

ADOPTING GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE REFORMS

Diachronic and Synchronic Variation

DONALD L. RUBIN

University of Georgia

KATHRYN GREENE

East Carolina University

DEIDRA SCHNEIDER

University of Georgia

Previous research demonstrates a decline across time in gender-exclusive language among language users who are occupationally mandated to conform to nonsexist language guidelines (e.g., journalists). Little prior research, however, bears on changes across time among language users who are not thus constrained. Some prior studies do suggest that individual difference variables such as psychological gender-role schema and attitudes toward sexist language predict the degree to which individuals will adopt these language reforms. Study 1 addresses the diachronic issue by examining gender-exclusive language in public speeches delivered by male business leaders across three decades. Gender-exclusive language did decline from the 1960s to the 1970s. Study 2 examines both gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive language in the writing of male and female college students in two writing tasks. Study 2 also considers language users' gender-role schema and their attitudes toward sexist language. For production of gender-exclusive language, males greatly exceeded females. For production of gender-inclusive language, an inverse relation with instrumental (traditionally male) gender-role orientation was found. Moreover, biological males and females each controlled distinct repertoires of linguistic strategies. Situational differences (an expressive vs. an instrumental writing task) exerted more powerful effects on gender-inclusive language than did gender. These findings dictate that simplistic formulations about relations between gender-related attitudes and language usage should be recast.

The trajectory of language reform in a society proceeds along two arcs. First, language reform—or its opposite, language maintenance—is invested in institutional policies and practices. These are chronicled in government edicts, ecclesiastical pronouncements, publishers' guidelines, and in school curricula (Cooper, 1990). Second, individual language users adopt—or resist adopting—language shifts. Processes of individual adoption are discernible by examining language features in

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typical discourse, and also by directly surveying speakers' language attitudes.

One significant campaign for language reform in the United States focuses on eliminating sexist language. The net impact of the movement for gender-inclusive language¹ is likewise a product of both institutional forces and individuals' processes of language change or resistance. This article reports two studies bearing most directly on the individual's adoption of nonsexist language practices. However, the findings of these studies can only be interpreted in light of institutional policies and practices pertaining to sexism in language.

The indictment of specific language practices as sexist and the consequent rationale for language reform are comprehensively reviewed elsewhere (see Henley, 1987; Kramer, Thorne, & Henley, 1978; Miller & Swift, 1991; Penelope, 1990; Spender, 1980; Todd-Mancillas, 1981). Grimm (1981) noted two bases for identifying a given language usage as sexist: A linguistic element may be *propositionally* sexist if it logically entails inequity between women and men. For example, the nonparallelism between "master" and "mistress," or the derivative implication of female marking in "actress" or "aviatrix" are instances of propositional sexism in language. Language usage may also be *consequentially* sexist if it affects actual cognitions and attitudes in a fashion that reinforces gender inequity. Psycholinguistic evidence (e.g., Crawford & English, 1984; Martyna, 1978; Moulton, Robinson, & Ellias, 1978; Shepelak, Ogden, & Tobin-Bennett, 1984) points to the sexist consequences of constructions such as "he" or "man" used in contexts that ought to be gender inclusive. The referents of these terms are often perceived to be gender exclusive, and repeated exposure to such linguistic constructions can reinforce sexist stereotypes.

By and large (although by no means univocally), institutional arbiters of linguistic usage in the United States have responded over the past two decades by issuing policies interdicting against sexist language (see Frank, 1989; Hill, 1986; Nilsen, 1977, 1987). Mandates against sexist language were adopted relatively early in the reform epoch by large textbook publishers and by professional and scholarly organizations. Revision of legal language to prevent gender inequity has achieved more recent acceptance (Kurzon, 1989). Officially sanctioned religious texts are also increasingly subject to revision to avoid sexist expressions (see Greene & Rubin, 1991).

Journalistic stylebooks have likewise been revised, but many influential periodical publications selectively maintain certain sexist language practices. For example, the *New York Times's* position on use of titles for males and females remains especially inconsistent and mystifying (Fasold, 1988). A 1991 *Times* editorial, although endorsing some nonsexist language reforms, held that gender-inclusive terms such as

chairperson and *waitron* actually undermine feminist causes ("The Waitron's Knife and Fork," 1991).⁶

Despite such inconsistencies, institutional shifts in language policies have reduced the overall amount of sexist language that readers normally encounter in print. Cooper (1984) documented a nearly threefold decline (from .25/100 words to .09/100 words) in "androcentric generics" across American publications during the 1970s. In these data, the reform first took hold in women's magazines and in scholarly publications. Remarks of male Congress members, as published in *The Congressional Record*, showed the slowest rate of decline. Occupational terms that traditionalists form by compounding with "-man" (e.g., "fireman," "businessman") were most resistant to change.

Similarly, Fasold (1988) sampled language from national newspapers published between 1966 and 1986. He bisected the period by comparing language use prior to revised stylebooks with usage following the promulgation of new guidelines. He concluded that "language usage policies codified in newspaper style manuals are strikingly effective" (p. 202). Where new policies prohibited sexist treatment, such as in the use of last-name-only references for both men and women (e.g., "Mondale and Ferraro" rather than "Mondale and Mrs. Ferraro"), these treatments virtually disappeared. On the other hand, where the style manuals explicitly maintained traditional gender-exclusive usage (e.g., "spokesman" rather than "spokesperson" or "public relations officer"), no shift in language practices occurred. In addition, the published institutional guidelines for reducing sexism apparently exerted a sort of transfer effect in reducing certain sexist language practices (differential use of middle initials to signal a person's status; for example, "Walter F. Mondale" but "Geraldine Ferraro") that were never explicitly addressed in the newspaper policies (Fasold, Yamada, Robinson, & Barish, 1990; see also Kuiper, 1988).

These studies concur in finding that male writers are more subject to reform in sexist language than are female writers (Cooper, 1984; Fasold et al., 1990). This is because female writers on the average used little gender-exclusive language before new policies were mandated.

If institutional policies interact with writer characteristics like gender even in highly prescribed contexts like newspaper writing, even more variability is likely in the sexist language usage of writers who are less formally regulated. The novelist LeGuin embodies that variability, initially rejecting gender-inclusive reforms, but later coming to regret that decision. In her 1969 novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, LeGuin used male third-person singular pronouns to refer to the fictional, androgynous Gethenians. A decade later she defended that practice in an essay, "Is Gender Necessary?" But 10 years after that defense (LeGuin, 1989), she recanted, commenting in italicized brackets on her earlier position,

I call Gethenians "he" because I utterly refuse to mangle English by inventing a pronoun for "he/she." [*This "utter refusal" of 1968 restated in 1976 collapsed, utterly, within a couple of years more. I still dislike invented pronouns, but I now dislike them less than the so-called generic pronoun he / him / his, which does in fact exclude women from discourse*]. (p. 15)

For authors of belles lettres such as LeGuin—but especially for composers of more pedestrian prose—few empirical studies inquire about the degree to which nonsexist language reforms have diffused into general usage. That is, apart from news writers or others who are directly subject to institutional constraints, little is known about the popular adoption of nonsexist language reforms.

In studying speakers' attitudes toward using sexist language, several researchers have employed a self-report survey asking people which specific gender-inclusive constructions they have adopted (Bate, 1978; Harrigan & Lucic, 1988; Henley, 1987; Rubin & Greene, 1991). In general, these studies point to the importance of group membership and attitudes toward gender issues on reported adoption of language reforms. For example, members of the National Organization for Women reported a higher rate of adoption than did medical students (Harrigan & Lucic, 1988). Where cross-sectional age comparisons were conducted, some regression in gender inclusiveness was evident; younger people on the average reported adopting fewer nonsexist language practices than did people 10 years their senior (Rubin & Greene, 1991).

On the other hand, none of these studies examined actual discourse production, none conducted actual text analyses. It is possible that gender-inclusive language attitudes showed decreasing strength across age groups because sexism had become a less intensely charged issue (Belkin, 1989). It is possible that gender-inclusive language practices have become normative, though detached in language users' consciousness from their sociolinguistic significance. Thus, by themselves, these studies of changing language *attitudes* cannot be taken as evidence of changing language *practices*.

Accordingly, the following two studies are designed to shed light on individuals' use of sexist and nonsexist language in less institutionally regulated contexts. Study 1 is archival, examining features of sexist language in a corpus of published public speeches presented by private-sector leaders over three decades. Study 2 considers relations between language attitudes and language practices in this domain. Its corpus consists of expressive and persuasive writing produced by contemporary college students. In addition, Study 2 permits a more sophisticated operationalization of gender, simultaneously considering biological gender and psychological gender-role schema.

STUDY 1: SEXIST LANGUAGE AMONG MALE PRIVATE-SECTOR SPEAKERS ACROSS THREE DECADES

METHOD

Language Sample

In selecting a corpus for study, we wished to sample language produced by credible sources who could be expected to exert some real impact on audience members. The language in this sample would represent a model likely to be emulated by those who aspire to dominant culture status and identity. At the same time, we wished to exclude texts that would be subject to direct regulation by publishers or organizational policies regarding sexist language.

To meet these criteria, we chose as our sampling frame speeches published in the archival periodical, *Vital Speeches of the Day*. The sample included only texts delivered by speakers with private-sector affiliations. Typically, these speakers were corporate executives speaking before trade groups or at college graduation ceremonies. To eliminate other sources of variability, we excluded texts delivered by women (only a negligible proportion of the population of published speeches, however, particularly during the 1960s) or by apparently nonnative speakers of English.

Texts appearing in *Vital Speeches of the Day* were submitted by speakers, by sponsoring organizations, or in some cases were solicited by the editors. Some of the texts were undoubtedly ghostwritten by public relations professionals, and some have been edited by their sources. They are in no way to be considered accurate transcripts of spontaneous oral utterances. On the other hand, there is no compulsion for these texts to be concerned with sexist language in particular. The publication's stated policy is to reproduce speeches unedited and unexpurgated.

To obtain the sample for analysis, 10 speeches delivered by male, private-sector affiliated, native English speakers were randomly selected from each even-numbered year's volume from 1960 through 1988. After discarding certain unusable texts (e.g., those for which reliable coding could not be established, those that contained large amounts of quoted material, or those that included traditional religious imagery), the final sample consisted of 41 texts representing the 1960s, 34 from the 1970s, and 45 from the 1980s. Within each text, the first, last, and medial 250 words were analyzed.

Language Coding

The scheme for coding sexist language was based on categories explicated in the National Council of Teachers of English *Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications* (Nilsen, 1987). These included (a) pseudogeneric use of "man" terms (e.g., "It is obvious that we need *men* of Lincoln's character to lead this land") and also occupational "man" compounds (e.g., "We turn, then, to the life of this great *statesman*"); (b) pseudogeneric third person singular "he" (e.g., "No matter what one's chosen calling may be, *his* education must prepare *him* for occupational efficiency and civic competence"); and (c) deprecating terms, which included diminutives (e.g., "There are folks who want to see if when push comes to shove I'm my own person or Ellie's *girl*") as well as gender-stereotyped references (e.g., "In wearing apparel, the *keen-eyed lady shopper*, being able to make such an expert appraisal of your competing products").²

Two coders examined each text, and the average of their frequencies was entered as data.³ Average interrater reliability for total number of sexist features for the final sample was .87.

Analysis

Because we had derived three indicators of gender-exclusive language—(a) pseudogeneric "he," (b) pseudogeneric "man" terms, and (c) deprecating expressions—we used multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to test for differences in such language across the three decades. Each speech was nested in one of three levels (1960s, 1970s, 1980s) of the single factor, decade. Post hoc analyses of the significant multivariate effect took two forms (Bray & Maxwell, 1982). First, we ran a discriminant analysis to ascertain what combination of the three sexist language variables maximized the spread between the three decades. Second, multivariate contrasts between each pair of decades were conducted to help determine at what juncture the language patterns had significantly shifted. All statistical tests used an alpha = .05 level of significance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Means for the three categories of sexist language in each decade appear in Table 1. The MANOVA revealed a significant effect for decade ($\lambda_{6,30} = .849$; $p = .004$). The discriminant analysis yielded a single significant discriminant function for maximizing the spread among the decades. The discriminant function was defined by a canonical correlation among the three language indexes of .36. Correlations between each individual language variable and the canonical discriminant function were .863 for "man" terms, .709 for pseudogeneric "he," and

Table 1
Relative Frequencies (per 100 words) of Gender-Exclusive Language in Public Speeches Across Three Decades

Language feature	1960s	1970s	1980s
"Man" terms	.3507	.1372	.1719
Deprecating terms	.0488	.0509	.0177
Pseudogeneric "he"	.3252	.1137	.0533

Table 2
Multivariate Pairwise Contrasts Between Decades for Gender-Exclusive Language in Public Speeches

Contrast	Hotelling's <i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i> value
1960s vs. 1970s	.139	3, 71	.025
1960s vs. 1980s	.151	3, 82	.009
1970s vs. 1980s	.984	3, 75	.260

.172 for deprecating terms. Thus deprecating terms were less helpful in discriminating among the time periods than were the other two variables. The discriminant function was only moderately successful in classifying the actual decade of each speech based on the language variables. It correctly classified 69% of the 1980s speeches, 18% of the 1970s speeches, and 54% of the 1960s speeches.

Some of the limitations in classification by discriminant analysis were due, no doubt, to the relative lack of distinction in language patterns between the 1970s and 1980s. This is confirmed by examining the multivariate group centroids generated by discriminant analysis: .533 for the 1960s, -.256 for the 1970s, and -.294 for the 1980s. In addition to pointing to the essential similarity between the latter two time periods, the centroid values show that a great deal more sexist language appeared in the 1960s speeches, and it dropped precipitously with the advent of the 1970s.

This pattern is confirmed by post hoc multivariate pairwise contrasts between the decades, summarized in Table 2. These contrasts show that the 1960s were significantly different from both the 1970s and the 1980s, whereas the multivariate contrast between the latter two decades was not statistically significant. Inspecting the univariate cell means displayed in Table 1, we see more than twice as many "man" terms used during the 1960s as in subsequent decades, and an even more dramatic disparity in use of pseudogeneric "he."

The dimensions of gender-inclusive language reform, captured in the aggregate in our content analysis, can be further appreciated by comparing typical texts across the time span. In 1965, William C.

Marquis, Manager of Industrial Marketing for the American Oil Company, addressed the Alabama-Mississippi Jobbers Convention as follows:

So what is an ideal small businessman? First, of course, he's a businessman, that means he is engaged in meeting the needs of the public in such a way that he can make a profit at it. . . . In the words on which Marshall Field built his great department store in Chicago, he has to "give the lady what she wants. (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, 32:1, p. 22)

A quarter of a century later, in contrast, business leaders are likely to address the same topic of competition and leadership, yet avoiding explicitly sexist pronouncements. Consider the apparently studied use of generic "people" by Thomas J. Donohue, President of the American Trucking Association, who stated in 1991:

My subject today strikes a chord with business people across the U.S. . . . Right now, at the Department of Transportation headquarters in Washington, there are an estimated 500 people who work on trucking issues. . . . Similar people are working at the ICC. (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, 58:10, p. 317)

STUDY 2

The findings of Study 1, then, suggest that public discourse among America's economic leaders manifests a sharp decline in sexist language. This decline parallels—and even precedes—previously documented (Cooper, 1984; Fasold, 1987; Fasold et al., 1990) reforms among more institutionally regulated discourse such as newspaper reporting. In understanding the processes of popular diffusion of nonsexist language reform, however, questions remain unanswered regarding factors that motivate adoption. Little is known, for example, about the diffuse effect of institutionally mandated language policies. In a series of surveys about attitudes toward nonsexist language practices (Harrigan & Lucic, 1988; Henley, 1987; Rubin & Greene, 1991), respondents only rarely cited institutional requirements mandated by others as an important factor in their decisions to adopt nonsexist language. Modeling by authority figures was cited as a more significant factor, but still less important than an individual's own ethical decision making.

Previous research points to the impact of individual difference variables on attitudes toward sexist language. These studies suggest that listeners' evaluations of gender-inclusive language (Greene & Rubin, 1991) and their willingness to select gender-inclusive forms (Jacobson & Insko, 1985) are positively associated with their attitudes toward gender equity in general. Psychological gender-role schema ("psychological gender" as opposed to mere biological gender; Bem, 1981) is another individual difference variable that apparently affects attitudes toward gender-exclusive language. Rubin and Greene (1991;

see Schwarz & Banikiotes, 1982) found that individuals with androgynous gender-role schema reported the highest rate of adoption of gender-inclusive constructions.

In addition to considering individual social-psychological factors, any sophisticated account of how people adopt linguistic innovations should also address situational factors. Situational variation in discourse style reflects the ways in which language users construe and construct the social contexts in which they find themselves (see Rubin, 1988). Studies of code switching in speech demonstrate that speakers may use an institutionally imposed language innovation in some situations (e.g., official, transnational contexts), but reserve a more traditional style to convey solidarity with a conversational partner (see Blom & Gumperz, 1972). Stylistic adaptation to audience is likewise a robust phenomenon in written discourse (Rubin, 1984).

With specific reference to situational variation in sexist language, Rubin and Greene (1991) found that people reported different behaviors when speaking to male interviewers than when speaking with female interviewers. In particular, college-aged men speaking with same-gender, same-age interviewers (a relatively high solidarity and informal context) reported using especially few gender-inclusive strategies.

None of these studies, however, examined actual production of gender-inclusive/exclusive style in connected discourse, only attitudes toward such language. In light of the notoriously tenuous link between attitudes and behaviors (see Kim & Hunter, 1991; Fishbein & Azjen, 1977), one needs to exercise extreme caution in drawing conclusions about language practices based on data regarding language attitudes. Indeed, Rubin and Greene (1991) explicitly call for analyses of language performance data to help account for the downturn in attitudes toward nonsexist language found in their study. It is possible that nonsexist language practices are progressing, they suggest, even though language attitudes are regressing. This state of affairs could arise if a new generation of language users has come to regard linguistic gender inclusion as a norm, but has dissociated this norm from any attitudinal linkage with feminist or egalitarian perspectives.

One study (McMinn, Lindsay, Hannum, & Troyer, 1990) did examine written language production in conjunction with several attitudinal and individual difference variables. This study suggests some linkage between production of gender-exclusive pronouns in writing and traditional sex roles and also between gender-exclusive pronouns and Christian beliefs. The research is less informative than it might be because it treats sexist language production as an independent variable by which writers are dichotomously classified. Its design precludes any conclusions about the degree to which production of sexist language can be more naturally accounted for as an outcome (i.e., a dependent variable) of logically prior attitudes toward language or gender roles than as an outcome that is contingent.

Study 2, therefore, examines production of gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive language in written discourse as a behavioral outcome of several factors. These logically prior factors include measured attitudes toward gender-inclusive language, measured gender-role schema, and experimentally manipulated situational variety.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were undergraduate students recruited from basic communication courses at a large southeastern university. Participation could be substituted for a required written assignment in these courses. Full sets of usable data were obtained from 88 participants, 65% of whom were female. Different data drawn from these participants (regarding production of gender-typical language) are reported in Rubin and Greene (1992).

Procedure

In group administrations, we asked participants to write letters in response to a fictional university proposal for mandatory drug testing. Participants were requested to fill at least two pages with writing. They took from 20 to 50 minutes to do so. To instantiate a situational variable, some of the participants (16 males and 27 females) were randomly assigned to write letters to a designated university official. Instructions for this group asked participants to take a deliberately persuasive/argumentative stance. It was expected that these instructions would result in relatively more careful and formal writing. Other participants (14 males and 31 females) wrote to friends. Instructions for this group encouraged free expression of feelings about the topic. It was expected that these instructions would result in relatively spontaneous, informal writing. Participants returned for a second session during which they filled out a gender-role schema questionnaire (Wheless & Dierks-Stewart, 1981). In addition, the 45 participants in the expressive/intimate audience writing situation at this time completed a questionnaire concerning attitudes toward gender-inclusive language (Rubin & Greene, 1991).

Language Coding

The letters that participants wrote were coded for specific uses of gender-exclusive references as in Study 1. As in Study 1, we aggregated instances of gender-exclusive features into three categories for analytic

purposes: (a) pseudogeneric uses of “man,” (b) pseudogeneric “he,” and (c) deprecating forms such as “girl” for “woman” or “actress” for “actor.”

Following the example of Cooper (1984), in Study 2 we also coded instances of gender-inclusive strategies. The eight indicators of gender inclusiveness that we tabulated paralleled those alternatives to gender-exclusive terms suggested in many handbooks (e.g., Treichler & Frank, 1989). These are essentially the same gender-inclusive strategies included in the self-report attitude measure first developed by Henley and Dragun (Henley, 1987): (a) using authentically generic alternatives to pseudogeneric “man” terms (e.g., “humankind” instead of “mankind” or “police officers” instead of “policemen”); (b) using “they/ their/them” to refer to singular antecedents (e.g., “A student who is already in trouble academically should not have to waste their time”); (c) using passive constructions with agent deleted (e.g., “Every student knows what must be done to stay drug-free”); (d) use of “one” (e.g., “To learn about the dangers of drugs, one can just read all the information that Student Health gives out”); (e) repeating a singular subject (e.g., “If a student has a drug problem, of course the student should be helped”); (f) use of “he/she” forms (e.g., “This only affects the individual him or herself”); (g) coordinating male and female terms (e.g., “Boys and girls must learn this lesson”); and (h) pluralizing third person references (e.g., “Students will cancel their applications”).

Two coders analyzed each writing sample independently. The average of their codings was entered as data for each analysis. Their interrater reliability (Cronbach’s alpha) was .99, for both total gender-exclusive and total gender-inclusive constructions. In order to adjust frequencies for sheer verbosity, we also counted total number of words. An interrater reliability estimate obtained for total word count was .99.

Measure of Gender-Role Schema

Psychological gender was measured in the present study by the Wheelless and Dierks-Stewart (1981) short form of Bem’s Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) 1974. This instrument has been used in studies of attitudes toward gender-inclusive language in speaking (Greene & Rubin, 1991) and production of gender-typical features in writing (Rubin & Greene, 1992), and it has shown consistent reliability in past use. Each of the 20 items on the scale asks participants to respond in terms of “how much this characteristic (stimulus adjective) is true of me.” The instrument yields two subscales, instrumental gender-role orientation (e.g., aggressive, forceful, and dominant) and expressive gender-role orientation (e.g., tender, sensitive, and friendly). These subscales also proved to be reliable in the present research: expressive (alpha = .91), instrumental (alpha = .91).

Attitudes Toward Gender-Exclusive/ Inclusive Language

Language attitude data were collected from a subsample of the participants. We administered a version of a questionnaire first developed by Henley and Dragun (see Henley, 1987), later used by Harrigan and Lucic (1988), and refined by Rubin and Greene (1991). Of interest in the present study are three composite scales. One composite scale measures judgments of sexism in language. It is composed of six semantic differential scales, each of which assesses beliefs about the degree of sexism associated with a particular stimulus phrase (e.g., "mankind" and "old wives' tale"). The internal consistency reliability of this scale (Cronbach's alpha) was .78.

The second composite scale measures the different linguistic methods participants reported using to avoid gender-exclusive reference. Participants gave dichotomous responses to each of 16 language strategies (e.g., "I avoid feminine prefixes like 'lady doctor'" or "I alternate order of feminine and masculine terms as in 'Each woman and man in this room'"). Internal consistency (Kuder-Richardson 20) was .66 for this data set.

The third composite scale measures willingness to use alternatives to "he" as a third person singular generic pronoun. It is composed of 5 Likert-type items, most of which inquire about different contexts (e.g., informal conversation, business writing) in that gender-inclusive alternatives are viewed as appropriate. Internal consistency was .89.

Analyses

We submitted the relative frequencies of stylistic features to multivariate analyses of covariance (MANCOVAs). Separate MANCOVAs were run for gender-exclusive language (composed of three stylistic variables as in Study 1) and for gender-inclusive language (composed of eight variables). The covariates in these analyses were the two gender-role schema subscales: instrumental and expressive gender roles. They are treated as covariates because they are continuous rather than discrete variables. The independent variables were biological gender (female, male) and writing task (expressive-intimate, argumentative-remote). Participants were nested in combinations of gender and writing task. Because of unequal cell frequencies, a hierarchical approach to partitioning sums of squares was employed. When MANCOVAs yielded statistically significant covariate effects, we examined these with multiple regression analyses to determine the associations between language variables and measured gender-role orientations. When MANCOVAs yielded significant factorial effects, we pursued these with post hoc discriminant analyses (Bray & Maxwell, 1982).

Table 3
Gender by Writing Task Cell Means for Relative Frequencies (per 100 words) of Gender-Exclusive Language

Language feature	Women/formal	Men/formal	Women/informal	Men/informal
"Man" terms	.0436	.2307	.0387	.0361
Deprecating terms	.0256	.0373	.0430	.1907
Pseudogeneric "he"	.0637	.2711	.0501	.2259

To test for relationships between language attitudes and language behaviors, we calculated canonical correlations for the subsample from whom we had collected attitude measures. We established $\alpha = .05$ as the level of statistical significance for all tests.

RESULTS

Production of Gender-Exclusive Language

Table 3 contains the biological gender by writing task cell means for the three indexes of gender-exclusive language. The associated MANCOVA revealed a statistically significant multivariate effect only for biological gender ($\lambda_{(3,76)} = .871; p = .014$).

The post hoc discriminant analysis yielded a single function of the three gender-exclusive variables for maximizing separation between male and female writers. The correlation between each of the language variables and the canonical discriminant function was .722 for pseudo-generic "he," .592 for deprecating terms, and .50 for "man" terms. The function thus comprised correctly classified 77.2% of the female participants, but only 44% of the men (a total of 66.3% "hits"). The multivariate group centroid for female participants was $-.263$, whereas that for males was $.516$, thus indicating that males on the average produced a higher frequency of sexist language than did females. This is confirmed by inspection of univariate means in Table 3. Men produced about three times more "man" terms than women ($M_m = .133$, $M_w = .041$), more than three times more deprecating terms ($M_m = .114$, $M_w = .034$), and more than four times as many instances of pseudo-generic "he" ($M_m = .249$, $M_w = .057$).

Production of Gender-Inclusive Language

Table 4 contains the biological gender by writing task cell means for the eight indexes of gender-exclusive language. The associated MANCOVA revealed a statistically significant multivariate effect for

Table 4
Gender by Writing Task Cell Means for Relative Frequencies (per 100 words) of Gender-Inclusive Language

Language feature	Women/formal	Men/formal	Women/informal	Men/informal
Singular "they"	.1953	.2075	.3608	.3688
"He/she" forms	.0731	.1159	.0280	.0360
Authentic generics	.6116	.7560	.6943	1.1431
"One" forms	.3915	.2230	.5913	.2108
Passive/deletion	.0000	.0000	.0079	.0287
Female + male	.0000	.0547	.0062	.0000
Repeating noun	.0408	.0273	.0146	.0504
Pluralization	1.2502	1.0295	.4764	.4012

instrumental gender role ($\lambda_{(8,71)} = .808$; $p = .047$). To further analyze this covariate effect we conducted a multiple regression with instrumental gender role as the criterion variable and the eight gender-inclusive language variables as the predictors. The multiple correlation was .443. Beta weights for the eight language variables were as follows: singular "they," .197; conjoining male and female terms, $-.017$; repeating singular nouns, $-.021$; "he/she" forms, $-.029$; passive agent deletion, $-.102$; pluralization, .059; authentic generics, .202; "one" terms, $-.413$. Because beta weights can be interpreted as correlation coefficients, it appears that most associations were negative; that is, higher scores for instrumental gender-role schema were associated with lower frequency of gender-inclusive language. Use of "one" terms was most powerfully associated with this pattern.

In addition to the covariate effect, the MANCOVA of gender-inclusive language revealed two factorial main effects. As a post hoc analysis of the effect of biological gender ($\lambda_{(8,71)} = .800$; $p = .036$), we ran a discriminant analysis, which yielded a single function of the eight language features. The canonical correlation between the eight language variables and the multivariate discriminant function was .432. Correlations between each of the language indexes and the canonical functions were as follows: "one" forms, $-.691$; conjoined male and female terms, .450; authentic generics, .339; passive agent deletion, .193; "he/she" forms, .183; pluralization, $-.131$; repeating nouns, .113; singular "they," $-.006$. Thus use of "one" forms, use of male/female conjoined expressions, and use of authentic generics contributed the most information for purposes of distinguishing male from female writers. The discriminant function constructed in this manner correctly classified 67% of the female participants and 69% of the male participants.

Because the discriminant function was defined by both positive and negative loadings for the various language variables, the multivariate group centroids ($-.338$ for women and .663 for men) are not easily

interpretable. The direction of the differences between women and men writers in use of gender-inclusive language is more clearly indicated by inspecting the univariate means, as in Table 4. Aggregated by gender, the means indicate that women used a higher relative frequency of “one” forms ($M_w = .491$, $M_m = .217$)—which was the most potent univariate indicator of gender in the discriminant analysis—and pluralization ($M_w = .863$, $M_m = .715$). On the other hand, men produced higher relative frequencies of all the other gender-inclusive forms: repeating nouns ($M_w = .028$, $M_m = .039$); conjoined male/female terms ($M_w = .003$, $M_m = .027$)—the second most powerful discriminator; passive agent deletion ($M_w = .004$, $M_m = .014$); authentic generics ($M_w = .653$, $M_m = .950$); “he/she” forms ($M_w = .051$, $M_m = .076$); and singular “they” ($M_w = .278$, $M_m = .288$).⁴ In sum, women exceeded men in the use of one significant gender-inclusive strategy, but men exceeded women in the majority of gender-inclusive forms.

In addition to the main effect for biological gender, the MANCOVA of gender-inclusive forms revealed an effect for the writing task factor ($\lambda_{(8,71)} = .680$, $p < .001$). To further analyze this effect we ran a discriminant analysis procedure, which yielded a single significant discriminant function for maximizing writing task group differences by means of the eight gender-inclusive language variables. The canonical correlation between the eight language indexes and the discriminant function was .557. Correlations between each of the eight language variables and the canonical discriminant function were as follows: pluralization, .714; singular “they,” $-.297$; “he/she” forms, .296; “one” forms, $-.233$; passive agent deletion, $-.220$; conjoined male/female terms, .203; authentic generics, $-.162$; repeating nouns, .063. Clearly, use of pluralization contributed the most information for discriminating between the expressive-informal writing task and the persuasive-formal writing task. The discriminant function thus constructed correctly classified 82% of the expressive-informal writings and 67% of the persuasive-formal writings (overall rate of “hits” was 74.4%).

Because the discriminant function for writing task was again defined by both positive and negative loadings for the various language variables, the multivariate group centroids ($-.648$ for expressive-informal writing and $.679$ for persuasive-formal writing) are again not easily interpretable. The direction of the differences between expressive-informal and persuasive-formal tasks in use of gender-inclusive language is more easily discerned by inspecting the univariate means (see Table 4). Aggregated by writing task this time, the means indicate that the persuasive-formal task engendered a higher relative frequency of pluralization ($M_{pers} = 1.140$, $M_{expr} = .439$)—which was the most potent univariate indicator of writing task in the discriminant analysis; a higher frequency of “he/she” forms ($M_{pers} = .095$,

Table 5
Zero-Order Correlations Between Language Production and Language Attitude Variables

	Judgments of sexism	Acceptance of alternatives	Methods adopted
Gender-exclusive language			
Pseudogeneric "he"	-.034	-.116	-.147
"Man" terms	.132	.201	.288
Deprecating terms	-.052	-.048	-.098
Gender-inclusive language			
Singular "they"	-.040	.029	.093
"He/she" forms	.128	.064	-.165
Conjoined male/female terms	-.065	.322	-.042
Passive agent deletion	-.051	-.107	-.184
Repeat noun	.128	.029	.076
Authentic generics	.128	.008	.050
"One" terms	-.163	-.265	-.138
Pluralization	-.136	.024	.036

$M_{\text{expr}} = .032$); more conjoined male/female terms ($M_{\text{pers}} = .027$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .003$); and more repeated nouns ($M_{\text{pers}} = .034$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .033$). On the other hand, the expressive-informal task engendered higher relative frequencies of passive agent deletion ($M_{\text{pers}} = .000$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .018$); "one" forms ($M_{\text{pers}} = .307$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .401$); authentic generics ($M_{\text{pers}} = .684$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .919$); and singular "they" ($M_{\text{pers}} = .201$, $M_{\text{expr}} = .365$).⁵ In sum, writers used the various gender-inclusive strategies differentially depending on writing task, although it can be said that more formal writing did encourage use of that gender-inclusive strategy that appeared to be most context sensitive (i.e., pluralization).

Relation Between Language Attitudes and Language Production

As shown in Table 5, the data indicate only trivial bivariate correlations between each of the three language attitude scales and each of the gender-exclusive and gender-inclusive language features. No canonical correlation between the cluster of three attitude variables and the cluster of three gender-exclusive language variables was significantly different from zero. The canonical language attitude variates accounted for only 4.32% of the variance in language production.

Similarly, no significant canonical correlation emerged for the multivariate association between the cluster of three attitude variables and the cluster of eight gender-inclusive language variables. The canonical language attitude variates accounted for 2.97% of the raw variance in gender-inclusive language production.

DISCUSSION

Study 1, indicating as it did that use of sexist language has declined substantially among business leaders over the past three decades, could give rise to complacency among advocates of sexist language reform. Confounding factors (e.g., differing channel and mode of discourse, opportunity for revision, and data coders) do not permit direct comparisons between the levels of gender-exclusive language in Studies 1 and 2. Still, it is worth noting, at least informally, that levels of gender-exclusive expression—as indicated in the 1980s column of Table 1 versus the formal writing columns in Table 3—appear to be elevated among contemporary college writers compared to 1980s public-sector speakers. This rough assay about production of sexist language is consistent with previous findings that indicated more positive attitudes toward gender-inclusive language among older or working people, as compared to among current college students (Rubin & Greene, 1991). Thus there remains some warrant for continuing efforts at language reform. Systematic instructional interventions designed to reduce use of gender-exclusive language among college students (e.g., Adamsky, 1980; Flanagan & Todd-Mancillas, 1982; McMinn, Troyer, Hannum, & Foster, 1991) merit replication and further evaluation.

EFFECTS OF BIOLOGICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL GENDER

Most dramatically, Study 2 showed men producing a proportion of gender-exclusive features three to four times greater than women produced. Some of that sexist language is patent. For example, one young man closed his expressive-informal message, “Got to go now. Can’t keep my *harem* [deprecating term] waiting.” The discriminant analysis confirmed, however, that more often men’s writing was distinguished from women’s by virtue of higher frequencies of conventional pseudogeneric pronouns and pseudogeneric “man” terms. One male wrote, quite typically, “Someone from the physician field with experience in drug testing should be interviewed to share *his* thoughts.”

Whereas Study 2 revealed an unambiguous pattern of male prevalence in gender-exclusive language, the reciprocal pattern of female prevalence in gender-inclusive language did not materialize as unambiguously as might be expected. Women were not consistently the predominant users of gender-inclusive language.

On the other hand, the analyses did reveal a generally inverse relationship between instrumental gender-role schema and gender-inclusive language. That is, traditional masculine traits such as competitiveness and inexpressiveness were associated with lower frequencies of gender

inclusiveness. It should be noted that instrumental gender-role orientation is an individual difference that can cut across biological gender.

How then did biological gender affect use of gender-inclusive language in this corpus? Evidently, male and female writers each favored different gender-inclusive strategies. The language variables that contributed most to discriminating between males and females were "one" forms (e.g., "If someone uses drugs, it's one's own business"), authentic generics (e.g., "police officer"), and conjoined male/female terms (e.g., "Sooner or later every student has to make that decision for *himself or herself*"). Of these three gender-inclusive features, women predominated in the first, although the latter two were typical of men.

It is evident, then, that men writers do indeed possess gender-inclusive strategies for avoiding gender-exclusive reference. One cannot, therefore, attribute the high incidence of sexist language among males to ignorance of alternatives. Rather, males as a group displayed a propensity to *retain* gender-exclusive usages in addition to a repertoire of gender-inclusive forms. For these men, adopting gender-inclusive forms was apparently not associated with the kind of cognitive dissonance that would lead to eliminating sexist forms.

EFFECTS OF SITUATIONAL (TASK) VARIATION

One further goal of this study was to examine how gender differences in gender-exclusive/inclusive language might themselves vary across situations. Toward that end, we imposed two different writing tasks on our research participants: a formal/persuasive task and an informal/expressive one. In the case of gender-exclusive language production, this situational variable exerted no detectable effect.

In the case of gender-inclusive language, on the other hand, the situational factor in fact affected writing style to a greater magnitude (as indicated by a lower lambda value) than did gender. In this regard, these results confirm previous assessments of the powerful impact of communicative context on style in writing, even relative to language differences due to writers' age (Rubin, 1984) and gender (Rubin & Greene, 1992). Writers—like speakers—are generally sensitive to the varying demands of audience and purpose in writing tasks, and they adapt accordingly (Rubin, 1984).

No simple pattern emerged for the distribution of gender-inclusive language features across the two writing tasks. Pluralization strategies (e.g., "*Students* who miss *their* classes all the time" as opposed to the singular, "A student who misses *his* classes all the time") predominated in formal writing. Not surprisingly, usage of "they" as a singular pronoun (e.g., "Every drug user takes *their* chances") was most common in writing informal-expressive messages to intimate friends. The grammatical conventions of traditional pronoun-antecedent agreement prevailed in writing to the more distant audience.

ASSOCIATIONS WITH LANGUAGE ATTITUDES

Attitudes toward gender-inclusive/exclusive language did not offer much help in explaining individual differences in actual language production. Language attitudes measured in this study were (a) judgments of sexism in common expressions, (b) self-reported adoption of gender-inclusive alternatives, and (c) willingness to accept nonstandard alternative pronouns. None of these—not in bivariate nor in multivariate analyses—showed substantial relation to production of either gender-inclusive or gender-exclusive language. Because the magnitude of the correlation coefficients was low, this does not appear to be an artifact of admittedly low power.

Studies comparing language attitudes with language production are rare in sociolinguistic research (Labov, 1966 is one exception). More generally, the meager power of attitude measures to predict behavior has long been the bane of social science researchers across a variety of research areas (Fishbein & Azjen, 1977). Sometimes weak relationships with attitude measures are a function of external barriers or difficulties in performing associated behaviors. In other cases, the weak relationships could derive from methodological artifacts; attitude scales should closely shadow the behaviors that they are hypothesized to predict. The present research, however, does not seem vulnerable to either of these weaknesses in typical attitude-behavior research. Certainly writers in this exercise fully controlled their stylistic choices, and the language-coding schemes were informed by and deliberately paralleled items on the language attitude instruments.

Rather than being dismissed as methodological artifact, therefore, the lack of consistency between these participants' language attitudes and their language behaviors deserves further consideration. Recall that in previous studies of sexist language production, sociopolitical beliefs about gender equity were among the most important predictor variables (Greene & Rubin, 1991; Harrigan & Lucic, 1988; Jacobson & Insko, 1985; McMinn et al., 1990). Thus there is reason to suspect that at least among college students, gender-inclusive/exclusive language is attitudinally marked only for the most sociopolitically conscious individuals. Many young language users simply fail to connect language choices with ideological choices.

This view is confirmed in our informal conversations with college students about use of the term *Ms.* Among many of our informants, use of the term *Ms.* has only a remote historical connection to feminist concerns. Such people may use gender-inclusive terms such as *Ms.* with considerable frequency; it has become habitual for them. Yet their language habits in this instance are not motivated by any underlying attitude about sexist expression (for a more case study contrary to this view, a case in which college students themselves initiated institutional change vis-à-vis language reform, see Mitchell, 1990).

IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE REFORM

The putative relation between attitude and language behavior is central to the debate over sexist language reform. Three general positions can be discerned (for related discussions, see Blaubergs, 1980; Frank, 1989; Henley, 1987; Penelope, 1982, 1990). First, benign linguistic traditionalists hold that conventional language constructions may indeed convey gender-exclusive meanings. That is, however, because we live in a society that has not yet achieved gender-equity. Gender-exclusive language accurately reflects our gender-exclusive society. For these individuals, social attitudes must change; language can remain unchanged. Safire (1992) argues, "As sexual equality is achieved, the need to stretch syntax will let up. I suggest a politics-grammar deal: let half the Senate be women and let the male pronoun embrace the female" (p. 6).⁶

A second position contends that language can, and indeed shall, shift toward gender inclusiveness, but this process cannot be effected by deliberate fiddling with language policies. This position is often associated with Lakoff (1973), who contended that, at least with regard to pseudogeneric pronouns, changing social attitudes toward gender and power must precede any language change. Language change is an evolutionary process that naturally shadows changing social realities, according to this position. Language users are likely to be largely unconscious of their shifting linguistic norms.

The third camp consists of linguistic activists who see deliberate language reform as a tool for reshaping sociopolitical relations. Relying on some version of a theory of linguistic relativity (the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis), this position is founded on the notion that changing habits regarding gender-exclusive/inclusive language practices will effect change in language users' habitual ways of perceiving and thinking about gender roles. The deliberate exercise of language planning for the purpose of engineering social perception includes legislating and enforcing nonsexist language policies in education, publishing, and government. Such reform efforts may even include judicious use of female-exclusive language as a tool for consciousness raising (Adamsky, 1980; Henley, 1987).

Taken together, Studies 1 and 2 presented here suggest that none of the three accounts are quite rich enough to explain current processes of language change. Study 1 demonstrated quite dramatically that among a certain segment of public figures gender-exclusive language sharply declined. The precipitous drop occurred at the juncture of the 1960s and 1970s and thus predated the propagation of most guidelines for nonsexist language. In addition, these language users were generally not under any direct mandate to alter their language. Consequently, we hypothesize that the shift away from gender-exclusive language in that sample was a moral and political response to changing

social norms. Language change, in all probability, reflected ongoing social change.

The young adult writers sampled in Study 2 represent a generation socialized at the hands of gender-inclusive language models resulting from the reforms of the 1970s. They should have been exposed to little gender-exclusive language, at least in officially sanctioned print. Yet the incidence of sexist language in their writing was not negligible. This finding may signal some failure for language reforms to easily diffuse simply through the mechanism of modeling in educational materials, print media, and speech of high-credibility figures.

Particularly troublesome from the point of view of language reform was the markedly high frequency of gender-exclusive language among male writers. Linguistic activists would institute their reforms by encouraging gender-inclusive alternatives to sexist expressions. Yet males in this sample manifested control over a repertoire of such alternatives, including even the authentic generic nouns (e.g., "fire fighters," "chair," "cabin attendants") that were excluded in mandated reforms of newspaper writing (Fasold et al., 1990). But these gender-inclusive strategies did not supplant gender-exclusive language among these males. Instead, the two modes of reference seem to coexist in their writing styles.

Interestingly, individuals with high levels of instrumental gender-role orientation (whether biological males or females) were found to use less gender-inclusive language. No similar effect for gender role emerged for gender-exclusive language. Like the finding for biological gender, this result indicates that gender-inclusive and gender-exclusive language are not in simple alternation. The process of discarding sexist language is distinct from the process of adopting gender-inclusive language. Biological males have done the latter but not the former, whereas instrumental gender-role types tend toward the former but not the latter.

Linguistic activists might need to consider separate strategies for effecting reforms to discourage exclusionary language and to encourage inclusionary language.

Finally, the lack of association between manifest language behaviors and measured language attitudes found in this study presents an extreme challenge to reformers. For the sample of participants in this study, at any rate, adoption of language reforms did not bring about any particular enlightenment regarding sex inequities in language. Nor did maintenance of traditional gender reference signify particularly regressive gender-related attitudes. To the degree that these results are generalizable, they suggest that those who wish to build a society that is equitable with respect to gender will need to rely on other tools in addition to language reform.

NOTES

1. In our usage, we equate gender-inclusive language with nonsexist language, and conversely, we equate gender-exclusive language with sexist language. This usage is not unproblematic, nor is it universally accepted. It reflects our biases regarding the nature of sexism. Authorities who disagree with our position (e.g., Penelope, 1990; Treichler & Frank, 1989) argue that some facts of patriarchal social life need to be exposed by gender-exclusive language. For example, *spouse beating* is not as informative or accurate a term as *wife beating*; the former distortion is actually more sexist than the latter. Because women in high government positions remain rare, referring to someone as "Congresswoman Schroeder" rather than "Representative Schroeder" contributes to greater gender equity.

2. Some of the sources of these examples are from outside the corpus analyzed. They are as follows: The first two are from "Lincoln's Leadership-Today" by John R. Van De Water, delivered November 19, 1962 before the Los Angeles Urban League (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, 29:5, pp. 145, 146). The third example is from "Education in Modern Society" by Deborah Partridge Wolfe, delivered August 2, 1962 before the Prince Hall Masons and Order of the Eastern Star (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, 29:1, p. 25). Example 4 is quoted from Patricia Ireland in "Does She Speak for Today's Women?" by Jane Gross (*The New York Times Magazine*, March 1, 1992, p. 54). Copyright © 1992 by The New York Times Co. Reprinted by permission. The final example is from "Antitrust and the Apparel Industry" by Paul Rand Dixon, delivered June 17, 1966 before the American Apparel Manufacturers Association (*Vital Speeches of the Day*, 32:20, p. 618).

3. The authors express their appreciation to a group of students enrolled in "Quantitative Methods in Communication Research" at the University of Georgia during the summer of 1990, who ably performed the language coding. These coders were trained in the coding scheme and procedures using speeches sampled from the same frame as those selected for the study sample.

4. When univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVAs) were run separately for each of the eight gender-inclusive language variables, gender differences proved statistically significant only in the cases of higher use of "one" forms among women ($F_{(1, 78)} = 8.56, p = .005$) and higher use of conjoined male/female terms among men ($F_{(1, 78)} = 4.38, p = .040$).

5. When univariate ANCOVAs were run separately for each of the eight gender-inclusive language variables, writing task differences proved statistically significant only in the cases of higher frequencies of pluralization ($F_{(1, 78)} = 14.43, p < .001$), "he/she" forms ($F_{(1, 78)} = 4.06, p = .047$), and conjoined male/female terms ($F_{(1, 78)} = 4.60, p = .035$) associated with the persuasive-formal writing task.

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