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Language, a crucial feminist issue, must not be ignored

By Carolyn Farhie

I am a senior Women's Studies major at Columbia College. I am busy with my thesis work, with my work in a battered womens' shelter, and with writing a community/identity chapter for the first Barnard/Columbia Women's Resource Guide. Yet when I read Emily Brunner's editorial, "Obsession with language obscures real issues of feminism" (Sept. 20), I knew it was time to pick up my pen and write a bit about the power of language.

In her editorial Emily Brunner asserts that the argument over sexist language is trivial and should not be included among "the real issues of feminism." I applaud Brunner's ability "to think of feminism as part of a larger context" and her inclusion of different forms of oppression as feminist issues (she mentions sexism, racism, and classism, but why not homophobia?). Indeed,

feminist issues run the gamut from racism to AIDS to rape, from the feminization of poverty to political power to economic equality.

Brunner fails to recognize the link between racism and sexism and the power of language. To assert that language form and use is not a major feminist question demonstrates a lack of understanding as to just how much weight the spoken and written word carries in our society.

Brunner's article was sparked by

the classic “freshman” versus “first-year student” debate. What does a freshman look like? Whom do you picture when you hear the word “freshman”? One may argue that the word can refer to a male or female, or similarly, that “he” can refer to either sex. But many psychological tests have proven that the word “he” in a textbook really does conjure up the image of a man.

Historically, a college freshman has indeed been a man, and probably

a white, upper-middle class man at that. Until very recently, women and people of color did not have access to the majority of universities (due to the lack of money, lack of political/social power, or lack of a penis). For centuries upon centuries white, European men attended universities to gain entrance into the civilized, public sphere while their wives bore children and cleaned the house. Freshmen became scientists who asserted that women needed their energy to reproduce and therefore should not waste energy on academics. Freshmen belonged to an elite, upper class invested in maintaining its power in business, medicine and the arts. One cannot forget that the word freshman carries centuries of cultural baggage with it.

Many consider this question of sexist language question trivial. But if it is no big deal for a woman to call herself a freshman, and if the word shows no sex/gender bias, then why would a man cringe at the idea of calling his whole class the “freshwoman” class? Why would it seem absurd to call a male first-year

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student a freshman? Why would one think it strange (and even discriminatory) to read a whole textbook written with just the pronoun “she” to describe both sexes?

Men have always constituted, and still do constitute, the overwhelming majority of writers. Historically, man has written from the objective and universal “I,” assuming that his experience can and should be applied to the rest of the world. Men have written to, for, and about men (even when writing about women). I am demanding the right to define myself, to name myself, to tell my own story. The word “he” has never been used in a textbook to describe me, to promote my freedom or well-being, or to validate me. I am not a freshman nor a “he,” and I do not belong to mankind.

It is possible to assert that a word is just a word. But language is both prescriptive (dictates behavior) and descriptive (notes behavior). For example, it is natural to assume a male identity when someone uses the word “congressman.” Politics continue to be con-

trolled by men, for the benefit of men. The word “congressman,” conjuring up a male image, reinforces the idea, whether consciously or unconsciously, that men rule the public sphere. Changing the word to “congressperson” may seem awkward and it certainly does not bring about political progress and equality; it does, however, call into question the sex of the politician and question the basic assumption that it is more “natural” for men to run in the public sphere.

The effects of language are not always so subtle. The word “faggot,” which is often viewed as simply a verbal insult, is derived from the French word *fagot*, meaning one of a bundle of sticks. Gay men were burned in fires of wooden sticks, thus the name “faggot.” Implicit in the word is a history of murder and discrimination. When someone utters the word, violence often follows. To assert that language is not linked with oppression is to ignore the hefty power that language holds to define, control, and persuade.

The same argument can be applied to words that are inherently racist. The prefix "black" is often used in white dominated language to imply darkness, evil, or the unknown, and to provide a negative connotation such as in "blacklist," "blackmail," "black market," and "blackball." Meanwhile, white is associated with goodness, purity, religion, and truth. While some may argue that this binary language opposition that associates black with bad and white with good has no affect on the society that employs these words, I assert that it directly or indirectly promotes racist ideology and affects how Afro-Americans perceive themselves and are perceived by others.

Language, especially in written form, historically has been used to oppress people of color, poor people, women, lesbian and gay people. It can be a sophisticated, dangerous and illusive weapon.

The Women's Studies majors at Columbia and Barnard *do* study racism, AIDS, abortion, poverty, and rape as crucial feminist issues. I believe that anyone who is interested enough to ask feminists about "the real issues of feminism" would receive diverse and insightful answers, not simply complaints about spelling or "pointless arguments about who should open doors for whom." I would like to add that I do not run around correcting every woman who calls herself a freshman or who uses the word "mankind" in a sentence. I don't care *what* she calls herself, because feminism is all about gaining, stealing, and creating the power to define ourselves.

A lie that we let our children chant in Western, patriarchal culture is "sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me." Names do hurt and they do carry history and power between their letters. We must not lose sight of the fact that language is a crucial issue in the fight against any monolithic, oppressive culture. Language, therefore, is definitely a crucial feminist issue.