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GENDER SENSITIVE LANGUAGE IN MACEDONIAN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

Within the gender-sensitive language discussion, the role of teaching materials, the teacher, and the way s/he teaches is often emphasized in raising students' awareness of gender issues.

This paper examines the use of the nouns: *student*, *teacher*, *friend*, *classmate*, certain adjectives, pronouns, and l-forms from the perspective of gender in a textbook and the aim is to perceive its role in promoting/regressing students' awareness of gender issues. The sample consists of the Macedonian language textbook for fifth grade in primary education. Each unit (noun, adjective, pronoun, and l-form) is coded. The analysis relies on the content analysis, which is based on coding and the interpretative-inductive method, as well.

The results show a balanced use of the listed nouns and represent a solid basis for teaching gender differences.

Keywords: Nouns, adjectives, pronouns, l-forms, gender, textbook.

1. Introduction

The relationship between language and gender is a complex and multifaceted topic that touches on various aspects of linguistics, sociology, and also, cultural studies. Language is not just a means of communication, but also a powerful tool that shapes our perceptions of the world, including our understanding of gender. The topic of gender is widely spread nowadays, mainly, because of the many types of freedom people enjoy all around the world. As our understanding about gender evolves, so does language. There is a growing recognition of non binary and gender neutral identities, leading to changes in how people use language.

It is known that education and the textbooks, i.e. the teaching materials play a major role in building students' personal attitudes towards gender issues and in overcoming gender discrimination and the traditional division of gender roles. It is particularly important to emphasize that gender sensitive language contributes to reducing gender stereotypes between men and women (Cameron, 2005; Sunderland, 2006). According to Holmes (2013), the use of gender-insensitive language reinforces negative attitudes towards women.

When talking about gender issues, it is of utmost importance to distinguish between the terms gender and sex which are often used synonymously. Diamond (2002) believes that sex refers to biological characteristics, and hence, people are either male or female. Unlike sex, gender is a more complex concept and is not an innate characteristic. According to Agius & Tobler (2012), gender is a construct that is associated with the social understanding (social perception) of behavior that is considered feminine or masculine. So, as Wood (2007) states, society assigns roles to women and

men. In this sense, men are strong, ambitious, successful, and women are caring, emotional, etc. However, it is important to note that gender roles change over time.

As stated by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (What is gender? What is sex?, 2023) although the terms ‘sex' and 'gender' are often used interchangeably, they have different meanings:

“Sex refers to a set of biological attributes in humans and animals. It is primarily associated with features such as chromosomes, gene expression, hormone levels, and reproductive/sexual anatomy. Sex is usually categorized as female or male, but there is variation in the biological attributes that comprise sex and how those attributes are expressed.

Gender, however, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, expressions, and identities of girls, women, boys, and men. It influences how people perceive themselves and each other, how they act and interact, and the distribution of power and resources in society. Gender identity is not confined to a binary (girl/woman, boy/man); and can change over time, as seen today. There is considerable diversity in how individuals and groups understand, experience and express gender through the roles they take on, the expectations placed on them, as well as the relations with others. The ways in which gender has been institutionalized in society are very complex.”

Newman (2023) agrees with the aforementioned definitions: “Sex” refers to the physical differences between people who are male, female, or intersex. A person typically has their sex assigned at birth based on physiological characteristics, including their genitalia and chromosome composition. This assigned sex is called a person’s natal sex. Gender, on the other hand, involves how a person identifies. Unlike natal sex, gender is not made up of binary forms. Instead, gender is a broad spectrum. A person may identify at any point within this spectrum or outside of it entirely. Consequently, people may identify with genders that are different from their natal sex or with none at all. These identities may include transgender, non binary, or gender-neutral.”

In an educational context, it must be noted that among other things, teaching materials also reflect the values in a society and have a role in building the personal attitudes, opinions, and views of students. Sunderland, Cowley, Rahim, Leontzakou & Shattuck (2001) argue that teachers should consider talking over the roles that are presented in the textbooks. Stojanoska and Janusheva (2024) believe that teaching materials should use language that contributes to overcoming gender stereotypes and the traditional pattern in which men have a superior role and women a subordinate one. Also, teachers are models for their students and they have the necessity of training on how to elevate the gender equality in their classrooms and to provide an education and learning environment which are free of gender stereotyping. When teachers recognize their own biases and the inequalities in the classroom, they can address issues encounters by boys and girls.

Considering the above mentioned, in this paper, the research question is related to the use of the nouns *student, teacher, friend, classmate*, certain adjectives, pronouns and l-forms in the Macedonian language textbook for fifth grade and the aim is to see its role in promoting/retrogressing students’ awareness of gender issues. The sample consists of the Macedonian language textbook for fifth grade in primary education. Each unit (noun, adjective, pronouns, and l-form) is coded. The analysis relies on the content analysis, which is based on coding and the interpretative-inductive method, as well.

2. Broader research context

A large number of researchers in the world pay attention to gender issues in education.

Sunderland et al. (2001) argue that teachers should raise students’ awareness of gender roles in textbooks and Persel, James, King & Snyder (2006) consider education to be an important factor in reducing gender bias. Pihlaja (2007) emphasizes that textbooks should reflect social reality, while Blumberg (2008) sees gender bias in textbooks as an obstacle to achieving gender equality. Mukundan & Nimehchisalem (2008) show that in English textbooks in Malaysia, the number of words associated with the masculine gender is greater than the number of words associated with the feminine gender, and Kizilaslan (2010) emphasizes that gender stereotypes in textbooks influence children’s affective and cognitive development. Alfaro, Bengoechea & Vázquez (2010) show that the language used in classrooms reduces the visibility of girls. Schoeman (2009; 2011) and Fardon & Schoeman (2010) find generic use of masculine forms in textbooks in South Africa. Such similar results are shown in research by Barton & Namatende-Sakwa (2012) in English textbooks in Uganda; by Amini & Birjandi 92012) in Iranian EFL textbooks; by Yasin, Hamid, Keong, Othman & Jaludin (2012) in primary mathematics textbooks in Qatar; by Esmaeelli & Amerian (2013) in English textbooks in Iran; by

Demir & Yavuz (2017) in ELT textbooks in Turkey; by Cocorada (2018) in Romanian language textbooks; by Bataineh & Kayode in Omani English language textbooks; by Bouzid (2019) in Moroccan ELT textbooks; by Norova (2020) in Uzbekistan EFL textbooks; by Akay & Açikalin (2021) in social sciences textbooks in Turkey; by Stojanoska & Janusheva (2024) in Macedonian textbooks. Also, a large number of studies show that there are gender stereotypes in textbooks and teaching materials, for example, women are represented less in materials related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics and more in materials related to the home and family. Therefore, teachers should be aware of the presence of gender stereotypes in these materials and discuss them with students more often (Kollmayer, Schober & Spiel, 2016). The research by Mizala, Canals & Ortega (2023) emphasizes that both, the curriculum and the teaching content should be prepared in a way that will reduce gender differences. On the other hand, different results are noted. For example, Bataineh's research (2020) notes a balanced approach, in terms of masculine and feminine nouns.

Hence, there is a need for gender sensitive education that emphasizes gender equality in textbooks and through language, so as to create non discriminatory educational practices and reduce the asymmetrical power dynamics between men and women (Janusheva & Stojanoska, 2024).

3. Methodology

In this paper, the research question is related to the use of the nouns *student, teacher, friend, classmate,* certain adjectives, pronouns, and l-forms, from the perspective of gender in a fifth-grade Macedonian language textbook and the aim is to see its role in promoting/retrogressing students' awareness of gender issues. The sample consists of the Macedonian language textbook for fifth grade in primary education, available at e-ucebnici.mon.gov.mk. The sample is purposive, which is in line with the views of Lincoln and Guba (1985) because each sample is collected for a specific purpose that will best answer the research question. Furthermore, the sample is selected in accordance with Yin's (2011) views on what constitutes a sample in a study. The sample selection is also based on the fact that this fifth-grade Macedonian textbook is among the first ones to be approved for use by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2023. Nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and l-forms are coded according to Maxwell's (2005) organizational coding in a protocol proposed by Crabtree & Miller (1999). The analysis relies on Schreier's (2014) content analysis which is based on the coding and on the interpretative-inductive method used in the research of Thomas (2006), Kahlke (2014), and Harding & Whitehead (2016).

4. Results, analysis, and discussion

4.1. Use of feminine and masculine nouns, adjectives, pronouns, numbers and l-forms

The Macedonian language textbook for fifth grade has 206 pages and has been approved for use by the Ministry of Education and Science in 2023. Many interesting and valuable insights emerge from the coding.

At the beginning of the textbook, the use of the nouns *ученику/ученичке* (student, m., f.) in the authors' addressing is pleasantly surprising, which shows that the textbook is a true reflection of social realits. This agrees with the views of Percell et al. (2006). Immediately afterwards, the address *Почитувани наставници* (*Dear teachers*) is noted, so it is not clear why the feminine plural form of teacher, наставнички, is not used.

In general, it can be seen that the authors have a highly developed awareness of gender-sensitive language because, throughout the textbook, there are elements that support the fact that it advances students' knowledge of gender issues and does not present the world from a male perspective, as claimed in a large number of studies, for example, in Cameron's research (2005).

On page 11, there is the sentence:

Авторот/авторката што пишува поезија се вика *поет/поетеса* (*The author* (m. f.) who writes poetry is called a *poet* (m. f.).

This use of, both, masculine and feminine forms is real refreshment, in terms of gender sensitive language, and their significance should be acknowledged.

In the vocabulary list, on page 13, there are 9 adjectives listed; four of which are masculine:

замислен, *среќен*, *расплакан*, *нетрпелив* (*to be lost in thought*, *happy*, *tearful*, *impatient*, and 5 feminine:
тажна, *лута*, *болна*, *исплашена* и *несигурна* (*sad, angry, sick, scared and uncertain*, f.).

This usage also indicates that the authors' approach to teaching content reduces gender stereotypes.

Furthermore, throughout the textbook, masculine and feminine forms are used at the same time, separated by a slash:

На твојот *другар/другарка* со гестови и мимики обиди се да му/ѝ претставиш еден предмет, кој се наоѓа во твојата училница (Try to introduce an object in your classroom to *your* (m.) *friend/girlfriend* using gestures and facial expressions, p. 14).
Тој/таа треба да го погоди предметот (*He/she* should guess the object, p. 14).

In this example, the feminine form of the possessive pronoun adjective *your* is missing and again it is not clear why it is not used.

On page 19, there is also no feminine form of the noun *uchesnik* (*participant*) and of the determined form *edniot*:

Едниот учесник нека ги пронајде дијалозите... (Let one (m.) participant (m.) find the dialogues...).

The nouns *другар* (*friend*) and *другарка* (*girlfriend*) are used in order to increase the visibility of the girls:

...провери го составот на *другарот/другарката* до тебе (…check the composition of the *friend/girlfriend* next to you).

On page 20, the use of gender sensitive language is also noted:

Со *другарите/другарките* општиш секојдневно. Напиши еден разговор што си го *водел/а* со *твојот/твојата другар/другарка* лично или преку пораки и запиши за... (You communicate with *your* (m. f.) *friends/girlfriends* every day. Write a conversation *you had* (m. f.) with your *friend/girlfriend* in person or via messages and write about...).

It is noted that the nouns and pronoun forms are listed in both the masculine and feminine forms. The value of the textbook in terms of gender sensitive language increases even more when it is seen that the l-form is given in both of the gender, i.e. the masculine and feminine.

Further, on pages 22, 28 and 31, the feminine form of the l-form and the noun *author* are not used:

Што би *направил*..., Идеја е основната мисла во твробата, порака што авторот сака да ни ја пренесе. Пораката/идејата што авторот ни ја праќа преку... и Откако го прочита текстот, провери колку си ја разбрал содржината (What would you *do*… (m.), An idea is the main thought in the work, a message that the *author* (m.) wants to convey to us. The message/idea that the *author* (m.) sends us through... and After reading the text, check how much you *understood* (m.) the content).

There is use of gender sensitive language on pages 31 and 33:

Со *својот другар/другарка*… (With *your* (m.) *friend/girlfriend*…).

However, the feminine form of the pronoun adjective is not used.

Further, on pages 34 and 44, there is use of the masculine and feminine forms of the noun:

Работи со *другар/другарка*. Кажувајте си именки. Ако *другарот/другарката* ти каже именка во еднина, ти промени ја во множина и ...помош од *наставникот/наставничката* да ти ги појасни зборовите...(Work with a *friend/girlfriend*. Tell each other nouns. If your *friend/girlfriend* tells you a singular noun, change it to the plural and ...help of the *teacher* (m. f.) to clarify the words...).

But on page 44, the following sentence only uses the form *teachers* (*наставници*, m. pl.), but not *teachers* (*наставнички*, f. pl.):

На пример, кога сме на часови, кога разговараме со *наставниците* и со другите вработени од училиштето... (For example, when we are in class, when we talk to the *teachers* (m. pl.) and other school employees...).

There is a very nice illustration of the gender sensitive language use in the exercise on page 48. In it, students are asked to underline the collective adjectives in several sentences. The sentences use two feminine and two masculine proper nouns, which indicates a balanced use of masculine and feminine forms:

Амела секогаш доаѓа прва на училиште (*Amela* always comes first to school).
Дарко ќе го прославува десеттиот роденден (*Darko* will celebrate his tenth birthday).
Дритон го освои третото место на натпреварот по танцување (*Driton* won third place in the dancing competition.
Ана живее на единаесеттиот кат од зградата (*Ana* lives on the eleventh floor of the building).

In the sentences on pages 59 and 61, again, the feminine forms of the nouns *author* and *poet* are not used:

Народните приказни се создадени усно, без да се знае *авторот*. *Поетот* е непознат и *Авторот* е анонимен/непознат (Folk tales were created orally, without the *author* (m.) being known. *The poet* (m.) is unknown and *The author* (m.) is anonymous/unknown).

Next is the exercise on page 61 which shows that the authors have knowledge of world research on gender sensitive language, which, in turn, confirms that the conversations between teachers and students about gender roles in society contributes to overcoming gender stereotypes. That is in line with the views of Cameron (2005), Sunderland (2006) and Kohlmeier et al. (2016).

Истражи на интернет дали само луѓето од машки пол можат да бидат винари и да се занимаваат со винарство и Што мислиш, дали постојат машки и женски професии? Објасни! (Research on the Internet whether only men can be winemakers and engage in winemaking and What do you think, are there male and female professions? Explain!).

Through this exercise we get to the heart of the problem of gender roles in society and the role of textbooks in achieving a gender-balanced approach to male and female students. The teaching content is approached with attention and awareness of gender issues, which is a condition for reducing gender differences confirmed by the results of the research of Mizala et al. (2023). This exercise is also very important due to the fact that such a discussion contributes to the students perception that professions are associated with both male and female persons.

On the same page 61, in the requirement

Своите истражувања сподели ги со твоите соученици (*Share your research with your classmates* (m. pl.) the feminine form is missing. The feminine form of the adjective is also missing in the requirement on page 63:

Самооцени се. Биди *искрен*. Така најдобро ќе процениш... (Self-assess yourself. Be *honest* (m.). That way you will best assess...

And in the rest of the textbook, the previously mentioned, i.e. use of forms for both genders is noted, as well as only the use of masculine forms.

4.2. Use of masculine forms only (singular and plural):

Секоја група треба да состави прашања, а потоа да одбере еден *член* кој ќе биде „*новинар*“ и ќе му ги поставува прашањата на Теодор, а друг *ученик* ќе го сними интервјуто со паметен телефон. *Учениците* треба да внимаваат како ги формулираат прашањата и по кој редослед ги поставуваат (Each group should compose questions, then choose one *member* (m.) to be the “*journalist*” (m.) and ask Teodor the questions, and another *student* (m.) will record the interview with a smart phone. *Students* (m. pl.) should pay attention to how they formulate the questions and in what order they ask them, p. 70).

Секој *ученик* нека смисли прашање... (Have each *student* (m.) come up with a question... p. 82).

Авторите на научно-популарните текстови... (The *authors* (m. pl.) of popular science texts... p. 82).

Едниот *учесник* од парот запишува збор, а *другиот* за време од пет секунди треба до него да го запише зборот… (One *participant* (m.) in the pair writes down a word, and the *other* (m.), within five seconds, should write the word... p. 93).

Напиши состав „И јас сум *другар* на Александар...” (Write an essay “I am also a *friend* (m.) of Alexander...” p. 108).

Биди *автор* и напиши песна за жената (Be an *author* (m.) and write a poem about the woman, p. 134).

Биди *автор* (Be an *author* (m.), p. 143).

Дали би *сакал* да поставиш некое прашање во врска со избраните стихови? (Would you like (m.) to ask a question about the selected verses?, p. 182).

Што е тоа? Продолжи ја приказната! Потоа, прочитај ја пред *соучениците* (What is it? Continue the story! Then, read it to your classmates (m. pl.), p. 195).

4.3. Use of masculine and feminine forms (singular and plural) with a slash:

Кој прв ќе образува глаголи од дадениве зборови (работи истовремено со *другарот/другарката* до тебе (Who will be the first to form verbs from the given words? (work simultaneously with your *friend/girlfriend* next to you, (p. 117).

Размисли и дај му насока на *другарот/другарката* до тебе како да стигне од училницата до училишниот двор, користејќи... (Give directions to your *friend/girlfriend* next to you on how to get from the classroom to the schoolyard, using... p. 120).

Обидете се со *својот/својата другар/другарка* математички да ја претставите задачата на судијата! (Try to mathematically present the judge's task with *your* (m. f.) *friend/girlfriend*!, p. 125).

Дали си *слушнал/а* за Шекспир? (Have you heard (m. f.) of Shakespeare?, p. 133).

Дали си *слушнал/а* за Клара Цеткин и Роза Луксембург? (Have you heard (m. f.) of Clara Zetkin and Rosa Luxemburg?, p. 134).

Вежбај со *другарот/другарката* составување реченици со... (Practice with *the friend/girlfriend* making sentences with... p. 139).

Што би го *замолил/а* мај? (What would you ask (m. f.) of May?, p. 182).

Играј со *твојот/ата другар/ка* (Play with *your* (m. f.) *friend/girlfriend*, p. 182).

Дали овој текст те потсетува на некој филм или на некоја книга што ги *гледал/а* или *читал/а*? (Does this text remind you of a movie or a book you *have watched* (m. f.) or *read* (m. f.)?, p. 194).

Раскажи во тетратката твоја случка во која си *чувствувал/а* страв (In your notebook, write about a time when you *felt* (m. f.) afraid, p. 196).

The nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and l-forms are used in both the feminine and masculine gender throughout the textbook. But they are also used only in the masculine gender for which there is no

clear explanation. It can be said that this is an oversight or inattention, and that the use of such forms does not diminish the fact that this is a solidly prepared textbook with a high level of use of gender-sensitive language. The results of this research confirm the results of Batayneh (2020) that there is a balanced use of masculine and feminine forms which certainly helps to break down gender stereotypes in education.

5. Conclusion

The conclusion is clear in itself. At this time, when the RSM is striving for membership in the European Union in order to become an equal member to other countries, new values and norms emerge. One of them is, of course, the commitment to gender-sensitive language, which is indicated in many European documents and recommendations from working groups. The inclusion of gender sensitive language in the textbook shows that changes are beginning to be made and that gender sensitive education is gradually beginning to thrive, which is a step in the right direction towards reducing gender stereotypes and forming correct representations of gender roles among students.

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