

## WHAT GENERIC FORM THE TEACHER ACTUALLY USES WITH HIS/HER/THEIR/ITS CLASS

Bren Ahearn  
Asia University

This study examines use of the generic referent by teachers. Classes were observed and  $\chi^2$  analyses were performed on the data. It was found that ESL/EFL teacher educators tended to use gender-neutral, rather than masculine generics; however, it also was found that this usage was not particular to ESL/EFL teacher educators. It also was found that usage of the male generic did not vary according to gender of user.

### INTRODUCTION

A number of writers believe that language is a reflection of attitudes and/or thoughts (Carney, 1977; Sheldon, 1990; Strauss-Noll, 1984; Treichler, 1983). Treichler (1983) observes that this reflection of attitudes, however, is from a male perspective. Sheldon (1990) magnifies this point by stating that "Our language reflects sexist, male-centered attitudes that perpetuate the trivialization, marginalization, and invisibility of female experience" (p. 4). Carney (1977) takes this point one step further by asserting that "Language not only reflects thought but also shapes it. Sexist language not only expresses but also reinforces attitudes which limit the options and contributions of girls and women" (p. 52). Carney uses three categories in order to classify sexist language:

- 1) language that girls and women are expected to use, in other words, the language seen as appropriate for them;
- 2) language that ignores women and girls, for example, the generic use of words like man; and 3) language used to describe women and girls.

(p. 52)

When I decided to do a research project, I knew that I wanted to investigate the topic of sexism in language; however, I was uncertain about which area would be the focus. Three events occurred that made me decide to focus on "the generic use

of words." First, while researching, I found myself most interested in the literature related to this area. Second, I realized that I often subconsciously avoid using "he/him/his" by itself as a generic referent, i.e. as a pronoun or possessive adjective which refers to a hypothetical/general singular antecedent which may be either male or female. (e.g. The use of "his or her" in the following sentence is a generic usage: "Everyone should turn in his or her homework.") On one occasion, while describing to a friend someone I would date, I used "he or she" to describe that person. It was not until after I had said this that I had realized what the implications of my hypercorrection were. Finally, I noticed that during a presentation one of my female colleagues used "he" to describe a generic subject in a study. Thus, in this section I have decided to investigate the implications of using the masculine generic (i.e. he, him, or his) as a generic referent and prescribed alternatives to the masculine generic.

#### **Implications of using a masculine form as a generic**

**referent:** It is apparent from Carney's quotation above that one implication of using a masculine generic referent is that women are ignored and/or subordinated. Carney, however, is not the only person who feels this way (Hartman and Judd, 1978; Kaye, 1989; Kendall, 1990; Sheldon, 1990; Treichler, 1983; Wojtas, 1990). Treichler (1983) remarks that perhaps "history" should be changed to "herstory" because history is "a male-centered narrative in which women traditionally have played little part" (p.15). Again, Sheldon (1990) claims that the use of the masculine generic and other sexist features "perpetuate[s] the... invisibility of female experience" (p. 4).

This implication also is applicable to the classroom. Kendall (1990) comments that teachers reinforce male dominance by using "he" as a generic pronoun. Hartman and Judd (1978) note that "When a grammatical pattern is being taught [to ESL students], authors [of ESL textbooks] generally seem to opt for a male rather than a female referent" (p. 385).

When a referent is female, however, the referent usually is a negatively stereotypical one (Kaye, 1989; Willinsky, 1987). Willinsky (1987) notices that in the 1966 edition of The Random House Dictionary, the male referent is used to refer to stereotypically male characteristics and/or professions (e.g. one male in the dictionary is a doctor), while the female referent was used to refer to negative characteristics: "...she always wears a crazy hat" (p. 147). Kaye (1989) observes some of the same phenomena in the revised sexism-reduced edition of Collins Cobuild Dictionary. While the new edition is better than the old one, there are still some negative stereotypes in the dictionary: "She lay in the pillow muffling her sobs" (This was the sample usage for "pillow.") (p. 193).

Studies have shown that subjects tend to think of a male when asked to describe the person represented by generic "he/him/his" (Hamilton, 1988; Kendall, 1990; Scott, 1980; Wilson & Ng, 1988; Wojtas, 1990). For example, Wilson and Ng (1988) explored the effect of generics on ability to recognize the gender of persons in flashed pictures. They had some of their subjects focus on sentences with masculine generics, and other subjects focus on sentences with feminine generics. They then at a sub-threshold level (which was determined individually for each subject during a pre-test) flashed pictures before the

subjects and asked the subjects to identify the gender of the persons in the pictures. Wilson and Ng found that the subjects who focused on the sentences with male generics tended to overreport the gender of the pictured persons as being male. Likewise, the subjects who focused on the sentences with female generics tended to overreport the gender of the pictured persons as being female.

Hamilton (1988) conducted an experiment which investigated the effect of one's own use of generics on one's perceptions of the persons represented by the generics. Some of the subjects in the study were instructed to complete a list of sentences in a "traditional, formal, academic style" (p. 788). Hamilton thought that the subjects who were given this type of instruction would use masculine generics in the sentences which required generics (Note: Hamilton placed on the test a few "dummy" sentences which did not require generics, so as not to disclose the aim of the study.). Other subjects were instructed to complete the sentences in a "modern, informal, casual style" (p. 788), and Hamilton thought that these instructions would result in the subjects' usage of unbiased pronouns. After the subjects had completed the sentences, they had to describe the persons they had in mind when they completed these sentences. Then they had to write the names of these persons. The results demonstrated "that male bias was higher in the masculine generic condition than in the unbiased condition" (p. 785). Stated more simply, the subjects who used male generics associated images of men with their usage of these generics. Also, the study showed that the male subjects overall exhibited more male bias than the female subjects did.

Cole, Hill and Dayley (1983), on the other hand, conducted a number of experiments and report that the use of the masculine generic does not lead one to think of men, unless the masculine generic is used together with "man."

**Prescribed alternatives to the masculine generic:** If using the masculine form as a generic has negative implications (e.g. its usage excludes women), then what form should one use? A number of alternatives have been suggested and/or referenced in the literature reviewed. The option most commonly cited is the gender-less plural pronoun (Carney, 1977; Kaye, 1989; Kendall, 1990; McBroom, 1981; Wilcoxon, 1990; Wojtas, 1990): "Each person must take care of themselves" (example mine). This plural form is not new--many established writers have used it. Among the writers were Fielding, Richardson, Shaw (Kaye, 1989) and Shakespeare (Kendall, 1990). This plural form also is recommended in both the original and revised editions of Miller and Swift's The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing (McBroom, 1981; Wilcoxon, 1989). Dr. Sara Mills of Strathclyde University's English Department makes the following statement on the usage of this form: "I think it has caught on because there's a common sense feel to it, since you're talking about a plural entity" (Wojtas, 1990, p. 7). Kendall (1990) also realizes that this form is becoming popular and remarks that language inevitably changes:

Although we can expect periodic lamentations that proposed changes mean the ruin of English, language is a living entity that constantly evolves, and notions of what constitutes "correct" English change, too.  
(p. 14)

Another common substitute for the masculine generic is to use both the masculine and feminine forms (Kendall, 1990;

McBroom, 1981; Wilcoxon, 1989); however, this usage tends to call attention to form rather than to meaning and thus can distract the reader/listener: "Each person went into his or her house in order to get himself or herself a piece of pie that he or she had made earlier" (example mine). A shorter form of this is "s/he." Mills (Wojtas, 1990) prefers to use this term because it shows that she makes an attempt to integrate all of her students into the learning process. An even shorter form is "she," which also includes "he" in the form (Kendall, 1990). Kendall notes that using this form as a generic would not work because the form is associated with the female gender and thus would evoke an image of a female.

Another option cited in the literature is "she" with no reference to "he" in the form (Sheldon, 1990; Wojtas, 1990). Sheldon (1990) often refers to animals and toys with an indistinguishable gender as "she." Her 6 1/2-year-old daughter, on the other hand, refers to these animals and toys as "he" and cannot understand why her mother is so adamant about calling them "she." Mills (Wojtas, 1990) uses "she" as a generic term in order to shock people and to get them thinking about the issue.

Other people suggest that "he" be retained as the generic pronoun (Nilsen, 1981; Wojtas, 1990; Zepezauer, 1983). Nilsen (1981) and Mills (Wojtas, 1990), however, qualify the retention of "he." Nilsen (1981) explains that as editor of English Journal she does not always "correct" quoted passages with sexist language. An example she cites is one by Sartre. Mills (Wojtas, 1990) explains that "he" can be used if it is indicated that the form refers to both genders. Zepezauer (1983),

however, does not qualify the retention of "he"; he does, however, rationalize this retention. He notes that forms such as "she/he...are unsayable" (p. 24). He also states that "they/their" are "ungrammatical" (p. 24).

Kendall (1990) notes another option which Dr. Spock employed in a new edition of Baby and Child Care: he alternated the pronouns "he" and "she" as referents for the baby. This switching of referents, however, might be confusing for the reader. Still another alternative is presented by Austin (1981). She uses "inappropriate" referents for certain nouns in order to provoke discussion amongst her students. For example, she refers to a nurse as "he." Yet another choice is presented by both Wilcoxon (1989) and Sheldon (1990): "it" can be used.

Ruch (1981) presents his own made-up pronouns as a choice. He proposes that "E" be used for generic "he" because it is derived from both "he" and "she." Furthermore, he explains that it makes sense to use a single letter because the first person singular subject, "I," is a single letter. He also suggests "rem" for generic "him." The "r" is from "her," the "e" is from "E" and the "m" is from "him." Ruch uses the same procedure used to derive "rem" in order to derive "zar" from "his" and "her" (the "s" from "his" becomes "z"). He, however, does not indicate why the vowel becomes "a."

Finally, there are two alternatives which do not require the use of a pronoun. First, there is the passive construction (Wojtas, 1990). Mills (Wojtas, 1990) gives the following example: "If assignments have been completed, they should be handed in" (p. 7). Next, there is the avoidance of pronouns (McBroom, 1981; Nilsen, 1981; Wilcoxon, 1989). McBroom (1981)

and Wilcoxon (1989) demonstrate Miller and Swift's avoidance of pronouns in the editions of The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: "A disabled child may be able to eat and get dressed without help" (Wilcoxon, p. 115).

Since having had completed the review of the literature, I had been wondering which forms of the generic pronoun the teacher uses with his/her class, and there were two reasons behind this wondering: 1) Since I am a language teacher and am interested in getting into teacher education, I am interested in what forms of the generic other teacher educators, who are teaching others to teach language, actually use in the classroom; and 2) I think that it might be possible that some teachers were trained to use the traditional "he" form and still do use this form. Thus, I conducted a pilot study in order to investigate the following research questions:

1) Which generic referent does the teacher who is teaching others to be ESL/EFL instructors actually use--the traditional masculine "he/him/his" or an alternate form? Does the teacher educator, who in theory is on the cutting edge of language, actually use the traditional male generic or a more gender-neutral variant? Thus, I propose the following two hypotheses:

**H0:** There is no statistically significant difference in frequency of use between the traditional "he/him/his" form and an alternate non-male-biased form.

**H1:** There is a statistically significant difference in frequency of use between the traditional "he/him/his" form and an alternate non-male-biased form.

2) If the alternate hypothesis above is true, then does the teacher who is educating others to be ESL/EFL instructors actually tend to use the gender-neutral form of the generic more



often than do teachers from other disciplines (e.g. accounting, finance, etc.)? Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

**H0:** There is no statistically significant difference, according to category of teacher, in frequency of use between the traditional "he/him/his" form and an alternate non-male-biased form.

**H1:** There is a statistically significant difference, according to category of teacher, in frequency of use between the traditional "he/him/his" form and an alternate non-male-biased form.

3) If the traditional male form of the generic is used, then does usage of the male form vary according to gender of the user? Thus, the moderator variable, gender, was introduced and the following hypotheses were tested:

**H0:** There is no statistically significant difference, according to gender of user, in frequency of use of the traditional "he/him/his" form.

**H1:** There is a statistically significant difference, according to gender of user, in frequency of use of the traditional "he/him/his" form.

## **METHOD**

**Subjects:** The subjects for this study were ten instructors from the Monterey Institute of International Studies in Monterey, California, USA. Five of the instructors were teacher educators from the MA Program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), and the other five were teachers from the MBA and MA Programs in International Management and International Policies Studies, respectively. The results of one of the teachers from the International Management Department were not used in this study because this teacher is a non-native speaker of English and therefore might not have a pattern of usage of the generic similar to that of a native speaker.

**Materials and Procedures:** A high-quality audio-cassette tape recorder was used to tape each lecture during the Spring,

1991 semester. Segments of approximately 45 minutes of tape-recorded material per teacher were used for the analysis. The segments of the tapes were played, and sentences containing uses of the generic were extracted from the recordings and transcribed. Next, a table listing each generic and antecedent was compiled from the sentences.

**Analyses:** The variables in this naturalistic inquiry study are nominal in nature, ergo,  $\chi^2$  analyses were performed on the data in order to test each of the three hypotheses. The Yates Correction Factor was used in the following two situations resulting in one degree of freedom: 1) if the organization of the data for any one-way  $\chi^2$  analysis resulted in an independent variable of just two levels; and 2) if the organization of the data resulted in a 2X2 table, i.e. each of the variables had only two levels.

Two-tailed alternate hypotheses were posed for each research question because no studies examining the teacher's use of the generic pronoun were found in the literature reviewed. In all statistical analyses, the level of significance was predetermined at  $\alpha = .05$ .

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The  $\chi^2$  analysis (performed using the Yates Correction Factor) in Table 1 shows that the null hypothesis of the first research question above can be rejected and that the alternate hypothesis is supported, i.e. there is a 95 percent chance that the teacher educators' use of the alternate generic more often than the masculine generic is due to factors other than chance.

**TABLE 1 TESOL Teachers' Use of Male vs. Non-Male Generics**

	Male Form (#)	Other Form (#)	Total (#)
TESOL Teachers	3.5	12.5	16

$X^2_{obs.} = 4$        $X^2_{crit.} = 3.84$       d.f. = 1      p < .05

There is a significant difference in the TESOL teachers' usage of the forms; however, how meaningful is this difference? Is this tendency to use the non-male generic characteristic of just the TESOL instructors, or of all instructors in general? This question of which teacher uses which form is a restatement of the second set of hypotheses stated in the introduction. These hypotheses were tested with a two-way  $X^2$  analysis (performed using the Yates Correction Factor), which indicated that there is not a significant difference in frequency of use, according to category of teacher, between the traditional "he/him/his" form and an alternate non-male-biased form. Thus, the analysis presented in Table 2 shows that the null hypothesis for the second research question must be accepted.

**TABLE 2 Use of Generics According to Teacher**

	Male Form (#)	Other Form (#)	Total (#)
TESOL Teachers	3.5	12.5	16
Non-TESOL Teachers	2.0	13.0	15

$X^2_{obs.} = .023$        $X^2_{crit.} = 3.84$       d.f. = 1      p < .05

Thus, it appears as if the tendency to use non-male-biased generics is not particular to the TESOL teachers.

The analysis (one way  $X^2$  with Yates Correction Factor) presented in Table 3 reveals that in this sample the usage of the traditional masculine form of the generic does not vary according to gender of user, i.e. the null hypothesis stated with the third research question above cannot be rejected:

**TABLE 3 Use of the Male Form According to Teacher Gender**

	M Teachers (#)	F Teachers (#)	Total (#)
Masculine Form	3.0	2.5	5.5

$X^2_{obs.} = .04$        $X^2_{crit.} = 3.84$       d.f. = 1      p < .05

Thus, contrary to what one might expect, the men in the sample did not tend to use the masculine form more often than the women did.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

### **Possible Threats to Validity and Suggestions for Further**

**Research:** It should be noted that this study was not performed in a vacuum, i.e. there are factors which may have affected the results. For example, the sample was very small. Perhaps the study should be repeated with a larger sample. The problem with attempting to repeat the study with a larger sample, however, is that it might be difficult to find a school with a large faculty of TESOL teacher educators. A threat to replicability might be the fact that at the Monterey Institute an emphasis is placed on languages. It is possible that many of the instructors at the Institute might be more aware of the language that they use than teachers at other schools are because of this emphasis on languages. An interesting follow-up study might be an examination of the use of the generic by teachers at another school, or a comparison of the use of the generic by Monterey Institute teachers with the use by teachers from another school. Another follow-up study might be an investigation of which generic forms the ESL/EFL instructor, rather than teacher educator, uses in the classroom. Still another idea for a further research project might be a comparison of what generics teachers think they use with the generics they actually use.

**Pedagogical Implications:** An examination of one token of the data from the TESOL teacher educators is interesting in the fact that the speaker used two different generics in one

sentence to refer to the same antecedent: ". . . but it's not obvious to a person [antecedent] who's never read, and his parents have never read to them." The fact that this teacher used both forms in the same sentence shows that perhaps for some users, the use of the generic is in a state of transition from a more traditional masculine form to a more gender-neutral one.

Which form should be taught to learners of English? Hartman and Judd (1978) explore the issue of prescriptivism versus descriptivism--should the ESL/EFL teacher teach "correct" traditional grammar and usage, or should he/she teach the language how it actually is used? They suggest that the student should be exposed to all forms and "an accurate description of the language must include a recognition of all the controversy surrounding the issue" (p. 391). If the student is not exposed to all the forms, he/she (also known as he or she, s/he, he, she, they, it and E) probably will pick up the various forms on the street without learning the connotations associated with each. After all, the student does not live in a traditional Standard English vacuum.

## REFERENCES

- Austin, K. & Ruch, W.V. (1981). Sexism and the English teacher: Where do we go from here? [letters from readers] English Journal, 70, 48-50.
- Carney, J. (1977). The Language of Sexism: Sugar, Spice and Semantics. Journal of Reading, 21, 51-56.
- Cole, C.M., Hill, F. & Dayley, L.J. (1983). Do Masculine Pronouns Used Generically Lead to Thoughts of Men? Sex Roles. 9, 737-50.
- Hamilton, M.C. (1988). Using Masculine Generics: Does Generic He Increase Male Bias in the User's Imagery? Sex Roles. 19, 785-99.
- Hartman, P.L. & Judd, E.L. (1978). Sexism and TESOL Materials. TESOL Quarterly, 12, 383-93.
- Kaye, P. (1989). 'Women are alcoholics and drug addicts,' says dictionary. ELT Journal, 43, 192-5.
- Kendall, M.E. (1990). Who is He? College Teaching, 38, 13-15.
- McBroom, G. (1981). Too Good to Miss [book review]. English Journal, 70, 51.
- Nilsen, A.P. (1981). The Struggle towards Sex-Fair Language. English Journal, 70, 5.
- Scott, K.P. (1980). Sexist and Nonsexist Materials: What Impact Do They Have? The Elementary School Journal, 81, 46-52.
- Sheldon, A. (1990). "Kings are Royaler Than Queens": Language and Socialization. Young Children, 45, 4-9.
- Strauss-Noll, M. (1984). An Illustration of Sex Bias in English. Women's Studies Quarterly, 12, 36-37.
- Treichler, P.A. (1983). Sex and Language Features [symposium]. English Journal, 72, 12-15.
- Wilcoxon, S.A. (1989). He/She/They/It?: Implied Sexism in Speech and Print. Journal of Counseling and Development, 68, 114-16.
- Willinsky, J. (1987). Learning the Language of Difference: The Dictionary in the High School. English Education, 19, 146-58.
- Wilson, E. & Ng, S.H. (1988). Sex Bias in Visual Images Evoked by Generics: A New Zealand Study. Sex Roles, 18, 159-68.

Wojtas, O. (1990). Putting it in neutral. The Times Higher Education Supplement, 925, 7.

Zepezauer, F. (1983). Non-sexist Guidelines: A Happy Neutrality. English Journal, 72, 23-25.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT:** I would like to thank Kathleen M. Bailey and Jack D. Horn for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this study.