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Mankind, Humans, Congressman: It's All Inclusive, Right Guys?

Abstract

This paper takes a look at research surrounding the use of gendered language and how it impacts occupations and careers from ages as young as grade school, and all the way into adulthood. The use of gender-fair language creates a more gender inclusive attitude towards traditionally male occupations. The masculine generic language used in our culture perpetuates gender stereotypes among children as young as six and continues on into adulthood. Changing the language to include both women and men allows for both to self-identify beyond the stereotypical occupations and see themselves as successful. This can be seen in how children view occupations as gendered, in whether or not women apply for job advertisements that use masculine generic language, and even in the job itself when the job relies on students evaluating a teacher's performance. Self-identification is important in regards to success, and language plays a role in this. Even gender-fair language is not fully inclusive as it reinforces the binary and causes erasure in marginalized groups such as the trans community or someone who identifies as nonbinary. Language is a powerful tool to uphold current power structures and make privileged bodies hyper visible.

Keywords: Gender, Masculine generic language, gender-fair language, binary, stereotypes, work, occupation, normative language.

Gendered language is an ever present cultural norm that reinforces gender roles and stereotypes within a society. As such, it is important to examine its impact on basic life events such as job opportunities and careers. Through rhetorical analysis the topic of gendered language will be explored by first, addressing what it is, and how the pervasiveness of such language reinforces gender discrimination, and heteronormativity. Next, reviewing the relevant literature on gendered language with its impact on: children, the job market, and leadership positions. Lastly, analyzing the literature using the terms and readings from Dr. Rossman's spring 2019 Gender and Communication class at Humboldt State University in order to give a wider scope to the significance of this issue. There has been a significant amount of research and study done on gendered language and the implications that it has for gender equality; however, this particular analysis aims to point out that such language has lasting impact and begins as young as five and continues into adulthood. This adds to the body of academic work already available by examining it through a feminist perspective of intersectionality using the terms and language appropriate for the communication discipline.

Defining Gendered Language

Many terms used prevalently within language are gendered, even when such a distinction is not necessary. This paper will be focusing on times when masculine language is used to describe populations consisting of both masculine and feminine under the guise of inclusion. Words like mankind, guys, human, congressman, fireman, policeman, etc., are all male generic language. Male generic language "purports to include both women and men yet literally refers only to men" (Wood, 2011, p. 102). Often, this type of language is so common that it goes unnoticed by the majority of people, including those that are excluded naturally through the male generic rhetoric. This language is embedded into our culture and every day speech, so it is important to understand its impact. Gendered language, such as male generic language, contributes to the patriarchal power structure present within surrounding society. This is because "language reflects sociocultural structures and perpetuates them" (Vainapel et al, 2015, p. 1513). Since gender is socially constructed, it can be considered one of the structures perpetuated through language. Many cultures uphold the patriarchal

structure, and therefore gender, through the words used while communicating. This is relevant to current discussion regarding gender equality because “language takes part in constructing and maintaining gender stereotypes and shapes power relations between women and men” (Vanapel et al, 2015, p. 1513). The power that language has to shape our culture and our world is not a new thought or concept, and there has been a large body of work dedicated to uncovering those connections, and more recently this has included the use of masculine and feminine terms. Throughout my research there seems to be an understanding that there are two types of languages, gendered and natural gender languages. “In gendered languages, masculine generics are more prominent than in natural gender languages” (Vainapel et al, 2015, p. 1514). This can be found in languages such as Hebrew, German, Swedish, Spanish, etc., as these often have a feminine and masculine form of the word (ex: Teacher in the German language becomes Lehrer=masculine, Lehrerin=feminine). English, however, is generally a much more gender neutral language as it allows the speaker to avoid gendered words and pronouns, yet these masculine generics are still commonly used. An accepted use of gendered language in English is to tag on articles to words in the form of prefixes or suffixes in order to make them feminine (ex: waiter=masculine waitress=feminine, bachelor=masculine bachelorette=feminine, hero=masculine heroine=feminine, and even the words male and female themselves). When the root of the word is masculine and its adaptation is feminine, it gives automatic preference and weight to the masculine form of the word. Many are recognizing that male generic language has unseen consequences, such as the ones discussed later in this writing, and as such has developed plans to be more inclusive by using “gender-fair terms [which is] referring to each person according to their gender, or using neutral gender terms” (Vainapel et al., 2015, p. 1514). An example of what is considered gender-fair language are when writers use the term he/she instead of referencing a group using masculine generic terms like guys or men, or using both the feminine and masculine form of a word in the same manner as opposed to only the masculine generic form like in the German word for teacher noted above. In languages that are considered gendered, such as Spanish or German, it can be difficult to adapt the rhetoric sufficiently in order to be inclusive or neutral, but with English, the language is more flexible and allows for sufficient

adaptations to create inclusive environments. When masculine generic language is used in place of neutral or gender-fair language it can erase entire groups of people, rendering them invisible and therefore powerless, reinforcing the power that language has to privilege one group over another.

Rhetoric of Visibility in Gender

The words that we choose to use have power because they perpetuate stereotypes, maintain gender power dynamics, and influence thoughts and behaviors. Men are privileged through language, this is problematic since it can lead to men being privileged culturally as well. When women are erased through language, all that we see is males occupying those spaces. This begins in early childhood as girls learn through masculine generic language where they are more visible and welcome in occupational spaces. In a study by Vervecken, Hannover, and Wolter (2013) they report that previous research says that “at about the age of six children eliminate their interest in occupations which are in conflict with their gender self-concept” (p. 208). This means that early elementary school aged children are limiting which professions to pursue or engage in based off of the masculine generic language used regarding the workplace. If these decisions are being made at such a young age, then we need to look at the culture surrounding them in order to encourage gender equality in the professional world, and that means looking at the language used to communicate. Researchers from the Departments of Psychology and Philosophy Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian (2017) did a study on language and perception in children and found that at five years old both genders felt that their own gender was the brilliant one, but at age six girls began to show signs that they did not identify their own gender as brilliant. Not only that, but the girls began to identify the activities that are for more intelligent people as not for them and avoid those activities, even if they were interested in it (Bian et al., 2017, p. 1). These findings imply that children at an early age consider intelligence to be a masculine trait and as such tailor their interests to reflect this belief. This is problematic because most of the solutions to gender inequality in the workplace have been targeted purely at adults without considering the patriarchal rhetorical impact early on. Discovering the correlation between gender inequality and language with children in elementary school has the potential to change the way that we approach solving gender

inequality as a society, as well as provide an alternative area of research that is worth expanding on. This particular research from Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian shows a direct relationship between career choice and belief surrounding gender stereotype. More research in this area would be helpful in identifying specific language used that perpetuates these types of limiting beliefs, especially since this belief from such a young age impacts future occupational choices.

The effects of language on occupations does not stop at a young age. Horvath and Sczesny (2016) from the University of Bern in Switzerland did a study on the use of masculine generic language in job advertisements. They found that the jobs advertised are often done so with masculine generic language, and that “the use of different linguistic forms in job advertisements has been shown to impact the self-perceived fit of applicants...” (p. 318). Meaning that if masculine language is used in a job advertisement, women are less likely to see themselves as desirable candidates and therefore, less likely to apply. Females are receiving the message that they do not belong as young as six and this information continues into adulthood. Horvath and Sczesny (2016) also found that using gender-fair language resulted in more females applying for the job. “Moreover, schoolchildren perceived women as more successful in typically male professions (e.g., physicist, pilot, firefighter) when the professions were presented with word pairs rather than masculine forms” (p. 318). Word pairs such as waiter and waitress make the inclusion of both male and female explicit and visible, which directly influences how the occupation is seen in regards to gender. This makes it clear that the type of language used regularly influences the perceptions of both children and adults, as such, it is clear that gender stereotypes are perpetuated through language. Using gender-fair language can expand individual perception beyond gender stereotypes and allow them to see themselves as occupying jobs that are typically occupied by others. Gender visibility in occupations is a powerful solution to the long standing gender inequality our society lives with. When the language used to describe an occupation is typically done in masculine form (i.e. fireman, congressman, fisherman), there should be no surprise when the people occupying those careers are representative of that language. Gendered stereotypes influence children’s perceptions

of which jobs are appropriate for them, which jobs adults apply for, and surprisingly, the job itself.

Unfortunately, gender stereotypes can play a role in the perception of job performance. Many job promotions or hirings are dependent on feedback received from peers or supervisors. Academics, for example, often rely on evaluations from students to determine whether lecturers can continue working at their college. What happens though when the students doing the evaluations have a gender bias? To find out, MacNeill, Driscoll, and Hunt (2015) used an online course to study gender bias in student's teacher evaluations. An online course served as a perfect place to study gender bias because the students interacted with their teachers virtually, allowing the expression of gender to be controlled in the study. In their study, they changed the name of the two teachers (one male and one female) to appear as the opposite sex and had students from different classes fill out teacher evaluations. They also had the same teachers appear as their original gender in some of the classes and be evaluated. When comparing the evaluations, they found that the same teacher as a male was given a much higher scores than as a female, especially in the category of compassion. The male teachers were rewarded for their compassion, receiving high marks, and the female teachers were expected to be compassionate receiving lower marks, even though it was the same instructor each time. Having such a large disparity evident from the evaluations in this study when the only difference was perceived gender, not only highlights how embedded gender stereotypes are within our culture, but also adds real life implications from them. Considering that student evaluations are often used to determine hirings and promotions "gender bias in these ratings constitutes an important form of inequality facing women in academia that is often unaccounted for in such decisions" (MacNeill et al., 2015 p. 292). The findings in this study are significant and must be considered in all situations where a job relies on evaluation and feedback to determine employment. Being that these stereotypes are perpetuated through language and affect so many aspects of the working world, relying on evaluations to determine an individual's future is less than ideal. Allowing gender bias in academia, even through evaluations, perpetuates the hierarchal systems of power and increases the power distance between men and women. "Western culture accords men an automatic

credibility or competence that it does not extend to women” (MacNeill et al., 2015, p. 293). An example of this would be the aspect of the study that points out the student’s evaluations in regards to the online teacher’s compassion. When males are rewarded for traits like compassion that females are expected to portray, it is impossible for the female instructor to receive as high of marks as their male counterparts regardless of the work that they put in. The result is that the credibility and competence acts as a sort of currency in the current hegemonic structures of our society, and this greatly privileges men over women. If using gender-fair language lessens the power distance between men and women, we have a responsibility to put greater import on its use. Research has shown repeatedly that gender-fair language helps lessen the degree of gender stereotypes when it comes to the working world, however, gender-fair language can create its own problems.

An Intersectional Analysis

Gender-fair language has the potential to lessen the gender equality gap. It “is easily applicable and does not create extra expenses for the organization concerned” (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016, p. 325). The research shows that gender-fair language helps, is accessible to everyone, and inexpensive; so why is it not promoted more? One possible reason is education. Many are either not aware of its benefits or unaware of its existence. Even if they are aware, they may not fully understand its impact. In a study done by Koeser and Sczesny (2014), they presented arguments that were either pro gender-fair language or pro masculine generic language to participants in order to examine the effect that persuasion would have on the participant’s viewpoint. They found that the argument for masculine generic language had little to no effect on the participants, but that the argument in favor of gender-fair language “increased use of gender-fair forms...” (Koeser and Sczesny, 2014, p. 555). This shows that education or persuasive arguments could make a difference in increasing gender-fair language, and motivate individuals to choose to change the way that they speak in order to lessen gender inequality over time. Many people put the responsibility for personal growth and learning on the individual, but if education could prevent gender bias and improve the quality of life for half of the population, it is worth the time and resources that it would take to make this change. It is important to note that while this could have overall

positive results in gender equality, gender-fair language is not a perfect solution. This type of communication reinforces the gender binary, resulting in ignoring or making invisible marginalized populations through normative language. "Normalization is a symbolically, discursively, psychically, psychologically, and materially violent form of social regulation and control" (Yep, 2003, p. 18). This type of social regulation and control goes largely ignored by the mainstream and dominant population because it is much easier to uphold the status quo, this is especially true for those that this type of normalization privileges. When even the language spoken does not acknowledge existence, there is a clear hierarchal system of power that is strengthened by the rhetoric used. While acknowledging that this power imbalance exists is an important step, breaking down this power structure will require new words to replace and dissolve the current patriarchal one. Creating new words and language to define social issues brings awareness to them, and helps begin the process of social change. This is necessary in the issue of gender equality because this area of academia is an ongoing field that is being added to regularly. Research regarding gender bias in communication points to language shaping the ability to self-identify as part of a group before belonging to it. This means that marginalized groups explicitly left out of the conversation are at a disadvantage when it comes to credibility and success. Looking at the study done by MacNeill, Driscoll, and Hunt regarding gender bias in online teaching, it is evident that this study only looked at the male/female stereotypes. What happens if the instructor is also a woman of color? Trans? Gender does play a large role concerning stereotypes, but there is a need to look beyond the binary when examining this rhetoric. As academics are continually identifying new terms that are fully inclusive to marginalized groups, there is a responsibility to adapt the language used surrounding these issues. With research pointing at self-identification as a key factor in the individual pursuit of occupations, this leaves many communities under represented. If jobs are stereotyped as typically male or female, then where does the trans community fit? Visibility in language can help with visibility in these spaces.

Conclusion

Current research supports that masculine generic language influences children from a young age to narrow their occupational interests in order to perform the gender stereotype assigned them. This in turn causes children to begin to play differently, choose interests that align with social expectations, and internalize notions of intelligence associated with each gender. These stereotypes are consistently reinforced through masculine generic language and impact who applies for which jobs and who keeps them. Masculine communication privileges the cis-gendered white male, making them the superior to the cis-gendered white female. Additionally, the language used often renders all others invisible and powerless- or at least less powerful. This can affect notions of self-identification among marginalized communities, resulting in less opportunity and less success. It is necessary for all languages, especially gendered languages, to create and normalize more inclusive discourse in order to eliminate gender inequality and invisibility.

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