



# A Common Problem

Amanda Higgin

Xanda and I are queuing for the Ladies’ during the interval of the Rocky Horror Show (which is no longer showing at New Theatre, I’m afraid, but here’s a tip for if you ever see it: you’d think wearing more clothes than everyone else would make you feel less vulnerable, but if you’re not dressed up you stick out like a sore thumb).

Of course, there is a queue for the Ladies’. There is always a queue for the Ladies’. To my female readers, it would be surprising if there were not a queue for the Ladies’. To my male readers, you are about to eavesdrop on a conversation surely every girl either has had or will have in some form, a conversation to be filed beside ‘Why don’t we get pockets?’ and the ubiquity of pink.

I have used the facilities in McDonald’s in the middle of the afternoon and had to queue. This particular

queue is a little longer than that because, as it seems, 70% of the females in our section of the audience have been holding it for the last hour, and Xanda and I did not have the forethought to jump out of our seats the moment the stage went dark in order to beat the, admittedly civilised, stampede.

“What do you think of the theatre?” Xanda asks, trying to start a conversation. We’ve already evaluated the play and are both too bemused by the plot (or lack of it) to maintain any kind of discussion. The queue is so long that we are actually still in the auditorium and therefore have the vantage point to judge the interior design.

“It’s definitely a theatre,” I reply unimaginatively. “Could do with more toilets, though.”

“Agreed!” Xanda laughs as we stand aside for a lady with a child holding each hand and finally advance through the door out of the auditorium.

“I mean,” I continue, getting on the familiar complaint train, “why don’t they just build more ladies’ toilets than men’s? We always take longer.”

“Ah, but that would be sexist,” Xanda comments, checking her phone. “Hang on, is it not more sexist to make all the women wait longer than the men?”

“Women could learn to pee faster.”

“Oh, now we’re attempting the re-education of half of all humanity? That really sounds feminist. You know, I think the problem is actually that women have to go to the loo more often than men. We have to go when we actually need it as well as to cope with periods.”

“Maybe women actually get fewer toilets than men? After all, a urinal takes up less floor space than a cubicle.”

“I might test that hypothesis...”

I ponder the possibilities as we edge forwards. “To add to that, women have to go whenever we can in order to preempt a lack of toilets in the future. If a guy is caught unawares then he can always go behind a bush or something. Or, as some Oxford partygoers have proved to me, in the doorway of another college.”

“That’s disgusting,” Xanda cringes. “I do think you’re taking this queue too personally, though.”

“Maybe,” I sigh. “Maybe.”■

# ‘Worn-Out Words’

Aidan Chivers

The cracked pots of consonants lie strewn across the ground,  
And quiver with the rattle of feeble cliché -  
Whimpering, they give out a creaky, plaintive sound  
Battered by tiny tongues forcing their decay.

Colourless vowels fade, hollowed out through overuse:  
An impotent oblivion of musty, mouldy scents.  
Antique tapestries unravel; dusty threads run loose -  
A sickly, pallid shadow of the artist’s intents.

Syllables, torn up, litter busy workshop counters,  
Reworked with feverish fingers by the Symbolist tailor  
Who re-stitches, and tires; re-sews, and flounders:  
He weaves his worthless patchwork of artful failure.

An anonymous message from one of our readers:  
Juliet - WCGG YMS HJPPY HE.

# Is Language Sexist? Is Sexism Linguistic?

Anna Wawrzonkowska

S	HE
WO	MAN
FE	MALE
HU	MAN
PER	SON

Do we think what we say, or do we say what we think? The difference is slim, but extremely important. In other words, the dilemma could be phrased as: is language shaped by our thoughts and opinions, or does it shape them?

The visual statement made by the graph above is clear and simple. Every ‘she’ is a modification of a ‘he’; every ‘female’ is just an addition to ‘male’. ‘Woman’ and indeed even ‘human’ suggests ‘man’ with an add-on. Viewed like that, language might seem a tool used to make ‘male’ default and ‘female’ derivative. The stance that the creator of the sign seems to be taking is, *English is intrinsically sexist*. They further comment on it with a caption, which reads: “*men fabricated the idea that they are the default sex (...) this is not just the “natural order” this is the language of a patriarchal culture*”.

Is the poster justified in making such advanced claims? In other words, does our language make us sexist?

Extensive research on this, known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, analyses the complex relations between language and culture. The hypothesis can be simplified to one sentence: *Language shapes* (strong version) *or influences* (weak version) *the culture which it is spoken in*. Going by this hypothesis, one

might say: yes, calling someone a “female” and someone else a “male” immediately shapes the idea of who is the default. In that sense English can indeed be perceived as sexist; it conveys intuitive notions that might shape the speaker’s point of view. It is fairly intuitive to divide the words as the graph does: fe-male, s-he, wo-man. However, it is important to note that although this point can be made *orthographically* (relating how the words are written), it comes undone when we consider the *phonetic* form of the words above (or, how the words *actually* exist in a language). In the IPA transcript, the picture would have looked like this:

female [ˈfiːmeɪl] vs. male [meɪl]
she [ʃiː] vs. he [hiː]
woman [ˈwʊ.mən] vs. man [ˈmæːn]
human [ˈʧʰ.u.mən] vs. man [ˈmæːn]
person [ˈpʰə.sɪn] vs. son [ˈsʌːn].

Although less obvious, this brings up an important point: only one pair of those is identical and holds up to the natural phonetic division (female-male). This comes from the fact that, actually, they come from completely different etymological backgrounds: for instance, English *son* comes from Proto-Germanic \**sunuz*, whereas *person* derives from Latin *persona* – two completely separate and different sources. The words have not been “fabricated” to promote patriarchy, as the poster claims; the way the words are written is not representative of how the words *are*, and their origin is completely and utterly innocent.

It’s easy to forget that language in itself has no mind and no agenda in its creation; it is an impossibly complex result of hundreds of years of communication, connecting between cultures and mindsets. Franz Boas, one of the first American linguists, noted that Northern

Canada’s Inuits have multiple words for the single English *snow*; Ancient Greek, with its philosophical focus, has several, distinctly different nouns for the umbrella term *love*. Language rather *reflects* culture than *shapes* it; it is a mirror in which a culture can see its own multifaceted image.

Looking in that mirror, we might find out that although some things that we have inherited from our linguistic ancestors are innocent (e.g. *person* is not related to *son* in any way at all), some others might reflect systematic discrimination – not present in a language in itself, but in the culture.

And so, glancing at our reflection in speech, we should ask ourselves an important question: do we make our language sexist?

Feminine pejoration is a well-attested occurrence. It is the process where, from two gendered nouns that are otherwise identical, emerges a degradation of the female noun. What, we might ask, is the reason for *hound* keeping its canine meaning, but *bitch* gaining another sense entirely? *Mistress* and *master* used to be equal in meaning; now *master* evokes power and excellence, whereas *mistress* is someone with whom you can cheat on your wife. Incidentally, you cannot use *master* in the same way. Speaking about wives and husbands, *hus-bonde* is ‘the master of the house’ – where’s *hus-bonda*, ‘the mistress of the house’? Words change their meanings whatever field they concern; however, if there emerges a pattern, it’s likely that some other factors are at play.

For instance, when German speakers describe a bridge (feminine *Brücke*), they would use adjectives such as ‘*beautiful*’, ‘*elegant*’, ‘*fragile*’, ‘*peaceful*’, ‘*pretty*’, and ‘*slender*’, whereas Spanish speakers, describing the same bridge (masculine *punte*), use terms like ‘*big*’, ‘*dangerous*’, ‘*long*’, ‘*strong*’, ‘*sturdy*’, and ‘*towering*’. You cannot

blame the bridge itself; I doubt that anybody has ever asked it what gender it was! You cannot blame language either; linguistic gender is abstract and draws on our own experiences to give it shape. And yet there is something in our heads that associates feminine with ‘*pretty*’ and masculine with ‘*strong*’. The only possible explanation is that language reflects and reinforces the culture of its users.

Is language sexist? Just as much as the user is. Is sexism linguistic? Not *only* linguistic, but yes,

the evidence in glossaries and grammar is enough to conclude so. So how can we possibly fight linguistic sexism and sexist language?

Unfortunately, fighting language resembles a blinking match with a mirror. It will not blink – unless you do. Because at the end of the day language is, above all, a reflection of us – and only through evolving so that our society is no longer sexist *in thought*, we can make it no longer sexist *in speech*.■

A full list of references for this article can be found in the online version of this article at [www.thepoorprint.com](http://www.thepoorprint.com).

# ‘Inkwell’

Tom Davy

“There’ll be hell toupee”  
We joked eight months ago in May  
While remarking on the putrid tan  
That could orange the seven seas.

And we were laughing to the end,  
Drinking and laughing, watching  
A map become increasingly red in the face.  
“It’s alright, we only need Florida”  
With another swig of optimism and, oh,  
That’s gone,  
So we’ll move on to the next one:  
She only needs this,  
She only needs that,  
And suddenly the only thing we need  
Is a stiff drink and each other.

There’s a comedy in tragedy  
But the joke is getting old  
And the tweets are getting old  
And we’ll be four years older  
By the time the punchline hits,  
By the time the laughs are spent up  
On pent up angry people  
Doing angry things.

And we’ll keep talking  
The same headline herding talk  
That penned him into our homes,  
Wounded and smudged with ink  
Until, dried up, the well recedes  
And refills for more.

THE COLUMN

Cut-Price Cuisine

Salmon and Butternut Squash Lasagne

Alice Correia Morton

A new column giving tips on how to eat well from the reduced-to-clear section.



The supermarket ‘reduced to clear’ section can be a treacherous place. Away from the bright lights of the aisles, unpacked in the kitchen, the purchased bargains can baffle. Foods thrown together by virtue of impending use-by dates don’t always lead to the most appetising of meals. But with the help of a few store-cupboard essentials and the odd fresh (but basic) ingredient, I’ll be putting together some pretty edible recipes featuring the regulars of Oxford’s reduced food scene.

The key ingredients for this recipe are lasagne-style sheets of butternut squash (39p reduced from £1.20 for about 8), hot smoked salmon pieces (£2 reduced from £4.20), and chives (20p reduced from 75p). The media’s push for January healthy eating and current demonisation of processed carbohydrates (such as pasta) has swelled the supermarkets’ stock of vegetable alternatives, which often end up reduced. So if there are no butternut squash sheets there may well be similar made from courgette, sweet potato etc. These substitutions would work equally well, bearing in mind that softer vegetables will require less time in the oven. Salmon doesn’t need to be of the smoked variety and could even be replaced by tinned tuna. However, if not using smoked add a large pinch of salt to the sauce. Parsley would work if chives are unavailable or you could go without.

(Leftover butternut squash sheets can become homemade vegetable crisps: cut up into smaller squares. Drizzle, brush, or toss with olive oil. Sprinkle with salt and your dried herb of choice. Bake at 190C for 30 minutes, turning them halfway through.)

- Ingredients:**
- 1 tin/box chopped tomatoes
  - 1/2 a leek or 1 medium onion (preferably white)
  - 1/2 red pepper
  - 1 large clove garlic
  - knob of butter
  - 1 packet hot smoked salmon pieces
  - 1 packet butternut squash lasagne sheets
  - small pot double cream
  - large handful of chives
  - generous pinch of black pepper

- Method:**
- Preheat the oven to 180C.
  - Chop the leek into slim discs (or finely dice the onion). Mince the garlic clove. Chop the red pepper. Chop the chives, reserving a few to garnish.
  - Melt butter in a medium/large frying pan on a medium heat.
  - Soften the leeks (or onions) in the butter, adding a splash of water after a few minutes to help them steam. When the leeks are getting soft add the garlic and the red pepper.
  - Cook for a couple more minutes then add 2/3 of the chopped tomatoes (or all if you have a large dish to fill).
  - Simmer for 5-10 minutes until the tomato begins to look more like sauce and less like it’s fresh out the can.
  - Stir through the salmon, the pepper and the chopped chives. Turn off the heat.
  - In an ovenproof dish layer the sauce with the butternut squash, starting and finishing with the sauce.
  - Drizzle with double cream.
  - Bake in the oven for 20-30 minutes, until you can poke a fork through the squash easily, and before the top is too brown.■

Slow Travel: The Glacial North

Tobias Thornes

The North wasn’t designed for travellers. Even in a warming world, where my arrival was met with bitterly weeping rain that would have been snow in a more typical November – if ‘typical’ still exists any more – Canada is not a country easily traversed. As I wended my slow way northwards, the darkness descending like a closing curtain, the muddy land relapsed at last to crystal snow, and I felt more and more an alien, on a harsh planet emptying of life.

My direction, needle north by hitch-hike, foot and crook, was dead against the flow: into the desolate lands lately abandoned by summer birds escaping to the south. ‘South’. Even the word became a warming balm: the memory of sweet sunshine on green hillsides, golden light amidst the glades. Never in my travels had I missed my temperate homeland more.

Yet on I went, slipping on a thicker coat against the cold that bit my hands red. Steadily the settlements grew sparser, the snowy roads less frequented, but I found my way to a place to sleep, somehow, each night. I had to keep moving. The days were growing shorter; soon it would be too late. Deep in so cold a country, perhaps it wasn’t surprising that few of the drivers who lent me a lift seemed worried about climate change.

They knew it was happening alright: the signs were all around. More and more years of later than average autumn snow; earlier and earlier springtime melt. But in the bleak midst of an Arctic winter such facts offer little consolation against the freezing air. Indeed, some welcome the warming summers and the melting ice. Canada is a land of rich resources, but until now its frigid northern seas have been spared the pitiless pounding of mechanised extraction. Maybe not for much longer: the oil giants have sniffed out precious reserves of that foul fluid beneath the Beaufort Sea, and would be eager to cash in on this discovery.

Some I came across looked forward to longer spells of open seas, more jobs, more trade, more money pouring in. But for the indigenous peoples of these ice lands, climate change could mean the destruction of an entire way of life. There’s a deep tension

here, growing like a fissure through a calving ice-shelf – the need to protect a precious place and the precious life that inhabits it, tugging against the desire to grow, to prosper, to embrace the change.

But there’s one spectacle that will never alter. Day by day, the sun began to flounder in its vain attempts to clamber up the sky, and when a couple in a snow-capped four-by-four offered me a spare seat, I joined their journey on the new track up to the northern coast. There, amidst the calm surroundings of a huddled Inuit settlement, I saw the sea at last again before me, glistening in the pale light so soon after dawn.

Looking back towards the south, the orange glimmer of the sun flashed and retreated, as though, frightened or disgusted at the world it glimpsed, it didn’t think it worth the effort to take a proper look. It was the last day of November. Before we left I gazed through the twilight at the northern horizon, making out the faint form of Baffin Island, Canada’s largest, and reportedly one of the most beautiful gems in the country’s crumbled constellation of landmasses.

There, I knew, the sun wouldn’t rise again until January. I wished dearly to travel to that island, to see its famed bestiary of Arctic Wolves and Foxes. But I could not venture any further, into the Polar Night of the Arctic Circle. No boats traverse that treacherous sea at this time of year. The island is isolated – except of course by plane.

It seems to me a saddening irony that the communities of both northern Canada and the ‘ground zero’ of climate change itself, Greenland, are so dangerously dependent on one of the most-wanted criminals on the global warming hit-list, the aeroplane.

Those mitigation target-busting beasts scratch their scores of scars across the Arctic sky, seemingly impervious to the dwindling glaciers and drowning lands beneath them, in whose demise they play a princely part, smashing the very vessels of masterfully crafted ice the visitors they carry have often come to see.

Canada has the longest coastline in the world, but its rate of coastal erosion is equally impressive. The Beaufort Sea swallows a metre of land a year, but where the stormy winds stir up still more energetic waves, up to twenty metres can vanish in just a few months. The culprit isn’t hard to see: wilder weather and melting permafrost

conspire to concoct a saline soup of destruction that threatens homes, supplies of food and fresh water and survival itself for the human and other animal inhabitants of this surprised ecosystem.

The Inuit have used sea ice for transport for thousands of years; now these waters will instead be the domain of dirty diesel cruisers, as the Arctic is unlocked – tamed of its cold, inhospitable sharpness; stripped of its snowy beauty. It’s already warming at twice the average global rate.

Slow travel north being impossible, I took the next best course and headed west: with a little light persuasion, the owner of a wind-battered fishing boat was willing to take me across the Hudson Bay. We set out as soon twilight crept across the sky, shivering as we swept over the cold, grey waters that looked even less forgiving than the land. Delayed by the relatively mild start to the season, this was perhaps the last boat back across this splinter of sea.

The stars made their never-ending circle overhead, a polar breeze rattled on the sail, and as the celestial backdrop so soon blackened again into night, I caught my first sight of the Northern Lights swimming like a mirage in the sky. The magic of those few minutes was worth every second of the long, slow struggle I’d had to get there. It was well after dark when we arrived in Churchill, a town on the frontier of the great winter freeze. I was told to keep my eyes peeled for its most infamous inhabitants, and wasn’t disappointed. Some brash young polar bears had snuck in to raid this, their sweetest honey-pot, where their kind are forced increasingly to scavenge on the streets when ice and access to food is scarce.

These tired, hungry creatures were late for their hibernation, still on the prowl for a few final morsels to feed their cubs. Amazing animals, the Kings of the Arctic grew fat on the fruit of its heyday; now they are reduced to beggars stealing crumbs from a species that proved to be the more powerful beast.

The relationship between bear and man, struggling to live alongside each other, is under increasing strain. But I saw no more of them; in a couple of days it was time to board on one of Canada’s few railroads, to be whisked to Winnipeg and along Canada’s southern belt of cities, then north again to find the country’s chilly western fringe.■

A Tale of Cats and Dogs

Text & Illustration by  
Tacita McCoy-Parkill

In all the years we have owned this dog, we’ve never bothered to teach her tricks. The one thing we have drilled into her head however, is sitting. She squats obediently, muzzle high in the air, and waits for the Good Thing that is sure to come.

The other day a cat crept into our garden, sliding along the fence and down to the underbrush. My dog blearily opens an eye from her snooze on the patio. She is faced with a feline presence and immediately springs up.

They stare at each other for several long silent moments.

My dog’s behind starts to tremble.

The cat glowers.

My dog sinks into her Best Sit, tail twitching, eyes pleading, and this is enough to bring the fur shooting up on the cat’s back. In the space of 30 seconds it turns and leaps back up and over the fence to resume observation/sunning deck from a safer distance.

When I was younger, I used to find this occurrence terribly funny. “Come look! The cats are scared of our dog,” I’d giggle- my dog is the size of a bread loaf and equally intimidating. Now I am a jaded undergrad, I know canine and feline behaviour well enough to see both sides. Wagging your tail loosely in Dogspeech is friendly, whereas

Catspeak sees a rippling tail as indication of irritation. Catspeak allows extended eye contact but Dogspeech considers this a sign of dominance; see how long your dog holds your gaze for as a good indication of who they think wears the trousers.

They had both wanted to be peaceful but were met with ‘tension’ and ‘hostility’. Now, I see the dog and the cat, and I am wistful; If only they spoke the same language.■

If only they spoke the same language...

