INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

INTRODUCTION

This paper seeks to explore the English linguistic basis for what is now known as "inclusive language", by which I mean in principle, language which adequately indicates the presence of whichever genders are in question. In practice it happens very seldom that the presence of the masculine and neuter are glossed over, and so I treat here only cases where feminine presence is or is felt to be ignored.

There is a movement today, in the church as much as anywhere else, to impose a strict code of inclusive language practice upon written English everywhere, regardless of style and context, to an extent which in my judgement is not always justified, and which is seldom supported by an analysis of English syntax.

This paper endeavours to supply the beginnings of such an analysis, and then to suggest two criteria which writers and critics from different points of view can seek to apply in individual cases.

GENERICS

I want to begin with some observations about the way we use the English language to refer to male and female members of particular species. For instance, take lions. We may often refer to "a pride of lions", meaning typically to designate a male, at least one female, and some cubs. Here the generic - or common gender - term for the family, "lion", or its plural, "lions", is the same as the word we use to denote the male. If we wish to denote the female we use a different word, "lioness". But we would not normally expect to speak of "a pride of lion and lionesses" to denote the same family. The English language does not require it. Similarly when talking about the biological species, lion, the word used is normally the masculine singular, as in, "The lion used to be indigenous in Greece and Palestine". Not naming the female does no violence to the language.

The same is true of the dog. A group of such beasts may be adequately denoted "dogs", regardless of which sexes are present. But when distinction by sex is required, the same term "dog" is used for the male, a different term "bitch" being assigned to the female. But when referring to the biological species, few would question the grammatical correctness of expressions like, "The dog is a close relative of the wolf".

Ducks are different. The generic "duck" is the name we give to the female of the species. If we wish to refer to the male we call him a "drake". Geese behave like ducks : the female goose is a "goose", the male a "gander".

Horses are different again. The term "horse" denoting the species has no masculine connotation. If we wish to speak of an adult male horse we would probably call him a "stallion"; his mate is a "mare". Sheep are similar : the male is a "ram", the female an "ewe".

For what I would guess to be a majority of animals, male and female both share the same name. If we wish to distinguish, we have to speak of the male or female elephant, the male or female giraffe, and so forth, or else introduce such words as "bull" anmd "cow" to replace "male" and "female".

I contend that *homo sapiens* falls into the same category as "lion" and "dog". The generic term "man", which serves to distinguish the species from other creatures, is the same word as we apply to the adult male. As such it translates the Latin *homo* and the Greek *anthropos*, from which we get our word anthropology. Latin and Greek, however, use different words - *vir* and *aner* respectively - to denote particular men. English does not have this luxury of separate terms, "man" having to do duty for both the generic and particular. And I would expect any dictionary to make this distinction between senses, as does my *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (which actually takes the process of classification rather further than I have). This has been accepted English usage for centuries and the precedent is a powerful one. Under it we have

"What a piece of work is man"	(Shakespeare)
"The proper study of mankind is man"	(Pope)
"Man is a political animal"	(Tr. from Aristotle)
"The Ascent of Man"	(Bronowski, title)
"The Phenomenon of Man"	(de Chardin, title)

With this weight of tradition I can see no problem in continuing to use the term "man" when the generic human species is in question. The female sex is not being omitted or forgotten here. "Man" frequently embraces "woman".

PLURALS

On the other hand, whether "men" in the plural can or should similarly include "women" is more of an open question. Certainly in the past this has often conventionally been the case. So in the King James Version of the Bible the message of the angels at Bethlehem is rendered

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men".   (Luke 2:14)

Few would conclude that women were to be excluded from the blessing - they would be wrong to do so, for the Greek word is *anthropois*, indicating the human race.

But this is not always happy. "Man" and "men" are not interchangeable, even when the whole human race is in question. Take for example Sam Walter Foss' poem about the philanthropist whose ambition was

"But let me live by the side of the road
and be a friend to man".

This is an echo from Homer's *Iliad* (vi. 14-15), where "man" translates an inflection of *anthropos*. To many ears this would mean something very different had Foss translated

"and be a friend to men".

There would be a definite suspicion that women were being deliberately excluded here, *given that a suitable alternative word ("man") exists*.

PRONOUNS

The argument so far has looked at some of the words used to denote gender which are available to us in the English Language. A particular problem arises in connection with pronouns and their associated possessive adjectives. In the third person singular we have

"he",	"his"
"she",	"her"
"it",	"its"

but in the third person plural only

"they",	"their".

This means that in the plural, "they" and "their" may be used indiscriminately without regard to the gender of the reference. We have no exclusive masculine or feminine plural. However in the singular, English gives us a wider choice and with it greater pitfalls. What do we do when we wish to use the singular, but not specify any particular gender ? The word we want does not exist. Several alternative conventions are in use, each with its merits and demerits.

(1) Be implicit : Use the masculine as a form of *shorthand* for either gender, e.g.

"If anyone is in difficulty with his pronouns, he can always copy this example."

Until recently this form of common gender (cf. "lion" above) was the predominant choice. It was neat and more elegant than some of its alternatives. Because it was understood as a shorthand, the unspecified feminine gender seldom gave offence. What was intended was and is understood by all. Today however, although still understood, this method is felt to give offence in some quarters where a decision has been taken not to accept the "shorthand".

Nevertheless even in circles where all reasonable attempts have been made to give fair expression to both genders, this alternative is still sometimes selected as the preferable option. So we read in the New Jerusalem Bible, which elsewhere goes out of its way to adopt inclusive language:

"If the wicked, however, renounces all the sins he has committed, respects my laws and is law-abiding and upright, he will most certainly live; he will not die. None of the crimes he committed will be remembered against him from then on; he will most certainly live because of his upright actions. Would I take pleasure in the death of the wicked - declares the Lord Yahweh - and not prefer to see him renounce his wickedness and live?"[1]

(2) Or, be explicit, always: Write "he or she" wherever "he" was used before. This is the language of precision such as might be expected in an advertisement for a job open to both sexes. However if used repeatedly it does make for tedious, inelegant prose. I think of this as the "sledge- hammer" approach.

(3) Or, be explicit, sometimes: Indicate initially that both sexes are potentially involved, but having done so revert to "shorthand". This provides an escape route from slavish repetition and so reads more elegantly.

(4) Or, alternate: Use "he" and "she" at random with preference for neither. This is the method used by Lesslie Newbigin in his book "The Gospel in a Pluralist Society", who writes in his preface :

"Like all people who have used the English language I have until recently been accustomed to using the masculine pronoun inclusively to refer to both halves of the human family. That this is, for valid reasons, no longer acceptable to many readers poses a problem for the writer. To use both pronouns ("he or she") at every point can make sentences intolerably convoluted. I have therefore used "he" and "she" inclusively and - I hope - impartially. I hope that this will not expost me to any charge of moral delinquency."[2]

This really is an adapted form of "shorthand" and can make for quite refreshing reading.

(5) Or, use the plural as if singular: Write "they" and "their", which as already noted are valid for both genders, as if they were also valid as singular. This is popular, colloquial, convenient, and not unwieldy, but traditionally viewed sa grammatically incorrect This approach has been adopted by the 2004 Today's New International Version of the Bible (TNIV), whose translators write of

"the so-called singular 'they/their/them,' which has been gaining acceptance among careful writers and which actually has a venerable place in English idiom...."

My experience is that this makes often makes for a very much more natural reading than that of the 1995 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) which rejects this approach in favour of a

---

[1] New Jerusalem Bible (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), Ezekiel 18:21-23.

[2] Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp x-xi.

variety of devices (for instance "the one" or "that one" for the neutral singular) which repeatedly come across as wooden and contrived, using them even when context does not demand it, as

"Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord."[3]

(6) Or, rewrite the entire passage in the plural. So the passage cited in (1) above would begin,

"If the wicked, however, renounce all the sins they have committed, respect my laws and are law-abiding and upright, they will most certainly live; they will not die."

(7) Or, punctuate: Use constructions such as "(s)he" or "he/she" which are now gaining acceptance in spite of their visual inelegance and awkwardness on reading aloud.

SUBSTITUTIONS

It saddens me the way we have come to accept the automatic replacement of the letters "man" at the beginning or end of a word by the neutral term "person". This attempt to solve one problem does so if at all often at the expense of our language. I do not welcome neologisms like "a ploughperson's lunch" which strike me as grotesque and help no one.

On the other hand many people now prefer to replace "mankind" by "humankind" or "humanity", which does violence to no one.

The compromise "Madam Chairman" still seems to be in use.

TWO PRINCIPLES

I do not believe there is a single solution to the above dilemmas. Instead I wish to propose two principles which may help us reach particular solutions in individual cases.

(1) *I affirm the right of women to expect due linguistic recognition wherever their interests are at stake*.

What is then at issue is, Just when are feminine interests at stake? Some would answer, all the time, whenever gender-related words are in use. This seems to me to be unduly defensive, an overreaction. In my own judgement as argued above, the generic, common gender, use of "man" and the "shorthand" use of "he" are both still perfectly understood and exclude no one. I do not myself believe that feminine interests are always at stake - that the feminine presence is given insufficient recognition - when they are adopted. Others will I know disagree.

Similarly when once a writer has made explicit that he or she includes women in his intention (as in this paragraph), reverting to "shorthand" thereafter should in my judgement offend no one of moderate inclinations. In this compromise the feminine interest is recognised and the risk of producing turgid English reduced.

As examples where what I call the feminine interest is definitely at stake I would offer :

First, the lines

"Brothers, this Lord Jesus
Shall return again".

---

[3] Matthew 23:39 NRSV. I find the NRSV to be stiff and pedantic in its substitutions in many places where TNIV is relaxed and natural. Compare at 1 Corinthians 13:1 "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels" (NRSV) against TNIV's "If I speak in human or angelic tongues". NRSV more frequently stretches its pedantry to an extent which in places obscures important theological points. So God's pet name for Ezekiel (e.g. at Ezekiel 2:1) is rendered by NRSV as "mortal" where TNIV retains "Son of man", a title later adopted by Jesus for Himself (e.g. Luke 9:58), as is granted even by NRSV.

in the hymn "At the name of Jesus"[4]. I know of no usage elsewhere where "brothers" includes a feminine component. "Siblings...", which is metrically equivalent, sounds no happier and so more drastic surgery may be required. (I am always unhappy about the wholesale rewriting of traditional hymns for whatever reason where the perpretators have manifestly failed to consult a poet, as often seems to be the case.)

Second, the chorus "Father God, I wonder..."[5] which first happily celebrates the parenthood of God and then continues

> "But now I am your son...."

Here again I know of no other usage where "son" means "daughter", and there is a perfectly good substitute "child" which does the job without being grotesque or destroying the metre.

In liturgy generally, where people of both sexes need to identify fully with what is said, one might well argue that the feminine interest is at stake all the time.

Others will draw the line elsewhere and the answers of previous ages may or may not be the same as today's. But the point I am making here is that this - whether or not feminine interests are at stake - is in each case the question to be answered.

> (2) *I affirm the right of the individual writer to use whatever language he or she chooses in order to achieve whatever effect he (or she) is trying to produce.*

The writer is a craftsman - or indeed a craftswoman. On picking up pen or putting finger to keyboard she is entering into a language with centuries of tradition behind it. She may have discovered for herself that "there are no perfect synonyms" and that there may be no exact alternatives to the words she wishes to use. She may need to weigh many considerations in the balance before coming up with her final turn of phrase. She carries responsibilities to God, to her heritage, to the interests of all her readers, men and women, and indeed to all other language users. And we the readers should recognise and respect her integrity.

It is my belief that when these two principles come into tension it is up to both sides to seek in love and humility to reach a compromise that does violence to neither human feeling nor the English language. Both parties should be aware that compromise - give and take on both sides - is often the only way in which human tensions can be resolved. Neither side should expect to dictate to the other on all occasions.

FINAL SUGGESTIONS

(1) Set the context by making plain initially which sexes you are referring to.

(2) Thereafter do not labour the point - be natural, not driven.

(3) Use whichever gender comes easiest, with "shorthand" if necessary.

(4) Extend the "shorthand" principle if appropriate so as to use both "he" and "she" inclusively in different places (as Newbigin above).

<div style="text-align:center">

M. B. Mosse,
April 1997.

</div>

---

[4] *Hymns Ancient and Modern Revised*, 225.

[5] Ian Smale, *Songs and Hymns of Fellowship* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1987), 92.

APPENDIX

I found the following paragraph in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Ninth Edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.1663, after writing most of the above, and include it unedited.

"The English language lacks a third person singular pronoun or possessive adjective applying neutrally to both sexes. The older convention was to use *he*, *him*, *his* for both sexes (e.g. *Each member must pay his subscription*), but this is now often felt to exclude women and girls. Acceptable alternatives include (i) rephrasing in the plural (e.g. *All members must pay their subscriptions*); (ii) using both pronouns or possessives (e.g. *Each member must pay his or her subscription*), though this is often cumbersome; *his/her* and *he/she* (or even *s/he*) are awkward to read aloud. The use of they and their in the singular is common in informal speech (e.g. *Each member must pay their subscription*) but is still considered ungrammatical and should be avoided in formal speech and writing.