

Q. There seems to be a trend toward using the plural pronoun when the singular is grammatically correct. For example, “If a witness appears nervous, the judge might assume that *they* are lying.” (Emphasis added.) I know that the ungrammatical *they* avoids the grammatically correct *he* (or *she*), but is it due to laxity or ignorance?

A. This interesting question was sent by attorney Robert A. Naragon of Doylestown, Pa. I answered that the ungrammatical plural pronoun *they* was probably used to avoid the sexist *he*. Unfortunately, the use of the incorrect plural pronoun *they* is not just a “trend.” It is ubiquitous, although there are grammatical alternatives. For example, in the sentence Naragon quoted, you could use plurals instead of the singular noun and pronoun: “If witnesses appear nervous, the judge might assume they are lying.”

Until the late 20th century, the singular masculine pronoun was used to refer to both sexes, but many women and some men became offended by the inferred inequality of women. For example, whenever a member of a group of males and females spoke, the person was identified as *he*, as in, “A person in the audience made a comment; *he* said...” And when a person’s sex was not known, the person was referred to as *he*, as in, “The anonymous correspondent said that *he* opposed. ...” Feminists believed that the pronoun *he*, as well as masculine prefixes (as in *mankind* and *manpower*), demeaned women and affirmed men’s superiority, and that eliminating such gender markings might reduce the bias against women.

Part of the problem was that those who demanded “gender equality” in language confused grammatical gender with biological sex. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg correctly pointed out, however, that “grammar has gender; people, God bless them, have sex.”

But women accepted the idea of discrimination by language, and the movement to “de-sex” English quickly became popular. Large organizations began to remove gender-specific language in their publications in order to avoid bias. At its 1975 meeting, the World Council of Churches recommended that “sexist language,” exemplified by words like

brotherhood and *fellowship*, be purged from English because they reflected “the powerlessness of women.” The American Psychological Association stated at its 1976 annual meeting that in order to avoid “language that discriminates against women by defining, deprecating, and ignoring [them],” a central office staffperson will be appointed to remove such language.” (Some women, however, argued that the suffix *-son* was equally offensive!)

The reason that speakers of English noticed the gender of singular personal pronouns (*he*, *she*, and *it*) was that English had long ago deleted all gender indications except for those pronouns. Many Indo-European languages (French, Italian, German, and others) still retain gender. In German, for example, *das Fräulein* (“an unmarried woman”) is grammatically neuter and so is *das Mädchen* (“girl”). The word for ocean or sea can be either masculine (*der Ocean*), feminine (*die Sie*), or neuter (*das Meer*). So speakers of most European languages recognize that it is not the actual individual, just the word that contains gender. Only in English is it easy to confuse gender with sex.

The “de-sexing” of English has been accomplished. But the evidence is that changing the language has failed to accomplish its purpose of improving the status of women. Despite our virtual elimination of gender, women’s salaries have not caught up with men’s. The number of female CEOs has not significantly increased; and whatever improvement in the status of women has occurred seems to have been because of women’s determined efforts rather than the change of language used to refer to them.

However, as women have made some strides in improving their roles, our language has become less “sexist,” and the change is especially noticeable in young

people’s language. Remember when the word *guy* referred only to a boy or man? Now both young women are called “guys,” and a group of young people of both sexes is referred to as “you guys.”

The same change of meaning has occurred in the word *fellow*. That meaning is seen in titles like “Fellow of the American College of Physicians” and other such honorary titles. The title has been bestowed on worthy individuals of both sexes, and no recipient seems to have complained. We’ve all heard the expression “Hail fellow, well met,” which evolved from the ameliorated meaning of *fellow*. That designation contains no gender, and it leads to the phrase “good fellowship,” which describes the relationships of women as well as men. Groups singing “For he’s (or she’s) a jolly good fellow” can be heard during celebratory occasions in the halls of both the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks.

Women who write books and poems are no longer called *authoress* and *poetess*; those titles have virtually disappeared in favor of the gender-neutral versions. Newspaper items refer to women as well as men by their last names instead of using the former “Miss” and “Mrs.” titles. And only the other day, the woman who heads the White House Council of Economic Advisors was introduced as “Chairman Christina Romer”—and nobody noticed.

Upon my retirement from the law college, I was awarded the title *lecturer emeritus* by a generous faculty. Some of my readers who are competent in Latin wrote, objecting that the ending *-us* indicates that I am a man. They are right: the correct title for a woman would be *emerita*, as it is in the gender designation of our new *Latina* Supreme Court justice. However, I am just as pleased to receive the masculine version of the title. **TFL**

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