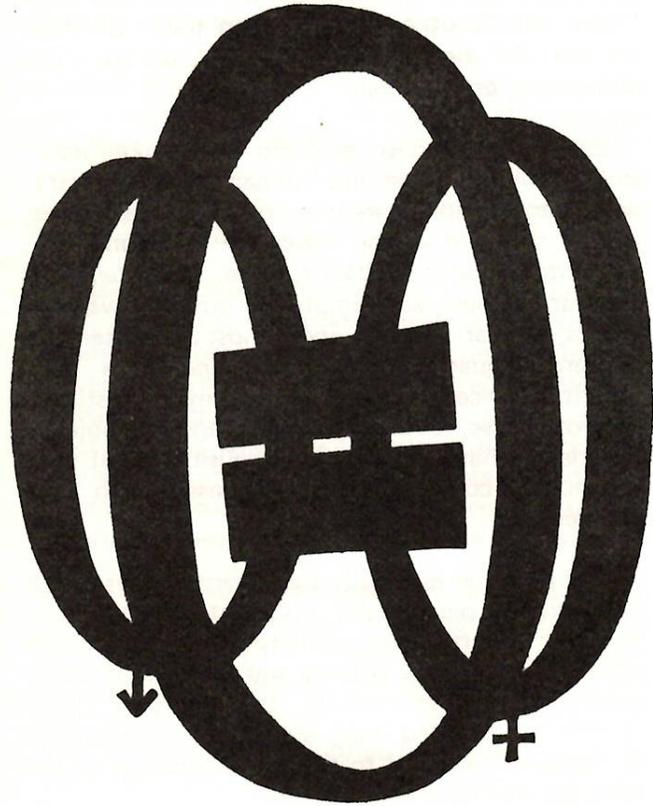


humanizing english



By MARY OROVAN

"The limits of my language are the limits of my thought"

Benjamin Lee Whorf

What the women's liberation movement is striving for is "humanness" for everyone, female and male. But this kind of evolution is impossible with the English language as it exists today.

When we use grandiose phrases such as, *the brotherhood of man*, do we mean that only "men" are "brothers", or women too? Or when we say, *All men are created equal*, do we mean all humans, or only men?

Even if we manage to avoid words like "man" and "mankind" and use human and humanity; or citizen, person, parent or other neutral words, we are still tied to the masculine pronoun *As a citizen, he is entitled to vote*. Using *he/she* is awkward at best, and simply left out of newspaper stories, scholarly papers and almost all written and spoken language. The word, *one*, is a poor substitute since it is considered formal and stilted, and, of course, *it* refers only to inanimate objects. We clearly have no way in English to deal with the human concept that encompasses both male and female.

This becomes especially significant in laws which deal with a person and *his* rights, with several Supreme Court cases actually trying to decide whether women are citizens and persons (in other words, he's). Incidentally, the Supreme Court to date has defined men, aliens and corporations as "persons" entitled to the full protection of the laws, but not American women.

More subtle, but probably equally devastating, is a school girl's reaction to continually hearing about *man* and *his* universe, and wondering if *she* has a place in it. Or in a class of 20 girls and 3 boys, being told that everyone will take *his* book home, or hearing the masculine pronoun automatically attached to all the top professions *a doctor sees his patients in his office*.

Use "They"—Use "She"

When we get abortion law repeal, everyone will be able to decide for himself whether or not to have an abortion - Albert Bleumenthal, N.Y. State Assemblyman

The examples are endless . . . but there are some ways people of good will can immediately avoid using *he* in neutral situations. The simplest is to make all generalized statements plural.

For example, in a children's book describing what doctors do, instead of saying, a doctor sees *his* patients in *his* office; change it to, doctors see *their* patients in *their* office.

Or a sentence such as, *Man* has always had *his* dreams, can be stated much more clearly as, *Humans* have always had *their* dreams.

Using *they* instead of *he* applies equally well to indefinite pronouns (anyone, someone, everyone, everybody, etc.). For instance, everyone must think for *themselves*.

This suggestion runs contrary to the prescriptive grammarians of the last century whose ideas are in disrepute today, but whose teachings are still rampant in elementary grammar texts. Their "rule" was: indefinite pronouns are singular, and agreement is always masculine unless everyone referred to is female. Quite a pronouncement.

Modern linguists now agree that there is no such thing as a "rule" in grammar: grammar was not handed down on the mount like the law to Moses. Instead, grammatical patterns change as the rationale for their evolution becomes clear.

It is perfectly logical for teachers of co-educational classes to say: everyone please take *their* book home tonight. The concept is plural, and more important, *their* doesn't discriminate against the women in class.

Teachers, writers and editors can begin to change new elementary texts, and in the meantime all of us can overrule inappropriate "rules".

Another way *he* can be avoided is simply to use *she*. At present, all animals on Sesame Street are always he's, unless they are "momas" or do something stereotypically female. This male oligarchy can be broken by using a neutral pronoun, or by sometimes using *she*. *She* can describe a bird soaring in the sky, a race horse—and, yes, a person, such as a scientist. But please no more she-nurses and he-doctors.

One fast word about using *she* for cars, boats and other objects. Suffice it to say that in general when something is tamed, conquered, used, the pronoun is you-know-what. Editors should begin to become sensitive to stereotypic male biases in metaphor.

Even women professionals when referring to their craft often use *he*: "A critic must be careful he doesn't . . ." Emily Genauer. Again despite old-fashioned grammatical proscriptions, female writers should feel free to use *she* or a neutral pronoun and insist it not be changed.

A New Neutral Pronoun

But is this enough? Some of us in the movement feel that there is much validity in adding a brand new pronoun.

The neutral pronoun I propose to concerned humanists is *E* for he/she, *e* for his/her and *e's* for his/hers.

<u>OLD FORM</u>		<u>NEW FORM</u>
he/she	becomes	E
him/her	becomes	e or em
his/hers	becomes	e's
himself/herself	becomes	eself

Example:

As a lawyer, *he* often argues *his* case in court.

As a lawyer, *E* often argues *e's* case in court.

E has great potential because the s and h are simply dropped from she and he, and we are left with E. Also, *E* corresponds very nicely to the English, *I*, a single capitalized letter.

Admittedly, it may be difficult to quickly incorporate *E* into the language. But it could be

done by at first using E in feminist writings, then in new children's books and, as soon as possible, in the popular media. Because the need for a standard neutral pronoun is so great—and pressure for it is increasing every day through consciousness-raising of the public—it could be that *E* could catch on as quickly as the word TV, for instance.

It is also possible that *they* could become the standard neutral pronoun—much as *you* is both singular and plural, and non-sexist. It is interesting to note here that *thou* evolved to *you* (singular) also largely because of changing concepts of "class". *They* as a universal neutral pronoun—singular and plural—is a distinct possibility.

Most people on whom *they*, *one* or *E* have been tested seem to prefer *E*, even though it is currently the least familiar. However, the important thing is not which pronoun ultimately evolves into the language, but that we begin to provide immediate viable alternatives to *he*.

Basically what we are saying is that the movement is already creating a need for neutral pronouns, and that in turn the pronouns will help the movement. The processes are intertwined and grow on each other. If we can encourage enough people to accept the words, we almost automatically encourage them to accept the concepts behind them. Or if a person has internalized the concepts, *E* will eventually have to use the words to express them.

We also realize that pronouns are root words—among the first words a child learns—and that it may take some effort to evolve new pronouns into the language. However, it is precisely because they are root words that they are so important. The next generation of children must learn early that they live not in a "he-man" world, but in a human one.

Words Shape Social Change

There are a few premises in current linguistic thinking that are relevant to the proposed pronoun additions. First most linguists agree that language is a constantly changing symbolism and that dictionaries are simply reports of current usage.

More important, linguists Sapir and Whorf postulate that our thoughts are limited by the vocabulary and syntax patterns available in our language; *that we literally can't think thoughts unless we have the words to express them*. For instance, many women in the past felt the injustices of the male-female class system, but were almost unable to communicate it to others, and even to themselves, until the words *male chauvinism* and *sexism* were born.

At the same time, words are a reflection of cultural attitudes and as such tend to "freeze" thinking patterns. However, all linguists agree that new ideas, and changes in customs are constantly creating words, and probably most important, that these new words *themselves* often spur, shape or solidify social change.

Just think of what happened to the *Negro* revolution when it became the *Black* revolution! Or how clever it was to turn around a whole raft of racial slurs by saying *Black is Beautiful*.

Every major advance in science and human relations has created a new vocabulary; we are on the brink of just such a verbal evolution, not only with additional pronouns, but in all aspects of Feminist analysis.

Making Man Human

Man is defined as a human being and woman is defined as female. Whenever she tries to behave as a human being she is accused of trying to emulate the male - Simone de Beauvoir

In the male-centered, patriarchal Indo-European cultures, it is not surprising that the word *man* is a synonym for *human*. Of course, this is completely inequitable and inaccurate— in spite of unconscious or conscious efforts to keep her invisible, woman is half the human race.

Anthropology is not the study of man, but the study of human; history is not the story of mankind, but the story of humanity; the photo exhibit of the 50's should not have been called the Family of Man, but the Family of Human.

There is no logical or scientific reason that the word human and its derivatives (humanity, human-kind, human being) cannot be substituted immediately in every context where man (meaning man and woman) is used. Once your ears become accustomed to hearing human (even without the article "the"), once your consciousness is raised, phrases like *man and his God*, or *man and his universe* becomes as insulting and arrogant as any racist remark!

Perhaps the worst aspect of using man instead of human or person is that it keeps woman in a separate category, making her inclusion in the human race indefinite or arbitrary, and often implying that males have had all the thoughts and accomplished all the deeds that shaped the world.

A chapter heading in a children's book which states, *Prehistoric man invents agriculture* is only one of thousands of similarly inaccurate statements. We don't know who invented agriculture, it could easily have been woman, and even more likely a combination of males and females.

Sometimes, these "man-made" pronouncements are entirely unclear, as in *man is a warlike animal*— does the author mean that males in our society are warlike, or that all humans are? And occasionally the use of man is unintentionally funny . . . *man, like the other mammals, breast-feeds his young*. Whether it's merely ambiguous or patently insulting, using man instead of human is always distorted and damaging! The insidious thing is that woman can be included in man, or not, at the whim of the writer—or reader. Usually she merely remains invisible; out of sight, out of consciousness.

The word substitution should be relatively easy for all of us to make because *human* already has a more desirable connotation than *man*. To be a human person means a more generous, peaceful and loving person than to be a "manly" person—which implies certain rigid, unemotional and martial traits. It is perfectly logical to say, *war is inhuman*, but almost a contradiction in terms to say, *war is unmanly*.

It may seem at first to non-feminists that this is stretching a point; but in my opinion, the distinction between man and human contains within it the seeds of almost everything we are striving for. Since sexism is probably the prototype of prejudice, only when man on earth becomes human will we have a chance for a humane, peaceful world.

Making man human, that's what the women's liberation movement is about. That's what every liberation movement is about.

1972

Notes on Neutral Pronoun

When this paper was first published in early 1970, I suggested co (from an old Indo-European root) as a possible neutral pronoun. It was adopted in about 1972 at Twin Oaks, VA and at other Skinnerian communes. Co appears in all their publications, and is used verbally as well.

As for the rest of the nation, what has been occurring in my observation is a gradual increase in the use of "they" for the generalized usage. This is especially true with indefinite pronouns... "each listener has their own program to consult" .

While there is still some discomfort with this...and elementary grammar books have not changed yet, "they" with indefinite pronouns is beginning to sound normal, and I believe it will evolve into accepted general usage.

In addition, many book publishers, etc., are making concerted efforts to "humanize English". They are changing singular sentences to plural ones to avoid the use of "he"--and they are using "human" instead of "man" more frequently.

1978