

The Failure of “She”
An Evaluation of Solutions to Gendered Language

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THE FAILURE OF "SHE"

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Abstract

This thesis looks at the prevalence of gendered language in modern day English in North America. Drawing upon different analyses of masculine pronouns and slang, this paper argues that modern solutions to gendered language fail to come to terms with the contextual elements of language. While acknowledging that gendered language is a significant problem, the author argues that the solutions thus far presented, specifically replacing the generic pronoun “he” with “she,” cannot combat the way language reflects societal masculinization. Using Wittgenstein to criticize a Heidegger’s notion of language, this paper argues that societal change is a prerequisite to the success of linguistic substitutions for gendered language.

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The Failure of “She,”

An Interrogation of Solutions to Gendered Language

Introduction

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, many feminists criticized gendered language in great depth. Gendered language, so called because certain words carry the connotations of masculinity and femininity as well the markings of sex, has been approached from many angles. Kirby’s Rule in the 1700s indicated that, grammatically, the generic pronoun for a group of individuals was *he* and that humanity may be deemed *mankind*. With this rule, the concept of the generic male pronoun began to pervade the English language.¹ The he/him pronoun is used frequently in American English to denote individuals of both genders; it is considered a neutral pronoun. This may be known as the *He/Man* approach, and signifies the use of male terms to refer to humans generically as well as to males.² Criticisms of gendered language do not stop at pronouns; words for generic professions such as *actor* or *congressmen* are androcentric. The colloquialism “you guys” is used for all members of a group. Slang and profanity are rife with patriarchal words including the images conjured by the terms *spinsters*, *crones*, and other, far more derogatory, words. Even comparable terms for men and women reinforce a patriarchal order in which linguistically women are deemed lesser. The use of the dual terms of Mrs. and Ms. to refer to women, as well as many other marital traditions,

1. Ann Bodine, “Androcentrism in Prescriptive Grammar: Singular ‘they,’ Sex-Indefinite ‘he’, and ‘he or she,’” *Language in Society* 4, no. 2 (August 1975): 135.

2. Wendy Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man’ Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language.” *Signs* 5, no. 3 (Spring 1980): 483.

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reinforces cultural stereotypes of women and indicates their belongingness to men. *Mrs.* combines *Ms.* with *Mr.* while the male referent stays the same. There are other, more significant, gendered words in profanity, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

There is a need to criticize the false neutrality that generic pronouns provide. The word *man* shares a dual purpose: according to Kirby’s Rule, it is a generic regardless of sex but also means those who are male. The generic use of the term *man* to refer to all people is similar to how one uses the word *Tide* to refer to all laundry detergent or “Clorox” to refer to all bleach, though the latter are acceptable synecdoche and the former represents gendered language.³ The erasure of difference in a generic and the masculinization of a generic pronoun are ubiquitous in American English.

There are many philosophers who have argued for alternatives to gendered language. There are ways to use some traditionally gendered terms without a male component. For example, *Homo sapiens* and *humankind*, *man power* and *workforce personnel*, *manmade* and *manufactured*, *spokesman* and *spokesperson*.⁴ These solutions, however, may fail as the origins of many words in English come from other languages which are even more gendered. The word *personnel* is a masculine noun in French, as opposed to the feminine *personnelle*. While this shows that gendered language may be inevitable, these philosophers have demonstrated ways to mitigate its usage in English. Solutions to gendered language must be interrogated as greatly as the language itself.

3. Lynne Tirell, “Language and Power,” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar, and Iris Marion Young, (Oxford, U.K.: Blackwell Publisher, 2000), 145.

4. Diana Viorela-Burlacu, “Sexist and Non-Sexist Language,” *International Journal on Humanistic Ideology* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 84.

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Many philosophers argue that linguistics needs to be studied on its own terms; they indicate that societal context matters less than the words in and of themselves. These philosophers, drawing on Heidegger, argue that language exists as a center of analysis in and of itself. Societal context may be important, but language exists outside of it, almost having its ontology. Wittgenstein answers Heidegger and shows that the signs of language can only be interpreted in social context. The social context of language matters in the context of gender because certain ideas of gender are influenced by society. Systemic oppression is the stratification of society along gendered lines, where one gender is deemed as and treated less than the other. This may be implicit, such as different portrayals of men and women in the media, or explicit, such as pay discrepancy. If gendered language truly reflects a larger systemic oppression, then an analysis of language *qua* language fails to come to terms with gender stratification. Importantly, the idea that language only reflects and does not cause societal gendered stratification also means that successful solutions to gendered language must come to terms with society's understanding of what it means to be a *he* and a *she*. Replacing *he* with *she* will never be able to remedy the difficulty of gendered language, and may in fact represent a more pernicious problem for the communicator who wishes to be cognizant of gendered language.

The Power of Gendered Language

The Importance of Language

Language is a system of symbols that shapes the way one interprets the world. According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, language determines our thought and

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behavior.⁵ While this is rarely deterministically true, language has a great influence on our behavior and how we interact with others. Language is central to communication; it is how we interact with one another and how they understand our thoughts. Language does not exist neutrally; it is influenced by our interactions and place in society, creating a feedback loop between our linguistic choices and our social categories, especially gender categories.

Language matters; this is why many governments have laws against hate speech. Everything we understand has meaning through language. While mental categories or pre-linguistic understandings of the world may be prior to language, language is an important analytical process as it articulates our thoughts, including pre-linguistic thoughts.⁶ These are thoughts one has before they are articulated in language, though some may argue those do not exist. The importance of language is reflected in everyday public policy; the sheer amount of time and effort it takes to establish the correct wording for legislation shows the importance American society places on language.

Without language, it becomes difficult to comprehend societal categories. We do not understand what the category of man or woman means without contextual language.⁷ When we describe what it means to be a man or a woman, this description matters because it reflects reality. Language is a form of representation; just as representation matters in popular culture, such as in television and movies, it also matters in everyday

5. Martyna, “Beyond the He/Man,” 492.

6. Laura J. Shepherd, “Women, Armed Conflict and Language – Gender, Violence and Discourse,” *International Review of the Red Cross* 92, no. 877 (March 2010): 144.

7. Ibid.

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language. When we hear, see, and communicate certain expectation about men and women, those become norms that we associate with all men and women. The norms we internalize come from what we see and hear around us; these norms shape how we interact with others. For example, the media’s representation of women as stay at home mothers teaches society that it is normal to be stay at home mothers.⁸ In other contexts, when women are represented as powerful in television and movies, credence is given to powerful women in the world. While this is not the only way society is taught to value women, media representation reflects and enforces appropriate and inappropriate gender roles in society.

Feminism and Language

According to Lynne Tirell “feminism,” is “a struggle to end sexist oppression by eradicating both the means by which the oppression is carried out and the ideology that seeks that it be carried out.”⁹ If language is a symbolic system that one uses to constitute their world, that symbolic system can embrace or erase certain ideologies. Language can enhance or erase the representation of women. If feminism’s goal is to stop the oppression of women, either its cause or its effects, feminists should examine gendered language as a part of their struggle. This does not mean that language creates violence towards women, but rather that patriarchal violence is mutually constitutive language. They both combine to constitute the lived experience of women. Accordingly, feminists should analyze language at either a byproduct or producer of sexism. While it is true that feminism must be concerned with gendered language, some of the solutions to gendered

8. Ibid., 148.

9. Tirell, “Language and Power,” 139.

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language fail to come to terms with the social constructed-ness of language. It is important that feminism become aware that their solutions, thus far, have had difficulty in combating gendered language.

Certain linguistic categories reflect important social categories.¹⁰ There are few places that the violence of gendered language can be analyzed as accurately as in the workplace. The connotations associated with the job *plumber* versus *pipng specialist* show the importance of language and the value that it puts on certain professions. This concept can be applied to gender; as gender categories become naturalized, a person who is called feminine has a different connotation than one called masculine. The former is used derogatorily more often than the latter. “Hitting like a girl,” for example, is to say one cannot fight or is passive. This has a highly negative connotation. To “man up” is to show strength and character.

Traditional feminist interrogations of linguistic violence rely on the female as the marked body upon which masculine generics reinforce inferiority. In this view, intent matters less than the effect of the word choice. One may not intend to hurt women in the room by referring to a mixed gendered group as male, but in many male-dominated circles refusing to recognize the participation of women can erase their experience. In STEM fields—science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—where women are underrepresented, this may create and reflect masculine environments where women are unwelcome. The answer, however, cannot be to simply change generics. There must be a broader criticism of the reasons language reflects that violence.

10. Ibid.

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William C. Gay indicates that violence is a strong manifestation of power. Critics are correct in that the etymology of words does not make those words violent, but they betray the domineering attitudes of the speaker. One question that arises in many discussions of gendered language is whether or not victims must be aware of the violence to experience it. The argument goes that if a subject is the victim of a burglary but does not notice it, has violence been done?¹¹ Gay argues that unknowing oppression is not oppression; to be offended one must acknowledge offense. Yet, instances of violence or systemic oppression towards women are unique. To take a more closely related example, women can still be discriminated against in the workplace without knowing it. It is not the knowledge that causes violence, but the material effects of the monetary discrepancy. Similarly, language can present women in a certain light, even if certain women are not aware of it. Discussions in the male locker room that objectify women are still objectifying even if a woman never becomes aware of it. Similarly, discussions that objectify men in a female locker room can still have broader implications on how those women view the other gender when they leave their private spaces. Accordingly, men and women do not need to be cognizant of oppression to experience it.

In the same way, one may not necessarily need to know that gendered language is oppressive, or at the very least exclusionary, to be effected by it. . Because gendered language reinforces societal views of women as negative, through giving negative connotations of femininity such as ‘hitting like a girl,’ women are affected by those societal views even if they aren’t there to experience the language. Sexist jokes in a male

11. William C. Gay, “The Reality of Linguistic Violence against Women,” *Gender Violence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Laura O’Toole and Jessica Schiffman (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

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dominated field, even if unheard by a woman, create an insular environment in which women are not welcome. This is especially true in areas in which women are clearly the minority. These may be implicated by what is known as “benevolent sexism.” This is the belief that men should provide for women, as being the provider is a signal of power in a relationship.¹² Many women and men have internalized this and created certain gendered ideals of relationships. The words that society uses to refer to generic individuals of either gender may reflect these ideas.

Much of this is reflected in the concept of gender constructivism. Children are active agents and the environment is one source of their information. When gendered pronouns are used in their environments, it constructs societal notions of gender to them. Sexist language, in this sense, becomes a form of propaganda for children.¹³ While the differentiating between men and women in language is not necessarily problematic, it is when those differentiations negatively affect either males or females disproportionately that the language becomes a problem. A young child only thinks ‘hitting like a girl’ is an insult if that phrase has been used around them with a negative connotation.

For those who still discount the importance of analyzing gendered language, there does not seem to be a negative to changing language. Why not give women both equal rights and words? Non-sexist language is an important symbol, through a symbolic source, of moving towards a new ideology that enables people to communicate precisely

12. Rachael D. Robnett and Campbell Leaper, “‘Girls Don’t Propose! Ew’ A Mixed-Methods Examination of Marriage Tradition Preferences and Benevolent Sexism in Emerging Adults,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28, no. 1 (22 June 2012): 96-121.

13. Cambell Leaper, and Rebecca S. Bigler, “Gendered Language and Sexist Thought,” *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development* 69, no. 1 (May 2004): 128-42.

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and without oppressive systems determining our pronoun usage.¹⁴ While the language itself may not create oppression, the negative connotations about women which pervade society has an effect on what language we use. This language then effects how we see the world, creating a cycle of stereotyping. Whether or not this amounts to violence is

Though many feminists believe that intent doesn't matter, the blatantly sexist reactions to the call for a change in discourse betray clear patriarchal intent. In fact, there has been a strong backlash toward the use of non-gendered language. Some rail against the non-gendered pronoun *they* as it supposedly violates grammar rules, even though it was for decades even before Kirby's rule. Many questioned the pedantic use of the formal *one*. Beyond these generally legitimate criticisms, some mocked solutions by ironically replacing words such as *nomenclature* with *nopersonclature*. This mocking may show the negative intent, or at least indicate deep-seated difficulty for feminist change.

Though there are correlative, if not causal, signs between the reactions to the feminist movement and the patriarchal use of generics, it does not follow that the use of the gendered terms arises from a sexist intent. Yet, oppression, if not material violence, can occur from the use of gendered discourse, even if the recipient is unaware. Violence does not always occur as a result of gendered language, but it may create situations in which women's experiences are not acknowledged.

Examples of Sexist Language

Naming is a powerful force. It can insult or uplift. Female generics that are the counterpart of male generics tend to be derogatory; this is true of the previously listed

14. Martyna, "Beyond the 'He/Man,'" 478.

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examples, as well as many uses of profanity.¹⁵ The word *master* effectuates a positive domineering connotation; a man that is in charge and powerful. However, the female equivalent, *mistress*, may call to mind an unfaithful woman, or a spinster. It is more probable that negative connotation arises from the female generic than a male generic; there are few instances in which the connotation of *mistress* is positive, let alone as strongly as the connotation of *master*.

The power of gendered language can also be explored in marriage. *Mrs.* and *Ms.* are categorical terms which imply something unique about the person to which they are referring. If an employer addresses an individual as *Miss*, that employer may see that woman, regardless of her age, as a child. That language reflects the employer's view of the woman, and together the language and context create a negative environment. This can have material effects, such as underpaying her. The employer may not connect the infantilizing language with her salary, but associating this term with a woman may allow her employer to treat her as an irresponsible girl.¹⁶

Man is an anchor in language while *woman* is not.¹⁷ There are virtually no female-based generics. In fact, the consequences of referring to a man as a woman are obvious. The use of *woman* as a generic when there are men in the room is frowned upon, and will likely incite backlash.¹⁸ Through gendered language, it is argued, men are

15. Andrea Nye. “Semantics,” in *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar, and Iris Marion Young, (Oxford: U.K.: Blackwell Publisher, 2000), 157.

16. Tirell, “Language and Power,” 140.

17. Sherryl Kleinman, “Why Sexist Language Matters,” *AlterNet*. March 11, 2007, accessed March 4, 2014. http://www.alternet.org/story/48856/why_sexist_language_matters.

18. *Ibid.*

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unmarked and women are *marked* as different or anomalous.¹⁹ When women are left entirely out of the picture by the use of male-centric generics, these generics indicate the female as the inferior. This usage connects femaleness with inferiority, as they aren't even deemed a linguistic place.²⁰ These terms perpetuates the erasure of women from the public sphere. Accordingly to Nye and other philosophers, using the term *mankind* legitimizes behavior that can harm women because they aren't considered part of the public sphere.²¹

To those who may think that the harm of gendered language is an exaggeration, studies show that women, as opposed to men, are called beautiful in job interviews; the physical attractiveness of females is made relevant determining their expertise. The phrase *beautiful* itself becomes gendered; it is unlikely that such a discussion would arise if the applicant were male.²² Men, on the contrary, were not deemed fit for a job based on attractiveness. The way language is used reflects the dominant notions of a female/male divide. Gendered language must be analyzed, therefore, in its context. Certain uses of language may be oppressive, possibly even sexist, in some scenarios, but harmless in others. In the workplace focusing on the attractiveness of a female candidate is inappropriate; outside of the workplace that same language may be flattering. The social context of word choice is particularly prevalent in gendered language.

19. Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man,’” 485.

20. Tirell, “Language and Power,” 143. Some quantitative analysis of the transition from using *he* as a gender pronoun to *she* as a generic pronoun would be a useful avenue of future research. This could show the dynamic trends in changing pronouns.

21. Nye, “Semantics,” 156.

22. Tirell, “Language and Power,” 144.

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Some even argue that women using gendered language either are denying their identity or pretending to be a man. Some philosophers say that when a woman uses gendered language she has internalized oppressive norms.²³ If the words themselves are the issue, even a female using them is problematic. Regardless of the speaker, the power of language and dominant structures entwine to create a difficult route for women to traverse.

The words women use may reflect their self-image. There is a difference between the terms *girl* and *woman* and a different self-concept when a woman thinks of herself as the former versus the latter. Many women are referred to as *ladies* or *gals* but rarely as women. The term *woman* has a more assertive connotation and may even insinuate reproductive abilities. The word *lady* removes these strong connotations, and recreates passive usage. The term *girl* eviscerates any authority that women have. *Girls* and those called that word, are encouraged to be passive and lovable, characteristics disparaged in men.²⁴ The societal context of the word *girl* facilitates an environment where the use of that word to refer to grown women is infantilizing; this may, in turn, have an effect on their ability to be taken seriously in the workplace.

As for pronouns, consider the ridiculousness of the following sentences:

“Menstrual pain accounts for an enormous loss of manpower hours,” or “man, being a

23. Liz Bondi, “In Whose Words? On Gender Identities, Knowledge and Writing Practices,” *The Royal Geographical Society* 20, no. 2 (1997): 253.

24. Harriet Lerner, “Girls, Ladies, or Women? The Unconscious Dynamics of Language Choice,” *Comprehensive Psychiatry* 17, no. 2 (March/April 1976): 295-99, accessed February 2, 2015, http://ac.els-cdn.com/0010440X76900031/1-s2.0-0010440X76900031-main.pdf?_tid=08841d4c-aaf6-11e4-8c78-00000aab0f27&acdnat=1422893621_d685de9bda82490954810dcf49f56580.

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mammal, breast-feeds his young.”²⁵ As C.S. Lewis says, “In ordinary language the sense of a word . . . normally excludes all others from the mind.”²⁶ The hilarity and irony of these sentences show not only the ridiculousness of male-centric generics, but their inutility in American English. The use of these sentences should lead us to question the necessity of gendered language. Words reinforce certain ideas; they are the “tools of thought.”²⁷

Some may still argue that using male generics does not recall a male image to mind. Empirical studies disprove this claim. In one study, college students were shown four generic sentences and asked to relate them to a picture, either male or female. The four sentences were “all men are created equal;” “at university a student can study whatever he wants;” “the feminists protested outside the hall”; and, “at university a student can study whatever she wants.” College students associated the male generics with male photos; in fact, masculine responses to the generic condition occurred nine out of ten times.²⁸ The study concluded that people tend to perceive the world as one filled with males.²⁹ While this study is clearly isolated, does not show causality, and must be repeated on a broader scale, it gives the indication that language and generics are important in modern day English. Since the generic pronoun, such as “all men are created

25. Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man,’” 488.

26. Ibid. The opposing side would say that this phrase does not sound awkward because man is a true generic; I do not agree. It seems that many individuals, certain an average American, would find this phrasing extremely strange.

27. Klienman, “Why Sexist Language Matters.”

28. Elizabeth Wilson and Sik Hung Ng, “Sex bias in visual images evoke by generics: a New Zealand Study,” *Sex Roles* 18, no. 4 (1988): 161-165.

29. Ibid., 166.

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equal,” called to mind is male, women as seen as not included in that pronoun. Thus, women are left out when those pronouns are used colloquially. Other empirical studies confirm that generics recall male images in the hearers mind. After reading the sentence “the average American believes he watches too much TV,” the majority of participants in a study vividly described male images.³⁰ This shows that it is inappropriate to use the *he* pronoun to refer to all women; it erases females from the discussion.

For those who still doubt the power of gendered language, it is revealing to analyze the attacks in response to feminist criticism. Women who showed concern were blatantly discarded; they were called irrational when using other forms of generics.³¹ There were some individuals who argued that women should not worry about gendered language, the denotation of the word is all that matters.³² This is blatantly false; societal norms intersect around dictionary definitions of words to give them new meaning.

Slang is prime example of gendered language. A male who is sexually promiscuous is called a Casanova or a player, words with positive connotations, while a female is a hussy or a harlot, deemed as dirty or wrong.³³ One of the most pernicious uses of gendered language in slang is in the term “you guys.”³⁴ Using the term you guys millions of times a day reinforces a message that men are the benchmark and women fall by the way side. In fact, historically, hiding a group will let those in power more easily

30. John Gastil, “Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language: The Oxymoronic Character of Masculine Generics,” *Sex Roles* 23, no. 11 (1990): 629-43.

31. Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man,’ 484.

32. *Ibid.*, 485.

33. Burlacu, “Sexist and Non-Sexist Language.”

34. Klienman, “Why Sexist Language Matters.”

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treat members of that group in whatever way they please. Calling women derogatory names makes sexual violence easier. As Klienman indicates:

Don't women deserve it? If women primarily exist in language as “girls”...and “guys,” it does not surprise me that we still have a long list of gendered inequalities to fix. We've got to work on every item on the list. Language is one we can work on right now, if we're willing. It's easier to start saying “you all” instead of “you guys” than to change the wage gap tomorrow. Nonsexist English is a resource we have at the tip of our tongues. Let's start tasting this freedom now.³⁵

Debate: A Case Study

Intercollegiate debate provides a case study where gendered language and female participation intersect. Women and minorities are disproportionately absent in collegiate debate.³⁶ In a study by Pamela Stepp in 1993, female participation was shown to be at 19%. There were few female coaches at the collegiate level. Regardless of actual participation, which has increased in recent years, females are likely to be less successful in the collegiate debate community. The debate glass ceiling seems to end in the Junior Varsity division; few females advance to elimination rounds. This may be due to the masculine stereotype of the good debater. Women are socialized to be feminine, but in debate if they are passive, they are seen as bad debaters; contradictorily if they are aggressive, they are deemed too pushy.

This study also addressed the rampant use of sexist language in the debate community.³⁷ The use of terms such as “you guys” within debates could be seen to contribute to the decline of female participation. Gendered language creates a vicious

35. Ibid.

36. Pamela Stepp, “Can We Make Intercollegiate Debate More Diverse?” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33, no. 4 (Spring 1997): 176.

37. Ibid., 183.

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cycle in which there are few women in debate, so the debater’s linguistic choices reflect that reality. However, those linguistic choices, specifically gendered language, reinforce the idea that women are or should not be in debate, making females uncomfortable in the community. It is true that there are a variety of reasons why women quit intercollegiate debate, but gendered language is one of many reasons why women may feel ostracized in this community. Women are still seen as unwelcome in the community, which originally was a space in which females were not allowed to participate.

However, as will be noted later, simply changing the words used will not fix the issue at hand. In fact, it may serve to mask the violence that women feel in the community. People will feel as if they have done enough to combat violence towards women by avoiding gendered colloquialism. There may be an attention and time tradeoff between linguistic analysis and cultural change. While this would preferably not be the case, the lack of attention on gender-based issues would indicate a limited cultural space for this type of criticism. Broader criticism of the social categories of masculine and feminine are needed before any supposedly liberatory project is undertaken. Nevertheless, collegiate debate is an important case study to consider, for they are a subset of the population who considers these issues in depth.

The Failure of “She”

Language Is Not Enough

As this paper has argued, language and social systems that may negatively affect women are co-constitutive. Though the effects of gendered language may not be material, linguistic violence in this sense is a reinforcement of social stratification. However, those who focus solely on linguistic violence can ignore the social component to language.

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Linguistic violence towards women can only exist because of social structures that disproportionately harm them.³⁸ Our examples above are symptomatic of a deeper issue. There is nothing inherently wrong about certain syllables or letters tied together; rather, it is that their usage has developed to reflect patriarchal norms. Structuralism, for example, tells us that meaning is dependent on its relation to other elements.³⁹ The meaning of a particular word not only depends on the denotation assigned to it by society, but its context within and sentence and situation. The inability to find a balance between those who believe in the fluidity of words, regardless of societal context, and those who embrace their importance within a social structure is one of the reasons that current attempts to combat gendered language have failed.⁴⁰

Some philosophers have simply replaced the generic *he* with *she*. This practice is inadequate to address the societal problems of concepts of masculine and feminine. This meaning and the difficulties that arise from it go further than a pronoun substitution. The complexities of language show that using the static term “she” only reifies gendered discourses and calls to mind a stable understanding of the masculine and feminine. These static notions need to be interrogated holistically, especially when language shapes our institutions and vice versa.

Those who attempt to simply replace *he* with *she* will still come into trouble with issues pertaining to the concept of the generic itself. If the feminist is correct that the generic person is always assumed to be male, changing the pronoun will not necessarily

38. Nye. “Semantics,” 156.

39. Ibid., 158.

40. Ibid.

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call a different image to mind. There is no way to express reality experienced by a diverse group of women using solely generics.

The Problem of Epistemology

There are a few epistemological problems that stop the effectiveness of switching the pronouns. The first is the epistemological problem. The wide-spread feminist critique of epistemology indicates that the dominant systems of knowledge are gendered. Feminists have criticized dualisms such as reason/emotion and rationality/irrationality. In the traditional view, men and women are viewed as antitheses: strong/weak, superior/inferior, etc.⁴¹ This standpoint lends itself to dichotomous views of the world in masculine and feminine terms; the former is consistently more valued than the latter, because of its alleged association with emotions and passivity.⁴² Language, specifically sexist language, is intertwined with this epistemology because each is constructed discursively. If it is true that both language and epistemology are gendered, some argue that they must use the rules of grammar to subvert that and unsettle dualism.⁴³ For these individuals language is a critical starting point.

On the contrary, Liz Bondi argues that if this epistemological masculinity is true, nonsexist language will still remain within a dualist, and possibly phallogentric, understanding of universal truth claims. Critics of gendered language simplify the importance of gendered violence in language and do not consider the complexity of the

41. Burlacu, “Sexist and Non-Sexist Language,” 82.

42. Bondi, “In Whose Words?” 245-246.

43. Ibid., 247. There are some serious challenges to this view of epistemology, but these are out of the scope of this paper.

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language and gender relationship.⁴⁴ Language is expressed within androcentric epistemology; reframing that language is not sufficient to fix problematic ways of seeing the world. Linguistic representation, therefore, isn't enough. To say that replacing *he* with *she* or changing the pronoun will shape the world implies that language can be separated from knowledge.⁴⁵ Replacement just masks the epistemological problem of how one knows the categories of which they speak from the linguistic problem of how they speak them. Focusing on language may even enhance the problem as movements for equal rights as equal treatment retreats from focusing on inequality and instead encourages women to be like men.⁴⁶ To claim that language is always *man-made* is to exaggerate the problem; language fits social reality rather than necessarily creating it.⁴⁷

The second problem is isolated by Liz Bondi; this is problem of gynocentric language. If one simply replaces masculine pronouns with feminine pronouns, they may create a *gynocentric* language that creates two separate knowledge types, one *masculine* and one *feminine*. The failure of *she* continues false universalization. There seems in this to be an inherent sameness within women; the simple switch of *he* for *she* accepts current gender as unassailable. Gender is unanalyzable and the problem fixed because the pronoun has been switched. The issue is that the societal connotations of *she* still exists regardless; the generic *she* remains a generic and seeks to represent all women or persons as singular. The plurality of female experience, especially in the context of gendered

44. Ibid., 248.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid., 249.

47. Jennifer Hornsby, “Disempowered Speech,” *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (Fall 1995): 127.

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language, goes unrecognized.⁴⁸ One of the major problems with gendered language is the issue of deviation; that is, women are deviants from the norm and not included in the generic referent. The underlying deviation is not women, per se, but that which is non-male. The male is the norm and those who are deemed as other are ostracized in language.⁴⁹ Creating a new gynocentric language does nothing to undermine these overarching understandings of masculine as dominant and feminine as invisible.

In this sense, even when a female takes up a masculine position, or *she* replaces *he*, she is simply recreating the norm and could be construed as pretending to be a man. She is a ventriloquist dummy. The intent behind the use of the pronoun *she* remains the same; the generic is still masculine. The medium of language defines the female sexual identity as one with a no authority; men are not faced with the difficulties of engaging this contradictory understanding of language and sexual identity. The important conclusion is that the failure of she relies in that a feminist presence in language, even when using non-gendered pronouns and gynocentric words, is still founded on the “gendering of language itself.”⁵⁰ Absolute gendered pronouns, regardless of their content, create and recreate a non-existent neutral form.⁵¹ However they are gendered, through *he*, *she*, or another modifier, this neutrality is pernicious in language, and reifies notions of what it means to be a certain gender

48. Bondi, “In Whose Words?” 250.

49. Ibid.

50. Ibid., 253.

51. Leaper and Bigler, “Gendered Language.”

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None of this is to say, however, that we should not combat gendered language. In fact, it is an easy way to start. But it does call into question movements that focus solely on gendered language rather than the broader realities of gender stratification in society. Since all subjects who think must use language, it may be a significant place to start; however, it cannot be the place to end.⁵²

The Problem of Power

Our discourse shapes our reality. Drawing from Foucault, argument is power. Language is, at its foundation, a symbol. These symbols reflect power; male pronouns as a generic reflect society views of power.⁵³ Foucault indicates that there is a certain regime of truth.⁵⁴ Language normalizes of certain worldviews because it gives us access to a fountain of knowledge. These regimes of power are reflected in our ways of speaking about the world; gender is one component of the way power and privilege interact with language.

One of the reasons that changing the pronoun will fail is because societal power structures are entrenched. For example, earlier the difference between the married *Mrs.* and unmarried *Ms.* were discussed. Changing this would not change historically sexist parts of marriage. In the marriage itself, there are certain symbols that operate from sexist ideologies. Prior to World War II vows took place with one wedding band; the bride wore

52. *Ibid.*, 129.

53. Avraham Sela, “Politics, Identity and Peacemaking: The Arab Discourse on Peace with Israel in the 1990s.” *Israel Studies* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 19.

54. Jurgen Habermas, “Some Questions Concerning the Theory of Power: Foucault Again.” In *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1994).

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a ring likely to show she belonged to the husband.⁵⁵ Engagement rings seemingly still operate this way; sexism pervades more than just language. This is distinct from other clothing choices in that engagement rings were a symbol to show that women belonged to, and were sense property of, their husbands.

However, Foucault’s solution, a genealogy of power, is ineffective to many feminists. They argue that a simple critique of the discourses of power will fail because that critique continues to exist inside a particular institutionalization of identity.⁵⁶ There needs to be a broader understanding of how power functions to disenfranchise bodies deemed as feminine or masculine. It is not that identity is negative, in fact history shows that proper usage of identity as a coalitional force can lead to significant change, it is that refusing to engage in oppression, such as gendered language, does not change that that identity still exists.⁵⁷

Replacing *he* with *she* does not change the way society has formed around particular notions of gender. The word *woman* is not a static symbol but rather a variable and emergent collection of categories. Many language theories rely on essentialist notions of the sign.⁵⁸ The goal must be to get away from those particular constructions and the way they influence the words one chooses, not necessarily the words themselves.

55. Vicki Howard, “A ‘Real Man’s Ring’: Gender and the Invention of Tradition,” *Journal of Social History* 36, no. 4 (2003): 837-56.

56. Jana Sawicki, Jana, “Foucault and Feminism: A Critical Reappraisal.” In *Critique and Power*, ed. Michael Kelly, (Cambridge, MA: the MIT Press, 1994) 351.

57. *Ibid.*, 353.

58. Joyce Davidson, and Mick Smith, “Wittgenstein and Irigaray: Gender and Philosophy in a Language (Game) of Difference,” *Hypatia* 14, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 72-96.

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Alternative Solutions

Many philosophers and linguists have attempted to subvert gendered language in other ways. Some have created new pronouns such as *tey*, or *co*; these have been largely rejected by both the philosophical and linguistic community.⁵⁹ There is reluctance within these groups to acknowledge the importance of language in shaping gendered language hierarchies.⁶⁰ Many are reluctant to introduce new pronouns; those who are in favor of using innovative words will still encounter the problem of societal acceptance. The issue of gendered language is a societal issue, and if the general public would be resistant to a new pronoun, the solution is inadequate to address the harm.

Beyond *she*, the most commonly accepted alternative is to just replace the gendered words with non-gendered words. For instance, *one*, *you* or *they*; however, these are generally accepted to be grammatically incorrect. In some sentences they are cumbersome or too formal.⁶¹ Interestingly, this is reflected in how children are taught in schools. Textbooks indicate that *they* is an incorrect antecedent for a singular usage. This is incorrect; *they* is quite frequently used, and is accepted in some circles, as a generic.⁶² The backlash against the use of these terms has been significant; some dismissive philosophers have begun to replace the letters m-a-n with alternatives. Some of these mocking responses include *huperson nopersonclature*, etc.⁶³ this response shows the

59. Martyna, “Beyond the ‘He/Man,’” 491.

60. *Ibid.*, 492.

61. Burlacu, “Sexist and Non-Sexist Language,” 85.

62. Bodine, “Androcentrism,” 139.

63. Burlacu, “Sexist and Non-Sexist Language,” 91.

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need for a broader discussion of the impact of the structures surrounding the terms, rather than simply the terms themselves.

Heidegger and Wittgenstein

It is difficult in the face of such criticism to create an acceptable solution to gendered language. Some organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, have banned gendered language. One only need to open a journal to see the replacement of the generic *she* for the previously used *he*” However, as previously discussed, simply replacing the already gendered masculine term with gendered feminine terms is an inadequate response to the issue of gendered language. Some argue that the study of language cannot be concerned with society’s response. The question of gendered language, then, would necessarily need to be approached from a different vantage point.

Heidegger’s “On the Way to Language,” written in his middle period, indicates that language is a worldview, has diversity, and is appropriated. In order to fully grasp language, one must study language as language. Language is where being dwells and reveals itself to individuals; it is the “house of being.”⁶⁴ A sign, according to Heidegger, represents something particular in the world. Language carries meaning from one to another through this sign. Speaking those signs breathes life in to them and animates ideas, objects, and understanding. This is how language creates being.⁶⁵

Drawing from Heidegger’s account, the scholar can understand the importance of language. Heidegger argues that we need to come to language itself and go to a place that

64. Martin, Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1971).

65. Paul Livingston, “Heidegger: On the Way to Language,” Villanova University, March 16, 2005, accessed March 4, 2014, <http://www07.homepage.villanova.edu/paul.livingston/heidegger%20on%20the%20way%20to%20language.htm>. Interestingly, later versions of Heidegger may repudiate these conclusions.

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exists before the speaking of language. Heidegger calls the speaker to speak in innovative ways, to understand and become aware of how language shapes being. Language should be experienced without this baggage or understanding.⁶⁶

In response to this understanding of language, the first step a scholar may take is to attempt to strip all societally imbued meaning from language. This is the wrong step. The example of gendered language shows not only is this impossible, but Heidegger cannot provide a pragmatic way of engaging with gendered language. Heidegger may be able to explain the importance of language and its effect on the world, but a deeper description how language is contextually based would aid this account. The problem is that language cannot be stripped from its context. Connotations of particular words will always be imbued with the receiver who hears it. While it is concrete, for Heidegger, in a sense, language *qua* language can never be found if the speaker is embedded in society's constructions of the feminine and masculine. For gendered language, social context has an importance not found in Heidegger. Thus we turn to Wittgenstein.

According to Wittgenstein, language's meaning is not just signifiers, though many studies show that in the context of gendered language pronouns call up images of predominately masculine figures;⁶⁷ rather, meaning is found through a web of context. In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein argues that words stand in for certain meanings. The traditional view of language is that a certain word functions as a sign and stands for an object in the speakers mind. There was a connection between that particular sign and the mental image that is elicited by that sign, both in the forming and in the receiving of that

66. Ibid.

67. Wilson and Hung Ng, “Sex bias,” 161-165.

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word.⁶⁸ Meaning comes through explanation and is given through an understanding; in this context meaning can be considered fluid. There are no private languages. These discursive practices are only embodied via a network of relationships. In fact, there must be a mental process in language. Contrary to Heidegger, one cannot describe language as language because language corresponds with the world. Wittgenstein gives the example of red; one can picture a red object but cannot just picture redness as redness. The redness must adhere to something in the mind. Even if someone images the color red in one's mind, it is a red light, or a red blob; that redness is bounded, even in mental imagery. The sign only becomes significant when it is attached to the world and not when it exists as itself; language cannot be studied, therefore, as language.⁶⁹

From this, one can see that language must be attached to reality; using language as a descriptor not only inherently reflects the outside world and its processes, but also it cannot be analyzed separate from societal constructions. The pronoun *man*, for instance, has meaning because it is attached to the object *man*. The syllables or letters m-a-n means nothing without a connection to meaning. For instance, if you write the word *man* on a piece of paper for a person with no knowledge of the English language, that person will either not recognize the word, or will likely relate those letters to something unrelated to the English word *man*. The complex writing of the gendered body makes it impossible to enter into a neutral use of either generic, regardless of the gender used. Because meaning is so complex and language cannot be studied simply as a mode of signs and signifiers without context, changing the word used to indicate *man* or *humanity* to another gendered

68. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1972).

69 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, (New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

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pronoun will necessarily fail. We cannot engage the pronoun *he* or *she* as a part of language as language, context in society is key. This is why the essentialist notions of language and how we formulate masculine and feminine concepts prevents the feminist from witting the term *he* to *she*.

Additionally, this view of language would prevent coming up with a new neutral pronoun. Importantly, it meaning attaches to signs because they attach to a specific object in the outside world, having a new word that does not correspond with a particular object in the world would fail in one of two ways. Either, the term would reattach to a generic person, because bodies are gendered that generic would be gendered. Use of the term *xe*, a newly formed generic, would conjure up the image of a particular body, even if it is meant to indicate a generic pronoun. If the feminist is right that society is stratified along gendered lines, that generic person would still be male, as male is the dominant category, and no gender is specified.

Clearly, these concepts of language seem at odds with one another: Wittgenstein is highly contextual as opposed to Heidegger's viewing of language as a key concept of the unconcealedness of being. Words aren't just representational; they are used representationally to create violence. In the context of gender, language, especially the replacing of masculine gendered pronouns with feminine ones, does not get to the heart of gender as being. In this, Heidegger would likely argue that language is more static and the changing of language cannot change the idea of being. Gender is not reduced to those discursive constructions, which is why the project of simply switching programs is inadequate. Changing the signifiers does not change the meaning or the uncovering of gender; the meanings will still be interpreted in the institutionally gendered context of

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patriarchy. Wittgenstein is concerned with communicating truths precisely; the status quo, via its use of gendered language, fails to do so. Yet replacing the pronoun with *she* is not the correct method because the context of the usage fails to come to terms with structural power relations, drawing on Foucault. Because language is contextual, one should draw on Wittgenstein’s philosophy to destabilize the symbols which gendered language utilizes, whether based in traditional notions of masculinity or femininity.⁷⁰ The context must be engaged with prior to viewing language as language; that contextual analysis must be a prior question.

Conclusion

The question of what to do about gendered language is a difficult one to answer. Because the violence from gendered language only exists as a product of societal gender constructs, any solution must first engage the complexity of power as it applies to society and language. Drawing from Wittgenstein’s view of language as contextual, replacing the gendered pronoun *he* with similarly gendered pronoun *she* will not come to terms with how society views masculine and feminine. The philosopher must explore new pronouns or alternative options than the ones presented here. Though many may argue there is no harm in switching the words, it is imperative that philosophers do not allow a tradeoff between linguistic and cultural analysis. *She* has failed; it’s time to find a new way to engage gendered language.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

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