

Title of Presentation:

Backlash and Bilingual Practice in the Gulf: Tracing Gender-Inclusive Reference and Institutional Contestation across L1 Arabic and L2 English Student Writing

Abdelhamid M. AHMED¹ & Lameya M. REZK²

1. Assistant Professor of English Language Education Core Curriculum Program, Deanship of General Studies, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar
2. Assistant Professor of English Language Education, Department of Educational Sciences, College of Education, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar

Domain of focus: Education (higher-education writing instruction)

Abstract

We contextualise our findings within documented institutional and policy resistance to gender-inclusive language in the region (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2014). This within-writer corpus study analyses 195 paired essays by Arabophone undergraduates, comprising 98,807 English tokens and 95,582 Arabic tokens, to test cross-language transfer of inclusive strategies. Using concordance searches and normalised rates, we distinguished singular versus plural they by antecedent features and coded Arabic strategies beyond gender morphology, including balanced binary pairs, collective nouns, and impersonal formulations.

In the English sub-corpus, we validated 21 instances of ‘singular they’ among 830 tokens of they, equal to 2.53 per cent of all they and 2.13 per 10,000 tokens. Most tokens followed generic human antecedents such as ‘a student,’ ‘an individual,’ ‘the learner,’ or ‘a person,’ and clustered in conditional or modal frames, aligning with contemporary guidance that endorses the singular ‘they’ in academic writing. In the Arabic sub-corpus, Arabic essays also deploy third-person plural pronouns and clitics: 407 tokens in 95,582 Arabic tokens (42.6 per 10,000) when counting stand-alone forms (هم/هن/هما) plus high-precision prepositional clitics (لهم/معهم/بينهم/عليهم/....). Within these, singular-they candidates—where a singular human antecedent licenses plural pronominal reference—are 8/407 (1.97%; \approx 0.8 per 10,000), with explicit inclusive markers otherwise rare.

We read these asymmetries as consistent with policy-mediated resistance alongside grammatical constraints, rather than with grammar alone. The relevance to the broader “backlash” conversation lies in how unsettled guidance and prescriptive traditions shape institutional practice and classroom expectations in Arabic-medium contexts, while English outcomes align with established style recommendations (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, 2014; El-Farahaty, 2023; American Psychological Association, 2020). Implications include reinforcing the use of singular ‘they’ in English-medium writing instruction and, for Arabic-medium instruction, adopting ESCWA-consistent style sheets for collectives and balanced pairs, as well as developing corpus-informed prompts for automated feedback across curricula. These steps target instructional touchpoints where resistance materialises and support instructors and students in navigating inclusivity without sanction.

Keywords: backlash; policy contestation; Gulf higher education; gender-inclusive language; singular they; Arabic academic writing; gendered morphology; within-writer corpus; bilingual writing; pedagogy and policy.

References

- American Psychological Association. (2020). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (7th ed.). <https://apastyle.apa.org/products/publication-manual-7th-edition>
- Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. (2014). *Guidelines for gender-sensitive language: English and Arabic*. https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/services/doc/guidelines_gender-sensitive_language_e-a.pdf
- El-Farahaty, H. (2023). A comparative investigation of gender terminology in the Egyptian and Tunisian constitutions. *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11196-023-09991-0>
- Mustafawi, E., & Shaaban, K. (2019). Language policies in education in Qatar, 2003–2012. *Language Policy*, 18(2), 209–242. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-018-9483-5>

Presenters' Bios

Dr. Abdelhamid M. AHMED is Assistant Professor of English Language Education at Qatar University and an Honorary Senior Researcher at the University of Exeter, UK. His work spans corpus construction, cross-linguistic discourse, metadiscourse analysis, metalinguistic understanding, and educational technology. He co-founded the Qatari Corpus of Argumentative Writing. His projects advance digital pedagogy and bilingual scholarship across Qatar and the GCC.

Dr. Lameya M. REZK is Assistant Professor of English Language Education at Qatar University and Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter, UK. Specialising in metadiscourse, corpus linguistics, and L2 writing, she investigates how learners develop metalinguistic awareness in English and Arabic writing. Dr. Rezk publishes cross-linguistic studies and presents internationally, contributing timely insights into second-language academic prose.