Gendering Talk

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Today, a Saturday in May, I start painting the trim on my house. This is a job I enjoy, and the cool spring breezes help the work's rhythm. Soon I find myself humming inane tunes, such as this one:

The farmer in the dell, the farmer in the dell,
heigh-ho the dairy-o, the farmer in the dell.
The farmer takes a wife . . .

Suddenly I stop humming and start laughing so hard I must stop painting for a minute. I feel silly for letting this childhood ditty creep into my unguarded mind, but mostly I laugh at discovering the assumption in this rhyme that the farmer must be a male—because the farmer "takes a wife." The universe of talk is showing me something deeply ordinary. So I ask more questions about this rhyme: Did I have a picture of this farmer in my head as I sang? Well, not exactly, but something like that. Had the picture always been male, from the first mention of the farmer, or did it just become male at "The farmer takes a wife?" It was always male, and did not require the wife to make it so.

As I ponder this, I start painting again, and soon, without any bidding, the rhyme comes onto my tongue again: "The wife takes a child." Hmm, In the 1990s, the savvy language user knows that it would be better to say "The farming couple takes a child." But the traditional rhyme connects only the wife with the child. To say it the new way loses the playful rhythm.

How many hundred times have I sung, read, or heard this rhyme without stopping to consider its stereotypical presentation of male and female roles? The farmer (presumed to be a male so surely that it’s unnecessary to say so—in fact, better not to say so!) acts to take a wife, who acts to take a child. Action begins with the male, who has a place in the world. In one of his acts, this male takes a wife. The wife also acts, but only within the domestic sphere, to take a child. And the wife acts only after the farmer has taken her. Before then she does not enter the story.

Like my mindless humming at the paint job, most people’s usage of the English language includes forms of talk that (more or less by accident and even without malice) make women seem invisible, deemphasized, or not taken seriously. When women are talked about, certain language features seem to put women in a bad light. Both male and female speakers use features that indicate micropolitical inequalities between men and women. How do speakers use these unequally gendered features? And what are the consequences of talking differently about men than we talk about women?

Consider this fragment of a phone conversation between two men who share responsibilities for managing apartments. Dan is traveling for Thanksgiving, so he describes to a colleague how his responsibilities will be covered:

[1] UTCL L.17.3

Dan: We’re gonna take off we got one of the girls here watchin the place for us

By using the expression “one of the girls,” Dan indicates a person to whom he has assigned a professional responsibility. He does not state the person’s name, but identifies that person only as a female living at the apartment complex. This phrase, “one of the girls here,” does not help a listener recognize the particular person to whom Dan makes reference. Dan has mentioned this “girl” in a way that specifically prevents us from guessing who she might be. The word “girl” is arguably demeaning because it make the person referred to seem immature and not professional.¹

Dan’s phrase displays lexical choices within a slot in his utterance that might be filled by any of several expressions: for instance, “this kid,” “a
student," "this woman," or "a responsible lady." Each of these would fit into Dan's utterance in the slot occupied by "one of the girls" without changing the main speech act Dan performs—informing his colleague that someone is minding the apartments. If Dan had used "kid" or "student" in this slot these choices would not have gendered the utterance, as does "girl."

Many word choices carry gendered information. Given the variety of ways of referring to a person that the English language makes available, Dan's choice of "girl" might indicate something about his orientation toward women. Yet if we were to ask Dan about the use of "girl," he might find the question picky or uninteresting. Perhaps your responses are similar. Why write about Dan's usage? Because it is within just such microscopic moments that we gender our world.

Let us contrast two ways to examine Dan's utterance. First, we may ask about its main speech act, and produce a description such as informing a colleague. Second, we may examine the form of some detail in the utterance—for instance the word "girl." The main speech act in an utterance represents that speaker's primary intention. Yet that intention is rarely all that is occurring at that moment. A speech act, like any fabricating process, is multiconsequential.

The manager of a steel mill intends to make steel and earn money. The manufacturing of steel might also place dangerous chemicals into nearby air and water. The manager bears responsibility not only for the primary intention, but also for its accidental consequences. The manager does not try to pollute the environment, but owns unintended consequences as well as intended ones.

Similarly, when a person speaks, dozens of things happen at once, and most speakers hold only some of these events under conscious or strategic control. We experience other speech features, including habitual accent, idioms, and metaphors as bits of personality and cultural identity. When a speaker says something gendered, this may not indicate an intention to act sexist. Nevertheless, if utterances foster an impression that men and women are unequal, this activity may both indicate and sustain male-female inequality.

Harm may be done within little details of conversation. The current chapter (and the next one) describes traces of bias in our everyday gendered speech patterns, using the term "soft-core sexism" to refer to a usage (such as "girl" in example [1]) that shows gender-imbalance but does not necessarily
show an intention to slight women. To illustrate hard-core and soft-core sexist language, consider these hypothetical examples:

- This broad lacks the balls to be a manager.
- I’m not sure this little lady is management material.

The first utterance sounds blatantly sexist. The language is crass ("broad," "balls") and the tone is abrupt. The second utterance uses management jargon ("management material"), but the phrase "little lady" retains a demeaning overtone. Furthermore, the two utterances make the same general point, which is that a particular female person is found unfit for a high-status job. This pair of examples illustrates a fuzzy boundary between soft-core and hard-core sexist talk. In soft-core sexist talk the problematic material

• is not crass in its enactment;
• is enacted as a side effect; and
• may be tolerated, because of speech habits, and because to interfere endangers freedom of speech.

Such items of soft-core sexist talk may become especially troublesome when used in public:


"This is the blind date stage of the campaign," said . . . Samuel L. Popkin of the political science faculty at the University of California at San Diego. "Someone tells you about a girl, but you haven’t met her yet, haven’t had a chance to check her out."

This statement sounds innocuous, like describing political races using a sports metaphor, but the analogy here is to dating. This professor's utterance (like Dan's utterance in example [1]) contains the world "girl," which by itself may do little harm. Yet here this word is embedded in an extended analogy between a political campaign and a date. Also, the word "girl" specifies a male viewpoint, implying that all politicians are men. Is this harmful within the male-dominated world of politics?
Let us return to Dan's utterance to consider the phrase “one of the girls.” How can we determine whether these details in Dan's utterance have environmental impact, or make any difference in the world? What harm might there be to Dan's word choice, and how would we monitor such harm? One source of evidence about any utterance is the talk that occurs just afterward. Speakers show each other in subsequent utterances how they are analyzing and making use of the details of each other's talk. Here is what happens just after example [1]:

[3] UTCL L17.3
Dan: We're gonna take off we got one of the girls here watchin the place for us
(0.2)
Jeff: Oh yeah?
Dan: D'You know Shirley, don'tcha
Jeff: Shirley, Shirley with the big whangers?

Just a few seconds after Dan mentions the name of this previously referred to “girl,” Jeff refers to the same person as “Shirley with the big whangers.” This physical description is one that few of us would wish applied to ourself or our sister. The description “big whangers” sounds demeaning to Shirley.

Is Jeff's demeaning usage (“big whangers”) consequential to Dan's prior usage (“one of the girls”)? This question cannot be answered with certainty. Jeff's utterance is more obviously demeaning than Dan's, but both are somewhat belittling, and both utterances gender Shirley.

We may contrast soft-core with hard-core sexism by comparing Dan's phrase “One of the girls” with Jeff's phrase “Shirley with the big whangers.” Yet is it possible that the former phrase creates an environment in which the latter may be said?

Once Jeff's demeaning utterance is spoken, Dan and Jeff celebrate its unfairness to women.

[4] UTCL L17.3
Jeff: Shirley, Shirley with the big whangers?
(0.4)
Dan: Yeah.
Jeff: [A : : w.
Dan: [Yeah- uh (.) up in two o four? The bi- you know two o four.
Jeff: Big girl, bi:g.
Dan: We’re talkin big everything’s [big on her
Jeff: [big
Dan O:h Lord=
Jeff: huh heh heh huh huh huh huh [huh huh huh huh huh
Dan: [How sweet, how sweet
Jeff: Indee:d, indee:d a:h yes: your- your type for sure
Dan: Yes

Jeff’s demeaning jest stimulates a period of overtly sexist speech play: "how sweet," "your type for sure." This progression is celebrated in laughter as well as in repeated choral performances of the word “big.”

The impact of word choice is especially vivid in humor. When you come across a punchline, ask what makes it work. Ask what the players are celebrating. Ambiguities often provide productive points for such analysis. Here is a joke (from a 1990 joke-a-day calendar) that exemplifies how we mark ideology about women and about men.

[5] Joke Calendar
Not found in Webster's
Lady pilot: a plane Jane.

This joke plays off a dictionary format for definitions. “Lady pilot” is the term to be defined, and the definition follows: “a plane Jane.” The term that makes the joke work, “plane,” is an ambiguous sound. Airplane seems the primary meaning, cued by spelling of “plane,” not plain, but this secondary meaning is proposed in the combination idiom “plane Jane.” A plain jane is a female who might not be especially pretty or gregarious. Plain (Jane) is a pun with (air)plane, the vehicle that pilots fly.

“Pilot” is typically a man’s occupation. To say “lady pilot” is to propose a marked usage, to describe an incumbent in a sex-atypical occupation. It is unusual to see a female pilot. About a woman performing a sex-atypical
occupation, Samuel Johnson is supposed to have quipped that listening to a woman’s preaching is like watching a dog walk on its hind legs; it is not that she does it well but that one is surprised to see it done at all. A lady pilot, like a woman preacher, is marked as atypical. Speech patterns remind us that this pilot is atypical. Would you ever say “man pilot,” or “man preacher?” Man is assumed in words like “pilot,” “preacher,” “president,” or “surgeon.”

You may have heard this riddle: A man and his son are in a car accident. The father is killed; the child is taken to the hospital by helicopter. When they wheel this child into surgery the surgeon says, “Oh my God, this patient is my son.” What is the relationship between the patient and the surgeon? When I first heard this riddle about 1980 I wondered whether the child had been adopted, or oddly positioned by divorce and step parenthood. Only after being asked to conceptualize a simpler solution did I find the more obvious probability—that this surgeon is a woman. Douglas Hofstadter discusses reactions to this story in terms of the term “default assumptions”:

Whether we light upon the answer quickly or slowly, we all have something to learn from this ingenious riddle. It reveals something very deep about how so-called default assumptions permeate our mental representations and channel our thoughts. A default assumption is what holds true in what you might say is the “simplest” or “most natural” or “most likely” possible model of whatever situation is under discussion. . . . But the critical thing about default assumptions—so well revealed by this story—is that they are made automatically, not as a result of consideration and elimination. You didn’t explicitly ponder the point and ask yourself, “what is the most plausible sex to assign to the surgeon?” . . . You never were aware of having made any assumptions about the surgeon’s sex, for if you had been, the riddle would have been easy.

Ordinary talk may show gendered default assumptions:

[6] Field note (overheard in elevator)

Jill: I don’t know what they’re doing in class today.

I don’t feel like goin’

Stan: Your father is paying tuition, young lady, and you . . .

(They pass out of earshot)
Stan not only presumes that the male parent is the primary payer of tuition, but he addresses Jill as “young lady,” which gives this encounter a flavor of parental discipline.

[7] Field note (Computer support line)

Carol: Thank you for calling Dell, this is Carol, how may I help you?
Mike: Uh huh, (...) is this tech support?
Carol: Yes it is. How may I help you?
Mike: Oh, uh, wow, a female technician.

This caller seems so surprised to find a tech support phone answered by a woman that he first rechecks whether he has the correct number. The technician reassures him that he has called the correct number, then she once again asks the caller to specify the computer problem. Mike ignores this repeated request, to instead comment on having reached a sex-atypical technician.

We expect a pilot to be male; if a pilot is a woman that is exceptional. We mark the exceptional nature of a nonmale pilot by an extra modifier: “lady pilot” is the item to be defined in this fictitious dictionary. Similarly, one may say “female technician,” “lady doctor,” or “lady lawyer” in order to show that the woman is in an exceptional role.

The definition of “lady pilot” combines the word “plane” (which is what a pilot operates) and a woman’s name. Therefore, the definition fits the term being defined. Yet the pun (plane/plain) places together within one phrase this hypothetical woman’s sex-atypical occupation and her unattractive social status. This pairing comes across as a coincidence, but it is this very coincidence, and only that, that makes the joke a joke. This coincidence implies that a successful female aviator may be a social suspect. Yet that derogatory implication remains slightly out of focus, so we can laugh at the joke without making explicit its default assumptions.

This “plane Jane” joke demonstrates three themes in talk about women, compared with talk about men.

- emphasis on men,
- derogation of women, and
- notice of a woman’s physical attractiveness.
Emphasis on men refers to talk that implies that men are more plentiful or important than women. "Lady pilot" indicates that an unmarked pilot is male, and thereby "pilot" emphasizes men over women. The rest of this chapter deals with this problem of emphasis.

Chapter 8 describes talk that is derogatory to women, and talk that emphasizes women's beauty. The phrase "plane Jane" carries the implication that a lady pilot carries social liabilities. Finally, this whole joke turns around connecting being a lady pilot to lacking physical attractiveness. These three issues all imply that successful women are social suspects.

This "plane Jane" joke carries linguistic traces of unfairly gendered ideology. Any real life utterance, like this joke, may carry traces of all three sorts of linguistic bias. Yet for clarity we consider these issues in isolation from one another. The present treatment concentrates on soft-core instances. Of course, hard-core sexism, blatant exclusion, and harmful insult also occur, and should draw social concern. However, there is value in examining subtler and less intended features of the ways we speak about women and men—choices as seemingly innocent as Dan's phrase, "one of the girls."

THE PROBLEM OF EMPHASIS

Some language features make it easy for speakers to emphasize males, or deemphasize women. These features invoke a world of male presence and female absence, a world in which women seem marginal while men seem central. To test the validity of each example, see if you can think of a counterexample—an example that would show something different or opposite from what the example shows.

Names

When, upon marriage, a bride changes her family name to that of the groom, her past family name has been comparatively effaced.⁴ We all carry family names. Some cultures (for example, American) place family names as the final word in a person's name. Some cultures (for example, Japanese) speak the family name first. Some cultures (for example, Hispanic) put the most important family name next to last. Yet in each of these languages a man's family name has preferential status over a woman's family name. If only one family

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name is to be specified for members of a married couple, that name is likely to be the family name held by the man prior to marriage.

A thought experiment: Suppose that you are getting married tomorrow, and that family name decisions are yours alone. Whatever you wish to do will be fine with all the others involved. Women readers: Would you change your family name to match your husband's? Would you keep your premarriage family name? Or would you seek a compromise (hyphenation, adopting a third name, etc.)? Men readers, answer the same question: How many would keep the premarriage name, how many would change, how many would compromise?

When I pose this second set of questions to the men in university classes, both men and women laugh, indicating that it is humorous to ask a man whether he is going to change his family name. What is this humor about? After the question to women, most listeners expect a different question to be asked of men. Did you expect me to ask if you men were going to allow your wives to keep their names? Were some of you (men and women) surprised that the same question was asked to men as to women? This illustrates a gender inequality in the use of language.

When we think about family, we may first think of the line of people with the family name that is the same as ours. To think about a mother-to-mother family line, one must think through a variety of family names. I cannot say of my maternal ancestors: "Those Hoppers were sturdy pioneers." I would have to say, "Those Butlers, Redds, Skeenes, and so on were sturdy pioneers."

A boy, knowing he comes from a long line of males bearing the name Wheelwright, for example, can identify with his forefathers: Johnny Wheelwright . . . can imagine some medieval John in whose workshop the finest wheels in the land were fashioned, a John who had a son, who had a son, who had a son, until at last Johnny Wheelwright himself was born. No line of identifiable foremothers stretches back into the past. . . .

Imagine, in contrast to Johnny Wheelwright, a hypothetical woman of today whose name is Elizabeth Jones, . . . a Woslewski whose father emigrated from Poland as a boy. . . . Elizabeth Jones' father's mother in Pennsylvania had been a Bruhofer, whose mother had been a Gruber. . . .
Thus, although Elizabeth Jones is said to have been a Fliegendorf whose people came from Schleswig-Holstein in the sixteen hundreds, fewer than 5 percent of her two thousand or so direct ancestors who were alive in that century had any connection with Schleswig-Holstein . . . The same may be said, of course, of Elizabeth Jones’s brother, Ed Fliegendorf’s relationship to the Fliegendorf family or Johnny Wheelwright’s relationship to the bearers of his name. Yet so strong is our identification with the name we inherit at birth that we tend to forget both the rich ethnic mix most of us carry in our genes and the arbitrary definition of “family” that ultimately links us only to the male line of descent.  

Family names are arbitrary. None of us chooses a family name at birth. Yet a family name carries different consequences for its male and female occupants. A man’s family name is emphasized more than a woman’s.

In the nineteenth century most U.S. women used their husbands’ full names: for example, Mrs. Henry Stanton. Path-breaking feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton insisted on using her own given name and surname along with her husband’s surname. Sculptor Elisabet Ney (now memorialized by a museum in Austin, Texas) was threatened by the Ku Klux Klan for her refusal to change her surname to her husband’s name. Lucy Stone, throughout most of her 1855 marriage to Henry Blackwell, insisted on using only her previous family name, though she met repeated legal difficulties in doing so. Her example led to the formation of a “Lucy Stone League” in the 1920s for the purpose of encouraging women to legally maintain their surnames. “Lucy Stoners” of the 1920s included Margaret Mead, Amelia Earhart, Fannie Hurst, and Edna St. Vincent Millay. In the 1930s the practice again became rare.

The way we manage married names continues to fluctuate. I have polled my classes on this question every year since 1975, when no woman in my undergraduate class would willingly change her name at marriage. By 1982 few women in the class would consider keeping their current names at marriage. In 1994, 70 percent would change family names to that of the male. This fluctuation indicates ideological fashion among college students. What remains constant is that virtually no man considers changing a surname at marriage. Family names seem derived mainly from male ancestors, which both men and women show whenever they use these names.
Given names (first names in the United States) usually mark the sex of the person, and the set of names also shows some imbalances. There are a number of women's names that seem derived from men's: Paulette, Georgette, Georgia, Pauline, Roberta, Bobbie. Many of the women's forms feature a diminutive ending such as -ette or -ine that make the labeled thing seem small as well as derived. Are there any men's names that appear to be derived from women's names, or that appear to be diminutive compared to a woman's name?

Finally, certain Anglo names such as Leslie, Shirley, and Evelyn were historically names for men. When women began to receive these names, the names became more rare among men. Were these names somehow diminished by application to women, and therefore deemed no longer suitable to men? There are now some Anglo names that seem androgynous but are mostly used for women: Taylor, Blair, Madison. Apparently there are nations (for example, Germany) in which names are legally prescribed to avoid gender ambiguities.

*Generic “He”*

Sometimes a speaker uses the pronoun “he” to refer to a person of indeterminate sex. English teachers used to tell students to use a masculine pronoun on such an occasion, since generic usage includes women by convention. The rationale is that we do not intend gender bias if we use generic terms.

The choice to say “he” when you do not necessarily refer to a man is ambiguous, or creates two meanings for the word “he”:

- male individual
- referent of undetermined sex

To use “he” is to activate both of these possible meanings, and a listener must figure out which is intended. The ambiguity of words like “he” or “man” is interesting in terms of how often each of the uses occurs. One study asked (within a sample of children’s books) how many of the usages of “he” were of which type. How many do you suppose were of each type? Were 90 percent of them generic, were 90 percent sex-specific, or was the breakdown about 50–50? Most of my listener-readers think near 50–50, which is a logi-
cal guess, but incorrect. Actually, 97 percent of the usages of "he" were sex-specific, not generic. Also, sex-specific "he" occurred more frequently than "she."

A generic "he" usage, then, is a marked exception, not the rule. One implication of this: When you hear "he" you expect it to be sex-specific, unless there is some clue to the contrary. Possible confusions related to these usages are captured in Lorel Scott's poem, "He or She," which reads in part:

When I was little I had to see if he means he
or if he means she, or if perhaps he means he or she. . . .
The physician, he, or the gambler, he, or the
President, he: what are we supposed to see:
Do we read 'the President' he or she? That is how
they say it should be. According to them,
there's no mystery. He means he or he or she.
Since I was a she, this was confusing to me.
When I read he, did that mean me?

Generic "he" seems ambiguous in ways that may impact the social identities of women and girls. The use of generic "he" arguably enhances sexism in talk and writing, and hence contributes to gender inequality. Generic "he" may indicate a speaker's belittling or derogatory attitude toward women: "Continual emphasis on the masculine as the unmarked conventional gender can . . . create the illusion that women have lesser rights in the moral order of speaking, an illusion shared by both men and women."

In other words, generic "he" unfairly emphasizes males over females, and marginalizes women.

To the degree that we use male words to talk about the human race, we could find ourselves thinking of humans primarily as males. (The farmer in the dell) The default thinking involved in generic usages is illustrated by this satirical treatment, which reverses women and men:

Think of the future of woman which, of course, includes both women and men. . . . Recall that everything you have ever read all your life uses only female pronouns—she, her—meaning both girls and boys, both women and men. Recall
that most of the voices on radio and most of the faces on TV are women's. . . .
Women are the leaders, the power centers, the prime movers. Man, whose nat-
ural role is husband and father, fulfills himself through nurturing children and
making the home a refuge for women. . . .9

Another humorous treatment of this issue puts the generic grid imaginatively
across races: black and white.

It's high time someone blew the whistle on all the silly prattle about revamping
our language to suit the purposes of certain political fanatics. . . .

Most of the clamor . . . revolves around the age-old usage of the noun
"white" and words built from it, such as chairwhite, mailwhite, repairwhite, cler-
gywhite, middlewhite, Frenchwhite, forewhite, whitepower, whiteslaughter, oneup-
swortheship, straw white, whitehandle, and so on. The negrists claim that using the
word "white" . . . to talk about all the members of the human species is some-
how degrading to blacks and reinforces racism. Therefore the libbers propose
that we substitute "person" everywhere where "white" now occurs. Sensitive
speakers of our secretary tongue of course find this preposterous. There is great
beauty to a phrase such as "All whites are created equal."10

Several investigators have tried to trace the interpretations of language users
who encountered generic usages versus inclusive usages.11 Sometimes subjects
were asked to read a passage and to draw (or choose from among several) pic-
tures of what was described. Those exposed to inclusive language still drew
(or chose) more males, but only by about a two-to-one ratio. When people
read passages like the first one (with "he" and "man" representing everyone)
such persons drew almost entirely males. Such results illustrate that words
like "he" are most often understood to indicate males.

Jeffrey Stringer and I examined hundreds of instances of "he" in tape-
recorded conversations to find out if generic usage occurs in talk as it some-
times does in writing.12 We found that speakers do occasionally select "he"
when referring to sex-unspecific persons in traditionally male social cate-
gories (such as pilot or surgeon). In these usages, speakers intend to refer to
males, although such reference is deniable as having been generic "he." In
other words, we found usages showing default assumptions that referents of
"he" were actually male. These pseudogeneric "he" instances are ambiguous between sex-specific usages and a disingenuous pretense of gender-neutral "he." Most often the use of "he" appears to refer to a male-presumed occupation:

[8] Field note
S: You would have to speak with our operations manager about that.
P: Is HE available now?

(In the next few examples "HE" is capitalized for easy reading, not to show spoken emphasis.) The operations manager is female, but P refers to this stranger as "he," likely assuming that the manager is a male. If challenged, P could defend this usage as generic. Here is a related instance:

[9] Field note
Son: I saw my new doctor the other day.
Mom: What did HE say
Son: I got a prescription for my toe.

The son's doctor is female, though the mom uses "he," showing a default assumption that a doctor would be a male. The son's reply avoids the gender issue by answering the question without referring to the doctor. In this next instance Suzanne attempts to correct a pseudogeneric "he," without success.

[10] Field note
Suzanne: I was referred to your office by Doctor Sayres.
Receptionist: Is HE your primary doctor?
Suzanne: No, she's my rheumatologist.
Receptionist: How long have you been under HIS care?

Sometimes a recipient corrects the speaker of a pseudogeneric "he." In example [10] such a correction turns the description of a visit to a doctor into a scene of gendered controversy:

Ava: Well- what'd HE say
Bev: He is a she- and everything's fine
Pat: [So you went to a woman?]
Ava: [A girl doctor? Sick!]
What if she's a lesbian
Bev: I'd rather have a lesbian check me out than a pervert!

Ava asks her friend Bev about a doctor's examination, using "he" to refer to the physician. Bev corrects the pronoun in her response, and two of her friends respond (in overlap) to this revelation. Pat expresses surprise that the doctor is a woman, aligning with Ava's default assumption that a physician would be male. Ava's response is more pejorative, perhaps because it was her usage that Bev had corrected. Ava criticizes the choice of a "girl doctor" as "sick," and continues by worrying that the physician might be a "lesbian."

Uses of pseudogeneric "he" may affect future actions:

[12] Field note

John: They want me to appear in court, but I really don't want to.
Claire: Tell them it's in the hands of your attorney and they'll have to talk to HIM.
John: That's a good idea. I don't have an attorney, but I'll call one this afternoon and see what HE says.

John is reluctant to appear in court. Claire advises John to take the problem to an attorney, referred to as "him." John agrees to accept the advice, and John's retaining "he" may indicate an emerging plan to retain a male attorney.

The pronoun "he" also occurs in cases in which a sex-definite referent is nonhuman. Many animals have biological sex just as humans do, but an animal's sex might not be readily apparent to, or relevant to, humans. One prescribed pronoun for referring to animals or objects is "it," but this usage is rare in conversation. Instead speakers use a gender-linked pronoun to refer to animals. Most of these pronouns are masculine.
Lottie: Then: (.) we went down to: where we caught the big ha:libut yihknow: we-e- uh en: uh •hh we worked that there’n we fin’lly got HIM up real close to the rocks.

The speaker refers to a fish as “him.” This usage seems to be a generic “him,” but the referent is not human.

The use of gender-linked pronouns to refer to animals often follows other gender markings in the talk. For example, consider the following interaction about a cockroach. Could the term “COCKroach” (not roach) and the expression “SON of bitch” have impacted the subsequent uses of masculine pronouns?

[14] UTCL J17.4
Jan: I killed that cockroach
Sid: Did you really?
Jan: Yes sir
Sid: That son of a bitch came back
Jan: Three ti::mes,
Sid: Guall:ee
Jan: And I kept flickin HIM outta here and finally the last time I took my shoe off and I smashed that sucker
(0.3)
Sid: Good for you.
Jan: HE’s dead now

Jan announces the killing of a cockroach, eventually referring to the insect as “he.” We can find precursors for the masculine pronoun in Jan’s prior description of the beast as a “cockroach” and a “son of a bitch.”

When speakers refer to animals, there is, of course, a likelihood of an incorrect pronoun. When this occurs, the usage may go unnoticed, or speakers may contend over the usage:

[15] Field note
M: I’ve been petting your cat. What’s HIS name.
J: HER name is Tutti
M: HE always runs up to me
J: SHE loves everybody, even strangers
M: Well HE's never tried to follow me
J: Yeah SHE usually stays pretty close to home.

The mail carrier (M) asks the cat's name using a masculine pronoun. The cat is a female, which J (the cat's owner) indicates with an embedded correcting feminine pronoun. M shows no notice of this correction, and again uses a masculine pronoun. J observes that "she" seeks affection from friends and strangers alike. M sticks with a masculine pronoun throughout the encounter, never seeming to notice the pronoun struggle.

To summarize: Possible uses of generic "he" in conversation actually refer either to occupants of overwhelmingly male roles, or to animals. If challenged, speakers of these pronouns could claim that they made a generic reference, but the pronouns themselves communicate default assumptions that the referent is male.13

Though we found no unmistakable generic "he" in conversation, we did find hypercorrect usages in environments that might allow a generic "he." In example [16] a university professor is lecturing on how various people address a mother-in-law:

[16] Field note
K: In Arabic culture a son-in-law speaks to HIS OR HER mother-in-law with a specific type of verb form.

This speaker uses the gender-inclusive "his or her" for a sex-specific referent, "son-in-law." Such hypercorrection indicates that, even though generic "he" may be rare or absent in conversation, its use is still regarded as possible.

Generic "they" seems to be the unmarked form used in conversation when referent sex is unspecified. This construction is precisely what prescriptive grammarians have periodically cited as incorrect. Consider this office conversation in which the referent is "outsider."

[17] UTCL J208, Wrobbel
Red: You know some- outsider that we don't normally recognize as
an elmos user needs a log in, some of the table corrections that go on, and THEY have distributed the conversions

Red refers to an unknown single and hypothetical computer user as "they." Example [18] further illustrates such unmarked use by showing how a speaker abandons generic "their" in a marked recompletion of an utterance. The scene is a suburban home on cleaning day:

[18] Field note

Kay: Somebody trashed out my freshly cleaned bathroom and didn't clean up THEIR own Whiskers.

(pause)

HIS own whiskers.

Kay complains about messy whiskers in a circumstance that allows no doubt about who grew the whiskers. Perhaps Kay's generic "they" softens her complaint with humorous vagueness. However, when the complaint target, who is also her addressee, does not respond vocally (the pause), Kay recompletes her utterance, substituting an emphasized "his" for the prior generic "their." This switch to a sex-specific pronoun turns the original tactful accusation into an on-record one.

The unmarked frequency of generic "they" in conversation suggests that grammarians originally prescribed generic "he" because most speakers already used generic "they." Yet that prescription also allows certain sex-specific uses of "he," which can be possibly heard as generic. The third person singular pronoun system in English provides routine locations to gender human referents, locations in which speakers are obliged to gender-tag human referents more or less automatically, that is, without stopping to consider how such usages reinforce the importance of gender categorization. Generic "he" is part of a network of speech resources by which speakers sort referents by sex, and effortlessly emphasize men over women. Such resources include gendered terms for occupations and the retention of male surnames at marriage. These usages fit seamlessly into social-institutional arrangements such as the gendered assignment of chores to children, the gendered labeling of adult professions, and the unequal distributions of heroic figures in our stories.
The squabble over generic "he" may disguise a more important practice of gender-marking pronouns—and (in some languages) nouns and adjectives as well. It could be interesting to compare repetitive, taken-for-granted gendering procedures across a variety of speech communities.

**Job Titles**

If you call somebody a "salesman" you probably picture a man. If you call somebody a "saleswoman" that is marked usage, like "lady pilot." Sometimes the job title's default value of "male" is reinforced by the syllable, "-man," as in fireman, garbage man, salesman, draftsman, and so forth. Yet many job titles default to a male value even without this explicit linguistic marking: lawyer, doctor, engineer, manager, president. Any of these terms evoke the expectation that the occupant is male—as is shown in the preceding pages by the use of pseudogeneric pronouns to refer to such persons. It seems no coincidence that

- these job titles include most of the high-prestige and power occupations in our society, and
- most occupants of these high positions are male—fulfilling the stereotype and making the situation harder to either unmask or change.

There are a few job titles, mostly lower status ones, in which a female occupant is unmarked: nurse, social worker, secretary. These default values for job titles reflect an unfortunate degree of occupational segregation by sex in North American society. This state of affairs in the language and the world makes men look good and present whereas women look absent, marginal, or suspect. And of course, these features interact with other features (for example, pronoun use, and talk about women's accomplishments—see chapter 8) to promote occupational inequality while appearing to simply reflect it.

**Representation in Fiction and Media**

Who are the heroes, on TV, in children’s books, and so on? There have been numerous studies of this issue over time, and some attempts to redress the problem. Thirty years ago the overwhelming majority of literary and media heroes were men, and in spite of attempts to compensate, the hero situation
remains sex-imbalanced. In children’s books little boys climb trees and little girls watch and worry. In spy novels the men do the fighting, thinking, investigating, and so on. This holds true across texts from the Bible to Saturday morning cartoons.

CONCLUSIONS

Men and women, in the details of talk, are portrayed as separate and unequal. This reflects no intention to slight women, but unreflective usages of traditional language forms. After a general introduction to this problem, this chapter has focused on the problem of emphasis—as represented by asymmetries in pronoun use and in surnames at marriage.

What should we do about the problem of emphasis? Proposed solutions to marriage-related naming practices have been a matter of contention for well over a century. Since 1970 a number of women and men have put themselves on the line with innovative naming practices. In the 1980s there was a backlash against such practices that largely continues today. Similarly, there has been cosmetic progress in the naming of certain titles for jobs. Terms like “salesperson,” “police officer,” and the like are increasingly used instead of terms including “man.” However, both the stubborn facts of occupational segregation and the unmarked expectation that a doctor or lawyer is a man remain largely as they were a generation ago.

Proposed solutions for the problem of generic “he” range from the creation of totally new pronominal forms such as “shem” to the alternating use of gendered pronouns. Yet even when English speakers invent practicable linguistic solutions to these perplexities, they still experience difficulty in changing these pronoun patterns in everyday talk. Most speakers resist such changes as awkward. The most widely accepted substitute in written and spoken English is the combination “he or she,” and even this usage remains controversial.

We should not overestimate the reach of grammarians’ prescriptions for language practices. For example, English teachers long advised students to avoid using singular generic “they,” yet that is the generic pronoun a majority of English speakers use in conversation. In recent years, some teachers and writers have prescribed greater gender fairness in pronoun use—and the
results of such advocacy may be similarly modest. Such analyses tell us more about what we are like as members of a speech community than about how we should change our talk.

Still, we should not underestimate the ideological reach of unmarked language forms. Grammarians who prescribed generic “he” have not needed to prescribe something English speakers already knew without question: to use gender-specific third person pronouns whenever possible. Members’ obligations within this scheme include making one’s own sex routinely and unremarkably evident and deciphering the sex of conversational partners as well as that of persons described in talk. This omnipresent gender-specifying project points to cultural preoccupations about the performance of gender. Similarly, the problems of marital naming and the titles of jobs are more symptoms of sexual inequality (within a marriage or a career) than they are free-standing problems in their own right. Our spoken indications of hidden preoccupations sustain the illusion that gender is more a natural category than an ongoing accomplishment within social interaction.

Protests about these problems seem so far to outnumber the reasonable solutions. If the examples in this chapter have not persuaded you that you should change your usage, then it is probably futile to try to just be politically correct. If you are persuaded that change would be useful, do not conclude that it is simple to change. Concentrate on changing your own patterns of use, rather than finding fault in those of others. These words from the meditations of Marcus Aurelius seem to the point.

From Alexander, the grammarian, [I learned] to refrain from faultfinding, and not in a reproachful way to chide those who uttered any barbarous or incorrect or strange sounding expression; but tactfully to introduce the very expression which they ought to have used, in the course of an answer or assent or inquiry about the thing, not about the word; or by some other suitable suggestion.15

This thoughtful emperor left good advice for anyone who is persuaded that we should address the imbalance between the ways we talk about men and about women.

You (as a speaking individual) may make the world a slightly fairer place for men and women if you can change some of your usages. You should
be warned that changes in language habits are often difficult to achieve. It is not enough to resolve to change. Should you decide to change your speech patterns, here are some places to begin:

- **Begin in your writing, or more specifically, in editing your writing.** It seems futile to keep these considerations in mind as you compose a first draft, but you can look for problems of emphasis (as well as derogation of women) as you check for spelling and grammar lapses.

- **Listen to a tape recording of your own speech once a year.** Listen repeatedly to small bits, especially to phone conversation. This habit may help you improve details in your speaking and listening performances.

- **Keep a diary of speech events that strike your ear as odd, conflicted, or just interesting.** Write descriptions of events immediately upon their occurrence, using precise wording (like the field notes in this book).

- **Cultivate a sense of humor about the mistakes you make in trying to change language habits.** Any resolve to make a change leaves a speaker vulnerable to errors and lapses of resolve. Sometimes you reform one usage only to find yourself performing another. A university administrator of my acquaintance once began a meeting of department heads by saying: "I'd like to welcome all the chairmen and chairpersons here this morning." This administrator was making a good faith attempt to be inclusive, but he used a sex-specific form to refer to males and a sex-neutral form to refer to women. If you decide to change any feature of your speech, you will find you will make many humorous mistakes. Be patient with yourself, as well as with others.

Each of the examples discussed in this chapter reflects linguistic habits in our languages and cultures that make men seem more numerous and important than women. I attempt to give clear examples, but in real life the circumstances are rarely clear. In the definition "lady pilot, a plane jane," the words "lady pilot" point to the sense in which many words refer to males as a default value. This raises the implication that "pilot" carries an expected value of male just as does the more explicitly rendered "he" or "salesman."

Women are rendered less attention than men due to such linguistic features of emphasis. Yet this is only part of the problem; another part is that the
quality of attention given to men (in microfeatures of language) differs from that of attention given to women.

So women receive a discursive double whammy—the practices of emphasis make women seem marginal or absent, but then what attention women do get is largely suspect or derogatory. Linguistic attention to women is attention that makes women blameworthy. Furthermore, this blame (sometimes it seems both praise and blame) is often cast in terms of a woman's physical appearance. These are the topics of the next chapter.