

5 THE ENGLISH NOUN IN THE PROMOTIONAL ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

5.1 On the Academic Discourse

Gender is a complex issue that has been studied for years from various standpoints. The present part is devoted to linguistic gender in the academic discourse. My intention is to show the English noun from the perspective of its social and historical significance and to prove that

linguistic meaning also expresses our attitudes towards the person we are speaking to, how we feel about the reliability of our message, how we situate ourselves in the events we report, and many other things that make our message not merely a recital of facts but a complex of facts and comments about facts and situations.

(Bollinger in Sunderland 1994: 24-25)

My plan is to find out whether and how contemporary institutionalised English reflects changes in social positions of men and women and to demonstrate the existing connection between the linguistic gender and the society development. The main analysis is conducted in the randomly chosen texts of on-line British university study programmes. I focus on the parts of the programmes aimed at recruitment and admissions policy and at defining applicants'/students'/graduates' rights and duties. I foresaw the occurrence of a large number of nominal phrases there (similarly to the forensic discourse).

“The noun phrase is an important structure in academic English. Academic style, especially in writing packs a great deal of information quite densely into noun phrases. Noun phrases in academic writing tend to be more complex than in everyday, non-academic speech or informal writing, especially in terms of modification and embedding of elements, all of which serve to integrate different types of information into the noun-phrase structure. This process, using a noun phrase to express a meaning more typically associated with an item from another word class, is called nominalisation.”

(Carter, McCarthy, 2006: 267, 271)

To cover the whole territory of the United Kingdom I found fair to examine the selected parts of programmes of a university of England (London University, Cambridge University), a university of Wales (Swansea University), a university of Ireland (Ulster

University) and a university of Scotland (Edinburg and Glasgow University). In this kind of texts the reference is made to a hypothetical person (e.g. an applicant, student, graduate). Since they equally refer to both male and female individuals I expected there a high occurrence of dual nouns that require secondary means for gender determination. My concern was to find out how these nouns express their orientation to masculine and feminine referents.

The two-fold usage of masculine pronouns (personal subjective *he*, personal objective *him*, possessive *his*, and reflexive *himself*) has been known for years. They have been used to refer either to male individuals or to human beings of both biological sexes.

5.2 The Basic Linguistic Devices of Expressing Generic Gender Reference in British University Programmes Published in 1989

A few years ago I examined randomly chosen texts of British university programmes published in 1989. The analysis showed that the authors of university programmes carefully preserved traditional manners and practices. Dual nouns with the generic function were most frequently used in the singular form with the pronouns *he*, *him*, *his*, *himself*.

5.3 On-line British University Programmes Created in 1998/1999

In 1998/1999 I analysed randomly chosen texts of on-line British university study programmes. The results proved my expectation - the online texts showed only one third presence of the generic usage of *he/him/his/himself*. The findings showed that the English language in academic discourse was enlarging a range of devices to express gender equality and to avoid gender unfairness. It was proved that in order to stress the dual gender reference English started to adopt new strategies for gender bias avoidance. The texts demonstrated a shift in the generic gender reference of a dual noun (*applicant*, *student*, *candidate*, *individual*, *person*, and *worker*). It was apparent that the authors of the 1998 and 1999 programmes were becoming aware of the fact that an improper linguistic means could strengthen gender discrimination and gender imbalance.

5.3.1 Coordinated masculine and feminine pronouns

In the study programmes created in 1998/9 the usage of the pronouns *he*, *him*, *his*, *himself* with a singular dual noun was falling into disuse and was getting suppressed by the usage of the coordinated pronoun forms. The coordinated pronoun forms *he/she*, *him/her*,

his/her as generic terms were the most frequently used. The order of coordinated pronouns (first a masculine pronoun and then a feminine one) remained unchanged. Some people still object to the *he/she* position that, in their view, reflects preference to a male sex. The texts contained prevalingly

- **personal pronouns *he/she***

that referred to dual nouns to show their generic orientation. They were used in two forms: *he or she* or *he/she*.

*The provisional enrolment of a **person** shall become null and void if **he or she** has not fulfilled the conditions for enrolment by the end of the period allowed for provisional enrolment.*

(London 1998)

*In addition, each **student** has a personal tutor (a member of the academic staff) to whom **he or she** may turn for help or advice of any kind.*

(London 1998)

*The primary criterion to be satisfied by any **candidate** seeking entry will be that **he or she** has a realistic chance of benefiting from the course.*

(Edinburgh 1999)

*If an **individual** is going to progress through business, sooner or later **he or she** will have to acquire the knowledge in order to make and defend decisions.*

(Edinburgh 1999)

*A migrant **worker** is any **person** who is a **national** of a member state of the European Economic Area who has taken up an activity as an employed **person** in the United Kingdom in circumstances where as a **national** of the United Kingdom **he/she** has an enforceable Community right to be treated no less favourably than a **national** of another member state in relation to matters which are the subject of the above mentioned Council regulations.*

(London 1998)

- **the possessive pronouns *his/her***

A high occurrence of the possessive pronouns *his/her* was also recorded in the analysed promotional academic discourse texts.

*If a registered or occasional **student** fails to meet such requirements in relation to enrolment as Council and Senate may prescribe (for example in relation to the payment of debts or the disclosure of criminal convictions), **his or her** enrolment may be revoked at any time by the Vice-Chancellor or **his or her** nominee acting under the authority of the Senate.*

*A registered or occasional **student** who has been granted an intermission in **his** or **her** studies or leave of absence from **his** or **her** studies shall not be required to enrol for the period of intermission or leave.* (London 1998)

*A registered **student** may be excused enrolment for part of **his** or **her** programme of study or research following **his** or **her** election or appointment to office in any representative student body approved for the purposes of this paragraph by the Senate, and a student so excused shall remain a registered student for as long as may be approved by the Senate...* (London 1998)

*The progress of all undergraduates is continually under review and every effort is made to ensure that each **student** is able to realise **his** or **her** potential to the full.*

(London 1998)

*... the life of the **student** to some degree reflects the way a working **engineer** spends **his** or **her** time.* (London 1998)

*A mechanical **engineer** must, through the exercise of **his** or **her** own creative imagination and professional skills, be able to combine theory and the practice ...* (London 1998)

*If the **applicant/student** is determined by the Panel to be unsuitable, **his/her** offer of admission/provisional enrolment will become invalid. The **applicant/student** may, if **he/she** wishes, apply for admission to an alternative course.* London 1998)

*If the **applicant** is deemed by the Panel to be unsuitable **his/her** application will not be processed any further.*

The preferred form was *his or her*, the less frequent form was *his/her*. I suppose that the same university programme was written by several authors as both forms were used without any special coordination.

5.3.2 The third person plural personal and possessive pronouns *they/their*

Quite a high frequency of the third person plural personal pronouns *they/them* and the third person plural possessive pronoun *their* with a dual singular noun demonstrated a different attitude towards the examined issue. (Their frequency was one third lower than the frequency of the coordinated pronouns *he/she*, *his/her*.)

Every **applicant** is considered individually in an holistic assessment using all the information available to us: ... **their** academic record, including GCSE and AS (or equivalent) grades and marks and A level (or equivalent) grades or predictions, this record being considered in the context of the quality (but not type) of schools/colleges at which it was achieved; ...

(London 1998)

Each year the Department reviews the progress of each **student** to determine whether **they** may continue on their chosen programme.

(London 1998)

Each **student** is assigned a personal tutor, normally for the duration of **their** undergraduate career.

(London 1998)

Any **person** who ... c/ has been informed in writing by a person acting under the authority of the Secretary of State for the Home Department specifically that **they** are not qualified for asylum or recognition as a refugee, but that nevertheless exceptional permission to enter, or leave to remain in, the United Kingdom has been granted ;...

(London 1998)

Another hallmark is the way that our degree programmes allow each **student** to tailor **their** studies to **their** own interests by selecting appropriate third and fourth year options.

(London 1998)

Each **student** has... a personal tutor who gives individual help and advice throughout **their** time in the Department.

(London 1998)

This not only allows a **student** to explore **their** particular interests in some depth, but can enhance **their** career prospects.

(London 1998)

5.4 The Innovative Linguistic Ways of Expressing Generic Gender Reference

During the analysis I observed several new ways of gender identification that were not found in the programmes from 1989.

5.4.1 Plural forms of dual nouns

The preference of a plural form of a dual noun is observed in order to express an equal male-female gender attitude and to avoid the use of the masculine singular pronouns.

Students who are provisionally enrolled are subject to the Charter, Statutes, Ordinances and Regulations of the University as are from time to time.

Applicants who do not consent to such a check will not be permitted to register on the course.

Applicants wishing to lodge a complaint about a rejection decision should use either the Appeals Procedure or the Complaints Procedure for Applicants. (All London 1998)

Many times the plural form of a dual noun was preceded by the predeterminer *all* to underline all-inclusive and generic reference.

...secondly, the University requires ***all applicants*** to show evidence of a good general education.

The plural form of a dual noun gives a chance to use the third person plural pronouns *they, them, their*. The use of a plural form with the third person plural pronouns does not express preference to any biological sex. It seems to be one of the most suitable and prospective ways of expressing gender equality.

Once ***students*** are admitted, we ensure that ***they*** are given the academic, personal and, where appropriate, financial support necessary for successful completion of ***their*** course at Cambridge.

In addition to the above, ***candidates*** (including those of mature-age) may, in special cases, be granted exemption from the General Requirement if recommended by a department/school as having reached the necessary entrance standard to enable ***them*** to start on the degree course for which ***they*** have applied.

(All London 1998)

5.4.2 Repetition of a singular dual noun

Less frequently a dual noun is used in the singular form. It was interesting to find twofold, threefold or multifold repetitions of a singular dual noun. This way also enables to avoid the use of the third person singular personal pronouns.

Complaints should be made in writing and referred, in the first instance, to the Admissions Officer. The Admissions Officer shall reply to the complainant stating that the complaint is being dealt with and that a full, written reply will be sent within 15 working days. The Admissions Officer shall refer the complaint to the appropriate Admissions Tutor/Administrative Officer for comment, together with the original application form and all relevant supporting material.

(London 1998)

This reminds of legal English, where repetitions belong to the linguistic devices used to make legal writing more precise and more all-inclusive.

*If the Dean/Head of School decides an interview is not necessary, the Head of Faculty Administration will write to **the applicant** and obtain written confirmation that **the applicant** understands the implications of their criminal record for future registration and employment and, in particular, that continuation on the course does not guarantee professional recognition or inclusion on the relevant state register. Only when this written confirmation is received from **the applicant** will the offer/registration be confirmed.*

(London 1998)

5.4.3 Repetition of the possessive form of a singular dual noun

The repetition of the possessive form of a singular dual noun might also be one of innovative manners how to avoid the use of the third person singular possessive pronoun. In the repetitive use the possessive form of a singular dual noun is preceded by the definite article *the* in order to underline the anaphoric reference.

*Where **an applicant** indicates a criminal record, the selector(s) should firstly consider the application against the academic and other criteria specified for the programme. If the application meets these criteria, the application will be assessed in order to ensure that neither **the applicant** nor the University community will be put at risk if **the applicant** becomes a member of the University. **The applicant's** information will only be shared with those who are involved in the consideration of the application and **the applicant** will be kept informed throughout the process.*

*Fairness: to ensure that **each applicant** is individually assessed, without partiality or bias, in accordance with the policy on Equal Opportunities, and to ensure that, as far as possible, an **applicant's** (instead of **his** or **her**) chance of admission to Cambridge does not depend on choice of College.*

(Cambridge University)

5.5 Miscellaneous ways

It is observed that the authors of the analysed programmes attempt to use different ways of avoiding third person singular masculine pronouns for expressing of generic reference.

5.5.1 The combination of a plural form of a dual noun, its singular form and coordinated pronouns he and she

In a few cases the plural form of a dual noun is followed by a singular form of the same dual noun and then followed by the coordinated pronouns.

*In the case of **students (plural)** who are already registered the Director of Student Administration will write to **the student (singular)** requesting that **he/she** obtain from the Subject Access Office of the Police Service for Northern Ireland (or relevant authority where **the student (singular instead of he or he/she)** lives outside Northern Ireland) a statement of the convictions together with the name of a referee who is willing to provide a character reference...* (Ulster University)

5.5.2 The combination of the plural form of a dual noun and its possessive singular form

The plural form of a dual noun followed by its possessive singular form instead of generically used masculine pronouns is observed.

*Faculties should ensure that **students (plural)** are aware of this and sign a disclaimer to the effect that in the event of an unsatisfactory disclosure the Faculty has the right to terminate the **student's (singular instead of his or her)** registration.* (Ulster University)

5.5.3 The usage of the indefinite and definite article

The singular dual nouns are frequently used with the central determiners *a/an* and *the* that we emphasise the back-pointing reference. It may be one of the ways how to avoid the use of masculine pronouns or coordinated masculine and feminine pronouns.

*If the University discovers that **an applicant** has failed to disclose a criminal offence as required under its procedures it reserves the right to withdraw an offer of a place or, if **the applicant** (instead of **he** or **she**) has registered as **a student**, terminate the registration and dismiss **the student** (instead of **him** or **her**).*

5.5.4 Leaving out the third person singular or plural possessive pronoun and their replacing with the definite article

Quite often this procedure is seen in the analysed texts. The third person singular or plural possessive pronoun is left out and replaced with the definite article.

*Every **applicant** is considered individually in a holistic assessment using all the information available to us:*

***their** academic record, including GCSE and AS (or equivalent) grades and marks and A level (or equivalent) grades or predictions, this record being considered in the context of the quality (but not type) of schools/colleges at which it was achieved;*

*the school/college reference; (**the** instead of **their** or **his/her** school)*

*the personal statement; submitted work, where requested; (**the** instead of **their** or **his/her** personal statement, submitted work)*

*test results, where a written test forms part of the assessment; (**the zero article** instead of **their** or **his/her** test results) performance at interview, if interviewed.*

The author here uses a singular dual noun and makes the generic reference by the third person possessive plural pronoun (*their*) and then by the definite and zero articles. In all the cases he manages to avoid the gender oriented co-referential pronouns. The extract may serve as an example of the author's potential range of devices for avoidance of masculine pronouns

5.5.5 Premodification of a dual noun by gender oriented male and female

In a few cases the gender-specific premodification of a dual noun through *male* and *female* is used.

*They are exclusively organised and run to provide **male** and **female** full time students with practical training and experience.* (London 1998)

Although the occurrence of non-traditional ways is still lower than the traditional ones, they show a noticeable shift towards the necessity of expressing gender equality in academic discourse.