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The Myth of the Neutral “Man”

I

Here are two riddles:

(1) A man is walking down the street one day when he suddenly recognizes an old friend whom he has not seen in years walking in his direction with a little girl. They greet each other warmly and the friend says, “I married since I last saw you, to someone you never met, and this is my daughter, Ellen.” The man says to Ellen, “You look just like your mother.” How did he know that?

(2) A boy and his father were driving when suddenly a large truck careened around a corner and hit their car head-on. The car was crushed, and when their bodies were removed from the wreck the father was already dead. The son, badly injured but still alive, was rushed to the hospital, where hasty preparations were made for immediate surgery. As the boy was brought in

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for the operation, the surgeon saw him and said, "I can't operate, that's my son." How is that possible?

If you have not heard these riddles before and they puzzle you, that's an important datum for this paper.

II

Recently it has been argued that the words "he," "man," etc. should not be used as gender-neutral terms because it is unfair to women; anyone who looks for the best *man* for the job or tells an applicant to send *his* credentials is less likely or less able to consider a female candidate fairly.

Two claims should be distinguished here. The first accepts that there is a gender-neutral meaning for terms like "he," "man," etc. Adherents of this view consider the gender-neutral uses of these terms an *effect* of, and an unpleasant reminder of, the lower status of women, and urge that the gender-neutral use be eliminated as a sign of good will and for symptomatic relief.

The second claim denies that terms such as "he" and "man" have gender-neutral uses. It argues that using these terms as if they were neutral terms *causes* unfairness. This is because not really being gender-neutral, the use of such terms leads one to apply the context to males, and makes it difficult to apply it to females.

The first claim is sometimes followed up with a shift to the second claim: once the first claim has been articulated, the second claim is thought to become true. Refusing to adopt this sign of good will indicates a lack of good will—that is, sexism. Continued use of "he" and "man" as neutral terms indicates that the attitude of the speaker is not gender-neutral. It will be recognized on some level of awareness that the speaker intends men to be preferred to women, and intends terms such as "he" or "man," although hitherto neutral, to apply primarily to men. Only people who have these intentions will continue to use these terms as if they were neutral. Such an argument defends and reinforces the first claim by appeal to the second claim.

The first claim, that there *are* neutral uses but they are symptoms of unfairness and should be eliminated, has greater initial plausibility than the second. Using "he" and "man" as neutral terms may well be the result of the greater prominence of men in our culture. But once this use has been established, it appears that it can be both intended and understood neutrally. There is

no initial reason to suppose that these terms are less likely to be applied to women than men, *if* used neutrally.

I am going to defend the second claim, but I would like to do so without appealing to any connection with the first claim. I believe that the second claim can be defended on its own, without appeal to sexist attitudes of the speakers. I shall try to show that however innocently and neutrally they are intended, the words "he," "man," etc. may not function as genuine gender-neutral terms; that their use is unavoidably somewhat gender-specific; and that male gender-specific descriptions make it difficult to recognize that descriptions in that context could apply to a female.

III

Let us first consider the criticism of the use of "he," "man," etc. as gender-neutral terms which, while allowing that the uses may be neutral, nevertheless requests relief from these symptoms of other injustices. This criticism reminds us that there are other neutral terms: One can look for the best person for the job, tell applicants to send their credentials to one, etc. It continues: If we change our language, we will increase awareness of past unfair treatment of women and save women from being constantly reminded of the male priority and domination that the neutral uses of "he" and "man" indicate. Although some of the suggested changes will be awkward at first, they will be signs of a spirit of sympathy and cooperation with the criticism and therefore with efforts of women to attain equal human status.

Once this request has been made, the continued use of "he" and "man" as gender-neutral terms does not *make* a person less likely to consider a woman for the job. Nevertheless it may be an indication that the person is not especially sympathetic to the problems of being automatically assigned a lower status, and therefore that the person may be less likely to consider a woman for the job. On this view, the gender-neutral use of "he," etc., is a consequence, or a symbol, not a cause, of existing unjust attitudes.

This request seems to be asking very little, just that a few words be changed, but it is actually asking more than that. The change in language might also publicize a political position, or challenge friends and colleagues. In our language where a lower socioeconomic class is detectable by dialect variants such as the

use of "gutter," "nylons," and "light bill," instead of "street" or "road," "stockings," and "electric bill," and a graduate education turns a "resume" into a "vita," a "convention" into "meetings," and "manuscripts" into "stuff" (as in "send me your stuff"), the change of few words is likely to announce a life style, broadcast a political position, or misdirect attention to the wrong issue.

If, after their relation to male status has been pointed out, "he" and "man" continue to be used in place of other neutral terms, it does not necessarily follow that the user lacks good will toward females. Small variations in language may have great social significance. It may not be a lack of good will, but a desire to concentrate on more significant issues or a shyness about taking political stands in casual conversations, that leaves the request unfulfilled.

IV

Perhaps you've recognized by now that the above riddles are intended to illustrate that assuming that a description (a surgeon, the friend of a man) applies to a male makes it difficult to recognize that the description could also apply to a female.

The second riddle is frequently presented as an illustration of our sexist presuppositions. We automatically assume that the surgeon has to be a man. But the first riddle has a similar effect without the presence of a professional description to receive the blame. I do not believe that the surgeon riddle does show sexism. What it shows is that once the assumption is made that a description is of a man, it is very, very hard to change that assumption. In the first riddle the assumption is probably made merely because an old friend of a man is somewhat more likely to be a man than a woman. (The assumption about gender need not have any empirical basis. There appears to be a tendency to assume that "my cousin," if spoken by a woman, refers to a female, and if spoken by a man, refers to a male.) Yet however weak the basis for the assumption, the perplexity caused by the riddles shows that it is still very hard to change one's assumptions about gender.

Note that these riddles do not show that the use of "he" or "man" in their alleged neutral sense makes it difficult to realize that a description in that context could be of a female. The only thing the riddles show is that if one assumes that a description

applies to a male, it is hard to realize that the description could apply to a female. But genuine gender-neutral terms should not foster such an assumption. Therefore I still have to show that the alleged gender-neutral uses of these terms are, in fact, somewhat gender-specific.

V

It is not legitimate to assume that any use of "he" makes people think of a male instead of a female. Language has an influence on thought, but there are many other influences, too. Consider another example: "being doctored" has worse connotations than "being nursed." Things that have been doctored are in a worse condition than if left alone, whereas things that have been nursed are frequently in a better condition as a result. However, such linguistic usage does not prevent people from seeking doctors rather than nurses for serious illnesses. It seems very likely that these verb forms are derived from the functions of doctors and nurses. Yet there is no reason to suppose that use of these expressions causes discrimination against doctors in favor of nurses.

So even though the use of "he" as a gender-neutral pronoun is related to the position of males as compared with that of females in this culture,¹ and even though women are in a position inferior to men, it still has to be shown that gender-neutral uses of "he," "man," etc. affect people's thinking by preventing them from applying the context in question to women.²

The claim that there is no really neutral use might not need defense if there were no other terms that had both a neutral and non-neutral use. But such is not the case. Many adjectives that refer to one of a pair of opposite qualities can be used neutrally to indicate the dimension whose extremes are the opposites. One can ask "How tall is she?" of a short person, and "How wide is that?" of a narrow object. "Tall" and "wide" are used not only as the opposites of "short" and "narrow," but as neutral terms to describe the quality or dimension of which the opposites are extremes. One *can* ask "How short is she?" or "How narrow is that?" but doing so expresses the expectation that the answer will lie on one end of the range of possible answers. In contrast, any tendency to suppose that anyone of whom it is asked how tall they are is in fact a tall person, is certainly very slight. Such uses of "short," "narrow," as well as

"young," "impure," "bad," and "small" are called *marked* while similar uses of the opposite terms, "tall" and "long," "wide," "old," "pure," "good," and "big" are termed *unmarked*.³

In this respect, unmarked and marked adjectives behave very much like the he-she, man-woman, his-her pairs. The use of "he" or "man" may be either gendered or neutral. However, if one uses "she" or "woman," one conveys the expectation that a person who fits the description will be female, not male.⁴ If one is going to argue that "he" and "man" cannot function as gender-neutral terms, it cannot be merely because such terms also have gender-specific meanings.

VI

It might be argued that, given that there are other neutral terms ("they," "one," "human," "person"), perpetuation of a neutral use of one of a pair of opposites gives that quality a priority or superiority over the opposite quality. There is some evidence that the unmarked term of a pair of opposites has higher positive associations. The use of a marked term often has a pejorative tone.⁵ It is not an accident that "good" and "pure" are unmarked, "bad" and "impure" marked. If by perpetuating the neutral uses of "he" and "man" one encouraged the continuation of the unfair priority of males, then there would be a sense in which such uses were not really neutral.

Granted that people usually do have higher positive associations for the term with the neutral use than with its opposite.⁶ And people have higher positive associations for "he" than "she." But it is far from clear that the positive association is a *result* of the neutral use; it may well be the other way around. The neutral uses of "tall," "wide," "high," "long," "big," etc. tell us that, in general, the larger size is better, or standard, or ideal. I suspect the reason for this is that children, during the time of first language learning, are expected to increase in size and are often praised for doing so and worried over when they do not. Thus at the outset they learn the term for the extreme that is their goal, and then come to use it to stand for the whole dimension.⁷ (This would explain why "old" is unmarked even though youth is so much admired and valued. The post-adolescent youth that is valued is many years older than the language-learning child.) When one uses an adjective that can

stand for one end of a dimension neutrally to name the dimension, one presents that end of the dimension as expected or standard. For example: "How cold is it?" vs. "How hot is it?"; "How hard is it?" vs. "How soft is it?". If one end of a dimension is a standard independently of a particular context, the term for that end would acquire a neutral use. If this explanation of the origin of unmarked adjectives is correct, the similarity of unmarked adjectives is no reason to suppose that the more positive evaluation of "he" is the *result* of its neutral use. It indicates, instead, that men's being more highly regarded than women promotes the neutral uses of male terms.

In any case, the higher positive associations of adjectives with neutral uses do not affect evaluations in particular cases. Although "wide" has a higher positive association for people than "narrow," wider objects are not necessarily valued more than narrower objects. For example, pocket calculators are touted for their narrow dimensions (although in advertisements one is more likely to hear the term "slim" than "narrow"). And so there is no reason to suppose that using "he" and "man" as unmarked neutral terms affects evaluations of females in particular cases. If one is going to argue that such uses are not really neutral, one has to show something more about these terms—something other than that they have the properties of other unmarked terms.

VII

There are important differences between unmarked adjectives and words like "he" and "man." The neutral use of adjectives is quite unambiguous, restricted to contexts in which a quantity or amount of that dimension is the topic (i.e., three inches *high*, 99 & 44/100% *pure*). The neutral uses of "he" and "man" have no restricted contexts to disambiguate them. Moreover, uses of these terms are frequently in need of disambiguation. We might be inclined to say that "man" in "The Neanderthal man was a hunter" was being used neutrally to mean "human." But this sentence could be used to describe just males. One might say, "The Neanderthal man was a hunter. The Neanderthal woman raised crops." In this context "man" is clearly intended to mean "male human." In an example from an introductory philosophy text, an apparently neutral use of "he" turns

out to be intentionally gender-specific. This ambiguity is resolved only by the last word:

Consider, firstly, two comparatively simple situations in which a cyberneticist might find himself. He has a servomechanism, or a computing machine, with no randomising element, and he also has a wife.⁸

Although "he" and "man" behave like unmarked adjectives in some respects, their double roles as both gender-specific and gender-neutral terms permit ambiguity in ways that the double roles of unmarked adjectives do not.

The ambiguity in the beginning of these examples allows an intended gender-specific "he" or "man" to be interpreted as a neutral term so that a context may be inadvertently applied to women. And ambiguity may also allow an intended neutral "he" to be interpreted as a gender-specific term so that the context is accidentally not applied to women. But if this is so, the culprit is ambiguity, which could be resolved without forsaking the neutral uses of male terms. Add that you are an equal-opportunity employer and there should be no gender-specific interpretation of "man" in "the best man for the job." One need not eliminate the neutral use of "he" and "man" in order to eliminate ambiguity. There will be other ways of resolving the ambiguity besides using other neutral terms that are not ambiguous.

VIII

Here's the problem: However the use of a term gets started, it would seem that if it was intended a certain way when used, and understood that way by others, then, on any available theory of meaning, that's what it means. If "man" or "he" are intended neutrally, as they often are, and if people know that, as they do, then it would seem that "man" and "he" do refer to the members of the human species, and that they are as neutral as "human" and "they."

In order to show that "man" and "he" and like terms are not really neutral, I have to show that even though speakers may intend to use these terms in a gender-neutral way, they can fail to do so.

Let's compare "he" and "man" with other terms whose gen-

der neutrality is not in dispute, such as "one," "they," "human," and "person." One striking difference is the inability to use "he" and "man" to refer to a female human. It would be a rare person who could say without irony "She's the best *man* for the job" or say of a female, "He's the best." Yet the undisputed gender-neutral terms can indeed be used this way: "She's the best person"; "That one is the best" (of a female). If "he" and "man" are genuinely gender-neutral, then they ought to be applicable to any person regardless of gender.

One might argue that one does not say "he's the best" of a female for the same reason one does not merely say "I believe" when one knows. On Grice's account of the latter, it is not that believing *implies* not knowing, but that one does not usually convey less information than one can.⁹ Therefore if one says one believes, people may assume one does not actually know. Similarly, one might argue, if it is clear in some context that the gender of a referent is known to the speaker, then the speaker is expected to specify that gender. It is not that uses of "he" and "man" *imply* that the referent is male, but simply that one does not convey less information than one can. If one uses "he" or "man," people may assume that either a male is being referred to or that the gender is not known.

This explanation, however, does not account for all the facts. It offers no explanation for why "She's the best man" is not permissible since gender *has* been specified. Moreover, it would predict that undisputed neutral terms could not be used if the gender were known. If the problem were only that speakers are expected to specify gender when known, the sentence "That's the best person" would be as inappropriate to say of either a male or a female as "That's the best man" is to say of a female.

On some theories of meaning, the meaning of a term is a function of its use. I have already pointed out that "he" and "man" do not have the same uses as undisputed gender-neutral terms. Recent theories of meaning have analyzed meaning as a function of the intentions of the speaker. Yet failures of gender-neutrality of "he" and "man" occur even though the speaker may intend a gender-neutral use. For example, Bertrand Russell in his classic paper "On Denoting" says:

Suppose now we wish to interpret the proposition, "I met a man." If this is true, I met some definite man; but that is not what I affirm. What I affirm is, according to the theory I advocate:—"I met *x*, and *x* is human' is not always false."¹⁰

If Russell were correct, then parents familiar with his theory would have no cause for anxiety if their young female child, on arriving home several hours late from kindergarten, said, "I met a man." Russell did not notice that "man" is not used neutrally in his context. This example shows that it is not enough that one *intend* a term to have a particular meaning for it to have that meaning. One cannot account entirely for the meaning of a term by the intentions of the speaker on a particular occasion. The meaning of a term involves, among other things, its expected interpretation, the way it functions with other terms, and its use in linguistic enterprises such as reasoning. This is important for the next point.

"He" and "man" cannot be used in some contexts where undisputedly gender-neutral terms can. But what about other contexts? Suppose it can be shown that a familiar and paradigmatic example of a gender-neutral use of "man" or "men" is not really neutral at all? Then I think it can be argued that there is no real gender-neutral meaning of these terms. Consider the first line of the familiar syllogism:

All men are mortal.

Most people would agree that the occurrence of "men" is intended to be neutral; this is a statement about the whole human species. But if it is a neutral use, then this syllogism, that paradigm of valid syllogisms, is invalid, for the second line usually reads

Socrates is a man.

The occurrence of "man" in this sentence is *not* a neutral use. If it were a neutral use, then replacing "Socrates" with the name of a female human being or a child would not affect the syllogism. Yet the usual interpretation of

Sophia is a man.

makes it false, or insulting. It is not taken to mean that Sophia is a member of the human species.¹¹

Thus the reference from "All men are mortal" and "Socrates is a man" to "Socrates is mortal" is invalid if the occurrence of "men" is intended to be gender-neutral in the first premise. Instead of a paradigm of valid inference we would have an equivocation, because the meaning of the terms has changed. It would be just like the argument:

All banks are closed on Sunday.
 The Outer Banks are banks.
 Therefore, the Outer Banks are closed on Sunday.

That the occurrence of "men" in the first premise is believed to be gender-neutral, and that the syllogism is believed to be neither enthymematic nor invalid, is evidence either that we are confused about neutral uses or that we are confused about validity even in the simplest cases. There is further evidence that it is the former. Consider another example:

Man is a mammal.

This use of "man" is neutral if any use is. But if this is conjoined with the dictionary definition of "mammalia":

the highest class of Vertebrata comprising man and all other animals that nourish their young with milk, that have the skin usu. more or less covered with hair, that have mammary glands. . . .¹²

it should be legitimate to conclude:

Man has mammary glands.

But this conclusion is less acceptable than:

Humans have mammary glands.

because "man" does not function in the same gender-neutral way as "human" in this context. A statement that members of the human species have mammary glands is not peculiar, but a statement that males have mammary glands is. Although both men and women have mammary glands, only the mature glands of women are ordinarily likely to be topics of conversation. If "man" could be used gender-neutrally, its occurrence in a context that applies to both male and female humans, particularly to female humans, would be given a gender-neutral interpretation. Instead, its occurrence in such a context is plainly gender-specific.

Alleged neutral uses of "he" are not as frequently found in syllogisms. But *if* it sounds strange to ask an applicant about the interests of his husband or wife, to instruct a child on the cleaning of his vagina or penis, or to compliment a guest on his gown or tuxedo, then something is less than neutral about "he" and "his" as well. Note that there is no ambiguity about these uses. The contexts make it clear that "man" and "his" are

supposed to be understood to be gender-neutral, if possible. Other obvious failures of gender neutrality are:

Man has two sexes
Some men are female.

IX

There are undoubtedly many more contexts in which attempts to use terms such as "he" and "man" gender-neutrally produce false, funny, or insulting statements, even though the gender-neutrality was clearly intended. How can this obvious failure of gender-neutrality be accounted for when people think they are using "he," "man," etc. in a gender-neutral sense? Rather than attribute the failure to peculiar properties of each context in an ad hoc fashion, I believe it is the result of a broader linguistic phenomenon: Parasitic Reference. Tissues are called Kleenex; petroleum jelly, Vaseline; bleach, Clorox; etc. to the economic benefit of the specific brands referred to and to the economic detriment of those brands that are ignored by this terminology. The alleged gender-neutral uses of "he," "man," etc. are just further examples of this common phenomenon. A gender-specific term, one that refers to a high-status subset of the whole class, is used *in place of* a neutral generic term. Many of us who deplore the efforts of drug companies to get us to use the brand name rather than the generic name of a product have failed to recognize that the use of "he," "man," etc. in place of "they," "one," "person," or "human" is a similar phenomenon with similar effects. Manufacturers realize that someone sent to buy "the cheapest Clorox" is less likely to return with the equal-strength half-price store brand than someone sent to buy the cheapest bleach. And this is true even when the term "Clorox" is intended and understood to be synonymous with "bleach." The failure of "Clorox" to be brand-neutral and the failure of "he" and "man" to be gender-neutral appear to be instances of the same phenomenon.¹³

Regardless of the intentions of the speakers and hearers, and regardless of their beliefs about the meanings of the terms, if the terms refer parasitically, substitutivity can fail, inferences may not go through, and equivocations will be produced. This is true not merely for brand names but for other terms, such as "he" and "man," whose neutral performances have been advertised

by lexicographers but which break down easily even under normal speaking conditions. The existence of Parasitic Reference requires that theories of reference and meaning recognize that the functioning of terms in one context may be affected by their uses in other contexts that are not explicitly present.

NOTES

1. Many people believe this claim, but Robin Lakoff in "Language and Woman's Place," *Language in Society* 2 (1973): 45-80, supports it with an impressive number of gender asymmetries in language whose best explanation appears to be the superior position of one gender in the culture. See also Mary Ritchie Key, *Male/Female Language* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1975); and Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976).
2. Even if the gender-neutral uses of "he," etc., prevent people from considering women in those contexts, there are some contexts where one does not want to be considered (for example, as a murder suspect). So one has also to show that the disadvantages of not being considered for jobs, awards, and consultation outweigh the advantages of not being considered for criminal activities, punishment, and obligations. Women who oppose the Equal Rights Amendment seem to disagree with other women not on the actual unequal status of women but rather on whether the advantages of this status outweigh the disadvantages.
3. Although this terminology was originally applied to phonological distinctions (e.g., the third-person singular of regular verbs is *marked* with an "s"), it has been extended to the use I cite. See John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), p. 79.
4. Porter G. Perrin and Karl W. Dykema, in *Writer's Guide and Index to English*, 3d ed. (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1959), pp. 538-39, 551-52, say: "As we must often refer to nouns that name either or both male and female, the language has developed . . . ways of making up for the lack of an accurate pronoun: The usual way is to use *he* or *his* alone even when some of the persons are female. . . . Sometimes when the typical individuals or the majority of the group referred to would be women, *her* is used in in the same way."
5. According to Lyons, *Theoretical Linguistics*, p. 467.
6. Evidence for this is to be found in C. E. Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, *The Measurement of Meaning* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1957), especially pp. 36-62. Unmarked

terms tend to be scored more positively by subjects on the semantic differential evaluative scale. But this is not always the case. It is worth remarking that "feminine" receives a higher positive evaluation than "masculine."

7. Eve V. Clark in "What's in a Word? On the Child's Acquisition of Semantics in his First Language," in *Cognitive Development and the Acquisition of Language*, ed. T. E. Moore (New York: Academic Press, 1973), pp. 65–110, points out that children learn to use the unmarked term of a pair before they learn the marked term.
8. L. Jonathan Cohen, "Can There Be Artificial Minds?" in *Reason and Responsibility*, 2d ed., ed. Joel Feinberg (Encino, Calif.: Dickenson Publishing Co., 1971), p. 288.
9. H. Paul Grice, "Logic and Conversation," in *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Cole and Jerry L. Morgan (New York: Academic Press, 1975).
10. Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," *Mind* 13 (1905): 479.
11. Let me add two explanations here. (1) The meaning of a term is not determined by the interpretation of one person alone. How others will understand it must be considered as well. Although some people might argue that in this context the syllogism "Sophia is a man" can be read as "Sophia is a human being," they will recognize that many other people will not take it this way (this is due in part to our inability to use "man" to refer to a female in other contexts). Although *some* people might be able to read "man" neutrally in this context, it does not follow that this is what it means. Further examples where "man" and "his" fail to be gender-neutral are offered to convince those who can make a gender-neutral reading in one case. (2) It might be argued that I have changed the meaning of "man" in the syllogism by substituting "Sophia" for "Socrates." The original syllogism might have had a neutral occurrence of "man" which changed with the substitution. For example, if I substituted "The Outer Banks" for "Savings and loan institutions" in "_____ are banks," I would change the meaning of "banks." However, if "man" has a gender-neutral use, it should retain that use regardless of the gender of the referent. There is no reason to claim that it has a gender-neutral meaning unless it has a use that can be applicable to females as well as males. Gender-neutral terms such as "human" and "person" are not affected by the substitution of a female name in their context.
12. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*.
13. Elizabeth Lane Beardsley, in "Referential Genderization," *Philosophical Forum* 5 (1973–74): 285–93, calls this phenomenon "linguistic imperialism."