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Exploring Linguistic Sexism in Students Written Academic Discourse of Department English at KUST

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Abstract

The present study examines linguistic sexism within the academic discourse of BS English students at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), employing a mixed-method approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This methodology enables a thorough analysis of the extent and impact of gender biases in language use, particularly focusing on the use of pronouns and nouns. The quantitative analysis scrutinized written passages from 92 students on the topic "Duties of a Student," revealing a significant preference for masculine pronouns and a complete absence of feminine pronouns, highlighting a prevalent normative gender bias. Conversely, the qualitative component involved focused group discussions with 14 representative students, exploring their awareness and perceptions regarding feminist linguistic reforms and the use of gender-neutral language. The findings indicate substantial gaps in the adoption of non-biased language, underlining the strong influence of entrenched gender norms on language choices. The study concludes that there is a critical need for educational reforms aimed at promoting gender-neutral language practices, which would challenge the patriarchal norms deeply embedded even within educated communities.

Keywords: Linguistic Sexism, Gender Bias, Feminist Linguistic Reform, Gender-Neutral Language, Academic Discourse

Background of the Study

Language serves as a fundamental tool that not only mirrors but also molds societal norms, values, and structures. Its role extends beyond mere communication, influencing perceptions and reinforcing societal hierarchies. This intricate relationship between language and society becomes particularly evident in the context of gender. Linguistic sexism, the practice of using language that discriminates or creates biases against a particular gender typically against women exemplifies how language can perpetuate gender inequalities. This form of sexism in language, often entrenched in patriarchal societal structures, manifests through various linguistic elements such as pronouns, nouns, and



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semantic derogations (Mills, 2001). Such practices contribute to the marginalization or invisibility of women in both spoken and written discourse, perpetuating a male-dominated linguistic landscape (Spender, 1980).

In response to the pervasive issue of linguistic sexism, feminist linguists and scholars have advocated for significant reforms. These reforms aim to promote gender neutrality and inclusiveness in language use, challenging the traditional gender biases embedded within linguistic structures (Romaine, 1997). The adoption of gender-neutral pronouns and the careful restructuring of language to avoid gender-specific terms are among the strategies proposed to dismantle linguistic sexism.

The context of Kohat University, where students are immersed in academic and social environments that constantly engage with language, provides a unique setting to examine these concepts. Particularly, students pursuing a Bachelor of Studies in English (BS English) are positioned as future educators, writers, and communicators who are likely to influence language norms through their professional endeavors. Their training and awareness of non-sexist language are crucial in promoting gender equality within and beyond academic settings.

Despite a growing consciousness of gender equality and efforts to reduce sexist language, linguistic sexism may still subtly permeate the written work of these students, either through unconscious bias or systemic cultural influences. This study aims to explore the prevalence and forms of linguistic sexism in the written outputs of BS English students at Kohat University. It will specifically analyze their use of pronouns and nouns, assessing whether their language choices reflect a continuation of gender biases or an adoption of reformed, inclusive linguistic practices. This investigation will contribute to understanding the effectiveness of educational interventions aimed at reducing linguistic sexism and promoting a more gender-inclusive language environment in academic settings.

Research Objectives

- a) To analyze the extent of linguistic sexism in the use of pronouns and nouns by BS English students at Kohat University in their written passages.
- b) To assess the students' awareness of feminist linguistic reform proposals aimed at reducing sexist language.
- c) To explore students' perceptions of instructions provided to them on the use of non-biased or gender-neutral language.

Research questions

- a) To what extent do BS English students at Kohat University exhibit linguistic sexism in their use of pronouns and nouns in written passages?
- b) Are the students aware of feminist linguistic reform proposals aimed at reducing sexist language?
- c) How do students perceive instructions provided to them on using non-biased or gender-neutral language?

Problem Statement

In recent years, significant attention has been paid to the phenomenon of linguistic sexism within academic Discourse, particularly focusing on Western educational contexts. However, studies examining how linguistic sexism is



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manifested in non-Western settings, such as Pakistan, remain sparse. There is a noted lack of comprehensive understanding concerning the presence and impact of sexist language within Pakistani university environments. Kohat University, located in a culturally and academically pivotal region of Pakistan, serves as an ideal setting for such an inquiry. The researcher selected this institution due to his existing enrollment as a regular student. This makes them a crucial demographic for examining the pervasiveness of linguistic sexism in academic communications. Investigating how these students employ language in their written and verbal exchanges can provide insightful revelations about the broader linguistic norms perpetuated within Pakistani academic settings. Moreover, the extent of students' awareness and acceptance of feminist linguistic reform proposals is equally significant. These reforms, which aim to eliminate sexist biases in language use by promoting gender-neutral terms, were first prominently discussed by Lakoff (1973). Exploring whether these ideals have penetrated the academic spheres at Kohat University could offer a gauge of progressive linguistic adaptation toward gender neutrality among the youth. Thus, this study aims to dissect the layers of linguistic sexism, gauge the awareness of feminist linguistic reforms, and assess the acceptance of gender-neutral language among university students, thereby contributing to a richer understanding of gender dynamics in Pakistani academic settings.

Significance of the Study

This research significantly contributes to the expanding knowledge base regarding linguistic sexism, focusing specifically on the higher education sector in Pakistan. It explores the engagement of future language professionals particularly English graduates with the pervasive issues of gender bias in language. The study scrutinizes the awareness and perceptions of these individuals concerning feminist linguistic reforms, along with their adoption of gender-neutral language practices. By analyzing how these future educators and language practitioners perceive and implement gender-sensitive language, the research aims to illuminate the current state and potential progress in linguistic practices within educational settings. This research is crucial for educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers who are vested in fostering inclusive language practices that promote gender neutrality. Furthermore, the findings of this study have the potential to inform and influence ongoing policy discussions related to gender equality in academia and the wider societal context in Pakistan. The outcomes could serve as a foundation for developing strategies to integrate feminist linguistic principles more comprehensively into the higher education curriculum, thereby advancing the discourse on gender equality in the region. This research aligns with and builds upon existing studies, such as those highlighted by Sunderland (2006), which emphasize the importance of addressing linguistic sexism as part of broader gender equality initiatives. This study not only addresses a significant gap in the current academic literature but also supports the movement towards a more equitable linguistic landscape in Pakistan's educational institutions and beyond.

Literature Review Linguistic Sexism



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Linguistic sexism refers to the discriminatory or biased use of language that perpetuates stereotypes, unequal roles, or diminished representation of one gender, often favoring males over females. It manifests in grammatical structures, lexical choices, and semantic connotations. Key concepts include *androcentrism* (male-centered language norms), *semantic derogation* (negative connotations of terms for women), and *gender-neutral language* (efforts to reduce linguistic bias). Linguistic sexism refers to the use of language that discriminates against one gender, often marginalizing women through biased linguistic choices (Mills, 2008). This bias can be seen in the way certain pronouns, nouns, and structures are employed, reinforcing stereotypes and gender hierarchies. Research suggests that the use of male-centric language, such as the generic "he" or "man," reinforces the notion that men are the default gender in society (Pauwels, 1998). BS English students, as emerging language professionals, are susceptible to such biases unless their linguistic behavior is critically examined and reformed. Previous studies in educational contexts have shown that students often unconsciously use biased language, mirroring the societal and cultural values they are exposed to (Cameron, 1992).

Feminist Linguistic Reform

Feminist linguistic reforms advocate for the elimination of sexist language through changes in pronouns, nouns, and titles (Piercey, 2000). Key proposals include using gender-neutral pronouns, such as "they," avoiding gender-specific job titles, and adopting inclusive language in all communication forms (Pauwels, 1998). These reforms have been endorsed by feminist scholars who argue that language shapes thought and that sexist language perpetuates gender inequality (Lakoff, 1973). However, the adoption of these reforms has been uneven, with some students and institutions embracing them while others resist due to traditional linguistic norms and cultural factors (Mills, 2008). In academic environments like Kohat University, it is essential to evaluate students' awareness of these reform efforts and assess how effectively they incorporate them into their written communication.

2.3 Approaches to Linguistic Sexism

Few studies have explored linguistic sexism in the academic discourse of students from multilingual and developing contexts. Bodine (1975) examined androcentrism in prescriptive grammar, revealing how the generic *he* gained prominence as a result of male-dominated regulation. Similarly, Awbery and Baron (1988) highlighted androcentric practices in grammar, emphasizing how grammatical structures historically reflected male-centric ideologies. The analysis of lexical practices in older dictionaries, as demonstrated by Kramarae (1981) and Pusch (1984), exposes the influence of male-authored literary works on word definitions, embedding gender bias in lexicography. These findings align with studies by Yaguello (1978) and Pauwels (1998), which illustrate the institutional challenges of adopting non-sexist language reforms. Schulz (1975) further highlighted semantic derogation, noting how terms for women often shift from neutral or positive connotations to negative or sexualized meanings. This phenomenon has also been observed across languages like French (Sautermeister 1985), German (Kochskämper 1991), and Japanese (Cherry 1987). The role of language planning in addressing linguistic sexism is evident in Cooper's (1989)



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work, which examines the American non-sexist language campaign. Despite these efforts, resistance to reform persists. For instance, the reaction of Harvard's Department of Linguistics to banning *man* and *he* mirrors the resistance noted by Kalverkämper (1979) to feminist linguistic critiques in German. Similarly, Cameron (1985) and Mackay (1980) scrutinized historical practices of grammatical gender reassignment, uncovering the deep-rooted resistance to gender-neutral language. Studies reveal linguistic sexism in various academic and sociolinguistic contexts. Lakoff (1975) and Spender (1980) provided foundational insights into how linguistic practices perpetuate gender inequality, serving as reference points for subsequent feminist linguistic critiques. Feminist linguists analyzed sexist linguistic practices like Blakar (1980) and Coquinche and García (2022) documented similar patterns in Norwegian and Spanish, respectively. Recent studies by Hellinger and Bussmann (2001) expand this analysis to languages such as Chinese, Lithuanian, and Thai, revealing universal patterns of gender bias in language. Parallel patterns of linguistic sexism in academic discourse have been noted in Pauwels (1998), who analyzed experimental evidence of gender perceptions in language use. De Caluwe (1996) questioned the utility of explicitly marking gender, highlighting the complexities of implementing reforms in multilingual contexts. Additionally, the comparative syntactic analysis by Raza et al. (2024) offers critical insights into Linguistic sexism in Pashto language. These studies collectively enrich linguistic sexism. These studies collectively emphasize the need for further research into linguistic sexism in academic discourse, particularly in underexplored contexts such as Pakistan. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing linguistic sexism in the written academic discourse of students at KUST.

Research Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-method approach is employed, combining both quantitative and qualitative research techniques. This dual approach ensured a comprehensive analysis of the use of pronouns and nouns, to provide deeper insights into students' awareness of feminist linguistic reform and their perceptions of non-biased or gender-neutral language. According to Takona, (2023)., mixed-methods research allows for the integration of numerical data with qualitative understanding, ensuring a more holistic exploration of the research questions. The quantitative portion of the study focused on examining written passages to quantify the extent of linguistic sexism. The qualitative portion involved a focused group discussion with students, which provided data on their awareness of feminist linguistic reforms and their perceptions of gender-neutral language.

Sampling

The study was conducted with 92 BS English students at Kohat University. Of these participants, 68 were female and 24 were male, a reflection of the gender distribution in the English department. This sample size and proportion allowed for a representative analysis of linguistic sexism across both male and female students. For the qualitative analysis, a focused group discussion was conducted with 14 representative students, comprising a mix of male and female students. The selection was based on a range of academic abilities, ensuring diverse



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perspectives in the discussion. Maxwell (2012) notes that purposeful sampling for qualitative research enhances the validity of the data by allowing diverse views to be explored.

Data Collection

For the quantitative aspect of the research, data were collected by analyzing the written passages of the 92 students. Each participant was asked to write a paragraph on the topic: “**Duties of a Student.**” The written texts were then examined for linguistic sexism, focusing specifically on the use of pronouns and nouns when addressing generic or indefinite subjects. The usage of pronouns such as *he*, *she*, or gender-neutral terms like *they* was analyzed. Additionally, the nouns used to describe individuals in roles, such as *chairman* or *spokesperson*, were assessed for potential biases. Cameron (1998) has discussed how language can reflect societal gender norms, which was a key factor considered during this analysis. For the qualitative aspect, a focused group discussion was conducted with 14 students from both genders and varying academic abilities. This method was chosen because it allows for in-depth exploration of attitudes and perceptions, as well as group dynamics that may influence opinions (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The discussion focused on two key areas: as Students’ awareness of feminist linguistic reform proposals aimed at reducing sexist language and Students’ perceptions of instructions on using non-biased or gender-neutral language.

Analysis and Discussion

This study examined linguistic sexism in the academic discourse of students of the BS English program at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). Of these, students’ written passages were analyzed in detail, focusing on the use of pronouns and nouns. Participants were tasked with writing a short paragraph on the topic ‘**Duties of a Student**’, with passages averaging 150–170 words. The topic was chosen for its inclusion of a gender-neutral term, *student*, which allowed for analysis of how participants navigated linguistic choices in relation to gender. The analysis primarily targeted pronoun usage, specifically the following options for referring to the non-sexist noun *student* as studied by (Pauwels 2000, 2001b, 2003).

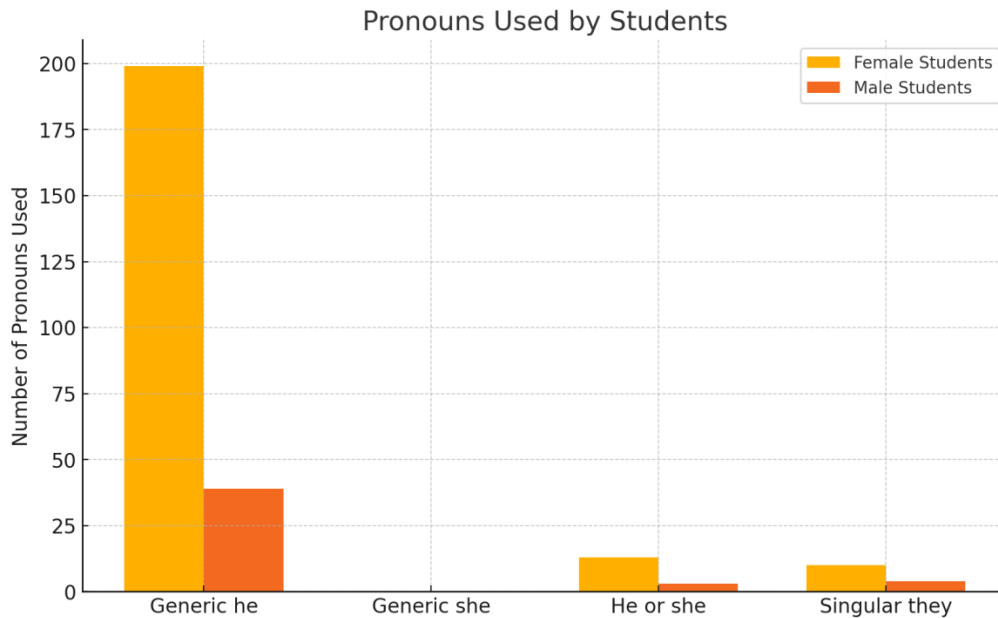
1. **Generic he**
2. **Generic she**
3. **Singular they**
4. **Repetition of the non-sexist noun**
5. **He or she**

Quantitative Analysis of Data

The analysis shows a total of **268 pronouns** in the data in male and female students, distributed as follows in the graph;



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linguistic sexism in student academic discourse**Pronoun Usage**

Generic he is overwhelmingly used more often than any other pronoun type, with a total of 238 instances. Notably, female students use *he* 199 times compared to 39 times by male students. This shows a strong preference or normative bias towards using masculine pronouns as the default. **Generic she** is not used at all by either female or male students. This absence could indicate a gender bias in pronoun usage, where the feminine pronoun is entirely excluded from academic discourse in this context. **He/she**, a more gender-inclusive option, is used relatively infrequently, with only 16 occurrences in total. Female students again show a higher usage (13 times) compared to male students (3 times). **Singular they**, which is gender-neutral, is used the least, with only 14 instances. Similar to other pronouns, female students use "they" more (10 times) than male students (4 times).

The data reveals a strong gender bias towards using masculine pronouns *he* as a generic term. This could be reflective of traditional linguistic norms or biases within the academic community or society at large, where male references are seen as the standard. The non-use of *she* and the low frequency of gender-neutral options like *he/she* and *singular they* suggest a lack of gender sensitivity in the linguistic choices of the students. This might point to a need for greater awareness and integration of gender-neutral language practices in academic settings.

Focused Group

For this research to see linguistic sexism and gender-biased language in educational settings, the Focused Group Discussions (FGD) was conducted with 14 students from the BS English program, which included 10 female and 4 male participants, reflective of the gender composition in the Department of English where females are the majority. This discussion was aimed at exploring their awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards sex-biased language and linguistic sexism through five structured questions. Here are the insights gleaned from this



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session: Participants were first asked to identify and discuss sex-biased terms frequently used in written language. They highlighted several male-exclusive compound nouns such as *chairman*, *policeman*, *mankind*, and *watchman*, underscoring a prevalent use of male-centered language. Notably absent were mentions of gender-neutral alternatives like *chairperson* or *police officer*, suggesting a gap in awareness of feminist linguistic reforms aimed at promoting non-sexist language. This finding indicates a significant educational oversight regarding the introduction and normalization of inclusive language alternatives, reflecting deep-rooted patriarchal norms within their linguistic choices. The discussion then moved to identify sex-bias in other parts of speech, particularly pronouns. Male students showed greater awareness, citing examples such as *he*, *his*, and *himself*. Conversely, female participants were less aware, with some unable to identify any problematic pronouns. This disparity highlighted a concerning trend: female students, who are more likely to be affected by linguistic sexism, displayed significant gaps in recognizing these biases, suggesting that male-dominant language norms are deeply ingrained and often go unchallenged. When questioned about their formal education on linguistic sexism, most students recognized the topic as part of feminist theory but noted a lack of practical instruction on adopting non-biased language. This indicates a critical shortfall in education, where theoretical knowledge is not complemented with practical applications, leaving students aware of linguistic sexism but unequipped to change their linguistic behaviors. Participants admitted to frequently using male-exclusive pronouns even in generic or indefinite contexts, with female students surprisingly consistent in their use of male-biased terms. This response underscores a habitual use of male-dominant language, compounded by a lack of confidence or reluctance to adopt feminist linguistic reforms. Such tendencies highlight the pervasive influence of patriarchal norms that continue to dominate language usage, even among educated individuals. The final discussion point focused on the reasons behind the acceptance of male linguistic norms, especially among female students. Many attributed this to early educational experiences where male-exclusive terms were predominant in both their native language (Urdu) and English. This early indoctrination into male-centric language norms has led to a normalization of linguistic sexism, with many female students unconsciously internalizing these biases as natural or inevitable. These insights from the FGD emphasize the need for educational reforms that incorporate practical training in non-biased language use, alongside a broader cultural shift towards recognizing and challenging linguistic sexism in academic environments.

Findings

The findings of this study underscore the persistent prevalence of linguistic sexism among BS English students at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST), despite the theoretical exposure to feminist linguistic reforms. The predominant use of the masculine pronoun *he* as a generic term highlights traditional gender biases, which seem ingrained within the students' academic discourse. This normative preference suggests that masculine pronouns are still viewed as the universal standard, effectively marginalizing feminine pronouns which were conspicuously absent from the students' writing.



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This exclusion not only perpetuates gender bias but also contradicts the goals of feminist linguistic reform, which advocate for inclusivity and gender neutrality in language. The minimal use of gender-neutral pronouns such as *they* or gender-inclusive forms like *he/she* indicates a significant gap between students' awareness of gender issues in language and their application of this knowledge in practical writing tasks. This discrepancy highlights a critical need for comprehensive educational interventions that not only discuss gender-neutral language as a theoretical concept but also promote its consistent use in everyday academic communications. Furthermore, the focused group discussions revealed that although students are familiar with the concept of linguistic sexism, there is a tangible lack of practical instruction on how to effectively implement gender-neutral language. This finding is particularly concerning as it suggests that current educational practices at KUST may not adequately prepare students to challenge or change entrenched sexist norms within their own linguistic practices. The frequent use of gender-biased language by female students also points to the pervasive influence of societal norms that favor male references, indicating that these biases are deeply rooted and are perpetuated through educational settings. Overall, the study illustrates a clear need for an educational overhaul that includes detailed, practical training in the use of non-biased, gender-neutral language. Such reforms should aim not only to raise awareness but also to equip students with the tools necessary to actively challenge and change sexist linguistic practices in both academic and social contexts. This approach will help foster a more inclusive and equitable communication environment, aligning more closely with feminist principles of equality and non-discrimination.

Discussion

This study explored linguistic sexism within the academic discourse of 92 students from the BS English program at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). The research focused on how students use pronouns and nouns to describe a gender-neutral subject '*student*'. Given their training in feminist linguistic reforms, the study aimed to observe their linguistic choices, balancing gender-biased and non-biased language. The quantitative analysis revealed a pronounced use of the generic *he*, with 238 instances, predominantly by female students (199 times). This overwhelming preference suggests a normative bias towards masculine pronouns as the default in academic discourse. Surprisingly, the generic *she* was not used at all, indicating a significant exclusion of feminine pronouns. The gender-neutral *singular they* and the more inclusive *he/she* were minimally used, suggesting a reluctance or lack of awareness towards gender-neutral language options among the students. The findings indicate a strong gender bias favoring masculine pronouns, which may reflect enduring traditional linguistic norms and biases that perceive male references as the standard. The absence of *she* and the scant use of inclusive and neutral pronouns highlight a gap in the integration of gender-sensitive language practices within the academic setting.

Focused Group Discussions (FGDs) with 14 students provided deeper insights. These discussions revealed a lack of awareness about sex-biased terms and a shortfall in education on practical applications of non-biased language. Students



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recognized sexist language as part of feminist theory but admitted to a lack of practical instruction on adopting gender-neutral language. This gap indicates that while students are theoretically aware of linguistic sexism, they are not practically equipped to implement non-sexist language in their communications. Most notably, female students frequently used male-dominant language, a habit underscored by early educational experiences where male-centric norms were prevalent. This suggests that patriarchal linguistic norms are deeply ingrained and often unchallenged, even in academic settings where one might expect a greater consciousness of language equity. These discussions and analyses underscore the necessity for educational reforms to better incorporate practical training in gender-neutral language usage. Moreover, they highlight the need for a cultural shift towards recognizing and actively challenging linguistic sexism in academic and broader societal contexts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study highlights a persistent prevalence of linguistic sexism within the academic discourse of BS English students at Kohat University of Science and Technology. Despite theoretical exposure to feminist linguistic reforms, the actual linguistic behavior of students—especially female students reflect a deep-seated normative bias towards using masculine pronouns as default. The complete absence of the generic *she* and minimal usage of gender-neutral options like *singular they* or *he/she* demonstrate a significant gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application of non-biased language. The focused group discussions further revealed that this disconnect stems largely from a lack of practical training and the enduring influence of patriarchal linguistic norms ingrained during earlier educational stages. These findings underscore the urgent need for educational reforms that not only address the theoretical aspects of linguistic sexism but also provide practical tools and training to foster genuine changes in language usage. Implementing such changes will require a concerted effort to challenge and shift the cultural and linguistic norms that currently favor masculine references, thereby promoting a more inclusive and gender-sensitive language environment in academia and beyond.

Practical Implications of the Study

The findings of this study highlight the persistent influence of traditional patriarchal norms on linguistic practices within academic discourse, even among students exposed to feminist linguistic reforms. The pronounced use of masculine pronouns as default, coupled with the exclusion of feminine and minimal use of inclusive pronouns, underscores a critical gap in the practical application of gender-sensitive language. This indicates the need for a paradigm shift in educational and societal language norms. The study's primary implication is the necessity to integrate comprehensive training in gender-neutral language practices within academic curricula, ensuring that theoretical awareness of linguistic sexism translates into practical competence. Additionally, applied linguists can play a pivotal role in developing tools, guidelines, and educational resources to promote inclusive language use and challenge entrenched biases. Addressing these gaps can foster a more equitable academic and societal



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discourse, paving the way for language reforms that reflect gender inclusivity and equality.

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