

An Overture

Humanizing Language

Not too long ago, one of the English instructors at our college told me of an incident that illustrates the pervasiveness of the conflict between women and words.

Her eleven-year-old daughter had been assigned to write a composition on the topic, “friends,” and the daughter asked her mother to check the final draft. This was not a routine request; the child was looking for a solution to a specific grammatical problem—when to use the pronouns, “he,” “she,” and “they.” Because the friend she was writing about in her essay was not a particular someone, she was undecided as to which of these forms was appropriate. She had uneasily settled on “they”—a plural pronoun—to use with friend.

Her mother’s reaction was predictable: “You can’t use ‘they’ because it’s plural—you should use ‘he’ to agree with a singular noun.”

Her daughter’s reaction was unexpected and emotional: “But, Mom you hear ‘he’ too much.”

I agree with the daughter. “He” confronts us everywhere; biochemists, professors, and pharmacists are always referred to as “he.” So, too, are students in many of the manuscripts we receive for consideration. Other masculine nouns assault us: the essay contest being sponsored by the honors society here on campus—the topic is “Man Alive: Can He Survive?” and, of course, the well-known PBS series, *The Ascent of Man*.

Grammatical convention supports all of these uses. The rule has been to choose “he” whenever a simple subject could be either masculine or feminine—a rule that was referred to as “masculine preferred” when I was in grade school.

A grammar text recently published by McGraw-Hill Book Company—an outspoken proponent of nonsexist language—makes an interesting point:

... But in actual practice, writers would choose “he” to agree with simple subjects such as executive, doctor, and treasurer, and “she” to agree with simple subjects such as nurse, receptionist, and secretary (Stewart, Lanham, and Zimmer 1975).

The widely disseminated *Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Publications* suggest an alternative approach that we use here at the journal: that is, to change nouns to their plural forms and thus avoid the problem of having to choose between “he” and “she.” Often such an approach solves an editing problem; however, the “He Problem” still occurs frequently enough in editing manuscripts that we felt we should develop some guidelines to deal with it.

ABT Guidelines

Starting with this month’s issue, we will be using the form *s/he* as the singular personal pronoun in ABT; *him/her* will be the objective form; and *hers/his*, the possessive form.

There are many who would argue that “he” is a generic pronoun—not a masculine pronoun. I think the best rebuttal to this viewpoint is found in Casey Miller and Kate Swift’s book, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times* (1977). They comment:

... Alma Graham makes the problem clear by stating it as a mathematical proposition: If you have a group half of whose members are A’s and half of whose members are B’s, and if you call the group C, then A’s and B’s may be equal members of group C. But, if you call the group A, there is no way that B’s can be equal to A’s within it. The A’s will always be the rule, and the B’s will always be the exception—the subgroup, the subspecies, the outsiders.

Our proposed pronoun forms will provide us with a consistent solution to a persistent problem.

The use of “man” and “mankind” and similar masculine nouns poses another frequent editing problem. Traditionalists might defend their use as generic terms; but they, too, are exclusionary. (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* defines “man” as “a human being, esp. an adult male human.”)

(Concluded on p. 271)

cesses. "Chunking" is a strategy for expanding the capacity of the short-term memory. Several related elements may be treated as one symbol so that together they occupy only one "memory slot." If these aspects of human information processing theory were reflected in our curricula, information would be better organized for retrieval before it enters long-term storage.

Human information processing theory also has implications for the learner in need of remediation. Educators should recognize that new learning is often impeded during the testing and comparison process that reconciles incoming information with that already stored in the memory. If the stored information is faulty or incomplete, the learner might make wrong decisions about how to code and organize the new symbols. This will impair the ability to recall and use this information when it enters the long-term memory. On a practical level, this implies that review for learning should not be arbitrarily assigned to some period before evaluation occurs. For some learners, at least, review will entail an on-going rehearsal of new and stored information to help ensure that through feedback in the "testing and comparison" process, appropriate categories are formed.

Finally, our new curricula should reflect the motivational aspects of information processing. Individuals set their own priorities by attending, coding, and storing those environmental cues that are consistent with their

own goals and intentions. As educators, we help define the learning environment for our students, but we must recognize that it is the learner who makes the final decisions in the processing of information.

References

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Humanizing Language . . . from p. 267

Once again, to quote Miller and Swift:

"Man is the highest form of life on earth," the *Britannica Junior Encyclopaedia* explains. "His superior intelligence combined with certain physical characteristics, have enabled man to achieve things that are impossible to other animals." The response of a male child to this information is likely to be "Wow!" That of a female child, "Who? Do they mean me, too?" Even if the female child understands that she too is part of man, she must still leap the hurdles of all those other terms she knows from her experience refer to males only. When she is told that we are all brothers, that the brotherhood of man includes sisters, and that the faith of our fathers is also the faith of our mothers, does she really believe it?

I'm not even sure I do. "Human" and "humankind" are preferable to "man" and "mankind."

A more subtle kind of problem is posed by the use of qualifiers with reference to women, such as "woman scientist," or "woman professor." In specifying sex, we imply that women in professional positions are exceptions to the rule. What looks like an effort to recognize female achievements turns out to be rather negative. We feel that women and their accomplishments should not be treated as unusual in *ABT*. Such accomplishments are increasingly becoming part of the rule rather than exceptions. Thus, qualifiers will not be used in *ABT*. In addition as a reflection of the increasing number of options available to all individuals, we will avoid references that stereotype male and female roles.

As Edwin Newman comments: "The rules of language cannot be frozen and immutable; they will reflect what is happening in society whether we want them to or not." In my view, *American Biology Teacher* should reflect the growing partnership of women and men in teaching and in science.

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If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.

Henry David Thoreau