Maslova T. B.

National Technical University of Ukraine

"Igor Sikorsky Kyiv Polytechnic Institute"

WHAT MAKES PROFESSIONAL ENGLISH POLITICALLY CORRECT AND NEUTRAL GENDER LANGUAGE

Today, the term politically correct has to do not only with the realm of politics but also with culture, academia and the language itself. According to the modern English dictionaries it is language, behaviour and attitudes that can be politically correct, that is non-offensive and avoiding any insults or negative judgements concerning race, gender, religion, sexual affinity, one's physical and mental personal development etc [1; 3]. With the recent shifts in global economy that opened up more opportunities for running multinational and international projects and businesses, advocating equal rights and social policies, and attracting more females into higher education and managerial workplace [5, p.14], political correctness has become a rather serious issue within professional communities.

The two main trends that make the present-day English language, which is lingua franca of the 21st century specialism, politically correct consist in using euphemisms that help some occupations and tasks sound more pleasantly, and neutral gender rather than gender-marked lexis.

Linguistically speaking, euphemism is a word or phrase coined to substitute for the one that has some upsetting, unpleasant, offensive, or embarrassing associations [1; 2; 6]. In business discourse, euphemisms come into play when it is necessary to denote humble occupations, unemployment status, lack of money and success.

Euphemisms can be achieved through the application of metaphor, which is a rhetoric device to describe things vividly by means of analogy. Typically consisting of more than one word, figurative euphemisms make unpleasant occurrences and financial problems appear less serious (*e.g. illegal immigrant – irregular immigrant, undocumented worker; unemployed – unintentionally at leisure, non-waged,*

economically inactive; job losses – job restructuring, reduction in force; failure – non-traditional success; (to) fire – (to) lay off, select out; bankruptcy – negative cash situation, cash flow problem; poor – economically disadvantaged, needy, in need; increase in tax – progressive revenue).

As known, the engineer originally refers to a skilled person who controls an engine, but this term is now extended to a person who deals with design, building or maintenance of various machines and structures. Accordingly, it is often adopted to form euphemisms to beautify and show respect to the titles of some professions (*e.g. telephone repairer – telephone engineer, mechanic – automobile engineer, trash cleaner – custodian engineer, garbage collector – sanitation engineer)* [2; 6].

The main problem with the names of profession, however, is sexism. Over the recent years a number of previously established words and expressions have started to be considered as discriminating against women either because they seem to give women a less important status that the male equivalent, or because they belong to male terminology and contain the stem *–man*. For that reason, there have been suggested alternative neutral gender words, and the terms which previously applied exclusively to men have been made to refer to both men and women since the female forms are found to possess negative associations which the male form does not have (*e.g. steward/ stewardess (air hostesses) – flight attendant, headmaster/ headmistress – head teacher, waiter/ waitress – server, waiter, authoress / author – author, poetess/ poet – poet, actor/ actress – actor)* [8].

The use of generic man is said to be one of the most common ways of expressing gender bias against women in the English language [4, p. 26], and it has been proposed to replace it in noun compounds by gender-neutral words such as *person, officer,* and the like, or eliciting alternatives from morphologically unrelated words (*e.g. businessman – business person, chairman – chairperson/ chair, layman – layperson, salesman – salesperson, policeman – police officer, tax man – tax officer, postman – letter/ mail carrier, fireman – firefighter, foreman – supervisor, statesman – state leader, cameraman – camera operator)* [2; 6].

In addition to the job titles, a range of other derivatives containing (pseudo) generic man have also been changed to prevent decoding man-based nouns as those that embody a male rather than a human, and thus eliminate the linguistic bias against women (*e.g. manhole – utility hole, man-made – artificial, manpower – human resources, mankind – humanity*) [7].

Meanwhile, a number of pronoun alternatives have been proposed in order to further secure gender equity. The thing is that although most English personal nouns, including job titles, are gender-neutral and can be pronominalised by either masculine or feminine pronouns, clear gender bias used to be shown in the language use when high-status professions, such as those of judge or surgeon, were pronominalised by generic he, while with such occupations as nurse and secretary generic she was used for anaphoric reference. Linked with generic man, the use of generic he also dominated when the personal pronoun was required to refer to someone, as opposed to something, without identifying whether that person was male or female, especially in a formal style, for example in contracts or legal documents as well as in proverbs.

e.g. The writer should know his reader well.

e.g. To log in, the user must enter his login name and password.

e.g. Everybody should act on his own responsibility.

To get rid of sexual bias in pronouns there have been suggested a number of strategies that replace the *he/ him/ his* pronouns without distorting the message or compromising style or readability:

– using plural nouns in the sentence,

– deleting the pronouns *he/ his/ him* altogether,

– repeating the same noun instead of using any pronoun,

– substituting articles *the/ a/ an* for *his*, and *who* for *he*,

– using a paired pronoun, like *he or she*, *she or he*, or *s/he* (in writing),

– rewording the sentence so that to avoid indefinite and gender-based personal pronouns, for example by means of the passive voice,

– changing the sentence and using another pronoun, such as *one, you, we*.

e.g. The writer should know the reader well.

e.g. To log in, enter your login name and password.

e.g. Everybody should act on s/his own responsibility.

Another popular alternative is generic they, which appeared in the 2000ies, even though some linguists comment that it may have come into the English language earlier if not because of the vigilance of English teachers. Despite a long history of debate with regard to its acceptability, the use of generic *they* and its inflected forms *them* and *their*, is nowadays acknowledged by many handbook writers and writers' guides as anaphoric pronoun and determiner in informal English [3; 7].

e.g. If the child possesses the nationality or citizenship of another country they may lose this when they get a British Passport.

e.g When a person gets married, they have to start thinking about their responsibilities.

Yet, the levels of acceptability of generic they vary according to the linguistic context. For instance, it is reported to that generic *they* does not jar when used as a pronoun for *everybody*, but it may jar with *somebody*, and with words such as *individual*.

It is best summarized by the Oxford Living Dictionaries website, which reads that in the past all people unquestioningly used the generic pronouns *he, him, his*, and *himself*, but now it is seen as outdated and sexist. The three options that would allow arriving at a more gender-neutral solution include the wording '*he or she*', '*his or her*', but this will work well only as long as it is not necessary to keep repeating this throughout a piece of writing, the use of the relevant noun plural and rewording the sentence appropriately, but it cannot be always be possible, and finally the use of the plural pronouns *they, them, their* despite the fact that they are referring back to a singular noun [8]. Compare:

e.g. A researcher has to be completely objective in his findings.

e.g. A researcher has to be completely objective in his or her findings.

e.g. Researchers have to be completely objective in their findings.

e.g. A researcher has to be completely objective in their findings.

Some people object to the use of generic *they* as it sounds ungrammatical, but the use of plural pronouns to refer back to a singular subject is actually not new. As a matter of fact, it represents a revival of a practice dating from the 16th century.

In conclusion, equality and dignity are the two key watchwords of political correctness. In modern globalized society it is very important to use politically correct language, which does not offend anyone and makes no distinction between the two different genders. In English it becomes especially tricky to refer to both men and women when it comes to pronouns because various factors can contribute to linguistic changes, and the changes adopted in a speech community may gradually be accepted as norms only over time. Therefore, one should be looking for a good politically correct neutral-gender solution in the current up-to-date English language dictionaries, handbooks, and corpora that indicate which choices of words, phrases and grammar forms are gaining wider acceptance in both writing and speech.

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