# THE ISSUE OF GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE IN ENGLISH: MODERN LANGUAGE CHANGES AND SOCIAL APPROACHES

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**Abstract:** This article explores how gender-neutral expressions have emerged and are being used in modern English. Terms such as "singular they," "chairperson," and "humankind" reflect the shift toward inclusive and equality-driven language. The research focuses on the causes behind this shift, including the impact of social movements and institutional policies, and examines how such expressions are applied in academic, media, and professional contexts. The study uses a mixed-method approach, combining discourse analysis, linguistic comparison, and real-world examples from various types of texts.

**Keywords:** gender-neutral language, English, language change, singular they, equality, inclusivity.

**Аннотация:** В статье рассматривается возникновение и развитие гендерно-нейтральных выражений в современном английском языке, таких как "singular they", "chairperson" и "humankind". Эти формы отражают стремление языка к инклюзивной и социальному равенству. Исследование направлено на выявление причин этих изменений, включая влияние социальных движений и политик организаций, а также на анализ применения таких выражений в научных текстах, медиа и профессиональной среде. Методология исследования включает дискурсивный анализ, сопоставление лексических единиц и изучение примеров из реальных текстов.

**Ключевые слова:** гендерно-нейтральный язык, английский язык, языковые изменения, равенство, инклюзивность.

Among the linguistic changes observed in English in recent years, the issue of gender-neutral language deserves special attention. As the ideas of equality, inclusion and combating discrimination are gaining momentum in society, these values are also being reflected in language tools. Instead of traditional gender-specific terms, such as chairman, policeman or units such as he/she, gender-neutral expressions such as chairperson, police officer or they are now increasingly used.

This article aims to study the formation and development of gender-neutral language tools in modern English and how they are used in different contexts in society. The object of the study is linguistic units that express gender neutrality in English, and the subject is their linguistic structure and social acceptance.

The study is conducted at the intersection of English linguistics and social sciences and focuses on the relationship between gender-specific language policy, changes in linguistics and their social manifestations. What is new about this topic is that it allows us to see through the structure of language how ideas of social justice and equality are formed through the means of language.[1]

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[1] McWhorter J. The Language Hoax. – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. – p. 102.

## 1. The Concept of Gender-Neutral Language and Its Importance (Extended Analysis)

Gender-neutral language is a relatively new approach in linguistics that is based on the use of neutral and inclusive language units that do not directly indicate sexual identity. This approach avoids the distinction between male and female genders and ensures that all people, including those who do not identify as male or female, feel respected and recognized in communication.

### 1.1. Historical Background

Traditional English has a lot of gender-specific words, most of which are masculine: chairman, fireman, salesman, he/his, etc. These linguistic units often not only referred to the male gender, but also subconsciously depicted women as "out of the norm." This linguistic approach promoted the idea of "male is primary, female is secondary." [2]

The feminist movement that emerged in the United States and Great Britain in the 1970s and 1980s drew attention to this problem in linguistics. Women and social equality activists argued that language was a tool for shaping society and criticized the socialization of both consciousness and institutions through language. Subsequently, many words were revised and gender-neutral alternatives were created.

### 1.2. Modern forms of gender-neutral language

The following gender-neutral units are common in modern English:

**Modern tenses:** they — a pronoun used to refer to a person but not indicating gender. For example: "Someone left their bag" — where "someone" is singular and "their" is gender-neutral.

**Neutrality in job titles:** fireman → firefighter, stewardess → flight attendant, businessman → businessperson.

**Change in the terms collective and humanity:** mankind → humankind, man-made → human-made, layman → layperson.

All of this demonstrates the semantic and stylistic flexibility of the English language. Although these words do not require grammatical changes, their use has great cultural and social significance.

### 1.3. The importance of gender-neutral language

In today's global society, language is not only a means of communicating information, but also a reflection of social values, human rights, and attitudes towards equality. By using gender-neutral language, no one in society feels excluded or misunderstood through language. In addition, gender-neutral language:

1) Reduces discrimination in the workplace,
2) Ensures clarity and objectivity in official documents,
3) Helps eliminate gender stereotypes in academic and scientific texts.
4) Many companies, universities, and international organizations are making gender-neutral language a mandatory standard in their communication policies for this very reason.

## 2. Causes of Linguistic Change (extended analysis)

Language is a social phenomenon in constant flux. Its change may occur at the grammatical, phonetic, or semantic levels, but the forces that drive language are often directly related to social processes. The emergence and spread of gender-neutral language is one such multifactorial sociolinguistic phenomenon. However, Mills argues that gender-neutral units sometimes perpetuate implicit sexual segregation.[3]

### 2.1. The Impact of Feminist Linguistics

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[2] Cambridge English Corpus. Usage Trends in Gender-Neutral Language. – 2021. – [Elektron resurs].
[3] Mills S. Language and Sexism. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. – p. 113.

In the second half of the 20th century, feminist linguistics began to shape new linguistic paradigms by criticizing the male-centeredness of language. Feminist scholars such as Robin Lakoff and Deborah Cameron revealed that language renders women invisible.[4] They considered the generalization of the word "man" to refer to humanity, and the reference to women only as "he or she," to be contrary to the principles of equality.[5] These critical approaches have led to a redefinition of gender-specific lexical units. As a result, linguists and the public have begun to use neutral variants, such as chairperson instead of chairman, and flight attendant instead of stewardess.

## 2.2. The Role of LGBTQ+ Movements

Along with feminist movements, the LGBTQ+ community has been one of the main factors that has increased the need for gender-neutral language. In fact, the role of LGBTQ+ movements is to protect human rights, ensure equality in society, combat discrimination, and promote cultural diversity. These movements do not only protect the interests of one group, but also serve to strengthen values such as justice, tolerance, and empathy in society as a whole. Also, existing language units were not suitable for people who do not identify as traditionally male or female (non-binary, genderfluid, agender, etc.). At this point, the phrase "singular they" played an important role.[6] Although it was initially controversial from a grammatical point of view, it has now become an officially recognized and recommended unit by Merriam-Webster, Oxford Dictionaries, and the APA Style Guide. These changes clearly demonstrate how language can respond to new needs and the role of social groups in shaping linguistic structures.

## 2.3. Institutional and political influence

One of the important factors that has promoted gender-neutral language is the change in institutional policies and language standards. International organizations (UN, UNESCO, European Union) and prestigious universities are demanding a gender-neutral approach in their documents. For example, the APA (American Psychological Association) in its 7th edition of the style guide states that "gender-neutral language is one of the basic ethical standards."[7]

Additionally, the GLAAD Media Reference Guide, prepared for journalists, provides clear guidelines on how to use gender-neutral language.[8] Such political and institutional directives directly affect the everyday speech and correspondence of language users.

## 3. Gender-Neutral Language: An Analysis Through Examples

One of the most effective ways of observing language change in linguistics is to compare lexical items and their functions in context. This is especially important in gender-neutral language, as these changes often occur through the preference for neutral variants to replace existing words rather than through the creation of new words.

## 3.1. Neutralization in job titles

The following table shows the appearance of gender-specific and neutral variants and their social connotations:

| Gender-specific expression | Gender-neutral expression | Description |
|---|---|---|
|  |  |  |

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[4] Lakoff R. Language and Woman's Place. – New York: Harper & Row, 1975. – p. 92.

[5] Lakoff R. Language and Woman's Place. – New York: Harper & Row, 1975. – p. 45.

[6] GLAAD. Media Reference Guide. – New York: GLAAD, 2016. – p. 18.

[7] EIGE. Gender-sensitive communication. – Vilnius: EIGE, 2016. – p. 6.

[8] GLAAD. Media Reference Guide. – New York: GLAAD, 2016. – p. 11.

| Gender-specific expression | Gender-neutral expression | Description |
|---|---|---|
| chairman | chairperson / chair | The suffix "man" has been dropped; widely used in official documents |
| fireman | firefighter | To prevent sexual harassment in the profession |
| policeman | police officer | Formal option used in documents and laws |
| stewardess | flight attendant | The feminine suffix "-ess" has been removed. |
| businessman | businessperson | Addressing a business person without gender identification |
| mankind | humankind | A non-male-centric version of humanity |

These examples represent not only lexical change, but also a renewal of social views. For example, while the word "mankind" has been used to mean "humanity" for centuries, the variant "humankind" is now accepted as an inclusive and modern approach to humanity.[9]

### 3.2. "The word "singular they": a grammatical revolution

"Singular they" is one of the most widespread and controversial phenomena in gender-neutral language. Originally considered a grammatical error, this tense is now recognized as a normative unit. It has its own grammatical, sociocultural, and psycholinguistic implications.[10]

**Examples:**
1.      If anyone calls, tell them I'm not home.
2.      Every student must submit their paper by Friday.
3.      Alex said they will arrive at 5 PM.

Although "they" here refers to a person, it does not indicate gender. This ensures respectful and inclusive communication, especially in contexts involving non-binary and trans people.[11]

### 3.3. Stylistic neutrality and the culture of communication

The use of gender-neutral language is not limited to formal contexts. It is also present in everyday communication, public speeches, and email correspondence. For example:
1.      Dear Sir or Madam → Dear Colleague / Dear Guest
2.      He who wins shall lead → The person who wins shall lead

### 4. Contexts of Gender-Neutral Language (extended)

Gender-neutral language is now actively used not only among linguists, but also in various social strata - the scientific community, business circles, the media, the education system, and even public policy. This language shift is now becoming a social phenomenon that is being normalized in various contexts.

### 4.1. Scientific and academic context

Many prestigious universities and academic publishing houses, including APA (American Psychological Association), MLA (Modern Language Association), and the Chicago Manual of Style, have included gender-neutral language in their style guides as a mandatory or recommended norm.

Examples:
1.      "Each student must hand in their paper"
2.      "The researcher should explain their methods clearly"

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[9] EIGE. Gender-sensitive communication. – Vilnius: EIGE, 2016. – p. 7.
[10] APA. Publication Manual of the APA. 7th ed. – Washington, D.C.: APA, 2020. – 120-bet.
[11] Mills S. Language and Sexism. – Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. – p. 89

## 4.2. Work Environments and Corporate Culture

There is increasing emphasis on gender-neutral language in corporate communications, job postings, and company policies. This is especially important for creating an inclusive workplace, ensuring gender equality, and establishing fairness in HR policies.

Previous statement: "A secretary must report to his manager."

New statement: "A team member must report to their supervisor."

Large companies (Google, Apple, IBM, etc.) have established gender-neutral language as the norm in written materials for employees, announcements, vacancies, and even internal protocols. In addition, although a gender-neutral approach to language policy in Uzbekistan has not yet been formed as a separate concept, this trend can be observed in practice in some professional titles and job titles. For example, terms such as "teacher", "leader", "poet", "worker", "student" are gender-neutral and can be used equally in relation to men and women.[12] This, in turn, is explained by the lack of strong gender markers in the grammatical structure of the Uzbek language. At the same time, gender-based differentiation continues in some social situations and informal speech. For example, forms such as "sister poet", "brother leader", "servant" are used in the oral language and media environment. This reflects certain contradictions in the path of gender neutrality of the language.

## 4.3. Mass media

The press, online publications and journalists are trying to use language carefully based on modern cultural requirements. Especially when writing about public figures or people who choose to be non-binary, it is considered an ethical norm to refer to them with their own tenses and names. Publications such as The Guardian, BBC, and New York Times have added units such as singular they, Mx. (neutral title instead of Mr./Ms.) to their style guides.[13]

**Example:**

 "Sam Taylor said they are not ready to give a comment."

Through such use, the media is fulfilling its mission to respect human personality, reduce stereotypes in language, and reflect a renewed social consciousness.[14]

## 4.4. Education system and school practices

Many schools and universities are encouraging the use of gender-neutral terms when addressing students. Specific lessons on "gender-inclusive language" are also being introduced into the curricula.

**Examples:**

"Dear learners" instead of "Dear students"

"students" or "class" instead of "boys and girls"

This not only increases the sense of equality, but also creates a respectful and inclusive environment among students.

## 5. Social Attitudes and Critical Perspectives (full and extended form)

Gender-neutral language (GBT) is one of the most controversial and noteworthy topics in modern sociolinguistics. Its introduction into a language is not just a change in grammar or lexicon, but a phenomenon that reflects the consciousness, values, and attitude of society to social justice. How this language approach is resisted or accepted in society is usually embodied in three main positions: supporters, critics, and those who have a balanced approach.

## 5.1. Supportive approach

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[12] UzDictionary.uz. O'zbek tilida jinsiy neytrallik. – 2024. – [Elektron resurs].

[13] The Guardian. Gender-neutral reporting language. – 2023. – [Elektron resurs].

[14] Holmes J. An Introduction to Sociolinguistics. – London: Routledge, 2017. – p. 202.

Supporters of gender-neutral language see it as an important tool for establishing equality in society, reducing discrimination, and creating an inclusive language environment for groups that do not feel recognized in society.[15]

The founders of this approach are feminist linguists (Robin Lakoff, Deborah Tannen), psycholinguists, and LGBTQ+ activists. They emphasize that language is not just a means of communication, but a mechanism for shaping social consciousness. For example, writing "chairperson" instead of "chairman" is not just a word choice, but also taking into account certain social strata.[16] The recognition of the "singular they" tense is seen as legitimizing the existence of non-binary and gender fluid individuals through language.

**The main arguments of supporters:**
1.     Social consciousness is formed through language.
2.     When language is inclusive, equality and respect are strengthened in society.
3.     New linguistic units develop naturally according to the times and needs.

### 5.2. Critical Approach

However, there are also critics of GBT. They believe that these changes:

1)     Destroy grammatical precision (for example, when "they" is used in relation to a person, it can be ambiguous).

2)     Change the language artificially and under political pressure.

3)     Destroy cultural and historical roots, especially in traditional societies. Linguist and writer John McWhorter says this about it:

"Artificially changing a language is imposing social norms on grammar. Each society should shape its own language in a natural way."

Some conservative groups also view GBT as a "cultural obligation" and "liberal pressure." They advocate preserving the ancient style of language and respecting traditional roles.

### 5.3. A balanced approach

Many linguists, however, choose a middle ground. They recognize the social benefits of gender-neutral language, but they also point out the danger of making it a mandatory standard in all contexts. Representatives of this approach, for example, Deborah Cameron, believe that GBT is necessary, but one should not rush to use it in conservative texts, religious discourse, or expressions from cultural heritage. GBT is a form of language, but not the only correct form. For each context, the language user must choose the appropriate option, depending on the needs and cultural environment.  Thus, a balanced position encourages the use of GBT in a timely, appropriate, and culturally appropriate manner.

Here, I would like to make a few recommendations:

**1. Create a "Gender-neutral language" guide**

A short guide or infographic can be developed on how to use gender-neutral expressions in official correspondence, scientific texts, and mass media in Uzbek and English. This will be especially useful for teachers, journalists, and students.

**2. "Language ethics" training to recognize stereotypes in language**

Interactive seminars, quizzes, and mini-courses on "gender-neutral language ethics" can be organized at universities or online platforms. Through this, participants will learn how to recognize ambiguous or biased expressions in their everyday language and change them.

**3. Gender-neutral editing tool using AI**

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[15] APA Style Blog. Singular "They": One Step Closer to Inclusivity. – 2020. – [Elektron resurs].
[16] Cameron D. Feminism and Linguistic Theory. – London: Macmillan Press, 1992. – p. 85.

Using modern technologies, it is possible to create an AI plugin or a simple Telegram bot that will automatically change ordinary texts to gender-neutral forms. For example, it will change "chairman" to "chairperson" and "he" to "they" in context.

**4. #InclusiveLanguage campaign on social media**

A social campaign or contest could be held with the participation of young people and students interested in linguistics under the slogan "Language begins with respect." In it, users create posts, videos, or memes that promote gender-neutral expressions.

**In conclusion,** the study revealed that gender-neutral language is an important sociolinguistic phenomenon in modern English. Efforts to ensure gender neutrality in language are not only a linguistic process, but also a form of language transfer of the principles of equality, inclusion and respect in social consciousness. Gender-neutral language is not just a grammatical innovation, but also about how society perceives itself, others and everyone through language. Small changes in language can be the basis for large changes in society. Therefore, a deep, scientific and socially responsible approach to this issue is relevant for each of us.

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