

## LEXICAL GENDER IN WRITTEN BUSINESS ENGLISH: A CORPUS-BASED APPROACH

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### ABSTRACT

*The lexical gender in specialist communication is examined in this essay. In a 10 million word corpus of written Business English, styles of address, professional titles, and the phrase "generic man" were the main topics of analysis. The results are discussed after a brief introduction and discussion of the literature on both gender in specialized communication and related corpus-based views of lexical gender in General English. Results were inconsistent. On the one hand, the "male-as-norm" notion supports common gender stereotypes. We know that in everyday language, gender is not talked about, not even mentioned. In other words, it is not the type of information that is predicated of a referent. It is not often uttered such statements as: 'she's a woman' or 'my computer is a thing'. These sentences are perfectly grammatical of course, and they make sense, but they are not uttered. Or if they are gender nouns such as 'woman' or 'man' are not used to convey information about gender but some implicature, often close to stereotype: 'She spends a fortune on perfume.—Well, what do you expect, she's a woman'.<sup>1</sup> For instance, there are more than 100 references to men than women in the corpus for each woman. On the other side, proponents of non-sexist English have also had an impact on written Business English. For instance, Ms is more frequently used than Mrs. and Miss, supporting the notion that Ms is more appropriate in professional contexts. The final section of this*

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<sup>1</sup> [SEMANTIC FEATURES OF GENDER LEXICAL UNITS OF ENGLISH](#)

LR Khalilova. Current research journal of philological sciences (2767-3758) 3 (01), 31-35

*article explores the positive effects that the study's research findings may have on business English instruction.*

**Key words:** *lexical gender, generic man, linguistic techniques, gender in specialized communication.*

## **Introduction**

Specialized corpora, or genre- and topic-specific corpora, have been used to support LSP teaching and learning, identify specialized terms, learn about word collocations, learn about grammar, learn about style, and learn about concepts. They are designed to include only samples of language of a particular type, belonging to a particular genre, register, etc. For instance, Nickerson (2005) makes reference to several corpus-based evaluations of corporate communication (see also Nelson, 2006). She gives a summary of recent studies on the usage of English as a lingua franca in international business settings and states that two themes have gained significance over the past ten years in the study of business communication. Analyzing contextualized communicative genres is one of them, with the emphasis on "the organizational and/or cultural variables that contribute to the realization of the unique text/event under consideration" (Nickerson, 2005, p. 369). Finding linguistic techniques that "can be connected with good communication in business, independent of the speaker or writer being a native or non-native speaker" is the focus of the second trend (Nickerson, 2005, p. 369). In keeping with Nickerson's point of view, this article describes an analysis of written Business English lexis that makes use of the concept of lexical gender to get a better understanding of the changes gender neutral language—i.e., language that is equitable for men and women alike—has made in business texts. The Wolverhampton Corpus of Written Business English (WBE), which has a corpus of about 10 million words of written Business English, was used to look into two topics: the use of "generic guy" in the WBE and how some courtesy and professional titles are employed in written Business English. In the broadest sense, this study examines the degree to which lexical gender is present in a

particular piece of conversation, a subject that has received much attention in general language and requires equal attention in specialized language. The article begins by describing the current state of gender in specialized communication. It then places the research in the larger context of the debate over language and gender by commenting on some recent corpus-based views of gender in general language corpora. This opens the door for incorporating ideological issues into the analysis of specialized communication. The research's potential pedagogical repercussions when the findings are used in the classroom are also explored and conclusions are offered in the final section.

### **The issue of gender in specialist communication**

Four kinds of gender—grammatical gender, lexical gender, referential gender, and social gender—tend to dominate recent study on the subject of gender and language. Grammatical gender, according to Hellinger and Bußmann (2001, p. 7), is an inherent quality of the noun that regulates agreement between the noun (the controller) and some (gender-variable) satellite element (the target), which might be an article, adjective, pronoun, verb, number, or preposition.

### **Lexical gender in the Wolverhampton Corpus of Written Business English: A corpus-based perspective (WBE)**

The WBE is a specialized corpus concerned with Business English collected from 23 different web sites related to business. It is an annotated corpus of 10,186,259 words; also a synchronic corpus, including only texts available on the web during a 6-month period in 1999–2000; and a monolingual English corpus, which comprises only texts written in English, although no restriction was applied as regards.

#### **Lexical gender and written Business English**

The presence of lexical gender in written Business English has been examined in this paper. We have come to two key conclusions on social titles, professional titles, and "generic man" by examining how much lexical gender is present in the Wolverhampton Corpus of Written Business English. First off, the Wolverhampton

Corpus of Written Business English likewise exhibits the 'Male-As-Norm' underlying concept of lexical gender: for each woman referred to in the corpus.

### **Acknowledgements**

I appreciate the valuable and enlightening criticism Brian Paltridge and two anonymous reviewers provided on a previous edition of this paper. In particular, I value their suggestions for improving and strengthening Section 5.2 as well as their thoughts on potential future research topics (such the potential influence of writers and audience as well as possible geographic influences). Carlos Matrán should also be thanked for his assistance with the chi-square significance test.

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