Importance of Gender-Sensitive Language and Some Guidelines for Business Writing

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Abstract

Gender sensitive language is a relatively new aspect of linguistic studies. This article will define gender sensitive language and illustrate its importance in communication, especially business writing. In addition, this article examines the reasons for gender sensitive language and gives some history of this issue gender. The article also represents linguistic approach towards gender and tries to explain gender categories in language.

Introduction

Current development of society emphasizes equal opportunities for each person. Most human societies have been patriarchal, giving male greater power than females. One key factor is that women are generally physically weaker than men and unable to fulfill certain tasks as well as men. Their duty was limited to domestic activities and women were thought to be suitable for activities such as: sewing, knitting, cooking, washing and looking after children and home. However, women tried hard to break this belief and started struggle for equal opportunities. While no society in the world has achieved total equality yet, so there are many organizations and special programs and projects designed to encourage women be active and to stimulate engagement in social, political, educational or any other activities. These processes are beneficial not only for women as it is a chance to broaden their viewpoint, but also for men to see some issues from different angles. Programs aiming to advance women's social activity are beneficial for society and for children as they give them ability to be brought up in a healthy society where everyone has an equal right to development and self-realization.

The aspiration towards the reality of unbiased approach has not started today. Many societies, especially in the West started striving hard for equal opportunity in the beginning of the 20th century. This struggle gained its strength in the 1960s-70s when the equal rights of each person was affirmed and it affected almost every aspect of society. Not only equal opportunities for education, voting, business and political advancement were open to people, especially to women who were regarded as the inferior than men, but international organization focused on human rights also raised issue of sufficient linguistic approach towards each representative of society. Due to that, knowledge and sophistication of gender sensitive language became of great importance. *"Words matter, and our language choices have consequences. If we believe that women and men deserve social equality, then we should think seriously about how to reflect that belief in our language use"* (Gender-Sensitive Language, 2010-2012).

I. The Distinction between Gender and Sex

Understanding distinction between gender and sex is very important as sometimes gender sensitivity in connection with women rights may be rendered as female opposition against male, in other words, gender sensitivity is the difference feminists see in the attitude towards the opposite sex. Gender studies give us clear differentiation between gender and sex. According to The Writing Center sex is defined as "biological make-up" or biological characteristics of an individual, however this is not the universal dividing unit of society as there are some individuals possessing biological characteristics of both sexes. Notwithstanding this, sex still remains to be one of the biggest elements of social distinction. As for gender it is rendered as *"a cross-cutting socio-cultural variable. Gender refers to social attrib-*

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utes that are learned or acquired during socialization as a member of a given community." (Christodoulou & Zobnina, 2009). Zobnina mentions that "gender" was first used to signify social rather than grammatical difference, at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Brighton, in the mid-1970s. Subject of gender analyses and projects oriented to gender equality is not the promotion of women over men but to investigate different abilities of women and men, their needs and characteristic differences in knowledge and skill and to create the environment where representatives of both sexes can have access and work in harmony without any trait of discrimination. However, it is not mistake when any gender oriented activity is perceived as protection and advancement of women's role in society. As mentioned above, women were almost always undervalued und suffered from some kind of discrimination, unfair treatment or treatment with a prejudice of a person. The most widespread discriminations are financial discrimination, when men are paid more in comparison to women because of the prejudice that women are less productive and reliable. Another one is so called glass ceiling, when women are denied top jobs, because of gender stereotype that women are family-dependent or unsuitable for the male-dominated jobs and professions. The worst form of discrimination is sexual harassment *"because it not only violates the individual's sense of dignity and right to earn a living, but also an assault on the person's sense of self-worth."* (University of Dehli, 2008). Awareness of sexist language and behavior as form of discrimination has grown in recent decades. Dominance of masculine words for general references or usage of gender dependent words in a careless way not only reflect unconscious assumption about gender roles, but also influence readers' way of thinking, their imagination, belief and perception.

Traditionally, English and those writing in English used masculine nouns when gender was unclear or the subject group contained representatives of both sexes. "All men are created equal" – this the well-known phrase from US Declaration of Independence where "men" refers to people in general. However, "man" in modern English writing is not perceived as the synonym of people any more. Readers imagine man when they read man in any written document. Women's wide involvement in social activities and their endeavor to achieve social equality made writers to rethink about the language and be more careful about the words they choose to express gender.

Gender sensitive language means the examination of the language and selection of forms which are unbiased and neutral. Some gender dependent terminology can be used, in case the subject is a certain individual and information given in the document is not intended to be generalized. That would not make readers question linguistic equality. Recent linguistic studies on the topic of gender and language emphasize four gender categories in a language. These are: grammatical gender, lexical gender, referential gender and social gender (Olivera, Sacristan, & Fernandez, 2003). In addition to this, Hellinger & Bussmann speak about false generics. Grammatical gender is a noun *"which controls agreement between the noun (the controller) and some (gender-variable) satellite elements (the target) which may be an article, adjective, pronoun, verb, numeral or preposition".* (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2001)

Lexical gender is explained to be certain words carrying gender dependent meaning: for example: mother and father, actor and actress, *"which may in turn relate to extra linguistic category of referential gender".* (Hell-

inger & Bussmann, 2001) Referential gender is the thing which identifies linguistic expression with non-linguistic reality. More precisely, some words having gender dependent of gender specific meaning are generalized and refer to female and male agents together. (Hellinger & Bussmann, 2001) For example father and son both have lexical-semantic specification as male while in an idiomatic expression "like father, like son" they refer to parents and children of both sexes. The most interesting is "false generics" or "generic masculine and male generics". Male generics this is terminology used for description of English language under this category. This category implies domination of the male words when a concept is generalized. For example: *"All men are equal" here "men" refers to people in general. This category most vividly shows inferiority of females' role and power that leads us to the last category - social gender. Social gender refers "to the socially imposed dichotomy of masculine and feminine roles and character traits"* (Kramarae, Treicher, & Russo, 1985).

As words matter and show our inference and attitude towards social roles and gender, some organizations and leaders have addressed gender specific language. They took different measures to solve this problem. In particular, UNESCO adopted a resolution dealing with this issue. (Unesco Publication Board , 2011). UN gave directives to its secretariat to follow global guidelines on gender-sensitive usage. (United Nations Secretariat, 1998). It should be mentioned that inaugural speech of Obama was careful selection of gender-sensitive language. He used "fellow citizens", "men and women" and other gender neutral forms. (The White House, 2013). Inter-Parliamentary Union despite the fact that it works for peace and co-operation among peoples and for the firm establishment for representative democracy, it pays great attention to gender sensitive issues, gender neutral language is one of them (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2011).

Let's see how gender sensitive language can be used and what the main guidelines are for English Language.

Pronouns

The most vivid words in English having gender-dependent meaning are pronouns "he, she, it". Scholars advise to use plural form both for nouns and pronouns if possible. In case usage of plural is impossible, pronouns should be used together "she/he" or "he/she". Sometimes the order of these options is disputable so they should be used interchangeably (Reutlingen University, 2012). Pronouns can be substituted by articles or "one" or by the nouns itself. Using of passive and switching from the third person to the second one are also solutions (Warren, 1986).

Generic words

Man and Mankind have masculine forms but their meaning refers to people or humanity in general. It was traditionally correct but modern English in order to avoid ambiguity and also express respect towards women uses people, individuals, humanity or humans instead (Wikipedia, 2015).

Job Titles

Gender neutral job titles do not specify gender. So the usage of fire fighter instead of fireman and police officer

instead of policeman is becoming more and more popular. There are some distinct female job titles for example actor/actress, stewardess/steward. In this case masculine forms are advised to use or totally new words are offered: for instance flight attendant (Wikipedia, 2015).

Gender neutral nouns

The only solution here is knowledge of substitutes. Here are some examples. (Hayek)

ladylike	Courteous, cultured
forefathers	Ancestors, forebears
Man-made	Artificial, manufactured
Brotherhood	Solidarity; human fellowship; human kinship
manpower	Human resources
Founding fathers	Founders

Personal titles

Hayek offers us relatively neutral solution for the personal titles. He advises usage of "Ms." with women as sometimes their marital status is vague or not known if not given special directives from the woman herself (Hayek).

Miss, Mrs.	Ms. (unless the woman herself prefers the courtesy title Mrs. or Miss). A woman's marital status is very often irrelevant to the matter in hand.
Mr. and Mrs. John Smith	Mr. and Mrs. Smith; or Jane and John Smith; or Mrs. Jane and Mr. John Smith
Mrs. Michael Austen	Ms. Patricia Austen
Dear Sir	Dear Sir or Madam; Dear Editor; Dear Service Representative; Dear Officer; To whom it may concern

Stereotyping Roles and Attributes

Stereotyping roles mean when certain jobs are presumed to be performed only by men or women, giving rise to gender biased terms. Hayek provides an example to illustrate stereotyping: John and Mary both have full-time jobs; he helps her with the housework. This sentence can be stated in other way which sounds more respectful and gender neutral. John and Mary both have full-time jobs; they share the housework.

Attributes means usage of certain words which underline stereotypic gendered attributes. For instance: women are caretakers, gentle and emotional, while men are achievers, strong and logical.

Gender sensitive language is not simply terminology and rules which should be carried by a gender savvy writer, it shows that a person or a company respects all employees, favors social equality and equal opportunity and helps avoid ambiguity. That is one way of achieving goals and sounds accurate and logical.

Doing business aims not only achieving success and building wealth but also requires respectful treatment of people, and regard for their needs and individuality. Such treatment implies communication first of all. Proper communication brings proper achievements. Communication can be oral or written but written one is the most important as it is not just a set of words but the reflection of your reasoning, attitudes and knowledge. It cannot be erased easily and the impression it gives to reader can damage or advance your business. Attention to of gender sensitivity in writing is one way to demonstrate relevance, erudition and culture.

II. Conclusion

Business writing is a tool which enables business authorities stay in touch with employees, customers and with people in general. Consideration of gender sensitivity in writing, using of non-discriminatory, inclusive forms makes employees and customers feel important and respected. That is not only a source of business prosperity and profit but it is also a way to build solid bridge between society and business as they are interdependent. Gender sensitivity in business English writing can boost devotion, dedication and feeling of equality, loyalty and respect in community. These are main features which enables business to build strong foundation of success and further development.

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