INDIRECT SEXISM

There are ways in which language can be indirectly and/or subtly sexist. In the literature this is called ‘covert’, ‘subtle’ or ‘indirect sexism’, in contrast to the ways discussed on the inside pages which are referred to as ‘overt’ or ‘direct sexism’. For instance, language used in ways that:

- exacerbate the sexual nature of women (or some men),
- stereotype activities as uniquely related to either women or men,
- present fixed and asymmetrical ideas about women (based on their bodies) and men (based on their attitudes or character traits),
- describe all men, indiscriminately, as controlled by an ungovernable sexual drive,
- focus on culturally accepted gendered frames (women looking for a prince or having marriage as their only goal in life),
- or combination(s) of the above.

Sometimes we think that what we say is “just banter” or a “joke”, however we can actually discriminate against people (even those who are close to us) by perpetuating an imbalanced society.

WHO WE ARE

LAEL is the department of Linguistics and English Language at Lancaster University.

RiGLS (Research in Gender, Language and Sexuality) is a forum set up to discuss current issues in language, gender and sexuality research. It meets weekly during academic terms; members of staff as well as PG students from LAEL and other departments attend the seminars.

Facebook: Rigls
Twitter: @RiGLS
Website: www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/groups/rgls/about.htm

AUTHORS OF THIS LEAFLET

Federica Formato holds a PhD from LAEL. Her thesis deals with language use and gender in the Italian parliament. At the moment, she researches sexist language in the institutional public sphere and speakers’ usages, attitudes and beliefs about the grammatical gender Italian language. She is a member of the Advisory Board of IGALA. f.formato@lancaster.ac.uk

Kate Wind’s research interests are in sex, gender, sexualities, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and stylistics. Her PhD on Sexual Identity Labels in Young Adult novels featuring Female Same-Sex Attraction is in progress at LAEL. k.wind@lancaster.ac.uk

Mandy Yu is a PhD candidate from LAEL. Her research interests include gender and language, and pragmatics. Her PhD thesis looks at how unmarried middle-aged women are represented in a Hong Kong TV programme. h.yu7@lancaster.ac.uk

This leaflet is intended to facilitate and promote social and academic best practice as regards non-sexist language.
NON-SEXIST LANGUAGE

They/them/themselves
To avoid sexism, you can use these forms, whenever possible, in theoretical and/or general discussions and to refer to groups of people or individuals whose gender is unknown or irrelevant.

Ms/Mr and other titles
Consider using the parallel titles Ms (for women) and Mr (for men) as well as, where applicable, professional gender-neutral titles, such as Inspector, Officer, Dr and Professor, in order to promote equality.

(Further to the above,) neutralization of gendered job titles
On some occasions we tend to associate a particular sex/gender with certain professions. It could be beneficial to avoid bias such as referring to a doctor in conversation with a masculine pronoun even though their sex has not been mentioned (as in, A: "I went to the doctor." B: "What did he say?") and to use gender-neutral terms for professions and positions, for instance, nurse and chairperson (not only for women!).

Alternation between female and male firstness
In pairs, please note that both female and male firstness is acceptable, e.g. brother(s) and sister(s) or sister(s) and brother(s).

NON-SEXIST PRACTICES (IN ACADEMIA)

Minority
The ratio between female and male humans in the world’s population is 1:1. You could take that into consideration when referring to disadvantaged groups. That is, "women" are, strictly speaking, not a minority.

Choice of data
If you have data to show, you could consider examples of language used or taken from both men and women.

Acknowledgement of sex-ratio in data
It could be useful, when relevant and/or as it may have implications, to acknowledge the gender ratio between the participants who inform your studies (for example, a third of those who completed the questionnaire were men, two thirds women).

Foreign languages
Unlike English (defined as a natural gender language), foreign languages can have a different grammatical gender system, e.g. Italian, French and German are defined as grammatical gender languages. When studying a foreign language, you may find it useful to reflect on how language can be used to represent a gender-(im)balanced world.

SEXIST LANGUAGE (CORRESPONDING TO THE PREVIOUS SECTIONS)

Marital status
Using Mrs or Miss could make the person referred to uncomfortable.

Gender symbolism
Using terms like male nurse or lady doctor, that are hinting at gendered professions, promotes a somehow fixed gender social and labour arrangement that perpetuates inequalities.

Girl/s
Using girl/s to refer to staff or students could accentuate gender imbalances in learning and working environments. Would you use boy/s for male students and staff?

Women/men pairs
Referring to men and women differently, e.g. Harriet Harman is the acting leader of Labour since the resignation of Milliband, could position the two people asymmetrically.

Generics
Using masculine-turned-generic terms, e.g. he or man, when gender is not known or the phenomenon described is not gender-specific — e.g. all men on this planet need to breathe — could not do justice to who is talked about or referred to.