

Honors Thesis Proposal

Gender-Related Language Trends in Written News: Corpus-Based Investigations on the Correlation between Prescribed and Actual Usage

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Committee Information

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Jacob Rawlins, 4051 JFSB, 801-422-2144,

Dr. Rawlins is currently a tenured associate professor and coordinator of the editing and publishing program within the Department of Linguistics. Within the field of editing and publishing, one of his main research focuses is on linguistic prescriptivism, and he has coedited a book on the topic (*Language Prescription: Values, Ideologies and Identity*). In addition to his years as a professor, Dr. Rawlins also has experience working as an editor and production manager at different publishing entities. I have taken the senior capstone course with Dr. Rawlins and am currently working with him in the major's culminating core course.

Faculty Reader: Dr. Matt Baker, 4045 JFSB, 801-422-1253

Dr. Baker is current an assistant professor of linguistics withing the editing and publishing program at BYU. He has experience in writing and publishing both in professional and teaching capacities, and he has authored a number of studies on professional writing. I have worked with Dr. Baker in a core substantive editing and technical writing course for the editing program.

Honors Coordinator: Dr. Alan Manning; 4053 JFSB; 801-422-2974

Purpose

I will be researching the correlation between prescribed usage guidelines and actual usage trends for inclusive gender-related terms in online and print written news sources. Through this study, I aim to determine the extent to which users of the English language are adhering to authorities in topics, such as nonbiased gender-related language, that are more subject to rapid cultural change and that hold such influence over general readership. This project may also provide a foundation of knowledge of patterns in my field that can open research into further study, such as why such correlations do or do not exist and what effects such usage has on readers.

Project Importance

As shown in the creation of Brigham Young University's new Office of Belonging, there is a push among public and private institutions to promote equitable practices and create safe spaces for people of diverse racial, ethnic, religious, gender, sexual orientation, and other backgrounds. One of the most pervasive yet subtle ways acceptance and belonging is demonstrated is through language. Words have power, and whether their effect is consciously recognized, using unbiased and inclusive terms has been shown to lead to more openness and acceptance towards marginalized groups in attitude and action. However, formal language usage rules have a long tradition of strict prescriptivism, or efforts to define and control exact uses of grammatical forms and words. In the modern world of editing, this practice is being replaced by descriptivist values, which aim to describe language as it is used and allow for the natural constant change and evolution of the English language. Only once potentially consequential trends are identified can those in editing and publishing and other related fields figure out the extent to which such phenomena are influenced by official language sources (as opposed to social forces, etc., or vice versa) and hence try to create more fair and accurate portrayals of different terms and topics.

By focusing on the specific cases of gender-specific language representation in the public genre of written news media, I aim to build on long-held discussions about sexist language usage in the public realm. In this, I aim to also focus on the increasingly current focus on inclusive language for all gender identities by looking at nonbinary options alongside the established masculine and feminine. This will begin an investigation of how different genders have been portrayed in this type of published media in order to identify trends and how those trends bear on both publishing authorities and consumers and users of the English language. With this kind of evidence, editors and others in publishing and other authoritative positions can make more informed decisions about how and why to make certain language choices to foster more inclusive attitudes and outlooks in readers.

Project Overview

Through my courses in the editing and publishing program as well as related internships in the field, I have been exposed to many discussions, guidelines, and debates about how gender is presented in written English. In addition to related studies on gender representation in published works (for example, in English language learners' textbooks and children's literature) and historically sexist trends in authoritative language sources (for example, in English language dictionaries¹) that establish the existence of gender-related written language trends and investigate their effects on

¹ See Endo Orie, "Sexism in Japanese-language Dictionaries," *Japan Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1993): 395; Morton Benson, "A Note on the Elimination of Sexism in Dictionaries," *Women and Language* 13, no. 1 (1990): 51; Margit Tavits and Efren O. Perez, "Language Influences Mass Opinion Toward Gender and LGBT Equality," *PNAS* 16, no. 34 (August 2019): 16781-16786, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908156116>; Sabine Precher, "Women's Rights—Children's Games: Sexism in Learners' Dictionaries of English," *De Gruyter*, October 16, 2009. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1999.18.1.47>; and Yasemin Nicola Sakay, "Sexist Dictionaries: Trivial or Troublesome in Gender Equality," *Daily Sabah*, March 7, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/life/sexist-dictionaries-trivial-or-troublesome-in-gender-equality/news>.

readers, there are many discipline-specific style guides that are established gatekeepers of language that address gender-related topics and general style guides written specifically to help writers navigate inclusive language options.

In comparing these sources' common guidelines with the actual way writers and editors use gender-neutral and related terms, I hope to establish a clear image of how the guidelines have changed over the years, how actual usage has changed over the years, and how these two trends align or diverge. This data will help establish the type of power that official guidelines have on how important language areas are portrayed in print and consumed by the general public. With this knowledge, those in the field can be more aware of the editorial choices they make and the bigger effects those choices may have.

There are four main segments to my proposed research process. First, I will do the publishing field's equivalent of a literature review by gathering different historical and modern usage and style guides and recording what they say about (or, lacking entries, how they use) gender-based language options. After documenting that, I will use the publicly available News on the Web (NOW) online corpus (which goes back to 2010 and updates daily) to find counts and collocates for related types of masculine, feminine, and neutral/nonbinary gender terms. I will then focus on tabulating and finding connections between these data sets, analyzing the trends and articulating patterns and other relevant findings, connecting them to theoretical sociolinguistic explanations if possible and necessary. From there, I will have all I need to do a final write-up discussion of my research and results.

Timeline

October–Mid-November: Background research stage consisting of reviewing and documenting guidelines found in style manuals, style guides, and other relevant authorities.

Mid-November–December: Data collection stage consisting of running corpus searches, evaluating initial results, and adjusting search terms and bounds.

January: Tabulation and organization stage of bringing together the data from the first two parts of the research.

Mid-January–18 February: Analysis and writing stage consisting of articulating patterns and other findings and finishing writing the formal thesis document. By 18 February, the thesis draft will be completed and defense information form submitted.

18 February–11 March: Final stage of making final polishing touches to the completed manuscript and preparing for and completing a thesis defense.

Funding

While there are many free resources I will use for this project, some funds may be necessary to purchase or gain full access to some of the most prominent style guides for study. In this case, I will come back and request for specific funding amounts from the Honors Program.

Culminating Experience

I hope to have my work published so that other researchers in the field can use it as a basis for further study. This would be appropriate work for different linguistic and communications journals, including BYU's student journal of language, *Schwa*. My findings may also be appropriate to share at different conferences both in academic linguistics and professional publishing fields. For example, this kind of research would fit with the type of work discussed at the international Prescriptivism Conference that happens every few years and at which our university has been represented before.