

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**PERCEPTIONS OF SEXIST LANGUAGE  
AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO  
ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN AND SOCIAL ROLES.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Psychology  
at Massey University.

Rachel Ann Scott

1993

## ABSTRACT

The language about women reflects the attitudes of men toward women and to the extent that women use them, the attitudes of women toward themselves. The relationship between language and the attitudes of those who use it is not one-way. Language reflects the attitudes of those who use it but it can also create and maintain attitudes and stereotypes. Hence the feminists' attack on the English language.

The trend to using non-sexist language is a conscious effort to change our thought by changing our language. The present study investigated the existence of a relationship between attitudes toward women, social attitudes, and people's perceptions of sexist language for 151 participants. The sample included two student groups (internally enrolled students and extramural students) and a non-student sample. The sample completed self-report questionnaires on their judgements of language as sexist, their perceptions of sexist language as a problem, and attitudes toward women and social issues.

The findings demonstrated that there is a relationship between sexist language and the attitudes people espouse. Liberal social attitudes and liberal attitudes toward women and gender roles were found to correlate with easier recognition of linguistic sexism. Traditional attitudes toward gender roles and conservative social attitudes resulted in a failure to perceive gender-biased language as sexist.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my supervisor Dr Ross Flett for his help and support throughout this work. His sense of humour and lighthearted approach to life made work on this project an enjoyable learning experience.

To my friends Shahla and Gavin, and my sister Kathryn, I appreciate the time and effort you gave in helping me to find those elusive subjects. Your encouragement and support throughout this work will long be remembered.

Special thanks to my mentor, Dr Robert Gregory, who was never too busy to talk. His understanding and your willingness to help will always be held in high regard.

Special thanks to my flatmate Richard, who knew to avoid me when the stress got too much. And to my family and friends, especially Gillian, without whose friendship I would never have survived the year.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	page
Abstract . . . . .	ii
Acknowledgements . . . . .	iii
Table of contents . . . . .	iv
List of tables . . . . .	viii
<b>1 INTRODUCTION . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Sapir-Whorf hypothesis . . . . .	2
Sex stereotypes . . . . .	3
Sexism in language . . . . .	4
Sexist language: introduction . . . . .	6
<b>2 GENERICS . . . . .</b>	<b>8</b>
Masculine generics . . . . .	8
Interpretation of man . . . . .	9
Cliches . . . . .	11
Interpretation of he . . . . .	12
Alternatives to gender-biased generics . . . . .	13
<b>3 PARALLEL TREATMENT . . . . .</b>	<b>15</b>
Sexist language and sexist behaviour . . . . .	15
Problems of designation . . . . .	17

	Problems of evaluation . . . . .	18
	Occupations . . . . .	18
	Trivialising . . . . .	19
	Gender marking . . . . .	20
<b>4</b>	<b>PERCEPTIONS OF SEXIST LANGUAGE . . . . .</b>	<b>21</b>
	Recognition factor . . . . .	21
	Sex differences in perceptions . . . . .	21
	Group differences in perceptions . . . . .	22
<b>5</b>	<b>SEXIST LANGUAGE AND OTHER FACTORS . . . . .</b>	<b>24</b>
	Language and attitudes . . . . .	24
	Demographic variables . . . . .	25
	Feminist orientation . . . . .	25
	Sex role attitudes . . . . .	26
	Social status . . . . .	26
	Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) . . . . .	27
	Summary . . . . .	28
<b>6</b>	<b>SUMMARY AND RESEARCH GOALS . . . . .</b>	<b>29</b>
	Recapitulation . . . . .	29
	Understanding the characteristics of sexist language . . . . .	29
	Recognition of sexist language . . . . .	30

	Knowledge of psychosocial processes . . . . .	31
	Attitudes towards women and sexist language . . . . .	31
	Demographics and sexist language . . . . .	32
	Social Attitudes and perceptions of sexist language . . . . .	33
	The present study . . . . .	33
<b>7</b>	<b>THE PRESENT STUDY . . . . .</b>	<b>35</b>
	Method . . . . .	35
	Participants . . . . .	35
	Development of the measurement scale . . . . .	36
	The Attitudes Toward Women Scale . . . . .	37
	Language Opinion Survey . . . . .	38
	Impressions of sexist language usage . . . . .	40
	Social Attitudes Survey . . . . .	41
	Pilot study . . . . .	42
<b>8</b>	<b>RESULTS . . . . .</b>	<b>43</b>
	Type I and II error rates . . . . .	43
	Demographic variables . . . . .	44
	Attitudes to sexist language . . . . .	47
	Language Opinion Survey . . . . .	50
	Social Attitudes Survey . . . . .	59
	The Attitudes Toward Women Scale . . . . .	62
	Correlational data . . . . .	66

Summary .....	70
<b>9 DISCUSSION .....</b>	<b>71</b>
Recapitulation .....	71
Purpose of the present study .....	71
Methodological limitations .....	72
Sample .....	72
Instruments .....	73
Extent of support for the hypotheses .....	75
Attitudes toward women and perceptions of sexist language .....	75
Demographics and sexist language .....	76
Sexist language recognition and social attitudes .....	76
Impressions of sexist language .....	77
Summary and conclusions .....	77
Theoretical implications .....	79
<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>APPENDICES .....</b>	<b>88</b>
1. Questionnaire used in the present study .....	88
2. Study review sent to participants .....	112



## LIST OF TABLES

TABLE	page	
1	Sample description of survey participants. Breakdown of sample group by sex . . . . .	36
2	Sample description of survey participants of own sex sample (demographics) . . . . .	45
3	Sexist Language: Sources of pressure to change. Percentages of each sex reporting pressure to change . . . . .	49
4	Means, standard deviations and t-tests for each sex for the categories of Sexist Language . . . . .	51
5	Frequency of rating a statement as 'non-sexist' (frequency and percentage (in parentheses) . . . . . of own sex sample) . . . . .	54
6	Mean ratings of items in language opinion survey for each sex (standard deviations in parentheses) . . . . .	55
7	Suggestions for how to encourage the use of non-sexist language . . . . .	56

<b>8</b>	Impressions of sexist language. Means and standard deviations for each sex . . . . .	58
<b>9</b>	Means and standard deviations for the Social Attitudes survey . . . . .	61
<b>10</b>	Means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients from the three samples and from the total sample. . . . .	63
<b>11</b>	Correlational data between the AWS, Impressions of sexist language, and categories of sexist language. . . . .	68

They plainly can their Thoughts disclose  
    Whilst ours must burn within:  
We have got Tongues, and Eyes, in Vain,  
    And Truth from us is Sin.

Then Equal Laws let Custom find,  
    And neither Sex oppress;  
More Freedom give to Womankind,  
    Or give to Mankind less.

Anonymous, 1976.  
The Virginia Gazette,  
22 October, 1736

(from Miller & Swift, 1976, p96)

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

When George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* was first published in 1949 it created an uproar. That 'Big Brother' could be watching over us, controlling our language, our thoughts and our actions leaving us with no personal control in our lives disturbed many people, especially those people who saw a resemblance to current language practices. Orwell's 'newspeak' in the eyes of the critics closely parallels the feminists' attempt to eliminate sexist vocabulary from the English language. In Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* the government sharply reduced the vocabulary in the belief that subversive thought is impossible when there are no words to express it. Current critics of the feminist movement compare Orwell's 'newspeak' to ongoing attempts to change the English Language by eliminating gender-biased language usage.

The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which undoubtedly Orwell would have conceded with, presents the view that language sets the limits of our world, that our access to language determines what we are able to think about and in what capacity (Spender, 1980). By increasing or decreasing the number of words available to us, our ability to express feelings and ideas is altered. Objects and events do not present themselves ready classified. The categories into which they are divided are categories into which we have divided them. It is our capacity to symbolise and the use we make of the symbols

we construct that constitutes the area of language, thought and reality (Langer, 1976). As human beings, we cannot impartially describe the universe because in order to do so we must first have a classification system. But paradoxically, once that classification system is in place and a language exists, humans can see only arbitrary things. This can be illustrated in the terminology different countries and cultures develop for their varying climatic conditions. Given the climatic conditions of most English speaking nations, the English language has only one word for snow. The tropical nature of the Aztec's climate resulted in a single word to cover snow, ice and cold. The Eskimos, on the other hand whose daily functioning is dependent on being able to survive sub-zero climatic conditions, have many different words for snow - snow falling, lying on the ground, drifting, packed for building blocks, and many more words for wind and ice. (Miller & Swift, 1976).

Both Orwell and linguists agree that language sets the boundaries of how we perceive our world. Whorf (1956) argues that when children acquire a language they simultaneously acquire a "world view" because what their language allows them to talk about determines the way in which they perceive the world. Cann and Garnett (1984) found that children as young as two years of age have begun to develop stereotyped ideas and images and by the age of six are even more accurate in identifying the sex linkage of sex stereotyped objects and roles. The sex-stereotype the child develops may simply act as a categorisation scheme, changing as the child experiences the social world. The same process can be said to be operating in adults. When there is a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist. It is by this means that sexism can be perpetuated and reinforced as new

objects and events, and new data, have sexist interpretation projected upon them.

Males have historically been the dominant group, and as such have produced the language, thought and reality. It is their categories and their meanings which have survived and those categories and meanings have in turn being validated and accepted by other males. Women have tended to be excluded from this process and unlike their male counterparts have had little opportunity to talk to other females. Thus it is the male principles in language, thought and reality which have ensued. It has only really been since the Second World War, when women began to enter the workforce in large numbers and thus were able to talk together as men had been able to do in the past, that the inequalities in the English language really became apparent. In the United States the percentage of women in workforce rose from 31.8 percent after World War to 53.4 percent in 1984. In Sweden, 77 percent of women hold jobs. Sixty-three percent of British women were in paid employment by 1986 (Wolf, 1990). New Zealand figures from the 1986 census indicate that 53.5 percent of women held jobs. As more and more women are entering the workforce the demands they place on dismantling the power structure are also growing in strength. Women are no longer willing to settle for the status quo. They are now demanding that they be given the same opportunities as men, in the workplace and in the home, and now in language usage.

The existence of sexism in the structure and usage of the English language has been well researched and documented. The resulting awareness of sexist language has led to numerous suggestions for change, but these changes have been hindered for a

number of reasons. Alternatives to sexist usage have frequently been made resulting in an overabundance of choice. Many choices are in conflict with each other, or result in confusion. Another source of difficulty in eliminating sexist language has been ridicule by those opposed to change.

Language itself is not neutral. It is a powerful means of conveying ideas and can easily maintain or perpetuate negative stereotypes about a particular race, culture or sex. When language usage inadvertently or intentionally excludes a group of people solely on the grounds of gender that usage is sexist. Sexism in language can take many forms and has serious implications for both males and females. Sexism is a prejudicial attitude or discriminatory behaviour based on the presumed inferiority or difference of a particular sex. It usually implies the discrimination and oppression of women by men but can work in reverse.

The English language currently contains usage which reflects the inequality in position and power of males and females. This usage is varied but in whatever form it appears the result is generally the same. By its very nature sexist language creates an image of what is expected and then through continued usage perpetuates and maintains those images. The sexist assumptions of society are mirrored by language. Thus by implication, if we have sexist language which systematically excludes half the population then problems occur. It becomes not only a means of exclusion but a means of ensuring power remains with a particular group - males. Sexist language makes women invisible, it serves to perpetuate power structures that favour men. The bid to eliminate sexist language is an attempt to make the English language more precise, to

make it say what it means, rather than concealing its meaning. By changing the use of sexist language and sexist structure in language advocates believe that sex-role stereotypes will begin to break down, resulting in a society that gives more equal opportunities and rights to people regardless of their gender.

The following report examines what constitutes sexual structure and usage in the English language and investigates its relationship to gender role ideals and traditional and liberal social views. Firstly, the use of masculine generics and their relationship to perceptions of gender roles and ideals are examined. Secondly, parallel treatment of the sexes with regard to language usage and terminology is discussed. Thirdly, perceptions of sexist language usage are examined. Finally, a summary is presented and the research goals of the present study are specified.

## **SEXIST LANGUAGE: INTRODUCTION**

Sexist language is a form of discriminatory language usage which treats females and males as unequal purely on the basis of their gender. Discrepancy exists as to exactly what constitutes sexist language, what forms it appears in, and who it affects and how. Many argue that sexist language simply does not exist and the attempt to eliminate so-called sexist language is an attempt to restrict freedom of expression. However research has shown that sexist language does exist and has been shown to discriminate unfairly between the sexes. Many forms of sexist language exist; non-parallel treatment of the sexes, stereotyping, ambiguously referring to one sex when meaning both sexes,



and presenting one sex as the norm in situations which could apply to both sexes.