

**Q.** Attorney Michael W. Rathsack e-mailed his objection to an item in *The CBA Record*, the newsletter of the Chicago Bar Association. The item argued for a “his or her” constitution because “male pronouns, which once performed a double duty, ... refer today only to males.” Mr. Rathsack disagrees, arguing that the personal pronoun *he* often refers to either sex, and that the phrases *he/she* and *his/her* are unnecessary and distracting.

**A.** Attorney Rathsack has a point. Until the middle of the 20th century, the word *he* could refer to either sex. For example, in the statement, “When anyone wishes to leave the meeting, he may do so,” the pronoun *he* means “any individual of either sex.” It is equivalent to the French word *on* (*on dit*, meaning “one says”) and the German *man* (*Man spricht*, meaning “one says” or “they say”).

But by the mid-20th century, many women and some men, in search of a reason for the social and financial discrimination against women, concentrated on the English language as the culprit. So the theory became that if you rid our language of “the sexist *he*” and other male gender designation, the bias against women would disappear. Even those people who disagreed with that theory went along with it. After all, who wanted seemingly to oppose sexual equality?

Large organizations quickly joined in. The American Psychological Association Council of Representatives issued a resolution stating in part, “Whereas the English language discriminates against women by defining, by deprecating, and by ignoring women,” and “whereas language in psychology textbooks is biased toward the masculine, ... there will no longer be any language that is sexist in official APA publications.”

The National Council of Teachers of English endorsed the plan and also attempted to reduce discrimination by reversing the usual *his/her* word order. In their publications they resolved to write, “A student who was not satisfied with *her* or *his* performance on the pre-test, took the post-test.” The NCTE also adopted the ungrammatical *them* and *their* to refer to a single individual or item; authors would now write: “*Anyone* who wants to attend the game tomorrow should bring *their*

money today.” (William F. Buckley—conservative in language and politics—commented, “Anyone who writes that kind of thing ... should not be hired as a professional writer.”)

But the public enthusiastically endorsed language manipulation. Political correctness abounded. Not only was the “sexist *he*” banned, but even words that sounded masculine were changed. The New York Department of Education came down hard on “man” compounds. *Statesman* became *leader*; *mankind* became *humanity*; and *manmade* became *artificial*. With these and similar changes, New York had done its share to avoid bias.

There were, however, a few dissenters. In 1977, I wrote an article called “Should the English Language Have a Sex Operation?” My answer was “no” for several reasons. First, I believed that manipulating the language would not eliminate bias; second, the forced language-changes would cause grammatical errors (like *them* referring to a singular noun); third, the phrases *he/she*, *his/her*, *her/his* (and even the proposed monster *s/he*) distract attention from the content of the message to its construction; and, finally, after deleting “sexism” from the English language, people would consider the problem solved, though bias continued.

But language distortion continued, creating some politically correct concoctions like this, found in a reputable legal journal: “A trial lawyer must have the same intensity and unwavering self-confidence in *themselves*, *their* preparation ... and the certainty of *their* eventual victory as an ace combat pilot in a single-engine jet fighter outnumbered in an aerial dogfight.” (Emphasis added.)

Strange etymologies were invented. A friend explained that the noun *person* should be banned because its second syllable refers to a male. In fact, *per-*

*son* has nothing to do with a *son*, being derived from Old French *persone* (“actor”), which gives us the modern English *persona*. The noun *female* should disappear, some argued, because of its last syllable. But *female* does not refer to a male; the noun is derived from Old French *femelle* (“little woman”).

Some women attempted to excise the “sexist ending” *man* from their names. A New York woman appealed to the court to change her name from “Lillian Cooperman” to “Lillian Cooperson.” (Apparently she overlooked the male-sounding *son* ending). But the judge turned her down. A Maryland judge was more sympathetic to one Toni Zimmerman; he agreed to allow her to change her name to “Toni Zimmerwoman.”

But, although the new usage created some strange concoctions, artificial manipulation of language hasn’t helped much. Bias is still with us. In our politically correct society, women are still paid less than men for equal work, and men continue to dominate executive positions.

However, language has gradually begun to change normally, in favor of a unitary gender system, instigated by the speech of young people. Currently our language indicates a leveling of the sexes. We are back to using the masculine gender for both sexes! We no longer speak of “actresses.” Both sexes are now referred to as “actors.” No longer are there “author-esses,” which now seems a somewhat demeaning title. For young people, the noun *guy* is generic; in a group of both sexes, women as well as men are called “guys.” Both waiters and waitresses are now often called “waiters.” We are back to using the masculine gender for both sexes!

The word *fellow* no longer indicates a male. “Good fellowship” is not a masculine attribute; and the singing of “For She’s a Jolly Good Fellow” is heard as frequently at celebrations of the ladies’ Red Hat Society as it is heard at festive meetings of the Knights of Columbus. This natural leveling of language seems to indicate a belief in a sexually equal society, for cultural change creates language change rather than vice versa. **TFL**

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*Gertrude Block, lecturer emerita at the University of Florida College of Law, can be reached at block@law.ufl.edu.*