University Students' Preferences for Gender Specific and Gender Neutral Occupational Terms and Gender Neutral Singular Pronouns: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT The present study reports on University of Swaziland students' preferences in the use of occupational naming terms and gender neutrality in third person singular pronouns' use. This case study employed the survey design to source information from 80 respondents. An 18-item self-administered questionnaire and follow up interviews sourced data on students' preferred occupational terms and gender neutral pronouns and the rationale for the particular preferences. Findings indicated that despite the increasing calls for gender neutrality in language use, university students still prefer gendered terms for sex-specific references and reserve gender neutral terms for references to persons of unknown sex. In terms of pronoun preferences, double pronoun constructions and the use of the androgynous 'they' represent the most preferred strategies of dealing with the pronoun problem among the university students. The study recommended the recognition of the language the users view as practical in any form of language planning.

INTRODUCTION

Language dynamism is manifest in language reformed and, for English; some of the most notable reforms have been actuated by a desire to achieve gender neutrality. Gender-related reforms are explicitly political in intent as they are actuated by a desire for social justice rather than consistent logic; hence the gender-related legislation likes the non-discriminating language use in job advertisements, meant to enforce the reforms. Such legislation necessitated gender-neutralising occupational and naming terms in job advertisements and in ordinary language use. Reforming "… gender based discriminatory naming practices in relation to professions, occupations and workplace roles was of high priority to feminist language planners given their public visibility" (Winter and Pauwels 2006:2). Such preponderance of occupational terms in oral and written, formal and informal communication necessitates establishing the extent of

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acceptance of their gender-neutral forms among a section of the language users.

Significance of the Study

Language reform for both gender neutrality and gender sensitivity stems from the understanding that, even though gender-neutral language reform constitutes small and seemingly trivial alterations in wording, its impact on our experience of reality is tremendous (Antony 2008). The observation is echoed by Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) who note the gendering of language no matter how mundane and purely grammatical it may appear, impacts our perceptions immeasurably. They cite as an example, studies which "…have shown that the male generic is in fact, not simply a grammatical convention, but that speakers actually visualize males when the word "he" or "his" is used in its generic form." This is the notion of linguistic relativism which acknowledged language's potential, not only to reflect but to change and influence reality. The impact of linguistic reform in favour of gender neutrality can only exert a positive and potent influence to the extent that the language users espouse that reform. This, therefore, provides sound rationale for establishing the extent to which the reforms have caught on among the language users. Writing

from a legal point of view, Kabba (2011: 427) argues that

…gender-neutral language is a tool which serves precision, clarity and ambiguity in that it aims to promote gender specificity in the pronoun used when drafting legislation, it reduces and in some cases completely omits redundancies and, in the process, produces shorter sentences which in turn produce clear and unambiguous drafts.

If gender-neutral language engenders clarity, precision and unambiguity, it provides language users added motivation for its acceptance. Also from a legal perspective, Rose (2010: 83) argues that

Whether considered through the prism of feminism, or through the lens of the modern legal writing movement's emphasis on clarity and reader reaction, the Court's continued use of male-gendered terms to refer to all people can no longer be seen as benign.

The clarity, precision and unambiguity occasioned by the use of gender-neutral language, as well as the far-reaching impact of linguistic gendering or de-gendering on "…real world gender stereotyping and role behaviour" (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012: 271), provide sufficient rationale for this paper, whose focus is the determination of the extent of acceptance of gender neutral terms among language users. Another rationale for establishing language users' acceptance of gender-related linguistic reforms is the understanding that, despite availability of legislation, use of gender neutral terms for everyday communication remains voluntary.

Study Focus

This paper focuses on the extent of gender neutrality in university students' preferences relating to occupational terms for female-specific, male-specific, and unknown sex referents. Gender neutral occupational terms, being nouns, require correspondingly gender neutral pronouns to accompany their use. However, equally important for this study is a determination of university students' preferences in dealing with the absence of a "…singular gender-neutral third-person personal pronoun" (Elrod 2014: 3). The study considers individuals' lexical choices as an index to their views, values and ideologies (Chng 2002). Focus on university students was premised on the assumption that they were con-

versant with gender-related language reforms and could influence society for gender inclusivity when they graduate and work in diverse fields.

Objectives of the Study

The study was guided by two objectives namely:
1. To determine students' preferred occupational terms and strategies for expressing "… female-specific, male specific or gender indefinite personal reference" (Fuertes Olivera et al. 2003: 70).
2. To establish students' preferred strategies for dealing with the lack of a singular third person gender neutral personal pronoun in the English language.

Literature Review

Consistent with the objectives above, the study is informed by literature on strategies that seek to reform the English language for gender neutrality at the level of occupational and pronoun terms. Reforms meant to rid the English language of patriarchy are three-fold namely; pronoun-focused, vocabulary-focused, and language-focused methods (Dorner 2010: 6). This paper focuses on the first two as reflected in the study objectives.

Vocabulary-Focused Linguistic Reforms

Although vocabulary reform takes on a scope larger than pronoun reform, it still is confined to either individual words or very narrow subsets of words. Despite vocabulary-related reforms being diverse, focus here is on the reforms related to occupational naming. Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012) argued that masculine occupational titles may dissuade women from pursuing careers whose occupational titles are masculine, hence the need to determine the extent to which language users have espoused the gender neutral occupational titles.

Occupational Terms and Strategies

Diverse strategies exist for the avoidance of gender specific occupational terms. One such strategy is lexical replacement of '-man' and '-

woman' compounds with '-person' compounds which has seen the coining of words like *chairperson*, *layperson* with some '-person' compounds like *fisherperson* and *repairperson* not having been well received according to Winter and Pauwels' (2006) study. Some '-man' compounds which do not have feminine equivalents like *countryman, statesman, alderman,* and *ombudsman* have also resisted conversion into '-person' or '-woman' compounds (Ordan and Wintner 2005).

Some sex-specific generic terms have undergone lexical modification with words like *draftsman* giving way to *drafting technician*, *foreman* to *supervisor*, *fireman* to *fire fighter*, *air hostess* to *flight attendant* and *housewife* to *home maker*. Cranford and Fox (2009) posit that the cause of gender neutrality can best be served by lexical replacement than by lexical modification. Unfortunately for lexical modification, some word coinages have been branded ridiculous impositions (Mills 2009) and have had difficulty catching on. An example of linguistic disruption that has not been taken seriously is the graphemic innovation of *woman* and *women* to *wommon/wimmin* and *womyn,* meant to challenge the notion that maleness is the norm which necessitates defining females from a male perspective (Pauwels 1998).

Another strategy for gender neutralising occupational terms identified by Winter and Pauwels (2006) is "morphological compounding with zero morphs." Examples of its manifestation are in the coining of the terms 'chair' (for someone chairing a discussion) and 'head' (for someone leading an organisation) by removing morphemes in the compounds *chairman* and *headmaster* (for instance) respectively. The words 'head' and 'chair' take on new robes in these contexts.

Further, elimination of suffixes '-ess', '-trix' and '-tte' from suffixed feminine terms like poetess, aviatrix and usherette also sought to attain gender neutrality in occupational terms. The gender-specific derivational endings imply inferiority to their unmarked forms (Perumal 2007). The suffixed forms diminish the status of the root word. A related strategy is dispensing with the prefixing or pre-modification of some occupational titles like *male nurse, female doctor, lady lawyer, career girl* which create asymmetry. Qualifying occupational titles backgrounds the incumbent's occupational proficiency and qualifications and foregrounds personal qualities. Such exclusionary forms reflect inequitable assumptions about, and representations of, the sexes.

Pronoun-Focused Linguistic Reforms

The pronoun problem is essentially one of determining which pronoun to use when referring to a specific person of unknown sex, when describing a hypothetical person, and for replacing words such as everyone, nobody, each person. This is because of the absence of a pronoun in English referring to one person without identifying the person by sex where the sex is unknown. According to Dorner (2010: 6), "Pronoun reform focuses narrowly on the smallest (though most ubiquitous) set of words…" Their ubiquity or omnipresence speaks to their importance in communication and hence, in language reform for gender neutrality. Elrod (2014: 3) noted that "The current pronoun system includes the first, second, and third forms of pronouns in the masculine, feminine, and neuter genders." Although, these serve most of our communication needs, there is need for a singular gender-neutral third-person personal pronoun which is both grammatical and free from gender preference or sexism. Elimination of sexism without resorting to awkward and cumbersome constructions is the goal. Literature identifies some options to the pronoun problem.

Gender-Neutral Third-Person Personal Pronoun Options

Winter and Pauwels (2006: 2) observed that "…to date, the evaluation and documentation of feminist language planning has largely focused on pronoun reform" among other innovations. In an attempt to address the problem, double-pronoun constructions have made a comeback (Miller and Swift 2001). Such constructions may be written as *he/she, he or she, she or he, s/he, (s)he*. These are, however, clumsy and awkward, especially with much repetition, the clumsiness worsening if what is repeated is *herself/himself*. How to determine which pronoun should precede the other and thereby, enjoy primacy by virtue of firstness has also been problematic. Another strategy is alternating the gendered pronouns to rid challenges of double pro-

noun constructions while making both gendered pronouns visible. An example is *'A doctor may choose to make her patient unconscious during an operation whereas another doctor may decide to operate on his patient in the patient's conscious state'*. Assigning different gendered pronouns for the same person, however, breeds confusion.

There are some strategies which this research regards as avoidance strategies. Pluralising the noun, where instead of saying *'a judge should conduct himself/herself well'* one can say *'judges should conduct them well'* has been identified as a way out of the pronoun problem. While this solves the pronoun problem, it brings the anomaly of not referring to people in their singleness when their sex is not known and may lead to ambiguity. A similar avoidance strategy is rephrasing a statement as in *'a judge's conduct should be exemplary'*. The feasibility of such a strategy is questionable particularly for speech whose spontaneous nature does not allow for editing. Even in writing, the process would be painfully slow where one has to rework all constructions with third person singular pronouns. Another proposed strategy has been to replace nouns with letters for instance if P meets B, P should. This is an unnatural innovation which detracts from readability. How such letters would replace *himself/ herself* is not accounted for. Yet, another avoidance strategy is the repetition of the noun in an utterance which defeats the whole purpose of pronouns, which is to avoid the monotony that comes with the repeated use of nouns.

Although, it has largely been confined to the domain of casual speech, use of the singular 'they' has had much advocacy as the most useful and natural alternative. It has, however, been discredited on the premise that its use lacks "… the important syntactic feature of agreement in number with a singular antecedent" (Miller and Swift 2001: 45).

The proactive have ventured into the creation of new pronouns with no gender marking. "According to one count, at least 80 proposals have been made for replacement of singular pronouns in English, but none has caught on…" (Romaine in Hellinger and Bubmann 2001: 162). The gender-neutral pronouns that have been coined have not found widespread use owing, partly to lack of consensus on which of them should be used as standard.

The indeterminate 'one' has been considered an option to the gendered singular pronouns. It has, however, been found to be pedantic and apparently inapplicable where the noun has already been specified. An attempt to use 'it' as a generic pronoun has also hit a snag with people having an aversion to being referred to by a pronoun traditionally known to refer to inanimate objects and non-humans. Some feminists' proposal to use feminine pronouns as generic forms (Romaine in Hellinger and Bubmann 2001) is tantamount to a reversal of stereotypes and not necessarily to the attainment of gender neutrality.

A review of these alternatives and the subsequent review of related studies provide the background upon which respondents' preferences can be appreciated and understood. Pauwels (1998) reports on Cooper's 1984 study on a corpus of 500 000 words from American newspapers, current affairs and women's magazines spanning the period 1971-1979 where the study revealed a dramatic decline in the use of the masculine generics from 12.3% in 1971 to 4.3% in 1979 per 5000 words. Ehrlic and King's 1992 study, reported in Pauwels (1998) revealed a gradual adoption of non-sexist alternatives in Canadian newspapers. Rose (2010) analysed the US supreme court's use of gender-neutral language during the 2006, 2007, and 2008 Terms and found that only one justice employed gender-neutral language consistently, four used generic male pronouns consistently with the rest falling between the two extremes. This relatively recent study on a group of people who are supposedly informed about the need for gender neutrality and conversant with available legislation on the area demonstrates how far from the ideals language users were then. With the increasing advocacy on gender neutrality, the assumption in the present study was that language users had progressively become gender-sensitive over time.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research reports on a case study survey of students at the Kwaluseni campus of the University of Swaziland. Being a case study, the investigation determined preferences of people sharing some similar characteristics. The survey design was preferred for its "…general-

izability or universality within given parameters, its ability to make statements which are supported by large data banks and its ability to establish the degree of confidence which can be placed in a set of findings" (Cohen et al. 2007: 207). Surveys' amenability to large numbers as was the case with the study (N=246) was a key attraction as wasits methodological soundness. As noted by Hutchinson (2004: 300) "…..flexibility, practical utility, and applicability in numerous situations" are defining characteristics of surveys.

Study Sample

Students (246) from five faculties at the Kwaluseni campus of the University of Swaziland participated in the study. These were full-time undergraduate students in the Faculties of Commerce, Education, Humanities, Social Sciences, and Science. Quota sampling was used to determine the sample size from each faculty, for each sex (male/female). Table 1 shows the population and sample figures according to sex.

The sample was meant to reflect the population in terms of gender composition. A 10% sample was considered representative of the population and would constitute 246 students (126 male and 120 female) according to proportional representation. The number of males in a faculty was divided by the number of males in the four faculties and multiplied by 126 to determine the number of males to include from each faculty. For the faculty of commerce for instance, it was $301/1256 \times 126$. The same was done for female students with the figures divided being multiplied by 120. With these figures determined, random convenient sampling was applied.

Instruments

Consistent with the survey design, a questionnaire was administered and follow-up interviews conducted to source data from the respondents. The 19 item questionnaire sought to establish the occupational naming preferences of the participants for male-specific, female-specific and persons of unknown sex for each item. The 19th item sought to determine the respondents' preferred options to address the pronoun problem. Follow-up interviews were conducted with 61 respondents (1/4 of the questionnaire sample) who were part of the questionnaire sample and had consented to participate. Interviews were conducted after the initial analysis of the questionnaire data to ensure the follow-up questions addressed aspects that perplexed the researchers.

Procedure

The questionnaire was personally administered and collected by the researchers with the assistance of colleagues who taught in the other faculties. Since the completion of the questionnaire involved merely writing three terms for each item, respondents completed the questionnaire in the presence of the researchers who then collected the questionnaires. This reduced instances of collusion and ensured a 100% return rate which enhanced the study's validity. Data was presented in tabular form before its analysis and discussion.

RESULTS

Data presentation was in two forms; data on occupational naming terms and on the pronoun problem, with the follow-up interview data infused into the presentation of the two categories.

Occupational Naming Strategies

Table 2 presents data on respondents' preferences on occupational naming terms. The sev-

Table 1: Population and sample figures

Faculty	Population according to sex			Sample according to sex		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
Commerce	301	280	581	30	28	58
Education	154	204	358	15	20	35
Humanities	227	299	526	23	30	53
Science	237	112	349	24	11	35
Social Science	337	310	647	34	31	65
Total	1256	1205	2461	126	120	246

Table 2: Respondents' occupational titles preferences

One who...	Male-specific		Female-specific		Unknown sex	
	Occupation	Frequency	Occupation	Frequency	Occupation	Frequency
1. *Chairs*	Chairman	154 (63%)	Chairperson	215 (87%)	Chairperson	221 (90%)
Meetings	Chairperson	55 (22%)	Chairwoman	6 (2%)	Chair	18 (7%)
	Chair	37 (15%)	Chair	25 (10%)	Chairman	7 (3%)
2. *Speaks for an*	Spokesman	182 (74%)	Spokesperson	141 (57%)	Spokesperson	221 (90%)
Organisation	Spokesperson	64 (26%)	Spokeswoman	105 (43%)	Spokesman	25 (10%)
3. *Owns and*	Businessman	163 (66%)	Business women	138 (56%)	Businessperson	221 (90%)
Runs	Businessperson	74 (30%)	Business person	98 (40%)	Business Executive	15 (6%)
	Business executive	9 (4%)	Business Executive	9 (4%)	Businessman	12 (5%)
4. *Sells Goods*	Salesman	151 (61%)	Salesperson	102 (41%)	Salesperson	113 (46%)
and Services	Salesperson	49 (20%)	Sales rep	62 (25%)	Sales rep	79 (32%)
	Sales rep	37 (15%)	Saleswoman	43 (17%)	Sales executive	54 (22)
	Sales executive	9 (4%)	Saleslady	9 (4%)		
			Sales executive	30 (12%)		
5. *Studied and*	Doctor	222 (90%)	Doctor	222 (90%)	Doctor	228 (93%)
Practices	Medical	18 (7%)	Medical	18 (7%)	Medical	18 (7%)
Medicine	practitioner	18 (7%)	practitioner	18 (7%)	practitioner	18 (7%)
	Surgeon	6 (2%)	Surgeon	6 (2%)	Surgeon	0 (0%)
6. *Takes Pictures*	Cameraman	170 (69%)	Camerawoman	123 (50%)	Photographer	200 (81%)
with a Camera	Photographer	59 (24%)	Photographer	111 (45%)	Cameraperson	37 (15%)
	Cameraperson	17 (7%)	Cameraperson	12 (5%)	Cameraman	9 (4%)
7. *Participates*	Sportsman	126 (51%)	Sportswoman	129 (52.5%)	Sportsperson	240 (98%)
Much in Sport	Sportsperson	120 (49%)	Sportsperson	117 (47.5%)	Sportsman	6 (2%)
8. *Fights Fire*	Fireman	125 (51%)	Fire-fighter	167 (68%)	Fire-fighter	160 (65%)
That Has	Fire fighter	108 (44%)	Fireperson	49 (20%)	Fireperson	59 (24%)
Gone Wild	Fireperson	12 (5%)	Firewoman	30 (12%) Blank	Fireman	12 (5%)
					15(6%)*	
9. *Fishes*	Fisherman	216 (88%)	Fisher	98 (40%)	Fisherman	93 (38%)
	Fisher	30 (12%)	Fishing woman	49 (20%)	Fisher	74 (30%)
	Fisherwoman	37 (15%)	Blank	79 (32) *		
	Blank	62 (25%)*				
10. *Attends to*	Flight attendant	33 (54%)	Flight attendant	133 (54%)	Flight attendant	130 (53%)
Passengers	Steward	44 (18%)	Air hostess	79 (32%)	Air hostess	93 (38%)
in a Plane	Air host	12 (5%)	Blank	34 (14%)*	Blank	22 (9%)*
	Blank	57 (23%)*				
11. *Attends to*	Barman	59 (73.75%)	Barmaid	50 (62.5%)	Barman	206 (84%)
Customers in 25(10%)	Bartender	21 (26.25%)	Bar lady	3 (3.75%)		Bartender
a Bar/Pub	Barwoman	18 (22.5%)	Blank	15 (6%)*		
	Bartender	9 (11.25%)				
12. *Is a Member*	Policeman	160 (65%)	Police officer	138 (56%)	Police officer	224 (91%)
of the Police	Police officer	76 (31%)	Policewoman	86 (35%)	Police	22 (9%)
Force?	Police	10 (4%)	Police	22 (9%)		
13. *Studied and*	Lawyer	209 (85%)	Lawyer	209 (85%)	Lawyer	216 (88%)
Practises Law	Legal practitioner	27 (11%)	Legal practitioner	9 (11%)	Legal practitioner	5 (10%)
	Attorney	10 (4%)	Attorney	3 (4%)	Attorney	5(2%)
14. *Delivers*	Mailman	81 (33%)	Mailperson	111 (45%)	Mail person	108 (44%)
Mail at Homes	Mail carrier	74 (30%)	Mailwoman	86 (35%)	Mail carrier	69 (28%)
	Postman	66 (27%)	Mail carrier	37 (15%)	Postman	69 (28%)
	Mail person	25 (10%)	Postman	12 (5%)		
15. *Acts in*	Actor	246 (100%)	Actress	128 (52%)	Actor	246 (100%)
Films		Actor	118 (48%)			
16. *Serves at*	Waiter	246 (100%)	Waitress	140 (57%)	Waiter	246 (100%)
Tables in	Waiter	106 (43%)				
Restaurant						
17. *Leads a*	Head teacher	93 (38%)	Headmistress	93 (38%)	Head teacher	108 (44%)
School	Headmaster	84 (34%)	Head teacher	84 (34%)	Principal	57 (23%)
	Principal	39 (16%)	Principal	37 (15%)	Headmaster	37 (15%)
	Head	30 (12%)	Head	32 (13%)	Head	44 (18%)
18. *Delivers*	Milkman	229 (93%)	Milk woman	79 (32%)	Milkman	160 (65%)
Milk at Homes	Milk deliverer	12 (5%)	Milk supplier	59 (24%)	Milk deliverer	15 (44%)
	Milk supplier	5 (2%)	Milk deliverer	56 (23%)	Milk supplier	37 (15%)
	Blank	52 (21%)*	Milk person	5 (2%)		

en 'Blanks'(signified by an asterisk[*]) represent occupational titles respondents could not determine.Interestingly, there was no blank for male-specific referents, three blanks for female-specific occupational titles and four for unknown sex referents. This signifies how firmly established male specific terms were in the language users' mental lexicon which made their retrieval automatic when terms for some female-specific and unknown sex referents were not readily available in the respondents' repertoire. In follow-up interviews on why blanks were only found in the two categories, respondents attributed it to both ignorance of the terms for the two categories and to having made up some of the words in those categories to complete the questionnaire without ever having used or encountered them anywhere. The most cited coinages by the respondents were *fisher, fisherperson, mailperson, mailwoman*. Some even admitted to uncertainty over the actual existence of some of the terms they used. Further probing on the criteria they used to coin the words revealed the use of analogy where they used the structure of a feminine or neutral form of a similar known word to determine the feminine and neutral forms of the novel word. One respondent, whose views reflected those of many, said *"If you are not sure about a word, just add 'woman' or 'person' to it."* This was evidently in reference to female-specific and neutral referents respectively.

It was apparent that respondents largely preferred sex-specific terms for sex-specific referents and reserved neutral forms for referents whose sex was unknown. From Table 2, as many as 12/18 items which had a masculine term were most preferred with the other 5/18 *(doctor, flight attendant, lawyer, actor* and *waiter)* not hav-

ing a masculine term and item 17 being the only item in the male-specific category which lent itself to a '-man' or '-master' compound where the form was not the most preferred, but coming a close second. Similarly '-woman' compounds dominated the most preferred position under the female-specific referents with 8/18 female specific terms *(business woman, camera woman, sportswoman, barmaid, actress, waitress, headmistress* and *milk woman)*, with 3/18 terms *(doctor, firefighter* and *lawyer)* not lending themselves to feminization and the remaining 7/18 terms in terms of domination on an item being neutral terms especially '-person' compounds. The unknown-sex references had the greatest share of gender neutral terms.

On whether they made a conscious effort to be gender neutral in their communication, an almost equal number of respondents answered in the affirmative and the negative, with the former arguing that gender bias was offensive while the latter argued that preoccupation with gender neutrality in communication detracted the smooth flow of communication. Interviewees explained the near unanimity in the occupational preferences for one who *'studied and practices medicine'* (item 5 Table 2) and one who *'studied and practices law'* (item 13 Table 2) by noting that the common occupational titles 'doctor' and 'lawyer' respectively, had no gender marking and so they applied to all three referent categories.

The summary in Table 3 derives from Table 2 and shows how different naming strategies and terms featured as the most preferred (1st) or second most preferred (2nd) terms for male-specific, female-specific and unknown sex references.

Table 3: Most preferred and second most preferred occupational naming strategies

Strategy	Position	Male-specific referents	Female-specific referents	Unknown-sex referents
Masculine generic '-man' '-master' compounds	1st	12/13 (92%)	-	3/13 (23%)
	2nd	1/13 (8%)	-	2/13 (15%)
'-person' compounds	1st	-	4/8 (50%)	6/8 (75%)
	2nd	5/8 (63%)	3/8 (38%)	2/8 (25%)
Lexical replacement	1st	1/10 (10%)	3/10 (30%)	5/10 (50%)
	2nd	7/10 (70%)	5/10 (50%)	6/10 (60%)
Zero morphs	1st	-	-	-
	2nd	-	-	2/3 (67%)
Unmarked forms, for example, actor	1st	2/2 (100%)	-	2/2 (100%)
	2nd		1/2 (50%)	
'-woman', '-mistress' '-compounds	1st	-	6/13 (46%)	-
	2nd	-	5/13 (38%)	-

Table 3 indicated an overwhelming prefer- ence (92%) for masculine generic '-man' and '- master' compounds for male-specific referents whereas the neutral '-person' compounds are most preferred (50%) for the female-specific ref- erents. The '-person' compound strategy meant to rid the language of the disparate visibility of masculine and feminine occupational titles has only dislodged the feminine forms as it has be- come the default feminine equivalent of the mas- culine '-man' and '-master' forms. Such misap- plication of the neutral terms explains Dorner's (2010) observation that lexical changes meant to eliminate sex bias end up creating the opposite effect when "…even gender-neutral words such as *chairperson* or *professional* that are applied to females become pejorative compared to their masculine counterparts" (p. 20).

There is still substantial use of the '-woman' and '-mistress' suffix (46% occurrence as the most preferred as shown in Table 2) for female- specific occupational terms. There is therefore, preference for gender specificity than gender neutrality where the sex of the referent is known. While there was no use of the masculine generic for female-specific referents in both the most and second most preferred terms (which is a positive development in favour of gender neu- trality), there was nevertheless, visibility of the masculine generic terms for unknown sex refer- ents. This implies that where occupational titles refer to persons of unknown sex, they are either assigned neutral terms or masculine generic

terms. The ideal of gender-neutralising all occu- pational terms is not reflected in the present study context.

Lexical replacement was manifestly a pre- ferred strategy in a number of cases across the three sex reference categories in both the most preferred and second most preferred positions. An explanation for this was that words like *mail- man, air hostess,* and *fireman* could not be mod- ified to make them suit particular sex-references necessitating the use of alternative terms. Only few items lent themselves to zero morphs and were not much of a preferred strategy appearing as second most preferred strategy only in the unknown sex reference category. The unmarked forms were used for male and unknown sex ref- erences with the respondents preferring the marked form 'actress' or 'waitress' for female- specific references.

The last part of the questionnaire had a state- ment respondents were supposed to rewrite to ensure it was gender neutral. Table 4 presents the categories that emanated from responses to this instruction.

The use of double pronouns to deal with the masculine generic pronoun problem was the most preferred (31% of eight possible options). This vindicated Miller and Swift's (2001: 46) observa- tion that "Despite the charge of clumsiness, double pronoun constructions have made a comeback." In most cases, the masculine pro- noun preceded the feminine and the few which had the feminine form preceding the masculine

Table 4: Questionnaire responses on pronoun preferences

Category	Example	Frequency
Double pronoun constructions	If a client has any concerns, he or she should contact his or her agent	76 (31%) 68 (28%) male 1st 8 (3%) female 1st
Singular 'they'	If a client has any concerns, they should contact their agent	47 (19%)
Pluralizing nouns	If clients have any concerns, they should contact their agent(s)	37 (15%)
Repeating noun to avoid the pronoun	If a client has any concerns, the client should contact own agent	27 (11%)
Recasting sentence to avoid pronoun	For any concerns, a client should contact an agent	25 (10%)
Using other neutral pronouns	If you have any concerns as a client you should contact your agent	20 (8%)
Using the impersonal 'one'	One should contact one's agent if one has any concerns.	12 (5%)
Retaining the generic 'he' and leaving statement as is	If a client has any concerns, he should contact his agent	2 (1%)
Using new invented pronouns	If a client has any concerns, *te* should contact *tey* agent	0 (0%)

were written as 's/he'. Interview respondents accounted for the firstness anomaly by noting that the masculine form had always preceded the feminine to the point that it just sounded right to the ear. One argued, "If *ladies and gentlemen* is acceptable then *he* or *she* should be acceptable too." Firstness in the 's/he' was explained in terms of convenience of the shorthand it offered than in terms of user preference which meant an even lower number of female-first preferences. Some argued for the alternation of the two pronouns in terms of firstness. One respondent noted the difficulty of sustaining the strategy where focus was on communication. Another proposed using the alphabetic order which would entail the order 'he or she' and 'her or him'. Double pronoun advocates argued that the strategy accorded visibility to both sexes. Additional to them being awkward and cumbersome, Page (2013) sees double pronoun constructions as contributing to the preponderance of complex, run-on sentences instead of direct sentences. Rather than address the pronoun problem, such constructions merely circumvent the problem. Page (2013) calls them cumbersome coordinates without a single form which are awkward in speech.

The singular 'they', which Page (2013: 172) regards as "…the emerging epicene pronoun of choice…" was the second most preferred option (19%) for antecedents whose gender is unspecified, or irrelevant. That the double pronoun construction and singular 'they' were preferred by half the respondents vindicates Warton's (2005: 11) assertion that "… the once universal 'he' has given way to 'he or she' and the androgynous 'they'." Those not favourably disposed to the singular 'they' believed its place was with informal usage whereas the statement in question was formal. Some rejected 'they' on the grounds of ungrammatically stemming from its inconsistency with a singular referent (Miller and Swift's 2001). The discordant sound the singular 'they', 'their', 'them' and 'themselves' make as they violate number agreement (Page 2013) has been advanced as reason enough not to use it. Some questioned the very logic of assigning a function to a pronoun which already had its own distinct function. Others even wondered whether the singular 'they' changes to 'themselves' in its usage.

Third in preference was pluralising nouns (15%) to eliminate the pronoun problem which some saw as avoidance rather than confronting the pronoun problem. One noted that its implementation would put words like 'anyone', 'each person' 'everyone' at the risk of extinction and interfere with the smooth flow of communication too.

Noun repetition (11%) was the next preferred avoidance strategy for whose preference not much rationale was advanced. Rather, it was criticised for being cumbersome, for not accommodating nouns like '*each student*' '*anyone*' and '*everyone*', for being a clumsy construction which one could hardly sustain in a discourse, for being restricted to the sentence level, and for defeating the purpose of pronouns to avoid irritating monotony. Rephrasing statement to circumvent pronoun use was yet another avoidance strategy (10%) which elicited a similar barrage of criticisms. Such recasting normally involves conversion from the active to the passive form resulting in some ambiguity and loss of precision.

The use of the neutral 'you' (8%) was preferred on the understanding that it is already gender neutral. Some, however, faulted its use for not being accommodative of all the instances the generic 'he' could represent. Some observed that 'you' referred to the reader or listener and so would not be applicable where the reader or listener was not the referents. Not much justification was given in favour of the impersonal 'one' which was criticised for monotony, dependency on the elimination of the initial subject, and the difficulty of using it and sustaining a discourse as it required drastic paraphrasing and rephrasing. Retaining the generic 'he' was the least popular option (1%) since it sanctified an undesirable status quo and compromised the attainment of gender neutrality. One even remarked that the generic 'he' was the problem and could not be the solution simultaneously. The majority noted that use of 'he' conjured up images of males and rendered females largely invisible.

Although, included among the possible options, the use of invented pronouns was not subscribed to by any of the respondents. All the participants interviewed confessed to never having heard or read about proposed new pronouns meant to provide a neutral alternative to the generic masculine pronouns. There were mixed feelings over whether language planning should proceed in the way of creating totally new pronouns.

None of the respondents was for the alternation of the feminine and masculine pronouns pronoun possibly because the strategy works for longer pieces of writing or speech where the pronouns are alternated per paragraph or …. Rose (2010) observed that technically the alternation of pronouns does not constitute gender neutrality neither does it address the problem of gendered generics owing to both the jarring effect it has on the reader as well as the challenges that attend efforts to keep in mind two images throughout the reading. Another option which attracted no respondents was the exclusive use of she "…to balance the overwhelming past usage of 'he'" (Page 2013: 168) which is a compensatory strategy amounting to a re-gendering rather than degendering of the language.

DISCUSSION

There manifest preference of masculine generic terms in unknown sex references among university students reflects a perpetuation rather than confrontation of gender bias by language users, even the supposedly well-informed ones. Prewitt-Freilino et al. (2012: 270) argues for instance, that "… a 'chairman' primes male pronouns and is rated as more masculine than a 'chairperson'."

Arguments advanced for not using gender-neutral language were ignorance of the neutral forms which means either that the advocacy has not filtered down from the reformers to the generality of the language users or that it has reached users at a general level on the need for gender neutrality without equipping users with the degendered language forms.Page (2013: 171) notes that in theory "Flight attendant has replaced stewardess, server or waitperson has replaced waitress; there are fire fighters, letter carriers, and no longer any poetesses." That not even a single respondent used the words server, waitperson and letter carriers could be symptomatic of ignorance of these forms.Even with the knowledge of gender-neutral forms, lack of supportive attitudes towards their use militates against linguistic gender reform with that reform seen as leading to stilted, unnatural language, potentially offensive to our aesthetic sensibilities (Rose 2010), a point detractors of the reform movement have long put forward. What has become palatable and aesthetically sound from long tradition of use holds sway over what is gender sensitive.

Available options for redressing the pronoun problem seem to have hit a snag for grammatical and aesthetic reasons. Page (2013) bemoans the English language's and its users' resistance to the accommodation of a new pronoun when, ironically, a new word is added to the English language every 98 minutes and wonders "With the inclusion of a million words, about five hundred thousand just in the last fifty years, how can it be so difficult to add a word – just one little word – a pronoun that doesn't trip itself up with a gender case." Lexical innovation on the gender-based pronouns is largely unknown and has almost stagnated. Dorner (2010) notes as interesting, the fact that there is much resistance to minor changes to common words like pronouns, whereas language users are better disposed to re-learning and espousing broader aspects of language invention. Winter and Pauwels' (2006: 3) asserted that "For English, gender-neutralisation has become the preferred strategy for eliminating gender-bias in occupational noun formations" has not impacted the language users' occupational naming preferences.

The pronoun problem is apparently more problematic than the occupational naming terms seeing that there is no consensus on a neutral pronoun with each available option riddled with limitations. That most of the available options represent avoidance rather than a confrontation of the pronoun problem compounds the challenge.The pronoun, being an established and fixed or closed part of the language resists intrusion by new members. This explains why all the respondents interviewed expressed surprise to learn about some singular gender-neutral pronouns that had been proposed. Despite having possibly received the greatest attention and advocacy of the three language reform methods, Dorner (2010) also acknowledges pronoun-focused reform as "the most difficult to enact" (p.11). The omnipresence of pronouns which make them susceptible to the attention of gender neutral language reformers equally accounts for their difficulty to enact since frequency of use engrains them in the minds of the language users. In general, language use, particularly the written language, is rooted in tradition and some linguistic reforms are considered too trivial to upset linguistic purity and even render the writing style less readable.

CONCLUSION

The foregoing presentation and discussion of data is consistent with the conclusion that

gender specificity is preferred to gender neutrality particularly in sex-specific references and that remnants of masculine generic forms are still manifest in unknown sex-specific terms. There is also a preference for the double pronoun constructions and the single 'they' for addressing the pronoun problem both of which are as problematic as the other options. On the basis of these conclusions, this study proffers some recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the researchers recognise the counter-productive nature of rapid and coerced language changes which can only attract resistance, there is need to acknowledge the expedience and urgency with which language reforms are needed if gender neutrality is to be realised. The study, therefore, recommends that lexicographers and dictionary writers consider what the users of a language view as practical in their attempts to expand and modify the English lexicon since options proposed need to be supported through actual language usage. Linguistic reforms which alienate the language users are not likely to realise much success. The study, further, recommended that language users leverage English language innovations for the cause of gender equality and neutrality as the impact of gender motivated linguistic reforms is dependent on the application made of them by the language users. Recognising the disintegrated, fragmented nature of the movement for gender equality in language, there is need for unified, consistent efforts by the international community, particularly those who produce any written material to use gender neutral language. Total onslaught of degendered language would sensitise language users to gender neutral language. There is also need for further study on a grand scale, to determine such naming and pronoun preferences among diverse groups of language users on the basis of which reforms to attain gender neutrality.

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