

# Use of Gender-Exclusive Language in Secondary School English Textbooks in Kenya: The Case of *New Integrated English Student's Book 3*

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the use of the pronoun “he” and nouns containing “man” which are generically used to mean people but intentionally or unintentionally they exclude the female gender. The paper confines itself to one of the English course books used in Kenyan secondary schools, *New Integrated English Student's Book 3*. Examples of gender-exclusive language used in the book are extracted and suggestions of using gender inclusive language are given. The study hopes to help in shaping the attitudes of learners in such a way that both genders will feel morally and socially included in the socio-economic developments of the society.

**Keywords:** Gender, sex, gender-exclusive, gender-inclusive, language.

## 1. Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the use of gender-exclusive English language with specific reference to the pronoun “he” and the noun “man” which are used generically to refer to both male and female. In the real sense “man” is not equal to people and therefore the pronoun reference “he” for neutral antecedents is gender-exclusive. The use of “man” as a generic term for people in general or as a person of either sex is now considered old-fashioned (Macmillan, 2002: 867). This paper takes cognizance of the pioneer work of the 1970s feminist linguists who concentrated on the way language features indicate sex-roles of women and men in society (See Cameron & Coates, 1988 and Tannen, 1990), and the 1990s where focus shifted to generic use of “he/man” (Martyna 1995, p. 42; Thomas and Wareing 1999, p.70).

Currently, women are getting involved in socio-economic developments and are increasingly becoming aware of their linguistics rights unlike there before. The fact that it is no longer a man's world is evident. Women today perform jobs which were male dominated e.g. the president of Liberia, Hellen Serlif, former Philippines president, Gloria Aroyo and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, members of national assembly, police officers, firefighters and salespersons. The titles statesmen, assembly men, policemen, firemen and salesmen can no longer be used to refer to them.

Historically, the use of “man” excluded women (Freeman, 1979, p. 492) as in when Thomas Jefferson indicated “all men are created equal” and “governments are instituted among men...” He did not use the term ‘men’ generically; rather he was precise at the time that women could not vote (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2003, p. 485). This was a blatant exclusion of women. Both men and women can be discriminated but most research has concentrated on negative attitudes towards women through the use of gender-exclusive language (Holmes, 1995).

The emphasis for use of gender-inclusive English language has found its way in the media, learning institutions and publishing houses. The United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in a 1999 book *Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language*, gives alternative words to use instead of words containing “man” and also made a call for the avoidance of gender-specific language in its bid to transform behavior and attitudes that legitimize and perpetuate the moral and social exclusion of women. Indeed the use of gender-fair language can be felt in the media, publishing houses and learning institutions.

## 2. Sex and gender

Sex refers to biological category which is usually fixed before birth (Romaine, p. 1994); (Wareing, p. 1999) and (Gradol and Swan, p. 1989:96). Spender (1980) remarks that we construct only two sexes (p.4): male and female. Gender, on the other hand, Gradol and Swan (1989) add is the social cultural dimension of the division of human beings into male and female (p.96). Wardhaugh (2002) adds that gender is a social construct, but which is heavily grounded in sex, involving the whole gamut of genetic, psychological, social, and cultural differences between males and females (p.313). Halls (2003) in Coates (2004) views gender as being constructed locally and that it interacts with race, class, sexuality and age (p.288). This presupposes that the way men and women are viewed may vary from one place to another. This view is affirmed by Wodak (1997) that gender constitutes what a person does and that what it means to be a woman or a man changes from one generation to the next as well as between different ethnic, religious groups and social classes (p.13). Spender (1980) affirms that the division of the world into plus male minus male has seen the construction of patriarchal order.

## 2.1 Gender-exclusive language

Language is considered gender-exclusive when particular expressions “support unfair or untrue attitudes to a particular sex, usually women” (Cambridge, 1995:1305). Conkright (2000) remarks that it inadvertently prejudices the audience’s interpretation of the described target (p.482). Such a language conveys stereotypical attitudes mostly towards women and occasionally towards men. Thus proponents of gender-inclusive language view the use of generic ‘he/man’ as demeaning to the woman. Gendered terms like policeman, salesman, firemen and watchman are generically used thus revealing sexism in language. ‘Doctor, engineer, lawyer’ etc are used as if they apply to one gender (male) (Wodak, 1997; Cameron, 1985 and Crawford, 1995). Their pronoun reference is more often ‘he’ connoting that these high status jobs are for men, but when a woman is a doctor she is marked ‘woman doctor’ (Thomas and Wareng, 1999, p.72) and is subordinate to male doctors as well as male patients (Romaine, 2004, p.111); consequently, her position in relation to men is inferior (Spender 1980, p.194). Though general improvement on use of gender-inclusive terms has been noted, a few glaring instances of insensitivity deserve attention. During the Westgate Mall attack in Kenya in September, 2013, news anchors in various television stations kept on referring to the attackers as “gunmen”, and the alleged organizer “mastermind” only for the purported mastermind to turn out to be a woman! Similar use of gender-specific language was noted during the March 2013 Kenyan general election where on a television station a political analyst commenting on a potential election re-run said: “if people turn out man to man in the re-run...” *The Standard* newspaper during the countdown to 2013 general election, ran an article which read in part “... we owe it to the British colonialists the establishment of ‘a one man show’. Also, the chair of the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission applauded Kenyans’ perseverance as “the long queues of our countrymen...” Similar examples where women are appointed ‘chairmen’ of boards or ‘he’ generically referring to both men and women also abound. In a Kenyan University’s admission office notice board, I saw a list of section heads with the title ‘Chairmen of Departments’, but on reading through it I found names of women among the chairs. In the school of Science, I saw a memorandum with the clause: “Chairman/chairperson of the department identifies the need for part-time lecturer.” It appeared as if the use of gender-neutral forms has not been fully accepted and readers have to be carefully directed that if a woman occupies the position of a chair, the reference is chairperson; otherwise, it is chairman. Chairperson in this case does not refer to men and it is marked. I also stumbled upon a memo addressed “To all chairmen of departments”. Furthermore, the charter of the university linked some administrative duties such as course allocation with the “chairman”. For the two years I was a student in a university, the office of the chair of language and linguistics department bore the tag “chairman”, surprisingly, when a female professor acted in the absence of the chair the tag remained the same. The higher institutions of learning perpetrators of gender-exclusive language even when they champion for moral and social exclusion of women in all spheres of life.

Gender-exclusive forms maintain status quo, and Romaine (1994) remarks that ‘language is made *by* men and *for* men, to represent their points of view and perspectives’ (p. 105). (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams (2003) add that language connotes sexist attitudes by the users (p.482) which exclude or demean either gender (Cameron, 1985, p. 72) almost invariably the female (Gradol and Swan, 1989, p. 96). It has been used to perpetuate deeply ingrained sexist attitudes and values (Coates 2004). Through language we can demonstrate meaning and values and according to Desprez-Bouanchaeb et. al (1999) imprecise word choice may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory and demeaning even if they are not intended to be (p.4).

Over-use of generic “man” and gender-specific pronouns like “he” are manifestations of linguistic sexism (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyam, 2003, p. 484). As was seen above, it is skewed towards women, a fact that makes Guimei (2010) keenly observe that the English language ignores women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to males and commonly to refer to human beings in general. In the sentence: “A lecturer should guide his students”, “his” refers to the subject ‘a lecturer’. To examine ‘lecturer’ in the sense of gender, it is either a male or a female, yet ‘his’, a masculine pronoun used as the subject’s reference, also covers the possibility of a female subject.

## 2.2 Gender-inclusive language

Treichler and Frank (1989) define gender-inclusive language as a language that explicitly includes both the females and males and that this language minimizes the gender differences. They also give gender-neutral, gender-fair, non-sexist and gender-free as phrases that can be used instead of gender-inclusive. But it has to be noted that if the sex of the antecedent is known to be either male or female then use of corresponding pronoun will not be considered sexist. However, when references are made to neutral subjects then, there is need to use gender-neutral language. The following examples of correcting gender neutral language are derived from Desprez-Bouanchaeb et. al (1999) in their *UNESCO Gender-Neutral Language Guidelines*.

- a) *Man’s* search for knowledge has led him to improve scientific methods. (The search for knowledge has led *us* to improve scientific methods.)
- b) The teacher is usually appointed on the basis of his training. (Teachers are usually appointed on the

basis of their training.)

Apparently, a lot of effort is being expended in transforming sexist attitudes through use of politically correct expressions. However, despite this, my reconnaissance study shows that this benefit has not trickled down in its fullness to the school textbooks. In some of the books, examples of gender-specific language abound in words like manpower, mankind, salesman, man among others and the pronoun reference used is “he”. One of the culprits is history books in an example like: *The first man lived in caves. He made fire to warm himself and chase away wild animals.* “Man” here is intended to mean both man and woman; likewise, “he” and “himself” is supposed to refer back to both man and woman. However, looked at critically, the woman is not part of the people who lived in the caves earlier, and this raises the question where was she then? Obviously, she is invisible.

Once attitudes relegating women to second rate citizenship are implanted in the minds of young people through association in examples in books, it may be an uphill task to reverse the genders that has already been done. Butler (1990) sees gender as something that is done in social interaction. Students interact with their books daily. These books, by extension are their social environment because examples are drawn from the real world. The examples used in reading comprehension passages and poems are either factual or relate to the real world. Weatherall (2002) observes that gender is discourse because it is an integral part of social life that is produced through everyday language and talk (p.81).

It should be noted that the English textbooks authors have made a lot of efforts to use gender-neutral language, but somehow lack of it emerges in the passages, poems and even grammar example they provide, a fact that waters down the gains made in incorporating gender-sensitive topic in the form three English curriculum. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the generic pronoun and noun “he/man” have been used to perpetuate negative attitudes towards women, exclude them or relegate them stereotypical women roles. This paper also offers alternatives to the gender specific forms used in the selected books. A form three textbook is selected purposively because gender-sensitive English Language is covered in the form-three English syllabus (Ministry of Education Science and Technology, 2002). *The New Integrated English* by Jomo Kenyatta Foundation is also purposively selected because it is used by many schools yet there are manifestations of gender-insensitive language. The objectives of this paper are:

- To identify use of gender-insensitive English language in the form-three English textbooks.
- To find out the roles assigned to the genders through use of pronoun references and words including “man” in English language text books.
- To suggest ways of making the gender-exclusive language gender-inclusive.

### 3. Methodology

A case study of *New Integrated English* form three student’s book was done. Sentences containing “he/man” used in a generic sense were identified. I then focused on the roles assigned to the females and males through various uses of the pronoun “he” and words containing “man”. Corrections of gendered examples were provided in brackets adjacent the gendered expressions. A short description of stereotypical roles assigned by gendered pronouns and words containing “man” was also provided. The sections studied include grammar, reading comprehension, poems, writing, listening and speaking.

### 4. Result and discussion

The following are examples of sexist or gender-insensitive language found in the course book. These words are used in the comprehension passages, poems and grammar exercises offered for students. I also provide gender-insensitive alternatives in brackets and a short comment. I start with words including “man”.

1. The rich man (person) who lives idly on his income: the man (person) who gambles in the hope of getting money without working for it; the woman (person) who marries for the mere sake of being comfortably established for life (p.64).  
(1) Portrays men as rich and women as gold diggers, a negative connotation.
2. Man (A person) proposes; God disposes (p.75).  
“Man” is used synonymously with “person”, but it discriminates against woman.
3. How long does it take a spaceman (space explorer) to fly to mars?  
Both men and women are known for feats in space exploration.
4. It was senseless and inhuman for the clansmen (relatives) to wage war against each other for no apparent reason (p.105).  
The relatives consist of both men and women, but here women are invisible.
5. “Dead man’s (person’s) path.” Dead men (people) do not require footpaths (p.189). Death is a phenomenon that befalls both men and women.
6. No man (one/person) is an island (p.227).

Both men and women should explicitly be captured since it is not only men who can be incommunicado.

7. One day the policeman (police officer) led her to the refuge (p.230).  
The police officer could also be female.
8. Look, son there is no fair play, no gentleman (respectable person)... the gentlemanly (respectful) third ... sportsmanship (sportiveness) is real...best man (person) won...(p.245).  
Women should be included since they are also taking part in sports and also desire to excel in them.
9. You beasts that men (people) call wicked (p.269).  
Men is not equal to people and it excludes women; people includes men and women.
10. Man is (people are) a social being (p.29).  
“Man” is not synonymous with people though the expression is often used in social sciences.
11. However, it was only after the arrival of a fire engine from Kisumu Airport that firefighters contained the blaze. By the time the Kisumu airport firemen arrived, everything in the bookshop had been destroyed (p.132).

(11) is a newspaper excerpt and in the previous sentence, however, “firefighters” is used. Even the media sometimes slips back to gender-insensitive language.

The following section presents sentences in which “he” is used generically and as in the previous section, suggestions have been provided for use of gender-sensitive language. This includes pluralizing the antecedent, using “their” or the alternative “he/she”.

1. If the patient (patients) look(s) seriously ill, he is (they are) referred to the doctor who carries out further examination which may include ordering for laboratory tests (p.80).
2. When the patient is (patients are) fully recuperated, he is (they are) discharged (p.80).
3. The patient was suffering from malnutrition because of his (/her) poverty (p.220).
4. We carry the death-disease... The disease that slowly wastes its victim (s) while he (they) still stand(s) upon his (their) feet as the wolf wastes its prey... (p.112).
5. The victim wrote in his statement... (p.236).  
12 to 15 are cases of restricting common gender antecedents to masculine gender.  
“patient” and “victim” means people yet the pronoun reference restrict it to male.
6. Oh about ninety minutes if he doesn’t (they don’t) hit any meteorites (p. 83).  
Space exploration has been associated with men. Now women are exploring space and should be given due recognition in language for this feat.
7. The ambassador arrived at the reception in his (their) pyjamas bottoms. (p. 83).  
The ambassadorial role is a traditional domain of men, but one which is now getting occupied by women. It is deplorable that such a demeaning example is associated with the male ambassador.
8. ...in a city, today’s driver was yesterday’s pedestrian and only knows the highway code from that perspective. He (/she) will therefore be subject to impulse buying. Newspapers, maize cobs, peanuts will all afford him (her) the opportunity to test his prowess at emergency braking...the driver is only trying to find his (/her) mobile phone or answer a text message (p.85).
9. The driver said he suspected the lorry driver was distracted by the first accident (p.131). 17 and 18 are insensitive to the realization that driving is no longer a male preserve.
10. Today (a) good driver(s) is (are) the one(s) who speed(s) and passengers like him (them). He is (they are) thus eager... (p. 149).  
The recklessness of the male driver makes him a hero.
11. Once mama has found her chicken under the seat, she will get out and the car will move (p.85).  
The antecedent “mama” strips the woman the title of a “passenger” while it is not the case with the male driver. The example of travelling with chicken is demeaning.
12. She burnt herself as she cooked food (p.86).  
The feminine pronouns portray the stereotypical role of women as cooks prone to accidents.
13. He (They) left his (their) property to both his wife (their spouses) and children (p.119)  
(24) Portrays women as the traditional receivers of wealth and men as toilers thus disregarding the fact that women work as hard as men do.
14. An accident-prone person demands too much or too little satisfaction for himself (themselves) (p. 149).  
(25) sets out gender neutrally but reverts to gender-exclusive language in the pronoun reference.
15. It gives the individual(s) the opportunity to do as good a job as he is (they are) capable and .... Also develops him (them) as a person, enabling him (them) to get more out of life. (p. 164).  
Gender-inclusive language is used in the passage ‘Universal Primary Education’ yet both male and female children are beneficiaries of universal primary education.
16. The contract worker wanted to write a letter to his (/her) lover three weeks ago (p.196).

- 26 portrays men as workers who leave women at home to only wait for letters and other benefits from workers.
17. I tried to call the doctor but his (the) line was engaged (p.198).  
These days there are women doctors, but the stereotypical male doctor still occupies this prestigious position in this selection.
18. The examiner(s) also does not have a favourable word for examinations; at least not when he (they) has stacks of scripts to mark. In most cases he has (they have) ... and he (they) must read them carefully(p.216).
19. An examinee might get few marks more than he (they) deserves... (p.216).
20. His [invigilator's] concentration is likely to suffer and a sharp examinee is likely to take advantage of the situation (p.216).  
28-30 disregards the fact that even the students know that some of their female teachers are examiners and that the students reading this text are both male and female and know they are potential candidates.
21. Angered by the remark the thug drew his(/her) gun.  
A case of neutral antecedent being assigned masculine gender.
22. Their MP failed them, they expected him(/her) to support the development (p.332).  
Still not acknowledging advances made in women leadership, the neutral gender restricts itself to masculine pronoun reference.

## 5. Conclusion

The data collected reveals that there a significant use of gender-exclusive language in the selected English language textbook. It creates a misunderstanding and actually promotes a male centered perception. It imprints in the minds of the learners stereotypical roles traditionally reserved for men and women. The female are directed to the stereotypical minding of children or demeaning acts such as travelling with livestock, while men assume more challenging and rewarding roles like sportspersons and doctors.

Authors, especially of English course books, need to adapt and integrate fully gender-sensitive examples. This will encourage girls to fairly venture into areas dominated by the male.

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