), Tatiana Dezhina (2017), Alla Kirilina (2021), Sabine Sczesny et al. (2016), Mariya Tomskaya (2017), Tatiana Voloshina et al. (2022) have turned their attention to the study of different aspects of gender linguistics and its development. This article aims to examine the representation of gender differences in different aspects of the English language: grammar, vocabulary and speech. Its goal is to provide a clear and expanded overview of the problem. Moreover, we have noticed that in the recent research works, the problem of the need to include gender neutrality study of English into the classroom has not received special attention. This article examines the existing works on various aspects of gender linguistics and makes its own contribution to the field.

To achieve this goal, the following objectives have been made:

- to study various aspects of gender representation in English: grammar, vocabulary and speech.
- to study linguistic and extra-linguistic reasons for English gradually becoming one of the first gender-neutral languages in the world;
- to turn attention to the problem of gender neutrality of the English language and its inclusion into the educational process.

The work is conducted in a linguistic-cultural paradigm: the authors believe that language is a part of culture, language and culture are interrelated and reflected in each other, therefore, the study of the representation of gender in language allows us to understand how native speakers view the world, as well as which notions about different phenomena they communicate through the language.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The article is based on the study of research works in the fields of cultural studies, linguistics, and sociology. On the basis of these works, grammatical gender of English is studied, examples of lexical units, phraseology, proverbs, and sayings are given, and differences in speech between men and women are described. The paper summarises the current state of understanding on the topic in the works of the researchers from Russia and other countries and reveals the linguistic and extra-linguistic factors for English becoming a gender-fair language. Moreover, the research turns attention to the problem of gender neutrality study among English learners, which has not received special attention in the academic circle in Russia.

RESULTS

Grammatical Gender in English

In early studies the term *gender* was used to denote the category of grammatical gender. The peculiar feature of the English language, for example, in comparison with the Slavic languages, is that the category of grammatical gender refers only to nouns which relate to living creatures. It was not until the 18th century that the neuter gender fell out of use in the English language. Linguists believe that this fact was due to phonological reasons, when the last syllable in words of neuter gender remained unstressed (Starodubtseva & Gorokhova, 2022).

The existence of the personal pronouns *he*, *she*, *it* in the modern language proves the fact that in the past there existed three grammatical genders of nouns in the English language. Nowadays, they can be called remnants of the category of gender. The interchange of nouns and personal pronouns occur according to the following principle: for masculine nouns *he* is used; *she* - for feminine nouns; *it* - for non-persons. The history of the language development clearly shows that in the English language, the anaphoric gender appeared simultaneously with the grammatical gender of nouns and continues to exist after the grammatical gender of nouns went out of use.

Therefore, we can state that the absence of the category of grammatical gender in English makes gender neutrality easier to be achieved than in the languages in which there is a clear distinction between grammatical gender

of nouns and other parts of speech as it is, for example, in Russian and other Slavic languages.

Gender-Marked Vocabulary and Phrases

By gender vocabulary we understand – after Liudmila Kozlova and Galina Tsareva (2021) – *feminine* and *masculine* vocabulary of the language. Stereotypes about masculine and feminine features exist at all levels of culture and change along with the changes occurring in the society. Yuliya Nikitina (2015) – a researcher from Tolyatti state university – states that the English language was influenced by Jewish-Christian traditions and continues to reflect the ideas of a patriarchic society when the masculine gender was considered to be dominant. The religious norms made the English language to be targeted at masculine gender, whereas feminine forms were frequently formed on the basis of the masculine forms.

In English general gender-marked vocabulary can be divided into three types: masculine, feminine, and gender-neutral. Examples of gender-marked vocabulary in English can refer to biological gender: *a boy, a girl, a man, a woman*; personal relationships within a family: *a husband, a wife, an uncle, an aunt*; forms of addressing: *Mrs., Ms., Mr., Sir*; names of professions ending with *-ess, -ette, -ine, -man, -woman*: *actress, teacheress (female teacher); fireman*.

Metaphoric nominations of males and females examined by Elena Kalugina (2012) are represented by the following examples: women are associated with food: *cheesecake* – about an attractive woman; *muffin* – about any woman. Non-attractive women are frequently associated with household items such as *bucket, bag*. A large group of metaphors representing women refer to zoonyms or botanical metaphors: *cherry* and *bush* are used to represent women's attractiveness; the word *tuna* represents women in general. Moreover, metaphoric nominations of males include representations of food: *beef* – a man who is strong, physically attractive; instruments: *pin* – about a criminal authority; *blade* – a man with a sense of humour. The examples of metaphors-zoonyms representing men are the following: *ape* – a tall, strong man; *grub* – a student of the first-year study at university, and many others. The researcher comes to the conclusion that metaphoric images of men and women in English are represented in language unequally. Men are represented as active, aggressive, leaders; whereas, women tend to be represented as someone for whom appearance and social status tend to be the most important characteristics.

Another important issue on the way to reveal the gender representation in the English language it is to study its reflection in phraseology. It is impossible to acquire a foreign language without the study of phraseology, since it reflects cultural values and a cultural worldview of a nation. Phraseology helps to recognise how representatives of a nation perceive the world, whose values and rules exist in their world (Kondrateva, 2021). Some phraseological units in different languages are similar as reflecting key universal values: love, labour, relationships between people, etc. As

for unique phraseological units – present and functioning in a specific language – they give a researcher an idea on how a specific nation views the world, including the ideas about men and women and their roles in society.

Nazezhda Yes'kova (2012) distinguishes the following groups of gender-marked idioms in the English language:

- Idioms which refer either to men or women: *a man's man* (a man noted or admired for traditionally masculine interests and activities); *best man* (a male friend or relation of the bridegroom); *a man about town* (a fashionable male socialite); *a fine lady* (a woman who is a good person, sophisticated and charming, almost always upper-class and rich); *bachelor girl* (an independent, unmarried young woman); *glamour girl* (a fashionable, attractive woman, especially a model of a film star).
- Phraseologisms which refer to relatives: *sworn brother* (a sibling by birth); *mummy's boy* (a boy or a man who is excessively influenced by or attached to his mother); *half-brother* (a brother with whom one has one common parent); *a full sister* (a sister born of the same mother and father); *a left-handed wife* (morganatic spouse); *sister-in-law* (the wife of one's sibling).
- Idioms containing male proper names: *Judas kiss* (an act of betrayal, especially one disguised as a gesture of friendship); *John Raw* (a new recruit); *Jack Sprat* (people of small stature, comes from an English proverb).
- Idioms which refer to the social role depending on biological gender: *to give birth*.

Another researcher of gender aspects of the English language Karina Pokoyakova (2019) distinguished the following semantic groups of gendered phraseology of the English language: physical characteristics: *teddy boy* (a young man, especially in the 1950s in the U.K., who typically dressed in narrow trousers, a long, loose jacket, and shoes with thick soles); *a peroxide blonde* (a blonde whose hair colour comes from bleaching with hydrogen peroxide instead of genetics, usually negative); psychological characteristics: *ladies man* (a man who gives women a lot of attention and likes to be with them); *a glamour girl* (a good-looking girl); social characteristics: *Miss Right* (a perfect female mate or wife); *a grass widower* (a divorced or separated man); a professional status: *a man of letters* (a writer); *the leading lady* (the top-class actress).

Darya Sanyukevich (2013) examined gender stereotypes reflection in the English proverbs and sayings. Several examples of such proverbs and sayings are presented below: women are viewed negatively when they are furious: *Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned*; not very intelligent: *Women have long hair and short brain*; at the same time, women are viewed positively in the role of wives and mothers: *Men make houses, women make homes*; women help men in their lives: *He that will thrive must first ask his wife*.

Men are viewed positively when they are good fathers: One father is worth more than a hundred schoolmasters; when they are good husbands: A good wife and health is man's best wealth. Being drunk is considered to be negative for a man according to the quote by Washington Irving. He that drinks beer, thinks beer.

Having studied the examples of the above-named vocabulary, idioms, proverbs and sayings, we can clearly observe that in English there exist gender-marked lexical units and phrases which contain discriminating and stereotyping views on the representatives of biological genders.

The Differences in Speech Between Men and Women

Another aspect of the study in the field of gender linguistics is the difference between the speech of men and women. According to the results obtained by the researchers, the styles of speech of men and women are revealed at two levels: the speech itself and speech behaviour. For instance, men are more categorical, aim at managing the path of the conversation, their sentences are usually shorter. Men are bound to use abstract nouns and adjectives, whereas women tend to use more verbs. Emotional lexical units are more typical for the speech of women (Poplevko & Nadolskaya, 2017).

Besides the speech behaviour, the authors mention the differences between men's and women's written speech. Men's written speech is characterised by the frequent use of linking words, slang, abstract nouns, stylistically neutral vocabulary, etc., whereas women's written speech contains modal constructions demonstrating uncertainty, clichés, assessing statements, euphemisms, etc.

Dilshodbek Rustamov et al. (2021) conducted their research on differences between women's and men's speech on phonetic and linguistic levels in which they claimed that the identification of the peculiarities of the speech of men and women supplements and clarifies the results of research in the field of gender studies. The researchers conducted an experiment involving men and women aged 18 to 25 years old, students of universities of the Siberian Federal District. The results of the study were the following:

- In the field of vocabulary, there is a clear difference in the topics of conversations.
- In the field of grammar, women are strongly inclined to use interjections.
- The peculiarities in the field of syntax, the use of introductory constructions with the meaning of a high degree of confidence are distinguished by men, while women use these constructions with the meaning of uncertainty.

As far as the phonetic peculiarities are concerned, the phenomenon of vocalism is inherent in women, followed by stretching of vowels, and men try to briefly pronounce the percussive sound. In women, assimilation by softness is noticeable and in men, the longitude of consonants prevails. Moreover, there is a loss of vowel sounds in the syllable by men compared to women.

In our study, we believe that the study of differences in speech between men and women still stays a perspective area of research and needs further development from the point of view of nationalities, types of relationships and other factors. Nevertheless, the results of the research works on this topic prove that the differences in speech of men and women do exist and frequently depend on biological gender.

Gender Neutrality of the English Language

The results of the research clearly show that English during its history has been a language with clear gender asymmetry. Nowadays, as a reply to this asymmetry due to the changes in the perception of social roles of men and women in the English-speaking society, the term *gender-fair language* has been introduced by the researchers. The English language unlike many other languages has entered the era of postgenderism when the official language is being transformed into gender-neutral. According to Sczesny et al. (2016), the gender-fair language is obtained by the neutralisation (when gender-marked words are replaced by gender-neutral ones), the feminisation (based on the explicit inclusion of women recommended for grammatical gender languages) or the combination of both.

Since nouns are not divided into grammatical genders in the English language, the changes in the formation of gender-fair language mostly concern the pronouns and names of professions. The English-speaking society faces significant changes in the use of English heard in public places, on T.V., in the newspapers, and other places. For example, in London underground the greeting "Ladies and gentlemen" was substituted with "Hello, everyone". The national anthem of Canada became gender-neutral when the phrase "True patriot love all of sons command" was changed into "True patriot love all of us command".

Gender-marked names of professions have become unacceptable: for example, waitron should be used instead of waiter or waitress. Gender-neutral pronoun they has become the accepted form among the speakers of the English language. Moreover, in 2018 gender-neutral prefix Mx has been introduced into the Oxford dictionary of the English language (Amosova & Shimanovich, 2019). These are only few examples of the use of gender-neutral language, which is rapidly developing in the English-speaking society.

Some of the scientists studying gender linguistics do not support the idea of language purification from gender-marked phrases. They insist that the social role of a person always includes gender component and think that gender-neutral language can be difficult to use and understand (Podubnaya et al., 2021). Nonetheless, despite the fact that some researchers are negative about the use of gender-neutral language, we believe that it is impossible to exclude this aspect while teaching English since gender-marked language has become unacceptable in many sectors of the English-speaking society. The results of the research clearly shows that the English language has already acquired the new forms and continues to acquire them,

therefore, teaching gender-neutral forms should become a part of school and university curricula around the world for the English learners.

In order to achieve gender-neutrality, the following principles should be observed:

- The use of neutral pronoun form they instead of he/she;
- The use of the structures he or she, his or her, and others;
- Addressing a person without mentioning biological gender;
- Excluding gender-marked names of professions and choosing gender-neutral variants: a firefighter instead of a fireman;
- Excluding gender-marked vocabulary, namely, gender-marked metaphors, slang, phraseology, proverbs, and sayings;
- Excluding words incorporating -man, for example, humankind, mankind.

The U.N. organisation has elaborated the principles of observing the rules of gender neutrality of English for its employees. These rules include the use of non-discriminatory language, making gender visible when it is relevant for communication, and not making gender visible when it is not relevant for communication. In order to find out that the speaker is using discriminatory language the guidelines recommend reversing the designation or the term from masculine into feminine or vice versa and check if the statement is changing its meaning or emphasis. Examples include: "Women should not seek leadership positions" or "Men cannot do two things at the same time". The recommendations how to make gender not visible when it is necessary include the following rules: the use gender-neutral words, the use of the plural pronouns, the use of the pronoun one, the use of the relative pronoun who, the use a the plural antecedent, the omission of the gendered word, the use of the passive voice (The United Nations, n.d.).

We can state that despite the fact that gender-neutrality has become a part of English-speaking society, most of the mainstream books used in Russia, namely Kazan Federal University, do not teach this aspect of language. Therefore, we believe that it is the task of teachers to draw the students' attention to the mistakes concerning gender-neutrality of the language in oral and written communication.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have showed that English has entered a new stage of its development when it is being reformed officially in terms of the gender-related language use. Speaking a foreign language always includes a cultural component when learners of the foreign language must become familiar with the culture of the native speakers. We think that the fact that English is gradually becoming a gender-fair language is due to linguistic and extra-linguistic reasons. The linguistic reason lies in the absence of the category

of grammatical gender for nouns and other parts of speech. This makes the gender-neutral variant of the language easier to achieve. The extra-linguistic factor is explained by enormous shift in cultural views regarding genders of the native speakers of the English language. The English-speaking countries have been strongly influenced by the ideas of the feminist movement. Even international organisations such as the UN have stated that the achievement of gender equality is an uncompleted task in the modern world and one of the biggest problems within the problem of the guarantee of human rights.

CONCLUSION

The results of research clearly show that in the past English used not to be a gender-neutral language: it still has gender-marked vocabulary, phraseology, proverbs and sayings, in which stereotypes about masculine and feminine genders are present. This conclusion was made as a result of the study of the recent research works in the field of gender linguistics by researchers from Russia and other countries. Nowadays, we can observe that changes in cultural views influenced by feminism in the English-speaking countries led to changes in the language itself. New norms of language have been accepted at the official level. English has become one of the first languages in the world in which gender neutrality has become predominant. We think since gender-neutrality is highly valued in the English-speaking society, it must be taught to learners of English in different countries – even in the counties which have not entered the era of postgenderism – since the primary aim of learning a foreign language is communication which always includes a cultural component.

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