Use of Nonsexist Pronouns as a Function of One's Feminist Orientation

Marsha B. Jacobson
University of Dayton

William R. Insko, Jr.
Columbus, Ohio

Subjects of both sexes were shown several sentences that contained a blank space where a third-person singular pronoun should be, and were asked to indicate what pronoun they would choose to complete the sentence. Some sentences referred to traditionally masculine positions (e.g., lawyer), some referred to traditionally feminine positions (e.g., secretary), and some referred to positions with generic titles (e.g., spokesman). As hypothesized, subjects with high scores on Spence and Helmreich's (1972) Attitudes toward Women Scale (AWS) chose nonsexist pronouns more frequently on all three types of sentences than did subjects with low AWS scores. Less feminist trends in the subjects' pronoun choices are discussed.

There is no doubt that sexism within our society is reflected in our language. Lakoff (1973), for example, cites several instances in which underlying negative attitudes toward women manifest themselves in language usage, such as the different connotative meanings for bachelor and spinster or for master and mistress.

However, to say that societal sexism influences linguistic sexism is not enough, for the reverse is also true: sexism in language helps to perpetuate sexist attitudes. Various authors allude to the psychological and enculturational effects of language (e.g., Kramer, Thorne, & Henley, 1978; Lakoff, 1973; MacKay, 1983; Martyna, 1980). If the linguistic environment to
which we are continually exposed is rife with sexist imagery, it cannot help but affect the way we think about and act toward women. In addition, if this is true, it would imply that nonsexist language would help foster more egalitarian attitudes.

If one wishes to be nonsexist in the use of language, third-person singular pronouns are particularly troublesome. The only genderless English pronoun that can be used in the third-person singular is *it*, which is clearly unacceptable when the referent is human. The grammatical imperative for sex-indefinite third-person singular referents is to use generic *he*. However, Martyna (1980) points out that, as most usages of *he* are sex-specific, we are more likely to interpret a particular instance of *he* as being sex-specific rather than sex-indefinite. Similarly, Kramer et al. (1978) state that even when *he* is used generally, people still tend to view the referent as specifically male. On the other hand, Lakoff (1973) (whose article included several instances of generic *he*) does not deny the sexist origins of such usage but feels that there are other aspects of language that are far more demeaning to women than generic *he*.

Many people, of course, use *they*, but it is not always clear whether such usage stems from a desire to be nonsexist or from an ignorance of proper grammar. Bodine (1974) states that singular *they* was widely used and accepted until the late 1700s when prescriptive grammarians, acting out of androcentrism, declared it to be incorrect and insisted that sex-indefinite *he* was the appropriate pronoun to use. Yet, she says, singular *they* has resisted all efforts to eliminate it from the language, and it continues to be frequently used. MacKay (1980) points out that singular *they* almost never occurs in formal writing and argues against its use on the grounds that, depending on the context, singular *they* can be awkward and ambiguous. However, Pateman (1982) counters by stating that if singular *they* were more generally and prescriptively used, it would not seem as awkward or ambiguous.

One is left, therefore, with *he or she* (or *he/she*), which is considered to be nonsexist not because it is genderless, but because it is all-inclusive, i.e., it refers to both sexes jointly. While sometimes more awkward or cumbersome to use than sex-indefinite *he*, *he or she* avoids the problem of ambiguity of referent (i.e., whether the referent is specifically male or not) and allows for the possibility of the referent being specifically female. Indeed, Moulton, Robinson, and Elias (1978) found that in a sex-neutral

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2 However, as Blauergs (1978) points out, the order of the two pronouns is not random. It is *he or she* and almost never *she or he*. Thus, in that the male half of the term comes first, *he or she* is not wholly devoid of sexism. Nevertheless, compared to the use of *he* alone in case where the referent is not necessarily or definitely male, *he or she* is considered to represent a nonsexist use of language.