

**A Perverse Case of the Contingent A Priori:  
On the Logic of Emasculating Language**

**(A Reply to Dawkins and Dummett)**

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ABSTRACT

I present several arguments which together or separately, and among other things, provide what I take to be a definitive argument against the use of so-called sex-neutral masculine language. The main title presents, in elevated language, a simple (perverse) idea --some might say small, and I am happy to agree-- that is the essential keystone of masculine language and the essential reason behind its current *remise-en-question*. The subtitle plays on deep structure to convey the idea that this paper has both semantic interests and deontic concerns. In the sense of any paper with an 'ought' in it, it is, among other things, an advocacy paper.

Part I: *Double Standards and the Contingent A Priori* focuses on the use of the word 'man'. Part II: *The Masculine Language Loop* examines how the pernicious *a priori* --the masculine language virus-- infects our pronominal system, and our attitudes.

**PART I: Double standards and the contingent a priori**

A statement is said to be *contingent* when it could fail to be true were the world relevantly different than it actually is. A truth is said to be knowable *a priori* when we can know it prior to experiencing the world as it actually is. A notorious candidate for a statement expressing a contingent a priori truth is: I am here now. Mere knowledge of language will suffice to convince you that this statement, whenever uttered, expresses a truth. You need no experience of the world to know that it is true. You may lack knowledge of who or what I am, where we are, or when. Still, you know that when I say that I am here now, I speak the truth.

Contingent a priori statements are a headache for philosophers. They're not supposed to be! How could something be contingent, and therefore possibly otherwise were the world other than it is, yet known to be the case without experience of the world as it actually is?

Michael Dummett, for one, has argued that the fact that Kripke's views on reference and modality imply the existence of contingent a priori truths shows that something must be wrong with those views. I argue here that Dummett's views on word preference and sex-neutrality imply the existence of contingent a priori truths and so that something must be wrong with *those* views.

This paper is not about contingent a priori statements in general, but about a particular and perverse case of

the contingent a priori that infects our language daily. I argue that allegedly *sex-neutral* masculine language is not sex-neutral, for it builds contingent existential generalizations about male persons into the very fabric of the language.

I focus in Part I on the sex-neutral use of the word 'man' (whose usage has recently been defended by Dummett). But the argument generalizes fully to pronouns and to other masculine language that serves sex-neutral and sex-specific double duty, as Part II aims to show.

### **Women are men too**

Ever since I discovered The Selfish Gene, I have been an avid admirer of Richard Dawkins. What prompts me to write this article is a worrisome development not in Dawkins ideas about genetics but in his attitudes about language, specifically about what he himself was at one time prepared to call "the masculine bias in our language." The idea and the fact, if it is one, that women are somehow excluded by some deep feature of English, have added new, can we say, *memetic* dimensions to the battle of the sexes. While some men and women struggle against "the masculine language meme", resistance to them escalates every day more fiercely.

Thus we have Dawkins in 1982:

I wish I had had the courage to instruct the computer to feminize personal pronouns at random throughout the text. This is not only because I admire the current awareness of the masculine bias in our language. Whenever I write I have a particular imaginary reader in mind [...] and at least half my imaginary readers are, like at least half my friends, female. Unfortunately it is still true in English that the unexpectedness of a feminine pronoun, where a neutral meaning is intended, seriously distracts the attention of most readers, of either sex. [...] With regret, therefore, I have followed the standard convention in this book.

And Dawkins in 1986:

I am distressed to find that some women friends (fortunately not many) treat the use of the impersonal masculine pronoun as if it showed intention to exclude them. If there were any excluding to be done (happily there isn't) I think I would sooner exclude men, but when I once tentatively tried referring to my abstract reader as 'she', a feminist denounced me for patronizing condescension: I ought to say 'he-or-she', and 'his-or-her'. That is easy to do if you don't care about language, but then if you don't care about language you don't deserve readers of either sex. Here, I have returned to the normal conventions of English pronouns. I may refer to the 'reader' as 'he', but I no more think of my readers as specifically male than a French speaker thinks of a table as female.

Finally, in 1993, amid an otherwise warm eulogy of the great Maynard Smith's phrasemaking abilities (who is celebrated among numerous innovations for his abbreviation of *Homo sapiens* as 'chaps'), we come upon Dawkins suddenly venomous:

The pompous high priests of 'political correctness' don't like this kind of verbal informality. Maynard Smith is too big a man to go along with their puritanical emasculation of language (and if my use of 'emasculation' gives offence to somebody, what a pity).

Since I was naively of the opinion that the battle of words was just regrets away from victory, I am grateful to Dawkins for shaking me from my doxastic blunder.

What *I* am distressed to find is Dawkins, aware of what offends and why (or so he was ten years ago), carrying on the offence. Why is it not enough that *some* of his friends feel excluded by his pronouns? Surely those women who don't wouldn't *mind* not being referred to by 'he'. Are women who feel excluded just hystericals that we can tut-tut and dismiss? Or have those who don't, simply inherited too many memes from our brave ancestresses who so dutifully put up with quite a lot of nonsense indeed?

What I am distressed to find is someone with Dawkins' manifest respect for women displaying such resistance to an issue which, for all we know, may well be of consequence for women, as some (fortunately quite a few) feel. And for such flimsy reason as to rob readers of a momentary distraction as a few feminine pronouns go by? (Who's puritanical?!) The plain fact that language (like its speakers themselves) is in constant evolution is proof enough of the ease with which people have always managed to overcome initial momentary distractions.

What's going on here?

Notice that there has been, as far as I know, no work whatsoever from the conservative camp showing that "the feminist case" against masculine language is wrong. Even Dummett in his recent Grammar and Style, in the chapter on "Ideological Usages", agrees that the facts he cites do not disprove the feminists' contention, but just that the feminist case needs "far firmer grounds before we should think of inflicting damage on what has come down to us from the past." The present article proposes to provide a good chunk of the required firm grounds.

Let me first pause a moment to reflect on just "what has come down to us from the past." What has come down to us from the past is at least a history of sexism. If you disagree with me about this, stop reading: my discussion is intended for those who are concerned about sexism --hence admit its existence-- but reluctant to see it in the language. It is intended specifically for those, like Dawkins, who "would hate to think" that such considerations "impinged on how [they] use [their] native language".

Yet if there is any sense in which language "is a mirror of the mind," then what has come down to us from the past is at least in that sense a language that mirrors the history of this sexism.

The conservative side has simply ridden the wave of the status quo in resisting linguistic change in the absence of some definitive proof of its utter necessity. But the sexism of the status quo makes the *prima facie* case

fall squarely on the feminist side.

**An argument from patrimony: What has come down to us from the past**

What has come down to us from the past, the past state of the language which Dummett would sooner protect from damage than the women claiming injury from its current (and eventual) state, are lovely phrases like:

Man is the measure of all things.  
God made man in his own image.  
The proper study of mankind is man.

I find Dummett's argument here nothing short of amazing. Suppose feminists had their way, he argues, and the word 'man' ceased to be used to refer to both men and women. (Dummett makes a big deal out of the fact that "no adequate substitute has been proposed." I hereby propose 'human': see below.) Though we could use 'humans' from now on, "that would not restore our ability to read such passages as they were meant." "A generation would grow up ignorant that 'man' had any other use; its members would then misinterpret passages like those cited."

Now, I don't know about you, dear reader, but I have to make at least an effort to read the above phrases "as they were meant" if they were meant to include women. (If God made women in his own image, it seems to me either women should look more like men, or we should say 'God made women in *her* own image.')

Indeed, Dummett himself feels the need to cite a later passage in Genesis ("*male and female* he created them") to disambiguate the former.

The reason retrieving a sex-neutral meaning out of 'man' is costly today is that the word had undergone a meaning shift since the bygone days of Old English, when the prevailing sense of 'mann' was indeed *human* and 'wer' was the word in use for *male* humans. Dummett appears to blame feminists for the fact that 'man' no longer comfortably applies to both men and women. But this shift began in English way before anyone was even imagining feminism. It began with the demise of 'wer', which 'man' moved in to replace. 'Man' evolved into an ambiguous term (and our problems began) because nothing moved in to fill the slot that the shift of 'man' should have left vacant. Conservative prescriptivists like Dummett only compound the problem. For they are impotent to undo the first half of this change (they are not striving to resurrect the defunct 'wer'), but are intent on interrupting in mid-stream the organic process of lexical replacement currently on-going. They want to freeze the language in its current state of unfinished business.

Dummett notes as proof that the Biblical passages cited were not intended to confine the application of 'man' to males, that "they were translated from languages in which there is one word for 'human being' in general,

and a distinct one for 'male human being.'" Now, the fact is that when these passages were translated long ago, they were rightly translated using 'man', because the originals featured words (like 'homo') that unambiguously meant 'human being', *and that's what 'man' unambiguously meant at the time*. Precisely because 'man' has undergone a semantic shift since then, 'man' is no longer the appropriate translation for words unambiguously meaning 'human being'. 'Human being' (or some such) is the contemporary front-runner for that job. To translate 'homo' as 'man' *today* is to commit the same sort of mistake as would be committed by translating (the presuppositionally unproblematic):

Malgré ses problèmes avec Xanthippe, Socrate était de tendance plutôt gaie.

as (the presuppositionally deviant):

Despite his problems with Xanthippe, Socrates had rather gay tendencies.

Dummett worries that if feminists have their way, it will have a "retrospective effect" of making it more difficult for us to recover the intended meanings of past liturgical passages. But if feminists had their way, if 'human' were used as a translation for 'homo' and 'man' reserved for 'vir', the translations into English would be isomorphic to the original passages, and *less* information would be lost. It is precisely because English makes an ambiguous use of 'man' that the original unambiguous meanings are difficult to recover *now*, let alone what it will be like in the future.

The choice we face then is twofold. We can leave things as they are and let future generations forever wonder about the ambiguity, forcing them to go back to Latin and Greek to figure out what the *English* phrases mean, in the meantime generating more and more ambiguous sentences for future generations to wonder about (without benefit of disambiguation support from Latin and Greek). Alternatively, we can disambiguate our sentences from now on, re-translate the revered passages as they should have been translated in the first place, and, bowing to a time slice of English when 'man' was an ambiguous word, put footnotes at the bottom of old translations of Biblical passages explaining then-current usage. Is this really too much of a novelty to handle? Man!

**An argument from the lexicon: When is a man too many?**

The case against 'man', save for the fact that women have a special interest in it, is not particularly feministic. Take the case of 'bank'. No more innocuous an example of lexical ambiguity can there be. But the innocuousness results, I submit, from the *semantic distance* between 'bank<sub>\$\$\$</sub>' and 'bank<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O</sub>'. If all banks were located near banks, stylish writers would avoid annoying readers by making precise whether they intended the financial institution or the river's edge. At the very least, the information content of 'I'm going to the bank' would be greatly reduced in such circumstances. And though it's useless to bet on it, we can expect that one of the uses would eventually fade out of existence.

A felicitous illustration of just such a happening is afforded us by the current state of the word 'presently'. North Americans by and large use this word to mean *right now*; whereas the British use it to mean *in a little while*. Because 'right now' and 'in a little while' are *semantically proximate*, precision-conscious English speakers unfamiliar with their audiences use 'presently' at their own risk and peril. ("Don't worry. An ambulance will be called presently.")

Lamentable though it may be, the word now suffers from an ambiguity, and it is only a matter of time before American usage takes over. This has something to do with the fact that Americans, by their sheer numbers, have linguistic clout. But that is not the whole of it. The numbers merely accelerate a process that is completely to be expected given complementary facts about English, namely, the fact that there exists another word, 'present', and various expressions like 'at present' and 'present tense', which don't mean 'in a while' but 'now'. Unfortunately for British usage, the average English speaker does not acquire new words by reading dictionary entries but in context, where meanings must be hypothesized using lexical resources already mastered. And these lexical resources, along with morphological rules forming adverbs with '-ly', naturally yield the American usage. For the British to insist that their highly irregular meaning remain the norm is for them to expect English speakers to be endowed with some sort of cultural memory of English-Past. Natural language doesn't work that way.

In the same way and for like reasons, the word 'man' *shouldn't* mean (shouldn't be expected to mean) *human* in contemporary English. The fact that in complementary expressions like 'manly', 'manhood', 'gentleman' and 'man and wife' the 'man'-morph makes exclusive reference to maleness, while all other 'man'-words (including 'mankind') are at best ambiguous, puts evolutionary pressure against the inclusive use. The semantic proximity here, indeed the fact that 'man' *subsumes* women, is too intense for the language to withstand the ambiguity. I'm no Nostradamus, but 'man' is doomed (sex-neutrally speaking).

And though of course lexical transformations take place over a long stretch of time, the fact that (sex-neutral) 'man', though hurting, is still as strong as it is, should itself raise suspicion. Certainly no other lexical evolution has been resisted so defensively and taken on as *cause célèbre* by Language Academicians. I'm not aware of movements founded to rescue 'presently' from impending misinterpretation by generations of Americans! (To be fair, Dummett does "deplore" North American uses of 'corn'.) But the relative amount of passion devoted at large to the defense of 'man' is surely revealing of deeper concerns.

So what's the fuss if (sex-neutral) 'man' is destined to oblivion anyway? Well, if nothing else, perhaps the future will reveal that feminists, far from being oversensitive whiners, simply have more refined intuitions about relevant areas of the English lexicon, much in the way that poets are more attuned to the interaction of sounds, and linguists more attentive to syntactic structures, than the average lay speaker. (And from a linguist's point of view, Dummett, Dawkins and other self-appointed language mavens, though above average on other counts, very much count as lay speakers.)

#### **An argument from style: When is a woman a man?**

Now, anyone genuinely worried about momentarily distracting readers should *a fortiori* avoid (sex-neutral) 'man', which doesn't merely force a double-take but actually requires appeal to a whole baggage of psychosocial speculation every time it occurs. Every single occurrence forces the question: Does the author intend/Do the circumstances of the discourse warrant the inclusion of women in this particular occurrence?

A good reason why it is largely women who notice (and complain about) this needless bit of hermeneutic hardship in the language is that it is only to women that befalls the question, every single time: Does this particular occasion of use include *me*? The answer for men is in each instance trivial: yes. Perhaps the latter fact is where Dummett gets his sense that "English speakers have managed without discomfort with a dual use of a single word."

Language users concerned with effective communication who acknowledge women as part of their audience or of their reference should avoid imposing upon them, indeed upon us all, this unnecessary burden. Those whose referential intentions include women have a duty to all their readers, here as with any referential intention, to use words that make their thoughts reasonably explicit. Period.

#### **An argument from ambiguity: When is a man a woman?**

I have as yet said nothing of the legitimate cases of miscommunication that directly result from the ambiguity of 'man'. These are of two sorts.

Some cases of miscommunication are due to the interaction of masculine language with sexist assumptions. This sort of miscommunication happens when we ask the question:

Who was the first man to fly westerly across the Atlantic?

and someone infers from the answer:

That was Beryl Markham

(the correct answer), that Beryl Markham was a man (a false but common inference in North America where 'Beryl' is an unusual name.) Note also the oddity of replying to the question with the otherwise appropriate (though formal):

\* The first man to fly westerly across the Atlantic was Beryl Markham.

Or take the old saw:

Man is a rational animal.

This is exactly the sort of sentence likely to get interpreted, by anyone holding the (still-too-popular) view that women, rather than rational, are intuitive and emotional, as stating a fact applicable only to *male* men.

Other cases of miscommunication needn't depend on sexist assumptions at all. Suppose we ask again:

Who was the first man to fly westerly across the Atlantic?

and we get the reply:

The first man to fly westerly across the Atlantic was Charles Lindberg.

Is the reply mistaken on the grounds that Markham did so before Lindberg? Clearly, someone could produce this reply who knew full well that Beryl Markham was the first *person* to fly westerly across the Atlantic. If the question were on an exam, say, it would surely be unfair to penalize a student for such an answer: the fault would lie with the teacher for asking (at best) an ambiguous question. The question *invites* a masculine answer.

### **An argument from anomaly: When a man is not a man**

Now take the case where, sexist assumptions aside, there is an anomaly simply at the level of the language.

The questions:

Which property best describes the/every man / most men who discovered fire?

Which property best describes a/any man who makes an important discovery?

can perfectly well be raised (so the story goes) by someone who ignores the sex of the discoverer. So they count, if anything does, as clear cases of sex-indeterminate uses of 'man'. It is puzzling then that one cannot answer these



questions, on a par with the above (formal) question-answer mode, by saying:

? The/every man who discovered fire was (surely) not a man.

? Most men who discovered fire were (undoubtedly) not men.

? A/any man who makes an important discovery is (likely) not a man.

(said by someone who believes, say, that males as a rule are not very observant). Compare with the following, and much less bewildering:

Which surroundings best describe the bank/every bank you go to?

The/every bank I go to is not near a bank.

(said by someone in Geneva, say), or:

Which surroundings best describe the location of a bank?

A bank is typically not near a bank./Most banks are not near banks.

The only way to restore sense to the anomalous reply is as an "echo-answer", meaning:

The person you are *calling* "the man who discovered fire" was not a man.

But note the use of 'person' here: I could no more say, except in jest,

? The man you're calling 'the man who discovered fire' is not a man.

? Most men you're calling 'most men who discovered fire' were not men.

Things just get worse from here. Compare the uncontroversially well-formed:

The man who invented ASL was not an American, he was Laurent Clerc.

with the following:

\* The man who first discovered fire was not a man, she was Lucy.

There is simply no way to rescue this construction:

\* The man who answered the door was not Peter Geach, he was Elizabeth Anscombe.

\* The man who answered the door was not Peter Geach, she was Elizabeth Anscombe.

### **The Keystone: Double standards and the contingent a priori**

If the dual use (or homonymy) of 'man' were all there is to it, then the word 'man' would function exactly as does the word 'bank'. And just as we say:

The bank<sub>\$\$\$</sub> I went to was not near a bank<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O</sub>.

A bank<sub>\$\$\$</sub> is not (typically) near a bank<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O</sub>.

Most banks<sub>\$\$\$</sub> are not near banks<sub>H<sub>2</sub>O</sub>.

we ought to be able to say (non-metaphorically) the very unnatural:

- ? The/every man  who discovered fire was (surely) not a man .
- ? A/any man  who discovers fire is (typically) not a man .
- ? Most/all/some men  who discovered fire were not men .

(Note that this is *not* the same as saying:

The/every/some man  who discovered fire was not a man .

which, like

The/every/some bank\$\$\$ I go to is not a bank\$\$\$.

is well-formed but tautologically false.)

Compare with:

- The/every person who discovered fire was (surely) not a man .
- A/any person who discovers fire is (typically) not a man .
- Most/all/some people who discovered fire were not men .

What the above anomalous constructions show is that 'man' as a sex-indeterminate term is a most peculiar one indeed. Let me hammer home its peculiarity.

It is not just that 'man ' *may* be used in a context where the sex of the referent is indeterminate. As the following sentences show, at least sometimes it can *only* be used when the sex of the referent is indeterminate.

Thus it is anomalous to say:

- \* The/every man  who discovered fire was (surely) a woman.
- \* A/any man  who discovers fire is (typically) a sensitive woman.
- \* Most/all/some men  who discovered fire were African women.

The anomaly is revealed by the humor present in the sentence:

The best man for the job is a woman.

Compare with the non-humorous:

The best person for the job is a woman.

These anomalies by themselves would pose no problem if it weren't for the fact that when the sex of the referent is determinately male, we *can* say (without humor):

- The/every man  who discovered fire was (surely) a man .
- A/any man  who discovers fire is (typically) a virile man .

Most/all/some men  $\square \square \square$  who discovered fire were African men  $\square$ .

Indeed, part of the problem is that such sentences have *almost* the flavor of analytic statements. This flavor is not due simply to the identical appearance of the lexical items 'man  $\square \square \square$ ' and 'man  $\square$ ', witness the lack of such an effect with 'bank':

All banks are near banks.

is ambiguous, but on no substitution is it deviant.

Let me illustrate why this poses a problem by means of an example which doesn't pose such a problem.

We have the old word 'person', which applies to any human male or female, and in the plural to any combination thereof, whose sex may or may not be known to the speaker. Here's a new word, 'ferson'. 'Ferson' is<sub>def</sub> a word which applies to any human male or female, and in the plural to any combination thereof, whose sex is *unknown to the speaker*, in the context of utterance. Thus we can say:

The *person* who first discovered fire was a woman / a man.

The *persons* who first discovered fire were my mother and father.

and

The *ferson* who first discovered fire was observant.

The *fersons* who first discovered fire were observant.

but we cannot say:

\* The *ferson* who first discovered fire was a woman / a man.

\* The *fersons* who first discovered fire were my mother and father.

because we cannot say such things without revealing our knowledge of the sex of the ferson.

There is nothing wrong with either a sex-indeterminate word like 'person', or with a sex-indeterminate word like 'ferson', in the sense that neither of them is discriminatory towards one sex or the other. But it is a mistake to think that sex-indeterminate 'man' is just like them. If it were like 'ferson', 'man  $\square \square \square$ ' would be inapplicable when the referent is known by the speaker to be male. But 'man  $\square \square \square$ ' is clearly applicable in such a context:

\* The *fersons* who first discovered fire were all male.

The men  $\square \square \square$  who first discovered fire were all male.

If it were like 'person', 'man  $\square \square \square$ ' would be applicable when the referent is known by the speaker to be

(exclusively) female. But 'man<sub>WWM</sub>' is not applicable in such a context:

The persons in this convent are all female.

\* The men<sub>WWM</sub> in this convent are all female.

The word 'man<sub>WWM</sub>' is an unhappy alliance between 'person' and 'ferson'. It purports to apply, like 'person' and 'ferson', to people of all sexes indiscriminately. But this is a misrepresentation.

'Man<sub>WWM</sub>' behaves like 'ferson' to rule *out* referents known by the speaker to be (exclusively) *female*, but reverts to behaving like 'person' to rule *in* referents known by the speaker to be (exclusively) *male*. Apparently with 'man<sub>WWM</sub>', what's good for the goose ain't good for the gander.

It is difficult not to notice that the *only* case excluded by the use of so-called neutral 'man' is the case where the referent is known to be a woman, or in the plural, a group of women. (One is reminded of old drinking establishments with one entrance for men and another for "Ladies with Escorts", but none for women by themselves.) Is it any wonder that women feel excluded?

This is a linguistic instance of a double standard. Curiously, it is the only such sort of double standard that is readily apparent in the language. Even 'animal' (which is like 'man<sub>WWM</sub>' is to 'woman' in its subsumption of humans) does not function like that at all. More curious still is the striking resemblance of this linguistic double standard to the sort occurring outside language, the sort all too familiar to women and to observant men. Indeed the resemblance is such that it is difficult to resist seeing it as a linguistic mirror of a social reality.

The semantics of 'person' and 'ferson' are simple. They both *denote*: men or women or men-and-women. 'Ferson' differs from 'person' only in carrying an *implicature* that the speaker does not know which it is. The implicature in question is *non-cancelable*, as witnessed by the fact that we cannot say (without violating the implicature):

\* The ferson was giving a lecture  
(but I don't mean to imply that I don't know the sex of the ferson in question).

This would suggest (if Grice is right that all conversational implicatures are cancelable) that we are not dealing with a conversational, but rather with a *conventional* implicature.

'Man<sub>WWM</sub>', on the other hand, has quite a complicated semantics, much more complicated than we are

reflexively aware of, judging from the popularity of the misrepresentation of 'man' as simply having a sex-neutral usage. The semantics of 'man' is disjunctive. It means:

$\text{man} = \text{df} \langle$   
 if referent known: {M} or {M & F} and {F}  
 if referent unknown: {M} or {M & F} or {F}

This meaning convention is a strange one indeed. Its weirdness alone raises suspicion.

Applied to a singular referent, equivalent generalizations of this semantic description, presented together, yield an impressive impression of the place of women in contexts of utterance:

*if known to speaker then not female*

the/a man I saw this morning  
 all/most men in my class

*if female then unknown to speaker*

the/a man who produced the oldest Peruvian textile  
 all/most men who perfected weaving techniques in 300 BC

*unknown to speaker unless male*

the/a man who came up with the idea  
 all/most men who drove a Mustang in the 60's

(...)

All jesting aside, we are a long way from the naive sentiment that 'man' is simply synonymous with 'person' or with 'human'.

Let us consider to which category of implicature belongs this *male or unknown*. According to Grice, a conversational implicature exhibits "a high degree of nondetachability". Grice's test for detachability is that it be possible to find another way of saying the same thing "(or approximately the same thing)" which lacks the implicature. In the case of 'man', there clearly is such a substitute available in the words 'person' and 'human'.

The first person to set foot on the moon was happy (but I don't mean to imply that I don't know the sex of the person in question, indeed she was a woman / he was a man.)

The first human to set foot on the moon was happy (but I don't mean to imply that I don't know the sex of the human in question, indeed she was a woman / he was a man.)

The question of cancelability is interesting. The fact that it is acceptable to say:

The next man to set foot on the moon will be happy (but I don't mean to imply that I don't know the sex of the man in question, indeed he'll be a man)

shows that the implicative structure of 'man' differs from that of 'ferson'. This, in conjunction with the fact that (at least according to Dawkins and Dummett) it is also acceptable to say:

The next man to set foot on the moon will behappy (but I don't mean to imply that he'll be a man, indeed I just don't know)

shows that each of the disjuncts in the implicature is *separately* cancelable. However, the disjunctive implicature as a whole is *not* cancelable, as witnessed by the deviance of the following attempt to make the referent known and female:

\* The next man to set foot on the moon will behappy (but I don't mean to imply that I don't know the sex of the man in question, indeed she'll be a woman).

It appears then that here too we are dealing with a *conventional* implicature. Indeed, evidence suggests that the constraint against 'man' applied to a known female referent is a deep implicature, part of the semantic core of the word. If it weren't, then the following sentences, where the speaker clearly does not know the referent to be female, would not be deviant:

\* Why do you believe that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will not be a man?

\* I don't know that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will not be a man.

Compare:

Why do you believe that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will be a man/a tall man/a man with a mustache?

VS \* Why do you believe that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will be a woman/a tall woman/a woman with short hair?

[not as echo-answer]

and

I don't know that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will be a man/a tall man/a man with a mustache.

VS \* I don't know that the/every/any man who will set foot on the moon will be a woman/a tall woman/a woman with short hair.

[not as echo-answer]

where the members of each pair are respectively well-formed and deviant. The implicature *male or unknown* is not

just a superficial function of language use, but a deep fact about the meaning of 'man' in the language.

This double standard is pernicious. Let me illustrate why this is so.

Here's a question:

Where do Mary and Bill live?

Here's an answer for it:

Downtown.

The question subterraneously looks something like this:

WH Mary and Bill live \_\_\_\_\_ ?  
☒  
9 4444444444444444444444444444 8

with the WH-phrase questioning, in this case, the locative complement. ('Do'-insertion is just a thingumajig we can forget about.) The reason the answer is so short is that it practices ellipsis on all but the blank. A more formal reply would fill in the blank while repeating the subterranean structure:

Mary and Bill live downtown .

A reply of intermediate formality would omit only some of the words:

They live downtown.

Now back to the point. The following question can be asked (or so the story goes at any rate) in a sex-indeterminate way by someone unfamiliar with aviation history. The question as posed respects the conventional implicature of 'man☒☒☒' (since the sex of the questioned element is unknown to the questioner):

Who is the most/an intrepid man☒☒☒ in aviation history?

The informal answer to this question:

Beryl Markham.

is just elliptical for the formal answer:

The most/an intrepid man☒☒☒ in aviation history is Beryl Markham.

But since the question can only be answered by someone familiar with the who's who of aviation history, a

consequence of the reply (courtesy of the conventional implicature of 'man') is the presumption by the audience that the speaker thinks that Beryl Markham is a man and, unless the speaker is not to be trusted, that Beryl Markham must be a man. A speaker who knew Beryl Markham to be a woman wouldn't (under typical circumstances) answer the question that way.


Note the naturalness of continuing the dialogue with an extra speaker saying:

That's funny, I thought it was a woman.

(Note also the naturalness of using *'it'* in this context. (!))

The presumption *that Beryl Markham is a man* follows from the implicature that the questioned element is either male or unknown to the speaker, augmented by the pragmatic assumption that it is not unknown to the speaker. This presumption can be *overridden* by someone's collateral knowledge that Beryl Markham is in fact a woman. What is overridden in this case is the presumption that the speaker is to be trusted or taken literally. The implicature itself is untouched. Likewise, if the answer had been: Mary Markham, then the collateral knowledge needed to override the presumption could have been deduced from worldly knowledge that men are not usually named Mary. A speaker might take advantage of the fact that the audience can be expected to have such collateral knowledge, and speak loosely or jokingly in answering the question this way.

But there is nevertheless something bordering on the stupid-sounding in the question-answer sequence:


Q: Who is the most/an intrepid man  in aviation history?

A: ? Why, Mary Markham, for sure.

And there is even less of a place in discourse for the intermediate answer:

A: \* She's Mary Markham.

Just to hammer the point home, consider the following:

Q: Which property best describes the most/some intrepid man  in aviation history?

A: \* She's spunky.

or even more absurd:

A: \* He's spunky [sex-neutral 'he'],  
(and that's no doubt why he's given birth to the even more intrepid human cannonball Daisy Markham).

The above discourse context demonstrates the perniciousness of the implicature carried by so-called sex-



neutral 'man' (as well as by so-called sex-neutral uses of masculine pronouns). What such an implicature does, in any context where the speaker is rightly presumed to speak truly, is to inform the audience *a priori*, that is, using only its understanding of the resources of the language, of a very *contingent* fact, wherever it is one, that the person who is the best aviator is male. This is what I'm calling "the perverse contingent a priori". It's less exciting than Kripke's, I admit, but it affects the lives of far more people.

Let me put this point a different way. Suppose I say:  
Every man in aviation history was intrepid.

It is a contingent fact (if it is one at all) that any, let alone all, aviators in history were intrepid. It is also a contingent fact that aviation history has not been the exclusive domain of women, that is, that at least one male participated in it. So both what the statement *says*, and what the statement *implicates*, if true, are contingently true. Admittedly, what the statement says, namely that every man in aviation history was intrepid, does not convey information that can be known a priori to be true. If true, this fact is discoverable only a posteriori. However, a long as what the statement says is true, something that is *not* said in the original statement (on the "sex-neutral" reading), namely that at least one aviator is male, can be known to be true without further recourse to experience, using only one's understanding of the language.

I have used examples with 'man' to make the point. The point is no different, and equally pernicious, in the case of masculine pronouns bound to sex-neutral quantifiers. In any typical context of utterance, the sentences:  
Everyone in this philosophy department should congratulate himself on his good mind.

Every philosopher in this department should congratulate himself on his good mind.  
Whoever is in this philosophy department should congratulate himself on his good mind.


*by virtue of their language*, predispose the audience to believe the very contingent fact that there is at least one male in the philosophy department. (To get a full sense of the perversity of this, just imagine that *the language* predisposed you *a priori* to believe that there is at least one female in the philosophy department!) The language predisposes us to see maleness everywhere, even when it is there quite contingently. Indeed, even when it is absurd.

The following is a true story. A gynecologist was giving a lecture about his practice in the following terms: "When a patient comes to me for birth control, I always first recommend to him the IUD. I reassure him that insertion will not cause him pain..." This prompted someone in the audience to ask: "Just how many men come to you requesting IUD's and just where do you insert them?" Dummett's example of the absurdity of using 'she' as of

common gender ("If an Athenian general had been asked this question, she would have replied...") surely pales by comparison.

It is high time to let go of the illusion that 'man' and his accomplice 'he' are equitable representatives of women.

### **Humans are people too**

It is simply false that English manages "without discomfort" with a dual use of the single word 'man'. Indeed, as the above examples show, it is even false that English manages without discomfort with a *single* use (the so-called sex-indeterminate use) of 'man' , given the latter's thought-provoking semantics.

Of the various anomalies witnessed above, several are the direct result of the use of 'man' in the sex-indeterminate sense. All of these would be precluded by the use of 'human' (alternatively 'person') instead of 'man', when it is the property of humanness or that of personhood, and not that of manhood, which is intended.

This is *not* to say that such an emasculation of the language would suffice to rid the language of the perverse "contingent a priori". The double standard illustrated above and manifest in 'man' is present in *all* forms of masculine language doing "sex-neutral" double duty. It is present wherever masculine pronouns are used in allegedly sex-neutral senses. It is present wherever allegedly neutral locutions like 'the professor', 'the mayor', 'the president', 'the patient' bind masculine pronouns. I discuss pronouns in Part II. So let me restrict the present remarks to 'human'.

My proposal that 'human' satisfies Dummett's criteria for a "sensible or dignified replacement" for (so-called sex-indeterminate) 'man' is not without flaw. The strikes against it are of two sorts: the passing and the permanent.

The first sort of complaint will be that the nominalization of the adjective 'human' will make people cringe the first few times they hear it. Well, so what? Most people cringe the first time they hear about sex. It is important to realize that there is nothing fixed about the lexical category to which a word belongs. Words are constantly being reanalyzed into different syntactic classes. English has been nominalizing verbs and adjectives (as well as verbalizing and adjectivizing nouns) since time immemorial. We all speak of *malcontents*, *deaf-mutes*, *jerks*, and of Madonna as *a natural*, why, we even (all of us eventually without cringing) *input*, *output* and *access* information and *nuance* it *a little* so as not to *impact* the *chair* of the *council* too *hard*. Since 'human', evaluated on worthy

criteria, is clearly --or so I hope to have shown-- more dignified than 'man', the only sensible reply to the complaint of unfamiliarity is: This too will pass.

The more permanent drawbacks of 'human' are due to various quirks of syntax. For instance, it requires pluralizing previously singular noun phrases, so

A History of Man on Earth  
and  
Man in Space

become

A History of Humans on Earth  
and  
Humans in Space

Unfortunately, pluralization comes at a cost of ruining not only certain rhymes, as in

Man proposes, God disposes

(turning it into the flat 'Humans propose, God disposes') but also of destroying the odd pun, as with Hamlet's

Man delights not me, ...No, nor woman neither

(though maybe heavy stress on W<sup>O</sup>men restores it...).

Can this really be the sort of thing that's in the back of Dummett's mind when he wants "feminists to acknowledge that there is much to set against the change"? That their case is not strong enough "to justify the price they ask us to pay"? Disambiguation of the language, a secure sense of inclusion for women when indeed they are included, and the denunciation of a false *a priori*, ...all for the price of a few puns?! Is it really *that* important to Dummett that letting feminists have their way will "ruin [an] immortal line spoken by Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*"?!

Dummett's worries about down-the-line recoverability of the meaning of the Bible and other old texts are undercut by the happy fact that 'man' as a generic singular is a complete syntactic oddity. This is certain to make constructions in which it appears noticeably marked, and to ready the reader for an anachronism (the sort of feeling one gets when one comes across syntactically precious constructions like "Put not your trust in princes...").

Curiously, no count noun other than 'man' enjoys this privilege in English, except for the (very occasional) use of generic singular 'woman', as in the immortal line sung by John Lennon:

Woman is the nigger of the world.

## **PART II: The Masculine Language Loop**

## Women, niggers, ships and things

One thing about which Dummett is dead right is that the case of 'man' is *not* parallel to the case of a word like 'nigger'. Barring uses such as Lennon's, words like 'nigger' "convey a contemptuous, or at best patronising, attitude founded upon a racist ideology." Dummett does not explicitly say so, but we can safely assume that he supports discouraging the use of such words, in spite of the disastrous mistranslations that are thereby just waiting to happen (cf. p. 8).

Dummett thinks that 'nigger' "inevitably" conveys such contempt, and I think it is important to see in what sense that may be so. Of course, there is nothing inherent in the word 'nigger' that makes it a term of abuse. 'Nigger' was at some time in some dialects the standard and innocuous phonetic realization of the word 'neger' from French 'nègre' from the Spanish 'negro' meaning simply *black*. We can assume that there was a time when the word 'nigger' was a perfectly innocuous phonetic alternative to the (then inoffensive) word 'Negro'. What made it offensive is that it came to be used by racist people as an expression of their racist attitudes. To see this, we can reconstruct the historical degeneration of the word from a non-offensive to the current abusive usage.

In those dialects (for example, some British and some Southern US dialects) where 'nigger' can be assumed to have been the standard way to pronounce the word 'Negro', the pronunciation as 'Negro' would have been at that time in those dialects a marked form (marked for formality or technicality). In other English dialects where 'Negro' is the standard pronunciation, it is 'nigger' that is the borrowed, and marked, word (in this case, marked for abuse, or the worst extreme of informality). The South's notorious racism thus figures in the lexical history of 'nigger'. 'Nigger' is indeed more strongly offensive than 'Negro' in approximately direct proportion to how much more racist the US South has been historically. In using the borrowed word 'nigger', non-southern speakers effect in some sense a dialect switch (they "speak like a Southerner") and in so doing, present themselves as sharing in the South's attitudes. They use that word (as opposed to its local lexical variant) in order to express their racism, much like we might use teenager talk to sound cool. In this, the word 'nigger' has features in common with the word 'feminist' as it is used in those circles where people pronounce it with clenched teeth.

We learn an important lesson from the history of words in the U.S. denoting people with African ancestors, or people with intellectual or physical disadvantages. From 'Negroes' and 'niggers' to 'coloreds' to 'blacks' to 'African-Americans', and from 'crippled' and 'retarded' to 'handicapped' to 'disabled' to 'challenged', in effect what

we see is the language attempting to run away from offensive attitudes by shedding the words that act as vehicles for them. Once a word has been coopted as a vehicle of bad attitudes, it is demonstrably more successful to adopt a non-offensive substitute word (however inelegant that may be) than to attempt to repair the damage done to the old word. George Bush sent American Liberals struggling for a new designation when he destroyed the adjective 'liberal' simply by using it accusatorily against the unpopular Democrat Dukakis. And in some circles it is considered politically wrong to be politically correct.

It would be *idiotic* to expect the (mere) adoption of a new word to result in the eradication from society of the offensive attitudes that ride on the use of the old word. As long as the offensive attitudes persist, they will eventually infect whatever words are around that denote their target. That is *precisely* why languages must constantly renew their resources. It is because eventually and ineluctably, those who do not share the offensive attitudes will run out of inoffensive ways of speaking. By keeping one step ahead, the language can also contribute to sweeping out such attitudes by opening up a segment of language for speakers to use who wish to reject these attitudes explicitly.

#### **An argument from affect: Putting your mouth where your heart is**

Now, the word 'Negro' is not contemptuous like 'nigger' (in recent memory, it was the clinical term). Suppose I, or a foreigner to the US, were to use the word 'Negro' genuinely unaware of its (current-day) racist overtones. It would not be not enough that *I* don't intend to hurt anyone by using the word 'Negro' because I am not racist. When I launch the word 'Negro' into the world by saying or writing it, *what it says*, what information and attitudes are conveyed on the sound wave or the page to other people's eardrums or retinas, is not just a matter of how my own intentions structure meanings in my own idiolect. The external world, the social terrain of attitudes and expectations, the history of racism, all impinge upon and affect the *copying-fidelity* of the message as it gets transmitted from me to my interlocutors. The reason 'Negro' hurts *even when said by non-racist me* is because it has been too often used by racists, in a historical context of racism, in a way that validates racism.

Now, "African-American" is an inelegant mouthful. But if African-Americans prefer to be so-called (because they perceive that 'black' has become tainted, or that it refers by a mode, i.e. color, by which they don't want to be referred to), bowing to their self-definition is a way for sympathetic others to manifest respect for their struggle out of second-class citizenship. (And striving for a shorter alternative is a way for African-Americans to manifest respect for our jaws.) Such sympathetic symbolic gestures are called for all the more if Aframerican

sensitivity toward self-definition is due to racism; they should perhaps even be performed out of a dutiful recognition of racism.

Nor is it necessary that *all* individual members of the group wish to be so-called: not all African-Americans are equally concerned with racism or even equally affected by it, and not all are equally prepared to assume a role of leadership in its eradication. But all stand ultimately to gain from it.

So why am I raising all this about 'nigger' and 'Negro' when I stated above that the case of masculine language was different? The case of masculine language is different, indeed. But only in the following, important, but nevertheless restricted, respect: the sex-neutral use of 'man' and of the masculine pronoun 'he' are not typically, or even non-typically, used to heap abuse on women. (There are plenty of other terms that do that.)

But now, indulge me in the following thought-experiment.

#### **An argument from innocence: the Free-Rider Meme**

Suppose there existed in a society of red and blue people the following convention about how to greet people at a dinner party. Since it is cumbersome upon arriving to have to shake *everyone's* hand, the convention has it that you shake the hand of the person closest to you when you enter the room. Others are thereby also greeted, and expected to feel as though they have been included in the greeting. Now, for no reason connected with this convention, but for reasons connected with colorism (a form of discrimination practised by the red people against the blue people), it's customary for blue people to be seated far from the door. (Perhaps they are thought unable to handle drafts). *It just so happens* that their hands will seldom be shaken when they are in mixed company. But that's not the fault of the convention. The convention is color-blind:

For any arbitrary  $x$ , shake the hand of  $x$  iff  $x$  is the person closest to you when you enter the door.

Now, the same blue people whose hands are seldom shaken at parties know that, in their colorist society, there are nasty people who would not shake their hands even if they were seated by the door, or who would do so only reluctantly. They also know that their red friends know this, and purport to be aggrieved by it.

It seems to me clear that, given the colorist context in which it holds, such a convention is a recipe for moral disaster. The blue people whose hands seldom if ever get shaken are likely to start wondering, about any person not shaking their hand, whether or not, had they been seated by the door, such a person would have shaken their hand. And worse, the people who don't, or who only reluctantly, shake blue hands are likely to wonder the

same thing about the same people, and to impute their own motives to them (as humans are wont to do) in a self-justificatory way. This is not to mention the psychological effects that the negative stimulus, the absence or infrequency of perceptions of blue hands in red, is likely to have on young children, red and blue. And so on. In this way, a perfectly innocent convention is coopted to serve the paranoia of colorism's victims and the self-validation of its perpetrators. Thus does it become an unwitting vehicle of colorism.

It seems equally clear that, in such a context, friends of blue people should work to dismantle the convention in spite of its essential innocence (as well as fighting for the rights of blue people to be seated near the door). To preclude a misinterpretation of the convention, and of their behavior in accordance with it as a collusion of colorism, true friends would go out of their way to shake blue hands.

I am not saying that any misinterpretation, however far-fetched, should be grounds for murdering the convention. If blue people had no arms, perhaps it would be just too looney to see colorism in the convention. But colorist memes, like racist and sexist memes, travel on anything that will give them a free ride, innocent or not.

Talk of memes brings me back to Dawkins. It is not enough that *Dawkins* doesn't intend to exclude women with his use of masculine pronouns (cf. p.2). Indeed, it would not be enough if the conventions of English didn't intend to exclude women (though I claim that, in the sense made precise in Part I and below, they do). It is sufficient that non-looney sexist people reading Dawkins might misinterpret him as saying Fi! to women. If women had always and universally been thought of and treated as the equals of men, it would be looney to interpret the use of masculine pronouns as a deliberate attempt to keep women, and female representation, invisible. But ours not being such a world, it is often tempting to read such pernicious motives in the use of masculine language. In a context of sexism, friends of women should go out of their way to make women visible, by deliberately avoiding masculine language. In a context of sexism, friends of women should go out of their way to shake them out of the kitchen.

If it means shaking deep structures to bring women to the surface, so be it. The fact that sexism is sometimes more subtle than racism (perhaps because everybody loves at least one woman at least briefly?) means only that we should expect its manifestation to be likewise subtle. The syntax of English could be fundamentally innocent of sexism (though the present article argues that it is not). But it is too handy an accomplice of sexist attitudes to be left to its own devices. In a social context of sexism, the masculine conventions such as they are confuse.

### **An argument from psycholinguistics: the Language Loop**

Now, speaking of confusion, I come to Dawkins' claim that "[he] no more thinks of [his] readers as specifically male than a French speaker thinks of a table as female" (cf. p.2). Dawkins fails to distinguish crucially between *grammatical gender* and *semantic gender*, and as a consequence, quite mistakenly thinks that he knows how it feels for a French speaker to think of a table. (He also quite unfortunately fails to appreciate that he cannot predict from how *he* thinks of his readers, how *his readers* will think of his readers --something I will come back to later.) Let me make two points concerning the initial confusion. These points are intimately connected with the idea in the preceding discussion that racist/sexist memes will use any vehicle as an excuse for replication.

First, it may amuse Dawkins to know that a famous linguist, Geoff Nunberg, has related to me that some Italian speakers of his acquaintance actually claim to conceive of objects in terms of their grammatical gender. An example he submitted was the Italian word 'lampada' [*lamp*] which was intuited by an acquaintance of his as naturally bearing its (feminine) *grammatical* gender on account of its obvious feminine properties *as an object* (delicateness? curviness? hearth-warmingness?...).

Though ludicrous --ludicrous because an exact Italian synonym of 'lampada' is the masculine-gendered 'fanale'-- what this example shows is that the psychological tendency to *loop* from words *back* to objects, from arbitrary properties of language back to the world, is nearly irresistible. The seductiveness of this proclivity is manifest in the sheer number of (failed) attempts to make sense, for example, of why Romance speakers say '*le soleil*' and '*el sol*' (because the sun is virile and powerful...) whereas they say '*la lune*' and '*la luna*' (because the moon is soft and romantic, or what have you) and, oops, some say '*la mer*' while others say '*el mar*'... The Whorfian Hypothesis may be bad philosophy of mind, but it got *something* right about the effect of language on psychology.

### **An argument from effect: Sizing up the target of emasculation**

Secondly, much as Dawkins would like it to be otherwise (his deflationary comment depends on it), the structure of the English system and that of the French system are radically different on the issue of gender. (Which is not to say that French lacks its own ways of transmitting sexist memes. In the disinfection of sexist vehicles, every language must be taken on its own turf.) Forgive me for dwelling on this, but it is apparent that I must.



Every noun in French belongs to one of two noun classes. Membership in these classes is arbitrary, and has been arbitrary for as long as there has been a denotation for the expression "the French language" (and in fact long before that). For all we know, it may not be an accident that the word for woman and the word for man belong to distinct nominal groups in Romance languages. It is surely not an accident, but a function of the previous fact, that one nominal class is called "the feminine" while the other nominal class is called "the masculine". There is, obviously, no necessity to these names.

There is a certain amount of semantic consistency in the French gender system, as all females fall in one class and all males in the other (though note that 'personne', *person*, is feminine). Save for this, French children learn the grammatical gender of each noun in the language by rote memory (remember Latin class?) or infer it from certain features of the syntactic context. For example, they can figure out the gender of countries (yes, countries have gender) by helping themselves to clues provided by prepositional phrases: 'aller *au* Canada', hence '*le* Canada' (masculine), but 'aller *en* France', hence '*la* France' (feminine). (--Is there anyone not tempted by the Language Loop here?)

There is no necessity to these groupings, types or tokens. French might have evolved to group all things less than five feet tall into one group and all things five feet tall or bigger into the other. Thus, short women would take the masculine gender and tall men and all countries the feminine (or vice versa). Whether nominal classes are arbitrarily defined or semantically motivated typically depends on how many such classes the language countenances, numerous classes requiring more semantic motivation (for obvious mnemonic reasons).

Just to keep things in perspective, there is a language in the South Pacific with 32 nominal classes, reputedly organized --believe it or not-- as a function of an object's *proximity to the Buddha!* Swahili, for its part, has either 12 or 18 nominal classes (depending on how you count), organized morphologically, that is, according both to lexical appearance and semantic contribution. Incidentally, the word for man and the word for woman belong to the same word class.

Now, there is nothing akin to a system of grammatical gender in English. There are no rules for determiner agreement (akin to rules for '*le*' and '*la*'), no rules for modifier agreement (akin to '*grosse*' for '*table*' (fem,sing), '*beaux*' for '*objets*' (msc,plur)) and no nominal classes for them to agree with.

There is, however, in English a system of semantic gender striking in its exclusivity: of the 600,000 or so words of English, this system is restricted to singular pronouns. There are three groups in this system, and only *one*

*word* per group (the variations are due to case markings): 'he', which applies to males and does double duty as the so-called neutral case; 'she', which applies to females, to ships (fading fast) and to one's own country (fading faster); and 'it', which applies to everything else. And let us keep in mind that the war with feminists is essentially about the excision of one tiny bit --the "neutral" bit-- of this itsy bitsy system. (Said this way, no wonder it hurts.)

If, for whatever reason, we were to dismantle the grammatical gender system of French, *every single noun*, hence every single Noun Phrase, Adjectival Phrase, and Prepositional Phrase, hence every single Sentence of the language would be affected, and the structure of the language as a whole would correspondingly be massively altered.

If, by comparison, we were to dismantle the semantic gender system of English (or just the problematic tiny bit of the system), the quality and amount of the effect on the language as a whole would be proportionate to the relative size of the system (indeed of the problematic tiny bit of the system) in the language --just to keep things in perspective.

Would dismantling the entire grammatical gender system of French entail disastrous "phenotypic" consequences for communication? *Not at all*. Though it would make purists cringe like crazy, and turn linguistic libertines into purists overnight, anyone who understands

La belle plume de ma tante est sur le bureau de mon oncle.

can just as well manage

Le beau plume de mon tante est sur le bureau de mon oncle.

as

La belle plume de ma tante est sur la bureau de mon oncle.

and, in fact, any combination thereof. Indeed, Anglophone Canadian kids packed off to defective French Immersion schools often end up speaking just like that, and it is easy to see why. Absent effective assimilation into French, these kids rely on the resources available in English, and English lacks a system of grammatical gender. (The fact that no one in these schools appears to notice that their kids aren't speaking *French* bears out the above point.)

Now, there are good reasons of a sociopolitical nature to resist the domination of French by English and the consequent dismantling of the grammatical gender system of French, which would be the eventual result of too many English parents enrolling their kids into French Immersion programs. (In the Canadian context, call this The Paradox of Good Will.) The question at issue is whether there aren't good reasons of a sociopolitical nature to insist on dismantling the semantic gender system of English.

It is clear that the pronominal classes in this system are semantically non-arbitrary, and that their syntactic effects are dominated by their semantic content, in contradistinction to French. Even at the high point of sailors' romanticization of their boats it was never *syntactically ill-formed* (in the intuitive sense relevant to linguists as well as in the prescriptive sense of school marmes) to refer to one's boat as 'it'. It was rather that it was *permissible* to refer to one's ship as 'she' as an expression of a nautical love affair. Likewise, though an animal is conventionally referred to in English as 'it' (except where its sex is relevant), I have yet to hear cat or dog owners use 'it' to refer to their pets.

As these cross-over examples show, the pronominal system in English is not syntactically deep. It is based on two properties: humanness (and as far as our emotions are concerned, some ships and animals might as well be human), and sex. Let us examine this more closely.

#### **An argument from history: Whose to say?**

Let us pretend that we have to decide how to refer to people. We have two resources, 'he' and 'she', but three jobs to do: refer to a man, refer to a woman, and refer to Whomever when we don't know or don't care about Whom's sex.

We could introduce a new pronoun, but closed-class lexical items like pronouns (and prepositions and connectives) are notoriously impenetrable. (They resist assimilation and borrowing, for example.) Short of this, one resource will have to do two jobs. It seems that the problem is simple: other things being equal, we should flip a coin.

Of course, other things are not equal. Our game is being played against a background of sexism that disfavors women. For reasons alluded to above, if men were gallant, they would demonstrate their sympathy with the plight of women by going out of their way to apply 'she' to Whomever. So I disagree with Dummett who "does not see what will have been gained if, after a century or two, this use of 'she' comes to seem natural, while the use of 'he' appears to confine the application to males". Gallantry is not nothing, Mr. Dummett.

Other things are not equal, of course, in a different way. Forget the fact that all known languages with a gendered two-pronged pronominal system analogous to English use the masculine as the impersonal pronoun. For all we know, this fact may show that which way the coin falls is predestined by principles of Universal Grammar. (Of course, I don't have to remind you of what follows --or, more to the point, doesn't follow-- from this natural contingency, if it is one.)

It is also a fact, and one which astonishingly we take entirely for granted, that the flip of the coin has always been, as a matter of historical fact and for any pronominal system of any language where a coin needed flipping, in the hands of (male) men. (God may have created Adam and Eve both in his own image, but it is Adam who got to name the animals.) Perhaps, for all we know, what this shows is that sexism, or the deferring-the-flip-of-the-coin-to-men, or the suffering of their lack of gallantry, is a naturally ingrained proclivity of humans. (Then again, perhaps what the current feminist revolt against masculine language shows is that when women have some power to influence events, what used to go without saying is shown to require discussion.)

I mention this only to say that by the time the printing press put pressure on Angles and Saxons to normalize the conventions of English, the language had already been to some degree infected by Latin and Greek via French, and by Old Norse, back to Sanskrit and Proto-Sanskrit, by the consequences of the said proclivity. So the old English grammarians of the 16th and 17th centuries who are responsible for our current intuitions of the acceptable don't bear all the blame for the current masculine state of the language.

But it is telling that zealous prescriptivists practically had to beat people out of saying  
Everyone is entitled to *their* opinion.  
and  
Anyone who lies should be ashamed of *themselves*.

which have always been and still are the natural forms to come out of people's mouths who have not been successfully tutored and who apparently ignore the 1850 Act of the British Parliament legislating that 'he' stands for 'she'.

**An argument from logic: The derivation of pedantry**

The high priests of grammatical correctness think it fundamentally "more correct" to say  
Everyone is entitled to *his* opinion.  
and  
Anyone who lies should be ashamed of *himself*.

How have its proponents rationalized such a prescription? Why have they believed it justified, at least enough to warrant imposing on others? (Alternatively, is it just brute pedantry that lacks even the courtesy to seek justification?)

Some appear to think that 'everyone and *his* opinion' is somehow a "more logical" thing to say --at best in the sense of being more consistent with other principles of grammar, at worst in no discernable sense at all-- than 'everyone and *their* opinion'. Those content with circularity simply assert that it is more consistent with historical

practice, with existing conventions.

My best attempt at rationalizing the historical practice (and its current-day defense) is as follows. For the purpose of the ensuing discussion, note that 'everyone', and positive polarity 'anyone', are *superficially singular* but (in some intuitive sense) *semantically plural* --'everyone', after all, means *everyone*.

It might be perceived as a fact of English that the verb agrees in number with the superficial number of its subject (the verb agrees with the superficially singular 'everyone'), not at the semantic level (the verb does not agree with the semantically plural 'everyone'). Thus, the same people who use the offending construction *don't say*

Everyone *are* entitled to their opinion.

This suggests the generalization:

Number agreement takes place at the syntactic surface (not at the semantic level).

The generalization might appear at first sight to be supported by the facts of number (and gender) agreement between an *anaphoric pronoun* and its *antecedent*. Such agreement could be thought governed by surface syntactic number (and gender) of the antecedent:

John<sub>masc,sing</sub> and *his* children.  
Mary<sub>fem, sing</sub> and *her* children.  
The Smiths<sub>plur</sub> and *their* children.

9444448    94448  
ANTECEDENT ANAPHOR  
  \            /  
  agreement

It is such facts (or rather, such misobservations) as the above that might be thought to justify the prescription that pronouns appearing as *bound variables* should also agree with the surface syntactic number of the *quantifiers* that bind them.

Everyone and *his* children.  
\* Everyone and *their* children.

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QUANTIFIER VARIABLE

However, on reflection, we can see that the generalization holds neither for anaphoric relations nor for subject-verb agreement. It is not the surface syntactic number of the antecedent that is relevant to anaphor agreement, nor of the subject to verb agreement, but its semantic number. As the example below illustrates, though the antecedent is syntactically plural, the anaphor agrees with the antecedent as semantically singular:

The United States let *its* soldiers down.  
\* The United States let *their* soldiers down.

And though the subject is morphologically plural, the verb also agrees with it in the singular:

The United States *is* a big country.  
\* The United States *are* a big country.

Secondly, it is thought just as natural, or just as logical, or just so, that sex-indeterminate pronouns in such constructions should opt for the *masculine* form. I shall return to this point in a later section.

Finally, it is important to realize that logic has nothing to do with any of this. Or to the extent that it does, it is far from clear that it supports the *his*-ers. There is no reason to expect the pronouns serving as *anaphors* to match those serving as *bound variables*. In some languages, these are simply distinct. What speakers of the *they*-dialect are doing is quite obvious. They are manifesting verbally the distinction of which we all have an intuitive grasp between an Anaphor and a Variable by using 'they' as general-purpose variable. This explains how they know to use 'they' in quantified contexts:

Somebody left *their* lights on.  
A stranger left *their* car in the driveway.  
The last person to leave left *their* umbrella.  
Someone's breaking in. Be careful, *they* may be armed.

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VARIABLE

but don't use it (as a singular pronoun) in anaphoric contexts:

John left *his* lights on.  
Mary left *her* lights on.  
The Smiths left *their* lights on.  
The stranger I met this morning left *her* car in the driveway.  
The last person to leave (the forgetful Johnny) left *his* umbrella.

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ANAPHOR

What *they*-sayers are grasping are the different logical relations involved in Anaphora and Binding. Anaphoric pronouns are *referential* expressions: they are just abbreviatory devices standing in for the referred-to antecedents (John, Mary, the Smiths,...). Such pronouns agree in number (and gender) with the referents for which they are stand-ins. But bound pronouns are not referential expressions; they are variables, that is, logical placeholders:

There is an X  
X: a person,  
X: a stranger, X left X's ...  
X: the last person to leave,

Such display of logical acumen as is manifested by *they*-sayers is lost on Language Pedants, who, stuck on appearances, mistakenly analyze 'they' as a plural pronoun even when it is acting as a bound variable. Though homonymous with the plural anaphoric pronoun 'they', when used as a bound variable, it is just that: a variable. In its capacity as such, it *has* neither gender nor number.

To argue that 'Everyone and their opinion' is ill-formed on the grounds that 'they' is plural whereas 'everyone' is singular is tantamount to arguing that  $3+X=5$  is ill-formed on the grounds that X is a letter, not a number.

When there is a sex-specific *restriction* on the quantifier, the *they*-dialect has two options. Go on as usual:

Every boy left *their* shampoo in the shower.

Every girl left *their* car in the driveway.

For all X,            X: a boy,            X left X's ...  
                           X: a girl,

or genderize the variable:

Every boy left *his* shampoo in the shower.

Every girl left *her* car in the driveway.

For all Boys  $X_{\text{masc}}$   $X_{\text{masc}}$  left  $X_{\text{masc}}$  ...  
 For all Girls  $X_{\text{fem}}$   $X_{\text{fem}}$  left  $X_{\text{fem}}$  ...

The Language Pedants conceive of themselves as having the grammatical upper hand because they think of their Binding system as overall more consistent with agreement facts about Subjects and Verbs, and Anaphora. Their belief is grounded in disregard for the intuitive but logically sophisticated distinction between Anaphora and Binding. I hope to have convinced you that their confidence in their linguistic superiority is at best spurious.

Could the Pedants argue that the *his*-dialect is merely selecting a different pronominal form to act as bound variable, namely 'his', where the *they*-dialect selects 'they'? Of course, this would make saying 'his' over 'they' a simple matter of taste, hardly something to base a prescription upon. But could they maintain that 'his' *just is* the general-purpose bound variable in their dialect?

The fact is that they couldn't. If 'his' were simply the general-purpose non-restricted bound variable, we should be able to say quite naturally:

\* Everyone in this nuns' convent left *his* comb in church.

() X:in this nuns' convent, X left X's comb in church

\* Some student in this girls' school will congratulate *himself* on *his* winning the award.

() X:student in this girls' school, X will congratulate X on X's winning ...

\* A female clergymember who likes *his* Mother Superior devotes *himself* to *him*.

( $\forall$ X) X:female clergy, ( $\forall$ Y) Y:Mother Superior, if X likes Y, X devotes X to Y

\* Any teacher who is female devotes *himself* to others.

( $\forall$ X) X:teacher who is female, X devotes X to others

If it were true that 'his' is just the general purpose bound variable, these constructions would not be ill-formed.

Compare:

Everyone in this nuns' convent left *their* comb in church.

Some student in this girls' school will congratulate *themselves* on *their* winning ...

A female clergymember who likes *their* Mother Superior devotes *themselves* to *them*.

Any teacher who is female devotes *themselves* to others.

The effect of the *his*-dialect is to *genderize the bound variable*. Or to put it another way, it imposes a masculine restriction on the quantifier (hence the deviance of the above examples where such a restriction clashes with the feminine restrictions overtly stated in the sentences). This is precisely the point, picked up intuitively by feminists, that masculine language masculinizes the norm. It invites, indeed --as in the deviant examples above-- *forces*, a partly masculine interpretation of the bound variable. This is the pronominal version of the *contingent a priori* discussed in Part I, and the main reason why those who think of 'he' as a sex-neutral variable are just misrepresenting the facts.

I am not saying that 'he' could not *become* a sex-neutral variable (in some sense of 'could'). I am saying that 'he', as a matter of linguistically observable fact, *is* not a sex-neutral variable.

There are good reasons why it would be difficult to develop the use of 'he' as a sex-neutral variable even if we tried very hard to do so, at least as long as 'he' is also used as an exclusively masculine variable. This is so for reasons of *semantic proximity* suggested in Part I.

Moreover, there are no good reasons to foist on ourselves this nearly impossible feat. English already has available the resources necessary for the expression of sex-neutral variables in the form of 'they'. Such usage is long-standing in the language.

1545: Thus it was agreed among us that every president should assemble *their* companies. ABP Parker

1563: A man or woman being lang absent fra *thair* party. Winzet

1600: Euery one to rest *themselues* betake. Shakespeare

1643: Each country hath *their* fashions, and garnishes. Trapp

1742: Little did I think to make a complaint against a person very dear to you, but don't let



- them* be so proud as to make *them* not care how *they* affront everybody else. Richardson
- 1848: A person can't help *their* birth. Thackeray
- 1874: Every one likes to keep it to *themselves* as long as *they* can. Dasent
- 1960: He's one of those guys who's always patting *himself* on the back. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*

Furthermore, there is an excellent reason beyond those above for doubting the wisdom of the masculine-pronoun prescription. This is no less than that it simply leads to absurdities. Take the sentence:  
Mary saw everyone before John noticed \_\_\_\_\_.

The prescription yields the unintelligible:

- \* Mary saw everyone before John noticed him.

Nor is this an isolated instance:

- \* Everyone arrived sooner than John expected him.
- \* Having written to everyone on board about the perils of the sea, there was nothing left for poor Mary to do but to pray for his safe return.
- \* Since nobody on the boat was allowed in the country as a refugee, Mary felt sorry for him.
- \* After everyone left, Mary cleaned up his mess.

If what the Pedants really care about is language, they should abandon this inane prescription.

Had grammarians of olden days noticed such constructions, rather than hastily concluding that the Binding system should be consistent with Anaphora, they might have thought it best that our Binding practice be instead consistent with itself. We would be consistent *they*-users today, and not in half the mess we are in, had they done so.

### **An argument from illogic: Sexism and the Language Loop**

Now let us get back to our historical toss of the coin. Our old grammarian chaps determined, for reasons now fully seen to be spurious, I hope, that a singular anaphoric pronoun was necessary in binding constructions. And when faced with the issue as to which of the two available singular pronouns it should be, they (rode the wave of history and) settled on the masculine. Of course, since people were already speaking by the time the grammarians came along (a fact that the grammarians were happy to overlook, as speakers of the *they*-dialect know full well), it is unfair to foist upon them all the responsibility for what ails us. So let us assume for the sake of innocence that settling on the masculine in case of pronominal conflict is, *pace they*-users, simply dictated by principles of Universal Grammar. Hence the chaps in question simply attempted to make sense of the workings of Universal Grammar, much like modern-day linguists, who are in the business of explanation, not prescription. (So, in case it's not clear already, the present paper is not (just) a linguistics paper.)

It is most illuminating to note just how our chaps explained Universal Grammar to their fellows. Why, they said (they did!), it is only *natural* to place the man *before* the woman, as in 'male and female', 'husband and wife', 'son and daughter' --Thomas Wilson, Arte of Rhetorique (1553), and only *proper* that the masculine should include the feminine as the male gender is the *worthier* gender --Joshua Poole, The English Accidence (1646).

Well if smart chaps like that could succumb to the Language Loop and explain away *arbitrary* properties of language (the innocent dictates of Universal Grammar) by projecting back from "*objective*" properties of the world, gee, why should we expect us ordinary folk to resist the Language Loop temptation? The fact is, masculine language invites fallacious psycholinguistic speculation of just this sort.

As every linguist knows who has taught (or tried to teach) elementary linguistics, it is very hard to convince most speakers of any language that they don't know all there is to know about language. How could they not know all there is to know about something which they feel to be so intimately theirs? (Moral philosophers often run into a similar problem with sophomores who know all there is to know about morality.) You'd be amazed at the fantastic folklore people come up with to explain to themselves linguistic facts: why, *lamps* start taking on womanly airs!

Where masculine language cohabits with sexism in our minds, that is certain to beget monsters. And even if this marriage occurs only in the minds of others, we still all have to live with the monsters.

### **Modes of presentation: A new twist on an old puzzle**

The old Babylonians failed to see that The Evening Star was the same planet as The Morning Star. Since they represented The Evening Star to themselves as the first star to appear in the evening, but The Morning Star as the first star to appear in the morning, they failed to make the connection. One can only wonder what effect it would have had on the history of astronomy (if not on Frege's puzzle) if those who named Venus 'The Evening Star', impressed perhaps by its luminosity, had named it instead 'The Star Reminiscent of Morning'...

Masculine language, by virtue of the *contingent a priori* which is its essential keystone, gives a misrepresentative impression of the universe. It leads the mind to a world view that, like the streets of Tehran, is disproportionately populated by men. It veils women.

In case you don't believe me, here's a little experiment that you can conduct on yourself and your friends. Here's a puzzle. Explain it (before reading on):

A man and his son are driving along on a road when suddenly a truck hits their car. The father is killed. The son is rushed to the hospital. When the

ambulance arrives, the doctor takes one look at the boy and exclaims: "I can't operate on this man, he's my son."

Of course, it's hard to get a puzzle like this in a context like this to have the effect it usually has. But the effect it usually has is stunning. People just don't get it, whole classrooms at a time. Sure, you set people up by calling it a puzzle, and in this way stack the deck. But the same puzzle, with the same opening fanfare, just doesn't get past go (in an enlightened audience) if you replace 'son' with 'daughter'. (Try it!)

This is not a puzzle about the Pope. It is *not* (well, in an enlightened audience it's not) that people are so deeply sexist that they can't conceive of a doctor as a woman. Indeed, if all you do is change a very inessential character in the storyline (the sex of the child is irrelevant to the puzzle, all that matters is that the father is killed), it lets people *see* the woman in the doctor's garb. The reason the puzzle puzzles is that the lexical images are relentlessly male: 'a man', 'his son', 'the father', 'the boy', 'this man', 'he', ... But when the puzzle ends with "She's my daughter", women suddenly pop back into the universe.

The only reason this pop is startling when it appears in pronominal form in a sentence is that masculine language dulls our mental perception of women. A feminine pronoun feels like a sudden spotlight in the dark. This is exactly why we must emasculate the language. Because the feminine pronoun feels too much like the intruder at the Men's Club. We must emasculate the language to expel ourselves from the masculine language Loop.

### **Conclusion**

I hope to have well done my semantician's duty. I hope to have convinced you --the person concerned to disinfect our attitudes of sexist viruses-- that it is time to blow the kiss of death to 'man' and his pronominal fellows. It is time to emasculate once and for all the mirror of our mind, lest its reflections be trapped in the ubiquitous Language Loop. I hope in writing his next book Dawkins will not only have women in mind but be mindful of women. If not, *that* would be a pity.

Words are our servants, not our masters.

Richard Dawkins [1993]

## NOTES