

CHAPTER 3

CHOOSING AND USING GENDERED LANGUAGE



CASE STUDY

“Cis Who? LGBTQIA+ What?”

Prior to 2014, Facebook users could identify their sex/gender with two options only: male and female. But early in 2014, Facebook published over 50 terms as user options for identifying sex/gender online (Goldman, 2014; Steinmetz, 2014). You may have seen some of this language, whether or not you’re a Facebook user. Some of the more prominent terms include *cis/cisgender* (more specifically, *cis female/male* and *cis man/woman*) and *transgender* (with variations like *trans woman/trans man*).

You’ve probably heard the term *transgender* and may remember our discussion of this form of gender in both Chapters 1 and 2, but perhaps *cis* is new to you. According to the Basic Rights Oregon organization, *cis* derives from the Latin meaning of “on this side of” and describes “people who, for the most part, identify as the gender they were assigned at birth. In other words, ‘cisgender’ is used to describe people who are not transgender” (Trans 101: Cisgender, 2014).

In 2013, self-described social justice comedian Sam Killerman published a handbook of gender terminology, with an extensive glossary of more terms than likely any of us have ever heard. Killerman explains that *cis* is a more politically sensitive replacement term for *normal*, because who gets to say what’s “normal” anymore?

HOT TOPICS

- ✦ The power of choosing and using language
- ✦ Nonsexist (gender-fair) language and the interrelationship between language and thought
- ✦ Reasons for using nonsexist language
- ✦ Forms of sexist language, such as man-linked terms and generic pronouns
- ✦ Sexual language and what it communicates about people
- ✦ Linguistic practices that reflect bias, such as married names and titles
- ✦ Vocal properties and linguistic constructions that communicate tentativeness
- ✦ How people manage conversation

Another term and categorization of gender is *asexual*, an identifier for people who aren't sexually attracted to either women or men (Decker, 2014). These individuals may engage in sexual activity and have meaningful relationships in their lives, but according to the Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), an asexual person "does not experience sexual attraction" (Asexual Visibility and Education Network, 2015). Don't confuse asexuality with agender, defined as a people who don't necessarily see themselves as lacking a gender, but they don't view gender as a central or defining part of their identity as people (Killerman, 2013). In addition, the term *bisexual* has given way to the more all-encompassing term *bigender*, which takes the emphasis off of the sexual nature of the identity. The term *queer* has been reclaimed by some people as an umbrella term for anything "non-straight," but because of its history as a derogatory term, not everyone uses it or responds to its use positively (Killerman, 2013).

Confused? Overwhelmed? Ready to throw your hands up and retreat to the past? We understand those emotions. But at least now you can consider yourself current when you see a designation like "LGBTQIA+" (St. James, 2015). (Although to some, the "Q" stands for *questioning* rather than *queer*, as in people who are questioning or in the process of better understanding their identity.) Just how well you understand and embrace the extensive terminology associated with identity is up to you, but here's something to think about: Before all these terms surfaced (with no doubt more terms to surface in coming years), people who felt "different" or "not normal" had no language to describe their sense of difference or being "other." Without language for even the most basic aspects of identity, many people retreat inward and feel invisible, which typically leads to a pretty miserable life. You might *be* one of these people, so perhaps all of this new language gives you optimism that the world is becoming less dichotomous, less black and white and more shades of gray, less male and female and more about celebrating human uniqueness.

Language is an evolving entity; the plus sign at the end of LGBTQIA+ indicates that additional language will no doubt emerge over time. We can either be rigid and irritated by changing language, or become educated and make conscious choices about the language we and others choose to use.

Have you ever thought about language—how yours originated and how it has changed and evolved over time? Why are some people so protective of language and resistant to attempts to update it, as though the words they used were a central part of their identities? Sometimes it seems we hold onto language like we hold onto old, worn-out luggage.

This chapter offers an in-depth examination of language because *the language we choose to use reveals to others who we are*. One linguist put it this way: “What we say *is* who we are” (Penelope, 1990, p. 202). Communication scholars Taylor, Hardman, and Wright (2013) suggest, “All that is human is mediated through language.” In this chapter, we put language under a microscope because, as much as some people discount its importance, the language you choose to use is your primary tool of communication, your primary method of communicating who you are to others and of becoming known by them (McConnell-Ginet, 2011). That puts language at the center of what most of us find incredibly important.

CHOOSING YOUR LANGUAGE

The terms *choosing* and *using* in the chapter title refer to our view of using language by choice. Many people use language out of habit—they talk the way they’ve always talked, simply because they’ve always talked that way. These people rarely think about the influence of language on their view of self, their relationships, and their communication. After reading this chapter, maybe you won’t be one of these people.

This chapter scrutinizes language in order to examine its powerful influences on communication. We explore language in two ways, which also parallel our definition of gender communication: communication *about* and *between* women and men. We first focus on how language treats us, how it’s used to communicate *about* the sexes. The latter part of the chapter explores language from the *between* standpoint, how gender affects our choice of language as we communicate with others.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE? WHAT IS SEXIST LANGUAGE?

A *language* is a system of symbols (words or vocabulary) governed by rules (grammar) and patterns (syntax) common to a community of people



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We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives. —Toni Morrison, author

(Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2016). Graddol and Swann (1989) suggest that language is both personal and social, that it's a "vehicle of our internal thoughts" as well as a "public resource" (pp. 4–5). Our thoughts take form when they're translated into language, but sometimes language is inadequate to truly express thoughts and emotions. Have you ever seen or felt something that you just couldn't put into words?

Language has power because it allows us to make sense out of reality, but that power can also be constraining. If you don't have a word for something, can you think about it? Have you ever considered that maybe your thinking might be limited by your language? A whole host of "realities" may exist that you've never thought of because there are no words in your language to describe them.

Two researchers who investigated this notion were Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. They developed what has come to be called the *Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis*, which suggests an interrelationship between language and thought. Whorf (1956) hypothesized that "the forms of a person's thoughts are controlled by inexorable laws of pattern of which he [she] is unconscious" (p. 252). In this view, human thought is so rooted in language that language may actually control (or at least influence) what you can think about.

Remember...

Language: System of symbols (words or vocabulary) governed by rules (grammar) and patterns (syntax) common to a community of people

Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis: Supposition about the interrelationship between language and thought

Sexist Language: Verbal communication conveying differential attitudes or behaviors with regard to the sexes; language revealing that one sex is valued over others

Thus, language is a powerful tool in two ways: It affects how you think, shaping your reality; and it allows you to verbally communicate what you think and feel, to convey who you are to others. In the discussion of terminology in Chapter 1, we defined *sexism* as attitudes, behavior, or both that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of others. It follows, then, that *sexist language* is verbal communication that conveys those differential attitudes or behaviors. Not surprisingly, research documents a connection between people's attitudes toward the sexes and their language usage (Budziszewska, Hansen, & Bilewicz, 2014; Cralley & Ruscher, 2005; Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Formanowicz, Bedynska, Cislak, Braun, & Szczesny, 2013; Parks & Robertson, 2005, 2008).

Sexist language reflects women's traditional lower status and the male-dominated nature of U.S. society and other societies around the world (Teso & Crolley, 2013). Some

scholars contend that English and similar languages cause women to be a *muted group* (Ardener, 2005; Kramarae, 1981, 2005). Muted group theorist Cheri Kramarae (1981) explains:

Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men are to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and the norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. So women cannot as easily or as directly articulate their experiences as men can. Women's perceptions differ from those of men because women's subordination means they experience life differently. However, the words and norms for speaking are not generated from or fitted to women's experiences. Women are thus "muted." (p. 1)

The intent in this chapter is to explore the English language, wonderful and flawed as it is—not to blame anyone, not to suggest that people use language purposefully to oppress others, and not to make readers feel defensive about how they use language. We all inherited a male-dominated language, but it's not some mystical entity that can't be studied or changed. Language may control some people, but it need not control you. Think of language as something that has tremendous influence on us, but remember that we can *choose* how to use it and how to influence *it*.

WHY USE NONSEXIST (GENDER-FAIR) LANGUAGE?

Inventorying your language and making changes takes work, but the benefits you'll experience are considerable. Below are five reasons for incorporating nonsexist (sometimes called *gender-fair*) language into your communication repertoire.

Net Notes



We all could use a little vocabulary expansion—whether for speaking or writing. Here are some useful websites that focus on language:

<http://www.yourdictionary.com> This extensive website offers dictionaries in many languages, a thesaurus, word-of-the-day, a resource of quotations, and specialized dictionaries.

<http://www.vocabulary.com> This site combines dictionary definitions with an adaptive game to help users build their vocabularies.

<http://www.wordsmyth.net> This site provides website search features and options for kids and adult educators alike, like clues and tips for solving crossword puzzles.

<http://www.word-detective.com> This online version of a newspaper column addresses readers' questions about words and language.

<http://www.wordspy.com> This site is self-described as "the word lover's guide to new words."

<http://wordnik.com> This website provides "everything you want to know" about words, related words, nontraditional definitions, related images, statistics, and audio pronunciations.

<http://www.wordsmith.org> You can sign up for A.Word.A.Day on this site, which also offers anagramming and other tidbits of information about language.

<http://www.dictionary.com> If you seek a definition for a word, type the word in at this site and it will provide several definitions from multiple reputable dictionaries, so you can compare meanings. The site will also provide pronunciation tips and translate words, phrases, or an entire web page from one major European language (including English) into another.

Reason 1: Nonsexist Language Demonstrates Sensitivity

While you may believe that variations among people are worthy of respect, you may communicate in a manner that contradicts your belief—out of ignorance (you just didn't know any better), nonchalance (thinking that sexist communication is “no big deal”), or denial (thinking no one would dare deem you a sexist because of how you talk) (Mallett & Wagner, 2011). Maybe your language is just a habit you think is too hard to change. But if who you are is how you talk, it's time to make your language match your beliefs.

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“Homophobe. Bigot. Gay-basher. Ignorant frat boy. Fat Jewish pig.” I was called all these names when I foolishly used a gay slur in a misguided attempt to be funny. Do I believe what I was called to be true? Aside from the Jewish and fat part? No, absolutely not. But I learned a valuable lesson: A word can matter, whether it's said with malice or as a joke.
—Brett Ratner, film director

Reason 2: Nonsexist Language Reflects Nonsexist Attitudes

Even though we aren't sure about the exact relationship between language and thought, it's clear that a relationship exists. So if you communicate in a sexist manner—whether or not you're aware it's sexist and regardless of your intentions—it's possible you hold some sexist attitudes (Douglas & Sutton, 2014; Swim, Mallett, & Stangor, 2004). Someone could justifiably deem you a sexist, insensitive person just by your use of outdated, non-inclusive language. Coincidentally, someone could deem you a nonsexist, gender-fair person with gender equitable views because you use gender-fair language (Koeser, Kuhn, & Sczesny, 2015).

Reason 3: Nonsexist Language Is Basic to the Receiver Orientation to Communication

In Chapter 1 we described our preferred receiver orientation to communication. With regard for language, simply put, if a listener (receiver) perceives your language to be sexist, that's a legitimate judgment—one you need to think about. You may not mean anything sexist or demeaning in your message, but if your message is interpreted by a listener as sexist, you can't erase it. The communication is *out there*. Convincing a listener you meant otherwise takes a lot longer than if you'd applied a little forethought before speaking.

Reason 4: Nonsexist Language Is Contemporary

One set of goals within higher education is that students will be able to think, write, and converse in a manner befitting a highly educated person. Using outdated, sexist language undermines that goal. The roles people can fulfill in today's world have changed a great deal and are likely to keep changing, so language must evolve to reflect current society.

Reason 5: Nonsexist Language Strengthens Expression

Some students believe that nonsexist language “junks up” their speaking and writing with a bunch of extra words, just to include everybody—like it’s “PC run amok.” But once students learn and begin to practice simple methods of avoiding sexist, exclusive language, they readily admit it makes their communication more clear and dynamic.

SEXIST LANGUAGE: FORMS, PRACTICES, AND ALTERNATIVES

This section is divided into two main areas: *forms* of sexist language and sexist *practices* that involve language. The first area has to do with language that is sexist in and of itself. In the second area, it’s not the words themselves that are sexist but the traditions inherent in how we use language.

Forms of Sexist Language

MAN-MADE EVERYTHING Words or phrases that include *man*, as though these terms should operate as generics to stand for all persons, are referred to as man-linked terminology—a form of sexist language that has diminished but not disappeared (Miller, Swift, & Maggio, 1997; Steinem, 1995). Calling a group of people that includes both men and women (or just women) “guys” is probably the most common example of sexist man-linked terminology (Earp, 2012). The term *man* or its derivative *mankind* in reference to all persons creates ambiguity and confusion when one doesn’t know whether the term refers to a set of male persons or to all persons in general.

Originally, *man* was derived from a truly generic form, similar to the term *human*. Contrary to popular belief, the term *woman* didn’t derive from the



term *man*, nor did *female* derive from *male* (Hardman, 1999). The terms for female-men (*wifmann*) and male-men (*wermann*) developed when the culture decided it needed differentiating terms for the sexes (McConnell-Ginet, 1980). Maggio's (1988) dictionary of gender-free terminology provides Greek, Latin, and Old English terms for human, woman, and man. In Greek, the terms are *anthropos*, *gyne*, and *aner*; in Latin, *homo*, *femina*, and *vir*; and in Old English, *man*, *female*, and *wer* (pp. 176–177). *Wer* fell out of use, and *man* came to mean *men*. The problem is that *man* (as well as *guys*) should be a designation only for *male* persons, not *all* persons.

Even though the word *human* contains *man*, it's derived from the Latin *homo*, meaning all persons. The term *human* doesn't connote masculine-only imagery like the term *man* does (Graddol & Swann, 1989; Maggio, 1988). Man-linked terms include expressions such as *man the phones* or *manned space flight* as well as numerous words that have *man* attached to or embedded within them (e.g., *repairman*), which convert the term into a role, position, or action that an individual can assume or make (Palczewski, 1998). Unfortunately, people see the masculine part of the term and form perceptions that the word describes something masculine only.

Alternatives to *man* (e.g., *people*, *persons*, *individuals*), the simplest being *human* (and its derivatives *human being*, *humanity*, and *humankind*), have become more commonplace in everyday language usage. Many man-linked terms can be “nonsexed” by simply substituting *person* for the word *man*; *chairman* becomes *chairperson*, *spokesman* becomes *spokesperson*, and so forth. Other terms require more creativity, such as *postman* becoming *mail carrier*, *spaceman* becoming *astronaut*, etc.

ANTIMALE BIAS IN LANGUAGE Language scholar Eugene August (1992) describes three forms of antimale language in English: gender-exclusive language, gender-restrictive language, and language that evokes negative stereotypes of males. First, August explores the equating of *mother* and *parent*, suggesting that the terms are often used interchangeably, whereas the term *noncustodial parent* is almost always synonymous with *father*. He suggests that males are also excluded from terms describing victims, such as the expressions *wife abuse* and *innocent women and children*. This language implies that males can't be victims of violence, rape, and abuse. This is clearly not the case, and our language is beginning to reflect that fact. For example, *spousal abuse* or *partner abuse* is more often used today because it reflects the reality that either spouse or partner in a relationship could be the abused party.

August's second category, gender-restrictive language, refers to language that limits men to a social role. August's examples include language that strongly suggests to boys the role they're to play and chastises them if they stray from that role or don't perform as expected (e.g., *sissey*, *mama's boy*, *take it like a man*, and *impotent*). In the final category, August claims that "negative stereotyping is embedded in the language, sometimes it resides in people's assumptions about males . . ." (p. 137). As evidence of this tendency, August cites terms linked to crime and evil, such as *murderer*, *mugger*, *suspect*, and *rapist*—terms he contends evoke male stereotypes that are "insulting, dehumanizing, and potentially dangerous" (p. 132). In reference to the term *rape*, August discusses the fact that the majority of rapes are committed by males on female victims; however, the bias comes in with the assumption of a female victim, ignoring rapes perpetrated against males.

THE PERPETUAL PRONOUN PROBLEM Think about what you were taught regarding pronouns. If you were taught that the masculine pronoun *he* (and its derivatives *his*, *him*, and *himself*) was perfectly acceptable as a generic term for all people, then you got an outdated lesson. Research from the 1970s to the present provides convincing evidence that the generic *he* isn't generic at all; it's masculine and conjures masculine images (Clason, 2006; Conkright, Flannagan, & Dykes, 2000; Earp, 2012; Gabriel, 2008; Gastil, 1990; Gygax, Gabriel, Sarasin, Oakhill, & Garnham, 2009; Hamilton, 1988; He, 2010; Krollok & Sorenson, 2006; Lee, 2007; Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978; Romaine, 1999; Stinger & Hopper, 1998). As Hopper (2003) points out, if the choice is made to say *he* not in reference to a specific man, two meanings for the word are created: a male individual and a person of undetermined sex. The listener's job then is to figure out which meaning is intended. Why give the listener that task? Why not make it clear?

One of the most illuminating early studies on this topic was conducted by Wendy Martyna (1978), who investigated college students' use of pronouns by asking them to complete sentence fragments, both orally and in writing. Students were asked to provide pronouns to refer to sex-indefinite nouns, as in the statement, "Before a judge can give a final ruling, _____." Occupations or roles depicted in the fragments included *doctor*, *lawyer*, *engineer*, *judge*, *nurse*, *librarian*, *teacher*, *babysitter*, and neutral terms like *person*, *individual*, and *student*. Participants also described images or ideas that came to mind as they chose pronouns to complete sentence fragments.

In a nutshell, college students in Martyna's research continually read sex into the subjects of sentence fragments and responded with sex-specific pronouns. The nurses, librarians, teachers, and babysitters were predominantly *she*, while the doctors, lawyers, engineers, and judges were *he*. Neutral subjects most often received the pronoun *they*. If the pronoun *he* had truly been a term indicating all persons, then *he* would have been the pronoun of choice no matter what role the sentence depicted. In conjunction with their choices of pronouns, students reported sex-stereotypical images that came to mind when they read the fragments.

If you think that Martyna's study is so dated that the results couldn't be replicated, think again. In the mid 1990s at two universities, researchers repeated and extended Martyna's study, hoping to find that contemporary college students were attuned to the problem of sexist pronouns (Ivy, Bullis-Moore, Norvell, Backlund, & Javidi, 1995). On the contrary, the results were virtually the same. For terms like *lawyer*, *judge*, and *engineer*, students responded predominantly with male pronouns and imagery, while *nurses*, *librarians*, and *babysitters* were female. The results of these and more current studies underscore the fact that people (at least in U.S. culture) can hardly function without knowing the sex of a person. If they aren't told the sex of a person, they generally assign one based on stereotypes (Earp, 2012; Flanigan, 2013; Grey, 2015). Are we passing this sex-stereotypical language down to our kids?

College students still think of doctors as 'he' and nurses as 'she'.



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Studies show that exclusive pronoun usage (1) places undue emphasis on males; (2) maintains sex-biased perceptions; (3) shapes people's attitudes about careers that are appropriate for members of one sex but not others; (4) causes some people to believe that certain jobs and roles aren't attainable; and (5) contributes to the belief that men deserve more status in society than anyone else (Briere & Lanktree, 1983; Brooks, 1983; Burkette & Warhol, 2009; Earp, 2012; Gygax et al., 2009; Ivy, 1986; Stericker, 1981; Stinger & Hopper, 1998).

THE PRONOUN SOLUTION Does a pronoun exist that can stand for everyone? Some scholars have attempted to introduce new words, or *neologisms*, into the language, primarily for the purpose of inclusivity. Historically, such neologisms as *gen*, *tey*, *co*, *herm*, and *heris* didn't have much success in being adopted into common usage. However, new neutral terms like *ze* and *hir* have emerged (and are preferred by many transgender people), but we've yet to see whether these will catch on in general use (Grey, 2015; Killerman, 2013).

Right now, the best ways to avoid excluding any portion of the population in your communication are to (1) omit a pronoun altogether, either rewording a message or substituting an article (*a*, *an*, or *the*) for the pronoun; (2) use *you* or variations of the indefinite pronoun *one*; or (3) use the plural pronoun *they* (which may drive your English professors crazy). Using a plural pronoun in a singular sense is becoming more common and acceptable, both in written and oral forms (Grey, 2015; Madson & Shoda, 2006; Strahan, 2008).

THE LADY DOCTOR AND THE MALE NURSE A subtle form of sexist language, called *marking*, involves placing a sex-identifying adjective in front of a noun to designate the reference as somehow different or deviant from the norm (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; West, 1998). Sex-marked language is limiting, discriminatory, and unnecessary. Examples of this practice include *woman* or *lady doctor*, *male secretary*, *female boss*, *female soldier*, and *lady lawyer*. As more people enter in greater numbers into fields typically dominated by members of other sexes, some of these references are disappearing.

Remember...

Man-Linked

Terminology: Use of words or phrases that include man in them as generics to stand for all people

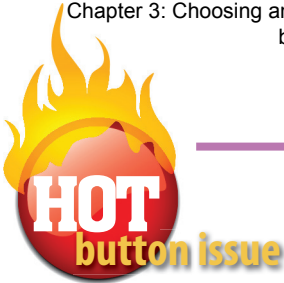
Antimale Bias: Language use that excludes men, restricts the roles for and perceptions of men, and evokes negative stereotypes of men

Generic Pronoun: Use of a masculine pronoun as a term to stand for all people

Neologism: New word introduced into a language

Marking: Placing a sex-identifying adjective in front of a noun to designate the reference as somehow different or deviant from the norm

Feminine Suffix: Adding a suffix to a male term to form a female term



"Go Team!"

Do you have athletic teams at your college? Are team names differentiated by sex? It's common to find men's athletic teams named simply "Tigers" or "Longhorns," but what happens when women's teams are introduced at those schools? Are they Tigers and Longhorns too or do they become "Lady Tigers" and "Lady Longhorns"?

At many institutions, the latter is exactly what happens. Is that a sexist practice or just a matter of which team came first? Sociologist Faye Linda Wachs (2006) studied the "male universal" norm in the sports world and concluded that "women's teams are often marked with feminized nicknames, while male teams hold the general mascot name (i.e., Lady Gamecocks, Wildkittens, Lady Lions). Though this practice is decreasing over time, it remains a barrier to equality for women's sports" (p. 45). Even major tournaments and sports associations contain differentiated language; for example the men's collegiate basketball tournament is simply the NCAA tournament, whereas the women's counterpart event is marked by the term "women's" or "ladies."

Studies have investigated the extent of the problem among collegiate athletic teams in the South, finding that most schools used gender markings for their women's teams; 61 percent of schools used the term "lady" to distinguish women's teams from men's. None used the marker "gentleman" for men's team names (Fabrizio Pelak, 2008). Research shows that women's athleticism is stronger at schools with non-gender-marked team names and that more women serve in coaching positions at such schools (Ward, 2004). Language is, indeed, powerful. If your university has sex-marked team names, should that tradition be changed? If so, how would you go about it?



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HOW'S TRIX? We have the eleventh-century French language to thank for many suffixes like *-ette*, *-ess*, *-enne*, and *-trix* still used in English to form a feminine version of a generic or masculine term, such as in *bachelor/bachelorette* and *governor/governess*. Your textbook author must admit to being an avid fan of the TV show *Shark Tank*, but cringes each time egotistical shark Kevin O'Leary disrespectfully refers to the female business moguls on the show as "sharkettes." Suffixed terms are problematic because, first, they often connote smallness, such as in reference to inanimate objects like *booklets* and *kitchenettes* (Holmes, 2001). Second, researchers have deemed it a subtle sexist practice to

Sex-marked language is limiting, discriminatory, and unnecessary.

attach suffixes to a male form of a word to establish a female form (He, 2010; Miller, Swift, & Maggio, 1997; Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007). The suffix “perpetuates the notion that the male is the norm and the female is a subset, a deviation, a secondary classification. In other words, men are ‘the real thing’ and women are sort of like them” (Maggio, 1988, p. 178). Does the sex of the person waiting on your table at a restaurant really matter? Does someone who is admired need to be called a *hero* or a *heroine*? Such terminology makes a person’s sex too important, revealing a need to know the sex to determine how to behave or what to expect.

How can sexist suffixes be avoided? Simply use the original term and omit the suffix. If there is a legitimate reason for specifying sex, a pronoun can be used, as in “The actor was performing her monologue beautifully, when someone’s cell phone rang in the theatre.” (Creators of the TV show *The Bachelor/The Bachelorette* will no doubt disagree.)

SPEAKING OF A HIGHER POWER . . . Saying that the topic of sexism in religious language is “sticky” is a major understatement. It’s not our intent here to uproot anyone’s religious beliefs, but merely to provide food for thought.

People continue to debate the potential sexism in biblical language, as well as litany (what gets read or spoken in worship services; Bryant, 2008; Clason, 2006). Miller and Swift (1991) explain that within the Judeo-Christian tradition, religious scholars for centuries insisted that the translation of such an abstract concept as a deity into language need not involve a designation of sex. According to these researchers, “the symbolization of a male God must not be taken to mean that God really is ‘male.’ In fact, it must be understood that God has no sex at all” (p. 64). To one dean of the Harvard Divinity School, masculine language about God is “a cultural and linguistic accident” (Stendahl, as in Miller & Swift, 1991, p. 67). As one rabbi put it, “I think of God as an undefinable being; to talk about God in gender terms, we’re talking in terms we can understand and not in terms of what God is really like” (Ezring, as in Leardi, 1997, p. H1).

The problem, at least for religions relying on biblical teachings, is that translations of scriptures from the ancient Hebrew language into Old English rendered masculine images of deity, reflecting the culture of male superiority (Kramarae, 1981; Schmitt, 1992). Thus, the literature



is dominated by the pronoun *he* and such terms as *father* and *kingdom*. Linguistic scholars contend that much of the original female imagery was lost in modern translation or was omitted from consideration by the canonizers of the Bible (Miller & Swift, 1991; Spender, 1985). This point received resurgent attention when the book and movie *The Da Vinci Code* came out. The Old Testament says that humans were created in God's image—both male and female. It's interesting, then, that we have come to connect masculinity with most religious images and terms. Also interesting, as August (1992) contends, is the “masculinization of evil,” the fact that male pronouns and images are most often associated with Satan, such as a reference to the *Father of Lies*. August says, “Few theologians talk about Satan and her legions” (p. 139).

Are you uncomfortable enough at this point in your reading to say to yourself, “Come on now; you're messing with religion. Enough is enough”? That's understandable, because religion is a deeply personal thing. It's something that a lot of us grew up with; thus, its images and teachings are so ingrained that we don't often question them or stop to consider where some of the traditions originated. However, questioning the language of religion doesn't mean that people are questioning their faith.

A few religions, primarily Judaism and Christianity, have begun lessening the male dominance in their communication (Jones & Mills, 2001). In some Christian sects, the masculinity *and* femininity of God are beginning to receive equal emphasis, as in one version of the Apostles' Creed which begins with “I believe in God the Father and Mother almighty, maker of heaven and earth.” In 2002, publishers of the *New International Version Bible* announced that they would begin producing editions that contained more inclusive language (Gorski, 2002). Not all references to *men* were changed to *people*, nor were male references to God removed, but sex-specific language was altered when it was evident that the original text didn't intend any sex. For example, some references to *sons* were changed to *children* and *brothers* into *brothers and sisters*. Then in 2006, controversy arose again when publishers of a gender-inclusive Bible translation, *Today's New International Version*, were criticized by evangelical Christian groups who contended that the version was a feminist-driven effort to undermine Christian theology (Clason, 2006). These kinds of reforms are interesting and increasing in number, but they are unnerving to many people.



“Stay Out of Scripture?”

Our discussion of sexism in religious language may raise some hairs on the back of your neck, because religion, to many of us, is something deeply felt and rooted in tradition.

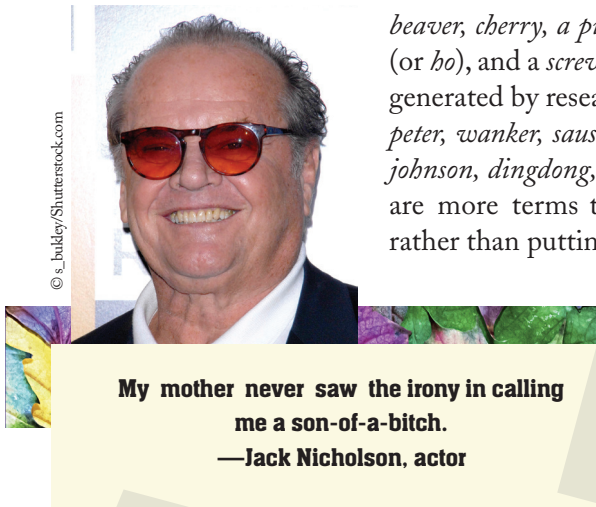
Many people feel that changing the language in current translations of the Bible is akin to (or worse than) altering Shakespeare. If you’re a person within the Christian tradition, which is grounded in biblical teachings, do you feel your faith or your ability to worship would be shaken if more gender-neutral terms appeared in the Bible? Would you trip over such language or see it as a welcome change? Is it political correctness gone amok, or an opportunity for more people to relate to biblical teachings?

REDUCED TO A BODY PART Language about sexuality profoundly affects perceptions, as well as communication. Most of us know that reducing people to their sexuality is a degrading practice that can be personally devastating.

Although research in the twenty-first century continues to explore sexual language usage (Braun & Kitzinger, 2001a, 2001b; Butler, 2004; Motschenbacher, 2009), we defer to the important work of linguist Robert Baker in the 1980s, who was interested in conceptions of women in American culture. Although men also are described in sexualized terms, significantly more sexual terms identify women than men (and we contend that that’s still the case today). One study uncovered 220 terms for sexually promiscuous women and only twenty-two terms for sexually promiscuous men (Stanley, 1977).

Think of how many terms exist that are based on anatomy, but that may be used to describe a whole person. Over the years of teaching gender communication on the college level, students have been asked to participate in a “mature exercise” in which they provide current sexual terms—the language of their generation, even if they themselves rarely use such language. It’s been interesting to see the shifts over the years, as well as the “creative” additions that inevitably make their contributions to the lexicon. Pardon the adult nature of this material, but here are some student-generated terms that describe women’s anatomy or sexual behavior, many of which are interchangeable with the word *woman*: *vajayjay* (thanks to the TV show *Grey’s Anatomy*), *coozie*, *coochie*, *vag*, *snatch*, *twat*, *pussy*,





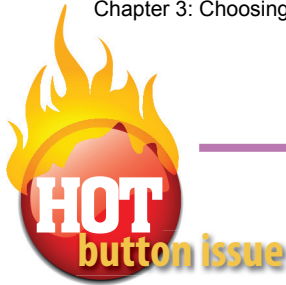
beaver, cherry, a piece, box, easy, some (as in “getting some”), *slut, whore* (or *ho*), and a *screw, hookup, or lay*. Here’s some male sexual lingo, again generated by research as well as college students: *wiener, dingle, schlong, peter, wanker, sausage, prick, cock, male member, dick, willy, tallywacker, johnson, dingdong, tool*, and a *screw, hookup, or lay*. Obviously, there are more terms than these, but we leave those to your imagination rather than putting them in print.

Anthropologist Michael Moffat (1989) studied university dormitory residents’ use of language and found that one-third of young men in the study, in conversations with other men, consistently referred to women as “chicks, broads, and sluts,” reflecting what Moffat termed a “locker-room style” of communication

about women (p. 183). More recently, Hopper (2003) analyzed the speech patterns of dozens of men as they commented on women; he concluded that the degree of objectification and references to body parts was startling. Yes, we know that both men and women are capable of using sexually demeaning terminology. Hopper found that women frequently called or referred to other women in sexually objectifying terms, but they primarily used terms that implied sexual promiscuity (e.g., *slut, ho, easy*). However, in his research, subjects rarely talked about men in sexually degrading terms.

Two other studies examined college students’ use and perceptions of sexual language (Murnen, 2000). In the first study, students were asked about their use of sexual language to describe others. Results showed that men were much more likely than women in the study to use (a) sexually degrading terms in reference to female genitalia, and (b) highly aggressive terms to refer to sexual intercourse. In a follow-up study, subjects listened to either two men or two women conversing about having sex with someone they’d just met the night before. Both male and female speakers who used degrading sexual language about their hookup were evaluated negatively by the listeners. However, in highly degrading conversations, the object of the degradation was judged as less intelligent and less moral than people who were spoken of in more respectful terms. Murnen concluded that use of sexual language is affected by a person’s sex/gender, and that attitudes toward people of a different sex, as well as about sexual activity in general, are revealed by choice of language.

Another form of sexual language describes sexual activity, with an emphasis on verbs and their effect on the roles women and men assume



“Dirty Words”

We realize that many of you don’t use the language we discuss (so bluntly) in this section of the chapter. But perhaps you’ve found yourself using language you wouldn’t ordinarily use—only in specific situations, like when you were really down over being dumped from an important relationship or when you’ve been frustrated or mad. You probably know people who do use this kind of language, even if you don’t use it yourself. How have you reacted when you’ve heard friends or acquaintances equate people with their sexual organs or body parts? Should language be an emotional release for people? Stated another way, is there a place and time for foul or degrading language? Does it depend on who’s around to hear you?

sexually. Baker’s synonyms for sexual intercourse, as generated by his students in the early 1980s, include *screwed*, *laid*, *had*, *did it*, *banged*, *slept with*, *humped*, and *made love to*. Feminist theorist Deborah Cameron (1985, 2009) adds the verb *poked* to the list. Author Jonathan Green (1999) offers such metaphorical language for intercourse as *jumped someone’s bones* or *bod*, *bumped uglies*, *gave a tumble*, and *knocked boots*. Local students have generously contributed their own linguistic examples to the mix, including *hooked up with*, *got some from*, *got some play*, *made* (someone), *did the deed with*, *porked*, *boned*, *boinked*, *did the horizontal polka* (or *mambo*) *with*, *took*, and even *mated*. Whew, that’s colorful.

According to Baker, the sexism lies in the placement of subjects preceding verbs as well as the objects that follow verbs. Sentences like “Dick screwed Jane” and “Dick banged Jane” describe men as the doers of sexual activity, while women are almost always the recipients. When a female subject of a sentence appears, the verb form changes into a passive rather than an active construction, as in “Jane was screwed by Dick” and “Jane was banged by Dick”—the woman is still the recipient (pp. 175–176). Baker debunks the argument that the tendency to describe males as active and females as passive reflects the fact that men’s genitalia are external and women’s are internal. If active sexual roles for women were the norm or more accepted, then Baker contends that the verb *to engulf* would be in common usage. Cameron (1985) proposes that the term *penetration* as a synonym for the sexual act suggests male origins; if a woman had set the term, it might have been *enclosure*.



Students of the twenty-first century believe that the dichotomy of male-active, female-passive sexuality is changing, as is the corresponding language. They offer a few active constructions for women's sexual behavior (largely related to women being on top in heterosexual intercourse, such as in the language *to ride*). Interesting changes will continue to take place in the sexual arena, linguistically speaking.

Sexist Linguistic Practices

THE NAME GAME Many of us believe that our names are an integral part of our identity. The long-standing practice of wives taking husbands' surnames isn't necessarily sexist; what's sexist is the expectation that a married heterosexual woman is supposed to or must take her husband's last name. For some women, assuming a husband's surname is something they've looked forward to all their lives. For others, this custom identifies the woman as property, which actually is the historic intent behind the practice.

Throughout a good deal of the twentieth century, most states in the U.S. required married women to assume their husbands' names in order to participate in such civic activities as voting (Emens, 2007). In the 1960s and '70s laws were overturned and many women kept their maiden names after marriage (Arichi, 1999; Emens, 2007; Goldin & Shim, 2004; Hopper, 2003). (There's really no such thing as a "maiden" name because most women's maiden or birth names are their fathers' last names.) Alternative naming practices became more prevalent during this time, such as adding the husband's last name to the wife's maiden name (having a two-word or hyphenated last name); the reverse of that (adding the husband's last name to the wife's birth or maiden name, although this option was far from prevalent; Stritof & Stritof, 2010); or coming up with a new hybrid last name for both spouses to adopt (Foss, Edson, & Linde, 2000; Johnson & Scheuble, 1995; Tracy, 2002). Married women who changed their names received warnings from academic sources as well as the popular press about a loss of identity and self-esteem, but research didn't detect any meaningful trends in this regard (Stafford & Kline, 1996). However, such practices were suspect in traditional social circles. Andy Rooney, late commentator for CBS' *Sixty Minutes*, was quoted as saying "women who keep their own names are less apt to keep their husbands."

Move forward into the twenty-first century and it seems as though the pendulum has swung back to the traditionalism of earlier generations, maybe more for expedience or simplicity's sake than as political commentary. Now

fewer heterosexual women retain their maiden names after marriage than in the past (Black, 2009; Boxer & Gritsenko, 2005; Brightman, 1994; Kopelman, Fossen, Paraskevas, Lawter, & Prottas, 2009; Scheuble, Klingemann, & Johnson, 2000). Fewer couples choose to hyphenate; occasionally, wives may add their husbands' last name to their maiden name, but rarely do husbands follow suit. She may become Mary Smith Jones, but rarely does he become John Smith Jones; he's just John Jones.

Situational naming—using different versions of one's name depending on role or context—has become trendy. Sociologists Scheuble and Johnson (2005) surveyed 600 married women and found that in family or social situations wives tended to use their husbands' last name only, but in professional situations many preferred a hyphenated version, one that communicated a sense of independence associated with professional rather than personal life. The decision to use last names situationally was associated with level of education, type of employment (full-time versus part time), and age when first married. Similar studies found that feminist attitudes, level of career commitment, professional stature, concerns of ancestry, and value placed on motherhood were also factors that affected women's decisions about married names (Hoffnung, 2006; Laskowski, 2010).

How do same-sex, bigender, and transgender couples handle the last name issue? This decision was interesting enough when same-sex marriage was only legal in a few states in the U.S., but once the Supreme Court ruling in 2015 made same-sex marriage legal across the country, this negotiation has only become more interesting. This is an under-researched topic, at least at present, but it will no doubt receive much more attention as many more same-sex and transgender couples navigate the name dilemma. For some couples—gay, straight, and otherwise—the issue isn't important until they have or adopt children and confront decisions about children's last names (Clarke, Burns, & Burgoyne, 2008; Lannutti, 2008; Suter & Oswald, 2003). In the Clarke et al. (2008) study, one reason cited for not changing either gay spouse's last name upon marriage was resistance to heteronormativity; in other words, why do what straight people do?



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**When I got married my feminist friends went mad. One sniffed, "Are you going to take your husband's name?" I said, "No, because I don't think 'Dave' suits me very much."
—Jo Brand, British comedian**

EUPHEMISMS AND METAPHORS The English language contains a great many expressions about the sexes that go seemingly unnoticed, but that form subtly sexist patterns. These expressions are usually in the form of *metaphors* or *euphemisms*—more comfortable substitutes for other terms (Cralley & Ruscher, 2005; Hegstrom & McCarl-Nielsen, 2002; Kovecses, 2010; McGlone, Beck, & Pfister, 2006). One of the most influential authors on the topic of euphemistic language is Robin Lakoff, whose research from the 1970s continues to have impact today. Lakoff (1975) explored euphemisms for the word *woman*, such as *lady* and *girl*, and their connotations. While some people think of *lady* as a term of respect that puts a woman on a pedestal, to others it suggests negative qualities such as being frail, scatterbrained, sugary sweet, demure, flatterable, and sexually repressed. To illustrate, substitute *ladies* for *women* in the following organizations' titles: the National Organization for Women, the Black Women's Community Development Foundation, and the Harvard Committee on the Status of Women (Lindsey, 2005). In this context, the term *ladies* minimizes the seriousness of the group.

Connotations of the word *girl* have changed a great deal in recent years, as has its spelling in the media (*grrrl*) (Siegel, 2007). Many adult women in the '70s and '80s reported feeling patronized and disrespected when referred to as *girls*. The term connoted childishness, innocence, and immaturity—and most women don't want to be thought of in those terms. However, today more positive meanings for *girl* have emerged (especially for women in their teens and twenties). Many positive efforts and projects across the country continue to use *grrrl*-language as a means of enhancing young girls' self-esteem and sense that they're not powerless in the world (Aragon, 2008; Radway, 2009; Riordan, 2001).

Some euphemistic confusion exists in the fact that there's no acceptable female equivalent term for *guy*. When males are called *guys*, females are called *girls*, rather than *gals* or *women*. Think about what would happen if you were to say to a group of men, "Good morning, boys!" It would most likely be interpreted as a condescending euphemism for men. The most appropriate terms to use depend on the context in which you find yourself.

A PARALLEL UNIVERSE *Symmetry* or *parallelism* in language refers to the use of gender-fair terms in referring to the sexes. Terms can be asymmetrical and sexist in three ways:

- ❖ Words that seem parallel (equal) but aren't: An example that seems to be on its rightful way out is the statement, "I now pronounce you man and wife." This language suggests that the man is still a man, but the woman is now a wife, with the connotation that she is relegated to that one role while he maintains a complete identity. How different would the connotation be if the statement were, "I now pronounce you woman and husband"? In this category, language may seem parallel simply because it's used often and may go unnoticed, but upon inspection, the language perpetuates inequity.
- ❖ Terms originally constructed as parallel, but meanings have taken on negative connotations (primarily for women) over time: Examples include *governor/governess*, *master/mistress*, *sir/madam*, and *bachelor/spinster* or *old maid*. A man who governs is a *governor*, but a *governess* has come to mean a woman who takes care of someone else's children. You can certainly see the gap between meanings in the second and third examples—*mistress* and *madam* have negative, sexual connotations while the masculine forms still imply power and authority. The last example is dramatic—as men grow older and stay single, they remain *bachelors* while women degenerate into *spinsters* and *old maids* (DeFrancisco & Palczewski, 2007; Romaine, 1999).
- ❖ Acceptable words, but their usage becomes unacceptable because it alters the equality: Examples can be readily found in media, such as in news accounts when citizens encounter tragedies abroad, and a news reporter describes how "three people have been taken hostage—one is a woman." You often hear nonparallel usage in reference to soldiers killed in conflicts around the world, when special note is made of female military casualties or prisoners. The language depicts men as the norm and women as the aberrations (Lakoff, 1975; Maggio, 1988). Is a hostage or casualty situation made worse because one of the people is female?

OUT OF ORDER Have you heard the traditional saying "ladies first"? While some people still operate by this standard in things like opening doors, the "ladies first" pattern isn't predominant in the language. When you put language under the microscope, you find that male terms are almost always communicated first and female terms second, as in the following: his and hers; boys and girls; men and women; men, women, and children; male and female; husband and wife; Mr. and Mrs. Smith; the Duke and Duchess of Windsor; king and queen; brothers and sisters.

Three exceptions include the traditional greeting, “ladies and gentlemen,” references to the “bride and groom,” and a mention of someone’s parents, as in “How are your mom and dad doing?” Putting the masculine term first gives precedence to men and implies that women were derived from men or are secondary to them (Amare, 2006; Frank & Treichler, 1989). The simple suggestion here is that you try to alternate which term you say or write first. It’s a small correction in your language and few may notice, but it will make your communication more gender-fair.

TITLES AND SALUTATIONS The common male title *Mr.* doesn’t reflect a man’s marital status. Mr. Joe Schmoe can be single, married, divorced, or widowed. The titles for women include *Miss*, *Mrs.*, and *Ms.*, which have been called *nubility titles*, derived from the term *nubile*, which means sexually attractive or marriageable (Romaine, 1999). What differentiates *Miss* from *Mrs.* is marital status, but this is only a fairly recent usage. Until the nineteenth century, the two terms merely distinguished female children and young women from older, more mature women (Spender, 1985). History isn’t clear about why the function of the titles changed, but some scholars link it to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, when women began working outside the home. Supposedly, working obscured a woman’s tie to the home, so the titles provided clarity (Miller & Swift, 1991). Because of the patriarchal nature of language, people deemed it necessary to be able to identify whether a woman was married, though it wasn’t necessary to know a man’s relationship to a woman.

To counter this practice, women began to use the neologism *Ms.* a few decades ago, although the term has existed as a title of courtesy since the 1940s (Miller & Swift, 1991). People of both sexes resisted the use of *Ms.* when it first came on the scene, claiming that it was hard to pronounce. But is it any harder to pronounce than *Mrs.* or *Mr.*? Some women today choose not to use the title because they believe it links them with feminists, a connection they consider undesirable. Others use *Ms.* just exactly for that reason—its link with feminism—and to establish their identity apart from men (Atkins-Sayre, 2005; Fuller, 2005; Kuhn, 2007). A common misconception is that *Ms.* is a title referring exclusively to divorced women (Chivero, 2009).

Regarding written salutations and greetings, for many years the standard salutation in a letter to someone you did not know (and did not know the sex of) was “Dear Sir” or “Gentlemen.” If you only knew the last name of a person in an address or if the first name did not reveal the sex of the person,

the default salutation was “Dear Mr. So-and-So.” But that sexist practice is changing because of questions about why the masculine form should stand for all people. The terms *Sirs* and *Gentlemen* no more include women than the pronoun *he* or the term *mankind*.

What are some nonsexist options for salutations? Sometimes a simple phone call or e-mail to the organization you want to contact will enable you to specify a greeting. An easier way to fix this problem is to use terms that don’t imply sex, such as: (Dear) Officers, Staff Member, Managers, Director, and the like. If it’s more comfortable for you to use a sex-identified term, use inclusive references such as *Ms./Mr.* or *Sir or Madam*. Other alternatives include omitting a salutation altogether, opting for an opening line that says “Greetings!” or “Hello!” or structuring a letter more like a memo, beginning with “Regarding Your Memo of 9/7” or “TO: Friends of the Library” (Maggio, 1988, p. 184). We caution against using the trite “To Whom It May Concern”; your letter may end up in the trash simply because “no one was concerned.”

USING LANGUAGE: ONCE YOU CHOOSE IT, HOW DO YOU USE IT?

Now that you understand what we mean by choice in language, here comes the real challenge: the actual usage of language in everyday interactions with others. We now move on to the *between* aspect of language—communication *between* the sexes, not *about* them.

Some studies have documented linguistic sex differences (Cohen, 2009; Erlandson, 2005; Tannen, 1995) profound enough to form *genderlects*, defined as “speech that contains features that mark it as stereotypically masculine or feminine” (Hoar, 1992, p. 127). In general, female speech patterns have been viewed as being weaker, more passive, and less commanding of respect, in comparison with male styles. But other research has produced different results regarding linguistic sex patterns, with male and female styles often being indistinguishable (Brownlaw, Rosamond, & Parker, 2003). In



**Could you do me a favor? Could you say “senator” instead of “ma’am”?
I worked so hard to get that title.
— Senator Barbara Boxer, to an Army Brigadier General during a Senate hearing**

Remember...

- Euphemism:** More comfortable term that substitutes for another term
- Metaphor:** Use of language to draw a comparison; the nonliteral application of language to an object or action
- Symmetrical or Parallel Language:** Use of language that represents the sexes in a balanced and fair manner
- Order of Terms:** Language usage that alternates which sex appears or is said first
- Titles:** Designations such as *Mr.* or *Ms.* before a person’s name
- Salutations:** Letter or memo greetings that often contain sexist, exclusively male language

various studies conducted by Anthony Mulac and his associates, subjects frequently incorrectly identified the sex of a speaker, based on written transcripts of casual conversation, as well as discussions in problem-solving groups (Mulac, 1998; Mulac, Bradac, & Gibbons, 2001; Mulac, Wiemann, Widenmann, & Gibson, 1988).

While Mulac discovered more similarities than differences in women's and men's speaking styles, he isolated some consistent male language features, which include references to quantity; judgmental adjectives (e.g., "Reading can be such a drag"); elliptical or abbreviated sentences, like "Great picture"; directives (commands); locatives (such as "in the background"); and "I" references. Female language features include intensive adverbs (such as use of the term *really*), references to emotions, dependent clauses (instead of full sentences), sentence-initial adverbials (such as use of the word *actually* to begin a sentence), longer sentences, uncertainty verbs (e.g., "It seems to be . . ."), negations (using negative terms such as *not*), hedges (e.g., "It's kind of . . ."), and questions (Mulac, Bradac, & Palomares, 2003).

An overdrawn, media-hyped linguistic sex difference garnered a lot of attention in the latter part of the 2000s; the focus was on who talked more—men or women. The ancient, enduring stereotype is that women *way* outtalk men, but does research bear this out? The controversy was launched when Louann Brizendine, author of *The Female Brain* (2006) and *The Male Brain* (2010), claimed that women use 20,000 words on average per day, whereas men only average 7,000 a day. The implication was either that women were verbose or men were reticent.

All sorts of personalities and pundits quoted the "facts," but the problem was, the numbers didn't add up. Researchers at different institutions studied the phenomenon, concluding that no such sex differences in sheer volumes of speaking were scientifically documented (Do Women Really, 2010; Newman, Groom, Handelsman, & Pennebaker, 2008; Stipe, 2010). Seasoned public speaking coaches estimate that the average English (U.S.) speaker talks at a rate of about 125 words per minute (around 2 words per second). Speaking 20,000 words at that rate would take 160 minutes total—about 2.6 hours in a 24-hour day. That equates to 10 minutes per hour in a 16-hour day, meaning that the average woman is silent for 50 minutes each hour (excluding 8 hours of sleep). When you do the math for the men's statistics, the average man speaks only 56 minutes in an entire 16-hour day, or 3.5 minutes each hour. Does that

seem accurate to you? Does that match your experience? Here's one of those times when getting the facts—doing just a bit of research—helped counter a stereotype.

Vocal Properties and Linguistic Constructions

Vocal properties are aspects of the production of sound related to the physiological voice-producing mechanism in humans. *Linguistic constructions* reflect speech patterns or habits; they are communicative choices people make.

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO? The *pitch* of a human voice can be defined as the highness or lowness of a particular sound due to air causing the vocal chords to vibrate (Karpf, 2006). Physiological structures related to voice production, as well as hormones, allow women to more easily produce higher-pitched sounds, while men more easily produce lower-pitched sounds (Evans, Neave, Wakelin, & Hamilton, 2008; Kooijman, Thomas, Graamans, & deJong, 2007; Krolokke & Sorensen, 2006; Tracy, 2002). But scholarly evidence suggests that differences may have more to do with social interpretations than with physiology alone. Research indicates that women and men have equal abilities to produce high pitches, but that men have been socialized not to use the higher pitches for fear of sounding feminine (Cartei & Reby, 2012; Ivy & Wahl, 2014; Viscovich et al., 2003).

In comparison to the low tones that most men are able to produce, the so-called high-pitched female whine has drawn long-standing societal criticism and even prejudice against women's voices (Cameron, 1985; Hoar, 1992; McConnell-Ginet, 2011). In patriarchal societies, men's lower-pitched voices are deemed more credible and persuasive than women's (Imhof, 2010). Examples of this can be readily found at radio and TV stations where women serving as news anchors or reporters tend to have (or develop) lower-pitched voices than women in the general population, in order to be perceived as more credible and taken more seriously by the listening or viewing public.

Men with higher-pitched voices are often ridiculed for being effeminate. Their "feminine" voices may be perceived as detracting from their credibility and dynamism, unless another physical or personality attribute somehow overpowers or contradicts that judgment. (Mike Tyson, former heavyweight boxing champion, is one example of this.)



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Mike Tyson's distinctive voice contradicts his former boxing champion status.

INDICATIONS OF TENTATIVENESS Research has documented how women tend to be more *tentative* in their communication than men, and this tentativeness can reduce the power of women's messages, making them appear uncertain, insecure, incompetent, and less likely to be taken seriously than men (Carli, 1990; McConnell-Ginet, 2011). However, other research indicates that instead of interpreting weakness or tentativeness from women's speech style, politeness or a motive toward affiliation, facilitation, and inclusion of others may be the intent (Mulac, Giles, Bradac, & Palomares, 2013; Palomares, 2009; Watts, 2003). Additional studies suggest that factors such as culture, status and position in society, communication goals, and the sex-composition of the group in which communication occurs have more impact than sex on stylistic variations (Aries, 2006; Eckert & McConnell-

Ginet, 2013; Mulac et al., 2001).

One vocal property that indicates tentativeness is *intonation* or "the tune to which we set the text of our talk" (McConnell-Ginet, 1983, p. 70). Research is contradictory as to whether rising intonation (typically associated with asking questions) is indicative of a female style or just a sex-based stereotype. Another tentativeness indicator is the *tag question*, as in "This is a really beautiful day, don't you think?" The primary function of the tag question is to seek agreement or a response from a listener (Blankenship & Craig, 2007). Lakoff (1975) believed that tag questions serve as an "apology for making an assertion at all" (p. 54). She attributed the use of tag questions to a general lack of assertiveness or confidence about what one is saying, more indicative of female style than male style. Older research supported a connection between women's style and the use of tag questions (Carli, 1990; Zimmerman & West, 1975), but more current research finds no evidence that tag questions occur more in female speech than in male speech, nor that tag questions necessarily indicate uncertainty or tentativeness (Hancock & Rubin, 2015).

Qualifiers, *hedges*, and *disclaimers* are other linguistic constructions generally interpreted as indicating tentativeness and stereotypically associated with women's speech. *Qualifiers* include *well*, *you know*, *kind of*, *sort of*, *really*, *perhaps*, *possibly*, *maybe*, and *of course*. *Hedging* devices include such terms as *I think* (*believe*, *feel*), *I guess*, *I mean*, and *I wonder* (Holmes, 1990; Winn & Rubin,

2001). *Disclaimers* are typically longer hedges that act as prefaces or defense mechanisms when one is unsure or doubtful of what one is about to say; they tend to weaken or soften the effect of a message (Beach & Dunning, 1982; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975). Students often use disclaimers like “I know this is a dumb question, but . . .” and “I may be wrong here, but I think. . .” Rather than imposing a stereotype, scholars advise that interpretations of tentativeness are best made within the given context in which the communication occurs (Cameron, 1985; Holmes, 1990; Mulac et al., 2001; Ragan, 1989).

MANAGING TO CONVERSE Have you ever considered how conversation is organized or “managed”? *Conversation management* involves several variables, but one interesting vein of research surrounds indicators of conversational dominance.

Conversation typically occurs in *turns*, meaning that one speaker takes a turn, then another, and so on, such that interaction is socially organized (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1978). When people take turns talking, they may experience *overlaps*, defined as “simultaneous speech initiated by a next speaker just as a current speaker arrives at a possible turn-transition place” and *interruptions* or “deeper intrusions into the internal structure of the speaker’s utterance” (West & Zimmerman, 1983, pp. 103–104). Interruptions and overlaps have been interpreted as indications of disrespect, restrictions on a speaker’s rights, devices for controlling a topic, reflections of an attitude of dominance and authority, and as more indicative of men’s speech than women’s (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Hancock & Rubin, 2015; Weiss & Fisher, 1998). Overlaps are considered less egregious than interruptions because overlapping someone’s speech may be seen as supportive—as trying to reinforce or dovetail off of someone’s idea. Interruptions more often indicate dominance and power play because they cut off the speaker in midstream and suggest that the interrupter’s comment is somehow more important or insightful.

In the most widely cited study of adult conversations, Zimmerman and West (1975) found few overlaps and interruptions within same-sex interactions. However, in mixed-sex conversations, more interruptions occurred than overlaps, and 96 percent of the interruptions were made by males. Other early research revealed evidence of male conversational dominance in terms of initiating topics, working to maintain conversation around those topics, talking more often and for longer durations, offering minimal responses to women’s comments, and using more declaratives than questions (Edelsky, 1981; Fishman, 1983).



Remember...



- Genderlects:** Language containing specific, consistent features that mark it as stereotypically masculine or feminine
- Vocal Properties:** Aspects of the production of sound related to the physiological voice-producing mechanism in humans
- Linguistic Constructions:** Speech patterns or habits; communicative choices people make
- Pitch:** Highness or lowness of a particular sound due to air causing the vocal chords to vibrate
- Tentativeness:** Forms of language that indicate hesitation or speculation and that can make people appear uncertain, insecure, incompetent, powerless, and less likely to be taken seriously
- Intonation:** Use of pitch that creates a pattern or that sends a specific message, such as a rising pitch to indicate a question
- Tag Question:** Linguistic construction related to tentativeness, which involves adding a brief question onto the end of a statement
- Qualifier, Hedge, and Disclaimer:** Linguistic constructions related to tentativeness, which preface or accompany a message so as to soften its impact or deflect attention away from the statement
- Conversation Management:** How a conversation is organized or conducted in a series of turns
- Overlap:** Linguistic construction typically associated with conversational dominance, in which one person begins speaking just as another person finishes speaking
- Interruption:** Linguistic construction typically associated with conversational dominance, in which one speaker intrudes into the comments of another speaker

More recent studies have gone beyond sex effects to examine the complexity of dominance in such contexts as face-to-face interaction, same-sex and mixed-sex dyads and groups, marital dyads, and online conversations (Palomares, 2010). Researchers now suggest that many nonverbal, contextual, and cultural factors, such as perceptions of power and status, seating arrangements, and sex-typed topics affect judgments of dominant or powerless styles (Aries, 2006; Guerrero & Floyd, 2006).

News talk shows on television, such as MSNBC's *Hardball* and Fox News' *The O'Reilly Factor*, are prime opportunities to observe conversation management (or, many times, mismanagement). Displays of vocal dominance and competitiveness among male and female hosts and guests are fascinating in these forums. The more seasoned guests have learned techniques to control the topics they respond to and raise with hosts, hold their turns at talk longer, and minimize interruptions from other guests or the host.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter on language, we've given you more than a few things to think about, because when you put something under a microscope, you see it in a whole new way. We've tossed a lot at you for one main reason—so that you won't use language by default or habit but instead *choose* to use language that accurately reflects who you are and how you think.

This chapter has challenged you to consider more fully how communication is used to talk *about* the sexes, as well as why and how communication occurs *between* them. We first explored the nature of language and some reasons for using nonsexist or gender-fair language; then we reviewed several forms and practices related to sexist language usage, as well as nonsexist alternatives. Regarding communication *between* the sexes, we examined vocal properties and linguistic constructions that continue to be studied for what they reveal about gender communication. As we said in the introduction to this chapter, the goal of this chapter was to focus on language and its important role in gender communication, to offer ways that you can expand your linguistic options, and to challenge you to *choose* and *use* language in a more inclusive, unbiased, and contemporary manner.

DISCUSSION STARTERS

1. What were you taught in middle school or high school about sexist language? If you received no such instruction, why do you think this information wasn't included in your education? Have you been taught anything in college English classes about sexist language?
2. Sexism in religious language is one of the more difficult topics to explore and discuss. For some people, it's an affront to put the language used to convey their deeply personal religious beliefs under the microscope. What are your views on this subject?
3. Think about sexual language, as discussed in this chapter. We all know times have changed in regard to sexual activity, but has the language changed to keep pace? What changes do you think still need to be made in this area?
4. In light of the information in this chapter on conversation management, assess your own style of communication. Are you more likely to be interrupted or to interrupt someone else? How do you respond to others' overlaps and interruptions? Do you have a lot of tag questions, qualifiers, hedges, and disclaimers in your communication? Think about classroom communication: Do you find yourself saying things like, "This might be a dumb question, but . . ." or "I could be wrong, but . . ."? If so, what effect do these disclaimers have on how you're perceived?

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