

Feminism Through Ages - Gender Distinction

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Abstract

Gender distinction in English is traceable to old times past. Moreover the women's empowerment movement in the West is with its recent success. With the result gender markings are directly dropped by the enlightened people in speaking and writing of English. It is the question of giving social equality to women at par with men in the West. Time had changed. The women in the Western countries particularly in Great Britain have had their tremendous advancement in many important spheres including legislative, executive and judiciary of the democratic countries. Accordingly there has been no apparent need to set women apart while addressing them by words or correspondence. The gender distinction was symptomatic of conservative thinking in terms of sexist marking and behaviour reflective of false beliefs. Thus the sexist language with gender markings is a cause and not a result of sexist thinking. Present day English is free from such gender markings. The recent trend is to substitute neutral terms to words and phrases of masculine version. For example the term 'chair person' is to replace 'chairman' and 'chairwoman'. Similarly 'humankind' is to substitute 'mankind'. Direct neutral terms are more suitable. For example 'mariner for seaman, president; convener for chairman.

There are some blind spots to get over. For example a country's ambassador's wife is not to be addressed as 'madam ambassador' since she belongs to no officialdom. How to dissociate gender and sex? It is not easy on all occasions. For example a 'ship' is referred to by the pronoun 'she' and also the moon. The interchangeability of sexes is another problem. The primary purpose is to honour the women's cause for social equality in the matter of getting addressed in social interaction. Etymological sequence of sexist words is to be analyzed perforce in isolation while philological study of words will give out the historical roots of such words. For example 'man' is a word with its origin as 'human being'. In old English 'man' was used commonly for both the sexes. Also the word 'girl' referred to boys as well as girls. 'Man' is derived from 'whifmann'. Hence 'wimmon' or 'wummon' is in old English. The conclusion is that no final say is made available to this question of rephrasing gender markings in English.

Gender Distinction

Introduction

Gender distinction in English is traceable to old times past. Moreover the women's empowerment movement in the West is with its recent success. With the result gender markings are directly dropped by the enlightened people in speaking and writing of English. It is the question of giving social equality to women at par with men in the West. Time had changed. The women in the Western countries particularly in Great Britain have had their tremendous advancement in many important spheres including legislative, executive and judiciary of the democratic countries. Accordingly there has been no apparent need to set women apart while addressing them by words or correspondence. The gender distinction was symptomatic of conservative thinking in terms of sexist marking and behaviour reflective of false beliefs. Thus the sexist language with gender markings is a cause and not a result of sexist thinking. Present day English is free from such gender markings. The recent trend is to substitute neutral terms to words and phrases of masculine version. For

example the term 'chair person' is to replace 'chairman' and 'chairwoman'. Similarly 'humankind' is to substitute 'mankind'. Direct neutral terms are more suitable. For example 'mariner for seaman, president; convener for chairman.

There is a point of criticism against making 'man' entirely masculine. In Old English 'man' has the term to mention men and women alike. 'Wer' of Old English meant a 'male human being' and also a 'wife'. 'Wif ---- with man or mann (a human being) to become 'wifmann', hence wimman or wumman. 'Wer' disappeared giving man especially male sense.

In the Old English the term 'man' was neutral meaning any human being, male or human persons. Thus 'man' meant a male and also a human being. The word girl in the Old English referred to boys and girls alike in common. Therefore the feminists miss the point while objecting to the use of the prefix 'man' to the word mankind. Similarly 'countrymen' indicates all people of the country together with no distinction of the sex.

The linguists divide sexism in language into passive and active categories. Both the divisions refer to the type of language as is used by women in the context of interaction with others particularly men of superior status.

Women are prohibited from using certain kinds of language like swear words or tabooed words. By tradition and practice as in the past women had to use politer verb form. Their sentence patterns are to be longer, less abrupt and more respectful

In the West woman is to be the honourable 'lady'. The feudal sense of Lord and his spouse is suggestive in the word 'lady' bringing social status of honour and prestige. It is appropriate to call the lady professionals as sculptor and asana and the like with no mention of status of sex. They will use language appropriate to the professional needs and vocational situations as freely as men.

There are various forms of active sexism such as '-ess'. This suffix is to follow as in the case of the 'actor' to be 'actress'. 'Judge' is not to be 'woman judge'. Thus men are unmarkable in contra distinction to women who are found marked as always.

1. Feminine words are forms that will have pejorative meaning. For example 'spinster' for female is in contrast to 'bachelor' for man. 'Spinster' may be suggestive of social distinction and 'bachelor' will mean juvenile process.
2. There are some words and the expressions in English which are essentially masculine. For example there are no equivalents of feminine expression to the words like 'masterful' or 'masterly'. Such words are in masculine expression of skill or power. It is inescapably coined that way.
3. 'Mankind' is a neutral word but it is with the suffix 'man' suggestive of masculine status. Therefore it is to be out of favour with the feminists. To 'man the ship' is the common expression. It is to be replaced by 'to person the ship'. But 'person' has 'son' as the masculine suffix. Therefore it backfires.

If this kind of argument is taken a far, there will be chaotic situation in neutralizing the force of feminist demand of asking for eschewing all the traces of masculinity in the expression of English words. There is to

be moderation in this context. An ambassador's wife need not be addressed as 'madam ambassador'. 'Honourable lady' will do well as 'Her Majesty' does. 'Your Excellency' is the formal addressing which is enough and common for both the sexes. Mr. President of the United States will have his consort addressed as the First Lady and not as Mrs. President. In all tolerant indulgence Ms will be the most suitable substitute for Mr, Mrs, and Miss.

The users of the English language particularly the professionals like practicing engineers are to be vigilant while using English in addressing female personages in official status and power in the West and the East. 'Respected madam' will do well in case of the Western clients more appropriately than 'Dear madam' as in India.

The conclusion is that there will be no excuse for the ignorance of refined expressions as related to public sentiments in the West. Therefore it will be too diplomatic to be aware of such changes in gender markings, protocol and other cross-cultural barriers in the use of business English in particular. This will ensure the aspiring professionals like engineers the higher degree of unoffending communicative competence along with dependable employability and prospects of career success.

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