

BY ANY OTHER NAME

By Jessica Raimi

As anyone knows who has ever sat down to write, writing is thinking. The thought not only precedes the word, it follows it too: we do not know what we mean to say until, after many trials and errors, we have found the words. The purpose of writing well is thinking well.

Editors, writers, and other users of English—especially those in the more progressive provinces of journalism and the ivory tower—today must worry about what is variously called nonsexist, gender-neutral, or gender-inclusive language. At Columbia, the University Senate has passed a resolution recommending nonsexist language in all University discourse; *Spectator*, the student daily, declared freshmen to be first-year students, and teachers of freshman composition, today called Logic and Rhetoric, caution students against the generic *he*.

Columbia is not atypical. There are editors at major university presses who will not publish a book employing the generic *he*, or will publish it only if prefaced with the author's apology for using an obsolete stylistic device. Editorial style sheets caution writers to recast sentences in the plural; to avoid "he-slash-she," which suggests Saturday night in the emergency room; not to use *waitress* or *forefather*; and to eschew mention of the color of a woman's hair.

Indeed, the aim is to excise what is called "bias" of every kind. One refers not to *illegal aliens* but to *undocumented workers*. People are not *poor* but *economically disadvantaged* or *low-income*. The handicapped are to be described by terms ranging from the merely unwieldy such as *vision-*

impaired for blind, to the ridiculous, such as *differently abled* and *physically challenged*. Some phrases are so delicate that you couldn't guess what they meant if you weren't told, such as *exceptional for retarded* and *involved for severely crippled*.

The ever-changing terminology of race is also crowded with euphemisms, such as *diversity* and *outreach*, which mean something far more specific than they say, and are as oblique as the outmoded term *restricted*. Other expressions lead to illogical formulations, such as schools that are 90 percent minority, or even policy prob-



lems—witness the debates on some campuses where affirmative action (itself quite a euphemism) has resulted in limiting the number of places for students of Asiatic blood.

Why are these linguistic reforms necessary, if indeed they are? In *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, Casey Miller and Kate Swift explain: "Only recently have we become aware that conventional English usage, including the generic use of masculine gender words, often obscures the actions, the contributions, and sometimes the very presence of women. Turning our

backs on that insight is an option, of course, but it is an option like teaching children that the world is flat."

But have women really been excluded from our language? Liberty and justice are often depicted as female; ships, cars, and countries are called *she*. We call Columbia University *mother*, and her bronze likeness is enthroned on Low Library's steps. When a person of unspecified sex is mentioned—a president, a doctor, a freshman—do we picture a man? The proponents of nonsexist language say we do, and that this is harmful to women. As the Columbia Senate reso-

lution put it, "We recognize the . . . ability [of language] to perpetuate stereotypes based on gender, and its power to form and sustain discrimination."

But this confuses cause and effect. Maybe we think of a man when we hear the word *policeman* simply because we have met more male than female police officers. Do those who lobby for *first-year student* seriously believe that you, the reader, think all freshmen are men? The generic *he* was institutionalized in an act of the British parliament in 1850; both American and British women have since gained the right to vote and to own property. Did the use of *he* to mean *he or she* retard those developments?

All words have origins, after all, including *and* and *the*. We understand the *man* in *freshman* and the *she* implicit in some uses of *he* to be remnants of an earlier time—if we think about it at all—just as we understand *doctor* to be either male or female, even though the feminine form would properly be *doctress* or *doctrix*. By the end of our century perhaps half the physicians entering practice in this country will be women. If by then anyone thinks of a man when hearing the word *doctor*—so what?

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The question is one of equality of opportunity versus equality of result. Is it equality when women are permitted to do what men do, or only when they do it in precisely equal numbers? And when we write, are we to be permitted to distinguish between a stereotype and a reasonable expectation?

One writer I know calls the new rules for avoiding bias "fig leaves." We laugh at those who covered the genitalia of marble statues with marble vegetation and draped the legs of pianos, all to deny the existence of sex, which we moderns know to be not only a fact of life but a Good Thing. But when we revise our grammar by fiat, resort to euphemism, and strive for "unbiased" language, we are denying the existence of things we know are true but which embarrass us.

Are the new editorial practices helping us build that shining city wherein all men are brothers and the lion reclines with the lamb? That is, creating a community in which we celebrate our diversity of race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, ethnic identification and degree of physical mobility, while not flaunting our position at the top of the food chain. Can changing our language change first our thoughts, and finally our actions?

The authors of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Language* think so: "Something 'magical' does happen whenever people—singly or as a class—begin to sense their potential as fully integrated members of society, and it is this 'magic' that using nonsexist language helps to bring about."

George Orwell described a more powerful form of that magic in his imaginary totalitarian system, called English Socialism, or Ingsoc: "It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words."

Language functions by consensus. Like money, and unlike apples, words are intrinsically useless: unless we agree, more or less, on what they mean, they can have no value for us. We get new words and usages from

technological innovations, journalism, street slang, popular music, advertising, political speeches, jokes, sports—any word or phrase can enter the Darwinian contest of language, and some mutations will survive, through a combination of favorable adaptation and chance. *Mickey Mouse* is an adjective; *Bugs Bunny* is not; we say *out in left field* but not *on the pitcher's mound*; we may *fedex* an urgent letter but we would not *purolate* it. For a multitude of reasons, interesting to contemplate and impossible to prove, certain things catch on.

I'm curious about the motives of those who seek to circumvent this democratic process. And I'm suspicious of those who tell me I've been writing the wrong way all these years, like the authors of *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, who declare: "To go on using in its former sense a word whose meaning has changed is counterproductive. The point is not that we *should* recognize semantic change, but that in order to be precise we *must*." But who says the meaning of a word has changed? Why should we believe it?

There is no excuse for avoiding clarity and truth in our writing, even if it means acknowledging that the world is not as we might wish it. As women join road crews, signs will come to say "People Working," but changing the wording of the sign will not change the composition of the work force.

So what style sheet ought we to adopt for the nineties? Perhaps each of us should be allowed to describe the world as he sees it. Those who think the English language is a vast conspiracy to conceal the presence of women on earth should try to reform it; those who like the language as it stands should use it as it is.

As for those who are sitting on the fence, trying to write in the plural and hoping this will all blow over, consider carefully the rationale of language reformers. They don't speak for everyone, they are not necessarily the arbiters of language, and some of their recommendations are silly. Don't fall for the argument that if you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem. Use the classic forms and wait for the dust to settle.

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