HE, SHE, OR WHAT?

Common Gender and The Pronoun Problem

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What is the pronoun problem? It is a deficiency in the English language: the lack of a third person singular pronoun to refer to words like "one," "person," "student," "artist," or "professor"--words denoting individuals of either or both genders. The pronoun problem is that our language itself insists that we always categorize a human being as a he or a she, even when we deliberately mean not to.

The traditional cure for this problem has been to dictate use of the masculine pronoun--he, his, him--to refer not only to male antecedents but to any word signifying a person of either sex. In such cases, we have been told, the male pronoun automatically loses its sex-specific meaning and becomes comprehensive; it magically turns into generic or "prescriptive" he. Thus, in a directive from the 1973 edition of The Little English Handbook, E.P.J. Corbett declares:

> When a noun could be either masculine or feminine... settle for one gender in the pronoun, with the implication that the other sex is included in the reference if applicable:
>
> ex. The student should bring his schedule cards to the bursar's office.[1]

Having been imposed with all the coercive power at the disposal of English teachers for generations, this cure of prescriptive he yields examples of "correct" usage like the following exerpts from recent essays by first year women students at Scripps College:

> My mother is an alcoholic. Noone who hasn't lived through it can possibly know the pain involved in watching a loved one destroy his life. The will to seek help must come from the alcoholic himself.
>
> or
>
> While the photographer always requires a subject on which to base his work, the artist does not.

As a result of experimental data produced by psychologists and linguists during the middle 1970's,[2] the confusion of meaning and the damage to women's self-image manifested in these writing examples was finally acknowledged by authors of grammar texts. The cure of generic he was recognized as iatrogenic--itself the cause of further maladies. And the harmful prescription was recalled--often somewhat reluctantly. In my class's 1980 edition of The Little English Handbook, for example, the corrected sentence of the earlier edition--the one about the student bringing his cards to the bursar--has itself become the illustration of faulty or "inappropriate" agreement between pronoun and antecedent. The author, Corbett, appends this explanation:

> In recent years...the use of generic he...to refer to singular nouns that could be either masculine or feminine has been considered an example of the sexist bias of the English language. Many writers today are making a genuine effort to avoid offending readers with any kind of sexist language.[3]

At this point in time, then, the English teacher is back to the original problem: how does she or he tell his or her students to refer to an unsexed antecedent? Following recommendations offered, among others, by Casey Miller and Kate Swift,[4]

the new handbooks offer a range of alternatives: 1) Stick to the plural: say, "Students should bring their cards." 2) Adopt informal usage patterns: say, "Everyone should bring their cards." 3) Use combined forms like he or she s/he, or her or his 4) Avoid pronouns altogether: say, "A student should bring a schedule card..." 5) Alter the mood or the person of the discourse: say, "Bring your schedule cards..."

Eliminating prescriptive he and selecting from these alternatives has become the official policy of numerous publishers and of the American Psychological Association. Many people seem to feel comfortable using this range and believe the pronoun problem is essentially solved.

Others do not. Why? First of all, hunting among alternatives consumes a great deal of attention and time. Because of the multitude of variables involved, applying this solution to any specific situation eludes patterning, refuses to become habit. No matter how much practice you get, finding the right substitute still requires fruitless deliberation. One writer reported that eliminating prescriptive he from a manuscript occupied one third of the total time he devoted to producing his book. And this continual need to make choices also interferes with speech. In the midst of a sentence, I have to stop and switch gears from singular to plural, or I have to consider whether I've use up my quota of hises and hers, or I find myself in a prescriptive cul-de-sac and have to backtrack.

Use of the range of alternatives for prescriptive he is even harder to teach. It's tricky for students to learn, it's a braindrain when correcting papers, and

it's impossible to find agreement about what agrees with what, among different authorities. For instance, Elisabeth MacMahan (1977) assures us that "We may now write in standard usage: 'Everyone should wear their crash helmets,'" while Penelope Choy (1980) warns us not to say, "Everyone did as they pleased." Some teachers swear by s/he; others say, "the slant has no place in good English."[5]

Finally, the situation frequently arises when not one of this panoply of options will do. In the preface to Passing On Sociology (1982), Charles Goldsmid and Everett Wilson warn that, while they have avoided prescriptive he by using feminine pronouns for instructors and masculine pronouns for students, they have thereby unintentionally fallen into gender stereotyping of primary and secondary school teachers.[6] And here is another example of no way out--this time a passage from Malcom Cowley's The View from Eighty (1981) included in my Freshman Composition anthology:

> Even before he or she is 80, the aging person may undergo another identity crisis like that of adolescence. Perhaps there had also been a middle-aged crisis, the male or female menopause, but for the rest of adult life, he had taken himself for granted, with his capabilities and failings. Now when he looks in the mirror, he asks himself, "Is this really me?"--or he avoids the mirror out of distress at what it reveals, those bags and wrinkles.[7]

Certainly an able enough writer and, at this stage of his life, no longer interested in male supremacy, Cowley searches for a way to make his meaning apply equally to men and women. But he finds none that will sustain him through the passage, and eventually slips back into the old ways. The language itself continues to defeat the author's purpose.

Is it any wonder, then, that a writer like Mina Schaughnessy, in the preface to her 1977 book, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing should throw down her pen and capitulate:

> After having tried various ways of circumventing the use of masculine pronouns in situations where women teachers and students might easily outnumber men, I have settled for the convention (of prescriptive he) but I regret that the language resists my meaning in this important respect. When the reader sees he, I can only hope she will also be there.[8]

And is it any wonder that, after acknowledging the rankling nature of this use of the masculine pronoun, William Zinsser, author of On Writing Well (1980), should go on to proclaim: "Let's face it, the English Language is stuck with the generic he."[9]

I agree; despite its perniciousness, prescriptive "he" is here to stay...until we introduce a substitute rather than resorting to evasions. The set of alternatives we now replace it with is inadequate to fill the hole that exists in the language. These evasions provide only what Frederick Crews, author of The Random House Handbook, calls a "cautious, imperfect strategy, a holding action until some new consensus about common gender is reached."[10]

Crews' widely accepted, somewhat messianic, prophecy is at once encouraging and disheartening. It assures us that the field is open and promises that a change is waiting in the wings. But it fails to specify what the change might be, and it advises us to remain, like the author himself, detached and casual until the miracle occurs and the dust clears.

If the official arbiters of English usage are not themselves in active pursuit of the solution, then who will find it? To my knowledge, only a small number of psychologists and linguists are now working systematically to go beyond our present "imperfect strategy." They are devising and testing new coinages or "neologisms" to serve as a third person singular pronoun of common gender.[12] But the preliminary work they have done in this area has been received by the language establishment with the Galileo treatment: it is regarded as taboo or heresy. Corbett makes no mention of a common gender pronoun; Crews passes the whole endeavor off with a pessimistic shrug; and Zinsser reacts to the idea with vituperative sarcasm:

> The pedants of course, have other solutions. (The pedants like the poor will always be with us.) One of their typical candidates is "thon," a third person pronoun that applies to either gender...Maybe I don't speak for the average American, but I very much doubt that thon wants that word in thons language or that thon would use it thonself.[13]

Zinsser's deliberately unfortunate example of a possible new coinage--"thon"--probably offends most of us, but I wonder if it sounds any more bizarre than terms like Ms. or Black people when they were first introduced. At any rate let us compare this presumably ridiculous formulation with the three most popular alternatives now available:

1) Maybe I don't speak for the average American, but I doubt very much that he or she wants that word in his or her language or that he or she would use it him or herself.

This I find intolerably clumsy.

2) Maybe I don't speak for average Americans, but I doubt very much that they want that word in their language or that they would use it themselves.

This sounds better, but it is still awkward; and worse, it loses the idea of a single person's preference and choice--the very point of the original sentence.

3) Maybe I don't speak for the average American, but I doubt very much that he wants that word in his language or that he would use it himself.

This reversion to prescriptive "he" may sound best to some listeners--the original writer included--but what I hear is both sexist and ungrammatical. In this form, the sentence excludes women from the class of language users and from the class of average Americans. It also violates the principle of agreement in gender between pronoun and antecedent.

Having weighed these possibilities, let me propose yet another formulation, this time using a different common gender pronoun:

4) Maybe I don't speak for the average American, but I very much doubt that ti wants that word in ter language or that ti would use it temself.

I would argue that this coinage--nominative, ti, possessive, ter, objective, tem--has a number of advantages over the previous three versions and that it is preferable to "thon." Though clearly distinct from he and from she, ti (spelled "it" backwards) is close enough not to jar our ears. The possessive and objective forms of this common gender pronoun--already used by some writers in the past--parallel the declensions of he and she and incorporate sound elements of both.[14] Like he, his, him and she, her, her, ti, ter, tem, blend easily with surrounding sounds because their consonants can be either voiced or unvoiced and their vowels can be either stressed or unstressed.

Testing this coinage once again, let me place it in a slightly different version of the original sentence:

5) As to the average American, I don't yet know if ti wants that word in ter language, or if ti would use it temself.

Finally, let me try out this new coinage with the sentence in which Mina

Shaughnessy succumbed to prescriptive he. Here is the original:

> 6) This book...is certain to prepare the inexperienced teacher for some of the difficulties he is likely to encounter and even provide him with a better inventory of necessary supplies than he is likely to draw up on his own.[15]

Rather than settling for this, would it not be preferable to venture in a new direction:

> 7) This book...is certain to prepare the inexperienced teacher for some of the difficulties ti is likely to encounter, and even provide tem with a better inventory of necessary supplies than ti is likely to draw up on ter own.

Of course, the option of these two wordings doesn't encompass all of our present choices. Shaughnessy might have found another way around prescriptive he, and someone will soon find a better coinage than ti, ter, tem. My real point in proposing this neologism is that we need not remain stalled at our present impasse. What I want to show is that the pronoun problem creates a barrier to the natural evolution of our language and of our psychology of gender that we can and should overcome.

Our identity as teachers of writing and as humanists is substantially grounded in love and concern for the English language as an instrument to generate, refine and conduct meaning. Indeed, it is this love and sense of custodianship that places us in the painful position of prescribing usage in the first place. I think we betray our commitments to English by continuing to accept the present situation--a situation in which the deprivation of a single word constantly makes our language inaccurate, clumsy, and, in Shaughnessy's telling phrase, resistant to our meaning.

I cannot believe that the technical difficulties of finding a new pronoun of common gender are so intractable that they would not yield to a concerted

assault. Up until now, with the exception of very few individuals, our profession has hesitated to mount any such attack.[16] Personally, I think it is time to get moving.

NOTES

1. Edward P.J. Corbett, The Little English Handbook (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), pp. 14-15.

2. see B. Thorne and N. Henley (eds.) Language and Sex: Difference and Dominance (Rowley Mass.: Newbury House, 1975) and C. Miller and K. Swift, Words and Women (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1976).

3. Edward P.J. Corbett, The Little English Handbook Third Edition (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1980), p. 23.

4. The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing (New York: Lippincott and Cowell, 1980), pp. 35-47.

5. Elizabeth McMahan, A Crash Course in Composition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1977) p. 118. Penelope Choy, Basic Usage and Grammar (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Jovanovitch, 1980) p. 86. William Zinsser, On Writing Well, (New York: Harper and Row, 1980) p.111.

6. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1980), p. vii.

7. X. J. Kennedy and Dorothy M. Kennedy, The Bedford Reader (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) p. 106.

8. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 4.

9. pp. 110-111.

10. (New York: Random House, 1977) p. 113.

11. This hesitancy to actively promote the adoption of a new pronoun is hsared even by strong proponents of language reform like Casey Miller and Kate Swift. They end their discussion of the Pronoun Problem in The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing with a presentation of the arguments for a neologism, but instead of endorsing these arguments, attribute them to "proponents of this plan." (p. 47).

12. see Nancy M. Henley, "This New Species that seeks a New Language: On Sexism in Language and Language Change" in Joyce Penfield, ed. Language and the Sexes.
W. Martyna, "Beyond the He/Man Approach: The case for Linguistic Change" Signs, 1980, 5, 482-493. MacKay, D.G. "Prescriptive Grammar and the Pronoun Problem," American Psychologist, 1980, 35, 444-449; "On the Goals, Principles and Procedures for Prescriptive Grammar." Language in Society, 1980, 9, 349-367.

13. p. 111.

14. tey, ter, tem was used as an experimental substitute for prescriptive he by the student newspaper of the University of Tennessee in 1973, and by the authors of an important paper in social psychology. See Spence, J.T. and Helmreich, R.L., "Who Likes Competent Women: Competence, Sex Role Congruence of Interests and Subjects' Attitudes toward Women as Determinants of Interpersonal Attraction." Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 1972, 2, 197-213.

15. p. 4.

16. Out of the 718 panel discussions planned for the upcoming MLA convention in Los Angeles, not a single one deals with the pronoun problem.

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