

# Sexist Language: Gender-Linked Expressions in Official Communications in the Academic Workplace

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## Abstract

This study investigated the occurrence of sexism in official communications in the academic workplace. Specifically, it attempted to determine whether or not words or expressions considered as gender-biased were used in memorandums written by officials of the respondent university and to identify in which examples of English usage classified as sexist do they belong. The study revealed that the most frequently used sexist words are the gender-linked masculine terms *freshmen* (used to refer to all first year students that include female students) and *chairman* (used to address even females serving as heads of departments). The examples of English usage considered as sexist which were found in the memorandums are as follows: using masculine nouns as generic, the non-parallel treatment of men and women, male being habitually placed before female, and gender-linked titles and work positions.

**Keywords:** *sexist language, academic discourse, gender-inclusive language.*

## Introduction

Communicative competence, a linguistic term coined by Dell Hymes, can be considered as an articulation of what it takes to communicate successfully. It describes the essential components of effective communication. These are the competences into which communicative competence itself is subdivided, namely linguistic, strategic, discourse, and socio-linguistic.

Of the aforementioned competences, the ones where much of the emphasis was placed on are linguistic, strategic, and discourse. Socio-linguistic competence is often disregarded. When people have ideas to express, they are often too concerned about what words to use,

how to put those words together, and what strategies to apply to deliver their message effectively. They tend to neglect one essential component of the communication process – the receiver of that message.

Socio-linguistic competence refers to the ability to use the language appropriate to the current social contexts<sup>[1]</sup>. It has been an integral part of communicative competence in that it includes learning pragmatic and sociolinguistic knowledge about how to appropriately use the language linguistically and socially<sup>[2]</sup>. It is taking into consideration the personal and cultural background of the participants in the communication process. While the linguistic, strategic, and discourse competences allow people to communicate correctly, the socio-linguistic competence makes them communicate appropriately. Sometimes, breakdowns in communication happen not for lack of clarity of the message but by what could be perceived as impropriety in the language used by the transmitter of the message.

Socio-linguistic competence enables a person to refrain from using language in any way that may be perceived as discriminatory.

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Discriminatory language includes any comments that indicate bias against other people based on factors such as race, gender, marital status, age, national origin or disability [3].

Sexist language is a form of discriminatory language, a gender-linked language that carelessly excludes female gender and presumes that male gender is the standard or the norm. It also contains words and expressions that unfairly label women on the grounds of their gender alone. There are 3 forms of sexism – blatant sexism, covert sexism and subtle sexism. Sexist language is considered an example of subtle sexism.

Notwithstanding the steady growth of feminism and awareness on human rights, sexism continues to flourish in places where men and women coexist. There are volumes of literature and studies describing how women have become victims of both conscious and unconscious sexism. Even in language, women, regardless of their actual power or social status, are seemingly treated as subordinates to men. This unequal treatment of women in language are evident in the following examples of English usage that can be considered sexist: use of masculine nouns (e.g., *man*, *mankind*) and pronouns (e.g., *he*, *himself*) as generics; non-parallel treatment of men and women (e.g., *Mrs.* indicating a woman's marital status but *Mr.* does not); habitually putting males before females in word pairs (e.g., *husband and wife*, *he or she*); gender-linked titles and positions (e.g., *chairman*, *ombudsman*); *gender markers* (e.g., *female professor*, *lady dentist*); feminine nouns with attached suffixes (e.g., *authoress*, *comedienne*); gender-based labels (e.g., *sharp-tongued*, *gossipy*); and semantically positive male-gendered forms and their negative female-counterparts (e.g., *governor-governess*; *wizard-witch*).

In social institutions and organizations where men and women intermingle, sexist attitudes persist. Women continue to struggle for gender parity. This struggle is at its strongest in the workplace – both in the corporate world and in the academia.

In the workplace gender stereotypes are alive, well, and busy producing gender discrimination [4]. The existence of multiple forms of gender inequalities in the workplace make it sometimes an inhospitable place for women [5].

It may not be surprising to hear women in the corporate world struggle for recognition and equal opportunities to get better salaries and occupy higher

positions. But this happening in the academic workplace is a different story. Feminism and human rights are taught in universities and as such gender discrimination are presumed less likely to occur in those institutions. It is in the light of this assumption that this study was conceived. This study was conducted to investigate the occurrence of sexism in the academic workplace.

Language is considered as one of the most powerful means which sexism and gender discrimination are perpetuated and reproduced [6]. Thus, it was through the use of language that occurrence of sexism in the respondent university was investigated. Specifically, the study attempted to determine whether or not gender-biased words or expressions were used in official memorandums written by university officials and to identify in which of the above-named examples of English usage classified as sexist do they belong.

## Materials and Method

To determine whether or not sexist language were used in formal communications in the respondent university, 14 memorandums were analyzed. 10 of the said memorandums were written by male and 4 by female officials belonging to the administrative and management councils of the respondent university.

Each memorandum was carefully read and examined. Examples of gender-biased words or expressions used in the memorandums were identified and then evaluated against examples of English usage that are considered sexist.

The occurrence of each gender-biased words or expression in the memorandums was counted manually for frequency. Each of the examples of sexist language found was contextually analyzed to correctly identify in which examples of English usage classified as sexist do they belong. The exact places where the said words and expressions appeared in the memorandums were shown in the tables where they are presented for analysis.

## Results and Discussion

The 14 memorandums analyzed for this study were written by members of the administrative and management councils of the respondent university, 10 of the said writers were males and 4 females.

The disparity in the number of male members and that of their female counterparts in the administrative and management councils represent another gender-

related problem – unequal opportunities to occupy higher positions in the academe. There are multiple studies [7, 8] that specifically focused on what factors prevent women leaders from occupying higher academic and senior management positions in the academic workplace.

Table 1 reveals that out of the 10 memorandums written by male members of the councils, 7 contain varieties of sexist language. None of the memorandums written by their female counterparts contain sexist language.

**Table 1. Frequency of Sexist Language Occurrence Found in the Memorandums in Terms of Gender**

Gender	Gender-biased Terms
Female	0
Male	9

The male writers in the respondent universities are seemingly oblivious with their use of sexist language. Conversely, the absence of words that discriminate their male counterparts in the memorandums written by female writers indicates their sensitivity towards the use of gender-inclusive language.

What is difficult to determine is whether or not the male writers used sexist language on purpose or the words they used are the ones they just got accustomed to using. One semantic rule which we can see in operation in the English language is that of the male-as-norm [9]. The male officials may have used the words considered as sexist not because they intend to devalue their female counterparts but because their language training created in them the tendency to always use the masculine form by default.

**Table 2. Masculine Generic Used in the Memorandums**

Gender-biased Terms	Memorandums Where They Are Used
For the incoming college <b>freshmen</b> , the report is to be submitted on...	Memorandum No. 93, s.2017 Date: December 19, 2017
..... accounting of students with priorities given to the seniors down to <b>freshmen</b> to expedite application for graduation...	Memorandum No. 6, s.2013 Date: July 11, 2013
Listed below are the schedules of interview for incoming <b>freshmen</b> students...	Memorandum No. 5 s.2015 Date: March 10, 2015

Presented in Table 2 is the masculine generic used by the male writers in the memorandums they wrote.

The word with sexist connotations that was used in 3 memorandums is *freshmen*. In each of the said memorandums the word *freshmen* appeared once. The word is a generic masculine term used to refer to students of mixed genders.

The male writers may claim that discriminating their female counterparts was furthest from their minds when they used generic masculine nouns in the memorandums they wrote. But Moulton [10] argued that regardless of the author’s intention the generic *man* is not interpreted

neutrally. There are studies [11,12] that concluded that when the word *man* is used generically, people tend to think male, and tend not to think female.

The generic *he* has the tendency to evoke images of males relative to *he/she* and the plural *they*. Gastil [13] investigated the aforementioned phenomenon. The results have provided strong support for the hypothesis that the generic *he* evokes a disproportionate number of males images. In addition, it was revealed that while the plural *they* functions as a generic pronoun for both males and females, males may comprehend *he/she* in a manner similar to *he*.

**Table 3. Non-parallel Treatment of Men and Women**

Gender-biased Terms	Memorandum/s Where They Are Used
To: Mr. Florentino G. Pineda, Dept. Chair-MCPAD <b>Mrs.</b> Crisanta T. De Leon Department Chair, ELD <b>Gng.</b> Josephine C. Arceta Puno, DWF	Memorandum No. 33 s.2014 Date: Dec. 4, 2014

\* Gng. is the equivalent of Mrs. in the Filipino language

Table 3 shows that in one of the memorandums written by a male writer the female recipients of the written communication were addressed as *Mrs.* and its equivalent in the Filipino language – *Gng.*

The use of the courtesy titles *Mr.* before the full name or surname of a male and *Mrs.* for female is an example of the non-parallel treatment of men and women. It is considered gender-biased for using *Mr.* would indicate only the gender of the person being addressed while *Mrs.* indicates both gender and marital status.

The naming practices for women and men are often asymmetrical which create the impression that women merit less respect or less serious consideration than men do [14].

Gender inclusiveness would require that women be addressed with the specific professional titles they possess, (E.g., *Prof., Dr., Arch., Engr.*). In addition, women should also be asked in which way they prefer to be addressed – *Miss, Mrs.* or *Ms.* If a woman’s marital status or her preference is unknown, *Ms.* should be used.

To maintain the gender inclusiveness of correspondence, in case the reader’s gender is unknown, the use of a non-sexist salutation like *Dear Professor, Dear Policyholder,* and the like, is strongly recommended.

**Table 4. Forms That Habitually Place Male Before Female**

Gender-biased Terms	Memorandum/s Where They Are Used
... to discuss the results of <b>his/her</b> evaluation and the comments made by the students. This is a way of assisting the faculty to assert <b>himself/herself</b> to achieve a better performance.	Memorandum No. 94 s.2017 Date: Dec. 19, 2017

Table 4 reveals that in one of the memorandums the form *his/her* was used twice for non-gendered antecedents. The writer may have thought that it is one way of avoiding the usage of the default masculine form.. But even the form *his/her* is considered a gender-biased expression. Habitually putting male (*he/his/himself*) before female (*she/her/herself*) is an example of English usage considered as sexist.

The lack of *epicene* (gender-neutral) equivalent of *he* and *she* is single biggest problem of the English language. The prescribed alternative to clumsy constructions like *he or she* or *his/her* is *their*. [15].

Berry[16] argues that all that is needed are four letters– *THEY* – to take a stand against the prejudice embedded in the English language. The usage of the singular *they* has now become acceptable.

**Table 5. Gender-linked Titles and Work Positions**

Gender-biased Terms	Memorandum/s Where They Are Used
Dr. Alodia Zapata BTTE <b>Chairman</b> Mr. Rafael Dayao BEED Chairman	Memorandum No. 38 s.2014 Date: October 31, 2014
Estrella Fajardo <b>Chairman</b> , Department of English Francelaida F. Baluyot Puno, Departamento ng Araling Pilipino	Memorandum No. 09 s. 2017 Date: October 09, 2017

As shown in Table 5, two female department heads in the respondent university are addressed as *chairman* in two separate memorandums. Whether the writers of those separate memorandums used *chairman*

deliberately or it was an honest mistake is difficult to determine. But the said word is the most ubiquitous among job titles in universities. It is the most talked gender-biased expressions when it comes to academic

positions in universities. The following alternative forms are available – *chair* and *chairperson*.

Bovin [17] found out that there has been an increase of the gender-neutral forms since their introduction to English, and that they are primarily used when there is no explicit gender-referencing. Several of the previously gender-biased titles (that often end with *-man*) were said to have been supplemented by new, gender-neutral titles.

But notwithstanding the availability of the gender-neutral forms, the usage of gender-biased titles continue, most especially in the academe.

**Table 6. The Gender-biased expressions used in the Memorandums**

Gender-biased Expressions	Number of Occurrence
Freshmen	3
Chairman	2
Mrs./Gng	2
His/Her	1
Himself/Herself	1

Table 6 summarizes the gender-biased words and expressions used in official communications in the respondent university. A total of 5 namely *freshmen*, *chairman*, *Mrs.*, *his/her*, and *himself/herself* were found in 7 out of the 14 memorandums analyzed in this study.

The gender-linked terms *freshmen* and *chairman* appeared three times each and the title *Mrs./Gng*. 2 times. Each of the forms *his/her* and *himself/herself* was used once. These gender-biased words and expressions can be classified as examples of English usage considered as sexist, namely using masculine nouns as generic (*freshmen*), habitually putting male before female (*him/her* & *himself/herself*), using gender linked title/work position (*chairman*), and non-parallel treatment of men and women (*Mrs.*).

**Conclusion**

The study has found that official communications in the respondent university contain elements of sexism. Gender-biased words or expressions were used in 7 out of the 14 memorandums that were written by male members of the administrative and management councils.

There are 5 sexist terms that were used, namely *freshmen*, *Mrs.*, *his/her*, *himself/herself*, and *chairman*.

The examples of English usage considered as sexist where the said gender-biased words and expressions belong are using masculine nouns as generic, habitually putting male before female, habitually putting male before female, and using gender-linked titles or work positions.

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