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HOW GENERIC ARE THE
MALE GENERIC PRONOUNS?

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Myth

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the roads. He smelled a familiar smell. It was the Sphinx. Oedipus said "I want to ask one question. Why didn't I recognize my mother?" "You gave the wrong answer," said the Sphinx. "But that was what made everything possible," said Oedipus. "No," she said. "When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered, Man. You didn't say anything about woman." "When you say Man," said Oedipus, "you include women too. Everyone knows that." She said, "That's what you think."

Was the Sphinx right in her skeptical reply to Oedipus' assumption that everybody knows that *man* includes woman? The same assumption is made by many--but do we use the words *man* and *he* in all cases where a generic word is appropriate or are these words relegated to only certain cases where a male subject seems most appropriate?

The problem is illustrated in the title to my paper: A few days after the program was printed and distributed, a friend of mine came up to me and pointed out an error in my title: "It's not a male generic pronoun--it's a masculine pronoun." I was embarrassed to admit that I hadn't been aware of the difference between male and masculine in that sense. She said that *man* referred to the male half of the species and that *masculine* was an arbitrary gender distinction between words. In using the phrase, "male generic pronouns," I unknowingly created an oxymoron, for anything that is truly generic, cannot be male--which brings us to the question: can *he* be a true generic and do we use it as such?

Language as a metaphor for human existence uses male-dominant metaphors--when we speak of the average, the hypothetical or the general human being, we use masculine words to describe it. *Man* is the unmarked word, *woman* is the marked. Our use of *man* when describing human experience, leaves the feminine image obscure, almost invisible and certainly unspoken.

Even if we change the word *man* to *human*, we are merely forestalling the problem until we need to use a pronoun. Mary Orovan described the problem this way:

Even if we manage to avoid words like "man" and "mankind" and use human and humanity; or citizen, person, parent or other neutral words, we are still tied to the masculine pronoun. . . . As a citizen, he is entitled to vote. . . . Whether it's merely ambiguous or patently instaling, using *man* instead of *human* is always distorted and damaging! The insidious thing is that woman can be included in man, or not, at the whim of the writer --or reader. Usually she merely remains invisible; out of sight, out of consciousness.²

This is a two-pronged problem: either women are invisible in our speech, or they come across as a special case: as Butler and Paisley termed it, "English allows women two choices: to be a linguistic variant or to be ignored altogether."³

Simone de Beauvoir described the idea of the linguistic variant in the title of her book, *The Second Sex*. In the introduction, she explains the otherness concept of woman:

Man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human₄ beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative.

The fact that we use gender qualifiers in words like *lady doctor*, *woman athlete*, *lady plumber*, suggests that a woman in any of these occupations is a deviation from the norm and that her gender puts her in a separate category from other, that is "real" doctors, athletes and plumbers. The suffixes *-ette*, *-ix*, *-ess* in words like *usherette*, *executrix*, and *poetess*, besides indicating the femaleness of the subject, also carry connotations of frivolousness, low prestige, littleness, confinement and cuteness. Alleen Pace Nilsen studied words which had feminine counterparts such as *waitress*, *governess*, *aviatrix*, *majorette* and *poetess*. The study indicated that, in almost every case, with the addition of the feminine suffix, the word suffered a drop in prestige.⁵

With the addition of a qualifier or a suffix, women are assigned to a special case; and, as Nilsen's study indicated, the case is not so special as we would like to think. Women are aware of the diminutive, frivolous qualities of these endings, and many women are beginning to resent their use. I attended a symposium last summer, and I heard Linda Sillitoe speak before a group where many historians were present. The person who introduced her, calling attention to her many accomplishments, noted that she was a writer, journalist and poetess. She accepted the introduction graciously, but then added, "I consider the term poetess in the same way that many of you would consider the term historiette."

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Another problem with the connotation of feminine words is their suggestive nature. It could be that I've heard one too many dirty jokes or that I've been privy to too many double entendres with sexual innuendo, or it could be that language has been dominated by males and reflects their way of looking at things. I'm not sure. I just know that I don't want to be called a *freshwoman* even if it is my first year of school. And when I finish my thesis--please don't tell people that I have a *Mistress* degree or that I'm a *professional*. But if my alternative to that is to be a *lay-woman*, it seems that I have not real choice in the matter as far as my reputation is concerned. And if I finally reach the point where I'm so respected that people want to address me by a title, well--you can call the men *sir*, but don't call me *madam*!

Men have no problem knowing whether they're the subject of a sentence, for when they hear the word *man*, it's certain that they're included. Women can't always make the same assumption. Often they have to suspend judgment until the sentence is completed or until several sentences are completed to know whether they've been included. Sometimes it becomes very confusing, especially when a writer swings from generic use of *man* to the specific use of *man* as in the following sentence: "Man is entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness--and to marry the woman of his choice."⁶

To be fair, I need to mention that there are occasions when *man* means woman and definitely *not* men. I can think of a few occasions. A New York Assemblyman is responsible for such usage: "When we get abortion law repeal, everyone will be able to decide for himself whether or not to have an abortion." Another is from an insurance policy: "If the employee becomes pregnant while covered under this policy, he will be entitled to . . ."⁸ And then there is a couplet by Mary Orován: "Man has two sexes, Some men are female."⁹

If we find these usages humorous, it means that we're seeing *man* used in an unexpected way. *Man* and *he* don't trigger images of women.

To study which pronouns are used in which contexts, I designed an informal survey which I administered to undergraduate and graduate students and to faculty members at BYU. I constructed sentences with generic subjects. Four of these subjects were traditionally male-related, four were traditionally female-related, four were neutral and four had indefinite pronouns.

If *he* were a true generic and included *she* explicitly, rather than implicitly, it could be used for sentences like, "Every nurse should care for his patients' feelings." and even "A good mother watches out for his children's safety." Of course I wasn't surprised when such was not the case with my findings.

Not only were people reluctant to use *he* in speaking of traditionally female subjects, they declined to use *he* for words like *everyone*, *someone*, and *anyone*, even though *he* is the current grammatically sanctioned choice, at least for formal usage.

The survey indicated the men tend to use the words *he*, *him* and *his* more liberally than do women. A greater percentage of women than men used either neutral or parallel language, especially where the subject was neutral or female-related. Both sexes used almost exclusively the word *their* for sentences with indefinite pronouns. For example, "If anyone calls, tell them I'll be back." The second most popular response here was the masculine pronoun.

I don't believe my statistics reflect accurately what happened here as long as I group my questions according to these categories. Different words in each category produced different results. For example, the same student might feel good about writing *he or she* when speaking of a nurse or an elementary school teacher, but that same student, will write *she* when the subject is a homemaker. In fact, only one student wrote *he or she* in response to the homemaker question.

I did not expect some of the responses that I received, but they were helpful in illustrating how students avoided having to decide the gender of a subject. Some students repeated the subject: "After a citizen has registered to vote, chances are that the citizen will indeed vote." Others omitted the pronoun: "A child should learn to respect parents' opinions early in life."

One point that my survey makes is that there are cases where *he* is not the preferred generic pronoun. Certainly this is true in cases where the subject is expected to be female. Of course, there is a difference in how strongly the gender of the subject is felt. *Homemaker* received more feminine pronoun responses than did *elementary school teacher*. *Electrician* received more male pronoun responses than did *pharmacist*. Although some students found *he* adequate to describe more neutral subjects such as *student* or *child* or *teenager*, a significant number used parallel language or neutral language.

My conclusion is that if *he* is a generic, it is a limited generic, not only in the contexts in which it can be used, but in its interpretation as well. Since *he* is so closely related to males and to our concept of what is male domain, then the perceived male-ness of the subject influences its use more so than does the generic quality of the subject. An area for research would be to ascertain whether a word is male- or female-related and how strongly that male or female image is felt.

I am not saying we should eliminate all generic usages of *he*; that would present another problem: How will the next generation view literature of the past where the writers have honestly used words like *man* and *he* to include all humankind? In a sense, by insisting on neutral pronouns and parallel language, we may be erasing women from much of the world's literature. Before, the feminine image may have been obscure--but I fear that her obscure image is in danger of being obliterated altogether.

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Still, if we continue to insist that everybody knows that *he* means *she*, we are failing to recognize women. We are like Oedipus in the poem I used to introduce my talk. When he responded with the word *man* to the Sphinx' question, he indicated his failure to recognize women. Small wonder, he could not later recognize his mother. The title of the poem is "Myth," which I think is the poet's judgment on our assumption that when we say *man* and *he* everybody knows we mean women too. Not only is this assumption a myth, but it shows lack of precision in both language and thought.

¹Muriel Rukeyser, "Myth," in *I Hear My Sisters Saying: Poems of Twentieth Century Women* ed. Carol Konek and Dorothy Walters (New York: Thomas Crowell, 1976), p. 243.

²Mary Orovan, "Humanizing English," n.p., n.d., p. 1, reprinted in "Sexist Semantics: An Investigation of Masculine and Feminine Nouns and Pronouns in Dictionary Sentences that Illustrate Word Usage as a Reflection of Sex-Role," by Helen Gershuny, (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1973), Appendix 5.

³Matilda Butler and William Paisely, *Women and the Mass Media: Sourcebook for Research and Action* (Madison, Wisconsin, Human Sciences Press, 1980), p. 35.

⁴Simone de Beauvoir *The Second Sex*, transl. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1963), p. v.

⁵Alleen Pace Nilsen, "The Correlation Between Gender and Other Semantic Features in American English," *Linguistic Society of America Bulletin* (28 December 1973), p. 6.

⁶Linda Waugh, "Marked and Unmarked, A Choice Between Unequals in Semiotic Structure," to be published in *Semiotica*, p. 10.

⁷Quoted in Gershuny, "Sexist Semantics," p. 31.

⁸International Association of Business Communication, "Without Biases: Guidelist for Non-Discriminatory Communication." n.d., p. 17.

⁹Orovan, "Humanizing English," p. 2.

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