

Nonsexist Language: Successes, Neologisms, and Barbarisms

Jane L. Buck

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It is a common practice to require psychology majors to learn to write papers in the style described in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (*American Psychological Association* [APA], 1983). The *Manual* insists on the use of nonsexist language and devotes several pages to a number of useful suggestions for nonsexist substitutions for sexist terms.

Several of my colleagues and I have encountered a certain amount of resistance, as well as confusion, from students when the use of nonsexist language is made part of the style requirements for research papers. Students have expressed opposition for a number of reasons, two of which have been the most common in my experience.

Some students defend a conservative view of language in which the use of the masculine gender is said to include the feminine. Others fail to understand or appreciate the underlying reasons for the requirement. One male student complained that being asked to eliminate sexist terms was an infringement on his First Amendment rights to free speech. Confusion often centers on the difficulty involved in choosing the best nonsexist alternative to a sexist usage. Confusion and resistance afford opportunities to discuss English etymology and questions of style and clarity as well as the invidious effects of sexist (and, of course, racist) language on individuals' self-concepts. The following discussion covers some of the linguistic issues that provide the basis for fruitful discussion.

I encourage students to use the suggestions contained in the *Manual*, such as the use of plurals to avoid the generic masculine pronoun and the substitution of gender neutral terms for masculine ones. In addition, it is often instructive to explore other approaches, including those appearing in the popular media. I have identified two major approaches to developing nonsexist language: the invention of neologisms and the substitution of extant, but often less familiar, terms for sexist ones. (The use of parallel feminine and masculine terms, such as actor and actress, has lost respectability, because it does not promote gender neutrality.) Neither approach is inherently superior, but neologisms seem to strain the limits of good form more frequently, possibly because their inventors are not familiar with the linguistic underpinnings of the language.

Examples of neutral substitutes are the *Manual's* suggestions (in addition to *people*) of *humanity*, *human beings*, *humankind*, and *human species* to replace *man* and *mankind*. Some people object to these substitutions because they contain *man* and are, therefore, as sexist as the words they replace. In response, one waggish colleague suggested that we replace *humanity* with the neologism *hupeople* (familiarily, *hupeops*). In the same vein, a few writers have suggested *herstory* as a replacement for *history*. Although the inclination to extirpate any mention of *man* or masculine-sounding words may be rooted in a genuine concern to raise consciousness about sexism, it reveals an ignorance of etymology that results in barbaric usages.

The Latin *humanitas*, the root of *humanity* and its relatives, is a wonderfully comprehensive--and grammatically feminine--noun meaning *humanity*, *human nature*, *human feeling*, *kindness*, *refinement*, and *culture*. The Romans, however, gave equal time to the male gender by assigning masculinity to *humanus*, an individual person. *History* derives, ironically, from a Latin noun of feminine gender, *historia*; the *his* in *history* has no connection to the Anglo-Saxon pronoun.

The *Manual* offers *chair* or *chairperson* as substitutes for *chairman*. In this instance, *man* does refer to a male person, as it does in *manhole* cover and *fisherman*, and gender neutrality requires another form. *Person*, used either as a prefix or suffix sounds unwieldy when attached to a word of more than one syllable. Thus, *chairperson* has entered the linguistic mainstream, but *personhole* cover and *fisherperson* have not.

Despite successful attempts to eradicate sexist language, there remain several useful words that are inextricably, if subtly, associated with one or the other gender. *Seminal*, derived from *semen*, is necessarily masculine, and *hysterical*, derived from the Greek word for uterus is necessarily feminine. I propose, in the first case, the substitution of *germinal*, a gender neutral word almost identical in meaning. And when men exhibit behavior that would be considered hysterical in women, they might be *testerial*, except that now we have compounded the problem with another sexist term. *Gonadal* could serve as a gender neutral substitute, thus creating a whole new set of diagnostic terms. A colleague, who objected to *gonadal* on aesthetic grounds, suggested *hysterical/testerial*.

Replacing sexist with nonsexist terminology fulfills both a stylistic requirement of APA publications and the need to be sensitive to the effects of language on psychological development. The search for appropriate, etymologically sound gender neutral terms is a worthwhile and intellectually stimulating enterprise.