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GENDER AND LANGUAGE IN THE LABOUR MARKET: ANALYSIS OF JOB ADVERTISEMENTS IN SLOVENIA BETWEEN 1958 AND 2018

Abstract. *The present article explores the use of grammatical forms in job advertisements published over the past 60 years (1958, 1978, 1998 and 2018). A historical examination of the use of gender forms in employment is based on analysis of job advertisements published in the Slovenian language, and the particular socio-economic context. The results show that the frequency of use of the masculine, feminine and neutral forms has not drastically altered over the decades. In general, feminine and neutral forms were used less frequently, and the masculine grammatical form consistently dominates. In 2018, the latter was seemingly 'neutralised' by adding the abbreviation M/F.*

Keywords: *language, gender, labour market, job advertisements, Slovenian language, masculine grammatical form, M/F*

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Introduction¹

Multiple studies show that the labour market exhibits various stereotypical norms and biases which dictate the perceived suitability of occupations, positions and working conditions according to gender (Eagly, 1987). Hiring procedures and other HR practices reflect sexist mental perceptions that in formal and informal ways contribute to systemic gender segregation: employment in specific industries (horizontal or occupational segregation) or positions (vertical segregation) is thus largely occupied by one gender (Bettio and Verashchagina, 2009). Gender inequality in both society and the labour market is also expressed or reflected in language, which (as a form of social practice) operates as a tool for the production and reproduction of asymmetrical power distributions (in the labour market, among others). Language is integrated into the same socio-cultural matrix that perpetuates gender prejudice in the labour we perform, wages we receive, expectations

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we hold towards ourselves and others etc. (McConnell-Ginet, 1998: 199). The present analysis treats this type of bias as sexism in language.

In job advertisements, discriminatory practice is defined as the unequal treatment of men and women in job postings, such as job advertisements published for a single gender only² or any statements that imply one gender is favoured over the other for the work (Employment Relationships Act – ZDR-1, 2013, Article 27). Yet, feminist linguistics observes sexism in language in the practice of creating job titles mainly in one (generic or normative masculine) grammatical gender form, which (according to language norm) is considered to be ‘neutral’. This is problematic since the grammatical form representing the title of the job or role also influences the perception of males or females as being members of particular occupational groups (Merkel, 2013: 21). Many foreign studies reveal that job advertisements across Europe still tend to be mostly published in the masculine grammatical form (Italy: Mucchi-Faina, 2005; Switzerland, Austria, Poland and Czech Republic: Hodel et al., 2017), while these findings are also confirmed by the sparse existing research available in the Slovenian language (see Kozmik and Jeram, 1995: 62–64; Salecl, 2003: 64; Robnik, 2016: 73). This practice of writing job advertisements in the masculine generic form is seen as a major factor facilitating mental representations that favour traditionally male individuals in particular, thereby reproducing male bias (Stahlberg et al., 2007).

The main purpose of this article is to determine the characteristics of (gendered) language use in the labour market in Slovenia and, more specifically, the grammatical forms used while writing job advertisements at four selected points in time (1958, 1978, 1998 and 2018); as well as presenting the systemic changes occurring in this field during the 60-year time span involved. The core research question pursued was: did the grammatical structure of job advertisements change between 1958 and 2018 and, if so, in which ways? We were especially interested in the grammatical forms used in the job advertisements and their correlation with specific occupational groups. Answers to the research question will be provided based on an analysis of job advertisements in the newspaper *Delo*, and data from the Employment Service of Slovenia (hereinafter: ESS). The results will be interpreted through the lens of psycholinguistic research, which points out the significance of specific grammatical forms in job advertisements for the perceptions of candidates, but also employers’ views on the suitability of certain occupations and positions for women and men (which are strongly connected to male or female gender stereotypes).

² “.../ except when a specific gender represents an essential and decisive condition for the performance of the job in question, and such demands are proportional and justified by a legally supported necessity” (ZDR-1, 2013, Article 27).

The labour market was one of the first fields to implement language reforms aimed at addressing sexist language. Encouraging equal opportunities for women and men and removing all types of discrimination against women in language are visible domains of analysis and a focused activity of many international organisations, national governments, feminist advocacy groups and the academic community in the past 30 years and beyond. Language changes have been developed based on equal opportunities policies and guidelines for promoting the use of non-sexist language in official correspondence, publications and job advertisements (Teso, 2010: 1–2). Gender equality in the employment process in the labour market has thus been closely connected with efforts to provide language equality in the job market, more specifically in official work advertisements (through changes in the occupational nomenclature). Activities to reform sexist language simultaneously started to be (more or less successfully) implemented in many other parts of the world, in the official languages of most Western capitalist countries³, and within non-governmental organisations⁴. However, their state of implementation has reached different phases in different countries and language communities⁵ (Tolstokorova, 2005: 1–2; Teso, 2010: 38–39).

In Slovenia, the field of language in the labour market was left unregulated for an extended period, meaning the grammatical structure of job advertisements was largely shaped by employers and their preferences. Job advertisements were first regulated by the Employment Relationships Act (ZDR), starting with 2002 (Article 25) (Employment Relationships Act – ZDR, 2002, Article 25) and later in 2013 with Article 27 (Employment Relationships Act – ZDR-1, 2013, Article 27). Based on this regulation, the ESS developed a practice considered to be a basis for gender-fair treatment in employment in Slovenia, meaning that a job position offered was usually listed in either masculine or feminine form, followed by the systematic addition of the abbreviation M/F (in Slovenian *M/Ž*) to indicate both genders. In January 2018, rules came into effect on the method for reporting information on job vacancies or types of work to the ESS, on public job postings and the procedure for providing employment (2017)⁶, stating that the ESS may

³ E.g. the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Spain, Belgium, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries.

⁴ The United Nations, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, the European Parliament etc.

⁵ In German-speaking countries, linguistic policies became part of the organisational culture of various institutions, including universities. Nevertheless, Austria remains (for now) the only state where gender-sensitive use of language in job advertisements and public administration is mandatory (Sczesny et al., 2016).

⁶ In Slovenian: *Pravilnik o načinu sporočanja podatkov o prostem delovnem mestu ali vrsti dela Zavodu RS za zaposlovanje, javni objavi ter postopku posredovanja zaposlitve (2017); proposed by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities.*

reject the publication of a job vacancy/advertisement if the unequal treatment of candidates due to their personal circumstances is implied. Since 1997, the Standard Classification of Occupations (Regulation on the implementation of the standard classification of occupations, 1997) has also been a helpful legal basis for the grammatical formulation of job advertisements because it presents terms for all occupations in both grammatical gender forms.

The first part of this article addresses current scientific findings highlighting the importance of the grammatical form in job advertisements. The second, empirical part, presents the results of Slovenian job advertisements and an analysis of findings at different points of time and by individual occupational groups. The discussion elaborates on the most significant findings, connecting them to the scientific conclusions in the first part of the article. The results of our research broaden not only the pool of scientific understanding regarding the discussed topic, but represent a welcome foundation for assessing public policies and measures in the domain of linguistic gender equality. In the conclusion, we answer the research question and also provide some critical reflection on the examined regulations' effectiveness with respect to gender-fair language in Slovenia's employment practice.

Scientific analyses of the social significance of the grammatical gender form used in job advertisements

Many studies show that information on gender stereotypes (for specific occupations) is embedded in the perceived meaning of words that signify occupations, and is immediately activated when such words are presented/encountered (Siyanova-Chanturia et al., 2015: 11). Based on this knowledge, it is suggested that the use of masculine and/or feminine grammatical forms can have an (indirect or direct) influence on the perception – and actual recruitment or employment procedures – of men and women in certain occupations or working positions.

The dominant use of the generic masculine form in job advertisements has proven to be problematic, especially as it does not frame men and women as equally important subjects (Ng, 2007). In theory, the masculine form is used as a 'neutral' form and it is assumed that it communicates gender-balanced semantic markers. Yet, the mental representations of the generic masculine form have been shown to promote a strong male-favouring bias whereby readers (or listeners) more frequently (sub)consciously conceptualise masculine representations rather than feminine representations of a specific social or occupational group (Stahlberg et al., 2007). These conclusions support the notion that people interpret the masculine form as specific, at least when no other linguistic or non-linguistic information

implies otherwise.

This evidence is supported by several studies revealing that masculine grammatical forms are less inclusive of women than various non-sexist language alternatives (Merkel, 2013: 21). The effect of the latter was established by Bem and Bem (1973) in their early research, focused on analysis of occupational titles in job advertisements. Their results showed that women were considerably more motivated to apply for a vacant position when presented in gender-neutral form (e.g. Lineperson) or feminine form (e.g. Linewoman) than in the masculine generic form (e.g. Lineman). Newer studies show that the use of masculine pronouns in the description of ideal candidates for vacant jobs (while indicating the criteria and specifications of a working position/candidate) lowers the motivation of women to apply, as well as their sense of perceived belonging and identification with the work environment and job position, compared to advertisements formulated using gender-balanced word pairs or neutral pronouns (Stout and Dasgupta, 2011). Women also felt that their chances of obtaining the job were greater when job advertisements were presented in a split-form as opposed to the 'neutral' generic masculine form (Merkel, 2013: 35).

Horvath and Sczesny (2016) established that gender forms impact people's self-assessment of their suitability for particular work, especially in terms of management positions⁷, yet not for positions with a lower status. Their research shows that female candidates assessed themselves as being comparatively less suitable candidates when applying to positions of high status when the job advertisement was exclusively presented in the masculine form. This effect was reduced when the masculine form was accompanied by the abbreviation M/F, and did not exist when gender-balanced word pairs were used instead. In the latter case, female applicants felt that they were equally suitable to be a candidate as the males. This was further affirmed by research into the leading positions in politics (Braun et al., 2005; Verweken et al., 2015). The chance of naming a woman as a potential candidate for the position of German Chancellor, for example, was heavily correlated with use of the grammatical gender of the noun *kanzler* (Stahlberg and Sczesny, 2001). When the masculine form (*Kanzler*) was exclusively presented, significantly fewer interviewees presumed this meant female politicians as opposed to when presented with the form *Kanzler oder Kanzlerin* (masculine and feminine forms in conjunction).

The grammatical structure of job advertisements not only affects

⁷ *The conclusion that the language used in job advertisements affects the mental perception of suitability for higher positions of employment, and not for lower ones, is in agreement with the findings of other studies, which in their interpretation link this fact to the mental perception of higher or leadership occupational positions as being traditionally 'masculine' fields (Eagly and Carli, 2007; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Koenig et al., 2011).*

prospective applicants, but the HR managers responsible for their recruitment as well. Concerning an example of hiring procedures or the selection of suitable female and male candidates for employment, Horvath and Sczesny (2013) established that, when interacting with the masculine form exclusively, decision-makers were reproducing the '*think manager–think male*' phenomenon, favouring male over female applicants for leadership positions (Merkel, 2013: 27). Female candidates were shown to be perceived as less suitable for high-status positions than male candidates when the masculine job title was used, even if they were assessed as equally competent. On the other hand, male and female candidates were evaluated as similarly suitable for high-status positions when forms representing both genders were used (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016). Research by McConnell and Fazio (1996) showed that job titles with masculine suffixes -man (e.g. Chairman) promoted the attribution of typically 'masculine' characteristics or stereotypes to persons considered suitable for the job (e.g. rationality), as opposed to terms post-modified by -person (e.g. Chairperson) or those without a suffix (e.g. Chair).

In addition to the generic masculine form and gender-balanced word pairs, advertisements feature two other forms, the split-form already mentioned (in Slovenian: direktor/-ica) or the generic masculine form accompanied by the abbreviation (M/F) to designate the 'male/female' option in the corresponding language (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016: 318). This variant (M/F) was specifically developed for the field of job advertisements in response to a European Parliament recommendation (2008) calling for the utilisation of gender-fair language and a more suitable replacement for the generic masculine form alone (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016: 323). Nevertheless, doubt persists as to whether it can be equally as effective as gender-balanced word pairs. The main reservations here relate to the fact that the masculine form is presented first (and in full form) to which a (minimal) language interjection is subsequently added that marks the inclusion of women in this context (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016: 318). The split-form, presenting the noun in masculine and then adding a feminine marking (suffix) after the slash symbol, operates in a similar interpretative manner. According to this logic, the simple addition of the letter *f* for *female* is sufficient to indicate that females are included. However, this form does not help in fully equalising people's perceptions of the suitability of particular genders for given jobs or positions (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016: 323–324).

In relation to the cumulative effects of linguistic forms on the practice of hiring, Merkel (2013) notes that it is necessary to understand the mechanisms in support of these processes. Since most advertisements are still only written in the masculine grammatical form, any other form, including the split-form (although not ideal) can represent a signifier communicating an organisation's

openness to applications by female rather than mostly male candidates. The formulation of a job advertisement in the split-form plays a greater rate of encouraging mental representations of both male and female job occupants compared to the generic masculine form, hence also affecting the rationale of HR personnel in their selection (who are more likely to look for candidates that possess both types of competencies and abilities). If the masculine generic form is used exclusively, the general connotations regarding the competencies and characteristics stereotypically attributed to men will be marked as more appropriate, leading decision-makers to (subconsciously) adopt bias in favour of applicants exhibiting these traits. The presented research and its conclusions are salient as they prove the negative effects of the normative use of the (exclusive) masculine generic forms in the employment process (and partially explain one vector of segregation evident in the labour market), while also supporting the positive effects of non-sexist language practices. These practices foster mental representations that show positive correlations with women's motivation to apply for an advertised job position that is formulated in a non-sexist form since they self-identify as more appropriate for the perceived expectations of the job (Merkel, 2013: 35–36).

It should also be noted that certain recently published psychological studies also point out the negative sides of using non-sexist linguistic alternatives (Merkel, 2013: 24). This research shows that negative effects are usually associated with a (perceived) decrease in women's persuasiveness and their likelihood of being hired (Formanowicz et al., 2012; Mucchi-Faina and Barro, 2001), with masculine and feminine terms holding different connotations for a specific (identical) job or position and, lastly, with feminine forms being perceived as 'forced', 'aesthetically questionable', 'clumsy', in some respects also 'grammatically unsuitable' (Pauwels, 2003: 553; Mills, 2008; Menegatti and Rubini, 2017; Merkel, 2013, etc.).

Analysis of the grammatical forms of job advertisements in Slovenia over the past 60 years

Methodology

In our historical overview of Slovenian linguistic practices, we examined the ways jobs and job advertisements were framed and expressed in language, concentrating on concrete terms signifying occupations (e.g. which grammatical forms are used in job advertisements) obtained from selected written sources – the newspaper *Delo* (or its predecessor *Slovenski Poročevalec*, published up until 1959), and the ESS⁸. Analyses of job adver-

⁸ Here we were greatly assisted by the staff of the Employment Service of the RS who provided us with

tisements were divided into four points in time: 1958, 1978, 1998 and 2018. We collected advertisements for all months in 1958 and 1978; from *Slovenski Poročevalec* (as *Delo*'s predecessor in 1958) and the *Delo* newspaper (monthly, on the 8th day of the month⁹), whereas for 1998 only 4 months of advertisements from *Delo* were recorded¹⁰ (also published on the 8th day of the month). For 2018, we acquired records of job advertisements of the ESS for 4 months (8th day of the month) and analysed every tenth entry on the list (which was in alphabetical order). Notably, the advertisements from 2018 contain the abbreviation M/F next to (nearly) every job title.

Table 1: SAMPLE OF COLLECTED JOB ADVERTISEMENTS, BY YEAR

Year	Months	Source	Number of advertisements
1958	All months of the year (8th day of the month)	Slovenski Poročevalec	632
1978	All months of the year (8th day of the month)	Delo	921
1998	4 months of the year (8th day of the month)	Delo	747
2018	4 months of the year (8th day of the month), every 10th advertisement within the month	ESS	1092
Total			3392

Source: Own analysis.

For further analysis, we aimed to arrange the data from the collected job advertisements to ensure the greatest mutual comparability possible¹¹. We only kept descriptors that were informative regarding the gender of the person being sought for a particular job. This list was coded according to the International Standard Classification of Occupations classification (ISCO) that allows for comparison with previous classifications in effect. This was crucial since we were analysing job advertisements in a time span of 60 years, during which the classifications were changing. Based on the impossibility of properly coding certain examples (where insufficient information was available to classify the job title with any standard code), we removed 39 advertisements from the database, which ultimately left us with 3,353 advertisements.

records for most of the ESS' published advertisements in 2018, for which we are sincerely appreciative.

⁹ If *Delo* was not issued on the 8th of the month, we analysed the previous day.

¹⁰ With 1998, the number of job advertisements published in *Delo* rose substantially, so we decided to analyse only 4 months of the year in order to have a comparable total number of job advertisements as in 1958 and 1978. The same strategy was used for job advertisements in 2018.

¹¹ Especially in terms of 1958 and 1978 where additional subjective descriptors appearing in the advertisements were removed, for example "young girl needed" etc.

After entering the ISCO codes, the job advertisements were additionally coded with the category of the grammatical form: (1) feminine form; (2) masculine form; (3) neutral form; and (4) unclassified¹². The neutral form category¹³ was further divided into 7 categories, as listed in Table 2.

Table 2: NEUTRAL FORM CATEGORIES

Code	Meaning/description
0	neutral form not in use
1	adding feminine suffix: /-ka; (ka), (-ka)
2	masculine form with added abbreviation M/F
3	feminine form with added abbreviation M/F
4	word pairs with added abbreviation M/F
5	word pairs: zdravnik/zdravnica (generally: masculine/feminine form)
6	plural or general form that does not directly mark gender (focus on activity)
7	adding feminine suffix combined with M/F abbreviation

Source: Own analysis.

For the purposes of interpreting the data from 2018, we divided neutral forms into two groups: the ‘expressly neutral forms’ consisting of forms that specifically express the inclusion of both genders, be it through (feminine) suffixes or gender-pair forms and an added M/F abbreviation, or forms that do not refer to gender at all, e.g. plural or general forms; and on the other hand the ‘formally neutral forms’ consisting of all types of job advertisement forms (masculine, feminine, neutral) with the M/F abbreviation¹⁴.

The data were processed using the SPSS software and analysed at four points in time and for ten major ISCO occupational groups.

Results

Analysis of the use of grammatical forms in job advertisements by year shows that use of the masculine grammatical form in job advertisements was consistently high, even growing over the years (from 68.8% in 1958 to

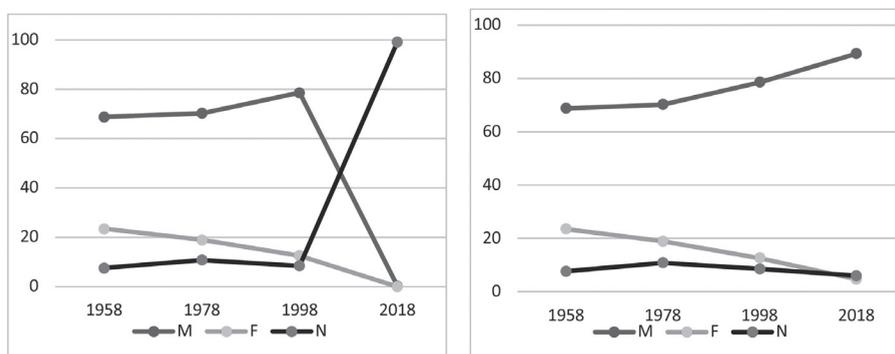
¹² The unclassified category contains examples where the structure of the advertised vacancy did not clarify whether it represented a masculine or feminine form since it specified two forms – but not for an equivalent occupation.

¹³ “Neutral form” is a concept encompassing several categories that, by stressing both gender forms or avoiding gender markers, strives for the greater promotion of gender-fair interpretations of job advertisements and is by no means associated with generic use of the masculine form.

¹⁴ These forms are supposed to go in line with current regulatory requirements for gender-sensitive language in job advertisements. The ‘neutrality’ of a job advertisement is only achieved through the addition of the abbreviation M/F and regardless of the form (feminine, masculine, neutral) in which the job advertisement is actually written.

70.2% in 1978, and then a sizeable increase to 78.6% in 1998). In 2018, use of the masculine form declined sharply to reach 0.3%, as shown in Figure 1 (left panel), but a closer look reveals that masculine generic forms (with an added M/F abbreviation) still represented up to 89.3% of the published job advertisements (see Figure 1 – right panel). In the same period, use of the feminine grammatical form in job advertisements was decreasing (from 23.5% in 1958, 18.9% in 1978, and 12.6% in 1998), a share that nearly halved between 1958 and 1998. By 2018, no job advertisements appear exclusively in the feminine gender form, yet they do appear in the feminine form with an M/F abbreviation but only in 4.7% of cases. On the other hand, neutral-form use in job advertisements increases between 1958 and 1978 (from 7.6% to 10.8%), yet falls in 1998 (8.5%) due to growing use of the masculine form in job advertisements. In 2018, the share of ‘formally neutral forms’ in job advertisements rises to 99.1% of all sampled job advertisements, although use of the ‘expressly neutral form’, which is more gender-fair in practice, makes up only 6% of the total cases.

Figure 1: TRENDS IN THE GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE OF JOB ADVERTISEMENTS BY YEARS, SHOWING ‘FORMALLY NEUTRAL FORMS’ (LEFT) OR ‘EXPRESSLY NEUTRAL FORMS’ (RIGHT)



Source: Own analysis.

It is noteworthy that when observing the trends in grammatical form use in job advertisements across the 60-year span, both the feminine as well as expressly neutral forms undergo a sharp decline, while in contrast the masculine forms see a considerable increase.

Figure 2: COMPARISON OF THE USE OF GRAMMATICAL FORMS IN JOB ADVERTISEMENTS, BY YEARS

Comparison of the use of grammatical form by year

Year	Masculine form	Feminine form	Neutral form
1958	68.8%	23.5%	7.6%
1978	70.2%	18.9%	10.8%
1998	78.6%	12.6%	8.5%
2018	0.3%	0%	99.1%

*The missing values were coded in the 'unclassified' category, where we were unable to obtain clear information whether it was a masculine or feminine form, since both were cited – but not for the equivalent job.

Detailed insight into the use of grammatical forms in 2018

Year	Masculine form (m/f)	Feminine form (m/f)	Neutral form (m/f)*
2018	89.3%	4.7%	6%

*Neutral form is a combination of plural or general form, word pairs (m/f) and adding a suffix (m/f).

Source: Own analysis.

The use of grammatical forms in job advertisements by major occupational groups (ISCO)

The analysis also considered the presence of different grammatical forms in job advertisements by major occupational groups. The share of feminine forms by occupational groups for the first three examined points in time shows they most often appeared in the group of “services and sales workers”. Between 1958 and 1978, we observe an 8.4% decline in feminine grammatical forms in this occupational group (in 1958 among all feminine forms up to 47.9% appeared in this occupational group, while in 1978 the share was 39.5%), whereas in 1998 this occupational group again shows a higher share of feminine forms (57.6%). While the second-most represented occupational group in the use of feminine forms in job advertisements in 1958 and 1978 is “elementary occupations”, the second-most represented group in terms of feminine forms in 1998 is “clerical support workers”¹⁵.

Another important finding is that in 1958 and 1978 the feminine form dominated job advertisements for two occupational groups¹⁶, “services

¹⁵ Their share is about half (just 13%) of those in the elementary occupations in 1958 and 1978 (where this figure ranges between 21% and 22%), but only because the divide in the use of feminine forms between the occupational groups “services and sales workers” and “clerical support workers” in 1998 is extensive.

¹⁶ From a total of 9 or 10 – depending on the inclusion of armed forces occupations.

and sales workers” and “elementary occupations”¹⁷. In 1998, corresponding with the general decline of use of feminine grammatical forms in job advertisements, the feminine form was no longer dominant in any major occupational group. In 2018, there were no more exclusively-feminine examples, whereas their counterparts with the M/F addition only appeared in 4.7% of all advertisements. The feminine form (with M/F) was most frequently registered in the occupational group “professionals” mostly due to the occupation of nurse where the masculine form denoting the job (“medical technician”; whose tasks do not fully overlap) was generally not used in job advertisements.

In connection to masculine forms in job advertisements, the analysis (at three of the analysed points in time) showed these forms were most frequent in the occupational groups “professionals”, “technicians and associate professionals”, and “craft and related trades workers”. However, their distribution was changing. While in 1958 and 1978 the masculine form was most frequently seen in advertisements for occupations for “craft and related trades workers” (in 1958 accounting for 30% of all advertisements in the masculine form, and 26% in 1978), with second and third places alternating between the time points. In 1958, the second-most represented occupational group in masculine gender form was “technicians and associate professionals” (25.1%), followed by “professionals” (16.4%), whereas in 1978 the situation was reversed with “professionals” (21.5%) being the second-most represented group and “technicians and associate professionals” (19.1%) holding third place. In 1998, the masculine form of advertisements was mostly found in the “professionals” group (26.6% of all masculine-constructed advertisements in 1998 appear in this occupational group)¹⁸ primarily due to the (labour market) demand for engineers, healthcare experts (e.g. in Slovenian “*fizioterapevt*”, “*logoped*”, “*zdravnik specialist*”, “*psiholog*” etc.), IT personnel (e.g. in Slovenian “*programer*”, “*razvijalec aplikacij, programske opreme*” etc.), teachers. The data also reveal that in 1958 the masculine form of job advertisement dominated in 7 out of 9 occupational groups, in 1978 in 7 of 10 occupational groups, whereas in 1998 it dominated in all 10 occupational groups. In 2018, while there are just three examples of masculine ad formulations without the M/F abbreviation added, over 90% of the ‘formally neutral’ job advertisements are constructed using the masculine form and the addition of M/F, where most of these appeared in the occupational group “craft and related trades workers”.

¹⁷ In 1978, this occupational group surpassed that of “services and sales workers” with 58.5% of the use of the feminine form within the occupational group.

¹⁸ Like in 1958, the second group is “technicians and associate professionals” (22.2%) and then “craft and related trades workers” (20%).

In terms of neutral forms, the findings show they were generally very rarely used and are only encountered in a few cases within the occupational groups in 1958. Such forms were found mostly in job advertisements for “clerical support workers” where they were often used in the form of “*knjigovodska, administrativna, pisarniška moč*” (“bookkeeping/administration/office assistance”). In 1978 and 1998, the neutral grammatical form saw a considerable expansion in the occupational group “managers” on account of many examples of advertisements for management looking for “head of ...” (or *vodja*, a neuter noun in Slovenian), this is also the occupational group that at the stated points in time was the most frequently used neutral grammatical form. Second and third places among occupational groups in terms of the frequency of the neutral grammatical form in job advertisements are the same at the first three points in time: “services and sales workers” (e.g. in Slovenian “*varstvo*”, “*prodajalci-prodajalke*”, “*frizerska vajenka ali vajenec*”), “technicians and associate professionals” (again due to the neutral noun *vodja* referring to a department head; also (in Slovenian) “*knjigo-vodstvo*”, “*poslovni tajnik/tajnica*” etc.) and “professionals” (in Slovenian “*računovodja (računovodkinja)*”, “*vodja projekta*” etc.). In 2018, the biggest share of ‘expressly neutral forms’ was registered in the occupational group “services and sales workers”. The neutral grammatical form has thereby replaced the feminine form, which featured as the dominant form within this occupational group (in job advertisements) at two separate points in time. A summary of the above findings is given in Table 3.

Table 3: HIGHEST FREQUENCY OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER FORMS IN JOB ADVERTISEMENTS BY MAJOR OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS AND YEARS

Form/year	1958	1978	1998	2018*
Feminine form	Services and Sales Workers	Services and Sales Workers	Services and Sales Workers	Professionals
Masculine form	Craft and Related Trades Workers	Craft and Related Trades Workers	Professionals	Craft and Related Trades Workers
Neutral form	Clerical Support Workers	Managers	Managers	Services and Sales Workers

* Taking into account that formally neutral forms in 2018 also consist of masculine or feminine forms to which the M/F abbreviation was added.

Source: Own analysis.

A more detailed examination of the neutral form use shows that the plural or general form which does not express gender directly was the most frequently used neutral form, specifically on account of advertisements in the form of job descriptions (e.g. in Slovenian “*delo na žagi*”, “*pomoč v trgovini*”, “*administrativna moč*” etc.) and the use of the Slovenian neuter noun *vodja*. The word *vodja* is a gender-unmarked (or double-gendered) noun playing

a significant role in this context since it is suitable for addressing both genders. The information about which gender this job title actually refers to largely depends on the other markers in the advertisement (description of the job position)¹⁹, however the content of the advertisement was not the subject of our research. This largely explains why they were coded as gender-neutral.

Most plural forms in 1958 were found in the occupational group “clerical support workers”, whereas in 1978 and 1998 these constructions are most frequently registered among “managers”. The remaining two neutral forms: the addition of the feminine suffix (in Slovenian (-ka, (ka), (-ka)) and gender-balanced word pairs were at all three time points utilised less frequently than the plural form, yet about equally represented when they did occur. The use of suffixes was most common in advertisements in the “services and sales workers” occupational group at all time points analysed, whereas gender-balanced word pairs appear almost as frequently in the “services and sales workers” and “elementary occupations” groups (in 1958 and 1978)²⁰. In 1998, the highest number of gender-balanced word pairs was found in advertisements for “services and sales workers” occupations. An overview of 2018 includes examples of ‘expressly neutral forms’ where the majority of all job ad examples were found in plural or general form (e.g. in Slovenian “*vodja področja enote*”, “*vodja marketinga*”, “*vodja kadrovske in pravne službe*” etc.), and thus this form was most frequent in the “managers” occupational group (still there are also many examples of the general form in the “elementary occupations” group, e.g. in Slovenian “*čiščenje*”, “*delo v proizvodnji*”). Job advertisements in gender-balanced word pairs or with suffixes were somewhat less frequent (e.g. in Slovenian “*frizer/frizerka – m/ž*”, “*kuhar/kuharica – m/ž*” oz. “*natakar/ica – m/ž*” etc.), while these are quite frequently found in the occupational group “services and sales workers”. The share of neutral forms by occupational groups is shown in Table 4.

¹⁹ Conditions in the labour market did not confirm the ‘neutrality’ of the *vodja* title. Although in the “managers” occupational group the dominant use of the masculine form in job advertisements was shifting to the inclusion of more ‘gender-neutral’ titles [*vodja*] (in 1978 and 1998), this practice does not appear to have affected the gender balance within the occupational group, as evident from the data for 1998 for example which show that the managers group employs only about one-third of women whereas two-thirds of those employed in this occupational group are men (Statistical Office of the Republic of Slovenia, 1999).

²⁰ However, the frequency as well as an increase in the use of gender-balanced word pairs in the group of “elementary occupations” can also be observed in this time.

Table 4: USE OF NEUTRAL GRAMMATICAL FORMS IN JOB ADVERTISEMENTS, BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUPS AND YEARS

Neutral form / years	1958	1978	1998	2018*
Plural or general form	Clerical Support Workers	Managers	Managers	Managers
Adding feminine suffix	Services and Sales Workers			
Gender-balanced word pairs	Elementary Occupations	Elementary Occupations	Services and Sales Workers	Services and Sales Workers

* Taking into account data on the neutral forms (due to the M/F abbreviation being added), which ranges in the same categories as at the three previous time points, having the M/F abbreviation now added (except plural forms).

Source: Own analysis.

Discussion

This article analyses the use of various grammatical forms in job advertisements in the Slovenian language at four points of time in the data collection. It establishes that the majority of all job advertisements, at all four time points spanning 60 years, were constructed with the *masculine grammatical form*. Use of the masculine form in job advertisements is revealed to be *growing* during the periods under analysis (despite increased language regulations in the labour market), whereas use of the feminine form is gradually *declining*. We established that the feminine grammatical form was most often used for traditionally female occupations, in the *services and sales worker occupational group*, and in 2018 among the group of professionals (notably represented by nurses and midwives). Among certain occupational groups, such as craft and related trades workers, plant and machine operators and assemblers for instance, the feminine (and neutral) forms were practically not observed (in total, reaching up to a few percent), which means that the job advertisements in these occupational groups did not directly address women in terms of applying for vacant positions. On the other hand, the masculine form was most frequently used for traditionally male occupations, specifically the occupational group *craft and related trades workers*, and in 1998 for the professionals group (as a result of job titles being written with educational titles; including IT occupations). Although both the feminine and masculine gender forms appeared to dominate at some point in time in the professionals occupational group, the masculine form was still largely used for traditionally 'masculine' occupations and feminine forms for stereotypically 'feminine' occupations within this occupational group. Here, it should be stressed that *use of exclusively a masculine or feminine form of job titles does not support linguistic gender*

equality and does not contribute to equal mental and perceptual representations concerning a particular occupation or activity; on the contrary, it affects and enables the production and reproduction of the feminisation and masculinisation of particular occupations in the labour market.

According to the presented (psycholinguistic and other) findings of several authors (Stout and Dasgupta, 2011; Merkel, 2013; Horvath and Sczesny, 2016), neutral grammatical forms are the only ones to successfully promote gender equality in the conceptual interpretation of job advertisements. Further, our analysis shows considerable discrepancies between these forms as well (among 'expressly' and 'formally' neutral forms specifically, and likewise within the 'expressly neutral forms' themselves). Gender-balanced word pairs, for example (or any forms marking the female and male gender simultaneously – which does not include denominations that only use labels for designating a gender (e.g. M/F)), were very rarely found in the job advertisements we examined. Neutral forms generally appeared in the plural form, concealing the gender being referred to rather than equally stressing both genders. The concealment of gender as 'neutralisation', where a single term encompasses both females and males might show positive results, yet this strategy (somewhat differently implemented, see Pauwels, 1998; Pauwels, 2003; Teso, 2010) usually applies to languages with neutral/semantic gender such as English²¹. In languages expressing grammatical gender such as Slovenian, the equal linguistic treatment of genders is often better served by the use of gender pairs (Sczesny et al., 2016; Teso, 2010).

Our analysis also detected considerable differences in use of the neutral form among various occupational groups. Key findings in this context are that the neutral form *among the feminised occupations* was particularly used *to stress both genders*, when used for *the masculinised occupations it primarily served to justify masculine neutrality*. The addition of feminine suffixes and the use of word pairs which expressly communicate both genders or, more specifically, where the masculine form is added to the feminine title (which suggests that feminine forms are only considered neutral by adding the masculine form) were chiefly used among the stereotypically female occupations. Stressing of the feminine form in addition to the masculine form communicates accessibility, or the desire that women apply for the job position. On the other hand, the neutral form among the masculinised occupations has additionally stimulated men to apply – either by adding the M/F abbreviation to a generic masculine form, or with job titles like

²¹ This strategy has some shortcomings, including that an unknown gender in the statement about the occupation usually leads to automatic stereotyping and the attribution of characteristics to persons performing the job who traditionally appear more suitable or motivated to perform it. This stereotyping often occurs subconsciously and is therefore highly likely to reaffirm prejudice and reproduce sexism.

“head of” (*vodja*)²², which are not really neutral. The prevailing use of plural or general forms to refer to masculinised occupations also helps conceal gender, meaning that the interpretation of gender (in job advertisements) still largely depends on the existing (stereotypical) representations of people and where the fact that men undertake a role of the ‘universal’ gender and embody the idea of the ‘ideal worker’²³ in the job market certainly does not help. As this process continues, masculine forms are being perpetuated (in mental representations and by adding them to the feminine forms), whereas feminine forms are disappearing or becoming neutralised (concealed by the addition of masculine forms).

Moreover, our analysis revealed that use of the neutral form was not particularly common throughout the period under study, remaining quite stable as a share across all points in time examined. One exception to this is 2018, when implementation of the ‘formally neutral form’ based on the addition of the M/F abbreviation led to the evident sharp rise in the share of formally neutral forms, albeit a closer look at this phenomenon reveals it chiefly features *masculine forms with an added M/F abbreviation*. Since studies show that the exclusive use of the generic masculine form in job titles affects the mental perceptions held by men and women (Gygax et al., 2008) and that implementation of language policies which contribute to the greater visibility of women in language can ensure more gender-balanced mental representations, the (seemingly inclusive) abbreviation M/F (which largely only appears next to a masculine job title) raises doubts as to its effectiveness in promoting gender-fair linguistic practices. In relation to this form, scepticism has been expressed by other researchers as well. From the viewpoint of the mental processing of the M/F abbreviation added to a masculine generic form, it has namely been shown that people interpret it as primarily masculine (since it presents only minimal linguistic information on the ‘inclusivity’ of women) (Horvath and Sczesny, 2016).

What is particularly problematic about use of this abbreviation is that it does not solve the core problem (the generic structure of advertisements being in the masculine form), even enabling the perpetuation of this issue. As mentioned, under the ‘formally neutral forms’ in 2018, the majority of all occupations (a greater share than at any other data point analysed) was constructed using the masculine form (including feminised occupations, like hairdresser, beauty technician, caretaker etc., where this might (exceptionally) act as a positive practice by leading to an increase in the level of

²² Where the supposed gender-neutrality of the word *vodja*, as was shown, did not properly reproduce the gender equality of positions in a particular occupational field in the labour market.

²³ Due to all of the characteristics traditionally attributed to men, as well as the less time they are expected to spend on childrearing and domestic duties, which represent a significant obstacle to career development.

male interest in these occupations and their subsequent de-feminisation). This practice was expected in 1958 when the classification of occupations of the time did not contain many feminine titles; yet in 2018²⁴ the classification of occupations recommends a gender-balanced encoding of occupations, meaning this regulation has not been properly complied with. Based on examples we examined, it may be speculated that the masculine form with the M/F abbreviation added is a 'unified' form of creating job advertisements in Slovenian and yet, as stated, certain occupations still rely on feminine forms and the M/F abbreviation – although these cases are much less common than feminine forms appearing at the earlier points in time analysed. We thus presume that the dominating use of the masculine form is generally not the result of 'rule setting' (since in that case the advertisement structure would be consistent), but more a (mostly) unreflected (and unregulated) practice of encoding job advertisements in certain forms considered to be 'usual', 'regular' or 'familiar'.

Conclusion

Research into sexism in language used in the labour market remains an important topic that calls for ongoing attention, even after decades of interventions (and awareness raising) in the field by international organisations, national initiatives and legislation. This builds on the understanding, based on a multitude of research findings, that grammatical characteristics, gender stereotypes and other gender-related linguistic information play key roles in the reproduction of cognitive perceptions regarding gender and work. These perceptions are attached to the traditional expectations of gender-role divisions and 'gender appropriate' occupations (Garnham et al., 2016: 6–7). Accordingly, we believe that the form of a particular job advertisement may affect the mental representations regarding the gender of a person who might (ideally) perform the specific job/occupation. The ways in which we formulate job advertisements thus hold real consequences for the employment of men and women in certain occupations. This knowledge attributes great significance and weight to the particular language used in employment processes in the labour market.

The present research contributes scientific findings to the scant existing pool of knowledge on this area in Slovenia, providing data on the use and changes of various grammatical forms in job advertisements in the Slovenian language²⁵ over the period of 60 years. Our study shows that over

²⁴ The goal of the gender balanced classification of occupations from 1997 was to facilitate the use of feminine title forms by providing employers with examples. Despite implementation of this classification, we established that it did not result in the greater use of feminine occupation titles.

²⁵ The research faced certain limitations, among them the analysis of a diverse set of data and forms

six decades the use of grammatical forms in job advertisements has not seen any drastic shifts, despite the extensive systemic (political, economic, social, legislative) changes affecting Slovenia in this period (including language changes); and that the grammatical structure of advertisements throughout the decades has remained persistently gender-specific – meaning it has been reflecting and dictating the situation in the labour market (since there is a correlation between job titles in the feminine/masculine form and the occupations filled largely by women/men). Gender equality in job advertisements was for most of the time frame under study (legislatively) unregulated, changing in the last two decades with Employment Relationships Acts (Act on Employment Relationships – ZDR, 2002, Act on Employment Relationships – ZDR-1, 2013) and the development of legal grounds through occupational classifications (Regulation on the implementation of the standard classification of occupations, 1997), enabling consistent gender representation while describing the titles of occupations. Nevertheless, we established that the dominant use of the masculine form has not been resolved; on the contrary, we observe growing trends peaking in 2018 (when the language in job advertisements was supposed to already be well regulated – compared to the other time points!). The preponderance of masculine nouns is evident by examining ‘expressly neutral forms’, whereas looking only at ‘formally neutral forms’ paints a picture of supposed neutrality that is questionable. This ‘double’ view of ‘neutral’ forms also underpins our criticism of the existing legislative and less formal approaches to language equality in job advertisements.

Overall, we may conclude that, despite many academic and institutional efforts to draw attention to the problematic nature of using (only) the masculine gender in job advertisements and certain (indirect) international and national regulations in this field, sexist linguistic practices in the labour market in Slovenia continue to be reproduced. The addition of the M/F abbreviation, which is formally seen as an acceptable practice for equally addressing males and females in the labour market is an intrinsically misleading and inefficient tool for ensuring lasting gender-fairness in the field of job advertisements since it projects the image of a labour market in which nearly all job advertisements are apparently published in a gender-neutral form. Building on the presented psycholinguistic research, we posit

obtained from two different sources (newspapers and an institutional source) in which the lion's share was represented by the streamlining and standardisation of data. This also explains why we were unable to measure the frequency of a particular title's occurrence (especially in 2018, where we only parsed each tenth advertisement). We also encountered some minor difficulties with ISCO coding (since the classification logic is different – based on the education required for a particular occupation). Another limit of the research is that we took only account of the ten main occupational groups (analysis of subgroups was not feasible as most numbered only a few examples of job advertisements).

that the dominant masculine form of job advertisements, despite the M/F abbreviation being added, has made it more difficult than ever in the past 60 years for the female segment of the population to interpret such advertisements as unambiguously inclusive²⁶. This practice should be replaced with a structure of job advertisements that uses gender-balanced word pairs (which is relatively simple based on the existing Standard Classification of Occupations,), exceptionally also with the addition of feminine suffixes, or use of the plural/general form. Considering that this article relies on foreign psycholinguistic research in the field, it is necessary to assess the impact of these forms (including feminine and masculine) using psycholinguistic research approaches in Slovenian as well.

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²⁶ Due to the extraordinary rise in the use of masculine forms and decline in feminine forms in 2018 and because the masculine form is becoming more explicitly marked by the existence of gender-balanced forms.

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