Inclusive Language: Sharing Experiences and Overcoming Barriers in Higher Education

Part I

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Gender-neutral vs. gender-inclusive language

- eige.europa.eu

- EIGE's Gender Equality Glossary & Thesaurus is a specialised terminology tool focusing on the area of gender equality. It aims to foster a common understanding of gender equality terms across the EU and promote gender-fair and inclusive language to improve equality between women and men. The concepts and definitions found in this glossary were published in 2016, and some may be out-of-date. EIGE is currently looking into which terms may need to be updated in the future.

- **News** Over 400 terms of EIGE's Glossary and Thesaurus are now available in four languages of EU candidate countries and potential candidates: Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian and Serbian (in Latin and Cyrillic alphabet for Serbia as well as for Bosnia and Herzegovina)

Online glossaries, thesauri and taxonomies

- Gender equality glossary by the Council of Europe **[edoc.coe.in]**

- Women's thesaurus by Atria **[https://collectie.atria.nl/en/thesaurus]**

- Gender and science taxonomy by GenPORT

[https://www.genderportal.eu/main-gender-and-science-taxonomy]

- The EU's multilingual thesaurus by EuroVoc

[op.europa.eu]

- Collection of gender-related glossaries in EIGE's Resource & Documentation Centre catalogue

[https://eige.europa.eu/library?t=glossary]

Gender-neutral language

- Language that is not gender-specific and which considers people in general, with no reference to women and men.

Gender-inclusive language (UN)

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.
Given the key role of language in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender bias.

Gender-sensitive language

- Realisation of gender equality in written and spoken language attained when women and men and those who do not conform to the binary gender system are made *visible* and *addressed* in language as persons of equal value, dignity, integrity and respect.

- [Apparently, easier said than done…]

UN's **Guidelines for gender-inclusive language in English**

These *Guidelines* include a number of strategies to help United Nations staff use gender-inclusive language. They may be applied to any type of communication, whether it is oral or written, formal or informal, or addressed to an internal or external audience.

When deciding what strategies to use, United Nations staff should:

- Take into account the type of text/oral communication, the context, the audience and the purpose of the communication;
- Ensure that the text is readable and the text/oral communication clear, fluid and concise;
- Seek to combine different strategies throughout the text/oral communication.

Gender in English

- In English, there is a difference between "grammatical gender", "gender as a social construct" (which refers to the roles, behaviours, activities and attributes that a given society at a certain time considers appropriate for men or women) and "sex" as a biological characteristic of living beings.

- English has very few gender markers: **the pronouns and possessives** (*he, she, her* and *his*); and **some nouns and forms of address**. Most English nouns do not have grammatical gender forms (*teacher, president*), whereas a few nouns are specifically masculine or feminine (*actor/actress, waiter/waitress*). Some nouns that once ended in *-man* now have neutral equivalents that are used to include both genders (*police officer* for *policeman/policewoman, spokesperson* for *spokesman, chair/chairperson* for *chairman*).

- A challenge for gender-inclusive communication in English is the use of the masculine form by default. For example, "*Every Permanent Representative must submit **his** credentials to Protocol.*"

Best practices/strategies

A number of strategies can be applied, when speaking or writing in English, to be more gender-inclusive:

1. Use non-discriminatory language
2. Make gender visible when it is relevant for communication
3. Do not make gender visible when it is not relevant for communication

Use non-discriminatory language

1.1 Forms of address

- When referring to or addressing specific individuals, use forms of address and pronouns that are consistent with their gender identity [Mr., Ms., Mx.]

- There should also be consistency in the way women and men are referred to: if one of them is addressed by their name, last name, courtesy title, or profession, the other one should be as well.

- E.g. Less inclusive: "Professor Smith (surname and title for a man) and Margaret (first name for a woman) will attend the luncheon." More inclusive: "Professor Smith and Ms. Jones will attend the luncheon (surname and title for both)."

Ms. or Mrs.?

Care should be taken to use the form of address preferred by each individual. However, when that preference is not known, precedence is given to Ms. over Mrs., as the former is more inclusive and can refer to any woman, regardless of marital status.

Use non-discriminatory language

1.2 Avoid gender-biased expressions or expressions that reinforce gender stereotypes

Discriminatory examples:

- "She throws/runs/fights like a girl."
- "In a manly way."
- "Oh, that's women's work."
- "Thank you to the ladies for making the room more beautiful."
- "Men just don't understand."
- Less inclusive: "Guests are cordially invited to attend with their wives." More inclusive: "Guests are cordially invited to attend with their partners."

How do I know if I am using discriminatory language?

- Reverse the gender: Would reversing the designation or the term from masculine to feminine or vice versa change the meaning or emphasis of the sentence? Would it make the sentence sound odd?

Examples:

- "Women should not seek out leadership positions."
- "Men cannot do two things at the same time."

Make gender visible when it is relevant for communication

- **2.1 Using feminine and masculine pronouns**

- "Pairing" is the use of both feminine and masculine forms (he or she; her or his). It is a strategy that may be used when the author/speaker wants to explicitly make both women and men visible. **It is advisable not to overuse this strategy in English**, however, as it may be distracting to the reader, in particular in narrative texts. It may also create inconsistencies or render the text less accurate — for example, in legal texts.

- Example: "When a staff member accepts an offer of employment, **he or she** must be able to assume that the offer is duly authorized. To qualify for payment of the mobility incentive, **she or he** must have five years' prior continuous service on a fixed-term or continuing appointment."

- The feminine and masculine forms can also be alternated throughout the text.

- **2.2 Using two different words**

- In cases in which highlighting gender would make the sentence more inclusive, two separate words can be used. This strategy should be used only when popular beliefs or preconceptions may obscure the presence or action of either gender.

- Examples: "Boys and girls should attend the first cooking class with their parents."

- "All of the soldiers, both men and women, responded negatively to question 5 in the survey on gender inclusivity."

Do not make gender visible when it is not relevant for communication

- **3.1 Use gender-neutral words**
- Less inclusive "Mankind", More inclusive "Humankind"; "humanity"; "human race" "
- **3.2 Using plural pronouns/adjectives**

In informal writing, such as emails, plural pronouns may be used as a shortcut to ensure gender inclusiveness. Such strategies are not recommended in formal writing.

- Example: "Before submitting your document, send it to the focal point for **their** review; **they** will return it to you with comments."
- **3.3 Use the pronoun** *one*
- Less inclusive "A staff member in Antarctica earns less than **he** would in New York." More inclusive "A staff member in Antarctica earns less than **one** in New York."
- **3.4 Use the relative pronoun** *who*
- Less inclusive More inclusive "If a complainant is not satisfied with the board's decision, **he** can ask for a rehearing." "A complainant **who** is not satisfied with the board's decision can ask for a rehearing."

Do not make gender visible when it is not relevant for communication

- **3.5 Use a plural antecedent**
- When referring to generic subjects, plural antecedents may be used in order to avoid gendered pronouns.
- Less inclusive "A substitute judge must certify that **he** has familiarized **himself** with the record of the proceedings." More inclusive "Substitute judges must certify that **they** have familiarized **themselves** with the record of the proceedings."
- **3.6 Omit the gendered word**
- Less inclusive "Requests the Emergency Relief Coordinator to continue **his/her** efforts to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian assistance." More inclusive "Requests the Emergency Relief Coordinator to continue efforts to strengthen the coordination of humanitarian assistance."
- **3.7 Use the passive voice**
- Less inclusive "The author of a communication must have direct and reliable evidence of the situation **he** is describing." More inclusive "The author of a communication must have direct and reliable evidence of the situation being described."

Gender-markers in Modern Greek

- Unfortunately, most European languages have many more gender-markers than just pronouns and possessives.

- In Greek, gender-markers include:

- **the definite and indefinite articles**

- **nouns**

- **adjectives**

- **participles**

- **Gender-neutral** language can be used in specific contexts by replacing gender-specific nouns with gender-neutral ones. E.g. "faculty members" instead of "male and female professors" (in Greek: «καθηγητ*ές* και καθηγήτ*ριες*»). However, in most cases a **gender-inclusive** and/or **gender-sensitive** language is preferable as gendered words cannot be avoided overall.

Proposed strategies

- **Gender visibility**
- As Greek has 3 grammatical genders, a strategy usually employed to achieve inclusiveness is "pairing" or even writing and saying all 3 genders: e.g. ο/η(/το) (definite article)
- To further enhance feminine visibility many write/say the feminine forms first, followed by the gender-denoting endings of the masculine with a slash: e.g. η/ο καθηγή**τρια**/τής
- Problem: superfluous and hard to attain (esp. in speaking)
- **Reappropriation of pejorative terms**
- A practice followed successfully by activist oppressed groups (e.g. lgbtqi+, indigenous American people) is also suggested for many feminine nouns denoting professions that were used pejoratively in the past (e.g. προεδρίνα = woman president, βουλευτίνα = woman MP).

Proposed strategies

- **New feminine nouns**
- New grammatical formations respecting grammar production rules are proposed to replace masculine forms currently in use (e.g. βουλεύτ**ρια** instead of η βουλευ**τής** for a woman MP).
- **The use of @ to denote all gender endings**
- A common practice in social media (e.g. βουλευτ@).
- Cannot be used in formal contexts and most importantly it is not pronounced; for this reason, it cannot replace the visibility strategy of writing all 3 or at least two (feminine and masculine) grammatical genders.

Reactions

- Most, if not all, of these strategies are usually faced with scepticism: most people (and women in particular) for various reasons dislike language changes.

- NB. Many people are gender blinded, i.e. they fail to recognise that the roles and responsibilities of women/girls and men/boys are ascribed to, or imposed upon, them in specific social, cultural, economic and political contexts. And clearly deny the decisive role that language can play in promoting gender equality and eradicating gender bias. They usually reject proposed changes as artificial, imposed and "too politically correct".

Ways to overcome barriers

- Paradigm change can be imposed by state institutions or be embraced and implemented as best practice (again at high institutional level).

- Gender education and gender training will help greatly towards this direction. For most deniers of change are not fervent or militant proponents of sexism. More often than not they are unaware of the problems caused by gender-biased language and simply defend (sexist) internalised norms that to them are "natural" and "given". In most cases, all it takes is to demonstrate they are not.

Sharing experiences

- Please consider the following
- I. Does your language have similar gender-bias problems as the ones we have in Greek?
- II. Have they been addressed?
- III. What are the proposed strategies that have been employed to overcome them?
- IV. What were/are the reactions that these strategies have faced?