

# Does Gendered Language Exist in a Foreign Language Context? A Study in Written Discourse of Saudi Male and Female EFL Learners

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## Abstract

This investigation aims to verify the hypothesis that gendered language exists in foreign language usage as manifested in the EFL learners' writing output in a Saudi university. The motivation behind this is to, ultimately, check and weed out elements of gendered language that are early on embedded amongst the genders which, with the passage of time, lead to various biases. Though it may be utopian to think of eradicating linguistic bias, yet this study hopes to contribute meaningfully to curb it and substitute the temptation of allowing it to seep into communication, by educating and training EFL users to substitute these with gender-free language and helping ensure greater gender equality. The writing output of 42 EFL learners was analyzed using an electronic parsing tool called Stanford Parser (v. 3.7.0), and all components classified as grammatical dependencies. Results showed that differences existed in male and female writings in the use of noun in subject position which occurred more frequently in female text at 69.15 mean dependency occurrence. This has long been held as a marked feature of female language use. The same dependency stands at a much lower 51.28 mean occurrence in males. Further, female writing has long been associated with a great deal of use of 'empty' modifiers, such as 'very' which act as modifiers to adverbs and adjectives. The current study upheld this contention as well. Lastly, backchanneling occurred more in female output in EFL than their male counterparts.

**Keywords:** gendered use of language, grammatical dependencies, language use in EFL, Stanford Parser, writing output

## 1. Introduction

Lexical choices made by the speakers or writers play on the cognition of the listener or reader and reduplicate gender related biases or preconceived notions even when the recipients of the message are gender neutral (Menegatti & Rubini, 2017). This process is unconscious and automatic. One example cited to demonstrate this is of the language of the obituaries (Kirchler, 1992). Semantic derivations attached to lexical labels trigger the recall of information related to the labels. Beliefs too can be stereotypical. In the same study, Kirchler (1992) noted how attributes like knowledge and intelligence were highlighted in the obituaries of men, and sincerity, kindness and other philanthropist qualities were highlighted in the obituaries of women. Thus, we see that stereotypical gender features were used even for the deceased people. Furthermore, Maass and Arcuri (1996) pointed out that many terms used to refer to one gender do not find a counterpart for the other gender. One example is the term *career woman*. There is no parallel term for men who choose to work as the general stereotype is that men are indeed supposed to work to earn a living but no such norm is fixed for women. Hence, the special term to refer to women who choose a career. Similar terminologies, especially for women, make them all the more visible in male domains apart from conjuring up all the connotations gathered by them over the centuries.

This would be a specially useful contribution as it can ensure greater participation of women in economic and political activity and hence their passage into the mainstream, which is also a national target in KSA. Such adoption of gender-neutral language has been successfully achieved in Sweden (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015). When a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to people with unknown gender was first introduced in Swedish, there was public opposition to its use. However, persistent use for as short as two years led to its acceptance and successful incorporation into the language.

The theory of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (also known as Whorfianism, 1956) propounds that our language is a construct of our thoughts (Whorf, 1956). The other part of the theory is Linguistic Relativism: Distinctions encoded in one language are unique to that language alone (Everett, 2013). Further, there is no limit to the structural diversity of languages (Holman et al., 2007). In the background of the hypothesis of the current study, that there are considerable differences in the semantic and syntactic characteristics of foreign language use by males and females, it would be a reasonable contention that this variance is symptomatic of the variance in their world view. Language is, after all, a tool or vehicle of thought and vocabulary is the basic foundation of idea conceptualisation offering a map of the concepts, processes and relationships that one wants to convey (Halliday, 1978). In a larger sense, Fowler (1991) stated that vocabulary represents the world for a particular community and in doing so, categorisation or segmentation is needed to help members of a culture make sense of the world. When undertaking analysis of a discourse, it is important to find out which terms habitually occur and which

segmented part of the world enjoys discursive attention.

Many of the theories of gendered language were rooted in the premise of inferior power position being reflected in women's language (Crawford, 1995; Sadiqi, 2002). These came to be placed under the broad subheading of *dominance approach*. This approach holds that as compared to men, in conversations, women's speech is more interspersed with back channelling signals and fewer opposition to interruption, while men's speech behaviours show a tendency towards holding the power centre, more interruptions and challenges. This view reflects the findings of Zimmerman and West (1975) that speech situations reflect *societal power relationships*. In an interesting study of courtroom discourses, analysis demonstrated that the features of speech previously associated with women were used by people in positions of powerlessness (O'Barr & Atkins, 1980). Consequently, the view that language encodes power and power is created through language (Duranti, 2004).

Recent studies, however, have also shown that such findings cannot be generalised across board. In other words, in all situations, all men cannot be assumed to be in a position of dominance over women (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 2016). Therefore, dominance cannot be an all-encompassing explanation of differences in gendered language production (Talbot, 1996). Gender identities alone may not govern language in a large number of language situations. Sometimes, other/ multiple identities affect language production (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). One example could be seen in language production amongst bi or multi-racial speech situations. In this, the need to establish one's racial identity rather than gender identity may be the dominant motivation (Hermans et al., 2017). Whatever be the motivation behind a particular type of language production, it has been clear to linguists, anthropologists, sociologists and language specialists that language remains an important issue to be studied to understand the society more comprehensively (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz, 2008).

Somewhat less critical than the Dominance Approach, was the Cultural Difference Approach. This was a product of the women's lib movements of the 70s. Notable amongst the studies undertaken driven by this approach were Maltz and Borker (1980) and Gumperz (1982). This new approach propounded that differences were discernible in the talk of men and women because they actually belonged to two different linguistic sub-cultures (Pratto et al., 2016). In other words, their early socialization was responsible for these speech differences. The Theory of Dominance was based on the premise of male domination of women using the vehicle of language. The new approach however, had 'feminist' works focusing on interruption (West & Zimmerman, 1983; Zimmerman & West, 1975); use of verbose language, questions and question tags, and back channelling (Fishman, 1983, 1997). Certain ways of speaking came to be recognised by feminists as characteristic of women's speech. Keeping conversations free of interruption (or if interrupting, limiting it to the purpose of encouraging and empathising with the speaker), and not vying for opportunity to speak, were seen as being exclusive to women's talk (Penelope, 1990). Many more recent works, particularly towards the late 90s, were undertaken to study gendered talk. Some of these investigated and evaluated exclusively women's talk while some were focused only on men's talk patterns. Whichever the approach, the common thread was in their treatment of both men and women as belonging to separate social groups. One less philosophical but highly popular work on these lines was *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. This and the others till the present times, have kept the pointer on investigating and analysing the differences in language use between men and women and not inequality between the genders has also been summed up (Cameron 1995). However, prior to this, inequality against women in mixed talk situations manoeuvred by men using language to the disadvantage of women or, when pursued by feminist-oriented researches, the superiority of all-women talk were the centres of academic interest.

### **Research questions**

Given that gender constitutes part of a writer's multiple identities, investigating how the development of second language writing reflects, affects, or constructs thoughts would provide important insights in educational contexts (Kubota, 2003). In the 1970s, female researchers began to look at how language code translated sexist values and biases. Since gender is embedded in everything in today's society, it is hoped that this study will shed new light on a hitherto unexplored facet of the EFL scenario. Accordingly, this study answers the following question:

What is the nature of English language used by EFL male and female learners at Qassim University?

### **2. Literature Review**

The ability to establish the difference between genders and debate on language use between men and women has increased and induced the interests of the researcher to learn about the relationship between language and gender (Crawford, 1995). Therefore, the present section reviews the association and concept of gender and language.

One main feature of language is that it has no gender restriction and can be used by both genders even if in different ways (Craig, 2006). The discussion on the problem of women interacting uniquely than men has existed for over a hundred years (Ngun et al., 2011). In fact, language has not only revealed the patriarchal system, but it also highlighted the male dominance over their female counterparts (Prividera & Howard III, 2006). The language used by women is considered a reflection of their inner qualities like solidarity, sensitivity, expressivities, emotions, sociability, etc. (Nadler, 2020). In the same way, the language of men is a reflection of their control, independence, and status just as politeness in the language of women can be explained through the usage of downtoners, softeners, compromises where these features will lend gentleness to the speech and this is a conscious act when a person focuses on the voice and uses intensifiers or boosters, upgraders or strengtheners (Lakoff, 1975). There are also studies contrary to the current hypothesis that men and women's languages differ. Rubin and Greene (1992) rather concluded that the writing of men and women is more similar than

different. Further, where they differed was in the mode of discourse. The writing samples also varied as they pertained both to spontaneous writing as well as revised writing. On some parameters, the writings did, however, display certain gendered features. One such feature is the use of the exclamation much more frequently by women, almost thrice as much as men. This is linked to women not being in a position of authority as one who would perceive the self in such a position would simply assert their view for affirmation. The study also concluded that women, more often than men, presented the opposing views as being equally legitimate.

Slotte et al. (2001) studied the spontaneous strategies used by males and females in text-based learning. The data were collected from two studies which examined the note-taking patterns of applicants to a Finnish medical school. On an average, it was found that females took notes more than males. However, notably, an almost equal number of the genders drew maps or resorted to underlining of the text. Whatever the learning strategy used, the overall achievement levels between the genders showed parity. In other words, the tests did not favour any gender. The use of overt study strategies was more frequent among the women than men. This study was conducted on applicants of the year 1988. The other study involved applicants to the same university in 1991. In the multiple choice questions, no gender specific performance trends were noted for Physics, Chemistry and Biology. In the second test, although the genders used different learning strategies, these were not statistically significant. The findings also did not prove that men used spatial study strategies more than the women.

Additionally, Block (2002) showed the relationship between gender and language and examining that there is a difference in constructing a society in terms of gender difference in language. Another great factor is the importance of dealing effectively with gender, as well as writing and the connection existing with second language writing, is uniquely constructed in a study in the second language that experimented with the social nature of writing instead of autonomous or individual nature.

### ***Features in gendered language use***

As early as 1975, Lakoff suggested some special features of women's language use: They make use of more correct grammar, intensifiers, tag questions and empty adjectives like 'nice' and 'charming'. She established a significant account of feminine linguistics. As per Lakoff (1975) the devices that soften the words are usually for women while stressing devices are usually for men. The mannerisms that are considered to be peculiar to women's language are direct quotations, verbal fillers, hypercorrectness, softeners, hedges, speaking in italics, and lack of humour, empty adjectives, tag questions, and minimal responses. Differently, Labov (1972, 1997) mostly explained the men's speech in different articles. However, considering the rising voice of female expression of language, Labov examined the features of gendered linguistics. These studies reveal that there is some difference in language spoken by women and men, in the same way, their writing also differed. Similarly, Soori and Zamani, (2012) pointed out that the difference in the usage of language between women and men is true and analysis of their writing output can help understand the bond between gender and language.

Despite of these views, Uchida (1992) stated that depending upon the *difference theory* for women and men, even those among the similar group, live in unique or varied cultural worlds and as an outcome, they endorsed many ways of speaking. In other words, in spite of women and men sharing the same environment, they behave like each of them were from a different place and culture.

## **3. Methods**

### ***Research design***

This study follows content corpus analysis of written output of both males and female EFL learners at Qassim University to verify the hypothesis that gendered language exists in foreign language usage as manifested in the EFL learners' writing output. The study took place in the Academic year (1444AH).

### ***Participants***

Towards this end, writing samples were collected from previously produced output of 42 EFL learners, with an equal number of samples of male and female writing in English. All samples were from learners who had consistently scored 3.0 or more CG in the last three exams held by the University. The median age of the group was 21.7 years and these learners were classified as upper intermediate in their writing proficiency.

### ***Data buildings and analysis***

The researcher used the students' written production in the course *Academic Writing* (Eng-244). This course is taught at level five. Prior to data collection and analysis, ethical considerations were safeguarded by getting permission from the Deanship of Higher Studies to conduct a study on gendered language theory. Furthermore, the students' consent was also obtained with the assurance that their writing would be used strictly for research purpose, they welcomed the idea and extended their oral consent. The Stanford Parser software (v. 3.7.0) was used to analyse the language items in each of the 42 EFL writing samples. The parser works by allotting a simple grammatical relationship or grammatical category to each entry. This is an especially useful tool for users who are not trained in core linguistics but need to analyse language. The current version of the tool contains around fifty grammatical dependencies. The tool can be used cross-linguistically. The version used here is 3.9.2. As per Marneffe and Manning (2008, revised for Stanford Parser, 2016) these dependencies are as follows:

1. cop: Compound Sentence
2. nsubj: Noun in subject position

3. dobj: Direct object
4. advcl: Adverb clause
5. det: Determiner
6. advmod: Adverb modifier
7. aux: Auxiliary verb
8. acl: Adjective clause
9. case: Case marker
10. Sentence Length (*my addition*)
11. neg: Negative marker
12. det (this): Use of determiner ‘this’
13. det (that): Use of determiner ‘that’
14. cc: Compound marker
15. auxpass: Auxiliary passive marker

The tool begins by first creating a tree diagram of the syntax. Thereafter, each lexical item is identified as a grammatical element. Even in this classification, the individual entry is labelled both as an individual as well as by its place in the sentence. This means that, all entries are labelled individually and in relation to other entries. Take the example of a sentence, *He suffered from an acute persecution mentality*. The parser identifies the first entry as *he* which is a personal pronoun, hence marked PRP, the next entry is *suffered* which is verb, past tense, and so on. Here is an example of the parsed text:

He/PRP  
 suffered/VBD  
 from/IN  
 an/DT  
 acute/JJ  
 persecution/NN  
 mentality/NN

**4. Results**

Finding statistical averages was seen as the most suitable way to crystallise the raw data obtained from analysis of the writing samples. The reason for this was that the researcher wanted to compare each one of the sixteen parameters that have been variously opined to be differently used by men and women in previous studies on gendered writing. By using statistical mean, we were able to surpass internal inconsistencies of the individual genders and arrive at usable numerical values. Table 1 below demonstrates the comparative values over the sixteen parameters across the two genders that we have chosen for the current study.

Table 1. Comparative Statistical Means of male and female authored samples across sixteen parameters

Dependency code	Dependency	Mean for Males	Mean for Females
cop	Compound sentence	10.76	14.08
nsubj	Noun in subject position	51.28	69
dobj	Direct object	81.46	33.30
advcl	Adverb clause	14.56	14.0
det	Determiner	78.64	66.15
the	Occurrence of ‘the’	194.96	175.46
this	Occurrence of ‘this’	9.12	2.96
that	Occurrence of ‘that’	23.6	26.69
advmod	Adverb modifier	20.32	26.53
aux	Auxiliary verb	31.28	27.69
acl	Adjective clause	17.64	18.76
case	Case marker	106.64	103.30
AvgSL	Average sentence length	28.8	31.5
neg	Negative marker	6.4	5.07
cc	Compound marker	67.12	71.9
auxpass	Auxiliary passive marker	11.04	10.76

To compare the values for samples produced by male and female participants, the following graphical representation in Figure 1 was made.

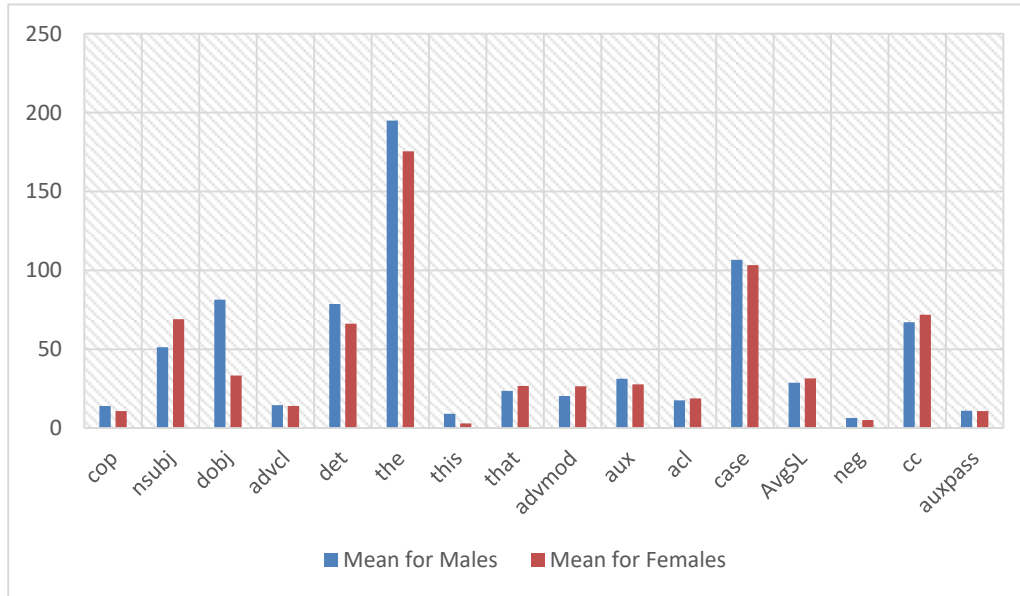


Figure 1. Representation of mean dependency occurrence in male and female textual outputs

**5. Discussion**

As can be seen in the data, while dramatic variations occur in some dependencies between the textual reproductions of males and females, certain parameters vary only negligibly, sometimes contrary to previous findings. Compounding of sentences, i.e., adding strings to the subject-predicate construction was found to occur more frequently in female text at 14.08 mean occurrence of the compound construction over a text of about four hundred words. This is lower in males at 10.76 mean occurrence over an approximately similar text length. This finding is corroborated by the dependency marked ‘cc’ for compound construction marker, which reflects a mean occurrence of 71.9 in females as against 67.12 in males. This shows that females tend to add information strings leading to longer sentences.

Noun in subject position occurs more frequently in female text at 69.15 mean dependency occurrence. This has long been held as a marked feature of female language use. The same dependency stands at a much lower 51.28 mean occurrence in males. This finding is also supported by the mean scores obtained for the determiner ‘this’ which can be used in place of ‘nsubj’ which stands at a mean occurrence of 9.12 among males against a markedly lower 2.96 in females. This goes to show that females have a preference for nouns rather than for their grammatical substitutes. In fact, lower ‘det’ i.e. determiner scores at 66.15 dependency occurrence for females against 78.64 for males also shows a marked preference in males to substitute the more individual-aimed noun for the more impersonal substitutes like ‘this’.

Female writing has long been associated with a great deal of use of ‘empty’ modifiers, such as ‘very’ which act as modifiers to adverbs and adjectives. These previous findings have been validated here with female textual samples showing a mean dependency occurrence of a higher 26.53 as compared to the much smaller 20.32 mean occurrence in male samples. Also the ‘acl’ i.e., adjective clause shows a higher (though marginally) occurrence in females at 18.76 as compared to the male output of 17.64 mean occurrence. Here Lakoff may be cited as being relevant though what is said is more for the speech act of the genders. Yet it is interesting. According to Lakoff (1975), women’s language is intonational because sometimes they “speak in italics” i.e. phrases are used to grasp the attention of a person. At times speaking in italics means whispering where certain phrases are uttered in low tones. This amount of stress is not found in men’s language style as they don’t like to speak in hint language. Next to it, there is an interesting factor where empty adjectives like fantastic, wonderful, sweet, well, gorgeous, lovely, adorable etc was used more by women than men. These adjectives do not play any major role while speaking and do not convey any message. Simply put, these are supportive words which act as fillers in-between the sentence constituents. If an adjective is used in a sentence then it defines the noun but in terms of empty adjectives, it is hard to even find the noun applying it into the sentences. In fact, empty adjectives act as compliments to the sentence.

Negative marker dependencies occur slightly lesser in females at 5.07 which shows their communicative pattern of allowing for greater back-channelling rather than the more interruptive and aggressive language exhibited by males at a mean occurrence of the negative marker dependency at 6.4.

The above finding is also supported by a computer analysis of a database as large as 70000 blogs which conclusively brought forth by Schler et al. (2005) to surmise that men and women indeed wrote differently. In fact, according to this study, the computer could identify the writer’s gender correctly almost 72% of the times. Surprisingly, human accuracy in identifying the writer’s gender on similar texts was between 55-65 percent. Further, gender could be identified in up to 76% of the texts if the computer also took into account the topic chosen to write the blog. The findings can be summarised as follows:

1. Women choose to write about people while men write about things.

2. Women include the other perspective as well while men tend to be objective writers.
3. 'Male' words find greater use as the age of the bloggers increases while 'female' words see a sharp decline of usage.

Schler et al. (2005) also note changes in the style of writing within gender categories. Male bloggers who frequently used more of prepositions and articles showed a decline in the feature as they got older. Similarly, pronouns, assent or negative words and blog words showed a decline in usage by females as we move to higher age brackets whereas, previously, with lower age categories, they reflected frequent use by female bloggers. Compared to females, males more frequently referred to politics and technology. Men also included more hyperlinks in their blogs. With progression in age, both genders displayed a more frequent use of pronouns and articles. Based upon style analysis (versus content analysis), the study was able to identify gender accurately (80.1%). In other words, writing styles of male and female bloggers are indeed different with statistically significant characteristics. Age too could be predicted accurately but based upon content rather than style.

## 6. Conclusions

This study set out to investigate if there are differences in language use by foreign language learners, English in this case. The study sample comprised 42 writing samples, with an equal number for male and female writers in English. The writing was mostly unguided but extracted from a single writing class at Qassim University. The data were parsed using the standardized Stanford Parser, a free parsing tool available online. It operates by creating a tree diagram and thereafter, classifying each component of the sentence into the suitable grammatical dependency. This tool is especially effective in comparing word category use in large data, and though the data in this study was not large, the tool was used to ensure error free parsing of the output. Results showed that differences existed in male and female use of noun in subject position which occurred more frequently in female text at 69.15 mean dependency occurrence. This has long been held as a marked feature of female language use. The same dependency stands at a much lower 51.28 mean occurrence in males. Further, female writing has long been associated with a great deal of use of 'empty' modifiers, such as 'very' which act as modifiers to adverbs and adjectives. The current study upheld this contention as well. Lastly, backchanneling occurred more in female output in EFL than their male counterparts.

Reviewing studies on language and gender in the broader field of second and foreign language education, Sunderland (2000) synthesized a large number of publications with a wide range of topics, including language learning ability, motivation/investment, teacher perceptions, learning styles and strategies, classroom interaction, teaching materials, testing, learner identities, masculinities, and pedagogies. Taking a close look at the importance of gender and writing relation, it is helpful to state that the second language writing research may explore gender differences in how men and women or boys and girls write differently in L2 with respect to process and product (Kubota, 2003). These differences, however, should not be conceptualized as fixed traits, but as phenomena contingent on context and power.

## 7. Recommendations

Unlike L1 where language and its nuances are naturally picked by users from the language environment, there is scope for ensuring gender parity in language use in L2 or foreign language learning. Based upon the findings of this study, it is recommended that EFL teachers sensitize their learners to language neutrality and freedom of expression in English. In other words, not only can gender neutral language be instilled in them, these learners may be encouraged to find unbiased expression in the foreign language. Moreover, reasons for the variations in foreign language (English) use by learners should be explored. Language use restrictions may be reflective of social values and norms, and if the aim of the educational institutions is to make their language learners proficient to compete with their global counterparts, then such divisive learnt behaviors need to be corrected.

## 8. Limitations

This has been a unique study in the field of EFL in the Saudi context being the first of its kind which examines gender differences in foreign language writing. However, the researcher believes that a larger sample size would have added to the value of its contribution. Another limitation in this endeavor has been the lack of variation in the topics chosen to write as these may decide the nature of word usage by writers. It is hoped that future replications will be sensitive to these limitations.

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