

Strategies for Solving the Problems of Gender Exclusive

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Abstract

The idea of using one gender marker as a generic one has, over the year, been constituting problems for scholars who are particularly concerned with the issue of gender. This has been of interest and has been giving some ripples in the academic circles. Some have been going to the extreme, using feminist theories, beliefs and stand, to cause other problems. In particular, feminists have questioned social attitudes as well as practice that concerned gender. They have seen women's interest as being made subordinate to that of man; they have seen women's personality as totally distorted; women's capacity as underrated or even systematically denied. All the accusations were made against what they refer to as the domineering power of man. From the point of view of mutuality, this paper believes that one of the ways through which the problem of domineering can be solved is by being neutral as far as gender is concerned. It is the belief that when neither is exclusively nor inclusively treated, the balance will be met and thus the problem of being linguistically subordinated will be solved.

Keywords: gender, feminism, gender- exclusive, gender-neutral

Introduction

Of recent, gender has become a popular discourse that has gained ground tremendously. The term focuses on the division of the class of homo sapiens into the two popular sexes i.e. the male and the female. The division of human beings into two biological states, no doubt, is of considerable importance in our society. Poynton (1989) observes that apart from the direct biological differences like insemination pregnancy, lactation, what is regarded as appropriate behaviour for males and females differ from different societies. However, apart from the biological differences, there is the need to distinguish gender from the social perspectives. If gender is a social creation, then there is the need to find evidences from the linguistic point of view to corroborate this. This becomes imperative since language is the primary mean by which we can create all the categories that can appropriately organize our lives. Evidences can be found from the way parents treat newborn babies taking into consideration the sex differentiation; the way women's messages or ways of life are looked into; what usually preoccupies the minds of women when compared with the adventurous nature which men are concerned with and so forth (Hassan, 1986).

Looking at the series of differentiations of male/female order, Poynton (1989:4-5) has observed three important areas which she believes need to be of concern:

- (a) The institutionalized inequality/inferiority of women, where they have been denied the right to engage in certain activities... and their very selves denigrated or trivialized.
- (b) The institutionalizes channeling of human diversity along two pathways: the choice determined only by which set of genitalia one happens to be born with together with the consequent damages...; failure to fulfill the stereotyped expectation and to say nothing of the loss to society itself of diverse talent.
- (c) The institutionalized hostility between male and female which is most frequently realised in action by male against female....

All the issues touched above have been showing, mostly from the female perspectives, the ways the female gender has been facing the hostility from the other sex. Since much has been said about this discrimination, attempts are being made by scholars to redress the issue. One of the ways in which some of the existing problems can be solved is from the language point of view. This is relevant since the role that the use of language is playing in our society is tremendous, it is the vehicle and the mover of the society. Therefore, the way language is manipulated in the society tells a lot on the way such a society is understood.

What is gender exclusive language?

By gender exclusive language we mean the use of language such that it discriminates on the basis of gender. In this type of usage, words or phrases focus mainly on one of the two sexes thereby excluding the other. If we look at most literatures, one gender marker often predominates and this is being used generally to refer to the two sexes. In the Bible, this is prevalent as we can locate as many examples as possible. Here are some examples:

Blessed is the **man** who walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly (Psalm 1:1)

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the most High...

Because **he** has set his love upon me, therefore I will deliver **him** (Psalm 91)

Blessed is **he** who keeps the words of the prophecy (Revelation 22:7)

He who is unjust, let **him** be unjust; **he** who is filthy, let **him** be filthy still; **he** who is righteous, let **him** be righteous (Revelation 22:11)

In the legal or quasi-legal documents, the exclusion is clearly shown as well. *The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (1999) is a very good example of this.

Section 106 of the Constitution state that somebody who wants to be a member will be qualified if :

- a. **he** is a citizen of Nigeria;
- b. **he** has attained the age of thirty years;
- c. **he** has been educated up to at least School Certificate level or its equivalent;
- d. **he** is a member of a political party...

In the examples shown, we can see that all the highlighted words are male markers but which, in the context of usage, reference is for both sexes. This implies that the female gender is totally excluded. Even in normal discourse, this exclusive nature is very common and as such, it becomes a problem which has to be solved thereby bringing in some degrees of equality. The concept of gender equality is gaining ground these days to the extent that in all human endeavours, women want to be treated equally. They want to participate actively in politics, governance, economic matters, science and so forth such that they are no more seen behind in every scheme of things.

Gender and cultural relativity

As already highlighted, gender plays an important role in the overall implication of language use. Some scholars in the area of feminist linguistics have seen the issue of exclusion in gender as very discriminative. Litosselite (2006) observes that feminist linguistics aims at theorizing gender-related linguistic phenomena and language use, and to link these to what can be called gender equality or gender discrimination. The assumption behind this is that linguistic change is as important as social change.

The study of the feminist linguistics can be linked to Sapir-Whorf hypothesis of cultural relativity. This is because feminist linguistics also deals with socio-cultural issues. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis can be viewed from two angles: (a) that language determines thought (Linguistic Determinism) and (b) that differences in language equal differences in thought (Linguistic Relativity). With this hypothesis, one can infer that the language of each society, according to Lamidi (2009), determines the people's view of reality. This ultimately determines the people's behaviour in the society. By implication, the way a people views the world is shaped by the language being used in that society. With this, we can see that different cultures and languages view the world in different ways.

Some scholars like Pinker (1994), Chandler (1995) have criticized the aspect of this Worfian hypothesis which rigidly states that language determines thought. Pinker (1995) uses the example of an adult immigrant who can be said to be 'languageless'. The immigrant was able to converse as well as recount experiences after learning sign language. The premise of Pinker is that if language determines thought, this immigrant would not have been able to converse or recount experiences.

Whatever way we look at it, from the feminist linguistics' point, the generic inference given to the use of *man, he, himself* is offensive to the women folk. They see the use as discriminatory relative to the masculine gender. Joseph (2006) has suggested that sentences in which such usages are can be recast to become neutral in the spirit of political correctness. Also, the issue of cultural relativity as it relates to language and gender could also be looked into more critically such that gender-fair language and its cultural implications will be placed on good pedestal.

Generic male or female

Before going into the issue of gender neutral usage, studies have shown that the usage of the female pronouns as a reference point to either a male or a female person could be traced back to early nineteenth century until the latter part of the twentieth century. This, according to wikimedia.org, was

prescribed by manuals of styles and school textbooks. We can find as many examples as possible like the following:

The customer brought his purchase for the cashier for checkout.

In a supermarket, a customer can buy anything he needs.

A patient who is at risk for breast cancer should talk to her doctor about it.

There has been the use of “his” or “her” as generic pronouns but even in the nineteenth century, some grammarians felt that this usage was misguided with the argument that “he” and “him” do strongly imply masculinity, rather than unknown gender. Series of attempts to move away from this tradition of masculinity, or at times femininity, as the generic reference has been described by different supporters as gender neutral, gender free, gender inclusive or non-sexist and various moves and suggestions have been made in trying to be non-sided. Apart from the use of he or she, him or her, his or her, himself or herself and other use that can include both male and female; there has also been the use of singular *they*. Singular *they* is widely used in informal language but it is becoming more common in formal language. See Yusuf (2002), Yusuf and Olateju (2003) on this. Really the use of singular *they* had existed in English since the fifteenth century and it is commonly heard today. A sentence like *Any Nigerian can succeed in business if they try hard enough* should not be seen as a misnomer in the present circumstance. The *they* as used here has helped in avoiding being exclusive or inclusive.

The use of Gender neutral language

As already said earlier, gender exclusive language is the use of language where a gender is excluded or discriminated against. In an attempt to solve the problem of discrimination, it is logical and reasonable to be on the neutral side. Being gender neutral implies that in the use of language, discrimination or exclusion of any of the two sexes is done away with. In this paper therefore, series of examples of language use showing the normal gender exclusive pattern will be shown and the gender neutral alternative will be provided thus satisfying both sexes from being excluded or subordinated.

Example 1

If an insurance agent contacts a family after the unexpected death of the husband, one of the first questions he may hear is, “Where is his insurance policy?” The insurance man knows that when a father dies, the meaning of life insurance suddenly becomes crystal clear. No one, at that time, asks what a man returns are on his investment. The bottom line is that life insurance provides cash when a man and his family really need it. I tell the husband that the amount his loved ones receive depends on him. I also tell him that if he gives proper attention to this matter now, few financial problems will ensue after his death.

This is the normal way the gender exclusive expression will appear but so as to solve the problem, the expression can be recast thus:

If an insurance agent contacts a family after the unexpected death of a family member, one of the first questions he or she may hear is, “Where is the life insurance policy?” The agent knows that when a client dies, the meaning of life insurance becomes crystal clear. No one, at that time, asks what a person’s return is on an investment. The bottom line is that life insurance provides cash when clients and their families really need it. I tell the client that the amount his or her loved ones receive depends on him or her. I also tell the client that if he or she gives proper attention to this matter now, few financial problems will ensue after death.

Explanation

The paragraph has been revised and in the revised version, we note that the use of “insurance man” has created a problem since the use has presented the problem of assumed gender. An insurance agent or representative can be either male or female and that is why it is changed to “insurance agent” or “agent”. The pronoun “he” refers to “insurance man” and as such, it has been changed to “he or she” in reference to the new gender neutral antecedent “insurance agent.” Since purchasers of insurance policies may be wife, husband or an unmarried adult which may belong to either gender, the use of “husband” is changed to “a family member” which includes all the categories of gender.

“His life insurance policy”, with the use of pronoun “his” is an indication of gender exclusion. The pronoun was changed to article “the”: the life insurance policy” to eliminate gender exclusion.

Further in the paragraph, the word “client” substitutes “man”, “a family man” substitute “husband” and so on and so forth so as to be neutral. Attempt is made so as to ensure that a gender does not suffer the problem of exclusion

Pronouns and gender exclusion

Apart from popular words like “man”, “woman”; “boy”, “girl”; “wife”, “husband”; the use of pronouns plays a very vital role in gender exclusion as earlier shown in the biblical and the legal examples cited earlier. Gender exclusive pronouns are those that refer unnecessarily to only one gender, thereby leaving out the other gender. In the subsequent sections, examples of gender exclusive sentences will be given and solutions will be suggested in the revised sentences.

Example 2

*Even though a doctor is usually busy, **he** should endeavour to attend to **his** patients always.*

This is the original sentence and the inherent problem here as far as gender is concerned is the pronoun “he” has overlooked the fact that “a doctor” could belong to either of the male or female gender. As a result, the pronoun “he” has been generalized to exclude one out of the two sexes.

Suggested Solution

This sentence can be revised or recast so as to bring in the meaning that will not be gender-specific. This can be done by getting rid of the singular “doctor” as well as the pronoun “he” and “his” and by substituting them with their plural versions thus making the revised sentence to read thus:

*Even though **doctors** are usually busy, **they** should endeavour to attend to **their** patients always.*

The revised sentence has removed the gender exclusive nature of the sentence and has thus made it to be gender-neutral.

Example 3

*A good lawyer or a scientist that is properly trained will always use **his** analytical ability before reaching **his** conclusion.*

The problem of this sentence also is the fact that “a good lawyer or a scientist” could be either male or female and the use of gender exclusive pronoun has therefore shown bias.

Suggested solution

So as to remove the exclusion of a gender, the gender exclusive pronoun “his” has to be deleted such that the revised sentence will be the following:

A good lawyer or a scientist that is properly trained uses analytical ability before reaching a conclusion.

This sentence has been recast so as to remove what would have caused the exclusion of a gender.

Example 4

A careful student budgets her time.

In this sentence, the use of “her” has overlooked the fact that “a careful student” could be either male or female. Since no reference is made to any specific female student, the pronoun “her” excludes one gender unnecessarily. In order to solve the problem, there is the need to substitute a gender neutral first or second person pronoun for a third person gender exclusive pronoun. This means that the pronoun “her” will be substituted such that the sentence will read thus:

Suggested solution

As a careful student, you should budget your time.

The revised sentence sounds more intimate than the first one but the fact there is that no gender has been excluded here thus upholding the gender neutral idea.

Example 5

*The success of a nurse depends on whether **she** communicates effectively with **her** clients.*

The problem in this sentence is the usual one which is the use of pronoun “she” to represent all genders thereby overlooking the fact that a nurse could be either male or female. Since no reference is made to any specific nurse, the pronoun “she” has excluded one gender unnecessarily.

Suggested solution

One important method or strategy that can solve this problem is that the gender exclusive pronouns only can be done away with by allowing the two that will indicate the two genders to function in a sentence. If “he or she” can be substituted for “her”, and “his or her” can also be used to replace “her”, then the gender exclusion would have been taken care of. The revised sentence will now read thus:

*The success of a nurse depends on whether **he or she** communicates effectively with **his or her** clients.*

The revised version of this sentence has removed the gender exclusive interpretation which was earlier given to the sentence.

Example 6

Every law student should bring his book on Jurisprudence to the class tomorrow.

As usual, the problem in this sentence is the overlooking of both male and female students through the use of pronoun “his” as a generic one. With this, a gender had been excluded.

Suggested solution

In this type of sentence, the gender exclusion can be removed by totally done away with by the total omission of the pronoun that has caused the problem and substitute it with a definite article. The sentence will now read thus:

Every law student should bring the book on Jurisprudence to the class tomorrow.

The revised sentence has therefore become neutral as far as gender is concerned.

Other strategies

- a) Apart from the examples of sentences cited above, some other scholars have suggested some other ways of avoiding being gender exclusive. One of such is the singular use of *they* as earlier mentioned such that we can have a sentence like

*Any nurse can be successful if they can communicate well instead of saying
Any nurse can be successful if she can communicate well.*

- b) The use grammatical number that will show plural can also help to avoid being gender specific. Supposed we have a sentence like *A doctor cannot heal himself*. This is gender specific and has excluded one gender. However, it can be revised thus: *Doctors cannot heal themselves*.

- c) Second person pronoun can as well be used so as to achieve being neutral in term of gender. We can thus construct the above sentence thus:

If you are a doctor, you cannot heal yourself.

- d) First person pronoun can also be used to achieve our set goal of neutrality. Thus, we can have the following versions of the same sentence:

If I were a doctor, then I could not heal myself.

If one is a doctor, one cannot heal oneself.

One who is a doctor cannot heal oneself.

- e) Apart from the above examples sometimes a sentence can be reworded into the passive voice so as to maintain neutrality:

Bola made her point well (active).

Bola's point was well-made (passive).

All these are instances of ways through which one can be gender neutral instead of the use of gender exclusive language. There are other areas that we have not been able to explore in this study but we need to know that everyday, works are going on in this area and this will continue ad infinitum.

Conclusion

The use of language in the present social context has brought about series of connotations, implications as well as other language variables. The language of women has been said to reflect their conservatism, prestige, consciousness, insecurity, emotional expressivity and other things that can be linked with women. The language of men is treated as showing their toughness, competitiveness, independence, control, adventure and other masculine characteristics. However, over the years, a great deal of gender-specific terminology in English has been replaced by gender-neutral terms. For examples, we have expressions like “chairman” or “chairwoman” that had been replaced by “chairperson”; “waiter” or “waitress” that had been replaced by “server”. Although this replacement seems to have put some older people in the wrong way, many people seem to have fallen in line with the elimination of the gender-marking syndrome. The belief is that the device has helped to eliminate sex-role stereotyping.

No doubt, the ideology of gender has become visible, as a consequence of social change. Even though there is enormous growing resistance to overcome, the fact remains that there is the need to grow along with the societal reality and to carry others along; hence, the need to ensure that linguistic domination of any gender is eliminated or grossly reduced.

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