Linguistic Sexism: An Overview of the English Language in Everyday Discourse

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Abstract

By typical definition, sexist language is considered to be any language that is supposed to include all people, but, unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender—this can be either males or females. A look at linguistic sexism is finding out the relationship between language and gender. A lot of people run into the difficulty of making the choices between certain words in their everyday discourses. They wonder which to choose – the chairman has arrived for the meeting or the chairperson has arrived for the occasion when referring to a woman. This is the stuff the English language is made of. It is ridden with linguistic sexism that excludes women and trivializes what women do. This paper examines elements of sexism in the English language which abound in the morphology, syntax and semantics of the language. Some solutions were also proffered.

Introduction

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Language is both an instrument of communication and an instrument of knowledge of the world around us. According to Jiménez Catalán, "by means
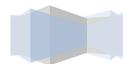
of language, we shape our view of society, we organize our knowledge; we learn new things and, above all, we assimilate the norms and social patterns of our community" (209). Language articulates consciousness, reflects culture, and affects socialization; hence, the need to recognize the importance of transforming language from traditional usage to more liberating one that is gender-sensitive. Language is dynamic and reflects changes in society and contributes to such changes. Using non-discriminatory language is, of course, a part of this dynamic process.

Analysing language is very important. As Labov postulated,

> there is a great deal to be done in describing and analyzing the patterns of use of languages and dialects within a specific culture: the forms of speech events, the rules for appropriate selection of speakers; the interrelations of speakers, addressee, audience, topic, channel and setting; and the ways in which the speakers draw upon the resources of their language to perform certain functions (30).

The job of this analysis falls on the sociolinguists. Consequently, we have had 'sociolinguistics' defined as 'the study of language in relation to society' (Hudson 1). That is, the branch of linguistics that is concerned with investigating, disclosing and ascertaining the relations of language to varied aspects of society, such as social class, ethnic origin, life style, education, age, sex, attitudes, emotions, and so forth. Sociolinguists deal with a shift from the over weaning preoccupation with structure and setting to the communicative purpose of the speech act. This branch of linguistics recognizes the fact that:

> The social roles and the psychological attitudes of the participants toward each other in a conversation (employer-employee, teacher-pupil, doctor-patient, parent-child, for example), the place and time of the communication act and the activity or topic being discussed will determine to a large extent the form, tone, and appropriateness of any oral or written message (Finocchiaro and Brumfit 22).

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Language is not static. We live in a patriarchal world that values men over women. Our language is a reflection of these values. Social changes produce
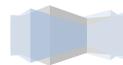
changes in language. This affects values in ways that have not been accurately understood. Language incorporates (reflects and expresses) social attitudes and values. If language and literature reflect and express social attitudes, they also can have the power to influence, to shape, those attitudes and values. It is constantly changing to reflect the changing nature of society. As we are moving towards equality in all areas of life, it is important that our language facilitates and reflects this change. Again, communicative competence goes beyond the ability to construct grammatically correct sentences to being aware of culturally suitable communication. This study, therefore, sets out to define and explain sexism, linguistic sexism and establish the English language as a sexist language and finally offer some alternatives to some sexist or exclusive words in the English language to reflect the changing nature of the society.

What is Sexism?

Sexism was defined by Wilson as "set expectations of women's appearance, actions, skills, emotions and proper place in society" (45). It is generally conceived as anything that conveys that one sex is superior to the other. In most societies, it is commonly shown in behaviours that depict males as superiors to females. Sexism has always been a problem in Western society. It has been a problem that many people overlook, simply because they think it does not actually exist! However, sexism is present in our current society today. A sexist action is, therefore, one which is predicated on an assumption of a difference between men and women which is not biologically justified and which is harmful to the interests of specific women (or men) or women (or men) generally. Graddol and Swan defined 'sexism' as any discrimination against women or men because of their sex, and made on irrelevant grounds (96). So according to this distinction, men too can be the victims of sexism though I suspect it is relatively rare.

Linguistic Sexism/Sexist Language or Gender Exclusive Language

By typical definition, sexist language is considered to be any language that is supposed to include all people, but, unintentionally (or not) excludes a gender—this can be either males or females. Sexist language is especially common in situations that describe jobs—common assumptions include that all doctors are men, all nurses are women, all coaches are men, or all teachers are women. Most people would agree that these assumptions are largely untrue today, though the language used often perpetuates the stereotypes.

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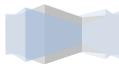
Atkinson defines "linguistic sexism" as "a wide range of verbal practices, including not only how women are labeled and referred to, but also how language strategies in mixed sex interaction may serve to silence or depreciate women as interactants" (403). Ivy and Backlund added that if sexism refers to attitudes and/or behaviours that denigrate one sex to the exaltation of the other, then it follows that sexist language would be verbal communication that conveys those attitudes or behaviours (72).

At its crudest and most hurtful, sexist language is a tool used to damage someone. Rather than a blind but innocent repetition of sexist behavior and terms many of us grow up with, some people carry that further and try to really emotionally harm a person by targeting them with sexist comments. But whether it is used on purpose or blindly, it is a form of abuse or bullying and I think we can all do well to watch what words escape our lips, just in case we are repeating things we've always repeated... without even knowing that they may be hurting someone.

Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams typified the discrimination against women by quoting Graham's funny analogy:

> If a woman is swept off a ship into the water, the cry is Man overboard. If she is killed by a hit-and-run driver, the charge is manslaughter. If she is injured on the job, the coverage is workmen's compensation. But if she arrives at the thresholod marked Men Only, she knows the admonition is not intended to bar animals or plants or inanimate objects. It is meant for her (447).

The stereotype for a woman must be everything bad while in the same circumstance, a man is always dignified. This shows the level at which the language has demeaned women.

Many feminists have examined the representation of women in language and have, according to Cameron, concluded "that our language are sexist: that is they represent or 'name' the world from a masculine viewpoint and in accordance with stereotyped beliefs about the sexes" (Cameron 12). This means that language encodes a culture's values, and in this way reflects sexist culture. He stated:

> Language could be seen as a reflection of sexist culture; or
> […] it could be seen as carrier of ideas and assumptions

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which become, through their constant re-enactment in discourse, so familiar and conventional we miss their significance. […] Thus sexism is not merely reflected but acted out and thus reinforced in a thousand banal encounters (Cameron 12).

English as a Sexist Language

Is English sexist? There is no denying it; English is one of the world's most spoken languages. Sociolinguistic researches, over the years have shown that the English language favors the masculine gender as opposed to the feminine. Sexism in the English language is only one of the many products brought to us by acculturation. In reality, women are treated unfairly not only in the field of language but also in other factors as well. Back in history, we learned that women were not given the same benefits that were given to males. For example, only men can vote in the elections. Women were only treated as properties, which is a form of discrimination against them. The problem with sexism in English go way beyond questions of vocabulary—sexism is built into the way the language is structured, and the very concepts each of us uses to describe ideas about language. Throughout all this, sociolinguists aimed to prove whether or not English is a sexist language. The results showed that there are evidences that English is indeed sexist.

Goddard and Patterson decided to refer to the English language as a gendered language based on three facts:

1. It is a language that is made up of sex-exclusive vocabulary (hunk for man, chick for women).

2. The language contains linguistic items that remain the same but change in meaning when referring to a man or a woman (tramp).

3. It is a language that carries within it a shared understanding about how men and women are meant to behave and the characteristics they are meant to possess (34).

Piercey in his perspectives article "Sexism in the English Language" the TESL Canada Journal/LaRevue TESL du Canada states that there is inherent

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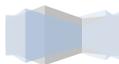
sexism in the English language (111). This would mean that the language deliberately discriminates against one sex in favour of the other.

Apart from being found in the vocabulary; sexism is built into the way the language is structured and in the semantics of language, as well as in the very concepts each of us uses to describe ideas about language.

The following are some elements of sexism in the English language:

1. Sexism in Semantics

In English, derogatory terms used for female outnumber that for male. Plenty of pairs of words, such as widow-widower, spinster-bachelor, mistress-master, madam-mister, should have connotation and denotation to the same degree. Whereas, only the words used for female bear the derogatory sense.

(a) Semantic Collocation

In English, a word may have different connotations when it is collocated with a male term or a female term. When applied to women, the same words are likely to narrow and assume sexual connotations. For example:

Professional

      (a) He's a professional.

      (b) She's a professional.

In (a), the normal conclusion is that 'he' is a doctor or a lawyer or a football player or a member of one of the respected professions. Sentence (b) could be interpreted in this way, or it could also be interpreted to mean that 'she' is either a prostitute or promiscuous.

Tramp

'Tramp' is defined as 'a person with no home or job, who wanders from place to place' or 'a woman considered to be sexually immoral (esp. in American English)'. For examples:

      (a) He is a tramp: He is a person with no home or job, who wanders from place to place, or a drifter.

      (b) She is a tramp: She is a woman considered to be sexually immoral, especially a prostitute.

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Loose

'Loose' seems a neutral word for both male and female. But 'a loose woman' reminds people of 'a woman considered to be sexually promiscuous' whereas 'a loose man' just means 'a casual person'.

From the above, we can see that the same word shifts from being positive male to being negative female. The way meaning is created in the society depends upon dividing the world into positive-masculine and negative-feminine according to the semantic sex prototypes.

(b) Semantic change of Sex-paired Words

In English there are a lot of sex-pair words, which are quite different from each other according to their semantic meaning. Generally speaking, men's agent nouns are often considered to be positive while those for women often obtain a negative meaning. Word pairs like courtier-courtesan, and master-mistress demonstrate more than a sexual difference. They are also indicative of a process of semantic derogation affecting the female terms. An analysis of the language used by men to discuss and describe women reveals something about male attitudes, fears, and prejudices concerning the female sex. Again and again in the history of the language, one finds that a perfectly innocent term designating a girl or woman may begin with totally neutral or even positive connotations, but that gradually it acquires negative implications, at first perhaps only slightly disparaging, but after a period of time becoming abusive and ending as a sexual slur. A master is a powerful or skilful man; a mistress is a woman kept for sexual purposes. A courtier is a polished man of high social status; a courtesan is just an up-market whore. There is nothing wrong with calling a man a bachelor, but calling a woman a spinster is contemptuous. Even a single word may behave differently: in American English, at least, when you call a man a pro, you mean that he is experienced, competent and reliable; when you call a woman a pro, you mean she's a prostitute.

This process of words that refers to women acquiring demeaning or sexual connotations has been widely observed, and has been termed as semantic derogation. For example:

governor and governess

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In Oxford English Dictionary, 'governor' is explained as 'man who exercises a sovereign authority in a colony, territory or state' whereas for the feminine
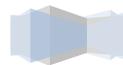
word 'governess', the first explanation is 'chief nursemaid'. In old English, these two words both refer to the chief member who has got considerable power as the executive of a political administrative unit, for example, Queen Elizabeth I was acknowledged to be the Supreme Majesty and governess of all persons. However, 'governess' later changed to 'a woman who cares for small children when she is employed by their wealthy parent.

Bachelor and Spinster

'Bachelor' and 'spinster' all designate an unmarried adult. 'Spinster', marked for females, seems to have acquired the insulting meaning of 'old maid' referring to someone who is unable to find a husband; by implication they are too ugly or too fussy. 'Bachelor', marked for males, by contrast, has the positive connotations of freedom and independence and still having all the choice of marrying or not.

The examples cited above are all asymmetrical, and diminish women rather than men.

"For the asymmetrical semantic developments for female and male paired terms, Schulz concludes that all words — regardless of their origin — which are associated with females acquire negative connotations, because there is a semantic 'rule' in a society which constructs male supremacy (as quoted in Spender 17). All the male terms have retained their original positive meanings while female terms have frequently undergone a dramatic 'downhill slide', ending more often than not with sexually debased meanings" (20).

Feminist theorists aim to understand the nature of inequality and focus on gender politics, power relations and sexuality. Feminist political activists advocate for social, political, and economic equality between the sexes. They campaign on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, discrimination and sexual violence.

It is the commitment to change that stimulates the feminist analysis and research of language. Feminist analysis is to explore the possibilities of using languages as an important means for reaching feminist political agenda, and they share a confidence in the power of language to help liberate women from oppressive circumstances and identities.

(c) Personification and Imagery

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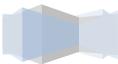
Personification of inanimate objects arises from stereotyped notions of male and female characteristics. Objects which are strong or powerful are generally personified as male, while those which are weak, passive or receptive are personified as female. Thus the sun is seen to be male while the moon (which receives light from the sun) is seen to be female. In common usage vehicles and mechanised objects are often personified and more objects tend to be personified as female than male. Typically objects which are containers, e.g. ships, are personified as female. Since objects do not have gender, it is more appropriate to refer to them as 'it'. The use of animal imagery is just one example where the images of women are less positive from that of men, for example a man is a tiger while a woman is a chick (en) (often in colloquial usage).

2. Sexism Inherent in the Morphology of the Language

Sexism is also said to be engraved in the morphology of the language. In the English language, there has been gender marking practice in human agent nouns, which treat women and men differently. That is, naming practices for women and men are often asymmetrical. In linguistics, markedness refers to the way words are changed or added to give a special meaning. The unmarked choice is just the normal meaning. The male term is for the most part unmarked while the female term is marked. It is created by adding a bound morpheme to the male term or by combing the male term with a word referring to female. In English, derivational morphemes are mainly prefixes and suffixes. These affixes often change the part of the stem. The affixes thereby help us to identify relationships within words. The female term is seen as the marked term and the male as the unmarked one. "A marked and unmarked term is a useful concept when analyzing sexism. It is a special kind of asymmetry. It is quite common in English. The base structure of nouns in English always seems to be the male form. The female form is always a derivative of the male form. This is one obvious evidence of sexism in English. Often women's job titles have been derived from males job titles by adding bound morphemes (suffixes) such as -ette, -ess and -trix. Take for example lion the female form is lioness, prince-princess, actor-actress, host-hostess and the list goes on. According to Trask,

> the female suffix –ess causes particular problems: a man is a poet, while a woman is (perhaps) only a poetess. But there are many other such cases. Men play golf and cricket, while women play women's golf and women's cricket. A

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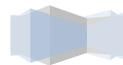
man can be a doctor, but a woman must often be a woman doctor. We are surprised when a professor or an engineer turns out to be a woman, or when a secretary or a model turns out to be a man… (277).

Fromkin et al, however, noted that since the advent of feminist movement, that many marked female forms have been replaced by the male forms, which are used to refer to either sex. Thus women, as well as men, are authors, actors, poets, heroes, and heirs (449). Women however remain countesses, duchesses, and princesses, if they are among this group of female aristocrats. When sex-specific words must be used, one should attempt to maintain gender symmetry.

3. Sexism in Syntax

(a) Generic Pronouns

Pronoun reference provides a classic instance of sexist language. The sexism in English is to ignore women by allowing masculine terms to be used specifically refer to males and generically to refer to human beings in general. It is mainly shown in the pronouns: he, she, his, her, himself and herself. The pronoun system uses him, his, him, and him both in the literal masculine sense and in the generic sense to mean a person of either sex. When such terms are used generically, misinterpretation can result and females are unintentionally excluded from consideration.

There is no pronoun for a person of unknown sex. On the formal occasions, he, his or him must be used to refer to such indefinite pronouns as each, everyone, no one, nobody, anyone, anybody and somebody. For example:

   i.   Everybody talked at the top of his voice.

   ii. One must remember to remain still when he attends a church service.

   iii. Every good citizen should love his country more than himself, he should be ready to die for it if the need arises.

   iv. The more education an individual attains, the better his occupation is likely to be.

   v.   Any person who passes the final will get a passing grade, won't he?

   vi. If a person hits you, you have a right to hit him back.

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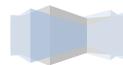
vii.   Any person who speaks his mind about religion could get in trouble.

Here we see the ubiquitous presence of he, him, and his as the default resumptive pronouns (a resumptive pronoun that has the same referent as an earlier noun phrase (in these cases any person and a person. Use of he, him, and his has historically been dictated by those who enforce the canons of Standard English. What is of interest to us in this context is that use of these pronouns makes women invisible.

Feminist linguists have commented that the practice of using the masculine for generic purposes makes women invisible in language and relegates women to a secondary position dependent on man.

(b) Generic 'Man'

Women are often rendered invisible when we are referring to the general gender. Like many words, the English word "man" has more than one meaning. Indeed, this word can be said to have layers of meaning. The word "man" is therefore inherently ambiguous. It is a generic term that refers to (a) a human being; (b) human beings as a group or race; or (c) a male human being. The generic "man" is both personal and singular. At the same time, it also means the totality of the human race. Because this word is singular and personal, it demands the use of singular and personal pronouns: "he", "him", "his". This word has a Hebrew Old Testament equivalent, adam, and a Greek New Testament equivalent, anthropos. The word gradually narrowed in meaning to become a word that refers to adult male human beings. Still in the language today, it is still used to refer to males and females.

Here are some Biblical examples to exemplify the use of "man" to refer to males alone:

- Matthew 19:3 "...is it lawful for a man [anthropos] to put away his wife for every cause?"

- Matthew 19:5 "...For this cause shall a man [anthropos] leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh."

- John 7:22 "...ye on the sabbath day circumcise a man" [anthropos].

- I Corinthians 7:1 "...It is good for a man [anthropos] not to touch a woman."

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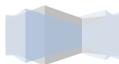
➕ Galatians 5:3: "For I testify again to every man [anthropos] that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do the whole law."

➕ Ephesians 5:31: "for this cause shall a man [anthropos] leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh" (Forgay 6).

This is how language ought to be used.

In another stance, the word "man" is used to refer to mankind on a whole. There are several cases on which we can get simplified examples be it clichés or day-to-day conversations. For instance:

▪ No man is an island.

▪ Man has been on the planet for more than a million years.

The term "man" in the sentences obviously refers to both men and women. But to the meticulous eyes of English majors, this can signal inferiority to the women race. Also, the sentence gives a misleading impression whether it talks about man alone or both men and women. Other examples are salesman, manpower, mankind, layman, cameraman, chairman, etc. We can seek alternative when we want to represent man as human beings and other expressions that incorporate "man" such as humanity, human beings, chairperson, etc.

(c) Word Order

Usually words denoting male sex are put in front of female sex. It is said that in 1553 one person named Wilson insisted that it was more natural to place man before woman, as in male and female, husband and wife, father and mother, brother and sister, son and daughter, he and she, he or she, host and hostess, king and queen. Implicit in his insistence that males take precedence is the belief that males come first in the natural order, and this is one of the first examples of a male arguing for not only just the superiority of males but that this superiority should be reflected in the structure of language.

4. Honorific/Use of Titles

Inequality is also implied for instance, in cases where a woman's title is not mentioned but a man's is; where a woman is addressed simply by her first name but a man is addressed by his title, first name and surname; Mr. and

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Mrs. Jones but never (or almost never) to Mrs. and Mr. Jones or Mr. & Mrs. John and Mary Jones; and in some salutations, directed to a man and a woman, when the woman is not addressed. Other practices also can create the impression that women deserve less respect or less serious consideration than men do, such as when endearments are used to address women in situations that do not justify such words.

Use of the title "Mr." before a person's name identifies that person as a male adult. The titles "Mrs." and "Miss", however, not only identify the person addressed as a woman but also make known her marital status. The title "Ms" was introduced so that a woman is not required to reveal her marital status and so people writing to or addressing a woman are not required to guess it by using "Miss" or "Mrs.". "Ms" should be used for a woman whose title preference is unknown. It should be followed by the woman's own name, or if she prefers, her spouse's name. Any given names or initials used in connection with the title "Ms" are invariably the woman's and not those of her spouse. "Ms" is the same whether singular or plural.

The contrast between bachelor and the highly pejorative term spinster, used to refer to persons who have never married, makes clear that a woman who has not been married, i. e., the object of serious male attention, is a lesser being than a male who "chooses" not to be married. Sexist language is also revealed in the categorization of women according to their age. Use of "Miss" and "Ma'am" are the examples of this. "Miss" is commonly used to address a 'younger' woman i.e. What can I get for you today, Miss? Convention had previously taught that 'older' women be referred to as "Ma'am" or "lady". However, there is no commonly used younger/older term for men. The address for men is always "Sir", as in What can I get for you today, Sir?

5. Use of Non-parallel Terms

There is asymmetric relationship existing in certain words when used to refer to males and females. A locution that establishes not just male dominance but the subservience of women to men occurs in the old fashioned but still used phrase I pronounce you man and wife. This is both a bizarre expression -- how do you go about pronouncing someone to be a man? -- and establishes the woman in the subservient role of wife. There is an easy way to improve the language of wedding vows. One may simply use husband and wife.

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Notice though how odd sounding I pronounce you wife and husband is. The man must always come first. Other examples:

- Lecturers and their wives are invited to attend.

In the above example, it is assumed that all lecturers are a) male, b) heterosexual, c) married. The reality may be that the lecturer is female, homosexual, single, co-habiting or living apart from a partner. Males and females should be referred to in parallel terms such as: girls and boys, women and men, ladies and gentlemen, husband and wife, male and females, etc.

Other examples are as Trask puts them below:

- The assailant attacked his next-door neighbour's wife. (the woman was not his neighbour?

- The pioneers trekked across the prairies with their cattle, their seed-corn and their wives (the wives were only there to cook, clean, sew and raise the children while their husbands were busy pioneering?) (277).

Sexist Terms and Alternatives

Many people speaking or writing English today wish to avoid using language which supports unfair or untrue attitudes to a particular sex, usually women. Professional organizations, periodical publications and feminist activists, grimly aware of this phenomenon, launch their awareness campaign to make people more sensible in using language as a social and political tool of communication. Political correctness in using language has been the banner of their campaign.

If in the company of people who are made uncomfortable by sexist terms, there is a polite and linguistically acceptable alternative in most cases. Some of them are:

To be avoided	To be preferred
mankind	humanity, human beings, human race, people, humankind, humans
man's achievements	human achievements, our achievements
If a man drove 50 miles at 60 mph	If a person drove 50 miles at 60 mph ...

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...	
the best man for the job	the best person (or candidate) for the job
man-made	artificial, synthetic, manufactured, constructed, of human origin
manpower	Workers, workforce, staff, labour, staffing, human resources
man	people, humankind, men and women, women and men, individuals, human beings, person, the individual
man the desk	staff the desk, be at the desk
manpower planning	labour market planning, workforce planning, staff planning, workload planning
chairman	chairperson, chair, convener (don't use non-parallel terms such as 'chairman' for men and 'chairperson' or 'person chairing' for women)
headmaster	head teacher, head
policeman, fireman	police officer, fire fighter
Patience, his wife of 20 years	Patience and Peter, married for 20 years.
The girls in the office	The secretaries/typists/administrative assistants
Two men and three girls work in that lab	Five people work in that lab or Two men and three women work in that lab
She's a tomboy	She's an adventurous/daring girl
He's a sissy	He's a sensitive/caring boy

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She's very masculine	She is a strong/independent/ assertive woman
What is needed is the feminine touch	What is needed is a caring/ considerate attitude
The ship set forth with her sail billowing in the wind	The ship set forth with its sail billowing in the wind
That car is hard to start but just give her a shove and she's up and running	That car is hard to start but just give it a shove and it's up and running

If the gender of the person being discussed is unknown or could be female or male, there are several alternatives. One is to use 'She or he should show his/her tickets', or even "S/he should show ..." (only common on forms and questionnaires). Another is to use the plural "Customers should show their tickets" or to use the second person pronoun instead - "Please show your ticket." Use of the passive is an alternative though it may lead to less clarity - "Tickets should be shown."

Do not assume that the male should always come first, so alternate she and he, hers and his, wives and husbands, women and men, girls and boys, mothers and fathers, etc.

Conclusion

Although feminists tend to be the only people fighting against sexism, this false ideology needs to be changed. People need to become more sociological in their thinking and realize this is a problem that we all should be working to fix. Many of us have never really taken the time to think about the effects of the language we use. How it can affect us or our position within society. Think about it for a minute and see if we are just succumbing to societal expectations or are we just more intelligent and more eager to promote change. The challenge to us, individuals, is to remedy this kind of problem in

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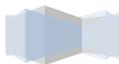
Modern English. Both genders must be given exactly the same respect. All along, we are one and the same because we are all created by God.

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