

## **Gender differences in language use: A linguistic analysis of two Saudi newspaper articles**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

Language use defines a society in more than one ways. This study aims to compare the use of a foreign language (English) by Arab journalists writing for the two Saudi dailies in English (Arab News, Saudi Gazette) to find clues of gendered language use. Twenty-four neutral writing samples with twelve each by male and female journalists form the dataset. Using a freely available parsing tool, grammatical dependencies are established for sixteen parameters. All parsed data are then summed up for each gender under each grammatical dependency and statistical analysis undertaken to verify if there are variations in the use of language by male and female participants. Results showed that male journalists used nine of the parameters higher than females including compound sentence, direct object, adverb clause, determiner, the, this, auxiliary verb, case marker and negative marker whereas the ruminant markers were used more by female journalists including noun in subject position, that, adverb modifier, adjective clause, average sentences length, compound marker, and auxiliary passive marker. Results show that contrary to most other such studies, there are no statistically significant differences in the use of English by Saudi journalists. This may be taken as an evidence of language use parity induced by gender neutral language training. However, the study recommends reinforcement of these results with replicated studies in other environments.

**Keywords:** Gendered language, language use, newspaper writing, language use parity.

### **Introduction**

Any newspaper text, displays elements and products of the society. Yet, it has the potential to impact our attitudes, belief systems and so on. Likewise, Oreg (2006) showed that newspaper texts have the power to change our perception toward ourselves or how others may perceive us. Take the example of newspaper reports. A given set of non-conformists may be variously referred to as 'extremists', 'terrorists', 'fundamentalists', 'militants', 'discontented elements', or even 'freedom fighters'! Each of these adjectives come with a unique set of connotations and affect the perceptions of the readers as well as of the people being referred to. Taking the argument further, these terms have the potential to start wars within a nation or with other nations. They also have the potential of making or breaking governments and social orders. However, there is no predictability about how far and in what way texts may influence social order (Bhoi et al., 2020). Seen as a product, a text is a reflection of the social order, perceptions, beliefs, and systems that run the society (Wiederkehr et al., 2015). Take the simple example of technical words like 'microblogging' (such as posting short messages on Facebook), 'keywords' (for words commonly punched on search engines while looking for information), 'hacking' (for trespassing information illegally), and 'email marketing' (for marketing via emails) and many more such expressions that are today to be found in the lexis of computer users. These words are specifically the **product** of the contemporary technology

explosion that has virtually overtaken our lives. Their very presence and frequency of use in our vocabulary is a moot witness to the way language is affected by social milieu. The unique pattern of an evolving language offers a unique perspective on the theme of linguistic and cultural change in the wake of technological dynamism (Schramm, 2000).

Newspapers are today important carriers of opinions and messages to the masses. They cover a range of topics and are an evergreen fountain of news and events geared to a large variety of readership (Hicks et al., 2016). In this sense a newspaper expresses social and public opinion using formal or informal language or in between these two extremes, and several scholars reported that the targeted reader base may have an impact on the language used. In the Arab context, there are only two national English dailies, Arab News and Saudi Gazette (Alsaedi, 2021). Incidentally, like other newspapers, these are privately owned. Moreover, Saudi Gazette took to an exclusively online mode in 2019 and continues to do so. Both these newspapers employ some women journalists (a minority) and even amongst these, all are not of Arab origin.

On the general writing or literary scene, Arab women are not as active as their male counterparts. Mellor (2020) further examined the difference in Arab journalists of both genders in Arab newspapers especially news related to Islam. Differences in the writing styles of males and females have been reported in studies that have spanned different sample types such as young and older students, blog writers, messaging, and so on (Alkhubiry & Al-Ahdal, 2020; Mellor, 2020; Thurlow & Poff, 2013). These have also been replicated in news and mass media writing in many contexts, but to the best of the author's knowledge, linguistic differences in newspaper writing of men and women in Saudi Arabia has not been a subject matter of research so far. However, it merits inquiry as societal biases and stereotypes may be reflected in language use, and with the Saudi Vision 2030 targeting development of all its citizens, identifying such differences, if any, can be the first step towards eradicating these. The current study, therefore, fills an existing gap by linguistically analyzing the journalistic writing in English of male and female newspaper writers in Saudi Arabia. This study explores:

## **Research questions**

Taking the foregoing literature review as a guide, the study answers the following questions:

1. What are the linguistic features discernible in the journalistic writing of Saudi male and female outputs in a national English daily?
2. Are the differences, if any, between male and female writing output statistically significant?
3. Which are the most outstanding features of these differences, if any were found?

## **Literature review**

According to Niblock (2004), newspaper managements have certain expectations news features and these expectations create differences between the writing styles of males and females. The study debates that the newspaper type is one of the main factors that divides newspapers into tabloids and broadsheets in the study to show the different characteristics: Broadsheets provide more space for detailed stories to be written. Niblock also indicated that "this format of newspaper tends to be associated with 'serious' reporting, with extensive coverage of international affairs and complicated issues at home". On the other hand, tabloids

carry concise stories due to the small size (Niblock, 2004). Yet, the variations between tabloids and broadsheets attribute their differences to the different readerships they are orientated towards (Bastos, 2016). Considering the reader's perspective, both genders write different news with distinct textual styles.

Bell (1991) found that the majority of broadsheet readerships are from the middle classes, while the majority of tabloid readers are working classes. Those readerships differed financially. They have received different educational backgrounds. Yet, these newspaper editors and writers orient their readers' appeal. Authors write according to their readerships' consideration on what is most news-worthy. It is an unsaid consensus that women can take on only the journalistic role of writing with a woman's touch as observed by Steiner (2017). Men, consequently, had little interest in writing for women's interest. Similarly, the impact of gender-specific language on news items is still un- or under-reported. This study shows how the gender writing differs with respect to the news perspective.

Women journalists provide women's perceptions on the issue. Bartimus et al. (2002) affirmed that women accepted reluctantly such tasks because it was their only opportunity to gain entry to the newsroom. This study also highlights the difference between both genders writing in newspaper with regards to women journalists' perception. Some other studies highlight the involvement of women writers in different newspapers and magazines and their preferences for the type news chosen for writing. The differences in linguistic features of both men and women in magazines was noted (Bergsten, 2007).

In a rich review of literature, Laarhoven (2018) highlighted the gender differences based on the book called Nabokov's Favorite Word Is Mauve, the journalist Ben Blatt determined the words that are used by the female or male author and identified a main, disturbing, difference: men probably write with women outside the whole picture. Blatt, while looking at the 100 classical literature works, calculated the pronouns used by female and male writers. In most of the books written by the male author, the term "she" doesn't appear. Some extreme circumstances include the books of *The House of Mirth* and *The Joy Luck Club*, but still in such female-oriented narratives, the term "he" is genuinely justified for 29% of the pronouns of gender.

Systematically, Philips worked on each one of Lakoff's findings and presented literature that supports and/or refutes it. Regarding question tags, one important study that she quotes was conducted by O'Barr and Atkins (2009) on courtroom discourse to check language and positions of power and powerlessness. Contrary to Lakoff's claim that women's speech displays features of 'powerless' speech, O'Barr and Atkins found that syntactic tags are to be found more in the lawyers' speech (which is presumably one of power) rather than in that of witnesses (one of powerlessness). On women's speech being more polite, Philips cites other writers who claim that culture and communication across linguistic boundaries is a deciding factor in politeness in speech rather than gender alone. For hedges too, Philips cites studies that conclude that the use of these is greatly dependent on the culture and social status of the speakers.

One often encounters lopsided gender ratios in occupations such as journalism. Quite conveniently, the difference of abilities argument is used to justify this. But whether this perceived or real difference justifies the remarkably low presence of a certain gender in some occupations could not be verified till the discovery of meta-analysis as a useful tool towards this end. Linn and Peterson (1985) used homogeneity analysis, a more refined version of meta-analysis to measure three types of spatial ability as represented in males and females. No gender difference was reported for spatial disembedding, moderate values were found for verticality/

horizontality, and remarkable differences were found for mental rotation (of a three dimensional object represented in two dimensions and an image asked to fit one of the given rotated images). Thus, blanket statements and beliefs of male superiority in spatial ability and consequent female inferiority in the same were to blame for the exclusion of the latter from fields such as astronomy and engineering, proved to be unfounded and baseless. Similarly, in another study by Linn and Hyde, it was established that gender differences in verbal ability were so small that they were fit to be overlooked. Some of the conclusions reached are:

1. Differences in the words recalled by men and women have become narrower as compared to Jastrow's study.
2. Women now use more unique words than men in contrast to the previous study. Better educational and vocational opportunities may be the reason for this.
3. On the count of scientific terms, nature words and animal words, the gap between the genders has closed now.
4. Food words are being used with no difference between the genders. Perhaps what accounts for this is the greater involvement of men with food related activities, such as, shopping, knowing the nutrition facts etc.
5. One parameter where women recalled more words than men was clothing where the difference was reported to be significant.

Perusant to previous studies on gendered language, Guinn (1982) conducted a study with freshman students at a US university to see if the gendered language had a difference of perception at the core of it. In a free writing exercise, the respondents were asked to describe a person they found unusual at their university campus. The researcher focussed on the choice of the descriptors (not just adjectives, but also, clauses and phrases) that the subjects used while writing the essay. Previously, descriptors elicited from graduate students were ranked on a scale of abstract to concrete by professors not directly involved with the study. The findings were interesting: Male writers employed more concrete descriptors than their female counterparts. The difference was, in fact, statistically significant. A broader range of descriptors was used by the respondents irrespective of their gender, when they described a male in their essay. Female respondents universally used certain descriptors when describing a male. These descriptors had to do with physical activity and energy. The last finding may be attributable to the societal stereotype of males being identified with physical strength, movement, and agility. When describing a woman, both male and female respondents wrote detailed descriptions of the body with face being represented vaguely, whereas both were detailed in describing the face vividly and the body vaguely when the person being described was a male. Female respondents also focussed more diligently on descriptors of interpersonal relationships as compared to the males. The descriptors used by the females clustered closer to the abstract end of the scale earlier devised. This made the essays of the females more abstract as compared to the concreteness of those written by their male counterparts.

Based upon international evidence of differences in male and female writing causing an achievement gap, Jones and Myhill (2007) outlines gendered linguistic differences in the writing of secondary school writers, and the study spanned a period of two years. The respondents belonged to six different schools. The samples were analysed at sentence and whole text level to rule out possible distortions. Significant gender differences were noted at text level based upon features such as paraphrasing, length of the text and general organisation of the material. Linking devices used also varied significantly between the two genders. In paragraphing, boys were found to be more competent with better and more appropriate paragraph breaks. Within the paragraphs too, superior topical arrangement was displayed by the boys in the study. Sentence length was visibly more in the boys' writing and also the length of the paragraphs.

The most significant finding of this study was that at sentence level, no gender differences were observable in the linguistic features. To verify the belief that boys may be better at non-fiction writing, this study also undertook text-type analysis. The conclusion was that text-type does not affect linguistic performance in any way. However, one of the features discerned was the greater use of past participle by boys when undertaking persuasive writing.

This study burst many earlier myths about the linguistic competence of the genders. Most remarkable of these was the general view that females were better writers than males. It rather concluded that boys' writing was better than that of the girls.

In a meta-analysis of 187 studies, Huang (2013) concluded that self-efficacy was an important factor in ensuring academic sentence compound markers. Given this fact, Huang noted that determining the role of gender differences in academic performance in relation to self-efficacy is also important.

Remarkably, Huang's meta-analysis revealed that writing self-efficacy is not a constant. It varies with variation in students' grades, or conversely, age is a significant parameter to decide self-efficacy. This is one finding. The other is that the school subject also plays a role in predicting variation in academic self-efficacy gender-wise. Further, culture plays its role in predicting academic self-efficacy gender differences.

DeFries et al. (1990) evaluated gender differences in twins for Verbal and Performance IQ, Reading Recognition and Spelling. Both identical and fraternal twin pairs were examined in the study. Three subsets of twin pairs were chosen for analysis: 1. Identical and fraternal twins of which neither individual was reading disabled; 2. Identical and fraternal twins of which at least one individual was reading disabled; 3. Opposite gender twins of which one individual was reading disabled. In a very interesting finding, DeFries et al. (1990) concluded that similar patterns of gender differences existed between the experimental and control groups. In other words, differences of cognitive abilities observable between the genders in the control group were replicable for those between the genders in the experimental groups i.e. the pattern of gender differences is very much similar for the two groups: disabled and control. The performance of males, whether reading disabled or otherwise, was slightly better than females on Verbal and Performance IO.

Again, males in both the groups performed somewhat poorly than females on Reading Recognition and Spelling. The texts used for the purpose were standardised psychometric texts. Even in cases where male and female individuals of a twin pair were exposed to different post-natal environments (being reared in different homes), the gender differences were the same as those displayed by twins who shared the same post-natal environment.

One important finding of this study concerns the role of psychology in language output. Clearly, psychological gender role is more potent than the biological gender in influencing the tone of the texts.

## **Methods**

### ***Research design***

Content analysis of the male and females journalists was conducted for obtaining insights into the linguistic parameters. As stated earlier, female journalists are far fewer than their male counterparts in Saudi English dailies. There are only two such dailies, viz., Saudi Gazette, and Arab News. The former is now published only in an online mode, while the latter



is also available in hard copy. Though the researcher set out to compare the linguistic feature in the writing of male and female journalists, this proved to be a challenge from the very beginning as in every issue of either of these newspapers, the male contributions outnumbered those of females in the average ratio of 8:1 in favor of men.

### ***Participants and tools***

This study gathers information on one genre of articles by both genders, the researcher collected data from newspaper issues spanning two months to reach an equitable number (12 each). Articles that fell in the chosen domain but had two co-authors were dropped as well as those that failed to reach the inclusion length of 350 words. Political and emotionally loaded articles, sports features, crime stories were also dropped. From each article included in the study, an excerpt of 350 words was randomly isolated, coded and kept aside till all 24 articles were thus collected.

Thereafter, each of the excerpts were run through an open source grammatical parser to work out the grammatical structure of the sentences, for example, which words form a phrase, and which fulfil the subject or object function for a verb. In the same way, each and every word was categorized by the tool and for each of the twenty four excerpts, grammatical dependencies were established. These results are summarized in Table 1 below. Compared to manual parsing, this process was many times faster and accurate and thus, enabled the researcher to parse the materials across 16 categories.

### ***Data analysis***

All data obtained from the parsing tool was initially color coded with red representing male and blue representing female output (see appendix 1). The dependencies used in this study are as follows:

1. cop: Compound Sentence
2. nsubj: Noun in subject position
3. dobj: Direct object
4. advcl: Adverb clause
5. det: Determiner
6. advmod: Adverb modifier
7. aux: Auxiliary verb
8. acl: Adjective clause
9. case: Case marker
10. Sentence Length (my addition)
11. neg: Negative marker
12. & 13 det (this, that): Use of determiner 'this', 'that'
14. Compound marker: cc
15. Auxiliary passive marker, auxpass

## **Results**

The raw data (see appendix) were added up with each grammatical dependency for each gender to make gendered comparison of total values possible. Table 1 below presents this data across the 16 parameters used in this study. Table 1 shows that males used 9 parameters higher than females for example, cop, dobj, advcl, det, the, this, aux, case and neg (M=13., 45.58, 16.83, 78.91, 201.41, 12.66, 33.5, 102.83 and 8.83) respectively whereas female used the remaining 7 parameters higher than males including nsubj, that, advmod, acl, avg sentences length, cc, and auxpass (80, 28.16, 2.75, 20.33, 23.57, 7.91 and 11.66) respectively.

**Table 1** Gender use of language excerpts from Saudi English dailies

Gen.	Female	Male
cop	11.66	13.16
nsubj	80	77.91
dobj	36.08	45.58
advcl	15.16	16.83
det	71.66	78.91
the	184.33	201.41
This	8.66	12.66
that	28.16	22.66
advmod	28.75	22.58
Aux	30	33.5
acl	20.33	18.75
case	111.91	102.83
Avg Sentence length	32.5	27.25
neg	5.5	8.83
cc	77.91	70.33
auxpass	11.66	10.5

**Table 2** One Way ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Cop	Between Groups	13.500	1	13.500	.451	.509
	Within Groups	658.333	22	29.924		
	Total	671.833	23			
Nsubj	Between Groups	26.042	1	26.042	.143	.709
	Within Groups	3998.917	22	181.769		
	Total	4024.958	23			
Dobj	Between Groups	541.500	1	541.500	4.210	.052
	Within Groups	2829.833	22	128.629		
	Total	3371.333	23			
Advcl	Between Groups	16.667	1	16.667	.656	.427
	Within Groups	559.333	22	25.424		
	Total	576.000	23			
det	Between Groups	315.375	1	315.375	.729	.403
	Within Groups	9521.583	22	432.799		
	Total	9836.958	23			
the	Between Groups	1751.042	1	1751.042	1.377	.253
	Within Groups	27967.583	22	1271.254		
	Total	29718.625	23			
this	Between Groups	96.000	1	96.000	.734	.401
	Within Groups	2877.333	22	130.788		
	Total	2973.333	23			
that	Between Groups	181.500	1	181.500	.784	.386
	Within Groups	5094.333	22	231.561		
	Total	5275.833	23			
advmod	Between Groups	228.167	1	228.167	2.841	.106
	Within Groups	1767.167	22	80.326		
	Total	1995.333	23			
aux	Between Groups	73.500	1	73.500	.330	.571

	Within Groups	4897.000	22	222.591		
	Total	4970.500	23			
	Between Groups	15.042	1	15.042	.436	.516
acl	Within Groups	758.917	22	34.496		
	Total	773.958	23			
	Between Groups	495.042	1	495.042	1.065	.313
case	Within Groups	10224.583	22	464.754		
	Total	10719.625	23			
	Between Groups	165.375	1	165.375	1.234	.279
avg	Within Groups	2947.250	22	133.966		
	Total	3112.625	23			
	Between Groups	66.667	1	66.667	1.533	.229
neg	Within Groups	956.667	22	43.485		
	Total	1023.333	23			
	Between Groups	345.042	1	345.042	.768	.390
cc	Within Groups	9879.583	22	449.072		
	Total	10224.625	23			
	Between Groups	8.167	1	8.167	.199	.660
auxpass	Within Groups	903.667	22	41.076		
	Total	911.833	23			

Table 2 shows that no significant differences between the use the 16 parameters in the analysed data exist except in Dobj which shows (Table 2) that male journalists use such parameter higher than female journalists ( $M=45.58$ ,  $F=36.08$ ) and the probability value is (Sig.052).

## Discussion

The results showed that nine of the parameters were used higher by male journalists including cop, dobj, advcl, det, the, this, aux, case and neg whereas the ruminant markers were used more by female journalists including nsubj, that, advmod, acl, avg sentences length, cc, and auxpass. These findings agree with some previous studies which reported that males and females used language differently. Guinn (1982) found that Male writers employed more concrete descriptors than their female counterparts. Female respondents also focussed more diligently on descriptors of interpersonal relationships as compared to the males. Likewise, Jones and Myhill (2007) found significant gender differences at text level based upon features such as paraphrasing, length of the text and general organisation of the material. Linking devices used also varied significantly between the two genders.

The study applied the One-way Annova to check the significance of use of linguistic parameters across genders. The study showed that there were no remarkable differences along the 16 parameters, though there were some differences. This finding is consistent with DeFries et al. (1990) who found that the pattern of gender differences is very much similar for the two groups: disabled and control. The performance of males, whether reading disabled or otherwise, was slightly better than females on Verbal and Performance IO.

## Conclusions

The findings of this study are very interesting. At the outset, they establish that the journalistic writing of male and female journalists in two Saudi English dailies are not



differentiable by their linguistic characteristics. In other words, the occurrence of each of the dependencies are comparable or at least not statistically different in significant terms, indicating similar use of language elements by both Saudi males and females. The finding is significant as the Saudi society is perceived by the outside world as one that is highly stratified along gender lines in favor of men, especially in the field of journalism which is perceived as a largely male domain. Moreover, the patriarchal make-up of the society did not afford equitable education and work opportunities to the female population, a fact duly recognized by the Saudi people. The change in the status of women, reflected in the facility they have exhibited in the use of English in journalistic writing is evidence of the grassroots change brought about in the society. Yet, the results may actually be a reflection of gender parity in language use in the field of journalism alone: The rationale is that newspaper reporters or feature writers are an educated, emancipated, conscious lot, which may explain the absence of typical features of language use in the writing of Saudi male and female journalists.

## Recommendations

It is recommended that language use in other media be investigated from the gender angle and results compared with those of this study. Moreover, in future studies, qualitative data in the form of interviews and demographic data such as educational and other background of the participants should be correlated with the findings.

## Limitations

Gendered language use needs to be studied in different contexts and settings to establish the parity arrived at in this study as people in different life situations are likely to use language differently. This study was conducted with a very selective sample as the participants can all be assumed to have a reasonable foothold in knowledge and awareness owing to their profession. Hence its findings cannot be generalized unless proven in other settings.

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## Appendix 1: Grammatical dependencies occurrence in male and female journalistic writing

Passage No.	Gen.	cop	nsubj	dobj	advcl	det	the	This	that	advmod	Aux	acl	case	Avg Sentence length	neg	cc	auxpass
1.	M	16	70	47	24	111	156	12	24	22	18	22	98	35	6	61	6
2.	F	14	87	47	21	82	191	18	54	32	58	25	81	41	16	74	16
3.	M	20	85	46	10	80	174	0	36	39	18	18	100	35	2	98	8
4.	F	16	60	18	6	70	156	20	42	30	24	18	132	32	0	101	10
5.	M	4	87	58	18	10	264	0	36	14	52	14	94	31	12	99	16
6.	F	20	85	38	6	68	168	18	54	24	18	20	92	17	12	92	6
7.	F	22	108	39	16	48	234	6	30	54	20	18	87	47	2	80	6
8.	M	8	78	38	14	84	180	32	12	14	42	20	134	32	10	86	14
9.	M	10	83	32	12	118	289	10	42	16	36	30	118	26	32	89	14
10.	F	12	96	37	20	66	178	6	12	26	18	19	132	36	2	108	14
11.	F	12	96	37	20	66	178	6	12	26	18	19	132	31	2	108	14
12.	M	8	65	44	16	80	168	20	6	24	24	17	113	17	4	51	6
13.	M	12	71	35	10	70	195	12	12	20	18	6	70	18	6	54	8
14.	F	6	67	36	16	76	180	6	12	14	18	11	92	46	4	54	12
15.	M	22	79	55	18	102	194	6	30	26	46	20	72	19	10	98	14
16.	M	16	67	46	23	82	208	0	32	20	26	20	124	54	2	32	8
17.	F	10	74	44	14	66	148	12	30	30	36	16	126	22	6	65	6
18.	F	4	69	30	12	92	254	0	6	24	50	26	120	17	4	67	20
19.	F	10	61	36	12	82	186	0	18	22	14	26	148	25	2	65	4
20.	M	16	89	80	22	70	184	48	0	24	40	21	86	13	10	54	4
21.	F	10	94	37	21	72	146	6	44	43	38	14	88	24	10	67	4
22.	M	14	94	24	18	72	211	12	18	26	22	14	104	25	6	64	6
23.	M	12	67	42	17	68	194	0	24	26	60	23	121	22	6	58	22
24.	F	4	63	34	18	72	193	6	24	20	48	32	113	52	6	54	28