Answer on Question #54822, Sociology / Other

Is there anything wrong with the traditional use of language such as businessman, chairman, mailman, or mankind?

Explanation:

Language is both an instrument of communication and an instrument of knowledge of the world around us. 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 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.

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. Language incorporates (reflects and expresses) social 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. Sexism was defined by Wilson as - set expectations of women's appearance, actions, skills, emotions and proper place in society. 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. 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. Sociolinguistic researches, over the years have shown that the English language favors the masculine gender as opposed to the feminine. 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.

Gender differences in large-scale assessment are considered by many to be the most carefully examined aspects of test fairness. Early researches focused on language proficiency differences between males and females. Many researches revealed that females outperform males in overall language ability, but Hyde & Linn (1988) concluded that generally females were found to have slight advantages in reading, speaking, writing, and general verbal ability, but the differences were so small that Hyde and Linn argued that gender differences in verbal ability no longer exist (as cited in Jie & Fenglan 2003). It is debatable whether females outperform males in general verbal ability.

There are many sexist implications built into the English language. The use sexist language has been a significant indicator in defining and maintaining the position of males as dominant in our society, with females assigned as a supportive or submissive role.

The following words and phrases portray males as dominant: mankind, manned, chairman, congressman, businessman, mailman, salesman, foreman, policeman, the best man for the job.

Some English-language listeners and readers subconsciously tend to picture a male when words such as man, he, or chairman are used. This is true even though such word use generically represents both men and women.

The examples that follow suggest possible language alternatives to gender stereotyping.

Biased (Sexist)	Unbiased (Gender-Free)
chairman	chair, moderator, group leader
businessman	executive, businessperson, manager
mankind	humanity, people, human race
mailman	mail carrier, letter carrier
Each chairman must submit his program to the member- ship committee.	Each chair must submit a program to the membership committee.

The guidelines offer ways that can help to avoid sexist language in writing (The following guidelines were developed in 1987 at the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC).

1. Although man in its original sense carried the dual meaning of adult human and adult male, its meaning has come to be so closely identified with adult male that the generic use of man and other words with masculine markers should be avoided whenever possible.

Examples: mankind, man's achievements, the best man for the job, man-made, the common man.

Alternatives: humanity, human beings, people, human achievements, the best person for the job, synthetic, manufactured, crafted, machine-made, the average person.

2. The use of man in occupational terms when persons holding the jobs could be either female or male should be avoided.

Examples: chairman, businessman, fireman, mailman, policeman

Alternatives: coordinator (of a committee or department), moderator (of a meeting), presiding officer, head, chair, business executive or manager, fire fighter, mail carrier, police officer.

Thus, a key point in respecting diversity is to think of people as individuals. Avoid categorizing groups of people as having specific common characteristics and do not use terms that set them apart from others. Unless a description of the individual or group is essential to the message meaning, omit references to race, religion, age, or disability.