

Language and Gender

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Outline:

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- II Two favorite examples:
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 - B The Great Pronoun Debate
- III A parting word on a topical matter: 'coed'

I Theoretical orientation

Language: Is the meaning in the words, or in our heads? What are the nuts and bolts of linguistic communication?
What you understand of what I say depends on what is in YOUR head, not mine. There is nothing 'in' the words themselves: just sound, or ink.

II Two favorite examples

A Language and the development of gay identities *The love that dare not speak its name.* -Oscar Wilde
Quotations from Leap (1996), from interviews of gay men — teenaged to middle-aged — about how they had difficulty naming themselves and finding information about their sexual orientation:

1 The absence of language about homosexuality in the community leads to a lack of identity for young gay males (and by inferential extension, young lesbians). How do you formulate, delineate, categorize, express a concept if there is no language for it — especially if there is no *communally shared discourse* about the norms for a category of people / behavior?

a. *"At the time I had no idea what being gay meant or what homosexuality was because nobody talked about it. I can't say that I heard any negative comments about it growing up either from my family or from school. There was just silence."*

b. *"From 13 until my bar age which was 17, I kind of was in touch with myself and I knew what was happening internally, but as far as it relating to the rest of the world, there was this vast desert of ... nothing. No information, no individuals I could go to, really. I mean, I had two teachers [whom he suspected were gay] and that was it, I think."*

c. *"There was an awareness that things aren't always the way you are told they are. It's like being an expatriate in another country and you can view your own country from that distance."*

d. *"When you are gay and twelve years old in a small town in western Kentucky like where I grew up ... you don't know anyone else who is gay ... The extent of gay life as you know it are scribbles on a bathroom wall."*

e. *"There was one book in the school library but I never had the courage to check it out 'cause it had 'GAY' written on it. But, I did sneak a few peaks at it. It was a prize-winning novel written by a man about how he felt about homosexuality. I wanted to check that book out so bad. But, I didn't. I just knew that whoever the librarian was who stamped my card would look at that book, see that it was about being gay, and automatically say, 'Why Vincent, you're a faggot, aren't you?' So I never got to read it — except for the cover."*

f. In the film *Ma vie en rose*, the lead character decides at one point that he is a 'garçon-fille': a 'boy-girl'. He doesn't feel comfortable with just *one* label, so he creates a new one from the vocabulary available. He proudly announces this discovery of a term for himself, only to be corrected that he is a 'garçon'.

g. *"... later, in my senior year, when I was seventeen or eighteen, I had an English teacher, too. It was real interesting, our relationship, because he was very, very 'pull student aside and get into their lives' kind of thing. I do not know for what reason, but he did that with me ... he knew I was gay and kind of brought me out a little more ... he approached me and said: How does your mother feel about this? And I said: Wow! And I told him, and the dam was lifted, and all the information I needed in my life was there ... "*

2 And what if there *is* discourse, but the messages are uniformly negative?

h. *"The first name I had for what I was was 'cocksucker'. Must have been seven or eight. It was years before I*

heard 'homosexual', more years til I heard the word 'gay'. The word 'cocksucker' was an awful word the way they used it, but it meant that my condition was nameable. I knew I was awful, but I finally had a name for all those odd feelings. I wasn't nothing. I was awful, but I wasn't nothing."

i. "Brothers [a TV sitcom] had an effeminate stereotyped gay man. That was a good example of how not to talk; I didn't believe gay people talked like that. Consenting Adult related a view which I knew was true and was looking for: a normal guy can be gay."

j. Jokes as an information source:

"Driving into a small town, a tourist notes the name of the community — Queerville — and wonders how the town got its name. When he stops at a gas station to fill up the tank, he asks the attendant. 'I don't know', the attendant replies, let me ask my wife. He turns to the side door and shouts 'Hey, Ralph!'"

One student in Leap's study reported hearing this joke in a locker room after basketball practice. Thereafter calling someone 'Ralph' was enough to get a laugh out of any listener. But this boy's internal reaction was: "I laughed too, but I kept thinking: Does this mean that two men can live together? I mean, OK, I knew that this was a joke, but I kept wondering, where is this place and how can I get there?"

3 Even language that seems neutral (e.g., no insults are directly stated) leads very naturally to inferences of abnormality or deviance.

A questionnaire for heterosexuals: Questions typically posed to homosexuals, when directed towards heterosexuals, reveal the base concept that homosexuality is deviant, but heterosexuality the norm.

(I don't know the source of this.)

1 - What do you think caused your heterosexuality?

2 - When and how did you first decide you were heterosexual?

3 - Is it possible that your heterosexuality is just a phase that you may outgrow?

4 - Is it possible that your heterosexual feelings stem from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?

5 - If you have never slept with someone of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?

6 - Why do you heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into your lifestyle?

7 - Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?

8 - A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexual. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?

9 - With all the social support marriage receives, the divorce rate is skyrocketing. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?

10 - Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?

11 - Considering the problem of world overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone were heterosexual like you?

12 - How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to exclusive heterosexuality without developing your homosexual potential?

13 - There seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed which might enable you to change. Have you considered aversion therapy?

B The Great Pronoun Debate: 'he', 'he or she', 'they'

a. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify his registration.

b. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify her registration.

c. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify his or her registration.

d. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify her or his registration.

e. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify their registration.

f. Students should use CAPTURE to verify their registration.

g. Each student should use CAPTURE to verify registration.

AAAAARGH!!

Is there a *scientific* way to settle this question? The role of descriptive linguistic research and of empirical psychological research in finding out what a word means to listeners/readers, and which usage is most natural for English speakers.

1 Descriptive linguistic research: Which came first — generic 'he', 'he or she', or 'they'?

The answer, historically verifiable, is 'they' and 'he or she', both in use in written (and therefore certainly also in spoken) English from its beginnings (around 500 A.D.) through the eighteenth century (see Bodine 1990 [1975] and references cited therein). 'They' used as a sex-indefinite singular can be found in the works of the greatest writers of English literature, including Shakespeare. It was not edited out by either authors or printers, indicating that it was

acceptable usage. It is also in common use in speech today, and frequently shows up in writing when someone ‘slips’. Therefore, use of ‘they’ and ‘he or she’ as sex-indefinite pronouns is a long-standing *fact* of English usage, and has come under attack only since the Renaissance.

The prescription to use ‘he’ when a singular sex-indefinite pronoun is needed stems from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century movements to standardize and ‘purify’ English along class lines, enforcing the English of the higher socioeconomic brackets as the only English acceptable in schools and in publishing. This movement has been spectacularly successful. Gender bias was part and parcel of this movement:

“Some will set the Carte before the horse, as thus. My mother and my father are both at home, even as though the good man of the house were no breaches or that the graye Mare were the better Horse. And what though it often so happeneth {God wotte the more pitte} yet in speaking at the leaste, let us kepe a natural order, and set the man before the woman for maners Sake” (T. Wilson, 1553, quoted in Bodine 1990 [1975] p. 171).

“The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine” (J. Poole, 1646, quoted in Bodine 1990 [1975] p. 172).

The new rule permitting only ‘he’ as a sex-indefinite pronoun was codified in influential grammar books published in later centuries, for instance the work of L. Murray, whose grammars were very influential in the development of American education:

“RULE V. Pronouns must always agree with their antecedents, and the nouns for which they stand, in gender, number, and person ... Of this rule there are many violations. ‘Each of the sexes should keep within its particular bounds, and content themselves with the advantages of their particular districts’. ‘Can any one, on their entrance into the world, be fully sexure that they shall not be deceived?’ [citing usages he views as incorrect] ‘on his entrance’, and ‘that he shall’ [citing the usage he prescribes]. ‘Let each esteem others better than themselves’, [replace with] ‘than himself’ ” (Murray 1795, quoted in Bodine 1990 [1975] p. 173).

Contemporary admonitions to change from ‘he’ as a sex-indefinite pronoun to ‘they’ or ‘he or she’ are challenged as ungrammatical, illogical, or as attempts to change or corrupt the language. The rule of using only ‘he’ was in fact the attempt to change the language, and it has only succeeded in formal usage, or among those who carefully adhere to rules of ‘proper English’ in all their usage.

2 Psychological evidence: What thoughts are evoked in a person’s mind when they hear or read ‘he’ intended as a sex-indefinite pronoun vs. alternatives such as ‘he or she’ or ‘they’?

Usage manuals traditionally simply state the meanings of words with no defense or empirical support, as in Strunk and White, 1979:

“The use of he as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances.”

Those who have bothered to look have verified that they are wrong about the beginnings of English. Are they also wrong about the loss of ‘all suggestion of maleness’? YES, according to a few clever psychological studies:

Moulton, Robinson and Elias (1978) presented 490 college students with the task of making up a story featuring a named fictional character (not themselves) in response to a prompt such as *In a large coeducational institution the average student will feel isolated in _____ introductory courses*. 1/3 of the subjects received the prompts with *his* in the blank; 1/3 with *his or her*, and 1/3 with *their*.

Results:	Story character gender under prompt condition						
	<i>his</i>		<i>their</i>		<i>his or her</i>		
	M	F	M	F	M	F	
1 Female:	41%	59%	35%	65%	20%	80%	
2 Male:	90%	10%	83%	17%	78%	22%	
3 Across genders:	65%	35%	54%	46%	44%	56%	

Khosrashahi (1998 [1989]) compared male and female students on two parameters: (a) which sex-indefinite pronoun(s) they used in their own college papers — *he* or *he or she*, and (b) their responses under a condition similar to that of Moulton, Robinson and Elias. 55 Harvard undergraduates were asked to read several paragraphs, then draw an image of the person(s) depicted in the paragraph, and then give the image a name. Sample paragraph:

It is usually believed that crying reflects sadness and smiling reflects happiness. However, things are not always this simple, and ambiguous cases do exist. For example, an unhappy person could still have a smile on ____ face.

Again, the blank would be filled in by *his, his or her, or their* for equal numbers of survey participants. There were some generic images drawn, given generic names such as *Terry*. But these were not the majority of results.

Students' own usage leaned slightly towards the traditional: Of the 55 subjects, 13 women and 12 men used at least a few instances of 'he or she' in their college papers.

"Men [whether they used 'traditional' generic 'he' or 'reformed' 'he or she'] produced fewer female and more male figures than women, but almost as many generic images [as women] ... men drew many more male characters than female ones [overall] ... Reformed-language women produced significantly more female than male figures ... whereas traditional-language women generated significantly more male images than female ones" (Khosrashedi p. 270)

That is, the only group which seemed to achieve equity in conceptualization as prompted by the paragraphs were the women who had ceased using generic *he* in their own writing.

Across all subjects, the % of images generated under each condition were:

Pronoun	Male image	Female image	generic image
he	67%	18%	15%
he or she	54%	34%	12%
they	63%	25%	11%

The results of the two studies are not out of wide disagreement with each other. They seem to indicate that:

a • The communicative effect (meaning?) of words can (should?) be investigated by empirical, scientifically valid means.

b • For the majority of subjects in experiments like this, generic 'he' evokes the image/concept of a male, not equal instances of male and female.

c • The usage which seems to come closest to achieving equity in concept/image evoked is 'he or she'.

d • Historically and contemporarily, 'they' is the most natural response of English speakers to the need for a sex-indefinite pronoun.

e • Men seem resistant to the activation of concepts/images of females, even under prompting with 'he or she'.

We need:

- i • More research of this kind to verify these results across larger numbers of people, preferably of different age and occupation groups.
- ii • Experimentation of this kind with 'she' used generically, to see if that raises the frequency of men's conceptualization of females.
- iii • To cease requiring (and perhaps even allowing??) 'he' used as a sex-indefinite pronoun in student writing and in our own usage, and move to 'he or she' where stylistically acceptable, avoidance of need for gender mention where it is not, and to consider accepting 'they' as a sex-indefinite pronoun (I do this already in my classes; the journal *Language*, the most prestigious of linguistics journals, accepts generic 'they'.)
- iv • To pressure whomever we can to become aware of the reality of the *non-neutrality* of generic 'he' (journals, magazines, newspapers, many of which still require 'he') to change their requirements.

For those who insist that generic 'they' is incorrect grammatically because it is a plural and you are trying to use it as a singular — I recommend the following response:

Thou art completely right! Now, canst thou suggest a way to halt the clearly ungrammatical use of 'you' as a singular? I am sure that, like me, thou hearest abominations such as 'you are a wonderful person' all the time! If the verb occurring with 'you' is 'are', then 'you' is surely grammatically a plural, and cannot refer to a single individual. What is thy solution? I am listening hopefully to thee!

III A parting word on a topical matter: 'coed' The word violates several guidelines for non-biased language usage.

- a • It is a gender-specific term for which there is no counterpart that has exclusively male reference.**

Up-to-date guidelines for nonsexist and nonbiased usage advise writers to avoid using terms without counterparts.

b • The word is **redundant in context**.

c • The term **makes unnecessary reference to the referents' gender**.

d • Another major guideline of nonsexist usage is to **avoid terms that are used almost exclusively to refer to or describe women**, such as 'vivacious' or 'petite'. 'Coed' refers exclusively to women.

e • There are also ideological arguments against this word. Using words that highlight their gender **suggests that their gender is somehow relevant or important to their status as students; it is not**. The word has, for many, **sexual overtones that are irrelevant to the social or occupational roles of women**.

If you, too, find the use of 'coed' in the local media offensive or just plain clueless, make your views known! Write, call, e-mail. Here is the address for the news director of KSBY-6:

David Colby, News Director
KSBY-TV
467 Hill St.
San Luis Obispo, CA 93405
URL: www.ksby.com (with a 'feedback' button for messages)

Sources:

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Khosroshahi, Fatemeh. 1998 [orig. published 1989.] Penguins don't care, but women do: A social identity analysis of a Whorfian problem. In D. Oaks, *Linguistics at work: A reader of applications*, pp. 260-283. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Leap, William. 1996. Gay English in a 'desert of nothing': Language and gay socialization. In Leap, Wm., *Word's out: Gay men's English*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press

Moulton, Janice, George M. Robinson, and Cherin Ellis. 1978. Psychology in action. Sex bias in language use: "Neutral" pronouns that aren't. *American Psychologist* vol. 33, pp. 1032-1036

For an example of sexist usage that cuts both ways, see:

—>> Rubba, Johanna. 1999. Of war and words. *New Times*, Apr. 29, 1999.

Web sources/bibliographies on language and gender:
<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/gender.html>
<http://www.ling.nwu.edu/~ward/gaybib.html>