

Why we should say "women and men" until it doesn't matter any more

Guest Editorial: M.J. Hardman

They say that "and" is a conjunction where both sides are equal. They say that "men and women" sound better. When we say that maybe we could say "women and men," they say that we are indulging in "reverse discrimination." They also used to say that generic "he" really included us all. I want to suggest that we should say "women and men" until the whole social/cultural world changes such that it doesn't matter anymore. I say that *only* by saying "women and men" do we today have any chance of equality on both sides of that little conjunction "and." Let me tell you why.

In English, three grammatical patterns interact (see Hardman 1978, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996) to reinforce each other:

- 1) number—singular and plural so that singular is the base form and plural is derived from singular.
- 2) ranking comparative—virtually all we say or do is ranked (e.g., the questions we mostly ask have to do with ranking: What did you like most at? What did you like best out of?)
- 3) sex-based gender—the masculine is the base and the feminine is derived therefrom.

This means that:

- 1) In English order matters. Therefore, what comes first is seen as first in the metaphorical sense — better, higher ranked. So in the phrase "men and women" women do indeed come second.
- 2) Women are perceived as being derived from men, feminine words are perceived as being derived from masculine, even when not true etymologically (e.g., "woman" from "man" and "female" from "male" — both false derivations etymologically).

Therefore, in the usual order, "men and women," women not only come second but are perceived as the additional appendage of the first item, as part of the derivation that the root carries with it.

In the phrase "women and men," on the other hand, because "women" comes first, women are *perceived*. Since within the structure of English "men" are not perceived as ever being derived from men¹, but as always being the root, men are also perceived. Therefore, the phrase "women and men" comes as close as is possible in English to an equal listing of two items.

Because of derivational thinking, the phrase "women and men" does not put women in the spot previously occupied by men; we are not perceived as the root even if named first. Rather, the ordering of feminine first balances two perceptions, "first" and "derived." It permits women to occupy a spot where we are *not* perceived as the derivation of men, while men are perceived as being there fully nevertheless, because they are the root. Therefore, *both* women and men are perceived as present in a syntactic

structure that comes as close to equality as is possible in English.

The ordering consequences apply not only to all other phrases as well as the one illustrated here, but to sentences, paragraphs, and discourse structures. Thus, for genuinely inclusive language, it must be "she or he." The other way around only allows us to be tacked on, as we always have been.² In sentences, if we discuss first what Mary did, and then what John did, Mary's activities won't sound like an addendum to John's, but rather both people will be perceived as having done something. In presenting, for example, research results, if we present women-related results first, then both sets of data will be heard.³

Derivational thinking pervades our perception and our thinking within English; constant energy is required if we wish to think otherwise.

Notes

- 1 The regular failures of fictional attempts to switch sex roles is an example of the difficulty of altering this pattern. I know of only two successful efforts in this direction:
Elizabeth Vonarburg's *In the Motherland / Maerlande Chronicles*, Bantam, 1992; translated from French by Jane Brierly.; successfully makes feminine linguistically the root, with masculine derived therefrom in a gripping epic-type novel.
Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters*. The Seal Press, 1977, 1985, translated from Norwegian by Louis Mackey, is the only successful sex reversal I know of, a funny satire with women in control, men with restrictive clothing, etc.
That both these books are translations from other languages into English says something about English. In the case of French, in terms of straight linguistic analysis, the masculine *is* derived from the feminine, by a subtractive morpheme—drop the final consonant; if nasal then nasalize the vowel, the feminine form is not predictable from the masculine. Because this is too radical, students, even today, still learn two lists for all adjectives — the masculine first and then the feminine! Forty years ago, I was involved in a project aimed at improving the teaching of foreign languages. We tried to introduce the feature of masculine derived from feminine to the teaching of French, to simplify learning. We failed. Derivational thinking was more powerful.
- 2 At a recent conference of an organization comprised almost entirely of women, the three male members asked that the language of the bylaws be changed from "she" to "he or she" to include them. After I explained what I have stated here, the group accomplished with unanimous vote the use of "she or he." Lately, a surprising number of women came to thank me and to say that they felt that the proposed change to "he or she" was in fact changing their organization from one of women to one dominated by men (all three of them!), but they hadn't known how to voice their concerns.
- 3 This has been a big problem in medical research, e.g., heart research. One example is that the artificial hearts were so constructed that they would not fit in a woman's body so that only men were candidates. When they finally did use one for a woman, it had to be "modified" (=derived) from the ones built for men.

References

- Hardman, M. J. (1978). Andean ethnography: The role of language structure in observer bias." *Semiotica*, 71 (3/4) 339-372.
Hardman, M. J. (1993a). Gender through the levels." *Women and Language*, Vol XVI, no. 2, pp. 42-49.
Hardman, M. J. (1993b). Derivational thinking, or, Why is equality so difficult? In Carol Ann Valentine (ed.), *Seeking Understanding of*

Communication, Language and Gender (pp. 250-263). Cyberspace Publishing Corporation,

Hardman, M. J. (1994), 'And if we lose our name, then what about our land?' or, What price development? In L. H. Turner & H. M. Sterk (eds.) *Differences That Make a Difference: Examining the Assumptions in Gender Research* (pp. 151-162). Westport & London: Bergin & Garvey.

Hardman, M. J. (1996, March/April). The sexist circuits of English. *The Humanist*, pp 25-32

MJ Hardman is a professor of linguistic anthropology and a member of the women's studies faculty at the University of Florida.

Who The Hell Am I?

Mary Herbert

Contemporary ladies (er, women) now can use whatever name they want, pre- and post-marriage/coitus, the name on the door is the name of choice, and not inheritance, dammit.

Holy Matrimony

is not going to dictate who we are.

A person of the feminine gender/sex/designation/choice can decide on her own whether to keep Daddy's name or use Mom's or select one of her own,

or even use her husband's/spouse's hegemony,

her lover's moniker, her superstar.

Jane Smith-Jones is the hyphenated choice of many a B.A., M.A.; bah, Ma, it's my decision. M.A. means equal access to names, language, semen, n'est-ce pas, Pa?

Holy cow!

I baptize thee in the name of... it is really weird, no?

I have alternatively gamboled and trudged through life (lotsa decades, pal, under a variety of labels) learning at age four to print with pride: C-A-R-L-I-S-L-E. Later learned to write it

with a graceful, authoritative swoop and

relished the pleasure of being near the top of the teacher's alphabetical listing.

Whatever happened to Mary Emelie Carlisle?

Look, see it inscribed in the front of her old books. Now Carlisle is gone, and so is Emelie.

Emelie was dumped overboard

when marriage made her become Mary Carlisle Kennan. A practical decision.

What is one to do? Acquire two selves. It is necessary to engineer a bridge to link the past self and the present self to join together as a rock-solid sign of identity.

And one needs to continue to receive mail.

Suppose A doesn't know B? So, use both names. What's the big deal, McNeil?

Ahem, Carlisle then becomes a seldom used middle name. But the poet could still use Emelie on occasion. Aren't those initials pretty? MEK. Notepaper. Notes. Embroidery.

Nota bene, you know, the stuff girls groove on.

Signs. Signifiers. Samplers.

Rock-solid name tags can weigh one down, and if that marriage bites the dust, trust me, the next one will pose the dilemma all over again. Deja-vu, would you marry me?

Throw out that lovely stationery engraved with MEK or MCK and tell the world I am

Mary Kennan Herbert

because some people know me by one name and others know me by another, and I am getting a headache. Feeling a bit lonely too, for "Emelie" and "Carlisle." After all, in 1938

two young, eager, expectant parents spent

lots of time mulling over the virtues of names

and decided it would be "Emelie," and not "Emily," nor "Emilie," nor "Emma,"

even though Emma was the name of a grandmother who everybody liked.

Get this: Carlisle was the chosen name of the paterfamilias.

The original label was Polish,

impossible for Americans to hear, say, or spell. What the hell. Carlisle, he decided. Not Carlyle (making no history) but, English, distinguished, brimming

with possibilities, promises, prose and poetry. Style.

A name, a lifestyle jettisoned into kitchen middens, onto the junk pile.

Herbert has a nice sound. Think of the giant: George Herbert. Heaven itself would welcome a poet named Herbert. What about Mary Herbert? Hmmm. Mary be good.

Mary, Mary, Mary.

At least I have kept that first name.

Lamb of God. Mary had a little lamb. Can't go wrong. Let's name her Mary after her mom.

Mother of God, why do we play in a lose-lose game? Why not a
nom de plume?

Merrily, merrily, merrily. She's losing it, hum the bees.

What's your name of the week, please.

A little girl runs through the meadow of foregrounded
marginalized dreams.
She comes to a stream, shaded by ancient unnamed trees. Yes, it
seems

these trees resemble Freud, Lacan, and Winnicott listening
intently,

leaning forward, well-clad elbows on their knees.

On the trunk of one weeping willow she sees initials carved for
all to see: MEC, MCK, MEK, MKH, MEC, MCK, MEK, MKH,
in a pattern unto infinity.

She is just a little girl learning to write, and now she has an
opportunity,

but-- alas!-- she lacks an awl/knife/pencil/penis,

nothing at all to create or carve yet another version of her
emblem. She cannot erase, nor modify nor change any of it.
Tree with names: 33, Mary: 0.

So why bother, "Why bother?" call the jays overhead.

Listen to the birds twittering in the gossiping leaves.

Beyond the trees, look up at the clearly labeled sky. What should
one know or remember?
Do you know who you are? Are you a girl or a bluejay? Are, are,
are?

Wholly arbitrary,

it's a roll of the dice as to whether a girl will be naughty or nice,
and whether or not
she is willing to be Jones or Smith, as the groom's new tags are
affixed

around the maiden's moonlit throat, encircled with a delicate
chain dangling like a crucifix

or a scrotum well hung like an oriole's nest

swinging from legendary elms that once upon a time lined the
streets of old villages in Massachusetts. Sepia-toned photos of
villages now denuded of elms. No birds. Silence.

Old pictures as silent as Atget's streets in Paris.

Ah, Paris! City of light. City of star-crossed lovers, cross my
heart.

Valentines, unsigned. Postcards of places. Silent harbors. Cities
where no one speaks.

My name. No sounds but the rattle of keys and dog tags.
Wedding guests gasp.

The bride nervously coughs. She fingers her ring. ID, please.
Business or vacation?

Bitch in training. Fetch, heel, stay. Beg.

ID, please. Name, rank, and serial number.

Occupation? Wife, mom, poet? State your name, please. Stay
awhile, Ms. Whatever. Please sign your John Hancock here.
You published a book? Could I have your autograph?

Any relation to George Herbert? You know, the famous poet. No.

Any relation to George F. Kennan? You know, the famous
diplomat. No.

Any relation to Thomas Carlyle? You know, the famous
historian. No. Any relation to
Kitty Carlisle? A visiting school dentist asked me that, long ago,
as he peered down into the

open maw of a fourth grader, to admire my molars.

"Got to take good care of those teeth," he counseled. "You might
grow up

to be a famous opera singer like Miss Carlisle and you will need
a beautiful smile.
Have you ever heard Kitty Carlisle sing? She has a beautiful
smile and a beautiful voice.

Have you seen her in the movies?"

Holy Moliere! I told the dentist I could not sing very well, but

I had indeed seen Kitty Carlisle in a Marx Brothers movie. I
toyed with the idea:
another beautiful Carlisle on the silver screen. That might be
more fun than being a grouchy

housewife in the kitchen. On the other hand,

there's nothing wrong with being a cute little number singing in
the kitchen. Whip up

a little souffle, make a salad of spring greens, a homemade
dressing with honey, hmmm?
If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

Honey, a blessing is in order. Sing for your supper. Ardor.

Marry: an archaic exclamation of surprise. Plight my troth. Fight
or flight.

Zealous identity crisis. Or maybe sloth. Chirp or caw. Twitter,
twitter. Marry me, Mary.
Order in the Court. Last name, Herbert.

-- Mary Herbert won first prize in the 1999 poetry competition
sponsored by the Midwest Conference on Christianity and
Literature. *A Path Clearly Marked*, Herbert's second book
of poetry, has just been published by Ginninderra Press in
Australia.