

## COMMENTARY

### ON THE RECENT DECLINE OF GENDER NEUTRAL LANGUAGE

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#### ABSTRACT

Despite accomplishments of the Feminist Movement and the widely disseminated ideals about equality for women, cultural myths and stereotypes still prevail in the U. S., Europe, and elsewhere. In the latter stages of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, gains had been made in the use of non-sexist, gender neutral terminology for governmental and legal usage, in business and the media, higher education, and many other venues. However, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a creeping decline in the use of gender neutral expression in written and spoken forms. In this commentary, critiques are noted, examples are presented, and suggestions for improvement are offered.

**KEY WORDS:** gender neutral language, gender inclusive language, 21<sup>st</sup> century feminism

#### THE PROBLEM

With the rise of the Feminist Movement in the 1960s, consciousness raising efforts led to emphasizing the effects of patriarchy the world over. Now many women work in the paid economy. Women are increasing in the number of college graduates, particularly in the fields of law and medicine, dominated in the past by men. The explosion of women's scholarly research and publications, their popular literature and electronic documents, and their presence in media productions has been overwhelming. But despite these accomplishments and the widely disseminated ideals about equality for women, cultural myths and stereotypes still prevail in the U. S., Europe, and elsewhere in the world. With wry humor Gloria Steinem, the outstanding American feminist, illustrated how technology has changed gender stereotypes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She told her audience at a Smith College commencement in 2007 that in her generation, women were asked how many words they could type in a minute, a question that was never asked of then all-male student bodies at Harvard and Princeton. Female-only typing was rationalized by supposedly greater female verbal skills, attention to detail, and smaller fingers. At that time the public could not envision male typists, certainly not Ivy-League-educated ones. Steinem noted that now computers had come along, that "typing" now was called "keyboarding," and that suddenly men could type!

It is well known that those espousing feminist views have advocated for gender neutral and gender inclusive use of language in both written and spoken forms. During the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it seemed that gains had been made in the use of non-sexist, gender neutral terminology for governmental and legal usage, in business and the media, in educational publishing and major news sources, and in religious writings, as well as spoken sermons and services. However, in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I have noticed

the creeping decline of the use of gender neutral expression in written form, as well as in the spoken rhetoric streaming from U.S. presidential candidates and others running for political offices. Particularly the traditional labels "man", "mankind" and "man-made" seem to have returned to both the printed and spoken form in the media, the arts, sports reporting, U.S. federal government reports, and local newspaper articles. Here are some examples I collected in the early months of 2012.

#### CURRENT EXAMPLES OF GENDER BIAS IN WRITTEN LANGUAGE

A news report on commemorating the Titanic disaster: "...the disaster was just this terrible comedy of errors, both man-made and natural."

A news report on the raging fire in a mountain community: "Man-made burns blamed for starting wild fires...."

A U.S. federal agency statement on weather conditions: "...extremes that could become more frequent because of man-made climate change from the burning of fossil fuels such as coal and oil."

Sports reporting in the newspaper on skiing conditions: "Vail Resorts is committed to making as much man-made snow as possible, as needed, said a company spokeswoman."

A major art museum's brochure on the featured exhibit: "The variety of materials used to document mankind's significant thoughts and beliefs during this long span." And in another section of the museum's brochure on the same exhibit: "Throughout mankind's written history and even before it, the human spirit has sought to find sacred significance in the existing world."

From the *National Geographic Magazine*, April 2012, an article on the Titanic disaster authored by Hampton Sides: "On closer inspection, the site appears to be littered with man-made detritus."



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In the prestigious *New York Times*, Sunday Review Section, the headline and featured article blared "Man-Made Epidemics," although the body of this extensive article about the rise of worldwide infectious diseases never used the words "man-made."

A spoken example reported in the media. The former president of Harvard University said: "...part of universities' function is to keep alive man's greatest creations."

At this time I am not aware of specific discussions, dialogue, arguments, or writings about the decline of gender neutral language. However, it is my opinion that the use of "man" (e.g., man-made) has returned due to the creeping conservatism in the U.S. brought on by the financial down turn and conditions in the broader, global society. This trend toward linguistic practices of times past seems to be taking hold in a milieu of uncertainty, both fiscal and social.

## CONCERNS ON THE RETURN OF "MAN-MADE"

As an author, researcher and instructor for over four decades, the topic of gender neutral writing has been a particular concern of mine. The ever-present discrimination that seems evident in written materials, such as those statements above using "man-made", "mankind", and "man", irritates me. Wordsmiths label this practice the pseudo-generic usage of man/men/mankind or the lumping together of both men and women alike. Anthropologists, sociologists and socio-linguists have reiterated for decades that language, written and spoken, powerfully influences attitudes, beliefs, and all types of behavior. Language usage reflects cultural traditions, customs, and values. But trends and practices in the use of language, written or spoken, change rapidly in our contemporary societies.

Some vociferous criticisms have been launched against the use of gender inclusive language in written and spoken form. Literary scholars, such as Jacques Barzun (2000), insist that there are long established sources going back to ancient times, such as versions of the Bible, making it obvious that the masculine pronoun refers to both female and male individuals. Also, the argument arises that using gender neutral language is awkward both for speaking and for writing. In response to those disputing the use of gender neutral language, one can point to today's shifting social and cultural attitudes. Current trends indicate that public and private businesses, government, and other organizations have become more sensitive and concerned about how language usage affects women and girls. Often it depends on how we broach a social or cultural matter when using rhetoric denoting gender. The structure of a language, its grammar or geographical variations, can influence usage. Furthermore, differences in culture or ethnicity affect usage (Garcia, personal correspondence, 2012; Garcia 2004).

Another line of reasoning asserts that much of gender neutral language is unnecessary because society has overcome gender bias and now none exists. This assertion is obviously erroneous. Continual media and news reporting readily confirms that

equality for women is an illusion. Critics of gender neutral language will bring up the issue of political correctness (Schwartz 2010). However, gender neutral language is not a question of political correctness, it is a civil rights issue calling for equal treatment and regard for over half of humanity. Numerous publications, handbooks, and guides available in print and online challenge the assertions negating gender neutral usage. Among them are *Guidelines on Gender-Neutral Language* (UNESCO 1999); Miller and Swift's *The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing: For Writers, Editors and Speakers* (1988); and Peters' *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (2004).

In her helpful guide to fair and accurate use of the English language (*Talking About People*, 1997), Rosalie Maggio reminds us that biased language refers to people in imbalanced or inaccurate ways. It leaves out certain individuals or groups. The directive: 'Employees are welcome to bring their wives and children' leaves out those employees who might want to bring husbands, friends, or same-sex partners. "Sexist language promotes and maintains attitudes that stereotype people according to gender while assuming that the male is the norm – the significant gender...When words like mankind, forefathers, brotherhood and alumni got a foothold in the language, it was because men were visible, men were in power, and that is what their world looked like" (Maggio 1997: 2,5).

## STRATEGIES FOR ALLEGIANCE TO GENDER NEUTRAL USAGE

There are useful techniques for everyday written correspondence, as well as professional writing, that one can employ to avoid the pitfalls of biased writing, particularly the pseudo-generic use of "he." Wordsmiths recommend: Rewrite the sentence in the plural; omit the pronoun "he" entirely; substitute we/us/our; use the second person "you"; replace "he" with words like "someone," "anyone," "one," "the one," "no one"; use genderless nouns/phrases such as "the average person or worker" or write out "he or she" or "her or his." Now in the new century, feminists, academics, educators, journalists, and other professionals are better recognizing that how we use language, written or spoken, really matters. Wording does affect our thinking. Manuscripts and drafts of papers, research reports, and news articles can be redlined indicating biased phrases and words, particularly "mankind" and "man-made," when "people," "humankind," or "humans" will express the point just as well. Utilizing "man" or "to man" as a verb is another example. This type of biased usage is unnecessary. For example, the phrase "having a guard to man the control room" is easily re-worded without losing the meaning, as "having a person as guard in the control room."

Spurred by the prospect that gender inclusive usage is in decline, another strategy for its maintenance is that all of us be on the alert in identifying biased written and spoken verbiage. I have provided a number of examples that I recently collected from national newspapers and media sources. Readers of this commentary can do the same. Then action can be taken by in-

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forming the source of this biased usage by phone, email, or direct personal communication. In the case of the exhibit brochure at a major art museum, a gentle protest brings awareness that the public is concerned about the use of mankind when "humankind," "people," or "humans" would do just as well.

Yet another, complementary approach is to proactively alert others – family members, relatives, co-workers, friends, and neighbors. We can help them to be aware of gender biased expressions that can be re-worded. Following on the examples provided earlier, easily overlooked but quite humorous, is the announcement on the skiing conditions at a well-known ski resort. The statement, purportedly coming from a "spokeswoman," proclaimed that man-made snow would be ready for skiing. The spokeswoman could have said the resort was committed to making snow with machines and left "man-made" out, since it was not necessary. Proactive awareness of the use of gender inclusive language is still essential in moving toward equality in contemporary society.

Finally, the role of staff, teachers, and faculty in higher education is critical. Once again they are called upon to examine the curricular and media materials, textbooks, workbooks, written assignments, and educational supplements for gender neutral language. It is possible that biased, sexist language has crept back into once-carefully developed work. Educators are crucial in the maintenance of gender inclusive language, whether written or spoken. The classic saying of anthropologists, "as we speak so we think," reinforces the point. Gender inclusive and gender neutral speaking and writing are all the more necessary in an era of financial downturn and worldwide turmoil.

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