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What Is Gender-Inclusive Language And Why Does It Matter?

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Is it sexist to say you guys? Why do we have three terms of address for women—Miss, Ms., and Mrs.—and only Mr. for men? And what should you do when someone changes their pronouns?

Language isn't just talk. The ways people use language can reveal and enforce harmful stereotypes. Language can also be used to challenge prevailing norms and conventions. By using genderinclusive language, we not only signal that we value equity—we can also help speak it into being, advancing social progress for people of all genders.

Why should we pursue gender-inclusive language?

Language is always changing and will continue to change, sometimes ahead of societal beliefs and behaviors and sometimes lagging behind. While simply changing our language does not guarantee societal change, linguistic efforts have raised awareness of gendered linguistic bias in ways that have had direct social impact.

Efforts to make the English language more gender-equitable have had a long history in the U.S. Important advances were made from the 1960s to the 1980s, when feminist activists used language strategically to highlight women's concerns on a national level. For instance, in the 1970s, activists pushed the term domestic violence into the public lexicon, helping portray it as a widespread social problem. Civil rights and feminist activists also made deliberate efforts to introduce Ms. as a term of address that designates gender, but not marital status—just like Mr. The term Mx. (pronounced "mix"), a term of address for transgender or non-gender-binary individuals, was also coined in the 1970s. Today, the term Ms. is widely used in the U.S. In the United Kingdom, Mx. is also an option on many government forms, drivers' licenses, bank paperwork, and so on.

Early activist efforts also tackled pronouns, especially the use of so-called 'generic' pronouns, and the gender-skewed perceptions they cause. For instance, when job ads are described in masculine language (as in, "The job applicant should submit his resume to…"), men feel especially encouraged to apply—and women tend to refrain. Biased language, which can surface as microaggressions, also correlates with diminished workplace satisfaction and can affect physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral health.

Nowadays, the use of singular they—as in, "If a student misses class, they must make up their work"— is on the rise as a gender-neutral preferred pronoun. Although originally decried by 18th-century British grammarians, who argued that masculine forms are more "comprehensive," the usage is increasingly acceptable in formal English, and widely used in informal English worldwide. Singular they is also an important gender-inclusive pronoun for those who identify as transgender, gender-fluid, or non-binary. As a result, in 2015, members of the American Dialect Society voted the singular they Word of the Year.

What does gender-inclusive language look like?

People are capable and powerful linguistic agents. Even small shifts in how we use language can advance social change—or signal change that may be on its way. A good example is you guys, a widespread term that many people claim is gender-neutral. Increasingly, however, English users are recognizing the term's masculine bent, opting instead for non-gendered words such as you all, y'all, or folks.

It can be hard to change one's linguistic habits, especially those developed over a lifetime. But it is possible. Research finds that people who use gender-inclusive language tend to do so because they are not only aware of gender-based linguistic inequalities, but also actively seek linguistic change. Here are some suggestions for

implementing gender-inclusive language, whether in workplaces or schools, via policies or regulations, or simply as part of everyday interactions:

Pay attention to names and naming conventions. Ask for a person's preferred name and pronouns, instead of assuming. When referring to women, use Ms. unless otherwise specified. When referring to someone's spouse or child, ask "Is their last name the same as yours or different?" Accept that preferred names, pronouns, and titles may change over time.

Avoid using asymmetrical language. If referring to men as men, also refer to women as women, not as girls, ladies, or females. If referring to men by titles (such as Dr. or Mr.), do the same for women (especially in meetings, during speaker panels, at conferences, etc.). Consider gender neutral titles, such as M., or job-specific titles such as Prof. or Chair.

Make sure that official forms and surveys offer options. Allow individuals to designate their own gender, or if it is necessary to provide options, include they as an alternative to the traditional male/female binary. Understand that previous official documentation may not reflect an individual's preferred name, pronouns, or titles. Consider asking individuals to designate their spouse or partner rather than husband or wife or to identify the parent or guardian rather than the mother or father.

Create a gender-inclusive culture. Ensure that official records, directories, databases, forms, etc. reflect preferred names and pronouns. Encourage individuals to share their preferred name and pronouns, and make the effort to consistently use them. When mistakes happen, acknowledge them, reflect on them, and implement strategies for change. Create a style guide or gender-neutral language policy. Hold trainings to establish a comprehensively inclusive climate.

Promote an active, critical organization space. Listen to colleagues, staff, students, and employees when they report experiencing hostile environments or interactions. Avoid considering diversity work as being finished, closed, or good enough. Establish a standing committee to review and incorporate scholarly research and activism, gather feedback, and assess state and federal policies regarding discrimination based on gender or sexual orientation in the workplace or elsewhere.

This brief was composed with J. Inscoe. Read more in Christine Mallinson, "Language and Its Everyday Revolutionary Potential: Feminist Linguistic Activism in the United States," The Oxford Handbook of U.S. Women's Social Movement Activism (2017): 419–439.