The Great Communicators: Language and the Media

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Each year, American consumers spend a considerable amount of money on media including books, newspapers, magazines, CDs, DVDs, and digital downloads. Modern technology has changed the way many Americans receive media. For example, Digital Video Recorders (DVRs) and Video-on-Demand services allow people to record television programs in a digital format and watch them at their convenience, an activity referred to as “timeshifting.” Also, Broadband Internet access provides high-speed connections, making it possible to watch television programs, movies, and videos through a computer. Smartphones or mobile phones with advanced operating systems allow people to watch television, movies, or videos anywhere. Ninety-eight percent of U.S. households have at least one television set, and many Americans (about 70 percent of adult Internet users) also stream television programs through their computers (Hope, 2010). In 2010, more than one-third (36.6 percent) of households had DVRs, 63.5 percent had Broadband Internet access, and 22 percent had Smartphones (Nielsen Company, 2010). As such technological gadgets are becoming the norm, it should not be surprising that Americans spend so much time consuming media. According to the Nielsen Company, the average American spends 35 hours and 34 minutes watching traditional TV, 2 hours and 9 minutes watching “timeshifted” TV, and 3 hours and 52 minutes using the Internet per week (Nielsen Company, 2010).

Obviously, the mass media are an important part of our everyday lives. Through them, we are both entertained and informed. In either case, however, we are mistaken if we think that the media are simply transmitting neutral or objective information and messages. Rather, as we will learn in this chapter, much of what is conveyed to us through the mass media is infused with particular values and norms, including many about gender. In other words, the media serve as gender socializers. Our focus in this chapter will be on what various media communicate about gender and how they communicate it. We will examine the gender images depicted in print media (newspapers and magazines) and an audiovisual medium (television), as well as a communication form common to both (advertisements). Although we will not discuss music, film, or theater, much of our analysis is applicable to those media, too.

Before we look at the content of specific media, however, it’s important for us to examine the primary means by which media messages are conveyed—that is, through language. While “a picture paints a thousand words,” the English language expresses our culture’s underlying values and expectations about gender. Let’s see how.

**SEXISM AND LANGUAGE: WHAT’S IN A WORD?**

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me!” How many times did you recite that chant as a child? In response to jeers or name-calling, we tried to tell our taunters that what they said had no effect on us. Yet, as we have grown older, we have come to realize that although words do not have the same sting as sticks and stones, they can indeed inflict as much harm. That is because words are symbols with meaning; they define, describe, and evaluate us and the world in which we live. The power of words lies in the fact that the members of a culture share those meanings and valuations. It is their common language that allows the members of a society to communicate and understand one another, and thus makes for order in society.

Language is a medium of socialization. Essentially, as a child learns the language of his or her culture, he or she is also learning how to think and behave as a member of...
that culture. What gender socialization messages, then, are conveyed through our contemporary language? Let's consider some of them.

To begin, consider the first group of word pairs in Part A of Box 1. In each case, a word associated with men appears on the left and a word associated with women appears on the right. What does each word connote to you? The words associated with men have very different connotations than those associated with women, and the latter are uniformly negative or demeaning. The male words connote power, authority, or a positively valued status, while most of the female words have sexual connotations. Interestingly, many of these words originally had neutral connotations; *spinster*, for example, meant simply “tender of a spinning wheel.” Over time, though, these words were debased, a process known as *semantic derogation*. “[L]exicographers have noted that once a word or term becomes associated with women, it often acquires semantic characteristics that are congruent with social stereotypes and evaluations of women as a group” (P. M. Smith, 1985, p. 48).

Reflecting on the words we have been discussing, what do their contemporary connotations tell us about the status of women in our society? In general, we see that women are associated with negative things and men with positive things. Additional examples are abundant. Linguist Alleen Pace Nilsen (1991, p. 267), for instance, points out that the word *shrew*, taken from the name of a small, but vicious, animal is defined in most dictionaries as “an ill-tempered scolding woman.” The word *shrewd*, however, has the same root, but is defined as “marked by clever, discerning awareness.” In the dictionary Nilsen analyzed, the meaning of *shrewd* was illustrated with the phrase “a shrewd businessman.” Consider also *patron* and *matron*, both Middle English words for father and mother. Today, *patron* signifies a supporter, champion, or benefactor, such as a “patron of the arts.” A *matron*, in contrast, is someone who supervises a public institution, such as a prison, or is simply an old woman. And which would you rather be: an old *master* (someone who has achieved consummate ability in your field) or an old *mistress* (an elderly paramour) (Lakoff, 1991)? It is important to note that many of the

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**BOX 1**

**Sexism and Language**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Connotations</th>
<th>B. Generic He/Man</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>governor—governess</td>
<td>policeman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>master—mistress</td>
<td>spokesman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>patron—matron</td>
<td>manpower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sir—madam</td>
<td>Social Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bachelor—spinster</td>
<td>mankind</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>workman’s compensation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Man the oars!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he, him, his</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Compiled from P. M. Smith, 1985; Strauss-Noll, 1984.
most unflattering and derogatory words for women are reserved for old women (Nilsen, 1991). Ageism often combines with sexism to doubly disadvantage women in our society.

Another form of semantic derogation is illustrated by the second group of word pairs in Part A of Box 1. When you read each word pair, chances are that the word pairs in which the female term precedes the male term sound awkward or incorrect. The tradition of placing the female term after the male term further signifies women's secondary status and is hardly accidental. Eighteenth-century grammarians established the rule precisely to assert that “the supreme Being ... is in all languages Masculine, in as much as the masculine Sex is the superior and more excellent” (quoted in Baron, 1986, p. 3). Thus, according to them, to place women before men was to violate the natural order. The masculine word also serves as the base from which compounds are made (e.g., from *king-queen* we get *kingdom*, but not *queendom*) (Nilsen, 1991). The exceptions to this usage rule are few (for instance, “ladies and gentlemen” and “bride and groom”), and most contemporary speakers of English perpetuate it—and its traditional connotation—in their everyday communications.

Semantic derogation is just one dimension of the larger problem of linguistic sexism. Linguistic sexism refers to ways in which a language devalues members of one sex, almost invariably women. In addition to derogating women, linguistic sexism involves defining women’s “place” in society unequally and also ignoring women altogether. With respect to the former, for example, we may consider the commonly used titles of respect for men and women in our society. Men are addressed as *Mr.*, which reveals nothing about their relationship to women. But how are women typically addressed? The titles *Miss* and *Mrs.* define women in terms of their relationships to men. Even when a woman has earned a higher status title, such as *Dr.*, she is still likely to be addressed as *Miss* or *Mrs.* A couple we know, both Ph.Ds, often get mail from friends and relatives addressed to Dr. and Mrs. To a large extent, a woman’s identity is subsumed by that of her husband, particularly if she adheres to the custom of adopting her husband’s family name when she marries. She will find that she not only acquires a new surname, but also a new given name, since etiquette calls for her to be addressed as, for instance, Mrs. John Jones rather than Mrs. Mary Jones (Miller & Swift, 1991b; P. M. Smith, 1985). Since the 1970s, however, it has become more common for women to keep their maiden names upon marriage (Kopelman et al., 2009), but it is hard to ignore the connotation attached to the word “maiden” here.

Another way that our language ignores or excludes women is through the use of the supposedly generic *he* and *man*. Traditional rules of grammar hold that these two terms should be used to refer not only to males specifically, but also to human beings generally. Some have even argued that the use of the masculine generic has increased. However, empirical research raises serious doubts as to whether this *he/man* approach is really neutral or generic (e.g., Conkright, Flannagan, & Dykes, 2000; Gastil, 1990; Hamilton, 1988) and there is much more agreement now that the generic *he* is sexist (Curzan, 2009).

To understand the issue better, read the words in Part B of Box 1. What image comes to mind with each word? Do you visualize women, women and men together, or men alone? If you are like a majority of people, these words conjure up images only of men (Conkright et al., 2000; Silveira, 1980; Treichler & Frank, 1989a; Wilson & Ng, 1988). Of course, it could be argued that these words lack context; provided with a context, it would be easier to distinguish whether their referents are specifically masculine or simply generic.
Perhaps, but research indicates that context is rarely unambiguously generic and, consequently, the use of "he/man" language frequently results in "cognitive confusion" or misunderstanding. Lea Conkright and her colleagues (2000) found, for example, that children reading stories discerned the gender of the characters by the pronoun (he or she) used to refer to them, not by the activity in which the characters were engaged.

There are those who feel that this emphasis on language is trivial or misplaced. Some maintain, for example, that a focus on language obscures the more serious issues of gender inequality, such as the physical and economic oppression of women. [Blaubergs (1980) provides an excellent summary of this and other, less compelling arguments against changing sexist language.] But we should keep in mind that "one of the really important functions of language is to be constantly declaring to society the psychological place held by all of its members" (quoted in Martyna, 1980, p. 493; Treichler & Frank, 1989a). Given that women are denigrated, unequally defined, and often ignored by the English language, it serves not only to reflect their secondary status relative to men in our society, but also to reinforce it. Changing sexist language, then, is one of the most basic steps we can take toward increasing awareness of sexism and working to eliminate it.

How can sexist language be changed? Various simple, but effective, usage changes have been implemented by individuals and organizations. Substituting the title Ms. for Miss and Mrs. is one example. Alternating the order of feminine and masculine nouns and pronouns is another (see Madson & Hessling, 1999). Perhaps most controversial has been the effort to eliminate the generic he/man. Instead of he, one may use she/he, or be and she, or simply they as a singular pronoun (Cheshire, 2008). Nouns with the supposedly generic man are also easily neutralized—for example, police officer, rather than policeman; spokesperson, rather than spokesman. Humanity and humankind are both sex-neutral substitutes for man and mankind (Baron, 1986; Frank, 1989; Treichler & Frank, 1989b). These kinds of changes are not difficult to make (see, for example, McMinn et al., 1991; McMinn, Williams, & McMinn, 1994). Because of the ease with which linguistic sexism can be overcome when the effort is genuinely made, we share Baron's (1986, p. 219) optimism "that if enough people become sensitized to sex-related language questions, such forms as generic he and man will give way no matter what arguments are advanced in their defense." Nevertheless, the way words and ideas are conveyed may be as important as the words and ideas themselves. Consequently, it is important that we also consider the issue of communication styles.

Do Women and Men Speak Different Languages?

Linguist Deborah Tannen (1990, 1994a, 1994b, 2010) argues that women and men are members of different speech communities. According to Tannen, women and men have different communication styles and different communication goals. Just as people from different cultures speak different dialects, women and men speak different genderlects. Women, maintains Tannen, speak and hear a language of intimacy and connection, whereas men speak and hear a language of status and independence. As a result, conversations between women and men are often like conversations between two people from different cultures and they produce a similar result: a great deal of misunderstanding (see also Shem & Surrey, 1998). But while Tannen's stories about miscommunications between women and men frequently bring smiles of recognition to people's faces, there are other researchers who question the extent to which women and men communicate