The Need for a Gender-Neutral Language

The English language is loaded with words that have sexist connotations which lead those who speak the language to subconsciously categorize people by their gender. That is, our sexist language contributes to and has a significant impact on how we think of men and women. Commonly used gender-biased* words often have “man” within them such as policeman, fireman and mankind, which classify a group of people as male, even if the group consists of both females and males.

Being a highly political phenomenon, language is the starting point for the expansion of sexist stereotypes in a culture. Because the gender-biased terms we use in our language are deeply buried in our minds, people who use these sexist terms are not aware of their significant consequences. Sexism in the English language may be difficult to recognize at first, and people who use sexist terms may not be aware that they are sexist themselves. Nevertheless, it is the subtle forms of sexism, such as language, that contribute to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. Our language is so deeply rooted within our culture that it affects even the lyrics of songs and the words used in advertisements which help create such negative stereotypes. These negative stereotypes also influence how children interpret sex roles. Language immediately shapes and determines how children perceive appropriate social expectations. The gender stereotypes that are learned at a young age are reinforced by both our language and our culture, which sustains negative gender stereotypes.

If a woman’s gender cannot be acknowledged in her own language, then how can we expect her to be treated equally within society? It is obvious that, in a world where women’s equality is still an issue, we need a gender-neutral language that does not ignore females. If language is a vital force in constructing, validating and keeping these stereotypes in existence, language reform can surely play a role in reducing the gender gap. By including both genders, a gender-neutral language will ultimately help support the idea that women are not objects but equal beings and that males are not superior to females. Using neutral words instead of masculine based words will eliminate the idea that men are more powerful and have higher priority over women in the society. I am not suggesting that the English language be completely re-written. However, written and verbal changes should be made by replacing gender-biased terms with gender-neutral terms such as police officer, fire fighter and humankind.

* Gender-bias, or sexism, is the belief or attitude that one gender, or sex, is inferior to or less valuable than the other.

A. Why is the writer concerned about gender-biased language? Explain in 3-4 sentences using your own words.

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B. You are writing for a weekly magazine. Your assignment is to write a paragraph of about 150-180 words discussing whether university education in your country should be in the native language or in English.

In your paragraph, make sure:
• you write an introductory sentence, a topic sentence, major and minor supporting sentences, and a conclusion,
• all your ideas are relevant to the topic,
• you use appropriate connectors.

Pay attention to:
• the content,
• the organization,
• the accuracy of the language.

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A.

* Gender-biased language causes a negative stereotype of women. Commonly used words such as policeman or fireman exclude women working in the same fields. While such terms imply that men are more powerful and stronger than women, they also contribute to the view that women are just objects. As a result, gender-biased language increases the gender gap, inequality and discrimination in society as it leads to women being perceived as the inferior sex.

B.