

# LANGUAGE AND MULIEBRITY

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Nor do they trust their tongue alone,  
But speak a language of their own;  
Can read a nod, a shrug, a look,  
Far better than a printed book;  
Convey a libel in a frown,  
And wink a reputation down.

Jonathan Swift - **The Journal of a Modern Lady**, 1.188

Emotive words are legitimately attached to those particular perspectives which do not allow for truly scientific or academic approaches to issues. Terms such as 'sexist', 'feminist', 'chauvinist' and the host of equivalent nouns, 'which denominate the professed followers of some leader or school, the professional devotees of some principle, or the practisers of some art',<sup>1</sup> abound in English. However, many of these terms have connotations of the unscientific or non-academic as they indicate the presence of an ideology or a set of values at variance with the avowed intentions of the scholar.

The aims of a scholar are the pursuit of truth, irrespective of its consequences, combined with the academic advancement of the individual. Commitment to any single cause may work to the detriment of the other more traditional concerns and may quite rightly be dismissed as being liable to distort reality as a consequence of a biased leaning. Non-feminists will argue of course that this is the fundamental shortcoming of feminism. By contrast, the feminist will claim that in an overwhelmingly sex-

ist society feminism is forced into being in order, firstly, to reveal the various ways in which existing theories and practices are themselves biased, and subsequently to develop unbiased approaches.

In a recent article in *English Usage in Southern Africa*,<sup>2</sup> Margaret van Zyl acknowledges that 'sexist language has become an issue fraught with emotion, the type and intensity of which are dependent on one's ideological viewpoint'. This of course is true, but it skirts a central question: what causes the variety of changes evident in the development of all living languages? The causes of linguistic change are multitudinous: the influence of other languages, which is strongest in the field of vocabulary, but which may also have an impact on grammar and syntax; the effects of general social and cultural change; laziness or the principle of minimum effort, which is most clearly evident in pronunciation and in colloquial or informal discourse; the manner in which analogy can lead to change such as in analogical plurals and forms; and it is possible that fashion plays a part in the process of change.<sup>3</sup> A case may be made out for feminism to be regarded as both being a fashionable concern, and, more importantly, a reflection of social and cultural change in some sectors of society. The question, however, revolves around the extent of the feminist movement: is it widespread enough to develop a groundswell of opinion in favour of its concerns and intentions?

For the feminist to succeed it is necessary that our language be 'demasculinized', but to achieve this requires a shift of emphasis in the language the extent of which is pervasive. The call is for us not to use male pronouns and nouns as generic terms in the belief that phrases, such as the 'history of mankind' instead of the 'history of humanity', are overt expressions of sexism at the level of language and yet they obscure the sexism underlying them at the level of theory.

The matter is also complicated by the very selection of examples which feminists use to support their views. The use of the words for 'women', **wif**, which had once enjoyed equivalence with the word for 'man', **wer**, as well as with the word **mann**, the generic term for all people, feminists argue, was gradually eliminated and replaced by the terms 'woman', 'man' and 'man or mankind' respectively. This turn of events is unsatisfying indeed for feminists but would satisfaction be attained were the word 'wif' to be resurrected? Probably not as the connotations attached to the word 'wife' which evolved out of the original term are undoubtedly viewed with a jaundiced eye, especially as the customs, which have come to be associated with and are implied by the word 'wife', are anathema to feminists, as the

word links women to men in a sex role stereotype of the kind against which feminists campaign so fiercely.

The major difficulty that the feminist faces in endeavouring to shape English usage is that language is not normally open to cerebral manipulation. While the logic of the feminist's argument is largely irrefutable, the extent of sentiment in favour of achieving the changes in usage, which they desire, has not yet acquired the momentum required to achieve the shift in approach which is feminism's goal. Nor is the cause assisted by such endeavours as attempting to coin a common gender pronoun. Such aberrations as the contraction of 'that one', **thon**, or **he'er** with its possessive and objective forms of **his'er** and **him'er** or the string of other more recent ephemeral and improbable proposals, including **E**, **hesh**, **po**, **s/he**, **tey**, **ve**, **xe** and **jhe**<sup>4</sup> detract from the feminist's cause and contribute to the scepticism and hostility of linguists and purists alike. That such proposals are emotive is without question: they are often dismissed as 'arrant nonsense' or 'an asinine reflex of Women's Lib' or even 'a great leap forward into the nineteenth century'.<sup>5</sup>

The 'rules' which govern usage, however, are not inviolable: in keeping with other rules in society which evolve as required by the needs and changes of society, rules of language are alterable. The long-standing difficulty is whether rules of language should be descriptive or prescriptive. Despite the impact which linguistic science has had on attitudes to language many archaic rules and practices have been entrenched, being handed on from generation to generation of teachers and retained in textbooks. No doubt this is partly due to ignorance or inertia, pedantry or snobbery, a need for certainty, quite probably a resistance to change, and - the feminist believes - male chauvinism.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the reason, such rules and practices continue to enjoy prominence in teaching and in English usage. The feminist would argue that words, phrases or grammatical rules that do not contribute to clarity and accuracy should be abandoned or ignored. Often, however, the alternative that is being proposed is incongruous and awkward.

All but the rabid feminist will concede that the majority of so-called sexist language usage is not deliberate. Established thought patterns govern our use of English as does our continual struggle to remain faithful to the rule books. In South Africa, where English Second Language speakers are often less aware of the 'correct' forms and where their usage has not yet become habitual the feminist might indeed find some solace - especially in regard to the pesky pronoun. In this country one is likely to hear statements such as those which follow:

'John she is going to town.'

'Sarah is in the kitchen. He is cooking the dinner.'

'John and Sarah are married. John works and she earns a lot of money.'

'Elizabeth spoke to his father.' (The father is that of Elizabeth.)

Of course such an argument might be dismissed as frivolous, but is it so far-fetched to imagine a not too distant day when 'correct' models of English will be spoken by fewer than five per cent of the population?

The feminist argument is one which has been propagated most strongly in the United States of America and almost as strongly in Great Britain. In these countries the family unit is becoming less significant. As the centrality of the family unit is brought into question there is need and room for a redefinition and a reallocation of roles for women and men. This development has given impetus to the cause of the feminist, but a comparable process in South Africa is apparent on a lesser scale. The consequence is that there is less support for feminism as a socio-political movement and therefore less support for those who would wish to 'de-masculinize' our English.

What is today considered 'masculine' and 'feminine' will alter and as it does the need for adjusting our usage will increase. In our essentially male dominated society chauvinistic feminists will need patience and an unremitting desire to further their cause as 'time he passes slowly' - to South Africanise and 'feminize' a cliché. From such avid endeavour may develop the insight they desire and which Shakespeare's words used in a vastly different context, succinctly summarize:

From women's eyes this doctrine I derive:  
They are the ground, the books, the academes,  
From whence doth spring the true Promethean fire.

W. Shakespeare - **Love's Labour's Lost** (IV:iii:302)

## NOTES

1. **The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary**, Volume 1. Oxford University Press, U.S.A., 1977, pp 514-5.

2. Van Zyl M., 'Writing for your audience': **English Usage in Southern Africa**, Volume 16 No 2. UNISA, Pretoria, 1985. pp 13-7.
3. Barber C.L., **The Story of Language**. Pan Books, London, 1967. pp 60-9.
4. Miller C. and Swift K., **Words and Women - New Language in New Times**. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1976. p 144.
5. Ibid. p 146.
6. Quirk R., **The Use of English**, Enlarged Second Edition. Longman, Burnt Mill, Harlow, England, 1982. pp 350-1.