# GENDER NEUTRALIZATION PROCESS IN CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH INTERNET DISCOURSE

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*SUMMARY*
*In the focus of the article there is the problem of gender neutralization phenomenon in the modern English language in general and in contemporary English Internet discourse in particular. The changes in the English language in diachrony are studied and interpreted in close connection with the review of «political correctness» and general tendency of euphemizing acute issues in the social life.*
*The research was chiefly performed on the basis of the British National Corpus and the samples of English Internet discourse with the total amount of the analyzed texts about 4000. Therefore, the findings of the research can be fully regarded as trust-worthy and highly informative. The results have proved the slow-down in the process of replacing gender marked job titles by gender-neutral words.*

*The research has perspectives for the future. The perspective may be seen in employing other corpora. The chief purpose is to prevent any form of linguistic bias that may occur in Internet discourse. The comparative analysis of these processes in British, American, Australian and Canadian English might also be noteworthy. Nevertheless, the diversity and profoundness of the researches in this field have proved the urgency of the topic involved.*

***Key words:*** *gender neutralization, job titles, English Internet discourse, political correctness, corpus.*

**Introduction.** In the paradigm of modern linguistics, questions related to the problems of linguistic categories associated with cultural realities are increasingly being raised. One of the most popular research topics today is the problem of the principles and patterns of cultural and linguistic implementation of such an ambiguous phenomenon as «gender neutralization» and its reflection in the processes of word formation and morphology. At this stage, this phenomenon is undergoing serious influence from both the ideas of cultural pluralism and, as a consequence, the development and observance of the principles of social and political correctness, as well as the need to correctly represent the equal rights of women on an equal basis with men and the elimination of any discrimination against representatives of sexual minorities in various spheres of public life, in particularly through professional nominations.

Approaches to the consideration and analysis of gender neutralization are different: the latter is interpreted as a special ideological reality, a tendency towards linguistic tolerance, a factor of modern language etiquette, etc.

Despite the popularity of the ideas of eliminating gender biases and boundaries that have swept the whole world, scientific research in the linguistic field related to gender neutralization inherent in the English language culture continues to remain unreasonably small.

The relevance of the topic of our research is due to insufficient knowledge of gender correctness in the linguistic aspect; the need to establish the status of gender neutralization in linguistics and linguistic cultural studies, as well as the need to study the manifestations of gender neutralization in the English language.

The object of the study is gender neutralization and the ways of its realization. The subject of the research is presented by complex words and words with semi-suffixes *«person»* introduced into the English language in diachrony to replace job titles with marked gender with the semi-affixes *«man/men»* (*«woman/women»*).

**Theoretical background.** In this section, there will be compared two methods of the gender neutral job titles formation, namely affixation and compounding according to the frequency registered in the British National Corpus to examine the general tendency of gender debiasing and discrimination prevention. In English, substituting gendered role nouns with gender neutral versions, known as «politically correct speech», has rapidly been gaining ground, with the primary aim being the inclusion of non-male people. Its effectiveness, however, has not been conclusively demonstrated. Previously, word embeddings have been shown to contain gender biases similar to natural language in the vast majority of the Germanic and Rhaeto-Romanic languages.

Gender-specific job titles are names of jobs that also specify or imply the gender of the person performing that job. A gender-neutral job title, on the other hand, is one that does not specify or imply gender, such as *firefighter*. In some cases, it may be debatable whether a title is gender-specific; for example, *chairman* appears to denote a male (because of the ending -*man*), but the title is also applied sometimes to women.

Proponents of gender-neutral language generally advocate the use of gender-neutral job titles, particularly in contexts where the gender of the person in question is not known or not specified.

The above applies to gender neutrality in English and in some other languages without grammatical gender (where grammatical gender is a feature of a language's grammar that requires every noun to be placed in one of several classes, often including feminine and masculine). In languages with grammatical gender, the situation is altered by the fact that nouns for people are often constrained to be inherently masculine or feminine, and the production of truly gender-neutral titles may not be possible. In such cases, proponents of gender-neutral language may instead focus on ensuring that feminine and masculine words exist for every job, and that they are treated with equal status.

The relation between language and gender has been extensively studied since the 1970s initiated, at least in part, by the second-wave feminist movement (Bucholtz, 2014). Since then, the field has expanded into including several sub-fields, as well as including the notion of sexuality. In addition, several notable theories have emerged, among them queer theory and Butler's performativity

theory. According to Baker (Baker, 2006), the performativity theory denotes that gender is not something we are born with, but rather something we do, something we perform.

The terms political correctness, politically correct or PC had not been commonly used until the end of the 1970s. The U.S Supreme Court firstly mentioned the term politically correct.

It is difficult to trace the history of this term, as there are different opinions about the exact date of its origin. Some believe that Caren de Crow president of the National Women's Organization in 1975 first introduced the concept of «political correctness», while others attribute the term to 1793, when the Supreme Court of the United States heard the case of Chisholm vs. Georgia. It was also used the terms politically incorrect, socially unacceptable. It is also thought that it was first used in 1987 in Alan Bloom's bestseller «The Closing of the American Mind». Despite the fact that the origin of this concept is still controversial, it is clear that the ideology of political correctness that emerged on American campuses in the 70s of the twentieth century became widespread and reflected in the English language. Thus, we can conclude that the concept of «political correctness» is multifaceted and the question of its origin is still open.

According to Collin's Dictionary, political correctness is «demonstrating progressive ideals, especially by avoiding vocabulary that is considered offensive, discriminatory, or judgmental, especially concerning race and gender» (Collins, 2024).

Since the second-wave feminist movement and the introduction of political correctness (Allan & Burridge, 2006), several changes have been introduced to make English a more gender-neutral and inclusive language. These changes have emerged as an action towards the sexist language. Partly to address this asymmetry in language, gender-fair language (henceforth GFL) was introduced as «part of a broader attempt to reduce stereotyping and discrimination in language» (Sczesny, Formanowicz & Moser, 2016). According to S. Sczesny et al., the GFL includes two principal notions: neutralization and feminization. Neutralization entails replacing gender-biased terms (e.g., policeman) with gender-unmarked forms (police officer), whereas feminization instead entails the usage of feminine forms, or both masculine and feminine forms, to increase visibility of female referents. One part of neutralization is the introduction of gender-neutral terms such as chairperson (or simply chair) and spokesperson.

According to Leech (Leech, 2011), contemporary English tends to colloquialization, Americanization, simplification, and gender neutralization, the latter fact being totally proved by the increasing frequency of gender unspecified job titles coined by means of highly productive semi-affixes *«person», «agent»* as well as the combination of nouns with *«operator», «attendant»* or the formation of agent nouns on the basis of verbal stems by adding suffixes *-ant, -or, -er.*

The ways of building gender neutral job titles may be subdivided into morphological proper and semantic. The former lies in the coinage of new nouns denoting occupations by morphological means application while the latter consists in replacing gender marked words with *-man/-men* and *-woman/-women* semi-affixes by gender unspecified synonyms or hypernyms like *«camera operator»* instead of *«cameraman»*, *«police officer»* instead of *«policeman»*, *«businessperson»*, *«spokesperson»*, *«spokesperson»* instead of *«businessman»*, *«salesman»* and *«spokesman»*. To illustrate the morphological proper way of building neutral job titles we may adduce such examples as nouns like *«firefighter», «flight attendant»* created on the noun + verbal stem basis plus suffixes like *-er*, *-or* and *-ant.*

**Previous research.** Evidence suggests that gender identification in English and its reduction have been thoroughly investigated by both computational linguists and NLP researchers recently, and impressive research massive on the topic has been witnessed so far (Bolukbasi et al., 2016; Caliskan et al., 2017; Ethayarajh et al., 2019; Kaneko and Bollegala, 2019 among others). In the light of the possible danger of gender stereotypes reinforcement (Hansen, 2022; Musto et al., 2015), this issue still requires further investigation.

Examining *The Time Magazine Corpus* (texts from the 1920s to the 2000s), researcher Maria Bovin found: *«The usage of the neutral term fire fighter has increased, starting in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the frequency of usage is lower, but it is also evident from the rows showing the total instances of all of the terms that the overall mentioning of the professionals in this line of work was less frequent in this decade. In addition, it is notable that the usage of firewoman is non-existent. In the case of policewoman, the frequency of usage is very low in all of the decades examined, but there are at least some instances of the term being used. The term firewoman, on the other hand, appears to never have been used in the magazine.»* (Bovin, 2016).

**Methodology.** The method used in this study is corpus linguistics. The research has been performed on the basis of the *British National Corpus* data, a 100 million words corpus containing British English, by sampling the relevant instances and determining their frequency per million words (112, 102, 325 words [4,048 texts]; The British National Corpus, 2001). The present study is corpus-based, which entails that a corpus is used as a method for answering the question of whether the gender-neutral occupational titles have increased. It should be noted that only a few professions or occupations were selected for examination. Cheshire's article (Cheshire, 2008) served as the initial inspiration, where it was indicated that some of the gender neutral job titles, such as *firefighter*, are becoming more common than the old, biased ones whereas other titles, such as *chairperson*, do not show the same tendency.

**Findings**. The suffix *-man* had the meanings 'person' and 'adult male' in Old English, but, even when used as a gender-neutral term to include women, it was understood to still mainly refer to males. Around the 20th century, the gender-neutral use of *man* and *-man* declined. Thus, job titles that include this suffix, such as *fireman*, *salesman* and *alderman* generally imply that the holder is male. For most such titles, gender-neutral equivalents now also exist, such as *police officer*, *salesperson* or *sales representative* (for *salesman* or *saleswoman*), etc.

In present-day English, there is still seen a strong tendency to form gender neutral nouns denoting occupations on the morphological basis, like *«mailman»* ↔ *«mailperson»*, *«crewman»* ↔ *«crewperson»*, but it also refers to other kinds of characterization like in *«layperson»* for *«layman»* in the meaning of a person without professional or specialized knowledge in a particular subject. There is also evidence of the increase in such a way of noun formation as compounding, for example *«mail carrier»* for *«mailman»*, *«flight attendant»* for *«air hostess»* or *«air host»*, *«congressional representative»* for *«Congressman»*, *«business executive»* for *«businessman»*, *«coordinator»* for *«chairman»*. These are also known as «non-sexist» words.
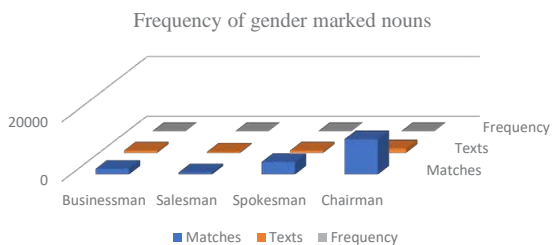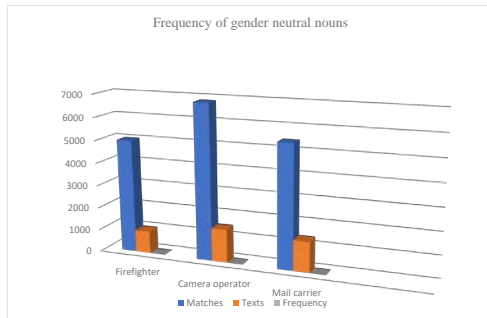
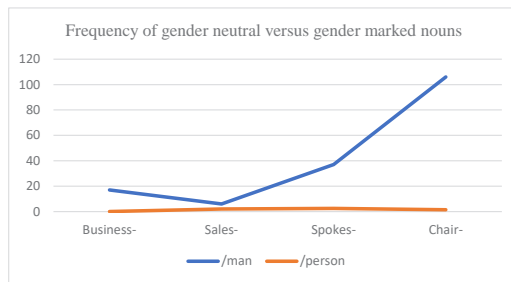**Fig. 1. The frequency distribution per million words of nouns with *-man* semi-affix denoting job titles**
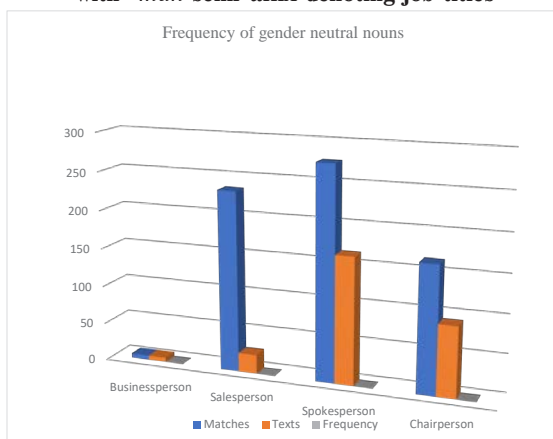


**Fig. 2. The frequency distribution per million words of nouns with *-person* semi-affix denoting job titles**
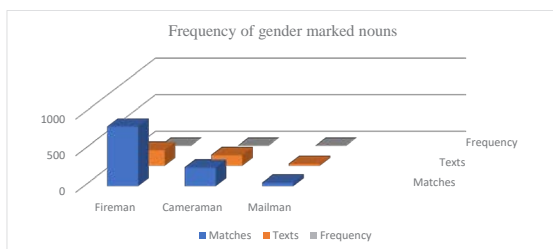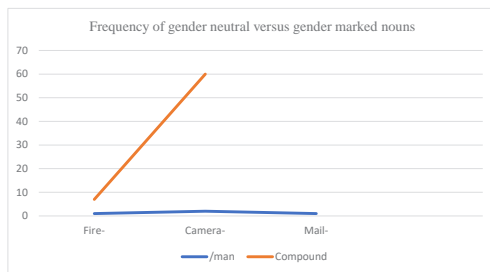


**Fig. 3. The frequency distribution per million words of gender marked nouns with *-man* semi-affix denoting job titles**

**Fig. 4. The frequency distribution per million words of gender neutral compound nouns denoting job titles**
*firefighter, camera operator, mail carrier*



**Fig. 5. The frequency distribution per million words of nouns with *-man* versus *-person* semi-affixes denoting job titles**



**Fig. 6. The frequency distribution per million words of gender marked nouns with *-man* semi-affix versus gender neutral compound nouns denoting job titles**

**Conclusions.** This section discusses the corpus findings and integrates them into a cognitive-functional framework. From this perspective, we can roughly distinguish that based on the *British National Corpus* data, it becomes clear that the frequency of job titles with *-man* semi-affix hasn't dropped that drastically recently if compared to composites with *-person* as it might have been expected, Figure 5. At the same time, gender neutral nouns denoting occupation coined by compounding are becoming more widely used as is seen from the graph, Figure 6. This is but natural, because alongside with the tendency of political correctness there are evident signs of terms unification and tendency for terms like *«operator»* or *«executive»* or *«agent»*. Proponents of gender-neutral job titles believe that such titles should be used, especially when referring to hypothetical persons. For example, *«firefighter»* instead of *«fireman»*; *«mail carrier»* rather than *«mailman»*. In the rare case where no useful gender-neutral alternative is available, they believe both male and female terms should be used.

*The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* advocates gender-neutral language in circumstances where all sexes are meant to be included. For instance, a business might advertise that it is looking for a new *«chair»* or *«chairperson»* rather than *«chairman»*. Gender-neutral language discourages *chairman*, on the grounds that some readers would assume women and those of other genders are implicitly excluded from responding to an advertisement using this word.

The findings indicate that the gender-neutral forms have increased in usage, yet they tend to be used primarily with male referents or when the gender of referents is either irrelevant or unknown. The results of the study cannot be seen as a reflection of the usage of these terms in British English in general, but rather serve as the basis for further studies. Gender neutralization has been launched in the language system, but the artificial nature of the pressure on the language element turns out to be weaker than the objective reasons for native speakers to preserve a cultural tradition, which can be defined as a behavioral and linguistic phenomenon. The relative linguistic stability can be explained by the nature of the conservative attitude of the British towards their language, the desire of native speakers to preserve the system of designation existing in their culture. It is, however, important

to keep in mind that the changes presented in this paper, where gender-neutral terms seem to be increasing, may not be due to gender-equality and inclusion aspects alone, but rather other factors such as professionalization of the particular terms, or lexical change due to other reasons.

An analysis of definitions from modern explanatory dictionaries shows that words with the component *«-man/men»*, are not marked as outdated or offensive. Words that are considered offensive may be recommended to be replaced with «inclusive» terms — in such cases, the language code is adjusted. From the point of view of social linguistics, a language code is, first of all, a norm of linguistic representation, which a native speaker must follow to a greater or lesser extent. Artificial pressure on the language causes resistance.

The results of the quantitative analysis show that gender-correct designations are generally used less often than incorrect ones. The gender neutral compounds are practically not only not being squeezed out, but even prevailing. The registered predominance of gender-incorrect nominations can also be explained by the fact that these social terms have been rooted in the language since a long time ago, unlike correct complex «neologisms», they correspond to the language norm and are frequency units. An analysis of definitions from modern explanatory dictionaries shows that words with the component *«-man/men»*, are not marked as outdated or offensive. Still, all the findings and results reveal the dynamic processes which are still in progress, affecting both the semantics and morphology as the language responds to the outward triggers and changing circumstances.

It has also been concluded that the usage of gender-specific forms might be influenced by socio-cultural aspects, such as changes in the employment policy. In the course of the research there have been collected data on both gender-specific and gender neutral occupational titles and on this basis a diachronic analysis has been performed. The corpus data have revealed the frequency of gender-specific forms. The results have shown a correlation between changes in the usage of gender-specific forms and socio-cultural events.

The perspective of the research is seen in investigating gender neutralization phenomenon both in synchrony and diachrony to forecast the possible changes in the English language in the future.

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# ПРОЦЕСИ ГЕНДЕРНОЇ НЕЙТРАЛІЗАЦІЇ В СУЧАСНОМУ АНГЛОМОВНОМУ ІНТЕРНЕТ-ДИСКУРСІ

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### *АНОТАЦІЯ*

*Стаття має закцентувати на проблемі гендерної нейтралізації в сучасній англійській мові в цілому та в сучасному англомовному Інтернет-дискурсі зокрема. Зміни в англійській мові в діахронії досліджуються та трактуються в тісному взаємозв'язку з вивченням «політичної коректності» та загальної тенденції до евфемізації гострих питань суспільного життя.*

*Дослідження провадилося головним чином на базі Британського національного корпусу та матеріалів англомовного Інтернет-дискурсу загальною кількістю близько 4000 проаналізованих текстів. Таким чином, результати можна вважати достовірними та інформативними. Результати засвідчили уповільнення процесу заміщення гендерно маркованих назв професій гендерно нейтральними словами.*

*Дослідження є перспективним у плані залучення інших корпусів. Головною метою є запобігання лінгвістичній дискримінації, випадки якої можуть траплятися в Інтернет-дискурсі. Також убачається доцільним порівняльний аналіз британського, американського, канадського й австралійського варіантів англійської мови. Актуальність цих питань підтверджується розмаїттям та глибиною досліджень у цій царині.*

***Ключові слова:*** *гендерна нейтралізація, назви професій, англомовний Інтернет-дискурс, політична коректність, корпус.*

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