

Nonsexist Language: A Progress Report¹

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What do students entering university know about inclusive language? This question led me to design a survey and distribute it to 348 students at a university in Eastern Canada. The results show that (1) students have had very little training in using nonsexist language; (2) despite being ill-informed, students have a wide range of opinions on issues of language and gender; (3) students regard it as important to know how to use nonsexist language; and (4) to this end, students should receive instruction in inclusive language usage *before* they get to university. Educators in elementary and secondary schools will need to take responsibility for teaching and using nonsexist language in their classrooms.

Que savent les étudiants et les étudiantes au sujet du langage non sexiste à leur entrée à l'université? Cette question a amené l'auteure à mettre au point un questionnaire, qu'elle a distribué à 348 étudiants et étudiantes dans une université de l'est du Canada. Les résultats indiquent que 1) la population étudiante a peu d'expérience dans l'utilisation d'un langage non sexiste, 2) que, même si elle mal informée, elle a un vaste éventail d'opinions sur la question de la langue et du sexe, 3) qu'elle juge qu'il est important de savoir comment utiliser un langage non sexiste, et que 4) à cette fin, elle devrait recevoir une formation sur la question *avant* son arrivée à l'université. Les éducateurs au primaire et au secondaire devront donc voir à enseigner et à utiliser un langage non sexiste dans leurs classes.

For over twenty years, and owing much to the women's movement, researchers, activists, and educators have analyzed sexism in language and promoted the use of nonsexist language. But how far have we come? As a feminist teacher of composition and literature, I have been concerned that many of my first-year and upper-level students who are new to the university at which I teach, Mount Saint Vincent, show no awareness of gender-inclusive language. I began to wonder just what they had been taught before they came to the university, and decided to conduct a survey to find out. Mount Saint Vincent is unique among Canadian universities because its student body consists of 85% women and 15% men; thus the opinions recorded by the survey are largely those of undergraduate women. Nearly all our 3,571 students (1991/92 enrolment) come from Nova Scotia, and 60% are over the age of twenty-four, mostly attending part-time. Although my study involved only students at Mount Saint Vincent University (348 participated), I hope it will prove useful to teachers elsewhere by providing information on inclusive language usage among one group of today's undergraduates. As I anticipated, the survey results showed that we have *not* come a long way in confronting and reforming some of the most obvious forms of sexism in the

English language. Many primary and secondary school teachers do not teach nonsexist language; those who do are a minority, going against the grain by rejecting male-biased language use. But the good news is that students want to learn how to write and speak in ways that are not sexist, if only someone will teach them.

I conducted this survey in September 1991, with the cooperation of part-time and full-time faculty members of the English Department. Instructors of first-year courses administered the survey in the second week of classes so it would be unlikely that students had yet received any instruction on inclusive language that year, and therefore I could find out what they knew about the topic before they came to the Mount. Instructors in fifteen first-year English courses used about ten minutes of class time to administer to their students the questionnaire on inclusive language; 348 students from the following courses participated: English 120, Writing Theory and Practice (nine sections); English 150, Introduction to English Literature (four sections); English 155, Forms of Literature (one section); and English 160, Masterpieces of Western Literature (one section). Of the 348 students, 291, or 84%, were women and 57, or 16%, were men. Coincidentally, these statistics match the overall percentage of female and male students attending this university.

The questionnaire first asked students to define sexist language. Most indicated that sexist language could be directed at members of either sex: it made “one sex” superior to the “other,” or it put down “one sex.” Many referred explicitly to males *and* females as victims of sexism (a few even underlined “and” or “male” for emphasis). Aiming for gender-neutrality in their own definitions, they seemed reluctant to specify that “men are made superior” or “women are put down”:

Language that offends or stereotypes a certain sex, be it men or women. (174 F)²

Sexist language (to me) is to stereotype or generalize the actions of a sex. For example “Women drivers” or “men only want one thing.” (47 M)

Sexist language is any degrading, cruel, or insensitive comment or “joke” about the male gender or the female gender. (102 F)

Language which puts down either males or females. (247 M)

When you’re referring to males and females as a whole, but use words that pertain to only one of the sexes. (60 F)

These students were trying to seem fair, to be looking out for sexist attacks on men too—and comment 47 indicates the stereotypes some men are struggling against. But although this fairness may be laudable, it obscures the fact that sexist language is a problem of patriarchy and that its victims are, for the most

part, women. For example, comment 60 above describes a situation in which a male generic would typically be used, but the student says the words “pertain to only one of the sexes,” as if it were equally likely that feminine-only terms or masculine-only terms would be used. Such a statement belies the real problem of exclusion that women face by making it seem as if men are equally victimized. It is telling that despite their desire to be fair to men, none of the 348 students defined sexist language solely in terms of discrimination against men.

However, a strong minority of students—30%—did define sexist language as specifically directed against women. It is especially worth noting the difference between male and female responses here. Although 98 women, or 34% of women participants, defined sexist language in terms of women alone, only 7 men, or 12% of men participants, did so. These results suggest women are more likely to view sexist language as affecting them, whereas men are more likely to deny the misogynous nature of most sexist language by defining it as affecting both men and women. Many comments of the (minority) group of women who defined sexist language in terms of women alone indicate they did so because of their own experiences with sexist language. They raised concerns about derogation and exclusion:

Sexist language is words used in a derogatory way that put down or insult women. (27 F)

Comparing women with something stupid, or with animals. (192 F)

“A woman couldn’t do that.” Talking about women in a condescending way. (240 F)

I feel sexist language for the most part is a put down to women. (308 F)

When an unknown person (i.e., a doctor) is referred to as “he,” even though his/her sex is unknown. (242 F)

Any language, phrase, word which excludes women or puts them down. (68 F)

Although this group of women articulated the pain and injustice *they* suffer as female victims of sexist language, overall, the comments of nearly all respondents showed that most students defined sexist language as unfair or hurtful to *others*—whether to men and women or to women especially. Their responses exhibited an altruistic concern, despite their getting little information on the subject in the classroom.

To find out about any previous training students had received, I asked three questions. Since instruction in inclusive language use always gives the “he or she” option to replace the generic “he,” I wanted to check how many students had actually received this instruction. In response to question three—“Have you ever been instructed to use ‘he or she’ instead of ‘he’?”—half the students (51%) said yes. On the one hand, this appears a healthy sign, but on the other,

that in the 1990s half our entering students are missing instruction in this pronoun form, even though it is used frequently on television by politicians and newscasters, is cause for concern. The responses to this question also show a significant difference between the male and female students: 54% of the women and 37% of the men said yes. It would be fair to say that most students (male and female) at Mount Saint Vincent University come from the same schools or at least out of the same Nova Scotian school system. If they received the same instruction, why do more women than men indicate that they have had this instruction? Female students might retain information about “he or she” more than male students since women find it worth remembering; or, teachers might mention it to female students more than to male students. I speculate that women might be more attentive to and more concerned about this kind of language change because it is an objective way of validating the female in society. Another explanation for the gender disparity may be found in research by John Gastil (1990) showing that for men “he/she” produces almost as many male images as “he,” and very few female images. So men may not remember “he/she” because they perceive it in the same way they do “he.” Still, from the pedagogical point of view, since more than half the first-year women and more than one-third the first-year men have previously instructed in using “he or she,” an instructor can expect a significant proportion of students to be aware of and to accept this pronoun construction.

Answers to question four — “Have you ever been instructed to use ‘she or he’ instead of ‘he’?” — show that only 20% of entering students have been taught to use the reverse form “she or he.” The figures of 22% for women and 16% for men indicate that “she or he” is taught much less than the traditionally ordered “he or she.” Nonetheless, these figures do show an improvement on related findings reported in 1988 by Jinni A. Harrigan and Karen S. Lucic, who distributed questionnaires to different sample groups, including groups of graduate students, and asked which pronouns they heard others use most often. Forty-nine percent said “his,” 23% said “their,” 22% said “his or her,” 12% said “her,” and 6% said “her or his.” Harrigan and Lucic asked a different question than I did, so the results are not directly comparable, but both of our studies show that in the late 1980s and early 1990s there is still very little use of pronoun pairs that shift the traditional order by putting the feminine form first. Harrigan’s and Lucic’s study also reveals the paucity of occurrence of the female pronoun on its own. “She” and “her” are rarely heard as generics.

Question five shifts away from pronouns to noun forms. Despite substantial societal acceptance of gender-inclusive job titles, and some media discussion of masculine-only terms like “mankind,” only one third of the students had ever received instruction not to use masculine-only general terms. This language change appears to be a top-down shift: masculine-only terms are being discouraged in government publications and in the media but are not yet being taught

in schools. In *Talking Gender: A Guide to Nonsexist Communication* (1991), Susan Ehrlich and Ruth King explain:

In Canada, nonsexist language is widely regarded as an essential component in achieving employment equity in the workplace. As a result, a number of universities, businesses, and other organizations have included such policies in their employment equity programs and have adopted language guidelines. (p. 74)

But changes in institutional policy do not necessarily translate into changed behaviour either at work or in employees' private life at home or at the local hang-out. For instance, the classified advertisements in the local paper contain gender-inclusive job titles, but there is still much informal use of terms like "waitress" and "stewardess" even though inclusive substitutes are now used in public forums.

Although only a third of the students received training in this area, nearly all of them were able to come up with nonsexist substitutes for the two job titles listed in question six. A full 80% of the students wrote "business person" as a substitute for "businessman"; 60% wrote "police officer" for "policeman." Responses for "mankind" (the final term), however, were divergent. The most common substitute was "humankind," given by 44% of the students—107 women (43% of all women) and 23 men (45% of all men). The next most common response by men was "human race," given by 8 men (15% of all men), as well as by 23 women (9.3% of all women). The next most common response by women was either repetition of the word "mankind" or writing a comment, such as "I don't think this is sexist." Thirty-three women (13% of all women) answered in this way, as did 5 men (9% of all men). In addition, a significant number of women provided no substitute for "mankind": 43 women, or 15% of all women (as well as 4 men, or 7% of all men), did not answer this sample, whereas only 15 women (as well as 6 men) did not fill in the blank for "businessman" and only 16 women (as well as 3 men) did not fill in the blank for "policeman." The latter two responses—repeating "mankind" or writing a comment in the blank, or leaving the space blank—together account for 28% of women's responses, but only 16% of men's. Thus more women than men expressed reticence about finding a substitute for the word mankind; later I will speculate on the reasons for this. One female student wrote in the blank: "I do not find this sexist just because it begins with "man," if it generally means everyone" (318 F). Another woman wrote: "I do not believe this should be changed as it is describing the *human* race not just a male person" (274 F).

Question 7, on the use of "Ms.," was the only question all female students answered. Of the 291 women, 37% said that they have used Ms. for themselves. Depending on your perspective, this number is disappointingly small, or a measure of some success, in the days of anti-feminist backlash. Over the last few years my students have shown little interest in the "Ms." form—and remember

that I teach at Canada's only women's university—so 37% represents a much higher figure than the 15% (a rough estimate) of students in my classes who openly admit to using Ms. Their ambivalence about Ms. deserves investigation. "Ms." has been in use for a long time now, promoted by governments and business, and it seems straightforward enough as a parallel to "Mr." But 63% of our female students do not use it, and a recent study by Donna Atkinson (1987) showed similar results, with 58% of her 223 women subjects never using Ms.

Interestingly, the statistics were reversed for the men who responded to my survey: 66% of them used "Ms." to address women. Part of the reason for the reversal might be the way I asked the question (see Table 1). Men may be more willing to use Ms. when addressing women in formal situations where a title is required, since they would want to be seen to conform to current professional codes. But the women students may have felt resistant to using this title *for themselves*, because they are not, especially in first-year, used to viewing themselves as people who would be addressed formally in the public sphere. The survey results suggest men and women have different perceptions of themselves as actors in the public arena. A University of Toronto study indicates that people perceive women who prefer the title Ms. as achievement-oriented and possessed of stereotypical masculine rather than feminine traits (Dion & Cota, 1991). Our undergraduate women resist this model, while undergraduate men seem more confidently to imagine themselves as professionals. One male student who said he referred to others as Ms. was hostile to inclusive language in general, suggesting that some people use Ms. because it constitutes perceived social conformity, not because they value the principles of sexual equality. Similarly, many women who did not use Ms. for themselves expressed quite positive views about inclusive language use:

I do feel it is important to use nonsexist language because men and women are equals. They deserve to be addressed in a nonsexist language. (109 F)

Because society is changing and women are no longer as unequal as in past times; therefore people should recognize this fact in every aspect including how they write and express themselves. (238 F)

Women students like these support language change, but still choose not to use Ms. It could be that they still value for themselves the traditional distinction between Miss and Mrs., or that they reject the feminist identity associated with the term. Perhaps they have not been convinced of its necessity. Many first-year students have told me, during informal conversation about this, that no one in their Nova Scotian high schools ever mentioned anything about the term Ms., so they had no idea they could use it. Some had a vague notion that it was a term used for divorced women—in other words, just another marker for a woman's

TABLE 1
*Percentage of "Yes" Responses to Yes/No Questions
 for Women Students, Men Students, and All Students*

<i>Question</i>	<i>% Women</i>	<i>% Men</i>	<i>% All</i>
3. Have you ever been instructed to use "he or she" instead of "he"?	54	37	51
4. Have you ever been instructed to use "she or he" instead of "he"?	22	16	21
5. Have you ever been instructed <i>not</i> to use masculine-only terms like "mankind" and "chairman"?	33	34	33
7. <i>Female students</i> : Do you ever use the title <i>Ms.</i> for yourself?	37	N.A.	N.A.
7. <i>Male students</i> : Do you ever use the title <i>Ms.</i> to address others?	N.A.	66	N.A.
8(a). Do you think it is important to learn to use nonsexist language?	82	84	83
9. Have you ever complained about anyone using sexist language?	50	31	47

marital status. Whatever the reason for female students' ambivalence, the use of *Ms.* remains contentious and has not yet become a widely accepted convention.

Question 8 provides positive news: 83% of all those surveyed answered yes when asked "Do you think it is important to learn to use nonsexist language?" (question 8[a]). The percentages were nearly identical for men and women respondents. Eighty-two percent of the women and 84% of the men said yes. Nearly all students gave some reason for the importance of using inclusive language, in their response to 8(b): "Why or why not?" Many students commented on the role of language in society, often emphasizing the relationship between nonsexist language use and equality for women, and sometimes referring directly to women's status in the work force.

I find it offensive to a certain degree when everything is referred to as he. What am I chopped liver? Women do as much for society as men do, if not more, we deserve the respect men receive. (241 F)

To ensure that equality is promoted consciously and unconsciously in society. (284 F)

There is too much prejudice and bigotry in the world. (159 M)

The implication of gender superiority is detrimental to society. (296 F)

In some way sexist language leads to a high rate of abuse and violence against women. (208 F)

Once we learn to treat everyone equally without prejudice, stereotyping, or generalizations, we will be able to accomplish greater tasks in less time. (47 M)

Because people will start to think of all jobs etc. for people not for man only or women only. (19 F)

We are living in a society where women are equals. Before they were not, so we could settle for using words like mankind or policeman. People are changing so society must as well. (104 F)

Society is so used to sexist language that it has become acceptable. Yet women are doing so much more these days that they have to be included in writing. Writing with non-sexist terms opens the public's eye to the fact that "oh yes, maybe God is a woman!" (239 F)

Habit is not a justification for excluding half the human race. (211 F)

These samples also demonstrate the seriousness with which students explained their position on eliminating discrimination, many of them expressing a concern for the well-being and improvement of humanity.

After equality, the second most common reason given for learning inclusive language was not to offend anyone. Students making this response implied that they would not necessarily be offended, but others might be. Often inclusive language is taught in these terms, which has the effect of trivializing the issue and making it seem something separate from students' own lives (see Kennedy, 1992). For example, one woman responded:

Some women are offended at terms such as above ["businessman" and "policeman"; question six]. I'm not really that offended, but you have to make room for other people. (71 F)

Unfortunately, this perception often develops into an attitude of resentment toward other women, who are viewed as troublemakers for bothering about

masculine generics. Barbara Bate (1988) comments that “women who criticize sex bias in language are often told that they are too sensitive, that they are looking for a fight, or that they are ignoring the ‘real’ problems women face” (p. 81). Student responses to my survey illustrate this exactly:

Because today there are so many women who would take offense. (223 F)

Women have become so liberated and picky about the language we use. (254 F)

Although answers to question 8(a) show that a vast majority of students think learning to use inclusive language is important, comments in 8(b) show that some students feel ambivalent about it and are uncertain of its relevance to their lives. This mix of reactions parallels public debate over the Ontario Women’s Directorate’s publication *Words That Count Women In* (1993). Despite some initial backlash, the overall reception of this nonsexist-language guide has been positive (see Cowan, 1993).

Question nine asked “Have you ever complained about anyone using sexist language?” Women’s and men’s responses differed substantially. Half the women said yes, whereas only 31% of the men said yes. These results suggest women are more likely than men to be bothered by sexist language and then to complain about it. Reading this question along with number eight, however, one might ask why if 82% of female students think learning to use nonsexist language is important, only 50% of them have ever complained about sexist language. Why don’t the other 32% complain? As Dean Hall and Bonnie Nelson (1989) discuss in their study of female engineers, socialized to be “nice” and accepting, women may be reluctant to complain about sexism in an environment made hostile by the anti-feminist backlash of the late 1980s. Although the positive responses to question eight suggest societal recognition of the importance of inclusive language, the fewer positive responses to question nine suggest this awareness has not been completely transferred into the practical speaking and writing of these students’ day-to-day lives. Still, half the women surveyed have at one time or another complained about sexist language, and others are hearing their complaints, producing a grass-roots debate that could considerably affect language change.

Question ten invited students to add a final comment, and ninety did so—about 25% of the women (75) and 25% of the men (15). These comments showed a range of emotions, from hostility to lack of interest to enthusiasm. Many negative comments correspond to typical arguments against sexist language identified by researchers such as Julia Penelope (1982). For instance, trivializing the issue is common:

People go overboard on this topic. It’s ridiculous. It doesn’t mean anything. (276 F)

Too much commotion over this topic. (128 M)

These comments suggest that although the students see others agitating for change, they do not see the point of worrying about sexism in language. This attitude seems to stem from certain assumptions about the neutrality of language. As a student responded to question number one,

I don't think of the language as sexist. Only people can be sexist. (268 F)

Barbara Bate has described a set of assumptions to which many people ascribe. These assumptions include: "Language describes how things are; it is not biased" and "Words cannot harm us; believing that they can shows that one is ill informed or paranoid" (1988, p. 80). Even some feminist students view sexism in language as a non-issue, as one student explained in her final comment:

I view our "sexist" language as something petty in the full scope of feminist and gender issues—with efforts and media devoted to our "sexist" language, one ignores needier topics like violence against women, exploitation of women, etc. (3 F)

To avoid reducing the subject to a question of whether or not using "she or he" is more important than stopping a man from beating a woman—which is what this student implies—it is important to discuss the ways that language does affect how women are treated physically, economically, and so on. Getting students to see that language matters, that it shapes our world, is an important part of teaching nonsexist usage.

In their final comments, some students who supported language change expressed reservations about the kind of changes that would occur:

Women sometimes take things too far, a word like mankind is not offensive. However, some situations need the reference to both men and women. (281 F)

I do not find words such as mankind offensive because it is well understood that the human race is meant here. (150 F)

A number of people echoed these comments in wanting to conserve use of terms like "mankind," insisting that such terms are not meant to be sexist but to refer to the human race. As mentioned previously, students can be very supportive of inclusive language and still not find the term "mankind" sexist. Despite these students' defence of the term, "abundant research on masculine generics (such as 'he' and 'man' in references to people of both sexes) has shown these terms to be ambiguous, exclusionary, and even detrimental" (Hamilton, 1991, p. 393). Mykol C. Hamilton's 1988 study of undergraduates in Southern California supported previous research (see Crawford, 1984; Martyna, 1978) by showing that "using masculine generics generates more male-biased imagery in the mind of the user than does using unbiased generics" (Hamilton, 1988, p. 795). Students

need to be informed of this research, so they will no longer insist the word “mankind” is inclusive.

I think students’ defensiveness comes from their being conditioned to use and value the term. Since childhood, students have heard the term “mankind” used, often reverentially, in lessons in school and church about history and the development of civilization; this context confers a positive value on the word, so students might feel uncomfortable about changing it, as if to do so were to tamper with something sacred. It seems threatening to their value system and their world view. And one can also infer that because of these associations they may never have noticed anything wrong with “mankind.” No one has told them about the studies to which Hamilton refers, studies demonstrating the masculine bias implicit in the use of such terms. Not only that, but previous teachers have instructed them to use masculine generics. In the survey, some students defend their use of sexist language by saying that they were taught to use it in school. Two students wrote in response to 8(b):

Because I’m used to it and it’s part of our education. But it would be good to change some substitutes for some words. (151 M)

I’m comfortable with the language I was taught — why change now? (212 F)

Another woman wrote as a final comment:

Personally I am more comfortable using “he” and not using non-sexist language. But if it is to be university policy to use non-sexist language, then I will do so. (224 F)

In a way, these students show how the education system works: they learned to use the generics “he” and “mankind” at school, so these terms must be right. But their answers also imply that if they were taught to use nonsexist language—if that was expected of them, as in the last comment—then they would adopt it. The problem is that it is not taught routinely at the elementary and secondary school level—nor for that matter at the post-secondary level. So by the time students encounter someone who expects them to use it, they may be quite resistant to suggestions or demands that they change. To break down that resistance, a teacher will probably have to inform them of studies like Hamilton’s and to draw on experiences of class members to demonstrate the relevance of inclusive language.

A few respondents wanted to make the specific point that not all women are interested in this issue:

I am a woman and I do not care if people use sexist language as long as we understand each other that is fine. (314 F)

I personally have never encountered a sexist situation. (27 F)

I am a very independent woman and feel if you are secure about your femininity these terms would not bother you. (180 F)

Each of these students presents herself as a model woman—strong and self-aware—and because she denies that any harm can come from sexist language, claims that other women should follow her example. In a similar vein, five female students made a final comment showing they were worried about men being excluded (numbers 53, 94, 150, 169, 315), as in the following:

The main thing that concerns me with this issue is that it has gone to the point where people are very touchy about female-sexist language and not very sensitive to the male point of view. (150 F)

By “male point of view” this student may have meant that not enough attention is paid to language discriminating against men. She could also have meant that men are under attack because masculine-only terms are being altered. In the same way that some students worried about inclusive language being taken too far, these students are worried that asserting women’s rights will harm men. They are worried about what happens to men and to society once patriarchal power begins to erode. These questions show that some students who realize language change is not neutral are concerned about how it will affect their worlds and society at large. Fearing its implications, they voice vague protests in statements such as this final comment:

It is important to respect women’s rights and equalities, but there is a limit to how far one goes. (7 F)

However, many students seem ready to brave the change, and some even expressed appreciation for the survey itself:

I am glad that someone has chosen this topic for a survey. It’s important to change our terminology with our ever changing society. (39 F)

Thank you for doing this. I am male and although it isn’t “macho” to say this, but being sexist is being stupid. (100 M)

I think that this is an important topic in today’s society and I am pleased that someone has gone to the trouble of finding out what others think. Thank you. (104 F)

To men, this may seem petty, but they are not the ones that have been ignored. (239 F)

CONCLUSIONS

One conclusion I draw from this survey is that students want more instruction in using inclusive language. Eighty-three percent of those surveyed said they thought it important to learn to use nonsexist language, but only 51% had been instructed to use “he or she,” only 20% had been instructed to use “she or he,” and only 33% had been instructed not to use masculine-only general terms. These responses, if generalizable beyond this study, send a message to today’s educators: students are ready and willing to learn about nonsexist language, but not enough teachers are giving them that instruction. Students educated in the late 1980s and early 1990s still did not receive adequate training about inclusive language or, for that matter, other gender issues. Blye Frank, a professor of education at Mount Saint Vincent University and a consultant on gender issues to the Nova Scotia School Boards, reports there is no provincial policy on sexist language use in the classroom or on inclusive language instruction, and that both therefore depend on individual teachers’ willingness to deal with them (Frank, 1992). Students may hear or read about debates on gender and language in the media and discuss them among themselves, but it appears that they receive little information in the classroom. It seems reasonable to assume that if students were taught to use nonsexist language in elementary school, they would be less likely to develop habits of sexist language use. Instead, we now find many students having to wait until they are 19 and entering college or university before they are given any concrete strategies for using inclusive language. And even at the post-secondary level there is no guarantee they will receive any such instruction. One feminist literacy worker mentioned to me that her son had only been taught to use inclusive language in a third-year geography class, when he had a feminist professor; up to that point he had thought inclusive language was an odd thing his mother worried about. This anecdote points out that nonsexist language instruction remains the responsibility of feminist educators. As it is a matter of chance whether a student ends up in a class taught by a feminist, if this issue continues to be ghettoized in this manner, progress in nonsexist language use will be slow.

This last point brings me to the issue of prescription. Although some educators shy away from prescriptive teaching methods—namely, telling others what to do—I believe the example of nonsexist language instruction demonstrates an instance when prescription is necessary. Furthermore, studies show that prescription works. In a study by Flanagan and Todd-Mancillas (1982), one group of students was told they had to use inclusive language; 100% of them did. A second group was given a choice; 70% of these students also chose to use inclusive language. When a teacher gives students a choice in something like this, however, it is illusory to say this is more democratic, because the inherently authoritarian position of the teacher means “students perceive even a teacher’s ‘optional’

suggestions as requirements” (Flanagan & Todd-Mancillas, 1982, p. 283). And requiring students to use inclusive language is simply requiring them to be fair rather than discriminatory. Teachers and students resistant to inclusive language training might not realize the language forms they are trying to conserve result from systemic patriarchal coercion. Julia Penelope has coined the term “Patriarchal Universe of Discourse,” or PUD, to describe how our world and words are shaped by male dominance (Penelope, 1990). In *Silences*, Tillie Olsen condemns the “perpetuating—by continued usage—entrenched, centuries-old oppressive power realities, early on incorporated into language: male rule; male ownership; our secondariness; our exclusion” (1990, p. 164). At least two female students answered 8(b) in a spirit echoing Olsen’s:

Because we do not consider the male to be the ruler or dominant one anymore. We are all equal, therefore it should be shown in our language. (220 F)

I think it is *very* important to use nonsexist language because if we do not stress the significance at this level how are we to have a future of equality. Practice makes perfect!! (194 F)

I would argue that there is reason to be prescriptive about this language change: that is one way it will get done. And, Flanagan and Todd-Mancillas found that students told they had to use inclusive language were not more resentful about using it than students told they had the choice: “contrary to expectations, the participants in the authority innovation-decision did not display greater negative affect toward the use of inclusive language” (1982, p. 281). Finally, inclusive language instruction should go beyond simple prescription of *new* conventions and provide opportunities for experimenting with language choices and for discussing related gender issues.

In fact, educating students about inclusive language has positive effects. In an experiment in which she used the generic “she” while teaching, but did not require students to do so, Cathryn Adamsky (1981) found that students did change their pronominal usage as a result of her example, and that men and women in the classroom found it revolutionary to hear and to use the generic “she.” One male student commented:

It was not difficult once I was in the habit of doing it. I used it to allow me to feel how women feel about using the generic “he.” Excluded.

And one female student said:

Once I started using “she” I found it hard to stop. I liked using the generic “she”—it gave me a sense of equality—power even. (Adamsky, 1981, p. 777)

Adamsky's study shows there are ways to teach inclusive language that will change students' language use and enable them to experience directly the effects of gender-biased language. In the responses above, the male student understood how women feel excluded by masculine-only generics, and the female student understood the sense of empowerment that comes from having one's gender identity affirmed through language. Two students in my survey made parallel comments. A male student wrote, "If it was the 'she' that was used more readily than 'he,' I guess I would get offended" (275 M); a female student wrote that nonsexist language "makes women feel better about being a woman" (96 F). More than a decade later, experiments like Adamsky's are still needed to demonstrate the need for inclusive language. My survey indicates that students know there is a need for it, but are uncertain how to change their language use. They need instruction.

NOTES

- ¹ I thank Ann Krane and J. Russell Perkin for comments on the manuscript; Debra Garland-Langille for data entry; the Research Office at Mount Saint Vincent University for financial support; and 348 students for answering the questionnaire.
- ² Student responses are identified by the number given to each questionnaire (for data entry purposes) and by a letter indicating the respondent's sex (which was determined by the response to question seven). I have standardized spelling and some punctuation in the students' responses.

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