

# **AWARENESS OF GENDER-SENSITIVE EXPRESSIONS IN THE PRINT MEDIA**

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## **Abstract**

Most contemporary and sensitive English language users, especially women and those who are careful not to be misunderstood as insensitive language users do not consider 'man' to be synonymous with 'people'. Therefore users of the English language, and for that matter any language, have to be mindful about the ways gender is expressed in discourse. This paper will deal with the print and online editions of the Malaysian daily newspaper *The Star* for the month of December, 2009. The study is primarily focused on nouns which are gendered in a way regarded as inappropriate because the noun refers to the wrong gender, or it is expressed in such a manner that it excludes one of the two genders, when both should be rightly included. The paper will confine itself to local (Malaysian) news items. It will elaborate on both the proper use of non-sexist language and that which is deemed sexist. The findings are expected to bring about greater awareness of gender-sensitive usage and lead to their appropriate use in the print media.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In recent years, the lexical expression 'sex' has been reserved for reference to biological categories, while 'gender' for social and cultural categories (American Heritage Dictionary, 1996). The use of 'man' as a generic term for people in general or as a person of either sex is

now considered old-fashioned (Macmillan, 2002: 867). According to the Cambridge International Dictionary of English, “Many people speaking or writing English today prefer to avoid using language that is sexist” (1995:1305). Before women became more aware of their linguistic rights, it was a man’s world. But today that it is not so, is most obvious.

The US Declaration of Independence proclaimed in 1776 has this noble assertion “.....all men are created equal.....”. The famous ‘I have a dream speech’ delivered by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1963 (cited in Johnstone, 2002) has the word ‘brotherhood’. African American women today would have preferred the word ‘solidarity’ or ‘sisterhood’, beside ‘brotherhood’. But the men who created the US Constitution in 1787 are not inappropriately referred to as the Founding Fathers even today (see Barack Obama’s inaugural address) because they were all men, 55 of them. In his inaugural speech to fellow Americans, Obama chose his words carefully. He said “fellow citizens” and not ‘fellow countrymen’, “forbears”, not ‘forefathers’. In various parts of his speech, he mentioned “men and women” and not just ‘men’ to refer generically and respectfully to both sexes.

Why is gender-neutral or gender-sensitive language necessary when it matters? It is to include, not exclude either sex. Women today perform feats which are equal to men. The UK had a hugely popular prime minister in Margaret Thatcher. Do we call her a ‘statesman’, or ‘stateswoman’? Lest we forget in Malaysia today, there are many state legislators who are women. Is a female state legislator an ‘assemblyman’ or ‘assemblywoman’? There are many women in the police force. Do we still call them ‘policemen’? Can both male and female police officers be collectively described as the ‘men in blue’? Gender-inclusive language is fair.

## SEXIST LANGUAGE

Sexist language encodes stereotyped attitudes, mostly towards women, but in a few cases also men. Research in this area has been concentrated on the ways in which language is used to convey negative attitudes to women (Holmes, 2008). Language is considered sexist when particular expressions “support unfair or untrue attitudes to a particular sex, usually women” (Cambridge, 1995:1305). In some instances men are also at the receiving end, for example, *conmen*, *gunmen*, *manhunt*, *manslaughter* and *manhandle* which have no feminine equivalents. When gendered nouns such as ‘chairman’, ‘freshman’ and ‘policeman’ are used to refer to both men and women, such usage is sexist. It makes women invisible and marginalized. If the following terms are also meant to include women, it is language sexism: *mankind*, *manmade*, *manpower*, *the man in the street*, *man’s best friend*, *showmanship*, *craftsman*, *layman*, etc. The caption below (*The Star*, 16 March, 2010, N4) is such an example:

*Ong: I have the blessings of the man in the street.*

The notion that the masculine pronoun ‘he’ could be either male or female is generally considered unacceptable usage now, according to The Writing Center of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2010). Thus the excerpt below from a letter to the editor of a newspaper (*New Straits Times*, March 19, p.19) is not of current usage:

*A councilor commands a great deal of respect in the area he represents.*

Some may even dispute the use of ‘master’ in the sentence below, preferring ‘accomplish’ instead:

*I was very eager to learn. I knew early on that it wouldn't be easy to master.*

## **NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE**

Non-sexist language does not discriminate either gender. There are no sexist interpretations or connotations. The expressions used refer to the sex of a person in non-partisan ways, for example: *The former headmaster of La Salle School passed away in his native Ireland.* It refers to a male principal. The example which follows is non-sexist either: *The craftsman, a 55-year old father of three from Batu Pahat, Johor has been making angklung since 1995.* It is not necessary to replace “craftsman” with the gender-neutral ‘artisan’, since the feature article was about a certain man who was skilful with his hands (*New Straits Times, Life & Times, March 19, 2010, p.2*).

If a man were to say “My wife is more comfortable with a lady doctor”, the use of ‘lady doctor’ does not indicate that she is an oddity in the medical profession or subordinate to a male doctor. It only indicates a patient’s preference. A photograph of five women had the accompanying description: *These former policewomen can't help but delight in their reunion.....* (*New Straits Times, March 10, 2010, p.1*). ‘Policewomen’ here is not sexist, as it only refers to the sex of the former police officers. This term is more apt than the gender-free ‘police officers’ in this context. In the context of a woman’s association organizing a Malaysia carnival, *Star Metro* (9 March, 2010, M15) had this caption: *Calling all female entrepreneurs.* Although ‘entrepreneurs’ is gender-neutral, in this context gender-specificity is needed. We do not need to say ‘single parents’ when the participants are all women, as in “*Paying tribute to single mums*” (*Star Metro, 9 March, 2010, M27*).

## **GENDER-NEUTRAL LANGUAGE**

Gender-neutral (gender-sensitive or gender-free) language is a style of writing which is inclusive of both sexes. The ideas first came from feminist language reformers during the 1970s. The generic use of ‘man’ and masculine pronouns when making references to persons of unspecified gender are considered sexist (Marlowe, 2001). Words do matter. If we believe in equality for both men and women, we ought to show it in our language use (The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2010). If we are referring to people who comprise both sexes, can we not avoid the use the male-based ‘man’, for example, in this sentence: *Dogs are truly a man’s best friend* ( *The Star Online*, December 28, 2009)? Granted that the expression ‘a dog is man’s best friend’ is very popular, to be gender-savvy in language use requires the user to come up with one that is neutral to both men and women. For example, something like ‘a human’s/ a person’s’ instead of ‘man’s’ would be considered as gender-sensitive. The irony in the news report is that it shows a woman with two of her dogs! The masculine noun ‘man’ is no longer the same as ‘people’. A young woman writing about her mother in a newspaper column refers to herself as a ‘handywoman’, not ‘handyman’ (*Starmag*, 26 March, 2010, p.15). Speakers and writers today have to be sensitive about how we express gender so that we can convey our ideas clearly and accurately to our audience. Because gendered nouns ‘- man’ and words beginning or ending in ‘-man’ and their plural equivalents are so commonly used, we often fail to notice the implications. Observe the following news item: “*The Government needs to come up with a master plan for manpower requirements for the next 10 years*”. (*The Star*, 31 March, 2010, p.8). A nonsexist alternative for ‘manpower’ is ‘workforce’. So, gender-neutral language provides nonsexist alternative expressions when referring to both male and female.

## METHODOLOGY

Local news reports which appeared in *The Star*, a Malaysian newspaper and its online editions were used for this study. Vocabulary items related to the use of gender were randomly identified from the news items published in December, 2009. The purpose for using the last month of the year was to find out how the print media chooses words to report news when referring to both men and women.

## FINDINGS

All the examples here have been taken from *The Star*, unless otherwise stated.

The following are examples of sexist language because the masculine noun is used inclusively of women. Nonsexist alternatives are provided in brackets. In some cases, being gender specific may not be wrong due to the sex of the person being very clear.

1. From a *layman's* (layperson's) point of view KTMB has great potential.
2. *Policemen* (Police officers) are assigned to ensure public order and protect the people.
3. We were stretched as we didn't have enough resources or *manpower* (workforce) but we felt that it was important for us to join in the campaign and make a stand.
4. This tree signifies *man* (humans, humanity) and animals in unity.
5. Surely the same words can be used to remind *man* that *he* can still be the master of *his* fate if *he* stops momentarily, to think before retaliating, failing which *he* might have to face the consequences of *his* haste ('everybody' for 'man' and change the masculine pronoun to a neutral one).

6. Following initial operations, police also detained two pregnant women who had been contracted to sell their babies to the syndicate and eight other people who acted as *middlemen* (agents, brokers, intermediaries, middle persons). *New Straits Times*, 28 December, 2009
7. “These mistakes will be corrected within a month,” he told *newsmen* (the press) after launching the signboards.....
8. Cupid Space Wanita MCA *chairman* (chair, head, president or chairwoman) Lim Swee Kiang said she felt more Malaysian- Chinese were staying single.....
9. Citing an example, Najib said the main values of Christmas were promoting peace and goodwill to all *mankind* (humanity, humankind).
10. In *layman’s terms*, (simple terms, plain language, laypeople’s language) that means printing money to create inflation that will boost asset prices and deflate away the real value of debt.
11. “The Appeals Board said there is no case until the committee makes a decision- only then can we identify the aggrieved party in this case,” Subang Jaya *assemblyman* (legislator, lawmaker or assemblywoman) Hannah Yeoh said.
12. The Perak menteri besar stunned *assemblymen* (lawmakers, legislators) at the house yesterday when he revealed that he was offered the menteri besar’s post. This is a modified example of a news item which appeared in *New Straits Times*, 1 April, 2010.
13. Even *pressmen* (the press) on duty were not spared as some were shoved by the revelers.
14. *Ex-servicemen* (Ex-armed forces staff) association president Datuk Muhammad Abdul Ghani was saddened that military personnel were involved in such a criminal activity.

15. The only *man-made* (constructed, handmade) structure visible at what amounts to the school gate is a 42m bamboo bridge .....
16. He advised the public to ask for police identification cards when approached by persons claiming to be *men in blue* (police officers, police personnel).
17. *Weatherman*: Johor woes to continue (Weather forecast). *New Straits Times*, 21 December, 2009.
18. At the same time, it is also well-deserved tribute to the *craftsmen* (artisans), whose skills and dedication have not only produced works of art, but also preserved many ancient forms of arts and crafts.....(*New Straits Times* 11 March, 2010).
19. The state has what it takes to attract tourists with its picturesque scenery, traditional *craftsmanship* (special skills) and food, apart from being the cradle of Malay civilization.
20. A Sani *spokesman* (spokesperson, spokeswoman), known only as Ida Nureeni, said the company would not comment nor issue any statement as investigation was ongoing (*New Straits Times*, 29 December, 2009).  
  
Those who are familiar with the proper name of the person know that it is a female. But where there is uncertainty with regard to one's sex, it is better to go for the gender-free item.
21. *Fishermen* (The fishing community) as well as search and rescue personnel have recovered the bodies of six more victims of a cargo vessel that sank near Pulau Banggi.
22. Indian youths venturing into business should network and learn from other Indian *businessmen* (businesspeople, entrepreneurs) said.....



23. Also despicable are the sweeping generalizations about foreigners as criminals, *conmen* (confidence tricksters) and prostitutes.

24. “I’m learning it because it is our *forefathers*’ (ancestors’, forebears’) culture.

25. Masjid India Muslim is known to all in the Klang Valley and throughout Selangor, so it is an icon of unity and *brotherhood* (solidarity) among Klang Muslims .....

However, the following items are not biased towards Malaysian women, for now, because of the absence of females in the work performed:

1 When Bulton failed to respond to his calls, the housemate called the *firemen*.

2 *Fishermen* returning from sea had also grabbed hold of the sturdy plants which save them from being swept away.

3 *Postmen* do not earn much.

## CONCLUSION

There is a growing need for journalists in Malaysia, and elsewhere, to be familiar with gender-neutral or gender-sensitive language expressions as they are inclusive of both men and women in general. However, when the sex of the person is informative or necessary, it is not sexist, as examples provided earlier serve to illustrate. Being gender-sensitive is part of verbal hygiene (please refer to Cameron, 1995). It is not an exclusively man’s world we live in now. Women rub shoulders with men in almost every occupation men perform, therefore gender awareness in language use has become necessary in media discourse.

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