Generic Pronouns and Sexist Language: The Oxymoronic Character of Masculine Generics

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This experiment investigated the propensity of the generic he to evoke images of males relative to he/she and the plural they. Undergraduates read sentences aloud and verbally described the images that came to mind. The results provide strong support for the hypothesis that the generic he evokes a disproportionate number of male images. Results also suggest that while the plural they functions as a generic pronoun for both males and females, males may comprehend he/she in a manner similar to he. Theoretical implications for a critique of sexist language and prescribing generic pronoun usage are considered.

The use of he as pronoun for nouns embracing both genders is a simple, practical convention rooted in the beginnings of the English language. He has lost all suggestion of maleness in these circumstances.... It has no pejorative connotations; it is never incorrect.

(Strunk & White, The Elements of Style, 1979, p. 60)

When Professor Strunk first wrote his “little book,” his advice went largely unquestioned. Half a century later, Strunk’s view represents the minority position in an ongoing public debate. Claiming that he fails to function as a generic pronoun, many individuals and organizations, including the American Psychological Association (1977), have chosen to use he or she or they in place of the “generic” he.

Many other authors, however, continue to use he or use alternatives only begrudgingly. Critics have offered persuasive rebuttals to these authors’

1I would like to thank Lea Haravon and Jim Dillard for their assistance in the design and completion of this study.

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arguments in defense of the generic he (see Martyna, 1978; Bendix, 1979; Blaubeck, 1980; MacKay, 1983), but the work of Cole, Hill, and Dayley (1983) reintroduced one of the central issues in the debate. The results of their experiments support the argument that the generic he does not evoke images in readers' minds any different from those brought to mind by he/she or they. They argue that by itself, the generic he does not lead to thoughts of men. The following study reexamines the question raised by Cole et al. Specifically, I provide evidence for the hypothesis that the generic he elicits more images of males than he/she and they. Before presenting this evidence, however, I locate the issue this study addresses in the larger debate surrounding the use of the generic he.

A substantial body of research supports the hypothesis that the generic he possesses a male bias. Regarding the origin of the term, Bodine (1975) found that the generic use of he derived from the androcentric worldview prevailing among 18th-century grammarians: “human beings were to be considered male unless proven otherwise” (p. 133). One would expect such a view in a patriarchal society that, until recently, has afforded women only a minor role in shaping the English language (Kramer, 1981).

Some authors acknowledge the sexist origins of the generic he yet deny its contemporary perniciousness (see Strunk & White, 1979, p. 60). Feminist scholars, however, maintain that the generic he and similar words “not only reflect a history of male domination” but also “actively encourage its perpetuation” (Sniezek & Jagielski, 1986, p. 643). For example, the ostensibly generic use of he has permitted varying legal interpretations that often exclude women but always include men (Ritchie, 1975; Collins, 1977; Hill, 1986).

In addition, critics contended that the generic he has reinforced sexist attitudes and behaviors in a more subtle, psychological manner. This argument finds its foundation in the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: our grammar shapes our thought (Whorf, 1956). Blaubeck (1980) applies this hypothesis to sexist words and phrases in the English language, including the generic he. She maintains that regardless of its origins, “Sexist language by its existence reinforces and socializes sexist thinking and practices” (p. 137). If Blaubeck and the scholars who share her view are correct, research should demonstrate both (1) the linguistic bias of the generic he and (2) the pronoun's detrimental social and psychological effects on language users.

Many investigators have found that the generic he possesses a male bias, at least in the case of high school and college students (Kidd, 1971; MacKay, 1980a; MacKay & Fulker, 1979; Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978; Soto, 1976; Switzer, 1990). Researchers have obtained parallel results in similar studies of sexist generics (Benn & Benn, 1973; Briere & Lantkree, 1983; Brooks, 1983; Harrison & Passero, 1975; Pincus & Pincus, 1980; Schneider & Hacker, 1973; Shepelak, Ogden, & Bennett, 1976; Sniezek & Jagielski, 1986; Stericker, 1981).

In addition to finding a male bias, researchers have demonstrated how the generic he, like other generic masculine language conventions, reinforces sexist attitudes and behaviors (Nilsen, 1977; Silveira, 1980). For instance, Martyna (1978) reasoned that the effects of the male-biased generic pronoun and other forms of sexist language accumulate over time. By the time girls become women,

...that natural process of imagining oneself to be the subject of a neutral human reference has somehow been short-circuited. Ninety percent of the women in my study reported no imagery at all in response to a sentence about a general human being, and the 10 percent who did reported seeing pictures of males. (p. 137)

Related, researchers have found that females almost seem to disappear from the population of “generic” persons in men's minds (Martyna, 1978; Sniezek & Jagielski, 1986; Switzer, 1990).

The above findings offer strong support for the general hypothesis that the generic he reinforces sexist thought and action through a linguistic bias in favor of male interpretation. It is at this point in the debate that the aforementioned work of Cole et al. (1983) becomes relevant. Their methodological and conceptual criticisms bring previous studies regarding the linguistic bias of the generic he into question, and their findings appear to break the vital linguistic link in the critique of the generic he that I have summarized above.

Cole et al. (1983) identified three deficiencies in preexisting research on the comprehension of the generic he: (1) studying something other than the result of an unusually poor education. On the contrary, college students are a relatively well-educated sample of the population. Despite the best intentions of grammarians and individual speakers, it appears that college-educated listeners simply do not consistently understand the generic he in the generic sense. This confusion is more understandable when one remembers that 86–95% of the time that people hear the word he, it explicitly denotes a male referent (Graham, 1973; Faggen-Steckler, McCarthy, & Tittle, 1974).

To make sure that the students in this study were familiar with the generic use of he, I informally administered a questionnaire and interview to the last 44 students after they completed all other parts of the experiment. The questionnaire inquired whether sentences with the generic he could refer to (a) males, (b) females, (c) either, or (d) neither. After they completed the questionnaire, I asked them about their answers. One third clearly understood the grammar rule allows he to serve as a generic pronoun. A quarter thought the grammar rule was outdated and/or “dumb.” Another quarter were not sure they understood it at all, and the rest of the respondents did not provide clear answers. The questionnaire's results are some what suspect, because the students often asked themselves if they could picture men, women, or either; neither; the interview, however, corrected for this to an extent. Many mentioned that their teachers/professors had suggested he or she as the generic pronoun, making he seem antiquated or unfamiliar. Perhaps the contemporaneous use of he or she along with the generic he exacerbates the inherent male bias in the latter pronoun.
effect of pronoun usage, using procedures that made students aware of the issue being studied, and employing dependent measures that “may not have tapped ‘mental images of maleness’” (p. 739).

The experimenters presented the results of six experiments that attempted to avoid these three pitfalls. In five of these experiments, students read job descriptions from which they visualized a hypothetical person. The students then completed a 25-item Sex Stereotype Scale (SSS), rating the femininity/masculinity of the hypothesized people. The first experiment validated the SSS; students rated a “flight attendant” as very feminine and a “chemical engineer” as very masculine. Using the pronoun (either he, she, or they) as the independent variable and the SSS as the dependent measure, their second and third experiments found no significant correlation between pronoun condition and SSS score. This proved true regardless of whether the job description alluded to stereotypical or neutral occupations. The results of their fourth experiment suggested that Kidd’s study (1971) was biased due to her generic use of man in conjunction with he. The fifth replicated Moulton et al.’s (1975) findings, then repeated their experiment using the SSS and found no significant pronoun effect. Their sixth experiment rebutted Crecce and Wilson (1979), whose findings had implied that occupation type was determining SSS score attenuating any possible pronoun effect.

The methodological critique that Cole et al. (1983) put forward should be taken seriously, yet their criticisms apply equally well to their own method of investigation. Their experiments do directly address the question of pronoun effect, but their procedures seem somewhat transparent and their dependent measure does not directly tap mental images.

First, the SSS asks students to rate hypothetical individuals on a scale representing stereotypical masculine/feminine dualisms. Many college students might recognize these dualisms, even when camouflaged by nine filler items. (Note that the two examples of filler items Cole et al. mention—“formal/informal” and “resting/busy”—could easily be construed as similar dualisms by a suspicious student.) In addition, each job description students read included pronouns and asked them to imagine a person; the experimenters did not use any filler descriptions. Compared with previous experiments, the purpose of Cole et al.’s study appears no less opaque to the perceptive student.

Second, Cole et al. (1983) use a problematic dependent measure. They require students to create and describe detailed hypothesized images. Forcing students to construct images probably resulted in some “false” images; thus, students might have completed the SSS with no image or only a contrived one in mind. In addition, the SSS does not perfectly correlate with the sex of the images, since people’s sex role stereotypes are not consistent. This dilutes any existing pronoun effect. Also, since each of Cole et al.’s experiments uses only one or two job descriptions, there is inevitably an occupa-

tional dilution effect. This is particularly important with regard to their second experiment, wherein they intended to use a “sex-neutral context” to obtain a “pure pronoun effect” (p. 741). Notably, the difference between average student ratings of the two “neutral” occupations used in the experiment was statistically significant. The above complications combine to reduce substantially the reliability of Cole et al.’s dependent measure.

One could expect these confounding factors—transparency of procedure, forced imaging, and dilution effects—to make the results of Cole et al.’s experiments somewhat random. Such randomness could explain the otherwise bizarre finding that the experimenters report but do not attempt to explain in their second experiment; the use of he/she tended to elicit more masculine ratings by both sexes than the use of the generic he (p. 742).

In this study of generic pronoun effects, I attempt to mitigate the methodological difficulties that Cole et al. identify yet fail to overcome. To make the purpose of my study opaque, students were informed that the experiment studied “imaging.” Only half of the 12 sentences the students read contained a generic pronoun or, for that matter, direct references to human beings. In addition, the students were not asked to construct images that necessarily contained people, nor were they asked to identify the genders of the people they visualized until they had visualized and described images for all twelve sentences.

To directly tap mental images and obtain a relatively “pure” pronoun effect, students’ responses were coded simply by recording their verbal descriptions of their visualizations and their answers to a subsequent question regarding the content of their images. They were not required to construct mental images, increasing the likelihood that they described actual visualizations. Finally, the nouns and contexts used in the target sentences were relatively neutral (e.g., “person”).

METHOD

Subjects

Forty-eight women and 45 men attending a large Midwestern university participated in the experiment, receiving nominal extra credit for their participation.

Procedure

After reading instructions and practicing the procedure with the student, the experimenter left the room. The student then read 12 randomly
ordered sentences written on note cards, including 6 target and 6 filler sentences. The 6 target sentences included one of the three generic pronouns that referred to neutral subjects such as “person” and “pedestrian”; no student saw more than one type of generic pronoun. (See Appendix One for the list of the 12 sentences.)

After reading a sentence aloud, the student verbally described any image that came to mind, speaking into a tape recorder. For example, one student read aloud the sentence, “The average American believes he watches too much TV.” The student then said, “I see a fat guy sitting on a couch with a remote control. T.V.’s sitting in front of him...”

After reading and visualizing the 12th sentence, the student answered four increasingly specific questions, the last of which directly asked the student to review the 12 sentences and recall whether the visualized subjects of the sentences were male, female, mixed (male and female), or neither (e.g., no humans in the image). Afterward, the student turned off the tape recorder, notified the experimenter, and completed Dillard’s (1989) questionnaire, assessing imaging ability, and Heilbrun’s Adjective Checklist (1981), providing masculinity and femininity ratings.

The recordings of student image descriptions were transcribed and coded according to whether the referents imagined were male, female, mixed, or neither. It was also noted whether or not the student reported seeing her/himself as the subject of the image. When the original image described and the image recalled in response to the question regarding the image’s gender were not clearly identical, six decision rules were employed.

Only one of these rules applied to more than six of the 1116 images recorded; this rule simply stipulated that the original image would be coded by itself if for some reason the student failed to answer the question requesting the recall of an image. Each student received a score for the number of target sentences that evoked male images, female images, mixed images, and

V. RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

The data were analyzed using pronoun condition, gender, imaging ability, and masculinity/femininity as independent variables and image scores as dependent variables. Reliability scores for the questionnaires assessing imaging ability were low (alpha = .50), and the Adjective Check List’s reliability scores for masculinity (alpha = .74) and femininity (alpha = .79) were adequate. Statistically significant correlations were found between the dependent variables and femininity, gender, and pronoun condition. (For a full table of correlations, see Appendix Two.) A hierarchical multiple regression found significant effects for pronoun condition and gender, but not for femininity, suggesting that femininity’s correlation with the dependent variables derived from its correlation with gender. Therefore, the main analyses use only pronoun condition and gender as the independent variables, examining their propensity to elicit male, female, mixed, and self images.

Main Analyses

To examine the interrelationships between the genders of the students, the different pronoun conditions, and the genders of the images brought to mind, the data were analyzed using a 2 (gender) x 3 (pronoun condition) analysis of variance (ANOVA) for each dependent variable. Then, t tests were used for more careful analysis of effects within and between pronoun conditions and gender groupings. Unless otherwise noted, differences in means reported below were statistically significant at p < .05.

Male Images. Table 1 shows the mean number of male images, standard deviation, and number of subjects for each pairing of gender and pronoun condition; subscripts in the table denote statistically significant relationships. For male images, the ANOVA found significant effects for pronoun condition [F(2, 87) = 31.65, p < .001], gender [F(1, 87) = 14.07, p < .001], and the pronoun-gender interaction [F(2, 87) = 11.89, p < .001]. Overall pronoun effects were highly significant; he evoked more male images (M = 3.75) than either he/she (M = 2.00) or they (M = 1.86). Pronoun effects were also significant within each gender grouping. For women he
Table I. Male Images: Means, Standard Deviations (in Parentheses), and Numbers of Subjects*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun condition</th>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>He</th>
<th>He/she</th>
<th>They</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female students</td>
<td>3.94a</td>
<td>3.94</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1.39)</td>
<td>(.90)</td>
<td>(1.02)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 17</td>
<td>n = 17</td>
<td>n = 14</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Male students</td>
<td>3.53b</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td></td>
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<td>(1.25)</td>
<td>(1.08)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>n = 15</td>
<td>n = 15</td>
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</table>

*Contrasts made row-wise (between genders) are indicated by subscripts a, b, and c. Contrasts made column-wise (between pronoun conditions) are indicated by subscripts x and y. For all contrasts, common subscripts indicate the absence of a significant difference at p < .05.

Evoked more male images (M = 3.94) than either he/she (M = 3.94) or they (M = 1.50). More male images came to mind for men when reading he (M = 3.53) and he/she (M = 3.20) than when reading they (M = 2.20).

Comparing overall effects for gender, women saw fewer male images (M = 2.17) than men (M = 2.98). Gender also significantly affected the propensity of individual pronouns to elicit male images. Women saw fewer male images than men when reading he/she (M = 3.94; M = 3.20) and when reading they (M = 1.50; M = 2.20).

Female Images. Table II shows the mean number of female images, standard deviation, and number of subjects for each pairing of gender and pronoun condition. For female images, the ANOVA found significant effects for pronoun condition [F(1, 87) = 40.95, p < .001] and gender [F(2, 87) = 7.45, p < .01], but not for the pronoun-gender interaction. Comparing pronoun conditions, he produced fewer female images (M = .66) than he/she (M = 1.38). Within gender groupings, he evoked fewer female images for women (M = 1.00) than he/she (M = 2.06). Due to the relatively small number of female images, however, no other differences between means within gender groups were statistically significant.

Regarding gender effects, women saw more female images overall (M = 1.54) than men (M = .49). Within pronoun conditions, women saw more female images than men when reading he (M = 1.00; M = .27), he/she (M = 2.06; M = .60), and they (M = 1.57; M = .60).

Mixed Images. Table III shows the mean number of mixed images, standard deviation, and number of subjects for each pairing of gender and pronoun condition; subscripts in the table denote statistically significant relationships. For mixed images, the ANOVA found significant effects for pronoun condition [F(1, 87) = 13.00, p < .001] and the pronoun-gender interaction [F(2, 87) = 4.06, p < .021], but not for gender itself. Regarding overall pronoun effects, he brought to mind fewer mixed images (M = 1.38) than either he/she (M = 2.31) or they (M = 2.79). Comparing pronoun effects for women, he evoked fewer mixed images (M = 1.06) than either he/she (M = 2.82) or they (M = 2.79). For men, fewer mixed images came to mind when reading he (M = 1.73) or he/she (M = 1.73) than when reading they (M = 2.80).

As stated above, the overall difference in the mean number of mixed images between genders was not statistically significant. Nevertheless, there were significant differences within pronoun conditions. When reading he,
that undergraduate males have a difficult time reading any generic term as gender neutral.

In addition to finding highly significant pronoun and gender effects, this study also appears to have mitigated the methodological dangers identified by Cole et al. (1983). The students appear to have been unaware of the purpose of the study. After reading through the sentences, the students answered the question, “Did you find the experiment interesting, difficult, or fun?” This question prompted many students to mention that they had no idea what was being studied. When debriefed after the experiment, students who were upset by “the sexist use of he” thought this usage was simply an error on the part of the experimenter, whom they presumed was studying something unrelated.

The experiment also appears to have tapped directly into the students’ mental images, rather than forcing them to construct artificial images or answer questions as if they had images in mind. The flexibility of the instructions allowed some persons to report “no image” and resulted in wide variations in reported detail. In answering the question as to the gender of the human in their images, students readily replied “I saw no people” when there were none in their original image. Similarly, the question did not force students to report a gender for every human imagined, and a few students reported that the gender of the person in their image was unclear—could be female or male (coded as mixed). Thus, the final question did not force students to add false detail to their images.

In retrospect, it seems plausible that Cole et al. (1983) found no significant pronoun effects due to the aforementioned complications in their procedures. Methodological differences explain the discrepancy between the results of their experiments and the results presented above.

CONCLUSION

This study restores the vital linguistic link in the argument against the generic he outlined in the introduction. The generic he appears to bias the reader toward imagining male referents, clearly suggesting that even when read in passing, the generic he contains a male bias. That this bias could reinforce itself in sexist thought and behavior seems eminently plausible, as previous feminist scholarship has shown.

The results of this study also have implications for prescribing language usages. MacKay (1980b) provides the relevant criterion:

A [language] usage should be prescriptively recommended if and only if the benefits of the usage outweigh the costs, where benefits facilitate communication (i.e., the comprehension, learning, and production of the language) and costs make com-
This study and the vast majority of relevant research suggest that for the undergraduate population, the use of he biases the listener toward predominantly male images (see Todd-Mancillas, 1981; MacKay, 1983). Thus, using the generic he interferes with effective communicative and viable alternative pronouns exist—even the most obscure of which (e.g., tay) students readily comprehend (MacKay, 1980b; Todd-Mancillas & Meyers, 1980). Using MacKay’s criterion, therefore, grammarians (and readers) should recommend the use of an alternative generic pronoun. Of course, if one acknowledges that language use has an effect on society, the harmful effects of the generic he mentioned above provide another argument for discouraging its usage.4

An interesting question that this study raises is which alternative pronouns function most effectively as generics. If he must go, which pronouns might replace it? Recall that for the college student population studied herein, they appear the most generic of the three pronouns listed above. Using they as a generic, however, does not solve the problem of males producing very few female images under any pronoun condition. Future research might compare the effects of he/she and they with more promising alternatives. Reversing he/she, writing it as she/he, might cause males to imagine more women. (A preliminary investigation, using a method similar to this study’s suggests that she/he does evoke significantly more images of women than he, he/she, and they for both female and male European-American, Midwestern undergraduates.) One might use she to refer to some individuals and he in reference to others. Or one might simply use she as a generic, counterbalancing the persistence of male bias. Even Strunk and White (1979), read literally, endorse this final suggestion: “If you think she is a handy substitute for he, try it and see what happens” (p. 61).

REFERENCES


4Note that Cole et al. explicitly state that even if no pronoun effect exists, “There are valid objections to use the masculine pronoun generically” (1983, p. 749). Many of the sources referenced herein offer alternative arguments against the use of the generic he; among these are Blauberger (1980), Goldsmith (1980), Martyna (1983), and MacKay (1983).


APPENDIX ONE

The following were the 12 sentences used. They are written in the he pronoun condition. For the he/she condition, the he was simply replaced by he/she. For the they condition, the subject was pluralized and the pronoun was replaced by they.

Target

1. The average American believes he watches too much TV.
2. After a patient eats, he needs to rest.
3. A pedestrian must be careful when he crosses the street.
4. A person is only as old as he feels.
5. If a person is very poor, he has to live in the city.
6. A teenager often daydreams while he does chores.

Filler

7. The apartment building was always a mess.
8. The birds perched themselves on the statue.
9. In the corner sat a box of worn-out shoes.
10. Fire hydrants should be opened on hot days.
11. The tropical rainforests of Brazil are a natural wonder.
12. You wouldn't believe what can be found under a car seat!

APPENDIX TWO

The table below provides correlations between the number of male images, female images, mixed images, imaging ability, femininity, masculinity, gender, and he compared with the combination of he/she and they, he/she compared with the combination of he and they, and they compared with the combination of he and he/she. Means and standard deviations are included for each variable to facilitate future meta-analyses. The number of cases is 93.

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<th>MXM</th>
<th>IMABIL</th>
<th>FEM</th>
<th>MASC</th>
<th>GEN</th>
<th>HE</th>
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*M Abbreviations: MIM: number of male images; FIM: number of female images; MXM: number of mixed images; IMABIL: imaging ability; FEM: femininity; MASC: masculinity; GEN: gender; HE: he; HS: he/she; THEY: they; and OTH: other pronoun conditions.

*For gender, female = 0, male = 1.
*For pronoun comparisons, the pronoun singled out (HE, HS, THEY) = 1 and the others (OTH) = 0.
*One-tailed significance: p < .01.
*One-tailed significance: p < .001.