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Review of Style and Variables in English, Timothy Shopen and Joseph Williams

Elaine Chaika

Providence College, echaika@providence.edu

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Review

Author(s): Elaine Chaika

Review by: Elaine Chaika

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"just," or "evenhanded," while a female executive with exactly the same management style is termed "rigid," "inflexible," or, even, "difficult."

A glance at the table of contents provides a sense of the range of this handbook: "Man as a False Generic" (as a noun, a verb, in prefixes and suffixes); "The Pronoun Problem" (including solutions which are at the same time accurate and graceful); "Generalizations" (where Miller and Swift expose some more of the subliminal messages language conveys, including ways in which language can work against men as well as against women); "Girls, Ladies, Females, Women" (when to use which, a chapter much needed for increasing sensitivity to how each of those terms *feels* to many women); "Parallel Treatment" ("man and wife" is *not* parallel); and "A Few More Words" (Alumnae, Alumni) through "Women's Liberation," a section which I wish had been far more extensive).

I hesitate to find fault with any aspect of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, since it is *the* book of its kind to date. However, I do wish—for our students and for the world at large—that Miller and Swift had relied less on the use of certain technical terms of grammar and other needlessly difficult vocabulary. The book, as a handbook, would profit from being crystal clear at all points, which it could be without sacrifice of either its argument or its substance.

More specifically, I do not agree with Miller and Swift that "fellow" and "master" and their compounds (e.g., "fellowship," "masterpiece") are okay because they "have long been sex-neutral" (by what criteria are they sex-neutral?). However, I should probably add that I have not been able to come up with satisfactory substitutes. "Sistership" is in use, but that does not fulfill the need for a term to include us all. And of course "mistress" has become burdened over the years with so many destructive connotations that we cannot even consider it.

However, Miller and Swift redeem themselves considerably when they provide us with a catchword we can use to call attention to sexist language: BOMFOG, the acronym developed by journalists covering political campaigns—because the phrase "the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God" occurred so often in candidates' speeches. Perhaps we could add "bomfog" to our list of marginal abbreviations for responding to student papers? That would let our students know that we care at least as much about people as we do about language.

Style and Variables in English, ed. Timothy Shopen and Joseph Williams (Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, Inc., 1981, pp. 272).

Reviewed by Elaine Chaika, Providence College

At last, here is a linguistics book that is neither trivial nor badly written, a book that enlightens and illuminates, that English teachers with no training in linguistics can profit from. The format of the seven essays in this volume makes it even more unusual. Rather than just lecturing the reader, each author intersperses questions, problems, and projects throughout his or her article(s). These problems are so constructed that, in and of themselves, they teach not only the theory under consideration, but how to analyze language data, both oral and written, sensitively. This technique of explaining by encouraging readers to make their own discoveries fails occasionally. Shopen's article showing the grammatical structure of English tries to illustrate the rule-governed nature of language by having the reader analyze his/her rules for the alternation of *a* and *an*. Strangely, however, he presents the fact that *an* is used before "*union, university, and utensil*" (pp. 13-14) as an apparent anomaly without ever point-

ing out to the naive reader that, although these are spelled with a word-initial vowel, they are pronounced as if they start with /y/. It is this which forces *an*. Yet such an explanation would have strengthened his demonstration that English is rule-governed, as well as, in itself, demonstrated our lack of awareness of what we are doing when we speak.

Williams, in both of his articles, often illustrates the feature he is talking about by using just that feature. For instance, in a discussion of doublets as a peculiarly English device, he comments "This is a habit and tradition so firmly and profoundly ingrained in English that we shall probably never expunge or banish it from our prose and speech" (p. 177). This technique backfires twice. On p. 29, to illustrate the concept of grammaticality, he slips in two ungrammatical sentences. So unobtrusively does he do this, however, that the reader may mistake the errors for typos. Problem 7 (p. 33) is presented as an incoherent set of sentences, but the reader is not told what to do with them. One can imagine someone not recognizing their purpose. Other than offering these piffling criticisms, one can only say of Williams' articles, especially the second, "Literary Style: The Personal Voice," that they are wise, clever, and chock full of insights of great use to the composition teacher.

One strange failure of editing occurs in the Zwicky article on oral style. Although an article by Wald and Shopen illustrates the idea of sociolinguistic variables primarily by considering the *in'*, *-ing* variation in words like *running*, Zwicky also expounds on that variable, and even presents a project amazingly like one they suggest. Williams mentions the same variable. One might think that it is the major variable in English.

Linde explains "the organization of discourse" clearly, thoroughly, and, yes, fascinatingly. It is the best introduction to this subject I have ever seen.

Although most English teachers might expect to be put off by discussions of research methods and statistical measures, they may be delighted to find that Wald's articles (one co-authored with Shopen) are far from dull. These treatments of sociolinguistic variables manage to explain why students talk as they do, as well as why the language has changed as it has.

It is unfortunate for readers untrained in phonetics, however, that the Introduction to the volume is so poor. Specifically, the presentation of vowels is diminished by the use of a common notation which is imprecise. That notation confuses the novice because it conflicts with normal English orthography, e.g., /aw/ to stand for the vowel sound in *house*. Difficulties are compounded by the casual throwing about of terms like "tense vowel" with no real explanation of what that is. Considering the importance of vowels in dialect differentiation, this weakness is a real flaw.

However, on the whole, this is an excellent volume, one which I heartily recommend.

Call for Resolutions

Janice Lauer, Chair of the 1986 CCCC Committee on Resolutions, hereby issues a call for resolutions to be considered for presentation at the Annual Business Meeting in New Orleans, Louisiana. The signatures of at least five CCCC members are required for each proposed resolution. Proposed resolutions, with these signatures, should be mailed to Dr. Lauer, Chair of CCCC Resolutions Committee; CCCC; 1111 Kenyon Road; Urbana, IL 61801. Resolutions must be postmarked by 28 February 1986.