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OPINION

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He said, ze said

Is there any place in the English language for gender-neutral pronouns?

It is official: I am a sexist pig.

A few weeks ago I attended a debate tournament at NYU during which I managed to offend a female student from Wellesley College by referring to her as "she." The topic of the debate was whether or not we should replace all gender-specific pronouns in the English language with gender-neutral pronouns. This way, rather than saying "his" or "her," you'd simply say "hir," and rather than saying "he" or "she," you'd say "ze."

Since I was arguing against this strange system, I kept adhering to the good ol' time-tested he/she scheme. Near the end of the debate round, my opponent complained that I was de-humanizing her by referring to her as "she" since "she" connotes all those negative things that we men think about women.

I'm all for gender equity and the constant adaptation of our language to new realities and social attitudes, but the gender-neutral pronoun movement has simply overshot the mark of equity and landed squarely in the realm of the absurd.

First, let's give credit where it's due: To function well, our language ought to be as good a mirror of reality as possible. In that case, having only two gender-specific pronouns — he and she — may not be optimal since

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Cezary Salad

there are people who do not consider themselves either male or female. Thus, we may be unfairly boxing individuals with confused gender identities into gender roles and the specific connotations that come with them, all of which indicates that our language needs to adapt to the realities of transgender persons if it is to function well and equitably.

Given this legitimate concern, the most logical solution would be to create a new pronoun to reflect the identity of those individuals and grant them independence from male/female gender roles and stereotypes. That way, if you feel you don't belong in the he/his or she/her column, you can belong to the ze/hir column, where ze and hir represent your specific group rather than all individuals regardless of gender identity.

But the gender-neutral pronoun movement bypassed this logical route, which would have been easy to implement and sell to the public, in favor of eradicating all gender reference from our pronouns.

Why?

Because, they say, our pronouns shouldn't exclude anyone and, more importantly, gender-specific pronouns reinforce the negative connotations imposed on women by our male-dominated society.

Somehow, though, I fail to believe that when we menfolk hear the word "she," we automatically imagine the barefoot woman in the kitchen cooking dinner while pregnant and exclaim, "that's the way it should be, woman!" I think our society has progressed enough so that this is no longer the case for a majority of people. If anything, this example underscores the fact that gender-specific words can carry a lot of baggage with them — although I did not believe my opponent from Wellesley when she argued that referring to a woman as "she" was as harmful to her as referring to a black person using the n-word. Not quite that much baggage, I think.

But all words carry connotations with them; that's just the way our language functions. So unless the gender-neutral folks show me a way to magically rid words of connotations, our only solution will be — if we want to have a gender-neutral language — to revamp our entire vocabulary. No more gender-specific names. No more words like "man" and "woman." No more "male" and "female" bathrooms,

either. No more "Mr." and "Ms.," perhaps we'd all be granted honorary doctorates (probably in gender studies).

But even if we did take all the steps necessary to castrate our language, I'm not sure that we'd be happy with the end result. I like gender specificity; I like to know whether an author is talking about a man or a woman when I read a novel. I like to know whether I should write Ms. or Mr. on my useless cover letters.

Clearly, this is all absurd. As George Orwell once stated, "If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought," so either way our connotations and prejudices will remain.

However, we can try to change public perceptions about certain groups and thus promote equity without destroying our language. In the end, I think this is the best solution; rather than performing superfluous surgery on our language and branding millions of people as sexists, let's instead fight sexism at the root: our minds. But if rearranging our pronouns should ever prove necessary, the all-inclusive "ze/hir" scheme is clearly not the answer.

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