

The Debate Over *Man*'s Neutrality: Why *He* Does Not Mean *She*, and How This Misconception Can Harm Us

By: Taylor Buck

The linguistic neutrality of male terms in English is an extremely multi-faceted debate. To fully grasp the issue, one faces questions not only of a grammatical nature, but of historical and cultural morphology as well. As Anne Curzan, Associate English Professor at the University of Michigan, explains in *Gender Shifts in the History of English*, English is a strictly 3-gender semantic “natural” system. It is formed by the subset of animate female, animate male and inanimate/non-human neuter (Curzan 16). This seems straightforward. However, when both female and male must be described by the same noun or pronoun, a contention forms concerning neutrality of terms. Historically, *he* has been the grammatically and socially accepted “neutral” term. “Grammarians have treated the masculine gender as primary in order of creation and in importance, both in the natural world and in the sentence,” University of Illinois Professor of linguistics Dennis Baron explains in his book *Grammar & Gender* (Baron 56). “Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English grammars set forth the doctrine of the worthiness of the genders, borrowed from Latin, to justify the use of masculine nouns and pronouns to stand for both the sexes. Even today, many linguists assume that the masculine is the normal, or unmarked, gender” (Baron 97). It is this very assumption of neutrality with which I plan to grapple. I intend to adequately deny the claim that *he* and *man* have gender neutral uses. I will support this position by showing the linguistic shortfalls of the terms, and will then explore how this may affect people’s gender-based perceptions of themselves and each other in modernity – especially in early years of individual development, when ideas of gender and self begin to form.

One cannot, as Curzan acknowledges, consider English as a language that has always had a consistent and uniform intention, because its development is based heavily on social change (Curzan 46). It is also impossible to prescribe a chain of cause and effect: linguistic and social changes are so deeply intertwined that the threads, ever-shifting, cannot be simply separated and analyzed. Thus we must draw conclusions based on what we have in front of us. After all, “members of a given culture or society create the categories of masculine and feminine and determine what those ideas represent. They are not fixed categories – they fluctuate through time, by context, and by speaker” (Curzan 46).

It is from this platform that we may draw historical context. “In specific matters of intonation or idiom,” remarks Baron, “the so-called masculine has frequently been judged worthier than the feminine” (Baron 66). Simone De Beauvoir illuminates this asymmetrical semantic polarization in *The Second Sex*: man represents both neutral and positive, while woman represents “only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity” (Beauvoir xxi). The patriarchy has manifested itself linguistically throughout history. “The mode in which abstract thought is cast and the language in which it is expressed are so defined as to perpetuate women’s marginality,” notes historian, author and teacher Gerda Lerner in *Creation of the Patriarchy*. “[English] is a language in which we are subsumed under the male pronoun and in which the generic term for ‘human’ is ‘man’ ” (Lerner 232). When dealing with a false neutral, language thus perpetuates the idea of the male as the ideal human. It is with this in mind that we move to the aforementioned core of the issue: why *he* does not fit the strict mold of neutrality, but instead constantly perpetuates ambiguities difficult to dodge.

As Curzan correctly acknowledges, within this natural gender system “the pronoun ‘he’ can no longer be a purely grammatical form with no meaningful content about the gender of the referent” (Curzan 58). Thus, per the argument of Janice Moulton in her essay *The Myth of the Neutral “Man,”* “not really being gender-neutral, the use of such terms leads one to apply the context to males, and makes it difficult to apply it to females” (Moulton 125). To be neutral is to be impartial; unaligned, unbiased. The appropriation of masculine terms for both genders can hardly be justified along such lines. After all, “if ‘he’ and ‘man’ are genuinely gender-neutral, then they ought to be applicable to any person regardless of gender” (Moulton 132). One cannot reconcile the “inability to use ‘he’ and ‘man’ to refer to a female human” (132) with the pronoun’s supposed neutrality.

This claim that masculine terms are not neutral would perhaps, as Moulton begins her argument, need no defense if there were no other terms in English with both a neutral and non-neutral use. Yet “many adjectives that refer to one of a pair of opposite qualities can be used neutrally to indicate the dimensions whose extremes are the opposites” (Moulton 128).

One can ask “How tall is she?” of a short person, and “How wide is that?” of a narrow object. *Tall* and *wide* are used not only as the opposites of *short* and *narrow*, but as neutral terms to describe the quality or dimension of which the opposites are extremes ... any tendency to suppose that anyone of whom it is asked how tall they are is in fact a tall person, is certainly very slight. (128)

In other words, the use of the word *tall* does not necessarily imply anything about the subject’s height. This can be said to parallel the issue of *man*’s neutrality if one were to argue that the use of *man* in a sentence does not imply anything about the subject’s gender. Thus, to adequately argue that *he* and *man* do not have gender-neutral uses, one must base this on more than just the terms’ gender-specific meanings. Swift and Miller point out the common dismissal of this ambiguity:

“...[it is] dismissed on the grounds that two different words are involved and that they are homonyms, like a *row* of cabbage and a *row* on the lake. Two words cannot be homonyms, however, if one includes the other, as does *man* in the first definition given by the most recent [1990] Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary: ‘A human being, *especially* an adult male human.’ Since the definers do not explain whom their italicized ‘especially’ omits, one is left to wonder.” (Swift and Miller 29)

Moulton suggests that in gender pronouns a contextual ambiguity exists which is not present with polar adjectives. There is no question that “How tall is it?” includes the possibility of shortness, whereas *he* does not immediately suggest the inclusion of *she*. Gender ambiguity necessitates clarification elsewhere in the text or dialogue, and if this clarification is not present, it is impossible to know whether females are really included. So, “although ‘he’ and ‘man’ behave like unmarked adjectives in some respects, their double roles as both gender-specific and gender-neutral terms permit ambiguity in ways that the double roles of unmarked adjectives do not” (Moulton 131). Yet Moulton continues with another proposed counterpoint to the claim that *he* lacks the ability to be neutral: “one need not eliminate the neutral use of ‘he’ and ‘man’ in order to eliminate ambiguity” (131). Awareness of the necessity for clarification, she says, could solve this problem while still utilizing male terms as occasionally female-encompassing.

Is this, though, an adequate means of dismantling the problem of *he*'s unclear double-meaning? Does stating in a pamphlet that you are an equal opportunity employer suffice to clear up the ambiguity of "I want the best man for the job"? Kelly L. Ross, a retired professor from the Department of Philosophy at Los Angeles Valley College, makes the affirmative argument in his paper *Against the Theory of Sexist Language*. (The emphases are his own.)

What a language with its gender system *means* is what people *use it to mean*. It is an evil principle to think that we can *tell* other people what *they mean* by what they say, because of some theory we have that makes it mean something in particular to us, even when they obviously mean something else. (Ross, "Against the Theory")

Moulton recognizes this point. "It would seem," she says, "that if it was intended a certain way when used, and understood that way by others, then, on any available theory of meaning, that's what it means" (Moulton 131). Therefore in order to expose *he* and *man* as truly lacking neutrality, it must be shown that "even though speakers may intend to use these terms in a gender-neutral way, they can fail to do so" (131); that the "essential absurdity of using the same linguistic symbols for the human race in one breath and for only half of it in the next" (Swift 31) is a patriarchal milk-spill not so easily sopped up by intention alone. One notable difference between *he* or *man* and other neutral terms such as *people* or *human* is, as previously mentioned, the contemporary inability of the former to refer strictly to a female. "It would be a rare person," Moulton says, "who could say without irony 'She's the best *man* for the job' or say of a female, 'He's the best.' Yet the undisputed gender-neutral terms can indeed be used this way: 'She's the best person'" (Moulton 132). Swift and Miller propose another example:

...the yearning to understand masculine terminology as including both sexes is sometimes so strong that it asserts itself in defiance of literary or historic evidence to the contrary. Of *course* Alexander Pope's admonition, "Know then thyself...the proper study of mankind is man," was intended to include women, we say. But the reader to whom these lines were addressed is made more specific by the author's later reference in the same work to "thy dog, thy bottle, and thy wife." (Swift 38)

As these examples show, it is not enough to have both sexes in mind when speaking with male terms. "One cannot account entirely for the meaning of a term by the intentions of the speaker on a particular occasion" (Moulton 133). In her essay, Moulton points to one more "obvious failure of gender neutrality:"

Man has two sexes
Some men are female. (135)

Why, then, are these nouns and pronouns used as if neutral? Ross makes the argument that "historically, if [any] language possesses a gender system and distinguishes between *he* and *she*, then one or the other will also tend to be the common gender for when both genders are involved." He assumes the position that words mean what we intend them to mean, and the word itself is of little consequence. Yet he seems to disregard the necessity of consistency. Linguistic communication depends not only on the author's intention but also on the reader's understanding, and without adequate disambiguation neither party can insure adequacy.

Moulton argues from another platform. She sees the continuation of the masculine trend in English as "the result of a broader linguistic phenomenon: Parasitic Reference" (Moulton 135). Much like referring to all lip balm, no matter the brand, as Chap Stick, or all tissues as Kleenex,

the gender-specific *man* which refers to “a high-status subset of the whole class” completely *replaces* the neutral generic. In his own attempt to explain the circumstance, Ross poses the objection that the sectioning-off of the linguistic female means that she is more “marked,” something that can be looked upon as positive rather than negative. However, when a girl loses claim to her gender simply because there are men around, *she* being thrown out in favor of *he*, it is difficult to expect that she will think of herself as “more markedly human” (Ross) instead of subordinate. “The concept of worthiness is no longer a rule of thumb to resolve the syntactic puzzle of what to do when an adjective refers to nouns of differing genders,” Baron says, “but a reflection of a natural order that places man at the head of creation, with woman in a subordinate, subservient, and frequently invisible second place” (Baron 98). Swift and Miller agree. Our language propagates the perception earlier described by Beauvoir, that men are positive and neutral, while women are negative.

We perceive males in terms of human qualities, females in terms of qualities—often negative—assigned to them as females. The qualities males possess may be good or bad, but those that come to mind when we consider what makes “a man” are positive. Women are defined circularly, through characteristics seen to be appropriate or inappropriate to women—not to human beings. (Swift 64)

From the intricately woven thread work of societal perception and linguistic standards, the next question begs itself: How does this ambiguity impact formation of gender concepts, both for self and other? Elizabeth L. Beardsley, in her essay *Traits and Genderization*, argues that these linguistic conventions have a significant influence on concept formation—both general concepts about what it means to be a person, and the self-concepts of individuals (Beardsley 122). “It is unlikely,” say Swift and Miller, “that any woman can recapture her feelings when the arbitrariness of that rule first struck her consciousness: it happened a long time ago, no doubt, and was only one among many assignments to secondary status” (Swift and Miller 33). They go on in *Words for Women* to explain that it is difficult to tell exactly when children begin to come to terms with the dual role of *man* and *he*, though certainly the experience differs based on sex, “ego-enhancing for the [boy] and ego-deflating for the [girl] (33). They draw on the work of Children’s Health Scientist Wendy J. Nilsen, who in a report provides her findings on the ways in which children may go about accepting the generic use of *he*:

...a boy who is accustomed to hearing such words as *he*, *him*, and *his* used in relationship to himself will feel a closer affinity to these terms than will a young girl who has instead developed an emotional response to *she*, *her*, and *hers*. (Swift 33)

A boy is able to “internalize the generic interpretation of masculine pronouns” as “part of a continuum” (Swift 34). The symbol that applies to him is reflected as the definition of the animate world. His recognition of this strengthens a bond between “his own sense of being and all other living things” (34). For a girl, however, this connection does not exist.

When she begins to expand her environment, unlike the boy, she does not simply enlarge her set of referents for the pronouns she is already accustomed to. Instead, she has to do a reverse switch... (34)

To put it briefly, kids learn early that male is the norm, so “the assumption that all creatures are male unless they are known to be female is a natural one for [them] to make” (35).

When dealing with terms that do not even fit the mold of true neutrality, the intention of the

speaker or author cannot always be agreed upon, even by adults. Thus, as Miller and Swift point out, “these terms must be doubly confusing to young children, whose understanding of words is limited by their immediate experience” (32). When learning about American History, children read about the pioneers traveling westward, often taking their “wives, children, and household goods” along. “A child may wonder whether women were involved in the process of self-government” or were among the Native American plunderers of settlements, or the child may “accept the implication that women were not themselves colonists or Indians or pioneers, but always part of the baggage” (Swift 40). When a children’s dictionary states that “man is the highest form of life on earth,” the male child may explain “Wow!” while the female responds with confusion: “Who? Do they mean me?” Even if she recognizes that she is in fact included under the *he* umbrella, she must reconcile this with the terms she knows to strictly refer to males (40). “When she is told that we are all brothers, that the brotherhood of man includes sisters, and that the faith of our fathers is also the faith of our mothers, does she really believe it? How does she internalize these concepts?” (41).

While these issues may seem miniscule, it is important to remember that societal ideals, social understanding, etc. are formed by the compilation of individual experiences. “Given the male norm,” Swift and Miller continue, “it becomes natural to think of women as an auxiliary and subordinate class, and from there it is an easy jump to see them as a minority or a special-interest group” (41). Forced to accept the reality that linguistically (and therefore socially, keeping in mind that English is a natural gender system) she is sometimes male and other times not male, she is “faced with ambivalence—not about [her] sex, but about [her] status as a human being” (41). The very ambiguity we have been dealing with carries through from the earliest stage of a child’s development of language. As Curzan iterates, “Like gender in society, gender in the English language represents a set of constructed categories, categories whose boundaries will change over time, reflecting the evolution of ideas about sex and gender” (Curzan 29). The male norm perpetuated through language is not a rule unaffected by social and educational change.

If “...*man* in the sense of male so overshadows *man* in the sense of human being as to make the latter use inaccurate and misleading for purposes both of conceptualizing and communicating” (Swift and Miller 28), truly gender-neutral word choice, such as *they* as singular, assume exceptional importance. “Our vocabulary is already being affected by the increasing equality of women and men under the law,” Miller and Swift acknowledge. “As women continue to gain recognition in commerce, government, the professions, the arts, and higher education, the process will be accelerated. Most important, children acquiring language in their formative years will be free to imagine and explore the full range of their human potential” (167).