

## **Gender Neutral Language : The Quest for Fairness in English Language**

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### **Introduction :**

Language is the medium through which we exchange information and ideas, communicate emotion, and it is an instrument of action. But no language is constant. It keeps on evolving, changing and developing. From time to time the long list of English vocabulary has added new words to its old ones and at the same time English sentence structures have also undergone a tremendous change and addition. These changes have taken shape due to various needs and impulses. One of the crying needs of the present time is the need of a bias-free gender-neutral language. For it has been criticized by many that with the racist and classicist a new opportunist, the so-called sexist, has merged. The word "gender" basically means "the system (in some languages) of making words such as nouns, adjectives and pronouns as being masculine, feminine, or neuter" (Summers, et al. 587). And the topic of this paper is concerned with the earnest need of a gender-neutral language, in other words a bias-free language in English. That is, language that eliminates the offensive terms and urges for neutral terms showing respect to both sexes--male and female, equally. "When writing or speaking, it is important to use language that includes men and women equally" (Hornby 490). But as taste varies from person to person, the use of language also varies from country to country. As Methew has clearly ascribed the above veracity in his abstract ". . . while English speakers have coined non-gender specific language where sexist terms exist, Spanish speakers have coined gendered terminology where none has existed before" (72). Likewise gender specification exists in French also: "one of the ways of showing difference of gender in French is by changing the ending of adjectives" (Summers, et al. 587). Non-sexists, who have in their group the feminist also, chewed upon such usages that exclude or stereotype a particular gender. They strongly discarded this usage and campaigned to install a gender-neutral language by recasting the old typecast generic or sexual stereotyped words usually expressed by third person pronouns and terms used for occupations with coined words which are all inclusive terms.

### **Empirical and historical evidences:**

People, globally, are optimistic of this language reform movement. It is evident from the outlook of Numberg, et al. who hold the optimistic view that "a glance at any newspaper or five minutes in front of the television news will produce evidence to show that people are changing their language to accommodate concern about fairness to both sexes" (5).

The uses of gender sensitive language are manifest in many empirical and historical evidences. As for example, soon after setting his feet on the moon Neil Armstrong uttered the most memorable sentence: "That is one step for a *man*, one giant leap for *mankind*" (Cayne, et al. 179-80 & Goetz, et al. 574 [italics added]). He sounds sexist. No doubt if his venture to the moon had been a recent incident he would have rectified his language thus: "That is one small step for a person, one giant leap for humankind". Such alternative might seem sand on the tongue to many and they might dismiss such usage considering the whole business as the hobbyhorse of a radical few. But still there is strong logic and debate exhorted by people and movements for the need of a gender-neutral language.

There are hundreds and thousands of such indications in the past, which are evolving very rapidly specially in the West though too gradually in the male dominant East. *Star Trek*, the most fabulous TV serial, especially for the kids, suffered from serious unfair terms and language in its earlier shows. The following citation of the announcement made on the spaceship will clarify the situation: "Spaceship, the final frontier. These are the missions of the Starship Enterprise. It's five years mission: To boldly go where no man has gone before." Many strongly suggested eliminating such use of sexist or racist language not only from spoken and written English but also from feature films and broadcasting business. The *Star Trek* producers found themselves in a fix. What to do now? They beat their brains very hard and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*--an exclusively nonsexist or gender fair production, was the output of their effort.

### **Measures in eliminating sexism from English language:**

Very often we use a gender specific word, mostly masculine gender instead of a gender neutral one, to denote mixed gender group. The dominance of masculine gender over neutral terms in a language

reflects the prejudices and dictation of a society. As such not only in English but also in most of the languages of the world we find the reflection of masculine gender dominance which bears the evidence of its involvement in a male-centred and male dominant society.

Warren convincingly remarks: "Yet the uncritical use of sexist language may blind us to our having adopted a particular value-laden perspective. Such blindness may systematically distort our theories and interfere with the careers and lives of many of our colleagues and students, both male and female." He further asserts that ". . . as scholars and teachers we pursue truth whatever it leads: to the reform of our ordinary concept and beliefs and, if necessary, of our everyday language" (471).

Gender neutrality or non-sexist terms or language has made a permanent room for itself in almost all the recent guidelines, handbills and policies of schools, colleges, universities and all sorts of education academies just to show importance to both the male and the female students. "The University of New Hampshire as an equal opportunity educational institution is committed to both academic freedom and the fair treatment of all individuals. It, therefore, discourages the use of language in illustration that reinforces inappropriate and demeaning attitudes, assumption, and stereotypes about sex roles. Accordingly, all official University communication, whether delivered orally or in writing, shall be free of sexist language" (Leitzel, B-8.1).

Such changes have also been encouraged by professional organizations, institutions, companies, trading firms etc. where both sexes serve ubiquitously, by revising their earlier by-laws and policies only for the sake of neutrality among their fellows. An easy survey of some style and procedure manuals will illuminate the accuracy. Davidson, et al. asserts that

. . . the government has developed policies to promote equality for women in the workplace. A gender-neutral language policy requiring the removal of gender bias from all government communication is an important part of the government action plan. (2)

**Modes of discrimination:**

Insensitive use of language may lead to serious problems as mental

disorder. Wilson claims that "ambiguous and conflicting language" is the basis of "psychiatric diagnosis, severe stigma and loss of civil liberty" (4). So most of the usage panels and style manuals discourage the use of insensitive or discriminatory language with co-workers. They are of the opinion that language should reflect society, as society consists of both male and female. They suggest eliminating the exercise of bias language, especially in examples, that always reflect men's authoritative manner and women's subservient position, which are in another way sex stereotyped techniques. Studies have shown that the various modes of discrimination comprise generic use of particular words, epicene pronouns or third person singular pronouns and indefinite pronouns to mean both sexes and the use of hackneyed occupational terms.

### **Generic use of 'man':**

Generics like 'man' and pronoun like 'he' are widely used in English language to mean both male and female. Most of the generic terms in English imply male superiority and reflect a male image when a reader comes across such generics. But what is the way out of this problem? Rearrangement of the most controversial utilization of the generic 'man' and the third person singular pronoun, the generic 'he', which are very often considered in English as an all inclusive gender, is the only sensible way to neutrality or to eliminate linguistic sexism in English language. "Generics are nouns and pronouns that are intended to be used for both women and men. Linguistically, however, some 'generics' are also of male specific, which create ambiguity and excludes women. Since male-specific 'generics' tend to call up primarily male images for readers, their use is incompatible with a gender neutral language objective" (Davidson, et al. 6).

As such, the use of such gender bias generics is incompatible. In the light of historical evidences 'man' was an all comprising gender neutral generics expressing in its broad sense both men and women. It very often used to be Anglo-Saxons as people of a general referent. But with the advancement of time both its meaning and applications have been squeezed denoting the male human being only. To most readers the noun 'man' generically does not give out a gender-neutral sense. The continual reverberations of this nonexclusive orthodoxy hurt the sentiment of any individual, particularly women, when 'man' is used

for both sexes comprehensively. Even modern dictionaries in some cases construe the dominant concept of males while defining 'man'. Example like 'man' *is the only sensible mammal on earth* at the very first instance gives the sense of a male in particular, not of females, though it has been used generically. The narrowness of the generic use of man has been made plain by the use of the word wife at the end of sentence like Man's basic needs are food, clothing, shelter, and a wife. Again, homemaking and child-rearing, though a work of women, are expressed by cumbersome sentence: Like all mammals, *man suckles his young*. Despite the objection to the generic use of 'man', "a majority of usage panel members still approve the use of it" (Numberg, et al. 10).

Hornby mentions that "*man and mankind* have traditionally been used to mean all men and women" (490 [italics added]). Keeping in line with the above, NCTE (1985) also opines: "Although MAN in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult, its meaning has come to be closely identified with adult male that the generic uses of man and other words with masculine markers should be avoided. The following is the list of unfair generics with suggested alternatives from both Hornby (1995) and NCTE (1985):

**Table : 1**

<b>Generics</b>	<b>Alternatives</b>
Mankind	Humanity, people, human beings
Man's achievements	Human achievements
The best man for the job	The best person for the job
Man-made	Synthetic, machine made
Man the stock room	Staff the stockroom
Nine man hours	Nine staff hours

**Generic use of Pronouns:**

Sexism at present is coloured by political use. Thus such use should be replaced with an all-inclusive gender-neutral pronoun. As a rule, a pronoun is to agree with its antecedents in number and gender. But as English lacks gender fair third person singular pronoun the use of 'he' 'his' 'him' is very often used generically to mean both male and female.

The most common gender neutral drafting problem encountered seems to be with use of the pronouns 'he' 'his' or 'him'. Traditional rules of grammar learned in school taught most of us to use these pronouns when referring to antecedents of unspecified gender. This usage is attributable in large measures to the fact that the English language does not have a sex-indefinite third person pronoun. (Davidson, et al. 6)

Although such usage is correct grammatically, it suggests to readers, if only subliminally, that the referenced is only to males. Faced with this problem, one has several options. For example: *Every student must submit his form to the admission office by today.* Here the word 'student' comprises both male and female, but the use of the pronoun 'his' strongly proclaims the presence of male students demeaning the females, which is sexist. Thus suggestion goes to recast the sentence in the plural: *Students must submit their forms to the admission office by today.* Several style panels have approved the use of singular antecedents followed by plural pronouns like they, their, them etc., violating the traditional canons of grammar. On the contrary others have strictly discarded such usage. "You can also use he or she, his or her, or him or her, specially in more formal speech of writing. But most writers think it cumbersome" (Hornby 490).

In old English the masculine gender was the only marker used to give the all-inclusive meaning of male and female. As it was an arbitrary practice, it did not confront problem of which pronoun to use with an indefinite singular antecedent. Old English was free of biological sex. Later with the transition of "natural gender," writers felt the urge of using pronouns in agreement with its antecedents--basically the controversial third person singular, keeping in line with the biological sex of the referents to their antecedent nouns. The ultimate output was the popularization of the generic masculine pronouns. A sentence like: *Citizens intending to vote should register his name prior arriving at the booth* - gives the impression of male citizens only, though it consists of women as well. Thus later as solution to the problem, use of plural pronouns they/their/them/themselves referring to a singular antecedent to give out an indefinite generic meaning came into fashion in most of the writings of Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Sir Walter Scott, Walt Whitman, George Bernard Shaw, etc. Thus the alternative of the earlier examples

might be: *Citizens intending to vote should register their names prior arriving at the booth.* Though both the usages were in fashion in English once, modern English considers it as cumbersome. Jane Austen's authentic lines in *Pride & Prejudice* sustain the testimony of the above: "*Everybody* declared that *he* was the wickedest young man in the world; and *everybody* began to find out that *they* had always distrusted the apperance of his goodness" (255 [italics added]).

Further, a reference from Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors* will strengthen the logic:

There's not *a man* I meet doth salute me  
As if I were *their* well-acquainted friend. (4.3.139, [italics added])

Such use is also located in his play *Much Ado About Nothing* (1994) where he cites:

God send everybody on *their* heart's desire! (3.4.167,  
[italics added])

The use of singular *their* etc. is accepted on various grounds. When a plural pronoun refers to a semantically collective, generic or indefinite term or expression, it can be used with a morphologically and syntactically singular antecedent. But the use of a plural pronoun is not at all acceptable when the antecedent it refers to is singular in number or a person about whom there is some definite information.

### **Occupational Terms :**

Sexist terms have become popular in occupational terms. When we utter: *The chairman will not be able to preside over the counsel meeting today,* it is likely that such an example conveys the sense that the chairman is a male. But to the utter surprise a female appears to take the seat of the chairman and it really seems embarrassing both to the members as well as the chairman herself. As such *chair* or *chairperson* replacing the hackneyed chairman has gained popularity. Most occupational terms are highly discriminatory reinforcing such ideas that it is not normal for women to be in professional, highly paid technical and manual jobs. The following examples bear the evidence: *A doctor ought to check up his patients carefully.* Though the pronoun *his* has been used in a generic sense, still it is considered offensive to

most readers. Thus it should be replaced by making both the subject and pronoun plural: *Doctors ought to check up their patients carefully.* Sometimes it goes so far as people use: *Our company is looking for a lady doctor.* It clearly establishes the male dominant fact that a woman cannot be a doctor or professor, as it is very often used as *Mrs Jane is going to take the chemistry class in the evening.* Whereas we are addressing one of her male colleagues, as *Prof. Becon will be the guest speaker at today's seminar.* Such stereotyped occupational terms really offend people as this sentence does: *Lawyers have wives and children to support.* The alternation of such biased language: *Lawyers have families to support* - strongly proves that either a male or a female equally can be the so-mentioned Lawyer.

Example like: *George always wanted to be a newsman.* also provides the indication that the news agency might consist of men only, though it has many women as well. Thus the sexist term newsman can be replaced with reporter, journalist etc. To the modern people, man tends to give out a narrow sense of male dominance, and as such, it prefers the coined gender free or gender-neutral words instead of the so-called generic man.

The following list of false generics with its alternative gender neutral is most commonly preferred:

**Table : 2**

<b>Examples</b>	<b>Alternatives</b>
Chairman	Chairperson, Chair
Policeman, fireman	Police officer, fire fighter
Mailman	Postal worker
Salesman	Sales person
Poetess	Poet
Stewardess	Flight attendant
Lady lawyer	Lawyer
Lady nurse	Nurse
Housewife	Homemaker, spouse
Businessman	Business executive, business person
Clergyman	Cleric
Watchman	Watch, security guard



### **Gendered Labels:**

Another odious task is imposing labels on specific groups denoting their respective sexes, which gives out sexist overtones. It is very often emphasized to treat all individuals equally, male or female. But it is a common sexist attitude, which slips into our oral and written protocol that we acknowledge male superiority over females by using various terms before individual's name. The most controversial expressions are 'Mrs' and 'Miss' for women in parallel to 'Mr' for men. The labels 'Mrs' or 'Miss' which describe marital status identify women only; and such practice is discriminatory. Non-sexists take this discrimination to heart that when a female is married, she is labeled as Mrs and, if not, labeled as Miss. Whereas, a male whether married or not is addressed as Mr. Thus the coined 'Ms' is likely to be preferred by all in labeling the females both married or unmarried. Again it is preferred to write 'Ms Jane' to 'Ms Brown' by one's first name instead of her family name to eliminate male dominance which is expressed through Ms Brown, upholding the identity of a female through a male, and which is sexist attitude, and demeaning a female's own identity. As such no-sexists prefer that a woman married or not should be labeled by her first name and not by her family name.

It is very often alleged that people all around the world are revolting this way or that way only for a gender fair language. This attempt may finally help in upliftment of the females' position in society. As part of such movement most of the countries of the world give credit to the mother side rather than the side of the father. This sentience has also started migrating from the West to the East, though very gradually. As a result most supervisors or teachers are very tactfully trying to read the minds of their students by setting questions on controversial issues like gender issues. Students in an admission test were asked to give their opinion on:

"Mother's name should be included in the identity of their children" --You may agree or disagree with this statement. Present your opinion. . . . (Admission test: 2000)

### **Conclusion:**

Sexism has made a permanent room for itself in English language in a variety of forms. But still good writers and publishers have raised their voices in favour of gender neutral language and many people in speaking or writing English today is avoiding the use of unfair or

untrue attitudes to a particular sex, usually women. Press, newspapers, journals have taken measures not to print materials dealing with unfair or gender bias language. The end of an argument is persuasion, and if a writer's writing offends the reader's feeling, the reader will lose faith in the writer's arguments. Finally it can be said that language should be free from all prejudices to any particular sex and group. The deserved neutrality can be achieved by repudiating sexist terms on occupational terms and to use the coined gender-neutral terms encompassing both sexes in general, and to replace the generic masculing pronominal pronouns with plural-all comprising pronouns. We cannot deny the fact that it is desired by all that sexism be eliminated from English language and we are optimistic in this matter.

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