

Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language in Finland

In Finland, gender equality has been a central issue since the 1960s, which has visible results in many areas such as employment and politics (European Commission, 2017; Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2006). For this reason, the urge for inclusive language usage is strongly emphasized. There are no grammatical genders in Finnish language, biological sex can be expressed through the use of prefixes (*mies-*, *nais-*) and suffixes (*-nainen*, *-mies*, *-tar/-tär*). The usage of these strongly decreased in the past few decades, whereas there are still some problematic questions regarding gender-referring vocabulary, especially profession names (Huszár, 2009).

One of the main issues is the usage of *-mies* 'man', which is the most frequent gender-referring suffix, and which used to be immensely common in profession names, as for centuries, only men could do the jobs referred to by this morpheme. From the 1950s – as women could also fill these positions – the usage of this suffix started decreasing. However, in certain cases *-mies* is still used, mostly in professions requiring hard physical work and political or leading positions, e. g. *kaivosmies* 'mine+man = miner', *esimies* 'fore+man = superior' (Engelberg, 2018; Karlsson, 1974; Maticsák, 2001; Niemikorpi, 1998).

Supporters of inclusive language usage claim that gender-referring profession names are against objectivity and professionalism, as they draw unnecessary attention to biological sex instead of other, more job-relevant qualities (Tiirilä, 2020). This argument is in line with the European Union's guidelines for gender-neutral language usage, which suggests avoiding gender-referring prefixes and suffixes – not only in the case of *-mies*, but also in the case of women-referring suffixes, like *nais-* and *-tar/-tär* – and using gender-neutral forms whenever one exists (European Parliament, 2018; Council of the European Union, 2018).

According to the opposers of inclusive language usage, profession names containing *-mies* should not be considered sexist because the suffix in them became semantically neutral and its original meaning has faded. However, Tiirilä (2020) claims that the fading of meaning is only possible when the original meaning is no longer used in everyday language (like in the case of ancient tools, e. g. *harki* 'harrow' > *harkita* 'to consider'). As genders, men and women are existing and are constantly present, it is impossible that the meaning of *mies* has faded.

Moreover, referring to both genders by words containing an element meaning 'man', can be confusing in everyday situations. This contradicts the 9th Article of Administrative Act which ordains for authorities to use objective, clear and understandable language. On the contrary, according to opposers of inclusive language usage, it is the newly created, gender-neutral words that make understanding difficult. The reason is that speakers are not familiar with these words and they may sound strange and unnatural. Tiirilä (2020) agrees that some words may sound strange at first, but vocabulary is the most rapidly changing part of languages, and new words can become a part of everyday language very quickly.

The official standpoint of Suomen kielen lautakunta [Committee of Finnish Language] (2007) stresses the importance of inclusive language usage. Language usage that promotes gender equality is particularly important in legal and administrative language and media, as these have a great impact on creating and maintaining models for everyday language usage. However, in informal communication it is acceptable to use gender-referring words and profession names.

This standpoint triggered a heated debate. Opposers of inclusive language usage are of the opinion that inclusive language is a product of radical political views and assigning what words should journalists use and what to avoid restricts their freedom of speech (Heikkinen, 2017). Besides this, certain politicians believe that the gender-neutral language used in certain legal texts (namely the

renewal of Parental Leave Act) eliminates the biological reality of parenting, questions the traditional parental roles and destroys the natural family structure.

On the other hand, supporters of inclusive language usage claim that gender-neutral language conveys the message of equality which fits the accepting atmosphere of Finnish society. Equality is one of the most important values in Finland, it should be represented in their language (Tiililä, 2020).

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