SciencesPo

Note of Intent - Equalingua
Sciences Po School of Management and Innovation
The Great Transition

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Wait… your language is improving!

Current issues

Promoting equality between men and women is the 5th of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals that have to be solved in order to make a more sustainable world. Nowadays, people are more aware than ever of existing inequalities between genders: dozens of biases, stereotypes and thus discriminations are related to this issue. As a consequence, phenomenon like harassment, domestic violence, development of the rape culture, salaries inequalities, job opportunities inequalities (see appendix) … are rising.

However, one should wonder about language itself. Indeed, we use language on a daily basis without grasping the true impact it has on our own gender biases. Whether it be gendered languages (French, Spanish, German) or non-gendered ones (English), they bring stereotypes to life and embed them in our mindset and behavior. Using biased language when editing and passing laws, publishing hiring posts, writing books etc. can be detrimental for our mental representations of what a woman is and what a man.

Although it is hard to find quantitative data on such a qualitative topic, the studies that have been made are crystal clear and define our problem. A Harvard study on our perceptions showed that out of 846,020 respondents to a questionnaire on gender bias, 75% automatically associate men/career and women/family word pairs (see appendix). Another study conducted in 2019 by the University of Copenhagen, which analyzed more than 11 billion words from 3.5 million books, concluded that negative verbs associated with physical appearance occur five times more often in women descriptions than in men ones. The analysis also shows that positive and neutral adjectives related to appearance occur about twice as often in descriptions of female figures, while male adjectives are most often described using adjectives that refer to their behavior and personal qualities.

Some tools were implemented in order to face this issue but did not go further. For instance, the French academy has started addressing the issue studying the initiative of inclusive language, which did not succeed. Studies have shown that inclusive language does not allow us to overcome our biases. In other words, the use of a more neutral language is not enough to change mentalities.

Linguists, sociologists and international organizations must work together to reduce this inequality gap due to our language. Even companies and national institutions can get involved, and that is what we try to implement thanks to Equalingua.

Our concept

Equalingua aims at raising awareness about our embedded gender biases in our language. We are an independent company acting as an audit firm for gender matters. First, we propose a set of solutions to companies in order to fix their gender biases in all their public speeches or document. Our main solution is embodied in our app: Equalingua Writing Assistant. The application works like a word corrector, which is focused on nouns and adjectives we use every day, in order to change them and make the published document more neutral and not steered to a gender. Every time a company needs to post something, like a hiring sheet, it can first write it on the app. The app will then analyze sentences and put red flags on words that are biased or discriminant for a gender. For a specific adjective, we propose words options in order to erase any gender discrimination. Then, after a very accurate view of the company, we advise them on how they could reduce their gender inequalities through language. One year after, we come back to see how the company evolved with the use of our app and we decide if they deserve to get our Equalingua certification. This certification is relevant in the extent that CSR is now one of the first concerns that new graduates entering working world have when they choose to apply for a position in a company[1]. Our certification will therefore make our customer more appealing in the hiring process. We also improve life at work, making the promotion process less discriminating.

Who will be our customers? First of all, we are targeting private companies in order to collect data that we will then use to present our solutions to governmental/public institutions. In that way we could use the money collected thanks to our app to develop it and consolidate our solutions.

Expected positive impacts

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[1] McGuire, P. (2018, September 26). *Does corporate responsibility really matter to graduates?* Irish Times

The gradual adoption of a mode of neutral language, whether quantitative (ratio of messages sent in neutral language), or symbolic (large institutions such as justice, the French Academy are starting to adopt for example) would be a first positive impact. It could then enable us to get more data and assess awareness and efforts to combat the consequences of using a gendered language through polls and commitments. As our solution can be used by all types of entities, there are more specific advantages to each type:

- Individuals: if the company manages to get our certification, every employee will feel valued and will not be concerned by self-censorship when taking risk in the company or wanting to be promoted. This applies to women especially, and the stereotypes associated with their jobs. Thanks to our solution, we aim to prevent fast associations: the doctor is not necessarily a man, and the nurse a woman.

- Human resources sections in companies: gender biases are so embedded in our behaviors that HR managers do not question the way they communicate inside and outside companies' working teams. Our app will fix problems of terminologies in hiring posts, and communication within the company.

- Public institutions, language academies: they are our final targets because they regulate the way societies work. They are able to make deep changes in our language and the way it is perceived. We hope to present them our solution so that they can discuss about it and try to embed it in their work.

Major risks and actions to reduce them

A major issue could be related to the design of the application, especially regarding the AI in charge of proposing the alternative words. Indeed, some companies like Amazon faced the same issues when it came to select resumes for a specific position: like their AI was mainly designed by male engineers, it worsened the gap between men and women, considering "good" adjectives as

the ones that were part of previous hired engineers' resumes. Like most of them were male, the AI understood that a good future employee should have the qualities of a man's resume [2] (see appendix). Our concept is different and will take in consideration this original bias. The AI program will be the product of a committee, equally composed of men and women. The AI will not be left on its own but will permanently be reviewed by this committee in order to reduce possible development flaws.

Also, the company can make a lot of efforts to get our certification, and once obtained, stop making efforts and finally go back to their previous situation. We ensure to our customers that the certification has to be renewed every year. This process has to be followed up in order to have a greater impact on a company's management. Fight for equality is a long-run challenge and that is why Equalingua is committed to make the certification truly valuable.

Like an audit firm, we cannot assess every single document made by a company, and there is a moral hazard of people willing to have the certification without really changing their environment (lack of time, very slight commitment…). Therefore, we will use randomization and pick up documents haphazardly to make a sample. This sample will be used as a statistical evidence to give the certification. The threshold to give our certification is 95% of the analyzed documents.

Partnerships

In order to give visibility to our project, we want it to be a bridge between different institutions that could help us developing our solution.

First, we are going to get in touch with the EHESS (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales) and the SciencesPo "programme de recherche et d'enseignements des savoirs sur le genre" in order to get a first insight of the work we have to do and improve our tool. Our corrector could also be used to improve the Sciences Po program: this is a win-win situation for both our objectives.
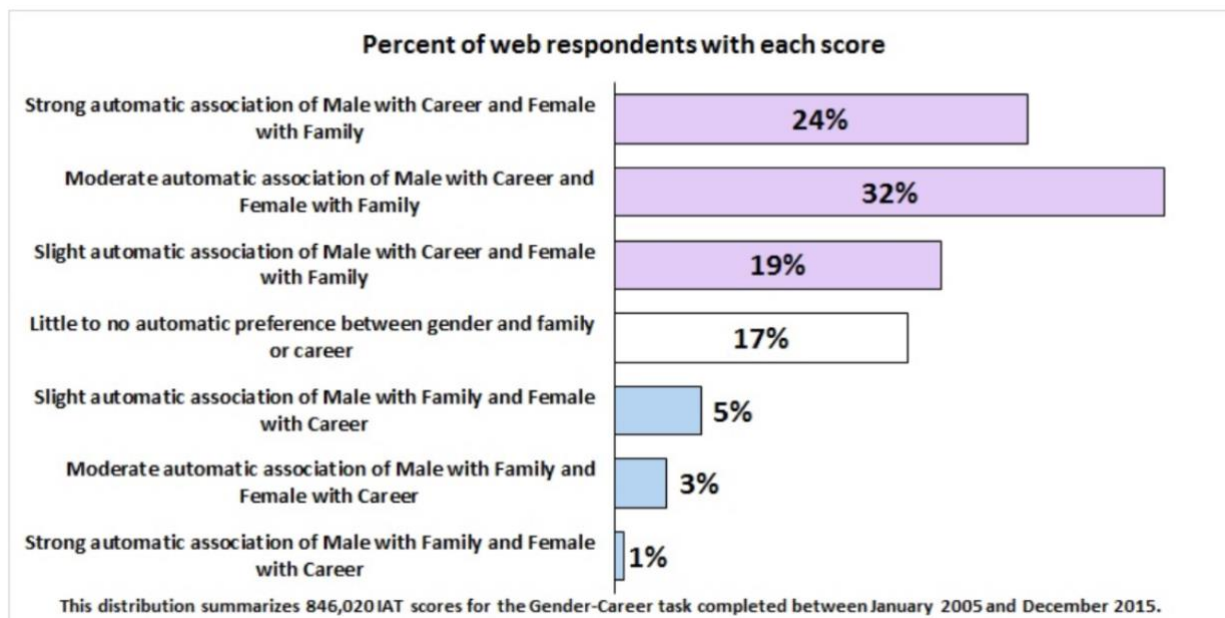
Eventually, we would like to be partner with the British Academy: this institution would help us to grasp the whole impact of language. Ultimately, we would like them to promote our certification.

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[2] Dastin, J. (2018, October 10). *Amazon scraps secret AI recruiting tool that showed bias against women*, Reuters
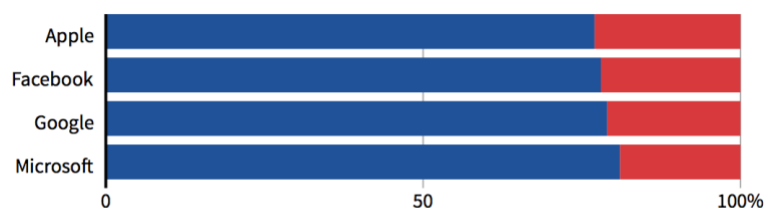
APPENDIX

IAT Gender-Career Test, Harvard University

Percent of web respondents with each score

Strong automatic association of Male with Career and Female with Family	24%
Moderate automatic association of Male with Career and Female with Family	32%
Slight automatic association of Male with Career and Female with Family	19%
Little to no automatic preference between gender and family or career	17%
Slight automatic association of Male with Family and Female with Career	5%
Moderate automatic association of Male with Family and Female with Career	3%
Strong automatic association of Male with Family and Female with Career	1%

This distribution summarizes 846,020 IAT scores for the Gender-Career task completed between January 2005 and December 2015.

Percentage of male and female in technical staff (AI, software development) in technology companies

GLOBAL HEADCOUNT

■ Male   ■ Female

Amazon	
Facebook	
Apple	
Google	
Microsoft	

0   50   100%
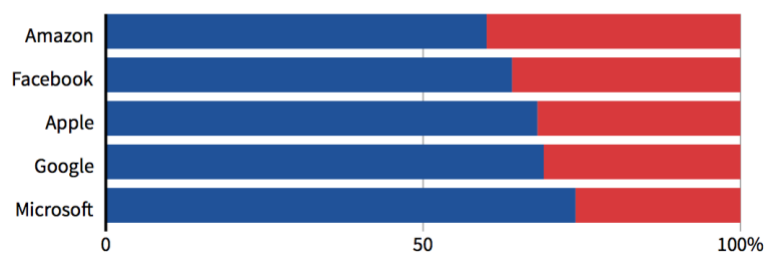
EMPLOYEES IN TECHNICAL ROLES

Apple	
Facebook	
Google	
Microsoft	

0   50   100%

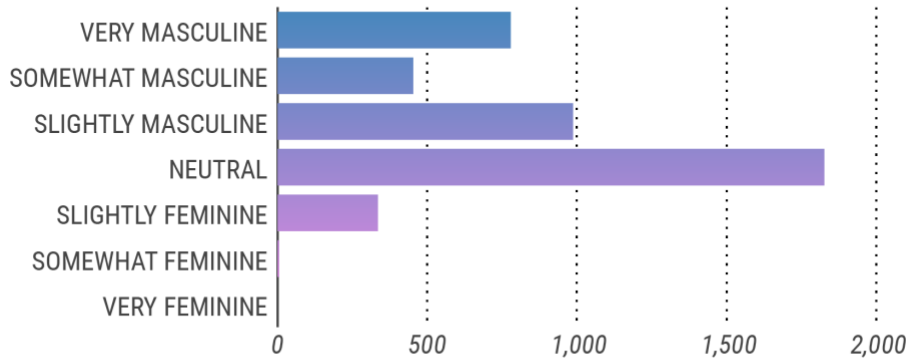Note: Amazon does not disclose the gender breakdown of its technical workforce.
Source: Latest data available from the companies, since 2017.
By Han Huang | REUTERS GRAPHICS

Example of Walmart in biased job posts

51% of Walmart job posts use language that skews male

Of the 4,385 Walmart job descriptions that Fortune analyzed, more than half used language that skews male. Textio predicts that jobs with neutral language perform best, attracting higher quality candidates and getting filled an average of two weeks faster.