

**WHEN THIS VERY PRESTIGIOUS RESEARCHER MET MRS. AVERAGE  
HOUSEWIFE, OR: WHERE HAVE ALL THE WOMEN GONE . . .**

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Linguists ought to be aware of their own linguistic output, and of how sex roles are reflected in language. We made observations about instances where somebody referred to persons, on a Nordic Summer Seminar in Psycholinguistics, during all the lectures and discussions. The results show a picture of the world which is not ours: men perform lots of different functions, they are active, independent, rational strong, controlling agents, while women take singing lessons, slim their hips, lie on the beach, and complain about the children and the homelife. We also discuss the effect which the presentation of our results had on the speech of the participants and suggest that others do the same type of experiments.

We think that linguists in particular ought to be able to be aware of their own linguistic output. We also believe that sex roles are reflected in language.

We had an opportunity to make observations on a Nordic Summer Seminar in Psycholinguistics in August 1979, and we think that the results might be of interest to others, too.

The seminar lasted two weeks, and our observations covered the first 8 days. Then we presented them to the participants. We also made some observations about the effects of the presentation. There were 24 participants (15 males and 9 females) and 12 lecturers and organizers (all males) from Scandinavia, England and USA.

We made notes during all the lectures, all the discussions following them, and during some of the workshops. We tried to write down all the instances where somebody referred to persons. We did not include those expressions which referred to specified individuals, such as Mrs. Thatcher, or a patient who was known to be either male or female, but we did include what was said about them. We also included the examples used, even when the lecturer used somebody else's examples, because we think that the choice of examples also tells us something about the possible worlds which the one who chooses them can think of.

We don't think that our system of taking notes was by any means perfect. It was not always easy to follow simultaneously both the scientific content of the speech and the reflection of sex roles. (How much relevant sex role material escaped our ears can be checked on the tape recordings made of the course.) However, we feel fairly confident about the reliability and validity of the material: the trend is all too clear as it stands.

What we were interested in was how much the world chosen by the speakers at the course resembles the world we think we are living in.

First, we paid attention to the use of pronouns. As we all know, the use is partly determined by the biology of the referent, *i.e.* if we have a biological female, such as *girl, woman, grandmother*, the pronoun *she* is used; if we have a biological male, such as *boy, husband, grandpa*, the pronoun *he* is used. But then there are cases where the referent can be either one or the other, *e.g. child, person, boss*. How are these referred to? This is what we found of the use of pronouns:

(1) Only the pronoun *he* was used to refer to the following persons:

(a) For biological reasons, a woman can never be any of the following:

the man in the street, you know, ordinary people  
 "jargon fellow"  
 boy  
 man  
 grandpa  
 guy  
 townsman  
 policeman  
 cameraman  
 bachelor

(b) Thank Goddess, women do not ever need to be afraid to become any of the following, according to our material:

epileptic  
 aphasic (Broca's aphasic, Wernicke's aphasic)  
 patient (of this type, occasional, typical, split brain patient)  
 sergeant  
 capitalist  
 animal  
 dog  
 monkey

(c) But for women who want to make progress in life (in the male world) it might be somewhat disappointing that -- apparently -- we can never become any of the following:

researcher (this very prestigious researcher)  
 research assistant  
 instructor  
 surgeon  
 neurosurgeon  
 boss  
 leader (a good leader)  
 captain on a ship  
 mountaineer  
 artist  
 singer

poet  
 beekeeper  
 barber  
 a person who writes computer programs  
 reporter  
 director  
 teacher  
 examiner  
 therapist

(d) Nor are females perceived as any of the following:

child  
 pupil (the gifted pupil)  
 subject  
 receiver  
 hearer  
 listener  
 answerer  
 speaker  
 talker  
 individual  
 person (an isolated person, every adult person)  
 adult (a normal adult)  
 homunculi, you know, little men  
 one – the other  
 $P_1, P_2$   
 you – the other guys  
 somebody  
 everybody  
 demon (the old demon)  
 God

(2) Only the pronoun *she* was used to refer to the following:

girl  
 woman  
 lady  
 wife  
 mother  
 grandmother  
 spinster aunt  
 waitress  
 maid  
 secretary

All except *secretary* in this *she*-list are female for biological reasons.

(3) *He* or *she* was used twice to refer to a patient (and once to refer to a patient who had been specified as male – but a patient specified as female was also twice referred to as *he*), once to refer to *anybody* (“... if anybody feels it is his or hers ...”), and once (Swedish *han eller hon*) to refer to a teacher (*läraren*) in a

Swedish-language workshop. (We leave out our own contributions to the discussions.)

We also looked at the division of labor between the sexes. Men appeared in the following occupations:

- artist
- barber
- beekeeper
- boss
- cameraman
- captain on a ship
- car mechanic
- chairman
- director
- examiner
- God
- instructor
- leader
- mountaineer
- neurosurgeon
- poet
- policeman
- reporter
- research assistant
- researcher
- sergeant
- singer
- surgeon
- teacher
- therapist
- a man working on a dock
- the man in the shop
- man with heavy work
- the person who writes computer programs

If one comes from Finland, where a little over 50% of the university students are women, and where women make up approximately 47% of the total labor force, one might be somewhat surprised to hear which occupations women appeared in during the seminar – this is the total list:

- Mrs. Average Housewife
- secretary
- waitress
- maid

Now, let us see what the world looks like in the light of the examples that we have collected. What do males and females do? Does this picture resemble the world in which we live? Can our children, girls and boys who try to become women and men, find any positive models to identify with? We can start by making some comparisons. First, let us look at the adventures of a little boy:

*boy:*

- (1) The boy chases the cat
- (2) The cat chases the boy
- (3) The boy is chased by the girl
- (4) The boy is hit by the girl

A little girl's world is not much different. (The examples come from a picture test, where boys and girls, cats and dogs, had similar roles.)

*girl:*

- (5) The boy is chased by the girl
- (6) The boy is hit by the girl
- (7) The girl ate bread

However, already here one can see different sex roles starting to emerge:

*girl:*

- (8) The flowers were watered by a girl

*boy:*

- (9) The boy gave her a present

When the boy grows up and becomes a guy, his world looks like this [1]:

*guy:*

- (10) The guy had fallen down from a tree
- (11) The guy had been clubbed
- (12) The guy had this hole cut in his head
- (13) The hole was made when the guy was alive
- (14) Some of these holes were made on guys who were not hit
- (15) These Egyptians were really bright guys
- (16) It is always the other guys who are wrong
- (17) It is always easier to conclude that you are right and the other guys are wrong
- (18) The man just thought of all those guys standing around
- (19) . . . ten people where everybody is sitting on some other guy's knees.

What is the girl doing while the boy experiences all these exciting and dangerous things? What is her world like when she grows up?

*girl:*

- (20) The girl is lying on the beach in a chair
- (21) What is the girl thinking of?

[1] We are planning to write a separate article about the use of *guy*.

The asymmetry of the *guy-girl* world is also reflected by the pair *man-woman*:

*man*:

- (22) The man who lives in the house next door to me . . .
- (23) . . . a light man with heavy work . . .
- (24) The man is working on a dock
- (25) The man walked home yesterday
- (26) The man is coming home from work
- (27) The man lifts a child
- (28) The man is expressing how a feeling for a woman has survived
- (29) The man says to his wife: "You are really complaining about nothing"
- (30) The man went to a restaurant
- (31) The man just thought of all those guys standing around
- (32) . . . long men and short men . . . wise men . . . the man in the street, you know, ordinary people . . .
- (33) The man likes that woman
- (34) Every man loves some woman who loves him
- (35) There is a man who is so fed up with his wife that he intends to kill her

While the man comes from work, goes to a restaurant, loves some woman, and intends to kill his wife, what does the woman do?

*woman*:

- (36) The man who walked here yesterday likes that woman
- (37) A man is expressing how a feeling for a woman has survived
- (38) Every man loves some woman who loves him

A woman in this linguistics world does nothing except loving a man; otherwise she is an object in a man's world. The picture does not change much if instead of comparing *man* and *woman*, we compare *John* and *Mary*. We must remind the reader that John is sometimes called Bill, or Mark, Fred, Luke, Matthew, Noam *etc.*, and that Mary can have other names, too:

*John*:

- (39) Fred is in his office
- (40) Fred is in the university
- (41) John went to the restaurant
- (42) Luke is on Mark's right

*Mary*:

- (43) Mary made him a cup of tea
- (44) When Mary walked through the room, she mibbed the tea (*mibbed* is a non-sense word used in a test).
- (45) ". . . full on the casement shone the wintry moon and cast warm gules on Madeline's fair breast . . ." (Keats)

Finally, we can compare *his* world to *hers*:

*he*:

- (46) He would prefer . . .
- (47) He feels . . .
- (48) He came home . . .
- (49) He works
- (50) He takes part in experiments
- (51) Everybody here presents his own research
- (52) He tries to see what the other has in his mind
- (53) He understands as well as possible the nature of the test he is taking
- (54) He knows what is understood
- (55) He is going to point it out
- (56) He means something
- (57) He talks and he means it
- (58) If he has a lot of common sense about what he is doing, he must base himself on logic
- (59) He has already shown his knowledge
- (60) He really sees what this structure means for the subject
- (61) He was directing the work
- (62) He is in control
- (63) He would not let himself be imposed upon by a cameraman
- (64) He can control
- (65) He can operate
- (66) He is a good leader
- (67) He has learned how to argue
- (68) He is better at arguing
- (69) He is about to make a winning move

In other words, *he* does various neutral things (examples 46–51) such as working and coming home, but *he* also has the ability to understand (examples 52–60), and to control things, act as a leader and to win (examples 61–69).

What does *she* do while *he* works and controls? This is all *she* does:

*she*:

- (70) She saw the ship
- (71) She is dependent
- (72) She is taking singing lessons
- (73) She slimmed
- (74) She slimmed her hipline

Comments are hardly needed—the examples speak for themselves.

Above, we made some comparisons of female-male pairs. But it is also revealing

to look at asymmetries: where do we have just a female or a male word, but no counterpart of the opposite sex?

– There was a *lady*, but no *gentleman*:

(75) . . . an old lady in my home town . . .

(76) Point to the one of the ladies who has second shortest way to the bus

–there was a *mother*, but no *father*:

(77) My mother takes care of me

(78) . . . mother-child interaction . . .

(79) Mother talks to a 2-year-old

– there was a *spinster aunt*, but no *bachelor uncle* (however, there was a bachelor who lived alone in the mountains . . .):

(80) . . . my spinster aunt as a possible candidate . . .

(81) My spinster aunt is an infant

– there was a *waitress*, but no *waiter*:

(82) The waitress came to the table and gave him the menu

– there was a *maid*, but no *male servant*:

(83) The maid sweeps the floor

– there was a *secretary*, who was considered to be female, although there are also male secretaries in the real world:

(84) . . . a severe secretary . . . she . . .

And, finally, there is a *wife* or *housewife*, but no *husband* or *househusband*. This is how her exciting story runs:

(85) A person is in the kitchen with his wife.

(86) . . . Mrs. Average Housewife . . .

(87) The wife has complained about how miserable her home life is

(88) He says to his wife: “You are really complaining about nothing”.

(89) Certainly, the wife has a different mental representation for a carburator from the car mechanic – if she has one at all

(90) There is a man who is so fed up with his wife that he intends to kill her.

All the examples (85-90) deal with a fictitious wife, and what results from them is a stereotype. However, when a person from real life is talked about, she has at least a chance of avoiding stereotypical features, even if she is a wife. In the following examples, *wife* is a specified, real-world person:

(91) When I have my hair cut by my wife, I sit like this

(92) It has been mostly my wife’s work, but I have been participating in it



(93) My wife is doing her dissertation on . . .

(94) We (= I and my wife) had an argument (about the Piagetian approach) . . . and she won

There is, it seems, a long way from fiction to fact, or *vice versa*.

What about males who didn't have female counterparts? There were a couple of occupational terms, such as *cameraman* and *policeman*. In addition, there was *townsman*, and there was *man in the street*, that was, *ordinary people*. Terms such as *townswoman* or *woman in the street* do not even exist in English as counterparts – or if they do, their connotations are different (*woman in the street* may take on sexual connotations which *man in the street* does not have).

It has been claimed that in spite of the morpheme *-man*, *townsman*, *policeman* and *man in the street* can also have females as referents. But how likely is it that when hearing *a man in the street*, one comes to think of a woman as a referent? The use of the pronoun *he* in connection with generic terms, such as *child*, *adult*, *person*, raises similar problems. The nouns themselves do not specify the sex of the referent: it can be either female or male. On the other hand, the pronoun *he* is elsewhere used to pick out a male individual. Can it really be the case that *he* is fair and evenhanded to females and males, when it is used of a generic term which does not in itself have any sex specification? For those who still believe that the use of pronouns is irrelevant to the way we create the world in terms of language, we would like to recommend some recent research on this issue (see the reference list).

For the reader who still believes in the neutrality of *he*, we would like to present a sample of this allegedly sex-neutral use of *he*. What kind of picture of the world is created here?

(95) An animal is relaxed, because you can talk nicely to him

(96) A little dog wagging his tail . . .

(97) A patient of this type, he would always . . .

(98) It is typical for a Broca's aphasic to use whatever linguistic devices he has

(99) An aphasic has this problem that he cannot express himself in any language

(100) The occasional patient who is taken to a hospital because they think he is crazy

(101) There has been absolutely nothing wrong with the child until he fell down from a tree, or his school-mate hit him

(102) The child's ability to do such things may or may not correlate with his ability to do other things

(103) A child . . . he will use this expression . . .

(104) A child . . . before he can do any of that kind of learning about transitivity schemata, he has to acquire . . .

(105) The person who writes the computer program, sometimes he does not know when the switches occur

(106) A person is in the kitchen with his wife

(107) Every adult person, if he is honest and not cheating with you, he would say . . .

(108) Even if the person was conscious of what he was doing . . .

(109) A normal adult who tries to express himself

(110) The God will gradually become more conscious of him or itself

So much for the 'neutral' world. Let us finally listen to what a woman says, according to the examples:

(111) My mother takes care of me

(112) My boyfriend made me come here

(113) I cannot understand my boyfriend's attitudes

(114) Every Monday I do my laundry

We have here presented a mixed bag of examples that we think reflect sex roles. Some examples are from lectures, others from discussions; some come from 'spontaneous' speech, others are specifically given as examples, either the speaker's own examples or someone else's; both men and women have contributed to the collection (even if men were in the majority), and there have been speakers both from Scandinavia and outside, both native speakers and non-native speakers of English. But in spite of the great variation in the origin of the examples, they tend to point in the same direction.

Instead of a long concluding synthesis, we just give a list of polarizations, where our examples indicate that women in general are closer to the second and men to the first pole:

<i>Men are seen as</i>	<i>Woman are seen as</i>
the norm	the deviant
universal	a special case
unmarked	marked
subjects, agents	objects
active	passive
independent	dependent
rational	emotional
strong	weak
visible	invisible
performing many different functions	restricted to few functions and roles

Men are defined both in terms of their place in the production and in terms of many other roles. Women are mainly defined in terms of their reproductive functions, as sexual objects, as mothers, as caretakers and housewives, and they are mostly defined in relation to other people, not as independent individuals. In other fields except the reproductive ones women are invisible, they just somehow disappear from the scene.

As one example of the invisibility, let us consider the Barber paradox, which

was also discussed at the course: "In a small village, so the story goes, there is a barber who shaves all the men who do not shave themselves" (Watzlawick et al. 1968: 194). The question is who shaves the barber. The paradox is said to be as follows: if the barber shaves himself, he does not fit the description given of the barber. On the other hand, if he does not shave himself, he should belong to the class of people whom the barber shaves. But, as was pointed out earlier, he cannot shave himself. One obvious but so far unnoticed possibility is to assume that the barber is a woman. This is a possibility at least in the American usage of the word *barber* ("Shear wonder – Playboy's playmate of the month. If all barbers looked like Baltimore's Dorothy Mays, this would be a better-groomed world", *Playboy*, June 1979: 5). It is paradoxical that this possibility has not been considered. Of course the paradox remains if you for instance change the job she is doing from 'shave' to 'haircut' – but the barber goes in our example.

One of the lecturers, a computational linguistics person, told about a program which simulates two robots, John and Mary, and said something that we think is reflected in the ways linguists used women and men in their output at the course. He said: "The robots have identical possibilities. They are identical *until they are given names*" (our emphasis).

*P.S.* After eight days, all the women and children on the course presented the material to the men. What happened? Were there any changes? Yes and no . . .

First, there were those who were conscious of being observed and who tried to remember it. Some of them tried so hard that it became difficult for them to remember what they were supposed to say. Some tried to make the whole thing a joke. Some caught themselves exactly when they were saying something sexist, and corrected themselves. And then there were those who did not change anything, and who didn't even seem to be aware of what they were saying. And, finally, there were also some people who almost constantly used *he or she* and avoided stereotypes. Some examples:

- (115) . . . each participant has his own – or, *her* own – I hope you noted that –  
hmm hmm krhm ahm . . . goals
- (116) Stop flirting with my ~~wife~~ husband (example written on the blackboard)
- (117) It's an example with Tom, Dick and Harry – I'm sorry that they are not  
Mary
- (118) (about the cerebral homunculus) We've seen him . . . or her (laugh) . . .
- (119) A blind child not being able to watch her parents . . .
- (120) I hypnotize a person, and when I wake her up . . .
- (121) . . . this person . . . there are certain ways for him or her to get the salt
- (122) . . . who wants to impose on her or him the microstructure . . .
- (123) Grice's model of man is a model of a rational man who is aware of his goals
- (124) A Czech speaker . . . on which grounds is he able to discriminate . . .
- (125) Every Czech speaker is able to pronounce . . . but in normal speech he does  
not . . .

(126) . . . husband who has been spoiled by his wife. She is very sensitive to his needs . . .

(127) A theoretician, particularly if he is not a psychologist . . .

We conclude with a last quote:

“man can be viewed from many perspectives, man and woman, or human beings, we should perhaps say . . .”

*P.S.* We would like to recommend similar projects to our colleagues. We are planning to do the same type of observations in a more systematic way at different Nordic and international conferences, together with others. If you're doing something similar, please send your results to us [2]! It might be useful for all of us to know that Big Sister is watching – and listening . . .! [3]

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[3] [Editors' remark:] It has been the Editorial policy of the *Journal of Pragmatics* to favor non-sexist usage as far as possible. An active concern with this question in editing papers submitted for publication has shown us that this is not always a straightforward task. (If you have four to five occurrences of *he* in the same clause, the rewrite rule 'he → he or she' will yield awkward results.) Therefore, we encourage creativity in non-sexist language use. Suggestions and comments (also from those who don't think that the use of the masculine as the unmarked gender tends to make people think that male is the unmarked sex, too) are extremely welcome. Authors may consult the *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language*, published in *American Psychologist* 30: 682–684 (1975).

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