



ACADEMIA DE STUDII ECONOMICE BUCUREȘTI
Sesiunea Internațională de Comunicări Științifice
*Youth on the move. Teaching languages for
international study and career-building*
București, 13-14 mai 2011

THE USE OF NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE IN BUSINESS

Maria ENACHE

Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest

Abstract

Since gender differences appear in all societies, they are reflected in language and gave birth to sex cultural stereotypes. Over the last years, the male-centred culture was studied by feminist critics, who drew the attention to the authority and leadership imbalance expressed in the written texts. The language of business (as well as that of politics and diplomacy) tries to settle this imbalance by offering a subtle response to the issue, providing examples of gender fair language to be used in written business communication texts.

Key words: gender difference, non-sexist language, leadership imbalance

Cultural differences between the sexes occur in all known societies and are made manifest in language, the expression of human reality.

It was not until the 1960s that feminist critics brought to light the hidden assumptions of male-centered culture in which "female" is defined by negative reference to "male" as the human norm. For most of human history - read by feminists as "his story" - women internalized civilization's reigning patriarchal biases and accepted the cultural constructs defining masculinity and femininity.

Stereotypical maleness and femaleness are built into the patriarchal culture and expressed in the language of both art and life. Feminist theorists pointed out that language categorizes and structures one's concept of oneself, others, and society, and amassed evidence indicating the male bias is encoded in our linguistic conventions. For example, the nouns "man" or "mankind" are used to define all human beings, and the pronouns "he" and "his" often refer to ostensibly gender-neutral nouns such as God, inventor, author, poet - and the advertiser as well. The gender identification created and maintained in language was based on the male as a normative model of the self and the female as a deviant "other," first identified in Simone de Beauvoir's landmark book, *The Second Sex* (1953). Since that time, feminist critics have brought to light the almost unthinkable acceptance of male norms and female opposites hidden beneath the surface.

By the 1960s, feminist researchers had begun to uncover the extent to which male dominance is so rooted in our terminology that it is accepted as "normal" language. Feminist scholars were the first to organize a school of criticism to recognize the presence of women (albeit their official invisibility), the kinship among them, and the differences between this sub rosa group and that of the male mainstream. Feminist criticism always examines cultural factors because to understand a woman's point of view (as a character in a novel or in an advertisement), a critic must take into account the social, legal, and economic status of women in society.

Three characteristics of women's language

Beginning with Lakoff (Lakoff 1975) feminist critics have set out to specify the impact of place on "woman's language," that distinctively feminine style of speaking and writing. They have focused on sentence structure, diction (word choice), organizational flow, and characteristic images to ascertain how women select and combine words in everyday life. This usage is related to the covert messages that culture sends about women's place. Women's speech reflects cultural imperatives calling for niceness, politeness, ladylike expression, and concern for the feelings of others. Women externalize society's message to be "nice" in their speech, just as men externalize society's permission to be "rough": male talk can be powerful, hard, and intellectual as a result of man's place from childhood on - the ball field, the army, the factory. But women are expected to speak more softly. Three characteristics that mark women's language as special are its propriety, hesitancy, and verbal excess (Lakoff 1975).

Propriety

Propriety in word choice (diction) and grammar reinforces the dual sexual standard. First and foremost, women are expected to talk "like ladies." This entails avoiding obscene words, curses, and angry expletives. Sexual or scatological terms are taboo for women, while men who curse are considered "one of the guys."

In addition to sanitized diction, women are also expected to use hyper-correct grammar and any polite forms of address the language possesses. The expectation of perfect correctness harks back to women's role as the keeper of the cultural flame: while men went off to work and war to protect society, women stayed home to preserve its cherished values for transmission to future generations. Women have traditionally been regarded as guardians of the language, primarily as mothers teaching their children informally, but also in more formal occupational roles as elementary school teachers and librarians. Women were thus conventionally cast as conservators of language deemed proper in reference to dictional choice and grammatical structure.

Hesitancy

Women's language also avoids the taint of impropriety by displaying hesitancy or tentativeness. This hesitancy is expressed in two ways: a tendency to make assertions using tag-question form and a reliance on "hedge" or filler words. Women are likely to state things tentatively either by appending a question to a declarative sentence or by turning a statement into a question. For example, a simple declarative sentence reads: "It's a nice day." This is made tentative by a tacked-on question: "It's a nice day, isn't it?" or by the interrogative, "Isn't it a nice day?"

A second way to express uncertainty is to circumlocute, and women tend to use "filler" and "hedge" words that undercut ideas so that they may be stated, but not strongly enough to provoke disagreement. Empty adjectives, long stripped of substantive meaning, such as "divine, charming, cute" are all-purpose descriptors attached to nearly any noun. Additionally, meaningless filler expressions such as "well," "you know," "sort of," or "like" punctuate sentences.

Verbal Excess

Related to women's use of tentative expressions and filler words is the last characteristic: a tendency to verbal excess. One kind of excess is sheer verbosity - constructions that use more words than necessary to express a thought. This, of course, inevitably accompanies reliance on filler phrases and is a means of softening direct assertions by circumlocution, or beating around the bush. Another kind of excess is hyperbole or overstatement. Language is hyperbolic when frequent underlining or italicizing of words and expressions occurs, when unremarkable comments end with exclamation points, and when emphatic words are sprinkled throughout.

The issue of cultural conditioning leads to the need for more careful examination of whether (or how) the language of marketing, advertising, business etc. perpetuates/changes sexrole stereotypes. Despite objectively similar roles that can be taken by men or women nowadays, stereotypes about sex-linked appropriate behaviors - including language persist and are embodied in advertisements, business letters and other documents. Even though women have entered the work force and educational institutions in record numbers in the past decades, old habits built into the traditional cultural heritage die hard. The construct of appropriate role behaviors may be changing more slowly than the actual sociocultural changes in role performance.

Gender-Fair Language to Be Used in Business Correspondence

The language used in business correspondence provides an important model for students and the larger community. Word choices often reflect unconscious assumptions about gender roles. As professionals, we all need to examine our language to reduce or eliminate choices that silence, stereotype, or constrain others.

The following examples provide inclusionary alternatives to specific exclusionary wording. Many are matters of vocabulary; others are matters of usage. What follows details choices and recommendations that address the following issues of gender-fair language use:

Eliminate the generic use of 'he' by:

- using plural nouns
- deleting 'he', 'his', and 'him' altogether
- substituting articles ('the', 'a', 'an') for 'his'; and 'who' for 'he'
- substituting 'one', 'we', or 'you'
- minimizing use of indefinite pronouns (e.g., 'everybody', 'someone')
- using the passive voice [use sparingly]
- substituting nouns for pronouns [use sparingly]

Eliminate sexism when addressing persons formally by:

- using 'Ms' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.', even when a woman's marital status is known
- using a married woman's first name instead of her husband's (e.g., "Ms. Annabelle Lee" not "Mrs. Herman Lee")
- using the corresponding title for females ('Ms.', 'Dr.', 'Prof.') whenever a title is appropriate for males
- using 'Dear Colleague' or 'Editor' or 'Professor', etc. in letters to unknown persons (instead of 'Dear Sir', 'Gentlemen')

Eliminate sexual stereotyping of roles by:

- using the same term (which avoids the generic 'man') for both females and males (e.g., 'department chair' or 'chairperson'), or by using the corresponding verb (e.g., 'to chair')
- not calling attention to irrelevancies (e.g., 'lady lawyer', 'male nurse')

Examples:

| Instead of | Use |
|---|---|
| If a student studies hard, he will succeed. | If a student studies hard, he or she will succeed. If a student studies hard, she or he will succeed. Students who study hard will succeed. |

| | |
|---|--|
| The average student is worried about his grades. When the student hands in his paper, grade it immediately. | The average student is worried about grades. When the student hands in the paper, grade it immediately. |
| Each student will do better if he has a voice in the decision. | Students will do better if they have a voice in the decision. |
| When a teacher asks a question, he seeks student response | When you ask your students a question, you are asking for student response. |
| The average citizen pays his taxes promptly. | Taxes are paid promptly by the average citizen |
| When everyone contributes his own ideas, the discussion will be a success. | When all the students contribute their own ideas, the discussion will be a success. When everyone contributes her or his own ideas, the discussion will be a success. |
| mankind man's achievements the best man for the job man the controls man the ticket booth chairman/chairwomen businessman/businesswoman congressman/congresswoman policeman/policewoman fireman mailman | humanity, human beings, people human achievements the best person for the job take charge of staff the ticket booth chair, coordinator, moderator, presiding officer, head, chairperson business executive, manager, businessperson congressional representative police officer firefighter |

| | |
|------------|--|
| stewardess | postal worker, letter carrier flight attendant, steward |
|------------|--|

As educators we must strive to provide gender balance through the careful selection of materials.

- A balance of literature by and about both women and men should be included whenever possible.
- Materials should be chosen to emphasize gender equity and to show males and females in traditional and nontraditional roles.
- Trade books, texts, videos, and other media resources should be chosen to show females and males actively participating in a variety of situations at home, work, or business.
- Present gender-equitable examples by alternating male and female names and by avoiding the use of stereotyped gender roles. When discussing roles traditionally held by males, use examples of females in those roles; use examples of males in roles traditionally held by females.
- Establish collaborative groups composed of both males and females to provide opportunities for all voices to be heard.
- Value intellect; avoid references to appearance and physical attributes.
- Choose females for leadership positions as often as males.
- Avoid comments or humor that demean or stereotype males or females.

Although women now comprise over 50 percent of the work force, they still have a long way to break the invisible barriers of sex stereotypes. Sex discrimination and deregulation have helped women make into the once male-dominated corporate world, but progress is slow.

Studies are currently being conducted to determine whether the effects of low salaries and prestige are a result of sex-biased language. There is reason to believe this is the case since other studies give clear evidence that sex-role stereotypes as well as sex-characteristic stereotypes influence individuals' perception of women in leadership roles. (Stern 2000, Lakoff 1975).

In this context, the selection of words takes on new meaning. When communicating, we should choose words carefully to avoid sex discrimination both in the selection process and by assigning a person – or group – to a leading or subordinate role.

References and bibliography

Andrei-Cocarta, Luminita, Andrei, Sorin Toma, *Effective Corporate Communication*, in Andrei-Cocarta, Luminita et al., *Language, Culture and Change*, Editura Timpul, Iasi 2009.

Enache, Maria, 2009, *Competenta comunicativa si oportunitatile de invatare*, Editura Universitara

Enache, Maria et al. 2005. *Commercial Correspondence*. Editura Universitara

Enache, Maria, Nicolae, Mariana – Linguistic Protectionism – An Approach to the Economic Crisis, in Andrei-Cocarta, Luminita et al., *Language, Culture and Change*, Editura Timpul, Iasi 2009.

Lakoff, Robin. 1975. *Language and Woman's Place*. New York: Harper & Row.

Lakoff, Robin. 2000 *The Language War*. University of California Press.

Miller, Casey, and Swift, Kate. 1980 *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*. New York: Barnes and Noble, Harper & Row.

Miller, Casey, and Swift, Kate. 1976 *Words and Women*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday.

Nicolae, Mariana, 2003, *Strategii pentru success in predare/invatare*, Bucuresti, Editura Afir

Spender, Dale. 1980 *Man Made Language*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Stern, Barbara. 1999. *Gender and Multicultural Issues in Advertising: Stages on the Research Hierarchy*, in *Journal of Advertising* 28 (Spring), 1999.

Simone de Beauvoir. 1949, 1953. *The Second Sex*.

Vetterling-Braggin, 1981 Mary, ed. *Sexist Language: A Modern Philosophical Analysis*. Totowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams and Co.