HOW CAN LANGUAGE BE SEXIST?

Prima facie, our title question may seem pointless. Barring bigots, virtually everybody will agree that language is frequently used in a sexist way. Why, then, the question?

We are formulating the title of the paper in this way because it serves to call attention to a general predicament of feminist philosophy as a serious theoretical enterprise. The sexist uses of language which first come to most people’s minds are likely to instantiate relatively uninteresting aspects of language. Examples are offered by sexism expressed through purely emotive meaning and by those sexist uses of language which directly reflect sexist customs and institutions, for instance the different ways of addressing a person in Japanese. There is no problem as to how such sexism is possible in language; nor is there any interesting intellectual problem as a how such sexist usages can be diagnosed and cured. Once we have our emotions in line and our institutions and customs freed from sexism, no residual problem remains. Or so it seems.

This discussion illustrates certain criticisms which are often levelled in general at feminist philosophy. While the social problems addressed by feminist philosophy are usually acknowledged to be real and important, it is frequently denied that their diagnosis and solution requires or leads us to any new philosophical, methodological, or other theoretical insights. Hence feminist philosophy comes to seem a misnomer. The problems with which it deals do not appear to have a sufficiently important theoretical component to be labelled philosophical; hence the analyses and solutions it offers are thought not worthy of the designation ‘philosophy’.

This is a view we are trying to combat by means of a case study. We suggest that a number of sexist uses of language illustrate interesting general theoretical problems. The diagnosis of such sexist uses hence involves serious problems of theoretical semantics. Even though there is in some cases no question as to how sexist language is possible, in others the very mechanism through which it comes about presents an interesting problem. In this paper, we are less anxious to solve this general theoretical problem we see raising its head here – it is too large for one paper anyway – than to recognize it, and less concerned with the details of instances of sexist language and sexist

language use than with their connection with the general problem we are posing. Through pointing out this connection, we are trying to give a concrete example of the theoretical interest of problems naturally arising from feminist concerns.

The theoretical problem we are posing is the following: In virtually every important current logical or philosophical approach to semantics, a set of representative relations between language and the world it deals with is taken for granted. For instance, in Tarski-type truth definitions, the valuation of nonlogical constants is taken for granted. In Montague semantics, the meaning functions associated with primitive words are likewise taken for granted. And in approaches which rely on translation to some privileged “language of thought”, the semantics of the target language is likewise left largely unanalyzed.

What we wish to suggest is, first, that the principles according to which these basic representative relations between language and reality are determined need much more attention than they are now given and that awareness of these principles is vital even for the understanding of and for the applications of contemporary formal semantics. We are tempted to speak of a subsystem of language (a subset of the totality of rules governing language) which is in some sense more fundamental than the subsystem studied in present-day formal semantics. For reasons which emerge somewhat more fully in what follows, we call the latter the structural system and the former the referential system.

This formulation is somewhat oversimplified, however, in that there is more interplay between the two systems than our schematic first statement leads one to expect. Furthermore, it is not clear that all the phenomena we have in mind are connected closely enough with each other on either side of the fence to justify us in speaking of a real (sub)system. Hence the preliminary formulation of our theme and the term “referential system” must be taken with a grain of salt, and must be considered as being tentative and exploratory in nature. In any case, we shall illustrate the general thesis by means of discussions of a few narrower problems. We shall also indicate how a couple of specific manifestations of sexism of language exemplify our general theoretical problem.

Some aspects of the referential system are sometimes classified as belonging to pragmatics rather than to semantics. Such labels are harmless as long as they do not mislead us into expecting that such “pragmatic” phenomena are somehow intrinsically related to the many other items also relegated to “the pragmatic wastebasket”, to use Yehoshua Bar-Hillel’s expression.