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WORKSHOP ON SEXISM IN LANGUAGE

by

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This workshop is intended for use with diverse groups in both academic and non-academic settings. In developing the workshop, we drew on our experiences with classroom discussions of the issue of sexism in language, a topic dealt with in our courses 'Language and Women' (Wheatley) and 'Female-Male Communication' (Badami). The responses of our students and of the community, business, and academic groups who have participated in the workshop suggest that the issues we address are worth raising, for feminists and non-feminists alike.

Purpose

Clearly, an implicit function of a workshop on this topic must be simply to focus attention on certain aspects of English and on proposed language reforms. But the primary purpose of this workshop is to increase participants' awareness of the complexity of this issue and of the consequent diversity of opinion which exists among both feminists and non-feminists. We believe that this awareness is crucial in developing respect for others' opinions, which in turn is a prerequisite for the eventual development of a form of language which is acceptable to most members of our society.

Materials

The materials consist of: a) an overview and agenda, b) a sentence list, c) a summary, d) a sentence list analysis, e) an annotated bibliography of books dealing with sexism in language and sex differences in language and communication patterns, and f) a list of guidelines on how to avoid sexist language.

The overview and agenda presents the workshop topic and format; it is distributed at the beginning of the workshop. The sentence list provides material for the participants to work with; it is distributed during the workshop.

The remaining materials are distributed in a packet at the end of the workshop. The summary contains brief essays on: definitions of sexism in language, the controversy over sexist and non-sexist language, and the pros and cons of language change. The sentence list analysis raises questions about the items on the sentence list; it is provided because time limitations may prevent discussion of all the sentences. The bibliography and list of guidelines suggest sources for further reference.

Format

1. The workshop begins with a brief talk in which we introduce one of the complexities involved in this issue: the differences in how people define 'sexism'. We have found that presenting the various definitions at this point helps the participants focus their discussions during the individual and small group exercises which follow. In the remainder of the introductory talk, we simply sketch out some of the questions to be considered and explain the format for the rest of the workshop.

2. Immediately after the introductory talk, we distribute a list of sentences containing words or language patterns which are controversial. (We have used different versions of the sentence list; the current list is composed of the items which seem to be of greatest interest and most susceptible to discussion in a short time.) Each participant evaluates these sentences individually. Then the participants work together in groups of 4 or 5 people, comparing their evaluations and rewriting the sentences which are judged to be problematic. Differences of opinion typically become apparent during these discussions.

3. When the groups have discussed most or all of the sentences (or sooner, depending on the amount of time available), we bring the groups together for a general discussion of the sentences. If necessary, we present possible reactions, alternatives, or arguments which have not been raised. However, in this discussion we concentrate primarily on bringing out the reasons for the disagreements that have emerged.

4. The discussion of the sentences leads naturally to a discussion of the pros and cons of language change in general. We elicit the participants' opinions and experiences, and we point out the assumptions which underlie different positions on this issue.

5. We conclude with a short summary talk. If necessary, we introduce relevant points which have not arisen due to time limitations or to the direction taken by the general discussion. We focus on clarifying the basic causes of the diversity of opinion on the issue of sexism in English.

Audience

We have used this workshop successfully with groups in community, business, and academic settings. Most groups have been diverse in background and opinions, but on occasion we have presented the workshop to an all-male group, an all-female group, or to a group composed only of feminists or only of non-feminists. Whatever the audience, the workshop seems to achieve our objective of making participants more aware of the reasons for current controversy over the topic.

Versions of the sentence list have also been used with success in the classroom in 'Language and Women' and 'Female-Male Communication' as a starting point for consideration of the topic of sexism in English.

The number of participants has varied from 10 to 40; about 20 is optimal.

Presenters

We have worked as an interdisciplinary team (linguistics and speech communication) in the design of the workshop and the preparation of materials. Once the format was established, we apportioned responsibility in presentation by having one of us (Wheatley) give the introductory and summary talks, and the other (Badami) lead the group discussion exercises. It would have been equally possible to assign each presenter to give one of the talks, and to divide responsibility for the discussion.

There are considerable advantages to the two-person format, including our ability to offer perspectives from two disciplines and to refer technical questions to the one of us with greater expertise. Most important for the impact of the workshop, whenever participants show inadequate understanding of an issue or initially express agreement on a subject, one of us acts as a 'devil's advocate' to offer alternative viewpoints. Whenever virtual unanimity of opinion is expected from the participants, it is especially effective to have two presenters, not only to express multiple points of view, but also to validate our assertion that diversity of opinion does exist.

Nevertheless, each of us has also presented the workshop alone. Although the merits of the dialogue format are lost, one person can easily handle the workshop.

Time

The workshop was originally designed for use in a 75-minute period. However, unless there are very few participants or the participants are

unusually uniform in their opinions, not all the material can be covered thoroughly in this amount of time. The presenters must therefore decide which topics to discuss at length. The summary and the sentence list analysis ensure that the participants can at least become aware of issues that have not been dealt with in the discussion.

APPENDIX: Materials

OVERVIEW

This workshop will explore some questions about sexism in English: In what ways is English sexist? How might we change English to eliminate sexism? What are the pros and cons of trying to change the language?

In seeking the answers to these questions, we will also consider a related issue: Why is language so controversial? Why do feminists disagree with non-feminists and with each other?

AGENDA

- A. Introductory Talk: What is 'sexism in language'?
- B. Individual Exercise: Sentence Judgment
Look at the list of English sentences we will give you. How do YOU react to these sentences? Mark the sentence according to your judgments.
- C. Small Group Exercise: Sentence Revision
We will divide into groups. Meet the people in your group, and compare your reactions to the sentences. Do you agree with each other? How would you rewrite the sentences that you don't like?
- D. General Group Discussion: Sentence Judgment and Revision
We will return to our large-group format to discuss our reactions and revisions.
- E. General Group Discussion: Pros and Cons of Language Change
How do you react to other people's language?
Are you offended by words you consider sexist?
Are you disturbed by changes that seem to you to be too extreme?
How do people react to you when you change your language?
Do you succeed in making people look at you or at women in general in a new way?
Do people think you are making a big fuss about nothing?
How important is it to change our language?
- F. Concluding Talk: A Summary of the Issues

SENTENCE LIST

Rate each of the examples below according to your own reactions to it. Imagine that you hear or see these examples somewhere—in conversation, in a newspaper, in a letter, etc.

- a) Mark each sentence as: ✓ — okay; no problem with this usage
 ? — awkward, strange or unusual usage
 X — offensive or unacceptable usage
- b) Circle any words or phrases that you find awkward, offensive, or unacceptable.

- _____ 1. The new chairman of our department got her Ph.D. degree from the University of Chicago.
- _____ 2. I met a very interesting lady at the conference yesterday.
- _____ 3. My cousin Nancy travels a lot because she's a stewardess.
- _____ 4. I addressed the letter to 'Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Page'.
- _____ 5. We should not underestimate the physical stamina of our species. Endurance in the face of great hardship is a notable characteristic of man. For example, pregnant women have been known to endure severe privation or exertion and survive to bear healthy children.
- _____ 6. My friend Carol will stand up for her rights to anyone. It really took balls to argue with her boss about the working conditions.
- _____ 7. The arguments for the defense were convincingly presented by a prominent woman lawyer.
- _____ 8. Voting against the proposal were committee members Richard Hegel and Deborah Sutton. Both Hegel and Ms. Sutton supported the alternative resolution which was defeated at last month's meeting.
- _____ 9. Anyone who wants to get ahead has to keep his nose to the grindstone.
- _____ 10. Time-Life Books, Inc.
Rockefeller Center
New York, NY 10020

Dear Sirs:

SUMMARY

Sexism in Language: Definitions

Our views of the problems with the English language, as well as of the problems with other aspects of our society, depend on how we define 'sexism'. Three common definitions are:

- (1) treating one sex, usually women, in a degrading or insulting way;
- (2) treating the sexes differently, regardless of whether the differences are openly insulting;
- (3) ignoring or overlooking one sex, again usually women.

The Controversy over Sexist and Non-Sexist Language

Our experiences in working with the sentences can help us understand why language is so controversial. First, we have seen that language is subjective. Each of us knows the meaning of English words, and we are able to communicate with each other because we are using these words to mean basically the same thing. But the meanings of the words are in our heads, not in the words themselves, and often these meanings are not exactly identical for every person. Because of this, a word may be sexist to one person, but non-sexist to someone else.

Secondly, even when we agree that a word is sexist, we may not agree about how we should change it. Our disagreements may be based on our ideas about what a truly non-sexist language should be like. Some of us believe that we should minimize the importance of gender, using neutral words like 'chairperson'. Others believe that our language should emphasize the presence and the good qualities of women, using words like 'chairwoman' to show women holding positions of authority.

In addition, even when we agree with each other in principle, we may disagree about specific proposed changes. For example, some of us are pleased with new terms such as 'Ms.', while others dislike the sound or look of the new term. Also, a new term may be opposed by those who consider it unlikely to gain widespread acceptance, but favored by those who are more optimistic about its prospects or who are less concerned with general usage.

In conclusion, we have found that people disagree about what certain words mean, what goal we are aiming for, and which new forms are best. Therefore, it is difficult even for a group of people who agree that sexism is a genuine problem to agree on how to make English non-sexist.

The Pros and Cons of Language Change

There is a more fundamental question which, in a sense, precedes any debate about specific language reforms: SHOULD we try to change English? To answer this question we must consider two other questions:

(1) How significant a problem is sexism in language?

Many people feel that sexism in language has a widespread, though subtle, influence, and that eliminating sexism is well worth the effort involved. These people believe that language reforms can improve the image of women in general and improve each individual woman's self-image—for example, by making her feel more comfortable with the name and title she uses, or with the words and patterns she uses in her own speech and writing.

However, other people feel that reforming the language itself is not really necessary, since language patterns reflect societal patterns. These people believe that changing the image of women will naturally lead to changes in the meanings and connotations of words. For example, if societal patterns change, people will come to know that 'chairman' is as likely to be a woman as a man.

Finally, some people view the issues of language as overshadowed by some other, more urgently needed changes—such as the ERA—and therefore choose to concentrate their interests and efforts on other problems.

(2) Is language change an effective means of consciousness raising?

Using new terms or objecting to offensive terms can make other people more aware of the existence of sexist patterns in our society. In this sense, language change is a valuable instrument for consciousness raising.

On the other hand, new language forms may alienate some people; these people may fail to understand the reasons for the changes, and believe that the issue of sexism in language is trivial or even ridiculous. This can contribute to people's viewing sexism in general as an unimportant issue.

In conclusion, there are no clear-cut answers to these questions; each of us must answer them on the basis of our own values, opinions, and experiences. Therefore, we cannot expect universal agreement—even among feminists—on the importance of language change.

SENTENCE LIST ANALYSIS

These are some questions that have been raised about English words and usage patterns like those illustrated in the sentence list. There are no right or wrong answers to most of the questions; your answers will depend on how you define sexism, what each word means to you, and how you feel about the issues involved in language change.

1. According to the rules of traditional usage, *chairman* can refer to a male or a female. Is this true, or does the *-man* ending exclude females? If so, should we use a feminine form, like *chairwoman*, or a neutral term? If we want to use a neutral word, should we say *chairperson*, *chairone*, *chair*, *chairer*, or a totally different word like *head*? The same questions arise with other terms involving *-man* (or *-woman*), such as *policeman* and *fireman*; in these cases, *police officer* and *fire fighter* are widely-accepted alternatives.
2. What is a *lady*? Does this term evoke traditional sex roles (*ladies and gentlemen*)? Does it trivialize women, as some people have suggested? Or is it a polite, deferential term? Or simply a synonym for *woman*? Whether you prefer the term *woman* or *lady* for a female adult of good character may depend on your age, your background, and your geographical location.
3. a) Is *stewardess* objectionable, because it can refer only to a woman? (Is there a corresponding masculine term? *steward*?) Is the sexually neutral term *flight attendant* an improvement? Do people still assume that a flight attendant is female, or, conversely, do they use this term only for males and continue to use *stewardess* for females?
b) In general, are sex-specific occupational terms and terms with *-ess* objectionable? (Does English even have a masculine suffix comparable to the feminine suffix with *-ess*?) If these terms are objectionable, is it always possible to find a good alternative? What about *actor* and *actress*? *Waiter* and *waitress*?
4. Titles and names raise a number of questions.
a) Is the title *Mrs.* objectionable, because it shows marital status, as *Mr.* does not? If so, should we use *Ms.* (pronounced 'mizz')? Some other title? No title at all?
b) Is it objectionable for a woman to 'lose' her name completely in formal address, using her husband's first name (*Mrs. Thomas Page*)?
c) Is it objectionable for a woman to adopt her husband's surname? If so, what alternative is better—hyphenating the two surnames (*Linda Willis-Page*), either for the woman only, or for both? Retaining one's maiden name—which is usually one's father's surname? Inventing

a new surname? Any alternative also raises another question: what surname should be given to children? (Hyphenating may work for the children, but isn't that just a temporary solution? What will the next generation do?)

d) Why do we always say *Mr. and Mrs.*, never *Mrs. and Mr.*? Is this part of a general pattern of customarily putting the term for the male first? (Consider *male and female*, *husband and wife*—but *ladies and gentlemen*.) If so, is this pattern a problem? Should we switch to putting females first, or alternate?

5. According to traditional usage, *man* can mean all humans. This practice is known as the generic (as opposed to sex-specific) use of *man*. Can *man* mean all humans, or is there a contradiction in including pregnant women in the group called *man*? If so, what term is better? *Mankind?* *Genkind?* *Humans?*
6. If *balls* in a slang sense means *courage*, is it possible for a woman to have balls? If not, does this mean that women are seen as less courageous than men, or does it merely reflect the physical fact that women do not have male sex organs? Does the existence of this slang term suggest that at least some members of our society equate courage with virility?
7. When a woman holds a position traditionally occupied by males, should we use a gender adjective with the occupational term? What about men holding positions traditionally occupied by females (as in *male nurse*, *male secretary*, *male model*, *male prostitute*)? If we indicate gender, does it affect our image of the person's position or competence? If we don't indicate gender, do we lose important information? Should we avoid gender adjectives, using them only when absolutely necessary (as in 'the first woman lawyer in that firm')?
8. Is it common to refer to men by last name alone, but to women by title and last name? If so, is this custom appropriately respectful toward women? Or is it offensive? If it is offensive, what would be better—titles for both, or for neither?
9. Traditional rules of grammar say that when we are talking about a person of either sex, we use the pronouns *he*, *him*, and *his*. This is known as the generic use of *he*. Are these pronouns really sexually neutral in this situation, as some people claim, or are they still masculine, excluding females? If this pattern is sexist, what can we do about it? Is it always feasible to use the plural instead? (For example, 'People who want to get ahead have to keep their noses to the grindstone.') If not, can or should we introduce new pronouns? Should we accept *they* as a singular pronoun in this type of sentence, as many of us already use it in speech? (For example, 'Anyone who ...

wants to get ahead has to keep their nose to the grindstone.')

10. How do you address a letter to a company or an unknown person? Is *Dear Sirs* (or *Gentlemen*) offensive because it implies that the reader will be male? If so, what alternative is better? Some suggestions are: *Dear Sir or Madam*; *Gentlepeople*; *Friends*; a term specific to the particular situation, such as *Dear Publisher*; or no salutation at all —just begin the letter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

These books explore some ideas and present some facts about sexism in language and about differences between the sexes in language and communication patterns.

1. *Words and Women* by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1977.

This is a popular and easy-to-read book, which uses examples from advertising, magazines, TV and literature. Miller and Swift deal with a variety of topics, including the importance of words and naming, the use of the word *man* to mean both women and men, the history of gender in English, the language of religion, words in dictionaries, and slang. They advocate language reform and discuss a number of proposals in detail.

2. *Body Politics* by Nancy M. Henley. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977.

This is a very readable textbook, subtitled 'Power, Sex, and Nonverbal Communication'. Henley's preface begins, "If you care about power, if you care about how power is wielded *over you*, this book is for you. It describes how the way we sit, smile, take up space, stare, cock our heads, or touch others is bound to our power relationships. Body language is not composed only of messages about friendship and sex; it is *body politics* also." In addition to examining nonverbal communication, she comments on spoken language. Henley contends that most changes in language and behavior will not succeed unless they are accompanied by significant changes in society.

3. *The Sociology of the Languages of American Women* edited by Betty Lou Dubois and Isabel Crouch. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University, 1978.

This is a collection of papers presented at a 1976 conference at New Mexico State University. Topics include speech patterns of southern black women, elderly rural whites, adolescent Chicanos and Chicanas, and men and women at faculty meetings and at academic conferences. Since the papers present research reports or summarize debates on research priorities, this book will be of greatest interest to academics.

4. *Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance* edited by Barrie Thorne and Nancy Henley. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1975.

This anthology is primarily about sex differences in language and communication patterns, although some of the articles deal with sexism in language. It contains an extensive annotated bibliography, organized by topic; this is now somewhat outdated, but still quite use-

ful. Most of the articles are interesting and worthwhile; however, a few of the research reports included in the volume are rather difficult reading.

5. *Male/Female Language* by Mary Ritchie Key. Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1975.

The book deals with many aspects of sexism in language and sex differences in language and communication patterns. Key discusses a number of other languages in addition to English, and uses examples and anecdotes extensively to clarify and support her points. The book also contains a comprehensive bibliography. Thanks to its style and the frequent cartoon illustrations, it is enjoyable reading.

6. *Language and Woman's Place* by Robin Lakoff. NY: Harper & Row, 1975.

Lakoff introduces her book by saying, "In this book I have tried to see what we can learn about the way women view themselves and everyone's assumptions about the nature and role of women from the use of language in our culture, that is to say, the language used by and about women." She reflects on the patterns and implications of her own speech and that of the people around her. Lakoff concludes that most language change efforts are futile, because language reflects society; she believes that change must start in society, not in language. Lakoff has been criticized for relying on her own experiences and impressions about language rather than collecting data.

7. *Sexism and Language* by Alleen Pace Nilsen, Haig Bosmajian, H. Lee Gershuny and Julia P. Stanley. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977.

This is a collection of essays dealing with sexism in language. Specific topics include courtrooms, literature, marriage, dictionaries and texts, and children's books. The appendix consists of the NCTE Guidelines on sexism in language. The book is interesting, although some of the papers show a tendency to overgeneralize.

8. *Sex Differences in Human Communication* by Barbara Westbrook Eakins and R. Gene Eakins. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1978.

In this textbook the authors discuss the differences between men and women in their self-image, their spoken language, their conversational patterns, the sound of their voices, their uses of nonverbal communication, and their reactions to sexist language. It has some thought-provoking illustrations and cartoons, but it is flawed by a tendency to overgeneralize—that is, to say too often, "It is said that...", without giving sources for the statements made.

GUIDELINES

Single copies of most of these guidelines are free of charge. If you wish to obtain more copies, check directly with the publisher to discover if there is a fee.

Publishers

1. *Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications* (16-page pamphlet)

McGraw-Hill Book Co.
1221 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Reprinted in *Elementary English*, vol. 52 (May 1975), pp.725-733.

Definitions of sexism; commentary on the roles of women and men, including job stereotypes, life style, and career options. Examples of sexist language and suggestions for alternate forms.

2. *Guidelines for Creating Positive Sexual and Racial Images in Educational Materials* (1975; 96-page pamphlet)

Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.
866 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Deals with both sexism and racism. Contains 'general content guidelines' for both topics, plus specific 'language-usage guidelines' related to sexism. Includes numerous examples of non-acceptable language and graphics, with suggestions for preferred forms. Also contains suggestions for textbook writers and teachers of specific subjects (reading, mathematics, music, etc.).

3. *Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks* (1974; 11-page pamphlet)

Scott, Foresman and Company
1900 East Lake Avenue
Glenview, IL 60025

Brief definition of sexism; general guidelines for text and illustrations; recommendations for avoiding sexist language. The latter section comprises the main part of the pamphlet, with many examples and suggested alternatives.

Academic Organizations

1. *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language*

American Psychological Association Task Force
on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education
American Psychologist (June 1975), pp.682-684

Reports on the results of a content analysis of 13 major textbooks commonly used in graduate education in psychology. Notes that sexism tended to take the form of omission rather than commission (that is, infrequent presentation rather than misrepresentation). Offers stylistic and substantive guidelines for authors of texts and articles in social science. The article is recommended in the 1975 'Change Sheet' for the *APA Publication Manual*.

2. *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications* (1974; 11 pages; NCTE Stock No. 19719)

National Council of Teachers of English
1111 Kenyon Road
Urbana, IL 61801

Reprinted as 'Appendix', in Nilsen and others, *Sexism and Language*, 1977.

Definition of and introduction to the general issue of sexism; general problems of language are listed with examples of problematic language and suggested alternatives; includes specific suggestions for authors, teachers, and researchers.

BOOKS RECEIVED

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