



Stanislava Moyšová

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-3072-4031>

University Comenius in Bratislava, Slovakia

stanislava.moysova@uniba.sk

Inclusive language in academic environments: Theory and practice

Submitted: 29.12.2024

Accepted: 08.12.2025

Published: 31.12.2025



Keywords:

gender-balanced
language,
gender-neutral language,
inclusive language,
pragmatic linguistics,
generic masculine nouns

Abstract

Research objectives: This case study aims to describe different modalities of inclusive language, i.e., gender-balanced, gender-sensitive, or gender-neutral language, which are used in the official communication of Comenius University Bratislava. We link these modalities with the results of an online survey carried out in August 2024, which showed how native Slovak speakers perceive inclusive alternatives for generic masculine nouns.

Research method: A critical text analysis was performed on online statements of the faculty members of Comenius University Bratislava and the online survey on inclusive language.

Process of argumentation: In the past decade, gender-sensitive or inclusive language has permeated the communication of many actors in civil society, be it the media, public institutions, or various associations. It reflects the post-structuralist idea that language is a tool of power and makes women invisible, especially in professional life and various other roles. In Romance and Slavic languages, the “invisibilization” is caused by generic masculine nouns. The implementation of forms other than the generic masculine is based on psycholinguistic research (mainly in the German language). According to these researchers, this leads to women becoming invisible in the language. Comenius University Bratislava adopted a gender equality plan, financed by EU-funded programs. The use of inclusive or gender-sensitive language is a part of this action plan.

Research findings and their impact on the development of educational sciences: The critical analysis of online statements of Comenius

University Bratislava and its faculty members shows that only in the Faculty of Arts and the Faculty of Pedagogy is gender-sensitive language systematically used (doublets or neuter nouns). The main information channel of the University and the profile of the Faculty of Law almost never apply inclusive language. The online survey which was carried out in August 2024 shows that the majority of Slovak native speakers consider the variants of gender-sensitive language (both lexical and graphical) to be strange and redundant.

Conclusions and/or recommendations: According to the survey, the generic masculine form is perceived by the majority of Slovak native speakers as a neutral form which denotes both genders. These findings could be correlated with the use of inclusive language (especially split forms) in statements on the social networks of different faculties of Comenius University Bratislava. The reasons for this situation could be the fact that the administrators who author the content are not informed about the action plan adopted at the university level (about the use of inclusive or gender-balanced language) and continue to use the classical generic masculine forms of nouns because the split form bears the characteristics of non-conventionality. A major shift in the use of gender-sensitive language could be enacted by a top-down approach in academia, but this will not solve the practical questions related to its functionality in the stylistics of the Slovak language.

Introduction

Defining the concept of *inclusive language* is not easy, as it is a relatively new concept in the study of language. Inclusivity in language has at least three meanings. The first is a mode of expression and communication that is comprehensible to all participants of a communication; it breaks down the distinction between “laymen” and “insiders” through the intelligibility of discourse. This kind of expression is based on the principles of simplicity, transparency, appropriate length, and dynamism. In the sense articulated by Erasmus of Rotterdam, it corresponds to *erudita perspicuitas*, that is, simplification in order to involve or include (*includere*) everyone in communication (Orgoňová, 2023, p. 216–225). The second meaning of the term, especially in the Anglophone cultural context, refers to a written or spoken text that tries not to offend anyone; inclusive or sensitive language semantically flattens or eliminates expressions that are considered expressive and that certain groups of people may

find offensive.¹ Among the general public, such euphemized language is known as “politically correct” language. Finally, inclusive language refers to a way of expression that takes into account both men and women (*linguaggio del genere* in Italian, *écriture inclusive* in French, or *lenguaje inclusivo* in Spanish). Inclusive language in the sense of “politically correct,” gender-balanced, or gender-neutral expression is rooted in the feminist philosophy currents that flowed into Europe from American universities in the 1970s (Moyšová, 2020, pp. 261–263).

Inclusive language as a gender-balanced form of expression

The third meaning of inclusive language is a cultural concept² which is implemented in European languages in different ways—on the lexical as well as the graphic level. It reflects the effort to make women visible in discourse since, according to some cognitive psychology studies (especially in German: see Braun et al., 2005; Stahlberg et al., 2007), they have been made “invisible” by the use of the generic masculine forms. According to these studies, language users imagine a greater representation of men than women in the designation of a profession or function thanks

¹ For example, the guide on inclusive language prepared for the employees of London City Hall instructs them to avoid the term “illegal migrant” and replace it with “person of precarious immigration status” or “person without documents.” Also, so that texts from City Hall do not exclude non-binary people, officials are to avoid referring to “women” and “men,” and to favor “people” or “Londoners.” Similarly, it is not appropriate to refer to “non-English speakers,” as this is “defective and degrading,” but to “Londoners with English language needs” (<https://europeanconservative.com/articles/news/londons-inclusivity-guide-drop-men-women-and-illegal-migrants>). Another example would be versions of literary texts modified by “inclusive readers,” who are changing the vocabulary of some novels of Roald Dahl in the spirit of politically correct language.

² This claim is supported by the fact that while forms of inclusive language can be found in different communicative situations and discourses in European French, Spanish, or Portuguese, inclusive or gender-balanced language is unknown in the varieties of French used in African countries, in Latin American Spanish, or in the Portuguese used in Brazil or Africa.

to generic masculine nouns (hereafter referred to as “genM”). These language-oriented efforts have been promoted in Western Europe thanks to feminist thinking since the 1990s, reflecting its concepts at the time (equality between men and women should be reflected in language through gender-balanced expression; the use of generic masculine forms has an impact on women’s place and status in society; language is ideologically influenced by patriarchal society and the struggle for power and control also takes place in linguistics) (Slender, 1990).

In practice, this type of inclusivity (especially in the Romance languages of Spanish or Italian and in the Slavic languages) seeks to eliminate generic masculine nouns (*študenti* in Slovak) and replace them with a double masculine and feminine form (*študentky a študenti*) or a neutral form (*študentstvo*).

In the Slovak academic environment, attempts to make language gender-sensitive in the name of women’s inclusion have only recently begun to emerge. The trend of inclusive language, which individuals, various public institutions, some media, and activists are trying to promote in European society, is reaching Slovakia after some delay. As mentioned above, the introduction of gender equality rules into the language—which, in line with classic feminism, is manifested by doubling (using both feminine and masculine nouns) instead of the genM—is the main tool for achieving equality in the language. According to some feminist currents of thought, the binary roles on the masculinity–femininity axis are understood as a limitation of an individual’s authenticity, as gender stereotypes punish and restrict people’s authenticity (Butler, 1993; Jeffreys, 2014). For this reason, the most recent versions of inclusive language have also begun to take into account so-called non-binary or genderfluid people. Thus, some communicants use nouns with neuter grammatical gender to denote a person.

Implementing inclusive language: Plans, guides, and awareness-raising

In 2021, Comenius University Bratislava adopted a plan for gender equality (Univerzita Komenského, 2025) financed by the European Commission. The plan was elaborated by the Gender Studies Centre, which is one of the departments of the Faculty of Arts. Milestone 3.4—“Raising awareness and information about the importance of gender equality in the academic environment” includes measure 3.4.1—“Use of gender-balanced language in official university communication channels. Training of male and female staff adding content within the University’s official communication channels on the use of gender-balanced language.” The plan also contains a guide which explains, among other things, how to eliminate genM nouns (*učitelia*) from a text: by replacing them with split masculine and feminine forms (*učitelia a učiteľky*; hereafter referred to as “doublets”) or with a neutral noun (*pedagogický personál*).

Qualitative and quantitative analysis of online statements published in official information channels of the university

For the purposes of assessing the use of gender-balanced language (doublets and/or neutral nouns), we created a corpus of texts published online from November 1 to December 27, 2024 on the Facebook profiles of Comenius University Bratislava and its faculties.³ From the comparative and quantitative analysis, it appears that the main profile of the university very rarely applies gender-balanced inclusive language (43 statuses published, 17 with genM, 1 with doublets, and 4 with neutral nouns). The Faculty of Law applies the practice similarly (27 statuses published, 9 with genM and 1 with doublets); even when addressing its target audience,

³ Only official sites and active profiles were taken into consideration. Therefore, we do not present data from the Faculties of Catholic Theology (inactive profile), of Natural Sciences (unofficial profile), of Sport and Physical Education (no profile), or Jessenius Medicine (unofficial profile).

students of the faculty, genM is used); the same applies for the Faculty of Medicine (17 statuses published, 8 with genM and 0 with doublets). The Faculties of Protestant Theology (12 statuses, 2 with genM and 0 with any form of inclusive language) and of Management (12 statuses, 4 with genM and 2 with doublets) prioritize genM in their Facebook communications. The Faculty of Pharmacy applies both genM (especially in the names of associations, e.g., *Spolok mladých farmakológov*) and doublets. On the other hand, the Faculty of Arts—of which the Gender Studies Centre (who produced the guide on inclusive language) is a part—gives priority to gender-balanced or gender-neutral forms (16 statuses published, 1 with genM, 3 with doublets and 4 with neutral forms) and systematically avoids genM. Very similarly, the Faculty of Pedagogy opted for gender-balanced language, but it applies strictly to split forms or doublets (*zástupcovia a zástupkyne, stredoškolači a stredoškolačky, nadšenci a nadšenkyne, etablovaní výtvarní umelci a etablované výtvarné umelkyne*; 25 statuses, 14 with doublets, including the splitting of adjectives and pronouns *ktorí/ktoré*, with graphic signs). The Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences also uses inclusive language (24 statuses, 8 with doublets and 4 with genM).

Table1.

Profile	Published statuses	Statuses with genM	Statuses with doublets	Statuses with neuter nouns
Comenius University Bratislava	43	17	1	4
Faculty of Law	27	9	1	0
Faculty of Medicine	17	8	0	0
Faculty of Protestant Theology	12	2	0	0
Faculty of Management	12	4	2	0
Faculty of Pharmacy	10	3	3	0
Faculty of Arts	16	1	3	4
Faculty of Pedagogy	25	2	14	0
Faculty of Social and Economic Sciences	24	4	8	0

Inclusive language and its perception by Slovak native speakers

As follows from the qualitative and quantitative analysis above, in the official communications of different university entities, there is a quite large range of modalities for the use of inclusive language, with the exception of the official communication channels of the Faculty of Law and the university itself. The reasons for this finding could be multiple, for example, the idea that doublets interfere with the fluency of reading and one's reception of a text (Moyšová, 2024b, p. 239). The online survey, which was carried out in August 2024 (with 432 participants, mostly from academia and public service) showed that doublets or neuter forms instead of genM forms do not facilitate communication. The survey was not representative (76% of the respondents had a university degree, more than half [54%] of which were in the humanities), yet it provided some useful indications about Slovak speakers' linguistic patterns: 19% of them declared that the Slovak language should make women more visible, while 60% thought that Slovak is fair enough regarding women. When assessing a phrase with repeated doublets (*vedúci a vedúce* or *reprezentanti a reprezentantky*), 24% of them thought that doublets express gender sensitivity and it is necessary to apply them systematically. On the other hand, 76% declared that the doublets which replace the genM form are not necessary, they are redundant, and the phrase is too long. When assessing a phrase with genM nouns, 20% of the respondents declared that the phrase is incorrect because the genM does not take women into consideration.

From these results, we can conclude that doublets constitute an expression whose reasons for use are not clear to the majority of Slovak speakers, but we can presume that they have no problems understanding the meaning of the phrase. On the other hand, the survey suggests that users had problems understanding neuter nouns with the suffix –*stvo* when they replaced the genM form. Only 20% of the respondents considered a phrase featuring several neuter nouns with the suffix –*stvo* instead of a genM noun to be completely comprehensible. Generally, these nouns denote countable entities (e.g., *študentstvo*), so they can be used to denote persons of both genders, but in other cases they denote

a quality (*poslanectvo* or *autorstvo*), so they cannot be used for persons in texts with a prevailing informative function, according to the rules of Slovak syntax (an artistic or literary text could represent an exception). However, in a Facebook status from the Faculty of Arts (12 November 2024), such nouns are used to denote persons (*autorstvo kvír filmov* and *medzinárodné odborníctvo*). The author of this status, attempting to replace the generic masculine form (*odborníci* [specialists]), chose a neuter noun, which has a pejorative meaning according to the Dictionary of Slovak Language published by the Slovak Academy of Sciences (KSSJ, 2003). In this case, the amalgamation of grammatical gender with social gender could lead to additional confusion in comprehension (Pekarovičová, 2016, p. 38).

Conclusions

Inclusive language in Slovak reflects various postulates about gender that have been taking shape in feminist discourse for four decades at European universities. Although the communication universe is changing radically in the contemporary world as a result of digitalization and the fourth wave of the information revolution (Horváth, 2023, p. 5; Plašienková et al., 2021, p. 40), the main function of online profiles of university faculties is to inform, which is linked to the clarity, transparency, and economy of a text. In the case of some forms of inclusive language, it appears that these aims are not always fulfilled (for example, the majority of respondents in the survey considered doublets to be redundant). The survey shows that amongst the majority of Slovak speakers, the generic masculine is perceived as an unmarked noun that represents both sexes. Thus, the (excessive) use of doublets or neuter nouns instead of genM nouns could be perceived as hindering communication. This fact could explain the certain reluctance to use it exhibited by some faculties. The principles of pragmatic linguistics (Popovičová Sedláčková & Piatková, 2021, pp. 7–8) could be helpful when preparing manuals or guides of inclusive language if the author of the text wants to inclusively address the public at large, and not only an informed subgroup.

Funding: This research was funded by a grant from the Slovak Ministry of Education (VEGA 1/0142/24 Linguistic inclusivity: integrative and restrictive communication).

Conflicts of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bohunická, A., & Kazharnovich, M. (Eds.) (2023). *(Im)pulzy súčasnej jazykovedy* [Impulses of today's linguistics]. Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Bohunická, A., Khazarnovich, M. & Orgoňová, O. (2023). *Sociálna inklúzia a používanie jazyka* [Social inclusion and Use of Language]. Univerzita Komenského.
- Braun, F., Sczesny, S. & Stahlberg, D. (2005). Cognitive Effects of Masculine Generics in German: An Overview of Empirical Findings. *Communications*, 30(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.2005.30.1.1>
- Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge.
- Gerbery, D. & Džambazovič, R. (2011). *Inovatívne orientácie v sociálnej politike. Perspektíva sociálnej inklúzie* [Innovative orientations in social politics. Perspective of social inclusion]. Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Horecký, J. (1959). *Slovotvorná sústava slovenčiny* [Morphologic system of Slovak language]. Vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied.
- Horváth, M. (2023). *Modelovanie eseje* [Essay Modelling]. Univerzita Komenského.
- Jeffreys, S. (2014). *Gender Hurts: A Feminist Analysis of the Politics of Transgenderism*. Routledge.
- KSSJ — Kačala J., Pisárčiková M., Považaj M. (eds.). (2003). *Krátky slovník slovenského jazyka*, VEDA, vydavateľstvo Slovenskej akadémie vied, <http://slovníky.juls.savba.sk/?d=kssj4>
- Moyšová, S. (2020). Koncept politickej korektnosti vo frankofónnom mediálnom a politickom priestore [Concept of the politically correct in the francophone medias and politics]. In R. Štefančík (ed.). *Jazyk a politika: na pomedzí lingvistiky a politológie* 5 (pp. 261–269). Vydavateľstvo Ekonóm.
- Moyšová, S. (2024). Aspekty inkluzívneho jazyka nielen v slovenčine [Aspects of inclusive language not only in Slovak]. *Kultúra slova*, 58(1), 3–14.
- Moyšová, S. (2024b). Inkluzívny jazyk v slovenskom mediálnom diskurze. [Inclusive language in Slovak media discourse]. In R. Štefančík (ed.), *Jazyk a politika. Na pomedzí lingvistiky a politológie* (pp. 233 – 242). Ekonóm.
- Orgoňová, O. (2023). *Používanie jazyka v digitálnej ére. Aspekty inkluzívneho jazyka*. [Use of the language in the digital era. Aspects of inclusive language]. In A. P. Rodič, S.P., & R. Raffaj (eds.), *Slovakistika v súvislostiach. Tradície a perspektívy* (pp. 215–225). Univerzitet u Beogradu.
- Pekarovičová, J. (2016) *Rod ako sociálna a gramatická kategória*. [Gender as a social and grammatical category]. In J. Pekarovičová, & Z. Hargašová (eds.), *Slovenčina (nielen) ako cudzí jazyk v súvislostiach II* (pp. 38–55). Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Pekarovičová, J. (2023). Rodový diskurz a jeho fungovanie v akademickej praxi [Gendered discourse and its functioning in academia]. *Studia Academica Slovaca* 52, 58–74.

- Plašienková, Z., Sámelová, A. & Vertánová, S. (2021). *Spytovanie sa na človeka v on-line svete* [Questioning the Man in an online world]. Univerzita Komenského v Bratislave.
- Popovičová Sedláčková, Z., & Piatková, K. (2021). *Pragmatická gramatika 1*. [Pragmatic Grammar I]. Univerzita Komenského.
- Puchovská, Z. (2023). *Tension entre l'ancienne et la nouvelle graphie. Quels enjeux pour la didactique du lexique en français langue étrangère?* [Tension between the old and new spelling systems. What are the challenges for vocabulary teaching in French as a foreign language?] In *Recherches et Applications*, č. 73 (pp. 125-137). Le français dans le monde.
- Sponder, D. (1990). *Man Made Language*. Pandora Press.
- Stahlberg, D., Braun, F., Irmen, L., & Sczesny, S. (2007). Representation of the Sexes in Language. In K. Fiedler (Ed.), *Social communication* (pp. 163–187). Psychology Press.
- Univerzita Komenského. (2025). *Plán rodovej rovnosti pre Univerzitu Komenského* [Gender equality plan]. Univerzita Komenského. https://uniba.sk/fileadmin/ruk/veda/projekty/Rodova_rovnost_na_UK/Rodova_rovnost_UK_SK.pdf