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Sexist and Non-sexist Usages in the English Language¹

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The author surveys feminist attempts to eliminate sexist language in five English-speaking countries and evaluates their successes and failures.

Introduction

Modern moves toward language modification in order to eliminate “sexist” usages began in the second half of the 20th century, particularly in the 1970s. In the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th the goal of organized women’s groups was to obtain *suffrage* or the right to vote; the term *suffragette* was coined in 1906 to designate these often militant women. The right to vote was finally granted to New Zealand women in 1893, to Australian women in 1903, to women of Great Britain in 1918, to United States women in 1920 and to Canadian women in 1940.

Then little thought was given to language problems but the female sense of solidarity carried over into the 20th century and formed a base for the “Second Feminist Wave” which proclaimed Women’s Liberation in the 1960s and 1970s with demands for wage

¹ In 1985 my colleague, Ronald E. Buckalew, and I published an article entitled *Attempts to Equalize Sex References in American English*. That article which appeared in *Strani Jezici* (No. 44, pages 185-191) dealt with the history of the third person singular pronouns in English and also with recent attempts to avoid the generic use of *he* along with other suggested language changes. This article deals with feminist demands for changes in “sexist” usages in English in five largely English-speaking countries of varying size, Great Britain (population 60 million), the United States (290 m.), Canada (32 m.), Australia (20 m.) and New Zealand (4 m.).



equity, child care support and ultimately language modification itself. Women had entered the work force in the 1940s during World War II when a large portion of the young male population served in various branches of the military; after the war many women found it necessary to continue employment outside the home in order to supplement the family income and maintain middle-class status. Along the road to economic equality, feminists came to see language itself as a major roadblock.

Feminist indictments

The contention of feminists is that certain English usages discriminate in favor of men and that terms for women are often derived from the basic male term, e.g., *waitress* from *waiter*; *hostess* from *host*, and the like. Women, they contend, are perceived as mere extensions of men as clearly evidenced by such derivations from the male verbal patterns.

Casey Miller and Kate Swift, early participants in the “language wars” write: “Only in the last decades of the twentieth century ... are significant numbers of people beginning to examine and challenge linguistic artifices that oppress women. On the frontiers of this long-overdue endeavor are poets and theorists who have chosen to dismantle both syntax and lexicon as they defy established meanings ... to suggest alternative insights into the human condition. ... Still others, working at a more pragmatic level, have chosen to concentrate on the ordinary discourse people use daily in all forms of written and spoken communication.” (pp. xv-xvi).

Richard Lederer puts it this way: “...women make up the majority of the population in almost every country in world. Yet concern has been growing that the English language stigmatizes women as an inferior group, undermines their self-images, and restricts their perceptions of life’s possibilities.” (p. 52).

Feminist demands for language modification have been successful to a degree in that they have been incorporated into various style manuals. For example, the MLA or Modern Language Association of America publishes two such manuals: the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (“for high school and undergraduate students”) and the *MLA Style Manual and Guide to Scholarly Publishing* (“for graduate students, scholars and professional writers”). Here is the advice given in the first manual for avoiding “sexist” writing (p. 43): “... many writers no longer use *he*, *him*, or *his* to express a meaning that includes women or girls: ‘If a young writer is not confident, *he* can quickly become discouraged.’ The use of *she*, *her*, and *hers* to refer to a person of either sex can also be distracting and momentarily confusing. Both usages can often be avoided through a revision that recasts the sentence into the plural or that eliminates the pronoun: ‘If young *artists* are not confident, *they* can quickly become discouraged.’ or ‘A young artist who is not confident can quickly become discouraged.’ Another technique is to make the discussion refer to a person who is identified, so that there is a reason to use a specific singular pronoun. *They*, *them*, *their*, and *theirs* cannot logically be applied to a single person, and *he* or *she* and *her* or *him* are cumbersome alternatives to be used sparingly.”



The author, Joseph Gibaldi, concludes his advice by pointing out that “Many authors now avoid terms that unnecessarily integrate a person’s sex with a job or role. For instance, *anchorman*, *policeman*, *stewardess*, and *poetess* are commonly replaced with *anchor*, *police officer*, *flight attendant*, and *poet*.” (ibid.). To appreciate the influence of this style manual, it should be pointed out that the MLA has 32,000 members, mainly high school or university teachers of English and foreign languages.

Poetess has never been in common use and indeed it sounds rather quaint. Gibaldi’s other three replacements (*anchor*, *police officer*, *flight attendant*) are logically quite acceptable but may end up simply as synonyms for *anchorman*, *policeman* and *stewardess*. Often the need for specificity prompts a speaker or a writer to add “male” or “female” to such neutral forms, e.g., *male police officers/ female police officers* or, more likely, *male cops/female cops*. If the mayor of a city faces the prospect of a football/soccer riot, he will want an adequate number of *male* police officers; if he has to deal with a demonstration on the part of women, he will need both *male* and *female* officers.

To sum up, one can say that feminists are dissatisfied with the following usages in English:

1) the generic use of the word *man* to mean *humankind* as in *Man is the only species capable of speech* where *Humankind is...* or preferably *Woman and man are ...*

could be used;

2) the use of the suffix *-man* to identify many occupations, e.g., *fireman*, *mailman* where *firefighter*, *mailperson* would be non-sexist terms;

3) the generic use of the 3rd singular pronoun *he* as illustrated in the paragraph above;

Lederer writes (p. 55): “Of our six types of pronouns – first-, second-, and third-person - singular only one, the third-person singular, identifies the sex of the individual. ... Among the candidates proposed to displace the generic third-person singular pronoun in English are *co*, *et*, *han*, *hesh*, *jhe*, *na*, *person*, *s/he*, *thon*, *ti* (an inversion of the letters in *it*), and *ws*, but none has caught on”.²

² Lederer writes (p. 55): “Of our six types of pronouns – first-, second-, and third-person - singular only one, the third-person singular, identifies the sex of the individual. ... Among the candidates proposed to displace the generic third-person singular pronoun in English are *co*, *et*, *han*, *hesh*, *jhe*, *na*, *person*, *s/he*, *thon*, *ti* (an inversion of the letters in *it*), and *ws*, but none has caught on..”

Thon (a contraction of “that one”) was actually put forward in 1858 by a Charles Crozat Converse of Erie, PA, who was seeking efficiency in pronoun usage rather than satisfying a feminist demand. One of his examples is this: “If Harry or his wife comes, I shall be on hand to greet him or her ...,” to be replaced by “If Harry or his wife comes, I shall be on hand to greet *thon* (i.e., that one who comes).” (Barge, p.1). The word *thon* can still be found in older dictionaries.

The proposed solutions above resemble the actual pronoun situation in Farsi, an Indo-European language that has over time simplified its pronouns. The sentences: “He is happy” or “She is happy” would both be rendered (in transliteration) *Ou Khosh hall hast* or informally *Un Khosh halleh*. Specification is achieved by using nouns, e.g., *Pasar*, “The son ...,” *Dokhtar*, “The daughter ...,” etc., instead of the pronoun *Ou* or informal *Un*. I am indebted to Behjat Baktiari of Dallas, TX, for these examples from Farsi, her native language.



4) the artificial formation of female equivalents to many occupational titles by adding demeaning suffixes, e.g., *actor* : *actress*, *usher* : *usherette*, *executor* : *executrix* where the base word, *actor*, etc., should be inclusive of both sexes;

5) social titles, particularly *Miss* and *Mrs.*, which identify women as to their marital status while *Mr.* does not specify such status for men. Feminists have coined the title *Ms.* (*mizz*) to parallel the form *Mr.*

Ms. and Miss

There is no doubt that *Ms.* has been successful in that it does fill a useful niche. Corporations that deal with large mailings find it useful as does the ordinary person who feels obligated to use a title but does not know the marital status of the woman to whom he is writing. But one unexpected result of adding *Ms* is a tendency to avoid titles in general in such contacts so that the recipients may simply be addressed as *Mary Smith*, *John Smith*, *John and Mary Smith*, etc. Many married women still prefer to be addressed as *Mrs.* and are displeased if addressed by letter as *Mr. and Ms. John Smith* since the *Ms.* could cast doubt on their marital status.

Miss, the traditional title for a girl or unmarried woman, is still alive and used around the world in the *Miss America*, *Miss World*, *Miss Universe* beauty contests. In the US each year there are thousands of local contests featuring a *Miss X County* or a *Miss Farm Show* or the like.

In Lithuania, which had the distinction of conducting a beauty contest in a women's prison, the title of the winner was *Miss Nelaisvė*, "*Miss Prison*..."³ And in day-to-day conversations *Miss* still seems to be preferred by younger unmarried women with *Ms.* being reserved for older women, married or unmarried. *Ms.* could well acquire the meaning of *spinster*, long the term for unmarried women 50 years old or older.

Cleansing the lexicon

Lederer (p. 52) poses some questions for the reader to answer and then compare them with his comments. For example, "... In each pair, which term carries more respect: *bachelor-*

³LITHUANIA: HERE SHE COMES ... A woman halfway through a four-year prison sentence was elected the country's first "Miss Prison" in a beauty contest behind bars. The woman, Kristina, whose surname and crime were not disclosed, was selected from contestants in Lithuania's women's jail, in Panevzys. The \$1,000 first prize and prizes for runner-ups are to be paid when the women complete their sentences." The New York Times, Nov. 15, 2002, p. A8.



spinster, sir-madam, poet-poetess, major-majorette, governor-governess?” The “correct” answers, according to Lederer, is the first item in each pairing. But essentially Lederer’s question is difficult to answer because the words in each pair have similar but slightly differing meanings. For example, a man can be called a *bachelor* (unmarried male) at any age from 20 to 100, while a “spinster” (unmarried female) is a woman aged 50 to 100. The word “bachelorette” has been offered to complete the pairing but feminists reject terms ending in the diminutive -ette. *Bachelor girl* is also unacceptable to feminists because of the word *girl*. Actually, *sir* or *madam* is an acceptable pairing even though Lederer cites the fact that *madam* is also the term used for the proprietor of a house of prostitution. However, people do have an ability to distinguish an acceptable meaning from a tainted meaning in words. *Madam* or, more typically, *Ma'm* is quite acceptable as a polite form of address; it is also used to form the popular palindrome: “Madam, I’m Adam.” *Major-majorette* is a false pairing, an accurate pairing being *drum major* and *drum majorette*, “a male leader of a marching band and a female leader, the latter usually twirling a baton.” *Major* unqualified is the designation of a medium-level army officer. The last pair, *governor-governess*, is grossly misleading; a *governor* is the chief executive, male or female, of a state in the United States, while a *governess* is a family tutor and care-giver. Lederer (p. 53) does point out accurately that the one derivative of a male term from a female original is the case of *widow* and *widower*.⁴

To illustrate the difference between *bachelor* and *spinster*, linguist Robin Lakoff offers these two sentences (Vetterling-Braggin, p. 64):

- (a) Mary hopes to meet an eligible bachelor.
- (b) *Fred hopes to meet an eligible spinster.

To a native speaker of English sentence (b) is obviously far-fetched.

The British Sociological Association (founded 1951) offers its 2,300 members a number of guidelines for avoiding “sexist” language. Besides the usual admonitions to avoid the word *man* and the suffix “-man,” as in *the man in the street* and *layman*, the BSA recommends appropriate (i.e., “anti-sexist) substitutes. Here is their list of “proper” and “improper” terms and expressions: (BSA, pp. 1-3).

SEXIST	ANTI-SEXIST
1. the man in the street	1. people in general, people
2. layman	2. lay person, non expert
3. man-made	3. synthetic, artificial, manufactured
4. Chairman	4. Chair
5. foreman	5. supervisor
6. craftsman/men	6. craftsperson/people
7. manning	7. staffing, working, running
8. to a man	8. everyone, unanimously, without exception

⁴As an amateur wood-cutter I am also familiar with the ominous term *widow-maker* which describes a grievous mistake in calculating where a tree trunk or heavy branch will fall.



9. manhours	9. workhours
10. the working man	10. worker, working people
11. one man show	11. one person show
12. policeman/fireman	12. police officer/ fire-fighter
13. forefathers	13. ancestors
14. founding fathers	14. founders
15. old masters	15. classic art/artists
16. masterful	16. domineering; very skilful
17. master copy	17. top copy/original
18. Dear Sirs	18. Dear Sir/Madam
19. disseminate	19. broadcast, inform, publicise
20. seminal	20. classical, formative

The list above illustrates the difficulty purists have in cleansing the lexicon of “sexist” words or phrases. In No. 5 *supervisor* could substitute for *foreman* but it would not cover another specific and important meaning, that is, when *foreman* designates the spokesman for a jury; attempts have been made to introduce into active usage *forewoman* and *forelady*. In No. 15 a dictionary definition of *old masters* is “a distinguished European artist of the period from about 1500 to the early 1700’s, especially one of the great painters of this period”;⁵ its replacement by *classic art/artists* is much too general. In the last two examples of sexist language, Nos. 19 & 20, the strange reason for consigning them to verbal banishment is the fact that their root is Latin *semen*, “seed,” which, more to the point, is also the source of English *semen*, “male reproductive fluid.” One wonders how the words *seminary* and *seminar* escaped the watchful eye of the sociologists but the existence of the many respected Ladies Seminaries in the 19th century and the presence of females in university seminars today undoubtedly saved the terms from the purists. One term, *suffragette* cannot be challenged because of the heroic actions of suffragettes fighting for the right to vote in England. There is a term for a male, *suffragist*, but it is rarely, if ever, used.

New Zealand and Canadian word substitutions

Peter Zohrab in his article *Sexist Language in English, German and Chinese* (pp. 15) cites the “bad” and “good” terms as identified by the New Zealand State Services Commission in its booklet *Watch Your Language* (pp. 31-33). Here are a few examples from the pamphlet:

⁵ Page 1260, left column, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 3rd edition, 1992.



BAD	GOOD
draughtsman	draughtsperson
stockman	rancher
tradesman	skilled worker
milkman	milk vendor
repairman	repairer
laughterman	slaughterperson
fireman	firefighter
housewife	consumer, cook, shopper

Would casual readers of this list be accused of sexual bias if they wondered how many New Zealand women are actually interested in becoming *slaughterpersons*? Zohrab is vexed that feminists want the suffix *-man* replaced in words like *repairman* but insist on leaving *gunman* untouched. He also notes with some asperity that feminists will refer to *God* as *she* but the *Devil* as *he*. The substitutes for *housewife* above actually seem quite insulting⁶. Wikipedia, a Canadian encyclopedia, presents the usual “do-nots” in its article on non-sexist language but it admits that the substitution of *fisher* for *fisherman* did not please women in that occupation who insist on being called *fishermen*. And similarly some *female horseriders* want to be described as *horsemen*. Finally, it cautioned its readers to avoid stereotypes, such as “*old wives’ tale*,” thus possibly expunging a source of folk wisdom (Pp. 1-2).

Australian word preferences

Australian feminists like those in the other four countries have their lists of words and expressions to be eliminated from the language. Only the terms that seem unique to Australia are listed below (T&LC, pp.1-4).

⁶According to Gertraut Stoffel, retired faculty member from the University of Auckland, “In New Zealand language change is not much of an issue any more. Political change has been achieved to a considerable degree. Although there are still more men than women in public office, New Zealand has a woman prime minister (the second woman in that office), and the governor-general, the attorney-general, the chief justice, several cabinet members, the leader of the Green Party and many other influential politicians and public servants are women. The main topic that is now being discussed by feminists is the still existing economic inequality of the many women who are not in top position”. (E-mail to T. F. Magner, January 2, 2003).



Avoid	Use	
	The girls in the office	The secretaries/office assistants/the women in the office
	Ladies	Women (except when used in a parallel manner with gentlemen)
	man of letters	scholar/academic
	sportsmanlike	fair/sporting
	workmanlike	skilful/efficient
	alderman	councilor/council member
	clergyman	member of the clergy
	draughtsman	drafter
	linesman	line worker
	storeman	storeperson/store worker
	proprietres	proprietor

Feminist successes

The feminists have had some successes. *Ms.*, denoting a woman, married or unmarried, has entered the vocabulary while the traditional *Miss*, an unmarried woman, still remains in use.

If anything, the two terms complement each other with *Miss* referring to a younger woman, *Ms.* to an older woman though the ages the titles denote could be overlapping. The pairing of sexes for the 3rd person singular pronoun, *he* and *she*, *he* or *she* is used by public speakers and presumably in official texts as style manuals support the usage but many speakers and writers use avoidance techniques, either using a plural noun or the pronoun *they* or the pronouns *everybody/everyone* and the possessive adjective *their*, e.g., *Everyone likes their Christmas gifts*.

There is a slight taboo in English on the use of the word *woman* and in speech *lady* is often used, much to the annoyance of feminists, e.g., “There’s a lady at the door,” but “There’s a man at the door.” In traditional word pairings the male usually comes first, a fact that feminists deplore, e.g., *men and women*, *boys and girls*, *husband and wife*, but always *Ladies and Gentlemen* when introducing a speech before a mixed audience. The time-honored expression *man and wife* suffers doubly by using both the old order and generic *man*; feminists prefer *husband and wife* or, even better, *wife and husband*.

The word *guy*

A venerable word, *guy* [ga], has extended its meaning to include women and girls, perhaps in response to the attacks on other feminine social titles or simply as a movement



towards inclusion of both sexes. First recorded in the year 1351 with the meaning, “a guide; a conductor or leader,” it achieved prominence in the name of Guy Fawkes and the 1605 Gunpowder Plot in England. “Guy” in the sense of “a man, fellow” was first recorded as an American usage in Swell’s Night Guide in 1847: “I can’t tonight, for I am going to be seduced by a rich old Guy”. (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 975). In my own experience “guy” has until recently been used only to denote men or boys; it is an informal term used in expressions like “Hey, you *guys*, let’s play a couple of innings of softball,” or “He’s the *guy* you’ve been looking for.” Here is a 1966 quotation from Wodehouse’s Plum Pie: “All the other places... had been full of *guys* and *dolls* standing bumper to bumper”. (ibid.). The very popular musical, *Guys and Dolls*, opened in New York City in 1950 and lasted for 1,200 performances, undoubtedly contributing to the popularity of *guys* though the word *dolls* would be anathema to feminists. In current usage in the US a waiter/waitperson or server can approach a table of men and women and ask: “How’re you *guys* doing tonight?” where formerly he/she might have asked: “How’re you *folks* doing tonight?” And I have recently heard a CNN female announcer address two female guests as “*you guys*”. *Guy* has a friendly connotation and it is possible that its greater use is due to an avoidance of the older social titles with their sexist pitfalls.

Language modification – some observations

Quite early in feminist efforts to cleanse the English language of perceived bias against women, a committee of the American Psychological Association released a prescient statement: “Any endeavor to change the language that may be considered sexist 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”. (1977, 2). This cautionary statement did not deter committed feminists from offering substitutes for all masculine-tinged forms. Proposing such substitutions is the easy part, having them accepted by the general public is the difficult part. And there is a third stage, that is, the general public might accept *work hours* for *man hours*, or *spokesperson* for *spokesman* but still keep both members of a “good-bad” pair and simply treat them as synonyms. As has been pointed out above, some substitutes don’t match the semantic field of the targeted form, for example, *manufactured* can replace *manmade* in an expression like *manmade fibers* but one cannot change a *manmade lake* to a *manufactured lake* and expect it to enter the vocabulary.

Lexical change, the addition or subtraction of lexemes to a language, is still a mysterious process. How did such a word as *humongous*, “enormous,” enter the English language? And how is one to explain the origin of “verbal tics” or “pause fillers” in speech such as the widespread “you know” and “like”; examples: “Fire-fighting *you know* is a demanding occupation,” and “She is, *like*, pregnant.” And why is it that the borrowed (from Dutch) word *booze*, “hard liquor,” is still a slang word in English after



more than 400 years of devoted usage? There is also the larger question of forced or guided language change, particularly in the lexicon. Substantial changes can be imposed if a government, a small homogeneous population and its media are in general agreement about the goal, usually the declaration of a new language, as in the present case of the Bosnian language (References, Magner and Marić). Such language shapers ignore the present generation and concentrate their efforts on pupils and students in the school system. Over time the sought-after language changes, no matter how odd-appearing at first, will eventually take root in the younger generations.

The end of militant feminism

After an initial torrent of books and articles the feminist movement now seems to be in a state of fatigue or restful waiting. It should be said that the feminist forces have never been monolithic in their programs. Christina Hoff Sommers divides them into gender feminists and equity feminists, the former group more doctrinaire, the latter more attuned to a feminist “mainstream”. (pp. 274-275). However, it was the doctrinaire group that in its heyday managed to insert its decrees in major writing guides, that planted women studies’ programs in university curricula, that caused half a generation of public speakers and media announcers to stumble over *he*’s and *she*’s and managed to popularize the title of *Ms*. The movement has largely abandoned its forays into language purification and now seems to be concentrating on economic and political goals instead, a move in the direction of equity feminism. What remains to be seen is whether thirty or so years of tinkering with the English lexicon and, to a minor degree, with its syntax, has resulted in an “equal-opportunity” language or whether the English language will endure in its unfettered way, accepting or rejecting new words and expressions in accordance with its own internalized patterns.

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SEKSISTIČKE I NESEKSISTIČKE UPORABE U ENGLJSKOM JEZIKU

Autor daje pregled feminističkih pokušaja da se eliminiira seksistički jezik u pet zemalja engleskoga govornog područja. Ujedno se i vrednuju njihovi uspjesi i neuspjesi.

