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Gender-Neutrality in Language

Gender neutrality in language or the use of gender-fair language is a hotly debated topic where linguistic reforms to cater to minorities are met with hostility. Language is one of the primary methods of expression and has a profound impact on how people think. Furthermore, language has the ability to make groups feel accepted or excluded. Considering that language, for the longest time, has deemed masculine words to be standard, groups such as women and the LGBT community continue to be discriminated against even in the form of linguistic practices. This essay aims to discuss sexism in language and establish that a reform towards gender-fair language is overdue.

The effect of language on thought and its influence on discriminatory behavior is well-known. Attempts have bee made to introduce or change words to provide equal dignity to people belonging to discriminated groups. Systematic evaluation of sexism in language dates back to the 1970s, and the following decades marked the introduction of guidelines on non-sexist language at national and supernational levels (Mucchi-Faina 3). Nevertheless, a large part of the debate surrounding sexism in language nowadays stems from the stance towards or against political correctness (PC).

Initially, the proposed language reforms concerned the invisibility of feminine presence in language and how masculine experiences are considered as standard. As a result, feminists urged modification of these linguistic practices. The language revisions proposed by feminists

vary; nevertheless, two broad perspectives of radical and liberal feminists can be identified. The stance undertaken by radical feminists is for a radical revision of language where traditional language should be altered to create a new women-centered language. This language revision proposed by radical feminists is criticized for reasons including the auto-segregation of women. However, the current debate concerning politically correct language coincides with the perspectives held by liberal feminists. The liberal feminists' approach towards language reforms considers the wider community and bring about a change concerning gender roles and cultural norms.

Two primary categories of sexist language are being targeted by liberal feminists, namely, generic masculine and lexical symmetry. For example, the generic masculine in the language use of words such as "chairman" or "mankind" irrespective of knowing the person's gender as these terms are considered to be grammatically correct. Consequently, the use of generic masculine terms hides the presence of women. Furthermore, lexical symmetry puts women in a position inferior to men; referring to adult women as "girls" is an example (Mucchi-Faina 4-5). Besides women, people who do not identify as any of the two genders can also be rendered a sense of equality and dignity through the introduction of neutrality in linguistics.

Gender identity has become an important topic in terms of inclusivity. The difference between sex and gender has come under light, including the argument that gender is not determined by biological factors. The usage of gender and sex as being interchangeable consolidates gender norms and conventions. By construing sex and gender as separate concepts, people of all gender expressions can feel accepted and not ostracized (Beaulieu 1-2). Mass opinion towards the LGBT community is influenced substantially by language, which has urged several countries to take proactive steps towards promoting gender-neutral pronouns (Tavits and

Perez 16781). Despite the benefits that a gender-fair language can render with respect to inclusivity and making minorities' presence visible, arguments exist that oppose gender-neutral language reforms.

Language reforms that call for the use of gender-neutral pronouns as standard instead of masculine pronouns have met with criticism and hostility. According to a study conducted by Vergoossen et al., four dimensions can be identified concerning arguments that oppose gender-fair language. The first dimension defends the linguistic status quo and considers a change in language to be obsolete or challenging to get accustomed to. The second dimension pertains to sexism and cisgenderism, where the arguments stem from sexist beliefs and hostility towards non-binary people. Moreover, another idea in this dimension is that the use of gender pronouns results in depersonalization (Vergoossen et al. 4). The third dimension comprises of the disparaging attitude of opponents towards the issue and the importance of gender-fair language and the proponents of the cause (Vergoossen et al. 7). This dimension highlights the arguments that are more recent and stem from resistance against political correctness, as mentioned earlier. The fourth dimension comprises arguments wherein the respondents are not opposed to gender-neutral pronouns but are concerned about potential reactions that may occur due to its usage. People falling in this dimension do not want to experience hostility that may be garnered by using such pronouns as others may have strong opinions about it (Vergoossen et al. 7). Similar to any reform, criticism for gender-fair exist. Nevertheless, a change that can improve the quality of life of numerous groups of society, although it may be difficult, is worthwhile.

Historically, language has seldom considered inclusivity and diversity. Nonetheless, construing the modern landscape where people of all genders are constantly fighting for equal rights and reforms have occurred, rendering them the same, language must also follow. Similar

to how society is steadily relinquishing antiquated notions and norms, a language that is not inclusive and relevant concerning current society should also be modified. The gender-neutral language will ensure that people belonging to all groups are empowered and feel a sense of inclusion and acceptance.

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