A GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE: MYTH OR REALITY?

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Abstract: We construct and represent ourselves to others through language, therefore language plays a crucial role in displaying ourselves as gendered persons. The present article tackles the topic of gender-neutral language, trying to answer the questions: 'Does society have to change before language can?' or 'Can language bring about changes in society?' 'Is a gender-neutral language a myth or a reality?'

Keywords: objective language, gender, sexism, connotation, society.

I can't live with you
But I can't live without you.
I can't let you stay
But I can't live if you go away.."
Queen

In a society in which gender is deeply rooted, in which everything is classified according to gender (among others), gender is not likely to disappear. Like it or not, apparently gender is here to stay. We construct reality and represent ourselves to others through language; language plays a crucial role in displaying ourselves as gendered persons and it often reflects the sexist nature of a society.

Gender is a burden for both men and women. To have to maintain connection with the others, while displaying your expertise, to always fight to establish your status in a hierarchical society can be very exhausting for men. To strive to maintain status while avoiding conflict, and avoid appearing better than the rest can be a burden for women.

William Satire (alias Douglas Hofstadter) [1] summarizes his feelings about non-sexist English as follows "My feeling about non-sexist English is that it is like a foreign language that I am learning. I find that even after years of practice, I still have to translate something from my native language, which is sexist English. I know of no human being who speaks non-sexist as their native tongue." But if men complain about learning a foreign language, what should women say about talking for centuries in a man-made English?

But even though gender is here to stay, there are a few changes than can be made so that living with gender would be a bit easier for women, since the way gender is reflected in language affects them in the first place. But this brings us to an essential question: *Does society have to change first before language can?* or *Can language bring about changes in society?*

Some researchers embraced the former scenario, claiming that language should be left alone, because in a society where women are equal to men language will take care of itself and will eventually reflect the changes that occur in society.

Others are for the language reform, mainly feminists, claiming that as long as women use a man-made language, changes in society will not take place. A man-made language encodes not only men's view of the world, but also the conviction that they are superior to women. They achieve this at the semantic level by suggesting that everything that is

[1] Cameron Deborah (1990) *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader*. London: Routledge p.195

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connected with women has a negative connotation. Thus women are forced to perceive language not only through the lens of maleness but also through the lens of misogyny. Another aspect has to be taken into account when proposing linguistic reforms: such reforms depend on the type of language in question. For instance in English, such reforms aim at neutralization or de-gendering, while languages such as French, which is more gender-marked than English, aims at visibility in what gender is concerned, that is re-gendering. Therefore feminists are determined to replace sexist words with gender-neutral words, to re-spell words that contain the words *man* or *his* like *mankind*, *history*, *woman* etc., to eliminate the pejorative meaning of words like *lady*, *spinster* etc., to eliminate titles such as Miss and Mrs.(which openly express a woman's availability due to ownership by a male) in favour of Ms. They underline the idea that such changes must take place at discourse level, because simply changing words in language would not serve their purpose.

Since women have so far used a man-made language, they haven't been able to transmit, to encode in the language their own experiences and attitudes. That is why feminists have aimed at writing feminist dictionaries which would illustrate women's linguistic contributions and their reflection of the world around them. Chris Kramarae and Paula Treichler[2] set out to write such a dictionary that would recognize women's contributions to the language as creative speakers. They claim that so far dictionaries have been written mainly by men (that is man-made dictionaries), who obliterated women's linguistic achievements through their constructions of definitions. In their dictionaries women are rendered invisible, reduced to stereotypes, ridiculed or trivialized. In their point of view a dictionary does not only reflect sexist social attitudes but it also preserves and recreates stereotypes. Let's take for instance the word nerves; two online English dictionaries[3] provide the following sentences to illustrate the meaning of the words:

She *was a bundle of nerves* (= very nervous) *before the audition.*

The journey tested ***her*** *nerves to the full.*

The above examples clearly point out that nerves are a feminine feature; only women are entitled to have a fit, only women have nerves etc. A non-sexist language is a language that doesn't eliminate either women or men, that doesn't discriminate against either women or men. It presupposes a re-consideration of words, so that they become sexually neutral. Thus *mankind* becomes *humanity*, *policeman*, *police officer*, *forefathers – ancestors* etc. *They* should be used as a singular pronoun, instead of *he* etc.

A variety of feminist perspectives appear in this popular dictionary[4], whose entries use definitions as a way of showing how women have contributed to the development of language and the ways in which many of them perceive it now.

"CRAFT: A term used by men to demote, from fine art, the work of women who use fabric and stitches rather than paint."

"STRANGERS: Unknowns who, if male, are not to be trusted. Knowns are not to be trusted either."

In writing this dictionary, Chris Kramarae and Paula Treichler do not claim objectivity and are under no illusions that by simply writing a dictionary of women's words they will solve the inequalities present in language and society. Their dictionary is simply a critique of current and past practices, commenting on how some forms of language are privileged over others.

[2] Kramarae, C. and Paula A. Treichler. 1996. *A Feminist Dictionary.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
[3] http://www.askoxford.com/?view=uk
http://dictionary.cambridge.org/results.asp?searchword=nerves
[4] http://www.press.uillinois.edu/s97/kramarae.html

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However, it is not possible to change or eliminate all sexist words in a language and what is more, sexism arises not in the very words, but in the way they are used by the speakers. They used them in such a way that betrays society's stereotypes where men and women are concerned. It goes without saying that society's perception of men and women should change so that a linguistic reform might be possible.

This is clear in people's attempt to use politically correct words. It has been noticed that words such as *chairperson*, instead as *chairman* are much more likely to be used when referring to women. The fact that people tend to use politically correct words only when referring to women, makes us wonder how efficient feminist reforms of the language really are. As Deborah Cameron[5] pointed out "In the mouths of sexists, language can always be sexist". Although men try to use politically correct words, to express equality between men and women, the way they use such words is proof enough that their attitude towards language change, towards women does not match language usage. Language reforms are still filtered through the lens of the dominant social values and attitudes that is why new theorists warn that a non-sexist language is an illusion because "language is pervaded by sexism and women are alienated from it because it is controlled by men.[6]

Critics have labeled women's attempts to reform the language as ridiculous and they did not miss a chance to make fun of their attempts, suggesting for example that from now on, *Manchester* should be named *Personchaster*. Their attitude suggests that women's attempts to reform the language, are like women in general: trivial and ridiculous. Simon[7] claims that attempts to reform language are "nonsense that produce linguistic absurdities leading to a bastardizing of language." In his view, the proposal to change the spelling of *women* in *wimin*, reveals anti-male fanaticism.

Men feel threatened by women's re-assessment of values; it clearly poses a threat to a patriarchal moral order in which man's natural right is to dominate women and they blame it all on feminists.

What is important is the fact that all this research in the field of language and gender has led to the concepts of masculinity and femininity being challenged. "People are re-evaluating what is 'right' and 'good' in practical terms of what is real…For the human race to survive, males will have to define themselves as less aggressive, and in order for womenkind to lift themselves out of their depression, females will have to define themselves as more aggressive".[8]

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[8] Key, Mary Ritchie. *Male/Female Language: With a Comprehensive Bibliography*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1975 p.28.

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