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Sexist Grammar

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## Sexist Grammar

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THE HISTORY OF LANGUAGE, at least what we know of it, is an example of the longevity of male social control and the effects of that control. The documents concerning the grammar of English that we have were written by men for the edification of other men, and, as such, they deal with male concerns from a male point of view. The contemporary discipline of linguistics, "the scientific study of language," is only the latest development in the tradition of male control of linguistic descriptions. The masculine tradition in English stretches from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, although its origins go back much farther.

Few grammarians who have tried to describe English have claimed that it has "grammatical gender," and modern writers on the subject describe the "natural gender" of nouns in English as the basis of grammatical classification. John Lyons (1969) has described the traditional concept of "gender" in English.

Gender plays a relatively minor part in the grammar of English. . . . There is no gender-concord; and the reference of the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it* is very largely determined by what is sometimes referred to as "natural" gender—for English, this depends upon the classification of persons and objects as male, female or inanimate. (*Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, pp. 283-4)

When a contemporary writer, L. E. Sissman (1972), says that the sentence "Everyone knows *he* has to decide for *himself*," is both "innocuous" and "correct," he is merely appealing for authority to the men who have gone before him. When Sissman uses the label "correct" to describe usage of the "generic *he*," he is relying on the prejudice of Jonathan Swift, who, in 1712, first announced "the ideal of grammatical correctness." The label "correct" came to be applied to so-called "generic" uses of the masculine pronoun as a result of male control of the educational establishment in England (and the texts), and consistent equation of the term *gender* with biological sex.

Because of space limitations, I cannot dwell on the many ways in which male dominance has influenced grammars of English, although it is important to acknowledge the extent to which social realities have determined the structure of descriptions of English, and thereby the language itself.

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None of the prescriptive grammars I examined had anything to say, explicitly, about either *man* or *he* as “generics” in English usage, although all of them use both *man* and *mankind* in their discussions of the origins and function of language, and they consistently replace such nouns as *child*, *student*, *youth*, and *writer* with the masculine singular pronoun, *he*. In this manner, the men who set themselves the task of describing English usage also established their usage as authoritative, without having to offer explanations or apologies. The immediate consequence of their social and economic position was the exclusion of women from discussions of learning and language use.

*Men*, to express their thoughts, make use of eight Kinds of Words, called the eight Parts of Speech, . . . (Daniel Duncan, *A New English Grammar*, 1731)<sup>1</sup>

Many wise and learned *men* have made use of our language in communicating their sentiments to the world, concerning all the important branches of science and art.

Some *men*, whose writings do honour to their country and to *mankind*, have it must be confessed, written in a style that no Englishman will own: . . . (John Fell, *An Essay Towards an English Grammar*, 1784, pp. vi-vii.)

As the Knowledge of Letters is of great Importance to *Men*, both in their Civil and Religious Capacities, so their Advances in it depend very much upon the first Steps . . . (Henry Dixon, “Preface,” *The English Instructor*, 1728.)

The right of women to an education has only recently been acknowledged, and it is still believed (by men) that educating women is a waste of time and money. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was unthinkable, and it is both strange and heartening to hear one grammarian arguing that his text is intended for women as well as men, since women also use English.

But yet i am not able to find any tolerable reason, why even any station or sex should be excluded from the benefit of the Languages. . . . As for that tender Sex, which to set off we take so much care and use such variety of breeding, some for the feet, some for the hands, others for the voice; what shall i call it, cruelty or ignorance, to debar them from these accomplishments of Speech and Understanding; as if that Sex was (as certainly we by experience find it is not) weak and defective in its Head and Brains. (Michael Maittaire, *The English Grammar*, 1712.)

The radicalism of Maittaire’s argument, if not immediately obvious from its social context, comes through to us when he calls the exclusion of women from learning cruel and ignorant. More importantly, the structure and content of his argument on behalf of women is written for the eyes of males, as evidenced in his use of *we* in the parenthetical statement.

One aspect, then, of the social oppression of women has been our exclusion from access to education, and one important method of implementing that debarment has been to refuse us the right to the English language as speakers. The usage of *man*, *mankind*, and *he* in the early grammars of English was not generic in any sense of that term, however one might wish to construe it. Men were

<sup>1</sup>My reference for Duncan’s grammar, and for most of the grammars of English prior to 1800, is the Scolar Press facsimile edition, *English Linguistics, 1500-1800*, ed. R. C. Alston (Menton, England: 1967).

educated to rule in England, and these first descriptions of English usage and structure were written with the male sex as their only audience. There are two immediate consequences for the history of English linguistics that may be traced to the exclusion of women from education. The first, and, I think, most obvious, has been the continuation of the myth that *man*, *mankind*, and *he* function as “generics” in English. Not one of these early grammarians mentions any such “generic” usage in their descriptions of English, yet all of them constantly refer to *man*, *men*, and *mankind*, as I have illustrated. However, beginning in the nineteenth century, these nouns of masculine reference began to be touted as “generics,” and it is not until the twentieth century that such male usage becomes firmly fixed as “correct” in American grammars. There are two ways in which *he* crept into our grammars as the dominant pronoun of reference: (1) because the traditional rule for pronominal replacement maintains that a pronoun must “agree with its antecedent noun in gender, number, and person,” and because, according to these grammarians, most of the nouns in English were masculine, unless marked with a special “feminine marker”; and (2) when grammarians began to take notice of the “indefinite pronouns,” *anyone*, *everyone*, *everybody*, etc., they decided that *he* was going to be the pronoun of reference.<sup>2</sup> Both of these descriptions derive what plausibility they may have from the erroneous equation of *gender* with biological sex and the correlative assertion that English has a noun classification system based on “natural” gender.

I have no idea how or why it happened, but very early in the development of English grammars grammarians equated the term *gender* with biological sex as the basis of noun classification, and our understanding of the structure of our language has been considerably hampered by their confusion. In 1712, Michael Maittaire (*The English Grammar*) stated the equation: “The gender signifies the kind or sex.” Murray, in his *English Grammar* of 1795, was even more concise: “Gender is the distinction of sex.” R. Harrison (*Institutes of English Grammar*, 1777), in his section entitled “Of Gender,” defined the English gender system as follows:

Nouns have properly two GENDERS; the *Masculine*, to denote the male kind; and the *Feminine*, to denote the female.

When there is no distinction of sex, a Noun is said to be of the NEUTER Gender.

The feminine Gender is sometimes expressed by adding *ess* to the Masculine. (p. 4)

James Beattie, in *The Theory of Language*, 1788, described biological sex as a notional category in English.

Another thing essential to nouns is gender. For language would be very imperfect if it had no expression for the sex of animals. Now all things whatever are Male, or Female, or Both, or Neither.

The existence of hermaphrodites being uncommon, and even doubtful, and lan-

<sup>2</sup>Ann Bodine, “Androcentrism in prescriptive grammar: singular ‘they’, sex-definite ‘he’, and ‘he or she,’” *Language in Society*, 4 (1975), 129-146; Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans, *A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage* (New York: Random House, 1957). Both cite the 1850 Act of Parliament that replaced “he or she” with “he” in official documents.

guage being framed to answer the ordinary occasions of life, no provision is made, . . . for expressing, . . . Duplicity of sex. (p. 134)

And in 1784, in *An Essay Towards an English Grammar*, John Fell pointed to the importance of pronouns as signals for gender in English.

The English Language applies the distinction of genders only to animals: all other words are neuter, except when, by a poetical or rhetorical fiction, inanimate things, and qualities, are spoken of, as if they were persons; then they become either Masculine or Feminine. *This is done, for the most part, by the use of the pronoun, which, in the English Language, is more distinct and forcible than in some other languages.* [My italics] In poetical or theoretical expressions of this kind, moral qualities, such as *wisdom, truth, justice, reason, virtue, and religion*, are of the feminine gender. The passions must be determined according to their different natures: the fiercer and more disagreeable are masculine—the softer and more amiable are feminine. *Mind* is masculine, *soul* feminine; for the latter term more of the affections are frequently implied than in the former. The *sun* is masculine, the *moon* feminine, the *Heaven* neuter—the *earth* is feminine; mountains and rivers are commonly masculine; countries and cities are feminine—and nature, as comprehending all, is feminine. (pp. 5-6)

Fell explains to us, following the usage of the “best” authors in English (all men, of course), that the gender of inanimate objects and qualities is determined in accordance with the sex-role stereotypes established by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Is he merely describing the situation in English as though there were no values attached to usage? I doubt it. In his grammar of 1646 (*The English Accidence*), Poole defined the values inherent in the “genders” of English: “The Masculine gender is more worthy than the Feminine, and the Feminine is more worthy than the Neuter” (p. 21).

By 1795, Murray could make the following observations regarding the use of gender in English:

Figuratively, in the English tongue, we commonly give the masculine gender to nouns which are conspicuous for the attributes of imparting or communicating, and which are by nature strong and efficacious. Those, again, are made feminine which are conspicuous for the attributes of containing or bringing forth, or which are peculiarly beautiful or amiable. Upon these principles the sun is always masculine, and the moon, because the receptacle of the sun’s light, is feminine. The earth is generally feminine. A ship, a country, a city, &c. are likewise made feminine, being receivers or containers. Time is always masculine, on account of its mighty efficacy. Virtue is feminine from its beauty, and its being the object of love. Fortune and the church are generally put in the feminine gender. . . .

Of the variable terminations, we have only a sufficient number to make us feel our want; for when we say of a woman, she is a philosopher, an astronomer, a builder, a weaver, we perceive an impropriety in the termination, which we cannot avoid; but we can say that she is an architect, a botanist, a student, because these terminations have not annexed to them the notion of sex. (pp. 24-25)

It is from Murray, then, that we first learn that the *-er* suffix is a masculine morpheme in English. He repeats the idea that the gender of nouns is derived from their inherent nature as partaking of their feminine or masculine characteristics, and connects this idea with female or male sexuality, respectively.

However, it was James Beattie, in 1788 (*The Theory of Language*), who provided the religious context of gender-classification in English.

Beings superiour to man, although we conceive them to be of no sex, are spoken of as masculine in most of the modern tongues of Europe, on account of their dignity; the male being, according to our ideas, the nobler sex. But idolatrous nations acknowledge both male and female deities; and some of them have given even to the Supreme Being a name of the feminine gender.

When we personify the virtues, we speak of them as if they were females; perhaps on account of their loveliness; . . . (p. 137)

Finally, Gould Brown synthesized the ideas of male grammarians, and made from them a systematic collection of "rules" in his compendious, and bulky, *Grammar of English Grammars* (1851). His is the most explicit description of the male traditions regarding gender in English that I have discovered. Because of the length, I will quote only brief portions of two of his "Observations on Gender," from sections one and six.

1.—The different genders in grammar are founded on the natural distinction of sex in animals, and on the absence of sex in other things. In English, they belong only to nouns and pronouns; and to these they are usually applied, not arbitrarily, as in some other languages, but agreeably to the order of nature. From this we derive a very striking advantage over those who use the gender differently, or without such rule; which is, that our pronouns are easy of application, and have a fine effect when objects are personified. Pronouns are of the same gender as the nouns for which they stand.

6.—The gender of words, in many instances, is to be determined by the following principle of universal grammar. Those terms which are equally applicable to both sexes (if they are not expressly applied to females), and those plurals which are known to include both sexes, should be called masculine in parsing; for, in all languages, the masculine gender is considered the most worthy,\* and is generally employed when both sexes are included under one common term. Thus *parentis* is always masculine, . . .

\*"The Supreme Being (*God*, . . .) is, in all languages, masculine; in as much as the masculine sex is the superior and more excellent; and as He is the Creator of all, the Father of gods and men."—*Harris's Hermes*, p. 54.

It is, of course, irrelevant that most of Brown's statements are entirely independent of the facts of known languages. His reliance on a quotation from Harris also illustrates the way in which men have used each other as supporting authorities in what might otherwise be a vacuum. The key words in the preceding quotations from Gould Brown are "natural," "not arbitrarily," "advantage," "rule," and "principle of universal grammar." In only a few sentences, he manages to both establish the "rightful" preeminence of the masculine gender and claim that the English method of classifying nouns is superior. How many of us could hope to accomplish as much? We have learned the male rules for male usage of a language that remains in their control.

The best evidence for this assertion lies in an examination of the development of grammatical descriptions and rules concerning the usage of the "indefinite" pronouns in English, which I have pointed out as the second way in which male grammarians have fixed *he* as the pronoun of "general" reference.

Baker, writing in 1770, made the following observation on English usage of *one*, which he did not extend to other pronouns such as *everyone* or *anyone*.

The *One* here is not the Unit in Number. It has the sense of the *On* in the French tongue, from which it is taken, and does not suffer a relative pronoun. . . . No person of tolerable taste would endure *she* or *her* in this use, . . . (*Reflections*, pp. 23-4; cited in Leonard, 1962, p. 225)

The earliest reference I could find to usage of the masculine third person pronoun as the “correct” replacement for the indefinite pronoun *any one* was in Murray’s grammar of 1795. (Bodine’s research confirms this date.) Both the context in which the reference occurs, and the nature of the reference itself are significant, because they reveal how completely men have taken for granted their “natural” right as the only interpreters and correspondents with reality. Under *Rule V—Pronouns and antecedents*, Murray lists the following quotation as an example of a violation of pronominal concord, even though his definition of pronoun agreement does not explicitly cover the example, and the example seems, for this reason, to be purely gratuitous: “Can *any one*, on *their* entrance into the world, be fully secure that *they* shall not be deceived?” (p. 96). Without additional comment or explanation, Murray simply corrects the “error” to read as follows: “on *his* entrance,” and “that *he* shall.”

As late as the middle of the nineteenth century, it is still possible to find grammarians who include *she* and *they*, along with *he*, as pronouns of general reference, when no distinction in sex is desired or necessary—Bullions, in 1856, and Kerl, 1859, although Bullions offers only one example that contains *he*, and Kerl’s examples of the use of pronouns are clearly sex-specific in their reference.

*He, she, and they*, are frequently used as general terms in the beginning of a sentence, equivalent to “the person,” &c., without reference to a noun going before; as, “He [the person] that loveth pleasure shall be a poor man.” (Bullions, *An Analytical and Practical Grammar of the English Language*, p. 45)

*He, she, and they*, sometimes refer to any one or any ones of a certain class of persons.

Ex. “*He* who trifles away his life, will never be rich in honors.” “*She* who knows merely how to dress, dance, and flirt, will never make a good wife.” (Simon Kerl, *A Treatise on the English Language*, 1859, p. 105)

By 1906, American grammarians, all men, had decided that *he* was the “correct” pronoun to use for generalized reference, and Henry Froude had no doubts regarding the appropriateness of its usage:

It is a real deficiency in English that we have no pronoun, like the French . . . to stand for *him-or-her, his-or-her*. . . . Our view, though we admit it to be disputable, is clear—that *they, their, &c.*, should never be resorted to, . . . With a view to avoiding them, it should be observed that . . . (b) *he, his, him*, may generally be allowed to stand for the common gender; the particular aversion shown to them by Miss Ferrier in the samples may be referred to her sex; and, ungallant as it may seem, we shall probably persist in refusing women their due here as stubbornly as Englishmen continue to offend the Scots by saying *England* instead of *Britain*. . . . (*The King’s English*, 2nd ed., 1906, p. 67)

One of his examples from Miss Ferrier, whose usage Froude attributed to her

sex, is the following sentence: "The feelings of the *parent* upon committing the cherished object of *their* cares and affections to the stormy sea of life." Froude "corrects" the disliked usage of the third person plural pronoun to *his* (p. 68).

C. C. Fries, in his *American English Grammar*, 1940, cautiously pointed out that, since the Middle English period, collective nouns in English followed a concord "which depended on the meaning emphasized rather than on the form of the noun" (p. 49). Toward the end of his book, after he has argued that teaching and grammar must deal with actual usage, rather than those "grammatical usages that have no validity outside the English classroom" (p. 287), he again states that "The indefinites *everyone*, *everybody*, etc., [occur] with a plural reference pronoun or a plural verb separated from the indefinite by other words" (p. 287). But at the same time that Fries was advocating acceptance of the third person plural pronoun as a replacement for indefinite pronouns, his contemporaries were pushing harder for the "generic" *he*. In 1941, Foerster and Steadman (*Writing and Thinking*) formulated the following "rule":

Make the pronoun agree with its antecedent in gender, number and person.

WRONG: Each one should be polite in *their* manners.

RIGHT: Each one should be polite in *his* manners.

In 1942, Eric Partridge, in his *Usage and Abuse: A Guide to Good English*, included the following observation in his notes: "*they*, *their*, misused for *he*, *his*, as in 'Anyone thinks twice, when their life is at stake': read 'his life'" (p. 335).

The traditional approach taken by male grammarians in their analyses of the "proper" relationship between the indefinite and personal pronouns has been to focus attention on whether or not the indefinite pronoun is understood to function as a singular or as a plural noun. By explaining meticulously why this or that indefinite pronoun refers to one or more persons, they have made the problem appear to center on the function of number in determining the appropriateness of *they* or *he* as pronominal replacements. But the problem is not one of number, and never has been, except for the treatment given the subject in traditional grammars. The real question remains: while native speakers of English have consistently used singular *they* for the indefinite pronouns, at least since the Middle English period,<sup>3</sup> why have the grammarians during those centuries pushed the pseudo-generic *he* as the "correct" pronoun? On the one hand, they have successfully used *number* as the superficial basis for "agreement," at the same time inserting the masculine pronoun and ignoring their descriptions of "natural" gender agreement, or pointing out that the masculine is "more worthy" and therefore in better "taste." It's all very confusing.

Nor have contemporary linguists, including the transformationalists, significantly altered the situation. Only one or two have even questioned the "propriety" of using the masculine pronoun for *everyone* and *anyone*, and they go ahead and inform students to use it anyway. Paul Roberts deals with the topic in the following way:

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<sup>3</sup>In her excellent article on androcentrism in prescriptive grammar, Bodine cites Poutsma, McKnight, and Visser for examples of singular *they* that cover several centuries of English literature (1975, 133).



Perhaps the most important point to bear in mind about the indefinite pronouns is that, though they are often semantically plural, they are always syntactically singular, at least in conservative usage. . . . The tendency for the meaning to dominate is strongest in the use of *they* (*them, their*) in reference to an indefinite pronoun: "Everyone averted their eyes." Conservative usage prefers "Everyone averted his (or her) eyes." It's a niggling point but one on which many people niggle. (*Modern Grammar*, 1968, p. 20)

Roberts' discussion of the problem, in spite of his effort to trivialize it, doesn't take much away from the traditional grammarians. Instead of trying to avoid the problem, which is the typical gambit, we might just as well use definitions such as that provided by Susan Emolyn Harman:

The third person singular *he, his, him* and the plural *they, their, theirs, them* may refer to masculine antecedents or to nouns having common or unknown gender: *Every man should do his work; . . .*

The third person singular feminine gender forms (*she, her, hers*) are used to refer to nouns whose gender is known to be feminine or the personified nouns of objects that are thought of as having feminine characteristics: . . . Mother Earth has *her* charms. (*Descriptive English Grammar*, 1950, p. 49)

In fact, some writers put so much faith in the truthfulness and validity of grammars of English, that we often find statements like this one, from *Born to Win* by James and Jongewald: The common pronoun "he" refers to persons of either sex except when "she" is definitely applicable (p. 2). They gave this as a footnote in their introduction and assume that it explains everything to the reader. If anything, such statements illustrate how previous "descriptions" have become the reality.

In the 1970's, the use of the masculine singular personal pronoun is so taken for granted that no one mentions that *he* is, in fact, masculine. Statements now seem to avoid the question of "gender" in English altogether, and descriptions of pronominal replacement for the indefinite pronouns usually mention that the pronoun that replaces the indefinite can be singular or plural. Finally, male grammarians have succeeded in their efforts to promote number concord as the primary issue. A recent description of contemporary English, regarded as one of the most important grammars of English even before its publication, provides an example of how entrenched the usage of the masculine pronoun has become.

. . . *Every* and *each* can have a singular or plural pronoun for co-reference:

Everyone	}	of the students should have
Each		
Each one		
	}	their
		his
		own books.

(Quirk, et al., *A Grammar of Contemporary English*, 1972, p. 219).

Gender, as a matter of fact, has virtually disappeared as a subject heading in modern grammar books, but the topic itself has merely been disguised, and appears most frequently in discussions of "semantic features."

Although I will give examples of the ways in which gender in English has created problems in semantic analysis, I would like to concentrate for a moment on how problems with gender in English have been glossed over by transformationalists, especially in their analyses of "pronominal replacement." Jacobs and Rosenbaum (1968: 96-7) provide the following representation of how the pronouns *she*, *it*, and *he* are characterized by semantic features in transformational grammar:

<i>he</i>	<i>she</i>	<i>it</i>
$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle +N \rangle \\ \langle +PRO \rangle \\ \langle +III \rangle \\ \langle +masculine \rangle \\ \langle +singular \rangle \end{array} \right]$	$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle +N \rangle \\ \langle +PRO \rangle \\ \langle +III \rangle \\ \langle +feminine \rangle \\ \langle +singular \rangle \end{array} \right]$	$\left[ \begin{array}{l} \langle +N \rangle \\ \langle +PRO \rangle \\ \langle +III \rangle \\ \langle -masculine \rangle \\ \langle -feminine \rangle \\ \langle +singular \rangle \end{array} \right]$

Before I discuss the implications of this feature analysis for the process of pronominalization as it is presented in transformational models of English, there are two peripheral observations I'd like to make: (1) The "features" for the pronouns *she* and *he* are the old labels from traditional grammarians, *feminine* and *masculine*. Although the use of these features implicitly acknowledges gender in English, the discussion in the text deals only with number and case; (2) The pronoun *it* has two features for gender, [-feminine] and [-masculine], instead of the traditional label, *neuter*. This use of the two sex-specific labels exposes the modern definition of noun classification in English as a function of the animate/inanimate distinction, once the nonhuman pronoun is defined by its *lack* of *gender*! Of course, this will insure that it does not replace nouns that carry either the feature [+feminine] or [+masculine]. However, as I will illustrate, there won't be any animate or collective nouns that aren't marked for one of these features, and *it* will rarely occur as a result.

When transformational grammarians explain pronominalization, how a given pronoun replaces an antecedent noun, they rely on the condition of "co-referentiality." This condition is met if both the noun and the pronoun share the same semantic features in their lexical entries. In texts, pronominal replacement is illustrated only with sample sentences in which the antecedent noun is a proper noun like *Mary*, *Artemis*, *Zeus*, or *John*. Since proper nouns in English are usually sex-specific, the choice of examples insures that there will be no questions regarding either the feature system or the transformational process being demonstrated, and the explanation looks convincing, as far as it goes. The sentence in (a) will result in (a'), and the sentence in (b) will become (b'), by pronominalization.

- (a) *Mary* wished *Mary* had been there.
- (a') *Mary* wished *she* had been there.
- (b) *John* wished *John* had been there.
- (b') *John* wished *he* had been there.

What transformationalists do not explain is how common nouns like *poet*, *general*, *individual*, and the indefinite pronouns, *everyone*, *anyone*, and *one*, will

be marked in the lexicon in order to insure that pronominalization will occur under the condition of co-referentiality. The answer, of course, is obvious, but no one talks about it. In their examples involving common nouns, Jacobs and Rosenbaum, explaining that they will mark nouns *only* for those features *relevant* to the immediate discussion, mark *poet* and *who* as [+human], without specifying sex, but *ballerina* is not even marked as [+human], and none of the common nouns in their grammar are marked for sex.

The fact of the matter is, although transformationalists have not leaped forward to claim it, that the transformational model of English *does* describe the “gender” system in English usage. Almost every noun, and all the indefinite pronouns in the lexicon of a transformational grammar, will carry the feature [+masculine] or [+male], and only a small subset of nouns, e.g., *ballerina*, *waitress*, *wife*, *secretary*, *prostitute*, *nurse*, etc., will be marked as [+feminine] or [+female]. The following quotation defines the situation accurately, and without apology.

For human nouns, *masculine* appears to be the general feature, *feminine* the special one: that is, unless a human noun is specifically marked *feminine*, the noun phrase of which it is the head noun is replaced by *he*, *his*, or *him*. (Walter Earl Meyers, *Handbook of Contemporary English*, 1974, p. 113)

As I've said, no one is talking about this, but within the framework of transformational theory the description accurately reflects the results of male dominance in the English vocabulary.

In the late 1960's, there was a brief flurry in theoretical writing on the subject of semantic features and their function in descriptive analysis. Katz and Fodor use *Female* and *Male* as “semantic markers” for sex-antonymous pairs of words, e.g., *bachelor* and *spinster*, *bride* and *groom*, and *cow* and *bull*.<sup>4</sup> There were objections to this system of marking features, on the grounds that this particular description lacked “simplicity,” and other grammarians suggested the adoption of a binary feature system of description, either [ $\pm$  Female] or [ $\pm$  Male].

Geoffrey Leech, in *Towards a Semantic Description of English* (1969), developed a systematic method of using binary features to describe English semantics. According to Leech, “Components (or semantic features) are the factors, or contrastive elements, which it is necessary to posit in order to account for all significant meaning relations” (p. 20). Interestingly enough, his first example of the ways in which these features account for meaning relations involves the four sex-related terms, *girl/boy*, *woman/man*. In order to characterize the gender distinction, he posits the feature [ $\pm$  Male]. [+ Male], obviously, is the relevant feature for both *boy* and *man*. Not so obviously, or comfortably, the feature [−Male] is used for *girl* and *woman*. Notice, however, that Leech defines these features as “contrastive elements.” In the case of gender, [−Male] must be the significant feature of *girl* and *woman*. Because females are defined traditionally as “non-males,” males become the standard of comparison for the entire species in Leech's description, and women are the beings who “contrast”

<sup>4</sup>Katz, Jerrold J., and Jerry A. Fodor, “The Structure of a Semantic Theory,” in *The Structure of Language: Readings in the Philosophy of Language* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 496.

with them. Furthermore, Leech can justify his analysis on the grounds of *simplicity*. Since almost all the animate nouns in English must be marked [+Male] in the dictionary, selecting [+Male] as the significant feature will suffice for virtually every such term in the language. The few words that apply exclusively to females can then be marked [-Male] to set them apart from the rest of the lexicon. Not only is the English lexicon male-dominated, but the description of the phenomenon is sexist.

Only one transformational grammarian has registered a protest against the prevalence of the male feature in the English lexicon, but he is still obliged to present *he* as the "correct" pronoun in those instances when the sex of a person is "unknown."

However, many animate nouns do not specify gender, for example *cook*, *teacher*, *student*. In a fine display of masculine superiority, the English language treats these unspecified animate nouns as masculine, that is, if we are forced to use a third person pronoun to replace a human noun when we do not know (or care about) the gender of the person referred to, we usually use *he*. (Mark Lester, *Introductory Transformational Grammar of English*, 1971, p. 48)

In general, however, those modern grammarians who do mention the problem of pronoun reference in English treat masculine dominance as a "given" hardly worth mentioning.

Earlier in this discussion, I mentioned that there are two consequences of the exclusion of women from education that have affected the history of grammars of English. The first, the gradual movement toward semantic dominance of the masculine pronoun *he*, I have illustrated. The second, which I will not dwell on, nevertheless deserves some attention here: because women have been defined as inferior by men, because we were therefore denied the right and the opportunity to seek an education in male institutions of learning, the examples used to illustrate specific grammatical points usually refer to men and their occupations and interests. In those examples that do mention women, we are always cast according to the social roles men have reserved for us. I will provide a few samples from several grammar books in order to illustrate my point.

The pronouns *him*, *his*, *we*, *it*, stand instead of some of the nouns, or substantives, going before them; as *him* supplies the place of *man*; *his* of *man's*; *we* of *men* (implied in the general name *man*, including all men, of which number is the speaker;) . . . (Robert Lowth, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 1762, p. 12)

A noun Substantive is, suppose the Name of a Thing, that standeth by *himself*, and requireth not another Word to be joined with *him*, to shew *his* Signification, as *Homo* a Man. (Richard Johnson, *Grammatical Commentaries*, 1706, p. 6)

He saw the train  
He gave me the cup  
He is tall  
He made me angry

(Leech, *Towards a Semantic Description of English*, 1969, p. 98)

- (1) a. I saw Joe and Carl
- b. I saw Joe, Carl, and my mother's brother

- c. I saw Joe, Carl, my mother's brother, and the boy whom you don't like  
 d. I saw Joe, Carl, my mother's brother, the boy you don't like, and a horse. . . .

(Jacobs and Rosenbaum, *English Transformational Grammar*, 1968, p. 268)

A man was waiting.

There was a man waiting.

A girl was mopping the floor.

There was a girl mopping the floor.

(Paul Roberts, *Modern Grammar*, 1968, p. 158)

It is bad enough that the authors of texts on English grammar continue to include examples that reflect the sexist attitudes and stereotypes that have been with us for so long. Worse, however, such examples, when they serve as the basis of grammatical definitions and explanations, can influence the analysis. When this occurs, we have an analysis that either ignores important points or misrepresents them. I am not saying that such examples do not abound in the language; I *am* saying that they are not the only ones.

I am weary of reading about the horrible things that "Miss Fidditch" does to little boys in the pages of *College English*. I know that we all have to laugh sometimes, but I'm tired of laughing at other women. The stereotype of the unhappy, withered, bitter, spinster school-teacher (*unhappy* because she is *unmarried!*) is a fiction created by men, and perpetuated by men. Those "school-marms" that men use derisively in their treatises on the evils of traditional grammar have been doing the job that the male system pays them to do. That they have done it too well merely testifies to their competence.

As the quotations from recent linguistic texts illustrate, however, it is not those old-fashioned "traditional grammars" that enforce usage. Usage is still what is taught under the guise of data, and it's still *male* usage that we teach in our linguistics courses. One way to change usage is to rewrite the textbooks. Another approach would change usage so that the grammar books would have to be rewritten. Both approaches are needed, and neither will work alone. I have presented enough evidence, I think, to give some indication of how long alternatives to the usage we know have been around in the language. That those alternatives have never "caught on" can be attributed to male control of the language through their media and their institutions, and, as a consequence, American English still reflects the social realities of "woman's place." Until the oppression of women ends, we might as well teach Gould Brown's grammar, or write our own.