

Gender exclusive and inclusive language in Finnish: Usage and attitudes

Gender exclusive and inclusive language has been studied extensively in many contexts, yet studies on Finnish are scarce (Engelberg, 2016). Gender exclusive language is still common in Finnish, as inclusive language reforms have only been introduced more widely relatively recently, ca. 2017 (Aamulehti, 2017). As such, language users are still divided on the topic, making this a particularly relevant time to study language attitudes.

This paper explores both use of and attitudes towards gender inclusive and exclusive forms in Finnish. As a 'genderless' language, gender is only marked on lexical items in Finnish. The focus is on common gendered occupational nouns and their novel inclusive alternatives, including *man*-compounds, such as *virkamies/virkahenkilö* ("ombudsman/ombudsperson"), *palomies/pelastaja* ("fireman/firefighter"), and less common feminine occupational nouns, e.g., *lentoemäntä/matkustamotyöntekijä* ("stewardess/flight attendant"). To consider nonbinary perspectives, cissexist binary constructions (e.g., *virkamies tai virkanainen*, "ombudsman or ombudswoman") are included as well.

The data was collected with an online survey with Finnish-speaking Finns as participants (n=1149). Participants were recruited via various online platforms, including Finnish-speaking subreddits on *Reddit* (e.g., *r/Suomi*, *r/Helsinki*, *r/LGBTQSuomi*), various Finnish speaking discussion forums (e.g., *suomi24.fi* age-specific subforums), as well as a few private Facebook groups for gender minorities. Most participants are cis men and cis women, but about 10% participants are transgender, including nonbinary individuals. The participants represent various age groups (15 years-old to over 90), but the majority are under 40-year-olds.

Usage was measured with a covert cloze test as well as acceptability measurements with example sentences, using both stereotypically gendered and neutral contexts (e.g., *fireman* vs. *ombudsman*). Attitudes were measured with a 14-item Likert-scale (adapted from Parks & Robertson, 2000) and open-questions. Preliminary results indicate that gender inclusive language still divides Finnish speakers. For example, when asked explicitly, 60% of the participants found the use of masculine occupational titles acceptable, although even a greater majority found gender inclusive forms acceptable (about 80%). The acceptance of gender inclusive language was not directly reflected in usage, as over half of the participants still used gender exclusive forms in both stereotypically gendered and neutral contexts. The participants' open answers reveal that acceptability is not the only criterion for evaluating language. Many participants found the neologisms acceptable *but* also 'weird', 'clumsy', 'stupid' or 'unnecessary' (cf. Hekanaho, 2020). Others, however, found gender inclusive language to be a welcome change, making the language more egalitarian.

References

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