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RELEASE: FEBRUARY 8, 1985

SMILES, SEXISM, AND SILLINESS

On a recent plane trip, I was surprised when a flight attendant leaned over my seat and asked if she could borrow my Time Magazine. A few minutes later, two more flight attendants asked if they could read my Time before returning it.

My curiosity was aroused. When they returned my magazine, I learned that the article they found so fascinating was a one-page essay on behavior called "Is Smiling Dangerous to Women?" It was written as a colloquy between a husband and his feminist wife.

The wife argued that one of the ways men keep women subservient is to assign them the role of smiling all the time. She argued that women are almost always shown smiling in ads to show their deference to men. She noted that stewardesses are required to smile throughout all flights, whereas no one expects the pilot to chuckle and grin.

The husband protested vigorously at the notion that cheerfulness is a sexist plot to keep women in their place. He concluded with the caveat, "You can catch more flies with honey than you can with feminist theory."

Although the essay was written with tongue-in-cheek, it does appear that many feminists have an ideological commitment to grimness instead of smiles. Fortunately, men and women who don't take their orders from the Bureau of Feminist Rectitude can still laugh.

I recently bought a personal computer along with an assortment of software to perform various functions. I discovered that one of the software programs will search material on the word processor, identify "sexist" words, and instruct the secretary how to purge all "sexist" words and substitute different words. Upon pushing the right keys, this program obligingly printed out its long list of sexist words followed by the gender-neutral word with which it should be replaced.

According to this software, we may no longer talk about businessmen, firemen, newsboys, mailmen or doormen; they must be businesspersons, firepersons, paper carriers, postal carriers or doorpersons. Longshoremen are out; they must be dock workers. Horseman and horsewoman are intolerable; they must be called equestrians.

Sportsmanship is out! It must be fair play. Salesmanship must be replaced by sales ability, chairmanship by chairpersonship. Mankind must be written as humanity.

We may not say lady, gentleman, man or woman; we must say person or people. Boy and girl must be replaced by child. Never mind that those words don't have the same meanings.

Unable to supply synonyms for such plainly sexist words as he, she, his, and her, the software curtly orders the typist to "revise."

Many word substitutions simply do not have the same meaning. Man-made must be replaced by artificial, spokesman by representative. Statesman must be replaced by diplomat, even though all statesmen are not diplomats and all diplomats certainly are not statesmen.

Some words apparently give such trauma to the software program that it bluntly spits out the instruction "avoid." The censored words are macho, manful, manliness, manly, ladylike, gentlemanly, and manpower.

Now we're getting into real trouble. The software states that groomsman must be replaced by groom. But the groom is the guy who gets the bride, and the groomsman is the male friend who helps get the lucky fellow to the church without losing the wedding ring. The groomsman would be quite surprised to learn that he is a substitute for the groom.

But that's not the bridegroom's only problem. The software insists that stableman be replaced by groom. So, now we have the bridegroom, his attendant, and the fellow who readies the horse for the getaway all answering to the same non-sexist name.

Repairman and craftsman become repairperson and craftsperson. Man-hours becomes personhours. But handyman? The computer must have choked on handyperson and tells us to "rephrase." A busboy is a clearer. The next time you dine in a restaurant, be sure to tell the waitress (excuse me, waitperson) to have the clearer remove your dishes.

At least five years ago, the Bureau of Feminist Censorship persuaded the big publishers to issue Censorship Guidelines prohibiting the allegedly "sexist" words, phrases, and pictures from use in textbooks. These attempts have not been able to overcome the American people's devotion to the English language.

Will the computer succeed in reprograming our language to conform to feminist guidelines? It's not likely, since the lesson of all advertising is that you sell your product best with smiles -- and that's against feminist ideology.