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SEXISM IN DICTIONARIES

In the present antisexist climate of opinion it is presumably the responsibility of the lexicographer, especially when writing for the young or even for the foreign learner, not to reinforce, as they say, sexist stereotypes. Lexicography is informative writing, and we share some of the problems in this area with anyone else who writes to inform; but we have a few extra problems of our own, peculiar to lexicography.

First then, a problem we share with other discursive writers. The story is told of a small child in a conventional Bible-reading home who, after hearing a lot about the early struggles of the children of Israel, asked "But why didn't the grown-ups help them?" That is a good illustration of one way in which language gets misunderstood. Just as children in Biblical English was meant to cover all the people, so man originally covered the whole human race. In other Germanic languages this 'human' sense of man has mostly been replaced by some other word: for instance Mensch in German. Modern women in the English-speaking countries are beginning to feel excluded by the use of man for 'human' in such expressions as manpower, primitive man, and one man one vote. Accordingly, the woman editor of the new Longman edition of Roget's THESAURUS OF ENGLISH WORDS AND PHRASES has grouped all the words referring to our species such as society, anthropology, and nation under the heading humankind, where older editions gave mankind.

Lexicographers, like other writers, should at least be aware that all this man/human/person business is in the wind, and have some policy as to what to do about it. In our latest dictionary, the LONGMAN NEW UNIVERSAL DICTIONARY (LNUD), for instance, flint tools are described as being used by 'primitive human beings'. That was a matter of policy. Policy should similarly dictate whether we refer to a fireman or firefighter, to a salesman or salesperson. It is easy to slip up. In the LNUD we unfortunately described a hurdle as being "jumped by men, horses, dogs, etc. in certain races"; and teenybopper as "a young teenage girl who zealously follows the latest trends in clothes, pop music, etc.". It may be true, at that, that teenyboppers are girls, but there is no justification for the definition of horse in the LONGMAN NEW GENERATION DICTIONARY as a "large strong animal with mane, tail, and hooves which men ride on".

We have, I think, two formal problems as lexicographers about man and person and human. The first is over the choice of genus word. Clearly, doctor cannot be defined as "a man who ..." (It seems that a man is more definitively male than the generic man!) A doctor must be "a person who" or "one who" or "somebody who", and that is a style decision. The second problem is over which is the first form and which is the variant. Is chairman to carry the main definition, or are chairman and chairwoman both to be cross-referred to chairperson?

Another thing that all discursive writers today must decide on is the grammar of pronouns. Is it to be "everyone must do his best" or "his or her best" or "his/her best" or "their best"? Traditionally he, him, and his were considered to apply to either sex, but perhaps this will hardly do today. It can give rise to fascinating constructions such as that quoted in the NUJ's Non-Sexist Code of Practice for Book Publishing (1982): "Everyone will be able to decide for himself whether or not to have an abortion". The alternatives he or she and he/she , and (s)he are clumsy, but probably the best we can do for the moment. (In our own dictionaries we now use he/she to refer to nouns like doctor, citizen, emigrant, driver.)

Old-fashioned grammarians still feel uneasy about using the plural forms they/them/their in such situations: "Everyone must do their best"; but it is becoming increasingly popular, since English lacks a human epicene pronoun. It is a usage that has been long established in English: since 1526, according to Flesch's (1964) book on English usage. John Ruskin, no less, wrote "I am never angry with anyone unless they deserve it". In American English, incidentally, there is the added problem that one is often followed by he/him/his: "One should wash his hair every week", rather than, as in British English, "... one's hair".

Although there is now this dispute as to whether he/him/his are to be regarded as marked for sex, there is no doubt that she/her are so marked. A recent baby book tried to restore the average by saying things like "If your baby cries, perhaps her nappy needs changing"; but this would probably irritate even the most feminist mothers of baby sons. It is really not a viable alternative, except with reference to a wholly female group. In a girls' school you might say "Everyone must clean her own equipment".

These pronouns of concord are part of the language we use in description, and we have to make the same choices as if we were writing a philosophical treatise or an instructional leaflet. But what we are describing as lexicographers is language itself, and it is our business to describe the language as it is. In my time I have had to resist pressure to distort or suppress the facts about language from bodies as diverse as the National Front (over the definition of racist), the hunting lobby (over blood sports), and a member of the Jewish Board of Guardians (over Jew). I cannot as a responsible lexicographer distort the facts to favour the feminist lobby either. If all the citational evidence suggests that the verb nag is generally used with a female subject, I ought to say so. If the she-oak, an Australian tree, is so called by people who use she to mean 'inferior', I must say that too. Since a whole range of deplorable words for women such as doxy/moll/crumpet/slut/slattern do exist, I must record them, just as I must record the vocabulary of racism, at least when writing for adults. The lexicographer's strongest weapon, that of simple exclusion, is perhaps more justifiably brought into play in a children's dictionary, where we may also decide to leave out both fuck and yid.

Feminine forms of human nouns need careful and accurate handling. A woman may be a chairman (Madam Chairman) or a landlord,

and a landlady is not simply a female landlord. A serious woman writer does not like to be called a poetess or authoress, and today even an actress may think of herself as an actor. Indeed, the suffix -ess may itself be offensive, and probably needs a usage note or label of some kind: people do not like to be called a Negress or Jewess, and manageress conjures up a rather different picture from manager. Even more offensive to many women is the suffix -ette, in usherette. A small temptation to be resisted here is that of generating a feminine or epicene form where the morphology allows it, whether or not the word exists. Has anyone ever been a trawlerwoman? is Ronald Reagan or Maggie Thatcher a statesperson?

If the dictionary we are writing uses invented examples in the text, rather than or as well as citational ones, then such examples are also part of the language of description rather than of the language we describe, and here I think lies our greatest freedom to be non-sexist, if we care to use it. The Non-Sexist Code, which I mentioned earlier, advises that women and girls should be shown in active and positive roles:

> Avoid stereotypes of active men watched admiringly by passive women, women jumping on tables to escape from mice, etc. In children's books little girls as much as little boys should be shown climbing ladders and digging holes, and adult women should be shown at work as scientists and architects. After all 40% of the British workforce are women, and of those who can work only one in twenty live in the so-called typical family, in which daddy goes out to work and mummy cooks and cleans while son Bobby plays with his toy guns and daughter Jenny plays with her doll's house.

The lexicographer can honestly try to take account of this changing state of affairs in the dictionary examples. In the LONGMAN DICTIONARY OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH (LDOCE), one sense of chair has the example "She holds the chair of chemistry at that university". At challenge, an example is "She challenged the justice of the new law"; at buzz, "She buzzed for her secretary"; at show, "a one-woman show of her paintings at the gallery." Conversely, men are shown in domestic situations. At the word bath an example is "He's bathing the baby".

It is possible to avoid this issue almost entirely; it is also possible to overdo the non-sexism. One avoids the issue by omitting the subject of the verb, so that the challenge example would come out as "to challenge the justice of the law" and bath as "to bath the baby"; or by choosing a different pronoun, so that buzz becomes "I buzzed for my secretary"; or by changing the construction, so that chair becomes "the holder of a chair of chemistry". This is on the whole the safer course. But if we decide, as some of us will, that a little positive discrimination is in order here, we have to decide also how far to go. It is reasonable, I think, to avoid always writing from within a man-centred universe; to refer not only to "my wife" but to "my husband", even to "my womb". The LDOCE gives at catch the example "my skirt caught in the door".

One can of course overdo the non-sexism, in the way that has

given rise of recent years to all those silly jokes whereby Manchester becomes Personchester and a manhole is a personhole. The following small bouquet of example sentences, written by a trainee lexicographer wrestling with the letter p, show the kind of thing I mean. She has simply reversed the sexes, with some odd results:

"She parked her boyfriend at the bar" (for park).
"His headache had passed off by lunchtime" (for pass off).
"He's a very particular housekeeper" (for particular).
"He patted his hair into place" (for pat).

Now you may think that all these sentences are possible, and of course you would be right. Men do have headaches, pat their hair, and fuss over their housekeeping, and one can imagine a situation where one might park one's boyfriend at a bar. But somewhere there comes a point where we must draw the line or risk becoming tendentious. Perhaps that line should have been drawn to exclude the following example from the LDOCE at debrief: "We debriefed our pilot after she had flown over the enemy's land". The trouble is that while in all other parts of the definition our discipline requires of us nitpicking accuracy, lucidity, and unambiguousness, the invented examples are the one place where we can allow ourselves a bit of a fling, by demonstrating what a word is 'for'. It is the difference between explaining the use of an egg-beater and beating an egg. That is fair enough, but such inventiveness can very easily become an ego-trip, and we have here a formidable weapon, not to be used just for fun. I once saw a Chinese-English dictionary published in Peking which, as I remember it, illustrates the phrasal verb give up by the example sentence "The ruling classes will never willingly give up power". That is a politically committed example sentence, but it certainly does not illustrate the commonest use of give up; and perhaps the message to be learnt is that we should stick to what is common, and not try to be too clever or funny or doctrinaire. The most useful examples, sadly, are those that exemplify the most commonplace collations. We must be alert to notice what is becoming commonplace, and not reinforce stereotypes that are now out of date, about sex or anything else; but in the writing of examples, as elsewhere, our business is to monitor and record the changes in language, not to create Newspeak.

References

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Non-Sexist Code of Practice for Book Publishing (1982) London: NUJ