

ON SEXISM IN LANGUAGE TODAY

GLYNIS ROSS-MUNRO

REFLECTIONS OF SEXISM IN LANGUAGE TODAY

It is an intuitively self-evident proposition, but also a widely researched and substantiated fact that sexism is part of most human communities. Sexism can be defined as the way in which women, as a class, stand at a distinct and pervasive social disadvantage to men, not just in reputation, but in fact (Smith, 1985, p. 170). Generally, society operates on a whole collection of assumptions by which we predict or ascribe meaning to the behaviour of other people: age, race, social status produce some of these assumptions but none are as pervasive in their influence as gender identity (Smith, 1985, p. 22). Society's consensus of opinion about the physical, psychological and behavioural characteristics of both sexes, and the evaluative conclusions drawn from this consensus, are encapsulated and transmitted linguistically, and it is in this reflecting of social sexism that language can be termed 'sexist'.

Some languages convey distinctions between males and females by various types of grammatical recognition of sex of speaker or listener (e.g. Japanese) and in some languages (e.g. Carib 'Lesser Antilles' Smith 1985, p. 23) it may appear initially that the two sexes speak separate languages. In English several trends can be

pinpointed to show more subtle means of transmitting linguistically the nature of male and female status differences.

Smith (1985) cites evidence of the predominance of 'male' references in most language material from media and fiction to educational and reference sources (p. 37). He also details ratios of positive 'prestige' or 'status' connotations for 'masculine' and 'feminine' words to negative 'masculine' and 'feminine' words, and concludes that the ratio is 3:1 in favour of 'masculine' words. Words considered could be craftsmanship, fellowship, mastery, bachelor's degree, workmanlike, as opposed to madman, fall guy, hangman, (or fishwife, callgirl, old maid, as opposed to lady, mother, etc.).

Smith also lists a collection of words which have undergone semantic degeneration (in comparison with their masculine counterparts) as a result of their feminine connotations: e.g. governor/governess; mister/mistress; patron/matron; bachelor/spinster; lord/lady. There are also a number of feminine versions of masculine words which have taken on unflattering sexual connotations e.g. mistress (as above), queen, madam, etc.

Most languages perpetuate male/female relationships as owner/owned by a number of conventions. In English, Miss/Mrs is under attack but Ms is still regarded negatively by many men and some women, even in educated sectors of the population. The tendency to describe a woman as 'John's wife' or 'John's widow' is acceptable in communities where 'Jane's husband' and 'Jane's widower' are unusual constructions. Introductions such as 'This is Jane, her husband is with I.B.M.' are similarly acceptable, whereas 'This is John, his wife is a doctor' would raise eyebrows.

The generic use of 'man', 'he', etc. has served the status quo of sexism well in that its useful ambiguity can place a question mark over the value and equality of women as human, and social, beings. Feminist objections aside, its use can be an amusing study. A woman can be 'man overboard', her killer can be charged with manslaughter, and she can receive workman's compensation, but a sign on a door saying 'men only' tells her clearly that she is excluded (Smith, 1985 p. 52). Such generic use of 'he' and 'man', as seen in this extract from an association's formal constitution, is dryly neutral:

The **Chairman** of the Council or in **his** absence the Vice-Chairman shall preside at such a meeting, the quorum for which shall be 25 members eligible to vote. **He** shall have a casting as well as a declarative vote.

The generic 'man' is even used in an educational article written by a woman for a woman's magazine:

Children are not always very confident or skilled at explaining themselves. Or they expect other people to be mind-readers. Encourage your child to speak up for **himself** and help **him** to find the right words to express himself.

The next sentence shows 'man' used in a neutral way for a philosophical statement:

Man is not just an isolated entity on Earth. He is also greater world - **the Cosmos**.

However, the following excerpt shows the usage becoming ambiguous through repetition:

Man should get to Mars within the present generation, predicts the veteran US astronaut Frank Borman, in SA for the Machel crash inquiry.

That's quite a claim, although **unmanned** space probes have already got close enough to photograph the 'Red Planet'.

Man reached the moon in 1968, 400 000 km away. But Mars, the nearest planet to Earth, is 400-million km distant, or a thousand times further, so it would be quite a ride. However, space writer Ronald N Bracewell says **Man** will eventually find the secret of travel at the speed of light, and that in 200 years time inter-stellar travel could be possible.

Even then it would take eleven years to travel to and from Proxima Centauri, nearest star to planet Earth. The **spaceman** on **his** return from that trip would be about 18 months younger...

The overuse of 'man', 'men' etc. allows a linguistic wall to be erected against women who are seen by implication to be incapable or unworthy of playing a significant role in the development of space travel. The

next extract shows the generic 'man' changed into 'right hand woman' for effect:

Marc Bohan is the king pin at Christian Dior, but the designer would be lost without his **right hand woman**. She's Madame Annick de Cizancourt, the fashion house's Haute Couture director, who monitors every aspect of Bohan creations. The elegant red-head ensures that each handmade garment reaches its final destination on time with not a stitch out of place.

The passage below (Smith, 1985, p. 180) contains the standard resistance to the eradication of sexist language:

Like-person-you know! Where's your personners person? You've been personipulating me! I must get back to serious thinking about the President's persondate, the persontle of greatness, penpersonship, oneupspersonship, the decline of the praying personstis, Persondrake and the Magician and whether the Presidency is still attainable by Governor... Rockefeller.

The next group of illustrations show how negative images of women can be conveyed. Denotative meaning is so easily carried in English that these male authors have had a field day with connotative meaning in their snippets of sexism. Words or phrases which diminish or trivialise women are used for negative effect in the vast majority of sexist language. Women 'gush' or 'wail', and their desires, abilities and behavior are seen as trivial. They want 'freebies', furs and diamonds, they cannot read, they lament, make noises, and obligingly disappear when they are in men's way.

Nice story from a doctor friend...A small boy was making a pest of himself in the doctor's surgery, shouting and fiddling about on the shelves.

'I hope you don't mind little Johnny,' **gushed** his Mum.

'Not at all,' said the doc. 'He'll be quiet soon. He's just reached the poisons.'

A smooth sophisticate who edits a top woman's magazine in this country was **bewailing** her fate at a

recent luncheon. Her readers had come to expect all kinds of **freebies** in the magazine, and it happened she had a great one - a rope of gold chain and semi-precious stones to hang around the neck.

Her problem, however, was how to tell her readers about it. 'It is impossible,' she lamented. 'to have a cover offering A Free Necklace to anyone any more. People will just think it is a sick joke.'

And lest the ladies start **making noises** about how much all that translates in **diamonds and furs** let me add that about a quarter of those 16 million players are women. If your non-golfing partner is giving you more uphill than the trickiest green, then you can take comfort in the fact that golfers in the 15th century faced a more daunting adversary than the **fairway-widow of suburbia**.

The tall **blond** standing at the bar **obligingly** gulps down her cup of coffee and **disappears**. The bartender locks the front door to keep any other female patrons from entering Take 46, a café-bistro in the West German textile-manufacturing city of Krefeld. Then, like members of a secret society, the 215 men sipping beer in the dimly lighted room grow quiet as Volker Elis Pilgrim, 45, settles onto a barstool.

These may be compared with the next passage where two women are mentioned entirely neutrally. British publications opposed to the conservative Government are likely to substitute 'Maggie trilled' for 'Thatcher said' when a negative impression is required:

Throughout Britain, politicians cleared their calendars and thought about campaign buttons. Buckingham Palace was alerted that Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher might seek an audience with Queen Elizabeth II to ask that Parliament be dissolved. The reason: last week's local election for 12,280 seats in much of England and Wales. Thatcher's Conservative Party made a solid showing, encouraging Tory leaders to press for an early general election that could come as soon as June. Virtually everyone expected Thatcher to announce this week her bid to win three consecutive terms.

Reverse sexism is possible but it lacks the bite of the connotations of culturally enshrined terminology for

the diminishing of women, and sounds more like the protests of an evicted gatecrasher.

The gravitas of a Goldblatt portrait doesn't hide the fact that Hugh Murray rather resembles a large cuddly care bear, even when he's trussed up in a suit, sagely surveying South Africa and all who might influence the country from Leadership's editorial chair.

... He also radiates a distinctly prosperous air a little like the business leaders (Murrayspeak for them would be 'a couple of the guys') whom he approached five years ago with nothing in the bank, but the gleam of Leadership in his eye: as public affairs adviser to Barlows boss Mike Rosholt, he'd been inspired by what might and could be done for the country by big business.

Hugh is highly persuasive. Add to that the courage of his convictions - this is a product in which he truly believes: a mind that moves in leaps and knows few bounds and enough good-ol-boy charm to cloak the wildest ideas with plausibility.... The guys promised a year of ads, the magazine was hatched and is flying high, with Hugh Murray still the only shareholder.

The National Yearling Sales open with the Select Invitation Evening, a quasi black-tie affair (well the auctioneers are in dinner jackets even if the guests aren't) where a handpicked 98 out of the 831 yearlings are on offer.

The horse traders by then have done their homework and can be seen crouching in their reserved seats, guarding their bulky catalogues like Bibles. If you're quick and good at squinting sideways, you can read the notes they have made.

It makes you so happy not to be a horse. For who would like to be dismissed thus: 'thin in the leg', 'don't like the way she handles her hocks', 'bad tempered' and the ultimate insult, 'a plain horse', which has you pondering gloomily over the undeniable truth that it remains the pretty, not the worthy who win life's races.

The next three passages are included to point out that there are many devices in use to avoid sexist language, and that the **vast majority** of all media and publications use them systematically. Plurals, imperatives, passive constructions, 'you', 'they' 'he/she' and non/sex-specific nouns are used. (Examples of these nouns may be people, the client, the patient, the traveller, the guest, the audience, and so on.)

Note: **Have** a bowl of cold water on hand during the cooking process. If vegetables are too dry, flick water into the wok. This creates steam and the vegetables cook well.

1. **You** may enter as many times as you like on this entry form or on a plain piece of paper.
2. **Anyone** may enter except **employees** of PLUS Promotions, PLUS Pharmacies, Trimark Agencies or their advertising agencies.
3. The **judges'** decision is final, and no correspondence will be entered into.

To succeed in business **you** have to know your market and where the gaps are: you may wish to compete - you may have to compete - with existing products, but if **you** can fill an otherwise unfulfilled need, you are halfway there. Thus Magnetic Components have aimed **themselves** firmly at the middle range of the marine radio market:

...Three years ago Magnetic Components made tape heads and employed over 200 **people**.

The converse of the statement that sexism in society is reflected in language is the proposition that language affects cultural and social viewpoints. This, the Whorfian hypothesis, is impossible to prove in its 'strong' form (i.e. language determines culture) but the 'weak' Whorfian hypothesis is strongly supported in psycholinguistics. Language is the major vehicle for the transmission of social beliefs and values (Smith, 1985, p.13), shaping and constraining our perceptions and reactions, and has thus perpetuated the status quo between men and women. The war which has been, and is being waged against sexist language - from the self censorship of the media to radical feminist rewritings of the Bible - will offer, in time, an interesting field for the study of the relationship between language and cognition.

AN ACCOUNT OF A LESSON DEALING WITH SEXISM IN LANGUAGE

This is an hour's lesson for a bright standard 8 class, half of whom are boys, and half girls. They are capable and can be creative and careful thinkers but tend to be lazy and easily distracted. Once they lose interest or concentration, it can be a major task to direct their attention again to the work in hand.

The aim of the lesson is to continue a series of language lessons aimed at increasing their awareness of the use, and misuse, of language in communicating meaning in its broadest sense of fact, opinion, emotion, etc. They have already looked at uses of literal and figurative language, the nature and interaction of denotative and connotative meaning, and the manipulation of meaning by the blurring of fact and opinion.

My main objective in the lesson is to integrate and extend their insights into language. I hope to arouse their interest by considering a topical area of debate about language, and so motivate them to sharpen their critical faculties while analysing uses of sexist language. My secondary objective is to work at correcting a recurrent problem in their essay work, where a sentence may read 'a person can do whatever you want if one knows that they won't hurt anyone else'. This class is not interested in discussing pronouns, but if they think that they are discussing sex, they might learn about pronouns anyway.

The desks are usually in a U shape in the classroom, so it will not need rearranging for a group discussion form lesson. The boards and overhead are permanently set up, and as soon as the class have arrived the lesson can begin.

Standing in front of the class, I will read them the following extract: 'A man and his young son were apprehended in a robbery. The father was shot during the struggle and the son, in handcuffs, was rushed to the police station. As the police pulled the struggling boy into the station, the mayor, who had been called to the scene, looked up and said, 'My God, it's my son!' What relation was the mayor to the boy? (Smith, 1985, p. 45) I will ask them to put up their hands if they have an answer, and will take answers on a biased basis, choosing boys, in ascending order of evaluated sharpness. After a few (hopefully wrong) answers I will switch on

the overhead projector, with a written copy of the riddle, to allow the class to read it as well as hearing it, and then let them proceed to the answer, 'his mother'.

I will then ask the class why this was not immediately apparent, try to elicit from an unwary boy the opinion that mayors are men, and ask for the name of the mayor of Cape Town. (Adele Searle is probably known to the girls at least from magazine reports.) Next I will try to set up a tension between the boys and the girls by accusing my victim of making sexist remarks. I will ask for a definition of sexism and accept any contribution along the lines of assessing women as a class as inferior to men, mocking, denigrating, dismissing, trivialising, diminishing, devaluing women as a group. I will construct the definition on the board as we go along. I will probably not have to ask them 'what about men?' as they will raise the issue of feminist devaluation of men, and this will be added to the definition. I will ensure that they make the point that the whole class or grouping of men or women is the object of sexism, and that such opinions must be based on logically indefensible generalisations. (For example I will pass round an insurance advertisement offering lower premiums to 'safer' women drivers.) A definition will therefore show that sexist statements suggest or state that men or women as groups are inferior to, less valuable than, or more trivial than members of the other sex on unjustified grounds, on the basis of illogical generalisations.

I will then ask the pupils to date and head their pages 'Sexism in language' for inclusion into their language files, and to copy down the agreed definition. While they are doing this I will distribute a work sheet. It will consist of twelve sentences which they must read, and, on the basis of the agreed definition, judge as sexist or non-sexist. This activity offers a change of working mode, demands analytical and evaluative skills, and is individual to force those who have given up on the discussion to focus on the issue in hand. The sentences will contain negative opinions about men or women, which have a logical justification; negative statements about men or women where gender is not used as the basis of criticism; statements about traditional areas of male or female concern where the sex concerned is not evaluated negatively; and sexist statements conforming to the definition. Here are the sentences:

1. Girls' giggling annoys me when I am trying to work.
2. Guys can't have a reasonable conversation with girls - all they do is giggle.
3. Housewives who go shopping in curlers have no self-respect.
4. Most men would rather wash a car than bath their own baby.
5. Men have only two faults: everything they say, and everything they do.
6. My father's friends are so boring: all they ever talk about is golf and money.
7. Mothers never stop fussing about your food, and sleep and homework - they can drive you mad.
8. I hate doing projects with boys, - they get all bossy but in the end the girls do all the work.
9. The boys at St Johns are so arrogant, - they drive around in Mother's sports car and think they own the world.
10. Telling secrets to a girl is like talking in confidence to a newspaper reporter.
11. Boys with motorbikes are always getting up to stupid dangerous tricks.
12. A girl who is not on diet, or preening in front of a mirror, is dead.

I will be able to see if anyone is not doing the work, so I will let them mark their work themselves from an overhead projection slide to give them direct, immediate feedback. I will field a few questions about why a sentence is or is not sexist, by passing the questions to other pupils, and then, before they get bored, introduce the issue of stereotypes. I will explain that a stereotype is literally a plate of type used to print and reprint one collection of words, and ask them to define a figurative stereotype, encouraging anything along the lines of 'convention, habit, fashion of reproducing a hackneyed or unconsidered expression of thought, without reprocessing or reconsidering the logic or justification of it.'

Now I will ask for a list of conventional or stereotypical qualities ascribed to males and females. Working quickly around the U of desks, I will ask, 'What are women supposed to be like?' (or 'men'), and will write typical, interesting or contradictory answers on the board under the headings 'males' 'females'. I will keep this as fast as possible, skipping over the hesi-

tators and coming back to them insistently, to maintain the pace of the lesson and to get spontaneous or amusing answers. Because I want to maintain the concept of stereotypes as transmitters of unexamined bias, and therefore as usually negative, I will try to rephrase some positive traits into their negative converses (e.g. 'women are verbal' would go on the board as 'talkative'). I will have my own list of ideas (Appendix 2) in case the class is having an 'off' day. Using the board lists, I will then ask individual pupils (not the very sensitive ones) whether one of the qualities recorded applies to them. Here I will be trying to get the pupils to compare gender stereotypes with their own identities or those of their friends, and to see how often ideas are mindlessly and uncritically accepted. In addition I am sure that I will be able to prove the point that there are many more positive qualities attributed to males than to females, owing to the sexist nature of society. I will not, however, push this too far, as preaching has a tendency to make this class's eyes glaze over. Here is a list of sexist stereotypes:

Male

logical
 arrogant
 rational
 coarse
 adventurous
 superior
 direct
 egotistical
 active
 reckless
 independent
 boastful
 confident
 opinionated
 objective
 aggressive
 assertive
 outgoing
 risk-taking
 stoical
 ambitious
 tough
 daring
 dominant

Females

gentle
 sensitive
 appearance-oriented
 fearful
 soft spoken
 gullible
 well groomed
 theatrical
 tender
 easily influenced
 understanding
 naive
 helpful
 timid
 co-operative
 give up easily
 emotional
 bad drivers
 talkative
 naggy
 home-bodies
 fussy
 passive
 impulsive

competitive

jealous
dependent
unsystematic
shy

Suspending the discussion completely I will give them a two minute lecture to the effect that sexist stereotypes may not only be a means of replacing critical thought about the sexes with uninformed prejudice, but may also be a useful mental shorthand to group and organise ideas about society and gender. Similarly I will say that sexist language may be used appropriately as a way of expressing solidarity with one's gender group, as a badge or a boundary for gender identity; or may be used inappropriately, at the wrong time, in the wrong situation, to exclude or offend people of the opposite sex. I will ask them to write this down. I like the class to have their own notes of a language lesson, and will use the change from structured discussion to undemanding individual work for a few minutes to clean and prepare the board for the last item of the lesson.

I estimate that I will have between fifteen and twenty minutes left at this stage, and I will ask the class to comment on the issue of 'persons' and to offer additions to the board which will read (already) 'chairperson; spaceperson; personhole cover; fireperson'. After some additions I will ask them to add a definition of a generic noun to their notes and will dictate this to them. I will then raise the issue of the generic pronoun 'he' and take opinions and a vote from the class as to whether it is sexist. After this (I will help the 'Yes - sexist' lobby) I will put up my last transparency showing ways to avoid the generic 'man' and 'he':

When a chef makes lasagna, he should use mozzarella cheese in his cooking.

When you make lasagna, you should use mozzarella cheese in your cooking. (you)

When people make lasagne, they should use mozzarella cheese in their cooking. (they...can also be done with 'we')

Always use mozzarella cheese when cooking lasagna. (imperative)

When lasagne is being cooked, mozzarella cheese should be used. (passive)

Change in a similar way:

When a spaceman does a space walk, he wears a safety harness attached to his space suit.

I will read the first six sentences, identify the construction used and point out that it is identified in brackets after each construction. I will uncover the next sentence and ask them to copy the next sentence below their notes and to rewrite it removing generic nouns or pronouns using all five given techniques.

If the class has been short of ideas, or we have moved very quickly, I will fill up any extra time by giving them a few more examples along the same lines.

With only about three minutes left, I will give them their homework as follows: 'Find a paragraph in a newspaper book or magazine which uses sexist language, cut it out or copy it out, and stick it on a sheet of paper. Underneath state how the language is sexist, and then rewrite the passage, making it neutral.' The two 'most sexist' passages will win the following prize: the finder will be allowed to nominate a pupil of the opposite sex (e.g. a tall, deep voiced boy for a feminist passage) to read the extract to the class at the start of the next English lesson. These must be submitted for marking.

I will evaluate the lesson chiefly on the degree and enthusiasm of the class's participation in the discussion periods, by how much I could praise their contributions and by how indicative of meaningful understanding these contributions were. The homework will help me judge whether their understanding in class generalised to their assessment of pieces of language from other sources, and I will check on consistency of pronoun use in the rewrites of the passages chosen. Because the rewrites require the integration of all the points covered in the lesson, I will be able to evaluate how far they are progressing towards an understanding of how language works, and how sexism is conveyed linguistically, and therefore be able to plan the next part of the language lesson series.

If these evaluations are disappointing, the most likely change to the next lesson will be a change from a structured, teacher-controlled discussion to a small-group pattern.

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