

Avoiding Sexist Language: How Important Is It?

Recently I received in the mail a copy of the WCU Loyalty Fund mailing sent from our Offices of University Advancement to raise funds for WCU academic endeavors. The quote on the front of the brochure caught my eye:

"The direction in which education starts a man will determine his future life." PLATO

By today's standards this is clearly a sexist and exclusivist use of language--"The direction in which education starts A MAN will determine HIS future life." I was floored, sad, then angry. Probably half the students at this university, plus many of the faculty who are directly involved in helping educate ALL the students, are not men. The quote leaves women out entirely.

I believe that the choice of this quotation to represent the university's appeal for charitable donations was a mistake. I believe this is an extremely important situation because an issue is raised by this choice from which all of us can learn. The choice of the quotation was clearly an oversight rather than a conscious decision, but I think the "mistake" of language should be publicized, not to embarrass anyone but rather to use this specific issue in the present life of our community to guide the direction of our future life. Indeed, David McDonald, Director of University Advancement, responded immediately when I contacted him. Apologizing for the "error in judgment," he agreed that "by today's standards, this quote was a very poor choice for use in a mailing being sent to both females and males." He then went on to do what he was trying to do in the first place--to invite me to support an important and worthy fund, which I did.

In her article entitled "Sexism in English: a 1990s Update," Alleen Pace Nilsen, Professor of English and Assistant Vice-President for Academic Affairs at Arizona State University, argues that the plethora of sexist language in American English proves that sexism is firmly lodged in the minds of people. "Language is like an X ray in providing visible evidence of invisible thoughts. The best thing about people being interested in and discussing sexist language is that as they make conscious decisions about what pronouns they will use, what jokes they will tell or laugh at, how they will write their names, or how they will begin their letters, they are forced to think about the underlying issue of sexism. This is good because as a problem that begins in people's assumptions and expectations, it's a problem that will be solved only when a great many people have given it a great deal of thought" (287) [in Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa, Virginia Clark, eds., Language Awareness, 5th ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990)].

Sexist language is a serious matter. Though many people around us laugh it off, many agencies, institutions, and publications take sexist language very seriously. For example, on the matter of sexist pronouns, the United States Geological Survey's writing guide begins its discussion with this strongly worded paragraph: "Variations of the pronoun 'he' are unacceptable to many people when [the pronoun refers] collectively to both masculine and feminine genders, and as a result ['he'] should be avoided in Survey reports. 'He' is inherently masculine, despite the remonstrations of some grammarians. 'He' can be avoided gracefully by careful grammatical construction."

Some might be outraged at the suggestion that Plato's quotation should be altered to make it inclusive of both genders. But if Plato's Greek word denotes both genders in the first place, then "man" is a poor translation because in contemporary English "man" is distinctly not the equivalent of "all people." Even though some people argue that "man," meaning "mankind," is supposed to be gender neutral, it manifestly is not. Thus, it is possible that we could accurately alter the quotation to read like this: "The direction in which education starts a person will determine that person's future life." --PLATO. If, as is more likely, the original Greek word was not gender neutral and really did denote only adult males, then the quotation has no place in a publication that represents the university--no matter how celebrated Plato might be.

Language not only grows out of society's values and its "reality," it also helps form those values and reality. The "Sapir-Whorf" theory of language and thought--so named for Edgar Sapir, a scholar of American Indian languages, and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf--addresses this reciprocal nature of language. Whorf taught that every language not only serves as an instrument to reproduce and voice ideas but also as a way of shaping the ideas, assumptions, impressions, and guidelines of an individual's mind. Language that continues to name, privilege, and highlight only one gender works against equality and the values of a late twentieth-century liberal arts education. Sensitivity to the language of such a quotation on a university fund-raising mailer is not merely an example of political correctness. It is an issue of morality, ethics, and social justice.

Other arguments for not using this quotation might be made. For instance, the quotation implies that education only begins at the university level. In fact, education starts just after a newborn yelps its first cry. Formal education starts with kindergarten (or preschool) and for most people ENDS with college. Robert Maynard Hutchins, for instance, comes closer to what WCU wants to say: "The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives." Hutchins may not be as revered as Plato, but he has said something very similar without raising the issue of sexism, which divides and distracts readers. Of course, by singling out "the young," his quotation raises the issue of ageism.

Whether sexist, ageist, racist, or exclusivist in any other way, expressions in public discourse intended to be inclusive raise a serious issue. As teachers and leaders who are constantly continuing to investigate, analyze, and contemplate "reality," we have a responsibility to help ourselves and our students form better linguistic habits.

Alice Weldon Perry, Modern Foreign Languages

