

The sense of the noun 'man' is *ambiguous*. It is not clear whether or not the expression is to be understood in a neutral manner. The ambiguity allows for the continued subjection of the female. Evolutionists began by thinking neutrally and then, tacitly, switched to thinking in terms only of the male. Employers who advertise for a 'man' can trade on the ambiguity (a) to dissuade women from applying for the job; and (b) to appoint a male.

Here it is the confusion generated by the continued use of 'he' and 'man' in their purportedly neutral senses, I believe, which justifies the claim that continued use of this language serves to reinforce male oppression. So long as we can switch, unconsciously, from the neutral to the non-neutral senses, in one breath, we are silencing and excluding women.

There are two reasons, then, why 'he' language tends to reinforce unequal power relations between the sexes. First of all, the claim that there is a genuinely neutral sense of the term 'he' is, in fact, false; rather the introduction of such language presupposes unequal relations between the sexes. Its continual use reinforces oppression. Secondly, there are often tacit switches from the supposed neutral to the non-neutral sense, slides which confirm that a greater degree of importance is often attached to the male in the neutral use of the expression.

Use of 'he/man' language specifically, then, does seem to reinforce unequal power relations between the sexes. I would propose, however, that, rather than this indicating that these expressions are part of a male language reflecting a male reality, it suggests that such discourse is *ideological* - it functions to disguise the power relations between the sexes. These relations are not presented clearly, for all to see; rather it is because there is domination of one sex by the other that the expressions 'man' and 'he' can be used in their purportedly neutral senses. But, as we have seen, there is *really* no such thing as a neutral use of them.

To conclude: while I strongly disagree with the 'philosophical' strands in Dale Spender's book, I believe that she presents an array of examples from English, many of which do provide incontrovertible evidence of sexism in language. Recognising that 'he/man' language - as one case of such sexism - reinforces male supremacy is not at all to do away with that primacy. But it is a step in the right direction.

To say, as Spender does, that there are two realities - the male and the female - is not only to make criticism of the male 'reality' impossible, but it is to weaken the feminist case. Supposing that the phenomenon is ubiquitous makes it more difficult to see where sexism in language really operates. [12]

Alison Assiter

Footnotes

- 1 D. Spender, *Man Made Language*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980
- 2 G. Frege, *On Sense and Nominaton*, in H. Frege and W. Sellars (eds.), *Readings in Philosophical Analysis*, NY, 1949
- 3 F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, McGraw Hill Book Co. Toronto, London, 1966
- 4 See M. Dummet, *Frege: Philosophy of Language*, Duckworth, London, 1973
- 5 I put the point in this picturesque fashion for effect. It is, of course, intended to be generalisable beyond husbands and wives.
- 6 N. Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*, MIT, Cambridge, Mass., 1965
- 7 J.L. Austin,
- 8 See, for instance, H.P. Grice, 'Meaning', in *Philosophical Review*, 1966
- 9 For example, Keith Graham, in 'Illocution and Ideology', in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Vol.IV, Harvester, 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/her utterance.
- 10 *The Papers of the House of Commons*, 31 January - 15 August 1850, Bills, Papers 1.
- 11 H. Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation', *Signs*, Autumn 1981
- 12 I should like to thank Jonathan Rée, Martin Boxer and Keith Graham for commenting on an earlier draft of this, and Noël Parker for his assiduous commenting on several versions.

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 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 inflict harm upon members of that sex (and perhaps on members of the opposite sex as well) makes great psychological sense.

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

- 1 Mary Vetterling-Braggin (ed.), *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*, Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1981
- 2 Casey Miller and Kate Smith, *The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers*, The Women's Press, 1981
- 3 E. Sapir, *Selected Writings in Language, Culture and Personality*, edited by D. Mandelbaum, Berkeley, 1949

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 S=df.

- (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

Dear John,

Glad the book reached you. Did my letter get lost? Incidentally, the problem with the editor of *The Sun* is not that he has failed to 'see the light', but that he provides the light for millions of readers.

Do you think it our job, do you think it right for Miller and Swift in their *Handbook*, to address the controllers of the gutter press? For all its faults, *The Sun's* prose is consistently clear and simple and straightforward; I note that in their previous book [1] Miller and Swift supported the criterion of whether a term or usage contributed to clarity and accuracy. Hasn't this principle been ditched in their latest contribution?

Best wishes, Mike

- 1 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times*, Penguin, 1979

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 flabbily 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 Doeuff [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 RP18. 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 by 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 unchallenged.

The moral of this - besides instilling a due sense of caution in writers adopting the ironic mode - is that consciousness-raising about sexism in language does not stop with the kind of problem dealt with by the *Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing*. And being a male feminist is fraught with difficulties, open as he is to suspicion and lack of trust.

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

- 1 Janet Radcliffe Richards, *The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry*, Penguin, 1982. See also the essay-review by Jean Grimshaw, 'Feminism: History and Morality', RP30 and Richards' reply in RP31.
- 2 Michele le Doeff, 'Women and Philosophy', RP17.
- 3 Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, The Women's Press, 1979

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 its publication? 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 and,

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 Marxisms 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 maim, 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 *Paradigms 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 they would stand a chance of doing so by seeing paraded before them only those images of sex and sexuality which were cheapened, degraded and commercialised; or by seeing no images of sex and sexuality at all. Nonetheless, I refuse to accept that merely viewing sexist images makes sexist audiences, anymore than just to censor sexist language will make the society that traded in it non-sexist. So, I agree with you that problems of sexist language do not stop with the kind of issues dealt with by *The Handbook*; perhaps I would add that the problems *start* elsewhere - not with the use of language, but with the conditions that make this use possible, current and acceptable. I return to my first letter: will the elimination of 'chairmen' inaugurate chairwomen, or chairpersons? Does the censorship of sexist imagery stamp out the circumstances which generated it and the audiences which receive it?

One last point to ponder: men and women 'fuck' in *The Guardian*, 'have intercourse' in *The Times*, 'copulate' in textbooks, and 'make love' in *The Express* and *The Sun*. They do nothing in Miller and Swift's *Handbook*. Is the act so irredeemably 'sexist', and if not, in what terms is it most happily conducted? In the silence of the bedroom behind closed doors?

Best wishes, Mike

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 Mepham's 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

1 Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory*, Signs, Vol.7 (1982), pp.515-544.

