Chairman or chairperson? Or perhaps chair?

Swedish upper secondary school students’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards unbiased and ‘politically correct’ English usage

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Abstract
The aim of this essay was to investigate the knowledge of, and attitudes towards unbiased English usage amongst Swedish upper secondary school students. For the purpose of this study, a survey was carried out at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden. In the theoretical background section, terms such as political correctness and gender-neutral language use are defined. In addition, references are made to studies in the United States and Europe on students’ awareness of these aspects of language.

For the present study, a survey was carried out in which 41 students answered 13 questions in written form. The students attend their third year at four different programmes at upper secondary school.

The results show that a majority of the students are very aware of the sensitivity of referring to persons of colour, and they are even afraid of being perceived as racists if they use terms such as black American. As regards non-sexist language use, the Swedish students were aware of the fact that terms such as firefighter and police officer can be used to designate both men and women. However, the students have little knowledge of the title Ms and of the neutral alternative to chairman, chair.
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*Questionnaire to Swedish upper secondary school students*
1. Introduction

In the 1980s, a strong movement started to have a great impact on American society. People became increasingly concerned with the language used to describe those looked upon as being disadvantaged or oppressed in society. The focus was on changing the conditions for people belonging to a certain ethnic group or of a certain sexual orientation, as well as to level out the inequalities between women and men. The aim was to eradicate prejudice in society, as well as in language (Crystal 2003: 177).

The political groups fighting for change often belonged to progressive movements whose aim was to protect the rights of minorities. The movement became especially strong in universities, and soon the institutions for higher education became the battleground for those who proposed language reforms, and those political groups, mostly right-wing, who saw these as a limitation of freedom of speech (Crystal 2003: 177).

In the nineties, the so-called language war grew stronger, and those who advocated changes in language were often referred to as being politically correct, or PC. More and more people were afraid of being perceived as politically incorrect and tried desperately to avoid using biased or sexist language. Examples of words that became extremely sensitive to use were black in reference to somebody’s ethnic group, as well as in other contexts; mentally handicapped people were now to be referred to as people with learning difficulties (Crystal 2003: 177).

In the mid-nineties, there was a strong reaction to this language politics that many found to be extreme and even absurd. Those referred to as the politically correct were also derogatorily called the thought police, mostly by conservative politicians and the media (Crystal 2003: 177).

According to Crystal (2003), those who argue for the use of politically correct speech claim that the usage of non-biased and non-sexist language helps eradicate the inequalities in society. However, the opponents of PC argue that language reforms are to be considered as only “make-up”, and that they hide the underlying problems of inequalities in society (Crystal 2003: 177).

The term gender-neutral language is often mentioned in the same contexts as political correctness. This is something that is being criticized by feminists who claim that the importance of using non-sexist language in a modern society has been obscured by the often-ridiculed usage of political correctness (Mills 2003). The usage of PC in an ironic way has
also limited the introduction of language reforms, something that many see as vital in the struggle against discrimination.

Much criticism has been put forward against the biases that have been, and still are, frequent in English vocabulary and grammar. The focus of language reforms has been on the vocabulary, and how “male” words with generic meaning, such as chairman and salesman, should be changed into inclusive words such as chair or chairperson and sales assistant. These changes have been welcomed by those who believe that changes in language render changes in society and alter the inequality that exists between men and women (Crystal 2003: 368). However, the reform attempts have also been met with scepticism. It is believed that the usage of e.g. chairperson leads to another kind of bias, and studies have shown that chairman is frequently being used when referring to men, while chairperson is often reserved for females. Critics say that chairperson has become a euphemism for women in certain circumstances (Peterson 1994:6).

In the research made for this paper, most of the relevant books and articles deal with political correctness and the use of gender-neutral language in the United States and countries such as France, Germany and Italy (Mucchi 2005; Galloway 2001). In these countries, studies have been made of students’ knowledge of and attitudes towards non-racist and non-sexist language. The focus of this essay is to carry out a study of the awareness of these aspects of language in Sweden and its upper secondary schools.

The starting point of this essay is that a considerate use of language is important in society in general and in our schools. Furthermore, it is of great interest that upper secondary school students and teachers reflect on their use of language, and that they strive for a language that is clear, accurate and sensitive to others. Adopting a reflective attitude towards language becomes a basis for good communication that is neither biased nor sexist.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the awareness of, and attitudes towards non-sexist and non-racist English usage amongst Swedish upper secondary school students. Furthermore, their ideas on what is called politically correct language will be investigated. For the purpose of this study, a survey will be carried out at an upper secondary school in southern Sweden regarding these questions.

The research questions for the present study are the following:

1. What is the level of knowledge as regards non-sexist, non-racist and “politically correct” language in English amongst upper secondary school students in Sweden?
2. What are the students’ opinions on these aspects of language? Are they of any importance to them, and do they reflect upon them? What choices as regards vocabulary and style of language do the students make?

2. Theoretical background

2.1 What is political correctness?

According to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 262), the term political correctness originated within political groups belonging to the left. They used the term to ridicule those colleagues they saw as being too self-righteous and serious. The authors further claim that the term was later taken over by conservative groups who have used it to denigrate those groups advocating social and language change.

However, long before the term politically correct was coined, language reform as a means to change society had been used. One clear example of such language change is the gradual replacement of the word Negro with African American, via Black American, to describe black people living in America. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet state that the descendants of African slaves were initially, “politely” named Negroes. This was the word used by the majority of the American people before the 1950s. During the 50s, the civil rights movement grew stronger and the slogan ‘Black is beautiful’ was now heard, as a demonstration of pride among the black population. This was also a strong protest against the racists who used the word nigger in an extremely derogative way (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003:262).

One generation later, black people wanted to reclaim and emphasize their origin, and they started to use Afro-American and American of African descent to label themselves. This was later followed by African American, which is the most popular term used in the present day. However, black is still commonly used and in more recent years, nigger, now often spelled niggah and pronounced differently, has been reclaimed by e.g. rap groups as a sign of brotherhood and kinship.

Among people with Latin American ancestry, there are similar discussions on how they should label themselves. Some people prefer Latino/a, since they see Hispanic as a term decided by others, while others prefer the same term Hispanic. They see the use of this word as a means to form coalitions between people originating from Latin America (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 262ff).
2.2 Gender-neutral language use

In *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (2003), Crystal argues that many important changes in language have been undertaken since society now looks differently at sexist language and its consequences. English is one of the languages that have undergone most change, to a more gender-neutral usage. According to Crystal, this is due to the great impact of the feminist movement in America. The promotion of gender-neutral language has led to new laws concerning language. One example is the law against sexist language in job advertisements (Crystal 2003: 368).

Another focus of language policies has been the lack of a gender-neutral third person singular pronoun in English. Crystal gives an example of a sentence where the problem is apparent:

> If a student should lose _ key, _ should report the loss to the bursar.

Following a more traditional use, the gaps would be filled with *he* and *his*, a clear case of the generic usage of male pronouns. This has been heavily criticized by language reformists who promote the use of *he* or *she*, or *she or he*, whereas the form *(s)he* is often used in writing. In the case of the sentence mentioned above, writers often change the structure of the sentence to avoid the problem. This can be done by initiating the sentence with: “If students lose their key...” (Crystal 2003: 368).

There has been, and still is, a strong debate over how much the language should and could be changed without losing its true identity. One example, which has been heavily debated, is changing traditional idioms such as *man in the street* and *Neanderthal Man*. For women who would not like to be judged solely on the basis of being married or not, and consequently being referred to as either *Mrs* or *Miss*, the more independent and neutral *Ms* has been introduced.

In 1992, *the Linguistic Society of America* offered clear guidelines to the usage of non-sexist language. Here are some examples from these guidelines (Crystal 2003: 369).

- Avoid so-called masculine generics, such as the pronoun *he* with sex-indefinite antecedents or *man* and its compounds (except in unambiguous reference to males).
- Avoid using genuine generics as if they referred only to males (e.g. “Americans use lots of obscenities but not around women”).
- Use parallel forms of reference for women and men, e.g. do not cite a male scholar by surname only and a female scholar by first name plus surname.
2.3 Students’ attitudes towards language change and gender-neutral language

The main argument from those who advocate language change is, as mentioned earlier, that such a change will also change the attitudes towards those regarded as “disadvantaged” in society. Therefore it is interesting to investigate what members of the young generation think about language reforms; which of the new words and phrases do they use and which of them has been rejected?

In 2001, Galloway carried out a survey among students at San Francisco State University regarding their opinions on language change and politically correct speech. The students answered multiple-choice questions and later explained their answers further in follow-up interviews. In the survey, the students were asked to choose among examples taken from The Official Politically Correct Dictionary and Handbook by Beard and Cerf (1993). The students had to decide how they would label people belonging to a certain ethnic group, gender or “disadvantaged” group.

The first choice the students had to make was between the terms Black, African American and person of color. The results showed that 64% of the students would use Black, 17% African American, while 11% would use these two as well as person of color.

When choosing between chairperson, chairman or chair, the majority of the students chose the gender inclusive chairperson; approximately half as many chose the generic masculine form of chairman, whereas only 11% used chair.

To account for one final example of this survey, when choosing between mankind, humankind and man, 41% preferred mankind to 29% for humankind. Actually, 23% added the term humanity that was not included in the questionnaire (Galloway 2001).

Galloway concludes that the alternatives to the gender-biased terms, such as chairman, have taken a stronger hold than the alternative terms to race-biased expressions. In addition, the writer claims that there has been a backlash to language reforms connected to political correctness, and that this may have hindered a faster progress.

In her study, Galloway also asked the students to state their opinions on the language change movement. The majority of the group of students thought that the changes were somewhat positive, while others did not think that they had had any positive effects whatsoever. Other opinions that the students brought forward were that PC language can be offensive as well, and that political correctness can be a way to avoid dealing with, what they argued were, “the real problems in society” (Galloway 2001).

According to Galloway “prejudice, racism, inequality, and powerlessness cannot be grappled with without honest, open dialogue” (Galloway 2001). The author further states that
laws against and discouragement of certain words and phrases will not help in the fight against prejudice. In addition, she argues that the backlash against PC may have to do with the lack of humour amongst its proponents. As an alternative, Galloway gives the examples of comedians such as Richard Pryor who used humour to display some of the absurdities in American society (Galloway 2001).

Galloway endorses the reforms to make the language use more sensitive and understanding. However, she criticizes the tendency of politically correct language to be repressive, and she hopes that this will not obscure the good intentions (Galloway 2001).

2.4 Gender-inclusive or gender-exclusive language

In her article, *Visible or influential? Language reform and gender (in)equality* (2005), Mucchi-Faina emphasizes the idea that language in some way influences thought. She also argues that one way of changing attitudes in society is to intervene in language and change words. Mucchi-Faini founds her argument on the so-called *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* in a moderate version, “language affects perceptions of reality and (...) the way in which people see themselves and the world.” (Mucchi-Faini 2005:190). In her research, Mucchi-Faini focuses on the non-sexist variant of politically correct language, and she has studied attitudes toward PC language and language reforms, and the effects produced by language on speakers.

More moderate feminists have focussed on two reforms that they feel are important to eliminate sexist language. Firstly, they want to change the use of the so-called generic masculine, or false generic, as they prefer to call it. The term false generic means that masculine forms such as *chairman* are being used when a person’s gender is unknown, or to refer to people in general. Feminists have criticized this usage for excluding women or not referring to women at all (Mucchi-Faini 2005:192ff).

Secondly, a reform concerning lexical asymmetry has been called for. Feminist groups have criticized the usage of terms such as *man and wife*, which they claim leads to the assumption that women are inferior to men. In addition, criticism has been put forward concerning the usage of *girls* to refer to adult women, as well as the emphasis on women’s marital status, the usage of either *Miss* or *Mrs* (Mucchi-Faini 2005:193).

However, there are academics who do not believe in the impact of non-sexist language use. Mucchi-Faini gives some examples taken from Blauberg (1980). Here, it is claimed that no evidence has been found that the usage of gender-neutral language leads to a less discriminatory society. Another such statement is that sexist language is unimportant in comparison to other injustices in society, e.g. economic oppression and physical violence. A
third opinion is that non-sexist guidelines for language are a form of censorship and that they limit freedom of speech (Mucchi-Faini 2005:193).

In contrast, guidelines in different languages promote a change from sexist to non-sexist language and put forward two ways to achieve such a change. Firstly, one should use inclusive words that refer to both sexes, e.g. *flight attendant* instead of excluding words such as *steward-stewardess*. Secondly, visibility should be used, i.e. to emphasize that women are present and new words should be formed where there is a lack of suitable terms (Mucchi-Faini 2005:194ff).

Mucchi-Faini identifies two strong stereotypes in the debate over political correctness. She refers to the first group as the *PC crusaders*, i.e. people who are extremely pro-PC, while those who are strong opponents to language reform are called *PC bashers*. The author of the article stresses that this is a sign of the controversy that still exists around language reforms and that language is very much connected to emotions (Mucchi-Faini 2005:200).

Two separate studies show interesting results as regards people’s attitudes toward sexist language. When college students in the United States, aged 18-20, were interviewed it turned out that women are more concerned with sexist language than men. Furthermore, they use more gender inclusive language to avoid sexism, and the studies also show that older women use more inclusive terms than younger women (Mucchi-Faini 2005:201).

In her article, Mucchi-Faini cites a study made by McConnell and Fazio (1996) on the impact of gender marked titles on perceptions of target’s personality. The results showed that a *-man*-suffix occupation title, such as *chairman*, caused an interpretation of the target as being more masculine than a non-suffix title, *chair*. Furthermore, the personality of a *chair* was seen as more masculine than the person-suffix title *chairperson* (Mucchi-Faini 2005:203).

Mucchi-Faini refers to studies that have been made (Henley et. al 2002) on the influence of using either the masculine generic form or the more neutral form. One of the studies deals with how this different usage affects the self-esteem of children in schools. The study showed that the use of masculine pronouns improved boys’ self-esteem, whereas girls’ self-esteem was improved when neutral pronouns were used (Mucchi-Faini 2005:205).

2.5 The importance of using gender-neutral language in schools and universities

In her book on non-sexist language, Doyle argues for the importance of using non-biased and non-sexist language in teaching. Doyle refers to three different organisations that have advocated a more neutral language use (Doyle 1995:98).
Firstly, the National Union of Teachers (NUT) has issued guidelines on how to counter sexism in schools, and on how to promote equality for girls and boys. The NUT sees three clear ways in which sexist language is used: females and males are stereotyped, women and girls are classed as inferior, and women are excluded in language use. The NUT states that using this kind of language cements gender stereotypes and as a result “girls may be impeded from seeing themselves in those jobs or professions referred to only in the masculine form”. The National Union of Teachers refers to research results that show that young children and young adults understand words including ‘man’, such as salesman as masculine nouns and do not see women included in the meaning. The organisation suggests that non-sexist guidelines should be included in the overall school policy (Doyle 1995:99).

A Europe-wide federation of teachers’ unions, ETUCE, has produced the text Towards Equality, where it urges every educational organisation to develop a policy on equal opportunities. These should include measures to combat stereotyping in textbooks and in other teaching material, as well as promoting the use of gender-neutral language among teachers and other school personnel (Doyle 1995:99).

In the guidelines produced by the Association of University Teachers (AUT), it is suggested that the use of the words he/his/him and man, and their related compounds as generic terms, should be avoided both in documentation and in oral communication. AUT also states that the usage of biased language can perpetuate “inequalities in society or employment of stereotypical ideas of work roles” (Doyle 1995:100).

2.6 Changing students’ usage of sexist language into gender-neutral language

In their article Effects of modelling on the use of non-sexist language among high school freshpersons and seniors (1995), Cronin and Jreisat state that several studies have been made in recent years as regards sexist language and its impact on attitudes and behaviours in society. In their study, Cronin and Jreisat define sexist language as “the use of a gender specific pronoun (e.g. he) to refer to both sexes, or when the masculine or feminine pronoun is used exclusively to define roles by gender” (Cronin & Jreisat 1995:819).

The authors of the article refer to several other studies when they claim that sexist language use is related to attitudes towards women. In addition, they argue that sexist language perpetuates sexist attitudes in society. Therefore, different efforts have been made to eliminate this type of language and trials have been made with special computer programs and guidelines for teaching non-sexist language use to college students. The results have indicated
that it is difficult to change students’ language use, and the decrease in the use of sexisms in
language has been small (Cronin & Jreisat 1995:819).

As a consequence, other ideas have been put forward, one being that the modelling of
non-sexist language in schools and colleges would be more effective than depending only on
instructions and guidelines. Cronin and Jreisat define modelling as “learning achieved not by
practice or by direct experience on the learner’s part of the consequences of performing a
particular action, but solely on observation of another agent” (Harre & Lamb 1983, quoted in
Cronin & Jreisat 1995). The authors continue by quoting Bandura (1986) who claims that
modelling “is a highly effective way of promoting language acquisition”.

In their study, Cronin and Jreisat (1995:820) asked questions to high school students of
different ages which included dilemmas of how to refer to people belonging to traditionally
male (business executive), female (nurse), and neutral (professor) professions. The main
interest of the study was to observe how the difference in instructions influenced the word
choices of the students. One third of the 144 students were given instructions, which included
examples where sexist language was used. The other two thirds were given either examples
with non-sexist terms or no examples at all (control group).

In their discussion, the authors argue that modelling has a significant effect on a person’s
use of non-sexist language. The results showed that the group who was given the instructions
including non-sexist examples went on to score the highest results as regards gender-neutral

Other results of the study indicated that females use significantly more gender-neutral
forms than males. Much to the surprise of the researchers, “freshpersons” used more non-
sexist language than seniors. According to the authors, one possible explanation is that the
freshpersons have been exposed to the issue of gender neutrality in language much earlier
than the seniors (Cronin & Jreisat 1995:822).

Cronin and Jreisat conclude by stating that modelling has a definite impact on students’
choice of language but that more effort has to be made to eliminate sexist language use. One
important starting point is the use of gender-neutral terms by teachers and other personnel in
schools and in colleges.

3. Method and material

As mentioned in the introduction, the aim of the present study is to investigate the knowledge
of, and the attitudes towards non-sexist and non-racist language among upper secondary
school students. The focus of the study is both on students’ knowledge and usage of non-sexist and non-racist alternative terms, and on their thoughts on these aspects of language.

In order to obtain the answers to the research questions stated in the introduction, a quantitative method was used. As a means to obtain a good perception of the students’ knowledge and opinions, an investigation including thirteen questions was carried out. The number of participating students in this survey was 41, 26 of which were female and 15 male.

The students participating in the study, and those who answered the questionnaire, attend four different programmes at an upper secondary school in the southeast of Sweden. The total number of students in this school is 715. The programmes that the students attend are the Social Science Programme, the Natural Science Programme, the Electricity Programme and the Health Care Programme. The two latter groups attend English classes together and will be accounted for as one group in the results section. The number of participating students from the respective programmes was 19, 11 and 11(4+7). All of the students attend the third year of their particular program and the reason for choosing these groups was to receive as mature answers as possible. Of course, certain year 1 and 2 students are probably just as mature as year 3 students; thus, a suggestion for a future study would be to compare the knowledge and attitudes of year 3 students with those of younger (and older) students.

As stated earlier, the aim of the questionnaire was to receive answers both regarding the students’ level of knowledge and their attitudes. Therefore, the questions were formulated in such a way as to obtain measurable results, as well as answers displaying the opinions of students on certain aspects of the English language. As a consequence, some of the questions had alternative or multiple-choice answers, whereas others were more of an open-ended nature in order to allow the students to put forward their thoughts and ideas.

About two weeks before the actual questionnaire was distributed, a test survey was performed with only seven of the students, all of them attending the Social Science Programme. After obtaining the results of this pilot study, some of the initial questions were altered to some degree in order to make them as clear as possible.

The intentions with the questions (See Appendix) were the following: Question 1 concerns the use of different terms for labelling black/African Americans and the students’ motives for choosing one of them. Questions 2 and 3 deal with the students’ interpretation of the use of the man-suffix in different contexts, while Question 4 concerns the interpretation of the word police officer. How men and women are described and referred to in different ways is the focus of interest in Question 5, whereas in Question 6, the students have to make choices of how to translate the Swedish words sitt and sina. Question 7 gives the students two
4. Results

4.1 Questionnaire to upper secondary school students

The results section will be divided into six groups with the following content: the first group of results accounts for the students’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards non-sexist and non-biased language. The focus of the second group is on the students’ attitudes and knowledge concerning gender-neutral alternatives in English, whereas the third set of results concerns the students’ knowledge of titles used for men and women. In the fourth category, the focus of interest is on knowledge of what are called “politically correct” terms, while group five concentrates on the students’ suggestions for the translation of Swedish sitt and sina. Finally, the last group of results deals with the students’ opinions on what “proper” language use is.

4.1.1 Students’ knowledge of, and attitudes towards non-racist and non-biased language use

Question 1

The first question in the survey that dealt with non-racist and non-biased language use read as follows:

1. Study the following sentences carefully:
   a) In 2016, the first African American will be elected president of the United States.
   b) In 2016, the first black American will be elected president of the United States.

Which of the two alternatives would you choose in your own text? Motivate your answer.

When the 19 students attending the Social Science programme answered the question, the results were the following:
Table 1.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When the 11 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ answered the same question, the results were these:

Table 1.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The response of the 11 Natural Science programme students shows the following results:

Table 1.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the students would choose the term *African American* in their own texts. The results are more clear and distinct in Table 1.1 among the Social Science students where 68% would use the first alternative. These students argue for example that to use *black* would be sensitive to *persons of colour* and even perceived as racist by many people. As a motivation for his/her answer, one student wrote:

I would choose alternative a, because I think that alternative b has got a bit of racism in it, describing the president just as black. It doesn’t matter if the president is black, black doesn’t explain where he comes from and that is important.
However, the students who chose the b alternative had other views on the matter, such as this student:

They aren’t from Africa — If you were to ask a black individual living in America which he/she preferred — it would be the b selection because they are American not African.

In addition, some of the students mentioned the dilemma of accurately describing American citizens who originate from Africa, e.g. South Africa, and who are white! Should they also be labelled *African Americans*, or is it necessary to invent a new term if one wants to categorize these people?

**Question 10**

As a follow-up to the first question, the students were asked to offer their opinions on the following phenomenon in language use:

10. In certain circles, for example in rap music, the word *nigger*, sometimes spelled *niggah*, is often used.
   a) Why do you think the word is used by these groups?
   b) Can the word be used by anyone?
   c) What do you know about the history of the word *nigger*?

In response to these questions, a majority of the students mention the idea that the word has changed in meaning, and that it is now used as a sign of identity. According to the students, *nigger* is only allowed to be used by black people themselves. The students, in their responses, express that they view the *n-word* as a very bad word indeed, and that they would never use it to designate black people. One of the students had the following to say about the use of this word:

The word spelled nigger should never be used, it is considered rude and disrespectful and it is the same as someone saying that an individual deserves to be enslaved as African Americans were during the Civil War.
4.1.2 Students’ knowledge of and attitudes towards gender-neutral alternatives to sexist terms in English

The majority of the questions in the present survey concern the gender-neutral alternatives to what are considered sexisms that are present in the English language. The aim of the following questions was to find out whether Swedish students are aware of the existence of these alternatives and if so, if they view them as equally correct to use.

**Question 2**

The first of the questions in this field was:

2. Study the following two sentences:
   
   a) The firemen saved two children from the fire.
   b) The firefighters saved two children from the fire.

   In your opinion, do the sentences express the same thing? Is one more correct than the other? Motivate your answer.

The results of the three different groups are presented in the following tables. They show which of the terms the students find more correct or if they view them as equally correct.

**Table 2.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fireman</th>
<th>Firefighter</th>
<th>Equally correct</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fireman</th>
<th>Firefighter</th>
<th>Equally correct</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In response to Question 2, 51% of the students think that the terms *fireman* and *firefighter* are equally correct in the English language. The use of *fireman* is more popular than *firefighter*; *fireman* is considered to be the “real” word, whereas *firefighter* gives the associations to superheroes and cartoons. Very few of the students mention that the –*man* suffix is present in one of the words, and it is not seen as something important for the understanding of the sentences. One of the students describes the difference between the two like this:

Yes, they express the same thing but in different ways. *Firefighters*, I would say gives a more sensational impression as a word. I don’t feel that one is more correct than the other.

### Question 3

A famous quotation from Neil Armstrong’s moonwalk in 1969 was included in the next question. The students had to decide whether they preferred the original or the modified version, where *man* is replaced by *human being* and *mankind* by *humanity*.

3. Do you recognize the following quotation: “That’s one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind”? An alternative way to express this sentence would be: “That’s one small step for (a) human being, one giant leap for humanity”.

According to you, does the meaning of the sentence change in any way?

Which version would you prefer? Motivate your answer.

When the students chose between the old and the new version, the results were as follows:
Table 3.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mankind</th>
<th>Humanity</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mankind</th>
<th>Humanity</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mankind</th>
<th>Humanity</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In two of the groups, a majority of the students preferred the modern version of the quotation. Many of the students argue that they chose the altered version, since they interpret it as including both men and women in a better way. Some have chosen the same version because to them it becomes easier to understand, while others claim that the second version is unnecessarily long. One of the students motivated his/her choice like this:

> The meaning changes a little. The base is the same of course, but perhaps the second is a bit more correct, not excluding women, but also a bit harder/more difficult. For me it doesn’t matter much really, I’m Swedish and it’s much the same anyway.

Among the Natural Science students, the original was the preferred version. A recurring motivation was that the altered version was more difficult to read and that one should stick to the original version.
**Question 4**

The focus of the next question was the students’ interpretation of the generic term *police officer* as opposed to the gender exclusive *policewoman*. The assumption was that most people interpret a *police officer* as being a man.

4. Read the following two sentences carefully.
   
   a) The police officer was awarded with a medal for outstanding achievements.
   
   b) The policewoman was awarded with a medal for outstanding achievements.

   How do you interpret these two sentences?
   
   What do you see as the major differences between the two?

The following tables show how the students interpret the gender of the *police officer* in the a- sentence of Question 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Man</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A clear majority in all three groups said that police officer could be interpreted as a male or a female officer. Those who claimed that the police officer was a man, motivated their answer by saying that most officers are men, and that they saw the image of a male officer when they read the sentence. Among the students belonging to the majority, one had the following explanation of his/her answer:

In a) you think of a man, because the ‘norm’ is that police officers are male. To say ‘policewoman’ though, it doesn’t sound as correct and ‘high-status’ as ‘police officer’. I don’t think you should make a difference there. A police officer is a police officer, whether it’s a man or not.

**Question 8**

Even though it was stated in the question, many of the students had difficulties grasping that chairperson, chairman and chair could refer to the same person. The first two words were accepted as translations of Swedish ordföranden, whereas the third one was more difficult to agree with.

8. Each of the underlined words would be translated as ‘ordföranden’ in an English-Swedish dictionary.  
   a) The new chairperson was only 32 years old.  
   b) The old chairman was now in his seventies.  
   c) The new chair started her first meeting.  

According to you, is there a difference in meaning between the three variants? Motivate your answer.

The main focus of the question was to study the students’ interpretation of the more unusual chair translation. These are the results of the three groups regarding Question 8 in the survey:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neutral alt.</th>
<th>Furniture</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 8
Table 5.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neutral alt.</th>
<th>Furniture</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neutral alt.</th>
<th>Furniture</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A high percentage of the answers are categorized as undecided. It became apparent that the students had trouble understanding the full meaning of the alternative chair in the present context. Many of those who explained their answers said that they interpreted chair as a piece of furniture and that they were unfamiliar with the word in these contexts. One student gave the following explanation:

Chairman is more of the original word and chairperson sounds like it came to be when someone thought women should be included as well. ‘Chair’ I just feel is the sort of thing you sit on.

Question 11
When analysing how women and men are referred to in English, a discussion of the word bitch was included in the questionnaire. The word is frequently used in the English-speaking world, carrying different meanings in different contexts. The aim of this question was to elicit the students’ thoughts on the usage of the word and what the word means to them.

11. Another word that is frequently used in the US, Great Britain, but also in Sweden is bitch.
   a) According to you, when is this word used?
   b) What is the meaning of the word?
   Does the word have different meanings, depending on who one is talking to?
One student expressed his/her thoughts like this:

The word bitch is used by both young girls and boys and I think it has a good and a bad meaning. It’s like whore in the bad meaning, if I say it to my friend ‘You’re such a bitch’ , then she wouldn’t be angry or sad.

Some of the students, mostly female, say that they perceive it as much worse when a boy calls a girl bitch, than when it is used among the girls themselves. However, much depends on the context in which the word is said, with which tone of voice it is said and their relation to the person who utters the word.

4.1.3 Students’ knowledge of title use for men and women in English

Question 5

The intention behind Question 5 was to investigate the students’ interpretation of two sentences that concern the same two people. The difference is that the man’s title is mentioned in the first sentence, whereas in the second one no titles are stated.

5. The following sentences deal with the same two persons. What are the differences in style between the two, according to you?
   a) The professor and his wife arrived at the party one hour late.
   b) Joe and Mary Jackson arrived at the party one hour late.

Many of the students proposed that the woman’s title should also be stated, or that no title should be stated at all, as in sentence b. In many of the students’ answers, the word status is used, and it is claimed that the man’s status is emphasised in sentence a.

Question 9

The main focus of interest in Question 9 was the level of knowledge among the students as regards women’s choice of titles. Additional attention was paid to the students’ interpretation of the title Ms. This is the neutral alternative for women who do not want to be categorized solely as being single or married.

9. Read the following sentences carefully.
   a) Miss Adams drove her son and daughter to school.
   b) Mrs Adams drove her son and daughter to school.
c) Ms Adams drove her son and daughter to school.

What does the underlined title tell you about the person described in each sentence?

Here are the results of how the students interpret the title Ms:

**Table 6.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single woman</th>
<th>Divorced woman</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single woman</th>
<th>Divorced woman</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Single woman</th>
<th>Divorced woman</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It became apparent that many of the students have not come across, or paid attention to the title use Ms. They had difficulties separating Ms from Miss; many interpreted them as the same title. The interpretation single woman was frequent, but many different readings, such as housekeepers, widows and women too old to be called Miss, were suggested. These suggestions were put in the other category.

### 4.1.4 Students’ knowledge of and attitudes towards what is called politically correct language

In the language reforms of the last decades, the replacement of terms regarded as “not correct” has been high up on the agenda. One of the terms is mentally handicapped which
should be replaced by *learning disabilities* according to dictionaries of politically correct language such as Beard and Cerfs’ from 1993.

7. Which of the following sentences do you see as the more correct one? Motivate your answer.
   a) Schools should be specially adapted for students with mental handicaps.
   b) Schools should be specially adapted for students with learning disabilities.

Here follow the choices the Swedish students made when faced with these two terms:

**Table 7.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental handicaps</th>
<th>Learning disabilities</th>
<th>Not the same</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental handicaps</th>
<th>Learning disabilities</th>
<th>Not the same</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 7.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mental handicaps</th>
<th>Learning disabilities</th>
<th>Not the same</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An overwhelming majority chose the more “correct” term, and many of the students wanted to distance themselves from the first term, which they saw as rude, harsh and offensive. Some of the students did not interpret the terms as having the same meaning, and they argued that *learning disabilities* is not a handicap in the same sense.
4.1.5 Students’ translation of Swedish sitt and sina

The lack of a sex-neutral third person singular pronoun in English can cause problems when translating Swedish reflexive pronouns such as sitt and sina. The aim of Question 6 was to investigate how the Swedish students tackle this dilemma, when the words collocate with the nouns teacher and student.

6. How would you translate the following sentences? Please comment on the difficulties you might have with the translation:

a) Läraren gick tillbaka till sitt klassrum för att starta sin lektion.
   [The teacher went back to his/her classroom to start his/her class]

b) Om en student förlorar sina nycklar skall detta rapporteras genast.
   [If a student should lose her/his keys this should be reported right away]

The following tables show the students’ solutions to the two sentences:

Table 8.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 6a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 6a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 6a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the two science classes, the written form *his/her* was rather commonly used in sentence 6a, whereas the Electricity and Health Care students preferred either *his* or *her*. However, the translation with solely *his* was the most frequent within the two science groups.

Table 9.1 Social Science programme students’ response to Question 6b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.2 Electricity and Health Care programme students’ response to Question 6b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 9.3 Natural Science programme students’ response to Question 6b

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>His</th>
<th>His/her</th>
<th>Her</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the b-sentence, which included *student*, a majority of the students preferred the translation of *his* to the *his/her* alternative, whereas the *her*-translation was very rarely used. This alternative was however used by seven students in the first sentence. The students whose answers have been categorised as *other* often chose to alter the sentences so that *sitt* was translated as *the* and *sina* was translated as *their*. The latter is by the way a recommended translation by some scholars (Crystal 2003:368). Some students who found the translation difficult chose to use *his* in one of the sentences and *her* in the other.
4.1.6 Students’ opinions on “proper” English usage

12. How important is it to you to use the right word or term to describe a person?
13. Give examples of English words that you see as sensitive, or doubtful to use.

Students from all three groups responded that it is very important to use correct language to describe people. Their main reasons are that they are afraid of being misunderstood, and that they could hurt somebody’s feelings by using the wrong word. Many of the students give long lists of English words that they see as dubious to use. In addition to the terms already mentioned in the survey, the students mention words such as *whore/ho’, slut, fuck*, etc. Some of the students mention that they often come across this kind of language in their daily lives, and that they become upset when hearing these words or being called these names.

5. Conclusion

The research questions posed in this essay concerned Swedish upper secondary school students’ knowledge of, and opinions on non-sexist and non-racist English language. Furthermore, the aim was to investigate whether the students reflect on which terms they use, and if they have been affected by the debate over “political correctness”. In the following, some of the results in the study will be commented on, and a conclusion will be drawn.

A majority of the students participating in this study seem very aware of the sensitivity of referring to *persons of colour*. In their survey answers, the students express that it could be viewed as racist to use a term such as *black American*. However, according to Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:262), *black* is used by many Americans and it is hardly seen as racist language use. From the results of the present study, one might conclude that some of the Swedish students are oversensitive when choosing words for various ethnic groups. It could be that the students have been affected by the PC debate, and that they prefer to stay on the safe side by choosing what they see as the more “correct” term.

Regarding non-sexist language, the Swedish students are mostly aware of the fact that words such as *firefighter* can be used to designate both men and women. However, many of them prefer the traditional *fireman*, and view its neutral alternative as something more heroic and lifted from the world of movies. Two of the investigated groups preferred *humanity* to *mankind*, since they interpreted the latter as including only men. Others perceived *mankind* as an example of generic use and preferred the traditional interpretation of the word.
According to the students, a police officer can be both male and female. However, they view it as more likely that it is a man and some of them described the image of a male officer when reflecting on the word.

A majority of the students had problems interpreting terms such as chair and titles such as Ms. When one analyses their answers, it seems that very few of the students have come across the neutral alternative to chairman, and they found the term odd in this context. Ms was a title that, according to the results, very few could distinguish from Miss. In general, the students interpreted the titles as having the same meaning.

Regarding the three different groups of students participating in the study, one can infer that the Social Science students seem to have the best knowledge of the investigated aspects of English. This is hardly surprising since they have probably discussed these matters more in class, and it is something that is in line with their education. However, many of the students in the other two groups gave thoughtful answers as well to the survey questions.

Since the number of participants was only 41, it is difficult to draw any far-reaching conclusions, as regards the differences between the groups. The ambition was to obtain a greater number of responses, but this was not possible due to work place practice and National tests for some of the students.

Some suggestions for future studies are to interview teachers about their thoughts on the importance of “political correctness”. In addition, interviews with students on these aspects could be interesting to carry out, as well as comparisons of the level of knowledge between students from different age groups.

To conclude, language reforms and terms such as political correctness have been heavily debated during the last decades. Perhaps it would be wise to turn away from the PC label, and concentrate on what is really essential. In Swedish schools, and in schools in general, students and teachers need to be aware of alternative terms in English, in order to avoid using sexist, biased and stereotypical language. Swedish students and teachers need to reflect on and discuss their choice of terms, and based on good knowledge, avoid using words that can be perceived as hurtful to others, whether in Sweden or in other countries.

The students in this study have shown in their response that they have a good knowledge in some of the investigated areas. In others, they have to further improve their awareness, in order to avoid using stereotypes in the English language. A majority of the students gave a lot of thought to the survey questions, and they showed that language is important to them.
References


Appendix

Questionnaire to Swedish upper secondary school students regarding neutrality in the English language, Autumn 2006.

Age: ________

Gender: Male   Female  (circle the right alternative)

1. Study the following sentences carefully:
   a) In 2016, the first African American will be elected president of the United States.
   b) In 2016, the first black American will be elected president of the United States.
   Which of the two alternatives would you choose in your own text? Motivate your answer.

2. Study the following two sentences:
   a) The firemen saved two children from the fire.
   b) The firefighters saved two children from the fire.
   • In your opinion, do the sentences express the same thing?
   • Is one more correct than the other? Motivate your answer.

3. Do you recognize the following quotation: ‘That's one small step for (a) man, one giant leap for mankind.’? An alternative way to express this sentence would be: ‘That’s one small step for (a) human being, one giant leap for humanity’.
   • According to you, does the meaning of the sentence change in any way?
   • Which version would you prefer? Motivate your answer.
4. Read the following two sentences carefully.
   a) The police officer was awarded with a medal for outstanding achievements.
   b) The policewoman was awarded with a medal for outstanding achievements.
     • How do you interpret these two sentences?
     • What do you see as the major differences between the two?

5. The following sentences deal with the same two persons. What are the differences in style between the two, according to you?
   a) The professor and his wife arrived at the party one hour late.
   b) Joe and Mary Jackson arrived at the party one hour late.

6. How would you translate the following sentences? Please comment on the difficulties you might have with the translation:
   a) Läraren gick tillbaka till sitt klassrum för att starta sin lektion.
      Difficulty?
   b) Om en student förlorar sina nycklar skall detta rapporteras genast.
      Difficulty?
7. Which of the following sentences do you see as the more correct? Motivate your answer.
   a) Schools should be specially adapted for students with mental handicaps.
   b) Schools should be specially adapted for students with learning disabilities.

8. Each of the underlined words would be translated as ‘ordföranden’ in an English-Swedish dictionary.
   a) The new chairperson was only 32 years old.
   b) The old chairman was now in his seventies.
   c) The new chair started her first meeting.
      • According to you, is there a difference in meaning between the three variants? Motivate your answer.

9. Read the following sentences carefully.
   a) Miss Adams drove her son and daughter to school.
   b) Mrs Adams drove her son and daughter to school.
   c) Ms Adams drove her son and daughter to school.

What does the underlined title tell you about the person described in each sentence?

Which group of women do you think uses the title Ms. Motivate your answer.
10. In certain circles, for example in rap music, the word *nigger*, sometimes spelled *niggah*, is often used.
   a) Why do you think the word is used by these groups?
   b) Can the word be used by anyone?
   c) What do you know about the history of the word *nigger*?

11. Another word that is frequently used in the US, Great Britain, but also in Sweden is *bitch*.
   a) According to you, when is this word used?
   b) What is the meaning of the word?
   c) Does the word have different meanings, depending on who one is talking to?

12. How important is it to you to use the right word or term to describe a person?

13. Give examples of English words that you see as sensitive, or doubtful to use.