Gender-Inclusive Language in English

_A Feminist Analysis of Gender Biases in the English Language._

B.A. Essay
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Abstract

The English language has changed a lot over time and Old English is vastly different from the Modern English written and spoken today. Modern English has lost its grammatical genders with the exception of pronouns and it is considered grammatically correct to use the generic “he” pronoun when it is the sex of the person in question is unknown or unimportant. Feminists have at least since the 60s pointed to gaps and sexist language use in English, and the generic use of “he” has been pointed out to be marginalizing to women and non-binary people. Feminists differ in opinions and approaches on how to achieve a more gender-inclusive language use. These approaches include name-changes, changing the names of job titles, discussing the –ette and –ess endings of words to imply their femininity and a critical approach on how and if you can successfully claim or reclaim words. Furthermore, with increasing knowledge of how rigid the binary category system of man and woman functions in society and how the majority of people have implicit biases towards men and women, even if they actively fight against sexism, it is important to use and understand the words feminine and masculine critically as they are not fixed concept, but vary cross-culturally and change over time. Surveys done on English pronouns show that “they” used as a singular generic pronoun evokes more gender-mixed images than the generic “he” pronoun, and research on the gender-neutral Swedish pronoun “hen” shows that attitudes towards it changing from negative to positive over time and with more exposure. While language change naturally with use and time it remains important to be critical of sexist language use, and be aware that with small conscious changes on how we address each other it might be possible to increase fair gender representation and limit marginalization.
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1 Introduction:

This paper wish to give an overview of the feminist linguistic approaches to problematic language use, as well as a look into the developments of the English language, and investigate which approaches and changes have been successful and why, as well as give an analysis of attitudes for and against a more gender-neutral language, with the main focus on generic pronouns.

The English language has gone through a lot of changes over time, especially grammatically, and Modern English is much different from Old English. The grammatically eroded and remaining grammatical genders have changed from being a classification system to something resembling semantic assignment. These semantic assignments are not fool proof as they depend on the speakers associations with certain concepts. Furthermore, a lot of the common words used today in English stem from a generally considered male-centric world-view, and often women and words for women are either degrading or non-existent. Feminists in the 60s started pointing out these gaps and biases in English and much work have been done so far to make English a more gender-neutral and fair language. These criticisms and concerns of the English language have many aspects; from specific words used about women and men, to gender-biased job titles and in generally pointing out archaic and patriarchal word uses in English that might not be obvious without investigation etymologic development. Likewise, has the commonly used generic-he pronoun that are used when a person’s gender is unknown been criticised for marginalizing women and non-binary people. Many solutions have been proposed such as inserting a third option for singular third person pronoun as well as using “they” as singular as it has been done in the past, and these changes and attitudes to changes will be investigated and analysed in this essay.
2 Feminist linguistic theories:

It is important to note that feminism, while a political movement consists of different views and ideologies, and while they all have the common goal of ending the social, economical and political inequality for women they differ in their theories. Therefore they also differ when it comes to linguistic theories, and the relevance of representation and gender-neutral terms in language. A short introduction of different movements of feminism is necessary to understand the different ideas concerning gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language.

2.1 Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism wish to establish equality between women and men in all aspects of society by eradicating barriers to women’s full participation. Liberal feminism influenced an early ground-breaking foundation of language, gender and sexuality research, and have made a strong effort to eradicate overt forms of sexism in the English language such as only using the masculine as a generic form and gendered agent nouns such as fireman. Liberal feminism also pointed out asymmetries in the semantics of gendered pairs such as: master/mistress and major/majorette. (Bucholtz)

2.2 Cultural feminism

Cultural feminism view women’s ways of behaving and speaking as distinctive qualities that ought to be validated by society. This distinction between the sexes is rooted in early socialization experiences and women’s biological potential to be mothers, and theorizes a nurturing instinct. Cultural feminism can be divided into two further categories: 1. Liberal cultural feminism, that specifically seeks equal value of what is seen as distinctive differences between the sexes. Books such books such as Deborah Tannen’s “You Just Don’t Understand” are written with the theory that heterosexual relationship often encounters communication problems based on different gendered interactional style. And 2. Radical cultural feminism that wishes to lift women’s practices over men’s often basing this position in women’s reproductive ability and is often more concerned with interaction than lexis. (Bucholtz) While the cultural feminism does not necessarily aim to change the language to be more gender inclusive, it is important to explain the ideologies in this paper, as it shows that there are many way of thinking as a feminist and it is not a field in which everyone agree. Deborah
Cameron, a linguist and author of “The Myth of Venus and Mars” has criticised the views in cultural feminism.

2.3 Radical feminism
Radical feminism believes that the root of social inequality is gender inequality, and this is based in men’s systematic and structural subordination of women. Sexual violence against women is the cornerstone of the subordination of women in the patriarchy (Bucholtz). The patriarchy through physical and verbal violence allows men to be in the dominant position over women, and radical feminists understand violence such as rape to be rooted in power and not desire. Language use is of high importance in this case, as the threat of sexual violence is not only evident in acts of rape or sexual assault but likewise in street remarks, sexual harassment in workplace setting as well as online. These linguistic practices are all seen as power device and help explain tendencies such as rape culture.

2.4 Masculinities
Masculinities in language has up until recently gone unexplored but e.g. by using masculinity as a starting point Stoltenberg’s in his book Refusing to be a man aims to incorporate men and masculinity more fully into the study of genders. It aims to conceptualize men and researches masculinity among women and non-binary gender identifications.

2.5 Queer identities
Queer identities in language and the movement and investigations thereof have historical tension between feminism and the gay rights movement, but Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble created a shared reliance for the two movements. Judith Butler came up with the revolutionary theory of performativity that consists of gender and sexuality being brought in as repeated discursive enactment of cultural norms. Queer theory in feminist forms draws heavily on Butler’s work. Butler helped shape and popularize a linguistic turn in Anglo-American feminist theory similar to turns in French Feminism. Butler was influenced by critical theory and philosophy.
2.6 Intersectional feminism

Intersectional feminism was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw and used to describe the specific oppression experienced by women of colour. It is the theory that one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression. (Risman, 2004) Patriarchy oppresses everyone, but there are different levels and intersections of oppression and they can interlink in varies ways. Intersectional is most often all-inclusive in its approach and investigates intersections between gender, race, class, and sexuality and so on in order to understand and combat the patriarchy.
3 The Gender Binary.

Feminism distinguishes between sex and gender, and O. Vasari explains that it “is the greek term Genos that feminism later integrated into gender theories in the 1970s to distinguish between “sex” versus the relational socio-cultural understanding of masculine and feminine “gender” as a socially-imposed division of the sexes that is not inherent, is changeable, and reflects historically and socio-culturally specific ideology of appropriate public and private roles according to person’s sex.” This means that sex refers to the biological differences in humans such as chromosomes, hormonal profiles as well as internal and external sex organs. It is sometimes referred to as the natural gender. Gender is in a feminist context that what we are. In a binary context that is either a man or a woman.

3.1 The Gender Norm:

While some presume innate differences in men and women, that explain the imbalance between the genders in culture, the actual differences are mostly unclear. Cordelia Fine describes in Delusions of Gender how we know very little about the actual differences between men and women, and criticises neuroscientists for making general statements on small grounds. She calls this neurosexism. However, usually there is a general consensus in society of what is expected of genders. What is presumed to be gendered behaviour is depending on what culturally is expected of men and women based on presumptions of masculine and feminine traits. Views on gender roles can differ cross-culturally as well as change over time. These presumptions of gender reinforce gender roles and are generated by generalization of gender, and an underlying belief in difference in abilities. It is not the words “male” and “female” that are oppressing but rather what we associate with the categories of “masculine” and “feminine” that often restrict rather than liberate us. (Swift & Miller) This is problematic, because if gender is a social construct, these presumptions of gendered behaviour are enforcing roles that people need to perform in order to fit in, and although plenty of research has been done on gender, specifically the difference between men and women, counting up differences are for the most part vastly generalizing and harmful. They are harmful for people of all sexes.
Gender roles and norms are often more rigid in more patriarchal societies than in liberal countries, although there are no countries with complete gender equality yet. As gender and gender roles are social construct these norms can change substantially, and only reflects the society of certain times, if change is managed. Clear examples of how gender normed practices on a smaller scale have changed can be seen in e.g. how high-heeled shoes originally were designed for upper-class men, but is now almost exclusively women’s-wear. Likewise, are the colours pink and blue often considered girl and boy’s colours, where it originally was considered the to be the opposite. This shows that what we generally think of as entirely “feminine” is constructed that way over time, and that we are socialised to act into. While there is no clear evidence that girls should prefer pink to blue it is apparent that by social association people will associate pink with femininity, and that these associations towards stereotyped colours are not easily discarded. (Cunningham)

Gendered stereotypes hinder people’s ability to fulfil their potential by limiting choices and opportunities. Both genders can suffer from gendered stereotypes. People that do not conform to the gender norm might experience discrimination. Men often experience a standard way to experience and do masculinity, while women still in a higher degree experience body-policing, body-shaming, glass ceilings at workplaces, wage gaps and so on. Women’s bodies are also objectified to a higher degree than men’s. A reflection of how differently we view male and female sexuality for example can be seen in the many degrading words there are for women, while it would be difficult to come up with the same amount for men.

3.2 Between the binary:
Sex, or the natural gender, is considered binary male/female, but to further complicate matters, some children are born with a mix between female and male genitalia. These are often termed intersex, and it is most often up to the parents to assign a gender to a child. Intersex conditions are reported in 2% of children. (Gough. Et Al) That means that even the biological sex is less rigid than generally assumed and does not fit well into a man/woman binary.
Most often than not the assigned sex aligns with gender identity. Assuming the assigned sex aligns with your gender identity, cultural influences creates expectations of genders often based on what gender you are perceived as. People that do not feel they belong
into either group can define themselves as non-binary. Non-binary gender is often used as an umbrella term for people identifying as neither man or woman or both, but can also be people rejecting the binary boxes and gendered expectations use a term. It is also these binary descriptors such as feminine and masculine many feminists wish to blur out as they are often more confining than not. While gender is a social construct the categorizing of people is provided for with words that often only encompass a binary gender system. It is important to note that while masculinity and femininity are adjectives most often describing a generalisation of how men and women behave, masculinity and femininity are not fixed concepts and change constantly, and that these traits are for all genders to embrace or reject as they wish.

3.3 Implicit association bias

Implicit association bias is the biases we learn through, as the word says, association and carry with us. These associations are picked up in the environment we grow up in. (Fine, Cordelia) and as Fine writes; the process of association “takes place without the need for awareness, intention and control.” It is simple and constant clues we pick up and use to navigate the world with often without giving it much thought and “that our implicit representations of social groups are often remarkably reactionary, even when our consciously reported beliefs are modern and progressive.” These cognitive biases are hard to fight, because we are often unaware, and living in society with status expectations also creates biases that favour higher statuses in general, reinforcing inequality, but the biases are however, not impossible to manipulate, when becoming aware of them. Research on implicit association biases can help shed a light on unconscious gender discrimination and explain e.g. why even in liberal societies women are still not equal in terms of wage or work status as well as why men are not under the same expectations of taking care of children and housework. By becoming aware of gender biases it is easier to actively and consciously tackle discrimination and oppression.
4 The Importance of Gender Neutral language:

As mentioned, feminism and its different movements and theories have long been concerned with language and sexist language use. Language is by far feminists sole focus, but my investigating the language and how we talk about gender, gives one an idea about what the English society assumes about gender. It is important for feminists both to acknowledge that we talk differently about men and women, acknowledge sexist word use and try to eradicate it, and it is important that simple but often used words such as pronouns are gender-representative and not exclusive. Terms that are patriarchal in nature enforce gender norms and stereotypes and terms that are gender-exclusive enforce the man as the norm, and the woman as the deviation. (Risman, 2004)

4.1 Names and titles

Names are important to discuss because they symbolize something a pronoun or a gender identity cannot capture. It describes who we are. Both our given names and surnames tell us who we are, what family we come from, and often an idea of what society we belong to. It is a big part of our identity. Swift and Miller describes how even the act of taking or changing a name is a strong act of self-identification. Therefore it is interesting to investigate why it is common for women to take their husband’s last name when marrying. Most women change their last-name to their husband’s last name, and many are still not aware that in most cultures this act of re-self-definition is no longer necessary. And while more and more make compromises when marrying or decide to keep it unchanged, it is still a largely universal expectation. It is unusual for a man to take his wives last name, and an important factor of this might be the hierarchy between the man and woman, and “once a name or a word becomes associated with women, it is rarely again considered suitable for men.” (Miller, C., & Swift, K) The hierarchy between men and women are easily discovered when investigating language use. Many words used for men to insult them often insinuate femininity, e.g. sissy that derives from sister. The association with femininity is considered offensive and shows that femininity is lower on the hierarchy than masculinity. Many regular words we use today derive from a segregated and sexist society, even the word for family derives from the latin famulus and means servant or slave. When women married/marry they give up their name and in that sense their previous identity to take their husbands name/identity. Not only by name but also by title are women associated with their marital status. The
uses of Mrs and Miss shows if a woman is married or not, where men simply use the title Mr. and the categories are seen as unnecessary. The alternative title Ms became a popular alternative for women to use. (Atkins-Sayre)

Other concerns with language that is unnecessarily gendered are job titles. As women have taken up more and more of the workforce it is apparent that many job titles are not gender-inclusive. Feminists argue that words such as salesman, fireman and policeman are exclusive in their representation and therefore also in the expectations, even if “man” by its own correctly can be understood as mankind/human and be generic in the same sense as the grammatically correct generic “he”-pronoun. These words are though mostly easy to change and the examples could respectfully be salesperson, fire fighter and police officer. (Swift & Miller)

Both the suffixes –ess and –ette to imply femaleness in words where it is not relevant are also criticised, because it implies an otherness, a deviation from the norm that is most often not necessary. The –ess suffix often used in occupations such as actor vs. actress is not necessarily diminishing but also not necessary, and the –ette taken from French is used to describe grammatically feminine words are often in English used to describe smaller things, but also used to feminine words. The word suffragettes, e.g. was originally used to diminish the suffragettes movement, but successfully reclaimed by the women. (Cameron, 2015)

4.2 Masculine and feminine

Masculine and feminine are adjectives used to describe behaviour we associate with gender. These words do not have a fixed meaning and their definitions can and have changed over time. Therefore it is important to use them with careful examination, as they are not static concepts but change with cultural expectations of gender performances. (Swift & Miller) While it is important to discuss femininity and masculinity as gendered concepts to understand how and why we categorise that way, they can in general speak often be substituted with more precise and fitting adjectives to describe behaviour patterns. The hierarchy between the masculine and the feminine are what makes these concepts complicated to use as simple adjectives, because while they exist together and depend on each other masculinity receives higher status than femininity.
4.3 Claiming and reclaiming words:

Reclaiming words is not uncommon when movements fight their perceived oppressor, and reclaiming of words can be more or less successful. It is not realistic to know beforehand if a reclaiming will be successful or not. A successful reclaim/claim in the feminist movement would be the terms “Suffragettes”. (Cameron, 2015)

Other movements have likewise claimed and reclaimed words before, while not everyone in the specific group might agree on whether or not the specific words should be used or not. Examples of this could be the queer movement/claiming the word queer, or the civil-rights movement in America claiming the N-word. Claiming and reclaiming word is therefore not a new tendency and a way to take the harm out of racial, sexist, homophobic or otherwise oppressive slurs. There are different opinions on whether or not claiming a word actually is helpful, or whether or not you actually just make a hurtful word more accessible.

In recent feminist movement attempts to claim newer words have appeared. The most common one is the claiming of the word slut, and there have been arranged slut-walks around the world. The slut-walk is a walk of women/people taking the term back to mean a woman who is proud of their sexuality. In this context slut is an empowering term of a sexual active woman. However, it seems that there are different opinions when it comes to reclaiming these terms. One of the problems concerning reclaiming is the implication that one had an original claim, and that that idea was taken away by another. It is understood within feminism that these reclaiming speech acts (calling each other bitch in a friendly environment woman to woman) can give a sense of empowerment. However, Kleinman argues there is a risk of desensitizing the words when we popularize and reclaim words like this, thus making them more acceptable for people to use these reclaimed terms in a negative sense. Words that create reinforce a divide between bad women and good women, and by using, with whatever friendly or joking intentions we may have, we help support the patriarchal claim that women can be sluts and bitches. Kleinman writes, “despite intentions putting “bitches” into the atmosphere over and again sends the message that it is acceptable for men to use the term. It creates a sense of empowerment, but the false power can provide feelings of empowerment among members of the oppressed group (in this case, women), the same feelings that make it difficult for oppressed people to see their lack of empowerment in society, and it can be argued that women/people that use these pejorative terms for
women, while feeling a short sense of empowerment unintentionally hurt women as a group.”

When attempting to reclaim words like slut/bitch it is not entirely clear what is being reclaimed because while it surely feels empowering and well-meant for women and oppressed people to use these words towards each other, the tension between the understanding of the meaning between feminists, and people who use it degradingly might be too far away for it to efficiently work. The contradiction between the aim and the reality is huge and the words might not be able to carry this weight, and it might trigger a terrible backlash against women in the long run.

Criticism of reclaiming words is relevant in intersectional feminism. The idea of reclaiming a word that presumably can be used against you is privilege to have that not all women or people have. The reclamation of the word “slut” is not liberating for black women in certain areas, e.g. because white men and women together have compared black women to sexual savages throughout history. Words that are reclaimed on behalf of a group and varied as women should aim to elevate all women, and not only be fought for and with white women.

4.4 Gendered myths:
Deborah Cameron is a feminist linguist who specifically questions the hypothesis written out by for example John Gray and in Deborah Tannen’s “You Just Don’t Understand” that men and women communicate differently. She believes in perpetuating a myth that is based on socially agreed stereotyping rather than linguistic data. The common thesis for these books and books like them being: Women like to talk, and men prefer action. Not only are they degrading towards women and fits into the idea of women being more emotional and in touch with feelings, and that they talk to much, even nag and complain more than men, but it is also patronizing towards men, portraying them as simple minded creatures unable to formulate their opinions properly. These seemingly scientific findings have been fact-checked by Liberman in 2006 as well as been written against extensively by Deborah Cameron and Cordelia Fine. It is clichés, that are exaggerated and understood because if we buy into these stereotypes these will be the patterns we look for in the world. It is a human tendency to rely on stereotypes when processing information about people, and a generalized representation of what different groups of people are like a shortcut to understanding or having an idea
of whom we are talking to or about. It downside is that it can and often reinforce prejudice. Often these stereotypes are found in popular media as sound-bite science, which means a single piece of research making headlines because of the ease with which it can be boiled down to a simple, arresting, and yet familiar proposition. It is not only a problem because there is not enough linguistic data to support these claims, but as radical feminist would stress it can also show an underlying cultural tendency for victim blaming and rape culture. The idea that male and female communication is so different is often used as reasoning for rape and sexual assault happening, and is rather excusing the problem rather than preventing it.

Furthermore, the notion that we are “different but equal” sounds great, but does not support actual equality. It is important to remember that this phrase has also been applied as part of the official ideology of South African Apartheid; and is in a gender perspective as well helping to reinforce a doctrine of separate spheres. The different but equal was a popular idea among anti-suffragists in the 19th century. It is problematic because by focusing on the differences between the gender that are way less than the actual similarities we create an unhealthy separatism, and the aim of equality is easily forgotten in debates about differences of the genders. The struggle between the genders is less about differences and more about power, and the myths are dangerous because they derail the real struggle and conversation. These myths are neither timeless or universal and the idea that women are better talkers have not always been the case, as in the 18th century men were the guardians of linguistic property, but with the rise of the therapy culture in the 1960s and 1970s this idea became more and more popular.

(Cameron, D), and beliefs about male-female differences are never neutral. Generalizations about women’s speech is often made to prove that women are less suited than men to have work that involves power and authority, and furthermore, it is patronizing towards men, as they are often described as bad as communicating and unable to help themselves in environments of “temptation.”
5 The Grammatical Gender

When it comes to gender-neutral language in feminism as mentioned in the first chapter wish to eradicate strongly gendered word, as well as pushing for an equal amount of representation. This has led to much etymological investigation, creativity with coming up with new and more neutral terms for e.g. job titles as well as something so common as a general lack of female representation when it comes to pronouns used in formal grammatically correct talks concerning people of unknown sex. Anna Livia argues in “Pronoun Envy” why the grammatical idea of a generic he-pronoun should be changed, and calls it an “indexical offense” because an emphasis on the masculine as the unmarked conventional gender marginalizes gender, and Ann Bodine says in Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar that “they” have always been used as default epicene pronoun in English to fill this semantic gap in spite of several centuries of ideologically biased prescriptive effort to abolish its use and impose the so-called generic “he”.

5.1 Pronouns and genos terminology:

As mentioned above, the natural gender (sex) is a system of categorizing people in a binary system differentiating between man and woman. The grammatical gender, however, is much newer, and the grammatical gender only muddled meaning with the natural gender in the 15th century. This led to an interchangeable use of gender and sex to refer to both social and biological differences. It was only with 1960s feminism that a distinction between the words and its meanings evolved to distinguish between biological and social.

The grammatical gender in English is a classification system that derives from the Greek Genos. It exists to indicate whether a referent’s gender is masculine, feminine or neuter in a grammatical system. Vasvári describes grammatical gender as having been believed to be conceptual category and “as a state of a prehistoric primitive way of ordering the world through extension of natural gender to inanimate through psychological personification/mythological animation and sexualisation while neo-grammarians saw it as an arbitrary formal category of syntactic agreement There are many other ways to classify grammar all over the world; such as animate/inanimate, numerical human/non-human, male/female, and as Vasvári writes there are even found shape-based system as small/big, liquid/solid in sub-Saharan Africa. Anne Curzan
describes the linguistic gender as the most “basic level of noun classification reflected in the behaviour of associated words.” That means that there are no limits to possible genders possible in language, and Curzan mentions there are languages discovered with over twenty gender classifications. Another type of conceptual categorization can be seen in e.g. modern Swedish and Danish, which do not distinguish between masculine and feminine, but rather “common” and neutral gender, which is more like a distinction between animacy and inanimacy. (Vasvári)

It is argued by Suzanne Romaine (Gender, Grammar and the Space in between) that Genus and Gender likely began as classification system for nouns “to keep specific lexical units morphosyntactically connected as illustrated with an early example of Protagoras, the formal gender system eventually began to take on psychological effect which had nothing to do with the creation of the category in the first place”, and was later interpreted as a semantic category. These semantic categories can be seen in connotative gender use, e.g. when continents, nations and ships, and even hurricanes, are referred to as “she.”assumingly because they take culturally perceived feminine characteristics. Coincidentally, natural and grammatical gender in English often go together. To compare, there are many languages without linguistic gender markers such as Hungarian, Turkish, Japanese, Mandarin, Cantonese, Eskimo, Korean, Filipino, Bengali and Indonesian. All languages however have resources to define and describe gender distinctions, so a genderless linguistic system does not mean less gender equality. The equality of the genders cannot be seen in the lack of grammatical gender systems, as a linguistic gender is not the cause or solution to sexism. (Vasvári)

5.2 Grammatical gender in history:
Curzan argues that “the shift of English from a grammatical to a natural gender system is highly unusual and involves a complex set of related grammatical transformations in the language”, and that “the natural gender system of Modern English – in which only nouns referring to males and females generally take gendered pronouns and inanimate objects are neuter – stands as the exception, not the rule among the world’s languages.” Historical linguistic theories suggest that Proto-Indo-European had two genders, originally, those being animate and inanimate. When Proto-Indo-European later split animate into masculine and feminine, the inanimate became neuter. Many languages stemming from Indo-European, such as German, Greek, Sanskrit and most Slavic languages, still has a 3-way distinction, while others merged back to two again. E.g.
Swedish and Danish re-merged feminine and masculine into what is now called “common” (or Proto-Indo-European animate), and languages such as the Romance, Celtic and Hindustani languages divided the neuter nouns between masculine and feminine. Some languages such as Persian, Amernian and Bengali lost grammatical gender entirely.

Before the Norman Conquest in 1066 Old English (Anglo-Saxon) had three genders, just like modern German and Icelandic, but Middle English had a modern system of natural-gender pronouns and no more grammatical gender (case) on the nouns. (Examples of Middle English can be seen in e.g. Canterbury Tales.) After the Norman Conquest there is an extended period of several centuries where people would be proficient in Anglo-Saxon as well as Norman French, which then evolved to become Anglo-Norman and Middle-English.

As Curzan explains that pronominal gender systems, in general, favour shifts to semantic assignments rather than a grammatical functions for word order and endings the grammatical gender found in Middle English noun phrases will potentially shifts to new discourse functions. That means that as the grammatical gender system changed, both what remained and what disappeared in English gender classifications has changed the functions of the classification system, and the pronominal gender system Modern English has to day is more of a semantic assignment rather than word and language classification.

Now, except for possession and the pronouns there are not many cases left in English. And even though gender is lost on nouns and their agreeing adjective, it was preserved on pronouns, and this shaped an atmosphere where semantic rather than grammatical cues was used to figure out which pronouns to use. A semantic assignment can be problematic as it can vary and change with tendency in society and therefore critics of specific language use question some of it. In the 1300s the solution to this problem was extending the plural pronoun they to be used as singular third person as well. This is not an unusual use of pronouns in English as e.g. the original plural ‘you’ got extended to mean a formal and singular you and ultimately completely annihilated ‘thou’. Even the pronoun, ‘we’ can be used as singular. (Swift & Miller) Only later, in the 18th century, grammarians started to recommend that “he” be used as the gender non-specific pronoun, with the reasoning that “they” was apparently plural. This meant that the generic “he” was adopted into the style manuals of the time, and considered the right way to reference non-specific gendered groups and people, and while this has been
the norm for a while since then it began facing pushbacks with feminism in the 1970s arguing that the language was primarily male dominated and needed to change.

5.3 Changing the generic pronoun.

It is very difficult to change the most common words in a language, and singular “they” is now the only one that has received a wider use. There is a struggle with recognizing the usefulness of having gender-neutral/epicene pronoun and the unease many people feel with using both the generic he and the singular they. Feminist (binary and non-binary) activists and languages reformers have long advocated for change and come up with a range of options and creative ideas. There was a lot of ground-breaking work going on in order to eliminate sexist pronouns and gender-biased vocabulary from standard English used by the early pioneers in the Women’s Movement. Other more popular options for gender-neutral pronouns matched a Swedish model, where new words are made up to take the gendered pronouns place in cases where the gender is unknown or the person identifies as non-binary. The gender-neutral pronoun in Sweden is hen.

In Words and Women, Swift and Miller describes how a realization of how sexist language in English is accepted does not go away, and that they became “sensitized, and from then on everything we read, heard on the radio and television, or worked on professionally confirmed our new awareness that the way English is used to make the simplest points can either acknowledge women’s full humanity or relegate the female half of the half of the species to secondary status.” In Swift’s and Miller’s attempt to desex the language of English they also noted that “the problem of the generic pronoun is a problem of the status of women: But is it more immediately a matter of common sense and clear communication.” In “Words and Women” by Swift and Miller they argue why it is problematic using the natural/lexical gender and gender understood as a social construct as synonymous words by saying the link “semantically blur a biological given with something that is socially induced” and that “failure to acknowledge and to respect this difference contributes to the overly rigid separation into “feminine” and “masculine” of characteristics common to both males and females.” It is therefore important that psychologists as well as grammarians are aware of the different meanings of the word.
Realising that the language around us is sexist or stuck in old stereotypes about genders is also helpful in understanding why there is still sexism existing.

Especially the pronouns in English have been criticised, specifically the generic-he pronoun use. Gender specific pronouns in English consist of “she/her” for female people and “he/him” for male people. “It” is the pronoun used for non-people and animals and babies, depending on your relationship with the animal and baby, and if you consider them people or not. They/them is generally used for gender-nonspecific people, and depending on your speech community. A variety of options and possibilities can be used for gender-nonspecific and/or non-binary people. Examples of this are: Xe/Xem, ey/em, ze/hir. “They”, the gender-neutral pronoun, has been named the Word of the Year by a crowd of over 200 linguists at the American Dialect Society’s annual meeting in Washington D.C on Friday January the 8th, 2016, thus bringing it into language and usage in a more conscious way while helping emerging ideas about gender identity, which could show that the singular use of they are becoming more popular to use, both in relations to non-binary people as well as in situations where the conversation evolves around a singular person of unknown gender.
6 Arguments against gender-inclusive language:

There have been various criticisms towards the use of gender-neutral language, mostly focusing on the specific usages, such as the use of human for man, he or she for he, often saying that this will lead to clumsily and awkward sounding sentences and odd constructions. Often opponents of gender-neutral language argue that the proponents of gender-neutral language are impinging on the right of free speech and expression, and that these new language policies might promote censorship.

6.1 Fighting symptoms:

One of the most interesting points, maybe not against it, but that is critical towards it, is if it even has the wished function of fighting sexism in people’s everyday. By removing or changing words to be gender-neutral, or more gender-inclusive words, do we really help remove sexism, or are we merely fighting the symptoms instead of the root of the problem? This points to that it could be arguably pointless with language reforms, because a sexist society will make sure that sexist meanings and expression reappear, and that language reforms is merely dealing with the symptoms and not the cause. Sara Mills defines sexism in language as something that “can be defined in a variety of different ways; “[a statement] is sexist if it contributes to, encourages or causes or results in the oppression of women”, and here we need to consider if the language merely reflects the world, or if it possibly affects the way we perceive the world.

6.2 Political correctness:

When discussing language politics, political correctness often appears as a pejorative term for people excessively calculating not to offend others. It can be used as a way of derailing a conversation, and it often happens when discussing marginalized identities. Usually it is referenced as political correctness when less of a certain kind of speech is advocated and is often understood as a form of censorship. (Mills) It is although completely understandable that people dislike feeling that they must conform to new ways of talking in an area they maybe do not feel is problematic to begin with but here it is important to remember that language has changed since the beginning of time, and making the language world more inclusive is not limiting but celebrates differences and collaboration and respect. Another argument often following complaints of political correctness is the idea that there are more needs to focus the energy on bigger and more
important issues. Firstly, this argument suggests that problems have to be huge in order to be worth discussing and trivialize problems considered minor. Secondly, it supports an idea that it is not possible to focus on more than one worthwhile topic at a time. All issues must not be equally problematic in order to be focused on. Small problems are problems nonetheless and we should be able to focus our energies on more problems at the same time.

While there are certainly bigger issues for feminist to tackle than correct language use, language is a reflection of our culture, and as the culture we live in and if we believe in an equal world the language should reflect that. It is therefore not a valid point to keep using sexist language or non-gender inclusive terms, with the mere reasoning that it is not important. We must address ourselves and how we choose to explain the world around us. It should never be acceptable to alienate people through language.

Furthermore, if the words we use against marginalized groups reflect our opinions it will also in certain scenarios lead to actions. These actions are dangerous for marginalized groups. For the same reason we reject racist language, because harmful words might lead to harmful and dangerous actions, the same goes for sexist language use.

6.3 They - the generic pronoun.

Gastil conducted in 1990 an investigation of what gendered images pronouns evoke in men and women. The experiment investigated if the generic he pronoun evoked a disproportionate amount of male images compared to female images. The research also compared these findings with what the use of he/she as well as “they” as singular pronoun evoked. The experiment showed that the he pronoun mainly produces male images, while a use of he/she produced an almost equal amount of male and female images. The findings also showed that the use of the singular-they pronoun is more generic than he/she. The investigation concludes that of the options between he, he/she and they, “he is the least generic pronoun of the three considered” and that “overall, he/she and they appear equally generic, but for men, they turns out to be far more generic than he/she.” (Gastil, 1990) This experiments supports the general feminist theory that a male oriented language use in implicit ways might marginalize women, and enforce the idea of male being the norm, and women the deviation.
6.4 Attitudes to “Hen” in Sweden.

The issue of common gender invented pronouns goes beyond English. In Swedish the common gender pronoun is hen. This was coined in 1996, and received official approval in 2015, when it was added to the dictionary of the Swedish Academy, and they are currently suggesting that the same words get the same status in Norwegian. Hen in Swedish was adapted from the gender-neutral Finnish word hän. The Swedish Academy SAOL dictionary was updated April 15 to include “hen” as an alternative pronoun to the the male pronoun “han” and the female pronoun “hon.” The pronoun “hen” can be used if the gender is unknown or not relevant, or it can be used as a pronoun for inter-gender (and non-binary) people. (Noack, N. 2015) In a survey investigating the attitudes and reaction towards a more gender-fair language in Sweden the results showed that reactions had moved from being hostile and negative to mostly positive. The survey shows that participants that feel stronger about their gender identity also had the most negative attitudes, and “this supports the idea that a gender-neutral pronoun challenges the traditions of a binary gender system” and that “androgynous gender roles were associated with a higher use of gender-fair language than traditional gender roles. (Rubin and Greene, 1991) In general people prefer stability rather than change, and a new word is bound to meet some resistance. Attitudes to gender-fair language is often related to age, sexism and political orientation but often positive attitudes increased when an interest for gender language and identity was included. Research has also shown that reading gender-fair texts increases the use of gender-fair language, and seeing the pronoun “hen” in ordinary Swedish newspaper might have created an overall more positive attitude towards the word.
7 Status; what now?

The research done on implicit associations bias strongly implies that while most people decidedly live up to their assigned gender as well as incorporates gender identity associated expectation a lot of these expectations are created and picked up early and all the time through socialisation. People of all genders learn from childhoods which characteristics and even colours that are markers for their identity. These associations are unconscious. That also means that even if we believe gender as a social construct we quickly develop and discover clues on which groups we belong to. When it comes to the language clues are given in the way that we talk and use the words on how we understand the world. This should conclude that if there were a lack of female representation in the language there would also be a lack of seeing yourself or identify yourself and your place in the world. The generic-he pronoun has here especially been criticised, for while it is understood to stand for all people, when used generically, it is misleading in representation of the general population and an unnecessary rule that can be easily solved with other words, especially since research shows that the generic-he pronoun is the least generic when it comes to invoking mixed gender-images in people, and other options, that are already natural to use in the English language, such as “they”, which is gender-neutral and “he/she”, that is gender-inclusive both invoke more mixed images with “they” seemingly being the most gender-inclusive solution (Gastil). Other options and made-up words to fit this gap in the language have been made, and research of the new Swedish gender-neutral pronoun “hen” has shown that while people are reluctant at first, exposure to it often change the attitude to being more positive towards it. (Rubin and Greene) This would show that small changes in the way we construct the language grammatically could have an including effect, and supports the idea that gender-neutral words and grammar in general are a good idea to aim for. There is no assumption that these conscious word-changes will change sexism, as the power inequality in a patriarchal society is more than how we discuss gender and the gender-exclusive language we use could be argued to merely be a symptom of that society we live in, but it is however, judging from the research not a completely unimportant change to push for.
8 Conclusion

The feminist movements have at least since the 1960s with different approaches attempted to combat sexist and patriarchal structures and words used in language. A general criticism of the English language is the exclusion of women in everyday language. When claiming that certain words are sexist in nature, and therefore hurtful and harmful to a marginalized group, it becomes important to know the history of the English language and how certain words, while not considered offensive now, have deep roots in a more rigid patriarchal structure than we live in now. Examples of words and structures feminist linguistic have aimed to change is gender-exclusiveness in e.g. job titles and creating titles for such as “Ms.” to imply independence. Feminists have also been critical of feminised words such as words with –ette and –ess endings because they are often unnecessary and can be used to minimise the role of women. There is a difference in opinion on whether reclaiming sexist slurs such as slut is helpful or not, and much research has been done into implicit association bias theory that explores the idea of picking up gendered social cues unconsciously and thus by living in a sexist society automatically seeing gendered patterns that might be artificial and socially constructed, and is especially important to consider when discussing gendered myths on difference in how men and women both think and talk differently, and might help explain why we assume differences rather than similarities. The English language has changed a lot from Old English to Modern English and the few remaining grammatical genders in English have been substituted with semantic categories. It is much harder it seems to incorporate a gender-neutral pronoun that works for all genders other than the generic-he pronoun. Usually it is argued that since it is meant generically it automatically covers all genders, but there are reasons to disagree. Different options have been offered such as entirely new gender-neutral pronouns incorporated into English as it is seen in Sweden and other countries and has shown to gain some support in the countries it is more frequently used. The most popular option is to re-incorporate ‘they’ for singular use. Although it might not sound elegant to English-speakers and might come with its own set of grammatical challenges, it does appear in research to be the most gender-inclusive pronoun, and is also to many non-binary people their pronoun of choice. It is not possible to say what will happen language-wise but the general tendency is that a want for change usually meets resistance but that attitudes such as seen with the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun will change as the words gets more common. With insistence on representation and inclusion many common words have been reconstructed to be gender-neutral and thereby more inclusive than its previous connotation.


