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THE INFLUENCE OF GENDER NEUTRALITY ON ENGLISH

Abstract

Language changes are very related to social processes. The grammatical category of gender in English has gone through significant evolution under the influence of both internal linguistic factors and external socio-cultural factors, including the development of feminism and the movement for gender neutrality. In Kazakhstan, where English is being actively studied, such language changes are becoming particularly relevant in the context of multilingualism and the country's language policy. In recent decades, there has been an active transition to the use of inclusive language forms, reflecting the desire for equality and the elimination of discrimination. Gender neutrality in language is manifested in changes in the use of pronouns, professions, and social roles. These processes illustrate the relationship between language and society, showing how linguistic changes reflect the transformation of social norms and values.

Key words: *gender, grammatical category, gender neutrality, socioculture, English*

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ГЕНДЕРЛІК БЕЙТАРАПТЫҚТЫҢ АҒЫЛШЫН ТІЛІНЕ ӘСЕРІ

Аңдатпа.

Тілдегі өзгерістер әлеуметтік процестермен тығыз байланысты. Ағылшын тіліндегі гендерлік грамматикалық категория ішкі лингвистикалық және сыртқы әлеуметтік-мәдени факторлардың, соның ішінде феминизмнің дамуы мен гендерлік бейтараптық қозғалысының әсерінен айтарлықтай эволюциядан өтті. Қазақстанда белсенді түрде оқылып жатқан ағылшын тіліндегі мұндай өзгерістер әсіресе көптілділік пен елдің тіл саясаты контекстінде өзекті. Соңғы жылдары инклюзивті тілдік формаларды қолдануға белсенді көшу байқалды, бұл теңдік пен кемсітушілікті жоюға деген ұмтылысты көрсетеді. Тілдегі гендерлік бейтараптық есімдіктерді, кәсіптерді және әлеуметтік рөлдерді қолданудың өзгеруінен көрінеді. Бұл процестер тіл мен қоғамның өзара байланысын бейнелейді, лингвистикалық өзгерістер әлеуметтік нормалар мен құндылықтардың өзгеруін қалай өзгертетінін көрсетеді.

Тірек сөздер: *гендер, грамматикалық категория, гендерлік бейтараптылық, әлеуметтік мәдениет, ағылшын тілі*

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ВЛИЯНИЕ ГЕНДЕРНОЙ НЕЙТРАЛЬНОСТИ НА АНГЛИЙСКИЙ ЯЗЫК

Анотация.

Изменения в языке очень связаны с социальными процессами. Грамматическая категория гендера в английском языке прошла через значительную эволюцию под влиянием как внутренних лингвистических факторов, так и внешних социокультурных факторов, включая развитие феминизма и движение за гендерную нейтральность. В Казахстане, где активно изучается английский язык, такие изменения в языке становятся особенно актуальными в контексте многоязычия и языковой политики страны. В последние десятилетия наблюдается активный переход к использованию инклюзивных языковых форм, что отражает стремление к равенству и устранению дискриминации. Гендерная нейтральность в языке проявляется в изменении употребления местоимений, профессий и социальных ролей. Эти процессы иллюстрируют взаимосвязь языка и общества, показывая, как лингвистические изменения отражают трансформацию социальных норм и ценностей.

Ключевые слова: *гендер, грамматическая категория, гендерная нейтральность, социокультура, английский язык*

Introduction

Unlike Kazakh and Russian, where the gender category has a morphological expression, in modern English the grammatical gender is preserved mainly in pronouns (he/she/it), whereas nouns in most cases are gender neutral. There were three genders in Old English (masculine, feminine, and neuter), but by the time of Late Middle English they had been lost. Nevertheless, for many centuries there has been a tendency to use the masculine gender as the "default" (generic he), which was criticized in the 20th century.

The use of "he" in the meaning of an indefinite person has been a common practice in the English language for centuries. This rule was fixed in grammar manuals, academic articles, and legislative texts. For example, in legal documents or scientific papers, the expression "Each student must submit his application by the deadline" was often found, even if it was about both men and women.

However, in the middle of the 20th century, with the growth of the movement for gender equality, such language practice began to be perceived as a reflection of a patriarchal worldview. Researchers and activists have begun to argue that using "he" as a neutral pronoun contributes to the invisibility of women in language and, consequently, in society. This has led to the fact that alternative forms of expression have been proposed in official texts and educational materials, such as: Replacing he with he or she (Each student must submit his or her application), using the passive voice or paraphrasing (Applications must be submitted by each student), using the pronoun they in the singular (Each student must submit their application). By gender-neutral treatment, we mean an attempt to avoid discrimination or gender-based insults [1]. Many teachers and textbook authors use gender-neutral lexical and grammatical strategies, but they fail to avoid gender stereotypes and unequal representation of characters, personalities, and precedent names [2, p.47].

The dominance of feminist linguistics in English became especially noticeable in the second half of the 20th century. Researchers such as Robin Lakoff and Deborah Cameron have drawn attention to gender stereotypes embedded in language and suggested replacing sexist forms with inclusive ones. For example, the word fireman gave way after the fact to the neutral variant firefighter. "Man" has also fallen out of general use – the use of neutral synonyms is preferable. The procedure for addressing women and men has also been revised. Instead of the traditional Mrs and Miss, new constructions have been used, and in business correspondence they try to completely abandon such appeals [3, p.73]. Some nouns denoting living beings can be attributed to both the masculine and feminine gender, i.e. they are gender neutral: friend (friend), cousin

(cousin), etc. When it is necessary to indicate a specific gender, a pointer word is added to the noun: boyfriend, girlfriend; he-wolf, she-wolf [4, p.130].

The greatest attention is paid to the location. In English, it has traditionally been used to describe a person in an unknown context, although the search for more inclusive options began in the 1970s. One of the solutions was to use them in a singular number (singular they), which is officially called by organizations such as the Oxford English Dictionary and Merriam-Webster.

Materials and methods

The following methods were used to analyze the evolution of the gender category in English and the impact of feminism and gender neutrality on modern language changes:

The descriptive method was used to characterize linguistic phenomena associated with changes in the gender category in the English language, such as the disappearance of grammatical gender, the spread of the singular they, the neutralization of profession names and feminitives.

The comparative historical method was used to trace changes in the genus category from the Old English period to the present. The differences between Old English, Middle English, and modern gender systems were compared, as well as the influence of Latin and French on English grammar.

Contextual analysis allowed us to consider how gender-neutral forms are used in various socio-cultural contexts, including academic texts, legislative documents, mass media and colloquial speech.

The sociolinguistic method was used to analyze public opinion and the perception of linguistic changes. Studies of English-speaking communities on the acceptability of feminitives, inclusive forms, and the use of the singular they were considered.

The comparative method allowed us to consider how the gender category develops in English compared to Russian and Kazakh languages, where grammatical gender is preserved and feminitives are actively used.

The use of these methods provided a comprehensive examination of the problem, making it possible to analyze linguistic changes in dynamics, identify their social prerequisites and predict the further development of the gender category in the English language.

Results

The study showed that the gender category in English has undergone significant changes under the influence of socio-cultural factors, including the development of feminism and the movement for gender neutrality. Historically, the English language had a system of three grammatical genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter), but by the Late Middle English period they had been lost. Despite this, the use of the masculine gender by default (generic he) persisted for many centuries, which provoked active criticism from linguists and social movements in the 20th century.

One of the most notable changes has been the widespread use of the singular pronoun they. Although this usage was found back in the Middle Ages, it received official recognition only in the 21st century. Today, the use of they as a gender-neutral pronoun has become the norm in scientific publications, legislative documents, and the media. An important step was the inclusion of this usage in reputable dictionaries and academic writing guides such as the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary, APA Style Guide, and Chicago Manual of Style.

In 2019, "they" was declared Merriam-Webster's "Word of the Year" as a singular pronoun. The dictionary added an explanation that they can be used to refer to a person whose gender is unknown or non binary. The APA has officially allowed the use of they as the sole pronoun in academic writing, especially when it comes to people who do not identify with the binary pronouns he/she [5].

In addition to changes in the system of pronouns, there is an active neutralization of professions and titles in modern English. Many words containing masculine or feminine markers have been replaced with more inclusive counterparts. For example, instead of fireman, firefighter is now used, instead of chairman, chairperson is used, and stewardess has been replaced by flight attendant.

Interestingly, unlike Russian and Kazakh, where there is a tendency for the spread of feminitives (for example, журналист – журналистка), the reverse process is taking place in English – feminitives are gradually falling out of use. Feminine forms such as actress or authoress are being replaced by universal variants (actor, author), which emphasizes professional identity rather than gender.

Sociocultural changes play a key role in the formation of new linguistic norms. Gender-neutral language is becoming an important part of public discourse, influencing media, legislation, education, and corporate culture. There are active discussions in the English-speaking world about the need for linguistic inclusivity, and many organizations have already implemented recommendations on the use of gender-neutral forms in official documents.

English has a significant impact on the linguistic picture of the world in Kazakhstan, where it is an important element of the educational system and international communications. The inclusion of modern language norms in English language teaching programs in Kazakhstan contributes to a more accurate and relevant perception of the language. In addition, the use of gender-neutral forms can have an impact on the bilingual consciousness of Kazakhstanis, gradually changing their attitude to the gender category in Kazakh and Russian.

Globalization and the spread of English make it possible to introduce gender-neutral forms into various languages, including Russian and Kazakh. In the Kazakh language, which itself does not have a grammatical gender category, such changes do not significantly affect the morphological system, but manifest themselves in vocabulary. For example, in the academic and business environment of Kazakhstan, English vocabulary is increasingly used, including gender-neutral terms.

At the same time, there is a certain linguistic interference. Russian-speaking Kazakhstanis learning English may have difficulty reproducing the neutral pronouns they/them, since in Russian they sound like a multitude of numbers. There are no such problems in the Kazakh language, since it does not initially mark gender in pronouns (jk = "he/she/it").

Thus, the results of the study confirm that gender-neutral English reflects global social changes aimed at achieving equality. These changes are already going beyond the English-speaking world and are becoming relevant for multilingual countries such as Kazakhstan.

Discussion

The conducted research revealed significant changes in the category of English language gender under the influence of the feminist movement and the desire for gender neutrality. These changes reflect not only linguistic evolution, but also deep sociocultural transformations in society.

Our results are consistent with the conclusions presented in the study by Bozhenko, Yulia S., Em, Lyudmila S., Kalinovskaya, Elena A. "Linguistic Signs of Gender Neutrality in the English and Russian Languages (by the Example of the Internet Publications)" (2022) [6, p.1455]. The authors analyze the manifestations of gender neutrality in English and note that one of the key aspects of this process is the rejection of the use of the pronoun he as a universal substitute. Instead, the use of they in the singular is fixed, which is consistent with the data of our study.

In addition, our work correlates with the research of Tony Sun, Kellie Webster, Apu Shah, William Yang Wang, Melvin Johnson in the article "They, Them, Theirs: Rewriting with Gender-Neutral English" (2021) [7]. The researchers emphasize that the introduction of gender-neutral pronouns and formulations in English goes hand in hand with changes in the social environment, including media, politics, and education. They also offer automatic text conversion methods to adapt it to inclusive language standards, which shows the importance of the technological side of this process.

However, despite the positive trends, some researchers point to difficulties and resistance in the process of introducing a gender-neutral language. For example, Vanmassenhove, Eva, Emmery, Chris, Shterionov, and Dimitar in their work "NeuTral Rewriter: A Rule-Based and Neural Approach to Automatic Rewriting into Gender-Neutral Alternatives" (2021) [8] discuss that although the desire to neutralize language is a global trend, in some English-speaking countries

there remains an ambiguous attitude towards such reforms. They note that traditional linguistic norms, entrenched in society, prevent the rapid introduction of new forms, which makes this process gradual and heterogeneous.

In the article "Framing Gender: Federal Appellate Judges' Choices About Gender-Neutral Language" (2009) Judith D. Fisher conducts an empirical study of the use of gender-neutral language by judges of the US federal Courts of Appeals. She compares the court decisions of 1965 and 2006, revealing changes in the use of gender-neutral language. Fisher found that in 1965, the use of gender-neutral language was minimal, whereas by 2006, there was a significant increase in its use. For example, in later decisions, judges more often used terms such as "police officer" instead of "policeman", and also replaced the pronoun "he" with "he or she" or simply "they" in cases where the gender of the person was not determined. This indicates a gradual transition to a more inclusive language in judicial practice [9].

In the context of Kazakhstan, where English is actively studied and used, understanding these changes is of particular importance. Kazakh, unlike English and Russian, initially does not have a grammatical gender category, however, the influence of English can lead to a change in the perception of gender-marked forms in the bilingual consciousness of Kazakhstanis. For example, the proliferation of English-language inclusive forms may influence discussions about the introduction or rejection of femininives in the Kazakh language, as well as the perception of gender norms in official documents and educational materials.

Thus, the interpretation of the results of our study confirms the global trend towards gender neutralization of language, reflecting society's desire to eliminate discrimination and promote equality. A comparison with the work of other linguists in recent years demonstrates the consistency of the conclusions and highlights the relevance of further research in this area, especially in the context of multilingual countries such as Kazakhstan.

Conclusion

The attraction to feminist linguistics and the movement for gender neutrality has led to significant changes in the English language, especially in the field of pronouns and professional vocabulary. These processes reflect modern social transformations and find a response in Kazakhstan's multilingual society. Understanding these changes is important both for teaching English in Kazakhstan and for studying the relationship between global language trends and national language policy.

The study confirmed that the gender category in English has undergone significant changes under the influence of socio-cultural processes, including the movement for gender neutrality and feminist initiatives. These changes affected both the lexical and grammatical levels of the language, which indicates a high dynamic of linguistic development in response to the evolution of social values.

Firstly, the results of the study confirm that the traditional use of the masculine gender as a neutral (generic he) no longer corresponds to modern norms of the English language. If in the past the pronoun he was used to refer to persons of any gender, today it is being replaced either by the construction he or she, or by the only they, which has acquired the status of a fully legitimate gender-neutral pronoun. This change has received official recognition in academic writing styles, legal texts, and journalism, indicating its widespread adoption and consolidation in the language.

Secondly, there is an active process of neutralizing professions and titles. It is interesting to consider these changes in the context of the Kazakh language, which, unlike English and Russian, is a language without grammatical gender. In the Kazakh language, pronouns and nouns are not marked by gender, which makes it initially gender-neutral. For example, the Kazakh pronouns ol ("he", "she", "it") and bul do not have a grammatical gender category and can be applied equally to any person or object.

However, despite this linguistic feature, in the Kazakh language, gender labeling can manifest itself in other aspects, for example, in the use of words denoting professions and social roles. Some professions are traditionally associated with men (engineer, басшы – "лидер"), while others are

associated with women (мұғалім – "teacher", although the word is formally neutral, it is more often associated with the feminine gender in the public consciousness). In recent years, discussions have also begun in the Kazakh language about the need to introduce gender-specific or, conversely, more inclusive terms.

In this context, learning gender-neutral English can have an impact on the Kazakh language, especially among the younger generation, who actively use English in their studies and work. Two possible scenarios of influence are: 1 - Strengthening the existing neutrality – the Kazakh language may remain without pronounced gender markers, while the Russian language, for example, adapts feminitives. 2 - The emergence of new borrowed gender-neutral constructions – for example, the use of English terms in the original or their adaptation in the Kazakh language (for example, лидер instead of басшы, спикер instead of сөз сөйлеуші).

Thus, the Kazakh language, having an initial grammatical gender neutrality, can adapt certain elements of inclusive English, especially in the field of official and academic communications. In the context of Kazakhstan's multilingualism, it is important to take these processes into account and study their impact on the linguistic worldview of native Kazakh speakers.

New trends are likely to have an impact on education, particularly for teachers. Since the integration of tasks aimed at the development of gender balance communication strategies into the process of professional communicative training of English language teachers is already possible and necessary. This contributes to the formation of future teachers' skills that allow them to take gender aspects into account in the educational process and ensure inclusiveness in learning [10, p.473].

The study confirmed that gender-neutral English is not just a linguistic phenomenon, but a reflection of broader social changes aimed at achieving equality and inclusivity. These changes go beyond the English-speaking world and have an impact on global language processes, including language policy in countries with multilingual populations such as Kazakhstan.

The Kazakh language, which initially does not have a grammatical gender category, demonstrates resistance to the introduction of gender markers, but at the same time may be influenced by the English language in terms of borrowing new terms and concepts. In the future, we can expect further strengthening of gender-neutral language norms, which will require continued research in this area, especially taking into account language processes in Kazakhstan and other countries with multilingual societies.

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