

Gender-Neutral Language in Societal Perception: Negotiating Inclusion and Controversy

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ABSTRACT

Gender identity and social impressions are greatly shaped by language, which also is crucial. Gender-neutral language's emergence seeks to support inclusivity and fit non-binary identities. This paper investigates society opinions, debates, and difficulties with gender-neutral terminology. It looks at how gender identity representation is shaped by language patterns and the elements causing acceptance or opposition. It also looks at how legislation and the media shape public perceptions and their contributions to either supporting or impeding language reform. This study examines scholarly literature, policy documents, and media reports using a library research approach. By means of case studies from many linguistic backgrounds, a qualitative study reveals recurrent themes in gender-neutral language acceptance and opposition, therefore evaluating the efficacy of media advocacy and policy implementation. Results show that even if younger generations are embracing gender-neutral language more and more, institutional and cultural barriers cause opposition. The paper emphasises how media helps to normalise inclusive language and the influence of government actions in either supporting or hindering their acceptance. The study finds that reconciling inclusivity with cultural traditions depends on collaborative efforts among policymakers, educators, media, and language institutions.



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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a fundamental role in communication and social construction, including in representing gender identity. In recent years, there has been a greater awareness of the importance of using more inclusive and gender-neutral language (Bauzà Bosch, 2021; Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015a). This is driven by the development of thinking regarding gender equality and the recognition of non-binary identities in various communities.

In many languages, especially those with grammatical gender systems like French or Spanish, the effort to adopt gender-neutral language becomes a significant linguistic challenge. Meanwhile, in Indonesian, which does not grammatically emphasize gender, the debate arises more in the realm of word choice and social identity references, such as the use of terms that do not refer to the binary gender.

The controversy regarding gender-neutral language in Indonesia arises from differing societal views on language change. Some support it as a progressive step towards inclusivity, while others consider it contrary to long-standing social norms. Therefore, research on gender-neutral language becomes relevant to understand how society responds to this phenomenon and its implications in daily life.

The structure of a language that differentiates gender can shape societal perceptions of gender identity. In this case, according to Foucart (2008) language can be categorized into three main forms: languages with grammatical gender systems like French and German, languages with gender-based pronouns like English, and languages that do not have grammatical gender systems like Indonesian. Although Indonesian is structurally more neutral, in practice, there is still gender bias in the use of certain terms, such as titles or greetings in formal and informal contexts. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is considered a tool that reflects social structure and power in society (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015a). Pierre Bourdieu (1991) in the concept of linguistic capital mentioned that language variation often reflects social hierarchies. The use of gender-neutral language can be seen as a challenge to traditional social systems based on the binary gender system. Furthermore, the Dominance Approach theory developed by Robin Lakoff (1975) shows that the differences in language used by men and women reflect social inequalities. Therefore, the application of gender-neutral language is often associated with the struggle for social equality in everyday communication.

In gender studies, Salih (2007) with the concept of gender performativity states that gender is not something fixed, but rather shaped through actions and language. Therefore, the use of gender-neutral language can help deconstruct the long-dominant binary gender norms. Furthermore, the perspective of Queer Linguistics introduced by Kulick (2000) emphasizes that language can be a tool to challenge heteronormative norms and create more inclusive spaces for non-binary identities. In the context of gender-neutral language, this perspective can help understand how language change plays a role in supporting more diverse gender identities in society (Butler, 2025).

However, not all societies readily accept the concept of gender-neutral language. Based on Labov (2002), Language Change Resistance theory, language change often faces resistance because it is perceived as threatening the stability of an established language system. In the context of gender-neutral language, resistance can arise from various factors, such as cultural and religious norms that still refer to the concept of binary gender, language habits that are difficult to change in a short period, and political controversies that associate the use of gender-neutral language with certain social movements. These factors indicate that language change does not only occur at the linguistic level, but is also closely related to the social and cultural dynamics in society (Coupland, 2016)

As part of gender study, there have been many studies conducted by previous researchers related to this topic. The first study conducted by Ashrafova (2024) exploring the relationship between language and gender norms. The study reveals a growing acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns in English among younger generations, but entrenched gender biases persist in languages with grammatical gender systems. Practical recommendations for promoting gender equality include advocating for gender-neutral policies, increasing public awareness, and challenging gender stereotypes through media.

The second study conducted by Diaz et al. (2022) exploring Gender neutral and non-binary language practices in the Spanish language classroom. It traces the history of inclusive language change in Spanish, explores the views of scholars and governing institutions, and critically examines the traditional reliance on prescriptive norms in language teaching. The paper concludes by posing reflexive questions to encourage deeper conversations about articulating a renewed pedagogical praxis that acknowledges the growing spectrum of social gender identities and provides grammatically inclusive alternatives for both teachers and learners.

Another study related to this topic was conducted by Lindqvist et al. (2019). Two experiments tested gender-fair language strategies to reduce male bias in recruitment situations in their study, three types of strategies were tested: paired forms, traditional neutral words, and gender-neutral third-person pronouns. Results showed that paired forms and actively created gender-neutral pronouns eliminated male bias, while traditional neutral words contained a male bias. The study suggests that gender-fair language strategies should avoid using traditional words and emphasizes the importance of actively created gender-neutral pronouns for their inclusivity.

The current study introduces a novel approach by examining gender-neutral language from a broader societal perspective, moving beyond specific contexts such as English-speaking communities (Ashrafova, 2024), Spanish language classrooms (Diaz et al., 2022), and recruitment settings (Lindqvist et al., 2019). Unlike previous studies that focus on promoting gender-inclusive language, this research uniquely investigates the controversies and resistance surrounding its adoption, analyzing ideological, cultural, and political factors that influence public perception. Additionally, it takes a cross-linguistic and comparative approach, exploring how different language structures both with and without grammatical gender adapt to or resist gender-neutral reforms. Another key novelty is the focus on media, activism, and policy-making, which have not been extensively studied in previous works but play a crucial role in shaping attitudes toward inclusive language. By addressing these gaps, this study provides a more holistic and socially relevant understanding of the dynamics of gender-neutral language, offering practical strategies for balancing inclusivity with cultural traditions in diverse linguistic contexts.

METHOD

Utilising a library research approach, this study examines how society views gender-neutral language, its adoption, and its controversies by gathering, evaluating, and synthesising existing material. A qualitative approach, library research uses secondary sources including books, policy papers, media reports, and scholarly

journal articles to gain a thorough grasp of the subject. Data is first gathered from reliable sources, such as government or institutional reports on language policies, sociological study, gender studies, and linguistic studies. This guarantees that a wide variety of viewpoints be represented, including those that support gender-inclusive language and those that criticise its application. The chosen literature is examined to find important themes, trends, and contentions about the acceptance and opposition to gender-neutral language in various linguistic and cultural contexts.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

3.1 Definition and Concept of Gender-Neutral Language

Gender-neutral language is a linguistic strategy aimed at reducing or eradicating gender bias in communication by eschewing gendered terminology, utilising neutral alternatives, and fostering inclusivity in both speech and writing (Creedon & Wackwitz, 2022). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2013) assert that language not only mirrors social realities but also actively shapes and perpetuates gender norms. The advocacy for gender-neutral language is integral to wider initiatives aimed at achieving gender equality, especially in cultures where conventional linguistic frameworks prioritise male forms. Historically, numerous languages employ male pronouns as general references, so perpetuating the perception that male identity is normative. Promoting gender-neutral forms can render language a more inclusive instrument for articulating varied gender identities (Coates, 2015; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013).

Languages demonstrate differing levels of gender marking linguistically. Certain languages, including Spanish and French, possess grammatical gender, wherein nouns, adjectives, and pronouns are intrinsically classified as masculine or feminine. Conversely, languages such as English and Indonesian lack rigid grammatical gender frameworks yet still exhibit gender prejudice through pronouns, occupational terminology, and default male allusions (Lakoff, 1975). For instance, English has conventionally employed "he" as a generic pronoun, whereas Indonesian phrases such as *ketua* (chairperson) and *dokter* (doctor) are frequently presumed to denote males unless specifically stated differently. Linguistic biases foster the notion that specific occupations or professions are primarily male-dominated, hence reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Initiatives to adopt gender-neutral language have led to numerous linguistic innovations. The singular they/them pronoun has achieved broad acceptance in English, recognised by organisations such as the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) as a grammatically accurate gender-neutral substitute for "he" or "she." Activists and intellectuals have proposed alternatives such as *Latinx* or *Latine* to supplant the gendered labels *Latino* and *Latina* (Diaz et al., 2022). In Sweden, the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* has been effectively incorporated alongside *han* (he) and *hon* (she), bolstered by progressive legislation and linguistic studies (Lindqvist et al., 2019). These modifications illustrate how linguistic reforms can enhance inclusivity and mirror the shifting cultural perspectives on gender identity.

Notwithstanding its growing acknowledgement, gender-neutral language persists in encountering opposition from multiple areas. Cultural and religious traditions significantly influence linguistic norms, with certain tribes perceiving

gender-inclusive language as a danger to their cultural legacy (Ashrafova, 2024). Institutional obstacles remain, since language authorities such as the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) and the Académie Française have resisted gender-inclusive reforms, contending that they undermine linguistic systems. Moreover, political and ideological resistance from conservative factions frequently characterises gender-neutral language as superfluous or as an element of a wider political goal, exacerbating societal polarisation (Bradley, 2021).

However, gender-neutral language signifies a significant transformation in both linguistic and social domains. It confronts entrenched gender biases inherent in language and advocates for inclusivity for individuals of all gender identities. Its execution, however, relies on cultural acceptability, institutional backing, and continuous promotion. The discussions on gender-neutral language underscore the convergence of language, power, and identity, rendering it a crucial focus in sociolinguistics and gender studies (Lailiyah et al., 2024).

3.2 Resistance to Gender-Neutral Language and Controversy

The implementation of gender-neutral language has incited substantial controversy and opposition in various linguistic communities, societies, and institutions. Although gender-neutral language is intended to foster inclusivity and mitigate gender bias, opposition exists as a result of political ideologies, institutional rigidity, cultural traditions, and linguistic concerns (Cossman, 2018; Quintana Teixeira, n.d.) These debates underscore the broader social conflict between traditional norms and progressive linguistic reforms.

1) Cultural and Religious Conflict

Cultural and religious traditions are among the most potent sources of opposition to gender-neutral language. Gendered language is considered an essential component of the heritage and identity of numerous societies, rendering any modifications to linguistic structures contentious (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004; Cameron, 2005). Grammatical gender is deeply ingrained in daily communication in languages such as Spanish, French, and Arabic, rendering it challenging to implement gender-neutral alternatives without disrupting traditional linguistic norms (Bradley, 2021). In addition, religious doctrines frequently reinforce binary gender concepts, which results in opposition from religious institutions that regard gender-neutral language as a challenge to their traditional teachings (Ashrafova, 2024).

2) Linguistic Authorities and Institutional Barriers

Language academies and official linguistic institutions have been instrumental in the opposition to gender-neutral language reforms. Organisations such as the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) and the Académie Française have publicly opposed modifications, including the implementation of inclusive grammatical forms and gender-neutral pronouns. Their primary argument is that gender-neutral reforms introduce superfluous complexity and disrupt the grammatical integrity of the language (Cameron, 2005; Lorber, 2021). Critics also contend that linguistic change should occur organically rather than being enforced through political or activist initiatives. The formal recognition of gender-

neutral language is impeded by the reluctance of these institutions to embrace linguistic innovations, thereby creating a barrier to its widespread adoption.

3) Political and Ideological Resistance

The debate over gender-neutral language is also deeply intertwined with political and ideological conflicts. Conservative groups often perceive gender-neutral language as part of a larger push for political correctness and progressive social change. They argue that such linguistic reforms are unnecessary and represent an ideological imposition rather than an organic evolution of language (Cameron, 1995). On the other hand, progressive movements advocate for gender-neutral language as a necessary step toward equality, emphasizing its role in reducing gender bias and making language more inclusive for non-binary and gender-diverse individuals (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). The polarization of opinions has turned gender-neutral language into a political issue, with different governments and educational institutions taking varying stances depending on their ideological orientation.

4) Practical Challenges and Public Perception

Beyond ideological resistance, practical concerns also contribute to skepticism toward gender-neutral language. Some individuals find new gender-neutral terms awkward or difficult to integrate into everyday speech. For instance, in English, while the singular *they* has acquired acceptance, some people still resist using it due to concerns about clarity and grammatical correctness (APA, 2020). In Spanish and French, gender-neutral alternatives such as *Latinx* and *iel* have confronted criticism for being impractical and difficult to pronounce (Knisely, 2023). Furthermore, surveys suggest that while younger generations are more receptive to gender-inclusive language, older speakers and conservative communities often view these changes as unnecessary or confusing.

The controversy and resistance to gender-neutral language emphasise the complex relationship between language, culture, and social change. While linguistic innovations promoting inclusivity continue to gain traction, they also confront opposition from cultural traditions, institutional authorities, and ideological debates. Overcoming these barriers requires public awareness, education, and gradual linguistic adaptation, ensuring that gender-neutral language becomes both functional and widely accepted in various linguistic and cultural contexts. The ongoing debate reflects broader societal discussions about gender identification, inclusion, and the evolving role of language in shaping human interactions.

3.3. The Role of Media and Policy in the Acceptance of Gender-Neutral Language

The acceptance of gender-neutral language is influenced by various societal factors, among which media and policy play a crucial role. Media serves as a platform for shaping public discourse, spreading awareness, and normalizing inclusive language, while governmental and institutional policies provide the necessary structural support for its implementation (Sarrasin et al., 2012). The interaction between these two elements determines the speed and extent to which gender-neutral language is integrated into mainstream communication.

1. Media as a Catalyst for Change

Gender-neutral language in regular contact is introduced and reinforced in great part by the media. By including inclusive language into their materials, news sources, social media channels, and entertainment sectors actively help to influence public impressions. Cameron (1995) argues that media discourse not only mirrors language changes but also shapes how language develops across time. For English, for example, the growing adoption of the singular she in television, social media, and journalistic writing has been much influenced by its greater use. In Spanish, too, terminology like *Latinx* and *Latine* have become popular via feminist organisations, internet forums, and activist-led campaigns (Gustafsson Sendén et al., 2015b). Particularly social media channels have sped up language changes by giving a forum for debate and campaigning. Influencer endorsements, hashtags, and viral postings help to make gender-inclusive words more visible and accepted. Media can, however, also be a battlefield where arguments about gender-neutral terminology turn polarising. While progressive media sources support inclusive language, conservative media frequently objects to these developments as either superfluous or motivated politically (Preece, 2016). This split shows how strongly influential media is yet how differently audience response and ideological viewpoints impact it, so it is not always accepted.

2. Policy Implementation and Institutional Support

In addition to media influence, legislative and institutional regulations are essential in legitimising gender-neutral terminology. Language changes have been formally acknowledged in specific nations and organisations, illustrating the influence of policy in facilitating social transformation. Sweden formally adopted the gender-neutral pronoun "hen" in 2015, incorporating it into official papers and educational resources (Lindqvist et al., 2019). In Canada and Australia, governmental standards promote the use of gender-inclusive language in legal and administrative documents, establishing a precedent for wider community acceptance.

Educational institutions, including universities and schools, have commenced the integration of gender-neutral language into curricula, educator training programs, and institutional policies. Ashrafova's (2024) research underscores the significance of formal education in influencing linguistic behaviours, necessitating that educators implement inclusive language practices to promote enduring societal acceptance. Nonetheless, opposition from language authorities, such the Royal Spanish Academy (RAE) and the Académie Française, indicates that not all institutions are equally amenable to change. These organisations contend that gender-neutral alterations undermine grammatical frameworks and should not be artificially enforced. The pushback from authority entities hinders formal acceptance, resulting in a disparity between progressive policies and conventional linguistic standards.

3. The Intersection of Media and Policy in Linguistic Change

When media and policy collaborate to promote gender-neutral language, their effectiveness is maximised (Cairney et al., 2022; Edström et al., 2015). Policy-driven changes provide official recognition and standardisation, while media coverage amplifies these changes and encourages public participation. Countries with strong media campaigning and supportive policies have witnessed faster adoption of inclusive language than those that rely just on one of these elements. For example,

Sweden's successful adoption of *hen* was aided by both government endorsement and significant media coverage, whereas in Spanish- and French-speaking nations, opposition from language institutions has hampered policy implementation despite substantial media support. However, issues exist in matching media portrayal and policy enforcement. While the media can help popularise gender-neutral language, policies must be actively enforced in legal, educational, and workplace settings to achieve universal acceptance.

Public perception is also important, because people are more willing to embrace linguistic reforms if they see them employed regularly in official documents and everyday conversation. This underscores the importance of ongoing collaboration among policymakers, media professionals, educators, and activists to bridge the gap between language innovation and institutional acceptability.

The role of media and policy in promoting gender-neutral language is critical, as both influence public views and institutional practices. Media outlets promote inclusive language through representation and debate, whereas policies provide structural legitimacy and official recognition. However, resistance from cultural, ideological, and institutional factors continues to impede widespread acceptance of gender-neutral terminology. Moving forward, a coordinated strategy encompassing media, policymakers, educators, and linguistic experts is required to ensure a fair and effective shift to more inclusive linguistic norms.

CONCLUSION

Language plays a crucial role in shaping gender identity, with languages with grammatical gender and those without rigid gender classifications displaying gender biases. Sociolinguistic and gender studies theories highlight the complex relationship between language, power, and identity. Despite growing acceptance, resistance remains due to cultural traditions, institutional barriers, and political views. Practical considerations like the utility and clarity of gender-neutral pronouns contribute to the slow adoption of inclusive language. Media and policy have an important influence in shaping the adoption and integration of gender-neutral terminology. Media tools, particularly social media, have helped to popularise inclusive language through advocacy campaigns and representation in entertainment and journalism. However, media discourse remains polarised, with progressive outlets backing linguistic reforms and conservative voices opposing them. Meanwhile, government policies play an important role in legitimising gender-inclusive language, as evidenced by nations such as Sweden, where the gender-neutral pronoun *hen* is officially recognised. Educational institutions play an important role in normalising gender-inclusive language, as early exposure to linguistic variety can form long-term society attitudes.

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