Linguistic Sexism in Business Writing Textbooks

ELIZABETH NIELSEN

The Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications (Revised, 1985) declare:

It has been enheartening to note that in the last ten years, trade publishers, textbook publishers, and publishers of reference works have become acutely aware of sexist language, thus largely alleviating the problem of discriminatory reference. Still, vigilance must be exercised. (NCTE 6)

While publishers may be "acutely aware of sexist language" and, in many cases, have developed their own in-house guidelines for avoiding such language, authors and publishers of business writing textbooks, on the whole, are not providing comprehensive instruction for avoiding sexist language. Sex-biased language is still a problem in our culture; thus, it is necessary to sensitize students to the problems of sexist language and to provide in-depth instruction in using language so they do not arbitrarily stereotype or delimit the potential of either sex. Despite publications such as the International Association of Business Communicators' Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communication (philosophically similar to but much more detailed than the NCTE Guidelines) and business journals which periodically deal with the topic of linguistic sexism, many business writing textbooks ignore or marginalize the topic, while simultaneously emphasizing that knowing how to use language with accuracy, precision, and sensitivity is the most important skill a businessperson can possess.

Researchers have amply demonstrated the profound effects of linguistic sexism on half the population. Nancy Henley has compiled a comprehensive overview of research illustrating that linguistic sexism is not imaginary, trivial, or superficial. She shows that people do not generally make distinctions between the generic and the masculine he or interpret "man-words" generically, and that avoiding sexist constructions does not automatically breed awkwardness and inelegance into our language. Henley argues both that linguistic change is not only possible and desirable but can happen relatively quickly under certain types of social pressure and that asking or requiring people to avoid linguistic sexism is not equivalent to censorship or infringing on free speech. Obviously, students must receive adequate instruction on avoiding sexist language, particu-
larly in textbooks intended to help students develop and refine their language skills.

In order to investigate how well textbooks treat this subject, I examined fourteen current business and professional writing textbooks that I had received as coordinator of a writing program. Thus, my sample is not "scientific," but it is useful for generally assessing business writing texts on the market today. The texts, all published since 1980, range anywhere from first to seventh editions. Those in their third to seventh editions presumably have wide and long-lasting acceptance.

For the purpose of this study, I asked three questions:

1) Is the concept of sexist language important enough to be indexed?
2) What problems related to linguistic sexism are identified?
3) How complete is the instruction given for correcting these problems?

For the second and third questions, I used NCTE's Guidelines as a standard for judgment. There are many other guidelines for nondiscriminatory writing available, such as those produced by Miller and Swift, the American Psychological Association, the International Association for Business Communicators, and McGraw-Hill; however, the NCTE publication provides a reasonable standard because NCTE is a national organization of over 8,000 English teachers, many of whom teach business writing courses. Also, the NCTE Guidelines represent the collected efforts of the editors of Council journals, professional staff members at NCTE, and members of the Women's Committee and have been readily available to all interested people since 1975. And perhaps most important, these guidelines are not particularly lengthy (they cover only the most glaring problems), or difficult to implement, or radical; they work within the already existing structures of the English language rather than invent new constructions. For example, the recommended alternatives in both vocabulary and grammar "have been determined by what is graceful and unobtrusive" (1).

Assessing Treatments of Sexist Language

To some extent, the importance of a particular subject in any given text is reflected in its index. So I began by asking, "Is 'sexist language' important enough to be indexed?" Of the fourteen texts I reviewed, four (Bowman and Branchaw; Nixon; Sigband and Bell; Swenson) have nothing indexed under such headings as "sexism," "sexist language," "nondiscriminatory language," "nonsexist language," "bias-free writing" (terms the other texts use) or any other word or phrase that might flag the subject. The authors do not mention sex-biased language, even though they advocate sensitivity to the encoding and decoding of messages, word connotations, audience, and the like. For instance, one text that does not
have a discussion of linguistic sexism includes a section called "The Nature of Language," in which the authors note: "Language is dynamic. It changes to meet the changing needs of people who use it" (Bowman and Branchaw 25). Another text states, "Words are not things in themselves, immutable and invariable in their properties like the chemical elements" (Nixon 522). Yet, none of these texts discusses gender-neutral language as a topic in itself or in any other appropriate section. I can only conclude that such omissions are deliberate political choices; what is not said is often as important, even more important, than what is said. In a sense, the omission of this topic further legitimizes linguistic sexism in our patriarchal culture. A student can easily read between the lines; an omitted topic must be inconsequential.

Of the ten texts that do index sexist language, what problems do they identify and what alternative solutions do they offer in comparison to those given in the Guidelines? Under the heading "Language," the Guidelines identify four problem areas: (1) generic man, (2) generic he and his, (3) sex-role stereotyping, and (4) sexist language in a direct quotation. The Guidelines also offer alternatives for correcting these problems.

Generic "Man"

The Guidelines note that it is sometimes difficult to recognize the generic meaning of man (mankind, man's achievements, the best man for the job, the common man, cavemen) since the word has come to refer almost exclusively to adult males. Eight texts, over half, identify the generic use of man as a problem area. Four of these admit that the word man has now become so closely associated with male human beings that it can no longer be applied to all humans. One of these four texts, however, gives contradictory and confusing advice: "Avoid extremism. Don't try to eliminate man in words which mean all humans" (Newman et al. 246). Others, while identifying some 'man-words' as problematic, appear to be as concerned with awkward constructions as they are with eliminating biased language. For instance, Communicating in Business Today warns students not to be "obviously ridiculous: we are still not ready to accept 'people-kind' for 'mankind' and almost certainly we never will be" (Newman et al. 246). Similarly, Basic Business Communication warns:

Some words clearly derived from masculine words cannot be avoided easily. Freshman, for example, would not logically be substituted by freshperson. And manhole is not easily substituted by person-hole. (Lesikar 48)

It seems unreasonable to assume that peoplekind will "almost certainly" never be acceptable; but more importantly, there are gender-neutral alternatives to mankind that are in current usage and not even acknowledged in the former text. Similarly, the latter text never considers the possibility of substituting first-year students for freshmen. By reducing the solutions to their most awkward alternatives, such texts implicitly
undermine the validity of their own arguments and deny the real psychological consequences of linguistic sexism.

Under this same category, the Guidelines note that problem words such as chairman/chairwoman, businessman/businesswoman, and salesman/saleswoman can be corrected by using "the same titles for men and women when naming jobs that could be held by both.... Using the same forms for men and women is a way to avoid using the combining form -person as a substitute for -woman only" (2). Five texts deal with this issue, but two of these contradict the Guidelines. For example, while Effective Business Communications advises that "occupational titles should be nonsexist," it lists chairman as acceptable and explains in a footnote:

A good many organizations still prefer and consistently use "chairman" for both sexes. As has been the accepted procedure for decades, a female presiding officer may be addressed "Madam Chairman" .... [But] ardent nonsexist communicators have asked, humorously, how a male presiding officer would feel if he were addressed as "Sir Chairwoman." (Murphy and Hildebrandt 78)

Textbooks, however, should do more than simply reflect the preferences of "a good many organizations" (however many that may be). These texts influence students and set the tone for future preferences in organizations; furthermore, by classifying those people who object to "Madam Chairman" as "ardent nonsexist communicators," the text makes alternatives such as chair seem radical when, in fact, many organizations find such alternatives quite acceptable.

Communicating in Business Today also contradicts the Guidelines by recommending that the combining form -people only be used when the population includes women: "Unless all the people referred to are men, don't say 'Our salesman' did an excellent job" (Newman et al. 246). Clearly, such usage draws attention to women being included or excluded from a population, and it ultimately interferes with the reception of the message. The decoder of such a message cannot discern whether the writer is using a "man-word" for both men and women or whether it means exclusively men. Thus, the gender-neutral alternative helps clarify the message (Henley).

Generic "He" and "His"

The Guidelines note that there is "no one pronoun in English that can be effectively substituted for he or his," and they offer seven alternatives for avoiding generic use of masculine pronouns (2-3). It is interesting to see how the texts I surveyed refer to each alternative. Seven texts note that sometimes the possessive form his can be dropped altogether or an article can be substituted; all the texts that deal with linguistic sexism (71%) recommend using the plural instead of the singular when possible; and four texts suggest that the first or second person can sometimes be substituted for the third person. Three texts suggest that in some situations the pronoun one (one's) can be substituted for he (his), but recommend that it
be used sparingly since it changes the tone of the writing. Only one text (Murphy and Hildebrandt) advises using the passive voice or another impersonal construction to avoid linguistic sexism; in fact, while most texts mention that there are some legitimate or preferable uses for passive over active voice, avoiding sexist language is not one of them.

Only two texts (Bovee and Thill; Varner) mention the problem of number when referring to indefinite pronouns. The Guidelines note:

When the subject is an indefinite pronoun, the plural form *their* can occasionally be used with it, especially when the referent for the pronoun is clearly understood to be plural . . . But since this usage is transitional, it is usually better to recast the sentence and avoid the indefinite pronoun. (3)

However, none of the texts I reviewed advocates using *their* to refer to an indefinite pronoun. Only one text (Varner) even mentions that some writers, in order to avoid sexist constructions, use *their* with indefinite pronouns, but an example of such usage is marked as being incorrect. Both texts that refer to the problem recommend recasting the sentence or using *his* or *her* to avoid the generic *he*.

Finally, ten texts mention that sparing use can be made of *he or she* and *his* or *her*. The Guidelines recommend restricting this choice to contexts in which the pronouns are not repeated, but most texts giving such advice are as concerned with the potential awkwardness of this construction as they are with the problem of linguistic sexism. For example, Effective Business Communications undercuts the entire argument for avoiding the use of the generic *he*:

> In long reports, to avoid severe problems of repetition or inept wording, it may sometimes be best to use the generic "he" freely. But a writer should note, in the preface or in the text, statements that the masculine pronouns are intended to refer to both men and women. (Murphy and Hildebrandt 77)

A student could easily infer from this explanation that writing in gender-neutral language cannot be sustained in a longer piece of writing and that a one-line disclaimer or footnote will solve the problem of linguistic sexism.

To be fair, some texts give even more progressive instruction than the Guidelines do. For instance, Contemporary Business Writing: A Problem-Solving Approach advocates using *he* or *she* as an effective technique for avoiding sexism and does not apologize for varying the pattern:

> This technique is effective. Its critics point out that the double pronoun creates awkward, hard-to-process sentences. However, *he or she, she or he, she/she, and he/she* alert readers that you are sensitive to the power of language in shaping thought and are willing to write so as to eliminate bias. (McNally and Schiff 130)

Similarly, Business Communication Today suggests that men should not always be mentioned first. Communicators should "vary the traditional
pattern with *women and men, gentlemen and ladies, she and he, her and his*" (Bovee and Thill 79). While mentioning the possibility of varying the pattern, *Communicating in Business Today*, however, warns writers only to use the turnabout s/he if they want to make a political point (Newman et al. 246).

In a few cases, the textbooks give other advice not included in the *Guidelines*: "Alternate male and female expressions"; "Repeat the noun"; and "When possible, use the person's name; then refer to that person with the appropriate pronoun." The latter advice, however, is not really an alternative solution for avoiding the generic *he*.

**Sex-Role Stereotyping**

The *Guidelines* suggest that writers examine the unconscious and unfortunate assumptions about sex roles inherent in certain word and phrase choices and choose nonstereotyped alternatives (3). The pamphlet gives four suggestions for helping to eliminate this problem. First, women and men should be identified in the same way. Generic terms such as *doctor* or *actor* should be assumed to include both men and women. If an alternative form is necessary, then it should replace titles for both sexes (4). Six texts acknowledge this guideline to some extent, albeit occasionally with only a single example. Second, women should not be represented as occupying only certain roles and jobs and men as occupying only certain others (4). Four texts give similar advice. Third, women and men should be treated in a parallel manner (4). Three texts recommend this. And fourth, language that patronizes or trivializes women or that reinforces stereotyped images of both women and men should be avoided (5). Three texts give such advice.

**Sexist Language in Direct Quotation**

Any type of written document can contain sex-biased language; thus, if sexist language is to be eliminated, writers must be as concerned with how others have expressed themselves as they are with how they themselves use language. After noting that quotations "cannot be altered," the *Guidelines* give three recommendations for dealing with sexist language in direct quotations:

1) Avoid the quotation if it is not really necessary.
2) Paraphrase the quotation, giving the original author credit for the idea.
3) If the quotation is fairly short, recast it as an indirect quotation, substituting nonsexist words as necessary. (5)

None of the fourteen textbooks reviewed identifies sexist language in direct quotations as a problem. Thus, students could easily assume that sexist language in direct quotations, regardless of how offensive, is simply not their problem.
The Tone and Quality of Coverage

The texts vary not only in the amount of space they dedicate to the discussion of linguistic sexism but also in the tone of the justification for avoiding sexist language. Of the ten texts that do discuss sexist language, the amount of space allotted to this subject varies considerably: from two sentences to four-and-one-half pages. In fact, out of 8,700 pages in the fourteen texts, the total amount of space allotted to avoiding sexist language is approximately fifteen pages. And this figure does not include space allotted for end-of-chapter discussion questions and exercises dealing with sexist language. Only seven of the fourteen texts mention sexist language in the end-of-chapter problems, ranging from a few discussion questions to a limited number of sentences or memos that students are asked to rewrite to eliminate sexist language.

The amount of space, of course, does not solely determine the quality of coverage; the tone of the instruction plays a significant role in how students "read" this problem. A few texts are willing to take a political and ethical stand and simply state that sexist language is demeaning and perpetuates stereotypes. They do not apologize for gender-neutral usage. For instance, Managerial Communication simply explains that "the use of sexist language usually excludes part of one's audience.... Clarity, as well as acknowledgment of one's audience, mandates" that we say what we mean. If we mean "he or she" then we should not say "he" (Micheli et al. 89). And Contemporary Business Writing: A Problem-Solving Approach states:

Business people show increasing sensitivity to language that reinforces biases about sex roles. Editing is a time to make certain that you employ nonsexist wording.... While revising a draft...avoid...stereotyping. Certain words carry connotations that imply exclusion or are demeaning to people in a business setting because of their sex. Correction simply means changing such usage to their gender-neutral alternatives. (McNally and Schiff 130-31)

This text depicts business communicators as people who are sensitive to sexist language and who are willing to alert readers to their convictions.

The majority of texts, however, have different views of the task of the business communicator and give conflicting messages. Embedded in the explanations or justifications for avoiding linguistic sexism in many of the texts are constant warnings: don't be "ridiculous," "extreme," "laughable," "offensive," "awkward," to name a few. Some texts subtly patronize those who strive for gender-neutral language. Consider the tone of this explanation in Communications in Business:

Today's writers and speakers face another connotational problem—that of so-called "sexist" language.... You may or may not share their uneasiness, but as a business communicator (whose task it usually is to satisfy people with what you say), you can't ignore it.

So rather than risk offending some of your readers or listeners, you might, whenever possible, consider casting your sentences in ways to avoid "sexist" construction. (Wells 55; emphasis added)
In a chapter-end exercise, this same text advises students to rewrite sentences to "prevent offending anyone on either side of the 'sexism' issue" (65). There is never any in-depth discussion about why some people are offended by sexist language or the harmful effects that such language has on the communication process. So students might feel that both sides, whatever they happen to be, are equally legitimate.

While Communicating in Business Today admits that "a writing style that implies questionable attitudes and assumptions about gender is at best insensitive," it then diminishes the political and ethical importance of this issue by saying that "even if it's only to appear 'with it,' most business people today prefer to avoid sexist implications in their writing" (Newman et al. 245). By not commenting on this type of attitude, the text legitimizes it.

Effective Business Communications initially states that "conscientious business communicators (as well as authors) should be continually alert to use nondiscriminatory expressions whenever possible"; however, the qualifying "whenever possible" leaves room for using freely the generic he in long reports and "man-words" in some cases (Murphy and Hildebrandt 74-77). This text, which gives the most coverage (space) to the topic, suggests that writers should make clear in the text itself or in a footnote that such usage refers to both sexes. While explanation of generic usage in texts already written may be educationally useful, people writing currently should understand that gender-neutral language can be sustained without the reader experiencing severe linguistic disruption, contrary to what such explanations imply. A footnote will not solve the problem. At worst, people won't read it and, at best, it seems patronizing and perpetuates masculine bias.

Basic Business Communication starts out by claiming that "sexist words are not directly related to writing clarity," but "for reasons of fair play as well as pleasing your readers, you would do well to avoid these words" (Lesikar 46). In the concluding remarks to this section, the author comments that the issue of sexist language is "somewhat complex and confusing" (48). Research, however, shows that sexist constructions do interfere with writing clarity (Henley); furthermore, such statements undercut the real necessity for avoiding linguistic sexism and reduce the argument to the point of patronizing women. Moreover, in comparison to most subject matter that college students are expected to digest, the issue of linguistic sexism is not all that complex and confusing. The extent to which it is only reflects the deeply embedded masculine bias in our language and culture.

Some Observations

To some extent, these business writing textbooks may be a barometer of both current attitudes about sexist language and linguistic changes now taking place in our culture. The majority of texts (71 percent) do acknowledge some aspects of linguistic sexism as problematic. These ac-
knowledgments, however, sometimes take the form of only one or two examples. Thus, the percentages do not accurately reflect the level of discussion, the problems identified, the possible alternative solutions given, or the actual tone of the instruction, all of which vary considerably from text to text. Many of these texts are instrumental in maintaining and perpetuating linguistic discrimination—even if inadvertently or unconsciously—by ignoring, patronizing, or marginalizing the instruction they give for avoiding sexist language.

What can authors of business writing texts do to improve their coverage of sexist language? First, they should reproduce in full the NCTE Guidelines or its equivalent. (The Guidelines have the merit of being relatively short and reproducible without permission.) Second, since there is no guarantee that students will be assigned or will read on their own a separate section on nonsexist language, this section should be cross-referenced in areas where the topic is germane to the subject under discussion. Or it might be even more effective to weave the topic into the very fabric of these discussions. For instance, a section on encoding and decoding messages, which exists to some extent in most of the texts, might discuss how sex-biased words affect the decoding of a message. Third, textbooks should summarize current research showing the negative effect of sexist language on perception and communication, and such sources should be cited. In the fourteen texts I reviewed, only three cited other material to read. Fourth, the texts should acknowledge the widespread support of professional organizations—such as the National Council of Teachers of English, the International Association of Business Communicators, and the American Psychological Association—for the elimination of sexist language. Fifth, authors should explicitly state in the preface how they have handled the matter of sexist language in writing the text. This information would be enormously helpful to those committed to the use of gender-neutral language and who must choose a text. The index alone does not give sufficient information to judge the quality or quantity of instruction.

And finally, the texts themselves should be models of nonsexist language. Even if a text contains adequate instruction on avoiding sexist language, the message can be easily ignored or interpreted as a token acknowledgment of a rather touchy subject if the content itself or problem-solving exercises have a marked sexual bias. The Guidelines warn:

Teachers and other professionals must be alert to the possible sexist implications of the content as well as the language of educational material. (6)

We need to move beyond the debate about whether linguistic sexism is harmful politically, economically, and psychologically. To many, there is sufficient "proof" that it is. What we need are textbook authors who are not afraid of taking a political stand and who are committed to integrating theory into practice. And we need some method of identifying these non-
sexist books in the myriad of those currently on the market.

Florida Atlantic University
Boca Raton, Florida

Notes

1 See, for example, The Journal of Business Communication, 1979, 75-76.
2 I used the revised 1985 edition, even though some of the texts I reviewed were published before 1985. This did not influence the results of this study, since the original Guidelines (1975) and the revised edition are essentially the same in terms of the problems they identify and the alternatives they give.
3 See Nilsen for a political history of the NCTE Guidelines.
4 Most texts did not give as complete an explanation as the Guidelines or identify or classify the problems in the same way; if a text gave a general reference or even in some cases an example of the problem area under discussion, I listed the text as having identified that area of linguistic sexism.
5 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; Lesikar; McNally and Schiff; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.; Wells.
6 Bovee and Thill; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.
7 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; McNally and Schiff; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.
8 Bovee and Thill; Himstreet and Baty; Lesikar; McNally and Schiff; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Wells.
9 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; Himstreet and Baty; Lesikar; McNally and Schiff; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.; Vaner; Wells.
10 Dumont and Lannon; Lesikar; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt.
11 Lesikar; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt.
12 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; Himstreet and Baty; Lesikar; McNally and Schiff; Micheli, et al.; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.; Nixon; Varner.
13 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; Lesikar; McNally and Schiff; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.
14 Bovee and Thill; Dumont and Lannon; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman, et al.
15 Bovee and Thill; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman et al.
16 Lesikar; Murphy and Hildebrandt; Newman et al.
17 Because the issue of salutations is not listed in the Guidelines or indexed under "sexist language" (or any equivalent term) in any of the texts I reviewed, I do not discuss this issue, though many of the texts address it to some degree.

Works Cited


Dubois, Betty Lou, and Isabel Crouch. "Linguistic Disruption: He/She, S/He, He or She, He-She." Penfield 28-36.


Henley, Nancy M. "This New Species That Seeks a New Language: On Sexism in Language and Language Change." Penfield 3-27.


