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# Language and gender

## Unit 8

## 1. The topic of this unit:

The present unit discusses the interrelatedness of language and gender, from two different perspectives: the idea of gender equality in language, and the differences in language use between the gender groups.

## 2. Gender equality in language

The idea of gender equality in language has received a lot of attention in the past 50+ years in the English speaking world and an increasing amount of attention in other languages and countries.

The 1960s was a time of social change geared towards the recognition and equality of various minorities in the United States: Blacks, women, and others. The feminist movement raised awareness about the grave inequalities that existed regarding the language use in connection with women vs. men. These inequalities included male-oriented linguistic biases such as the following: the use of *he* as if it was a gender neutral pronoun (e.g. *If anyone wants to leave, he should leave*), the use of the word *man* in compounds as if it was gender neutral (e.g. *stone-age man*), usage that treated certain professions as if men were default in that profession (*doctor* vs. *lady doctor*; *judge* vs. *female judge*; *poet* vs. *poetess*; *actor* vs. *actress*) or the only ones (*postman*, *fireman*, *policeman*), treating other professions as if they were limited to women (*stewardess*, *nurse* etc.), and others. Other unequal treatment included the use of *Mr.* vs. *Miss* and *Mrs.* in titles, where the men's title does not reflect marital status, while the women's titles do. Some societal practices also carried gender bias, for instance hurricanes were officially named only after women until the end of the 20th century, apparently due to the belief that only women were volatile and emotional. Newspapers used to routinely refer to women by their first names in articles after the initial mention of their full names, regardless of their social status, while men were referred to with title + last name after the mention of their full names.

These biased and sexist practices have gradually changed since the 1960s. The use of *he* as a gender neutral pronoun is now considered to be blatantly sexist and, therefore, something to be avoided. Instead, the use of *he or she* or *s/he* is usual (*If anyone wants to leave, he or she can leave*, or *If anyone wants to leave, s/he can leave*). Some authors prefer using she as a gender neutral pronoun (as an apparent backlash), others use the singular-*they* (*If anyone wants to leave, they can leave*).

The introduction of many sex-neutral new pronouns was also proposed over the years, but none of them have stuck. Some of them are *tey, co, E, ne, thon, mon, heesh, ho, hesh, et, hir, na, per, xe,* and *po*.

Gender biased compounds of generic reference have been replaced by plural forms (*stone age people, prehistoric people, Neanderthals*), gender biased profession names by gender equal ones (*postman* by *mail carrier*, *fireman* by *fire-fighter*, *waiter* and *waitress* by *food server*,

*policeman* by *police officer*, *stewardess* by *flight attendant*). Some profession names became gender neutral (*he is a nurse, she is an actor*), others now have a range of variants (*chairman, chairwoman, chairperson,* or *chair* – as in *Joanna is now chair of English*).

The title *Ms*. (pronounced [mɪz]) was introduced as a parallel to *Mr*. in not reflecting marital status (and became a symbol of feminism to an extent that it also became the name of a liberal feminist magazine. Newspaper articles started to treat women equally to men in referring to them with title + last name, following the New York Times, which introduced the practice in 1978. Meteorological services now alternate using male and female names for hurricanes.

**Video task:**
Watch this talk, "Why gender inclusive language matters" on youtube.com in which Wim Chesson talks about how use of language can hurt others in who they are. Can you think of phrases in your first language that could similarly inadvertently hurt others?
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I2YNrEgKHZY

Question to think about:

1. Do you recognize any gender biased practices in your native language (in titles, gender marked compounds or profession names, pronoun usage, or other practices)? Discuss with your friends.
2. If your native language is Hungarian, consider the profession names that have male–female pairs such as *tanár – tanárnő* "teacher" – "female teacher"*, író – írónő* "writer" – "female writer"*, színész – színésznő* "actor" – "actress". What are your impressions of them? Do they really feel like the male/female counterparts of the same profession name, or does the unmarked form for males feel like a default form? Now consider profession names that do not form pairs such as *mosónő* "washer woman"*, óvónő* "female preschool teacher"*, védőnő* "female district nurse in childcare", *hóhér* "executioner"*, kórboncnok* "prosector"*, sofőr* "chauffer". Are they sexist in any way?

**Research task:**
Some languages, like Hungarian, do not mark gender in pronouns: there is only one 3rd person singular pronoun (*ő* "s/he" in Hungarian). This might create the impression that there is no gender bias in Hungarian at all. However, people tend to make assumptions about the gender of the person in question when they hear sentences like *ő orvos* "s/he is a doctor"*, ő mérnök* "s/he is an engineer"*, ő adminisztrátor* "s/he is a secretary", assuming in the first two cases that the referents are males, and in the third case that it is a female.
1. If your native language is Hungarian or another genderless language, make a list of sentences using profession names and adjectives (e.g. *ő szép* "s/he is beautiful", *ő izmos* "s/he is muscular") and test them on 10 native speakers of Hungarian / the language (an equal number of males

vs. females) and note their assumptions about the gender of the referent. What patterns do you recognize? Repeat the test with a different age group of speakers. Do they exhibit the same patterns?
2. Enter your sentences into Google Translate, asking it to translate them into a gender marking language like English, Russian, German, etc. How does Google Translate render the sentences? Do you recognize a pattern?
3. What can be done about sexist practices of Google Translate?
4. Consider the screenshot below (Figure 1), made during a Google Translate test for Hungarian in September 2019. Test Google Translate if it still gives the same English equivalents of the Hungarian sentences. Do you find any improvement?

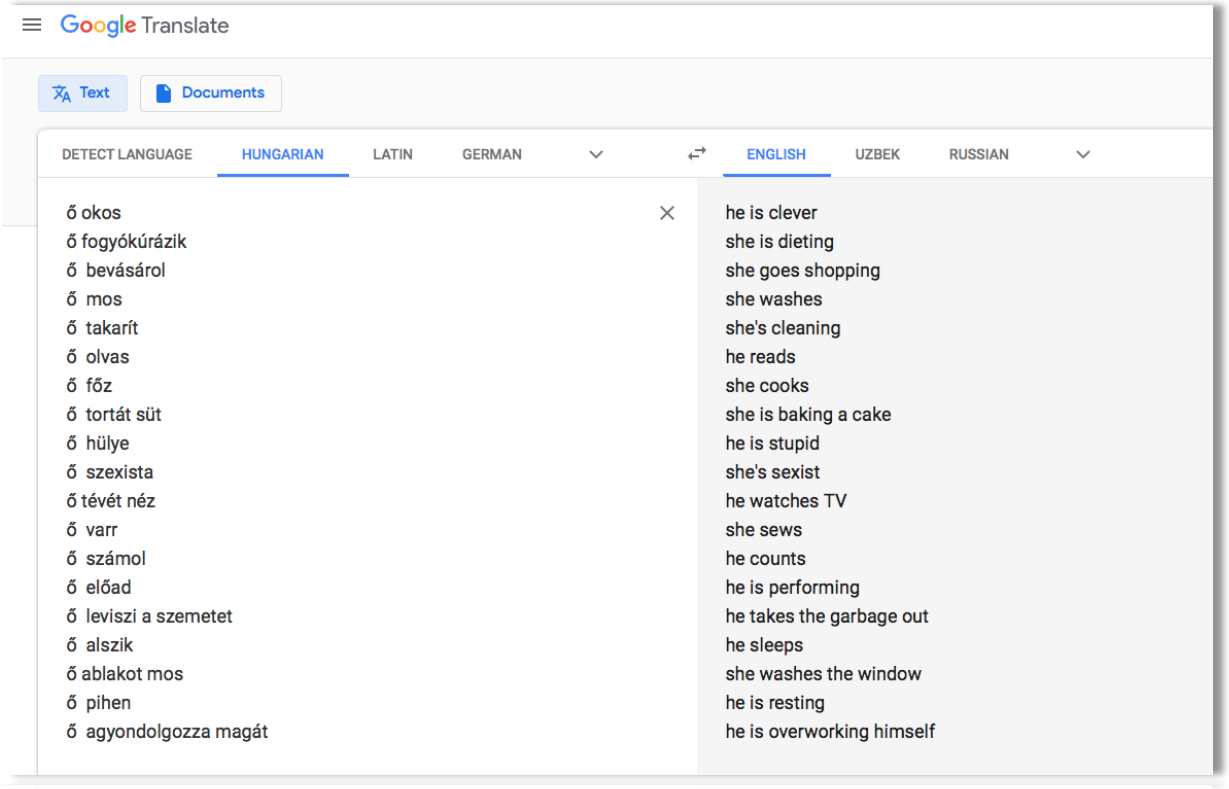


Figure 1. Google Translate screenshot, September 2019.

In the English speaking world non-sexist language use has become the norm in the past few decades. This includes everyday speakers using unbiased language in both speaking and writing. The Linguistic Society of America (LSA) first issues its guidelines of non-sexist usage in 1996, providing linguists with recommendations about it given that their professional output (books, dictionaries, etc.) likely has a lasting effect and influences their readers' own language use, and since, as language professionals, they should be careful to avoid biased language or linguistic stereotyping. You can find the original guidelines here: https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/lsa-guidelines-nonsexist-usage.

Question to think about:
Read the extended and updated guidelines of the LSA from 2016 here: https://www.linguisticsociety.org/resource/guidelines-inclusive-language

1. In what ways were the original guidelines changed in 2016?
2. Can you think of similar guidelines existing in your own country?
3. If you were to be part of a group of people compiling a similar set of guidelines to be used in academia in your own country, what points included in the LSA guidelines would you adopt, and what points would you consider as unnecessary to adopt?

## *3. Gender based differences in language use*

Gender is a very important social variable along which people's language use may differ. Trivial examples include the fact that men tend to swear more than women, and women know more color terms than men.

Sometimes gender based differences go much deeper than that. In some languages there are gender exclusive differences, that is, features in which women's and men's usage is different (rather than just a tendency in which one gender group does something more frequently or to a greater extent). Gender exclusive differences tend to occur in indigenous languages rather than in European languages. For instance, in Pirahã, a Native American language spoken in the Amazon jungle in Brazil, men use whistle speech and women humming speech when using the language (in addition to speaking it), and in several North American indigenous languages women and men use different allophones of the same phoneme.

European languages tend to have no gender exclusive differences, only gender preferential differences: features which both women and men use, but to a different extent (like the examples concerning swearing or color terms above, where the difference is in how much a gender group uses a feature compared to the other).

One of the first and most influential articles that caused many sociolinguists to look into female–male differences in the use of the English language was Robin Lakoff's paper "Language and women's place", published in the sociolinguistics journal *Language in Society* in 1973. In it Lakoff talked about characteristics of women's speech such as the use of tag-questions (to confirm validity), rising intonations (to express tentativeness), and certain adjectives in English (such as *lovely* or *divine*), and others. Even though subsequently almost all of these observations were proved to be wrong (in that they turned out to be associated with subordinated position, regardless of gender, rather than with gender per se), Lakoff's role in triggering interest in gender differences in language is unquestionable.

Question to think about:

1. Make a list of words in your native language that you believe are typically used more by males vs. by females.
2. If your native language is Hungarian, consider adjective such as *isteni* "divine", *cuki* "cute", *fasza* "bitching" – do they tend to be used more by one gender group than the other? Can you think of other words like this?

In the past half a century linguists (primarily sociolinguists and discourse analysts) have analyzed and found many differences in the language use of women vs. men in English, in features such as interrupting, topic accommodation (whether a person responds positively to a new topic in conversation introduced by their interlocutor), carrying out specific speech acts (such as explaining or apologizing), conversational styles, and many more.

The difference in conversational styles was studied by American linguist Deborah Tannen in several of her academic publications as well as her book written for the average reader titled *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation* (1990), which stayed on the *New York Times'* bestseller list for four years, making her probably the best known linguist among the general public. Tannen's main point is that while women use conversation to establish connections and negotiate relationships, men do so to maintain and negotiate status in hierarchical social order. Thus, the two gender groups approach conversation with different goals in mind, use it differently, and also frequently find themselves in conflicts resulting from conversations with members of the opposite gender.

**Research task:**
Compile a bibliography:
1. If your native language is not English, do a search (for instance, via Google Scholar) to see what has been written about female vs. male differences in language use in your language.
2. If your native language is English, do a Google Scholar search to see what trends there have been in the research into female vs. male differences in English in the last 10 years.

## *4. Variationist findings regarding gender*

Variationist sociolinguistic findings are uniform as to female vs. male differences in the use of standard vs. non-standard variants of sociolinguistic variables. They show that, if there is a difference between female and male speech within the same social group (by class, age, etc.), women are always more standard in their language use than men. Please note the first half of the previous sentence as well, "if there is a difference", since sometimes there is no difference. But if there is one, women are always found to be more standard than the men in the same social group.

Figures 2 and 3 below illustrate findings from two very different contexts. Figure 2 shows Wolfram's 1969 findings regarding the use of multiple negation in English among African-Americans in Detroit: in all social classes – upper middle, lower middle, upper working, and lower working class – women have a lower proportion of use of the non-standard feature. Figure 3, from a study on variation in Hungarian in Hungary (Kontra 2003), shows that in two age groups, 18-30 and over 61, Hungarian women accept the hypercorrect (=non-standard, *-ban/-ben*) form of the superessive case *-ba/-be* as correct to a lesser degree than the men in the same age group, and in the middle age group (31-60) they accept it equally as the men. (The subjects' task was to decide whether the hypercorrect sentence *János kérte a felvételét az új egyesületben* "John asked for admission into the new association" was correct or not. The standard Hungarian equivalent of this sentence is *János kérte a felvételét az új egyesületbe*.)

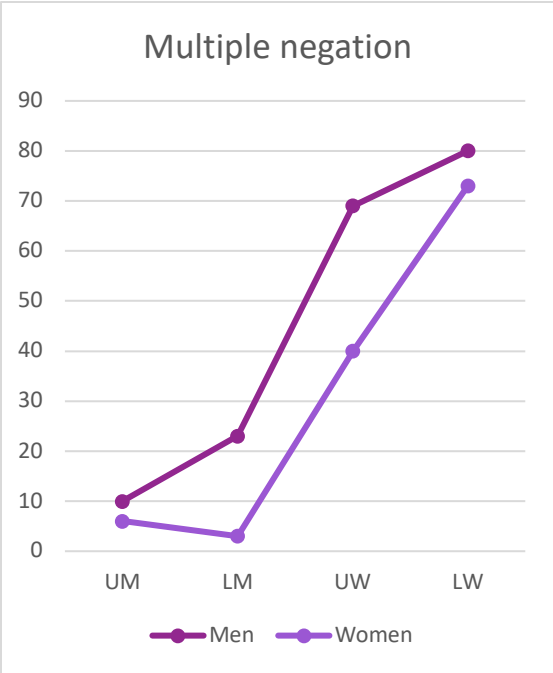



Figure 2. The use of multiple negation by men vs. women in Detroit (Wolfram 1969: 162).

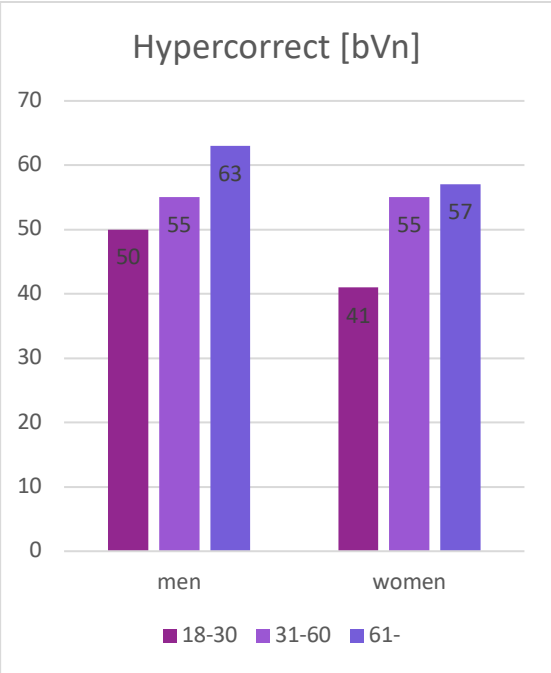



Figure 3. Accepting hypercorrect [bVn] as correct in Hungarian (Kontra 2003: 103).

## *5. Language change and gender*

Variationist sociolinguistics has also demonstrated that women also often behave differently from men in their language use in another very important way: in adopting innovative features of language and thereby leading language change.

### *5.1. Intonation: High Rising Terminals*

The spread of the rising intonation pattern in declarative sentences in English in the past decades is a good example (You can hear it in this Youtube video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tj4EIGje4dA). This phenomenon (called "high rising terminals" or HRT by linguists and popularly labeled "uptalk"), where statements end in a rising pitch as if they were yes/no-questions, has been shown to have appeared on the west coast of the United States in the 1980s primarily among young women, later spreading to other social groups such as men, other age groups, and other parts of the English speaking world.

The explanations as to why women are more standard than men (in the cases when there is a difference) and why they tend to spearhead language change point to complex social phenomena at work. They include reference to the fact that gender inequality in virtually in all societies in the world is the status quo, with women suffering from various forms of disadvantage socially (in pay, their opportunities to study and work, and in a myriad of social situations), and they try to compensate for it in being more standard than the men. In some social contexts – for instance, in working class contexts in English – women have been shown to have a greater stylistic range because of their work positions (typically in the service industry, dealing with middle class clients, while the men of their social class worked in socially homogeneous workplaces such as factories, steel mills, docks etc. and communicated only with other men of their class, using their vernacular).

## *5.2. Voice quality: Vocal fry*

Another feature of language used by young women in North America today is vocal fry, the use of low pitch with the way of speech production that linguists call creaky voice (for a brief characterization and demonstration by a speech therapist, see this video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4L7-9N1xQZA). It is widespread and widely noticed in the English speaking world, often evoking strong, mostly negative attitudes and associations.

**Video task:**
Watch the following short Youtube videos about vocal fry.
1. A short video regarding the perceptions of people in the business world:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1Ly5vJKwik
2. An openly negative characterization of the phenomenon by a self-appointed influencer:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EZbmISBPG2c

What seems to be the reason in your opinion for such negative attitudes to vocal fry?

In 2015, feminist author Naomi Wolf published an opinion piece in the British newspaper The Guardian discussing vocal fry and some possible reasons for the negative attitudes towards it (https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/24/vocal-fry-strong-female-voice).

## *6. Summary*

The interrelationship of language and gender is important in at least two ways: in talking *about* women and men, and also in the differences *in* women's vs. men's speech.

In the English speaking world non-gender-biased (non-sexist) language use has become the norm in the past half a century, manifested in pronoun use, names of professions, as well as many ways of reference to women and men.

Variationist sociolinguists and other linguists have found many ways in which women's and men's language use differs: in discourse practices, realization of speech acts, conversational styles, and use of sociolinguistically relevant characteristics of pronunciation and grammar.

Women are also often found to be leading in language change through adopting innovative features of language. From them, these features often spread to other social groups and become general, as the case has been with high rising terminals in English in recent decades.

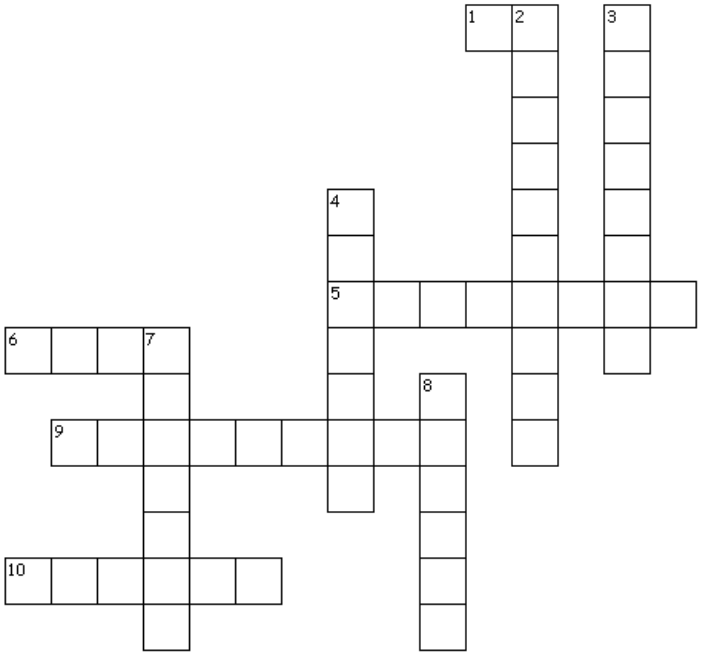
**Review questions:**

1. What are some examples of sexist language use in English?
2. In what ways has language use changed in the past few decades to avoid sexism in language?
3. What is the most consistent finding of variationist sociolinguists regarding differences of women's vs. men's language use?
4. What is the most consistent finding of variationist sociolinguists regarding the role of women in language change?

**Glossary of terms:**

**Gender stereotype**: an idea that portrays women and men in traditional roles regardless of whether these roles still exist or not.
**Sexist language use**: language use that treats women and men unequally in some respect.

A crossword puzzle for you:




Across
1. Women's title adopted instead of Mrs. and Miss.
5. If there is a difference between men's and women's speech in the same social group, women are more ... .
6. Feminist author who wrote about vocal fry in 2015 (Naomi).
9. Weather phenomenon that used to be always named after women.
10. The popular name for what linguists call "high rising terminals".

Down
2. Sexist name for the profession now known as "flight attendant".
3. Creaky voice phenomenon used by young women.
4. Sexist name for the profession now known as "mail carrier".
7. Sexist name for the profession now known as "fire fighter".
8. The social manifestation of sex.

**Further reading:**

Kontra, Miklós, ed. 2003. *Nyelv és társadalom a rendszerváltáskori Magyarországon* [Language and society in Hungary at the time of the change of regimes]. Budapest: Osiris.

Swann, Joan. 2000. Gender and language use. In: Mesthrie, Rajend, Joan Swann, Andrea Deumert, and William L. Leap. *Introducing sociolinguistics.* Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 216–247.

Tannen, Deborah. 1990. *You just don't understand: Women and men in conversation*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Wardhaugh, Ronald. 1998. Language and gender. In Wardhaugh, Ronald. *Introducing sociolinguistics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 309–324.