

Gender-Bias In The Use Of English By Teachers And Learners Of English As A Foreign Language, Case Of Goma Secondary School Teachers And Ttc Students

Makasi Ngesera Theophile,
Teacher Of English At Isc-Goma

SUMMARY

One social attitude that has a broad extension and has persisted through generations is superiority of men over women. This attitude which is deep-rooted in people's minds is often vehicled by the languages that they speak. We have tried to explore the English grammar and vocabulary, together with the available ad hoc literature, to find out whether this language also contributes to vehicling gender-bias in favour of the male. This exploration has confirmed the existence of an inbuilt linguistic gender-bias in favour of man and against women.

In order to find out whether teachers and learners of English are affected by this gender-bias, we have administered a test to a sample of sixty teachers of English in Goma secondary schools and forty students from the English department in local TTCs. The test results have confirmed our assumption that the teachers and the students are deeply affected by the gender-bias, which tends to indicate that the linguists' attempts to fight gender-bias have been unsuccessful so far. Among the solutions to this situation, we have proposed hat teachers of grammar in TTCs insist more on the gender issue in language and that seminars about linguistic gender-bias be organized in favour of teachers of English in the town.

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I. INTRODUCTION

This study of Gender-Bias in the use of English falls in the scope of socio-linguistics, a research area that has received the attention of many applied linguists. According to them, the word bias means a slant in one's judgement. The expression Gender-Bias in language, then, refers to language features that denote a slanted judgement either in favour or against a particular gender: the male or the female. (Philbrick, 1965).

Language as the vehicle of human thought, reflects its speakers' culture including their feelings and their views of the world. Progress in whatever field, -technology, behavior, religion, social attitudes, etc.- often results from people's interactions with language. This seems to indicate that language must have a great deal of effect on human mind. Indeed, as Shirley Russel (2001) clearly states, humans "perceive the world around them in two ways: with their physical eyes and through the distorting lens of their language. As they learn to speak, their children absorb attitudes from adults through the words they are given to learn." Even adults who are learning a second language do not escape that linguistic impact on their minds. Through the new language, they also absorb the social attitudes of the native speakers of the language that they are learning.

One social attitude that has a broad extension and has persisted through generations is superiority of men over women. Does this attitude have any linguistic roots? In other words, is there any evidence of an inbuilt linguistic bias against women in the English language? We have considered this issue referring respectively to the grammar and the vocabulary of the English language.

Our assumption was that English, like other languages, has an inbuilt linguistic bias in favour of the male gender and that Congolese learners of English, namely those in Goma town, are affected by that bias and manifest it in their use of this language. This gender-bias is so deep-rooted in their minds that the attempts made by modern linguists and grammarians to fight it have hardly succeeded in uprooting it.

To verify this, we have explored the English grammar and vocabulary, together with the available literature about linguistic gender-bias, using documentary techniques so as to point out the gender-bias features. An investigation test has been administered to a sample of sixty teachers of English in Goma secondary schools and forty students from the English Department at Goma and Machumbi TTCs to find out whether their use of the English language is actually gender-biased in favour of the male.

This paper revolves around three points, namely a review of literature about gender-bias in the English language, an evaluation of the success of linguists' attempts to fight this bias among teachers and prospective teachers, and suggestions.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ABOUT GENDER-BIAS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Available literature about linguistic gender-bias in the English language revolves around the identification of the gender-bias features in the language and linguists' attempts to fight it.

Gender-bias features in the English language

As Jane Sunderland (2006: 35) explains, while empirical and other work on gender and language existed well before, it is the Women's Liberation Movement that "heralded a new important and feminist impetus to language and gender study" in the late 1960s and the early 1970s.

One of the feminists of that time, Germaine Greer, in her famous book *Female Eunuch* (1972) noted "how terms of endearment for women are also terms for food, (e.g. honey, sweetie)" and she qualified this as a way 'to degrade and stereotype women'. Another famous feminist writer, Robin Lakoff, in her work entitled *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), complained about 'sexism', 'male chauvinism' and linguistic discrimination against women. Two years later, Robin Morgan, in her work *Going Too Far* (1977) also identified sexist usages in the English semantics and maligned the identification of women through their father's names if they are not married or their husbands' when they get married. In her book *Man Made Language* (1980), Dale Spender also referred to the English language as a 'gender-biased system' in which "usages have acquired a masculine orientation." In 1998, the UK Society of Personal Officers in Government Services, in conjunction with the Commissions for Equal Opportunities, Racial Equality and the Royal Association for Disability and Rehabilitation produced a document called *Language and Equality*. One of the four sections of this document was devoted to the Gender and Language topic; it pointed out a number of features denoting gender-bias in the English language.

Among the English language areas where gender-bias was observed, feminists have mentioned grammar, lexis, titles in business correspondence salutations, and titles demoting marital status.

Grammar

The lexeme grammar refers to "the entire system of a language including its syntax, morphology, semantics and phonology" (Chalker and Weiner 1998). So word order in a sentence, word agreement in a text, and word variation are the concerns of grammar. At these levels of the English language, the existence of a linguistic inbuilt bias in favour of men and against women is observed. The following facts pointed out by Shirley Russel (2001) can illustrate that gender-bias:

In 1553, the grammarian Wilson ruled that the man should precede the woman in pairs such as male/female, husband/wife, brother/sister, son/daughter, gentlemen/ladies, etc. He claimed that it was 'natural'. His point of view was tacitly approved of by other grammarians and linguists.

Around one century later, in 1645, the grammarian Joshua Poole explicitly reinforced Wilson's claim when he said that "the male should precede the female because this was both 'natural' and 'proper since men were the worthier sex.'" His idea was also generally accepted tacitly. As language can influence both thought and behavior (Sunderland 2006:36), whether the language user is aware of it or not, the idea that the linguistic precedence of the male vehicles, is that the male is superior to the female.

Another aspect of the linguistic bias in favour of man in the English grammar is the absorption of the female by the male, an application of John Kirkby's rule stating that the male gender is more comprehensive than the female and so the latter should be included in the former (Russel 2001). Practically, in English grammar, this applies for instance to noun predicates of both male and female subjects, as in "John and Mary are actors." The feminine of 'actor' is 'actress', but since we have a compound subject made of male and female, the male absorbs the female, and so the predicate is masculine. The result would remain the same whether we had 2, 3 or more females against one male; the single male would still absorb all the females as in "John, Mary, Susan, Pauline and Caroline are actors." Once again, the idea which this rule vehicles, is that man is superior to woman.

The inclusion of the female into the male, as advocated by Kirkby, paraphrased by Russel (2001), also applies to the pronominalization of dual-gender singular nominals. Indeed, as explained by John Seely (2005), English lacks a strictly neuter personal pronoun and the speaker is often confronted with the choice between "he" and "she" or "him" and "her" when he/she wants to pronominalize dual-gender singular nominal in sentences like the following ones:

- When a teacher enters a classroom, usually greets the pupils.
- Every pupil knows that will fail if doesn't learn lessons.
- When pupils meet a teacher, they usually greet.....
- When we meet a person that we know, we usually speak to
- If I ever find the person who did that, I'll punish

The same problem occurs when dealing with the agreement of third person singular possessive determiners with nouns that may refer either to man or to woman. In English, the possessive determiner agrees in gender with the noun of the possessor. If this noun is a dual-gender nominal, most speakers of English use the

masculine possessive determiner “his” on the ground that the male gender is more comprehensive than the female which may be included in it as advocated by Kirkby.

e.g. - A good teacher should love his pupils.

- According to the Bible, someone who doesn't feed his family is worse than a pagan.

Although the use of ‘he’ or ‘his’ is unconscious for most people, it can and does have unseen effects. As Shirley Russel (2001) points out, it succeeds in “making women invisible in various important areas of life and in brainwashing younger generations who learn English into believing that man is the more important and superior sex.”

LEXIS

Lexis is defined by P.H. Matthews (2007) as the vocabulary of a language and the study of vocabulary” and by Chalker and Weiner (1998) as the “stock of words in a language, the level of language consisting of vocabulary.” So it refers to all the vocabulary of a language or its study and it includes stem/root words and derivational words.

As Rom Simpson (2001) acknowledges, the sense of masculine superiority is present in vocabulary. Concerning nouns of professions, for instance, Shirley Russel (2001) points out that “women are not often given the same gender-free titles as their male counterparts.” That is the case of words like lawyer, solicitor, doctor which are often prefaced by “lady” or “woman” to refer to female persons who enter those professions. E.g. A woman doctor or a lady doctor.

Women are also not given titles such as ‘waiter’, ‘manager’, ‘steward’, or major; the diminutive suffix ‘-ette’ or ‘-esse’ is added and so we have words like ‘waitress’, ‘manageress’, ‘stewardess’, ‘majorette’ to refer to female persons who would occupy those positions. The idea which these language features vehicle, Russel (2001) says, is that women “are not the real things in not being male.” In other words, they seem to imply that men are the owners of those professions, women occupy them by default.

In the Gender and Language section of their document called Language and Equality, the UK Society of Personnel Officers in Government Services (SOCPO) showed the risk inherent to the use of such a discriminatory vocabulary. They argued:

The central issue here is the predominance of forms and terms which exclude and denigrate women. It is now accepted as sound business practice that the talents and abilities of women are fully utilised at all levels in the work place. To be able to do this effectively, an organisation must promote positive images of women both internally and externally, which is very difficult if women are excluded by the language an organisation uses.

Another feature of the English lexis that reflects gender-bias in favour of men is syntagmatic relations. Julia Stanley, paraphrased by Shirley Russel (2001) made an inventory of descriptive words in the English language. Shirley Russel (2001) reports as follows what was observed from that inventory:

There are more words available to describe men than women, but also more of these words show men in a favourable light. In the large vocabulary of words used to describe men, only twenty-six words implying sexual promiscuity were found and of these many – such as stallion and stud – were felt to be complimentary.... In the much smaller list of words used to describe women, by contrast, 220 terms signaling sexual promiscuity were found. All were of a degrading nature. Surprisingly, words that describe the same sexual behavior are considered as insults when applied to women, but complimentary if applied to men.

Sue Lee (paraphrased by Shirley Russel 2001) illustrates that gender-bias with the words ‘slag’ and ‘stud’. She explains:

The word ‘slag’ is used not necessarily of girls who actually sleep with boys they love before marriage, but of girls who want to make the running in sexual relationships; who actively pursue boys and show interest in them; who treat boys, in fact, as boys treat girls. The male equivalent of ‘slag’ is ‘stud’. Yet, while ‘slag’ is a word of insult, the term ‘stud’ confers prestige.

Dictionary definitions of the two words confirm that biased judgement. Macmillan English Dictionary, (2002), for instance, defines ‘stud’ as “a sexually attractive man”, but ‘slag’ as “an insulting word for a woman whose sexual behavior is considered to be immoral.” From such examples, Sue Lee (paraphrased by Shirley Russel 2001) concludes that the language men use to discuss sexuality is biased heavily in their favour; a woman is damned if she shows much interest in sex and also damned if she does not show enough interest in it.

Another problem associated with gender-bias in lexis is that some words will be associated with sexual promiscuity when applied to women, but not if applied to men. An utterance like ‘she’s a professional’ is likely to be pejorative while ‘he’s a professional’ is not! That the English language is biased in favour of men is confirmed even by the connotative use of the words ‘man’ and ‘woman’ themselves. Calling a man a woman is humiliating him, but calling a woman a man is often praising her! An utterance like ‘When faced with a problem,

Peter is a woman' would be humiliating for Peter; but one like 'Faced with a problem, Mary behaves like a man' would honour Mary.

Titles in business correspondence salutations

Letter writers have to face the gender problem in formulating salutations for their business letters. As Rom Simpson (2001) points out, "traditionally the policy in business letter-writing is to use "Dear Sir" where we are uncertain of the addressee's gender, especially if the addressee is highly positioned in the firm." For instance, where the addressee is the Managing Director, the Sales Manager or the Production Manager, the writer is likely to use the salutation "Dear Sir" if he/she does not know their gender. This tendency may be founded on the following 2 possible reasons:

- The assumption that such high positions in business firms are likely to be occupied by men and not women,
- The assumption that the lexeme "man" refers both to the human species and to the male of that species, and so the female is included in and absorbed by the male.

Both assumptions vehicle the same idea: masculine superiority and they may contribute either to making women invisible or to excluding them from business high sphere positions.

Titles denoting marital status

Names used with English titles that denote marital status also contribute to rendering women invisible. Mrs. is followed by the woman's husband's name and Miss by the father's name. This practice of giving up their own names and taking up their husbands' or fathers' names, Russel (2001) says, "robs women of their public identity;" their identity is absorbed by that of their husbands or their fathers. That this is a bias in favour of men has been openly expressed by Dale Spender (1980) in her book *Man Made Language* in which she points out that the "the only real names belong to men, since these are handed down from father to son." Even Robin Morgan (1977:106) evoked this prejudicial practice saying: "The very semantics of the language reflect women's conditions. We do not even have our own names, but bear that of the father until we exchange it for that of the husband."

From what precedes, we can conclude that, in many of its features, the English language is highly biased in favour of the male gender. Speculating about the origin of this gender-bias, Spender (1980:142-143) rejects the idea of a 'mere accident' result and states: "I would reiterate that it has been the dominant group – in this case, males – who have ... constructed sexism and its justification and developed a language trap which is in their interest."

Grammarians' and Linguists' attempts to fight the linguistic gender-bias in the English language

Attempts of solutions to the linguistic gender-bias in the English language have been envisaged. A number of grammarians, for instance, have advocated the use of he / she, him/her, his / her when faced with pronominalization of dual-gender nouns.

e.g. When a teacher enters the classroom, **he/she** greets the students.
When a teacher enters the classroom, students greet **him/her**.
A teacher is recommended to know all **his/her** pupils' names.

Also the use of "they", "them" and "their" with gender-free singular nouns and indefinite words like someone, anyone, etc. has been recommended by some grammarians to escape gender-bias (Swan 2005).

e.g. If anyone gets in, tell **them** I'm out.
When someone gets married, **they** have to start thinking about **their** new responsibilities.

In lexis, alternative linguistic items have been adopted to replace gender-marked ones and to refer inclusively to both women and men. Examples of these are:

Alternative item	lexical items to be replaced
Spokesperson	spokeswomen/spokesman
Flight attendant	hostess/host
Doctor	lady doctor
Manager	manageress
Chairperson	chairwoman/chairman
Fire fighter	fireman/firewoman

Etc.

With regard to the titles denoting marital status, Ms. is now recommended as a title for all women, married or not. In business correspondence, the use of ‘Dear Sir/Madam’ as a salutation is proposed to avoid the sexist salutation ‘Dear Sir’ when referring to a firm official whose gender is unknown to the letter writer.

Linguists and social scientists acknowledge people’s resistance to adopt the changes. As they explain, people find the new lexical items awkward to use. About this, Jane Sunderland (2006:60) reassures: “Not everyone has the will to make the change and the removal of awkwardness may only be achieved when ‘traditional titles’ – and other lexical items – are out of circulation altogether.... Once the change is made, the new terms will become accepted as natural and stop seeming awkward to remember.”

III. Evaluation of the success of Linguists’ fight among Goma secondary school teachers of English and TTC students.

Collection of data

To assess the efficiency of linguists’ attempts among Congolese speakers of English in Goma town, we administered a test to 60 teachers of English at secondary school and 40 students in the 3rd year of the first cycle at Goma and Machumbi TTCs (Teacher Training Colleges).

The choice of these two groups of speakers of English was motivated by the fact that, as teachers and prospective teachers of English, they should be the best informed about the gender-bias issue. In the test, they were asked to fill-in the following sentences with appropriate personal pronouns or possessive determiners:

1. When a teacher enters the classroom, usually greets the pupils.
2. Pupils usually greet their teacher when they meet
3. If a student doesn’t learn lessons, will fail the exams.
4. Any person who wishes to travel by plane must make sure that buys air ticket in time.
5. When someone marries, must start thinking about new responsibilities.
6. If anybody wishes to see me, tell that must wait until I finish my work.

Presentation of data

The testees’ responses to the test items were as follows:

Table n°1: Testees’ responses to the test items

Responses	FREQUENCY														
	Male Testees					Female testees					Total				
	NB	BM	BF	Tot.	%	NB	BM	BF	Tot.	%	NB	BM	BF	Tot.	%
1.He	-	60	-	60	81.1	-	22	-	22	84.6	-	82	-	82	82
She	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
He/she	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12
They	4	-	-	4	5.4	2	-	-	2	7.7	6	-	-	6	6
2.Him	-	44	-	44	59.5	-	24	-	24	92.5	-	68	-	68	68
Her	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
Him/her	20	-	-	20	27	0	-	-	0	0	20	-	-	20	20
Them	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12
3.a) His	-	52	-	52	70.3	-	22	-	22	84.6	-	74	-	74	74
Her	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
His/her	14	-	-	14	18.9	2	-	-	2	7.7	16	-	-	16	16
Their	8	-	-	8	10.8	2	-	-	2	7.7	10	-	-	10	10
b) He	-	50	-	50	67.6	-	22	-	22	84.6	-	72	-	72	72
She	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
He/she	16	-	-	16	21.6	2	-	-	2	7.7	18	-	-	18	18
They	8	-	-	8	10.8	2	-	-	2	7.7	10	-	-	10	10
4.a) He	-	56	-	56	75.7	-	18	-	18	69.2	-	74	-	74	74
She	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
He/she	14	-	-	14	18.9	8	-	-	8	30.8	22	-	-	22	22
They	4	-	-	4	5.4	0	-	-	0	0	4	-	-	4	4
b) His	-	52	-	52	70.3	-	18	-	18	69.2	-	70	-	70	70
Her	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
His/her	14	-	-	14	18.9	8	-	-	8	30.8	22	-	-	22	22
Their	8	-	-	8	10.8	0	-	-	0	0	8	-	-	8	8
5.a) he	-	46	-	46	62.2	-	16	-	16	61.5	-	62	-	62	62
She	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
He/she	18	-	-	18	24.3	8	-	-	8	30.8	26	-	-	26	26
They	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12

b) His	-	46	-	46	62.2	-	16	-	16	61.5	-	62	-	62	62
Her	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
His/her	18	-	-	18	24.3	8	-	-	8	30.8	26	-	-	26	26
Their	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12
6.a) Him	-	48	-	48	64.9	-	16	-	16	61.5	-	64	-	64	64
Her	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
Him/her	16	-	-	16	21.6	8	-	-	8	30.8	24	-	-	24	24
Them	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12
b) He	-	48	-	48	64.9	-	16	-	16	61.5	-	64	-	64	64
She	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0	-	-	0	0	0
He/she	16	-	-	16	21.6	8	-	-	8	30.8	24	-	-	24	24
They	10	-	-	10	13.5	2	-	-	2	7.7	12	-	-	12	12
TOTAL	238	502	0	740	-	70	190	0	260	-	308	692	0	1000	-
%	32.2	67.8	0	100	-	26.9	73.1	0	100	-	30	69.2	0	100	-

Source: Fieldwork data, 2023

Explanation of symbols:

NB= Non-biased

BM= Biased in favour of Male gender

BF= Biased in favour of Female gender

Tot. = Total

Analysis and interpretation of data

It appears from this table that, where either the masculine or the feminine is applicable, most teachers and prospective teachers of English in Goma use the masculine. For each of the 10 test items, the majority of responses – between 62 and 82 per cent – are gender-biased in favour of the masculine gender. The total percentage of gender-biased responses is 69.2%. Only 30.8% of the responses are not gender-biased.

For each of the test items, the preferred non-biased form is ‘he/she’ for subjective pronouns, ‘him/her’ for objective pronouns, and ‘his/her’ for possessive determiners. Out of the 308 non-biased responses, 210 i.e. 68.2 % are of that type. Few teachers and prospective teachers use the plural ‘they’ and ‘them’ or the plural possessive determiner ‘their’ to refer to singular nouns or indefinite pronouns.

Gender-bias in the use of third person singular pronouns or possessives with dual-gender nouns or expressions is observed, both among men and women. 67.8 per cent of men’s responses and 73.1 per cent of women’s are gender-biased in favour of men. None of the responses is gender-biased in favour of women! Both men and women seem to accept that the masculine pronoun or possessive determiner can represent both the male and the female genders where either is applicable, but the feminine pronoun or determiner cannot.

After the testees had handed in their test copies, we asked them some clarification questions. To the question whether nouns like pupil, teacher, student, person and pronouns like someone, anyone only referred to men, all the test-takers – even those who had given gender-biased responses- acknowledged that they were dual-gender and could, therefore, refer either to men or to women.

To the question why they used masculine pronouns or possessive determiners while they knew that the nouns could refer either to the male or to the female gender, those who had given gender-biased responses answered that, for gender-free nouns, masculine pronouns were the best indicated and more natural choice because the word ‘man’ can represent the human species. Even those who had given non-biased responses recognized that they were able to use ‘he/she’, ‘his/her’, ‘him/her’ because the test was written and so they had time to pause and think; in speech, they confessed, they always use the masculine pronoun or possessive where either gender is applicable.

Concerning the use of the plural pronouns ‘they’, ‘them’ or the possessive ‘their’ with singular dual-gender nouns or indefinite pronouns, most of the test-takers said that it sounded ungrammatical.

About the use of the word ‘man’ to refer to the human species, all the test-takers said nothing was wrong with it. Also the use of the salutation ‘Dear Sir’, in business correspondence where the gender of the addressee is unknown to the letter writer, seemed normal and logical to all of them.

The fact that most of the testees used masculine pronouns and possessive determiners with gender-free nouns in the test although it was a written one, their unconscious choice of masculine pronouns and possessives where both the masculine and the feminine are applicable, their feeling that the use of masculine pronouns and possessive is normal, logical and natural in such contexts, are strong indications that the linguistic gender-bias in favour of men is deep-rooted in their minds. Grammarians’ and linguists’ attempts to fight sexism in the English language have not been successful among teachers and prospective teachers of English in Goma so far. Whether the situation is different among other non-native speakers of English in the town is questionable. Indeed, if the teachers’ English is already gender-biased, how could we expect the other speakers to do otherwise?

IV. SUGGESTIONS

In order to fight gender-bias in the English language successfully in Goma town, some steps need to be undertaken:

First, teachers of grammar in Goma, Machumbi and Nyiragongo TTCs need to insist more on the gender issue and on the solutions proposed by grammarians and linguists. If prospective teachers of English are sufficiently informed about the issue and get sensitive to it, they may hand down their linguistic attitudes to their pupils progressively.

Secondly, seminars about the gender issue in language need to be organized in favour of those who are already teachers of English at secondary school and in English language centres in Goma town. Such seminars could be organized jointly by TTCs, inspectors and the provincial Division of “social affairs, gender and family”. In those seminars, teachers would be sensitized not only about the use of non-biased third person singular pronouns, but also about using non-biased salutations in business correspondence.

If these two steps are undertaken, gender-bias in the English language may progressively disappear in Goma town. Surely, the use of masculine/feminine alternatives – he/she, him/her, his/her – is found by many teachers and prospective teachers to be clumsy and boring, especially in speech; but if they get used to hearing it and are encouraged to use it, they will finally find it natural, as advocated by Sunderland (2006: 60).

Concerning the use of “they”, “their” and “them” with singular gender-free nouns or indefinite pronouns like “someone”, “anyone”, etc., most of the testees find it ungrammatical; they consider that these forms are plural and should be used to refer to plural nouns. However, as Simpson (2001) states, although they may still sound incorrect, “they are useful because the only third person singular pronoun we have that is not specifically masculine or feminine is it/its, and that clearly will not do.” As he goes on to explain, we are perhaps “witnessing a change in the definition of “they/them/their”. After all, ‘you’ was once only a plural pronoun and slid into singular via the polite form; ‘they’ could do the same over a different question of manners.”

Dictionary writers are already at work to ratify the correctness of the proposed alternatives. Macmillan Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2012), for instance, specifies that “ ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ are also used instead of ‘he’, ‘him’ or ‘their’ ” when we refer back to words such as everyone, someone, or anyone. What our test-takers need to be reminded of is the fact that language is conventional and dynamic: although ‘they’, ‘them’ and ‘their’ have been considered to be plural, they can shift to the singular if the social situation requires such a change.

V. CONCLUSION

Our assumption, when undertaking this study, was that the persistent man’s tendency to consider himself superior to woman could have linguistic roots. In other terms, we assumed that there was an inbuilt linguistic bias for men and against women in the English language and that this gender-bias could be deep-rooted in the minds of Congolese speakers on English in Goma so as to make the grammarians’ and linguists’ attempts to fight it unsuccessful.

An exploration of the English language and of available gender-related literature confirmed the existence of an inbuilt linguistic gender-bias in the English grammar, lexis and other usages such as correspondence and marital status-related titles. A test administered to a sample of teachers and prospective teachers of English in Goma confirmed that this gender-bias was deep-rooted in their minds.

Among the solutions to this situation, we have proposed that teachers of grammar in TTCs insist more on the gender issue in language and that seminars be organized in favour of teachers of English in the town. If such steps are undertaken, the gender-bias in the English language can progressively disappear in Goma town.

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