A corpus-based view of lexical gender in written Business English

Pedro A. Fuertes-Olivera *

Universidad de Valladolid, Escuela Universitaria de Estudios Empresariales, Paseo del Prado de la Magdalena s/n, 47005 Valladolid, Spain

Abstract

This article investigates lexical gender in specialized communication. The key method of analysis is that of forms of address, professional titles, and 'generic *man*' in a 10 million word corpus of written Business English. After a brief introduction and literature review on both gender in specialized communication and similar corpus-based views of lexical gender in General English, the results obtained are explained. Mixed results were found. On the one hand, the 'male-as-norm' principle contributes to reinforcing typical gender stereotypes: for example, for each *woman* referred to in the corpus, there are more than 100 occurrences for *man*. On the other hand, advocates of non-sexist English have also influenced written Business English: for example, *Ms* is more than 9 times as frequent as *Mrs*. and *Miss*, which sustains the claim that equates *Ms* with professional settings. This article ends by discussing the ways in which the research findings of this study could positively impact upon the teaching of Business English.
© 2006 The American University. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Specialized corpora – i.e., genre- and topic-specific corpora designed to include only samples of language of a particular type, belonging to a particular genre, register, etc. – have been used to help with LSP teaching and learning, to identify specialized terms, to learn about word collocations, to learn about grammar, to learn about style, and to learn

* Tel.: +34 983 42 35 82; fax: +34 983 42 30 56.
  E-mail address: pedro@tita.emp.uva.es

about concepts. Nickerson (2005), for example, refers to a number of corpus-based analyses of business communication (see also Nelson, 2006). She provides an overview of current research focusing on the use of English as a *lingua franca* in international business contexts, and affirms that in the course of the last decade two trends have become increasingly important in the investigation of business communication. One of them consists of analyzing contextualized communicative genres, emphasizing "the organizational and/or cultural factors that contribute to the realisation of the individual text/event under investigation" (Nickerson, 2005, p. 369). The second trend is concerned with identifying the language strategies that "can be associated with effective communication in business, regardless of whether the speaker/writer is a native or non-native speaker" (Nickerson, 2005, p. 369). In the spirit of Nickerson's view, this article reports on an analysis of written Business English lexis that uses the notion of lexical gender to gain a clearer picture of the changes gender neutral language (i.e, language that is fair for men and women alike) have made in business texts. A corpus of approximately 10 million words of written Business English (*the Wolverhampton Corpus of Written Business English* (WBE); see Section 4, below) was utilized in order to investigate, firstly, how some courtesy and professional titles are being used in written Business English, and, secondly, the presence of 'generic *man*' in the WBE. In very broad terms, this paper analyzes to what extent lexical gender is present in a particular piece of discourse, a topic that has been examined quite extensively in general language and that needs to be explored to the same degree in specialized language. It starts by describing the state of play of gender in specialized communication; then by commenting on some recent corpus-based views of gender in general language corpora, it contextualizes the research in the general framework of the issue of language and gender, thus paving the way for incorporating ideological issues into the analysis of specialized communication. Finally, some findings are discussed, and conclusions are drawn, including the pedagogical consequences that this research may have when the results are introduced into the classroom.

2. The question of gender in specialized communication

Recent research on the issue of gender and language tends to concentrate on four categories of gender: *grammatical gender*, *lexical gender*, *referential gender*, and *social gender*. Hellinger and Bußmann (2001, p. 7) claim that "grammatical gender is an inherent property of the noun which controls agreement between the noun (the controller) and some (gender-variable) satellite element (the target) which may be an article, adjective, pronoun, verb, numeral or preposition." As a general linguistic category, grammatical gender is a typical feature of languages such as German and Spanish, where nouns are classified as 'masculine', 'feminine' and 'neuter'. In Spanish, for example, we may contrast *actuario atractivo* and *actuaria atractiva*, where *atractivo* and *atractiva* are, respectively, masculine and feminine forms of the adjective *atractivo* "attractive", selected in agreement with the grammatical gender of *actuario* (masculine) "male actuary" and *actuaria* "female actuary".

Referential gender "relates linguistic expressions to a non-linguistic reality; more specifically, referential gender identifies a referent as "female", "male" or "gender-indefinite"" (Hellinger & Bußmann (2001, p. 8)). For example, a personal noun like colloquial Spanish *zorrón* "prostitute" is grammatically masculine, has a lexical-semantic specification as [female], and is generally used to refer to females (Fuertes Olivera, 1992). This shows that