Sociolinguistic Sexism in English Language Classroom (Biased Interpretations)

Mariami Akopian
University of Doha for Science and Technology, Qatar
Email: *akopianmariam291@gmail.com*

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ABSTRACT

The research experiment dwells upon to study the essence of various lexical and grammatical means constituting linguistic sexism in the English language classroom and suggests specific recommendations for teaching of nonsexist style of English. The research experiment consists of case studies and tests developed by the researcher with the purpose of investigating whether and/or how linguistic sexism is problematic in teaching of the English language among Georgian students of English at university. The discussion of the literature demonstrates that the use of generic and sexist forms creates masculine gender-bias which is perceived and understood as not referring to females or to unspecified gender referents.

The experiment concretizes on the existence of various lexical and grammatical means constituting linguistic sexism in the English language, and attempted to explore whether and/or how these variables are problematic in teaching of the English language referring to the administered tests and suggests specific recommendations for teaching of nonsexist style of English. Whether grammatical gender exists in language or not, gender will be communicated through different means of practices as long as it is an appropriate social category in a language community. In Georgian, in most of the pairs of gender-marked nouns, the feminine precedes the masculine. Therefore, the subjects of the experiment were given the tasks containing the Georgian sentences and texts with pairs of gender-marked nouns, gender-unspecified forms and several other gender focused forms to translate into English.

The implementations of gender-neutralization language teaching methods might serve as a remedy for gender unequal language treatment performed in the English language classroom. Here, the role of social and linguistic factors determines the success of applying non-sexist teaching methods.

Keywords: *linguistic gender interpretation; gender bias of referential order; generic pronouns; political correctness; lexical gender interpretation; sociolinguistic sexism*

Introduction

The research paper dwells upon the essence of various sociolinguistic and sociocultural aspects that constitute linguistic sexism in English language classroom. There is an existing controversy concerning the fact that each particular language has its own influence on its thought and the ways of behavior of its speakers. Hence, these influences are reflected on speakers' sociolinguistic behaviors

in a foreign/second language acquisition. The current paper reveals partial research findings (pre-test results) of a doctoral dissertation experiment in a scope of sociolinguistic aspects of sexism in English language and its problems of teaching English as a foreign/second language among Georgian university students. The objectives of the experiment aimed to investigate possible sources of sexist interpretations in English, to conduct case studies to test gender bias and develop gender neutral language performances among foreign/second language speakers of English. With the respect to conducted experiments that were about to translate gender-specific tasks from Georgian into English, the techniques of content analysis and discourse analysis were employed in order to respond to research hypotheses.

The research experiment employed a qualitative research approach to ensure the validity and reliability of research findings. The research methods applied are the followings: review and analysis of existing literature on the topic and case studies in two study groups. Hence, through quantitative research approach, the experiments are conducted in control and experimental groups with the purpose to measure gender variables (e.g. generic pronouns: *he/she*; lexical gender words*: businessman, flight attendant*, etc; referential order: *ladies and gentlemen*; and other gender preferential choices) during fifteen study weeks at university.

Gender is about cultural values and limitations concerning what roles and identities are regarded to be acceptable for women and men, acknowledging something as feminine or masculine. Studies of language and gender show that meanings are originated by language, emphasizing the fact that linguistic features are not explicitly related to specific attributes such as a person's sex; hence, there are various gender ideologies that shape up daily interactions and practices that display them in a sensible manner in social settings (Litosseliti, 2013).

Method

In pursuit of understanding linguistic sexism in English, a comprehensive systematic qualitative content analysis has been carried out followed by the studies held in control and experiential groups. Sexist language use in English language classroom has been studied under the following parameters: lexical gender, gender referential order, gender-preference specification and generic pronoun usage. This section is structured around the hypotheses that the research aimed to investigate providing sufficient details for its reliability and generation.

Research Hypothesis 1: Gender Bias through Generic Pronoun Use

Data Collection: The data has been collected from 60 participants of the study through completion of task 1 in pre-test in control and experimental groups. The primary focus of the task was to translate a passage from Georgian having genderless pronouns into English having generic pronouns to detect a gender bias.

Data Analysis: The results have been analyzed to explore gender bias and its outcomes in English language classroom. Specifically, the frequencies of generic pronoun usage to assess biased gender interpretations in foreign/second language outcomes.

Research Hypothesis 2: Lexical Gender Bias (Occupational Terms)

Data Collection: After completion of task 1 in pre-test paper, the same participants have been asked to translate another Georgian passage that had a focus of occupational terms into English. The data has been collected from the completion of task 2 from both control and experimental groups.

Data Analysis: The results have been analyzed to determine whether gender bias in first language influences the interpretations in foreign/second language.

Research Hypothesis 3: Politeness and/or Referential Order Forms

Data Collection: The third part of pre-test experiment was administered among the same 60 participants of the study. The students had to translate another Georgian passage with the focus of politeness and/or referential order forms into English.

Data Analysis: The findings have been collected from both groups to determine whether the tendency of gender bias of referential order forms exists among Georgian speakers of English.

Research Hypothesis 4: Gender-preference bias

Data Collection: And the final part of pre-test paper was task 4 the essence of which lies in the following: the students were given five sentences having some occupational terms/words with multiple choice options of gender preference elements, e.g. singular third person gender pronouns or lexical gender nouns.

Data Analysis: The results have been collected and compared between both control and experimental groups to determine whether students tend to interpret gender-preference occupation/profession words based on gender stereotypical assumptions concerning occupation/profession wordings they are aware of.

Calculation

As a part of the experiment, the researcher has developed three consecutive tests (pre-test, while-test and post-test) that were administered during one academic semester among 60 students at Georgian Aviation University in Tbilisi, Georgia. Consequently, 60 sophomore and junior students of English that were divided into two study groups (the experimental and control groups) have participated to test the hypotheses of the doctoral research experiment. The subjects of both groups were allocated with a considerable amount of time to read, think and translate the Georgian passages into English with a specific instruction. The pre-test that consisted of specific gender variables generated for the research study took place during English language lectures. The assessment comprised of four types of tasks: task 1 – grammar task (focus on gender pronouns), task 2 – lexical gender task (e.g. *businessman/woman*), task 3 – politeness or referential order task (e.g. *ladies and gentlemen*), and task 4 – multiple choice task (gender-preference specification). Since the Georgian language does not possess any grammatical gender pronoun or gender-specified terms, it was up to the subjects of the experiment to identify the gender of the referent applying all sematic clues used in the text. The research hypotheses and the research findings have been analyzed and described in next section.

Analysis of Research Results

Research Hypothesis 1: Gender Bias through Generic Pronoun Use

Research findings: Based on the results obtained through the translation of the first task in both experimental and control groups the following observations have been made. In experimental group, there were twenty-three masculine cases, four cases of feminine, and three frequencies of gender-unspecified *he/she* gender pronoun references. As for control group, there were twenty-two cases of masculine gender pronoun interpretations, three cases of feminine gender pronouns, and five instances of gender-unspecified *he/she* references. Hence, referring to the interpretations gained from both groups, it can be stated that there is a slight difference among experimental and control group results in the variety of generic pronoun use, instead, there is a strong masculine interpretation reference noticed in both groups that again highlights the existence of gender bias or sexism in the English language among Georgian learners of English. Overall, task 1 results support Hypothesis 1 by demonstrating an existing masculine gender bias among Georgian learners of English through the use of generic pronouns in their language outcomes. These findings emphasize the need of developing a syllabus with a focus of generic pronoun usage in English language course.

Research Hypothesis 2: Lexical Gender Bias (Occupational Terms)

Research findings: Referring to the results obtained through the analysis of translations of the second text in pre-test paper, the following conclusions can be drawn. In the experimental group, the word *tavmjdomare(თავმჯდომარე)* was translated as *chairman* by twenty-four students, and only six of them interpreted it as *chairperson*; the word *postalioni (ფოსტალიონი)* was translated as *postman* by all members of the group, there was no single case of *mail carrier*; as for the word *masts'avlebeli (მასწავლებელი)* it was translated with feminine gender interpretation (*teacher – she*) by twenty-five students, while only five related it to masculine gender (*teacher – he*); the word *ektani (ექთანი)* was related to feminine gender by all thirty students of the group – *nurse* is *she*; the words *mdzgholi (მძღოლი)* and *mekhandzre (მეხანძრე)* were interpreted with masculine gender reference (*he*) – *fireman and driver* by all thirty subjects of the experiment.

As for the control group, the following results have been observed: the word *tavmjdomare (თავმჯდომარე)* was translated as *chairman* by 26 students, and only 4 of them interpreted it as *chairperson*; the word *postalioni (ფოსტალიონი)* was translated as *postman* by all members of the group, there was no single case of *mail carrier*; as for the word *masts'avlebeli (მასწავლებელი)* it was translated with feminine gender interpretation (*teacher – she*) by twenty-four students, while only six subjects referred it to masculine gender (*teacher – he*); the word *ektani (ექთანი)* was related to feminine gender by all thirty students of the group – *nurse* is *she*; the words *mdzgholi (მძღოლი)* and *mekhandzre (მეხანძრე)* were interpreted with masculine gender reference (*he*) – *fireman and driver* by all thirty subjects of the experiment.

The only difference in task 2 results obtained in two groups was the following: *chairman* – 26 cases, *chairperson* – 4 cases in the experimental group, while *chairman* – 24 cases, *chairperson* – 6 cases in the control group. The word *teacher* was referred as *she* 24 times, and only 6 times as *he* in the experimental group and as *she* 25 times, and only 5 times as *he* in the control group. The rest of occupational words such as *fireman, nurse, driver,* and *postman* have been interpreted in almost the same way. It can be concluded that pre-test results of task 2 are almost identical in both experimental and control groups that supports the research hypothesis 2 which states that there is a lexical gender bias in occupational terms. Lastly, if no alternatives and explanations are provided to students, then there is a rising of gender bias and gender leaning towards stereotypical features in occupational terms. These biased interpretations become a part of learners' linguistic heritage when no specific semantic clues are mentioned.

Research Hypothesis 3: Politeness and/or Referential Order Forms

Research findings: As for the Task 3 which was about politeness and/or referential order forms (*ladies and gentlemen*), the students were given another text in Georgian to be translated into English The results of the third task – politeness and/or referential order forms have been counted and summarized in the tables below.

Table 1. Pre-test Results of Task 3 Experimental Group

Pre-test Results of Task 3 Experimental Group				
ცოლ-ქმარი *tsol-kmari*	და-ძმა *da-dzma*	გოგო-ბიჭები *gogo-bich'ebi*	სიდედრ-სიმამრი *sidedr-simamri*	დედ-მამა *ded-mama*
Wife and husband – 6	Sister and brother – 21	Girls and boys – 16	Mother-in-law and father-in-law – 12	Mother and father – 16
Husband and wife – 16	Brother and sister – 2	Boys and girls – 10	Father-in-law and mother-in-law – 13	Father and mother – 7
Couple – 8	Siblings – 7	Guys – 4	Parents-in-law – 5	Parents – 7

Table 2. Pre-test Results of Task 3 Control Group

Pre-test Results of Task 3 Control Group				
ცოლ-ქმარი *tsol-kmari*	და-ძმა *da-dzma*	გოგო-ბიჭები *gogo-bich'ebi*	სიდედრ-სიმამრი *sidedr-simamri*	დედ-მამა *ded-mama*
Wife and husband – 5	Sister and brother – 20	Girls and boys – 14	Mother-in-law and father-in-law – 14	Mother and father – 16
Husband and wife – 18	Brother and sister – 3	Boys and girls – 11	Father-in-law and mother-in-law – 12	Father and mother – 8
Couple – 7	Siblings – 7	Guys – 5	Parents-in-law – 4	Parents – 6

Table 3. Pre-test Overall Results of Politeness or Referential Order Forms

Pre-test Overall Results of Politeness or Referential Order Forms from Both Experimental and Control Groups		
	Experimental Group	**Control Group**
Feminine Referential Order	71 cases	69 cases
Masculine Referential Order	48 cases	52 cases
Neutral Form	31 cases	29 cases

According to the results gained through the translation of the third text, the following conclusions have been drawn. There were *five* focus words in the Georgian text to be translated into English. Here are the ones: ცოლ-ქმარი (*tsol-kmari),* და-ძმა (*da-dzma),* გოგო-ბიჭები (*gogo-bich'ebi),* სიდედრ-სიმამრი (*sidedr-simamri),* and დედ-მამა (*ded-mama).* Each pair of compound words was translated in different referential order: ცოლ-ქმარი (*tsol-kmari*) was translated as *wife and husband, husband and wife, couple*; და-ძმა (*da-dzma) - sister and brother, brother and sister,* siblings; გოგო-ბიჭები (*gogo-bich'ebi) - girls and boys, boys and girls, guys*; სიდედრ-სიმამრი (*sidedr-simamri) - mother-in-law and father-in-law, father-in-law and mother-in-law, parents-in-law*; დედ-მამა (*ded-mama) - mother and father, father and mother, parents*. It must be mentioned here that only few students in both groups preferred not to specify a gender reference choice, and instead, they used the words as *couple, siblings, guys, parents-in-law* or *parents*. Referring to the evidence mentioned in the tables, there is no major difference among the results of experimental and control groups. This data stands with the hypothesis 3 which states that there is a strong tendency of referring politeness and/or referential order forms either to feminine-masculine or masculine-feminine referential order with a minor frequency of applying gender unspecified terms when translating Georgian paternal/maternal genetic words in a different preferential order.

Research Hypothesis 4: Gender-preference bias

Research findings: Based on the results of task 4 obtained from the subjects of both experimental and control groups, the following conclusions must be claimed. Almost the same gender interpretation tendency was noticed to be applied for the reference of translation of random gender-preference sentences among experimental and control group students. The gender-preference sentences split in the following findings: first, the majority – 43 students refer *teacher* to a female gender, while only 9

students refer it to male gender; second, the majority of students prefer to use *flight attendant* instead of *steward* or *stewardess*: 42 cases of flight attendant, 14 cases of stewardess, and 4 cases of steward; third, almost all participants prefer to say *ladies and gentlemen* (51 cases) rather than *gentlemen and ladies* (9 cases); fourth, the reference for the word *driver* in this context seems to be split in several ways, however, still the majority (20 cases) prefer not to specify the gender of the referent by choosing an option of neutral *he/she*, 19 cases refer it to masculine gender, 17 cases show feminine reference and only 4 cases prefer to use gender-unspecified *their*; and finally, the occupation in the last sentence was not made explicit to the students, as a result, based on the semantic clue *working in the theatre* made the students decide whether they relate *work in the theatre* to the female or masculine gender: 25 students related it as work for females, 15 related it to males, however, the majority preferred to use gender-unspecified *his/her* option, and only 2 students preferred to use *their* as again gender-unspecified/neutral pronoun option.

Referring to the hypothesis 4 and the results obtained above, it can be generalized that the target students tend to interpret gender-preference occupation/profession words based on gender stereotypical assumptions concerning occupation/profession wordings they are aware of. As it was noticed, there was almost the same tendency of gender preference interpretation among both experimental and control groups. It must be stated that if no additional instructions are given to students like providing alternatives to generic interpretations, then stereotypical and sexist feature choices become more commonly used among the learners of English. It might be also mentioned here that culture might also affect a gender preference choice of occupation/profession terminology. In sum, the bias and stereotypical features are noticed to be used by the students of both experimental and control groups. The results gained in this task have been summarized in the tables below.

Table 4. Pre-test Results of Task 4 <u>Experimental Group</u>

Pre-test Results of Task 4 <u>Experimental Group</u>				
Q.1	Her – 22	His – 5	His/her – 2	Their – 1
Q. 2	Flight attendant - 20		Stewardess – 8	Steward – 2
Q. 3	Ladies and Gentlemen – 26		Gentlemen and Ladies – 4	
Q. 4	He – 10	She – 9	He/she – 10	Their – 1
Q. 5	Her – 12	Him – 7	Him/her – 10	Them – 1

Table 5. Pre-test Results of Task 4 Control Group

Pre-test Results of Task 4 Control Group			
Q.1	Her – 21	His – 4	His/her – 3	Their – 2
Q. 2	Flight attendant - 22		Stewardess – 6	Steward – 2
Q. 3	Ladies and Gentlemen – 25		Gentlemen and Ladies – 5	
Q. 4	He – 9	She – 8	He/she – 10	Their – 3
Q. 5	Her – 13	Him – 8	Him/her – 8	Them – 1

Table 6. Pre-test Overall Results of Multiple Choice of Gender-preference Task

Pre-test Overall Results of Multiple Choice of Gender-preference Task from Both Experimental and Control Groups			
Q.1	Her – 43	His – 9	His/her – 5	Their – 3
Q. 2	Flight attendant - 42		Stewardess – 14	Steward – 4
Q. 3	Ladies and Gentlemen – 51		Gentlemen and Ladies – 9	
Q. 4	He – 19	She – 17	He/she – 20	Their – 4
Q. 5	Her – 25	Him – 15	Him/her – 18	Them – 2

Conclusions

The research has shown that lexical and grammatical means constitute linguistic sexism in the English language, and in its turn analyzes whether and/or how they are problematic in English language based on the interviews and lesson observations. The discussion of the literature provides with the background knowledge of development of language and gender studies and attempts to describe the nature of sexist language and its practices.

To make reference to the findings of experiment, one must state that the role of a teacher-instruction plays a significant role in a development of gender free language environment. On top of that the more gender-unspecified terms are provided and practiced with the students during lessons, the more students tend to avoid leaning towards either masculine or feminine gender specification. To summarize, one must admit that the problem of linguistic sexism is one of the most common problems of teaching a language in a modern world. Hence, one must develop gender free language practices to teach and apply in language classroom.

A number of research analyses have shown that modeling is one of the most beneficial language practice tools, specifically in language acquisition phrase. Hence, in this research problem, modeling on language acquisition might be a considerably efficient method of implementing nonsexist language

practices. It is important to mention that the acquisition of gender neutral language practices might be theorized as a continuous process described by the application of both sexist and non-sexist language. One must state here that not only modeling a nonsexist language is enough, but also a discouragement of generic forms to be used must be mentioned and practiced. Hence, nonsexist language practices used by role models might lead students' awareness to accept gender free language forms.

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