

# **Taking the dick out of dic(k)tionary**

## **non-sexist writing for enthusiasts**

Notes by Janet Blagg, with examples from *Words and Women* by Miller & Swift

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*Even those who are committed to non-sexist writing can throw up their frocks at the difficulties inherent in avoiding the use of 'Man today, he ...'*

### **Useful books**

Margaret Doyle, *A-Z of Non-Sexist Language*, Women's Press, 1995.

Casey Miller & Kate Swift, *Words and Women*, Penguin, 1979.

— *Handbook of Non-sexist Writing*, Women's Press, 1981.

Elaine Morgan, *The Descent of Woman*, 1972.

Anna Pauwels, *Non-discriminatory language*, AGPS Style Manual.

Evelyn Reed, *Woman's Evolution*, Pathfinder Press, 1974.

Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.

## 1 The problems with sexist language

There are several.

**1** Grammatical conventions of 'man' as generic and the use of he/his, etc for indefinite singular are major culprits in making half the human race and its achievements invisible at the same time that they falsely elevate the other half. As well, they may serve to obscure the content of any piece of writing to a female reader. [*Gurdjieff story*]

**2** Other fixed elements of language — a vocabulary that has evolved to attribute positive qualities to males and negative qualities to females — contribute to stereotyping that hinders both sexes.

**3** Less a problem of language, but perhaps a product of it, the assumption in writing of male-as-norm — such that in general works the female is rarely exemplified, and when she is, it is as stereotype or as deviant, ie, non-standard.

Stereotyping is damaging to everyone. It arrests the full human potential and development of both men and women. The role expectations embodied in language that makes male = standard = positive = important and female = deviant = negative = trivial are damaging both ways. Few men can live up to the masculine ideal; everyone is frustrated.

When sexist language is deliberate, writers have plenty of vocabulary to choose from. More often though it may be subconscious, or simply lazy: it's easier to talk as if all doctors are male and all nurses female; easier to accept and pass on the stereotypes instead of thinking them through.

In the face of these and a myriad other ways in which so-called feminine values are devalued in speech and writing, well documented for over three decades, there has been much progress, although it is slow, and there are obstacles. Resistance to change, often based on an inability to see that there *is* any problem (though also based on misogynistic attitudes), is often couched in 'save the English language' terms.

Many still argue that the whole issue is trivial. But consider this: until the mid-60s most writings in education referred to teachers as 'she' (as a low-status profession, most teachers were women). As more men entered the profession they protested that references to teachers as 'she' were responsible for low pay/status, etc, and conjured up images of 19th century schoolmarm. Not so trivial after all.

There is plenty of evidence that careless language compounds social injustice, both by disempowering the marginalised group, and by feeding the assumptions of those who believe that non-males, non-whites, non-English-first-language-speakers are substandard, unimportant.

Just as importantly, the *qualities* of the marginalised are also marginalised — qualities like certain so-called attributes of femaleness (caring, for example).

And despite over 30 years of awareness of these facts (the first non-sexist guidelines for a textbook publisher appeared in 1972), and despite the adoption of PC language by many institutions, the problems of sexist attitudes embodied in language are as alive as ever.

Only a few years ago, in *Heinemann Australian Dictionary*, 2nd edition: of the sample sentences given to illustrate headwords, more than 80% referred to males, and nearly 100% of words denoting strong, clever, positive values had a male subject, while sentences exemplifying words connoting weakness had a female subject.

### **A demonstration**

In 1972 two sociologists (Joseph Schneider and Sally Hacker, Drake University, New Orleans) decided to test the hypothesis that 'man' is generally understood to embrace woman. Some 300 college students were asked to select from magazines and newspapers pictures to illustrate chapters of a sociology textbook. Half the students were assigned headings like 'Social Man', 'Industrial Man' and 'Political Man'. The other half were given corresponding headings like 'Society', 'Industrial Life' and 'Political Behaviour'.

Analysis of the pictures selected revealed that in the minds of about 40% of subjects of both sexes, the word 'man' in the title evoked images of males only — filtering out recognition of women's participation in these major areas of life — whereas the headings without 'man' evoked images of both males and females.

### **The problem with political correctness**

PC means that it is now obligatory to use non-discriminatory language. No problem there. But now that new power groups (feminists, gays, etc) have assumed the right to say how they will be called, the old power base (the right) is incensed (Lynne Spender, *Blue Pencil* 1994). Scorn and mockery aimed at 'bleeding heart liberal intelligentsia do-gooding elites' from the prime minister down is more ferocious than ever. But that is not the problem with PC that I am concerned with here.

My concern is that some aspects of PC continue to make women invisible, at the same time making writing awkward, annoying and opaque in general. PC often represents a band-aid that many writers feel obliged to adopt, which they do without very much thinking, simply employing a token solution, whereby entrenched attitudes are not examined and continue to flourish. Worse, according to George Orwell (*Politics and the English Language*), renaming inequality and discrimination in the hope that they will go away simply destroys language without shifting reality one inch. The only safeguard, he argued, was simplicity and concreteness; in other words, using good English words in good faith.

It is not, I think, that Orwell believed language had no affect on how society operates. Language is a major carrier of social expectations, and societal changes are reflected in language — slowly (compare dictionaries over the centuries). Language is the basis of thought and society operates through language. Would a person who never heard racist language (liminal or subliminal) be able to express racism?

Our concern therefore is to use language that hurts no-one; that if possible exalts that which was unjustly despised, and which, moreover, does not destroy the English language, rather enriches it.

## Conscious solutions are required

There are lots of sources now for help in non-exclusivist writing; it is pretty much mandatory in most publishers and places of employment. The AGPS is comprehensive; some solutions are offered in these pages. But the best are to be found in a deep engagement with the issues. If we really know what we are doing with language we don't need formulaic solutions. Our awareness of entrenched attitudes and our desire to avoid them will enable us to make our writing a lucid contribution to positive social change.

For instance, go out of your way to use women in examples, alone or alongside males. And not just a stereotype of female, but as a human being who happens to be female. Have you a male character who doesn't need (for plot purposes) to be male? Try transposing a female for that male, without altering any of other aspects of description. You may end up with a character that is a whole lot more real than a woman who is represented as exception (fancy!) or as stereotype. (In a kids' novel I suggested changing the Headmaster/he to Principal/she with no change of dialogue or any other aspect. But he's a pompous old fart, said the author. So? A female principal can be a pompous old fart too. Yet when someone sets out to depict a not-particularly-nice female principal they will more likely choose *stereotyped* characteristics like prissiness or bitchiness.

The idea is not to erase or whitewash discriminatory attitudes.

In fiction anything can be said in dialogue. I remind authors that while a certain statement may be sexist (or racist, etc) and offensive, they can give it to a character to say if they want (I like to see people hoist by their own petard).

## Q: Who are the Egyptians?

In an early backlash against non-sexist writing William Buckley (1972) complained that:

*... the sexist 'The ancient Egyptians allowed women considerable control over property' has got to be changed to 'Women in ancient Egypt had considerable control over property' — which is, very simply, a totally different statement from the first.*

Indeed it *is* a totally different statement, and quite probably far more accurate.

## 2 Man is neither generic nor normal

While the generic 'man' is supposed to stand for all humankind, that is not what is effectively taught or understood. If a child sees a woman and says 'man' the child will be corrected. If a boy at kindy is asked to draw a man he might well be taken to the counsellor if he draws a woman. The basic assumption in a reader's mind, proved in a variety of tests, is that man foremost means adult male.

The meaning of 'man' in any particular usage is not self evident. For instance, Alexander Pope: *The proper study of mankind is man*. It sounds generic, but he goes on to say: *thy dog, thy bottle, thy wife*. More recently, Erich Fromm described 'man's vital interests [as] life, food, access to females, etc.'

It seems perfectly normal for a book called *The Spiritual Problems of Modern Man* to carry a picture of a lone man on its cover. If *man* truly were generic, it should seem just as normal to see a lone woman. In fact, though, it would appear utterly disorienting to most people (someone should do it!)

### History of man v. man

We have a problem in English that the word for mankind is the same as the word for adult male. Native English grew out of a Teutonic branch of Indo-European along with the German and Scandinavian languages. In the ancestor of all these, *man* did mean a human being irrespective of age or gender, and in Germany etc, survives as *mensch*, *manniska* and *menneske*, along with a different word for adult male.

In English, *wif* meant female and *wer* or *waep* meant male. Added to *man* for adult female and male we get *wifman* and *waepman*. *Wifman* evolved into woman (plural women retaining the vowel sound of *wif*), while somewhere in the Middle Ages, *waepman* became obsolete and adult males began to be addressed as man.

About 1000 AD we can see the true generic man in English:

*His mother was a Christian, named Elen, a very full-of-faith man.*

In 1325 a husband and wife are described as *right rich men*.

And in 1597 *the Lord had but one pair of men in Paradise*.

But by 1752 Hume had to qualify what man meant: *all men, male and female*.

These days no-one writes: 'Man, being a mammal, breastfeeds his young,' or 'My brother married a spaceman or weatherman,' or 'That postman is in her eighth month of pregnancy.' If man truly were generic, we wouldn't shy away from these forms.

### Solutions for the false generic 'man'

We can explain to the reader what we mean by man, as Jacques Barzun did (1974):

*We must understand that 'the brotherhood of man' does not exclude our beloved sisters.*

But how do we accomplish that feat? Write it on the blackboard 150 times? A better idea is to use the explanation to make a strong statement about the problem.

How are we to understand the following? (try reworking them):

*Man is the highest form of life on earth*

*We are all brothers*

*Language was devised by man, it is unique to man, and it works only when men agree on what its components mean.*

*the man in the street ... the man on the land ... the average man*

Finding solutions to these common expressions is tricky, because we don't want to lose the easy flow of the original. Still, the following don't sound too bad:

*We are all brothers and sisters*

*The man and woman on the street*

More difficult is a lengthy passage about the human condition (see Fromm quote), where all one's skills are called on to make it read just as easily as the original, which is why it is important to feel utterly convinced about the worth of the exercise.

See the list of alternatives to man/mankind at the bottom of page 10.

### **Agent nouns — postman, chairwoman, etc**

If the group as a whole is called A, and some of its members are called As and some are called Bs, then the Bs cannot be fully-fledged As. The distinction is between the standard (male-as-normal) and the deviation (or diminutive, eg, usherette, hostess).

It's easy to drop the diminutive, but trickier to deal with agent nouns of the *-man* suffix construction. 'Person' is an acceptable substitute for the general name of the role and when the sex of the holder is unknown, for example, *chairperson*, but it sounds pretty awful if you have to use it too often or in more informal writing. Sometimes there are alternatives, such as *chair*, *garbo*, or *postie*. Angler for fisherman.

I encourage the use of the use of such gender-specific terms as *chairwoman* (and thus also *chairman*) when referring to specific people, for its visibility and to reclaim female constructions. However, there are women who insist on 'chairperson' because 'chairwoman' is seen to have the stain of secondclassness about it.

*The A-Z of Non-Sexist Language* provides numerous alternatives for all the problematic terms.

### **But as the actress said to the bishop**

When women first performed on the stage in the mid-17th century, they were called actors. The word 'actress' was coined some 50 years later (perhaps when it was clear they weren't going to go away). Women who act prefer to be called actors now. But actress/actor seems to me a unique pair. *Only* a woman can be an actress, and for a long time there was higher status for women as actresses than there was in practically any other sphere. Thus the actress in the joke is strong, unconventional, used to taking her place in society, and not afraid of laughing at the bishop who is the bastion of

society. Moreover, now people say 'female actor' (though they don't call men 'male actors'), so the standard and the deviation is reinstated.

### 3 Number is not more important than gender

*'He' deserves to live out its days doing what it has always done best — referring to 'he' and not 'she' — Wendy Martyna*

*A: 'There's someone on the phone for you.'*

*B: 'Who is it?' or 'What do they want?'*

B is making the typical response made by ordinary folk. It's highly unlikely that anyone would respond: 'Who is he?' or 'What does he want?'

Yet the use of the masculine pronoun — he, his etc — following the indefinite singular (someone, etc) is still seen by some as the only correct form. Which is a pity, because it indubitably:

**1** implies, in most minds, males, not females

**2** makes women invisible

**3** the ambiguity makes it much harder, obscure, for women to relate to; even if unconsciously, when reading a text dotted with he/im they must always ask, 'Is this referring to me or not?' (see example by Jung)

From the earliest writing in English we've used *they, them, their* and *themselves* as singular pronouns when gender is unknown. We do it automatically in speech. It was only with the pronouncements of the 18th century grammarians (Joseph Priestly, 1761; George Campbell, 1776) that gender was sacrificed to number. These men considered it more important that number be correct than gender, even though clarity is rarely (if ever) sacrificed with a mismatch of number, yet always is sacrificed in the case of gender. It was argued against at the time, vehemently, but they were impervious to objections. (Now who does that remind you of?)

Fowler (1950) speaks for the misogynistic grammatical fundamentalist:

*'As anybody can see for themselves,' is a phrase that sets the literary man's [!] teeth on edge.*

But this literary **woman** reminds Fowler:

*Everyone to rest themselves.*

*It's enough to drive anyone out of their senses.*

*Nobody likes a mind quicker than their own.*

Shakespeare, Shaw and Scott Fitzgerald respectively, and, as a more recent example, *New Scientist*, June 1995:

*By making the movements as if to pick up the headset and put it on their head, the viewer enters the next level of the virtual world.*

## Solutions for he/his, etc for indefinite singular

Again, you can set out an explanation of your decision [and see David Ormerod, *Andrew Marvell*]. These days books about infancy might explain that they cast the child as male (he) since the mother is 'she', but the cost of this convenience borne by the female child is too high.

Note the difference between the *unknown* indefinite singular (the person on the other side of the door is definitely one or the other) and the unknowable (we don't know if the next Booker prize-winner will be male or female).

Several solutions / alternatives to the masculine pronoun for indefinite singular exist — *as anybody can see for themselves* — and in my opinion this example is the first solution. However, it can be unwieldy where there are by necessity a lot of pronouns. This problem also constrains the following options, so it is good to mix them about:

**1** *he/she, she/he, he and she*, etc. Not so easy with 'herself and himself'; okay to use very occasionally, but used too often, even in official writing, it interrupts the easy assimilation of the message.

**2** Recast into the plural: *we/us/our; you/you; people/they; we/one*, etc.

**3** Recast so *no pronoun* is necessary, for example, repeat the noun; use definite or indefinite article.

**4** Alternate *he* and *she* in paragraphs or chapters. Can be effective, but not automatically so. The best thing about it is the shock it gives readers to read 'she' as the sole pronoun. Also, it would be helpful to give a nice little lecture along with the author's note re the alternation.

**5** Make up *new pronouns*. It has been tried, valiantly, but is the hardest thing to change in language when there is no spoken precedent. Nevertheless, there is the success story of Ms, despite the mean-spirited complaint in its entry in *A Concise Dictionary of Correct English* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1979):

*Ms: preferred to Mrs or Miss by liberated women who do not regard their marital status as a fit subject for public knowledge. Mercifully, the use of Ms does not much exist outside a handful of newspapers which are written or read by liberated women. The word is foolish, ugly, meaningless and almost unpronounceable, and deserves oblivion.*

The best alternative is to use the plural except when it sounds too strange.

And use rich and strong constructions — like *men and women/ women and men/they* — as often as you can, obviously only when it is appropriate to the intention. It also suggests a certain connectedness which isn't a bad thing to foster.

**NB:** I have heard an egg-laying chook referred to as 'he'! If an animal is not specifically named by sex, use 'it'.

## 4 You bloody woman!

It is still the worst insult you can make to a man to imply he has feminine qualities, and a primary aspect of male homophobia is the implication that the homosexual male has female qualities. When it comes to deliberately insulting a man, the words motherfucker and pimp — both connected with women — are nothing compared to calling him a girl, woman, sissy, and of course, fag, poof, and so on. It's no accident that homosexual men are also marginalised.

Check the differences between dictionary definitions of man/woman; mannish/womanish; brother/sister; master/mistress; spinster/bachelor, etc. According to *Webster's 3rd*, womanish means 'unsuitable to a man or to a strong character of either sex.'

*Manly* connotes the best of *human* characteristics: strong, courageous, resolute; *womanly* is only the best of female characteristics: nurturing, etc. There's no word for a strong, courageous, resolute woman: you simply have to call her a strong, courageous, resolute woman.

Males generally are presumed to possess the human qualities while females are defined by female qualities (see note re *Heinemann Dictionary* on p 3). The qualities any male may possess may be good or bad, but the ones that come to mind when we ask what makes a 'man' are positive. *Be a man!*

*Words & Women* quotes a teacher who was trying to describe one of her best students in an article:

*I found myself saying, 'she's really a prince.' I just couldn't say princess because that connotes someone who is fussy and spoiled.*

All the everyday words for female — woman, girl, lady — have carried the additional meaning of *prostitute*. The hundreds of informal/slang/insulting words for women almost without exception define her sexually, derogatively, and with reference to her looks; all objectify, so that the woman is not considered a human being but only one of her parts.

Now, the term of derogatory objectification is as likely to be *feminist*. (When it's not the ubiquitous and nonsexist 'elite'.) Feminist is just as useful a pejorative, for who is going to pay any attention to a prostitute or a feminist?

In our language, assertive women are said to *castrate* men, in the sense of undermining, disempowering them, but this ignores — and there is no word for — the undermining and disempowering that men, individually or societally, perform on other men and on women and on non-dominant values. Our language obscures this fact.

I do not address the effect of powerful women. Sexist language is the product of an entrenched and ancient power base, which is not associated with individuals, rather, it is endemic.

## 5 Gender shifting and other quirks of history

Dale Spender uses the term 'man made language', and over the last couple of thousand years, so it has increasingly been. While some students of social evolution are concluding very convincingly that the carers of children most likely invented language, along with most other aspects of early society, they certainly were not able to see it through to today. Those with the obvious power in society have written the dictionaries. Women have clearly been defined by a patriarchal/masculist society and shifts in words reflect this. Once a word becomes associated with women it is rarely again considered suitable for men. *Virago* and *shrew*, for example.

- *Virago* was originally a woman or man of exceptional strength and courage. Gradually used less of men (because those qualities were expected of them?), its meaning became the one we know now — bad-tempered.
- *Shrew* in the 13th century meant evil man and applied to males and females. Its meaning softened to something more like 'rascal' when applied to men. By Chaucer it also meant scolding person and soon came to be applied to women only.
- *Master/mistress* originally meant great (Sanskrit *maha*); now master still does (expert, etc), but mistress's last recorded meaning is a kept woman (almost archaic now?) Other than that it has almost no meaning at all any more.
- *Mrs* before about 1800 referred to any adult woman. With the social anonymity wrought by the movement to cities it came to carry the information 'married' — in the village everyone would have known who was married.
- *Queen, dame, madam, mistress, princess*, all originally honorifics, are all now heavily loaded with negative connotations.
- *Girl* was once a young person of either sex till the 1600s.
- A *gossip* meant a sponsor in baptism.
- *Harlot* was a good fellow in the 14th century.

**A few words for man/mankind:** people(s), person(s), humans, human beings/race/species, men and women, women and men, humanity, humankind, human nature, folk, homo sapiens, fellow creature(s), beings, souls, society, community, citizenry, civilisation, human family, earthlings, mortals, population, individuals, our forebears/ancestors, early people, flesh and blood; we, us, you and me, one, everyone — and consciously write women in!