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IS IT POSSIBLE TO CHANGE HERSTORY? : ABOUT SOME ASPECTS OF LANGUAGE REFORM

The basic idea of political correctness was to avoid language that would degrade individuals or groups or discriminate against them on the grounds of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, and so on. Some of the most interesting changes that have taken place in the English language over the last 30 years have been driven by the desire to avoid, if not banish, sexism in the language.

Key wods: *political correctness, sexism in the language,language reform, Ms.*

The actuality of the problem. Language updates itself all the time and is doing so more quickly now than ever, thanks to the spread of new technologies. Visual distracts us from the written word; advertising bombards us with disjunctive grammar; e-mails threaten the death of spelling and punctuation as we know it. Words acquire new meanings in several ways. Among them is an attempt to avoid unpleasant associations with the help of neutral words and the influence of social and political ideologies.

Some of the most important changes affecting English and other European languages since the 1970s have arisen from changes in society’s attitudes towards women prompted by political activism. In many countries the use of non-sexist language is now legally mandated in certain circles such as in job advertisements, government publications, and media.

The aim of the article is to show how women have sought to engineer change in the way that society perceives them, e.g. by introducing new terms of address such as Ms.

Political correctness evolved from the desire to protect the feelings of vulnerable individuals and groups. The basic idea was to avoid language that would degrade individuals or groups or discriminate against them on the grounds of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, and so on [Berman 1992; Burton 1982; Devine 1993; Fish 1994]. “Political correctness,” “politically correct,” and the common abbreviation for both, “p.c.,” cover a broad spectrum of new ways of using and seeing language and its products, all of which share one property: they are forms of language devised by and for, and to represent the worldview and experience of, groups formerly without the power to create language, make interpretations, or control meaning. [Lakoff 2000, c. 91].

Some of the most interesting changes that have taken place in the English language over the last 30 years have been driven by the desire to avoid, if not banish, sexism in the language. This reform movement is noteworthy for its differences from most previous reform movements, which have usually been inspired by a desire for English to be more logical or more efficient in expression.

And unlike other political language reforms, which tend to be limited to individual names for ethnic groups, gender reforms involve basic grammatical components like pronouns, basic grammatical rules like pronoun agreement, and basic words like *man, father, male* and *female.* Some of these elements have been in the language for over a thousand years. It is not surprising, therefore, that the effort to undo them can often be a difficult and untidy business.

Much of the early research on language and gender devoted a great deal of energy to addressing the issue of “women’s language” using long lists of specific linguistic features such as hedging and intensifiers, the use of tag questions, the use of a high rising tone at the end of utterance, etc. These features were believed to be tied to women's subordinate status, and made women seem as if they were tentative, hesitant, lacking in authority, and trivial.

This approach is doomed to naivety and circularity unless it acknowledges that the same linguistic features can, when used by different persons in different contexts and cultures, often mean very different things.

Much of language is ambiguous and depends on context for its interpretation, a factor far more important than gender. In closer examination, there are few, if any, context-independent gender differences in language. The same words can take on different meanings and significance depending on who uses them in particular context. Imagine the words "How about meeting for a drink later, honey?" said by a male customer to a waitress he does not know or said by a woman to her husband as they talk over their schedules for the day. Such examples suggest that we need to seek our explanations for gender differences in terms of the communicative functions expressed by certain forms used in particular contexts by specific speakers. They also point to the complexity involved in reforming sexist language. We cannot simply propose to ban words like sweetie or honey from public communication because they can be construed as offensive in some contexts.

Women occupy what might be called a problematic or negative semantic space. Because women are devalued, so is their language. The question of language and gender seen from a feminist perspective must address not only the question of how women speak, but also, how women are spoken about.

If we accept the argument that what we call society is largely constructed through language, and the feminist argument that language is "man-made", then our history, philosophy, government, laws, and religion are products of a male way of perceiving and organizing the world. [Taylor 2003, c. 107].

Sexism in language can be demonstrated with many different kinds of evidence. Words for women have negative connotations, even where the corresponding male terms designate the same state or condition for men. On the cognitive grammar view, "connotation" is not a distinct (and secondary) level of meaning, but is fully incorporated into the semantic structure of a word [Taylor 2003, c. 202]. Compare the words *bachelor* and *spinster*. *Spinster* and *bachelor* both designate unmarried adults, but the female term has negative overtones to it. Such a distinction reflects the importance of society's expectations about marriage, and, more importantly, about marriageable age. A spinster is more than a female bachelor: she is beyond the expected marrying age and therefore seen as rejected and undesirable. *Bachelor,* on the other hand, tends to have a more favorable connotation; the man has remained unmarried because he has chosen to do so.

Some have speculated that the word *spinster* may be dying out. The original meaning of this word is a woman engaged in spinning. Because these women spinners were often unmarried, this connotation eventually ousted the original meaning and became the primary sense of the word. In the seventeenth century the term spinster became the legal designation of an unmarried woman. It appears to be still in common use in British English, as can be seen in the British National Corpus, where we can find 156 instances in a sample of 100 million words of text. By comparison, the word bachelor occurs 479 times, whereby men and their activities are more talked about than women and theirs.

If anyone has any doubt about the negative connotations of spinster, all they need to do is look at the range of words with which it is used. There are some neutral descriptive adjectives used with the word, such as *66 year old, disabled*. But the majority of words collocating with spinster are negative. They include the following: *gossipy, nervy, over-made up, ineffective, jealous, eccentric, love-/sex-starved, frustrated, whey-faced, dried-up* *old, repressed, lonely, prim, cold-hearted, plain Jane, atrocious, and despised.* By comparison, the collocations of bachelor are largely descriptive or positive, with the exception of one occurrence of *bachelor wimp.*

The words bachelor and spinster thus differ in many more ways than just the feature specification *male* vs. *female*. No doubt it is the gender bias implicit in the spinster frame that accounts for the relatively infrequent use of the word spinster, as well as the coinage of the expression *bachelor girl*. The expression attributes to single adult females the same motives for not marrying as to their male counterparts.

This example shows how the meanings of words are constructed and maintained by patterns of collocations. Collocations transmit cultural meanings and stereotypes which have built up over time. The problem lies not with words themselves, but how they are used. Seemingly gender-neutral terms such as aggressive and professional have different connotations when applied to men and women. To call a man a professional is a compliment, but to be a woman and a professional is perhaps to be a prostitute, in English as well in other languages as diverse as Japanese and French, where *une professionelle* is a euphemism for prostitute [Romaine 2000, c.109].

The cultural stereotypes about old maids in the marriage market also affect the term *maiden,* as in maiden horse to refer to a horse that has not won a race. The Oxford English Dictionary defines the figurative usage of the term maiden as sharing the meaning of "yielding no results." Woman who has not caught a man has lost the race. Other figurative uses such as maiden voyage, maiden speech, maiden flight, etc. referring to the first occasion or event of a kind relate to the stereotype that women should be virginal, inexperienced, intact, untried, and fresh in worldly as well as sexual matters.

Because the word woman does not share equal status with man, terms referring to women have undergone pejoration. If we examine pairs of gender-marked terms such as *lord/lady, baronet/dame, Sir/Madam, master/mistress, king/queen, wizard/witch*, we can see how the female terms may start out on an equal footing, but they become devalued over time.

Lord preserves its original meaning, while *lady* is no longer used exclusively for women of high rank. The use of lady as a polite euphemism for woman is far more common in Britain than in the USA. The term lady is not simply the polite equivalent of gentleman. It can be seen from the fact that lady is used in circumstances where gentleman would not be. We say *cleaning lady* but not *garbage-gentleman*. The expression *lady of the house* is not matched by *gentleman of the house*, but contrasts instead with *man of the world*, another indication of the linguistic mapping of the division between the public and private spheres onto male and female. The British National Corpus [http://thetis.bl.uk/lookup.html] gives 25 cases of *lady of the house*, 3 of *woman of the house*, none of *gentleman of the house*, and only 8 of *man of the house*. By contrast, there are 29 occurrences of *man of the world*, but only 12 of *woman of the world.*

Baronet still retains its original meaning, but *dame* is used derogatorily, especially in American usage. *Sir* is still used as a title and a form of respect, while a *Madame* is one who runs a brothel. Likewise, *master* has not lost its original meaning, but *mistress* has come to have sexual connotations and no longer refers to the woman who had control over a household. There is a considerable discrepancy between referring to someone as *an old master* as opposed to *an old mistress*.

King has also kept its meaning, while *queen* has developed sexual connotations. *Wizard* has undergone semantic upgrading; to call a man a wizard is a compliment, but not so for the woman who is branded as *a witch.*

It is not hard to see why women have been especially sensitive to gender differences in naming practices and forms of address since these are a particularly telling indicator of a person's social status. To answer Shakespeare's question of "what's in a name?", we could reply, a person's social place. To be referred to as "the Mrs." or "the little woman" indicates the inferior status to which men have allocated women.

Language reflects women's status, but does this mean that society has to change before the language can? Or can linguistic change bring about a social reform? Language is clearly part of the problem, but how can we make it part of the solution? One can compare the case of women to that of other minorities such as blacks, who have pointed out how the term "black" has negative connotations, as can be seen in terms such as "black market", "black sheep", "black ball".

Probably all deliberately proposed innovations are laughed at initially. Suzanne Romanie wrote in her book: "I noted some resistance, particularly in Britain, to accepting the title Ms. I had quite an argument with my bank before they allowed my full name to be printed on my checks without any title. Of course, some professional women have the option of using their titles to avoid being addressed as Miss or Mrs. I once had the experience of giving my title as Dr, to which I got an aggressive reply, "but is it Miss or Mrs?" [Romanie 2000, c.129].

Society's perception of men and women must change in order for linguistic reform to be successful. But language is not simply a passive reflector of culture, it also creates it. There is a constant interaction between society and language.

The reinterpretation of the feminist term Ms is a good example of how women's meanings can be appropriated and depoliticized within a sexist system. The title Ms has not entirely replaced the marked term Mrs, as was intended. It has been added as a new term of address alongside the conventional Mrs and Miss, or is seen as a replacement for Miss and thus is used more often than not in connection with unmarried women. Some studies showed that many people used Mrs for married women, Miss for women who have never been married and Ms for divorced women. For some people Ms also carries the connotation that a woman who uses the title is trying to hide the fact that she is single. These examples make clear that the introduction of the new term Ms has not altered the underlying semantic distinction between married and unmarried.

There are some signs that change has taken place to rectify some of the linguistic imbalances in English and other languages. Many government agencies, newspapers, publishing houses have style manuals prohibiting the use of sexist terminology. The United States Department of Labor has made some attempts to eliminate sexist language in their documents. It, for instance, revised the titles of almost 3,500 jobs so that they are sex-neutral. Thus, *steward* and *stewardess* are "out" and *flight attendant* is in.

In **conclusion**, it can be said that the study of gender differentiation is much more complicated than it at first appears. The existence of sexist language is not simply a linguistic but a social problem. Any remedy will require change in both society and language. Many women object to having to be labelled as married or unmarried when they give their title as *Mrs* or *Miss*. Men are all *Mr* and do not have to reveal their marital status. Feminists proposed *Ms* as a female equivalent of *Mr*, and it is now well established as an option. This came into use in the early 1970s, when it was adopted by feminists who did not wish to be publicly labelled as married or single, and some people still use it, or disapprove of it, for this reason. Nowadays it is often used to refer to women whose marital status is not known, and most people find this acceptable and useful. A woman should be addressed by the form she uses herself, whatever your own feelings on the subject. This is not to make a stand for or against feminism; it is simply good manners.

The perspective of this work can be the study of how the influence of gender differs from culture to culture and how it may interact with social characteristics of speakers such as social class, age, and context.

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