4. Sexism All Around Us

Why I Won't Celebrate Brotherhood Week

by Anne McEvoy Schmid

Every American hears a lot about brotherhood and doing unto your neighbor as you would have him do unto you. Strains of John Denver's singing "I wish every man could be free" are familiar to all of us as is the advisability of practicing brotherly love and listening to the views of the man on the street.

But I wonder if enough thought has been given to the probable effect of referring to all people in masculine terms — "brother," "man," "he," "him," and every job title ending in "man" (fireman, policeman, congressman, chairman, journeyman, salesman, tradesman, etc. *ad nauseum*). Even the word "humanity" contains the word "man"!

The general use of "he" and "him" and "man" rather than "people" might make syntax flow more smoothly, but what does it do to feminine egos and self-concepts? There must be some reason why American women, given political and social advantages unavailable to many sisters in other lands, have not attained more power.

Perhaps one reason lies with the negative self-image caused by hearing people referred to in masculine terms. Everyone from animals pictured in books to the Holy Ghost in the popular song, "American Pie" seems to be a "he,"

Maybe Freud wasn't so far off when he recognized penis envy. Young girls learn early and thoroughly that boys are the ones who count. The sexist English language makes that message abundantly clear.

Do young girls picture a fifty-fifty mixture of men and women when they hear society referred to in masculine terms more often than not? Or do they somehow feel, understandably, left out? They are! Do they feel, atypical, peculiar, and worse, abnormal?

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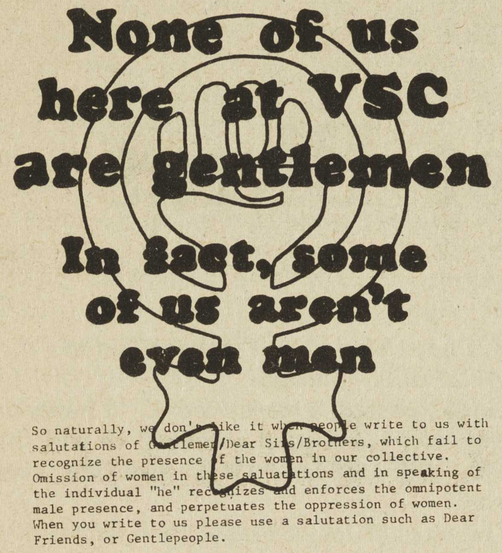

Don't use "Gentlemen:" The above illustration is used by Vocations for Social Change (Workforce) *magazine to let its readers know they don't like sexism in language.*

(After all, the proverbial man on the street is always used to signify the norm.) Does "he" really mean both sexes to them? Does "man" really mean both men and women? Or does red mean red, green mean green, tree mean tree, her mean her, and he mean he? Consider the following and be your own judge:

Many years ago, my sister Janie came home from kindergarten with an exciting story to tell mother. However, as mother was entertaining some friends and busily engaged in conversation, Janie was not getting the attention she desired. One of mother's friends, noting the child's frustration, said, "Sometimes you have to hit that woman with a brick to get her attention." Thereupon, my sister marched out to the garden, got a brick, and was just about to strike when all noticed what was happening.

The other day at school, I was talking to a teacher aide who has two boys, eight and ten. They had just been watching the Olympic games on try's 100-man team. Her boys looked and saw some women on the team and questioned this. They told their mother they had thought she said it was a 100-man team. So what were *women* doing on it?

The point is, children interpret words literally. When they read "cow," they picture a cow; when they hear "house," they picture a house; when they are told that someone needs to be hit by a brick, they oblige, and they can't understand what women are doing on a 100-man team. When they see and hear and read "him," "he," "his," "man," "mankind," "brotherhood," "chairman," "postman," and all the others, they picture men or boys — not girls or women. The continued exposure, indeed the barrage of male-gender words drives home the fact that this is indeed a man's world.

We all know that language is *reflective* of change, but this does not mean that language cannot or should not be progressive itself.

If little girls read and hear "one" or "them" rather than "he" or "him," if they are exposed to chairperson, congressperson, clergyperson, tradesperson, salesperson, and the like, perhaps they will stop picturing men or boys in these positions.

Of course these words sound awkward and even ridiculous to us now, but so did many new words when we first heard them.

It does not take a student of the subject to recognize that there is nothing static about the English language. What is grammatically "correct" has changed throughout history, as has what sounds "acceptable" or "normal."

It is probable that the above changes would cause the English language to be less smooth and flowing. Perhaps it does sound less forceful and dramatic to say, "People do not live by bread alone" or "People's reach should exceed their grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

In my opinion, initial awkwardness and (perhaps) some losses in force and drama are a small price to pay for the elimination of sexism from the English language.

In the last analysis, we must ask ourselves, What is more important — syntax or souls?