

# "He" and "She": Changing Language To Fit a Changing World

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*"Inclusionary" language is fast becoming the norm in everyday speech, classroom interaction, and public address. As educators, should we not adopt and encourage use of the inclusionary language model?*

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**A** RECENT Washington, D.C., social news column featured a woman appointed to a high level government position. The columnist did not overlook the opportunity to point out that "She . . . doesn't go in for that chairperson-instead-of-chairman nonsense."

But is it nonsense? Is the question of language usage simply one of individual preference, or are there implications, beyond mere preference, which ought to be taken seriously by educators? How do children react to certain aspects of traditional language? What are implications of current research findings? Are we aware of what is happening in the "real world" with respect to language changes?

As a framework for considering this matter, we propose an analogy. Suppose as a medical doctor you have the choice of prescribing Drug A or Drug B for a given ailment. Both drugs have the same probability of curing or relieving the ailment, but Drug A has the possibility of causing negative side effects for some people, while Drug B does not. As a doctor, which drug are you going to prescribe? Recognizing that life is seldom so clear-cut, we suggest that Drug A is analogous to traditional language. It does have the possibility of causing or contributing negative side effects for certain groups of people, while language of the Drug B type eliminates this possibility. Using the language analogy, Drug A would be labeled *exclusionary* language; Drug B, *inclusionary* language.

Exclusionary language functions in two ways. First, its traditional usage excludes females in effect if not by intent, because

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words such as "chairman" and "newsman," allegedly gender-generic, tend to be interpreted as being gender-specific. Second, the reversal of traditional usage excludes males in effect as well as by intent when gender-specific terms such as "chairwoman" and "saleswoman" are used. Inclusionary language is that which does not exclude, either by intent or in effect, on the basis of sex.

## "Mailmen" Are Not "Ladies"

Young children react literally to language. We recently observed a three-year-old attempt to retrieve a bottle from a cabinet. The small space required that the bottle be tipped sideways first. "Use your head," cajoled her father, observing the dilemma. The youngster promptly stuck her head inside the cabinet and proceeded to push at the bottle. Use her head? She did as she was told!

This kind of literal language interpretation (coupled with firsthand observation) re-

inforces children's perceptions that certain occupations must be held by males. Listen to preschoolers argue that "policemen," "firemen," or "mailmen" are men, *not* "ladies," and reflect on the negative side effects of inaccurate concept shaping for both boys and girls. Traditional language constantly shapes and reinforces the concept that boys are "supposed" to be in certain occupations, while girls are not. At best, traditional language fails to contradict the exclusionary concept (regardless of how it is formed initially), while it does serve to reinforce it.

Children have no difficulty learning inclusionary language. The three-year-old son of one of the authors knows that people who fight fires are "firefighters." He uses the term because adults have provided him with this language model. "Firefighter" not only retains the important concept (and actually enhances the imagery), but the term encourages recognition that the occupation is open to all who have the ability and the desire to pursue it.

But, we are told, inclusionary language sounds so "funny." How awkward is it to say "salesperson" for "salesman" or "saleswoman"? "Salesperson" has been in common use for some time. A nine-year-old matter-of-factly explained to a faculty member that his father was the new department "chairperson." The youngster had no difficulty with the term; what our ears become attuned to is what sounds "right." Political figures, sensitive to their constituencies, use "his and her," and "person" nouns with golden-tongued ease. They recognize the impact of language.

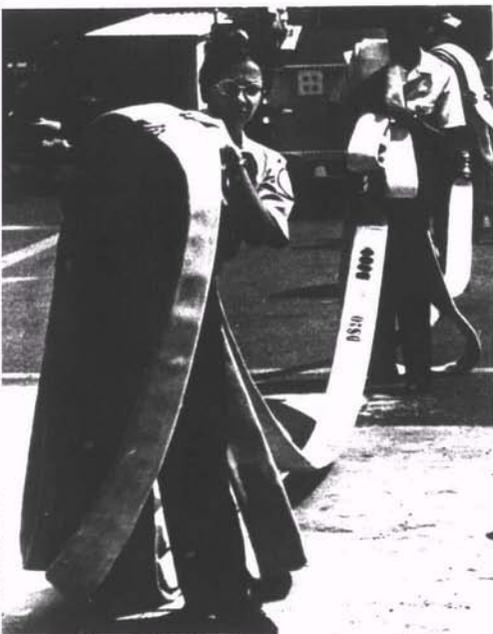
Moreover, exclusionary language is inefficient. Young children learn that "man" means male, not only because they interpret literally, but because that is the sole meaning of the word as it is used at their level. Later, however, children must somehow unlearn this concept, or they must modify it to encompass the masculine used as the generic. This does not seem to be an insurmountable task, until we observe that there is no clear way to determine when "man" is generic, and when it is not. For example, does the club constitution which states that all "men" with certain qualifications are eligible for mem-

bership mean that the club is inclusive ("mankind"?) or sex exclusive?

At this point, let us offer a second analogy. To avoid some of the problems and hazards of living, we practice prevention by employing measures such as those which protect us against fires, disease, and accidents. Prevention usually requires the avoidance of certain actions as well as the inclusion of other actions or measures expected to have a wholesome effect. Thus, to remove the possibility of negative side effects of language, we need to avoid exclusionary language while consciously using inclusionary language.

## Research Implications

Concern about the exclusionary nature of English is evidenced by the writing of people such as linguists Key (4) and Lakoff (6), social scientists Bosmajian (2) and Kidd (5), and educators Tiedt (8) and Burr, Dunn, and Farquhar (3). They write on the subject of language bias and include the



Sharon Devlin, "firefighter," carries hose during training exercise.

generic use of "man" and the masculine pronouns in their analyses.

Three studies are of particular interest because subjects were asked to respond to different ways of using language. College students in Kidd's research responded to 18 statements in which the masculine pronoun and "man" were used traditionally. They were to identify each pronoun antecedent according to several characteristics, including sex. For the first nine statements, the identification was open ended, so that the sex of the referent could be identified as male, female, either, or both:

The potentialities of *man* are infinitely varied and exciting.

Social status \_\_\_\_\_ Financial position \_\_\_\_\_  
Sex \_\_\_\_\_ Race \_\_\_\_\_

The second nine statements were in a forced-choice format:

A painter may or may not acknowledge the laws of perspective. *He* accepts such limitations if they further the kinds of reality he is trying to achieve.

- female-male
- successful-unsuccessful
- white-black
- rich-poor

Kidd found that the subjects did not respond inclusively to the generic pronoun either in the free-choice or the forced-choice situation. In the free-choice, males were selected 407 times and females 53 times. Kidd concluded that the masculine pronoun as the generic is not generally interpreted as representing a neutral antecedent; it is, in fact, considered male. She suggests that since the intended purpose is not accomplished, its continued use seems unwarranted.

Schneider and Hacker (7) asked college students for newspaper and magazine pictures to illustrate a proposed sociology textbook. Two forms of chapter titles were used. Both forms contained eight common titles which were neutral in gender; for example, Culture, Ecology. In addition, one form used five "man"-associated labels such as "urban man" and "political man" while the other form contained comparable inclusionary titles such as "urban life" and "political be-

havior." Schneider and Hacker found that 64 percent of students receiving "man" titles submitted pictures containing only males, compared with 50 percent of those receiving the inclusionary titles. The authors concluded that a significantly large number of students did not interpret "man" generically.

Bem and Bem (1) asked high school seniors to rate twelve job advertisements on an interested-uninterested scale. Eight ads identical on all three forms contained inclusionary language. The language of four telephone ads varied. Operator and service representative positions were considered traditionally female, while "frameman" and "lineman" were considered traditionally male. The company's traditional exclusionary language was used in Form I. Form II employed inclusionary language while sex-reversed exclusionary language was used in Form III, for example, telephone operator was referred to as "he," while "frameman" became "frame-woman." The following results were obtained when subjects were asked to indicate interest in the traditional opposite-sex jobs:

Language Type	Women	Men
Traditional exclusionary	5%	30%
Inclusionary	25%	75%
Sex-reversed exclusionary	45%	65%

Because the only difference in these ads was the language used, the conclusion that for some people, both male and female, language has a strong effect seems inescapable.

## Emerging Trends

Sensitivity to the use of inclusionary language in the "real" world is growing.

Leading publishers such as Scott, Foresman and Company and McGraw-Hill Book Company have issued guidelines for improving the image of women in books. Included in the guidelines are alternatives for exclusionary language, such as humanity, human race, human beings, or people for "mankind," as well as examples of alternatives to generic use of masculine pronouns. Iris M. Tiedt (8), editor of *Elementary English*, has provided guidelines for inclusionary language for those submitting manuscripts.

In the state of Washington, the Higher Education Personnel Board revised its job classifications to eliminate "man" terms. Thus, "appliance serviceman" is "appliance mechanic," "seedman" is "seedworker," "offset pressman" is "offset press operator." Similarly, the U.S. Department of Labor has changed its dictionary of occupational titles so that "person" replaces "man." Its Office of Workmen's Compensation Programs has been officially changed to the Office of Worker's Compensation Programs.

Thus, inclusionary language is already part of the "real world" of everyday speech, classroom interaction, and public addresses. Moreover, it is appearing with increasing frequency in textbooks, newspapers, and magazines. If we, as educators, view our role as that of facilitating individual development to the fullest, should we not also adopt the inclusionary language model? The trend is here. What is our choice—to help or to hinder? We predict that when our present preschoolers are adults, inclusionary language will be the norm and everyone will marvel at the fuss over language usage 'way back in the '70's!

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