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Gender Expression in English: An Integrated Study of Grammatical, Lexical, and Discourse-Level Structures

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Abstract. This article examines how gender is expressed in English across grammatical, lexical, and discourse levels. We first outline theoretical frameworks of language and gender (e.g. performativity, language ideology) and situate English in a historical perspective (Old vs. Modern English). We then analyze grammatical gender in English – noting that English lost noun-class gender by Middle English (Curzan, 2003) so today only pronouns (he/she/they) and a few affixes (e.g. -ess, -man) encode gender (Curzan, 2003). We discuss the rise of singular they and other neopronouns as contemporary responses to binary defaults (Bradley et al., 2019). Next, at the lexical level we survey gender-marked vocabulary and coinages: from traditional gendered terms (actor/actress; chairman/chairperson) to new honorifics like *Mx.* and identity labels (nonbinary, cisgender). We explore how prescriptive and inclusive language efforts (e.g. Cameron's notion of verbal hygiene (Cameron, 1995)) have influenced these changes. At the discourse level, we examine how speakers negotiate gender identity in conversation and media. For instance, discourse analyses show that news outlets often reproduce gender stereotypes more than fiction (Slipachuk et al., 2024), and that conversational style and pronoun usage reflect ideological stances. Across sections we trace continuity and change: traditional norms (generic "he", Marked/Unmarked masculine bias) versus contemporary shifts (nonbinary pronouns, gender-neutral reform). We draw on sociolinguistic theory (e.g. language ideology, performativity) to explain how linguistic forms both reflect and shape social gender concepts (Cameron, 1995). By integrating multiple levels of structure, this study highlights the complex, evolving nature of gender expression in English. Our analysis underscores that language both mirrors historical gender roles and adapts to demands for inclusivity, with implications for communication and identity in a diversifying society.

Keywords: *gendered language; linguistic gender; inclusive language; English pronouns; discourse analysis; language ideology; gender identity*

Introduction

Gender as a social category is widely mediated through language. English, like many languages, encodes gender in various ways, but the patterns are neither fixed nor uniform. Traditional English exhibits an androcentric bias (e.g. masculine generics, gendered titles), whereas modern use increasingly reflects awareness of nonbinary identities and equality ideologies. This article provides an

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integrated analysis of gender expression in English at three linguistic levels: grammatical (pronouns, agreement, morphological marking), lexical (vocabulary and neologisms), and discourse (spoken interaction and media). We combine historical perspective (how English grammar and lexicon evolved) with contemporary trends (e.g. rise of singular *they*, gender-neutral terms). Theoretically, we draw on sociolinguistic concepts of language ideology and gender as performance to interpret these changes. In exploring "language and gender," we go beyond noting male/female speech differences to examine how English structures and choices index gender identity and ideology. By weaving together levels of analysis, this study aims to give a comprehensive account of how English both reflects traditional gender roles and is adapting toward inclusivity. The article proceeds as follows: Section 1 outlines theoretical perspectives on gendered language and ideology. Section 2 examines grammatical gender in English, particularly pronouns. Section 3 analyzes lexical gender markers and neologisms (titles, terms, pronouns). Section 4 discusses discourse-level enactment of gender (talk, media language). We conclude by synthesizing insights and noting directions of change.

1. Theoretical Framework: Language, Gender, and Ideology

Linguistic approaches to gender have shifted from viewing men and women as using language differently (e.g. Lakoff's *Language and Woman's Place*) to understanding language as constructing gender identities (Butler's performative view). Underlying both is the notion of language ideology – the set of beliefs about language that link social attitudes (e.g. about men and women) to linguistic form **(**O'Neill, 2021; Cameron, 1995). O'Neill (2021) emphasizes that campaigns for nonsexist language arise from ideology: anti-sexist reformers (promoting generic *they* and removing masculine defaults) operate from a view of linguistic relativity (language shapes social reality), whereas anti-cis-sexist (nonbinary-inclusive) reformers invoke performativist ideas (language enacts identity). Both stances, however, share an underlying belief that language acts on the world and can either constrain or emancipate speakers (O'Neill, 2021). For example, the practice of using generic "he" was once unchallenged under the ideology that language "naturally" defaults to male, but feminist and inclusivity ideologies revealed this as exclusionary. Similarly, prescriptive "male and female languages" (women's supposedly more polite style vs. men's directness) has been largely supplanted by recognizing gendered speech as variable and context-dependent (Coates, 2015; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013). A key concept is gender indexicality – features of language that index masculinity or femininity in a given community. Speakers may consciously adjust their language (e.g. using gender-neutral terms or pronouns) as an ideological choice to include different gender identities. Scholars have noted the dual impact of ideology: some reformers seek to make language "gender-fair" by eliminating bias (a form of verbal hygiene described by Cameron, 1995), while others point out that simply replacing male terms might not suffice without changing underlying attitudes. In sum, this study assumes that grammatical, lexical, and discourse-level features are not neutral: they are embedded in and influenced by social ideologies about gender (O'Neill, 2021; Cameron, 1995). We will thus interpret English gendered forms in light of how societies conceptualize gender, both historically and today.

2. Grammatical Encoding of Gender in English

Modern English grammar retains very little of the grammatical gender (masculine/feminine/neuter) system found in many Indo-European languages. Historical note: Old English (5th–11th c.) had a full

inflectional system with three genders for nouns, and agreement in adjectives and pronouns (Curzan, 2003). During Middle English (12th–15th c.), under French influence, English gradually lost grammatical gender: feminine noun forms disappeared and agreement distinctions collapsed (Curzan, 2003). By Modern English, the only gender-inflection persists in personal pronouns (he, she, it) and in a handful of derivational affixes (e.g. -ess for feminine agent nouns) (Curzan, 2003). For example, actor/actress and host/hostess show a remnant of grammatical gender marking, but nouns like table or sun have no gender marking (though some are culturally personified as female, e.g. ships traditionally called "she").

2.1. Pronouns and Generic Forms

The most salient grammatical gender feature in English is the third-person singular pronoun. Standard pronouns are gendered: he/him/his, she/her/hers, plus the neuter it/its. Historically the generic pronoun for an indeterminate or hypothetical person was he (as in "If someone calls, he should leave a message"). This generic "male" usage was once prescribed; suffragists and later feminists challenged it as excluding women (Cameron, 1995). Contemporary English largely treats he/she generics as sexist or awkward. The primary solution has been to use singular they. Indeed, research shows singular they has a long pedigree in English and is common in speech (Bradley et al., 2019). Bradley et al. (2019) note that "singular 'they' has a long history in English (Balhorn 2004), and is very common in speech" (Bradley et al., 2019). Speakers readily accept they as a generic pronoun in contexts like "If a student asks for help, I try to help them" (Bradley et al., 2019). Even style guides and dictionaries have begun recognizing singular they: for example, Merriam-Webster chose "they" as its 2019 Word of the Year, and the AP Stylebook now endorses it in many cases (Baron, 2019). (Notably, even Shakespeare and Dickens used singular they when a referent's gender was indeterminate (Baron, 2019).)

Nevertheless, some speakers still feel grammar permits only plural they, leading to prescriptions against singular use (Bradley et al., 2019). Alternative strategies include he or she constructions or rephrasing to plural antecedents ("All students should know their rights"). In practice, usage is shifting: Bradley et al. report that most English speakers accept generic they (Bradley et al., 2019), and change is driven by pragmatic and ideological factors more than syntax (Bradley et al., 2019). In addition to they, new gender-neutral pronouns have been coined (e.g. ze/hir, xe/xem) but none has won broad adoption (Bradley et al., 2019). Still, specific communities and style guides (such as academic or LGBTQ+ contexts) do use these alternatives.

2.2. Agreement and Ellipsis

Because Modern English lacks grammatical gender agreement on verbs or adjectives, gender distinctions arise only in pronouns and some derivations. When nouns refer to people, agreement is by biological sex or identity (if known). For example, "The doctor finished his rounds" (with generic his traditionally used) is now often rephrased or replaced: "The doctor finished their rounds" (using singular they) or simply "The doctors finished their rounds" (plural). Pronoun choice thus reflects both grammatical and social considerations. In narrative and conversation, speakers may deliberately use gendered or non-gendered language to signal respect or solidarity. Some prescriptive grammars

still insist on singular they only when gender is unknown and argue for he/she or alternation (e.g. he/she; he…she) in other contexts, but modern usage often ignores these rules to prioritize inclusivity.

2.3. Titles and Honorifics

Grammatically, English distinguishes gender in certain titles: Mr. (generic for men), Mrs./ Miss/ Ms. (various forms for women), and increasingly Mx. as a gender-neutral honorific for any or none (Baron, 2019). While Ms. (introduced early 20th century) eventually gained wide use, Mx. is a recent addition (coined 1970s) that is entering official forms and dictionaries (Baron, 2019). The gradual acceptance of Mx. parallels broader shifts: just as Ms. decoupled marital status from women's titles, Mx. decouples gender entirely (Baron, 2019). These honorifics show how even small grammatical elements carry ideological weight. Currently Mr. remains default when gender is unknown, but progressive usage encourages asking or using gender-neutral titles (Mx. or just first names) to avoid assumptions. In sum, English grammar now encodes gender only minimally – mainly through pronouns – but even these minimal markers have outsized social significance, prompting vigorous debates and reforms. The next section turns to lexical gender markers beyond grammar.

3. Lexical Gender Markers and Neologisms

Lexically, English contains many gendered terms whose usage has changed over time. Traditional patterns often assumed man as default: e.g. chairman, policeman, fireman (with -man implying male). Many of these have shifted to gender-neutral forms (chairperson, police officer, firefighter). Similarly, the suffix -ess marks female occupations (actress, stewardess) and is increasingly viewed as unnecessary; a trend noted by Curzan is that Modern English retains only a few such suffixes (Curzan, 2003). For example, stewardess is largely replaced by steward or flight attendant regardless of speaker gender. These lexical changes reflect ideological pushes for inclusion; well-known "gender-neutral writing" guidelines (as in business and education) recommend neutral terms to avoid bias.

At the same time, some gender-specific lexical items endure. Kinship terms like niece/nephew, aunt/uncle are explicitly sex-specific. Yet even here, conversations about inclusivity have introduced uses of parent instead of mother/father for non-binary families, or siblings instead of brother/sister. Color and trait terms often carry gendered connotations (e.g. calling something pretty vs. handsome depending on assumed gender), but such lexical connotations are not fixed by grammar, so speakers are free to subvert them for effect.

Gender-Neutral Neologisms. Recent years have seen new words enter or gain prominence as people find language for gender diversity. For instance, nonbinary and genderqueer are now common in English discourse, whereas they were rare before the late 20th century. Many identity-labels (cisgender, transgender, agender, bigender, etc.) have become part of sociopolitical lexicon. These terms are not grammatical markers but carry gender meaning and often arose from different communities. Another class of neologisms is invented pronouns mentioned earlier (zie, xe, per, etc.), though usage surveys find them still marginal compared to they (Bradley et al., 2019).

Some gender-neutral vocabulary comes from conscious "language reform." For example, Mx. as noted is one reform to avoid Mr./Ms. distinctions (Baron, 2019). Spivak pronouns (e.g. ey/em/eir) were coined by sex-separatists in the 20th century. Many of these proposals get recorded in dictionaries or

style guides but rarely become widespread outside activist circles. In professional and legal contexts, however, we see systematic lexical changes: e.g. removing pronouns altogether in job ads ("chairperson" instead of "chairman", "humankind" instead of "mankind"), and using constructions like he or she or singular they in official writing.

Overall, the lexical level shows a tension between tradition and innovation. Traditional usage often reflects historical gender roles (e.g. calling a female doctor a "lady doctor" decades ago, or assuming "nurse" implies female). Modern usage, influenced by egalitarian ideology, tends to neutralize such terms. Linguists note that when one gendered word is eliminated, sometimes a bias shifts or a new problem arises (e.g., postman → postal worker, but pronoun defaults still debated). The ongoing creation and dissemination of new terms (e.g. cisgender first attested mid-90s, now in many dictionaries) highlights that English vocabulary is actively evolving to map onto contemporary understandings of gender.

Table 1; *Examples of traditional vs. inclusive terms*

Traditional / Former form	Inclusive / Current form
actor / actress	actor (used for any gender)
chairman	chairperson / chair
policeman	police officer
hostess	host (for any gender)
stewardess	flight attendant
Mr. / Mrs. / Miss (marital titles)	Mx. (gender-neutral title)
he / she (generic)	they (singular gender-neutral pronoun)

This exemplifies how lexical choice encodes gender ideas. Note that not every new term spreads: some remain "marked" as queer usage. Nevertheless, as O'Neill notes, language reform movements (anti-sexist or anti-cis-sexist) are underpinned by ideology – e.g. a belief in linguistic relativity (changing words can improve status/visibility) or performative identity (language enacts identity) (O'Neill, 2021). In practice, many English speakers now avoid gendered terms unless necessary, showing a shift in normative usage over the past few decades.

4. Discourse and Gender Identity in English

At the discourse level, gender is performed and negotiated through talk and text. This includes everyday conversation, narrative, media language, and public discourse. A key insight is that speakers (and writers) actively do gender in interaction (e.g. Kiesling 2004): they may use language differently to align with masculine or feminine identities (e.g. vocatives like "dude" vs. "girlfriend"), or adjust style (amount of eye contact, intonation) based on gender norms. In English conversation, research has shown subtle tendencies (e.g. women's use of more tag questions, men's higher use of imperatives), but these are socialized patterns, not grammatical rules. More relevant here is how changes in discourse norms reflect broader changes in gender ideology. For example, it has become more common to hear people give their personal pronouns on social media, signalling identity and setting normative expectation of respectful address. Educational and corporate institutions

increasingly train people in inclusive communication (avoid assuming pronouns, use gender-neutral language), indicating a shift in discourse practices.

Media discourse. The language of media (news, magazines, online content) is particularly telling about societal gender norms. Critical discourse studies have documented that media often reproduce gender stereotypes through both content and form. For instance, Slipachuk et al. (2024) found that English-language news articles frequently employ gendered language to attach context or attributes to events, especially in political and social reporting (Slipachuk et al., 2024). Their analysis shows that gender stereotypes (e.g. characterizing female public figures as emotional or male figures as authoritative) appear more often in news than in fiction (Slipachuk et al., 2024). This may be because news tries to quickly "label" individuals for the audience, relying on conventional gender roles, whereas literary texts have more creative freedom. In the mass media, gender-marked lexemes (Mr., Mrs., Queen, businessman, etc.) and even photographs with gender-coded descriptions reinforce traditional roles. Studies using Systemic Functional Linguistics reveal that male referents often get generic terms ("spokesperson") while female referents are identified by relationships or appearances ("mother, secretary, beautiful").

Furthermore, media discourse on gender itself is evolving. The rise of online platforms has amplified debates on pronouns and identity. The public sees headlines about nonbinary rights and the politics of language (e.g. controversy over university guides to gender-neutral pronouns). Linguists note that in discussions of gender online, language ideology clashes play out explicitly: opponents decry "political correctness" in pronouns, while advocates argue for "harm reduction" in language (O'Neill, 2021). O'Neill points out that reform movements share a commitment to avoid harm in communication, reflecting how discourse on gender is moralized (O'Neill, 2021).

Conversational interactions. In face-to-face or digital conversation, speakers may encode gender identity through linguistic choices. For example, a transgender or nonbinary person might switch pronouns or choose certain nouns to assert identity; listeners must interpret and align usage accordingly. Studies of spoken interaction (e.g. gendered features of talk shows, classroom talk) show that transgender participants sometimes face misgendering (incorrect pronoun use) and may correct it, signaling the social significance of these forms. While the present study does not conduct original corpus analysis, we note that anecdotal and published reports emphasize the pragmatic use of inclusive language: asking "their preferred pronouns" has become standard in progressive settings.

Power and context. Discourse also reveals power dynamics tied to gender. For instance, female candidates in politics often face derogatory language and gendered scrutiny in interviews, which male candidates do not. Advertisements frequently use gendered appeals (e.g. pink products for women). Such discourse events perpetuate or challenge stereotypes. Critical discourse analysts argue that whenever language highlights one gender over another (e.g. calling women "girls" in professional contexts), it indexes an ideology of dominance or subordination. In summary, discourse-level English both mirrors and constructs gender norms. Contemporary shifts toward inclusivity are visible in changing media guidelines (e.g. some outlets now avoid using gendered descriptors unless relevant) and in personal interactions. As language evolves, so does what is considered appropriate discourse. The next section draws conclusions across these levels.

Conclusion

This integrated study shows that gender in English is a multi-faceted phenomenon, manifesting at grammatical, lexical, and discourse levels, shaped by both tradition and change. Grammatically, English has minimal gender marking – essentially the pronoun system and relic affixes – and even these are subject to ideological contestation (e.g. generic he vs. inclusive they (Bradley et al., 2019)). Lexically, a legacy of gendered terms is being challenged by neutral or newly coined alternatives, reflecting an evolving ideology of equality. Discourse analysis reveals that everyday talk and media continue to be sites where gender identity is negotiated: speakers routinely encode assumptions about gender, but changing social attitudes are pushing speakers and institutions toward more neutral and inclusive choices. Throughout, theoretical constructs such as language ideology and performativity help explain these dynamics: language both reflects existing social structures (as O'Neill notes, e.g. anti-sexist vs. anti-cis-sexist goals (O'Neill, 2021)) and participates in constructing them.

Historically, English moved from a grammatically gendered system (Old English) to the relative gender-blindness of Modern English (Curzan, 2003). Today, the pendulum swings back somewhat: we see a proliferation of gender-related lexemes and pronouns as people demand language that reflects their identities. The singular they exemplifies this: once stigmatized as "incorrect," it is now the pragmatic default for unknown or nonbinary gender (Bradley et al., 2019). Social actors (educators, style guides, speech communities) play a crucial role in accelerating or resisting these changes.

In sum, English gender expression is dynamically negotiated. While some traditional forms persist (e.g. he for generic uses in older texts), the contemporary trend is toward more inclusive patterns. This has implications for language policy (e.g. school and workplace guidelines), for sociolinguistic theory (the continued unraveling of the male-default norm), and for our understanding of identity. Future research can build on this integrated approach by examining, for example, how corpora of social media reflect pronoun use across time, or how second-language learners adapt to English gender norms. Ultimately, recognizing the interplay of grammatical structures, words, and discourse practices enriches our understanding of how language encodes and shapes gender in the English-speaking world.

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