Guy, Guys, and Gender Neutrality

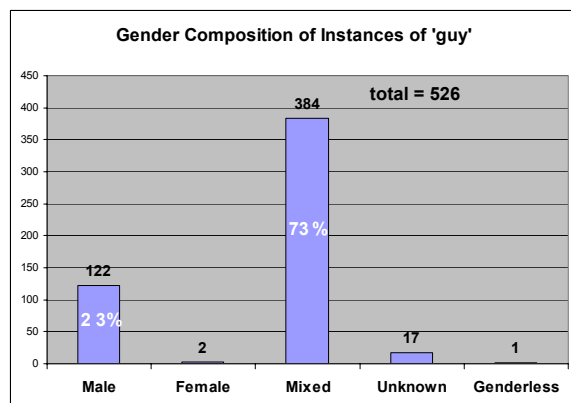**Sean McLennan   Indiana University   CLS 40   040415**

Introduction

• It is common to hear forms of the word 'guy' in reference to mixed groups of people or women exclusively despite its undeniably male connotation and historical meaning.

• Unusual given gender-aware language reform brought on by the feminist movement – this usage appears to have slipped in under our "cultural radar".

• This usage has been criticized as sexist and compared to the (so-called) generic 'man' and 'he' (Hofstadter, 1997; Clancy, 1999).

• The present study (a corpus analysis) illuminates some important differences between 'guy' and 'man' and 'he' that suggest they cannot be meaningfully compared.
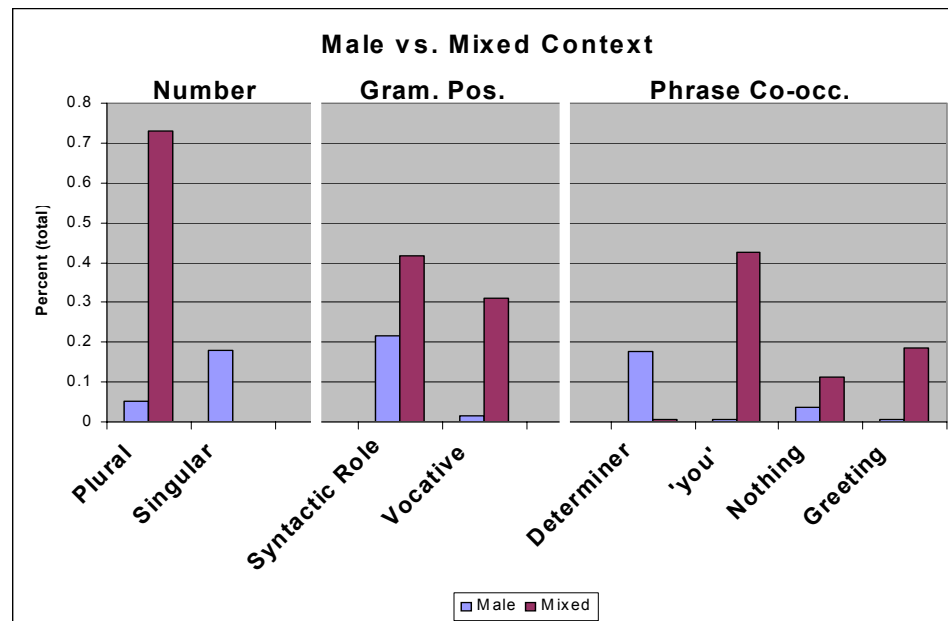
Corpus Analysis

• E-mail:
- computational nature
- static community
- restricted demographics
- known community where referents are more clearly interpretable
- computational tractability

• Corpus:
- 1879 e-mail messages
- closed list
- approx 70 participants
- primarily Canadian undergrads
- nearly equal gender ratio
- Nov. 1998 - Oct. 2002

• Factors Examined:
- number: singular vs. plural
- grammatical position: subject, object, ind. object, vocative
- phrasal co-occurrence: determiners, 'you', 'hey/hi', etc.
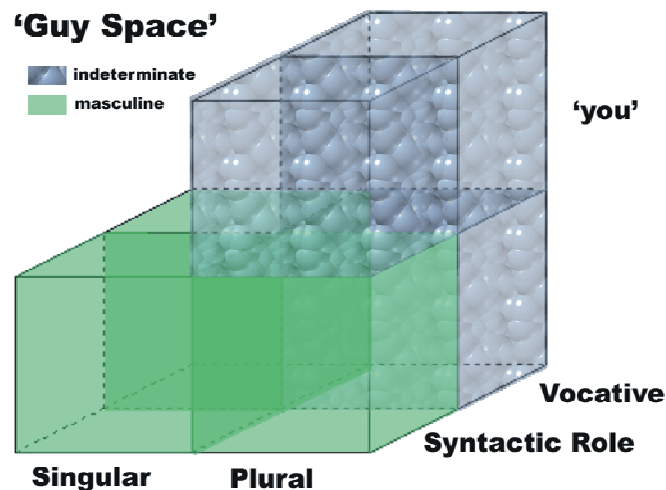- gender composition of referent: male, female, mixed, unknown, genderless

Results

• of 526 instances, 384 (73%) had mixed-gender referents. 122 (23%) had exclusively male referents

Gender Composition of Instances of 'guy'

• distribution of other factors:

Male vs. Mixed Context

• nearly mutually exclusive in distribution with one exception: "syntactic roles"

• "syntactic roles" (= subj, obj, or ind. obj): mixed instances are 98% 'you guys' vs. male instances which are only 3% 'you guys'

• 3 dimensions of grammatical context 'guy space': ± plural, ±'you', ±vocative are sufficient to predict 98% of the referents in this data

'Guy Space'

Discussion

- comparing the so-called "generic" uses of 'guy', 'man' and 'he'

guy	man	he
high frequency (73%)	low frequency (5%)	low frequency (3%) (Graham, 1975)
highly predictable from grammatical context	marginally predictable from grammatical context	not predictable from grammatical context
historical change in direction of neutrality	historical change in direction of specificity	prescriptivist imposition (Bodine, 1975)
non-gendered imagery (?) (Bodine, 1996)	gendered imagery	gendered imagery
balances lexical paradigms	in conflict with existing paradigm	in conflict with existing paradigm

Conclusion

- while the results of this present study may not be completely generalizable to standard English, it provides sufficient evidence to seriously question a comparison between the usage of 'man' and 'he' in the generic sense.
- the evidence presented here supports the hypothesis that unlike 'man' and 'he', 'guy' is becoming polysemous with one interpretation that is exclusively masculine, and another that is neutral with respect to gender.
- this conclusion is consistent with the lack of feminist outcry at this apparently sexist use of 'guy' as a generic.

References

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