



Centre for
Gender & Development Studies
The University of the West Indies
St Augustine

Guidelines
For the Use
of
**NON-SEXIST
LANGUAGE**
at
**The University
of the
West Indies**

Valerie Youssef & Beverly-Anne Carter



Centre for Gender & Development Studies
The University of the West Indies
St. Augustine

**GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF
NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES**

Valerie Youssef & Beverly-Anne Carter

© CENTRE FOR GENDER AND
DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
2001

© 1997 by the
University of Toronto
All rights reserved.



© 1997 by the
University of Toronto

ISBN Number : 976-620-159-9 (pbk)

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

PREFACE

As we stand poised to cross the Millennium it is good to be able to see the results of the University's drive towards equality of access and opportunity for all members of our society manifested in so many different areas within the institution. In the area of gender equity specifically, we have not only been able to achieve a gender balance in our student numbers but also it has been possible to witness the establishment in 1993, of The Centre for Gender and Development Studies at St. Augustine, as well as the establishment of a Graduate degree programme in that field and a Minor in Gender Studies at the Undergraduate level.

This booklet that I have the pleasure of introducing to you now is just one of the latest works to emanate from The Centre. Like all of the Centre's accomplishments, it presses us forward to a recognition of our own inadequacies, in this case, of the inequities that remain unnoticed in our most basic communication tool, language.

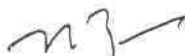
As the University presses forward as a catalyst in the field of social change, I urge all members of our institution at all levels to embrace the conventions laid down in this document. It is not my intention to prescribe its usage but rather to urge you to confront the realities of stereotyped language usage as presented within it, and in recognising them, to rectify your language usage from a considered perspective.

The student body which passes through our corridors daily, needs meaningful standards to be set within the University on which it can draw for life skills. Most often the standards for appropriate language use are not manifest within the media, and in the arena of gender reference, students are confronted with an often baffling inconsistency. In the drive for equity of treatment

some feminist scholars reverse the inequity of centuries by setting up a generic 'she' to replace generic 'he', a practice which simply reverses the stereotypical prejudice rather than taking us forward.

This document does not do that, however, but seeks gender neutrality in the suggested terminology and lays down clear and comprehensive guidelines which encourage us to a consistent expression of this gender neutrality through a comprehensive documentation of gender imbalanced terms.

I recommend that, as an institution, we embrace the norms suggested within it. Not only should we use them ourselves, but recommend them to our students at an early stage, so that gender neutral standards are well inculcated in them by the time they go out into the work force beyond our doors.



Compton Bourne
Principal

RATIONALE

The most potent danger in any prejudice is its invisibility to those who are not its victims and it is in this context that the Centre for Gender and Development Studies has produced not just guidelines for the use of non-sexist language at UWI, but a brief rationale for their use.

With justification, guidelines for non-sexist usage will only be used if language is seen to be sexist in the first place and for many of us who have not been negatively used by it, the English Language appears to be non-offensive in this regard. Many of our biased conventions have been unthinkingly perpetuated through habituation and elimination of them demands a consciousness-raising through exposition, illustration and example.

On the surface of it, and particularly within the realm of Standard language, English appears gender neutral; at a deeper level, the *perceptions* which attach to the 'neutral' language and its *misuse* because of these perceptions, create a problem. It is refreshing to read in the Introduction to Professor Richard Hudson's revised edition of Sociolinguistics (CUP:1996, xii-xiv):

'One very general change is the removal of sexist language, a source of great embarrassment to me now. In 1979 even sociolinguists wrote sentences like the following (from page 5 of the first edition): "The difference between sociolinguistics and the sociology of language is very much one of emphasis, according to whether the *investigator* is more interested in language or society and according to whether *he* has more skill in analyzing linguistic or social structures" How times have changed. I now believe firmly that every such sentence reinforces the assumption that the prototypical person is a man so I have tried to ensure that my text is now completely bias-free.'

Media usage of slanting, bias and sexually derogatory slang terms need concern us less but are also worthy of mention in heightening our gender sensitivity.

A few examples from traditional terminology as well as from modern adaptations will suffice to indicate the necessity for change.

Traditional generic terms

The most widely debated terms when language change is discussed are the generic *man* and the generic pronoun *he*. Many argue that these terms are generic and that it is therefore appropriate to use them to cover reference both sexes. The problem that is masked here, however, is their ambiguity between a generic and a male meaning. Both may be used generically or to refer to the male species. Because of this duality, and the fact that, traditionally, a prototypical exemplar of humanity was conceived of as male, they are most often taken to refer to males alone as evidenced not only by a plethora of perception studies, which have analyzed what individuals conceptualize on reading these terms, but also by the semantic non-acceptability of sentences like the following which would be allowable if the words were truly generic:

- 'Man is a mammal who gives birth to live young which he suckles'
- 'As for man, he is no different from the rest. His back aches, he ruptures easily, his women have difficulties in childbirth...'

There are a whole range of similar terms which are semantically neutral but tend to be perceived as 'male' as evidenced by the following real examples:

- 'Doctors wishing to attend the course may bring their wives.'

(Female staff members in many institutions including UWI, who hold doctorates, are invited to official functions with their spouses but the invitations are most usually addressed to Dr and Mrs. X; such invitations render the unfortunate male spouse the necessity of attending the function in his capacity as 'Mrs. X' if the female recipient of the invitation has been accorded her correct title!)

- 'We must somehow become witness to the everyday speech which the *informant will* use as the door is closed behind us: the style in which *he* argues with *his wife*, scolds *his* children or passes the time of day with *his* friends.'

(This from world-famous sociolinguist William Labov in his less enlightened days!)

- 'Americans of higher status have fewer chances of having fat wives.'
- 'Drivers - belt the wife and kids. keep them safe!'

The perceptions behind the terms in use then are what constitute a problem in perpetuating gender-biased stereotypes which we need to deal with if we are prepared to allow women to become a visible part of the work force. We live and work in a hierarchically organized institution and wider social milieu which still makes a display of qualifications. We need then to recognize that a woman has the possibility of being as qualified as a man by addressing a potential PhD holder as 'Doctor' when in doubt as to her status. Unfortunately, evidence has shown that this courtesy is more often extended to men than to women, perpetuating the stereotype we wish to get away from. The 'Mrs.' title addressed to a woman is used by each stratum of the University population beginning with senior academic staff and ending with the student body itself.

Modern Non-Sexist Generics

It is perfectly true that many institutions have made modifications toward gender neutral terminology through the adoption of terms such as Chair or Chairperson to replace Chairman. What has happened in reality is that this language has been applied only to women and has simply become a new women's label. If such terminology is to be applied, however, it must be applied across the board, creating new generic terms for which the prototype is male or female. Ultimately, we are striving for equity of the sexes as an ongoing perception and we will never achieve this as long as we maintain gender-specific labels. Job descriptions, including those of Secretary, Nurse and Homemaker are not usefully prefixed by male as if the designation without the prefix were demeaning but like Doctor, Lawyer and Astronaut should come to be regarded as gender-neutral, as males and females spread into traditionally single-sex domains.

While the famous anthropologist of the 1920's Benjamin Lee Whorf argued that language crucially determines the way we think, we know that language itself is determined by culture, and experience shows us that this is not fixed but changing. What happens is that language lags behind a changing culture and has to be pressed into the service of the new order to bring it in line. Any modern academic institution needs to be in the forefront of this kind of progress rather than supporting the rearguard like the popular press.

Finally, it may be useful to examine and question the tone set by the media.

Media Language Today

For brevity we will take a single example of a cultural change that has been ill-supported by an out-dated and sexist press.

The title Member of Parliament was traditionally perceived to have a male incumbent. Today it has changed so that we readily conceive of a female MP. That current local examples like Kamala Persad-Bissessar and Pamela Nicholson come more readily to mind than individual males, indicates that women are still the exception rather than the rule, however.

In the UK, women have progressed further - there are 157 female Labour MPs in the new government; in reality equity is coming, yet by the popular press these women are deemed: '*Blair's Babes*'. It is almost as if sections of the press are threatened by this insurgence of female strength into the male domain of parliament - reported to have an insufficiency of female toilets and an embarrassing excess of barbering facilities - and must use language to put woman in a place where they can deal with her. A female MP is only a '*babe*' and a babe is only a male's toy.

It is hard to reverse the ploy even if woman would wish to, since the English Language is weighted so heavily in favour of derogatory terms for women and positive ones for men. Even where the original was neutral, degeneration has taken place as evidenced in the unequal opposition between the meanings of *master* and *mistress*, *bachelor* and *spinster*. In the realm of slang, North American English has 320 derogatory sexual terms for women and only 20 for men.

Lest we should feel that academia is immune to such discriminatory folly, consider the following description of Suzanne Romaine in *The Guardian* ('quality' British Press) as incumbent of the Merton Chair of English language at Oxford University on the 28th March, 1984:

'She comes over as something of an enigma. A fussy silk blouse pokes out from under a casual striped sweater. Hair, centre-parted, is neat as a doll's house curtains. She's half demure, half bolshie.'

The physical description, totally inappropriate to the reporting of an academic's assuming a prestigious position again demeans with its reference to 'hair' like 'doll's house curtains', 'demure' yet 'bolshie'. The linguistic cutting down of womanhood to a size at which she can be handled seems a common weapon in the face of a female advance that is self-evident. Language use should come to terms with reality or expose sadly the folly of its users.

CONCLUSION

It is with these kinds of concerns that we feel the University of the West Indies would wish to address the issue of non-sexist language use. Ahead of its time, not behind it, like the media samples above.

The University, as the chief educator of the nation's academic elite for the 21st century, needs to provide a model for precise and unbiased use of language as a main part of its educational purpose.

While we stipulate a series of salient guidelines below it must be clear that what is needed is a far-reaching non-discriminatory practice that extends deeply into the spoken as well as the written medium and ensures that men and women receive equal courtesy through equal treatment. We ourselves may have to examine ourselves carefully to perceive the folly of a discrimination that may be sufficiently entrenched that we miss it. As members a respected academic institution, let us use language as a tool of demonstrable equity, not as a weapon of an outdated elitism.

GUIDELINES

1. GENERIC USE

(a) The use of '*man*' in the generic sense

Although in its original sense '*man*' had the dual meaning of adult human as well as adult male, a considerable body of research (c.f. rationale p2 above) attests to the fact that '*man*' has become a "pseudo-generic", and is often not interpreted as including females. To avoid the gender-bias inherent in the use of the generic '*man*' and to ensure precision and clarity of expression, it is recommended that the word '*man*' in its generic sense should be replaced by one of the following:

- humans
- human being(s)
- humanity
- humankind
- human race
- man & woman
- men & women
- individuals
- people
- person(s)

(b) The use of 'man' in idioms and phrases

The use of 'man' in clichéd terms should be avoided. Alternatives for some of the most common of these are given below:

<u>Example</u>	<u>Possible alternatives</u>
the best man for the job	best candidate/applicant for the job; the best person for the job; the best woman/man for the job
man in the street	the average citizen, the average person, ordinary people
average working man	average taxpayer/ average citizen/ average person
man-hours	work-hours/person- hours
average housewife	average homemaker; average household
a man who	a person who, someone/somebody who
man of letters	author, intellectual, scholar, writer
man of science	scientist, specify discipline (e.g. zoologist)
manpower	human resources, labour, labour force, personnel,
manpower planning	labour market planning

(c) The use of 'man' as a verb

Whenever possible, 'man' should not be used as a verb. Possible alternatives are as follows:

<u>Example</u>	<u>Possible alternatives</u>
to man the desk	to staff the desk
to man the phone	to answer the phone

(d) Retention of 'man' words

There are however some 'man' words which do not need to be changed because they are not compounds incorporating the more gender-specific 'man'. A sampling of these words includes manuscript and manipulate, both derived from the Latin 'manus' meaning 'hand' and human from the Latin 'humanus' meaning human.

(e) The use of generic *he*, *his*, *him*

Male pronouns can also be used to refer to an individual male person or to male or female persons. To end the exclusion of women that results from the pervasive use of masculine pronouns, several alternatives are possible.

1) Recast in the pluralExample

Give each student his paper as soon as he is finished.

Alternative

Give students their papers as soon as they are finished.

2) Use they/their as neutral singular pronounsExample

Any candidate who has failed to submit essays set by *his* teachers...

Alternative

Any candidate who has failed to submit essays set by *their* teachers..

Modern grammars which focus on language in context and link semantics closely to syntax, accept the plural possessive adjective in cases where the semantics (meaning) of the sentence subject may be plural

3) Substitute *he or she* or *s/he*Example

When a student enrolls *he* must...

Alternative

When a student enrolls *he or she* OR *s/he* must...

4) Reword to avoid the problemExample

Each student must submit *his* assignment...

Alternative

Each student must submit *an* assignment...

2. JOB TITLES

Job titles or occupational terms that relate only to one sex are inaccurate and discriminatory (cf. rationale p3). Terms such as *professor*, *nurse* and *doctor* can effectively be used as gender neutral; marked terms such as *lady professor*, *male nurse* and *lady doctor* cannot. The following list provides some examples of neutral, generic, occupational terms:

<u>Example</u>	<u>Possible alternatives</u>
businessman	business person/people; executive; professional
chairman	*chairperson/head (of a department); convener (of a meeting/committee); presiding officer;
layman	layperson; layman/laywoman; non-professional; non-specialist
middleman	intermediary
spokesman	official; representative; speaker; spokesperson
weatherman	meteorologist; weather reporter

* Research has shown that in contexts where 'chairperson' has been offered as an alternative to 'chairman', 'chairperson' is used only or mainly when the holder of the office is a woman. Care must be taken to prevent a reintroduction of gender-stereotyping inherent in the use of a masculine (high value form) and a feminine form that in comparison to the masculine is less highly valued. It is recommended that the form 'chairperson' be used for both sexes.

An unresolved area of difficulty in the search for alternatives to occupational or professional titles which appear to exclude one or other sex, is the problem of terms such as *Visiting Fellow*, *Bachelor's degree*, *Master's degree*. Consider the effect of *Mistress 's degree!* *Visiting Scholar* is a useful alternative to *Visiting Fellow*.

3. IRRELEVANT GENDER EMPHASIS

(a) Sex-role stereotyping

Linked to the question of job titles is that of sex-role stereotyping which assumes that all the office holders in a particular occupation are male. The following examples clearly assume that all academics are male; appropriate alternatives are suggested:

<u>Example</u>	<u>Alternative</u>
Academics have wives and children to support.	Academics have families to support.
A faculty member and his wife may attend.	Faculty members and their spouses may attend.

Other examples of stereotyping are found in texts which assume that women are always wives and mothers and that men are breadwinners. One consequence of this type of stereotyping is that descriptions of women often focus on their roles as wife and mother, irrespective of their roles or qualifications.

A further consequence of this type of stereotyping is that attention is drawn to a woman's physical attributes, irrelevant in a description of her professional expertise – the implication here being that these physical attributes are somehow an important

feature in the context. Usually, such references to a woman's physical attributes in a professional context trivialise her worth and cast doubt on her professional expertise (cf. Rationale p.4)

It is well worth noting that sex-role stereotyping works against men as well as women for certain negatively-perceived classes of person are generally assumed to be male e.g. convicts, prisoners, thieves and gamblers! Here too we must clearly guard against a priori categorization in our thought processes.

(b) Biased foregrounding

Similarly gender-bias is promoted when women are by their portrayal perceived to be passive victims whereas men are portrayed as proactive, actors occupying centre stage. Alternatively, the male in an incident may be foregrounded at the expense of the female:

'A man who suffered head injuries when attacked by two men ... early yesterday ... was pinned down ... by intruders who took it in turn to rape his wife.

(c) Stereotyped gender portrayal of inanimate objects.

Although inanimate objects in English are generally described as gender neutral there has always been a curious tendency to label possessions as female, which should be avoided:

Example

She flies like a bird (with reference to a privately-owned aircraft).

Alternative

It flies like a bird.

Similarly, because of their implicit associations, all gender ascription to inanimate objects and abstract concepts is undesirable. In support of this we may consider the following from an eighteenth century grammarian L. Murray who very seriously justified such ascription by the following:

'The sun is always masculine and the moon, being the receptacle of the sun's light, is feminine. In general, the earth is feminine, as are ships, countries and cities in their capacities as receptacles and containers. Time is always masculine because of its powerful effectiveness.'

4. TERMS OF ADDRESS

(a) Patronising or demeaning expressions

Many terms in common usage patronise women by according them a lower status or defining them inaccurately. Expressions such as 'girls' when addressed to mature women and even 'dear', 'love' and 'darling', addressed to either men or women in public situations are inappropriate and offensive. Expressions such as 'the weaker sex' and the 'fairer sex' should equally be avoided.

Compliments that convey a clear tone of sexism are demeaning and inappropriate in professional contexts. The following list is by no means exhaustive, but illustrative of the kind of statement to avoid:

"You think just like a man"

"You're pretty smart for a woman"

"You're really feminine for a career woman"

"You're beautiful when you're angry"

It has been suggested that when one is unsure about the degree of sexism conveyed by the compliment, one should try substituting the opposite sex in the sentence:

"You're pretty smart for a man"

"You're really masculine for a career man"

A good rule of thumb is that any statement that starts out, *"This may sound male chauvinist..."* is likely to be exactly that. The speaker is indulging in "Clayton's sexism".

Clayton's sexism

This term 'Clayton's sexism' is defined as the sexism that one practices when one is contrivedly not being sexist. It is displayed by people who know what sexist usage is, but do not think it a serious problem. Although reluctant to be seen as impenitent sexists, they reveal their sexism nevertheless by mocking a caricature of non-sexist usage. Anything that could be listed with the following is probably best rejected, if one wished to avoid the charge of 'Clayton's sexism':

"With Sharon here, I'd better not use the word I was going to use."

"I'll explain that again, for the benefit of the girls-sorry ladies, sorry, persons"

"I'm still waiting for someone to sexually harass me."

(b) Other terms of address

A person's right to specify the surname by which they wish to be addressed should be respected in all circumstances.

There is inconsistency in this area for, in the case of a man, there is only one ascribed name throughout life and no conflict arises, but for a woman there is the tradition of her taking her

husband's name on marriage. Should a woman prefer to use her birth name in her professional life or revert to it after divorce, care should be taken that the woman be addressed by the name which she prefers. Similarly, when a woman retains her 'maiden' name after marriage, either singly or together with her husband's surname, her preference should be respected. The woman should not be compelled to give up her given name for that of her husband.

Titles are problematic in their inconsistency, also. 'Miss' and 'Mrs.' are indicators of both marital status and sex, while 'Mr.' indicates sex only. The feminine equivalent of 'Mr.' is 'Ms.'. As a general guide, all women should be called 'Ms.' when professional titles are not relevant contextually. Such is the prejudice within society against single marital status for a woman that many married women eschew Ms., but the authors feel that individual preference should be forfeited in this specific case in the interest of the general good of eliminating the significance of marital status in female reference.

In correspondence, the salutation that extends equal treatment to both sexes is Dear Sir/Madam One can also use Dear Colleague.

As regards social occasions when invitations are to be issued, preference should be given to a range of deliberately non-sexist formats like the following:

Example

Robert James and
his wife Nicole

Dress: Black Tie

Alternative

Robert and Nicole James

Dress: Evening

When a faculty member is female, care should be taken to address the title holder appropriately. If Dr. Nicole James, for example, were the faculty member, it would be quite inappropriate to address an invitation to Dr. and Mrs. Robert James instead of Dr. Nicole James and Mr. James.

The above guidelines are not exhaustive but cover the major areas of sexist bias in modern professional writing. It is hoped that staff at UWI will take them up as an informed resource to guide them in this minefield of miscommunication.

REFERENCES

- Cameron, Deborah (1992) Feminism & Linguistic Theory (2nd Edition) UK: Macmillan
- Commonwealth Secretariat (1995) Gender Bias in School Text Books. UK.
- Equal Employment Opportunities Office (1991) Guide to Nonsexist Language. Australia:Victoria University of Wellington
- Ehrlich, Susan, & King, Ruth (1994). Feminist meanings and the (de)politicization of the lexicon. Language in Society 23:59-76.
- Graddol, David & Swann, Joan (1990) Gender Voices UK: Basil Blackwell
- Hudson, Richard (1996) Sociolinguistics Cambridge University Press