

“Come in, Mrs. Johnson. Or is it Miss?”: Female title usage in the South Midlands

Janet M. Fuller  
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale

Since *Ms.* began gaining popularity in the 1970s, it has been adopted for general use in business, but is otherwise associated with liberals, lesbians, and other independent women (Atkinson 1987; Hill 1986; Lillian 1995). Or is it? Contrary to earlier findings, the present study shows that *Ms.* is losing its meaning as a feminist moniker. Unfortunately for its proponents, this does not mean it is gaining ground as a neutral title; instead, *Mrs.* and *Miss* are thriving, and the understanding of *Ms.* shows a great deal of variation.

These data come from 296 undergraduate students (ages 18-28) and 73 faculty members (all over the age of 28) who completed a written survey. Part A of the questionnaire asks respondents to indicate the titles they would use for 15 women, about whom they are given short descriptions. Part B consists of open-ended questions which ask, ‘What does *Ms./Miss/Mrs.* mean to you?’ This paper focuses on the answers to the open-ended questions to determine the meanings of each title for these two populations, but also correlates these responses with the patterns of titles selected for the 15 women described in Part A of the questionnaire.

These data indicate that faculty and students use and understand female titles quite differently. Only 52% of the total student responses in Part A involved the use of *Ms.*, while 84% of the faculty responses did. Further, 76% of the faculty, but only 21% of the students, explicitly state that *Ms.* is a neutral title which does not indicate marital status. The most common meaning for *Ms.* among the students was ‘unmarried’, but even this was given by only 43% of the respondents. The only other salient meaning of *Ms.* for the undergraduates was that it indicates that a woman is ‘adult’ or ‘mature’; this meaning was given by 30% of the respondents.

Meanings of *Miss* concentrated on the characteristics of youth and single marital status for both respondent groups. Significantly, 18% of the faculty indicated that this title was obsolete, while only 3% of the students did.

The title *Mrs.* was the only title for which there was a single, generally understood meaning. In both faculty and student surveys, 96% of those surveyed responded that it meant ‘married’. Again, more faculty than students felt this title was obsolete: 10% of the faculty said they did not use this title, while none of the students gave this response.

The results of this study indicate that the title *Ms.* is used and understood as a neutral title by many of the faculty at this university, but not by the undergraduate students. Instead, the undergraduates continue to employ high rates of *Mrs.* and *Miss*, and, if they use *Ms.* at all, they seem to understand it as a title for mature, single women. The possible reasons for the discrepancy between student and faculty responses (e.g., age-grading, change over time, regional variation or other differences between the two populations) will be discussed with reference to findings of previous studies.

References:

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- Lillian, Donna. 1995. *Ms.* revisited: she’s still a bitch, only now she’s older! *Linguistica Atlantica* 19.149-161.