

Dance Terminology and Gender:
Linguo-Cultural Perspectives
(Based on Materials in English and Uzbek)

KHUDOYBERDIEVA OYJAMOL MUZAFFAROVNA
Termez State Pedagogical Institute, Uzbekistan

ABSTRACT

This article explores the linguo-cultural representation of gender in dance terminology within English and Uzbek contexts. By examining lexical choices, semantic connotations, and cultural underpinnings, it investigates how gender roles are encoded in the language of dance. The study highlights both convergences and divergences in the representation of gender in these two linguistic systems, emphasizing the influence of cultural norms, traditions, and historical practices on terminology. It concludes by discussing how these linguistic patterns reflect broader societal attitudes towards gender roles in performance art.

INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a mirror of culture, capturing societal norms and values, including perceptions of gender. Dance, as a form of artistic and cultural expression, is deeply intertwined with these linguistic and cultural constructs. This article examines the gendered nuances in dance terminology within the English and Uzbek languages, focusing on the cultural and historical contexts that shape these linguistic choices.

While English dance terminology increasingly adopts gender-neutral expressions, reflecting modern shifts toward inclusivity, Uzbek dance terminology retains strong cultural markers of gender, rooted in traditional values. By comparing

these two linguistic systems, this study aims to illuminate the intersections of language, gender, and culture in the realm of dance.

The study of dance terminology through the lens of gender and linguo-cultural perspectives has gained significant academic interest across linguistics, anthropology, cultural studies, and gender studies. Both English and Uzbek dance terminologies serve as linguistic reflections of societal norms, traditions, and gendered expectations. This literature review critically examines key research, theoretical frameworks, and comparative studies to explore how dance lexicon encodes and perpetuates gender roles within these two linguistic and cultural systems.

LITERATURE ANALYSIS

This review mainly focuses on sources from a Western perspective, emphasizing concert dance, dance education, and cultural and recreational dance forms predominantly found in North America and Europe. The authors recognize that this approach does not cover all aspects of the literature, particularly regarding gender roles in dance within anthropological research and non-Western contexts.

Butler's (2004: 10) notion of gender as not having fixed, universal, or singular categories and that "masculine" and "feminine" are notoriously changeable resonates with my experience across the equality and mainstream dance fields where gender is often done and undone in different ways depending on the social contexts within which they are performed.

Several theoretical approaches provide a foundation for analyzing gender and language in dance terminology.

Scholars such as Deborah Cameron (1998) and Robin Lakoff (1975) argue that language both reflects and constructs gender identities. This framework is essential for understanding how dance terminology encodes societal expectations for masculinity and femininity.

Edward Sapir (1929) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956) emphasize how language shapes cultural worldviews, helping

explain how English and Uzbek dance terminologies reflect different cultural values and historical traditions.

Dance is often analyzed as a semiotic system (Kaepler 1978), where movements, terminology, and performance structures carry embedded meanings of gendered cultural norms. This perspective is particularly useful for examining how Uzbek and English dance terminologies create and reinforce gender distinctions.

Even though dancing is predominantly seen as a female activity, men have always danced, throughout history. But the gendering of some dances to this day comes from a narrow understanding of what it means to be male, and so it causes many men to be reluctant in taking part of dancing activities. One example of that is classical ballet, a dance whose physical techniques are perceived as – feminine and where, usually, there are less male dancers.¹

Scholars have approached dance terminology through various theoretical lenses, including feminist linguistics, critical discourse analysis, and semiotics. Cameron (1995: 328) discusses how gendered language in performing arts reinforces social structures, while Butler's theory of performativity argues that gender identities are constructed through repeated social practices, including dance. These perspectives inform how dance terminology both reflects and shapes gender norms in different cultural contexts (1990: 272).

The historical evolution of dance terms shows how gender distinctions have been maintained or blurred over time. Early dance manuals from the Renaissance and Baroque periods used highly gendered descriptions, distinguishing between male and female movement styles. In contrast, contemporary discourse increasingly embraces gender-neutral or fluid terminology. Studies such as those by Hanna (1998: 233) illustrate the shift from rigid gender binaries in classical ballet terminology to more inclusive language in modern and contemporary dance forms.

According to Louro (2013) and Connel (1995), the process of educating men and women in society implies the process of teaching and learning values, postures and body movements that are regarded as masculine or feminine. Therefore, thinking about

the relation between dance and gender implies calling into question the relation between body and gender, since, according to Gender Studies, we experience masculinities and femininities as t1/ – certain muscular tensions, postures, physical skills, ways of moving (...) (Connel 1995: 189).

Thus, when dance and gender intersect, two dimensions reveal their mutual influence: on the one hand, gender regulates a dancer's life choices; on the other, the dance they produce spread and broadcasts gender representations.

That is, dancing is influenced by cultural and moral values that are constructed about what it means to be male and female, by how meaning is attached to the dancing body from dominant gender representations; at the same time, it puts meaning into practice, defining and regulating what is understood by a physical performance more adequate to men or women, reproducing behaviors, postures and physical techniques that are associated to what is considered masculine and feminine life styles. In brief, dancing is gendered and genderifying (Andreoli 2018).

Before looking into feminist studies, the term “gender” needs to be discussed. Goellner (2004) highlights that the use of the term gender emerged in the 1970s, within the Anglo-Saxon scenario, a period which some authors call the second wave of feminism, which we will detail below. According to her, even though the term “gender” may be analysed from different perspectives (Marxism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, feminism and others), there is a consensus that it refers to the social construction of sex, because, as an analytical category, gender shows that male and female are historical constructions.

Judith Butler (1990) says that gender can also be characterised as the actual apparatus of production through which the sexes are determined. In this way, gender is not to culture what sex is to nature, since gender is also the discursive/cultural meaning in which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced and defined as a pre-discursive form prior to culture, a politically neutral dimension upon which culture acts (p. 272).

We believe that ballroom dancing has much to lose by excluding or rejecting couples that do not fit into the conservative norm of gentleman and lady, leader and follower in ballroom dancing. If deep transformations have occurred in our society, we cannot assume that the conservative models originally applied to ballroom practice should remain in force. As such, we think that the terms “gentleman” and “lady” are no longer adequate for modern ballroom dancing practices that aim to promote other corporeities in dancing spaces. Continuing to use these terms as well as the terms “leader” and “follower” without due problematization reveals the discursive maintenance of a norm that is being contested. The lack of a more in-depth debate on the subject means that the “ladies-women-followers” and “gentlemen-men-leaders” relationship persists in dance classrooms and spaces, implicitly reinforcing the cisheteropatriarchy of dancing practice.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

English dance terminology demonstrates a dual structure of gender-neutral and gendered expressions. Terms like “dancer,” “performer,” and “choreographer” are widely used across genders, emphasizing skill and artistry over gender identity. This trend reflects a modern push towards inclusivity in language and performance art.

However, classical dance forms, particularly ballet, still employ gendered terminology that carries historical and cultural significance. For instance:

- ***Ballerina***: Refers specifically to a female ballet dancer, often associated with grace, elegance, and a light, ethereal quality.
- ***Danseur***: Refers to a male ballet dancer, traditionally viewed as the strong and supportive counterpart to the ballerina.
- ***Prima ballerina***: A title for the leading female dancer in a ballet company, underscoring her prominence within the art form.
- ***Ballerina*** – noun – a woman who is a ballet dancer. Example: “Seeing men who aren’t **ballerinas** in ballet flats this year on the streets will be the true trend test.”

The word “ballerina” originates from Italian, specifically from *ballerina*, meaning “a woman who dances professionally or for pleasure.” It is the feminine form of *ballarino*, which refers to a “professional male dancer” or “a person who loves to dance.”² The term has a deep linguistic and historical background, tracing its roots back through several languages and cultural influences.

In Italian, *ballerina* is derived from *ballare*, meaning “to dance.” This verb itself comes from Late Latin *ballāre*, which also means “to dance.” The structure of the word includes the following elements:

- *Ballare* (to dance)
- *-ar- / -er-* (a common extension in noun derivation)
- *-ino* (a suffix used in Italian to denote occupations, as seen in *postino* “mailman” and *scalpellino* “stonemason”)

This pattern of word formation is common in Romance languages, where suffixes help indicate professions, roles, or characteristics.

The Italian term *ballerina* was borrowed into English in the 18th-19th centuries, when ballet became popular across Europe, particularly in France and Russia. By this time, *ballerina* was not just a general term for a female dancer but became a prestigious title in ballet. In classical ballet hierarchies, a *prima ballerina* referred to the leading female dancer in a company.

Interestingly, English also adopted *ballerino* for male dancers, though it is less common than its feminine counterpart. In modern usage, English often prefers the neutral “ballet dancer” for both genders, though *ballerina* remains dominant for female dancers.

The word *danseur* originates from French, where it means “male dancer” (especially a ballet dancer). It is the masculine counterpart of *danseuse*, which refers to a female dancer.

Etymology of "danseur"

1. **From Old French "danser" (to dance):** The verb *danseur* comes from Old French and is believed to have been borrowed from *Frankish* or another Germanic language. It

replaced the older Latin word *saltare* (to jump, dance), which originally described more lively or leaping movements.

2. **Possible Germanic influence:** The root of *danser* is likely connected to Middle Dutch *dansen* and Old High German *dansōn*, which also meant "to dance." These words trace back to Proto-Germanic *þansōną* (to pull, stretch), possibly related to rhythmic movement.
3. **French nominalization:** In French, the verb *danser* (to dance) was turned into a noun to describe a person who dances:
 - **Danseur** (maledancer)
 - **Danseuse** (femaledancer)
4. **Adoption into English:** The word *danseur* was borrowed into English in the 19th century, primarily in the context of ballet to refer to a professional male ballet dancer.

The term remains specialized in English, used mostly in formal dance contexts rather than general dance.

Related terms

- *Danseuse* – The feminine form of *danseur*, referring to a female ballet dancer.
- *Danseur noble* – A term used in classical ballet to refer to a male dancer known for elegance and refined technique, often playing princely or heroic roles.
- *Danse* – The French noun for "dance," directly related to *danseur*.

Table 1. *Comparison with other languages*

Language	Word for male dancer	Word for female dancer
French	danseur	danseuse
Italian	ballerino	ballerina
Spanish	bailarín	bailarina
English	dancer / danseur	dancer / danseuse

The word *danseur* reflects its French origins, where it developed from *danser* and ultimately from Germanic and Latin influences. Its use in English remains largely confined to ballet terminology, distinguishing male ballet dancers from their female counterparts (*danseuse*).

b-boy noun [C] (also B-boy) a man or boy who breakdances (= does a form of dancing to hip-hop or similar music, that can include fast foot movements, spinning on the head or back, and balancing on the head or hands), or is part of breakdancing culture:

Example:

The film is about a ballerina who falls for a **b-boy** in a record store. He taught me the **B-boy** stance and breakdancing poses.

B-girl*noun1*: a girl or woman who adopts the pursuits or styles of hip-hop culture

Example:

Last fall ushered in the simultaneous debuts of SWV and Jade—two talented trios ... both spinning romantic tales and sporting hip-hop gear. Within months, these budding **B-girls** blossomed ... into role models with millions of fans and even look-alikes.

These terms not only distinguish roles within performances but also reinforce traditional gender binaries in classical ballet. In contemporary dance genres, efforts are being made to break these boundaries, with many companies embracing non-binary casting and terminology.

The art of Uzbek dance is considered one of the oldest forms of art. With the advent of ancient man, “dance” appeared, but it was not conceived as an art. Since the era of the primitive communal system, people performed movements associated with the labor process, plants, animals, battles and hunts, and religious rites. Circling around the fire, knocking with stones and sticks, clapping their palms, walking in the same way, and giving voice, people themselves, completely unconscious, formed a certain “rhythm.”

Uzbek dances were formed and developed at the palaces of the Khorezm and Kokand khans, the Bukhara emir and among the common people. All these three directions of Uzbek dance have been studied in detail by art critics, and detailed information is given about the dances “Kattauiyin” of Fergana, “Makom Raksi” of Bukhara, “Makom Ufari” of Khorezm, which have become classics of Uzbek choreography. “The art of folk dance,”

said art critic, professor Lyubov Avdeeva, helped a person to cognize the world and “create”, that is, “create life” (Kamarbekovna 2020).

Uzbek dance terminology, in contrast, strongly reflects the cultural and traditional roles assigned to men and women. Gender distinctions are explicitly embedded in linguistic expressions, often tied to the type of dance, movements, and associated cultural values. Examples include:

- *Qizlarrasi* (Girls' dance): Characterized by soft, delicate, and fluid movements symbolizing grace, modesty, and femininity. This type of dance often features traditional costumes like *atlas* dresses and intricate headpieces.
- *Yigitlaro'yini* (Boys' game): Defined by bold, dynamic, and energetic movements that showcase strength, bravery, and agility. Male dancers typically wear culturally symbolic garments like *chapan* (a traditional robe) and *do'ppi* (embroidered caps).

These terms not only describe the performers but also convey societal expectations and cultural ideals tied to gender roles in Uzbek society. The distinction between male and female dances is further reinforced by the different types of movements, costumes, and even music used for each gender.

Linguo-cultural comparisons. In English, the push for inclusivity has led to a greater use of gender-neutral terminology, especially in contemporary dance. Conversely, Uzbek retains highly gendered terms that highlight cultural traditions and societal roles. English gendered terms in dance often emphasize the aesthetic or technical aspects of performance. For example, *danseur* suggests strength and technique, while *ballerina* evokes delicacy and grace. Uzbek terms, however, carry deeper cultural connotations, with gender-specific dances symbolizing broader societal values such as modesty, honor, and community.

English, being a largely gender-neutral language in terms of grammar, does not encode gender into its dance terms outside of specific labels like *ballerina*. Uzbek, on the other hand, employs linguistic markers such as gendered adjectives and possessives

(e.g., *qizlar* for girls, *yigitlar* for boys) to explicitly denote the performer's gender.

The cultural contexts of English and Uzbek dance terminologies reveal differing attitudes toward gender roles in performance art:

- **English culture:** The evolution of gender-neutral language in dance reflects broader societal movements toward gender equality and inclusivity. Contemporary dance genres often challenge traditional gender norms, with performers and choreographers exploring fluidity in both roles and movements.
- **Uzbek culture:** Dance remains a medium for preserving traditional values, with gender-specific dances playing a crucial role in cultural ceremonies and celebrations. These traditions are deeply rooted in the nation's history and continue to influence the linguistic representation of dance.

CONCLUSION

The study of dance terminology through a linguo-cultural lens reveals significant insights into how language reflects and shapes societal attitudes toward gender. English and Uzbek, as two distinct linguistic systems, illustrate contrasting approaches to gender representation in dance. While English increasingly leans toward inclusivity, Uzbek remains rooted in cultural traditions that celebrate gender-specific roles. These linguistic patterns not only enrich our understanding of dance but also highlight the broader cultural values embedded within language. As dance continues to evolve, so too will its terminology, reflecting shifts in societal attitudes and cultural identities.

NOTES

1. *Gender Roles and Gender Differences Dilemma: An Overview of Social and Biological Theories*.
2. Ballerina, *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ballerina>, accessed 29 Jan 2025.

REFERENCES

- Andreoli, G. S. 2018. *Dança, gênero e sexualidade: narrativas e performances*. NovasEdiçõesAcadêmicas. Mauritius: Beau Bassim.
- Bailey, M. 2013. *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*. University of Michigan Press.
- Butler, J. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge.
- Cameron, D. 1995. *Verbal Hygiene*. Routledge.
- Foster, S. L. 1996. *Choreographing Gender: Feminist Theory and Dance*. Indiana University Press.
- Goellner, S. V. G. 2004. In Christianne Luce Gomes (Ed.), *Dicionáriocrítico do lazer* (pp. 97-100). Belo Horizonte: Autêntica.
- Hanna, J. L. 1988. *Dance, Sex, and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance, and Desire*. University of Chicago Press.
- Kamarbekovna, F. Z. 2020. Uzbek stage dance and its way of development. *International Engineering Journal for Research & Development*, 5/4, 4-4.
- Khudoyberdieva, O. M. 2023. The role of dance terminology in linguistics. *Genius Repository*, 26, 83-85. Available online: <<https://www.geniusrepo.net/index.php/1/article/view/246>>
- Kodirova, M. 2024. Functions of phraseological units in Uzbek business discourse. *American Journal of Philological Sciences*, 4/9, 47-55. Available online: <<https://doi.org/10.37547/ajps/Volume04Issue09-07>>.
- Shapiro, B. 2020. *Dance and the Politics of Gender: Moving Beyond the Binary*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, H. 2003. The body, dance, and cultural theory. *Contemporary Sociology*, 34/2, 165-166.
- Tog'ayevna, Q. M. 2022. The study of pragmatic features of addressing units in Uzbek language. *Current Research Journal of Philological Sciences*, 3/3, 61-66. <https://doi.org/10.37547/philological-crjps-03-03-12>.

KHUDOYBERDIEVA OYJAMOL MUZAFFAROVNA
TEACHER, TERMEZ STATE PEDAGOGICAL INSTITUTE
E-MAIL: <TEACHEROYJAMOL@GMAIL.COM>