

## Who Is He?

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*“When an ESL student enters our classes,  
he faces many challenges.”*

Now for a moment, please imagine this ESL student as he enters your class. What does he look like? What sex is he?

Unless you recognized the situation as the set up it was designed to be, I'd bet my last red felt-tipped grading pen that you were picturing a male student. The supposedly generic *he* just does not conjure visions of a female.

Since language exposes cultural values, it is not surprising that American English reveals male dominance in many overt as well as subtle ways. Although by now most of us have evolved alternatives to a few of the more blatant forms of sexism in English and we use *Ms.*, *chairperson*, *Dear People*, and so forth, many ESL professionals may be unaware of their contribution to the perpetuation of male dominance through their habitual use of the generic *he*.

At the 1989 CATESOL conference in Long Beach, I couldn't help noticing that at three of the best workshops I attended, the presenters consistently used the generic *he*. As I left their sessions carrying pages of notes and useful handouts, I was struck by the paradox that these women—who stood out as being particularly articulate, conscientious and creative—were nonetheless helping to maintain females' lesser status through their pronoun choice. In contrast, during his inspiring address, plenary speaker Jaime Escalante never failed to use *he or she* in reference to a *student*. Escalante has gained national attention as a result of the movie *Stand and Deliver* which portrays his tremendous success in teaching in a barrio high school in East Los Angeles. When he told the overflow crowd at the conference that 66% of his AP calculus class are females—in spite of girls' infamous math anxiety—the stir of approval in the room was obvious. Could it be that Escalante's overt inclusion of females in his speech reflects his concern for girls as well as boys and is one of many ways,

both subtle and direct, in which he encourages outstanding achievement by such a high percentage of girls?

A considerable amount of research has confirmed that the word *he* prompts listeners to think of a *he*, but not a *she*. Studies consistently show that using male referents, even when both genders are intended, leads people to think of males, not males *and* females (Bertilson, Springer, & Fierke, 1982). For example, Mackay (1980) had university students read paragraphs containing the generic *he* which referred to neutral antecedents. Then the readers answered multiple choice questions, "one of which, unbeknownst to the subjects, assessed comprehension of prescriptive *he* and its antecedents" (p. 445). The results showed that "80% of the subjects on 75% of the trials comprehended neutral antecedents of prescriptive *he*—such as *person*, *writer*, or *beginner*—as *male* rather than *male or female*" (p. 447). Only one reader in five consistently interpreted *he* generically. Based on my own teaching experience, I suspect that if Mackay's subjects were asked directly about the meaning of singular *he* when it refers to a neutral antecedent, most of them would have been able to recite the prescriptive rule that *he* is a generic term required to maintain singular agreement; however, their performance indicated that in a simple reading context, male terms used "generically" induced four out of five of the readers to think of males. This shows the insidiousness of sexism in language—speakers may well be able to say what words are supposed to mean, yet in reality another meaning is applied.

Is this a petty issue? No, it is not. If we state that we are seeking "an outstanding student," and say that "*he* is expected to reveal certain traits," we are more likely to seek a man than a woman because of the dominant image of males conveyed by the use of *he*. Even though it is no longer allowed to advertise for a males-only position, using the singular pronoun may yield much the same effect. In fact, a study done by Moulton, Robinson and Elias (1978) showed that "self-selection bias is likely to occur with the use of male terms in gender-neutral advertisements. An employer may intend to attract both male and female applicants, but women are less likely to think of themselves as candidates when terms such as *he*, *his* and *man* are used" (Moulton, Robinson, & Elias, 1978, p. 1035).

Mackay (1980) argues that the generic *he* has many similarities with effective propaganda. First, he notes that among educated speakers it is used very frequently (over 10<sup>6</sup> occurrences in a lifetime). Also, it is seemingly indirect, not an overt assertion of male dominance, but rather a reflection of our assumption and acceptance of its existence. Its use is acquired by speakers at a very early age, before they might question it (Mackay, 1980). Further, generic *he* is reinforced as a high status form because it is typical of the grammar of well-educated and prestigious speakers who eschew the "incorrect"

but commonly used third person plural form to refer to a singular sex-neutral antecedent, as in: *Everyone should watch their pronouns.*

Teachers' use of the generic *he* certainly does not indicate a blatant disregard for their female students. Its use is likely to be a longstanding, unquestioned habit. Also, for the benefit of their upwardly mobile students, some teachers may consciously strive to provide a model of correct, well-educated English. However, it is ironic that their effort to honor the traditional generic-*he* rule may perpetuate the limits on their female students and inflate the egos and expectations of the males. (Virginia Woolf wryly observed that the function of women in our society is to be mirrors who reflect men at twice their normal size. And we all know what happened to her.)

The problem of sexism in English reflects the problem in our culture. Although we have made some gains, an average full-time woman worker still does not earn as much as the average man; in fact, she makes only slightly more than two-thirds of his income. And it is not lack of education that is the cause for this wage gap: "Women with four or more years of college earn less than men who only have high school diplomas" (National Association of Working Women, 1989, p. 2). Women make up 52% of the U.S. population, yet only 5% of the U.S. Congress ("Record Number," 1988) and 11% of the Supreme Court. The list of inequities could go on and on, but instead of wallowing in the scope of the imbalance, let's turn to something we can do to be a part of the solution.

It behooves us to lead in reducing the limits placed on ourselves and on our female students—limits which the English language helps to sustain both overtly and indirectly.

Some scholars may argue that language change only follows cultural change and does not produce it. If that is indeed the case, since the culture is slowly moving toward more equality for women—albeit in jumps and starts—it can't hurt for us to do all we can to speed the language's response. Particularly in the field of ESL where women predominate, we should be conscious of linguistic choices available to us which do not contribute to females' invisibility.

What do we do to counteract the generic *he*? We know that pronoun forms are extremely resistant to change. And *he/she*, *his/her* can become terribly cumbersome: "*When a student enters an ESL class, he/she has to face many challenges as he/she confronts a language different from his/her native tongue.* Jaime Escalante would croon, "It's so easy, it's so easy, you can do it," and he's right. All we have to do is remember, whenever we can, to go for the plural.

When ESL *students* enter our classes, *they* have to face many challenges. (And so do we.) ■

## References

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