Gender Stereotyping in the English Language

LAUREL RICHARDSON

Everyone in our society, regardless of class, ethnicity, sex, age, or race, is exposed to the same language, the language of the dominant culture. Analytic of verbal language can tell us a great deal about a people's fears, prejudices, anxieties, and interests. A rich vocabulary on a particular subject indicates personal interest or obsessions (e.g., the extensive vocabulary about cars in America). Different words for the same subject (such as freedom fighter and terrorist, passed over and crooked, snake love and bull) show that there is a range of attitudes and feelings in the society toward that subject.

It should not be surprising, then, to find differential attitudes and feelings about men and women rooted in the English language. Although the English language has not been completely analyzed, six general propositions concerning these attitudes and feelings about males and females can be made.

First, in terms of grammatical and semantic structure, women do not have a fully autonomous, independent existence; they are part of men. The language is not divided into male and female with distinct configurations and declensions, as many of our languages are. Rather, women are included under the generic he: the pronoun he can be used generically to mean he or she. Furthermore, when used as an indefinite pronoun, grammatically refers to both men and women. So, for example, when we read men in the following phrases we are to interpret it as applying to both men and women: "men are born," "one small step for man, one giant step for mankind," "man, that's tough," "man overboard," "man the toolmaker," "alienated man," "garbageman." Our roles of etiquette complete the grammatical presumption of dichotomy. When two persons are pronounced "man and wife," Miss Susan Jones changes her legal name to Mrs. Robert Gordon (Vanderbilt, 1972). In each of these correct usages, women are part of men; they do not exist autonomously.

The exclusion of women is well expressed in Mary Daly's anti-jarring slogan "the sisterhood of man" (1973:7-21).

However, there is some question as to whether the theory that man means everybody is carried out in practice (see Brindis, 1979; Martyn, 1990). For example, an eight-year-old interrupts her reading of "The Story of the Cowmen" to ask how we got here without cavemen. A ten-year-old thinks it is dumb to have a woman president. A beginning anthropology student believes (incorrectly) that all shamans ("which doctors") are males because her textbook and professor use the referential pronoun he.

But beginning language learners are not the only ones who visualize males when they see the word man. Research has conclusively demonstrated that when the generic man is used, people visualize men, not women (Schneider & Harker, 1973; DeFeo, 1976: Martyn, 1979; Hamilton & Henley, 1982). DeFeo, for example, reports that college students choose silhouettes of males for sentences with the word man as men in them. Similarly, the presumably generic he elicits images of men rather than women. The reason is so persistent that linguists doubt whether there actually is a semantic generic in English (MacKay, 1983).

Man, then, suggests not humanity but rather male images. Moreover, over one's lifetime, an educated American will be exposed to the prescriptive in more than a million times (MacKay, 1983). One consequence is the exclusion of women in the visualization, imagination, and thought of males and females. Most likely this linguistic prejudice persists in men's feelings of dominance over and
A few weeks after Messy Gothamism... because New York City's parks and recreation commissioners (the first female to hold the position) someone asked her how many statues of women were in the city's parks. "I said I wasn't sure, but I'd find out," Gotham says. What she found was that there wasn't a single statue of an American woman in New York City. In fact, of the Park Department's 417 monuments considered significant in terms of size, subject or artist, only three depict individual and identifiable females: Joan of Arc, Alice in Wonderland and Mother Goose. "I considered Mother Goose because she's another kid and I was trying to make sure I was getting everybody in," says Gotham. "But I was also making a point."


Part of the problem is that most of the monuments and statues in New York City were erected between 1876 and 1917. "Before the women's movement, women were not considered on a par with men in terms of their accomplishments," Gotham says. "There's a visual domination of males in our society."

Promoting more portraits of women isn't easy, but Gotham is a fighter—and she's already getting results. "The owner of an art gallery said about what our department is trying to do and slammed a statue of Cassatt's Sister," says. "It's going to get into Central Park, next to the public library, within the next few months." Now in the works is a project dedicated to Surratt, the author of the Statue of Liberty model and the Eleanor Roosevelt Bicentennial, a landscape that will include a bronze sculpture and pastry of a woman, born in the last century.

"Maybe if women stuff 150,000 letters, we'll be doing better in New York, they'll be pictured to do it in their cities," says Gotham. "I have a whole movement going."

responsible for writers, feeling that interaction with the development of equality in relationships.

Second, in actual practice, the poorest male perpetuates different personality attributes and foster acquisition for men and women. Nurses, secretaries, and clerical school teachers are almost invariably referred to as the doctors, engineers, electricians, and presidents as he, in one classroom, professors referred to as an unidentified child as he but shifted to one when discussing the讥刺 gains. In a facility discussion of the problems of aspiring new staff, all architects, engineers, security officers, doctors, and computer programmers were referred to as he; secretaries and file clerks were referred to as she. Marilyn (1973) has noted that speakers consistently use he when the reference has a high-status occupation (e.g. doctor, lawyer, judge) but shift to she when the occupations have lower status (e.g. nurse, secretary).

Even when our sex ascension to such high status objects subtly reinforces different personalities for males and females. It stems as though the small (e.g.Kincaid), the
generous (e.g. poetry), the unpredictable (e.g. the farm), the nurturing (e.g. the church, the school), and that which is owned and controlled by men (e.g. boats, cars, property, money) represents the feminine, whereas those which are controlling potential power in and of itself (e.g. God, Satan) typically represents the masculine.

Adequate status and are continuous. In one college, the men's studies are called the humanities and the women's studies the practicals.

Some of you may wonder whether it matters that the female is linguistically included in the male. The inclusive common of women under the psycholinguistic, men, and the perceptive use he, however, is not a trivial issue. Language has tremendous power to shape attitudes and influence behavior. Indeed, Mackey (1985) argues that the perceptive use "the all characteristics of a highly effective propagandistic technique; frequent repetition, early age of acquisition (before age 6), conformity (he is not thought of as proper gender), use by high-prestige sources (including universities, texts and professors), and endorsement (prescribed as thought..."
It is a matter of common knowledge. As a result, the prescriptive affects females' sense of life options and feelings of well-being. For example, Adamsky (1981) found that women's sense of power and importance was enhanced when the prescriptive he was replaced by she.

Awareness of the impact of the generic man and prescriptive he has generated considerable activity to change the language. One change, approved by the American Language Association, is to replace the prescriptive he with the plural they as accepted practice before the 18th century. Another is the use of he or she. Although it sounds awkward at first, the he or she designation is increasingly being used in the media and among people who have recognized the power of the pronoun in perpetuating sex stereotyping. When a professor, for example, talks about "the lawyer," as "he or she," a speech pattern that counters sex stereotyping is modeled. This step to neutralize the impact of pronouns is evidenced further in the renaming of occupations: a policeman is now a police officer; a houseman is a mail carrier; a stewardess is a flight attendant.

Third, linguistic practice defines females as immature, incompetent, and incapable and males as mature, competent, and infallible. Because the words man and woman tend to connote actual and human attributes, common speech, organizational titles, public addresses, and bathroom doors frequently designate the women in question as ladies. Simply contrast the different connotations of lady and woman in the following common places:

Lucy, be a lady (woman) tonight.
Barbara's a little lady (woman).
Ladies (Women's) A/C Corps.

In the first two examples, the use of lady decontextualizes the contextual meaning of woman. So civilizing is the use of lady in the last phrase that the second is wholly anomalous. The male equivalent, lord, is never used; and in syntax, gentlemen, is used infrequently. When gentleman is used, the assumption seems to be that certain culturally conditioned aspects of masculinity (e.g., aggressivity, activity, and strength) should be set aside in the interface of community and order, as in the following phrases:

A gentleman's (man's) agreement.
A duel between gentleman (men).
He's a real gentleman (man).

Rather than feeling constrained to set aside the stereotypes associated with man, males frequently find the opposite process occurring. The contextual connotation of man places a strain on males to be continuously sexually and socially passive, as the following examples reveal:

I was not a man (gentleman) with her tonight.
This is a man's (gentleman's) job.
Be a man (gentleman).

Whether male, therefore, feel competent or anxious, valuable or worthless in particular contexts is influenced by the demands placed on them by the expectations of the language.

Not only are men infrequently labeled gentlemen, but they are infrequently labeled boys. The term boy is reserved for young males, bellhops, car attendants, and as a patsy to those males judged inferior. Boys convey immaturity and powerlessness. Only occasionally do males "have a night out with the boys." They do not say "they talk" in the office. Rarely does our language legitimize camaraderie in males. Rather, they are expected, linguistically, to adopt the responsibilities of manhood.

On the other hand, women of all ages may be called girls. Grown females "play bridge with the girls" and indulge in "girl talk." They are encouraged to remain childlike, and the implication is that they are basically immature and without power. Men can become men, linguistically, putting aside the immaturity of childhood; women, for them, to retain the openness and playfulness of boys' language is linguistically difficult.

Further, the presumed incompetence and immaturity of women are evidenced by the linguistic company they keep. Women are categorized with children ("women and children first"), the infirm ("the blind, the lame, the women"), and the incorruptible ("women, conviction, and idleness"). The use of these categorical designations is not accidental but persistent. "Value these select etymological groupings are powerful forces behind the actual expressions of language and are based on distinctions which are not regarded as trivial by the speakers of the language" (Key, 1972:83). A total language analysis of categorical groupings is not available; yet it seems likely that women tend to be included in groupings that designate incompetence, ineptitude, and immaturity.

On the other hand, it is difficult for us to conceive of the word man to any categorical grouping other than one that extends beyond humanity, such as "Man, ape, and angel."" Or "Man and Superman." That is, men do exist as an independent category capable of autonomy; women are grouped with the stigmatized, the immature, and the foolish. Moreover, when men are in human groupings, males are invisi-
ably first on the list "men and women," "he and she," "man and wife." This order is not accidental but was prescribed in the 16th century to honor the wealthier party.

French, in practice women are defined as men of their sexual desirability (to men); men are defined in terms of their sexual prowess (over women). Most slang words in reference to women refer to how sexual desirability is men (e.g., dog, fox, lone, dear, chest); slang about men refers to their sexual prowess over women (e.g., jade, stud, tough). The fewer examples given for men is not an oversight. An analysis of sexual slang, for example, fixed more than 1,000 words and phrases that derogate women sexually but found "somewhere near this attitude for describing men" (Kramarske, 1971:72). Farmer and Henley listed in Schulz, 1975 lists 500 synonyms for pressure, for example, and only 65 for whatmenager Stanton (1977) reports 220 terms for a sexually promiscuous woman and only 22 for a sexually promiscuous man. Shuster (1973) reports that the passive verb form is used in reference to women's sexual experiences (e.g., to be laid, to be had, to be taken), whereas the active is used in reference to the male's sexual experience (e.g., buy, have, have sex). Being sexually attractive to males is culturally conditioned for women and being sexually powerful is approved for males. In this regard, the slang of the street is certainly not countercultural; rather it perpetuates and reinforces different expectations in females and males as sexual objects and perpetrators.

Further, we find sexual connotations associated with neutral words applied to women. A few examples should suffice. A male academician questioned the title of a new course, asserting it was "too suggestive." The title: "The Position of Women in the Social Order." A male tramp is "tramp" but a female is "beggar." A man is "easy" and a woman is "easy laid." And consider the difference in connotation of the following expressions:

It's easy.
He's easy.
She's easy.

In the first, we assume something is "easy to do"; in the second, we might assume a professor is an "easy grader" or a man is "easy-going." But when we read "she's easy," the connotation is "she's an easy lay.

In the world of slang, men are defined by their sexual prowess. In the world of slang and proper speech, women are defined as sexual objects. The rule in practice seems to be: If in doubt, assume that any reference to a woman has a sexual connotation. For both genders, the constant bombardment of prescribed sexuality is bound to have real consequences.

Fifth, women are defined in terms of their relations to men; men are defined in terms of their relations to the world at large. A good example is seen in the words master and mistress. Originally, these words had the same meaning—"a person who holds power over servants." With the demise of the feudal system, however, these words took on different meanings. The masculine variant metaphorically refers to power over something in "he is the master of his trade"; the feminine variant metaphorically (although probably not in actuality) refers to power over a man sexually, as in "She is Tom's mistress." Men are defined in terms of their power in the occupational world, women in terms of their sexual power over men.

The existence of two connotations for mistress (Miss and Mrs.) and but one for blaster (Mrs) underscores the cultural concern and linguistic practice: women are defined in relation to men. Even a divorced woman is defined in terms of her no-longer-existing relation to a man (she is still Mrs. Man's Name). But apparently the divorced status is not relevant enough to the man or to the society to require a label. A divorced woman is a divorcee, but what do you call a divorced man? The recent preference of many women to be called Ms. is an attempt to provide for women an equitableness with that is not dependent on marital status.

Suddenly, a historical pattern can be seen in the meanings that come to be attached to words that originally were neutral; those that apply to women acquire obscene or derogatory connotations. Thus, such patterns of demeaning holds for neutral words referring to men. The processes of pejoration (the acquiring of an obscene or degraded connotation) and etymologization (the reacquiring of a neutral or positive connotation) have been repeated for terms for males and females have been studied extensively by Kluhr Schulz (1975).

Leveling is the least derogatory form of pejoration. Through leveling, titles that originally referred to an older class of persons come to include a wide class of persons. Such democratic leveling is more common for female designations than for males. For example, compare the following: land-lady (landlady); home-servant (sweeper); government (servant)...

Most frequently what happens to words designating women as they become pejorated, however, is that they come to denote or connote sexual promiscuity. So and ever, for example, remain cities of country, but in some "madam, miss, and mistress have come to designate, respectively, a brothel-keeper, a prostitute, and an unmarried female partner of a man [Schulz, 1972:66]."
Names for domestic helpers. If they are females, are frequently derogated. Hurty, for example, originally means "housewife." "Laundress," "nailbiter," "spinster" ("leader of the spinning wheel"), and nurse all referred to domestic occupations within the home, and all at some point became slang expressions for prostitutes or mistresses.

Even kinship terms referring to women became desig-

nated. During the 17th century, mother was used to mean "a bawd"; more recently mother (mother f——-) has become a common derogatory epithet (Cameron, 1972a). Probably at some point in history every kinship term for females has been derogated (Schultz, 1975:66).

Terms of endearment for women also seem to follow a downward path. Such pet names as Turt, Dolly, Sitty, Polly, Blossy, Biddy, and Jill all eventually became sexually derogatory (Schultz, 1975:67). Where comes from the Spanish Latin root as care and once meant "a lover of either sex."

Indeed, even the most neutral categorical designations—girl, female, woman, lady—are in those places in their history have been used to connote sexual immorality. Girl originally meant "a child of either sex." through the process of semantic derogation is eventually meant a "mismatch." Although girl has lost that meaning, girls still retain sexual connotations. Woman considered a "mistress" in the early 19th century; female was a derogatory epithet as just the same part of the 19th century, and when lady was introduced as a neologism, it too become depressatory. "Even so neutral a term as person, when it was used as applicable for woman, suffered vulgarity" (Marxen, 1965:350, quoted in Schultz, 1975:71).

Whether one looks at elite titles, occupational roles, kinship relationships, endearments, or age-sex categorical designations, the pattern is clear. Terms referring to females are pejorative—become negative in the middle innings and abusive in the seventh" (Schultz, 1975:69). Such semantic derogation, however, is not evidenced for male referents. Lord, barrow, fisher brother, nephew, brother, brownian, boy, lad, fellow, gentleman, man, male, and so on have "have failed to undergo the derogation found in the history of their corresponding feminine designations" (Schultz, 1975:67). Insincerely, the male word, rather than undergoing derogation, frequently is replaced by a female referent when the speaker wants to degrade a male.

A weak man, for example, is referred to as a "stinking (diminutive of stinker)," and an army general during basic training is called a prissy. And when one is speaking about a male, it is referred to as a bastard or a non-a-fa-bite—women appellations that impugn the dignity of a man's mother.

In summary, these verbal practices are consistent with the gender stereotypes that we encounter in everyday life. Women are thought to be a part of the, non-assertive, dependent, or restrictive to roles that require few skills, char-

acteristics that are considered more important, and the national, societal, and physical power, assumed to be socially protect, and defined primarily by their relations to the world of work. The use of the language perpetuates the stereotypes for both genders and limits the options available for self-

identification.

REFERENCES