

Language, Sexism and Schools

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We need to be clear what we mean by sexism in language before we can begin to assess what the educational implications are. The phrase covers at least three areas of concern.

First there is the area of sex differences in language use: linguists have demonstrated in research in many different societies that women and men talk differently. This is sometimes manifested in differential patterns of pronunciation or grammar, sometimes in differences in communicative competence - the evidence suggests that women and men adopt different interactive styles.

Secondly, the phrase refers to sexism in the system. The linguistic system reflects cultural beliefs about the relative importance of the two sexes. This means both that women tend to be hidden (through the use of so-called 'generic' forms, 'he' and 'man' and also through gaps in the lexicon which mean that there is a lack of words to express women's experience, and that women are trivialised and denigrated (words referring to women tend to have lower status, and over time acquire negative meanings, cf. 'hussy', 'dame' and compare master/mistress, bachelor/spinster).

Lastly, sexism in language can lead to alienation - it has been argued that since men create language to reflect their view of the world, and since language determines the way speakers see the world, then women are forced to see things from a male viewpoint.

It seems to me that all these three aspects of language and sexism have educational implications; I shall examine them in turn.

In terms of language use, girls in school differ from other disadvantaged groups: the significant aspect of their language use is not their pronunciation or grammar, but the wider area of their communicative competence. It has been shown that children acquire language appropriate to their sex, and this includes differentiated communicative competence. In the school setting, this differing understanding of when to speak, when to remain silent, how to mark speech for politeness, when it is permissible to interrupt, etc. helps to contribute to different outcomes for girls and boys.

Crucially, their differentiated communicative competence enables boys to

dominate in the classroom. Research findings demonstrate that boys participate actively in class, call out answers, make lots of guesses, while girls listen more passively. Girls are explicitly taught that loudness is 'unfeminine', and it seems that girls' sense of their own identity as female makes them feel that the speech acts of arguing, challenging and shouting are inappropriate behaviour for them. The English infant school defines the quiet child as well-behaved and the noisy child as badly-behaved. It is girls rather than boys who conform to the schools' demand for quietness and who are perceived by teachers as 'good'.

But recent innovations in educational practice have stressed the importance of active learning. Being actively involved means talking, among other things - the quiet child if quiet means passive and unassertive, is a child who is unable to participate fully in learning.

Another consequence of boys' more noisy undisciplined behaviour is that they get more attention. Recent research in the United States, Britain and Sweden confirms this - it seems that teachers give about two-thirds of their attention to boys. Boys receive both more disapproval and more praise. By responding to boys' demanding behaviour, teachers in effect reward that behaviour. Teachers' responses encourage boys to act independently, but lower girls' self esteem: by 11 or 12, bright girls are known to have significantly lower self-image than boys of comparable ability.

Teachers' awareness of the different communicative competence of girls and boys also affects the choice of topics to be discussed in school. Lessons are organised to reflect boys' interests, because teachers have learned that boys will object - loudly - to topics they see as effeminate, while girls will accept "boys" topics.

As far as sexism in the linguistic system itself is concerned, it seems reasonable to assume that it has a profound influence on school children. The use of 'he' after sex-indefinite antecedents (e.g. the child...he; the scientist...he) and of 'man' as a noun referring to human species as a whole (e.g. 'stone age man'; 'men of ideas') are not only sexist in themselves, but can have a cumulative effect on girls, reinforcing their sense of alienation.

These 'generic' forms which are common in school textbooks, help to make women invisible, and serve to marginalise girls. (If you're sceptical about this, try reading a book where 'she' is used throughout as the generic pronoun - it is amazing how differently the reader feels in terms of whether she identifies with the text or not.)

What can teachers do about sexism in language? First and foremost, schools should be encouraged to have a formal policy in relation to language, as do, for example, major publishing houses (e.g. McGraw Hill) and some professional organisations (e.g. the National Union of Journalists). Moreover, teachers need to know about sex differences in language use in order to adopt new strategies. They can discuss the issue in class with pupils, monitor topics to see they aren't biased towards boys' interests, call on girls to speak, look at girls when addressing the class, get girls to chair groups and to report back on group work.

At root, however, the problem is a social, not a linguistic one. Some schools are making brave efforts to combat these social pressures by, for example, encouraging teachers to make sure they talk to and listen to girls as much as boys, and by throwing out sexist textbooks, but until society changes, teachers will have to fight an uphill battle.