Gender controversy in modern English. Gender-sensitive words

Siladi Vasyl

PhD, associate professor of the Philology Department

Rakoczi Ferenc II Transcarpathian Hungarian University

Kossuth square, 6. 90202 Berehove Transcarpathia, Ukraine

E-mail: szilagyi.laszlo@kmf.org.ua

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9710-2286

Abstract. The article investigates the phenomenon of gender-sensitive language in modern English from linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives, focusing on its historical development, theoretical foundations, contemporary transformations, and pedagogical implications. The study aims to determine how gender-inclusive forms function in present-day English, how they are perceived by younger speakers, and what role education plays in their dissemination and normalization. The research combines theoretical analysis and empirical investigation. The theoretical component includes a critical review of linguistic and feminist scholarship on language and gender, androcentrism, discourse theory, and language reform. Special attention is given to recent academic publications of the last five years addressing inclusive language practices. The empirical component is based on a structured questionnaire administered to university students. Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to analyse awareness, frequency of use, contextual variation, and attitudinal responses to gender-sensitive language forms. The findings demonstrate that gender-sensitive language in English is no longer marginal but increasingly integrated into academic and professional discourse. The singular *they*, the honorific *Mx.*, and gender-neutral

professional titles (e.g., *firefighter*, *chairperson*) are recognized by the majority of respondents. While systematic usage remains context-dependent, attitudes toward inclusive language are predominantly positive. Awareness correlates with academic background and exposure to digital media. The results confirm that language reflects broader sociocultural transformations toward equality and inclusivity. Gender-sensitive language represents not merely lexical innovation but a structural shift in linguistic norms influenced by social justice movements, institutional policies, and generational change. Its pedagogical integration is essential for sustainable implementation. Further research is needed to explore long-term normative stabilization, cross-cultural comparisons, and the cognitive impact of inclusive linguistic forms.

Keywords: inclusive discourse, sociolinguistics, singular they, linguistic reform, language and identity, educational linguistics.

Гендерна полеміка в сучасній англійській мові. Гендерно-чутливі слова

Сіладі Василь Васильович

PhD, доцент, кафедра філології

Закарпатський угорський університет імені Ференца Ракоці ІІ,

площа Кошута, 6 90202 Берегове Закарпаття , Україна

E-mail: szilagyi.laszlo@kmf.org.ua

Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9710-2286

Анотація. У статті досліджується феномен гендерно-чутливої мови в сучасній англійській мові з лінгвістичної та соціолінгвістичної перспектив із акцентом на її історичному розвитку, теоретичних засадах, сучасних трансформаціях та педагогічних наслідках. Метою дослідження є визначення того, як гендерно-інклюзивні форми функціонують у сучасній англійській мові,

як вони сприймаються молодим поколінням мовців, а також яку роль відіграє освіта в їхньому поширенні та нормалізації.

Дослідження поєднує теоретичний аналіз та емпіричне розшукування. Теоретичний компонент включає критичний огляд лінгвістичних та феміністичних праць, присвячених питанням мови та гендеру, андроцентризму, теорії дискурсу та мовної реформи. Особлива увага приділяється нещодавнім академічним публікаціям за останні п'ять років, що стосуються практик інклюзивної мови. Емпіричний компонент ґрунтується на структурованому анкетуванні, проведеному серед студентів університетів. Для аналізу обізнаності, частоти вживання, контекстуальних варіацій та ставлення до форм гендерно-чутливої мови були використані кількісні та якісні методи.

Результати демонструють, що гендерно-чутлива мова в англійській мові більше не є маргінальною, а дедалі більше інтегрується в академічний та професійний дискурс. Займенник singular they (однина «вони»), почесне звертання Mx. та гендерно-нейтральні назви професій (наприклад, firefighter, chairperson) визнаються більшістю респондентів. Хоча систематичне вживання залишається залежним від контексту, ставлення до інклюзивної мови є переважно позитивним. Рівень обізнаності корелює з академічним підґрунтям та впливом цифрових медіа.

Результати підтверджують, що мова відображає ширші соціокультурні трансформації на шляху до рівності та інклюзивності. Гендерно-чутлива мова є не просто лексичною інновацією, а структурним зсувом мовних норм під впливом рухів за соціальну справедливість, інституційної політики та зміни поколінь. Її педагогічна інтеграція є необхідною для сталого впровадження. Подальші дослідження потрібні для вивчення довгострокової нормативної стабілізації, кроскультурних порівнянь та когнітивного впливу інклюзивних лінгвістичних форм.

Problem Statement

Language is not a neutral instrument of communication; it encodes social hierarchies, power relations, and cultural representations. For centuries, English grammatical conventions and lexical patterns reflected androcentric norms, where masculine forms functioned as the default representation of humanity. This linguistic asymmetry has been critically examined in feminist linguistics and sociolinguistics.

In recent decades, increasing attention has been paid to gender-sensitive language as part of broader efforts to promote equality and inclusivity. Contemporary debates focus on pronoun usage, professional titles, institutional language policies, and the symbolic function of linguistic visibility. However, despite growing public awareness, the degree of actual linguistic transformation and its pedagogical implications remain contested.

The controversy surrounding gender-inclusive forms reflects tensions between prescriptive tradition and descriptive change, between linguistic economy and social representation, and between grammatical conservatism and cultural evolution. Therefore, systematic academic analysis is required to clarify the linguistic, social, and educational dimensions of this phenomenon.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications

The relationship between language and gender has long been explored in linguistic scholarship. Early critical insights into androcentrism were articulated by R. Lakoff [1], who demonstrated how linguistic structures reflect gendered power relations. A. Bodine [2] examined prescriptive grammar and its role in reinforcing masculine generics. D. Cameron [3; 4] expanded feminist linguistic theory by analysing discourse regulation and "verbal hygiene." J. Butler [5] conceptualized gender as performative, emphasizing language as a site of identity construction.

Historical analyses of English gender shifts have been provided by A. Curzan [6], while broader diachronic perspectives are found in A. C. Baugh and T. Cable [7]. O. Jespersen [8] offered early observations on gendered linguistic asymmetries, though from a traditional perspective.

Recent sociolinguistic research further expands the theoretical framework of gender-sensitive language. J. Coates [13] emphasizes that conversational patterns and discourse strategies reflect socially constructed gender identities. P. Eckert and S. McConnell-Ginet [14] conceptualize gender as a social practice embedded in communities of practice, highlighting the dynamic interaction between linguistic forms and social positioning. L. Litosseliti [15] stresses the importance of methodological pluralism in gender and language studies, combining discourse analysis with sociocultural theory. J. Sunderland [16] explores how gender representations in educational and children's texts shape early linguistic socialization.

In addition, J. Holmes and M. Meyerhoff [17] underline the significance of discourse-based approaches to understanding gendered communication patterns. M. Talbot [18] critically analyses media discourse and its role in reinforcing or challenging gender stereotypes. S. Mills [12] provides an in-depth discussion of linguistic sexism and pragmatic asymmetries in contemporary English usage.

Recent scholarship increasingly addresses inclusive language in institutional and digital contexts. Contemporary studies emphasize the normalization of singular *they*, institutional guidelines, and technological mediation of inclusive writing tools. Fomenko [9] provides a comparative analysis of gender bias in Ukrainian and English, highlighting structural differences and sociocultural implications. Research in applied linguistics examines educational strategies for implementing inclusive discourse.

The issue of gender-sensitive language in modern English is actively examined by contemporary scholars, who consider it a multidimensional phenomenon at the intersection of linguistics, sociolinguistics, translation studies, and educational research.

The problem of political correctness in modern English through the prism of sociocultural transformations is analysed by V. Kukushkin [19], who emphasizes changes in the lexical system and normative orientations of speakers. The study examines mechanisms for replacing gender-marked units with neutral equivalents, as well as processes of institutional legitimation of new linguistic standards in public and academic discourse. The interconnection between language reform and shifts in social perceptions of equality and representation is interpreted as a natural consequence of broader cultural transformations.

Gender neutralization as a translation strategy in rendering military terminology in the Ukrainian–English context is examined by M. Moroz [20], with particular attention to cross-linguistic difficulties in conveying gender-marked forms. Special focus is placed on preserving semantic precision and social sensitivity in translation. Translation is thus conceptualized as a space where linguistic systems, professional discourse, and ideological attitudes toward gender representation intersect.

Gender aspects of linguistic constructions in English are investigated by B. Hulian et al. [21], who focus on syntactic and lexical models reflecting socially conditioned roles. The analysis encompasses both traditionally gender-marked forms and contemporary tendencies toward neutralization across different types of discourse. The interaction between grammatical means, cultural stereotypes, and discourse practices is identified as a key factor shaping linguistic representations of gender.

Modern English lexicography as a tool for modeling feminine identity is explored by L. Letiucha et al. [22], who analyse representational strategies in dictionaries. The research traces methods of presenting female nominations, transformations in definitions, and changes in usage examples. Lexicographic practice is interpreted as reflecting broader processes of rethinking gender roles within the linguistic worldview.

A lexical and semantic analysis of linguistic means representing female gender identity in contemporary English is conducted by O. Bahatska et al. [23], who consider

language as an instrument for constructing social subjectivity. The study outlines transformations in semantic fields associated with female nominations and their evolution under the influence of social change. The construction of gender subjectivity is linked to dynamic semantic processes within discourse.

The functioning of feminine forms in Ukrainian and English is compared by L. Komar et al. [24], who outline structural and sociolinguistic differences between the two linguistic systems. The research aims to determine the degree of normativity and productivity of gender-marked forms. The role of language policy and social demand in shaping gender-sensitive vocabulary is emphasized as decisive.

The influence of gender stereotypes on the formation of linguistic identity is examined by L. Makoviychuk [25], who conceptualizes language as a mechanism of socialization. The study analyses how cultural models are reflected in linguistic behavior and discourse practices. The formation of linguistic identity is interpreted as the result of interaction between individual experience and socially conditioned expectations.

The peculiarities of translating gender-marked elements in English-language fiction are analysed by Ye. Dolynskyi [26], who focuses on preserving stylistic and pragmatic nuances. Attention is given to difficulties in conveying gender connotations in cross-linguistic transformation. Contextual analysis is identified as a necessary condition for the adequate reproduction of gender semantics.

Gender-related challenges in modern English are investigated by R. Saurbaev et al. [27], who address public debates surrounding inclusive forms. The article examines social, normative, and communicative aspects of implementing gender-sensitive vocabulary. Tension between traditional grammatical norms and emerging social expectations is presented as a characteristic feature of contemporary linguistic development.

The formation of a gender-sensitive culture through language learning is analysed by S. Suciati et al. [28], who highlight the role of the educational environment

in transforming linguistic practices. The research emphasizes pedagogical strategies aimed at reinforcing inclusive communication models and fostering critical awareness of language stereotypes. Integrating gender issues into language education is interpreted as an effective mechanism for transforming social attitudes and communicative behavior.

Over the last five years, academic discussions have intensified around digital language tools, inclusive writing assistants, and policy frameworks in universities and corporations. Scholars analyse both linguistic adaptation and resistance, demonstrating that language reform is not purely structural but ideologically embedded.

Despite this growing body of literature, gaps remain in understanding generational perception, contextual variability of usage, and pedagogical implementation strategies.

Identification of Unresolved Aspects of the Problem

Although theoretical discussions of gender-sensitive language are extensive, several aspects remain insufficiently addressed:

1. The extent to which younger speakers internalize inclusive norms beyond formal contexts.

2. The relationship between awareness and consistent linguistic practice.

3. The pedagogical mechanisms that effectively promote inclusive communication.

4. The interaction between digital media exposure and linguistic change.

5. The long-term stabilization of innovative forms within grammatical systems.

This study contributes by combining theoretical synthesis with empirical data focusing on university students as agents of linguistic transformation.

Formulation of the Aim and Objectives of the Article

The aim of this article is to analyse gender-sensitive language in modern English as a linguistic and sociocultural phenomenon and to determine its contemporary usage patterns and pedagogical implications.

The objectives are:

1. To examine theoretical foundations of gender-sensitive language.
2. To analyse historical development of inclusive forms in English.
3. To assess students' awareness and attitudes toward inclusive language.
4. To evaluate contextual variation in usage.
5. To identify educational strategies for sustainable implementation

Main Material of the Research

1. Theoretical Foundations of Gender-Sensitive Language

Feminist linguistics challenged the assumption that masculine generics are neutral. Lakoff [1] argued that linguistic asymmetry reflects social inequality. Cameron [3] emphasized that language reform debates reveal ideological conflicts about authority and normativity. Butler's theory of performativity [5] suggests that repeated linguistic practices construct gendered identities.

Holmes [17] argues that gendered linguistic patterns should not be interpreted as biologically determined but rather as socially negotiated within specific discourse communities. Coates [13] similarly demonstrates that differences in communicative style are context-dependent and shaped by interactional norms. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet [14] reinforce this position by proposing that linguistic variation reflects participation in gendered social practices rather than fixed categories.

Mills [12] further develops the critique of linguistic sexism by analyzing pragmatic implications of lexical choice, while Talbot [18] connects gendered discourse to broader ideological structures embedded in media and institutional communication.

The masculine generic pronoun "he" historically functioned as a universal referent. Bodine [2] demonstrated that this convention was not inevitable but codified

by prescriptive grammarians. The critique of such forms initiated systematic reform efforts.

2. Historical Development in English

English differs from many Indo-European languages due to the absence of grammatical gender in nouns. Nevertheless, lexical and pronominal systems reflected gender hierarchy. Jespersen [8] observed gender distinctions in occupational terms. Curzan [6] documented historical shifts, including the re-emergence of singular *they*, which dates back to Middle English.

The modern revival of singular *they* represents not innovation but restandardization. Contemporary dictionaries and style guides increasingly recognize it as grammatically acceptable.

Professional titles have undergone transformation: *fireman → firefighter*, *chairman → chairperson*. These lexical reforms aim to eliminate gender marking where irrelevant.

3. Modern Trends and Sociocultural Dynamics

Gender-sensitive language reflects broader sociocultural shifts toward inclusivity. Digital platforms accelerate dissemination. Institutional policies, university guidelines, and corporate communication standards influence normalization.

However, controversy persists. Critics argue that inclusive reforms complicate grammar or represent ideological imposition. Supporters emphasize symbolic visibility and equality.

The singular *they* illustrates this tension. Empirical corpus studies demonstrate increasing frequency in academic and journalistic writing. Its acceptance indicates adaptive flexibility within English grammar.

4. Methodology of the Empirical Study

The empirical component involved a questionnaire administered to university students specializing in humanities and social sciences.

The questionnaire included:

- Awareness assessment (recognition of inclusive forms).

- Frequency of usage in formal and informal contexts.

- Attitudinal evaluation (Likert scale).

- Open-ended questions on perceived importance.

Quantitative data were statistically summarized; qualitative responses were thematically analysed.

5. Results

The majority of respondents recognized gender-neutral forms such as singular *they* and neutral professional titles. Approximately two-thirds reported occasional usage in academic writing. Usage frequency was higher in formal contexts than in informal speech.

Positive attitudes predominated. Many participants associated inclusive language with fairness, respect, and social justice. Awareness correlated with academic exposure and media consumption.

These findings confirm hypotheses regarding generational openness and contextual variability. Inclusive forms are perceived as legitimate but not yet fully habitual.

6. Pedagogical Implications

Educational institutions play a central role in normalizing inclusive discourse. Curriculum design should integrate:

- Critical discussion of language and power.

- Practice-oriented exercises.

- Awareness of historical linguistic development.

- Teacher training modules.

Sunderland [16] emphasizes that early exposure to gender-balanced linguistic models in educational materials significantly influences children's perception of social roles. Litosseliti [15] highlights the necessity of integrating critical discourse analysis into teacher training programs to foster awareness of implicit gender bias. Holmes and

Meyerhoff [17] argue that classroom discourse itself becomes a site where inclusive linguistic practices can be modeled and normalized.

Educators influence linguistic attitudes through modeling inclusive communication. Pedagogical innovation is necessary to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Conclusions

Gender-sensitive language in modern English reflects dynamic interaction between linguistic structure and sociocultural transformation. Historical analysis demonstrates that many inclusive forms are not radical innovations but recontextualized elements of earlier usage.

Empirical findings indicate that younger speakers demonstrate awareness and generally positive attitudes toward inclusive language, particularly in formal contexts. Nevertheless, consistent usage remains situational.

The integration of gender-sensitive language into educational practice is essential for long-term normative stabilization. Language reform should be approached not as prescriptive imposition but as reflective adaptation to evolving social values.

Future research should explore cross-linguistic comparisons, longitudinal studies of normative acceptance, and cognitive aspects of inclusive language processing.

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