**Emancipation involves language. A complaint about our vocabulary.**

Milly de Montparnasse

The way we speak, write and basically communicate, shapes the way we think, it reflects our beliefs, our society and our costumes. Words and language are powerful tools capable of modifying reality, producing changes and mutating minds. Language is not a static object: it can be adapted to pursue shared goals, to raise awareness, to open society, to emancipate those who are left behind. We should use language, not be used by it.

The following riddle shows how much we are affected by the words we use. Take your time to solve it, you will know when the answer is correct.

«A father and his son were driving to a ball game when their car stalled on the railroad tracks. In the distance a train whistle blew a warning. Frantically, the father tried to start the engine, but in his panic, he couldn’t turn the key, and the car was hit by the onrushing train. An ambulance sped to the scene and picked them up. On the way to the hospital, the father died. The son was still alive but his condition was very serious, and he needed immediate surgery. The moment they arrived at the hospital, he was wheeled into an emergency operating room, and the surgeon came in, expecting a routine case. However, on seeing the boy, the surgeon blanched and muttered, “*I can’t operate on this boy - he’s my son.*”».

Douglas Hofstadter, the philosopher who made this riddle famous in *Matemagical Themas*, takes one minute to solve it, but for most people it takes more than five minutes and someone never even guesses it right.

No, the doctor was not the biological father and the dead man the adopted one, nor did the boy have two fathers. The answer is very simple, in fact every absurd explanation that comes in your mind is incorrect: the surgeon is the boy’s mother.

(image: cover of the book

Link to add on ‘Matematigal Themas’

<https://ia800901.us.archive.org/22/items/MetamagicalThemas/Metamagical%20Themas%2C%20Hofstadter.pdf>)

Hofstadter explains how ‘default assumption’ «permeate our mental representations and channel our thoughts». These reductive presuppositions are automatic stereotypes deeply rooted in our minds. When it comes to speaking about hypothetical people, someone who is indefinite, the declension is always in the masculine. The assumption is that supposed generics like 'he' and 'man' are neutral in people's minds. This is clearly false. Staying on the riddle, most people reading 'surgeon', even those most sensitive to gender and race issues, imagine a white man, maybe even straight. This happens every time we generalize using the masculine and it is clearly a problem, which is also, as far as I know, shared by most languages.

The monolithic structure of default assumption prevents us to think genuinely, and minorities to be incorporated in normal debates. As Hofstadter wrote, «no matter how generic "man" is claimed to be, there is a residual trace, a subliminal connotation of higher probability of being male than female», of being white instead of black or Asian, of being heterosexual and cis instead of homosexual and trans, of being a person without handicap instead of a person with disabilities. The emancipation of women, LGBTQ+ community members, disabled and not-white people requires a change in our vocabulary. Those who invoke ‘purity of language’ or ‘linguistic traditions’ as an excuse to not change their linguistic habits are wrong: a neutral and more inclusive way of speaking would constitute a giant leap for humanity.

(image: UN women neutral language

source: <https://twitter.com/un/status/1262322788687323136>)

Therefore, the first step to achieve this goal is to also use feminine pronouns when speaking in a generic way. Next time you’ll talk about a hypothetical person or a group of people, say 'she or he' instead of ‘him’; say, for example, 'actors and actresses' instead of ‘actors’. This little transgression will help you and the others to change their mental images and will help minorities to emancipate themselves.

Tags:

#emancipation #language #gender #defaultassumption #hofstadter #languageneutrality #reductivepresupposition #vocabulary #feminism #equality #surgeonriddle