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# Grammatical Aspects of Feminatives Through the Ukrainian Prism

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**Funding:** No specific funding was received for this work.

**Potential competing interests:** No potential competing interests to declare.

## Abstract

This article aims to study the grammatical and social aspects of the use of feminatives in the Ukrainian language on the basis of terminology science. It was shown that adding in text extra feminatives as simply opposed to masculinitives may result in a number of inconsistencies leading to violation of grammatical and phonological rules and to the degradation of the language expressive ability. Not doing much to make a woman more visible, this opposition, in particular, leaves no room for correctly identifying non-binary persons and personified objects.

As a possible solution, we propose to recognize the general gender combining simple genders by the logical “OR”, the existence of which follows from the analysis of the language practice. The corresponding nouns should be used instead of the masculine names in the generalizing function.

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**Keywords:** feminine, gender, terminology science, apt term criteria, non-binary persons, personification, Ukrainian grammar.

## Introduction

Feminatives are getting more and more prevalent from one language to another. Following the global trend, the Ukrainian media have been recently flooded with feminatives. Even though language enrichment is, in principle, a positive phenomenon, a number of problems in the operation of feminatives have been revealed resulting in a kind of rather slack acceptance of these by Ukrainian society and especially by the majority of professional linguists. For example, *Лариса Кислюк* reminds us that “the use of masculine nouns as “title names” in the official business style is fixed in the language

tradition and rules of etiquette”<sup>1</sup> (2018, 456–457). Алла Архангельська observes that even the “feminative-friendly” Czech language displays significant restrictions on their use (2019, 376). In particular, she cites the Czech grammar textbook that complete elimination from the communication of masculine forms in the generalizing function of the type *studenti, žáci, učitelé*, when they refer to a group of people regardless of their gender (as advocated by feminist linguistics), will result in undesirable consequences for the language system, as the hierarchical structure of word-formation tools and the lexical system as a whole will be weakened (Šticha 2011, 575). The researcher resumes that feminatives as means of linguistic identification of a woman do not emphasize her social status, so in a positive context linguists definitely prefer traditional “masculine” forms (2019, 376). Олександр Тараненко points out that linguistic androcentrism cannot be regarded as an attitude of the society to a woman, predicting that “the numerous and diverse traces of linguistic “patriarchy” in the language structures of European civilization nations, in particular in the Slavic and Romance ones are sure to remain, though in a somewhat weakened form,” and concludes that “different ways of overcoming linguistic “inequality” of females observed in modern languages and those found within gender linguistics, along with the evident upsides, impose some restrictions in realization” (2020, 46). However, this academic adherence to the obsolete paradigm of “masculine vs feminine” helps little in solving the fundamental problem to be equally represented regardless of gender and motivates the opponents to act more actively and even rashly. At the same time, the Ukrainian language, possessing highly developed grammatical tools and a long tradition of naming women, can serve as an expressive example in resolving issues connected with feminatives worldwide.

If there is a social demand for feminatives, there should be professional researches carried out on the grammatical, stylistic, and semantic preconditions for the use of these. As far as these units may be considered as terms, the term theory should be applied. Therefore, this problem requires the combined application of statistical and analytical methods of terminology science (Vakulenko 2014, 20–28; Вакуленко 2020, 12–15), where, following (Адмони 1964, 81-82), the statistical method acts in the symptomatic sense (unlike mathematical statistics, symptomatic statistics is mostly about occurrences rather than quantities).

At the verification phase of terminology management (see Bussey 2020), the apt (appropriate) term tokens (Vakulenko and Meljnyk 2014, 36; Вакуленко 2020, 11) should be applied, where the criteria of **essentiality** (coverage of key aspects of the concept and absence of false associations), **derivativity** (ability to easily create derivatives of the word), **good sound** (concordance with phonotactic rules), **organic nature** (compliance with spelling and language tendencies), **unambiguity**, and **brevity** are relevant to feminatives. This covers the morphologic structure, stylistics, semantics, and other linguistic areas. The terminology theory obliges that if the units are newly created, they should successfully meet necessary requirements.

## Results and discussion

To be specific, we will analyze the feminative set given in (Плачинда 2018).

According to the statistical method, there are 13 problematic units out of 257 entries, which is more than 5%. The

analytical method reveals the following.

The words *bokserka* ('female boxer'), *mashynistka* ('female machinist') *molochnycja* ('milkmaid'), *oficerka* ('female officer'), *pasichnycja* ('female beekeeper'), *zastupnycja* ('female deputy') denote also a T-shirt or sport shoes, female typer, thrush, an officers' mess, a beekeeper's wife, and ausiliatrice, respectively (Грінченко 1958–1959; Городенська 2016, 43), thus violating the requirement of essentiality. This inability to correctly express the desired sense is rather typical to feminatives. For example, an *elektrychka* is a suburban train, rather than a female electrician; *apanamka* is a hat, rather than a female citizen of Panama; an *ughorka* is a sort of plums, rather than a female citizen of Hungary. These semantic issues are the consequences of the fundamental law of linguistic sign asymmetry (Karcevskij 1929).

The inner form of the word *barmenka* ('female barista') relates it to the 'man' which also signifies the lack of essentiality.

The words *istorykynja* ('female historian'), *mystkynja* ('female artist'), *chlenkynja* ('female member') having a phoneme /k/ before the /y/ in a rare suffix "yni", do not comply with the rule of positional alternation of Ukrainian phonemes. If a phoneme /k/ is followed by a suffix starting with an /y/, it turns into a /ch/: *bijka* – *bijchynja*, *mamka* – *mamchyna*, *turok* – *turchyn*, *vovk* – *vovchycja*, etc. Іван Вагилевич (1965) lists also the variant *lemchynja* as one of the derivatives of *lemko*. So, the exceptions to this rule exist only for rare words that did not have time to acquire their normal form. Since the word end formant "-ynja" is relatively infrequent in Ukrainian, so the decisive role here is not the etymology of the suffix and not even the palatalization of velars /k/, /gh/, /x/ but the phonetic and phonological similarity of the corresponding contemporary morphemes. Therefore, the words ending with "-kynja" are not natural (organic) to the Ukrainian language.

The variant *kolezhanka* ('female colleague') is derived from the word *kolegha* which is of common gender (both masculine and feminine) that indicates a violation of the criterion of organic nature (naturalness).

The *pidpryjemnycja* ('female entrepreneur') is derived from a non-existing form *\*pidpryjemnyk*, thus violating the requirement of naturalness.

The feminine *ambasadorka* ('female ambassador') which is associated with the word *posolstvo* (< *posol*) having a differing stem, does not meet the criterion of derivativity. Generally speaking, all feminatives display this inability to form their own derivatives.

All these facts indicate degradation of the expressing capacity of language.

Now we will proceed to some more general observations.

Given that the feminatives are formed by adding an extra suffix and an ending, they are usually longer than the "masculine" forms, thus losing in brevity. In addition, they are supposed to be used along with "masculinitives", contrary to the language's tendency to eliminate redundancy of expression means (Серебрянников 1970, 250). That is, satisfactory compensation from other criteria should be expected. However, this cannot be the case because of denotation deficiency resulting from the linguistic sign asymmetry.

This asymmetry has another important consequence for feminatives: the exact one-to-one correspondence between the

social and the grammatical gender is not achievable.

First of all, what about **non-binary** persons? And what about those who have been changing their gender more than once? Is it appropriate to reflect this gender shift in the professional service chapter of their CV? The use of feminatives as opposed to masculinitives is aimed to positively discriminate against women, but this is done at the expense of non-binary and other persons who belong to even more deprived groups. Then it appears that we should either invent special variants for all kinds of non-binaries (which is grammatically impossible) or come up with some other and more fundamental solution.

Next, what about **personification** which is a common technique in fairy tales? Its application assumes that any living being and even any subject name should be prone to acquire necessary gender features (including non-binary, of course) which is impossible to realize within the paradigm “masculinitive vs feminative” (cf. Вакуленко 2018).

Then, do feminatives really help to make women more **visible**? The most effective gender indicator is a name, not a profession. At the same time, the Ukrainian female surnames with masculine endings “-yshyn” and “-iv” are still common: *Fedoryshyn, Kukharchyshyn, Ivankiv, Jurkiv*, etc. Let us recall the inability of feminatives to form their own derivatives which also restricts the alleged “visibility”. For example, a *\*dyrektorka* is supposed to work in her *dyrektorskyj kabinet* (‘director’s office’, derived from *direktor*), and a *\*doktorka* is supposed to have her *doktorsjka dysertacija* (‘doctoral thesis’, derived from *doktor*) that lose all feminine features.

Such inconsistencies happen in other languages, too. Though the female professors at the Ca’ Foscari Venice University appear as “Professoressa”, the masculine endings “-i”, “-o” are kept in their surnames: *Cerasi, Cesiri, Masiero, Santulli, Tosi, Turano*<sup>2</sup>. The same happens in the German language where the formant “mann” (‘man’) appears in the surnames of women and in the word “die Mannschaft” (‘team’) which is used even for teams of women. This “mannish” tradition is unlikely to be eradicated because the formant “man” became a base for many important concepts, including “woman” and “human”.

The negative attitude of the majority of Ukrainian women towards feminatives which is reported in (Архангельська 2019) and recognized also in (Плачинда 2018), grounds on the semantic load of feminatives that implies segregation, relating women to an inferior category. Except for historical non-prestigious “female” professions, feminatives are traditionally used in sports to denote female athletes that compete, in most cases, separately from men. In order to provide positive discrimination for women who would have little chance if competing with men, the European Commission offers grants exclusively for female researchers<sup>3</sup>. This linguistic tradition may not be ignored.

The solution to the above-mentioned problems does exist, and not only for Ukrainian. Let us pay attention to the fact that there appear nouns, pronouns, and verbs (in the past tense) that do not have a definite gender (cf. Вакуленко 2018): *dity* (‘children’), *batjky* (‘parents’), *ljudy* (‘people’), *druzi* (‘friends’), *istoty* (‘beings’); *molodecj* (‘well-doing person’), *mrecj* (‘dead’), *mudrecj* (‘sage’), *predok* (‘ancestor’); *khto* (‘who’), *nikhto* (‘nobody’), and so on. We should add here the names of animals, insects, and other living beings that have certain grammatical gender which does not correlate with their biological sex: *kyt* (‘whale’), *mavpa* (‘ape’), *zebra* (‘zebra’), *linyvecj* (‘sloth’), *peresmishnyk* (‘mocking bird’), *akula* (‘shark’),

*krab* ('crab'), *tunecj* ('tun'), *krevetka* ('shrimp'), *moljusk* ('clam'), *ravlyk* ('snail'), *lychynka* ('larva'), *komar* ('mosquito'), *mukha* ('fly').

The examples of phrases displaying this phenomenon may be the following: *nikhto ne buv ghotovyj do cjogho* ('no one was ready for this'); *cja ljudyna – spravzhnij fakhivecj* ('this person is a real specialist'); *kozhen iz nas mozhe skazaty svojjj polovynci: "Ty – mij skarb"* ('each of us can say to our partner: "You are my treasure"'); *odnogho z batjkiv togho, khto ce zrobyv, proshu pryjty do klasnogho kerivnyka* ('one of the parents of the person who have this done, is asked to come to the classroom teacher'). What is the gender of *nikhto*, *ljudyna*, *fakhivecj*, *kozhen*, *nas*, *polovynku*, *skarb*, *khta* given that the verbs *buv* and *zrobyv*, and the adjective *ghotovyj* are masculine? What if it were a girl? What is the gender of *odnogho* and *batjkiv*, given that the pronoun's ending indicates the masculine gender but this is probably a mother?

Here further questions arise. If we agree to forge a feminine 'fakhivchynja' for a female specialist, do we need to invent a masculine form for 'ljudyna' (which is feminine in Ukrainian) for a male specialist? What about non-binary specialists? What to do with the feminine Ukrainian word "polovynka" and masculine "skarb" to make them "neutral" for each gender?

The next example is even more eloquent. Let's compare two phrases, the first one written in the "traditional" style, and the second with a feminine.

U nich pered ekzamenom cej student zdaten na te, chogho ne navazhuvavsja zrobyty protjaghom cilogho semestru ('On the night before the exam, this student is able to do something that they did not dare to do during the whole semester').

U nich pered ekzamenom cej student i cja studentka zdatni na te, chogho ne navazhuvalysja zrobyty protjaghom cilogho semestru ('On the night before the exam, this student and this *studentka* are able to do something that they did not dare to do during the whole semester').

Do these two sentences mean the same things?

Thus we may conclude that the language practice requires recognition of the **general gender** (Ukr. *zaghaljnyj rid*, Rus. *oguljnyj rod*), which is a combined gender like the common one and acts in place of the masculine in the generalizing function (Vakulenko 2018). In contrast to the common gender, the general gender combines simple genders using the logical "OR" instead of the "AND". Note that the rise of such combined genders is a consequence of the language's tendency for the grammatical gender to disappear.

So, the words *chlen* ('member'), *profesor* ('professor'), *zastupnyk* ('deputy'), *osoba* ('person'), *ljudyna* ('human'), *dytyna* ('child'), etc., used in the generalized function, should be considered as having a general gender, though they display formal grammatical characteristics of masculine or feminine genders. The same goes for personification. If the name of the profession is denoted by a substantive participle, like *upovnovazhenyj* ('authorized'), we should keep in mind the omitted noun that was present in the full form of this collocation. In this case, the lacking noun is *predstavnyk* ('representative') which governs the grammatical gender of the profession name (masculine acting as general).

Then the problems to name non-binaries and personified objects obtain a necessary and achievable solution.

Then the feminatives may be used if biological sex or social gender is emphasized, prevalently in the conversational style: *avtorka* ('a woman who writes'), *doslidhnycja* ('a woman doing research'), *filologhynja* ('a woman doing philology'), *likarka* ('a woman doing medical treatment'), *spivrobotnycja* ('a co-working woman'), *vchyteljka* ('a woman doing teaching'), etc. For example: *svoju pershu vchyteljku dity pam'jatatymutj use zhyttja* ('the children will remember their first *uchyteljka* all their life'); *cja avtorka ghlyboko rozkryvaje zhinoche jestvo* ('this *avtorka* deeply reveals the feminine essence'); *ja poznajomyvsja z cikavoju filologhyneju i khochu z neju zustrichatsja* ('I got acquainted with the interesting *filologhynja* and I want to meet her'); *nasha spivrobotnycja peremoghla na zhinochomu shakhovomu turniri* ('our *spivrobotnycja* won the women's chess tournament). But: *vona – Vchytelj z velykoji litery* ('she is a Teacher with a capital letter'); *sered nashykh spivrobotnykiv lyshe odna zhinka* ('there is only one woman among our employees'), etc.

The names of female athletes and some historical professions are used also in the official style *futbolistka* ('female football player'), *plavchynja* ('female swimmer'), *medsestra* ('nurse').

## Conclusion

So, having applied the terminological approach, we investigated the grammatical and some social aspects of the use of feminatives in Ukrainian and other languages. It was demonstrated that the unrestricted use of feminatives results in the deterioration of the communicative function of a language. In particular, this leaves unresolved the problems of correctly denote non-binary persons and personalized objects, as well as the task to make a woman more "visible". It was shown also that the feminatives with the final formant "-kynja" hardly comply with the Ukrainian phonology. It is proposed to recognize the general gender which combines simple genders by means of the logical "OR" and may serve as the basis to successfully resolve all mentioned issues.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Вживання іменників чоловічого роду як «титульних імен» в офіційно-діловому стилі закріплене мовною традицією і правилами етикету.

<sup>2</sup> Università Ca' Foscari Venezia. Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Culturali Comparati. URL: <https://www.unive.it/pag/16871/>.

<sup>3</sup> The REWIRE Programme: REinforcing Women In Research. URL: <https://rewire.univie.ac.at/>.

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