The Women's Liberation Movement And The English Language

By Shuzaburo Hironaga

The women's liberation movement, which has brought about a considerable change in the relations between the sexes, has made its presence felt in the vocabulary of the English language as well.

The most conspicuous example is the now fairly wide-spread use of Ms. (pronounced Miz) in place of Mrs. or Miss as a title of respect prefixed to a woman's name.

Actually the title Ms. is not new. It occurred in secretarial handbooks three decades ago. But it was largely unused until two things happened: the growth of direct mail selling made the abbreviation an effective time and money saver, and a significant number of women began to object to being labeled according to their marital status.

Business firms using direct mail advertisements find it handy to use Ms. for a woman when they do not know whether she is single or married.

The women's liberationists regard Miss and Mrs. as unbearable symbols of discrimination based on sex. "Why should I be asked if I am Miss or Mrs.,” they complain, "when a man, married or single, designates himself Mr.?"

At first most men frowned upon the proposed alteration of the age-old practice, but there were some who did support the non-discrimination movement.
In a statement read into the Congressional Record in April 1971, Representative Jonathan Bingham, Democrat of New York, said:

There are an increasing number of American women who do not want to be identified as Miss or Mrs. I sympathize with the way they feel. I know from many conversations with women, including my wife and my daughter-in-law, that they resent being asked by strangers whether they are Miss or Mrs.

In the same year Representative Bingham introduced a bill requiring that states not have women disclose their marital status when registering to vote, unless the same disclosure is required of men. Representative Bella Abzug, Democrat of New York, later introduced another bill to prohibit the Federal Government from designating the marital status of an individual in any records, correspondence or documents.

The movement attained the first stage of success in February 1972 when the election committee of California State passed a bill allowing women to sign the electoral roll as Ms. In January the following year the Style Manual of the U.S. Government Printing Office officially accepted Ms. as an optional feminine title without marital designation.

What helped to popularize Ms. more than anything else was the women's liberation magazine Ms. inaugurated in New York in the spring of 1972. The 300,000 copies of the preview issue sold out within eight days. Within weeks, 20,000 letters poured into the editors' one-room office, supportive and personal letters from women responding to "their" magazine. Soon even unfeminist Americans were getting used to addressing a woman as "Ms. So-and-so."

Lexicographers could no longer ignore the patent trend though as late as March 1973 the Gallup Poll indicated that married men in general did not like "Ms." The word "Ms." has already found its way into many dictionaries including:

*The American Heritage School Dictionary, 1972*
Arn<br>

A Dictionary of New English, Longman, 1973
The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1973
The Heritage Illustrated Dictionary of the English Language, Int'l Ed., 1973
Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary, 1973
School Dictionary, Macmillan, 1974
Webster's New College Dictionary, 1974
Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, 1975
New Webster's Dictionary, Handy School and Office Edition, 1975
Obunsha's Comprehensive English-Japanese Dictionary, 1975
The Concise Heritage Dictionary, 1976
The Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1976
Longman Modern English Dictionary, 1976
6,000 Words, A Supplement to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1976

The Scribner Bantam English Dictionary, 1977

Among other terms which have entered the English vocabulary in connection with the women's liberation movement are:

*bra burner*, early 1970s, to mean any militant women's rights advocate (after a few militant women had burned their brassieres publicly at women's rights demonstrations, the term then being formed by analogy with the Vietnam War draftcard burner).

*consciousness raising*, 1970, making women aware of their oppression and of ways to combat it and overcome feelings of inferiority, passiveness, and dependency. Consciousness raising is often done through women's discussion groups called *consciousness raising groups*.

*Equal Rights Amendment*, often abbreviated in speech and writing as ERA, was passed by Congress in 1972 and sent to the states for ratification. It forbids discrimination against women.

*libber*, 1973, an advocate of the women's liberation movement.

*male chauvinist pig*, 1970, sometimes abbreviated to MCP, a male
who thinks men are superior to women, is prejudiced or discriminates against them, or who considers women as mere sex objects.

NOW, acronym for the National Organization of Women, organized in 1966.

NWPC, acronym for the National Women's Political Caucus, established in 1971.

sexism, 1970, prejudice or discrimination against women, or the belief that one sex is superior to the other.

sexist, a person who practises or believes in sexism. Also an adjective derived from sexism.

WEAL, acronym for the Women's Equality Action League, formed in 1968.

women's lib, 1970, short for the women's liberation movement.

Another new word winning considerable currency is *chairperson.* The women's liberation advocates prefer *chairperson* to *chairman* and *chairwoman* as the latter imply that sex makes a difference.

Coined in 1974 by Helvi Sipila, Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations for Social and Humanitarian Affairs, *chairperson* can now be seen often in newspapers and magazines, and has already been adopted by several dictionaries including *6,000 Words, A Supplement to Webster's Third International Dictionary, 1976; New Webster's Dictionary, Handy School & Office Edition, 1975,* and *Obunsha's Comprehensive English-Japanese Dictionary, 1975.*

Similar but less frequently used new words along this line are 1) *spokesperson* and *congressperson* used as substitutes for *spokesman* and

1) *e.g.:* For further information, call Mrs. Louis Kawashima (Tel: 078-242-1304), speech contest chairperson. — *Mainichi Daily News,* Feb. 12, 1977.

2) *e.g.:* "We are stressing there are qualified women for every position in the Cabinet, not necessarily suggesting every position be filled by a woman," a spokesperson for the magazine said. — *Mainichi Daily News,* Nov. 24, 1976.

3) *e.g.:* WASHINGTON (UPI) — Attorney General Griffin Bell told a White House Cabinet meeting last week his investigation of alleged Korean influence peddling "now covers 110 congresspersons," according to meeting minutes obtained by Scripps Howard News Service. — *Mainichi Daily News,* Aug. 7, 1977.
Some women's liberationists are opposed to the use of the noun _man_ and pronoun _he_ to denote any human being irrespective of _sex_. The irrationality of this usage was pointed up by Kate Miller and Casey Swift in their article in the spring, 1972, issue of _Ms._ as follows:

On the television screen, a teacher of first-graders who has just won a national award is describing her way of teaching. "You take each child where you find him," she says. "You watch to see what he's interested in, and then you build on his interests."

A five-year-old looking at the program asks her mother, "Do only boys go to that school?"

"No," her mother begins, "she's talking about girls too, but——"

But what? The teacher being interviewed on television is speaking correct English. What can the mother tell her daughter about why a child, in any generalization, is always _he_ rather than _she_? How does a five-year-old comprehend the generic personal pronoun?

The effect on personality development of this one part of speech was recognized by thoughtful people long before the present assault on the English language by the forces of women's liberation. Twenty years ago, Lynn T. White, then president of Mills College, wrote:

The grammar of English dictates that when a referent is either of indeterminate sex or both sexes, it shall be considered masculine. The penetration of this habit of language into the minds of little girls as they grow up to be women is more profound than most people, including most women, have recognized: for it implies that personality is really a male attribute, and that women are

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4) _De-Sexing the English Language_ by Kate Miller and Casey Swift, _Ms._, spring, 1972, p. 7.
human subspecies..... It would be a miracle if a girl-baby, learning to use the symbols of our tongue, could escape some wound to her self-respect; whereas a boy-baby's ego is bolstered by the pattern of our language.

To avoid the use of *he* when it means anyone, male or female, *he* or *she* or *he/she* is sometimes used, but it tends to make the sentence very clumsy, especially when it is repeated many times.

As a solution to this problem, Kate Miller and Casey Swift suggest the creation of a common-gender pronoun. In analogy to the pronouns *they, their* and *them*, which can refer to males or females or a mixed group, they propose *tey, ter* and *tem* as their singular version applicable to both sexes.

Fred Wilhelms, an American educationist, advocates the use of *ne, nis* and *nim*, taking the letter *n* apparently from the grammatical term "neuter gender," while Varda One, publisher of the Los Angeles underground newspaper *Every-woman*, proposes *ve, vis* and *ver*.

None of these suggestions, however, is likely to win the support of the general public, to say nothing of the grammarians.

Meanwhile, the McGraw-Hill Book Company of the United States issued in 1975 *Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes* for the use of its editors and authors. It represents a serious attempt to eliminate discriminatory attitudes toward women that are built into the fabric of the English language.

The recommendations are intended primarily for use in teaching materials, reference works and nonfiction works in general, for McGraw-Hill realizes that the language of literature cannot be prescribed.

Here are some excerpts from the *Guidelines*:

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5) *De-Sexing the English Language* in *Ms.* spring, 1972, p. 7.


Men and women should be treated primarily as people, and not primarily as members of opposite sexes. Their shared humanity and common attributes should be stressed — not their gender difference. Neither sex should be stereotyped or arbitrarily assigned to a leading or secondary role.

An attempt should be made to break job stereotypes for both women and men. No job should be considered sex-typed, and it should never be implied that certain jobs are incompatible with a woman's "femininity" or a man's "masculinity." Thus, women as well as men should be shown as accountants, engineers, pilots, plumbers, bridge-builders, computer operators, TV repairers, and astronauts, while men as well as women should be shown as nurses, grade-school teachers, secretaries, typists, librarians, file clerks, switchboard operators, and baby-sitters.

Both men and women should be shown engaged in home maintenance activities, ranging from cooking and housecleaning to washing the car and making household repairs. Sometimes the man should be shown preparing the meals, doing the laundry, or diapering the baby, while the woman builds bookcases or takes out the trash.

Members of both sexes should be represented as whole human beings with human strengths and weaknesses, not masculine or feminine ones. Women and girls should be shown as having the same abilities, interests, and ambitions as men and boys. Characteristics that have been traditionally praised in males — such as boldness, initiative, and assertiveness — should also be praised in females. Characteristics that have been praised in females — such as gentleness, compassion, and sensitivity — should also be praised in males.

Like men and boys, women and girls should be portrayed as independent, active, strong, courageous, competent, decisive, persistent, serious-minded, and successful. They should be shown as interested in their work, pursuing a variety of career goals, and
both deserving of and receiving public recognition for their accomplishments.

Sometimes men should be shown as quiet and passive, or fearful and indecisive, or illogical and immature. Similarly, women should sometimes be shown as tough, aggressive, and insensitive. Stereotypes of the logical, objective male and the emotional, subjective female are to be avoided. In descriptions, the smarter, braver, or more successful person should be a woman or girl as often as a man or boy. In illustrations, the taller, heavier, stronger or more active person should not always be male, especially when children are portrayed.

Women and men should be treated with the same respect, dignity, and seriousness. Neither should be trivialized or stereotyped, either in text or in illustrations. Women should not be described by physical attributes when men are being described by mental attributes or professional position. Instead, both sexes should be dealt with in the same terms. References to a man's or a woman's appearance, charm, or intuition should be avoided when irrelevant.

The Guidelines gives a long list of sexist terms and their non-sexist counterparts recommended by McGraw-Hill. Given below is a part of the list.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NO</th>
<th>YES</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the fair sex; the weaker sex; the distaff side</td>
<td>women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the girls or the ladies</td>
<td>the female side or line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(when adult females are meant)</td>
<td>the women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>girl, as in: I'll have my girl check it.</td>
<td>I'll have my secretary (or my assistant) check it. (Or use the person's name.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lady used as a modifier, as in</td>
<td>lawyer (When you must modify,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
lady lawyer

the little woman; the better half; the ball and chain
female-gender word forms, such as authoress, poetess, Jewess
female-gender or diminutive word forms, such as suffragette, usherette, aviatrix
libber (a put-down)
sweet young thing
co-ed (as a noun)
housewife

career girl or career woman

use woman or female, as in: a course on women writers, or the airline’s first female pilot.)
wife
author, poet, Jew
suffragist, usher, aviator (or pilot)
feminist; liberationist
young woman; girl
student
homemaker for a person who works at home, or rephrase with a more precise or more inclusive term
name the woman’s profession:
attorney Ellen Smith; Marie Sanchez, a journalist or editor or business executive or doctor or lawyer or agent
cleaning woman, cleaning lady or maid
Housewives are feeling the pinch of higher prices

Pioneers moved West, taking their wives and children with them.

mankind

Consumers (customers or shoppers) are feeling the pinch of higher prices.
Pioneer families moved West. or
Pioneer men and women (or pioneer couples) moved West, taking their children with them.
humanity, human beings, human race, people
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primitive man

man's achievements
If a man drove 50 miles at 60 mph....
the best man for the job

manmade

manpower

grow to manhood

The average American drinks his coffee black.

businessman

fireman
mailman
salesman

insurance man
statesman
cameraman
foreman

you and your wife
man and wife

steward or purser or stewardess
policeman and policewoman

primitive people or peoples; primitive human beings; primitive men and women human achievements
If a person (or driver) drove 50 miles....

the best person (or candidate) for the job artificial; synthetic; manufactured; constructed; of human origin human power; human energy; workers; workforce

grow to adulthood; grow to manhood or womanhood

The average American drinks black coffee.
or Most Americans drink their coffee black.
business executive; business manager
fire fighter
mail carrier; letter carrier
sales representative; salesperson; sales clerk

insurance agent
leader; public servant

camera operator

supervisor

you and your spouse

husband and wife

flight attendant

police officer
maid and houseboy
the consumer or shopper .... she
the secretary .... she
the breadwinner .... his earnings

house or office cleaner; servant
consumers or shoppers .... they
secretaries .... they
the breadwinner .... his or her
earnings
or breadwinners .... their earn-
ings

It must be pointed out that not all the suggested alternatives in McGraw-Hill's Guidelines are appropriate. For example, business executive or business manager is not the same as businessman. Nor is leader or public servant synonymous with statesman.

The Guidelines may not necessarily be followed in toto by authors writing for McGraw-Hill publications, but the fact that one of the largest publishers in the United States has made these concrete suggestions for the elimination of sexism in English will certainly go a long way toward reforming the language in favor of the women's liberation movement.

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