GENDER DIVIDE
THE LONG ROAD TO TOLERANCE

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This presentation will explore tolerance towards gender issues and the importance of various attitudes for the non-native English language professional. It is not the purpose of this presentation to offer answers, only to raise questions.

Development is a natural process that aims at the increased well-being of people in a way that can be **sustainable** for future generations. It involves improvements in the **material conditions of life**, as well as in the choices and opportunities available to people **to fulfill their own potential**, both as individuals and as members of various groups – including states and their governments. "**Gender equality**" means particularly that women and men should be able to exercise their rights regardless of whether they were born male or female. This does **not** mean that women become the same as men. Rather, men and women may arrive at equal results from different starting points, using different paths.

The above assertions are politically correct but how is our individual potential fulfilled in real life? How is gender equality really operating at a macro and/or micro social level? Or do we face an ever-increasing, though obviously better hidden, gender divide? How **tolerant** are we towards our fellow human being? As individuals and as society?

Tolerance is a cultural concept and the very definition of the term in various languages may look at a different angle. The Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture gives the following definition: *willingness to accept or allow behaviour, beliefs, customs, etc., which **one does not like or agree with**, without opposition* [1]. The Explanatory Dictionary of the Romanian Language (DEX) lists several meanings, out of which only the first one is relevant to our discussion: *faptul de a tolera; îngăduință, indulgență.* If we look up the verb *a tolera* we come across the following entry: *a îngădui, a permite o situație, un fapt (nepermis); a trece cu vederea* [1]. The focus is on forbidden and if we further cross reference with *îngăduință, indulgență* the stress falls on mistake. It is not the aim of the present paper to discuss the above difference, but only to underline that we operate with a term that has various values for various users.

People are fascinated by discussions about gender gap, sex differences, gender stereotypes, etc. From serious research to the pages of tabloids we can put together impressive lists of references on the subject in the western world, and since the '90s in an increasing trend in Romania as well. International agreements stipulate equality between men and women in numerous documents among the best known being the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) endorsed by all members of the UN. But are men and women really treated as equal? Do we treat equally our sons and daughters? [2] Are we equally treated at our workplace or do we want to be? How tolerant are we towards the other sex? How tolerant are we towards the way another culture treats gender roles? How ready are we to accept or allow the Romanian traditional treatment of women in small rural communities or the muslim way of addressing gender roles in society? What is the tolerance pattern towards gender in the Romanian business community?

Let us briefly look at the concepts of gender and sex as they are used nowadays by most researchers of these issues.

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GENDER δσ

> ➢ a cultural concept – people are given genders, they are distributed social sex roles ⇨ *gender roles*
> ➢ a relative concept ⇨ social roles are only *partly* determined by biological constraints
> ➢ an individual concept ⇨ each individual may have his or her own sense of femininity or masculinity which may differ from the popular notion

MEN μ

- ✓ more concerned with achievements outside the home
- ✓ (either hunting and fighting, or going out to work in a modern society)
- ✓ assertive
- ✓ competitive
- ✓ tough

SEX σδ

> ➢ given by our biology
> ➢ it is an absolute category
> ➢ determines features of our anatomy, physiology & neurology
> ➢ physical differences not directly related to the bearing and begetting of children are *statistical*, not absolute [3].
> ➢ may shape our behaviour, cognitive & affective characteristics

WOMEN V

- ✓ taking care of the home, children and people in general
- ✓ tender
- ✓ concern for relationships and environment

Clearly the behaviour of men and women all over the world is shaped by the gender roles they are expected to play. To what extent are the sex differences – the biology of which are a simple fact of life established by research and statistics – the product of socially constructed gender roles? Lately researchers ask themselves if it is possible that the male strengths in mathematical problem solving and spatial skills are socially constructed? Is the same true about the interpersonal sensitivity of women? The same researchers, however, admit that as human beings, men and women are more alike than different in many "invisible ways". The above discussion gives an answer to the insistence with which tabloids deal with sex differences: *differences make news, similarities do not.*

The United Nations Development Programme publishes an annual report with a **Human Development Index** trying to indicate progress towards internationally agreed goals across countries. In 1995 UNDP added a **Gender and Development Index** which tries to assess the extent of gender equality and a **Gender Empowerment Index** to consider where women stand in decision-making. The conclusion is, predictably, that there is a *gender gap* everywhere in the world, even in places where it has eroded in the last decades.

Where does all this leave the Romanian English language specialist? How do we deal with the changes in English language that reflect the gender issues? How do we explain sexist language to our Romanian students who – in smaller percentage than at the beginning of the '90s, true – consider that this is "an affluent world" issue, not one to be addressed by a socially and economically disadvantaged Romanian society?

Sexism in language

Sexism started in the 1960s to be a system of beliefs and practices which affirm the dominance of men over women. Later on it came to mean general discrimination against one sex, treating people unfairly on account of their sex. Most European languages have been affected, to various degrees, but none so much as English probably because of the influence of the feminist movement in the United States.

Various areas of language have been affected. Gender is a salient distinction in English. Vocabulary is a field in which new words appear to replace the generic masculine which is normative: *chairman* becomes *chairperson, chair* or *chairwoman*. Obviously this has given rise to a lot of controversy including statements such as *"I don't want to be considered a piece of furniture!"* Where pairs exist the feminine term is morphologically marked: *manager/manageress* and thus marked as exceptional or deviant, while the masculine is generic. There are two exceptions: *nurse*

and *prostitute*. There are even instances where the use of sexually neutral language has become a legal requirement such as job descriptions. The preferred title for women in business is Ms., unless the individual requires to be addressed as Miss or Mrs. or has some other title, such as Dr.

In grammar it is not only the lack of a sex-neutral third person singular pronoun in English that creates problems. There are differing adjectives as well: *pretty/handsome*. Or, if the form is identical, the meaning can acquire an extra value according to the way society looked upon gender roles: *an honest man / an honest woman* (+chaste).

Many organizations, including publishing companies, now issue guidelines recommending ways to avoid use of sexist language. Business communication courses devote a special attention to non-discriminatory language coming up with solutions to avoid bias.

Gender neutral language:

Man ⇨ humanity, humankind
man ⇨ person: spokesperson
man-made ⇨ artificial, synthetic, manufactured
man-to-man ⇨ person-to-person, personally
prehistoric man ⇨ prehistoric people
manned by ⇨ staffed by
manpower ⇨ work force, staff
fireman ⇨ firefighter
businessman ⇨ business executive, businessperson, business manager
cameraman ⇨ camera operator
chairman ⇨ chairperson, chair
foreman ⇨ supervisor
policeman ⇨ police officer
statesman ⇨ leader, politician

The use of singular *they* is recommended by some authors such as in:
any student wishing to consult his tutor ⇨ *any student wishing to consult their tutor*
but is criticised by others who think that a plural word should not refer back to a singular one. Other possibilities are to use *he/she* or *she/he* or even *(s)he*. But the problem of *her*, *his* or *him* is still not solved.

In letter writing the use of *Dear Sir/s* as the salutation for an unknown person or group has become more and more unacceptable. The recommended form is *Dear Sir or Madam. Dear Jane/Joe Smith* is more common than *Dear Ms/Mrs/Miss/Mr Smith*.

Certain roles should not always be identified with a specific gender. It is preferable to use *nurses/teachers ....they* than *the nurse/teacher....she*. If categories of people are discussed, such as bosses and office workers, it is recommended to avoid referring to the boss as *he* and the office worker as *she*. It is advisable to reword the whole sentence in order to use *they* or no pronoun at all. Moreover, in today's business world, it could be appropriate to sometimes use *she* when referring to a boss and *he* when referring to an office worker.

In writing, whether for business or academic, the use of parallel forms of reference for women and men is recommended: do not cite a male scholar by surname only and a female scholar by first name plus surname.

Conclusion

Gender-neutral language represents an advance towards tolerance in some areas of language use, but does not challenge the underlying conventions which makes masculine gender the norm. It is impossible to predict how long it takes for spoken language to respond to fresh social pressures so that a new usage becomes automatic throughout a community.

NOTES

[1] the highlights belong to the author.
[2] We use gender roles and act according to cultural stereotypes from the very moment babies are born. Children learn from early on the difference between how the two sexes are expected to act in the community's acceptance: *What are little boys made of?/Frogs and snails and puppy dogs' tails..... / What are little girls made of?/ Sugar and spice and all that's nice.*
[3] Statistics are not debatable, but when the psychological differences beween the sexes are attributed to innate factors such as sex hormones, brain anatomy, etc. and are used to take policy decisions in career development (political, military promotion) or hot social issues (child custody) then the political heat and the passions that arise on both sides of the gender divide raise questions towards the degrees of tolerance shown by individuals and/or society.

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