WRITING FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

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Spot the 'mistake':

' ... the man in the street has been hard hit by inflation ...'

'*The Ascent of Man* is a documentary ...'

' ... the .number of man-hours clocked by Unisa staff ...'

'*Lord of the Flies* is about the power of evil in man's own being.

'Language is a capacity unique to mankind.'

Sexist language has become an issue fraught with emotion, the type and intensity of which are dependent on one's ideological viewpoint. Feminists approach the issue with almost evangelical intensity, male chauvinists (to exhaust a cliché) treat it with hilarity, and most writers and editors (of textbooks in particular) approach the thorny and tedious issue of whether to *he*, to *she*, or to *s/he* with exasperated despair.

It is tempting to dismiss the issue as a temporary flurry in the feminist teacup, one that will - like the apocryphal bra-burning - become an amusing anachronism.[1] It is seductively easy to dispense with the problem by including a token apology at the beginning or end of one's article/chapter/textbook ('While aware of, and sympathetic to, the current issue of non-sexist writing, I have spared by readers the clumsiness of dual pronouns, and have used the customary *he*.'). However, people (both male and female) are finding this kind of token gesture increasingly offensive, and indicative of bias on the part of the

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writer. If we wish to communicate effectively with our audiences - and this, after all, is the purpose for which we venture into the written or spoken word - we thus have to consider the issue of the attitudes we are conveying, and the stereotypes we are perpetuating.

The strong version of the Whorf hypothesis[2] states that all higher thinking is dependent on language, and that language thus determines thought. While no longer accepted in exclusive totality, this view of the relationship of thought to language still is acknowledged as representing at least an aspect of the way that the language we use affects the way we perceive reality. Jenkins (1969) posed the question as follows:

What is the relationship between thought and language?

1. Thought is dependent on language.
2. Thought is language.
3. Language is dependent on thought.
4. None of the above. Or, perhaps, all of the above.

The correct answer, according to Jenkins, is 'all of the above'.[3] If the language we use thus interdependently reflects and affects our perception, the issue of gender in writing has further-reaching implications than merely an orthographic choice.

Originally, the English language included a word for women, *wif*, a word for men, *wer*, and a third term for human beings in general - *mann*. By about the fourteenth century, this useful distinction had been eliminated, leaving us ultimately with 'woman', 'man', and 'man'. The terms 'man' and 'mankind' are thus considered to be terms referring to the human race in general, in that women are included 'by implication'. Increasingly, women are finding it intrinsically unsatisfying to be included in the human race 'by implication', as the use of the word 'man' as the cover term, and 'he' as the generic, implies that the male principle is the norm, and the female an interesting evolutionary detour, a subspecies of the genus.

As this point, bigots of varying gender and age (but usually male, and usually older generation) snort with amused contempt, and exclaim irritably at the excessiveness of sensitivity over what to them seems a non-issue. 'But *of course*,' they assert dismissively, 'of course 'man' is the neutral term. When Donne said 'No man is an island', *of course* he meant all human beings.' What writers (especially dead ones) *mean* is open to educated conjecture and interpretation, but how their readers perceive their meaning can be objectively established. Current research indicates without doubt that to the twentieth century mind (even

one whose 'consciousness' has not been 'raised') the term 'man' to a statistically significant degree evokes images of males only. Research projects like those of Schneider and Hacker (1972)[4], Nilsen (1973)[5], and Harrison (1974)[6], clearly demonstrate that *man* in the sense of male so overshadows *man* in the sense of human being as to make the latter use inaccurate and misleading for purposes both of conceptualizing and communication.[7]

(This is classically illustrated in the following extract from a National Party pamphlet, explaining the new love-across-the-colour-line arrangements: ' ... should a White man marry a Black man - the White man will be regarded as a member of the Black group.')

One may choose to disagree with the argument, and deny the claimed implications and effect of the use of the male generic in writing, but good writers cannot ignore the effect they are having on their audience, and it is undeniable that current audiences have an increasingly sophisticated ear for sexist under- and overtones. Just as there is no longer any justification for perpetuating racist stereotypes and bias in one's use of language, so the time is coming (has come, in fact, in places like the United States), when sexist usage will be regarded as indicative of lack of education or extreme subjectivity on the part of the speaker or writer.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES AND HOW DOES ONE DEAL WITH THEM?

There is little point in substituting one stereotype for another. A grimly determined replacement of every 'he' with a 'she' merely exchanges biases. Although exclusive use of 'she' has a shock value that is of assistance if one is trying to make an ideological statement (and is enormously satisfying if one happens to be female!), one should aim for a natural combination of both pronouns. Some writers aim at strict fairness by writing alternate chapters or articles with alternate pronouns used as the generic. The main point is not to be reduced to counting incidences of each pronoun, but to convey, through one's choices of language, an awareness that roughly half the world's population is female, and that roles and expectations (in Western society, at least) are no longer rigidly defined by gender. (There is no justification, for example, for constantly referring to doctors as 'he'.)

The pronoun 'one' offers an alternative to the gender-marked pronouns, and there is also the option of omitting pronoun reference at all. (For example, 'If a student is unable to complete the course, he may apply for a refund' can be rephrased as 'A student who is unable to complete the course may apply for

a refund.') Use of the plural ('people', 'writers', 'teachers', 'politicians') allows one to use 'they' - perhaps one of the most successful and least ambiguous ways of dealing with the issue of the gender of the population one is writing for and about.

While pronouns are the most obvious manifestation of sexist bias (and can become a maddening tic if one becomes aware of them), the term 'man' is an equally thorny problem. There are occasions when its elimination creates ludicrous effects (a Sony Walk-person?, an enforced metamorphosis of the South Africanism 'Ag come on man!' to 'Ag come on person!'?), which essentially trivialize the issue. However, substitution of the words 'people', or 'human beings', or fairly simple re-wording (working hours' instead of 'man-hours'; 'staffed' instead of 'manned', for example) are relatively painless ways of removing possible causes of offence or inaccuracy. (Overheard in the lift: 'Even if PW were to announce one man, one vote tomorrow, the United States still wouldn't be satisfied!' I should think not!)

Another source of sexism in language is the use of terms to refer to women. 'Girls' and 'ladies' are generally found unacceptable, unless one is in truth referring to juvenile females or the consorts of lords, and condescending nomenclature should be avoided. (If career-man is tautological, career-woman is equally so, and if a new male member of staff is never referred to as a bubbly blond who is father to three children as well as being career-orientated, then neither should female staff members be thus defined.) Also, tacking an -ess ending onto a common gender English word is reasonably resented by most people so identi-fied.[8]

Having cleaned up one's own prose, one still has to deal with less 'sophisticated' writing that one wishes to quote or use. Again, just as one would never quote or refer to racist statements or theories without pointing out the bias to one's audience, so in quoting material which shows a sexist bias (either in its language, or in its underlying stereotypes or assumptions), one has a responsibility to indicate this.

EXAMPLE:

> Cicero claims that 'the speaker will not be able to achieve what he wants by his words, unless he has gained profound insight into the characters of men ...'. (sic) (Cicero : *De Oratore*)

It is easy to become bogged down in trivia and - especially if one is male, and relatively unaffected by sexism - convinced that the textual contortions sometimes required are a waste of time.

It is easy to deteriorate into being 'precious' and self-consciously pious about being totally fair and neutral. It is not easy to adopt a balanced attitude and write and speak balanced, bias-free prose. But to deny that the effort is worthwhile is to deny that language and its usage have any effect or meaning at all.

NOTES

1. The essentially ephemeral nature of synthetic neuter pronouns (like 'thon' - a contraction of that + one - listed in Funk & Wagnall's *New Standard Dictionary* of 1913, and 'co' suggested in 1970), and replacement words for man and mankind (like 'gen' and 'genkind') seems to suggest indeed that imposed attempts to change the language are doomed to failure.

2. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality,* Cambridge (Mass.), MIT, 1965.

3. J. Jenkins, 'Language and Thought', in J. Voss (ed) *Approaches to Thought*, Charles E. Merrill, Columbus, Ohio, 1969.

.4. Joseph W. Schneider and Sally L. Hacker, 'Sex Role Imagery and the Use of the Generic "Man" in *Introductory Texts: A Case in the Sociology of Sociology*', paper presented at the section on Sociology of Sex Roles, American Sociological Association Annual Meetings, August 1972, New Orleans.

5. Aileen Pace Nilsen, 'Grammatical Gender and Its Relationship to the Equal Treatment of Males and Females in Children's Books', PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 1973.

6. Linda Harrison, 'Cro-Magnon Woman - In Eclipse', *The Science Teacher*, April 1975, pp 8-11.

7. Casey Millar and Kate Swift, *Words and Women*, Doubleday, New York, 1976, p. 25.

8. Ibid, p. 159.