

Hastings expert says our language is too sexist

By Carol Bryant
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Each person must be selective about the language he/she uses.

Sexism in the English language is a touchy topic these days. Concern about sexism in language is influencing how textbooks, job descriptions, government grants, legislation and letters are written, according to Dr. Dwayne Strasheim, a linguist and the Dean of Hastings College.

Linguistics is "the scientific study of language. We try to look at language as objectively as possible," he said.

Strasheim became interested in studying sexism in the English language after the topic was discussed briefly at an English forum, presented monthly by a Hastings College professor, last year. His forum this year in April was titled, "Everyone Should Take Off His/Her/Their Hat: Sexism in the English Language."

What's the best choice — "chairman," "chairperson" or "chair?"

"There are lots of issues that involve that particular one," Strasheim said. "The structure of the English language does discriminate against women. While 'man' in early stages of English meant any human being. . . it has come to designate men. The big issue on that one is whether 'chairman' is really a generic term for male or female." Strasheim noted that the National Association of Parliamentarians has officially adopted the use of "chairman." People who use "chairman" believe it is a generic term, he said.

Choosing an appropriate salutation for a letter can also be a difficult task, especially if the sex of the letter receiver is unknown. The solution — no salutation. That's what Strasheim uses if he does not know the sex of the person receiving the letter. If he is writing a letter of recommendation, he might use "To whom it

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philosophical issue involved here, the relationship between language and the society it serves."

One linguistic viewpoint is that language reflects the culture that uses it. For example, Strasheim said, the Eskimo language contains 13 words meaning snow, but the English language has one word which represents snow. "What's important in the society is reflected in the language," he said.

Another linguistic idea is that language helps determine the culture. If this thought is correct, "Judicious tampering with language will do good. These seem pretty trivial on the surface. If there's sexism in our society, this is one way it (reducing sexism) can be done."

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"Most publishers will bend over backwards to eliminate sexism from textbooks," Strasheim said. For instance, they try to eliminate portraying women in stereotyped jobs — as nurses or elementary school teachers.

Strasheim traces the concern about sexism in the English language to the late 1960s and early 1970s, the protest time of the Vietnam War era.

"Those kinds of issues seemed to manifest themselves," Strasheim said. "Most of the

"gen" have all been proposed as replacements for "he." "I don't think these ("thon" and "gen") are likely to catch on," he said.

"Try to write around it by using plurals," Strasheim said. When he can't use a plural form, the linguist uses "he/she," even though it is awkward. "I use it (he/she) because sometimes that's the best solution."

"I've heard men say awful things about this issue. Obviously, that's not the whole idea of these reform movements." The linguist said some women do not support the reform. "There are all kinds of different opinions."

Strasheim is a 1958 graduate of Norfolk High School and a 1962 graduate of Wayne State College with a bachelor's degree in education. He received his master's degree in linguistics from the University of Washington in 1965 and his doctorate in English language and linguistics from Ohio University in 1970. Besides serving as the Dean of Hastings College, he also teaches a linguistics class each semester at the school.

Strasheim doesn't believe any speedy changes in language will be made. "Language doesn't change that rapidly." He did give one example of a change in language which has occurred during the last 20 years. "'Ms.' is becoming very widely accepted," he said. "It's a title for a female who doesn't want to give away her marital status. I use 'Ms.' even if I know the person. That's an example of very rapid change."

"Everybody has been affected by this in some way. It's just a result of sexism in society."



Dwayne Strasheim

7. Women use more tag questions than men do. (Example: "That was a terrible movie, wasn't it?")

*Source: Dr. Dwayne Strasheim

Answers: 1. true; 2. false; 3. false; 4. false; 5. true; 6. true; 7. true

Some hints to avoid sexism

Dr. Dwayne Strasheim said non-sexist use of the English language

6. The replacement of the ending "-man" with "-person" in a large

that they do not misdiagnose." Alternatively, some women have ad-