The state of gendered language

What editors need to know in 2020
Sarah Grey

We live in a strange and fascinating moment: History seems to be speeding up. Crisis after crisis breaks faster than we can keep up, technology advances just as quickly, and the looming spectre of climate crisis makes us all wonder how much time we've really got before the world changes beyond recognition.

When it comes to sex, gender, and discrimination, the contradictions of change have also been moving quickly – recent years have brought huge strides against sexism, homophobia, transphobia, and assault and abuse all around the world, but they've also brought harsh backlash against every step toward progress.

The movements and debates that are playing out right now around questions of sex and gender are some of the most culturally and emotionally fraught drivers of language change. Thus it should come as no surprise to language professionals that English, too, is evolving and iterating faster than ever. As editors, part of our mandate is to keep up with those changes as best we can. If we're to help our clients stay relevant, we need to understand not only what's changing but what forces are driving those changes. It's important for us to view the material we edit in a larger societal context – to help authors and readers think about the assumptions a piece of writing makes, the power dynamics it reflects, and the voices it includes or erases.

In this paper, I'll walk you through some recent changes around gender and language. We'll start with a quick review of how language change works, look at some specific examples of recent changes, and end with some tools you can put to work in your editing.

Language change

Language has always been changing. Sometimes it happens slowly – the Great Vowel Shift took about four centuries – but when social movements campaign for language change, it can happen so rapidly that it's hard to keep up. Changes in politics, in culture, and in technology spur and are spurred by changes in language. Language changes to fill a need: old words haven't kept up with new realities, or old realities newly confronted. As linguist Gretchen McCulloch points out,

> The changeability of language is its strength… because we remake language at every generation, because we learn it from our peers, not just our elders, because we can make ourselves understood even though we all speak subtly different personal varieties, language is flexible and strong.[1]

About the author

Sarah Grey recently joined O'Reilly Media as a developmental editor after nearly a decade running her own freelance business, Grey Editing. She is a Robinson Prize laureate and an Advanced Professional Member of the CIEP. She has written about and taught editing and writing for the American Copy Editors Society, SfEP, the Editorial Freelancers Association, Editors Canada, Ideas on Fire, Copyediting, Conscious Style Guide, and many more. She lives in Philadelphia, USA, with her partner, their daughter, and their beagle.

Garner's Modern English uses a scale called the Language Change Index which classifies linguistic forms into five stages of acceptance, with stage 1 being brand new and stage 5 being universally accepted. Not all style guides offer such guidance, and when they do it's often dated. Dictionaries, too, rely on analysing how words are used in edited, published prose.

That means that because, as editors, we are linguistic gatekeepers, the people who write the style guides and dictionaries *look to us about what to include*. We have the power to guide the language in a better direction. Let's look at a few examples of how this can play out in real life.

Sexism: Beyond the obvious

The first organised push against sexism that included deliberate changes to the English language dates to the women's movements of the 1960s and 1970s. This is where we see the changes most people think of when they think of gender bias in language. It included changes like using *he or she* instead of a universal male pronoun; using descriptive, nongendered descriptive titles, like *mail carrier* or *server*; introducing *Ms* as a title that doesn't disclose marital status; and referring to female adults as *women*, not *girls*.

While editors today still find ourselves correcting these usages in our work, we consider them to be pretty basic and straightforward; few authors and even fewer readers question (or even notice) when we fix them.

So that's it! We won! Paper over, right?

If only it were that simple. The truth is, gender bias can show itself in a thousand ways even when writers follow these rules carefully. By asking the right questions, we can bring underlying assumptions to the surface and begin to change them: for example, the idea that women's bodies are the most important part of them, or that women should be or are solely responsible for reproductive labour, such as child rearing, cooking, and cleaning.

We see these assumptions everywhere – from adverts that depict women cleaning the kitchen to media coverage that focuses more on the looks and clothing choices of women in leadership than on the actual work they do. Scientists, politicians, CEOs, and union organisers find interviewers asking who's watching the children instead of focusing on the topic at hand – questions they'd never think to ask men in the same professions.

In one particularly egregious example of focusing on image, the liberal-leaning *New York Times* interviewed Scottish first minister Nicola Sturgeon shortly after she took office:

> 'I wish we lived in a world where how you looked or what you wore wasn't an issue for men or women, and it's by and large not an issue for men, so I wish it wasn't an issue for women but it is,' she said, wearing a fitted apricot-colored dress and beige patent-leather heels.[2]

That's the friendly version, but the backlash is worse. The UK's *Daily Mail*, not known for its progressivism, reported on a meeting between Sturgeon and Theresa May with a photo of the two, seated and wearing skirts, with the headline 'Never mind Brexit, who won Legs-it!'[3] Two heads of state, major world leaders, were reduced to competition not over power or resources but the attractiveness of their legs (Fig. 1). This kind of demeaning focus is a way of recentring power – it sends a message that no matter how much you achieve, you'll still never be more than a sex object.

A similar message can also come across in writing that makes light of rape, sexual harassment, intimate partner abuse, and other forms of gender-based violence.

Othering

Othering is what you do when you call attention to someone's differences from what you perceive as the norm. When you point out attributes that set a person apart from the unstated idea of 'normal', you're marking them as *other*, as different. You're also telling your audience something about what you see as normal. When I try to buy a laptop bag online and the categories I find are 'work', 'outdoor', 'travel', and 'women', that tells me something about who the bag seller thinks uses laptops and who works, travels, or goes hiking.

Let's look at an example. We can use Google Ngrams to track how often phrases are used through history.[4] 'Woman doctor' spikes in frequency after 1900, while 'man doctor' is rarely used at all; 'male doctor' is more common than 'man doctor', but in both the 19th century and the 21st 'female doctor' is still more widely used.

This is because we only give the noun a modifier if we think the reader will otherwise make a different assumption – so 'woman doctor' means that doctors are presumed male unless otherwise noted. We see the converse if we search for 'male nurse' and 'female nurse' – 'male nurse' is far more common.

Fig. 1: A demeaning headline. Photo © *Daily Mail*

At other times, sexism comes across when women are simply erased. This happens in historical writing frequently: there is, perhaps, no phrase that erases more women than the simple but insidious 'and his wife'.

Respect is another issue. It's surprisingly common for writers to use last names in second references to men and first names in second references to women: I once came across, in an academic book I was editing, the list 'Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Rosa'. Those with professional titles such as 'Dr' also report having colleagues and even students use only their first names.[5]

Gender bias can emerge when only one kind of voice gets to speak. I recently began working for a tech publisher, and decided to check out one of the sector's most popular books, 2008's *Clean Code* by Bob Martin. It's a fun book, full of first-person quotes from programmers illustrated by cartoon drawings of those being quoted. It's great for explaining lots of aspects of the industry, but one aspect comes across inadvertently: the author only quotes men (and white-appearing men, at that). Never mind that women programmers have been breaking ground since the 1940s: the message to young women considering a career in programming is all too clear.

That's the kind of erasure that prompted artist and writer Alison Bechdel to formulate what's become known as the Bechdel Test.[6] Her character explains that she'll only see a movie 'if it satisfies three basic requirements. One, it has to have at least two women in it, who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man'. Watch some of your favourite movies and see how many pass the test – then try it on the next work you edit.

So far, I've mostly talked about two categories – but gender is a lot more complicated than that. As the LGBTQIA+ movement gains ground, more and more people identify openly as trans, nonbinary, genderfluid, or agender (among many other terms). Few language changes in recent years have received as much attention as pronouns, with the epicene *they* emerging as a simple, elegant, and already ubiquitous solution to the problem of binary gender in English pronouns. In 2019, dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster declared *they* its Word of the Year, noting that 'lookups for *they* increased by 313% in 2019 over the previous year'.[7] Identifying one's pronouns on conference nametags, social media bios, and email signature lines has become common practice (and good manners) – though it was relatively rare outside activist circles just a decade ago.

The first time I attended a copyediting conference, I was amazed to find all of the lexicographers coming down strongly in favour of these usages of the singular *they*.

Fig. 2: Google Ngram comparison of 'woman doctor' and 'man doctor'
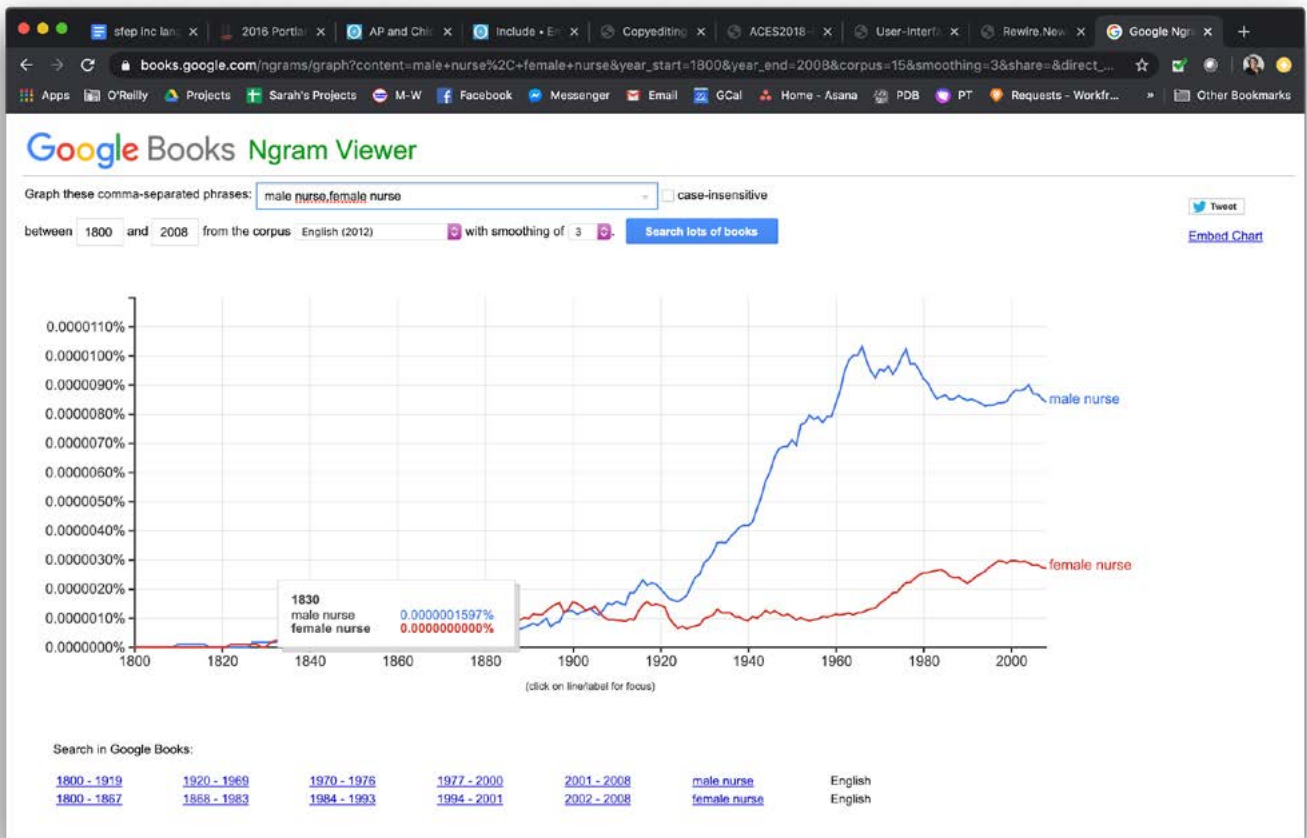

Fig. 3: Google Ngram comparison of 'male nurse' and 'female nurse'

They pointed out that we already have a pronoun that's both singular and plural: *you*, which has been doing double duty ever since we lost *thee* and *thou*. Even *themself* has broken through into mainstream acceptance. As lexicographer Steve Kleinedler points out,

> The fact that there is an outcry over the recent acceptance of this feature (which, again, is several centuries old) is more proof that even something as relatively static as a language's pronoun system can undergo change.[8]

The copyeditor Alex Kapitan, who has written an excellent usage guide on transgender terminology, posits perhaps the most important rule to remember in assessing new changes to language:

> Do not care more about words than you do about people.[9]

Simple? Perhaps. But the chorus of 'But it's ungrammatical!' is only beginning to quiet down, thanks in part to the recent acceptance of singular *they* by style guides and dictionaries. Of course, *they* isn't the only gender-neutral pronoun; people who don't fit the binary have come up with a creative and ingenious range of neologisms over the years. *They* does seem to have emerged as the front-runner, though, likely due to its familiarity and long history.[10] The clear trend is toward finding more inclusive, less binary ways to speak and write.

Any editor can tell you that the rules of language are what allow us to communicate meaning; a language without rules would be nothing but noise. But rules aren't written in stone, and when they cause harm, editors have not only the right but the *responsibility* to use our considerable linguistic power to help change language for the better.

Notes

1 Gretchen McCulloch (2019). *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*. New York: Riverhead Books, 273.

2 Katrin Bennhold and Steven Erlanger (2015). Nicola Sturgeon, star of Scottish politics, vows to secure more power. *New York Times*, 8 June. **nytimes.com/2015/06/09/world/europe/nicola-sturgeon-star-of-scottish-politics-vows-to-secure-more-power.html**

3 Bonnie Malkin (2017). Daily Mail 'Legs-it' front page criticised as 'sexist, offensive and moronic'. *Guardian*, 28 March. **theguardian.com/media/2017/mar/28/daily-mail-legs-it-front-page-sexist**

4 Research by Colleen Barry, Kory Stamper, Dilane Mitchell, and Karen Yin (2016). Sexist creeps. Panel presentation at American Copy Editors Society, summarised at **consciousstyleguide.com/ap-and-chicago-on-sexist-language/**. Google Ngrams is a free web tool that lets you search for and compare the frequency of words and phrases in Google's massive corpus of published works from 1800 on. This kind of analysis is called *corpus linguistics* (see Jonathon Owen (2017). Copyediting and corpus linguistics. Slide presentation from ACES. **aceseditors.org/assets/files/pdfs/CopyeditingandCorpusLinguistics.pdf**).

5 JA Files, et al. (2017). Speaker introductions at internal medicine grand rounds: Forms of address reveal gender bias. *Journal of Women's Health* 26(5), May. **ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/28437214**. Oncologists who spoke out about this behaviour received threatening messages, and their presentation on the topic was controversial enough to prompt conference organisers to hire security guards. See Alexandria Carolan (2019). 'Call me doctor': How women in oncology are fighting for cultural change. *Cancer Letter*, 13 December. **cancerletter.com/articles/20191213_1/**. For first-person stories, search the Twitter hashtag **#CallMeDoctor**.

6 See the Bechdel Test cartoon by Alison Bechdel (1985). 'The rule', dykes to watch out for. **en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bechdel_test**.

7 Merriam-Webster's Words of the Year 2019. **merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year**.

8 Steve Kleinedler (2018). *Is English Changing?* New York: Routledge, 74.

9 Alex Kapital (2017). Transgender style guide. *The Radical Copyeditor*. 31 August. **radicalcopyeditor.com/2017/08/31/transgender-style-guide/**

10 For a deep dive, see Dennis Baron (2020). *What's Your Pronoun? Beyond He & She*. New York: WW Norton.

Things to look out for

Here are some questions you can use to test for gender bias in the material you edit.

- Does this writer make assumptions about the gender or sexual orientation of the reader?

- Do references to a person's gender, sexual orientation, marital status, looks, etc provide information that is relevant to the topic at hand, or could they be left out?

- Is anyone in the text sexually objectified? Who, and in what way?

- Are names dealt with equally? Are first names, surnames, and professional titles used similarly for everyone discussed, or are they skewed by gender?

- Whose voices does the reader hear? Whose voices are left out?

- Does the writer assume that a woman's partner must be a man, or vice versa? Are gendered terms like *husband* and *wife* used when *spouse* or *partner* would be more accurate for more people?

- Does this writing assume a gender binary? Does it exclude the experiences of people outside that binary (such as assuming that everyone who menstruates is female)?

- Does this text use people's stated pronouns, gender identities, and names?

- Does the text disclose sensitive information (such as former names, gender assigned at birth, or experiences of sexual assault) about anyone who has not consented to that disclosure?

Additional resources suggested by the CIEP

Plain English for editors CIEP course (**ciep.uk/training/choose-a-course/plain-english-editors**) and guide (**ciep.uk/resources/guides/#EPL**)

CII Inclusive language guidelines: **cii.co.uk/media/10120292/inclusive-language-guidelines.pdf**

European Parliament, Gender-neutral language in the European Parliament: **europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/151780/GNL_Guidelines_EN.pdf**

Man Who Has It All, on Facebook (**facebook.com/MANWHOHASITALL**) and on Twitter (**twitter.com/manwhohasitall**)

United Nations, Gender-inclusive language: **un.org/en/gender-inclusive-language**

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