Generics Problem and Social Media: The Use of Personal Pronouns in Facebook Apps

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Abstract: Sexist language is a language that represents women or/and men differently and/or unequally. One such representation is visible in the usage of pronouns. Referring to a person of unspecified sex/gender by masculine forms (which, conventionally and grammatically is advised) leads to asymmetry, i.e. masculine is a norm and feminine is invisible. Because of that, gender-neutral pronouns have been introduced to the language. However, none of these has become popular enough to start to be used by an ordinary English user. And thus, a problem appears. If one wishes to avoid sexist language, what should (he/she/s/he/they/ze/one/...) do? This article intends to examine, basing on Facebook, how social media deal with this problem of generics.

Keywords: non-sexist language, gender, singular they, generics, Facebook

1. Introduction

Sentences in which indefinite antecedent in a singular form and a pronoun appears are probably of most confusion when it comes to non-discriminatory and correct usage. ''Somebody left … coat'' may serve as an example. Some may without hesitation claim that the missing word is his. Others, on the other hand, may argue that the correct pronoun is their. But there are more possibilities of completing that sentence (which are discussed further) and that is what may cause confusion: when there are many options, which one is the right one (if there is one). Therefore, a text producer is forced to make a decision not only to choose one of the options but also, by making the choice, reveal the political preferences that correlate with this choice.

The objective of this article is to study the ways social media deal with the generics problem. For the purpose of this

study, Facebook has been conceptualised as the prototypical social media website (being ranked number 2 most viewed website worldwide according to Alexa.com). While Facebook allows its users to connect with each other (Dąbrowska, 2013: 12), it also allows them to interact with each other by using Facebook applications (e.g. games). These applications (apps) publish information (on user's behalf) about user's achievements or about help request by asking other users to get involved into some actions. These information the apps publish (posts) are in the centre of this study. In order to study the ways of dealing with the problem of generics, ten most popular Facebook Apps (as of the time of July 2014) have been selected. The apps have been used by the author of this study during one month (July 2014) and as many posts as possible have been collected. Thereafter, the posts have been analysed in order to retrieve information about the use of personal pronouns.

2. Social Media, Facebook, Gender and Pronoun Problem

Because it is relatively a new term, it is difficult to fully define the term social media. For the purpose of this study, the working definition shall be the definition by Ahlqvist and colleagues (2008: 13): "social media refers to the interaction of people and also to creating, sharing, exchanging and commenting contents in virtual communities and networks." While discussing social media, the emphasis is focused on the social aspect, i.e. the fact of people connecting and forming communities. However, while being a part of a network (a group), an individual at the same time has an opportunity to express one's identity by the use of social media (Ahlqvist *et al.*, 2008: 15). One such medium may be Facebook, "the leading social network of the modern era" (Dąbrowska, 2013: 12).

Since the beginning of Facebook, its creators were concerned about equality and because of that the service made a choice not to force its users to choose their sex/gender. As a consequence, the users were talking about themselves in the third person singular and Facebook introduced a newly-coined word *themself* (Gleit, 2008, Okrent, 2014). Therefore, sentences like "[Name][1] tagged themself in a photo" or "[Name] has changed their profile picture" (Okrent, 2014) were a norm among Facebook users. However, a problem occurred when Facebook became international and started to be translated to other languages. Namely, it was a great challenge for translators to deal with the grammar Facebook has chosen to use. Because most of the languages differentiate between female and male pronouns and do not have any gender-neutral pronoun (like *they*, *their*, *themself*, which Facebook opted for), Facebook users from other countries came across some problems: "people who haven't selected what sex they are frequently get defaulted to the wrong sex entirely" (Gleit, 2008). Thus, in 2008 Facebook decided that selecting one's sex/gender would help resolve this problem and it became a requirement in order to create a profile. As for the already signed-up users, they were asked whether they want to be referred to as "him" or "her" (Gleit, 2008, Okrent, 2014). However, this caused another problem, specifically the fact that not all the people find the male/female binary distinction satisfactory and do not want to be referred to as either "her" or "him." This eventually was worked around by some users by changing the Facebook code which allowed to use the singular *they* again or even to choose any other pronoun a user wanted, for instance *zie*, *xe*, *thon* or *yo* (Okrent, 2014). However, in February 2014 Facebook started to implement some serious changes regarding self-identity. Now, American users and (since June

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[1] Because some names may denote the sex/gender of a user, the author has decided not to use any specific names in the citations and examples further.

2014) British users may choose from more than 50 custom gender options, which include beside female and male e.g. cisgender, trans, agender, intersex, or non-binary (Weber 2014, Williams 2014). Moreover, the users may also choose a pronoun they prefer to be referred to. The options are: female (*her*), male (*him*), neutral (*them*) (Williams, 2014).

3. Generic *He*

While referring to a person of unspecified or unknown sex/gender or to people in general, it was advised to use male pronoun *he*, claiming that *he* in generic references includes both men and women. "The use of *he* as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. *He* has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances. […] It has no pejorative connotations; it is never incorrect" William Strunk and E. B. White (cited in Gastil, 1990: 629) comment in their influential book from 1979 *The Elements of Style*, first published in 1918. However, with time, it started to change. This convention has been criticized, stating that it leads to the impression that male is the norm and that it makes females invisible (Mills 2008: 47). This criticism is based on numerous studies concerning the usage of the word *he* (see Madson & Hessling, 1999 for list of research). For instance, it has been proven that when hearing the pronoun *he*, most of the time a male referent comes to mind (Gastil, 1990: 640). Furthermore, the claims that the unmarked gender is the masculine reflect the view that the masculine is of a higher status than the feminine and in consequence downgrades women (Cameron, 2006: 737). Also, such usage of masculine may lead to the impression that man is a prototypic human being, especially among children. When children personify an inanimate object they tend to use male terms. When asked why, a 6-years-old girl

replied "that there were «more hes than shes»" (Weatherall, 2002: 15). Therefore, basing on these research and other studies it may be stated that using masculine as generics create an impression that man is a norm and that masculine generics do not include females.

4. If Not *He* than What

Because of the criticism generic *he* has gained, it is advised to avoid the use of masculine forms in generic references. In particular, academic and professional writers are instructed to obey some style guides published by such organizations as the American Marketing Association (AMA), the American Psychological Association (APA), or Chicago Manual of Style, to name few (Madson & Hessling, 1999: 559-560, 2001: 156). These guidelines include using symmetrical paired pronoun constructions (*he/she, s/he, he and she*), alternating between the *he* and *she* pronouns in a text, i.e. using in one paragraph masculine pronoun and in the next paragraph feminine pronoun, rephrasing sentences in order to avoid the need of using pronouns, using passive, repeating the noun or using synonymous nouns, using plural forms, eliminating the pronoun or changing it to *the*, *a*, *this* (Madson & Hessling, 1999: 560-562, Madson & Shoda, 2006: 275, Romm, 1985: 126, Wilcoxon, 2001: 114-115). However, these techniques are not always possible; e.g. in some situations rephrasing a sentence using plural may cause ambiguity, like in "Readers' perceptions of alternating text may be attractive to authors, depending on their goals" (Madson & Hessling, 1999: 571) and (over)using paired pronouns may look/sound clumsy, awkward, and even distracting or infuriating (Klein, 1993: 1, Wilcoxon, 2001: 115). Moreover, these require more effort, compared with using a singular pronoun: "like most writers, I curse the fate that set me down into a culture with a language

without a non-gender-specific pronoun" comments Seifert (1992: 35). Therefore, some call for a new gender-inclusive pronoun. "We are in need of a new pronoun. Should anyone find a nice-sounding, gender-ambiguous, inoffensive little pronoun, we would ask himorher if heorshe would please escort it to hisorher dictionary as soon as possible. Thank you" comments Nevins (2006: 7). Although in the history of pronouns there have been many attempts to introduce a new gender-neutral pronoun, all of the attempts failed (see Baron retrieved February 2014). Another, extreme one may claim, proposal is the use of *she* generically. Because of its nature, female pronoun causes readers/hearers to focus their attention on the pronoun and "to recognise just how sex-specific the «generic» «he» is" (Mills, 2008: 88). Finally, there is yet another possibility of avoiding the use of generic *he*, namely using *they* in singular references. This practice may be traced back e.g. to times of Caxton or Shakespeare (Malmkjær, 2006: 348) (see Balhorn, 2004 for examination of how long the singular *they* has been in the language), but today[2] may evoke many controversies. In 1746 John Kirbky made his Eighty Eight Grammatical Rules, in one of which stating that "the male gender was «more comprehensive» than the female" (Spender 1985: 148) and in 1850 The British Parliament made it a law that *he* should include *she* (Bodine, 1975). Therefore, this "practical convention" about which Strunk and White (cited in Gastil, 1990: 629) mention is not a pure history of English grammar but rather the result of the actions that specific people took in order to make language reflect the social patriarchy (male is more important, male is the norm) (Bodine, 1975, Weatherall, 2002). However, despite these efforts, singular *they* is still widely used by the

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[2]Today meaning the time of conducting the study, i.e. July 2014. The perception on this topic is constantly changing, for instance singular *they* has been voted by the American Dialect Society as the Word of the Year 2015 (Marquis 2016).

native speakers of English, not only among the people of poor education but also among academics or teachers (Pauwels, 2003: 512-513, Seifert, 1992: 35). In parliamentary debates and radio programs in Australia the usage of singular *they* estimates at around 75 per cent of all generic pronouns (Pauwels, 2003: 513) and in talk shows and interviews from American television at 60 per cent (Romaine, 2001: 161). Also, in New Zealand in spoken language generic *they* is used most often among other pronoun, for 80 per cent of non-gender-specific referents (Holmes 1998: 37). Similarly, in U.S. newspapers, singular *they* is the preferred pronoun in generic references (Balhorn, 2009: 409). Therefore, Manija S. Blaubergs's (1978: 251) prediction for extending *they* to singular rather than introducing a new pronoun seems as the most probable. Moreover, studies show that singular *they* is perceived as the least biased and the most generic pronoun (Gastil, 1990: 640, Madson & Hessling, 2001: 157).

5. Anaphoric and Deictic Expressions

Anaphora is defined as "the use of (usually) a pronoun to refer to the same referent as some prior terms" (Levinson, 1983: 85). Therefore, in a sentence "[Name] came in and he lit a fire" pronoun *he* can be claimed to refer directly to [name] (Levinson, 1983: 67). Apart from anaphora involving pronoun (which is for the purpose of this study of the most importance), three more types may be distinguished in English language, meaning anaphora involving ellipsis, anaphora involving pronominal substitution, and anaphora involving demonstrative determiners (McEnery, 2000). Anaphora can occur within a sentence, across sentences of one text producer or across sentences of two or more text producers (e.g. in a dialogue) (Levinson, 1983).

Deixis, on the other hand, "concerns the ways in which language encode or grammaticalize features of the context of

utterance or speech event, and thus also concerns ways in which the interpretation of utterances depends on the analysis of that context of utterance" (Levinson, 1983: 54). Therefore, it may be simplified that deixis concerns words (or phrases) that cannot be understood without the context. Deixis may be classified into five categories: person deixis, time deixis, place deixis, discourse deixis, and social deixis (Levinson, 1983).

As Levinson (1983) claimes, the two terms may cause confusion, therefore it is important to make a distinction between anaphoric and deictic expressions : "deictic […] expressions are often used to introduce a referent, and anaphoric pronouns used to refer to the same entity thereafter" (Levinson, 1983: 86). Simultaneously, a word may be used both as anaphora and as deixis, e.g. "I was born in London and have lived there ever since" (Levinson, 1983: 67), where *there* can refer to London (anaphora) and, at the same time, can be contrasted with *here*, which locates this sentence outside London (deixis).

6. Facebook Apps and Use of Pronouns

Apps (short for applications) are most often games created by outside developers (some apps are created by Facebook, though, e.g. Messenger which helps communicating with other users). These games very often publish information on users' profiles on their behalf in order to interact with other users by appearing in the news feed (Facebook.com, 2014).

It is crucial to state that this study does not aim to find any regular patterns or make generalisations. Instead, the purpose of this study is to examine the ways the apps use the pronouns while publishing on users' behalf, meaning what strategy the apps use: differentiating between female and male pronouns, using generic *he*, singular *they* or other strategies mentioned above. Because most of the games have similar mechanisms when it comes to

publishing requests, for the purpose of this study ten most popular apps were selected (as for the time of July 2014, from Facebook top charts), being representative for all of the apps that may be found on Facebook. All of the selected apps are gaming apps, have more than 10 million users and have been used by the author of this study in order to obtain all of the possible posts the applications might publish (being a user that is male, female, or of custom gender and wishes to be referred to as *they*). The posts have been analysed in order to verify the presence of personal pronouns. Further, the posts in which pronouns where found have been categorised into three groups: 1) posts with first-person singular pronouns, 2) posts with third-person singular pronouns, and 3) posts with singular *they*. Below, examples of posts published by each app are presented. The pronouns in the examples are emphasised in cursive.

1) First-person pronouns

Most of the apps choose to avoid the problem of sex/gender by deciding to use first-person pronouns *I*, *me*, *my*. Seven out of ten apps use this strategy while publishing on users' behalf. Although the apps require permission for information about user's sex/gender, the posts the apps publish are not written in third-person singular but from the user's perspective.

> Yay, *I* completed level 3 in Candy Crush Saga! Click here to follow *my* progress! (Candy Crush Saga by King)

> CLICK HERE to play Farm Heroes Saga with *me* and get 50 GOLD BARS FREE! (Farm Heroes Saga by King)

> *I* just completed The Farmland, and there's so much more to explore! Click here to join the game and celebrate with *me*! (Pet Rescue Saga by King)

> *I* run out of lives! Can you send *me* one? (Trivia Crack by Etermax)

> [Name] needs your help! Could you send *me* some Energy? (Criminal Case by Pretty Simple)

> *I* won a prize in 8 Ball Pool! Come and play with *me* now and see how much YOU can win! (8 Ball Pool by Miniclip.com)

> I just completed level 1, scored 20030 and got 3 stars. Click here to follow my progress! (Papa Pear Saga by King)

2) Her/his *distinction*

Only one app out of the ten chosen differentiates between male and female users by referring to them as *her* or *his*. The app uses the permission for information about user's gender/sex and publishes posts written in third-person.

> [Name] is udderly flooding the market with fresh organic milk in FarmVille 2! Come visit *her* dairy farm and get free coins! (FarmVille 2 by Zynga)

> [Name] is expanding *his* orchard with a new apple tree in FarmVille 2! Come make apples a core part of your farm too! (FarmVille 2 by Zynga)

3) Singular they

From the ten apps selected, two of them choose to publish posts written in third-person perspective and to use singular *their*. Although both apps require access to information about user's

gender/sex, the apps do not differentiate between male, female or any other users while publishing posts.

> [Name] has just expanded *their* island! Check the magical islands that allow... (Dragon City by Social Point)

> [Name] got promoted to Level 3 – Fish III in Zynga Poker. To celebrate a special bonus is being offered to *their* friends for a limit... (Texas HoldEm Poker by Zynga)

7. Discussion

From the data collected it appears that the most used and subjectively the less problematic is the first-person pronoun choice. The apps creators seem to be wary of the sex/gender problem and simply avoid it by the simplest means possible. However, by doing this, the creators choose to break out from Facebook's (let's call it) "trademark" of referring about oneself in the third person. But, even Facebook itself is no longer using this trademark and instead the users talk about themselves in the first person (Okrent 2014). Therefore, the first-person pronoun choice seems to be consistent with Facebook itself, taking into consideration that most of the apps (six out of seven that uses first-person pronouns) were created after Facebook changed its ways of self-referring.

The next way of using personal pronouns found in the study is the use of male versus female pronouns. This, however, appears to be the less popular among the apps creators, which seems to be reasonable. Facebook in its beginnings did not require to provide information about one's sex/gender and even now, after the gender "revolution," users have the possibility to make this information private. Thus, choosing to differentiate between

female and male pronouns appears to be the most problematic and (it may be claimed) the most controversial choice. It may be stated that by doing this, some users may feel discriminated against as they do not feel to fit in this binary distinction.

Finally, the last pronoun choice that has been found is the use of singular *they*. Although controversial (grammatically but not discriminately), this solution of referring to people in third-person singular seems to be perfectly acceptable among creators. It may be stated that one of the apps that uses singular *they* has followed Facebook path because of the fact that it was made in the time Facebook did not distinguish between male and female, i.e. before 2008. On the other hand, it may be claimed the other app has intentionally chosen to use singular *they* as the app was created after Facebook has decided to differentiate between the sexes.

However, what may be observed from the sample is the fact that the same creators may use different pronoun choice, e.g. Zynga in one app uses singular *they* (Texas HoldEm Poker) and in another differentiates between female and male pronouns (Farmville 2). This may be explained by differences in Facebook policy when the apps were created, meaning that one app was made before and the other app was made after 2008. Moreover, it may be stated that some app creators still struggle with the gender-pronoun problem. In a post by Pretty Simple two subjectively opposing ways of referring may be categorised, i.e. third-person reference ("[Name] needs your help") versus first-person reference ("send *me*"). It seems that this app is torn between the Facebook third-person heritage and first-person novelty. Moreover, even though a user (from the USA or UK) now may choose the preferred pronoun, the app that differentiates between female and male users does not distinguish the gender-neutral pronoun *they*, which results in the users being referred to as *he* and not the pronoun they wish to be referred to.

8. Conclusion

The results of the study reveal that the problem of generic pronouns among Facebook apps is dealt with in three ways. The most popular seems to be avoiding generic references by using first-person pronouns instead of third-person, and thus not revealing the political preferences. In the beginnings of Facebook all the posts concerning a user were written in third person. This, however, has been changed and sentences like "[Name] is enjoying her [or his] breakfast" are no longer to be found; instead, more probable version of this post is "My breakfast was so good today" (Okrent, 2014). Only remaining options of using third-person by Facebook are notifications about user's birthday or user's actions, e.g. changing profile picture. Recently, only versions possible were "[Name] edited her profile" or "[Name] edited his profile" (before 2008 only version was "[Name] edited their profile") (Okrent, 2014). Therefore, some apps follow this path of differentiating between male and female users (and making women visible), but these seem to be not numerous, though (one out of ten apps studied). However, the only generic used by Facebook apps, and Facebook itself, is the singular *they*. This option has been given by Facebook to users who do not wish to reveal their sex/gender or do not feel to fit in the *he*/*she* binary. Thus, although claimed to be incorrect, singular *they* seems to function just fine among Internet users.

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