

# FEMONICS – GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL HISTORY TEXTS

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## **Abstract**

*This lecture deals with gender and language in school texts; how it manifested, with what consequences and how it can be addressed. A qualitative intrinsic case study of a sample of school History texts from three textbooks published post-2004 was conducted to determine the extent of the use of gender-inclusive/exclusive language in the texts. The micro-level critical discourse analysis of the linguistic elements and texture of the texts revealed that on the 258 pages analysed, 642 occurrences of gendered language were found. All three selected texts contained occurrences of gender-exclusive language. The generic he and man were less of a problem than gender stereotyping, firstness and omission. Although the raw numbers revealed that the overall instances of gender-exclusive language in the linguistic elements were few, gender-exclusive language persisted in the texture of the texts. The solution seems to be critical literacy. Teachers are encouraged to discuss with learners why gender-exclusive language may occur in these texts and what could be done to eliminate gendered language. The procedure of this single case study could be repeated in multiple case studies of the other school subjects.*

**Keywords:** *critical literacy, gender-inclusive and -exclusive language, History, school texts, South Africa*

## **Introduction**

Since the middle of the 1970s, the relationship between gender and language had been a major focus within the women's movement; and it soon became clear that language was one of the sources of discrimination against women. It was argued that changes to the language system and its use would contribute to the achievement of equal rights (Leue, 2002). The Whorfian assumption behind this was that a change in language would yield changes in thinking, and in turn changes in society (Carroll, 1956). Feminist language critique has been for mostly aimed at the use of sexist language in the media and educational textbooks (Leue, 2002). With special reference to History as a school subject, Bam and Visser (2003), Chisholm (2003) and Fardon (2007) indicated that textbooks are an important part of the curriculum, and given that learners are frequently required to assimilate the materials of their textbooks in detail, they have the potential to influence the development of learners' gender attitudes at an impressionable age. If based on gendered material, it may well contribute to the development of sexist attitudes at a sub-conscious level.

## **Background to the problem**

The problem of this study centers on the issue of gender and language in South African school History textbooks published post-2004 (a decade since the introduction of the notion of inclusivity in education policy), and its effect on learners' gender identities (Department of Education, 2002; Department of Education, 2009). Fardon and Schoeman (2010) and Schoeman (2009) have examined what was emphasised about women in South African school History

textbooks, and how language was used to position women in history. Their results confirmed that although blatant examples of sexism had been removed from textbooks and more information on women had been added, men still dominated the narrative, and textbook language still functioned to position historical women in stereotypical ways. During school visits (2010) for assessment of student teachers' lesson presentations, 20 senior phase and FET Social Sciences and History teachers in five focus group interviews, indicated that the elimination of gender-bias in History textbooks is still a major problem. As one teacher puts it " ... (D)istricts do not have the financial resources to order special texts from publishers; they simply have to choose what appears to be the most gender equitable text in print." According to the teachers, what is typically purchased for use is filled with numerous examples of covert bias and symbolic or stereotypical representations of males and females. According to Fardon (2007), when learners read and work from gendered materials, certain social values and attitudes are transmitted. Learners can quickly learn to believe misrepresentations of what it means to be masculine and feminine in South African society. According to Braslavsky (2006) given textbooks' powerful role in schooling, it is critical to identify in textbooks those aspects hindering gender equality. Nielsen (2008, p. 55) warns that "(t)eachers and other professionals must be alert to the possible sexist implications of the content as well as the language of educational materials".

The following three research questions were formulated: (a) Is gender-inclusive language given enough attention in South African school History textbooks published post-2004? (b) What problems related to gender-exclusive language are prevalent in these texts? and (c) Which classroom strategies could be implemented to identify gender-exclusive language in school History texts, and promote the use of gender-inclusive language?

Given these questions, the study reported on here, explores the extent of gender-inclusive/exclusive language in South African school History texts. The purpose of the lecture is to highlight the areas in South African school History texts where a sense of hierarchy is still found in the use of language to place one group of people above others, creating or perpetuating negative social stereotypes. In keeping with the notion of inclusivity in the national policy documents, some classroom strategies to promote gender-inclusive language will be provided.

## **Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework of this study is critical discourse analysis. Language embodies an interpretation of reality and language can influence thought about that reality. The interpretation arises from the selection of substantive aspects of experience and their formal arrangements in the verbal code. Selection of substantive aspects of experience implies that language is not natural, neutral or static. It is subject to human manipulations in order to reflect those aspects of experience that users wish to express (Hayes, 2000). According to Butler (1999), in many societies, the patriarchal order has selected those aspects of experience that sustains it. This interpretation of reality from a male's point of view has resulted in a sexist society, and language, as one of its institutions, has come to reflect that gender bias.

Penfield (1987) argues that language plays a critical role in the struggle for gender equity and deserves careful examination. Consequently, various language analysis approaches have been developed to identify gender-exclusive language. Critical discourse analysis is one such an approach which considers texts as part of specific social practices that have political implications about issues of status, solidarity and distribution of social goods and power (Gee, 2004). Weiss and Wodak (2003) affirm that there are many ways of conducting a critical discourse analysis, but the unifying perspective is to centre the analysis both on the choices of linguistic elements in

discourse, and on the texture of the text. This perspective is considered to be a useful analytical tool for research on gender discourses.

## **Methodology**

A qualitative intrinsic case study was conducted to determine whether attention has been given to gender-inclusive language in school History texts published since 2004.

### *Sampling*

The non-probability sampling technique was used to identify the textbooks and text samples from the population. To compile the sampling frame a Google search of the catalogues of major publishers was conducted to obtain the particulars of Grades 10, 11 and 12 South African school History textbooks published post-2004. The purposive sampling technique was used to arrive at a representative sample. It was decided to investigate texts from three textbooks that could be used throughout the country, namely E.A. Horner, L. Hattingh, D. van Schalkwyk and B. Sello's *Viva History. Grade 10. Learner's book* published by Vivlia in 2005; E. Brink, K. Gibbs, A. Grundlingh, M. Thotse and J. Verner's *History for all. Grade 11. Learner's book* published by Macmillan in 2006; and J. Bottaro, P. Visser and N. Worden's *In search of History. Grade 12. Learner's book* published by Oxford University Press in 2010. Systematic sampling was used to select the sample texts which appeared on pages 83 to 135, 62 to 135 and 67 to 204 of the three textbooks respectively.

### *Document study*

The sample of school History texts were analysed for possible instances of gender-inclusive/exclusive language using one-rater (linguistic) analysis. The one-rater analysis of the texts follows the views of Beason (2001), who has indicated that multiple raters (content, structure, message, etc.) should be avoided in the study of school textbooks, due to the largely quantitative nature of the analysis. The unifying perspective pertaining to critical discourse analysis (choice of linguistic elements and text texture) was used for the document study. Consequently, the gender-inclusive/exclusive language in the sample texts was identified using four categories (pseudo-generic he; pseudo-generic man; titles, labels and names; and gender stereotypes) derived from the NCTE's (2002) guidelines for gender-fair language, and two categories (order-of-mention and male-to-female) from Porecca's (1984) studies of linguistic sexism in the syntactical construction of textbooks. Table 1 provides the definitions of the six categories.

**Table 1: Categories for analysing the gender and language in the texts**

Generic he	The male singular pronoun used as the default pronoun to represent both genders.
Generic man	The use of the noun man in terms to represent both genders.
Titles, labels, names	The use of linguistically feminised words and titles.
Gender stereotypes	Gender representations of career, behaviour, role, physical attributes, attitudes, etc. that promote stereotypes.
Order-of-mention (Firstness)	Word pairs of opposite genders; where the number of male terms are listed first, in a list of male and female terms compared with the number of times the female terms come first.
Male-to-female (Omission)	The number of male terms that appear in the text as compared to the number of female terms.

A quantitative data count was performed on the six categories used for the text analysis. The occurrences of the first four categories were presented as raw numbers; and the last two categories as ratios rounded up or down to the nearest whole number. Not all of the sentences included gendered language, and some sentences contained more than one occurrence of gender-exclusive language. The discussion of the gender-exclusive language in the textbooks should be contextualized within the number of pages analysed. This study does not assume objectivity, and was performed on small scale. The sample resembles the population in as many ways as possible; hence, the sampling error of biased selection and the sampling bias of under-representation were reduced. The use of the male-to-female order-of-mention ratio as opposed to female-to-male ratio was retained in this study, even though its terminology is an example of male firstness.

## Results

The results of the analysis of the gender and language in the three selected texts are set out in the following tables.

**Table 2: Instances of gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 10 History textbook *Viva History*: linguistic elements and texture of the text**

Categories	Generic he	Generic man	Titles, labels, names	Gender stereotypes	Order-of-mention M 1 <sup>st</sup> : F 1 <sup>st</sup>	Male-to-female	No of analysed pages
Occurrences	2	4	7	45	3:1	117:39 ≈ 3:1	52 25% of the textbook

Table 2 summarises the data count of the gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 10 school History textbook *Viva History* with regard to the linguistic elements and the texture of the text. The number of pages analysed in the textbook *Viva History* was 52. Besides the ≈ 3:1 male-to-female ratio, there were only a few occurrences of gender-exclusive

linguistic elements in the text. The data count revealed 2 instances of the generic he, 4 instances of the generic use of man and 7 instances of linguistically feminised titles, labels and names. The ratio for the number of times male terms were listed first, compared to the number of times female terms came first was 3:1. The analysis of the texture of the text revealed 45 instances of gender representation that promotes stereotypes. The  $\approx 3:1$  male-to-female ratio indicates that male terms occurred three times more often than female terms, and that the gender bias of female invisibility was prevalent in this text.

**Table 3: Instances of gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 11 History textbook *History for all*: linguistic elements and texture of the text**

Categories	Generic he	Generic man	Titles, labels, names	Gender stereotypes	Order-of-mention M 1 <sup>st</sup> : F 1 <sup>st</sup>	Male-to-female	No of analysed pages
Occurrences	0	4	6	37	4:0	86:10 $\approx 8:1$	70 25% of the textbook

Table 3 summarises the data count of the gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 11 school History textbook *History for all* with regard to the linguistic elements and the texture of the text. In the textbook *History for all* the number of pages analysed was 70. Despite the greater than  $\approx 8:1$  male-to-female ratio, only a few occurrences of gender-exclusive linguistic elements occurred in the text. In the data count there was no instance of the generic he, 4 instances of the generic man and 6 instances of linguistically feminised titles, labels and names. When gender appeared in syntactical pairs in the text, the male terms always appeared first at a ratio of 4:0. The analysis of the texture of the text revealed 37 instances of gender stereotypes. The greater than  $\approx 8:1$  ratio of male-to-female occurrences in the narrative, which demonstrated exclusion and invisibility of women in the text, resulted in an unbalanced proportion of female and male references

**Table 4: Instances of gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 12 History textbook *In search of History*: linguistic elements and texture of the text**

Categories	Generic he	Generic man	Titles, labels, names	Gender stereotypes	Order-of-mention M 1 <sup>st</sup> : F 1 <sup>st</sup>	Male-to-female	No of analysed pages
Occurrences	1	17	12	55	4:2	122:55 $\approx 2:1$	136 25% of the textbook

Table 4 summarises the data count relating to the gender-exclusive language in the selected text from the Grade 12 school History textbook *In search of History* with regard to the linguistic elements and the texture of the text. A total of 136 pages in the textbook were analysed. With

regard to the indefinite pronouns in the text, an analysis revealed one instance of the generic he and 17 instances of the generic noun man. Twelve instances of linguistically feminised titles, labels and names were identified. Male terms dominated 4 to 2 over female terms in the order-of-mention category. An analysis of the texture of the text showed that gender stereotypes were reinforced in the textbook; 55 instances of gender stereotypes occurred. The male-to-female ratio in the textbook was  $\approx 2:1$ , which illustrates imbalance in the text, that there were more exclusions than inclusions of women.

## Discussion

A micro-level critical discourse analysis of the selected texts was conducted to determine the extent of the use of gender-inclusive/exclusive language in South African school History textbooks published post-2004. The analysis of the gender and language in the three selected texts yielded the following: On the 258 pages analysed, 642 instances of gendered language were identified. A total of 190 instances of gender-exclusive language belonging to the first four categories occurred.

In the first category, the pseudo-generic he, where the singular pronoun was used to present both genders, a total of 3 occurrences of gender-exclusive language were counted: *Viva History* 2 instances, in *History for all* no instance and in *In search of History* 1 instance. This low count is evidence of a general avoidance of the neutral masculine pronoun he or his as only a few occurrences were counted. To promote gender-inclusive language, the inclusion of female references alongside male ones was secured by adopting linguistic prescriptivism such as the use of paired pronoun expressions.

A survey of the second category, the pseudo-generic man, where the noun man was used to represent both genders, a total of 25 occurrences of gender-exclusive language was identified: *Viva History* 4 instances, *History for all* 4 instances and *In search of History* 17 instances. In two of the three selected texts (those from *Viva History* and *History for all*) only a few occurrences of gender-exclusive linguistic elements were identified. Gender-neutral vocabulary or symmetric phrases were used to include both females and males, such as in the gender-neutral lexical terms humanity, human beings and people. In the text from *In search of History* the neutral masculine noun man was a common manifestation. It was used four times more than in the other two textbooks.

For the third category – linguistically feminised titles, labels and names – there were a total of 25 occurrences of gender-exclusive language: 4 instances in *Viva History*, 6 instances in *History for all* and 12 instances in *In search of History*, which means that in two of the three textbooks (*Viva History* and *History for all*) only a few occurrences of this category were identified. Feminisation and neutralisation were used to promote more gender-inclusive language. Given that 25% of each of the textbooks were analysed, the text from *In search of History* contained three and two times more occurrences of feminised titles, labels and names respectively. The titles, labels and names selected to name people reflected inequitable assumptions about females and males in all three textbooks. This was exhibited in, among others, the semantics of female and male words, gender asymmetry, polar lexemes and gender marking.

In category four, there were a total of 137 occurrences of the gender representations of career, behaviour, role, physical attributes and attitudes that promote stereotypes: *Viva History* contained 45 instances, *History for all* 37 instances and *In search of History* 55 instances. The study revealed a perpetuation of traditional stereotypes of women and men in the texts. In all three of the texts, women were mainly depicted as nurses, teachers, mothers, housewives, etc.

Men were, among others, portrayed as soldiers, merchants and politicians. Women were still stereotyped as passive and timid, and associated with domesticity and women's work, although there were occasional portrayals of women as soldiers, professionals and technical workers. The focus was also on their physical attributes. Men, by contrast, were brave and actively involved in the world around them. They were admired for their accomplishments.

With regard to the order-of-mention or firstness category, the number of times male terms were listed before female ones, compared to female ones before male ones, reflected a ratio of 11:3. The frequency with which males preceded females when both were included in a single phrase and *vice versa* was: *Viva History* 3:1, 4:0 in *History for all* and 4:2 in *In search of History*. The higher frequency of male firstness in the texts reflected a perception of male supremacy.

One of the most widely manifested instances of gender-exclusive language was omission. When females do not appear as often as males, the implicit message is that women are not as important as men, or that their accomplishments are not as worthwhile to mention as men's. For the male-to-female category, the total number of male terms that appeared in the texts as compared to female terms were 325:104. Gender-exclusive language was particularly prevalent in this category with its male-to-female ratio of  $\approx 3:1$ . Male terms were mentioned almost three times more often than female ones. Females were excluded from the interaction and their opinions omitted.

25% of the content of each of the textbooks was analysed, and the text with the most gender-inclusive language was that from *History for all*, with 147 occurrences of gendered language. The text with the second-most gender-inclusive language was that from *Viva History*, with 218 occurrences of gendered language. The text with the least gender-inclusive language was that from *In search of History*, with 266 occurrences of gendered language.

## Conclusions and implications

Although the textbooks published since 2004 contained gendered language, the notion of gender-inclusivity as set out in the national policy documents has been accepted and applied to some extent. Inclusionary alternatives to specific exclusionary wording are used, which reduces the prevalence of gender-exclusive language in the texts. The publishers have not been able to rid the textbooks entirely of the use of gender-exclusive language – firstness, omission and traditional stereotyping prevailed. In view of the widespread importance attached to textbooks in classrooms, these textbooks will have a gender-biased impact on the learners who use them, and become a tool for the transmission of gendered values.

Teachers need to ask themselves: How does what I teach induce learners to think critically about the topic of gender equality? There are numerous prescriptions on what teachers can or should do when they encounter gender bias. Hartman and Judd (1978, p. 383) urges teachers to attempt “through their use of existing material, to mitigate the harm it can cause: for example, by discussing the roles that are portrayed, rather than encouraging acceptance without comment”. Zografou (2000, p. 20) encourages teachers “to use sexist materials to question the outdated assumptions, and thus counteract the message of negative sex stereotypes. Through class discussion, together the teacher and the students can analyse the content of the textbook and challenge the standard sexual myths”.

Behrman (2006) suggests a pedagogy that includes critical literacy. Behrman (2006) identified reading from a resistant perspective as one of the most commonly used classroom strategies that supports critical literacy. He argues that this type of reading would be particularly

effective and beneficial in History and Social Sciences, because it would offer learners multiple perspectives of the same event. Behrman (2006) suggests that the resistant-perspective approach involves learners in the interpretation of a text from the viewpoints of people from different backgrounds (i.e. racial, cultural, gender, religious, socio-economic, sexual orientation). By considering how a particular group would be affected by the reading of a text, the learners can gain a better understanding of the standpoints of marginalised groups and analyse the power relations and social inequities promoted by the text. By providing the stories of people whose voices typically are not heard, teachers offer learners the opportunity to participate in dialogue about why certain perspectives are normally privileged, while others are silenced. Learners can also read the text using functional grammar (dialectical) or by critiquing the word choice of an author. Reading from a resistant perspective also confronts certain stereotypes promoted by a text and deconstructs the meaning or value being privileged.

According to Henley's (1987) model of sexism in language, the textbooks published since 2004 fall within a transitional stage; and to reach the next (final) stage a major awareness-raising campaign is needed. To this end, it is recommended that this study, with its focus on gender and language in school History texts, should serve as the basis for a larger discussion of the language issue in school texts, and inspire analyses of other narrowly focused school texts. The procedure of this single case study could be repeated in multiple case studies of the other school subjects to obtain a scientifically sound understanding of the issue of gender and language in all South African school texts.

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