
Still a gender-biased language?

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Updates on gender inequalities and the English language

Excerpt from Jenny Cheshire, *A question of masculine bias?* (ET1, 1985)

Anyone who wants to write non-sexist English will need to have their wits about them. They will need to be thick-skinned, too, for if they write sentences like my first one, they will hear criticism from those people who are upset by the use of the plural pronoun *them* with a singular noun like *anyone*. If they try to please both feminists and prescriptivists then they will find themselves grappling with double pronouns like 'his or her' and 'him and her' – not to mention the problem of their relative ordering.

Changing the way that we are accustomed to using English is tedious and time-consuming, and we may well wonder whether it is really worth the effort. Is there really a built-in masculine bias in English, that we need to be constantly on our guard against? And if there is, does it matter? Or is it simply that the language reflects a traditional cultural bias? If so, it seems very likely that, as the social roles of men and women change, so the English language will change, to keep pace with the changes in our cultural outlook.

The answer, I think, is that both these things are true. There is a built-in masculine bias in English, and this does have very serious impli-

cations for both the women and the men who use the language. And this bias will not disappear unless there is some measure of conscious reform in the language. On the other hand, there is also a great deal of masculine bias in the way that certain words have come to be used; and this is, in many cases, much easier to put right. Some of these words are already falling from favour, and being replaced by more neutral words.

As more people take care to remove masculine bias from their own English, so the language will gradually stop distorting our perceptions of women. Language changes slowly, but we can help to speed up the process. We need to be careful, for it is all too easy to be labelled as hysterical extremists, and to provoke unconverted users of the language into making jokes about *personhole covers* and the like. The real problem, of course, is not a linguistic problem but a social one. The two are interconnected, though, and language change will go hand in hand with social change, as it always has. The next generation should, with luck, find jokes about *personhole covers* as incomprehensible as laboured Victorian puns are to us today. □

MY 1985 article ended on an upbeat note, confidently predicting that as more people take care to remove masculine bias from their own English, so the language will gradually stop distorting our perceptions of women. The twenty-two years that have passed represent pretty much a generation of speakers, making this a good time to consider whether or not my confidence was misplaced. How successful have language reforms been?



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Unequal pairs

Certainly some of the trends mentioned in the *English Today* article have now become the norm. Consider unequal pairs such as *master* and *mistress*. *She was X's mistress* rather than *she was X's lover* sounds extraordinarily dated to me today: in fact, *they were lovers* would surely be more usual. It is also, of course, neutral in terms of who 'belongs' to whom. My admittedly subjective view is borne out by a search through the BBC's web pages, which reveals that *mistress* now tends to occur only in historical contexts (such as *the Prince Regent's mistress*) or in jokey light-hearted articles that stereotype men as much as they stereotype women.

Being a mistress

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Being a mistress is, in many respects, the perfect sexual situation. You get wined and dined and treated like a lady, you get as much sex as time permits, you may even get a contribution towards the rent (but you don't have to wash anyone else's socks) and you certainly don't have to put up with sport on the TV or have to deal with them coming back drunk from the pub.

From 'Being a mistress', h2g2
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A878204>,
accessed 27.11.07

The BBC web pages provide further indications that we are now more likely to view people simply as people rather than through a rigid polarization into males and females. The job formerly done by a (female) *air hostess* or (male or female) *steward* is described as the work of a *flight attendant* on 136 of the BBC pages and of an *air hostess* on only 21 pages. *Air stewardess* occurs on a further 13 pages and *air steward* on 24 pages. An *air steward* could presumably be male or female, as could a *cabin attendant*, which occurs on 13 pages. Gender-neutral terms therefore account for 84 per cent of the terms referring to this kind of work. This, then, looks like a clear case of successful language reform.

On these BBC pages *firefighter* is overwhelmingly preferred to the traditional term *fireman*, occurring on 500 pages (the maximum that can be examined). *Fireman* is used on only 89 pages. However, other job titles reveal a more

mixed picture. *Headteacher* is used on 156 pages, whereas *headmistress* is on only 32; but *headmaster* is not, as I predicted in 1985, becoming obsolete. On the contrary, it occurs more frequently than *headteacher*, on 167 pages.

The relative frequencies of other job titles are more difficult to interpret. *Police officer*, for example, occurs on 500 pages, but *policeman* is just as frequent. *Policewoman* crops up on only 39 pages, but perhaps this merely reflects the statistic that women are not as numerous as men in the police force. Sometimes the gender-specific *policeman* or *policewoman* is used in a historical context, as in the World War II examples below. More puzzling is the variety of terms that frequently occur in a news story: there may be a gender-neutral term in the headline, with a gender-specific term in the story, or the reverse may occur. In these cases, it looks as though journalists are exploiting the existence of both sets of terms in the interests of creating a varied writing style, so that the point of coining the neutral term has been lost.

World War II: The People's War.
Being a policewoman during the war

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World War II: The People's War. Wartime memories of a policeman in Bradford

Policewoman admits misconduct

A police officer has admitted an allegation of misconduct in the way she dealt with a young mother who was later stabbed to death.

<http://search.bbc.co.uk/cgi-bin/search/results.pl?scope=all&tab=all&recede=all&q=policewoman&x=84&y=13>,
accessed 27.11.07

Of course, my brief survey of the BBC web pages was merely a quick way to gather some relevant data for this article. We could determine current usage more accurately by searching some of the corpora that are now publicly available. Nevertheless the figures are suggestive. If nothing else, they demonstrate the kinds of research that could usefully be done on a more systematic basis. They suggest to me that, apart from some odd exceptions, gender-neutral terms are on the increase overall.

The style guides that journalists use confirm that the intention is to refrain from specifying gender unless it is relevant to the news story.

Guardian style guide

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Guardian style guide
(<http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide/>,
accessed 27.11.07)

actor: for both male and female actors; do not use **actress** except when in name of award eg *Oscar for best actress*;

headteacher: one word, not **headmaster**, **headmistress**

businessman, businesswoman: but say **business people** or the **business community** rather than **businessmen**, which still finds its way into the paper occasionally

A further indication that times have changed is seen in the comments made when people do use a term that is marked for feminine gender. In today's *Guardian* Quick Crossword (November 27, 2007), the answer to 21 across is *poetess*, from the clue 'such as Sappho (no longer PC)'. 'PC' or 'Political Correctness', of course, can indicate disapproval or condescension: nevertheless the crossword compiler is clearly aware that *poetess* should no longer be used – or perhaps it is simply that the *Guardian* editor has insisted on enforcing the recommendations of the paper's style guide. In any event, readers of the crossword will be forced to recognize, if they did not know already, that *poetess* and, perhaps, other feminine forms derived from an unmarked masculine form, is no longer universally acceptable.

Outdated stereotypes

The media are enormously influential in promoting public awareness of terms reflecting stereotypes of female behaviour. It is encouraging, therefore, that terms such as *working wife*, *working mother* and *single mother* are rarely heard in public discourse now. Perhaps the loss of the first two terms reflects the fact that, in the UK at least, there are now more wives and mothers working outside the home than not. In this case my 1987 prediction that language change goes hand in hand with social change would be right. On the other hand, there are still more mothers looking after children on their own than fathers, so the current term *lone parent* perhaps reflects a conscious drive towards the elimination of social stereo-

typing through our language. If so, this is encouraging.

These few examples suggest that perhaps it is not too difficult to correct masculine bias in a language, if people are willing to do so. That people must be willing to do so is an important caveat, though. Every morning I pass a school whose notice board proclaims its name in large letters alongside the school motto, *Come in and do your duty to God and man*. The school governing body have decided on two separate occasions that there is no reason to change the language.

In-built structural bias

What now of my 1985 prediction that the inbuilt structural bias of the English pronoun system could not easily be eliminated? The problem, of course, is that although in English the plural third person pronoun *they* can refer to males or females, or both at once, when we want to use a third person singular pronoun we have to say either *he* or *she*. There is no singular form that can refer to both males and females when no specific individual is intended, or the person is unknown, as there is in some other languages such as, apparently, the African language Zande. In English we are forced to make a choice between a male pronoun or a female pronoun, and the default choice over the years has been *he*. A wealth of experimental evidence has shown that using generic *he* encourages people to think in terms of males: although we may think we are using *he* with a generic sense, its dual function as both a generic and a masculine pronoun prevents people from interpreting it with a generic sense. For many years the only alternative was to risk prescriptivist disapproval by using a singular *they*.

In 1985 a wealth of alternative forms were being proposed, and there were guidelines advising us on how to avoid generic *he*. It was novel at that time to observe some people writing *s/he* or *(s)he*, or going to considerable lengths to make their subjects plural, thereby avoiding the problem. It is encouraging that in 2007, in British university circles at least, it has become unthinkable to use *he* with an intended generic sense. Plural subjects are used, or the compound *he or she*. In my own university, *he or she* is *de rigeur* in speaking as well as in writing. None of my colleagues would dare to use a generic *he* pronoun; if one

should slip out accidentally, it is soon corrected, if not by the speaker, by someone else. This, then, is surely a sign of change, though I do not know how widespread the practice is in other circles. Several students still write *he* in their written work, so there is no guarantee that, if change has occurred amongst some people, it will persist.

What is undeniably widespread, though, is an increasing informality in written English, and an increasing use of direct address to the reader, using the pronoun *you*. A recent letter from my university and college union states:

If you believe that the subscription band indicated for you at the top of this letter is wrong, contact us with your membership number as soon as possible.

Formerly, one might have been more likely to see the sentence phrased as 'A union member who believes his subscription band to be wrong...', with the indefinite singular subject *a union member* forcing a subsequent choice of a third person singular pronoun, which in most cases was the so-called generic *he*. Official communicative style has changed, presumably driven by a desire to improve comprehension, and this seems indirectly to have caused a reduction in the use of indefinite subjects in favour of a straightforward *you*, with the consequent decline of generic *he*. This is good news for those who want to remove masculine bias from the English language, but it does not necessarily reflect an underlying desire to use gender-neutral language.

Even when people do use gender-neutral language, we cannot assume that there is no masculine bias in their thinking. In 1989 Khosroshahi looked at the written work of Harvard students and divided them into two groups: those who had reformed their language and those who had not. An experiment using test paragraphs with generic *he*, *he or she*, and *they* pronouns found that only women who had reformed their language interpreted the sex inclusive pronouns *he or she* and *they* as

referring to women as well as to men. Men with reformed language interpreted more paragraphs as referring to men in just the same way as male and female students who had not reformed their language. Thus, although people may change their language in response to public pressure – or for some other reason – changed language does not necessarily entail changed thinking. Masculine bias may persist even when there is no outward sign of it.

There is no need to end on a discouraging note, though. More encouraging – and very interesting – are reports from schoolteachers in Baltimore that their students have spontaneously created a new third person singular pronoun *yo*, which they use in casual conversation to refer to both females and males (for example, *yo is a clown; yo needs to pull his pants down*). Other forms, such as *youngin* and *shorty*, are apparently being used in similar ways by these young people. The 1985 *English Today* article listed a number of attempts by writers and academics to introduce gender-neutral pronouns into the English language, none of which has been successful. Perhaps the members of the next generation in Baltimore will have more success. In any event, their language use shows that, in their pronoun usage at least, they seem genuinely not to distinguish between male and female referents.

On balance, then, there have been changes in the use of English in the last twenty-three years that suggest to me that our language is freer than before of masculine bias, even if reform is far from complete. What needs to be determined now is the extent to which our thinking is equally free of masculine bias. ■

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