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# From Gender-Neutral to Gender- Inclusive English.

## The Search for Gender-Fair Language

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by

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**Abstract:** This article provides a brief overview of the search for gender-fair English, from the impact on English of the feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century explorations of inclusive English. It reviews the guidelines currently available for editors and publishers, and the ongoing investigations for the fair and principled use of English to meet new societal needs.

Unlike most other European languages, English does not have issues of masculine and feminine morphological gender as it is a natural gender language. However, as English is today the dominant language for scholarly and professional communication, and has become a common medium of instruction and scholarship in international higher education settings, the search for gender-neutral language has had enormous effects on English worldwide. Much has been written on this topic over the last fifty years in the popular media, academic journals and feminist publications. This article sets out to provide a brief overview of the increasing attention paid to achieving a principled and fairer use of language in English.

The political and legislative results of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s was far reaching. Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she spoke of the lack of fulfilment experienced by the suburban housewife, was a best-seller. Kate Millett's (1969) *Sexual Politics*, in which she attempted "to formulate a systematic overview of patriarchy as a political institution" (Preface) was an important theoretical reference. The work of women's equal rights advocates, such as Gloria Steinem, Susan Brownmiller and Kate Millett, led the action of a whole generation of feminists.

Perhaps the most important piece of policy-making reform in the US at this time was the Equal Rights Amendment, a proposed amendment to the American constitution which grew from the work of women activists from the 1920s to guarantee

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equal legal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex by ending the legal distinctions between men and women. Approved by the US Senate in 1971, the ERA was not ratified until 2020 and, despite decades of activism, which continues to the present day, it has not yet been added to the Constitution. In the 1970s, similar legislative action was being taken in the UK. The Sex Discrimination Act (1975) was aimed “to render unlawful certain kinds of sex discrimination and discrimination on the ground of marriage” and to work “towards the elimination of such discrimination and promoting equality of opportunity between men and women generally; and for related purposes”<sup>1</sup>.

In this atmosphere of social revolution and reform, the legal attention to removing gender bias in the workplace also had important repercussions on the use of language. Under the SDA, employers were required to make it clear that jobs were open to both men and women. This led to the widespread use of “gender-neutral” terms in the workplace. Reference to professions lost gender specific suffixes such as *-man/-woman*. For example, *salesman* and *-woman* became *salesperson*; *police man* and *-woman* were replaced by *police officer*; and *firemen* began to be referred to as *fire fighters*.

This trend continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, the common feminine marker *-ess* (*waitress*, *authoress*, *actress*, *headmistress*) was increasingly dropped and replaced by gender neutral terms, such as *waiting staff* or *writer* or *head teacher*. Other professions have been commonly replaced by masculine terms such as *actor* or *author*. Interestingly, these terms have lost the distinction of being intrinsically masculine and are increasingly used to refer to the person that performs this action, regardless of gender identity.

New forms of honorific reference were also adopted. In addition to the traditional *Mr*, *Mrs* and *Miss*, the title *Ms* began to be used by women who chose not to specify their marital status. This was at a time when married women in the US and UK almost universally took on their husband’s surname legally at marriage, a practice which continues widely to this day (Duncan, Ellingsæter, and Carter 2019). Moreover, married women were often also addressed by their husband’s first name (for example, *Mrs John James*). *Ms* has now been accepted widely in the English-speaking world. Since the 1990s, a new title, *Mx*, has also been used. Initially intended for use as a gender-neutral title for both men and women, with no indication of marital status, it has gradually begun to be used more in relation to transgender, gender-queer, nonbinary, and intersex people, without any connotation of the person’s gender<sup>2</sup>.

In 1972 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, both professional editors, published two influential articles: “Desexing the English Language” in the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* – a feminist magazine still being published today – and “One small step for genkind” in *The New York Times Magazine*. In this latter article they extensively discuss the gender bias in language that expresses stereotyped attitudes in a patriarchal society assuming the superiority of one sex over another:

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1975/65>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://practicalandrogyny.com/2014/08/28/when-was-the-mx-gender-inclusive-title-created/>.

Except for words that refer to females by definition (mother, actress, Congresswoman), and words for occupations traditionally held by females (nurse, secretary, prostitute), the English language defines everyone as male. The hypothetical person ('If a man can walk 10 miles in two hours...'), the average person ('the man in the street') and the active person ('the man on the move') are male. The assumption is that unless otherwise identified, people in general – including doctors and beggars – are men. It is a semantic mechanism that operates to keep women invisible; 'man' and 'mankind' represent everyone; 'he' in generalized use refers to either sex; the 'land where our fathers died' is also the land of our mothers – although they go unsung (Miller and Swift 1972a).

Miller and Swift described how thoughtful writers and editors were beginning to exclude some of the more obvious sexual stereotypes, including the executive editor of the *Washington Post* who in 1970 wrote to his staff: "The meaningful equality and dignity of women is properly under scrutiny today ... because this equality has been less than meaningful and the dignity not always free of stereotype and condescension" (Miller and Swift 1972a).

Miller and Swift also cite the case of H.W. Fowler, the famous British lexicographer and commentator on the usage of the English language who, at a time when feminine forms were beginning to be dropped, actively advocated the revival of the feminine endings to nonsexual words. In 1926, in the first edition of his *Modern English Usage*, Fowler wrote: "with the coming extensions of women's vocations, feminines for vocation-words are a special need of the future" (Fowler 1926: 176). After the First World War and the increased participation of women in the workforce, Fowler not only encouraged the use of feminine forms such as *authoress* and *poetess*, he also suggested the creation of neologisms such as *teacheress* and *doctoress*. These neologisms, however, did not enter common usage.

Turning to the world of publishing, in their later and extremely influential *Handbook of Nonsexist Writing. For writers, editors and speakers* (1980-2000), Miller and Swift set out to call attention to and remove "the unconscious bias embedded in modern English" (p. ix). In the *Handbook*, Miller and Swift dealt with the issue of using *man* as a false generic reference. They had already addressed this issue in the 1972 article, "One small step for genkind", in which they proposed *gen*, a new term to replace the generic *man* (*mankind*):

Searching the roots of Western civilization for a word to call this new species of man and woman, someone might come up with *gen*, as in *genesis* and *generic*. With such a word, *man* could be used exclusively for males as *woman* is used for females, for *gen* would include both sexes.... *gen* would be both plural and singular. Like *progenitor*, *progeny*, and *generation*, it would convey continuity... In the new family of *gen*, girls and boys would grow to *genhood*, and to speak of *genkind* would be to include all the people of the earth (Miller & Swift 1972a).

This proposal also did not enter common usage. In the *Handbook*, which specifically addressed editorial questions, Miller and Swift offered various other solutions to creating gender-neutral language, including rephrasing to include people of both sexes. For example:

*A man who lies constantly needs a good memory* might be replaced by *Someone/Anyone who lies constantly needs a good memory* or rewritten as *A chronic liar needs a good memory* (p. 18).

Regarding the word *man* used with reference to the human species – thus obscuring women’s contributions to civilization – they proposed the use of *ancestors* / *people* / *human societies*:

*Men have always hoped to conquer disease* reformulated as *The conquest of disease has always been a goal of human societies* (p. 20).

They also addressed the use of the word *-man* in compound words: *mankind*, *manmade*, proposing instead the neutral terms *human beings*, *humankind*, *human-made* as possible alternatives. Also *-man* as a suffix in words such as *chairman*, *spokesman* – again proposing *chairperson* or more simply *chair*, *co-ordinator*, *convener* (pp. 30-33).

During the mid 1970s, further attempts were made to remove the word *man* from references to women. Some of these include semi-phonetic alternative spellings: *womin*, *wimmin* (singular *womon*), and especially in the US, *womyn*. In more recent years, the intersectional term *womxn* (pronounced “wo-minx”) has started to be used to include a range of identities of marginalised genders, including non-binary people.

A second important related issue – which Miller and Swift called the Pronoun Problem – was the traditional use of the pronouns *he*, *his*, *him* for generic reference. In a preview edition of their article “Desexing the Language” in *Ms Magazine*, Miller and Swift had made an attempt to coin a series of new gender-neutral pronouns: *tey*, *ter* and *tem*, as the singular form for the pronouns *they*, *their*, *them* (see the table below). They called this “the human pronoun”, which would allow women to be recognised as “full-fledged members of the human race”.

### The Human Pronoun

		Singular	Plural
Nominative	<i>he</i> and <i>she</i>	<i>tey</i>	<i>they</i>
Possessive	<i>his</i> and <i>her</i> (or <i>hers</i> )	<i>ter</i> (or <i>ters</i> )	<i>their</i> (or <i>theirs</i> )
Objective	<i>him</i> and <i>her</i>	<i>tem</i>	<i>them</i>

Source: Miller and Swift 1972b: 103-4.

Resistance to such proposals was often ferocious, as Wendy Martyna points out in her article “Beyond the ‘He/Man’ Approach: The Case for Nonsexist Language” (1980). The avoidance of the generic male was called variously “Ms-guided” and “linguistic lunacy”. Reactions ranged from fierce personal attacks: “Women are irrational, all women: when some women threaten to disembowel me unless I say ‘personhole-cover,’ I am surer even than I was that all women are irrational” (Milton Mayer, cited in Martyna 1980: 485) to barely disguised ridicule:

The fact that the masculine is the unmarked gender in English ... is simply a feature of grammar. It is unlikely to be an impediment to change in the patterns of the sexual division of labor towards which our society may wish to evolve. There is really no cause for anxiety or

pronoun-envy on the part of those seeking such changes (Harvard Linguistics Faculty, “Pronoun Envy,” cited in Martyna 1980: 483).

Other responses were trivialized as a source of humour; the search was often seen as a passing fad that offended the traditional reader, despite the “striking social implications caused by the confusion and exclusion by the use of the generic masculine” (Martyna 1980: 484).

However, the search for a language which speaks fairly of both sexes was not a new one. Dennis Barron provides a long glossary of what he calls “common-gender, epicene, or bisexual pronouns” (Barron 1981: 88-96). The first of these dates from as early as about 1850 (*ne, nis, nim; hiser* (his and her) which appeared in the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. Barron lists over thirty other proposals made throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: for example, *hiser, himer /hyser, hymer* in *The Literary World* (1884) or *he'er, him'er, his'er* in the *Chicago Tribune* (1912) or *ze, zim, zees, zeeself* in the *Newsletter of the American Anthropological Association* (1970).

Nevertheless, although it was generally recognised that there was a need to fill a semantic gap, none of these proposed alternatives were able to replace the generic *he* and the singular *they* which remained widespread. For clarity, the singular *they* is used with both plural and singular reference, much like the *you* pronoun, which in English has both singular and plural references. For example, *Each student submitted their essay* (Grey 2015). The generic singular *they* was endorsed in 2015 by the editors of the *Washington Post*, though with a caveat to first try avoiding it if possible. However, today the singular *they* is in widespread current usage. *They* was even chosen as the Word of the Year by the American Dialect Society in 2015, when it was recognized by the Society “for its emerging use as a pronoun to refer to a known person, often as a conscious choice by a person rejecting the traditional gender binary of *he* and *she*”<sup>3</sup>.

At this time, feminist scholars were reflecting on how to resolve the controversy over sexist language. Martyna (1980: 93), for example, endorsed a dual strategy of research and action to speed up the language changes that were already in progress in order to improve the credibility of feminist proposals. She also proposed increasing pressure on government agencies and the media for increased use of non-sexist language. Miller and Swift called on publishers and the mass media to ensure that the public receives information that is “as accurate as research and the conscientious use of language can make it” (Miller and Swift 2000: 8).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has seen a new wave of political activism, in which much linguistic reform comes from trans, non-binary, intersex, and genderqueer activists, whose call for “inclusive” language is for language that includes people of all genders and none. This to a degree contrasts with the previous feminist aim of using language to raise the status and visibility of women as it attempts to include rather than highlight women’s roles.

From the unsuccessful attempts made to coin new gender-free pronouns in the 1970s, the range of proposals available has increased greatly. Much work is being

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.americandialect.org/2015-word-of-the-year-is-singular-they>.

done to increase awareness, especially in university contexts. See, for example, the document made available to the community of the American University in Washington:

#### The different types of pronouns

Subject Pronoun	Object Pronoun	Possessive Pronoun	Reflexive Pronoun
___ is an activist	I am proud of ___	That is ___ book and That book is ___	That person likes ___
She	Her	Her/Hers	Herself
He	Him	His	Himself
Ze*	Hir	Hir/Hirs	Hirself
Ze*	Zir	Zie/Zirs	Zirself
E or Ey	Em	Eir/Eirs	Eirself or emself
Per	Per	Per/Pers	Perself
They (are)**	Them	Their/Theirs	Themselves
Name	Name	Name's/Name's	Name

\*Additional alternate spellings for “ze” are “zie”, “sie”, “xie”, and “xe.” \*\*When using “they” as a singular gender inclusive pronoun, you would still conjugate associated verbs as you would for the plural version, as in “they are an activist” or “they like to go shopping”, not “they is an activist” or “they likes to go shopping.”

Source: American University, The Center for Diversity & Inclusion. <https://www.american.edu/ocl/cdi/pronouns-guide.cfm> (2001).

Another example comes from the Cambridge University Students’ Union LGBT+ committee which, besides the singular *they*, proposes two other sets of alternative pronouns known as the Elverson and Spivak pronouns. In 1975, Christine Elverson won a contest by the Chicago Association of Business Communicators for her proposals of what she called the “transgender” pronouns *ey*, *em*, *eir* and *eirself*, formed by dropping the “th” from *they*, *them*, and *their*. American mathematician Michael Spivak drew up the pronouns *E*, *Em*, *Eir* and *Emself* which he used in his *The Joy of TeX* (1990), and which are still used today in many text-based online virtual multiple reality systems for participants with undefined genders.

It is now common practice for people to include their choice of pronouns in their signature blocks and webpages. This is not reserved to academic or professional settings. For example, recently Marks & Spencer, a major British multinational retailer, is addressing the issues of gender identity and non-binary experiences, and encourages staff to share their pronouns at work, on their name badges and emails, as part of a more general Inclusion and Diversity policy<sup>4</sup>.

Various style guides now exist to provide guidelines about trans-inclusive language, such as *The Trans Journalists Association’s Style Guide* or *The Association*

<sup>4</sup> <http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/sustainability/our-people/inclusion-and-diversity>.

of *LGBTQ Journalists' Stylebook*. The general principle followed is that gender identity should be treated with respect and sensitivity. Most of these guides recommend the use of the singular *they* for non-binary people, unless other pronouns are specified by individuals.

With reference to the pronoun issue, the guidelines for authors for the influential *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (<https://read.dukeupress.edu/tsq>), recommend not alternating the use of masculine and feminine pronouns in an article “unless the alteration refers to shifting social or subjective gender identities or if the gender of the person being written about cannot be determined with confidence”. It is suggested that the form *s/he* should only be used under similar circumstances, whereas it is preferable to use both pronouns: *he or she/him or her/his or her*. Alternatively, the sentence should be rewritten in the plural to avoid an implicit gender binary (see the *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* Style Sheet).

In 2019, Merriam-Webster, the authoritative American dictionary, named *they* its Word of the Year in recognition of the fact that searches had risen by 313% over the previous year (Saguy and Williams 2021). As a nonbinary personal pronoun, singular *they* seems to have become an essential term in gender-inclusive language politics. Recent scholarship places the use of *they/them* as non-binary personal pronouns within the trans-inclusive language reform movement (Zimman 2019).

As the dominance of English as a global language is indisputable, used as it is in the international worlds of publishing, broadcasting, teaching, and learning (Crystal 2003), it is interesting to look at the specific context of formal academic writing and publishing today. As questions of transgender rights and gender equity continue to be discussed, editors are increasingly feeling the need for guidelines, in particular regarding a gender-neutral pronoun.

A great deal of research in the fields of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics has been dedicated to the importance of gender and language (see, for example, the useful overview by Deborah Cameron 2010). More recent work has focused on the role of gender research and academic writing for publication (see, for example, Katja Thieme and Mary Ann Saunders (2018); Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry (2018)). Various steps have been taken in recent years to attempt to render women and their scholarship more visible in the academic world: for example, since the 1990s the use of given names in bibliographies has been widely adopted. In the same period there was an attempt to alternate the use of male and female pronouns in alternate paragraphs/chapters of publications. However, this tended to lead to considerable confusion and was no longer recommended, and often actively discouraged.

Academic style guides provide guidelines on how to improve uniformity and clarity in scientific writing, and consistency in referencing styles. The prominent publication manuals of the American Psychological Association and the Chicago Manual of Style are used worldwide by researchers, students, and educators across all fields of academic research. The most recent editions of both style guides now also pay particular attention to bias-free writing, addressing how to write about disabilities, race, age, and socioeconomic status. Both guides also dedicate considerable space to gender and inclusivity. An examination of these two guides gives us a

picture of the recommendations the academic world is receiving with regard to bias-free language in formal written English.

The Chicago University Style Guide (2017) places considerable emphasis on the issue of maintaining readers' credibility. It suggests avoiding the "political quagmire" that discussions of bias-free language can descend into by focusing only on "maintaining credibility with a wide readership", thus simplifying the argument for eliminating bias (Section 5.251): "What you should strive for – if you want readers to focus on your ideas and not on the political subtext – is a style that doesn't even hint at the issue" (Section 5.254). The Guide notes that in speech and informal writing people tend to use the third-person plural pronouns *they*, *them*, *their*, and *themselves* (or the nonstandard singular *themsel*) to avoid using gender-specific pronouns. However, it claims "while this usage is accepted in those spheres, it is only lately showing signs of gaining acceptance in formal writing" and recommends avoiding its use. When referring specifically to a person who does not identify with a gender-specific pronoun, however, *they* and its forms are often preferred (Section 5.48). The Chicago guide discusses the general acceptance of gender-neutral language and credibility. While many "reasonable" readers find the generic masculine pronoun unacceptable, many (often different) readers find resort to "nontraditional gimmicks" (such as *he/she* or *s/he* or *they* as a singular pronoun) to avoid the generic masculine. The guide claims that "either approach sacrifices credibility with some readers" (Section 5.252). Despite its focus on a non-political perception of "credibility", the Chicago guide, however, does propose some methods for avoiding the pronoun problem and producing gender-free language. These include: omitting the pronoun if it is unnecessary and replacing it with the definite article *the* (*The programmer should update the records when data is transferred by the head office*); using a plural antecedent and thereby eliminating the need for a singular pronoun (*Contestants must conduct themselves with dignity at all times*); or using the neutral singular pronoun *one* (*An actor in New York is likely to earn more than one in Paducah*). The guide recommends moderate use of the formula *he or she*, preferably when no other option is satisfactory (Section 5.255).

The manual of the American Psychological Association (2020) takes a much less conservative approach to achieving bias-free language, with guidelines that take into account the concept of intersectionality defined as "the way in which individuals are shaped by and identify with a vast array of cultural, structural, sociobiological, economic, and social contexts" (p. 148). In Chapter 5, the APA guide provides a wide discussion of Gender identity, distinguishing between "cisgender" (individuals whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their gender identity); "transgender" (persons whose gender identity, expression, and/or role does not conform to what is culturally associated with their sex assigned at birth), including also terms such as "gender-nonconforming," "genderqueer," "gender-nonbinary"; and "transgender and gender non conforming (TGNC)", for which the umbrella term of Sex assignment (assigned sex) is recommended. Unlike the Chicago guide, the APA recommends avoiding the use of the pronouns *he* or *she* as alternatives to the singular *they* because such contractions imply "an exclusively binary nature of gender". Whereas the use of the singular *they* avoids making assumptions about a



person's gender (Section 4.18). Transgender studies is an interdisciplinary research field which first emerged in the 1990s, and has continued in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, transforming language practices related to gender especially on many university campuses in the US and the UK. However little discussion has been dedicated to questions of trans scholarship and trans experience in the realm of writing studies:

Trans activism pinpoints exclusions that cisgender people are not able to see and shows up forms of violence that many cisgender people are often unwilling to acknowledge. There is an increasing number of initiatives to get instructors and students to honour trans people's names and pronouns (Thieme and Saunders 2018: 2).

The authors argue that it is difficult to “quantify” trans-gender and non-binary scholars as they are often hidden to their readers (see also the study by Brauer 2017). Nevertheless, work is being carried out towards an “ethics of citation” within the transgender scholarly community in which the awareness of the opposite danger of outing transgenders people is at the forefront. Some suggestions for avoiding this through the judicious integral citation of names, pronouns and identity-marking modifiers such as “trans women like Jane Meyers,” or “queer studies critic Evelyn Brown” (Thieme and Saunders 2018).

This brief overview of work on gender-neutral and gender-inclusive writing in English, which has a much longer history than many may have imagined, gives rise to several reflections for authors and editors alike. Neologisms do not seem to be easily taken up in general use, whether they be Fowler's feminine forms in the 1920s, or new forms of gender-neutral pronouns such as those proposed from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Therefore, perhaps one way forward is through increased sensitivity and awareness which will allow new forms to evolve naturally. Nevertheless, the recognition of the need to embrace new and changing questions of identity may require much more than waiting for a spontaneous evolution of language. The ethical practices of referring to work by trans scholars is encouraging the development of a new and different awareness of the sociality of citation (Thieme and Saunders 2018). And the responsibility of editors in the publishing world cannot be ignored. What Miller and Swift wrote in 1980 is still relevant today:

To go on using in its former sense a word whose meaning has changed is counterproductive. The point is not that we *should* recognize semantic change, but that in order to be precise, in order to be understood, we must (Miller and Swift 1980: 8).

The editorial policies developed by publishers that provide editors and contributors with guidance on the style and tone of content they require are essential to accelerating language awareness, and thus change, in order to achieve “clear, convincing, graceful ways to say accurately what we want to say” (Miller and Swift 2000: 9).

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