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Prescribed Passivity: The Language of Sexism

Julia Penelope

The recent controversy concerning the use and reference of so-called "generics" in the English language reveals the extent, if not the nature, of the political investment at stake in preserving the myth of generalized reference. Before I offer my data and observations regarding this myth, I would like to emphasize that the arguments supporting generics, especially man, men, and mankind, are not substantive, but political, and those who would like to maintain the use of masculine nouns as general references are relying on popular misconceptions, not linguistic data. Of course, if linguistic history provides clues to the outcome of this controversy, I have to conclude that popular misconceptions (those definitions with the most political power backing them) will prevail, and the data I present here will become another set of "interesting" historical articles that we will choose to ignore because the evidence is embarrassing. On the basis of my evidence, there are no "generics" in English. I have found that that portion of our vocabulary that refers to human beings is divided into two unequal sub-classes, woman and man. By far, the larger sub-class contains those nouns that designate the affairs of men.

* This article first appeared in Reza Ordonbadian and Walburga Von-Raffler Engel, Views on Language (1975); Murfreesboro, Tenn: Inter-University Publishing. Pp. 96-108.

As others have observed, men have been the doers and the actors, the central figures in their histories, and those nouns that refer to traditionally prestigious social positions and occupations carry (+male) as an inherent semantic feature, e.g., doctor, lawyer, judge, chairman. Only a few nouns carry the inherent feature (+female) (or -male as Geoffrey Leech would mark them), e.g., nurse, prostitute, secretary, spider, housewife. As a consequence, when women take up activities outside their roles as wife and/or mother, we move into negative semantic space, semantic space that does not exist for us. When a woman occupies a professional position usually reserved for men, she does not move into the semantic space covered by the "standard" occupational label. Instead, her anomalous position must be marked by the addition of a special "female marker"; we insert woman/female/lady in front of the occupational term, e.g., lady doctor, female surgeon, lady or woman lawyer. Those occupations with less social prestige must have a special "feminine" suffix attached to them, e.g., waitress, authoress, poetess, majorette. We understand any term that occurs in its "standard" unmarked form to refer to a male, and failure to provide the information that the person is a woman often results in confusion for the hearer. For example, if I tell a friend that I have an appointment with my lawyer/doctor/therapist, she will assume that that person is male, and indicate that assumption by asking, "Oh, why are you going to see him?" or "Do you think he would see me?" In contrast, when a term is marked (+female) it acquires a negative connotation, the price exacted for moving out of our semantic space and into the domain of man. Those occupations ordinarily reserved for women, e.g., prostitute, nurse,

secretary, teacher, require that the feature (+male) be marked explicitly, as in male nurse, male prostitute, male secretary. (There were fewer examples in this category since men have not shown as much interest in traditionally "female occupations" as women have shown in those of men, presumably because the jobs that women occupy pay less money.) That we need to mark occupational terms for gender indicates to me that our semantic space is rigidly determined by culturally defined sex roles, and when one of us goes beyond the boundary of the space provided for us by the English lexicon, we move into negative semantic space, and special linguistic accommodations must be made.

It is fair to ask at this point what the existence of special gender markers has to do with the question of generics in English. Just this: the place of women in our society is reflected in the semantic space that we occupy, a small space that contains such labels as prostitute, housewife, mother, nurse, and secretary; the remainder of the English semantic space, including those terms called "generics," belongs to the male sex. It would appear that the explicit semantic markers (+female) and (+male), are only the most obvious and superficial indicators of the way in which English semantic space, our cognitive space, reflects male dominance.

As I have said earlier, the arguments that favor man and man-kind as generics are not substantive, but political. The Oxford English Dictionary states clearly in its definitions of man that generic usage of the noun is "obsolete," and the editors go on to note that "in modern apprehension man as thus used primarily denotes the male sex, though by implication referring also to women"

(my italics). Note that women are included in man only by implication, not inference! With respect to the phrase a man, the OED is equally explicit: The phrase is used "quasi-pronominally," for one, or any one, but it "implies a reference to the male sex only." And, as early as 1924, Otto Jespersen was blunt in his judgment that: "This is decidedly a defect in the English language," and he went on to mention that "the tendency recently has been to use unambiguous, if clumsy expressions like a human being . . ." (Jespersen, 1985: 231). Authorities notwithstanding, the men in the media have been making a lot of noise about recent attempts to alter or bypass the traditional masculine "generics," and their trivializations of the issues have taken various forms. In general, feminist suggestions have been put down and categorized as illicit tampering with the language, as fads, or as grotesque errors in a class with ain't and double negatives, depending upon the degree to which the writer identifies himself as the last bastion in defense of the "purity" of the English language. One writer has called feminist remodeling of the language "the new Sisppeak" (Kanier, p. 79), while L.B. Sissman, in his article "Plastic English," says that such tampering is as threatening as the American Communist Party, and he accuses feminists of "distort(ing) and corrupt(ing) further the language already savaged by the Establishment politicians when they conspire to eliminate the innocuous, and correct, locution, 'Everyone knows he has to decide for himself,' and to substitute the odious Newspeakism 'chairperson' . . ." (Sissman, 1972: 37). Possibly the most recent example of the violent reactions to conscious language change were the letters written to the New York Times protesting the detailed and explicit

McGraw-Hill Guidelines for the Equal Treatment of the Sexes.

Men, however, are not the only ones resisting language change, nor are our opponents only the press pedagogues. Two women, Robin Lakoff and Alleen Pace Nilsen, are also opposed to eliminating masculine "generics," and their reasons are interesting for the insights they provide into the mechanisms of justification. Ms. Nilsen, although she suggests that we avoid terms like man, argues that "it is unrealistic to expect to get rid of all of them (generic masculine terms). Therefore, it makes more sense to adjust to them" (Nilsen, 1973: 9). The murkiness of this type of argument and the difficulty of rationalizing neutrality are illustrated in their concluding statement:

Educational and psychological damage occurs only when people think that generic terms refer exclusively to males. And, unfortunately, rather than increasing awareness in the general public of the nature of the generic terms, the invention of specifically feminine terms such as chairwoman, freshwoman, spokeswoman, etc., has the opposite effect giving the impression that women cannot be included in any term incorporating a masculine marker. I fear that in the long run this will serve to exclude women even further from the mainstream of thought and action. (Nilsen, p. 10).

As I have already mentioned, generic terms do refer exclusively to males, except by implication, and Nilsen can only infer that she is included in them. But

inference is not the same as denotation. The issue of "generic" has to do with what people think, and usage indicates that people think of a male when they write or hear man, except for those who have something invested in having us believe otherwise. For this reason, use of terms like chairwoman and spokeswoman are conscious choices and give us a social visibility in roles outside the home that we have never had, correctly asserting that women are not included in terms with masculine markers. Finally, if anything is likely to exclude women from worldly spheres, it will be the perpetuation of the notion that women are included in terms like forefather, or that high-sounding statements like "All men are created equal" or "God created man in his own image" include women as references.

Robin Lakoff's argument follows that of Nilsen in its studied neutrality, but Lakoff is not as careful in her assertions. While she is quite frank about her pessimism, counseling a conservative approach to conscious language change, she blithely accepts and supports the myth that "generics" refer to women as well as men, without consulting more carefully researched sources.

. . . in English we find man and mankind, which of course refer to women members of the species as well. . . but more seriously, I think one should force oneself to be realistic: certain aspects of language are available to the speaker's conscious analysis, and others are too common, too thoroughly mixed throughout the language, for the speaker to be aware each time he uses them. (Lakoff, 1975: 45)

Does Lakoff want us to believe that she was not conscious of it when she used the pronoun he in that last sentence? What is saddening about her statement is that she side-stepped the major issue she raised: It is precisely those aspects of language use that are not conscious that we have the most trouble eliminating from our speech. I cannot be satisfied with letting so-called generics continue to pass as such, just because some people do not want to think about what they're saying. One way of becoming aware of something is to talk about it, and to make our usage conscious. It would seem that as long as linguistic change is "accidental," linguists can afford to be nonchalant. But, in the cause of "political realism" we are cautioned to exert pressure on those areas of usage that are "available to the speaker's conscious analysis." Or, as Nilsen would have it, we need not be disturbed because "Educational and social damage occurs only when people think that the generic terms refer exclusively to males." If Nilsen is correct, then a great deal of educational and social damage has been done, especially in public school and college textbooks.

At this point we have no way of determining what is available to conscious analysis, nor can we ascertain when people think generic terms refer to women and men. Until further proof is forthcoming, it is safe to assume that so-called generics refer exclusively to the male sex, especially when the writer or speaker is male. In my opinion, women have wishfully read themselves into "generics" in an effort to remain ignorant of their political position. I am not speaking only of terms like man and mankind; such uses of masculine terms are too obvious to merit the attention given to them. I am saying

that women have read themselves into other terms as well, for example, children, kids, people, person, individual, teacher, sociologist, and surgeon. As Otto Jespersen had observed:

While a great many names for human beings are applicable to both sexes, e.g., liar, possessor, inhabitant, Christian, fool, stranger, neighbour, etc., others, though possessing no distinctive mark, are as a matter of fact chiefly or even exclusively applied to one sex only, because the corresponding social functions have been restricted either to men or to women. This is true of minister, bishop, lawyer, baker, shoemaker and many others on the one hand, nurse, dressmaker, milliner on the other (Jespersen, 1965: 232).

At the publication time of this article, things are pretty much the same.

The definitions that follow, taken from Random House Dictionary, make explicit the way in which the English lexicon is divided into two gender-determined vocabularies. The terms for which I have provided definitions are: feminine, womanly, and womanish; masculine, manly and mannish. The comments on effeminate were found under the definition for female. The two contrasting sets of terms delimit the semantic boundaries of "socially approved" behaviors we are expected to exhibit if we are unfortunate enough to have been born female or male.

FEMININE -- 1. Pertaining to a woman or girl:
Feminine beauty, feminine dress. 2. Like a woman;
 weak; gentle.

WOMANLY -- Like or befitting a woman; feminine; not
 masculine or girlish. syn. -- WOMANLY implies
 resemblance in appropriate, fitting ways: WOMANLY
DECORUM, MODESTY. WOMANLIKE, a neutral synonym, may
 suggest mild disapproval or, more rarely, disgust.
WOMANLIKE, SHE(HE) BURST INTO TEARS. WOMANISH
 usually implies an inappropriate resemblance
 and suggests weakness or effeminacy: WOMANISH
BEHAVIOR.

EFFEMINATE -- is applied reproachfully or
 contemptuously to qualities which, although natural
 in women, are seldom applied to women and are unmanly
 and weak when possessed by men: EFFEMINATE GESTURES;
AN EFFEMINATE VOICE. FEMININE, corresponding to
MASCULINE. Applies to the attributes particularly
 appropriate to women, esp. the softer and more
 delicate qualities. The word is seldom used to
 denote sex, and if applied to men, suggests the
 delicacy and weakness of women: A FEMININE FIGURE,
POINT OF VIEW, FEATURES.

These definitions make explicit all of the cultural
 assumptions regarding the "true nature" of women: We are
 delicate, petulant, liable to burst into tears at any
 provocation, we possess decorum--have you ever heard of
 masculine decorum?--we are modest, we are weak, and we are
 gentle. Even the definitions of the terms for women are
 cast negatively, as that which is not masculine. Contrast

the tone of these definitions with those for males, which are uniformly affirmative.

MASCULINE -- 1. Having the qualities or characteristics of a man; manly; virile; strong; bold; A DEEP MASCULINE VOICE. 2. Pertaining to or characteristic of a man or men: MASCULINE ATTIRE.

MANLY -- Having the qualities usually considered desirable in a man; strong; brave; honorable; resolute; virile. Syn. -- Manly implies possession of the most valuable or desirable qualities a man can have, as dignity, honesty, directness, etc., in opposition to servility, insincerity, underhandedness, etc. It also connotes strength, courage, and fortitude . . .

I infer from these definitions that women are servile, insincere, underhanded, weak, cowardly and lacking in fortitude. In fact, RHD offers as antonyms for manly three significant words: feminine; weak; cowardly. But the definition for mannish provides an exact illustration of what I have inferred from the previous definitions.

MANNISH applies to that which resembles man: . . . applied to a woman, the term is derogatory, suggesting the aberrant possession of masculine characteristics.

Characteristics such as strength, dignity, honesty, and courage are "aberrant" in women!

The semantic space of English is neatly divided in accordance with social sex-role stereotypes; women are fragile, passive and dishonest, all negative attributes, whereas men are strong, bold, honest and forthright, all positive attributes. In the examples that follow, we can see ways in which the stereotypes of women are taken for granted in various media, with the understanding that the characteristics of women are negative in comparison to the positive standards set for men.

- 1) A. The guards were seldom harsh and never cruel. They tended to be stolid, slovenly, heavy, and to my eyes, effeminate -- not in the sense of delicacy, etc., but in just the opposite sense: a gross, bland fleshiness, a bovinity without point or edge. Among my fellow-prisoners I had also for the first time in Winter the sense of being a man among women, or among eunuchs. The prisoners were hard to tell apart; their emotional tone seemed always low, their talk trivial. (Ursula K. LeGuin, The Left Hand of Darkness, p. 170)

- B. Ignorant, in the Handdarn sense: To ignore the abstraction, to hold fast to the thing. There was in this attitude something feminine, a refusal of the abstract, the ideal, a submissiveness to the given, which rather displeased me. (LeGuin, The Left Hand of Darkness, Pp. 202-203)

- C. Every man's been one, every woman's had one.
(Ad for the movie, Paperback Hero)
- D. Is there a lady in the house, with some children and a spouse, with some worries on her mind about dinner?
(Radio ad, Athens, Georgia)
- E. Usually, however, role analysis is pitched in terms of the roles of some particular category of person, such as doctor or female.
(Erving Goffman, Encounters, p. 91)
- F. Gibson's has special bargains for the ladies: 40% off on clothes for children, and double sheets, two for the price of one.
(Radio ad, Athens, Georgia)
- G. It is a far cry from the unfortunate days when slaps and kicks were exchanged, weak sisters exploded in tears, and strong men staged walkouts. (Judith Crist, New York, 1/20/75, p. 50)

Each of these examples illustrates the type of context in which we find reference to women, and the use of traditional concepts of women and their behavior, as further explanation is unnecessary. I could multiply these examples, but I offer them only as evidence that the polarization of roles defined by terms like feminine and masculine can be found in contexts in which the words themselves need not appear. The contexts in 1.A. - 1.G. demonstrate the strength and prevalence of sexist

assumptions in our society; one need only call upon them to sell sheets, promote a movie, describe an alien personality, or outline a method of role analysis in which one has doctors, on the one hand, and females on the other.

The next set of examples contains explicit references to women. The topic in each quotation, whether it is food, motherhood or embroidery, is one assumed to be of interest only to women. Consequently, I would like to emphasize the terms that do not appear; we do not find the "generic" man, although, if we remember our traditional grammar, we learned that any group that contained one male had to be referred to by a masculine generic. The writer of each example, then, must assume that no single male is interested in food, embroidery, crafts, or reproduction. Nor do we find person, people, or individual, terms that would theoretically include women.

- 2) A. As Woman, she would have been happier had she continued enshrined in the privacy of domestic love and domestic duty. (Frank Caprio, Female Homosexuality)
- B. This comprehensive book of one hundred embroidery stitches will be useful not only to teachers and students, but to women of all ages who are interested in embroidery stitches. (100 Embroidery Stitches, p. 2)

- C. Women unconsciously prefer to fulfill their maternal role and to be loved by a man.
Woman is intended for reproduction.
(Caprio, Female Homosexuality)

- D. The right idea for today's creative woman from the Cooking and Crafts Club.
(Book-of-the-Month Club Flyer)

When the subject matter pertains to one of those categories that fall within the semantic space of women, we will find the term woman, and not a masculine generic. Notice, however, that when the topic falls within the semantic space reserved for male behaviors and male concerns, such as anger, control, autonomy or dignity, we find the so-called generics man and mankind.

- 3. A. By questioning the control exercised by autonomous man and demonstrating the control exercised by the environment, a science of behavior also seems to question dignity or worth. (B.F. Skinner, Beyond Freedom and Dignity)

- B. A small step for man, a giant step for mankind! (Astronaut)

- C. The history of anger is the history of mankind. Man has been exposed to the effects of anger, others' as well as his own, since he was first placed on earth. (Anger, p. 1)

Before I go on to consider the problem of reference with respect to terms of more general application, I would like to offer for your consideration a set of anomalous examples, anomalous because of the semantic ambiguities and shifts of reference which they illustrate.

4. A. Man is not made for defeat... A man can be destroyed but not defeated.
(Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea)

- B. Archeologists announced today that they have discovered evidence of man's existence as far back as 3,000,000 years ago, based on the dating of a woman's skeleton.
(Radio news, Knoxville)

- C. A college professor had dinner at the home of her department chairman. After dinner, he invited her to join him in his study, and his wife invited her to watch TV in the livingroom. Her chairman prevailed in the awkward debate that followed, insisting that they needed the privacy. As the two of them were entering his study, his daughter followed them in, wanting to know why the professor had to stay with him in his study.
"Because," replied the father, "that's what the men do." (private conversation)

And one finds interesting extensions of the masculine bias with the verb to man, in spite of the OED's definition, "to fill with men." The following anecdote illustrates

how far some are willing to push for the genericness of the male norm.

- D. In a midwestern college, a memorandum was circulated informing the faculty that the registration tables would have to "be manned." When a woman pointed out that half of the department was women, her chairman replied: "You're a man. The Bible says 'In the beginning God created man in his own image.' So, God created you and you're a man." (Private correspondence)

I wish I could leave you with the obvious ways in which women are excluded from semantic space beyond that occupied by their traditional roles. By now, the appeal to the genericness of masculine terms may seem hardly noteworthy. But my last set of examples, uses terms of general reference, e.g., person, child, kid, and individual, provide evidence that whenever someone speaks or writes about "people," the intended reference of the given term is males.

- 5) A. You're a mother and a wife, and your men count on you. So take One-a-Day Vitamins with iron for the people who count on you. (Television ad)
- B. First Satirist: A satirist can't teach people anything if he offends them. Second Satirist: I offend them. They love it. I make fun of their wives. (Jules Feiffer, Feiffer's Album, p. 2)

- C. Our people are the best gamblers in the galaxy. We compete for power, fame, women. (Star Trek)
- D. Jack thought with surprise how good this was. This atmosphere of dim, shabby people, men who would not recognize him or anything in him. . (Joyce Carol Oates, Do With Me What You Will, p. 517-518)
- E. When I was going to school, I spent most of my time talking to teachers and their wives. (Edward Albee, in an interview, New Yorker, 6/8/74, p. 29)
- F. For the merry-go-round rider, for example, the self awaiting is one that entails a child's portion of bravery and muscular control, a child's portion of manliness . . . (Goffman, Encounters, p. 98)
- G. American middle-class two-year olds often find the prospect too much for them. They fight their parents at the last moment to avoid being strapped into a context in which it had been hoped they would be little men (Goffman, Encounters, p. 105)
- H. We find that holders of the MA and MS who enter this department do well in graduate work here. Their applications, like those of

women, and of members of minority groups, are welcome. (Dept. of Psychology flyer, U-T Knoxville)

- I. Even in the most serious of roles, such as that of surgeon, we yet find that there will be times when the full-fledged performer must unbend and behave simply as a male. (Goffman, Encounters, p. 140)
- J. This kind of equipment is to the homecraftsman what washing machines, clothes dryers, etc. . . . are to the housewife. (Woodworking)
- K. It is here, in this personal capacity, that an individual can be warm, spontaneous, and touched by humor. It is here, regardless of his social role, that an individual can show "what kind of a guy he is." (Goffman, Encounters, p. 152)
- L. Sociologists qua sociologists are allowed to have one profane part; sociologists qua persons, along with other persons, retain the sacred for their friends, their wives, and themselves. (Goffman, Encounters, p. 152)
- M. Ordinary walking may have to be put on, too, especially, presumably, by the half of our population whose appearance is, and is

designed to be, appreciated by all, and savored by some, . . . (Goffman, Relations in Public, p.272)

Each of the preceding examples illustrates how completely women are excluded from the semantic space occupied by masculine definitions, through either a specifically male term, e.g., manly, manliness, men, or an explicitly female reference, e.g., wives, mother, housewife. Such usage provides some evidence that women are rarely, if ever, present as persons in a writer's mind, which, in its turn, tells us how far we have yet to go in exposing sexism to "conscious analysis." The varied sources for these examples also provide us with an index of the "educational and social damage" done to women in the media. In addition, the obvious prevalence of male referents for terms that are generally defined as neutral with respect to gender calls into question the validity of Lakoff's claim that nouns like person and people are "purely empty" (Lakoff, 1975: 37).

Where does one go from here? What are we to do when we have to continue to use a language in which semantic space is dominated by males? For the time being, I suggest that we mark gender explicitly, creating pairs of terms, e.g., chairwoman/chairman, spokeswoman/spokesman, saleswoman/salesman. The use of neutralized terms perpetuates the invisibility of women in positions outside their traditionally defined roles, and the tendency to assume that such roles are filled by males has been illustrated earlier in this paper. Our language is sexist because our society is sexist, and until there is significant reversal of the prevalent attitudes toward

women we cannot hope to accomplish much. As Lakoff has observed: "The presence of the words is a signal that something is wrong, rather than (as too often interpreted by well-meaning reformers) the problem itself" (p. 21). Nevertheless, efforts to remove biased gender reference from our vocabulary may at least force upon us an awareness of the deeply ingrained sexism that usage reflects.