

Man Made Language

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SECOND EDITION

PANDORA

London Boston Sydney Wellington

Language and Reality: Who Made the World?



'The objects and events of the world do not present themselves to us ready classified', states James Britton (1975). 'The categories into which they are divided are the categories into which *we divide them*' (p. 23). My question which arises from this statement is not whether it is an accurate assessment, for I readily accept that language is a powerful determinant of reality, but who is the *WE* to whom James Britton refers? Who are these people who 'make the world' and what are the principles behind their division, organization and classification?

Although not explicitly stated, Britton is referring to males. It is men who have made the world which women must inhabit, and if women are to begin to make their own world, it is necessary that they understand some of the ways in which such *creation* is accomplished. This means exploring the relationship of language and reality.

Susanne Langer (1976) has pointed out that human beings are symbolizing creatures (it is, perhaps, our capacity to symbolize that differentiates us from other species), and we are constantly engaged in the process of producing symbols as a means of categorizing and organizing our world. But it would be foolish to have complete faith in the system of order we have constructed because it is, from the outset, imperfect, only ever serving as an approximation. Yet it seems that we are foolish: we do 'trust' the world order we have created with our symbols and we frequently allow these representations to beguile us into accepting some of the most bizarre rules for making sense of the world. It is our capacity to symbolize and the use (or misuse) we make of the symbols we construct that constitutes the area of language, thought and reality

It is because we can be seduced by language that a debate has been waged for many years on the relationship of language, thought and reality. On the one hand there is considerable evidence that not all human beings are led to the same view of the world by the same physical evidence and on the other hand is the explanation – namely the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis – that this is because of language. It is language which determines the limits of our world, which constructs our reality.

One of the tantalizing questions which has confronted everyone from philosophers to politicians is the extent to which human beings can ‘grasp things as they really are’; yet in many ways this is an absurd question that could arise only in a monodimensional reality which subscribed to the concept of their being only *one* way that ‘things’ can be. Even if there were only one way, it is unlikely that as human beings we would be able to grasp that ‘pure’, ‘objective’ form, for all we have available is symbols, which have their own inherent limitations, and these symbols and representations are already circumscribed by the limitations of our own language.

Language is *not* neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas. It is itself a shaper of ideas, it is the programme for mental activity (Whorf, 1976). In this context it is nothing short of ludicrous to conceive of human beings as capable of grasping things as they really are, of being impartial recorders of their world. For they themselves, or some of them, at least, have created or constructed that world and they have reflected themselves within it.

Human beings cannot impartially describe the universe because in order to describe it they must first have a classification system. But, paradoxically, once they have that classification system, once they have a language, *they can see only certain arbitrary things.*

Such an understanding is not confined to linguistics. The sciences of physiology and biology have also helped to substantiate – sometimes inadvertently – the false nature of impartiality or objectivity. Evidence gathered from these disciplines demonstrates that we ourselves come into the process of organizing and describing the universe. Unfortunately for those advocates of the human capacity to ‘grasp things as they really are’ there is one basic flaw in their argument – they have failed to take into account that the brain can neither see nor hear :

To speak metaphorically, the brain is quite blind and deaf, it has no direct contact with light or sound, but instead has to acquire all its information about the state of the outside world in the form of

pulses of bio-electrical activity pumped along bundles of nerve fibres from the external surface of the body, its interface with the environment (F. Smith, 1971: 82).

The brain too, has to interpret: it too can only deal in symbols and never know the 'real' thing. And the programme for encoding and decoding those symbols, for translating and calculating, is set up by the language which we possess. What we *see* in the world around us depends in a large part on the principles we have encoded in our language:

each of us has to *learn to see*. The growth of every human being is a slow process of learning 'the rules of seeing', without which we could not in any ordinary sense see the world around us. There is no reality of familiar shapes, colours and sounds to which we merely open our eyes. The information that we receive through our senses from the material world around us has to be interpreted according to certain human rules, before what we ordinarily call 'reality' forms (Williams, 1975: 33).

When one principle that has been encoded in our language (and thought) is that of sexism, the implications for 'reality' can readily be seen. So too can the implications for 'objectivity', because 'scientific method' has been frequently accepted as being 'above' fallible human processes and, because its truths have been paraded as incontestable, many individuals have had little confidence in their own experience when this has clashed with prevailing scientific 'truths'.

It is not just feminists who have come to challenge some of the accepted notions about the impartiality of science and who have focused on the relationship of language, thought and reality – although there are distinctive and additional features of the feminist approach which I will discuss later. There is new interest in such areas as the philosophy or sociology of science in which the question of 'objectivity' is being taken up, and where old answers are being viewed as inadequate and false (Chalmers, 1978; Kuhn, 1972). That science is a dogma, just as were the feudal, clerical and market dogmas which preceded it, that is open to query and to challenge (Young, 1975: 3), is not a traditional evaluation of scientific method, but it is an evaluation that is becoming increasingly more popular. That reason, objectivity, and empiricism have been used to justify 'science' in a way that revelation, divine inspiration and mythology have been used to justify 'religion', is a

factor which has not been explored: yet the parallels exist. It has been just as heretical or crazy to challenge one dogma as it was in the past to challenge the other.

But this is changing. Alan Chalmers (1978), for example, tackles some of the misapprehensions that are held about science and scientific method, whereby the naming of something as 'science' has implied 'some kind of merit, or special kind of reliability' (p. xiii). He too, takes up some of the issues of language, thought and reality when he readily demonstrates (partly by use of a diagram, p. 22) that not all human beings – scientists included – are led to the same view of the world by the same physical evidence, for what observers see when they view an object or event 'is not determined solely by the images on their retinas but depends also on the experience, knowledge, expectations and general inner state of the observer' (p. 24) which, as Chalmers illustrates, may very often be culturally specific and which I would argue is largely determined by language, which is the means of ordering and structuring experiences, knowledge, expectations and inner states.

Chalmers is intent on discrediting the premise that science *begins* with observation and he convincingly points out that this is a fallacy: contrary to the belief of the 'purity' of empiricism, he indicates that 'theory precedes observation' (p. 27) and the types of theories which are culturally available play a substantial role in determining what the observers – empirical scientists among them – can see.

When there are a sexist language and sexist theories culturally available, the observation of reality is also likely to be sexist. It is by this means that sexism can be perpetuated and reinforced as new objects and events, new data, have sexist interpretations projected upon them. Science is no more free of this bias than any other explanatory activity.

It is this recognition that human beings are part of the process of constructing reality and knowledge which has led Dwight Bolinger (1975) to 'reinterpret' our past and to assert that our history can validly be viewed *not* as the progressive intuiting of nature but as exteriorizing a way of looking at things as they are circumscribed by our language. Once certain categories are constructed within the language, we proceed to organize the world according to those categories. We even fail to see evidence which is not consistent with those categories.

This makes language a paradox for human beings: it is both a creative and an inhibiting vehicle. On the one hand it offers immense freedom for it allows us to 'create' the world we live in; that so many different cultures have created so many different 'worlds' is testimony

to this enormous and varied capacity (Berger and Luckmann, 1972, have categorized this aspect of language as 'world openness' p. 69). But on the other hand we are restricted by that creation, limited to its confines, and, it appears, we resist, fear and dread any modifications to the structures we have initially created, even though they are 'arbitrary', approximate ones. It is this which constitutes a language trap.

It could be said that out of nowhere we invented sexism, we created the arbitrary and approximate categories of male-as-norm and female as deviant. A most original, imaginative creation. But, having constructed these categories in our language and thought patterns, we have now been trapped for we are most reluctant to organize the world any other – less arbitrary or imperfect – way. Indeed, it could even be argued that the trap which we have made is so pervasive that we cannot envisage a world constructed on any other lines.

It is, however, at this point that feminist insights into language, thought and reality, are differentiated. While it could be said that we invented sexism from out of nowhere and utilized the principle in encoding reality, I doubt that feminists would make such a statement. While it could be argued that it was mere accident that 'objectivity' and the 'scientific method' came to acquire their meritorious¹ status and while such a discussion could occur without reference to gender, I also doubt whether feminists would completely accept such an explanation. The distinctive and additional feature of feminist analysis of language, thought and reality is that feminists assert that we did *not* create these categories or the means of legitimating them. To return to James Britton's statement at the beginning of this chapter, I would reiterate that it has been the dominant group – in this case, males – who have created the world, invented the categories, constructed sexism and its justification and developed a language trap which is in their interest.

Given that language is such an influential force in shaping our world, it is obvious that those who have the power to make the symbols and their meanings are in a privileged and highly advantageous position. They have, at least, the potential to order the world to suit their own ends, the potential to construct a language, a reality, a body of knowledge in which they are the central figures, the potential to

1 At this point I consulted *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* to find out if the word I wanted was meritorious or meretricious. Obviously it is meritorious: meretricious (the closest entry to my feeling for mentricious) is defined as 'of, befitting a harlot' Now where does that one come from!

legitimate their own primacy and to create a system of beliefs which is beyond challenge (so that their superiority is 'natural' and 'objectively' tested). The group which has the power to ordain the structure of language, thought and reality has the potential to create a world in which they are the central figures, while those who are not of their group are peripheral and therefore may be exploited.

In the patriarchal order this potential has been realized.

Males, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought and reality. Historically it has been the structures, the categories and the meanings which have been invented by males – though not of course by *all* males – and they have then been validated by reference to other males. In this process women have played little or no part. It has been male subjectivity which has been the source of those meanings, including the meaning that their own subjectivity is objectivity. Says Dorothy Smith: 'women have largely been excluded from the work of producing forms of thought and the images and symbols in which thought is expressed and realised', and feminists would state unequivocally that this has been no accident. She indicates how historically males have talked to males and thereby encoded (false) principles in language, thought and reality (1978: 281–2):

This is how a tradition is formed. A way of thinking develops in this discourse through the medium of the printed word as well as in speech. It has questions, solutions, themes, styles, standards, ways of looking at the world. These are formed as the circle of those present builds on the work of the past. From these circles women have been excluded throughout this period in which ideologies become of increasing importance first as a mode of thinking, legitimating and sanctioning a social order, and then as integral in the organisation of society, women have been deprived of the means to participate in creating forms of thought relevant or adequate to express their own experience or to define and raise social consciousness about their situation and concerns. They have never controlled the material or social means to the making of a tradition among themselves or to acting as equals in the ongoing discourse of intellectuals.

This provides a broad outline of the way in which women have been excluded from the production of language, thought and reality. It shows how they have been omitted from the circles in which such forms are produced, and often of course, omitted from consideration by the

members of the circle. It explains why it is possible for women today to generate meanings which are at variance with the patriarchal order and patriarchal tradition. Our foremothers may have generated similar meanings to our own but as a muted group without access to the production of legitimated language their meanings may also have remained invisible.

It is not just the macro-view which Smith puts forward which helps to establish that women have been silent – not just in language, but in thought and reality as well. The micro-view also provides insights into the manner in which patriarchal order has been created. It is possible to find specific examples which illustrate the way in which the dominant group put the principle of sexism into the language: and, as has been indicated, once it is in, it goes on compounding as it is projected on to new objects and events. Once *in*, it is very difficult to get it *out*.

The circumstantial evidence

The evidence for the relationship between sexism and language, and males, has been largely circumstantial: there *is* sexism in the language, it *does* enhance the position of males, and males *have* had control over the production of cultural forms. It therefore seems credible to assume that males have encoded sexism into the language to consolidate their claims of male supremacy. While personally convinced of the legitimacy of this argument, I have also recognized the desirability of being able to provide concrete examples of the process at work. Actually to document the introduction by males of some aspect of sexism into the language, to indicate the way in which males systematically proceeded to embed some form of sexism into language, thought and reality would be to put the discussion of sexism and language on a very different plane. Because I could see the advantages of being able to provide specific instances of male 'intervention', I was more than ready to begin such a search: the problem was, where does one begin?

Although it is not possible to go back to the beginning (earlier than any written records), it is possible to start with sexist examples and to work backwards in the hope of finding records which could pinpoint the introduction by males of specific sexist usages, structures or meanings. The language as it exists today can become the starting point for investigation and using the language itself as a source of evidence is not without precedence. Anthropologists, for example, have long known the

value of language structure in 'cracking the code' of another society even if they have not adopted a comparable approach to their own. Whereas the almost inaccessible meanings of other cultures have sometimes been revealed by clues provided by the language structure, few efforts have been made to locate or interpret any clues which might reveal some of the 'hidden' meanings of our own. That there is no Hebrew word in the old testament for *Goddess*, for example, provides a clue to the meaning of a deity in those times – at least, among those who were engaged in the task of writing (Stone, 1977: 7), but that there is no word in the English language for a strong female (this is discussed more fully in the next chapter) does not seem to have been a factor which has interested many language scholars who wish to know more about our rules for making sense of the world.

Undoubtedly our own meanings are partially hidden from us and it is difficult to have access to them. We may use the English language our whole lives without ever noticing the distortions and omissions; we may never become aware that there is no symbol for women's strength. But although it is not always easy to get outside this language trap, to get outside the limitations of one's own language, it is not impossible. There are clues, if one is prepared to look for them.

Whereas the semantic base of the language is intangible and sometimes difficult to 'catch', the structure of the language is more concrete and more readily traced. When I became interested in locating examples of the male introduction of sexism, I had no preferences for either semantics or structure. While I traced the *meanings* of many different words I could not find more than circumstantial evidence that they were the product of male efforts (dictionary-makers, of course, being primarily male), but in tracing some of the *structures* of the language I was able to find numerous decrees, written down by males, which were directed towards ensuring male primacy within the language. Thanks to the zealous efforts of the prescriptive grammarians, there are accounts of males introducing sexism into the language.

There were also some perceptive writers who were offering clues about the language and who were indicating possible directions for research. In 1971, commenting on the social significance of our language structure, Richard Gilman said that (1971: 40–55)

the nature of most languages tells us more about the hierarchical structure of male-female relationships than all the physical horror stories that could be compiled that our language employs the

words *man* and *mankind* as terms for the whole human race demonstrates that male dominance, the IDEA of masculine superiority is perennial, institutional, and rooted at the deepest level of our historical experience.

With clues such as these offered by Gilman and with language structure appearing to afford far more opportunities for locating male intervention, I began to investigate the use of *man* and *he* for evidence of male effort in the introduction to the language.

To me, it seemed perfectly clear that the use of *man* and *he* as terms to denote a male, but on occasion to encompass a female, was an example of a sexist linguistic structure. Initially I saw it as a convenient means for making women invisible, for *blanketing* them under a male term. I also saw it as a means of creating difficulties for women because representing them with a male symbol on some occasions made this particular linguistic structure ambiguous for them. They were required to ascertain to whom this symbol referred, whereas no such problem existed for males who can never be ambiguous in such structures. If males are present, then males are named, but women are sometimes included in that male name. In order to know the meaning of a particular utterance, such as 'man must work in order to eat', women had to have additional information to determine whether they were included. No man needs to seek further information to establish whether men are included in a reference such as 'love is important for women', for if men were intended to be encompassed the statement would be 'love is important for men'! The use of *man* and *he* to refer also to a woman only creates difficulties for women – which is probably why linguists have never seriously addressed this problem.

Those understandings of the sexist nature of *man* and *he* now seem, in retrospect, to be very elementary and very crude. But that was the point at which I started. I began by trying to cultivate the position of an outsider and by asking myself questions about the significance of *man* and *he* in the English language. What are the implications of a society which has a language based on the premise that the world is male unless proven otherwise? What is the result of eliminating the symbol of woman from the language? What are the effects of making a common linguistic structure ambiguous for half the population?

Such questions are still not considered reasonable by some people who remain convinced that either the use of *man* and *he* to encompass women is insignificant and that any attempts to analyse such usage are

'making mountains out of molehills', or that this is mere linguistic accident (Morgan, 1972) and something we have to put up with; or both! But the introduction of the special use of *man* and *he* – of *he/man* language as Wendy Martyna (1978) so aptly puts it – was neither insignificant nor accidental and once encoded in the language it had many repercussions for thought and reality.

He/man language

The rationalization that 'man embraces woman' is a relatively recent one in the history of our language. It was a practice that was virtually unknown in the fifteenth century. The first record we appear to have is that of a Mr Wilson in 1553 who insisted that it was more *natural* to place the man *before* the woman, as for example in male and female, husband and wife, brother and sister, son and daughter. Implicit in his insistence that males take precedence is the belief that males 'come first' in the natural order, and this is one of the first examples of a male arguing for not just the superiority of males but that this superiority should be reflected in the structure of the language.

Thomas Wilson was writing for an almost exclusively male audience, and an upper-class or educated male audience at that. Those who were going to read his words of wisdom – and to confirm or refute them – were men who were interested in grammar and rhetoric. Judging from the success of this particular ploy, it appears that Mr Wilson's audience appreciated the 'logic' of this particular rationale, and accepted it.

If females had been familiar with this decree – which seems unlikely, given that females of all classes were systematically denied access to education – they might have protested that the so-called natural order posited by Mr Wilson did not appear so unquestionably natural to them. But women were not included in the production of grammatical rules and their views on the logic of this usage go unrecorded. Their muted state is reproduced.

The records of 1646 reveal that the concept of the natural precedence of males having encountered no opposition – from males – has actually gained ground. According to one scholarly grammarian, Joshua Poole, it was not only natural that the male should take 'pride of place' it was also *proper* because, in his line of reasoning, the male gender was the *worthier* gender. He seems to have offered little evidence for his claim, but his male colleagues do not appear to have disputed it.

The seal was set on male superiority, however, when in 1746 John Kirkby formulated his 'Eighty Eight Grammatical Rules'. These rules, the product of Mr Kirkby's own imagination, contained one that indicated the esteem in which he held females: Rule Number Twenty One stated that the male gender was *more comprehensive* than the female.

This represents a significant departure from the simple proposition that males are more important. It is a move towards the concept that male is the universal category, that male is the norm. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *comprehensive* as 'including much', so Mr Kirkby was arguing that man included much more than woman because man was more comprehensive and this, according to Mr Kirkby's reasoning, should be encoded within the languages for all to comply with. As he could not have been arguing that there were more men than women, he must have been using some criteria other than number for his evidence of the more comprehensive nature of man. One is left with the conclusion that Mr Kirkby believed that each man represented much more than each woman and that it was legitimate to encode this personal belief in the structure of the language and to formulate a grammatical rule which would put the users of the language in the 'wrong' if they did not adhere to this belief.

That each man included much more than each woman was a personal opinion that Mr Kirkby was entitled to hold. It was his generation of meaning and it reflects his own perspective on the world and his assessment of his own place within that world. The activity which he was engaging in is one which human beings engage in constantly every day of their lives as they attempt to project meaning into their existence. But Mr Kirkby was a member of the dominant group and had the opportunity – experienced by few – of making his subjective meanings the decreed reality.

He handed down Rule Number Twenty One to a male world of grammarians who were not averse to sharing his assumptions about the centrality of the male and who were not reluctant to insist that 'non-males' – or, as it has become in Mr Kirkby's rule, 'minus males' – also share these assumptions. There is an example of one sex encoding the language to enhance its own image while the other sex is obliged to use this language which diminishes, or conflicts with its image.

Rule Number Twenty One is one man's bias, verified by the bias of other men, and imposed upon women. They did not participate in its production, they do not benefit from its use. It was a sexist principle

encoded in the language by males and which today exerts a considerable influence over thought and reality by preserving the categories of male and minus male.

During Mr Kirkby's time, most people did not modify their language use to accommodate his rule. Although he wrote for such a select audience, even many males remained oblivious to his rule. It may have served to reinforce hierarchical distinctions among those who 'knew' that the use of *he/man* included women on the 'grammatically objective grounds' that *he/man* was more comprehensive, but it was not taken up avidly by the whole population. But the rule was there, it had been recorded, and it was extremely useful for the nineteenth-century grammarians who vehemently took it up and insisted on rigid adherence to this rule in the name of grammatical correctness – another invention of the dominant group which legitimates their prejudice!

Before the zealous practices of the nineteenth-century prescriptive grammarians, the common usage was to use *they* for sex-indeterminable references. It still is common usage, even though 'grammatically incorrect': for example, it is not uncommon to say 'Anyone can play if *they* learn' or 'Everyone has *their* rights' Then – and now – when the sex of a person is unknown, speakers may use *they*, rather than the supposedly correct *he* in their reference.

To the grammarians, however, this was incorrect and intolerable. When the sex is unknown the speaker should use *he* – because it is the more comprehensive term. It is also, of course, the term which makes males visible, and this is not just a coincidence.

Users of a language are, however, sometimes reluctant to make changes which are decreed from above (see also p. 153 for women's reaction), and it is interesting to note just how much effort has been expended on trying to coerce speakers into using *he/man* as generic terms. As Ann Bodine (1975) has noted, using *they* as a singular is still alive and well, 'despite almost two centuries of vigorous attempts to analyze and regulate it out of existence' on the ostensible grounds that it is incorrect. And what agencies the dominant group has been able to mobilize in this task! Bodine goes on to say that the survival of *they* as a singular 'is all the more remarkable considering the weight of virtually the entire educational and publishing establishment has been behind the attempt to eradicate it' (p. 131). One is led to ask who it is who is resisting this correctness?

But the history of *he/man* does not end here. It has not just been the

educational and publishing establishment that has worked towards establishing its primacy. The male grammarians who were incensed with the 'misuse' of *they*, were instrumental in securing the 1850 Act of Parliament which legally insisted that *he* stood for *she* (Bodine, 1975)!

The introduction and legitimation of *he/man* was the result of deliberate policy and was consciously intended to promote the primacy of the male as a category. If there are people today who are unaware of the significance of *he/man*, I do not think that some of the male grammarians who promoted its use were quite so unaware. The tradition of men talking to men, of men appealing to like-thinking men for validation of their opinions and prejudices, is one which can be traced in the writings of grammarians, and one which continues today. There is still a closed circle. We have inherited men's grammatical rules, and as Julia Stanley says (1975: 3):

these 'fixed and arbitrary rules' date from the first attempts to write English grammars in the sixteenth century and the usage that is still perpetuated in modern textbooks merely reflects the long tradition of male presumption and arrogance. When a contemporary writer L. E. Sissman says that the sentence 'Everyone knows *he* has to decide for *himself*' is both 'innocuous' and 'correct', he is merely appealing for authority to the men who have gone before him.

We cannot appeal to the women who have gone before. As a muted group we have no record of their thoughts – or of their objections – on this topic.

As the dominant group, males were in the position to encode forms which enhanced their status, to provide the justification for those forms, and to legitimate those forms. At no stage of this process were females in a position to promote alternatives, or even to disagree. To my knowledge there has never been an influential female grammarian and there were certainly no female Members of Parliament to vote against the 1850 Act. The production of this linguistic form – and the effects it has had on thought and reality – has been in the hands of males.

It is worth remembering this when encountering the resistance to changes which feminists are seeking. Currently, when they are trying to eliminate this practice of using *man* to symbolize *woman*, they often meet the objection that they are 'tampering' with the language. If one accepts that the language is the property of males then this objection is

no doubt valid. But if the objection is based on the understanding that the language is pure and unadulterated then it is not at all valid. Feminists are simply doing what males have done in the past: they are trying to produce their *own* linguistic forms which do not diminish them. In this case it requires the removal of an 'artificial' and unjustifiable rule, invented by some male grammarians and sanctioned by other males, in the interest of promoting their own primacy. Feminists are trying to remove the 'tamperings' of males who have gone before.

Think male for man!

The task of finding males in the act of structuring sexism into the language has been only partially completed by documenting the introduction of sexism into the structure of the language. In order to appreciate the full significance of this act it is necessary to look at the effects that *he/man* has had upon thought and reality.

Man (and *he*) is in constant use as a term which supposedly includes females, and one of the outcomes of this practice has been to plant *man* uppermost in our minds. There is quite a lot of evidence which suggests that people think *male* when they use the term *man* and one of the best illustrations that I have come across of this process at work is that provided by Elaine Morgan. Because she makes the point so well, I will quote her case in full (1972: 2-3):

I have considerable admiration for scientists in general and for evolutionists and ethologists in particular, and though I think they have sometimes gone astray, it has not been purely through prejudice. Partly it is due to sheer semantic accident, the fact that man is an ambiguous term. It means the species: it also means the male of the species. If you write a book about man or conceive a theory about man you cannot avoid using the word. You cannot avoid using a pronoun as a substitute for the word, and you will use the pronoun *he* as a simple matter of linguistic convenience. But before you are halfway through the first chapter a mental image of this evolving creature begins to form in your mind. It will be a male image and he will be the hero of the story; everything and everyone else in the story will relate to him. A very high proportion of thinking is androcentric (male centered) in the same way as pre-Copernican thinking was

geocentric. It's just as hard for man to break the habit of thinking of himself as central to the species as it was to break the habit of thinking of himself as central to the universe. He sees himself quite unconsciously as the main line of evolution with a female satellite revolving around him as the moon revolves around the earth

The longer I went on reading his own books about himself, the more I longed to find a volume that would begin: 'When the first ancestor of the human race descended from the trees, she had not yet developed the mighty brain that was to distinguish her so sharply from other species'

Here Elaine Morgan has begun to explore the relationship of sexist language to thought and reality and the fact that many people get a shock, a clash of images when they encounter her last sentence, is a measure of the extent to which we have been encouraged to think and to see male, by the use of the term *man*. And what Morgan has understood, many others have documented empirically.

Alleen Pace Nilsen (1973) found that young children thought that *man* meant male people in sentences such as 'man needs food' As Elaine Morgan hypothesized, Linda Harrison found that science students – at least – thought male when discussing the evolution of man; they had little appreciation of the female contribution even when explicitly taught it (1975): J. Schneider and Sally Hacker (1973) found that college students also thought male when confronted with such titles as Political Man and Urban Man. Unless students are unrepresentative of our society – an unlikely possibility – there seems to be considerable empirical evidence to suggest that the use of the symbol *man* is accompanied, not surprisingly, by an image of male.

The relationship of language, thought and reality is more complex than a one-to-one correspondence of symbol and image, but this does serve as a starting point from which to ask questions. If both sexes have an image of male when they use the term *man*, does this have different repercussions for females who are excluded from the imagery than it does for males who are included? Are females – or males – even aware that females are excluded? And what effect does this male imagery have on our 'rules of seeing'? Do we project male images on to the objects and events of the world, are we 'trapped' into seeing male when without the particular blinkers provided by our language we might discern female images in the world we inhabit?

The answers to some of these questions are still a matter for conjecture. The answers to others are more readily available.

By promoting the use of the symbol *man* at the expense of *woman* it is clear that the visibility and primacy of males is supported. We learn to see the male as the worthier, more comprehensive and superior sex and we divide and organize the world along these lines. And, according to Linda Harrison and Wendy Martyna – who went slightly further in their research than other investigators who were exploring the links between male symbols and images – females understand that they are not represented in *he/man* usage; both Harrison and Martyna found that males used *man* more often than females and Martyna attempted to discover the basis for this choice.

When Wendy Martyna asked people in her sample what they thought of when they used the symbol *man*, the males stated that they thought of themselves. This was not the case for females. The females said they did not think of themselves, they did not use the term in relation to themselves, hence they used *he/man* less frequently than males. There is irony in the acknowledgment of females that they only used the terms *he/man* at all because they had been taught that it was grammatically correct! From this, Martyna concludes that 'Males may be generating a sex specific use of *he*, one based on male imagery, while females are generating a truly generic *he*, one based on grammatical standards of correctness' (Martyna, 1978). How convenient if this is the case!

The findings of Harrison and Martyna also raise another interesting possibility. When women use *he/man*, they do so because they perceive it – erroneously – as being grammatically correct. But they use these symbols much less frequently than males. Perhaps when they choose not to use it, women are the 'offenders' who are using *they* 'incorrectly'; perhaps it has been women who have resisted in part the prescriptive grammarians' injunctions and have kept *they* alive and well, precisely because they can use it without conjuring up male images and so do not feel excluded by the term.

The hypothesis of Wendy Martyna, that men use *he/man* because it includes them and women attempt to avoid using it because it excludes them, brings together the two research areas of sexism and language and sex differences in language use. It supports the Ardener model of dominant/muted groups, indicating the way in which males can construct language so that it provides positive reinforcement of their own identity while requiring females to accommodate and transform

those usages. It demonstrates the 'necessary indirectness' of expression for females. That there may be a mismatch between the models of the world which females generate and the surface structure which males control is a contention not without support in the light of Martyna's findings.

When the symbol *he/man* disposes us to think male, women who are required to use those symbols are required to think again. This is an extra activity, one which males are not called upon to perform. As members of the dominant group, having ascertained that their male identity is constant, males are not required to modify their understandings: they are never referred to as *she/woman*. But having ascertained their female identity women must constantly be available – again – for clues as to whether or not they are encompassed in a reference, for sometimes they are included in the symbol *he/man*, and sometimes they are not. What the dominant group can take for granted is problematic to the muted group and this could be another means whereby they are kept muted.

There's many a slip ...

It is not just that women do not see themselves encompassed in the symbol *he/man*: men do not see them either. (It is unlikely that any male, not just those in Martyna's sample, would have an image of female to accompany the symbol *he/man*.) The introduction of *he/man* into the structure of the language has helped to ensure that neither sex has a proliferation of female images: by such means is the *invisibility* of the female constructed and sustained in our thought systems and our reality.

That males do not see females in the symbol *he/man* is an hypothesis that has been put to the test and has been supported. Muriel Schulz (1978) examined the writings of many leading sociologists – past and present – who ostensibly included females in their analyses of mankind and she found that in many instances there was a consistent image in language, thought – and reality – and it was a male-only image. If female imagery impinged at all upon the thought processes of the following lecturer – who was delivering a lecture entitled 'The Images of Man' – he would not have been able to make the statements that he did (1978 1):

'How does Man see himself? As a salesman? A doctor? A dentist?' (So far the speaker could be using Man generically, referring to women as well as to men.) 'As far as sexuality goes,' he continued, 'the Kinsey reports on the activities of the American male surely affect his self-image in this regard' (It becomes clear that the reference has been masculine all along..

It is these unintentional disclosures which are an index to the imagery which is operating, for few writers/speakers who are concerned with *mankind* would make specific statements that they do not include women; on the contrary, my experience has been that of being patronizingly informed on many occasions that 'Of course I mean women as well when I say *men*: it's just a figure of speech. *Everyone knows that man embraces woman.*' Everyone might be *told* that man embraces woman but everyone certainly does not operate this rule, as many examples can illustrate.

The effect of this rule that *man* means *woman* is to put women on the 'defensive' – not just because they are required to glean additional information, but also because in the process of gathering that information – for example, 'Are you including *women* in your discussion of *mankind*?' – they are frequently treated as unreasonable. Given the ambiguity of the symbols *he/man* for women, it is most reasonable to clarify the context, but their efforts are not always viewed in this light and on more than one occasion I have been treated as 'stupid' when I made the reasonable request to determine whether I was included in a reference.

The 'slips' where speakers reveal that it is male and male-only imagery which accompanies *he/man* are not isolated and rare. As Muriel Schulz indicates, examples abound in almost any collection of reputable writings. Alma Graham has also done research in this area and indicates that many males 'give themselves away', for even while they are protesting that they are including females their usage reveals quite the opposite (1975:62):

In practice, the sexist assumption that man is a species of males becomes the fact. Erich Fromm certainly seemed to think so when he wrote that man's 'vital interests' were 'life, food, access to females etc.' Loren Easley implied it when he wrote of man that 'his back aches, he ruptures easily, his women have difficulties in childbirth' If these writers had been using *man* in the sense of the human species rather than males, they would have written that

man's vital interests are life, food and access to the opposite sex, and that man suffers backaches, ruptures easily and has difficulties in giving birth.

It is because *man* evokes male imagery that the very statement of Graham's that 'man has difficulties in giving birth' strikes us as unusual. Like the statement from Elaine Morgan that the first ancestor of the human race had not yet developed *her* mighty brain when she descended from the trees, we encounter this clash of images. If *man* did encompass female imagery, there would be no such clash.

This provides another means for testing the validity of the assertion that *man* includes *woman*. Theoretically, if *man* does represent the species then the symbol should be applicable to the activities of all human beings. On the other hand if *man* does mean male then there will be a violation of the semantic rules when the term is applied to activities that are uniquely female. This test is not difficult to undertake and it yields some interesting data.

We can say that 'man makes wars' and that 'man plays football' and that 'he is an aggressive animal' without there being any clash of images even though we recognize that such statements generally only apply to half the population. But the human species does a great deal more than make wars and play football, and half the population, at least in our society, has been labelled 'passive' rather than aggressive. The human species also produces children and cares for them, yet what happens when we use *man* to refer to these equally human activities?

Can we say without a clash of images that *man* devotes more than forty hours a week to housework or that *man* lives an isolated life when engaged in child rearing in our society? A note of discord is struck by these statements and it is because *man* – despite the assurance of male grammarians – most definitely means male and evokes male imagery. (Miller and Swift, 1976: 25–6):

One may be saddened but not surprised at the statement 'man is the only primate that commits rape.' Although as commonly understood it can apply to only half the human population, it is nevertheless semantically acceptable. But 'man being a mammal breastfeeds his young' is taken as a joke.

The joke is the incongruity which is inherent in *man* performing a specifically female task. There would be no joke at all if *man* were a genuine generic and included the female instead of being a pseudo-

generic. Unfortunately, the 'joke' is on women who have been systematically eliminated from language, and consequently from thought and reality. I would suggest that if it were ordinarily possible to make statements such as 'man has been engaged in a constant search to control his fertility', we would have a very different language and a very different reality. We would have one where females were visible – and audible – and we would not be able to divide the sexes into dominant/muted groups.

The effects of *he/man* language are considerable – though different – for both sexes. This is literally a man-made product which serves to construct and reinforce the divisions between the dominant and muted groups. Such a small 'device', such a little 'tampering' with the language – but with what enormous ramifications for the inequality of the sexes!

Through the introduction of *he/man*, males were able to take another step in ensuring that in the thought and reality of our society it is the males who become the foreground while females become the blurred and often indecipherable background. *He/man* makes males linguistically visible and females linguistically invisible. It promotes male imagery in everyday life at the expense of female imagery so that it seems reasonable to assume the world is male until proven otherwise. It reinforces the belief of the dominant group, that they, males, are the universal, the central, important category so that even those who are not members of the dominant group learn to accept this reality. It predisposes us to see more male in the world we inhabit, so that we can, for example, project male images on to our past and allow females to go unnoticed; we can construct our theories of the past, including evolutionary ones, formulating explanations that are consistent only with male experience. (Elaine Morgan, 1972, shows just what different knowledge is constructed when a female image is kept in the foreground.)

He/man also makes women outsiders, and not just metaphorically. Through the use of *he/man* women cannot take their existence for granted: they must constantly seek confirmation that they are included in the *human* species.

The outsiders

Sheila Rowbotham (1973a) has touched upon this problem. 'Now *she*

represents a woman but *he* is mankind', says Rowbotham, and 'If *she* enters mankind *she* loses herself in *he*' (p. 33). As Gilman has also pointed out, this 'simple' device of having the name of half the population serve for the whole population as well makes it very difficult for the half who are excluded for they are without a full name, without a full identity. The only way women can achieve humanity is by labelling themselves as *man* and as Rowbotham indicates this means losing their identity as *woman*.

'Reversal of roles' has often been useful as a consciousness-raising device, as a means of getting beyond the limitations of the language trap, and, in order to elaborate on the significance of being unable to assume full membership of humanity, a few researchers have attempted to reverse the situation and to find out what happens when the dominant group encounter this – for them, unusual and artificial – situation, of being excluded from a reference. As Casey Miller and Kate Swift found, the men did not like it. They protested vigorously. And of course they invoked the argument invented and used by their forefathers, that it was grammatically incorrect to leave men out.

Miller and Swift (1976) have documented the affront to male dignity which was the outcome of referring to elementary and secondary schoolteachers as *she*. During the 1960s the minority of males in the elementary schoolteaching profession began to protest loudly about this injustice and were 'complaining that references to the teacher as *she* were responsible in part for their poor public image and consequently in part, for their low salaries' (p. 33). One remedy for this situation would have been to work towards enhancing the image of women, for, after all, the majority of the profession were female. But this solution did not seem to occur to the angry male schoolteachers who were concerned with getting themselves, and their concomitant male prestige, into the picture. One such teacher, speaking at the National Education Association Representative Assembly, stated that referring to men as *she* was 'incorrect and improper use of the English language', and that while *she* continued to be used when there were males in the profession, 'the interests of neither the women, nor of the men, in our profession are served by grammatical usage which conjures up an anachronistic image of the nineteenth century school marm' (Miller and Swift, 1976: 33-4).

These male teachers wished to completely dissociate themselves from the negative female imagery that was evoked with the use of *she*: it was positive male imagery which they wanted and so they proposed on

'objective', 'correct' grounds that the women should be referred to as *he*. (Miller and Swift, 1976: 34):

There is the male-as-norm argument in a nutshell. Although the custom of referring to elementary and secondary school teachers as *she* arose because most of them were women, it becomes 'grammatically incorrect and improper' as soon as men enter the field. Women teachers are still in the majority but it is neither incorrect nor improper to exclude them linguistically.

I have also observed that males are likely to become distressed when they are excluded from a reference. Perhaps this is because the situation is unfamiliar, or perhaps it is because they are not used to dealing with the ambiguity ('Do you mean men when you use the term *sisterhood*?'), or perhaps it is because they appreciate that in a society predicated on male primacy it is a subversive act to promote female imagery at the expense of males. Regardless of the reason, however, there is little doubt in my mind that males are generally distressed when they are excluded from a reference, and yet those same males will often not acknowledge that female exclusion from a reference could cause comparable difficulties for females.

Within the classroom I have set up my own experiments (see Spender, 1980). I gave a mixed-sex class of thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds grammatical 'exercises' in which the point was, at first, to remove females from the reference. During this period the class was quite co-operative and both sexes appeared to have no difficulties with the task. But then I modified the exercise and asked the students to remove males from the references and, at this, the male students protested. They became hostile and some of them left the class rather than continue with what they rationally declared to be stupid and unfair exercises. They too were very affronted when rendered invisible.

Socially, it is quite difficult to exclude males from linguistic references because so rare is this occurrence that listeners assume that any speaker who refers to males as *she/woman* is mentally disturbed. Given our language and resultant thought and reality it would be such a fundamental and profound error to refer to males as *she/woman* that no speaker could do it unintentionally. Such usage does violate the semantic rules and people who do not follow the semantic rules do not make sense. This is an example of yet another sanction for the perpetuation of the use of *he/man*.

The dice are loaded against women. Almost every reasonable protest

that women can make about the use of *he/man* can be countered conveniently by man-made objective rules – such as grammatical rules of correctness. And frequently women have bowed to the wisdom which is ostensibly enshrined in those rules. But how logical, rational, or objective are these rules which men have devised for eliminating females from language, thought and reality?

Male subjectivity

Males made up the rules of prescriptive grammar and males are still in the main the custodians of those rules; it is therefore unlikely that male grammarians will issue a review of their own inadequacies. Happily, however, Julia Penelope (Stanley, 1975) has developed a feminist critique of the work of male grammarians and has provided many useful insights in the process.

One of the basic assumptions of the male grammarians has been that the English language possesses *natural* gender. When a language has *natural* gender, objects are labelled according to their sex – that is, they can be feminine, masculine or neuter – and this is in contrast to languages which possess *grammatical* gender (French and German, for example) where there is no relationship between the sex of the object and the gender to which it is linguistically allocated.

For example, in German, where there is grammatical gender, a tree is referred to as masculine, a tomcat as feminine and a wife as neuter. English used to have grammatical gender (the Anglo-Saxon gender allocation was similar to that of modern German), but it has given way to natural gender which the male grammarians have frequently posited as an improvement because it eliminates the confusion that can arise when sex and gender are not correlated.

But one significant factor which has been overlooked by male grammarians is that English possesses *natural* gender only if *one is male!*

It is easy to see how male grammarians could have fallen into this language trap of their own making, for their *he/man* symbol has worked not only with the rest of the population, but with them as well. They have assumed the centrality of the male and built their theories upon it, and those theories do not look nearly so objective and reasonable when their assumptions are revealed as mistaken. English does *not* have natural gender unless the population is composed exclusively of males.

There is nothing *natural* in being a female and being referred to as *he/man*. There is just as much confusion, and just as much 'artificiality' as there is in referring to a tomcat as *she*. In fact, it could be argued that for the female half of the population there is even greater confusion than that caused by grammatical gender, because they have constantly been informed by grammarians that English possesses natural gender and there is an expectation that sex and gender should correspond.

There may be no confusion for males with the gender system of the English language because they are always referred to as *he/man*, and so for them natural gender may indeed be an improvement. There is no ambiguity created for males by the use of *he/man* to refer to men and sometimes to woman, so it is understandable that this has never been raised as an issue by male grammarians for whom *natural* gender has been *male*. But it should suggest to females that unless they are prepared to believe that the language is the property of males they should have little regard for the male grammarians' subjective invention of grammatical correctness.

That the natural gender of the English language is male gender constitutes yet more evidence that, for females, the only semantic space in English is negative. Female gender is not natural, in theory or in practice in language, and when women find themselves missing from the range of positive symbols which the language offers, and invisible in the reality which language constructs, they are witnessing the results of male control of semantics.

This is one more cog in the machine of dominant/muted groups. In order to fabricate and justify the superiority of the male, the dominant group has been obliged to spin a web of rationalizations. It is an old proverb that one lie leads to another and there can be few better examples of this than the lie of masculine supremacy.

In order to sustain their grammatical justifications, grammarians have produced many edicts which speakers of the language are required to take into account. Many of these edicts, and not just the ones associated with the construction of male supremacy, are absurd – it was writers such as Dryden and Swift, for example, who declared that it was incorrect to finish a sentence with a preposition, because you could not do it in Latin (Guth, 1973: pp. 97–8) – and some of them are contradictory.

While the male grammarians have assiduously argued that a pronoun must agree with its antecedent in number and gender, they have been

able to overlook the infringement of this rule which is occasioned by *he/man* being the *correct* form of address in the presence of just one male! If there are thirty women in a group and one man, the members of that group must be referred to as *he*, which certainly breaks the rule of agreement of number.

We could ask why it is that for so long male grammarians have been unaware of the falsities of their own laws. It does not seem to be necessary to look far for the answer. In a language where women have been encoded as invisible, the knowledge which is constructed assumes this invisibility – this non-existence – and proceeds accordingly. And new knowledge which is constructed compounds this invisibility.

For women to become visible, it is necessary that they become linguistically visible. This is not such a huge obstacle as it may at first appear: there are no uses of *he/man*, for example, to refer to women in this book. There is no ambiguity here about *man* for when I use the symbol *man* I use it only in reference to male images. But other changes are also required. New symbols will need to be created and old symbols will need to be recycled and invested with new images if the male hold of language is to be broken. As the language structure which has been devised and legitimated by male grammarians exacts ambiguity, uncertainty, and anomie for females, then in the interests of dismantling the muted nature of females, that language structure and those rules need to be defied.

I do not think the world will end if we deliberately break those rules – but there might be a fissure forged in the foundations of the male supremacist world.