

CHAPTER 13

Changing ‘man made language’: Sexist language and feminist linguistic activism in Australia

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‘By the mid-seventies’, wrote American feminist scholar Alette Olin Hill in 1986, ‘there were many female voices being raised against the tyranny of patriarchal Loud Mouths. Language itself was being examined as both an instrument of oppression and as a possible tool of liberation’.¹ Language became a significant concern for the international feminist movement through the 1970s. Efforts were made to investigate the gendered nature of language, campaigns were waged to change popular understandings of sexism in language and, ultimately, style and usage guides were designed that aimed to transform language at the institutional as well as the personal level. Australia actively participated in this international debate about sexist language, and campaigns to change language usage were waged in Australia.

The feminist campaign to change language was a form of what linguist Deborah Cameron calls ‘verbal hygiene’ (Anne Pauwels uses the somewhat less loaded term ‘linguistic intervention’): a way in which groups in society aim to monitor and censor language in ways that reflect their own social,

1 Alette Olin Hill, *Mother Tongue, Father Time: A Decade of Linguistic Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), xvi.

political or cultural concerns.² It might be more useful—and this is the term I prefer to use in this chapter—to talk about these efforts as ‘linguistic activism’: an effort to change speech as part of a broader attitude to change cultural attitudes and from there to create social change and, in this case, to achieve greater equality for, and less discrimination against, women.

This chapter considers what I call ‘feminist linguistic activism’ in Australia in the 1970s and 1980s. I will firstly consider the international feminist and academic concern with the gendered nature of language. Some of the concrete efforts made to shape language use, through style guides and the use of titles such as ‘Ms’, will then be examined in an effort to assess what changes were made, or at least attempted, in terms of shaping official public language, such as the language of government. Finally, I will consider criticisms made at the time of such change, and the subsequent debates that continue to the present around so-called political correctness. These suggest a strong and continuing resistance and backlash to changes in language and usage.

Linguistic activism took place in a context of social, cultural and political change in Australia. The advent of the Whitlam Labor Government led to an increased concern with addressing the status of women at a legislative level, and a greater receptivity to the feminist agenda. The Whitlam Government ratified the International Labour Organization’s convention on discrimination in employment, but although there was a move towards passing a federal Sex Discrimination Act, the dismissal of Whitlam’s government in 1975 meant that such legislation would not be enacted until the 1980s.³ Nevertheless, the 1970s saw the beginnings of change in the status of women.

Language too, especially public language, changed rapidly through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Major shifts in public language use began in the 1960s and were closely identified with youth culture and student activism.⁴ For student activists in the 1960s, the use of offensive language

2 Deborah Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), x; Anne Pauwels, *Women Changing Language* (London: Longman, 1998), 92.

3 Marian Sawer, ‘Women’s Work Is Never Done: the Pursuit of Equality and the Commonwealth Sex Discrimination Act’, in *Sex Discrimination in Uncertain Times*, ed. M. Thornton (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2010), 79, doi.org/10.22459/SDUT.09.2010.03.

4 Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing: A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 200.

was part of an attempt to 'shock and challenge authority'.⁵ Through that decade and the 1970s, there was a significant increase in obscenity in films in particular.⁶ This flowed through to other areas of popular culture. Popular culture became increasingly less subject to censorship, particularly in relation to language and depictions of sexuality. Swearing and offensive language became increasingly common in film and literature, and to a lesser extent on radio and television. Some censorship in the media continued: there were (and are still) guidelines in place that attempt to regulate acceptable content and language, especially at times that children might be listening or watching. But the 1970s was nevertheless a watershed decade in terms of changes in popular culture.

Feminists embraced opportunities to use language, including 'bad' language, in ways that matched their agenda of liberation. Feminists critiqued the gendered norms around swearing. Women were traditionally expected to refrain from using obscenity and were shamed for doing so; some feminists called for women to freely use obscenity as a form of power.⁷ Scholar of bad language Geoffrey Hughes has noted that despite this no distinctive vocabulary of abuse was developed by women.⁸ But women undoubtedly came to use bad language more freely in public,⁹ and for some women this could be a valuable form of empowerment.

Germaine Greer was probably the most notable feminist figure of the period to revel in using language as a means to shock and to call attention to women's liberation. Her use of four-letter words was deliberate—not just to shock but, as she said of one of them (unnamed in this *Australian Women's Weekly* interview, but probably 'fuck'), 'I'd like to take all the steam and violence out of that word. It's a factual word and it should be a gentle one'.¹⁰ Greer's notoriety for using 'shocking' language helped to call attention to women's use of language. A month after her interview in the *Weekly*, Greer was arrested in Auckland for using indecent language in a public place after saying the words 'bullshit' and 'fuck' at a public

5 Edwin L. Battistella, *Bad Language: Are Some Words Better than Others?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 82, doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195172485.001.0001.

6 *Ibid.*, 68.

7 Hughes, *Swearing*, 207, 210.

8 *Ibid.*, 211.

9 Ruth Wajnryb, *Language Most Foul* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 124–25.

10 Kay Keavney, 'The Liberating of Germaine Greer', *Australian Women's Weekly*, 2 February 1972, 4.

lecture at Auckland University. When subsequently appearing before the magistrate, the court was protested by young people (including girls) chanting these words.¹¹

While actions such as Greer's encapsulated the efforts of the women's movement to liberate women's use of language, especially in public, feminists also campaigned for what proved to be a much harder and longer fight: changing sexist and discriminatory language.

Gendered language and the call for change

A concern with the gendered nature of language, along with gendered stereotypes in the media and in children's books, was on the agenda of second-wave feminists in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Concerns ranged from debates over titles of address for women, to the negative connotations attached to many terms applied to women, to the sexist nature of language as demonstrated in, for example, job titles. The aim was not only to call attention to sexism in language, but also to agitate for change.

The gendered nature of language began to be actively investigated and debated within academia through the 1970s. Robin Lakoff's 1973 article 'Language and Woman's Place', and subsequent book of the same title, provided one of the first serious academic studies of the ways language was gendered. It had a significant impact in making language and gender an important field of study. In the article, Lakoff noted that 'linguistic discrimination' was part of how women were denied access to power.¹² She went on to describe various examples of women's distinctive linguistic behaviour; for example, how certain words, such as 'adorable', were more likely to be used by women.¹³ However, Lakoff saw attempts to change certain usages—for example, the use of gendered pronouns—as ultimately futile, and she argued that it was better to focus on what could be changed.¹⁴ She concluded that only social change could create language change, 'not the reverse'.¹⁵

11 '\$40 Fine for Obscene Word', *Canberra Times*, 11 March 1972, 33.

12 Robin Lakoff, 'Language and Woman's Place', *Language in Society* 2, no. 1 (April 1973): 48, doi.org/10.1017/S0047404500000051.

13 *Ibid.*, 51.

14 *Ibid.*, 75.

15 *Ibid.*, 76.

Australian feminist and writer Dale Spender also intervened into linguistic scholarship, but took a different view of the potential of feminist linguistic activism. She published the pamphlet *The Language of Sexism* in 1975, noting that there had been no systematic research to date into the language of sexism.¹⁶ Her later book *Man Made Language* (1980) disputed what she regarded as Lakoff's 'acceptance' (that is, descriptive approach) of the gendered nature of language. Spender's book was a fierce attack on the sexist nature of language, arguing that a monopoly over language was one of the means by which men had ensured their own primacy. Her book went on to outline the various ways in which language was sexist and to call for ways in which women could have their voices heard.

Spender's contribution was, like many feminist works on language and sexism in this period, not just a study of the gendered nature of language but also a call to change language. Many feminists, although certainly not all, believed that changing language could help change attitudes and could be a way to empower women. Spender argued that 'changing both society and language were equally important tasks'.¹⁷ Women could not rely on waiting for society to change so that language would change.¹⁸ She argued that men had 'encoded' sexism into the language to maintain their superiority, and it was time for the feminist movement to challenge this by changing the language. Indeed, language was to be liberated. She declared: 'We need a language which constructs the reality of women's autonomy, women's strength, women's power'.

Spender's book was reviewed extensively at the time. Sarah Lawson in *American Speech* called the book 'fascinating and illuminating'; sharing Spender's feminist aims, she too called for the elimination of sexist words, and repeated Spender's call for consciousness-raising.¹⁹ Verna Rieschild, an Australian linguist reviewing the book in the *Canberra Times*, saw the book as the product of both linguistic and feminist research, with 'an eventual feminist victory'. Victoria Green of the Women's Electoral Lobby was less concerned with the linguistic scholarship, seeing Spender's book as 'lucid, powerful and immensely entertaining'.²⁰

16 Dale Spender, *The Language of Sexism* (Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre, 1975).

17 Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 31.

18 *Ibid.*, 30.

19 Sarah Lawson, 'More on Sexism and Language, Review of Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*', *American Speech* 59, no. 4 (Winter 1984): 371–72.

20 'Language, Gender and Power', *Canberra Times*, 3 October 1981, 14.

The view that changing language could change attitudes fitted into an intellectual perspective taking shape in the 1970s and 1980s that argued that knowledge was constructed and situated. Language was not ‘natural’; instead it was possible to query and deconstruct language and construct new knowledge. The feminism of the 1970s was also concerned with the nature of power and how power governed human relationships.²¹ An analysis of, and a call to change, language was part of this dissection and reimagining of power. Not all feminists agreed with this preoccupation and perspective, believing that the focus should be more on changing society—reiterating Lakoff’s view: change society first and language will ultimately change. But as feminist linguist Anne Pauwels writes, looking back at the period from the perspective of the 1990s, many feminists believed that at the very least language needed a push in the right direction.

Campaigning against sexist language

One major way in which feminist linguistic intervention was enacted was through the push for a variety of guidelines and recommendations for usage. Much of this only happened in the 1980s, but were a direct product of the agitation and debates around language usage that began in the 1970s.

Influential early texts in the campaign included Casey Miller and Kate Swift’s *Words and Women* (1976) and their *Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* (1980). Miller and Swift, who were both Americans, had already addressed the question of gender and language when their 1976 text, *Words and Women*, appeared. Both worked as freelance editors, and had come to be increasingly aware of the sexism inherent in the texts they edited, especially the common use of the generic pronoun ‘he’. In 1971, they wrote an article for *Ms* magazine proposing new generic personal pronouns including ‘tey’, ‘ter’ and ‘tem’. This article formed the basis of *Words and Women*, which was a broad study of gender and language. Miller and Swift discussed at length the various ways in which words and language could shape cultural assumptions, and pointed to what they called the ‘double standard of linguistic behaviour’.²²

21 Susan Magarey, *Dangerous Ideas: Women’s Liberation—Women’s Studies—around the World* (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2014), 30.

22 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women* (New York: Anchor Press, 1976), 55, 106.

While they acknowledged that by 1976 '[s]ignificant gains have been made in many areas', 'the transformation of English in response to the movement for human liberation has scarcely begun'.²³

In both the *Ms* article and *Words and Women* Miller and Swift called for change, while also providing some basic guidelines on how writers and publishers could avoid sexism in their writing. These guidelines were expanded in the *Handbook* published three years later. The *Handbook* was published in American and British editions, and would have a significant influence on usage guides, including Australian usage guides. Miller and Swift wrote in their introduction in the British edition:

What standard English usage says about males, for example, is that they are a species. What it says about females is that they are a subspecies. From these two assertions flow a thousand other enhancing and degrading messages, all encoded in the language we in the English-speaking countries begin to learn almost as soon as we are born.²⁴

They went on to outline how users of the *Handbook* could start to change their linguistic and writing practices to address sexism. This included the use of the generic 'he'—again they called for a new gender-neutral pronoun to come into general use, proposing alternatives such as 'co', 'e' or 'tey'. They also noted that writers often made generalisations that excluded or denigrated women and distinguished women in a demeaning way; for example, referring to a female doctor as a 'lady doctor'.

A transnational print culture of language usage guides developed through the 1970s and into the 1980s, and complemented other efforts at transforming language, such as the publication of feminist dictionaries. Australian language usage guidelines were often adapted or drew from guides produced in the United Kingdom or the United States of America, including Miller and Swift's. Australian feminists embraced the campaign to change sexist language, and in particular called for new guidelines to help reshape usage. Numerous guides were subsequently published to help shape and guide language use in the public sphere—including and especially government agencies, publishing houses and editors, and

23 Ibid., 153.

24 Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing for Writers, Editors and Speakers* (London: The Women's Press, 1980), 4.

the media. Guidelines called attention to sexist usage and stereotypes, but could also help guide writers and others through providing viable alternatives.

The activism behind this activity was the product of the belief that language change and reform could have real-life consequences for women in terms of how they were depicted and treated. By implementing institutional change, community perceptions and ultimately behaviours could be changed. It was also driven and informed by, as Russell writes of feminist dictionaries, authority derived from personal experience.²⁵

The first really influential set of guidelines reproduced in Australia was the *Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications* (1974).²⁶ McGraw-Hill was a major publisher of educational texts in the United States and globally, and the guidelines received extensive media coverage in the United States and elsewhere.²⁷ They were often cited in later language usage guides, and informed, for example, academic journal practices.²⁸ They also reflected an increasing willingness on the part of American publishers to address concerns over sexism in publications, and McGraw-Hill explicitly decided, after consultation with feminist groups, to develop guidelines to assist their editors.²⁹

The McGraw-Hill guidelines were subsequently published in Australia in 1978 in a version edited by Edna (Edel) Wignell, an Australian children's author, and given the new title *Counter Sexist Guidelines*.³⁰ The Australian title explicitly suggested the activist function that Wignell saw the guidelines as having. The Australian version, as well as the US original, had an impact on Australian publishing practices, and informed many of the usage guides that followed.³¹

25 Lindsay Rose Russell, 'This Is What a Dictionary Looks Like: The Lexicographical Contributions of Feminist Dictionaries', *International Journal of Lexicography* 25, no. 1 (2011): 22.

26 A copy of the guidelines is available in *Elementary English* 52, no. 5 (May 1975): 725–33.

27 Miller and Swift, *Words and Women*, 144.

28 See, for example, 'Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals: Publication Manual Change Sheet 2', *Educational Researcher* (March 1978): 15–17.

29 'Any Change in Sexist Texts? Feminist Press Staff Survey Education Publishers', *Women's Studies Newsletter* 2, no. 3 (Summer 1974), 10.

30 Edna Wignell, *Counter Sexist Guidelines* (Richmond, Vic.: Primary Education, 1978).

31 The original McGraw-Hill guidelines or Wignell's edition are cited as 'further reading' and in reference lists in many usage guides. Anne Pauwels in her 'Women and Language in Australian Society', in *Women and Language in Australian and New Zealand Society*, ed. Anne Pauwels (Sydney: Australian Professional Publications, 1987), 26n. 23, also attests to the influence of the guidelines in Australia.

The introduction to the guidelines—which stated McGraw-Hill's intentions in producing them—noted:

We are endeavouring through these guidelines to eliminate sexist assumptions from McGraw-Hill Book Company publications and to encourage a greater freedom for all individuals to pursue their interests and realize their potentials. Specifically, these guidelines are designed to make McGraw-Hill staff members and McGraw-Hill authors aware of the ways in which males and females have been stereotypes in publications; to show the role language has played in reinforcing inequality; and to indicate positive approaches towards providing fair, accurate, and balanced treatment of both sexes in our publications.³²

Acknowledging that 'the language of literature cannot be prescribed', the recommendations in the guidelines were intended 'primarily for use in teaching materials, reference works, and nonfiction works in general'.³³

Counter Sexist Guidelines for the most part simply reproduced the American text, but included an annotated list of 'recent counter-sexist materials' that Wignell described as being a 'personal resource for teachers at all levels, parents, librarians, writers, discussion leaders, career advisers, [and] people concerned with breaking sexist language barriers'.³⁴ The American text contained a variety of instructions on usage, as well as content. For example, it suggested that feminine and masculine stereotypes should be avoided at all times. Women should never be 'typecast'; men should not be shown as 'constantly subject to the "masculine mystique" in their interests, attitudes, or careers'.³⁵ Beyond gender stereotypes, it was also recommended that all people should be depicted in ways that represented them as 'whole human beings'.³⁶ A 'patronizing or girl-watching tone' was to be avoided. They listed a number of examples of stereotypes to eschew: 'scatterbrained female', 'henpecking shrew', 'frustrated spinster', 'fragile flower'.³⁷

32 Wignell, *Counter Sexist Guidelines*, 1.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., ii.

35 Ibid., 2.

36 Ibid., 4.

37 Ibid., 5.

The McGraw-Hill text also took up the issue of generic ‘mankind’, something that often featured in discussions of sexist language. It suggested a number of more inclusive, gender-neutral usages: ‘mankind’ should be replaced by ‘humanity’ or ‘human race’; ‘manmade’ should be replaced by ‘artificial’, ‘constructed’, or other alternatives; ‘manpower’ should be replaced by ‘human power’ or ‘human energy’.³⁸ While not advocating the use of a brand-new gender-neutral pronoun as Miller and Swift did, the guidelines did suggest either rewording prose so that gendered pronouns could be avoided, or alternating the use of ‘he’ and ‘she’ where possible. They conceded it may be difficult to avoid the use of ‘he’, but if it proved to be unavoidable, they called for ‘emphatic statements’ in the preface and wherever possible in the text ‘to the effect that the masculine pronouns are being used for succinctness and are intended to refer to both males and females’.³⁹ Occupational terms ending in ‘man’, such as ‘salesman’ and ‘chairman’ were also to be replaced by gender-neutral alternatives.⁴⁰ Most later usage guides would include this as a standard suggestion; however, it would be one change that would continue to be criticised, as would the replacement of terms such as ‘mankind’.

In addition, the guidelines devoted space to discussing what they called ‘non-sexist and equal use of language’. This included making sure that men and women were referred to in parallel ways, and that women were referred to as individuals and not in terms of their marital status—an example used was to say ‘Indira Gandhi’ or ‘Prime Minister Gandhi’, rather than ‘Mrs Gandhi’.⁴¹ Job titles were to be non-sexist, and men should not always be first in order of mention.⁴²

The impact of the McGraw-Hill guidelines on Australia pre-dated the publication of the Australian edition. Indeed, a notable moment in the campaign against gendered language in public and institutional discourse came as early as 1974. In November of that year, Australian United Nations delegate John McCarthy (who would go on to be an Australian ambassador) argued on the floor of the UN that the issue of

38 Ibid., 8.

39 Ibid., 9. It should be noted that while the changing of pronouns was largely dropped as an issue until very recently, when it has come back into debate due to the issue of how to include people of non-binary gender, a recent study concludes that the use of generic masculine pronouns continues to reinforce sexist assumptions and attitudes. See Megan M. Miller and Lori E. James, ‘Is the Generic Pronoun He Still Comprehended as Excluding Women’, *American Journal of Psychology* 122, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 483–96.

40 Ibid., 10.

41 Ibid., 11.

42 Ibid., 12.

sexist language should be addressed by the organisation. He was quoted as saying: 'My delegation would strongly suggest that such terminology be eliminated from all intra-secretariat communications'.⁴³ McCarthy also asked delegates to study the McGraw-Hill guidelines, copies of which he offered to them.⁴⁴

Calls for changes to Australian workplace practice appeared in the middle of the 1970s, although they were generally dismissed. The ACT branch of the Administrative and Clerical Officers' Association, for example, called in 1975 for a motion to be passed on prohibiting the 'use of sexist words in all its correspondence, minutes, and other documents, wherever practicable'. This motion was at least in part inspired by the impact of the McGraw-Hill guidelines.⁴⁵ However, the branch council refused to even debate the motion, citing freedom of speech.⁴⁶ Language activism was also embraced by universities through the 1970s. For example, UNSW magazine *Tharunka* provided 'a guide to non-sexist writing' in 1978 (acknowledging the McGraw-Hill guidelines), and ANU student paper *Woroni* included a lengthy article on sexist language in 1979, which acknowledged Miller and Swift's *Words and Women*.⁴⁷

Alongside usage guides, sexism in media and educational content was also debated through the 1970s. Feminists campaigned not just to change language but to change the substantive content of things such as school curricula and television programming. From the middle of the 1970s, a number of booklets were put out by the Curriculum Development Centre to address sexism in the public sphere.⁴⁸ Dale Spender's booklet on the language of sexism (mentioned above) was first published in this series in 1975; in the same year, a pamphlet on 'non-sexist curriculum' was also published. The latter was a background paper from a conference on International Women's Year where there was some discussion about how to avoid 'sex bias' in educational materials and media. The pamphlet noted that stereotypes were 'prevalent in the media' and such stereotypes 'may restrict the life options of students'.⁴⁹ It outlined how school

43 'Sexist Language at UN', *Canberra Times*, 21 November 1974, 5.

44 *Ibid.*, 5.

45 'Publisher Tries to Equalise Sexes', *Canberra Times*, 4 March 1975, 7.

46 *Ibid.*; "'Bias" from ACOA', *Canberra Times*, 22 February 1975, 2.

47 'A Guide to Non-Sexist Writing', *Tharunka*, 25 September 1978, 10; 'The Hard Word', *Woroni*, 11 June 1979, 12. A further article on sexist language appeared in *Woroni* on 8 September 1980, 25.

48 The Curriculum Development Centre (CDC) was a government-backed statutory body established in 1974 and absorbed into the Department of Education in 1981.

49 *Non-Sexist Curriculum* (Canberra: Curriculum Development Centre, 1975), 3.

curricula should not present ‘male’ and ‘female’ courses; should provide sex education and the study of sexism; should include women’s studies courses; and should address bias in educational materials.⁵⁰

Another element of language that feminists took up in the 1970s was the use of the title ‘Ms’. Pauwels suggests that feminists saw the use of the titles ‘Miss’ and ‘Mrs’—the designation of women by their marital status—as a ‘flagrant example of sexism in language’. Spender in *Man Made Language* observed that to insist on the title Ms was to ‘undermine some of the patriarchal practices’.⁵¹ Although usage guides only sometimes discussed titles as part of general language use, the issue is worth exploring here because of its importance within the feminist movement. As Pauwels argues, the quest for the adoption of ‘Ms’ as an alternative title for women was an integral part of women’s rights and was the ‘linguistic expression of women’s concern to be recognized in roles other than that of “wife of”’.⁵²

Pauwels’s study of the adoption of the title in Australia suggests that the title only came to be adopted at a more widespread level in the early to mid-1980s. However, as she also points out, Ms became an *alternative* rather than a *replacement* (as had first been intended) for Miss and Mrs.⁵³ In a survey Pauwels conducted in the mid-1980s, only 20 per cent of her respondents used the title.⁵⁴ The survey revealed that most women at that point in time saw the title as being applicable largely to divorced or de facto women—that is, women whose marital status was not, by the standards of the day, conventional.⁵⁵ Some women also regarded the use of the title as ‘an ideological expression’.⁵⁶ Those who did choose to use the title explained that they did so in order to obtain equal treatment with men. Reasons for not using it included those who thought it only applied if one was divorced or in a de facto relationship, but some simply thought it ‘unaesthetic’.⁵⁷ Pauwels saw the title as being adopted slowly; to hasten its adoption, it was important that the title not be exclusively associated with marital status.⁵⁸

50 Ibid., 4–5.

51 Spender, *Man Made Language*, 28.

52 Anne Pauwels, ‘Language in Transition: A Study of the Title “Ms” in Contemporary Australian Society’, in Pauwels, *Women and Language*, 132–33.

53 Ibid., 137.

54 Ibid., 143.

55 Ibid., 140.

56 Ibid., 142.

57 Ibid., 144, 146.

58 Ibid., 147, 152.

Changing official language: Usage guides in the 1980s

The 1980s saw the official adoption of non-sexist guidelines at an institutional level in Australia and this had an influence on public discourse, especially at the government level. This was reinforced by legislative changes such as the passing of state anti-discrimination laws and the Sex Discrimination Act under the Hawke Labor Government in 1984 that made gender-discriminatory job advertisements unlawful. In addition, Australia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1983.⁵⁹ Despite opposition to these efforts, women finally were able to claim equal rights to employment opportunities.⁶⁰ Women would continue to battle for full equality in the workplace, but the passing of the Act was a significant milestone.

It is unsurprising then that the Hawke Government also saw a return to a focus on sexist language. The Office of the Status of Women (OSW), within the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, took up the issue. One of the first products of this renewed focus on discriminatory language was *Fair Exposure*. This was a pamphlet published by the OSW in 1983 that provided general guidelines for the non-sexist portrayal of women in the media. The foreword, written by the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister on the Status of Women, Susan Ryan, and the Shadow Minister responsible for Women's Affairs, Ian McPhee, argued that the media was 'a powerful determinant of attitudes' and that there was a need 'to reform media portrayal of women'. The guidelines in the booklet were an important first step, it was argued, in this reform process.⁶¹ *Fair Exposure* included several pages of guidelines on language, as well as a detailed discussion of representation of women in advertising. It acknowledged both the McGraw-Hill and Miller and Swift texts in its compilation, and took up many of the same issues around language. For example, the section on language began with a discussion of male generics, suggesting

59 Pauwels, 'Women and Language in Australian Society', 22.

60 Sawyer, 'Women's Work Is Never Done', 81.

61 Office of the Status of Women, *Fair Exposure: Guidelines for the Constructive and Positive Portrayal and Presentation of Women in the Media* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1983), ii.

that 'man' and 'men' could be avoided by the use of 'person', 'people' or 'human beings'.⁶² After the publication of *Fair Exposure*, numerous official language usage guidelines were drawn up.

In 1984 the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) adopted their own non-sexist language guidelines, drawn up by the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English. These guidelines suggested that broadcasters avoid the generic use of 'he', avoid 'irrelevant gender description' and 'unequal gender description', and avoid 'sexist stereotypes and demeaning language'. Arthur Delbridge, editor of the *Macquarie Dictionary*, who headed up the Standing Committee on Spoken English, noted that the guidelines were to 'remind broadcasters of the need ... for communication to be achieved in words that are appropriate in meaning and style yet not needlessly or inaccurately discriminatory'. He pointed out, however, that the lists of examples provided in the guidelines were 'open-ended, and much is left to the judgement and good taste of the individual broadcaster'.⁶³

Guidelines published by the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) were adopted in 1986, drawing on a number of publications including Spender's *Man Made Language* and the ABC's 1984 guidelines. The ACTU had launched its 'Action Program for Women Workers' in 1984, which had included prescribing the elimination of discriminatory clauses and sexist language in awards. The ACTU guidelines argued that trade unions had long fought for equality for women workers, but discriminatory day-to-day language was a more recent concern to be addressed. While acknowledging that some people saw language as a trivial matter, the ACTU argued that 'language is not a trivial matter, but a symbol of underlying attitudes, and it acts as a barrier to equality'. The guidelines were not just aimed at changing the language of awards, but also at systematically revising the 'terminology used in unions in many other ways, such as union titles, letter writing, rules, journals and day-to-day spoken language'.⁶⁴

62 Ibid., 5.

63 'SCOSE Guidelines on Non-Sexist Language', *SCAN* (28 May – 10 June 1984): 8–9. Thanks to Tiger Webb of the ABC for providing me with a copy of this.

64 Australian Council of Trade Union, *Non-Sexist Language: Guidelines for Unions* (Melbourne: ACTU, February 1985), 2.

Like other guidelines, the ACTU text addressed issues such as masculine pronouns, and it recommended avoiding words that contained the word 'man', avoiding terms that relate to only one sex and avoiding patronising terms. It recommended that union publications be checked for language and for the content they contained (for example, making sure there were no sexist jokes or cartoons).⁶⁵ It also addressed some issues distinctive of the language of the union movement. For example, a section was devoted to letter writing. Letters to union membership were traditionally addressed 'Dear Brother' and signed off as 'yours fraternally'; the guidelines suggested addressing members 'dear comrade (or colleague, or member)' and signing off 'yours sincerely (or faithfully)'.⁶⁶

The ACTU guidelines concluded with a general statement on the 'importance of the educative role that the provision of non-sexist worded awards can have on men and women workers and employers'. Undertaking such change would bring equal pay and equal opportunity and treatment for women closer; '[w]e thus consider that this exercise has far greater value than a mere token gesture and as such demands widespread support'.⁶⁷ 'It is not sufficient to dismiss as irrelevant changes to the award because women are not currently employed. The award in its language should accommodate and facilitate what is hoped to be changed occupational structures in the future.'⁶⁸

Anne Summers, feminist, writer and public servant, was one of the key figures helping not just to develop usage guidelines, but also campaigning for a general acceptance of the need for such guidelines. This battle was never entirely won, but activists such as Summers helped to articulate (and continued to assert) why it was important that public language change. Summers was just one of a number of so-called 'femocrats'—feminists who entered the bureaucracy through the 1970s and especially in the 1980s, and who helped to guide and inform public policy, especially in relation to women's issues.⁶⁹ Their influence on shaping official language and usage was significant.

65 Ibid., 15.

66 Ibid., 14.

67 Ibid., 19.

68 Ibid., 20.

69 See Marian Sawer, *Sisters in Suits: Women and Public Policy in Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990), 21–25. The term 'femocrat' was first used in 1983 and is an Australianism; see *Australian National Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2016), vol. 1, 600.

In 1986, Summers, then First Assistant Secretary with the Office of the Status of Women, addressed the Style Council on the new inclusive language chapter that was to be included in the *Commonwealth Style Guide*. The Style Council in the 1980s was a powerful body that helped to ‘judge’ appropriate language usage in the public sphere. Most notably, it helped in the production of the *Commonwealth Style Guide* that determined government usage and informed much public writing. Summers argued in her address that the chapter aimed ‘to encourage the use of language which explicitly includes women and thereby acknowledges their existence and their contribution to our society’.⁷⁰ She also commented that ‘[w]e believe encouraging people to use different language will encourage them to think differently about women—including the way women think of themselves’.⁷¹ Language as it existed at that point in time did not, she concluded, ‘provide well enough for women to be described with dignity’.⁷² Examples of language guidelines in the chapter echo those we have already seen. For government use, recommendations such as the use of ‘chair’ over ‘chairman’ and ‘Ombud’ rather than ‘Ombudsman’ had direct consequences for official government style and usage.⁷³

Criticism and resistance

None of this linguistic activism and the attempts to reform usage occurred without significant resistance. Through the 1970s and 1980s (and beyond), plenty of arguments were raised, largely from conservative quarters, as to why all of this was unacceptable.

The conservative argument against language change was often couched in terms of arguing against the notion that language could be ‘engineered’. This argument was often based on the idea that language was ‘natural’, and could not be artificially changed (and even if it could, this would be impractical and difficult). Much of this tied into a view that focused on using linguistic evidence to argue that language was inherently neutral. The most common example cited here was ‘mankind’, which many

70 Anne Summers, ‘Inclusive Language: Address to Style Council ’86, Macquarie University, Sydney’, 1–2, Papers of Style Council 1986, Australian National Dictionary Centre Archives. Emphasis in original.

71 Ibid., 8–9.

72 Ibid., 10.

73 ‘Draft of Inclusive Language Chapter for Commonwealth Style Manual’, included with Papers of Style Council 1986, 3, 5.

argued was not gendered because of its long history of usage to refer to all of humanity. This overlapped with those who feared the dangers of change and who argued that non-sexist language often resorted to euphemisms and 'double-speak'. Language changed in the ways proposed would lack clarity. Some also argued that such change was meaningless: it could not actually change attitudes.

The 1984 ABC guidelines drew a variety of comments in the press that reveal some of the lines of argument. One editorial reported that one of the members of the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English had found most members of the public were opposed to the guidelines. The editorial criticised the guidelines as 'a mixture of common sense and almost paranoid avoidance of "sexist" terms'. The usual objections were raised, such as the etymology and history of 'man' and 'mankind', and the fact that alternatives to sexist language were generally 'clumsy'.⁷⁴ Professor Ralph Elliott, an ANU English professor and regular reviewer for the *Canberra Times*, commenting on the ABC guidelines suggested:

The cause of women is better served by a positive use of words which, wherever applicable, acknowledge their sex than by banning a large treasury of English words from the common vocabulary and prescribing colourless words of neutral, or neuter, connotation in their place.⁷⁵

Both the editorial and Elliott's comments were challenged. Marian Sawer (then of the Women's Electoral Lobby) responded that the dropping of the generic use of 'man' was 'not engaging in the political manipulation of language—rather we are exposing it'.⁷⁶ Responding to Elliott's comments, two members of the ANU Women's Studies department, Dorothy Broom and B. Refshauge, argued for the value of guidelines such as the ABC's. They argued that both Elliott and the newspaper editorialist, in calling for more 'positive use of words', failed to specify what this language could actually be. They concluded that 'in the interest of accuracy as well as equity we should strive to avoid constructions implying that the male is the human norm from which the female is a diverting exception'.⁷⁷

74 'The Neuter ABC', *Canberra Times*, 20 May 1984, 2.

75 Ibid.

76 Letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 4 June 1984, 2.

77 Letter to the editor, *Canberra Times*, 6 June 1984, 21.

Anne Pauwels was responsible for writing the chapter on inclusive language for the 1988 edition of the Australian *Style Manual* and recounts in her book *Women Changing Language* the backlash the chapter received. She summarises the range of criticisms thus: ‘The guidelines were described as an attempt to de-sex language, to take sex out of language, to castrate language, to manipulate language, to can the man, to ban words, to outlaw words, to force manufactured words into usage’.⁷⁸ Some of the responses attest to the strong emotions that came into play, such as this letter to the editor in the *Australian*: ‘This campaign is not only destroying our fine language ... but is designed to emasculate the virility characteristic of a young and enterprising country’.⁷⁹ The vitriol towards feminists was demonstrated by others, and the irrationality of the position is encapsulated in this letter: ‘No wonder the Australian female cannot be taken seriously by males in their quest for equal opportunities when we are represented by dehydrated Mses with their psychotic dribbling of human eating sharks’.⁸⁰ Mainstream media also subjected the guidelines to ridicule. An opinion piece in the *Australian Financial Review* made fun of the change of job titles with ‘man’ in them and joked that his own name (‘Waterman’) would now have to change; indeed, ‘person’ was an inadequate substitute, he argued, all ‘persons’ should be ‘perthings’.⁸¹

The move to condemn so-called ‘political correctness’ ignited from the late 1980s, and language guidelines have been favourite targets of conservative critics. John Howard’s government in the 1990s, for example, attempted to bring back the use of ‘chairman’ in government publications and usage. A debate in federal parliament in 1997 over the use of ‘chair’ vs ‘chairman’ in the Productivity Commission Bill is indicative of the kinds of arguments posed by both sides. Senator Andrew Murray, an Australian Democrat, called for amendments to the Bill to change ‘chairman’ to ‘chair’. He acknowledged that the Liberal Coalition was unlikely to support the amendments, but nevertheless stated that the use of chairman was ‘demeaning, belittling and marginalising ... to many Australian women’.⁸² Language was, Murray argued, ‘a very potent force of both oppression and change. How we use language sends messages

78 Pauwels, *Women Changing Language*, 186.

79 Letter, October 13, 1988, quoted in *ibid.*, 187.

80 Letter to the editor, *West Australian*, 11 October 1988, quoted in *ibid.*, 188.

81 Peter Waterman, ‘Newsperting Bites Canberra-Speak’, *Australian Financial Review*, 12 October 1988, 12.

82 Commonwealth, Parliamentary Debates, Senate, 1 September 1997, 6105, www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/.

about what sort of society we are'.⁸³ Murray expressed his disappointment that more women in the Coalition had not fought against the reversion to chairman. Michèle Asprey, a lawyer and plain language consultant, wrote in *Australian Style* (the newsletter of the Australian Style Council) later that year that Howard's push was, she believed, 'a disturbing symptom of the way the government is thinking about women more generally'.⁸⁴ Yet this commentary was met with a typical response from conservative quarters, with one man, Colin Taylor, writing to *Australian Style* to say that he was surprised to find the newsletter advocating non-sexist language, that made-up constructions such as 'chairperson' were unacceptable and that the 'pressure to disfigure the language to suit a vociferous minority' should be resisted.⁸⁵

'Political correctness' became a common term of abuse used by the conservative wing of Australian politics (as it also became in the United States and the United Kingdom). As linguists Keith Allan and Kate Burridge argue, politically correct language is accused of being a form of euphemism, but in fact this is not always or commonly the case.⁸⁶ The debates over political correctness are too extensive to discuss here, but undoubtedly language and language change has been a major focus of criticism of so-called 'political correctness'.⁸⁷ This continues to be the case.

Two recent examples will suffice. The use of the term 'chairperson' continues to be contentious. In 2012, it was reported that Tony Abbott (then leader of the Opposition and a conservative) called the head of the Sydney University Student Representative Council a 'chair-thing' when she objected to being called a 'chairman'.⁸⁸ This reflects just one recent conservative complaint about the use of a gender-neutral alternative to 'chairman'. In 2016, the release of the Victorian Government's public service guidelines on inclusive language caused a furore in the press. In particular, the guidelines addressed the issue of language that could be properly inclusive of transgender and LGBTIQ people. The guidelines

83 Ibid., 6106.

84 Michèle Asprey, 'A Chair with No Leg to Stand On', *Australian Style* 6, no. 1 (December 1997), 2.

85 Colin Taylor, letter to the editor, *Australian Style* 6, no. 2 (June 1998): 5.

86 Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 96.

87 For further discussion of language and political correctness, see Sarah Dunant, ed., *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (London: Virago Press, 1994).

88 Myriam Robin, 'Origin of the Species: Is "Chairman" a Gender-Neutral Term?' *Smart Company*, 19 October 2012; Howard Mann, 'Mansplaining the Word of the Year—and Why It Matters', 9 February 2015.

therefore revisited the use of gender-neutral pronouns, such as 'zie'. Critics rejected the guidelines, with one conservative academic, Jeremy Sammut from the Centre for Independent Studies, arguing that the guide was dictated by 'academics wielding their critical postmodernist theory of the world' who were 'determined to force [it] on the rest of us'. 'It's a totalitarian project dressed up as liberation theory', he concluded.⁸⁹

Despite the ongoing debates over alleged 'politically correct' language change, is it possible to trace real change in sexist language, if not in attitudes? Pam Peters in her study of the power of usage guides to shape grammar and language has concluded that style manuals and usage guides have 'limited power ... to dictate the paths of change against the tide of common usage'.⁹⁰ However, debates over sexist language have, arguably, helped to shift 'common usage'. Anne Pauwels writing in the 1990s concluded that real change had occurred. While it was difficult to assess an impact on spoken language, she argued that it was possible to trace an impact in written language. This was especially the case in institutional language, in education and in publishing.⁹¹ Furthermore, ongoing debates around usage can, I would suggest, still raise awareness and influence our perceptions and practice around usage.

Language activism prompts much debate over whether it is proper to try and engineer language change. The feminist movement demonstrated that it was possible to go some way to changing attitudes by changing language, I would argue, but this was not done (and still is not done) without considerable resistance. In the current political climate where women's rights are under threat, and where we are seeing a populist surge that rejects so-called political correctness (and hence legitimises sexist and racist language), this may be an opportune time to learn from the story of feminist linguistic activism of the 1970s and 1980s.

89 'LGBTI's Guide to Safespeak', *Geelong Advertiser*, 17 December 2016, 21.

90 Pam Peters, 'Usage Guides and Usage Trends in Australian and British English', *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 34, no. 4 (2014): 597, doi.org/10.1080/07268602.2014.929082.

91 Pauwels, *Women Changing Language*, 204–13.

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