Gender-neutrality in Written Discourse
A newspaper-based diachronic comparison study of gender-neutral vocabulary

By Yuchen Zeng
Abstract

This paper investigated the use of sexist language in English vocabulary by examining gender asymmetry and sexism in contemporary written discourse. The traditional sexist language often reinforces gender stereotypes and inequalities. In English, the masculine terms are considered the unmarked form (the norm) while the feminine terms are marked. This paper discussed different types of gender asymmetry in languages in relation to the markedness theory, and introduced the gender-inclusive alternatives to traditional sexist language, such as using gender-neutral pronoun, using gender-neutral title Ms., using gender-neutral working titles such as Police officer, Firefighter and Spokesman. In order to evaluate how gender-inclusive language is actually used in the US, this paper conducted a diachronic research of sexist and gender-neutral terms in news articles from the New York Times (NYT) from 1965 to 2015, uncovering a gradual increase in the use of gender-inclusive language over time. The findings are compared with two prior studies of sexist language in British written discourse. The results indicated that masculine pronouns and social titles continue to be prevalent in the NYT, along with the UK. However, the feminine title Ms. is more commonly used in the US as opposed to the UK. Additionally, certain gender-neutral working titles such as police officer and firefighter have become the most frequently used terms. In contrast, terms such as spokesman are still very unpopular in the UK and the US. This paper concluded with a future vision of the application of gender-neutral vocabulary in written discourse.

Keywords

Gender-neutral vocabulary, Diachronic, Gender Asymmetry, Sexist language, Gender-inclusive Language.
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1. Introduction

The United Nations declared that the world population reached 8 billion people on 15th November 2022. Girls and women represent half of this vast population, but the female population is consistently neglected in comparison to the male population. The female gender has traditionally been viewed as the “weaker” sex. It is partly due to the historical and ongoing gender discrimination and inequality which privilege men and marginalize women. Gender discrimination refers to specific acts of treating individuals or groups differently, while gender inequality is a structural and systematic issue that impacts various aspects of society. Gender inequity is a social phenomenon which exists across different cultural backgrounds and countries worldwide. Beyond discussions on education, economic resources and equal employment, gender inequality are hidden under the everyday spoken language.

Rosalie Maggio (2015) said that “Language both reflects and shapes society. Culture shapes language and then language shapes culture.” (p. 12). Language is a powerful tool for shaping the way gender is perceived in people's minds. Every aspect of language, including vocabulary, grammar, colloquialisms can be traced back to its historical roots. Linguists have conducted a great amount of research to examine the linguistic behavior of men and women, the linguistic phenomena related to gender from different perspectives, the difference of how each gender chooses to use the language and being described in the language. Lakoff (1973) identified two primary forms of gender discrimination in language: 1. the way women were taught to use language, and 2. the way women have been treated in the language. The inherited language from patriarchal societies reveals numerous visible and invisible gender asymmetries (the unequal treatment of genders in languages) in the inherited language from the patriarchal society, reflecting the historical inequality between men and women. For example, gendered words, terms, and expressions that are associated with men may be considered more powerful while those associated with women may be considered weaker. Feminine nouns often require extra marks while the masculine nouns are considered as “the norm” or “default”. With the rise of feminism in the 20th century and increased research on language and gender, there is a growing call for using more gender-inclusive (gender-neutral) language. Gender-inclusive language movement advocates for the use of gender-neutral language that does not perpetuate gender-biases such as using gender-neutral
pronouns, use they instead of he or she, and use gender-neutral titles such as firefighter, police officer instead of fireman and policeman.

This paper will discuss gender asymmetries in language, exploring sexist language in English vocabulary (pronouns and terms) in relation to Markedness theory. This paper will provide a brief introduction to gender-inclusive language and conduct a diachronic study to assess the application of gender-neutral vocabulary in American written discourse over 5 decades, with a focus on The New York Times (NYT). The results will be compared to findings from two prior studies on the usage of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary in British written discourse, discussing similarities and differentiates.

The research questions are:

1. How has the usage of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary changed in The New York Times articles from 1965 to 2015?
2. What are the similarities and differences in the usage of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary between the US and UK written discourse?

2. Language and Gender

Sczesny, Formanowicz, and Moser (2016) pointed out that gender asymmetries are present in most languages in the world, the only difference is that they may be more or less conspicuous depending on the structure of the language. Languages can be distinguished into three types based on their grammatical gender: genderless, natural gender and gendered language (Sczesny et al., 2016). Genderless languages, like Finnish, do not have gendered pronouns or gendered nouns (Gygax et al., 2019). English is an example of a natural gender language which has three personal pronouns, he/she/it, and non-human nouns are genderless. Gendered languages, such as French and German, not only contain three pronouns but also assign a grammatical gender to objects. Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) analyzed 30 languages (including genderless, natural gender and gendered languages) and their research proved that linguistic gender inequality in language is universal and ubiquitous. In many languages, masculine words are considered the norm while feminine words are subordinate. This reflects the broader societal issue of gender inequality, where men are seen as the default and women are often excluded or marginalized.
2.1 Gender pronouns and false generics

One of the most fundamental and universal circumstances of gender asymmetry is the use of false generics (Sczesny et al., 2016). False generics refer to the usage of a single gender phrase to generically represent both genders (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). The following table listed the third person pronouns in English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nominative</th>
<th>Accusative</th>
<th>Possessive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>He</td>
<td>Him</td>
<td>His</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminine</td>
<td>She</td>
<td>Her</td>
<td>Her/Hers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plural</td>
<td>they</td>
<td>Them</td>
<td>Their/their</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In English, the male gender has been considered the default gender, therefore, the use of masculine pronouns such as he and him has been regarded as standard when referring to an unknown or hypothetical gender, using the feminine pronoun will be considered incorrect. The gender bias is reinforced through the use of language, where the masculine form and pronoun is often used to refer to all people, regardless of gender. In English, the masculine pronoun he can be applied when the gender is unknown or irrelevant. The feminine pronouns apply only to females, while the masculine pronouns can address males, unknown gender, and a group of mixed genders. The use of false generics in English extends to a variety of idiomatic expressions (Hellinger & Bußmann, 2015). Here are a few instances of male pronouns being used in English idioms.

1. Use man to refer human

   *Every man for himself.*
   
   *A man is known by his friends*

2. Use masculine pronoun for hypothetical gender

   *Everything comes to him who waits.*
   
   *To each his own*
   
   *A person is known by the company he keeps.*

The word Human represents the collective identity of both male and female, however, only the masculine plural pronoun men is the synonym for human and can be used to describe all genders. The phenomenon of using the masculine form to represent all people is similar to the traditional gender hierarchy in society, where male perceived as the dominant group and the norm. This patriarchal culture has historically marginalized and excluded women from public life. The male perspective, male experiences, and the male
social hierarchy may be reflected and reproduced in linguistic structures. Caroline Criado Perez (2019) stated that defaulting to the masculine perspective contributes to a broader societal and cultural problem in which the experiences and perspectives of men are seen as universal, while those of women are viewed as specialized or niche. The experiences and perspectives of women are not given equal weight or respect, and the experiences of men are seen as the default or norm.

2.2 Markedness theory and sexist language
Markedness theory is a linguistic concept that involves distinguishing between “marked” and “unmarked” components in language (Battistella, 1996). “Unmarked” components refer to linguistic components whose meaning is general and widely used, while “marked” components refer to linguistic components whose meaning is specific and relatively less common (Battistella, 1996). Certain linguistic expressions are regarded as the standard or unmarked form, while others are considered marked or deviant from the norm. In the English language, the most common past tense form is adding \(-d\) or \(-ed\) to its present tense verb, such as *love* and *loved*. However, certain verbs have irregular past tense, such as *write* and *wrote*, in this case, those irregular past tense verbs are deviant from the norm, which can be seen as “marked”. These marked forms make up a very small percentage of the English vocabulary. According to markedness theory, these marked words are not selected at random but rather as a result of diverse socialization and cultural influences that cause deviations from the norm.

The phenomenon of linguistic marking is related to social existence, and the opposition between marked and unmarked linguistic units reflects the human categorization of world reality. Markedness theory suggests that certain forms or structures associated with one gender are “marked” or distinctive than those associated with the other gender. This idea of male as the norm and female as “the weaker sex” or “the second sex / the extra human” implies that femininity is associated with weakness in languages which contribute to the marginalization of women in society. Hence, it is common in language to treat masculine lexical categories as superlative or unmarked, and feminine lexical categories as deviant, extra and “marked”. In English, almost all words used to represent both genders and almost all words denoting masculinity are unmarked (nominal gender) while the feminine words are marked (Battistella, 1996).

Gender norms and expectations have influenced forms of address such as *Mr./Mrs./Miss* and working titles. In traditional English language usage, women are marked by their
marital status as *Miss* and *Mrs*. while men are addressed as *Mr*. The marriage mark represents that traditional society considers marriage to be more important for women than men, hence married and unmarried women need additional marks. Occupation titles in English are marked by both grammatical gender (gender suffixes) and social gender, and the feminine forms often carry more negative connotations in comparison with the masculine forms.

### 2.2.1 Feminine suffixes: the extra mark

Both natural gender language and gendered language mark feminine words and phrases. These marked lexical terms are associated with specific gender roles and social expectations, and nouns with feminine suffixes can imply smallness and lower status. The idea that feminine roles or identities are subordinate and inferior to their masculine equivalents is reinforced by the association of femininity and smallness or insignificance, perpetuating gender bias in society. Certain feminine working titles/words in English are derived from corresponding masculine titles, supplemented by gender suffixes; there are four feminine suffixes in English vocabulary: *-ess*, *-ette*, *-enne*, and *trix*.

**-ess:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Host</th>
<th>Steward</th>
<th>Prince</th>
<th>Duke</th>
<th>Actor</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Hostess</td>
<td>Stewardess</td>
<td>Princess</td>
<td>Duchess</td>
<td>Actress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**-ette:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Usher</th>
<th>Bachelor</th>
<th>Farmer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Usherette</td>
<td>Bacheloret</td>
<td>Farmerette</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**-enne:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Comedian</th>
<th>Tragedian</th>
<th>Equestrian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Comedienne</td>
<td>Tragedienne</td>
<td>Equestrienne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**-trix:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Aviator</th>
<th><em>Executor</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Aviatrix</td>
<td>Executrix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Other than these feminine suffixes, English often uses -man and -woman to mark different occupations, and the masculine forms are more widely accepted by society. If a certain occupation lacks grammatical gender, then it will be assigned a social gender according to social gender expectations.

2.2.2 “Man” and “Woman”
In the English language, working titles are strongly linked to gender, suffixes -man or -woman marked the gender of the terms, such as policeman and policewoman. In most cases, the masculine form is commonly used while the feminine form is rarely used. This is partly because the suffix –man in English not only means adult male, but also used to refer to a human individual. As a result, many working titles default to ending with –man (which can be seen as an example of male as norm). The working titles that end with –woman are extra marked. There are some words that denote professions and identities such as president and lawyer are not explicitly marked for gender, but are generally considered to refer to men. At the same time, there are some occupations that are by default associated with females such as maid and nurse. Each occupational term contains a social gender. Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) indicated that social gender is concerned with the stereotypical expectations of which social roles are considered appropriate for each gender. Certain working titles deviate from the mainstream (traditional assumptions) require formal “gender marks”. In contemporary society, it is a common perception that high status occupations which require specific skills and a high level of education are often attributed to males, if a woman does the same job, her job title will be marked with women / lady / female. In contrast, jobs associated with lower social status are more often associated with females, and male practitioners will be marked with man/male, for example, male nurse. The phenomenon of certain working titles being traditionally and inherently associated with a specific gender is due to the long history of male dominance in society. Here are some following examples of gendered working titles in English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Chairman</th>
<th>Businessman</th>
<th>Policeman</th>
<th>Salesman</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>Chairwoman</td>
<td>Businesswoman</td>
<td>Policewoman</td>
<td>Saleswoman</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Mark as Female or Woman
The issue of gender working titles is a common dilemma across languages. Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) indicated that given the majority of general personal nouns can be assumed to have a male bias, hence language always holds the principle of “male as norm” whether it had grammatical gender or not.

3. Gender-inclusive language

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests that language shapes people’ thought process, and the thought process shapes reality – people’ perspectives on the world differ depending on the languages they speak (Kay & Kempton, 1984). Sapir (1929) stated that humans “are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society…the ‘real world’ is to a large extent unconsciously built upon the language habits of the group” (p. 69). Hellinger and Bußmann (2015) indicated that language not only reflects social hierarchies of gender and it helped to construct a male-centered worldview. The sexist language has shaped the current society and continues to have a negative impact on future generations, such as reinforcing gender bias and stereotypes about gender roles and expectations which may limit children’s aspirations and opportunities. Additionally, the lack of gender-neutral vocabulary in languages makes it more difficult for speakers to express themselves in a gender-inclusive way.

A significant breakthrough in gender-inclusive language occurred during the 1960s and 1980s, the second wave of feminist movement promoted social equality for women and brought public attention to the field of language and gender. According to Litosseliti (2021), the second wave of feminism had significant influence on language, and feminist linguistics began exploring the connection between sexist language and gender inequality or discrimination in society. In the meantime, a large group of women left their homes and entered various and male-dominant professions after World War II (Mallinson, 2017). Women began challenging the traditional language forms. In response, the English language adapted (marked) all kinds of new working titles ending with –woman instead of –man to meet the social needs (Mallinson, 2017). Feminist activists have also called for the use of Ms. to refer to women instead of Miss or Mrs. At this point, the gender and language reform mainly focused on the binary genders: using corresponding feminine
nouns for masculine nouns, such as *spokesman/spokeswoman, chairman/chairwoman*. Despite the gender-neutral nouns ending with –*person* such as *spokesperson* were created, it was rarely used in real-life situations. There were exceptions, two gender-neutral working titles: *police officer* and *firefighter* became popular in the late 20th century.

In the 21st century, many organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, have adapted gender-inclusive language guidelines in order to decrease gender discrimination and promote equality. Unlike the gender-inclusive language movement of the 20th century, the contemporary gender-inclusive language movement aims for a more gender-neutral or genderless language expression: to abandon binary gender-marked words and to use words that do not reveal one’s gender. The United Nations (2022) website explains gender-inclusive language as “speaking and writing in a way that does not discriminate against a particular sex, social gender or gender identity, and does not perpetuate gender stereotypes”. The organization has introduced several strategies to use gender-inclusive language:

- Use plural pronouns instead of false generics – use *they* and *them* as a singular form for an unknown gender.
- Use gender-neutral words: *humankind* instead of *mankind*.
- Use gender-neutral working titles, such as *firefighter* and *police officer* and nouns end with –*person*.
- Use *Ms.* instead of *Mrs.* and *Miss* when addressing a female. (*Mx.* is the gender-neutral social title, however, its usage in written discourse is currently low, hence this paper will not include *Mx.* as a research keyword)

(UN, 2022)

4. Previous research

Paul Baker (2010) conducted a diachronic study on gender-marked language in British English corpora from 1931, 1961 1991 and 2006, analyzing various forms of written discourse including press, fiction and others. Baker examined the usage of gendered pronouns, gender related profession, and terms of address. According to Baker’s findings, the use of male pronouns has decreased since 1961 and the use of female pronouns seem to show a slight increase. However, there was still a huge gap between the usage of male and female pronouns in British written discourse. The usage of *man* and *men* decreased between 1960 to 1990, and slightly increased in 2006. For gendered working titles, such
as spokesman, spokeswoman and spokesperson, Baker’s study indicated the gender-neutral term spokesperson was the least popular form. He found the term policeman was most popular until 1961, but in 2006, police officer overtook policeman in popularity. Baker’s research demonstrated that masculine title Mr. was much more frequently used than feminine titles in all four corpora, despite Mr. appearing to decrease through time. The feminine social title Ms. had only slightly increased in usage by 2006 but it remained rare in British written discourse. Baker indicated that there is still a long way to go before Ms. becomes the preferred feminine term of address.

In 2014, Laine and Watson conducted a diachronic study on linguistic sexism in the British Newspaper The Times, they have investigated the usage of gendered pronouns, nouns with masculine suffix, forms of address. They counted the words in each article under the World News section from 1965 to 2005, standardized the data per 1,000 words. The study showed that between 1965 and 1975, there was a dramatic decline in the total usage of masculine generic, reaching its lowest point around 1985. But since then, the term man has grown in popularity, and the authors predicted that it will become more acceptable in the future. Regarding gendered working titles, the contemporary Times uses less feminine suffixes than 1960s - the usage of feminist suffixes increased after reaching its lowest point in 1985. Laine and Watson (2014) have also investigated the usage of Policeman and police officer, data showed the usage of police officer has increased since 1965 though it has not fully replaced policeman. When it comes to the forms of address, Laine and Watson’ study supported Baker’s arguments, showing that there was still a significant disparity between the mention of women and men in The Times. In 2005, the percentage of all feminine social titles was 14.4%, whereas the Mr. topped the results with 85.6%. Regarding the feminine social titles, the data shows that 75% of women were referred to the traditional social titles in The Times by 2005 which suggests the feminine social title Ms. was still not widely accepted in the UK.

5. Methodology

The aim of this paper is to conduct a diachronic analysis using a corpus linguistic approach based on The New York Times, in order to evaluate the usage of sexist terms and gender-neutral vocabulary in its articles. The findings will be compared with two previously mentioned research studies and to discuss whether there are any similarities
and differences in the usage of gender-neutral vocabulary between American English written discourse and British written discourse.

5.1 Collection of data

McCarthy (2004) defined a corpus as “a collection of written and spoken text, usually stored in a computer database” (p. 1). A corpus demonstrates how language is utilized in real-life situations. Corpus linguistics refers to the methodology of using large collections of texts to analyze through statistical methods (Gries, 2009). Corpus linguistic analyses are based on evaluating the frequency of occurrence of certain linguistic elements, some elements may occur more frequently compared to others, and whether the frequency of certain elements aligns with the researcher’s expectation (Gries, 2009). In this paper, the US press *The New York Times* is selected as the corpus to examine the frequency of selected terms. The analysis of NYT articles can somehow reflect how gender-inclusive language is accepted by American society over the years.

NYT was selected as the primary data source for 2 reasons, firstly, it is the most popular news press in the US. Secondly, its official website stores news articles from 1851 to the present, allowing for keywords searches and queries for articles from specific years. On the NYT search page, there are options of data range which can be selected from January 1 to December 31 of a given year, and the types and sections of news reports can be selected. Laine and Watson (2014) focused on the articles under the World News section in *The Times*, but this paper will include all the articles from the NYT in the selected years due to its website lack of supporting the classifying news articles prior to 1980.

Laine and Watson (2014) have conducted a diachronic study and analyzed data from 1965 to 2005, due to the year 1965 represents the scenario prior to the intervention of feminist in the English language during the second half of the 20th century. This paper will also choose 1965 as the starting point to collect data from 1965, 1975, 1985, 1995, 2005 and 2015, and analyze the application of sexist terms and gender-neutral terms in the NYT over 5 decades.

Here are the chosen sexist terms and gender-neutral terms (based on the UN gender-inclusive language guideline):

1. Pronouns: he, him, his, she, her, hers, they, their, them
2. Gender terms: man, men, woman, women, human.
3. Gender-neutral words: humankind, mankind
4. Working titles: spokesman, spokeswoman, spokesperson, 
Policeman, police officer. 
Fireman, fire fighter.

5. Social titles: Mr., Mrs., Miss and Ms.
The number of articles that contain these chosen terms from 1965, 1975, 1985, 1995, 2005 to 2015 will be counted and compared.

5.2 Data normalization and comparison
This paper will collect the total number of articles that contain chosen terms in a given year, instead of focusing on the overall frequency of a certain keyword in the NYT. The results will be presented in frequency lists (see Appendix). However, it would be subjective to directly compare these numbers due to the quantity of articles published in the NYT varies from year to year. The data need to be normalized for further comparison and analysis across years. Percentage as a normalization method will be used to calculate the proportion of articles that contain the selected keyword in a given year. In addition, the total number of articles published by the NYT in a given year is also counted. Lastly, the findings will be analyzed and compared with Laine and Watson’s and Baker’s studies. Both studies used frequency per unit to normalize their findings, they have counted the frequency of certain elements per 1000 words. This paper uses a different normalization method, so the findings (digits) cannot be directly compared, however, the trends of keywords usages throughout the years can be compared, such as whether the frequency of certain words has increased or decreased in years.

With the rise of feminism and gender-inclusive language movement, there should be a gradual decrease in traditional sexist language and an increase in gender-inclusive language in American written discourse. The usage of gender-inclusive language and sexist terms in British English and American English should share a similar pattern in written discourse due to globalization. The usage of masculine pronouns in the NYT might decrease between 1965 and 1985, while certain masculine generics, such as man might gradually increase after 1985; for gender-neutral term *humankind* is predicted to become more popular from 1965 to 2015 and may replace *mankind* by 2015; In terms of working titles, Baker (2010) said that *police officer* has become the most popular term in the UK in 2006, and it is predicted to be equally popular in the US around that time, along with *firefighter*. However, some other gender-neutral working titles which end with –
person such as spokesperson might not be as popular in American written discourse. Regarding social titles, it is expected that the masculine title Mr. will continue to dominate the news articles in American written discourse from 1965 to 2015. Both Laine and Watson (2014) and Baker (2010) suggested that the feminine term Ms. is not as popular as the traditional titles in the UK, but this might differ in American written discourse, as Ms. has become an official term of address in the US since 1972 (Frum & Foster, 2018).

6. Results and discussion
The total number of the articles from the NYT containing selected keywords in each of the years 1965, 1975, 1985, 1995, 2005 and 2015 was counted, and the resulting numbers were then divided by the total number of articles published (posted) in each year to determine the percentage of articles containing these keywords. The following analyses and comparisons were all based on the percentage data; for the raw data, see Appendix. In this section, the data will be analyzed to discuss the application of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary in the NYT in the past 5 decades. The result will be compared with two prior studies in order to investigate the similarities and differences in the usage of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary between the US and UK written discourse.

6.1 Gender pronouns
The results (see figure 1) showed that male pronouns were predominantly used in news articles from the NYT between 1965 to 2015, which was consistent with the previous research on written discourse in the UK. Among the masculine pronouns, the subjective pronoun he was most widely used, followed by the possessive adjective /pronouns his, while the objective pronoun him appeared less frequently. In 1965, 51% of articles used the masculine pronoun he, 40.81% used his, and 13.51% used him.
Both previously mentioned studies highlighted a dramatic decline in the total usage of masculine generic in British written discourse, with the lowest point by 1985. However, though there was a decline in the usage of masculine pronouns in American written discourse between 1975 and 1985, the change was not as dramatic (the percentage of the pronoun *he* dropped to 51.51%, but still higher than 1965). The usage of masculine pronouns in news articles began to increase after 1985. By 2015, almost 70% of articles used *he*, and 64.67% of articles used *his*.

In general, the usage of female personal pronouns in NYT articles is less frequent compared to male pronouns. In 1965, only 11.41% of articles used the feminine pronoun *she*, and the number grew to 36.89% in 2015 (see figure 2). There was no significant difference between the use of pronouns *she* and *her* due to *she* functions as subject pronoun and *her* functions as the object pronoun and possessive adjectives. The possessive adjective *hers* was extremely unpopular in news articles. In 1965, the pronoun *her* was used more often in newspapers than *she*. The feminine objective pronoun *her* also showed a decline in 1985 (similar to the masculine pronouns), but the subjective pronoun *she* showed a minor increase from 16.05% to 16.61%. Figure 2 shows *she* became the most common feminine pronoun in news articles since 1985. In 1965, only 15% of articles used *her* and 11.41% used *she*. However, in 2015, 34.4% used *her* and 36% used *she*.

Although the usage of both male and female pronouns in the NYT has increased after 1985, the data reveals that the percentage of female pronouns has increased faster than
the male pronouns. In figure 3, the feminine pronoun *she* and the masculine pronoun *he* are placed together for comparison.

![Figure 3: Percentages of He and She](image)

The percentage of articles that used the female pronoun *she* increased from 11.41% in 1965 to 36.89% in 2015, showing a growth rate of 223%. On the other hand, the male pronoun *he* increased from 1965 to 2015 by 36%. Despite the male personal pronouns still dominant in 2015, the usage of female pronouns is expected to continue growing rapidly and eventually reach the same level as male personal pronouns in the next 50 years.

The United Nation gender-inclusive language guideline advised to use *they* as a gender-neutral pronoun. However, the NYT website does not support *they* and *them* as a search term after the year of 1975. Only the percentage of gender accusative case *him, her* and *them* in the news articles can be compared. Data in figure 4 may not be as convincing due to *him* being the least popular male pronoun and *her* being the most commonly used female pronoun in written discourse. Nonetheless, the trends and usage growth can still be analyzed based on the data.
Figure 4 illustrates a minimal disparity in the usage of *him*, *her* and *them*. In 1965, *them* grew by 162%, while *him* increased 147% and *her* increased 125% from 1965 to 2015. In the past 20 years, the usage of *her* and *them* increased significantly and the usage of *him* remained relatively stable.

The usage of personal pronouns in the NYT articles shows that the masculine pronouns have been the most frequent from 1965 to 2015, but the use of feminine pronouns and gender-neutral pronoun (*them*) has increased significantly in the last two decades, whereas the growth rate of male pronouns has been relatively low in comparison. With the development of gender-neutral language, the discrepancy between the frequency of masculine and feminine pronouns in English written discourse should gradually decrease and the gender-neutral terms are likely to become more prevalent in the future.

### 6.2 Gender generics

Baker (2010) suggested the usage of masculine generics in British corpora had decreased in 1990, Laine and Watson (2014) identified 1985 as the lowest point in the frequency of masculine generics in *The Times* while the frequency of feminine generics continued to rise. The data collected from the NYT articles supports their observations of masculine generics, the percentage of articles containing *men* and *man* decreased in 1985, in the meantime, the percentage of feminine generics also decreased, though not as much as masculine generics (see figure 5).
Since 1985, the percentage of the usage for all gender generics has increased year by year. Laine and Watson (2014) predicted the masculine generic *man* will become more acceptable after 2005, the data collected from the NYT confirms that *man* is indeed the most commonly used generic in written discourse in 2015. In 1965, there was a substantial gap in the usage of masculine generic *men* at 11.38% compared with the feminine generic *women* at 5.37%. Figure 5 shows an increase in the usage of *women* in 1996, 10.14%, which was very close to the percentage of *men* - 10.17% in the NYT articles. Although the difference between the two has expanded in 2005, the percentages remain very similar in 2015. Given this minimal difference between the usage of *men* and *women*, it is reasonable to assume that the significant gap between *man* and *woman* in 1965 was due to the use of false generics in written discourse.

Figure 6: The percentages of *human*, *man* and *woman* in 1965 and 2015
With the increase of the usage of *human* and *woman* in 2015, the term *man* might be replaced by *human* and only function as the plural form of the male gender in written discourse.

### 6.3 Gender-neutral word

In 1965, the word *humankind* was not used in any of the news articles published in the NYT while *mankind* was used in 465 articles. There was a significant decline in the usage of *mankind* between 1975 and 1995, despite it remaining to be more commonly used than *humankind* (see figure 7). *Humankind* has become more popular in written discourse between 2005 and 2015, 144 news articles in 2015 used *mankind* while 102 used *humankind*. This supports the assumption that *humankind* may replace *mankind* in the future.

![Figure 7: Percentages of Humankind and Mankind](image)

### 6.4 Working titles

Figure 10 demonstrates the percentage of articles that contain *spokesman*, *spokeswoman* and *spokesperson* in the NYT from 1965 to 2015. *Spokeswoman* and *spokesperson* were invented after 1965, and only 25 articles published in 1975 used *spokeswoman* and 18 used *spokesperson*, while 8095 articles contained *spokesman*. 
Since 1995, there has been a significant increase in the use of the term *spokeswoman*, arguably because more women are joining in the profession. The percentage of *spokesman* declined in 1995, it grew back in 2005 and declined again in 2015. Baker (2010) indicated the gender-neutral title *spokesperson* is the least favorite form in British written discourse; this is also reflected in the news articles from the NYT. The news articles tend to use *spokesman* and *spokeswoman* to represent gender, and the gender-neutral term *spokesperson* has not been widely accepted.

In contrast to *spokesperson*, gender-neutral titles such as *police officer* and *firefighter* had been widely accepted by US society since the late 20th century. Figure 11 demonstrates the usage of *policemen*, *policeman* and *police officer* in the NYT news articles between 1965 and 2015. The feminine terms - *policewoman* and *policewomen* are counted but due to the small number of samples, the comparison of female terms are not included in figure 11, however, the original data can be found in Appendix.
Laine and Watson (2014) claimed in 2005 that police officer had not replaced policeman, and Baker (2010) indicated that the police officer had overtaken policeman in popularity in 2006. In 1965, the gender-neutral term police officer was not commonly used as compared to policeman and policemen in the NYT articles. However, by 1975, police officer became the most frequently used term. Since then, the masculine forms (policeman and policemen) have been declining in written discourse and have been replaced by police officer and police officers. Figure 12 illustrates the acceptance of the gender-neutral term firefighter in American written discourse, it was later than police officer. The usage of firefighter was lower than firemen until 1995, since then, the percentage of articles including firemen and fireman has been declining while firefighter has become the most popular term in news articles ever since.
Based on the findings, one can argue that American society is more supportive of gender-neutral working titles compared to British society.

### 6.5 Social titles

Similar to the UK, *Mr.* appears in a very high percentage of written discourse in the US. In 1965, the masculine title *Mr.* was used in the majority of articles from the NYT, accounting for 36.9% of the total, while *Mrs.* was used in 16% and *Miss* in 11.3% (see figure 8). Since the 1960s, the American females began to use *Ms.* as a term of address for women, instead of using *Mrs.* and *Miss* due to these social titles revealing the marital status. In 1985, 10.94% of the articles from the NYT used the term *Miss*, 8.9% used *Mrs.* and only 0.091% of the articles used *Ms.* The traditional feminine social titles remains the predominant feminine title in the American written discourse before 1995.

In 2015, 52% of the articles from the NYT included *Mr.* while only 23% included *Ms.* indicating that the male is still the central focus in written discourse.

![Figure 8: Percentages of Social Titles](image)

Baker (2010) noted that in the UK, *Ms.* still has a long way to go before it becomes the favored female term of address. In 2006, it was only used 10.9% of the time when a feminine social title was needed. However, in American written discourse, *Ms.* has become the most commonly used female term of address since 1995.
Figure 9 shows the proportions of the usage of female social titles in the NYT from 1985 to 2015. The US Government Printing Office authorized the use of the new feminist title *Ms.* in official government documents since February 1972 (Frum & Foster, 2018). However, the data of news articles did not immediately reflect this policy change, as 1975 to 1985 was the period when *Ms.* was least used in the news articles. There was a dramatic increase of *Ms.* Occurred between 1985 and 1995, the usage of *Ms.* rising from 0.091% to 13.031%, and becoming the most commonly used female title in the US. In 2015, the usage of *Ms.* rose to 23.67%. Laine and Watson (2014) said that it seems that *Ms.* have replaced *Miss* in *The Times* but the result does not reveal whether *Ms.* is more connected with unmarried women, married woman or both. In the US, after *Ms.* becoming the most popular female title, *Mrs.* almost disappeared from the written discourse, the percentage declined from 16.04% in 1965 to 2.29% in 2015. These trends suggest that the usage of "Ms." is expected to continue increasing, while *Miss* and *Mrs.* may gradually disappear in the NYT.

7. Conclusion

This paper conducted a diachronic study on the implications of sexist language and gender-neutral vocabulary in *The New York Times* articles from 1965 to 2015. The findings were analyzed and compared with two prior studies on sexist language in British written discourse. Since 1965, there has generally been an increase in the usage of gender-
neutral terms and a decrease in sexist terms in written discourse in American newspapers' written discourse.
In terms of gender-neutral vocabulary, terms like Ms., firefighter and police officer have been widely accepted and have become the most favored terms in the society, however, terms like spokesperson are not as popular. Despite the percentage of sexist language in written discourse has decreased, certain words such as masculine pronoun he, his and him, masculine generic man and the social title Mr. remained at a surprising level. The usage of the feminine pronouns still lags behind the masculine pronouns. The usage of the plural pronoun they in the NYT could not be examined on the website, but it is expected to be used more frequently in written discourse along with other gender-neutral terms. Within the selected years, 1965 was before the major feminist movement in languages and the data appeared to have the highest rate of sexist language. The data in 1985 is unexpected given that almost all the gendered pronouns and generics decreased in that year. The usage of gender-neutral terms has increased in the late 20th century and continues to rise in the 21st century. Most gender-neutral terms were used in the NYT in 2015.
After conducting a thorough analysis and comparing the results with two studies focusing on the sexism in British English, it has been found that the NYT is more accommodating towards gender-neutral terms in comparison with the UK newspaper The Times. This finding suggests that American society may have a more liberal and progressive approach to the use of gender-neutral terms while the UK remains more conservative.
In conclusion, it is expected that the use of sexist language and nouns with masculine and feminine suffixes in written discourse will gradually decline in the future, the use of feminine pronouns will gradually increase and reach the same level of the masculine pronouns. However, in terms of the working titles, despite the fact that police officer and firefighter have become the new norm, the gender-neutral noun that ends with –person has a long way to go before it becomes widely accepted by the society. Gender-inclusive language respects individuals regardless of their gender identity. The gender movement in the 21st century will continue to impact the English language, and perhaps in the future, written discourse may use less binary gendered vocabulary but more gender-neutral vocabulary.
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Japan*. 23


## Appendix

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1. Pronouns: he, his, him, she, her, hers, they, them.

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2. Gender: Humans, Human man, men, woman, women.

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3. Gender-neutral terms: humankind, mankind

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4. Working titles

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4.2 Policeman, police woman, police officer.

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4.3 Fireman, fire fighter.

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5. Social titles: Mr., Mrs., Miss and Ms.

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