

ATTEMPTS TO EQUALIZE SEX REFERENCES IN AMERICAN ENGLISH

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This article presents an overview of efforts to neutralize sex-specification in American English. The confusing situation in pronoun usage resulting from such efforts is examined in detail.

Languages differ markedly in the extent to which they designate male and female speakers or writers. In a Slavic language sex-specification occurs often and in various forms; in a language like English such specification occurs much less frequently. The contrast in sex-specification can be demonstrated quite easily by juxtaposing a personal letter or monologue in Croatian and one in English. In Croatian one learns almost immediately whether the writer is male or female; in English one can deduce that the *I* is male or female depending on the subject matter, but often one must read several paragraphs or several pages to reach such a conclusion, and it is possible that such identification simply cannot be made.

Though English employs relatively few linguistic devices to specify the sex of an individual, still such distinctions (e.g. *actor* : *actress*) have come under attack by members of the women's movement (called Women's Liberation or, somewhat pejoratively, Women's Lib). Feminists claim that these distinctions and ambiguities (see *man* below) are discriminatory and contribute to women's second-class status in American society. In this article we shall touch upon a few of the main points of contention, in particular the matter of generic *he*.

The problem of man

The word *man* and the usually unaccented suffix *-man* draw the ire of feminists who claim their use perpetuates the masculine bias of English. There are essentially three meanings for the word *man*: (1) humankind; (2) a human being, male or female; and (3) a male person. In the title of a TV series, »The Ascent of Man«, the meaning of humankind was intended; in the often-quoted phrase of the poet John Donne, "No man is an island," the meaning of a human, male or female, is implicit; in the expression "man and wife" a male human is specified. Feminists charge that even when *man* is used in a generic sense (the first two meanings), there is a tendency on the part of the hearer or reader to conjure up an image of a male. The word *person* has been put forth as a substitute for *man*, particularly in its second meaning; thus, "No person is an island." A famous American legal decision, widely known by its key phrase "One man, one vote," is now sometimes referred to as "One person, one vote." Sometimes other words are used if

they maintain the meaning and eliminate *man*, e.g. "primitive people" instead of "primitive man," "human achievements" instead of "man's achievements."

The suffix *-man* appears in a large number of English words designating occupations and nationalities, e.g. *postman*, *chairman*, *salesman*, *Frenchman*. In most of these words *-man* is unstressed and pronounced differently [mən] from the noun *man* [mæn] with which it is identifiable only historically and orthographically. The suffix also appears in the words *woman* and *human*, though accidentally (Latin *humanus*) in the latter case. Feminists propose that the suffix *-person* be substituted for *-man*, where possible e.g. *salesperson*, *chairperson*, (or simply *chair*); **letterperson* sounds a bit bizarre and so *mail carrier* or *letter carrier* are suggested as replacements for *postman*. Some wag has suggested that logically then *women* should be changed to **woperson*. But (-)*person* has its own problem: the final syllable *-son* is identical to the word which designates a male child and thus continues the masculine bias at a younger level. Although (-)*person* actually derives from Latin *pesona*, most Americans are ignorant of the Latin origin and would associate *-son* with the Anglo-Saxon *son*. And so, it has been facetiously suggested, instead of **woperson* the only sex-free solution would seem to be **woper*.

As feminists have come to realize that English cannot easily be manipulated, they have become more modest in their proposals for such changes in terminology. The feminist writers Miller and Swift for example, are now reconciled to the continued use of *woman* and *human* and regard as impractical efforts to "find alternatives for every word containing the syllable *-man* (1980,20), efforts which produce a **wobody* (for *woman*), a **hubody* (for *human*) or **personipulate* (for *manipulate*).

The feminist claim that words compounded with *-man/men* discriminate in favor of males has a basis in fact. In the sentence "Englishmen prefer tea, Frenchmen prefer wine, but Americans prefer coffee," the words "Englishmen" and "Frenchmen" obviously refer to both males and females of the respective nationalities, as does the more neutral "Americans." But the inclusive sense in all three nationality designations disappears when the context changes: "Englishmen prefer blonds, Frenchmen prefer brunettes, but Americans prefer redheads." Between these two extremes there are many instances where the meaning of the *-man/-men* element is ambiguous with a tendency on the part of the reader or hearer to assume that only males are designated; or, put another way, when the meaning is not clear, one knows that *at least* males are designated. Thus, in the sentence "A successful businessman puts in long hours," we know that a female *may* be included in the meaning of »businessman« but we have no doubt that the male is included. And a schoolchild, asked to draw a picture of a businessman or a mailman, will typically draw a male figure.

Ms. — a success story

Dissatisfaction with the specificity of the social titles *Miss* (an unmarried woman) and *Mrs.* (a married woman) led in the 1940's to the creation of the title *Ms.* (a woman, marital status unspecified; in pronunciation *Ms.* rhymes with *fizz*). (According to some style manuals of English these titles and others may be written without the period, e.g. Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr and the like). The "flagship" journal of the women's movement itself bears the name *Ms.* The

innovation of *Ms.* has been rather successful because it satisfies a bureaucratic need in addressing women, particularly by mail, when their marital status is unknown. Its pronunciation does cause a problem in the American South where *Mizz* has been the typical rendition of *Mrs.* Though the written use of *Ms.* is widespread in communications from agencies, corporations, universities and the like, it is not known how much it is actually used in oral communication. Many women prefer that their marital status be known and thus use *Mrs.* while others, particularly young women, like the notice of availability implicit in the title *Miss.*

The generic he

Undoubtedly the keenest point of contention in efforts to equalize sex references in English is the use of the pronoun *he* (and *his*, *him*, *himself*) in a generic sense, that is, in referring back to a noun which is non-specific as to sex. Traditionally a sentence such as "A good student does *his* homework" was understood to mean that the student could be male or female and that *his* included both *his* and *her*. Here is a passage by a veteran journalist (a male) in which the forms *he*, *his* and *himself* (underlining added) are intended to be generic, that is, to refer to either a male or female: "...if a *writer*... wants to write about an experience in *his* life, *he* should ask *himself* if it will be of interest... The next step is to choose the best form for what *he* has to say." Feminists contend that, no matter what the intention of such pronoun usage is, the passage above conveys the impression that a writer is typically male and thus ignores the existence of female writers. For feminists a preferred rendition would be "...if a *writer* wants to write about an experience in *his* or *her* life, *he* or *she* should ask *himself* or *herself*..." or "...if a writer wants to write about an experience in *their* life, *they* should ask *themselves*..."

Some writers systematically use *she* instead of *he* in the generic sense, e.g. "A conscientious scientist will report what *she* has discovered in the laboratory." But such a usage just reverses the alleged discrimination, replacing generic *he* with generic *she*. The *New York Times* in its editorial columns has a more quixotic practice, sometimes using *she* as the generic, but not consistently; in such a usage the reader is inclined to take the *she* as the form designating females only. And it would seem that the more this happens, the more likely readers will be to interpret all uses of *he* and *she* as non-generic or sex-specific.

The confused situation in pronoun usage is now such that many Americans employ avoidance strategies, particularly in trying to avoid the cumbersome use of "he or she", "his or her," etc. One device is to simply eliminate the pronoun reference if the meaning is not affected. Another more common device is to use the plural of the antecedent noun; thus, instead of a sentence like "A *writer* should plan *his* or *her* articles well in advance," a rephrased version could be "*Writers* should plan *their* articles well in advance."

Though not deemed logical by language purists, another device is to use *they* or *their* in referring back to a singular noun, e.g. a sentence such as "Everyone should do *his* or *her* duty" could be recast as "Everyone should do *their* duty." Or, instead of "If a *student* wants to succeed, *he* or *she* should work hard," one might write "If a *student* wants to succeed, *they* should work hard." The association of *they* or *their* with a singular noun is actually

common in American spoken usage and not uncommon in written English e.g. Shakespeare's "God send everyone *their* heart's desire." As noted by Evans & Evans (1957,509), "the use of *they* in speaking of a single individual is not a modern deviation from classical English. It is present in the works of many great writers, including Malory, Shakespeare, Swift, Defoe, Shelley, Austen, Scott, Kingsley, Dickens, Ruskin, George Eliot."

Historical background

Consideration of the historical background and parallels may help to put the current developments in perspective. It may also reveal both similarities with past changes and differences from them. Old English (c. A.D. 500—1100) had grammatical gender like most European languages past and present. The gender of a word was dependent primarily on its form and paradigm-class membership, not its meaning. The most common word for 'person' and indefinite 'one', namely *man(n)* (which gradually narrowed its meaning to 'male person'), was a 'masculine' noun. When this word had generic, indefinite reference, it required a so-called masculine pronoun (*he* in its various case forms). However, this did not entail explicit reference to maleness, as many other words referring to sexless entities were likewise masculine, such as *nama* 'name', *tīma* 'time', and *fōt* 'foot'. With the breakdown of the highly inflectional grammatical system in the transition to Middle English, the grammatical gender system was replaced with one where there is no gender involved in adjective concord and where anaphoric pronoun choice is based on the sex of the referent. Where that is indefinite, the previously established practice of using the masculine *he* has been simply carried over into the new system.

Regardless of the long existence of generic *he* in English, once *he* more often referred specifically to a male referent (in contrast to its use in the old grammatical gender system), many instances of its use became potentially ambiguous, because the reader or listener could not always determine from context which *he* (generic or sex-specific) was intended. Increasingly throughout the modern period we find writers and especially speakers resorting to alternatives, such as those noted above, in order to avoid this potential ambiguity.¹ In 1859 the American Charles Converse coined *thon* (from *that one*) to replace generic *he*, e.g. "Each pupil must learn *thon's* lessons," but his proposed neutral pronoun and other more recent suggestions (*co*, *ve*, *xe*, *jhe*, *hir*) have had no success. The more recent changes in the roles of women, as more and more positions formerly reserved for men became available to women and actually occupied by them, have intensified the pressures for change and have accelerated the movement toward it, with tradition and especially the prescriptions of school-learned grammar providing inhibiting effects. The result is that very widely in speech and less widely in writing the pronoun *they* has come to have singular indefinite reference in addition to its older plural reference.

Many speakers who use singular *they* in speech seem to be relatively unaware of the extent and role of it in their speech. When consciously noted in someone's speech or in textbooks, it is usually regarded by purists as a

¹ A much earlier example of similar behavior for the same reason is found in the history of *his* and *its*. Prior to the seventeenth century, the genitive form of neuter *it* (earlier *hit*) was *his*, the same as for masculine *he*. In the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, we find avoidance strategies similar to those operating today with generic *he* and *itd* forms. Such alternatives as *thereof*, *of it*, and even genitive *it* were used with diminishing of neuter *his* until the analogical *its* prevailed.

number agreement error. There are in fact many unambiguous situations where current English speakers consistently use *they* with what is clearly a singular antecedent. A pronoun which consistently has a singular antecedent is in those instances a singular pronoun. A typical example is encountered when someone answers a telephone and the identity of the caller is unknown to someone else present. This second person will often say of the caller, "What did they want?" Now no one in this situation thinks or intends to imply that more than one person was on the other end of the line. We thus have a clear example of singular *they*. This pronoun is used frequently in speech in referring to *one, anybody/anyone, everybody/everyone*, and *nobody/no one*, as well as human indefinites like *person, child, citizen, teacher*, and the like, where no specific referent is intended and where *he* has been prescribed and normally used in writing by most educated people, modified by the increasing use in formal writing of *he or she* and explicitly plural antecedents and pronouns as a result of the avoidance strategies mentioned earlier.

This is therefore plural when it has a definite antecedent but may be either singular or plural when it has an indefinite one of uncertain sex (although it is not uncommon in speech to hear singular *they* used even with an antecedent indefinite as to person but definite as to sex, such as "Each girl scout sold all *their* cookies.") Even though many grammarians and the general educated public commonly regard the use of *they* with an indefinite singular antecedent as an error in number agreement, this perception is itself in error, as the same people do not regard *you* with singular reference as an error even though it provides an excellent historical parallel and precedent. *You* (OE *gē, ēow*, etc) along with its other inflected forms was solely a plural personal pronoun in Old English, in opposition to singular *bū* (Mod. Engl. *thou*) and its forms. But when through a long sociolinguistic process it came to be first an alternative singular (the "polite" singular) and then the only singular form, it continued in Standard English to be the plural as well. Although the exact process and causes of the change are different from what has been happening with *they*, the result is similar. We stand now in a situation where both *he/she/it* and *they* have singular reference, but only *they* plural, just as *thou* and *you (ye)* once both had singular reference and only *you (ye)* plural. *They* is thus as singular now as *you* was then and is now.

Conclusions

There are many problems in the attempt to change American speech and writing habits in order to eliminate a perceived sex-bias. For one thing it is not certain that language forms affect the status of women in a particular society; one can cite languages with a minimum of so-called discriminatory terms where the status of women is comparatively low and other languages with the opposite situation. As long ago as 1907 the Polish woman novelist Eliza Orzeszkowa, in commenting on the Polish language and its differentiated surnames for men and women (e.g. Rogosz [a male], Rogoszowa [a married woman], Rogoszówna [an unmarried woman]), wrote the following:

"The ending of feminine names with [the suffixes] *owa, ówna* supposedly denoted in its primitive origins the fact of a wife belonging to a husband, a daughter to her father, in a word — a woman to a man. A form serving to express *such* an idea seems to a certain number of

today's women to be an affront to female independence and dignity, to be in conflict with present-day ideals about women, to be a linguistic relic of their ancient slavery. Now I do not deny that this form may be such a relic; I leave the final decision to the philologist. But what I am completely sure of is the fact that only the intelligence, virtues and deeds of women can win them independence and dignity and make these their permanent property. One ending of feminine names or another will neither harm nor can it help the cause of women; there is therefore no good reason for doing injury to the language without doing the slightest good for the cause of women . . ." (Rothstein 1976, 77)

It is difficult enough to change language habits when a government mounts a large-scale program of language planning; it is infinitely more difficult when groups within the society who may feel "offended" by certain language forms exhort their fellow citizens to accept linguistic change. Language change has its own logic and timetable and does not readily respond to pleas for fairness. The brave statement by the feminists Miller and Swift that "the need today, as always, is to be in command of language, not used by it" . . . (1980,8) betrays a confidence about language manipulation that few linguists would share. A more realistic view is that expressed by a committee of the American Psychological Association which prepared guidelines for non-sexist writing (1977,8): "Any endeavor to change the language is an awesome task at best. Some aspects of our language that may be considered sexist are firmly embedded in our culture, and we presently have no acceptable substitutes."

In the United States there is no serious government effort to encourage or mandate language changes called for by feminists, though many publishers and professional organizations have issued guidelines or recommendations for non-sexist writing. Occasionally officials in the Federal Office of Education have made desultory attempts to achieve sex-free language. Recently one official, Paul D. Grossman[!], chided the University of California at Berkeley about sex-biased language in its course catalogue, e.g. a course title "Of Molecules and Man: A View for the Layman" should, according to Grossman, be changed to "Of Molecules and Human Beings: A View for the Lay Person." A faculty committee at Berkeley accepted some recommended changes ("worker's compensation" for "workman's compensation") but forcibly rejected most of the others. It is worth quoting a few lines from the faculty response:

"The argument against the long-accepted universal use of *man* and *mankind* is political, not linguistic or logical. It may be compared to the mandated universal use of *comrade* . . . in 'classless' societies . . . Pretending or asserting that the syllable *man* signifies males exclusively can lead one to such barbarisms as *ombudsperson* or *freshperson*."

"His as the appropriate (and neutral) pronoun to follow *one* or a *person* is an English usage of similar

longstanding acceptance, although some writers — especially in state universities — have lately taken to substituting the cumbersome and unnecessary *his or her*.”
 ”In no case should the University accept the idea that the office for civil rights [of the Office of Education] is a better judge of appropriate language in its publications, or descriptions of its courses, than the University itself.” (Safire 1985, 10—12)

What is the situation today? There is no sure way to describe the results of feminist efforts in a country of 238 million people. In any case what is said here applies only to the written language; changes in the spoken language can only be described after the passage of some decades. It seems clear that the social title *Ms./Ms* has gained a foothold in business and bureaucratic usage. There is a heightened sensitivity to the use of occupational titles ending in *-man*; what used to be advertised in a restaurant as a ”businessman’s luncheon” is more likely to now appear as a ”businessperson’s luncheon.”

The greatest confusion concerns generic *he*, when to use it or how to avoid it. We carried out a small experiment with some 50 freshmen (ages 17—21) at the Pennsylvania State University, asking them to write a short essay on ”What a Newcomer Can Expect at Penn State”; we used the word *newcomer* to avoid possible bias in *freshman*. Our hope was that they would, in their writing, be forced into using the third person singular in reference to the ”newcomer.” All we can say from reviewing the papers is that confusion reigns. Some students use the traditional generic *he*, others *he/she* or *s/he*, others *they* and others mixtures of the various possibilities; one male student used *she* as the generic pronoun. Our judgment is that the student’s variations in usage reflects the widespread uncertainty about third person pronouns in American society today.²

Changes in the usage of at least some Americans have already come about as a result of the recently accelerating social pressures to avoid generic (*-man*) and *he*. The linguistic situation is quite unsettled at the moment among educated users of formal English. Although *they* in its singular meaning continues to gain ground as a generic pronoun in less formal contexts, such as advertising and local newspapers, it is widely resisted in more formal writing, even by many of those who disapprove of generic *he*. The ultimate sorting out of the present confused picture will result from the varied social and linguistic forces at work, but as none of the present alternatives is ideal, the final results cannot be predicted with confidence.

² There is a considerable amount of mixed usage for all the pronouns. The traditional prescription that the pronouns *I, he, she, they, who*, are to be used in subject position with *me, him, her, them, whom* being used in all object positions is widely ignored in colloquial usage, e.g. ”Jim and *me* are going to the movies,” ”Give the papers to my wife and *I*,” ”*Who* are you calling?”

From a historical perspective this is not at all surprising, because not only do none of the nouns which occupy the same positions now have any corresponding case marking but even the other personal pronouns (*it* and *you*) as well as the other relative, interrogative, and demonstrative pronouns (*that, which, what*, etc.) now make no distinction in form between subject and object position. Given this lack of reinforcement of any such distinction in the grammatical system in general, English speakers have very little, if any, sense of inflectional case, except for the genitive forms.

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NASTOJANJE DA SE UJEDNAČE REFERENCE NA SPOL U AMERIČKOM ENGLISKOM

Sažetak

Autori ispituju nastojanja američkih feminista da ohrabre uporabu terminologije u američkom engleskom koja je neutralna s obzirom na rod. Poseban je problem generična ili uključiva upotreba riječi *man* i sufiksa *-man* koji se ponekad odnose na muškarce i žene a nekad samo na muškarce. Ovdje se razmatraju mogućnosti zamjene riječju odnosno sufikson *person/ -person* koji nisu obilježeni s obzirom na rod. Inovacija u društvenom oslovljavanju *Ms.* mnogo se upotrebljava barem u pisanoj komunikaciji. Autori naposljetku razmatraju pomutnju u uporabi zamjenica koja je posljedica nastojanja da se neutraliziraju reference na rod.