Sexist Language: Fatherfuck or Genderspeak?

Mike Shortland and John Favvel

The numerous recent writings on sexist language have prompted the following exchange of letters between two members of the Collective:

Dear John,

I enclose the book on sexist language [1] I mentioned during our last conversation. I think it ought to be reviewed for the next RP. Would you take it on, perhaps adding in the Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing [2] too. Several of us believe RP should tackle the whole issue of sexist language in a serious and practical way - beyond simply inserting a note inside the back cover of the journal to the effect that 'Authors should write accessibly, and avoid sexist and racist formulations'. (I'm not sure we ought to have such a note anyway; for one thing 'accessibility' is difficult to define a priori, and for another it is an 'our job as editors to deal with this. If sexist or racist formulations were intrinsic to the piece we would either not be publishing it, or we would be publishing it precisely for its problematic position on this. This is, of course, to consider hypothetical problems.)

In practice, we work closely with authors to make their work clear in meaning and intention. Beyond that, my initial reaction is to beware of any great reformulations of language beyond those which, for example, would alter gender-specific formulations like 'chairman' to 'chairperson'. I am conservative in this regard not just because I hold the English language in high respect but because the impulse behind some of the linguistic prescriptions being advocated strikes me as crude and poorly thought through.

I have only skimmed through The HandBook, but chunks of it remind me of Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four. The whole intention of his Newspeak was that if one could manage to eliminate certain words from normal currency, the emotions the words labelled would also disappear. The point was that unexpressed thoughts and emotions atrophy. There is something frightening - or is it instead liberating? - in the notion that new linguistic structures and contents will reshape a person's view of reality and truth. In any case, is there anything more involved here than a satiric thrust against polysyllabic prose, vague pseudo-scientific concepts and ugly neologisms? Linguistic relativism which, according to Sapir [3], has the real world unconsciously built up on the language habits of different groups is a powerful theory, but how would one go about proving or disproving it? I will grant that the argument that a language biased against one sex can inflect harm upon members of that sex (and perhaps on members of the opposite sex as well) makes great psychological sense.

Mike Shortland and John Favvel

Notes

2 G. Preje, On Sense and Non-sense, in H. Preje and W. Sells (eds.), Reading on Philosophical Analysis, NY, 1949
5 I put the point in this picturesque fashion for effect. It is, of course, intended to be generalisable beyond husbands and wives.
7 J. L. Austin,
8 For, in Language, R. P. Grice, 'Meaning', in Philosophical Review, 1966
9 For example, Keith Graha, in 'Ilocution and Ideology', in Issues on Modern Philosophy, Vol. II, N. Sperber, 1981, argues that intentions are sometimes irrelevant in determining which illocutionary act has been performed. The speaker himself, he claims, may sometimes be unaware of the true import of his utterance.
10 The Papers of the House of Commons, 31 January - 15 August 1850, Bnllls, Papers 1.
11 H. Cixous, 'Estoration or Decapitation', Signs, Autumn 1981
12 I should like to thank Jonathan Soe, Martin Roper and Keith Graham for commenting on an earlier draft of this, and Noil Parker for his assiduous commenting on several versions.
But, in practical terms, would the elimination of 'man' in occupational titles open the way for women into those occupations? Does the status, role or authority of a 'chairman' change when he becomes a 'chairperson'? Doesn't a woman merely assume the mantle of that authority when she takes over the chair? And doesn't the use of a 'neutral' term like 'chairperson' actually disguise or distort the fact that the powers invested in the title, and the position the title occupies in a network of social relations, remain constant despite linguistic alterations?

I'll look forward to hearing from you.

Best wishes, Mike

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Dear Mike,

Thanks for the Vetterling-Braggin book. An interesting collection of essays, in which several schools contend. It even includes - the better to confute it in subsequent essays - the wild provocation of one Michael Levin: '... the warping of language to suit the ideological line of the new feminism ... ugly neologisms.... Like all bullies, the new feminists ...' and so forth. Or, to illustrate another aspect of the collection, how's this for clearing the decks (from a paper by Sara Shute)?:

I offer the following definition of 'sexist language' in any society S:

Sexist language exists in Sdf,

(i) There are names, terms, or expressions which are taken by speakers of the language to be appropriate to refer to or to characterize people who possess (at least) certain biological reproductive characteristics but which are inappropriate to refer to or to characterize those who possess (at least) certain other biological reproductive characteristics, and

(ii) There are names, terms, or expressions which are used to limit certain activities of people who possess (at least) certain biological reproductive characteristics, but not to limit those same activities to those who possess (at least) certain other biological reproductive characteristics.

Hardly the kind of thing to get the editor of The Sun to see the light, I fear. It seems to emerge unhappily from two misguided traditions: that philosophy is better the closer you can get it to look like Newton's Principia Mathematica, and that women in order to be academically respectable should write just like men.

No, I think we should be starting from the real problem, and take it from there.

All the best, John

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Dear Mike,

I won't argue about The Sun any more, beyond asking (rhetorically, if you like): What is philosophy for? But on style, as someone quoted in the first Miller/Swift book wrote, 'the style is the writer'. This strikes me as a more important point than you allow. The increasing feminist awareness of recent years offers the potential for a much more radical reassessment of disciplinary paradigms than has yet been universally conceded. Many of the papers in the Sexist Language collection are of the 'Let us, as Philosophers, examine this new phenomenon' variety. (A similar approach informs Janet Richards's remarkable attempt [1] to see feminism as floundering fiably until rescued by Oxford Philosophy). A worthy and comfortable enterprise, no doubt. But for radical thought we need to turn to someone like Michele le Doueff [2, or to Mary Daly's Gyn/Ecology [3] both attempts to think through the implications of feminism for philosophy, rather than slotting feminism into a pre-formed academic package.

Yes, I did receive your letter; and I agree that day-to-day decisions about language choice are the most pressing. As far as neologisms are concerned, I think one soon gets used to linguistic 'absurdities'. I'm more interested in lending support to those trying to create a non-sexist verbal climate than in safeguarding 'our' linguistic heritage. Language has always been pretty absurd anyway. Anyone worried by the use of the singular 'they', for instance, in place of 'he or she' (i.e. the generic 'he') can generally be calmed, if not silenced, by reference to Shakespeare: 'God send everyone their heart's desire.'

This type of solution, to cope with every problem of sexist words in an ad hoc fashion, does not speak to more difficult problems. It may be worth recalling an episode from the history of RP. In RP16 a book review began:

Through the sixties and early seventies English academic Marxism lay back with its legs open. We experienced the successive thrills of penetration by the giants of continental European Marxist philosophy.... It seems that this tradition of Western Marxism which has been inseminating our culture is now senile, perhaps even a corpse.... each time it was a more or less transitory affair and there soon followed a post-coital tristesse.

It has all been a rather confusing experience.... This paragraph aroused considerable anger among women readers, and an exchange of letters was printed in RP16. The 'Women in Society' Course Collective wrote to say this betrayed 'careless and uncritical participation in the worst sort of sexist ideology'. The reviewer, John Mepham, wrote to say that he had been misunderstood, that he was trying to criticise the politico-cultural policy of the New Left Review,
and that 'this deliberately and manifestly sexist image was used in order to make an anti-sexist point'. He sounded a bit bewildered that his irony had been so misconstrued. In response, Valerie Binney pointed out that his ironic metaphor was open to very different reading by women and men, and that it might have succeeded better had the review been written by a woman. More deeply, she drew attention to some difficulties in the metaphor itself: to appear to criticize the NLF for 'prostituting' itself to various bodies of European thought may call up suitable feelings of disdain for the journal, but leaves the metaphor uncharged.

The moral of this - besides instilling a due sense of caution in writers adopting the ironic mode - is that consciousness-raising about the metaphor itself: to appear to criticize the NLF for 'prostituting' itself to various bodies of European thought may call up suitable feelings of disdain for the journal, but leaves the metaphor uncharged.

In simple answer to your first letter, I think language important enough to require continual monitoring. Notwithstanding all you say about a 'linguistic heritage', the language you and I, and women and the editor of The Sun use, is not a unitary discourse but a site of conflict always open to contestation: a political, philosophical battlefield. The question is not whether we should take up arms, but who the enemy is and what weapons we should bear. I agree there will be casualties, some regretted, but c'est la guerre! Are we friends or foes?

Regards, John

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Dear Friend!

There are two issues involved in the example you use from a past debate in the pages of RP: one is linguistic, the other socio-political. (Before you reach for your sword, I know they are intertwined, but there is some value in separating them out for analysis.)

We could spend many hours debating exactly what we mean by our statement, but presumably we would agree that we both live in a 'sexist' society. This is something we oppose, and are committed to changing, so things which bolster sexism in society we fight against and things which seem to subvert it we support. Indeed, all sides of the debate in RP16 and RP18 would also call themselves 'anti-sexist'. The problem is that linguistic considerations often clash with anti-sexist commitments - hence the debate.

My impression is that you would always value your male feminist commitments above any attachments to linguistic freedom of expression, metaphorical flourish or ironic thrusts. John Mepham's use of a sexual analogy was carefully chosen but gave offence to some women. Had you been on the editorial board of RP at the time, and - let's make the problem more difficult - had you known that the passage would give offence to some readers, what would you have done? Would you have supported the decision? In my first letter I mentioned printing 'sexist' pieces precisely for their problematic positions on the relation between language and sexism; doesn't John Mepham's paragraph fall into just such a category? I think it does, although I don't particularly like the use of sexual analogy in this context, I would argue that its presence makes an important point about the reception of French Marxism into English political discourse. The reason I don't like the analogy is that it is open to misinterpretation and the whole point of example, illustration and analogy is to clarify not to confound.

I'm intrigued to know why it was that using the example of the sexual act was thought offensive, why writing of 'penetration', 'insemination', 'post-coital tristesse' and 'affairs' was believed by the author and his critics to be sexist. Am I the only one to detect a note of prudery and Mary Whitehouse-ness in many feminist critiques of 'sexist' discourses? I note, for instance, that Miller and Swift in The Handbook do not venture into the area of sex, obscenity and pornography. I find Virgil's point apposite: 'Shall we say boldly: kill, rob, betray; but that, only in whispers? But perhaps things today are more complex. To main, kill and plunder is fare for any audience; to have sexual relations fit only for adults. The anti-abortionists who favour capital punishment; the male politicians who criminalise prostitution; the feminists who demand leniency for murderers but full sentences for rape ... does not a strange myopia affect our vision of sexuality and crime?

Anyway, I find The Handbook's silence on sex mystifying, especially as the authors take such pains to impose a point of view on grammar, which should only have the points of view of precision and naturalness. John Simon, in his recent book Paradigm Lost, makes the point that the great majority of young girls are not likely to grow up miserable and psychically stunted by such constructions as 'Everyone must look after himself'. But I think the problem is not whether there are casualties, some regretted, but c'est la guerre! Are we friends or foes?

Best wishes, Mike

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Dear Mike,

Yes, I think the act probably is irredeemably sexist, in the present state of society, and the language used is a pointer to this. Catherine MacKinnon put
it succinctly in a recent paper [1]: 'Man fucks woman: subject verb object.' There is in fact a whole section of the Sexist Language collection devoted to this problem, which is welcome. (And men fuck men in The Guardian as well, you shouldn't forget. But that's something else.)

John Simon's remark is simply silly and thoughtless: of course young girls won't grow up 'miserable and psychically stunted' - or any more so than anyone else, at any rate. But they will grow up, unless something is done about it, into a society in which their existence is tacitly denied by such constructions as 'Everyone must look after himself.' You can defend any single such injustice by isolating it and saying that changing it won't make much difference; a wizard tactic for defending the status quo. The point is to work for a language which embodies our hopes and aspirations and ways of looking at the world, and if patriarchal sensibilities get bruised in the process, that's too bad.

Your challenge over what I would have done about John Mephams review is made simpler, not more difficult, by assuming one knew it was going to cause offence. In circles where people know one another, or can rely on levels of cultural understandings, your valued 'linguistic freedom' is fine. Only Jews can - and as things stand, should - get away with telling Jewish jokes. And RP could well print a few more ironic thrusts at the left (such as the immortal 'Peter Rabbit and the Grundrisse' of RP11). But feminists have enough problems with men without having to suffer the wit and wisdom of an almost entirely male collective.

Fraternally, John