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## REVISIONS/REPORTS

# Beyond the “He/Man” Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language

Wendy Martyna

*Time* calls it “Ms-guided,”<sup>1</sup> a syndicated columnist “linguistic lunacy.”<sup>2</sup> *TV Guide* wonders what the “women’s lib redhots” with “the nutty pronouns” are doing.<sup>3</sup> A clear understanding of the sexist language issue continues to elude the popular press. The medium is not alone in its misunderstanding. This discussion separates the strands of argument often tangled in current approaches to the issue, whether these approaches appear in the popular media, academic journals, or feminist publications. The arguments against sexist language have been mistranslated more often than not. Those mistranslations have then been responded to by opponents of language change. Clarifying these, and synthesizing the case against sexist language, can help to offset the con-

This work is dedicated to the memory of Kate De Pierri, who was a contemporary in spirit, energy, and commitment, despite the fifty years between us. Early encouragement, much appreciated, came from Catharine Stimpson, Barrie Thorne, Nancy Henley, Cheris Kramer, and Adrienne Rich. Valuable resources were provided by Mary Ritchie Key, Virginia Valian, Simon Klevansky, Patti Leasure, LeeAnn Slinkard, and the many generous people who are part of the “women-and-language grapevine.” I am particularly grateful for the critical readings of earlier drafts by Len Erickson, Herb Clark, Sandra Bem, Leigh Star, and Terri Daly.

1. Stefan Kanfer, “Sispeak: A Ms-guided Attempt to Change Herstory,” *Time* 100 (October 23, 1972): 79.

2. Harriet Van Horne, “Women’s Movement Foolishly Assaults the English Language,” *Rocky Mountain News* (February 19, 1976), p. 51.

3. “As We See It,” *TV Guide* 19 (July 17, 1971): 1.

tinuing, annoying trivialization of this issue, which has constituted a major roadblock on the path toward a language that speaks clearly and fairly of both sexes.

The "he/man" approach to language involves the use of male terms to refer both specifically to males and generically to human beings (*A Man for All Seasons* is specific; "No man is an island" is generic). The he/man approach has received most attention in current debates on sexist language, not only because of its ubiquity but also because of its status as one of the least subtle of sexist forms. In linguistic terms, some have characterized the male as an unmarked, the female as a marked, category. The unmarked category represents both maleness and femaleness, while the marked represents femaleness only.<sup>4</sup> Thus the male in Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* excludes the female in Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness*, while the male in Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* is supposed to encompass the female of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

The outlines of the he/man debate are evident in an exchange of letters in the *Harvard Crimson* in 1971. The linguistics faculty of Harvard criticized an attempt by a theology class to eliminate sexist language from its discussions: "The fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English . . . is simply a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor towards which our society may wish to evolve. There is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes."<sup>5</sup>

Virginia Valian, a psychologist, and Jerrold Katz, a linguist, countered by posing this hypothetical situation: "In culture R the language is such that the pronouns are different according to the color of the people involved, rather than their sex . . . the unmarked pronoun just happens to be the one used for white people. In addition, the colored people just happen to constitute an oppressed group. Now imagine that this oppressed group begins complaining about the use of the 'white' pronoun to refer to all people. Our linguists presumably then say, 'Now, now, there is really no cause for anxiety or pronoun-envy.' It isn't a question of linguistics, but of how the people involved feel."<sup>6</sup> The students' claim: the generic masculine is both ambiguous and discriminatory. The linguists' claim: it is simply a feature of grammar, unrelated to the issue of sex discrimination. The students' counterresponse: it is more than a feature of grammar, but a factor which both reflects and maintains societal sexism. This 1971 scenario has been enacted many times in the

4. Herbert H. Clark and Eve V. Clark, *Psychology and Language: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1977), p. 524.

5. Harvard Linguistics Faculty, "Pronoun Envy," *Harvard Crimson* (November 16, 1971).

6. Virginia Valian and Jerrold Katz, "The Right to Say 'He,'" *Harvard Crimson* (November 24, 1971).

years since: the cast varies, but the plot and dialogue remain familiar. William James noted three stages a new idea moves through: it is first attacked as absurd; then admitted to be true, but seen as obvious and insignificant; and finally, seen as so important that its adversaries claim they discovered it. If James is correct, then the controversy over sexist language now sits somewhere between stages one and two.

### *Resistance to Change*

Comments on the he/man issue vary in their subtlety. Among the most blatant are personal attacks on those who attack the generic masculine. One columnist describes the editor who had altered his sexist prose as "an ardent Amazonian." He later bursts out: "Women are irrational, all women: when some women threaten to disembowel me unless I say 'personhole-cover,' I am surer even than I was that all women are irrational."<sup>7</sup> Trivializations of the movement for sexist language appear in a wide range of locations, from *Time's* article on "sispeak" to a nationally syndicated columnist's critique of the "libspeak tantrum."<sup>8</sup> This reaction to sexist language appears more striking when contrasted to the popular response to racist language. The U.S. secretary of agriculture, Earl Butz, left office following public outcry over his racist remarks (which the media refused to repeat, "even in this liberated age").<sup>9</sup> Butz's remarks were equally sexist, but he apologized only to the black male members of Congress, not the females; and it was his racism, not his sexism, which caused his censure. Public reaction to Billy Carter's "witticisms," often as racist and sexist as Butz's remarks, illustrate this same contrast. Sexist language is popularly treated as a source of humor more often than outrage. Pauli Murray has called this ridicule of women "the psychic counterpart of violence against blacks,"<sup>10</sup> and Naomi Weisstein speaks of this humor as "a weapon in the social arsenal constructed to maintain . . . sex inequalities, . . . showing that women can't be taken seriously."<sup>11</sup> If pronouns are as amusingly insignificant as some consider them to be, we should expect no outcry were the situation reversed, and the female pronoun became the generic. Yet when the female pronoun has been used to refer to both sexes, as in the teaching profession, males

7. Milton Mayer, "On the Siblinghood of Persons," *Progressive* (September 1975), pp. 20-21.

8. Kanfer.

9. David Felton, "Butz Is Just a 4-Letter Word," *Rolling Stone* (November 18, 1976).

10. Pauli Murray, testimony, U.S. Congress, House, Special Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Education and Welfare, *Discrimination against Women*, 91st Cong., 2d sess., 1970, on section 805 of H.R. 16098.

11. Naomi Weisstein, "Why We Aren't Laughing—Anymore," *Ms* 2, no. 5 (November 1973): 49.

have lobbied for use of the male pronoun. They argue that use of "she" is responsible, in part, for their poor public image and low salaries.<sup>12</sup>

Resistance to language change has also involved more sophisticated lines of argument. The first centers on the meaning of "he." The generic masculine does not need replacement, argue some, for "he" can include "she" (or "man" can embrace "woman," as grammar teachers are fond of saying). Frank M. argues this position in a letter to "Dear Abby": "I'm tired of the ignorance of those who insist that the word 'man' applies only to males. My dictionary has several definitions, of which the first two are: 1) human being, person . . . 2) the human race. So why don't we stop all this asinine changing of words?"<sup>13</sup> Jacques Barzun similarly explains: "No one until recently ever saw in the phrase [Madame Chairman] any paradox, incongruity, or oppugnancy between terms. It is consistent with common sense and perfect equity; the 'man' in it denotes either sex."<sup>14</sup>

Others argue that the generic masculine includes both sexes because they intend it to. Anthony Burgess, for example, says that his use of "he" and "man" is neutral, and that it is women who "force chauvinistic sex onto the word."<sup>15</sup>

Yet the question of what "he" and "man" really mean is fully answered neither by turning to dictionary definitions nor by consulting the intentions of their users. Good intentions are not enough, unfortunately, to guarantee that generic meaning will be conveyed. And guided tours through Latin and Old English are not enough to guarantee that the generic masculine is used clearly and fairly today. Further, the denotations found in dictionaries do not always reveal the connotations that "he" and "man" can carry.

Others who resist language change deny neither that sexist language can serve as a symbol of sexist society nor that sexist society needs to be changed. What they do disclaim is that the one has much to do with the other. The need, they say, is to change the sources, rather than the symbols, of sexism in society. Nina Yablok puts forth in rhyme: "If I had my choice, if I had my druthers / I'd take equal rights. Leave equal words to the others."<sup>16</sup> To Stefan Kanfer, the hope for a nonsexist language reveals "a touching, almost mystical trust in words."<sup>17</sup>

Another group, which also tends to support social change, wonders

12. M. S. Fenner, "After All: Proposal for Unisex Pronoun," *Today's Education* 63 (Summer 1974): 110 ("ne").

13. "Dear Abby," *Los Angeles Times* (August 17, 1976).

14. Jacques Barzun, "A Few Words on a Few Words," *Columbia Forum* (Summer 1974), pp. 17-19.

15. Anthony Burgess, "Dirty Words," *New York Times Magazine* (August 8, 1976).

16. Nina Yablok, "A Woperchild Joins the Arguthing," *New York Times* (March 30, 1977).

17. Kanfer.

about the very possibility of language change. Robin Lakoff, whose work has encouraged a greater awareness of sexist language, has nevertheless argued that pronouns are "too common, too thoroughly mixed throughout the language, for the speaker to be aware each time he uses them. It is realistic only to hope to change those linguistic uses of which speakers themselves can be made aware, as they use them."<sup>18</sup> Others are deterred by the difficulty, rather than the impossibility, of language change. One writer, referring to "the ugly and awkward 'he or she' forms," says, "They may be only a passing fad, but they offend the traditional eye."<sup>19</sup> Eye trouble is not the only complaint. To William Buckley, the "distortions ring in the ear."<sup>20</sup> This pessimism about language change is at least partly due to a misrepresentation of the causes for optimism. A common view seems to be that feminists have failed to take into account the complexities of language change, viewing it as a relatively quick and easy process. In fact, those who advocate nonsexist language do not pretend that change will be quick, easy, or unopposed.

Much resistance to change arises from a confusion over *what* will be changed, as well as *why* there should be change. The widespread worry is that both specific and generic forms of "he" and "man" will be eliminated, should language change go according to feminist plan. Some writers manifest a mania for manipulating each "man" in our language into a "person," and then mentioning the menace such manipulations pose. Russell Baker, for example, would have substituted "person" for "each 'man'" in the previous sentence, as he did in his satire of "Nopersonclature."<sup>21</sup> Despite the many suggestions to the contrary, we do not have to begin language change by renaming NOW the National Organization for Wopeople. The many fears of retitling such works as *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* and *A Man for All Seasons* are similarly unfounded: the term "man" as used here is specific, not generic. Sexism, not *sex*, is under attack.

The fear of losing all sex-specific terms in the language has led to the characterization of a nonsexist language as "sexually obscure," "a unisex tongue . . . a dull tongue and a false one," and "a spaying of the language."<sup>22</sup> One member of the California State Assembly opposed a move to replace "assemblyman" with "assembly member." "That takes the masculinity out of it!" he declared.<sup>23</sup> Not only a "sexless" language,

18. Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

19. Edward Devol, "The He-She Dilemma Built into the Tongue," *San Francisco Chronicle* (February 13, 1977).

20. William F. Buckley, Jr., "Unsex Me Now," *National Review* (May 28, 1976), p. 583.

21. Russell Baker, "Nopersonclature," *New York Times* (March 4, 1973).

22. Israel Shenker, "Is It Possible for a Woman to Manhandle the King's English?" *New York Times* (August 29, 1971); E. B. White, as quoted in Blake Green, "A New English: Unbiased or Unsexed?" *San Francisco Chronicle* (October 11, 1974); and Charles McCabe, "Spaying the Language," *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 24, 1977).

23. "Assembly Moves to Desex Its Titles," *Los Angeles Times* (January 14, 1977).

but also an ungrammatical one, is dreaded. William Buckley, Jr., is among those refusing to substitute singular "they" for generic "he." Those who issue guidelines for nonsexist language, he says, "want us to validate improper usage." Anyone who uses a singular "they," in Buckley's view, "should not be hired as a professional writer."<sup>24</sup>

### *Arguments for Change*

Those who oppose the generic masculine are concerned with both equal rights *and* equal words. Nonsexist language would not only reflect a move toward a nonsexist ideology; it would also function in itself as one form of social equality. Eliminating the ambiguity and sex exclusiveness of the he/man approach would enable us to communicate more clearly and fairly about the sexes.

The New York State Supreme Court housed a confrontation in 1976 between those who differ on this question of equity. Ellen Cooperman's petition to change her name to "Cooperperson" was denied by the court, on grounds it would set a precedent for other "ludicrous changes (Mannings becoming Peoplings)" and expose the women's movement to ridicule. However, she considered her petition as personally and politically important, arguing that "Cooperman" reflects "the pervasiveness of linguistic male predominance" and is among those factors complicating women's efforts to achieve self-identity.<sup>25</sup> Her view is shared by many others who testify to the importance of the he/man issue. For example, Susan Sontag sees language as "the most intense and stubborn fortress of sexist assumptions," one which "crudely enshrines the ancient bias against women."<sup>26</sup>

The damage the generic masculine has done is itself a strong argument for change. Research has begun to suggest the behavioral implications of sexist language. Sandra Bem and Daryl Bem, for instance, have assessed the impact of sex-biased job advertisements, finding that sex-unbiased advertisements encourage more high school females to apply for male-related jobs.<sup>27</sup> Most of such studies have focused on the psychological impact of broad gender cues. While there are ample data to suggest that manipulating such cues has psychological impact, we have not yet assessed the particular contribution the generic masculine makes in creating these cues. The data on the way the generic "he" encourages

24. Buckley.

25. "Fighting for Her Cooperpersonhood," *Los Angeles Times* (October 24, 1976); and Ellen Cooperperson, "What's in a Name? Sexism," *New York Times* (November 21, 1976).

26. Susan Sontag, "The Third World of Women," *Partisan Review* 40, no. 2 (1973): 186.

27. Sandra Bem and Daryl Bem, "Does Sex-biased Job Advertising 'Aid and Abet' Sex Discrimination?" *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 3, no. 1 (1973): 6-18.

a male rather than neutral interpretation, however, suggest that that role is considerable.

Cognitive confusion is another consequence of the generic masculine, one particularly relevant for the academic disciplines.<sup>28</sup> Joan Huber, for example, has characterized the use of “he” and “man” as “an exercise in doublethink that muddles sociological discourse.” She cites the recent sociology text which proclaims: “The more education an individual attains, the better his occupation is likely to be, and the more money he is likely to earn.” The statement is accurate only if the individual is male.<sup>29</sup> The American Anthropological Association is among many scholarly associations to caution its members that use of the generic masculine is “conceptually confusing.”<sup>30</sup> Ambiguity results when generic and specific meanings are not easily separable; exclusion results when context prohibits a generic interpretation. Watch what context does to the supposedly generic “he” used by Paul Meehl to describe this hypothetical researcher: “He” produces a long list of publications but little contribution to the enduring body of knowledge, and “his true position is that of a potent-but-sterile intellectual rake, who leaves in his merry wake a long train of ravished maidens, but no viable scientific offspring.”<sup>31</sup>

Context, many say, should be sufficient to decide whether a specific or generic meaning of “he” and “man” is intended. Yet my empirical explorations demonstrate that, even in a clearly generic context (e.g., “When someone is near a hospital, he should be quiet”), “he” is ambiguous, allowing both specific and generic interpretations to be drawn.<sup>32</sup> My research does not argue that “he” *cannot* function generically, but that it allows both specific and generic interpretation, even in a context which should force a generic inference. Moreover, our encounters with “he” rarely take place in clearly generic contexts. In educational materials, for instance, the sex-specific “he” appears five to ten times for every single generic “he.”<sup>33</sup> The generic masculine thus appears amidst a profusion of references to specific males. Based on this predominantly sex-specific

28. Mary Beard observed in 1946, “For hundreds of years the use of the word ‘man’ has troubled critical scholars, careful translators, and lawyers. Difficulties occur whenever and wherever it is important for truth-seeking purposes to know what is being talked about and the context gives no intimation of [what] ‘man’ means” (Mary Beard, *Woman as Force in History* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1946], p. 59).

29. Joan Huber, “On the Generic Use of Male Pronouns,” *American Sociologist* 11 (May 1976): 89.

30. American Anthropological Association, *Newsletter* (January 1974), p. 12.

31. Paul Meehl, “Theory Testing in Physics: A Methodological Paradox,” *Philosophy of Science* 34 (1967): 103–15.

32. Wendy Martyna, “Using and Understanding the Generic Masculine: A Social-psychological Approach” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1978).

33. Carol Tittle, Karen McCarthy, and Jane Steckler, *Women and Educational Testing* (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1974); and Alma Graham, “The Making of a Nonsexist Dictionary,” *Ms* 2 (December 1973): 12–16.

usage, our best guess when encountering a "he" is that it will not contain an implicit "she."

Startled laughter often greets such sentences as "Menstrual pain accounts for an enormous loss of manpower hours," or "Man, being a mammal, breast-feeds his young." We do a double take when hearing of the gynecologist who was awarded a medical award for "service to his fellowman." C. S. Lewis captures the importance of these reactions: "In ordinary language the sense of a word . . . normally excludes all others from the mind. . . . The proof of this is that the sudden intrusion of any irrelevant sense is funny. It is funny because it is unexpected. There is a semantic explosion because the two meanings rush together from a great distance; one of them was not in our consciousness at all till that moment. If it had been, there would be no detonation."<sup>34</sup> To avoid this "semantic explosion," we are cautioned by writers' manuals to avoid a generic "he" when the issue of sex "is present and pointed," as in "The pool is open to both men and women, but everyone must bring his or her own towel."<sup>35</sup> Similarly, we avoid a generic "he" when the female meaning is predominant. An investigation of psychology textbooks found that hypothetical professors, physicians, and psychologists were referred to as "he," while hypothetical nurses, teachers, and librarians were "she."<sup>36</sup> If "he" includes "she"—if "man" embraces "woman"—why these shifts to the female pronoun?

Empirical explorations of how we comprehend the generic masculine also indicate its sex exclusiveness. My studies of pronoun usage show striking sex differences in both the use and understanding of the generic masculine. Females use "he" less often than do males, and turn more frequently to alternatives such as "he or she" and "they." Males have an easier time imagining themselves as members of the category referenced by generic "he." Seven times as many males as females say they see themselves in response to sex-neutral sentences referring to a "person" or "human being." In general, males appear to be using and understanding "he" in its specific more often than in its generic sense. Females both avoid the use of "he" and respond to its use with a more generic than specific interpretation. For females to do otherwise would be to encourage self-exclusion.<sup>37</sup>

34. C. S. Lewis, *Studies in Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 11.

35. Theodore Bernstein, *The Careful Writer: A Modern Guide to English Usage* (New York: Atheneum Publishers, 1965), p. 351.

36. American Psychological Association Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education, "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language," *American Psychologist* 30, no. 6 (June 1975): 682-84.

37. Wendy Martyna, "What Does 'He' Mean—Use of the Generic Masculine," *Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 131-38; and Wendy Martyna, "Using and Understanding the Generic Masculine" (paper presented at the Ninth World Congress of Sociology, Uppsala, Sweden, August 1978).

The confusion and exclusion caused by the generic masculine have striking social implications. Although one legal scholar notes the “useful function” ambiguity can perform, “by virtue of its lack of precision,”<sup>38</sup> the ambiguity of “he” and “man” is far from useful for those who are included by inference only. A member of the Canadian Parliament, Simma Holt, challenged the equity of the Federal Interpretation Act, which reads: “Words importing male persons include female persons and corporations.” Holt was reassured that the act creates no injustice, for females are explicitly included within the definition of the generic masculine. Doubting that assurance, Marguerite Ritchie surveyed some 200 years of Canadian law and discovered that the ambiguity of the generic masculine has allowed judges to include or exclude women, depending on the climate of the times and their own personal biases. As she concludes: “Wherever any statute or regulation is drafted in terms of the male, a woman has no guarantee that it confers on her any rights at all.”<sup>39</sup> Legal controversy over the generic masculine has arisen in the United States as well, involving, for example:

Administration of a scholarship fund set up for “worthy and ambitious young men”;<sup>40</sup>  
 dispute over a Kiwanis Club admission of women, despite bylaws specifying “men” as members;<sup>41</sup>  
 the appeal of a murder conviction in which the self-defense instructions to the jury were phrased in the generic masculine, thus “leaving the jury with the impression that the objective standard to be applied is that applicable to an altercation between two men”;<sup>42</sup>  
 and  
 sex-biased application of the legal notion of “a reasonable man.”<sup>43</sup>

### *Prospects for Language Change*

Language change may be difficult, but it is not impossible. Some prominent individuals, for example, have made striking changes in their language use. Millions were listening when Harry Reasoner apologized for referring, on a previous broadcast, to the “men” of the Judiciary

38. Ovid Lewis, “Law, Language and Communication,” *Case Western Reserve Law Review* 23 (1972): 316.

39. Marguerite Ritchie, “Alice through the Statutes,” *McGill Law Journal* 21 (Winter 1975): 702.

40. Frederick Cusick, “Law Students Win Their Case—against a Will,” *Daily Hampshire (Northampton, Mass.) Gazette* (March 1, 1975).

41. B. W. O’Hearn, “N.Y. Kiwanis Club Admits First Woman,” *Middletown Connecticut Press* (January 23, 1974).

42. *State of Washington v. Yvonne Wanrow*, Supreme Court of Washington 559 Pacific Report, 2d ser., 1977, pp. 548–59.

43. Ronald K. L. Collins, “Language, History, and the Legal Process: A Profile of the ‘Reasonable Man,’” *Camden Law Journal* 8, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 312, 323.

Committee. In response to the many objections he had received, he not only apologized but also asked indulgence for future language offenses he might inadvertently commit.<sup>44</sup> A variety of government agencies, feminist groups, professional associations, religious organizations, educational institutions, publishing firms, and media institutions have also endorsed language change, issuing guidelines or passing regulations concerning sexist language.<sup>45</sup> Initial empirical studies suggest considerable language changes among university faculty and politicians.<sup>46</sup>

The strongest argument for the possibility of language change is that substantial numbers of language users have already managed to construct detours around generic "he" and "man." Ann Bodine<sup>47</sup> surveys instances of socially motivated language change in England, Sweden, and Russia; Paul Friedrich<sup>48</sup> investigates the Russian example in detail, exploring how pronominal change resulted from a growing concern for social equality.

Many guidelines for nonsexist language encourage either the replacement of the generic masculine with sex-inclusive or sex-neutral forms or rewriting to avoid the need for a single pronoun or noun.<sup>49</sup> "They" has long been in use as an alternative to "he"; Bodine claims that "despite almost two centuries of vigorous attempts to analyze and regulate it out of existence, singular 'they' is alive and well."<sup>50</sup> Research on pronoun use confirms Bodine's observation.<sup>51</sup> Maija Blaubeergs and Barbara Bate have both categorized the many proposed alternatives to sexist language forms.<sup>52</sup> The two main ones are sex-inclusive forms (such as "he or she" and "women and men") and sex-neutral terms (such as

44. Jean Ward, "Attacking the King's English: Implications for Journalism in the Feminist Critiques," *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (Winter 1975): 699-705.

45. For example, American Psychological Association, "Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals," *Publication Manual Change Sheet 2* (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, 1977); Scott, Foresman & Co., *Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1974); Macmillan Publishing Co., *Guidelines for Creating Positive Sexual and Racial Images in Educational Materials* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1975); and "Assembly Panel Acts to Rid Laws of Sexism," *New York Times* (February 19, 1976).

46. Barbara Bate, "Nonsexist Language Use in Transition," *Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 139-49; and Sandra Purnell, "Politically Speaking, Do Women Exist?" *Journal of Communication* 28, no. 1 (Winter 1978): 150-56.

47. Ann Bodine, "Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular 'They,' Sex-indefinite 'He' and 'He or She,'" *Language in Society* 4 (August 1975): 129-46.

48. Paul Friedrich, "Social Context and Semantic Feature: The Russian Pronominal Usage," in *Directions in Sociolinguistics*, ed. J. Gumperz and D. Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1972).

49. An example of such guidelines: McGraw-Hill Book Co., *Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974).

50. Bodine, pp. 129-46.

51. Martyna, "What Does 'He' Mean—Use of the Generic Masculine"; and D. Terence Langendoen, *Essentials of English Grammar* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970).

52. Maija Blaubeergs, "Changing the Sexist Language: The Theory behind the Practice," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1978): 244-61; and Bate.

“chairperson” and “humanity”). Since 1970, several new pronouns, including “tey,” “co,” “na,” and “E,” have been suggested.<sup>53</sup> The difficulty of changing the language must also be contrasted with the difficulty of *not* changing. The awkwardness that may result from the “he or she” construction may be less troublesome than the ambiguity and sex exclusiveness of the he/man approach, and even that awkwardness will eventually decline.

Why the persistent misrepresentation and misunderstanding of the sexist language issue?<sup>54</sup> The simplest explanation is antifeminism, yet this by itself is not enough. Why should this issue remain a source of ridicule when other feminist claims have come to be treated seriously? Why do some feminists, both female and male, consider the fight for “equal words” to be a misdirection of energy? There seems to be a general cultural reluctance to acknowledge the power of language in our lives, an insistence that language is of symbolic rather than actual importance. We chant in childhood, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me,” yet we carry the psychological scars from words long after the bruises and scrapes have healed. We may still be in the midst of a cultural reaction against early preoccupation with the magical power of words.

The importance of this kind of “magic” was suggested by the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis, which states that language can determine our thought and behavior patterns and that different languages can shape different world views.<sup>55</sup> It is usually assumed that feminist argument is grounded in the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis. Michael Schneider and Karen Foss worry that “feminists inadvertently have helped to perpetuate and diffuse an outdated, oversimplified, and basically inaccurate view of the relationship between thought and language.”<sup>56</sup> In its strongly stated form, this hypothesis has seen little empirical support and strong theoretical criticism since its formulation in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet it has come to be generally accepted in its moderate version: that language may influence, rather than determine, thought and behavior patterns.

53. Casey Miller and Kate Swift, “De-Sexing the English Language,” *Ms* 1 (Spring 1972): 7 (“tey”); Mary Orován, “Humanizing English,” mimeographed (Hackensack, N.J.: Mary Orován, 1971) (“co”); June Arnold, *The Cook and the Carpenter* (Houston, Tex.: Daughters Publishing Co., 1975) (“na”); Fenner (“ne”); and Donald G. MacKay, “Birth of a Word,” manuscript, Department of Psychology, University of California at Los Angeles (“E”).

54. Nonsexist language change has also been ridiculed. See, e.g., “Of Men and Wopersons,” *New York Times* (April 12, 1975); “Dr. Spock Treats His Gender Problem,” *San Francisco Chronicle* (April 5, 1976); and “Dr. Spock Tells Why He No Longer Sings in Praise of Hims,” *New York Times* (October 13, 1973).

55. Benjamin Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Essays of Benjamin Whorf*, ed. J. B. Carrol (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1956).

56. Michael Schneider and Karen Foss, “Thought, Sex, and Language: The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis in the American Women’s Movement,” *Bulletin: Women’s Studies in Communication* 1, no. 1 (1977): 3.

The moderate version of the Sapir/Whorf hypothesis is reflected in the feminist move for nonsexist language. The issue is not what *can* be said about the sexes, but what can be *most easily* and *most clearly* said, given the constraints of the he/man approach and other forms of sexist language.

What can be done to resolve the controversy over sexist language? A dual strategy, involving both research and action, can be most effective in accelerating the language changes already in progress. The many research projects, articles, and course offerings described in *Women and Language News*, a national newsletter, reflect the increasing interdisciplinary and international interest in language and sexism.<sup>57</sup> These theoretical and empirical approaches contribute to our understanding of the nature and consequences of sexist language and lend a credibility to feminist claims. Such approaches need to be translated into other persuasive forms. Pressure on government agencies and the media, for example, can involve letter-writing campaigns, public advertisements, popularization of research results, workshops for those with power to effect language change, and organized demands for guidelines and regulations encouraging nonsexist language use.

Despite the misinterpretation of the sexist language controversy, the movement toward nonsexist language has begun. That movement has been slowed by confusion. Increased clarity can help us be more effective in crafting future changes. Edward Sapir was aware of the psychological implications of language. "All in all," he claimed, "it is not too much to say that one of the really important functions of language is to be constantly declaring to society the psychological place held by all of its members."<sup>58</sup> The goal of those of us who argue for language change is to revise the character of that declaration, so that our language comes to suggest the equal humanity of *all* its users.

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57. *Women and Language News* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University, Department of Linguistics), various issues, 1976-78.

58. Edward Sapir, *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture, and Personality*, ed. David Mandelbaum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963).