

# Sexism in English Reference Books Used by College Freshmen: Implications for Gender Equality

LUISITO P. MUNCADA

<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5929-3811>

[lpmuncada4@gmail.com](mailto:lpmuncada4@gmail.com)

University of Eastern Philippines Laoang Campus  
Laoang, Northern Samar, Philippines

Originality: 95% • Grammar Check: 100% • Plagiarism: 5%



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

---

## ABSTRACT

Sexist words in the books showed an unfair treatment of the female gender. The generic term, man, refers not only to a male person but also to denote humanity. The personal pronoun is used to refer to a hypothetical person in general and accepted in Filipino society. This research is a qualitative study that used content analysis to interpret the data. Sexism was found evident in English references. It is recommended that the sentences containing sexist language be taken out of the 12 books dissected for political correctness to make them gender fair. The textbook Board should be aware of RA 7192 (DepEd, GAD program) and CHED Memo No. 1, s. 2015, they should be gender sensitive. Policymakers should be mindful of the dynamism of language, and its importance in education must be more responsive to the needs of the time through quality language and gender sensitive. Publishers are cautioned to exact gender-fair language from their clients so that both sexes get equal treatment in publication. Students should be alerted to sexist language, and teachers should teach gender sensitivity, even only as incidental teaching. English reference books used by the college freshmen should be reviewed, and those who found out to be sexist should be substituted with gender-fair ones.

**Keywords** - English, sexism, mixed methods, content analysis, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

Sexist language is the language that expresses bias in favor of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner. In most cases, preference is in favor of men. Language is parallel to that of attitude in the community. In the olden times, women stayed at home and performed some domestic works which manifested that they were backgrounders, server and generally submissive to men; while men were regarded as the center both family and society. In a world, for a long time, women have been looked on as “the weaker sex” in society. Even in a biblical world where the claim is that “everyone is created equal,” discrimination against women exists. Language is one area that reflects this social fact. However, because of the greater status-consciousness, the feminist movement worked to reduce sexual discrimination and sex-role stereotyping. This led to some conscious attempts to influence and use language and linguistic behavior. The problem is that the language among the present generation has been carried out over the years.

Sexist language has been defined as “words, phrases, and expressions that unnecessarily differentiate between females and males or exclude, trivialize, or diminish either gender” (Parks and Robertson, 1998). Theoretically, the sexist language could have deleterious effects on either women or men, but empirical evidence in American society strongly suggests that the preponderance of negative results accrue to women. Concern about the negative effects of sexist language is grounded in the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis of linguistic relativity, which suggests an affinity between language and culture (Cameron, 1985; Carroll, 1956; Simpson, 1993; Thorne, Kramarae, and Henley, 1983).

While Bongcac (2003) conducted a study on the gendering of speech and thought and presentation of Ninotchka Rosca’s “Twice Blessed: a Stylistic Analysis” which shows how stylistic analysis selected features of language could reveal the subtle ways of presenting speech and thought presentation styles or modes and showed how a continuum existed with each point marked in precise linguistic terms which allowed a clear measure of such feature as the degree of character’s independence from the author’s viewpoint, the nature of authorial intrusion, kind of fusion between author and character, as well as deviation from or adherence to presentational norms and description of reader positioning. Bacarro’s (2001) study investigated changes in the children’s choice of toys from

gender-biased to non-gender-biased choice employing an intervention approach, and as a subsidiary, whether or not there is an existence of gender-biased practices among teachers in the kindergarten classes of Silliman University Early Childhood School. The writer's intervention approach included non-gendered-biased stories and song presentation of sets of biased toys as appropriate toys for everyone regardless of their sex, resource persons portraying non-gendered biased activities. Atanga's (2007) study focused on gendered discourse in the Cameroonian parliament which looks on the discussion and question-and-answer sessions in the parliament. The study aimed to examine the amount of male and female talk and gender distribution of topics as well as how female, and male parliamentarians were addressed by looking in depth at the available traditional and modern discourse articulated and how these were legitimated through different discursive strategies. Critical discourse analyses showed that traditional gendered discourse tended to construct men and women in gender-differentiated ways, legitimated discourses in ways which included social, cultural, and institutional discourse as well as for maintenance of the status quo more widely. Language like other forms of social interaction has to be appropriate in use. In different communities, children's and adult's speech, men's and women's language, differ. Language does not only have to be appropriated to the individual addressed, but it also needs to be suitable for particular occasions and situations. In other words, language varies not only according to the social characteristics of the speakers, social class, ethnic group, age, and sex but also according to the social context in which it is used. The same speaker uses different language register and styles in a different situation for different purposes. In society, men are considered superior individuals: their physical appearances, judgment principles, and activities are viewed as fully representative of all humans, male and female. This view can make women invisible in language or altogether exclude them. It can also lead to their portrayal as deviations from the 'male human' norm. Women's linguistic status is often dependent on or derives from, that which is represented as autonomous. By relegating women to a dependent, subordinate position, even in language use, the portrayal of women and men as equal human beings is prevented (Lei, 2006). Pimentel (2006) stressed that one essential human right is the right to education and education must be instrumental to the fulfillment of one's maximum potential as a person; hence, education must cater to the need not only of the society but to the individuals who are the lifeblood of humanity. An education that liberates individuals from the baggage of gender equality has a higher chance of creating a society that is fair and just. As protected

by the Philippines Constitution, gender equality must be present in all aspects of human development.

As enshrined in the United Nations Development Program (2018) Goals, women continue to experience discrimination and violence in every part of the world, and gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world.

According to United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, gender equality at the United Nations is imperative, and giving importance of women in decision-making increases effectiveness and productivity thus bringing new outlooks and solutions to the table, unlocks greater resources, and strengthens efforts across all the three pillars of our work.

In the book titled *Gender-Fair Language: A Primer*, Dr. Judy M. Taguiwalo, the Director of UP Center for Women's Studies stated that as early as 2001, then Bayan Muna Partylist Representative Liza Masa filed a resolution banning the use of "sexist language in all official communication and documents of the House of Representatives" (Kintanar 2014). With the increasing issues on sexism and gender equality in the field of education, particularly in the higher education institutions, the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) issued the CHED Memo No. 1 series of 2015 on Establishing the Policies and Guidelines of Gender and Development in the Commission on Higher Education and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This Part IV, Rule No. I, Section 1 of the memorandum states that the CHED and HEIs shall ensure that gender stereotypes and images in educational materials and curricula are adequately and appropriately revised. The gender-sensitive language shall be used at all times. Capacity-building on gender and development, peace and human rights, education for teachers, and all those involved in the education sector shall be pursued toward this end. Partnerships between and among players of the education sector, including the private sector, churches, and faith groups shall be encouraged (CHED Memo No. 1, s. 2015). The Department of Education Gender and Development Program through Republic Act 7192 in education, nontraditional livelihood, and occupation; nonsexist schooling in textbooks, teacher training, and training scholarship; participation of women in science and technology and women's career opportunities in the bureaucracy (Pimentel 2006). In like manner, the content of reference books transmits messages to readers about society, about children, and about what adults are supposed to do, whether directly or indirectly or even subliminally. Textbooks and reference books shape role expectations and further contribute to the institutionalization of sexism.

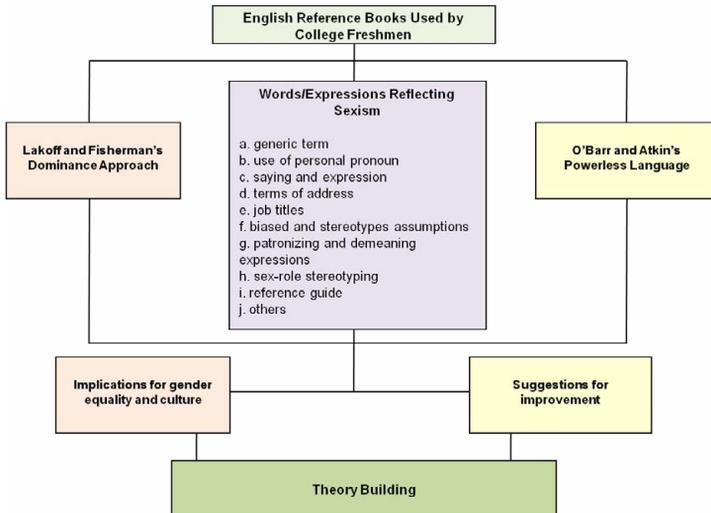
Sexism is discrimination by gender. While it is primarily women who are affected by sexism, it can be used to discriminate against either men or women. The language reflects and reinforces the values of society. The English language has developed in a male-dominated, male-centered society. If one examines carefully how she or he expresses himself or herself, she or he will see how male-centered the language is. For example, “the man we want for the job,” may be changed to “maintenance staff.” The terms Miss and Mrs. Indicate the sex and marital status of the person while the term Mr. indicates maleness only. It is a tad unfair to specify the marital status of women but not of men. The parallel term for Mr. is Miss, and instead of Mrs., here is Ms. These examples would draw attention to the sexist nature of language and provide ways to change it. On this background, the problems of making students realize that there is such a thing as politically correct language use is investigated in this paper. Towards this end, the words/expressions reflecting sexism used by the writers of different English reference books will be reviewed, analyzed, and be substituted with gender-fair ones.

## FRAMEWORK

The interest of this study is sexism in the language in reference books in English. As such, the researcher studied the books for the politically incorrect language they contain. The sexist language was analyzed to suggest gender-neutral terms.

In analyzing sexist language, the researcher was guided by Lakoff's and Fishman's “dominance theory” which stipulates, that changing in language utterance to both men and women signifies of male superiority and female subservience. O'Barr and Atkins “powerless language” was also made as a basis for analysis.

The words/expressions reflecting sexism were analyzed according to Lakoff's and Fisherman's “dominance theory” and O'Barr and Atkins “powerless language.” From these, the researcher's ways of improving the language data were identified and implications for gender-fair language and culture were drawn.



## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main purpose of this study is to find out if the sexist language is found in English reference books used by the freshman college students of the University of Eastern Philippines, Northern Samar so that in the teaching process, it can be rectified. Specifically, it aimed to (1) determine the sexist words/expressions found in English reference books used by freshman students, (2) identify these sexist words or expressions; (3) categorize which of the following classifications do the words or expressions reflecting sexism fall; (a) generic term, (b) use of personal pronoun, (c) saying and expression, (d) terms of address, (e) job titles, (f) biased and stereotypes assumptions, (g) patronizing and demeaning expressions, (h) sex-role stereotyping, (i) reference guide, and others; (4) establish the treatment of men and women that can be gleaned from the sexist words/expressions; (5) identify how this sexist language can be corrected; (6) ascertain the implications that can be drawn from the use of sexist words/ expressions in these English reference books as regards; (a) gender equality and (b) culture.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study was conducted in the three campuses of the University of Eastern Philippines, Northern Samar. This research is a mixed method, both quantitative

and qualitative using content analysis to be able to focus on the words or expressions reflecting sexism as found in the English reference books used by college freshmen of the University of Eastern Philippines. The researcher asked permission from the heads of offices of the three campuses to conduct the study. This was done through a letter to the University President and the Executive Directors of the external campuses. Upon approval, the researcher asked permission from the librarian the books needed for the study. The study carefully analyzed the words/ expressions based on their context of use. The sexist words or expressions obtained from the reference were listed down by categories and analyzed by using Lakoff's and Fishman dominance approach and O'Barr and Atkins' powerless language" theories. Implications for making these expressions politically correct were drawn, and suggestions were offered.

### **Research Site**

This study was conducted in the three campuses of the University of Eastern Philippines. The main campus, in Catarman, and the two satellite campuses are in the municipalities of Laoang and Catubig in the province of Northern Samar.

### **Instrumentation**

There were no instruments used in the study. However, the researcher used guidelines for equal treatment of the sexes culled from McGraw Hill Book Company Publications. The guidelines were designed to make authors aware of how males and female have been stereotyped in publication. This is also used to show the role that language has played in reinforcing inequality and to indicate positive approaches toward providing a fair, accurate and balanced treatment of both sexes in the publications.

### **Procedure**

The researcher asked the English instructors/ professors what reference books they used in teaching English to first-year college students. These were listed down and pored over in detail to find out if the books contained sexist words or expressions. All books which were found to have sexist words/expression were the object of content analysis. In looking for the sexist language under study, the following steps were undertaken:

- a. Reading the English reference books used by college freshmen.
- b. Listing sexist words/expressions in context.
- c. Identifying the functions and categories of these expressions.

- d. Determining how men and women are treated based on the use of the words/expressions.
- e. Finding out how gender equality may be reflected in the sexist use of the words/expressions.
- f. Drawing implications for gender equality and culture.

The Researcher used some guidelines for equal treatment of the sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications. After the classification of the words/expressions, the content of their use was analyzed as to the treatment of men and women based on the words; /expressions. Implications for gender equality and culture were drawn. Frequency counts and percentages were used in recording the sexist words/expressions. The researcher tallied the sexist words/expressions found in each reference books, determined the total number as they appeared in the reference books and percentages were determined.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

This study investigated sexism in English reference books used by College freshmen at the University of Eastern Philippines. It listed down the sexist words/expressions and classified them as to generic terms, use of personal pronoun, saying and expressions, terms of address, job titles, biased and stereotyped assumptions, sex roles stereotyping, reference guide and others. The treatment of men and women from sexist words/expressions was also looked into using Lakoff's and Fishman dominants approached and O'Barr's and Atkin's powerless language. Corrections of sexist language were suggested, and implications for gender equality and culture were drawn.

The research is qualitative; it used content analysis of the sexist language found in English language reference books. Frequency counts and percentage were used to get which sexist words/expressions in the reference books were most used.

Twelve English reference books were read and from them were listed down the sentence, paragraphs which content sexist words/expressions. Only the sentences/paragraphs that sexist content language was taken and included in the analysis. These expressions were examined for their treatment of men and women. Categories and functions, gender and culture implications and suggestions for correction were presented.

The study revealed that the books which had the most sexist words/expressions were communication skills I and Study and Thinking Skills by

Esther Baraceros which contend 250 sexist words/expressions followed by Study and Thinking Skills by Constanca M. Mazon with 117 words/expressions, College English for Today Book II by Jovita N. Fernando with 99 sexist words/expressions, Developmental Reading by Araceli Villamen et al., with 83 sexes words/expressions, English Skills for College Freshmen by Perla M. Villanueva with 39 sexes words/expressions, Better English for College by Josephine Serrano with 32 sexes language, Effective Study of English Skills by Tizon (2017) with 29 sexes words/expressions Study Skills in English for a Changing World by Magelende Flores with 23 sexes words/expressions, English Plus: Enhancing our Basic Grammar by Maria Carina Dichoso with 20 sexes words/expressions, New Perspectives in English Two by Jovita N. Fernando with 11 sexes words/expressions, Business English Correspondence by Aquino, Callang, Bas, & Capili (2000) with 8 sexes words/expressions and Basic Communication and Thinking Skills by Tizon (2017) with 5 sexes words/expressions. The study showed that the maturity of the sexist words/expression belongs to the categories of a generic term, use of the generic personal pronoun, saying and expressions and reference guide. Man was the generic term commonly used in the sentences. Personal pronoun such as he, his, himself, her, she was also present. Other classifications of sexist words/expressions were reference guides such as chairman, congressman, and policeman. In general, there were 716 sexist words/expressions found in the 12 reference books used by College Freshmen in the University of Eastern Philippines existing. This was in conformity with the study of Wijetunga (2015) of the Department of Language Studies, The Open University of Sri Lanka which stated that the ESL textbooks of grades 9, 10 and 11 were found to be sexist in their use of language, thus promoting prejudices against females and contributing to causing a broader rift in the already existent gender disparity of the Sri Lankan society. This was also confirmed by the study of Tao (2008) that the (EFL English as a Foreign Language) textbooks have found out there exists sexism or gender inequality in the Chinese high school EFL textbooks. An article published by UNESCO for International Women's Day Celebration also confirmed this study and stated that gender bias is rampant in textbooks in multiple countries, researchers argue. In the study of Benavot & Jere (2016) found out that sexism is prevalent in textbooks throughout the world, with many portraying girls and women in submissive household roles.

As regards the treatment of men and women, according to language use, the majority of the sexist words/expressions referred to the male gender. Only a few sexist/expressions treated showed powerlessness by the O'Barr and Atkins categorization. This is confirmed by the study of Pattalung (2008) that the most

significant problem areas regarding sexist language are words that indicate that men are the standard by which people are to be judged and words that indicate that women are somehow different from men when doing the same things. Lili and Zhenzhou (2002) and Ansary and Babaii (2003) found out that occupations for men are abundant and varied in current language textbooks. The study of Thomson (2002) also confirmed this finding and states that it is clear that there is a variance by gender in common English language usage. This can lead to sex bias, even in EFL teaching materials. Whereas the materials examined had minimal sex bias, the goal must be to attempt gender neutrality.

## CONCLUSION

Sexist words/expressions are found in English reference books. This implies that the book writers are not gendered sensitive, they are not conscious of political correctness in language, thus missing on the opportunity to include it as a necessary element in teaching correctness in language use. Book users themselves, either as teachers or students seemed not to care about this aspect, or they may not be particular with gender fair terms. It could be inferred further that although they know gender agreement in sentence structure, they are not sensitive to the fair treatment of both sexes.

The use of sexist words/. Expressions such as a generic pronoun referred to genderless antecedents. The generic term man in sayings and expressions were used, and there seemed to be no attempt to use gender fair terms, an unconscious carryover of what has always been used and never questioned. That the reference books were not gendered fair implied that the book writers were not gendered sensitive. It could be inferred further that if the books were made gender fair, a sense of personal worth, dignity, and respect for the rights of all people would be fostered among the book users. Male dominance in a society which contributed to the rise of sexist words/expressions may be lessened through gender-fair language which looks at both sexes on equal footing. Sexist language fosters the idea that men are superior to women' an unfair treatment of the female members of society. Sexist words/expressions in the reference books promote marginalization of women who are regarded as lesser human beings, acting only as a backgrounder to men. Thus, to avoid this, there is a need to teach the politically correct language.

## TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of this study could be used as an additional input in classroom instructions not only in language classes but also in other disciplines. The sexist words found in the different books could be substituted with politically correct one and may be adapted into a more compact form like brochures or guides to be distributed to language classes as instructional materials. Further, the said brochures or guides may also be used by the different offices to make them aware the political correctness of language bearing in mind the different situations concerning gender and culture, thus fostering equality and reinforcing positive approaches toward providing a fair, accurate, and balanced treatment of both sexes.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researcher acknowledges the Almighty God for giving him wisdom and determination in accomplishing this research. With affection and gratitude expresses his deep appreciation to the people whose wisdom and untiring support gave him the courage to finish this research.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Ansary, H., & Babaii, E. (2003). Subliminal Sexism in EFL/ESL text bias. *Asian EFL Journal*, 5(1), 5-31. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/i9VTgR>
- Aquino, F. Callang, C., Bas, H., & Capili, C., (2000). Business English Correspondence. NBS.
- Atanga, L. (2007). *Gendered Discourses in the Cameroonian Parliament* (Doctoral dissertation, Lancaster University). Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/WBpRii>
- Bacarro, P. (2001). "Non-Gendered-Biased Intervention Approach and Kindergarten Children's Choice of Toys at the Silliman University Early Childhood School," Unpublished Thesis, University of the Philippines. Retrieved from <http://koha.nlp.gov.ph/cgi-bin/koha/opac-ISBDdetail.pl?bib=87658>

- Baraceros, E. (2000). *Communication Skills Ii'2000 Ed.* Rex Bookstore, Inc. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/dMaHYK>
- Tizon, M. (2017). Reading Comprehension Ability of Grade VI Pupils of Kinangay Sur Elementary School. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/drNaFc>
- Benavot, A. and Jere, C. (2016). How Children around the World learn to be Sexist. UNESCO article for International Women's Day. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/VHePk2>
- Bongcac, R. A. (2003). The Gendering of Speech and Thought Presentation in NinotchkaRoscas Twice Blessed: A Stylistic Analysis. *Unpublished Dissertation, Philippine Normal University*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/CYjNvo>
- Dichoso, M. C., (1999). English Plus: Enhancing Our Basic Grammar. Academic Pub.Corp. Retrieved from <http://koha.nlp.gov.ph/cgi-bin/koha/opac-ISBDdetail.pl?bib=113210>
- Fernando, J. (1988). New Perspectives in English Two. Rex Book Store. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/YaFoZF>
- Flores, M. (2001). Study Skills in English for a Changing World. Rex Book Store, First Edition.
- Lakoff, R., & Lakoff, R. T. (2004). *Language and woman's place: Text and commentaries* (Vol. 3). Oxford University Press, USA. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/EtS7PX>
- Lei, X. (2006). Sexism in language. *Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 5(1), 87-94. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/1M81gZ>
- Lili, G., & Zhenzhou, Z. (2002). Children, gender, and language teaching materials. *Chinese Education & Society*, 35(5), 34-52. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/jFv6mC>
- Mazon, C. (1999). Study and Thinking Skills. St. Augustine Pub. Inc., Manila.

- O'Barr, W. M., & Atkins, B. K. (1980). "Women's language" or "powerless language"?. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/Vb6Ptc>
- Parks, J. B., & Robertson, M. A. (2000). Development and validation of an instrument to measure attitudes toward sexist/nonsexist language. *Sex Roles*, 42(5-6), 415-438. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007002422225>
- Pattalung, P. N. (2008). *An analysis of sexist language in ESL textbooks by Thai authors used in Thailand*. The University of North Texas. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/Vh6wgQ>
- Pimentel, M. (2006) "Creating a Gender Fair Learning Environment for Basic Education." *The Philippine Journal of Education*.
- Serrano, J. & Bello, E. (1998). *Better English for College*, Phoenix Publishing House Inc. Quezon City.
- Tao, B. (2008). Identifying and Combating Sexism in EFL Textbooks--With a Case Study into China. *Online Submission*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/YSy4GA>
- Thomson, S. (2002). *Perceptions of Gender Difference: An analysis of an EFL textbook*. The University of Birmingham. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/mrFzRz>
- Kintanar, T. (2014). *Gender-Fair Language: A Primer*. UP Center for Women's Studies, University of the Philippines. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/bbf1vP>
- Wijetunga, L. M. S. (2015). *Sexism in Textbooks: A Case Study of G.C.E. O/ LTEXTBOOKS*. Retrieved from <https://goo.gl/CgNHvc>
- Villanueva, P. (1989). *English Skills for College Freshmen*. Katha Pub. Inc. Retrieved from <http://koha.nlp.gov.ph/cgi-bin/koha/opac-ISBDdetail.pl?bib=655520>
- United Nations, (nd) Retrieved on July 2, 2018, from <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/>.

United Nations Development Program, (2018). Retrieved from <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/gender-equality.htm>

CHED Memo No. 1 series of 2015. Retrieved from <http://ched.gov.ph/cm-1-s-2015/>