

Chapter 4

Language and Feminism

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the various ways in which language portrays a negative image of women. Some of the ways in which language has been found wanting in as far as women are concerned are outlined as follows: Language creates false gender neutrality as this purported neutrality ends up showing a bias towards maleness anyway. Language generally makes women invisible and always overshadowed by men. It makes maleness the standard measure of humanity, and maturity is all about and thus maleness is seen as the norm. Sex-marking also encourages male visibility and powerlessness of women in a male-dominated world. The world is seen through an oppressive male worldview. Reform efforts have been piecemeal and as such have largely failed to reach the desired destination. The chapter closes by discussing the concepts 'woman' and 'generics' which have been found to be controversial in the life of women.

4.0 INTRODUCTION

Feminists argue that language creates a negative impression of women. They argue that various human languages masquerade as gender neutral while in fact encoding a world view on which maleness is the norm and women are either invisible or represented as the other. Some feminists claim that males, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought and reality.

The view of language as a vehicle for the perpetuation of women's subordination was prevalent in the 1980s. Writers gave attention to the sexism implicit in language that contains purportedly generic uses of masculine terms, especially the supposedly neutral 'man' and male pronouns in some languages.

One question raised was whether concerted attempts to avoid sexism in speech might themselves constitute a feminist advance, or whether language's working to women's detriment is merely a symptom of existing power relations. On the assumption that language can be a site of oppression in its own right, some argued that women's enfranchisement—whether as political subjects or as knowledgeable beings—required women to find a distinctive voice. The use of language as it is passed down to her can seem to falsify a woman's experience, and present an obstacle to discussing it authentically. Women have been described as 'silenced'.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-4090-9.ch004

Language and Feminism

This unit discusses some of the language issues of concern to feminists including what they call false gender neutrality, followed by invisibility of women, maleness as norm, sex-marking, encoding of male worldview, reform efforts, maleness of language, metaphor, philosophy of language, the category 'woman' debate and generics respectively. The objectives of the chapter are to identify ways in which language creates negative impression of women; discuss feminists claims on the relationship between language and women; and distinguish between the various ways in which language has negative impression of women.

4.1 FALSE GENDER-NEUTRALITY

According to Saul (2017), there has been a great deal of feminist concern over the supposedly gender-neutral use of terms like 'he' and 'man'. It is believed that these terms have both gender-specific meanings, as in sentences (1) and (2), and gender-neutral ones, as in sentences (3) and (4).

1. He drank the wine.
2. A man went into a bar.
3. When a student comes into the room, he should pick up a handout.
4. Man is a primate.

Feminists, however, have pointed out that even the supposed gender-neutral meanings of these terms are not really gender-neutral. Janice Moulton (1981a) and Adele Mercier (1995) provide examples in which there is no doubt that a gender-neutral meaning is intended, but this meaning seems unavailable. As a result, the sentences seem ill-formed:

5. Man has two sexes; some men are female.
6. Man breastfeeds his young.

We are, then, making a classificatory error if we claim that 'man' and 'he' are gender-neutral terms. In order to avoid such a classificatory error, we need to do more careful work on what the meanings of these terms actually are. Perhaps the meaning of 'he' that has been called 'gender-neutral' is not really gender-neutral, but something much more complex. Mercier suggests, for example, that we should understand the 'gender-neutral' use of 'man' as referring to either (a) a person or persons of unknown sex; or (b) males or a combination of males and females. This explains why 'men' in (5) and 'man' in (6) are anomalous: these terms are being used to refer exclusively to persons known to be female.

The supposed 'gender-neutral' meaning of these terms, then, is not truly gender neutral. But, on its own, this does not show that there is a problem with those uses that have traditionally been classified as gender-neutral, as in sentences (3) and (4).

4.2 INVISIBILITY OF WOMEN

Feminist concerns, however, go beyond mere classificatory ones. Feminists have also argued that terms like 'he' and 'man' contribute to making women invisible, that is, to obscuring women's importance,

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