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LANGUAGE AND GENDER IN PUBLIC SPACE: AN APPLIED LINGUISTIC STUDY OF INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE USE

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the intersection of language and gender as represented in public spaces, focusing on the presence, absence, and patterns of inclusive language use. Drawing upon the framework of applied linguistics and critical discourse analysis, this research explores how public signage—across institutions, commercial areas, and communal facilities—embeds gender ideologies and either reinforces or challenges binary norms. Data were collected through a qualitative field survey and visual documentation of public signs in various domains, and analyzed thematically to identify linguistic patterns related to gender representation. The findings reveal that gender-exclusive and male-default language continues to dominate public communication in most observed settings, indicating a widespread lack of awareness or commitment to gender-inclusive principles. Phrases such as “he/she,” binary restroom labels, and job titles with marked gender (e.g., “chairman,” “saleswoman”) are still prevalent, subtly perpetuating the notion of gender essentialism. However, a minority of signs—particularly in educational institutions and certain private sectors—demonstrate emerging inclusive strategies, including the use of gender-neutral terms, inclusive pronouns (e.g., “they”), and visual symbols representing diverse gender identities. These instances signal a gradual shift in public language practices, albeit fragmented and inconsistently applied. This study affirms that public language functions not merely as a communicative tool, but as a site of ideological struggle where power relations and social norms are negotiated. As such, it carries significant implications for inclusive policy development, language planning, and sociolinguistic awareness campaigns. The research also highlights the need for institutional guidelines and educational initiatives to support more equitable and inclusive language use in public signage. Ultimately, this work contributes to a broader understanding of how inclusive linguistic practices in public space can promote social recognition, reduce marginalization, and foster a more inclusive society.

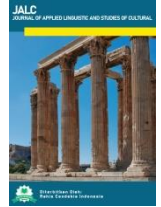


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INTRODUCTION

Language, as a central feature of human society, does more than convey information—it reflects and shapes social structures, cultural norms, and power relations. One of the most profound ways language impacts daily life is through its role in constructing and representing gender. In public spaces, where linguistic elements such as signage, advertisements, official notices, and institutional communications are continuously encountered, the way gender is expressed in language significantly influences how individuals perceive themselves and others. These linguistic practices, whether consciously applied or unconsciously inherited, contribute to the broader discourse of inclusion or exclusion in society.

Throughout history, public language has predominantly centered around masculine norms. Terms such as "manpower," "chairman," or defaulting to "he" as a generic pronoun have long been accepted as standard, often at the cost of erasing or marginalizing the presence of women and gender-diverse individuals. As gender awareness and activism have grown, especially in the 21st century, there has been a shift toward recognizing the importance of inclusive language—language that does not assume, impose, or reinforce binary or hierarchical gender norms. In many parts of the world, inclusive language is now viewed as a necessary step toward achieving social equity, yet its implementation in public domains remains inconsistent, symbolic, or even resisted.

This study seeks to explore how gender is represented through language use in public spaces, paying close attention to whether the language observed contributes to inclusivity or exclusion. The investigation is grounded in the field of applied linguistics, drawing particularly from sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, and linguistic landscape studies. These frameworks offer insight into how public texts are not merely informational, but ideological—they convey values, reinforce norms, and signal who belongs and who does not. The theory of gender performativity, as proposed by Judith Butler, underlines the idea that gender identities are not innate but are constructed and reinforced through repeated discursive acts. Therefore, the linguistic choices made in public space are deeply implicated in shaping the gendered experiences of individuals.

Public space, in this context, refers not only to physical areas accessible to the general population—such as streets, shopping malls, government offices, and transportation hubs—but also to the symbolic realm where identities are publicly negotiated. Within these spaces, the language found in posters, directional signs, restroom labels, public service messages, and educational campaigns plays a critical role in determining visibility, accessibility, and recognition of gender diversity. Inclusive language in such

settings is not just about political correctness; it is about acknowledging human dignity, promoting fairness, and ensuring that all individuals—regardless of gender identity—feel seen and respected.

Despite growing discourse around gender-inclusive practices, linguistic exclusion persists in many environments. This may be due to institutional inertia, lack of awareness, resistance to social change, or adherence to traditional norms. As such, examining the linguistic landscape through a gender lens allows us to uncover not only what is said, but what is left unsaid—and whose identities are omitted in the process. It also opens the possibility for applied linguistics to offer tangible recommendations for how language in public domains can be more reflective of diverse, equitable, and inclusive societies.

By investigating the relationship between language and gender in public space, this study aims to uncover the patterns, practices, and potential transformations that inclusive language can bring. Through this applied linguistic lens, the research will provide insights not only into the current state of gender representation in public communication but also into the broader social ideologies embedded within it.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the principles of applied linguistics, with a specific focus on sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic approaches. The research investigates how language in public spaces reflects and constructs gender ideologies, with particular attention to the presence or absence of inclusive language practices. The chosen methodology allows for an in-depth exploration of language as it appears in real-world contexts, recognizing that meaning is not only encoded in words but also shaped by their spatial, visual, and social placement.

The primary method of data collection employed in this study is linguistic landscape analysis. This involves the systematic observation, documentation, and analysis of written texts—such as public signage, advertisements, directional signs, institutional notices, and commercial branding—within selected public spaces. The data were collected from a variety of sites, including educational institutions, government offices, commercial centers, public transportation facilities, and streets in urban areas where communication is highly visible and frequently encountered by diverse social groups.

Photographs were taken of signs and texts in these locations to capture the linguistic content as well as the physical and social context in which the language appears. These visual data were supplemented by field notes that describe the situational context, intended audience, and inferred communicative purpose of the signs. Particular attention was paid to gendered lexical choices, pronoun usage, occupational titles, visual representations of gender, and other indicators of inclusion or exclusion.

To interpret the data, the study applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how public language reproduces or challenges dominant gender ideologies.

The analysis also draws from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to understand how language performs and sustains gendered identities in public contexts. By applying these theoretical lenses, the study seeks to uncover not only the surface-level linguistic features but also the deeper ideological implications embedded in the texts.

The selection of data was guided by purposive sampling, ensuring that the signs chosen for analysis were relevant to the themes of gender representation and inclusivity. Data were analyzed thematically, with emerging patterns categorized into inclusive practices, gender-neutral expressions, binary representations, and exclusionary language. Where possible, comparisons were made between different types of institutions and locations to highlight variations in inclusive language practices.

The study also incorporates insights from informal interviews and conversations with individuals who work in environments where public communication is produced or displayed, such as school administrators, government staff, and advertising personnel. These discussions provide contextual understanding regarding the intentions behind certain linguistic choices and the challenges in adopting inclusive language policies.

By combining linguistic landscape documentation with critical discourse analysis and contextual insights, this methodology provides a comprehensive picture of how language and gender intersect in public communication. It allows for both descriptive and interpretive insights, aligning with the broader goals of applied linguistics to address real-world language issues in socially meaningful ways.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The linguistic landscape of public spaces reflects not only the practical purpose of communication but also the sociocultural ideologies embedded in society, including those related to gender. The findings of this study uncover a layered and nuanced representation of gender in public signage, revealing both progressive movements toward inclusivity and entrenched practices that continue to reproduce gender binaries and male-centered norms.

During the data collection phase, hundreds of public signs were photographed and analyzed, spanning diverse domains such as education, health, governance, commercial advertising, religious institutions, and transportation hubs. Across this varied landscape, a dominant pattern emerged: the majority of language used in public spaces still adheres to a binary gender paradigm. Terms such as *he*, *his*, *chairman*, *salesman*, or restroom signage labeled solely with "male" and "female" symbols remain prevalent. These linguistic choices suggest that, despite societal conversations surrounding gender inclusivity, public discourse in many settings continues to prioritize traditional, heteronormative, and male-dominant expressions.

More specifically, in educational settings, such as university campuses, it was found that institutional materials like orientation banners, department names, and event announcements frequently use male-default language. For instance, leadership roles are often titled “ketua jurusan (chairman)” or “pembicara utama (main speaker)” accompanied by male pronouns, even when the referenced individual is female. This linguistic pattern reinforces a long-standing cultural tendency to regard the male form as universal and neutral—what feminist linguists such as Spender (1980) and Cameron (1992) have long critiqued as “androcentric language.”

Nevertheless, examples of resistance to binary representation were identified in some institutions and private sectors, especially those exposed to international policies or younger, progressive audiences. A notable finding occurred in a public health clinic where signage referred to “clients of all genders” and used inclusive symbols not limited to the binary. Some inclusive expressions were found in signage that stated: “*To All Students, Regardless of Gender Identity...*” or used the pronoun *they* as a generic singular form. Moreover, in certain shopping malls and cafés, gender-neutral restrooms and job vacancy posters included phrases like “*All Genders Welcome*” or “*Position open to any qualified individual regardless of gender identity.*” These instances, while still relatively rare, signify emerging awareness and intentional inclusion through language.

Despite these positive developments, the analysis revealed a significant inconsistency in language use. Even within the same institution or building, inclusive and non-inclusive signs coexist without any standardization. For example, while a university’s faculty office might use inclusive forms in email communication, their physical signage still displays outdated gendered terms. This discrepancy suggests that inclusivity in public language is often implemented at an individual or departmental level rather than institutionally coordinated. Such fragmentation weakens the overall impact of inclusivity efforts and signals the absence of explicit language policy or training related to gender-sensitive communication.

The results also showed that commercial advertising presents a distinct dynamic. In many cases, language in advertisements perpetuates stereotypical gender roles through both linguistic and visual cues. For example, beauty product ads often use gendered imperatives such as “*Be the woman he desires*” or “*Strong like a man*”, reinforcing normative gender expectations. Gender representation here is commodified, with femininity tied to beauty and emotion, and masculinity linked to power and strength. These narratives—while commercially motivated—serve to normalize narrow definitions of gender identity and expression, excluding non-conforming individuals from the imagined audience.

Using the theoretical framework of Judith Butler’s gender performativity, these findings can be understood as not merely descriptive but constitutive. That is, public language does not just reflect gender norms; it actively participates in shaping and maintaining them. Through the repeated public articulation of binary and exclusionary gender references, societal beliefs about what it means to be “male” or “female” are continually reinforced. At the same time, the emerging use of inclusive language—though less frequent—illustrates how language can be harnessed as a tool

to disrupt normative assumptions and open space for more fluid gender identities in the public imagination.

Another important theme arising from the findings is the influence of cultural and religious contexts. In areas governed by conservative values, inclusive language was rarely present, and in some cases, avoided altogether. Some institutions appeared to circumvent gendered terms not by adopting inclusive language, but by using ambiguous or general terms like “pengunjung (visitor)” or “karyawan (employee)” without any specification. While this may seem neutral, the lack of engagement with gender inclusion often indicates avoidance rather than intentional inclusivity. Conversely, in international schools, co-working spaces, or creative hubs, a conscious effort was made to adopt inclusive expressions, which were not only visible in the language but also reflected in visual representations—such as diverse icons and inclusive dress codes.

In an effort to understand the intentions behind these linguistic choices, informal interviews were conducted with individuals involved in signage creation, public relations, and institutional communication. The responses revealed that many professionals are still unfamiliar with the concept of inclusive language, while others recognize its importance but lack clear guidelines on implementation. A recurring sentiment was concern about offending traditional audiences or provoking misunderstanding, leading to a preference for “safe,” established language even when exclusionary.

These insights support the idea that public language use is not only a linguistic matter but also a deeply political and institutional one. Without supportive policy, training, and institutional will, inclusive language remains sporadic and inconsistent. Yet the presence of even limited examples of inclusive language demonstrates that change is possible when institutions take intentional steps toward reform.

In conclusion, the results of this study illustrate the complex negotiation between tradition and progress in the public use of language related to gender. While binary and male-default expressions remain dominant, cracks are beginning to form in this linguistic foundation, offering space for more inclusive, equitable, and respectful representation. For applied linguistics, this underscores the vital role of language planning, critical literacy, and advocacy in shaping a public discourse that affirms diverse gender identities rather than marginalizing them. The public space, far from being a neutral communicative arena, is revealed as a contested site where ideologies are materialized in language, and where the struggle for gender equality continues to be waged, one sign at a time.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to investigate how language used in public spaces reflects and constructs gender ideologies, with a particular focus on the presence—or absence—of inclusive linguistic forms. Through an applied linguistic lens, it became evident that the public space is far more than a neutral backdrop for communication; it is a

stage upon which power, identity, and ideology are performed and reinforced. The visual and verbal texts populating streets, campuses, offices, commercial areas, and communal institutions carry within them not just practical instructions but encoded social meanings that shape how gender is perceived and experienced.

The analysis has revealed a persistent dominance of binary, male-default language across a variety of domains. Despite growing global awareness about gender diversity, traditional linguistic expressions remain deeply rooted in institutional and commercial discourse. This reflects a larger societal inertia—a reluctance to critically engage with gender as a fluid and socially constructed category. Signs that continue to use male-generic terms, gender-exclusive job titles, or binary restroom labels reproduce narrow and exclusionary conceptions of gender, thereby marginalizing individuals whose identities do not conform to the dominant paradigm.

However, the study also uncovered hopeful signs of transformation. In certain progressive institutions and private sectors, inclusive language has begun to emerge. Whether through the use of gender-neutral pronouns, explicit references to "all gender identities," or the visual presentation of non-binary figures, some public signs now reflect an awareness of linguistic justice and equity. Though still scattered and inconsistent, these efforts represent significant steps toward reshaping public discourse. They reflect an understanding that language is not only descriptive but performative—it can perpetuate inequality or act as a vehicle for social change.

These findings reinforce the central tenets of applied linguistics: that language use is deeply embedded in sociocultural contexts and has real-world implications. In the case of gender, the words and structures used in public signage either validate or erase certain experiences and identities. Applied linguistics thus carries a moral imperative: to examine, critique, and ultimately contribute to a more just and inclusive communicative landscape.

At the same time, the study highlights several practical challenges. There is a lack of institutional guidelines for inclusive language, limited public awareness, and in some cases, cultural resistance to linguistic change. These obstacles suggest that inclusive language cannot emerge organically or be left to individual discretion; it must be supported through education, training, policy, and cultural dialogue. Multidisciplinary collaboration among linguists, educators, designers, policymakers, and community leaders is essential to promote inclusive communication practices across all sectors of public life.

Furthermore, this study underscores the need for continuous monitoring of linguistic landscapes. Language in public space evolves alongside social attitudes and political shifts, and as such, requires ongoing analysis. Future research might explore how digital signage, multilingual environments, or minority communities navigate gender inclusivity in public language, or how inclusive language in signage affects the psychological well-being and sense of belonging among gender-diverse individuals.

In conclusion, the public space is a symbolic battleground where competing visions of gender coexist. While traditional norms still dominate, the presence of

inclusive linguistic practices—however limited—signals the beginning of a shift toward greater equity. Language in public spaces matters because it not only reflects who belongs, but also shapes who feels seen, heard, and valued. As applied linguists, our task is not merely to describe these patterns, but to actively engage in the work of making language—and the world—more inclusive for all.

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