



QES

The Queen's English Society

"Gender-neutral" language in the European Parliament

The following pages reproduce an annotated version of the guidelines issued by the European Parliament on the avoidance of any terminology indicative of a person's sex.

QES gives the full text that follows this introduction by Harald Rømer, the Secretary-General of the European Parliament at the time these guidelines were issued.

On 19 May 2008 the Bureau welcomed Parliament's first set of language-specific guidelines for gender-neutral language.

The European Parliament is committed to using gender-neutral language in its publications and communications and is now the first of the institutions to provide language-specific guidance on gender-neutral language in all the Community's working languages. Drawn up by a working group under the auspices of Parliament's High-Level Group on Gender Equality, these guidelines were the fruit of long and close collaboration among the relevant linguistic services and provide suggestions and examples for each specific working language.

I am very pleased to have been asked to provide the foreword to the printed version of these guidelines, which represent a significant achievement for Parliament's linguistic services. I now invite all colleagues to read the guidelines in their working languages and apply them in all parliamentary publications and written communications.

Harald RØMER
Secretary-General

QES comments

“Gender” is inherent in all languages. There is a “neuter gender” but that is a grammatical definition and does not necessarily correspond to the “sex” of a person.

The EU has here immediately undermined its own argument as in its own text, it says “*implying that one SEX is superior to the other*” and “*a person’s SEX ... is irrelevant*”. It has here defined people by SEX and not by gender. This precisely renders any further consideration of the matter of “gender” irrelevant.

(i) See the [important note at the end of this article](#).

Whether it please the EU or not, men and women are – and will for the foreseeable future – remain different. That does not make one superior or inferior to the other. They are of equal value.

As “gender neutrality” “*cannot be applied in the same way in all languages*” and as “*it is essential that authors in the European Parliament take account of such cultural and linguistic differences*”, it is pointless trying to apply a patchwork of contrived but differing terms in different languages to cover up a sex-specific term here or there. The overall purpose of “gender neutrality” is impossible to achieve in one let alone all European languages.

As “*authors should be careful to ensure that the solution chosen is appropriate*” that means that they have the option of being “gender neutral” or not as the case may be. So why bother occasionally, if the principle cannot be applied always? This is tantamount to adopting a law forbidding a certain crime except where that crime is unavoidable.

The idea that using a feminine term in referring to a female person in some way denigrates that person is an absurdity. The problem is not of a linguistic nature but rather psychological. A woman who feels demeaned by being referred to as such is labouring under a complex that may have been caused by her having suffered discriminating treatment by men. A man who objects to the use of a feminine term for a woman is himself subject to a subconscious discrimination against women and somehow considers them inferior and so shuns any word that might express his (albeit subconscious) discrimination.

Indeed, the EU itself here refers to “*this generic or neutralising use*” thus confirming that it is accepted that the basic masculine word is precisely “generic” and “neutralising” and that it bears no sexual bias.

As this is so and, moreover, as “*avoiding the generic use of the masculine form is not always easy*”, why bother to seek piecemeal solutions that will not suffice to eliminate the (often essential) sexual distinction from a text?

WHAT IS GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE?

The purpose of gender-neutral language is to avoid word choices which may be interpreted as biased, discriminatory or demeaning by implying that one sex is superior to the other, since in most contexts a person's sex is - or should be - irrelevant.

Using gender-neutral language is more than a matter of political correctness. Language powerfully influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions. Parliament as an institution fully endorses the principle of gender equality, and the language it uses should reflect thisⁱ.

To this end, it is important to establish guidelines to ensure that as far as possible gender-neutral language is the norm, rather than the exception, in parliamentary documents.

These guidelines must reflect two particular features of Parliament's work; first, its multilingual working environment and, second, its role as a European legislator.

In the multilingual environment of the European Parliament the principle of gender neutrality cannot be applied in the same way in all languages. Some expressions may be acceptable in one language but controversial in another (e.g. '*human rights*' and '*Menschenrechte*' v. '*droits de l'homme*'). It is essential that authors in the European Parliament take account of such cultural and linguistic differences.

The way in which the principle of gender neutrality is reflected in a text will depend heavily on the type and register of the text involved.

For example, what may be appropriate in a speech (*^Ladies and Gentlemen*) or a direct form of address (*'Dear Sir or Madam'* at the top of a letter) will not necessarily meet the formal constraints of legislation, which must be clear, simple, precise and consistent, and does not lend itself well to avant-garde solutions which create ambiguity (such as the alternation of masculine and feminine forms for the generic pronoun or use of only the feminine form in some documents and only the masculine in others).

Authors should be careful to ensure that the solution chosen is appropriate for the type of text and the future uses to which it will be put.

ISSUES COMMON TO MOST LANGUAGES

Although the specific problems in avoiding sexist language vary from one language to another, a number of the following problems are common to most languages.

(a) Generic use of the masculine gender

The grammatical convention in most European languages is that for groups combining both sexes, the masculine gender is used as the 'inclusive' or 'generic' form, whereas the feminine is 'exclusive', i.e. referring to women only. This generic or neutralising use of the masculine gender is increasingly perceived as discriminating against women.

Avoiding the generic use of the masculine form is not always easy, particularly in formal texts. The use of 'he or she' etc. is awkward if used repeatedly and makes sentences longer. This is a particular problem in heavily inflected languages where using both forms of pronoun may mean that many other-words in the sentence have to be duplicated in order to agree with both genders. Combined forms ('s/he', 'him/her') are generally seen as clumsy and difficult to pronounce. Alternating masculine and feminine forms is another strategy sometimes used, but it can be quite distracting and ambiguous and is not recommended in the more formal setting of the European Parliament.

"Man" is a word that refers also to the species. Humans are "mankind", our ancestor was the Neanderthal Man, the intelligent human is homo sapiens. Would the EU have us resort to "personkind", the "Neanderthal Person" or "persona sapiens"?

There is absolutely no shame in making the language more precise by defining not only the occupation, profession or quality of a person but also that person's sex. Shall we stop referring to our Queen by that title and to her ancestors and heirs as Kings? Would "God save the Monarch" not leave us all the poorer? What about Prince Charles and Princess Anne? Must Anne become Prince Anne? Would that not discriminate against her as indeed "actor" discriminates against actresses?

Those who campaign in favour of "gender neutrality" should at least be consistent. They object to women being discriminated against yet wish to attach masculine labels to them. This is a contradiction.

Precisely! Other languages are moving the other way and giving women full recognition by inventing feminine adaptations of masculine words for them. Is English the only language with such complexes? Probably so because the influence here is not European but rather American and such complexes and discrimination are rife in the USA.

This is perfectly legitimate as there is no feminine word for the post.

If a generic term exists, by all means. Note that here, the authors of this Recommendation have tripped over their own feet. They say "only if the gender of the person is relevant". In this case, they clearly meant "the sex of the person". They are confused by their own terminology and (lack of) logic.

Precisely, would Brussels now change traditional usage going back centuries? While Ivan Pavlov may continue to use his correct name, does Ivana Pavlova have to change hers? And, on this subject, is it still acceptable for the EU to use "boys' names" and "girls' names" or must these, too, be neutralised?

This is the sensible solution: Madame and Frau (Mrs.) for all ladies over 18 and Mademoiselle and Fräulein (Miss) for females under 18. We rarely refer to a man under 18 as Mr. If the EU wishes to make a sensible change, it could revive "Master" for boys and teenagers.

In many languages, the word 'man' is used in a wide range of idiomatic expressions which refer to both men and women: *manpower*, *layman*, *man-made*, *statesmen*, *committee of wise men*... With a little effort and thought, such expressions can usually be made gender-neutral.

By combining various strategies (see the specific guidelines), the principle of gender neutrality should normally be clear, and the occasional generic use of the masculine gender in difficult situations could then be considered acceptable.

(b) Names of professions and functions

From the public debate in this area in recent years, it is possible to identify two main, but divergent, approaches to avoiding gender bias in terms for professions and functions.

The general trend today in a number of European languages (such as English and the Scandinavian languages) is to **reduce the use of gender-specific terms**

In most cases, this gender-neutral trend has led to the disappearance of the older female forms, with the previous male form becoming unisex (i.e. *'actor'* instead of *'actress'*). The principle has, however, also worked the other way around. In Scandinavia, for instance, male nurses insist on being referred to by the (grammatically) female term. In fact, the equivalent masculine term refers to a different (lower) job function.

This gender-neutral approach contrasts with the trend in other languages (for example German and French and some Slavonic languages) towards **introducing more gender-specific terms**. The difference is explained by the far greater structural role of grammatical gender in those languages. As they have a specific masculine and feminine gender, most occupations are by tradition grammatically masculine, with only a few exceptions, typically for traditionally feminine jobs such as 'nurse' or 'midwife'. In such languages, the feeling of discrimination has been felt particularly strongly and has led to the creation of female equivalents of virtually all functions of masculine gender (*'Kanzlerin'*, *'Présidente'*).

In Parliament, job titles refer equally to persons of both sexes, irrespective of the grammatical gender of the relevant term.

To make the message clear even in 'gender-specific' languages, notices of vacancies in Parliament generally use the traditional generic form, followed by *'f/m'*.

In the multilingual environment of Parliament, it is recommended for practical reasons to avoid double forms in favour of generic terms when referring to the job function. Gender-specific terms should be used only if the gender of the person is relevant to the point being made, or - in the case of a 'gender-specific' language - when referring to individual persons (*'la Secrétaire générale de la Commission'*).

(c) Names, marital status and titles

In a number of official languages (notably those introduced with the enlargement in 2004), the form of names is traditionally modified according to their grammatical function (inflection). This has proved particularly difficult in the multilingual environment of the European institutions where the general rule is not to inflect names.

In some languages (for example French and German), an older unmarried woman would normally be addressed as if she were married (*'Madame'* or *'Frau'*). **In Parliament, reference to a woman's marital status is normally avoided.** Usually, such titles are simply dropped in favour of the person's full name.

Generally speaking, a woman's own wishes as to how she would like to be addressed or referred to, should be respected (*'Madame le Président'* or *'Madame la Présidente'*).

There we have it! There is no blanket solution for all languages even if there were a solution in any one of our European Languages – which there is not!

Here are all the caveats: “*translators are required to render texts faithfully*”; “*Authors should also be aware of the major cultural differences*”. In plain language, this means that the whole “gender-neutral” policy of the EU is a non-starter. It cannot be applied and will simply result (to the extent that an attempt is made to apply it) in a hotchpotch of ungainly and unnatural prose that will smack – nay reek – of meddling European officialdom.

But, of course, it will not be unobtrusive. It will rattle at every turn of phrase!

All this having been said, there do remain a few neutral terms that form part of the existing language and can be used naturally.

The suggestions here advanced by the EU itself for English are not offensive and can be safely used to avoid a few sex-specific terms but they will not change the nature of the language with its sexually specific references.

And what about “a Frenchman” or “a Frenchwoman”?

Pronouns such as he/she, him/her and his/hers cannot be avoided.

So is it worth trying to do a job both partially and badly – and spending taxpayers’ money on producing this kind of pointless nonsense when the EU has so many more important matters on its plate (such as standardising the curvature of bananas?)

So, having laid down the Rules, they can simply be changed for the sake of convenience!

CONCLUSIONS

What works in one language may not work in another. For each of the official languages, appropriate non-sexist terminology must be sought which is in accordance with the national customs, and takes into account any national legislation on the matter, guidelines at national level or other authoritative sources.

At the same time, however, it must be underlined that translators are required to render texts faithfully and accurately in their own language. If an author intentionally uses gender-specific language, the translation will respect that intention. This makes it all the more important for authors of texts in and about Parliament to be fully aware of the principles of gender-neutral language.

Authors should also be aware of the major cultural differences in this area between different European languages, which make it impossible to harmonise usage fully within the European Parliament.

Bias-free language has more chance of being accepted by users if it is natural and unobtrusive. Genuinely neutral and inclusive alternatives should be sought rather than expressions which are in themselves contentious.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES FOR ENGLISH

A. GENERIC USE OF 'MAN'

Avoid the generic use of ‘man’

Alternatives: **staff** (for manpower), **the French** (for Frenchmen), **synthetic, artificial** (for man-made), **advisory panel** (for committee of wise men), **political leaders** (for statesmen)

B. GENERIC USE OF 'HE', 'HIS', ETC.

Complete rephrasing may sometimes be necessary. Instead of, for example, ‘the official shall carry out his duties’

- *Use plural forms* (‘officials shall carry out their duties...’)
- *Use the imperative* (‘please send your CV to ...’)
- *Omit the pronoun altogether* (‘an official’s salary is dependant on ~~his~~ length of service’)
- (sparingly) *Use the passive* (‘the relevant documents should be sent to ...’)

If none of the above strategies work, *use ‘he or she’, but do so sparingly* and avoid repeating it more than once in the same sentence.

Avoid combined forms such as ‘he/she’, ‘him/her’, ‘s/he’ Avoid alternating masculine and feminine forms.

In formal contexts (legislative acts, Rules of Procedure) it may not always be possible to avoid the occasional generic use of ‘he’ or ‘his’, but strenuous efforts should be made to reduce such use to a minimum. In the specific case of Parliament’s Rules of Procedure, as it is particularly difficult to ensure gender neutrality when referring to the President (where the use of plural is not an option), one possible solution might be to adapt the Rules as required when a new President is elected.

If EU logic were consistent, why is "fisherman" acceptable? Should it not be "fisher"? Another example of the arbitrary nature of this Recommendation.

It is not a little puzzling that for the Euro-sages, "actress" is out but we cannot do without "waitress"!

C. NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

Use gender-neutral job titles

Generally in English, it is by now long-established that words like 'doctor' or 'lawyer' refer to a professional of either sex (without 'woman', 'lady' or 'female' tacked on the front). In some cases a substitute is available ('firefighters', 'flight attendants', 'athletes'), but it is still normal to use 'fisherman', etc. A list of recommendations is set out in the Appendix.

Use 'Chair' instead of 'Chairman'

'Chairperson' should be avoided, as the tendency has been to use it only when referring to women. 'Chair' should be used consistently for both sexes (for example, the Conference of Committee Chairs).

Use 'rapporteur' not only for reports but also for opinions, i.e. instead of draftsman'

Other languages do not generally have a separate word equivalent to 'draftsman', and on the cover page of an opinion it is unlikely to lead to confusion. Where necessary (for example, to distinguish clearly from a main rapporteur in running text), 'the rapporteur for the opinion' could be used.

Use 'press officer' or paraphrase: 'a representative for ...' or 'speaking for...', or (sparingly) use 'spokesman' or 'spokeswoman' depending on the actual sex of the specific person concerned.

APPENDIX

RECOMMENDED NAMES OF PROFESSIONS AND FUNCTIONS

It is generally not difficult to find a gender-neutral term for professions, occupations, functions, etc. in English, although there are some exceptions. The following is a non-binding list of recommendations, with alternatives where relevant.

- Actor/actress (actor is now commonly used for both sexes; use actress if the person's sex is relevant)
- Ambassador (for both sexes)
- Author (not authoress)
- Business person / executive (plural: business people) (not businessman; alternatively and in plural contexts, use business circles or business milieux)
- Doctor/physician (for both sexes, including for 'Ärztin', etc; avoid lady/woman doctor; also applies in the sense of Ph.D.)
- Firefighter (not fireman)
- Flight attendant or (in plural) flight crew (not air hostess)
- Head/head teacher (of primary or secondary school; not headmaster/headmistress)
- Lawyer (for both genders)
- Layperson (plural: lay people; not layman/laymen)
- Lecturer (for both genders)
- Manager (not manageress)
- Mayor (not mayoress)
- Midwife (for both sexes; there is no accepted alternative for male midwives)
- Nurse (for both sexes; avoid male nurse)
- Police officer (not policeman/policewoman unless the officer's sex is relevant)
- Sales representative (not salesman)
- Speaker (for both sexes)
- Teacher (for both sexes)
- Translator (for both sexes, including for 'traductrice', 'Übersetzerin', etc)
- Usher (not usherette)
- Waiter/waitress (no gender-neutral term has been successfully proposed)
- Weather reporter/forecaster (not weatherman)
- Writer (for both sexes)

Unless a person's sex is relevant, do not precede professions, occupations or functions with 'lady', 'woman' or 'female'.

ⁱ This phrase, “*Language powerfully influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions.*” perfectly sums up the gross misconception underlying “gender-neutrality”. It stands the proposition on its head. Of course it is not language that influences attitudes, behaviour and perceptions; it is exactly the opposite. Attitudes, behaviour and perceptions are human sentiments that stem from within the individual. The language used by the individual is coloured by those sentiments. In fact, language is the result of these attitudes, behaviour and perceptions. It is not by forcing the individual not to use a given word or to use another word that the individual’s attitudes or prejudices will be changed. The EU would do far better to leave language as it is and to concentrate on reforming some of the negative attitudes, behaviour and perceptions in society. However, recognising and expressing the difference between men and women is not an attitude, behaviour or perception; it is a fact of life.

See also the following related articles:

http://www.queens-english-society.com/uploads/Rogues_E.U.pdf a newspaper article on these guidelines.

http://www.queens-english-society.com/uploads/Errors_gender.pdf an explanation of sex and gender.

http://www.queens-english-society.com/uploads/Errors_politicallycorrect.pdf on political correctness.