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**NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE AND THE
NEW HUMANISM: THE CASE OF THE
ENGLISH LANGUAGE**

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Introduction

Sexism, as used here, refers to all forms of derogatory references, prejudice or discrimination against the female members of the society as evident in the terms and expressions used to refer to them. Many people speaking or writing English today wish to avoid using language that supports unfair or untrue attitudes to a particular sex, usually women. Consider the following utterances, which are supposed to refer to women:

"Man, being a mammal, breastfeeds his young"
or: "Menstrual pain accounts for an enormous
loss of manpower hours."(Kuhn 1993:1)

If you are a woman, do you ever feel left out when people talk about chairmen and freshmen and men in general? If you are a man, do you ever wonder about how women feel when they hear people talking like this? What does it mean when a good percentage of the population are being made invisible? Grammarians have argued that women are being included in what is known as the "generic" use of *he* or *man*. But common sense and research (see Martyna 1983) show that this is not so.

Sexism in language means that language treats women as lesser human beings, as a not quite standard version of *homo sapiens*. This needs to change. Language

reflects and reinforces societal attitudes. The status of men and women in the society are reflected partly by the different ways that they are talked about. Most cultures traditionally use language in a manner that discriminates against women and girls. When we use male-marked vocabulary, we propagate the erroneous notion that women are not welcome, that women are not able, that women are not allowed. What we accept, we teach. If we accept gender-marked language, we teach gender-biased behaviour.

Language is a system of vocal and graphic symbols that human beings use to communicate their ideas and feelings with one another. We use this same set of symbols to communicate within ourselves; that is to think. If our symbols are prejudiced or sexist, then our thinking and our consequent actions are also prejudiced and sexist.

Certain language can help to reinforce the idea of male superiority and female inferiority. What is now termed "sexist" language often suggests an inherent male dominance and superiority in many fields of life. Male pronouns, **he**, **his** and **him** are used automatically even though the sex of the person is not known as for instance in: "A student may wish to ask *his* tutor about *his* course". Or, "Who *mans* this establishment?"

At work there is a tendency to associate certain jobs with men or women. For example, "A director must be committed to the well-being of *his* company." but "A nurse is expected to show *her* devotion by working long hours." In addition, job names often include reference to the sex of the person: "We're employing some new *workmen* on the project." "I'm talking to a group of business*men* next Friday." "The *chairman* has a veto power." "He is a *male* nurse" "There is a *woman* doctor in that clinic." The use of such words tends to reinforce the idea that it is not normal for women to be in professional, highly-paid, technical and strenuous jobs. Also, that it is not

natural for a man to work in such a role as that of a nurse.

So how can this bias in the language be reduced? Over the last few years, changes in the role of women and men in society have made much sexist language out-of-date. Native speakers of English are slowly adjusting to the pressures for a more neutral language. Speakers of English as a second or foreign language should learn to do the same.

What can we do about our own language in the light of the new humanism to show that our language portrays every human being whatever the sex as God's creature; created in the image and likeness of God and therefore having dignity and deserving of respect? The purpose of this paper is to provide information on sexist language and discuss possible approaches to eliminating them in our everyday communications in English. This is in keeping with the new humanism which is interested in human welfare and the belief that human beings should see one another as children of the same creator and should therefore treat one another with dignity.

Sexism in English

My basic assumption in this paper is that women experience linguistic discrimination and derogation both in the references made to them and in language use. Females tend to be relegated to the background and culturally assigned mean roles such as sex objects, dependents and even servants. Because of these traditional roles assigned to and played by women in the society, certain lexical items acquire certain meanings when used to refer to men and another when applied to women. Lakoff (1975:19) expresses a similar opinion about American women thus:

often a word that may be used of both men and women (and perhaps of things as well), when

applied to women assumes a special meaning that, by implication rather than outright assertion, is derogatory to women as a group.

Hudson (1996:102) also observes this tendency which in English tends to manifest in two ways one of which

involves words that are clearly restricted in reference to one sex or the other, with female words tending to have less favourable meanings. A classic pair is *master* and *mistress*, where the male meaning is 'good' and the female is 'bad'; specifically, a *mistress* not a *master* is a partner for extra-marital sex.

According to Graddol and Swann (1989:110) this sexual abuse of the word that refers to the females is typical of many languages. In *Ibibio*, for example, the equivalent terms: *eteufok/ekaufok* have similar connotations with *ekaufok* being used to refer to a female lover (usually a married one) while *eteufok* is often used to mean a master whether he is a lover or not and whether married or unmarried.

Sexism in language in general comes in three major forms: language ignores women, it defines them as less significant than men, and it outrightly derogates the female (Henley 1987, Gomard 1995, Romaine 1999, Udofot 2001, Yussuf 2002). The English Language ignores (or obscures) women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically to refer to both males and females and generically to refer to human beings in general. The most significant manifestation of sexism is in the use of the generic masculine pronoun *he* and its variants as in the sentence:

Every good citizen should love his country more than himself; he should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

Another version of the use of the generic or 'neutral' masculine is in the use of *man* (and related compound words like *the black man* and *the common man*) to cover the female as in

Man is a political animal.

Besides ignoring and obscuring women, as has been shown above, the English Language defines women as less significant than men. In fact, Nilsen (1977) notes that most nouns in the language are considered to be basically male, so that an extra word or affix is needed when the referent has to be specified as female (see also Yussuf 2002). This sexist attitude is reflected in the words: *prince: princess, major: majorette, lawyer: woman lawyer, and host: hostess*. Certainly, it is not difficult to see how the attachment of the feminine suffixes '-ess' and '-ette' to *prince* and *major* respectively to form feminine words indicates the significance of the female only as an appendage to the male.

The suggestion that women are an appendage to the male is related to the male-bias in word combinations in which separate words refer to the female and the male. In *he or she, man and woman, Adam and Eve, brothers and sisters*, and many other such combinations, the male come first. They take precedence over the female, since they have been classified as the 'worthier' sex and women only as *the fair sex* out of politeness (see Henley 1987 and Romaine 1999). The few exceptions to this pattern (e.g. *ladies and gentlemen* and, especially, *bride and bridegroom*) fall within the lexicon of what is stereotypically regarded as the female domain - marriage and sexual relations (Nilsen 1977).

Another term which reflects sexism in the English Language is *illegitimacy*. Spender (1985: 181) notes that "it is only the male who needs the apparatus of the state to legitimate their role", since the question of not

having a 'legitimate' parent cannot arise for a woman who has just borne a child." Interestingly, the 1978 edition of the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defines *illegitimate* as "... born to a mother who is not married." Nilsen (1977: 140) states, in relation to the concept of *illegitimacy*, that "the feeling is very strong that before a person is really part of our society, he or she must demonstrate an affiliation with a father, by a surname." Surnaming and its counterpart, marital re-naming, therefore form very significant aspects of the cultures of English-speaking people that have drawn the attention of feminists immensely. Coryell (1971: 59) asserts: "in studying patriarchy, I learned that women and children came to bear the husband's and father's name because he owned them."

Surnaming and marital re-naming have links with the use of *Miss* and *Mrs*. According to Thorne and Henley (1975: 29), "to call people *Mrs* or *Miss* is to help maintain a definition of women which relegates them primarily to family roles". But even within the family which has been classified as their domain, women are symbolised as insignificant. It has therefore not been possible to pass down women's names by giving their children names like *Jennifer, Jr.* (Nilsen 1977b: 139). In the opinion of Spender (1985: 24), "one...direct result of this practice of only taking cognizance of the male name has been to facilitate the development of history as the story of the male line." And even if the story of the woman is written it is history not *herstory*. The desire to perpetuate the male line has given rise to the widespread preference for male children since female children erase the father's identities on marrying.

Women have tried to find a number of solutions to the problem of sexist naming. They have, among others, retained their maiden names on marrying; they have adopted the title *Ms* to de-emphasise the undue perception of marital status as a definitive feature of a

woman's identity and personality; they have adopted compound or hyphenated names formed from maiden names and husbands' names; they have taken their mothers' first names as last names; and they have retained their maiden surnames and added their husband's surnames to them. In connection with these various attempts Ashley (1989: 68-69) says:

If it were not for custom, each person, male or female, whatever their marital status, ought best to go through life with one name of their own, producing a better sense of identity, independence, and an easier time with credit, banks, and all record-keeping generally.

The third thing the English Language does to women is that it derogates them. Also referring to this tendency, Spender (1985: 23) states:

The semantic rule which has been responsible for the manifestation of sexism in the language can be simply stated: there are two fundamental categories, *male* and *minus male*. To be linked with male is to be linked to a range of meanings which are positive and good: to be linked to minus male is to be linked to the *absence* of these qualities, that is, to be decidedly negative and usually sexually debased...

In the English Language, when a woman has sexual intercourse for the first time, she is not described as giving away her virginity; rather, it is taken away from her: she is *disvirgined* or *deflowered* (Nilsen 1977b: 137). These words suggest that in engaging in sex, the woman is *dispossessed* of some aspect of her sexuality. But even when higher control over her sexuality is demonstrated by a woman as happens when she is a 'prostitute', it does not bring about her elevation. Hundreds of demeaning synonyms (e.g. *whore*, *tart*, *slattern* and *harlot*) therefore exist for the word *prostitute*

(see Schulz 1975). In order to suggest that prostitution is normally a female activity, when a man engages in it, he is referred to as a *male prostitute*.

As a further manifestation of what Graham (1975: 61) refers to as being "assigned to a semantic house of ill fame", feminine titles of honour such as *queen*, *governess*, *madam*, *mistress*, *lady* and *dame* have been degraded and have all in one form or the other been associated with prostitution or fornication (see Schulz 1975 and Chimombo 1998). Feminine terms such as *old maid*, *spinster* and *heroine* have also acquired negative connotations, because while the first two seem to be taken to suggest ill luck in the matter of marriage, *heroine* is the name of a destructive drug (see Cheshire 1985 and Cameron 1985).

One other example of the deprecation of women which Nilsen (1977: 32) among others, draw attention to is their comparison to food through such slang or terms of endearment as *dish*, *honey* and *sweetie pie*. These slangs underscore the 'edibility' of women. Incidentally, in Nigerian Pidgin English, one of the synonyms of *fuck* is *chop* ('to eat'). To have sex with a woman is therefore 'to eat her'. Regarding the implications of depreciating women linguistically, Spender (1985: 23-24) states that

The semantic derogation of women fulfills a dual function: it helps to construct female inferiority and it helps to confirm it... In a society where women are devalued the words which refer to them - not surprisingly - assume negative connotations. But because the options for defining women are confined to negative terms, because their meanings are primarily those of minus male, women continue to be devalued.

As a solution, women have attempted to reclaim the obsolete positive meanings of some terms and have tried to create new positive meanings for others. For example,

women have referred to themselves as 'hags', 'witches', and 'spinsters' to show that they have control over what they are called and how they are treated (Kramarae and Jenkins 1987: 140)

Language and Thought

In spite of some dissenting opinions (Cf Hill: 1988, Lucy: 1992) many linguists tend to agree that language influences thought and the way we see the world (Whorf: 1940, Graddol and Swann: 1989, Cazden: 1994, McCormick: 1994, Hudson: 1996). This means that the concepts and the attitudes that people learn through language could vary depending on the language through which they were learnt. If the influence of language were healthy all the time, all would be well. The problem arises where the concepts learnt through language are unhealthy. This appears to be the case with derogatory references to women which are reminiscences of ideas and attitudes now considered outdated.

In English, clear instances of this prejudice are shown in Lakoff's (1975:30-40) review of the denotations and connotations of words like *lady* and *gentleman*; *spinster* and *bachelor*; *widow* and *widower*. According to this source, *lady* suggests triviality while *gentleman* does not. In job terminology for instance, 'the more demeaning the job, the more the person holding it (if female of course) is likely to be described as a lady' (Lakoff 1975:23) as in *cleaning lady* rather than *cleaning woman* and *prostitute lady* rather than *woman*. For men there is no such dichotomy. Similarly, a bachelor is not supposed to be ashamed of his bachelorhood. Often, he is described as *an eligible bachelor*. A spinster on the other hand is considered a failure. An old bachelor sounds interesting but an old spinster is looked down upon as an unsuccessful female. A woman whose husband is dead is referred to as his widow but no man is ever referred

to as his wife's widower. This may be due to the fact that a woman is seen as her husband's property even after he is dead. The origin of these may be traced to female powerlessness and dependence on men, a position assigned to them by a male dominated culture from which they are struggling to break free (Cf. Lakoff 1975: 28-30).

Towards Non-Sexiest English Language Usage

As a solution to the problems that the generic masculine can create, a number of proposals have been made. One of these is that the generic masculine be replaced with *he or she*, *him or her*, and the like, which expressly indicate that women are included in the antecedent of the pronouns. This strategy can be illustrated with the following sentence:

Every good citizen should love his or her country more than him or herself; he or she should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

Alternatively, Nilsen 1979 and Cheshire 1985 have proposed that the gender-neutral third person pronoun *they* and its forms be used with a singular meaning. The proposal makes it possible to say

Every good citizen should love their country more than themselves; they should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

Some have even suggested the use of the 'generic feminine' pronoun *she* and its variants (see e.g. Cameron 1985). On the basis of the suggestion, one would be able to say:

Every good citizen should love her country more than herself; she should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

New gender-neutral pronouns have in addition been created as replacements for the generic masculine pronoun (see e.g. Key 1996). In one of such creations, *e* is used to mean *him or her*, and *ir* stands for *him or her* and *his or her* (Eade 1979: 231). This proposal would make the following sentence acceptable:

Every good citizen should love his country more than himself; he should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

When reference is to either or both sexes, but not specifically to the male sex, the words 'man' and 'men' should be avoided. Alternatives, such as 'person', 'people', 'human beings', 'men and women' should be used. It is unacceptable to use 'man' to mean humanity in general - women constitute over half the world's population. This proposal to replace the generic man with *human being*, *person*, or other neutral terms has also been made by Graham 1975, Stanley 1977 and Maggio 1987.

Using *person* when reference is made to a human being whose sex is not known or not relevant would reduce women's feeling of exclusion. For example, women would have fewer problems with the statement 'We need a highly competent person for the job' than they would with 'We need a highly competent man for the job'. The same is true of such word pairs as *chairperson: chairman*, *the Black person: the Blackman*, *the-person-in-the-street: the-man-in-the-street* and so on. Since it may be necessary in some situations to indicate that the people being referred to are not children, the combinations *woman or man* and *woman and man* have been seen as useful replacements for the generic masculine noun. The same is true for the term *adult*.

Though the above proposals of alternatives to the generic masculine follow sound linguistic principles, they have been vehemently criticised and/or resisted

(see e.g. Ehrlich/King 1998). *He or her* and *woman and man*, for example, have been regarded as clumsy and the singular *they* has been called 'ungrammatical' (Yussuf 2002). A specific quite recent example is in the following note in the usage guide to *First Steps with Ladybird ABC* (Clark 2000) in the Ladybird children book series: "To avoid the clumsy 'he/she', the child is referred to throughout [this book] as 'he'" (copyright page). Proponents of linguistic equity have also been regarded as "hysterical and hypersensitive" (see Gomard 1995) and feminist efforts at non-sexist change in English have been described by, for example, Heintz (2000: 2-3), as a tampering with "the world's most elegant and expressive language" by "ignorant and insecure women".

There have also been defences made of non sexist language. Thorne / Henley (1975), Stanley (1977) and Meyers (1989), among others, have impressively defended non-sexist language against the above and other criticisms. As such, equitable gender-related language change has continued to occur.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion it is recommended that the whole business of feminism should be able to address the necessity to eradicate all inequitable, demeaning, or sexist language customs. In other words, in addition to having only personal names and avoiding the use of *Miss* and *Mrs*, word formation processes that symbolise women as appendages to men must be shunned; word orders that consolidate the pre-eminence of men must be reversed and words and expressions that are derogatory of women should be rejected in favour of neutral and more favourable ones.

Also, men and women should not be presented as sexual, social or vocational stereotypes. Members of both sexes should be represented as whole human beings,

with human strengths and weaknesses, not masculine' and 'feminine' ones; women should not be characterized as emotional, sentimental, dependent, passive, inferior, gentle, etc., and nor should men be characterized as dominant, strong, sensible, superior, unemotional, etc. Women should also not be presented in terms of their marital status or relation to their husband's job. Modifiers like 'women doctor', 'authoress' should also be avoided; terms like 'doctor' 'nurse' should be assumed to include both men and women.

In the meantime, while waiting for the non-sexist pronouns to become acceptable usages an extra effort should be made to use those options that exist to help us avoid using sexist language. Frank and Paula (1989) present a wealth of possibilities in *Language, Gender, and Professional Writing*. Here are a few of their alternatives to the generic *he* (some example sentences have been changed)

Generic *he* (to be avoided): "Every student must turn his paper in on time."

- Rewrite the sentence in the plural: "All students should turn in their papers on time."
- Rewrite the sentence in the second person: "Please turn your papers in on time."
- Use *One* (brings British flavor to your prose. Use it sparingly.): "One should always turn one's paper in on time."
- Eliminate the pronoun altogether: "All papers must be turned in on time."

The change may be gradual but as the philosophers say, it is by evolution rather than revolution that permanent changes occur in human society.

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