

The French Review

From the Editor's Desk

A few years ago (*FR* 80.1, Oct. 2006) we published a compelling article entitled "Le Traitement des insultes sexistes et racistes dans les dictionnaires bilingues." The author, Elisabeth Campbell, examined 5 bilingual French/English dictionaries as well as the 2000 edition of *Le Nouveau Petit Robert (NPR)*, which she refers to as "...l'ouvrage de référence monolingue incontournable" (114). Among other things she concludes that there should be markers in monolingual dictionaries next to a word to show that it is used pejoratively when the definition of the word itself does not make this clear. She also shows conclusively that pejorative French terms for women are only marked as such in 45% of the sample group of 13 words she selected and studied in six different French-English bilingual dictionaries (132). In many cases the dictionaries disagree on what should be considered as "pejorative" usage with respect to women. She also points out that the marking for pejorative terms is much higher for racist terms than for sexist ones.

Ultimately, Campbell says, sexist language has become a commonplace in dictionaries and those who use it are thus protected whereas the victims are not—in spite of advances in dealing with discrimination against women in the past thirty-five years. Until women become part of the lexicography power structure this will continue.

In August 2009 Catherine Vincent, a reporter for *Le Monde*, reviewed two recent books, one of which is entitled *Le Miso mis à nu* and was written by Françoise Leclère (Ed. La Maronie, 2008) (*Le Monde*, 6 août 2009). Leclère did a study of the monolingual *Le Petit Robert* (2005 edition) or "Bob" as she calls it. She discovered that many definitions denigrate women, even if subtly, while pretending that the definitions are neutral. For example, the word "mâle" is defined as "1. Individu appartenant au sexe doué du pouvoir de fécondation, 2. Fam ou péj. Homme caractérisé par la puissance sexuelle." For "femelle" the definition is "1. Animal du sexe qui reproduit l'espèce en produisant des ovules fécondés par le mâle; 2. Pop. et péj. Femme." So we see that males are individuals, whereas women are "animals." The male has the power to procreate, the female to reproduce (1).

Françoise Leclère says that this kind of sexism is present in all French language dictionaries. She reminds us that Alain Rey, whose name is most frequently associated with *Le Nouveau Petit Robert*, once said that a dictionary is a "présentation idéologique," but she prefers to use the word "androlecte" (not found in the *NPR*, which means that language, though supposedly neutral, is envisaged from a masculine perspective. She gives the example of "fille de joie" and asks what "joy" is meant; more specifically whose joy does she bring about?!

Vincent also discusses another book, *Sexisme et sciences humaines: pratique linguistique du rapport de sexe* (Presses Universitaires de Lille), which was published in 1982 and whose authors, Claire Michard and Claudine Ribéry, come to the same conclusions as Leclerc. Their study considered a series of anthropological texts published before 1970. Terms for "femme" and "homme" are almost always more favorable to the man and demeaning to the woman. Michard and Ribéry chose Claude Lévi-Strauss's sentence "Le village entier partit le lendemain dans un trentaine de pirogues, nous laissant seuls avec les femmes et les enfants dans les maisons abandonnées" to show how men are determined by their humanity, women by their sex.

Vincent asks how one can fight such stereotypical social representation of women: "Qui fait du couturier un créateur et de la couturière une petite main, du grand homme quelqu'un d'admirable et de la grande femme une personne de haute taille?" She suggests that at the very least the names of trades should be feminized. In fact, some are, as in "boulangère" and "boulanger" (2).

As early as 1897 the word "avocate" was making the rounds in the newspapers because one Jeanne Chauvin had become the first woman to ask for the title. All it took then was to possess a "licence en droit" and swear an oath since the legal profession was not restricted to men. However, Jeanne Chauvin was not allowed to take the oath since, in certain cases, lawyers could fill in for judges. To be a judge one had to be a citizen with full political rights. Women had not yet been granted them.

It was not until 1900 that a law was passed authorizing women to become lawyers according to Claudie Baudino, a political scientist at l'Université libre de Bruxelles (2), even though there was no law forbidding it. Once the law was passed journalists stopped referring to Jeanne Chauvin as "la demandeuse," "la future avocate," and "la plaideuse" and used the masculine "femmes avocats." Baudino concludes that "Lorsqu'on ne peut plus, au nom de la démocratie, refuser aux femmes l'accès à certaines professions, la langue devient le dernier rampart contre l'égalité" (2). Thus, says Vincent, the generic use (called neutral) of titles like "médecin," "avocat," or "professeur" refuses to women in those professions the social visibility that should go with the title.

In 1983 the Roudy Law concerning professional equality among men and women was passed and certain professions were allowed to feminize the names for them. Hence we have "une directrice d'école," but have nonetheless kept the masculine "un directeur de cabinet" even when the director is a woman. The same hierarchical and gender difference exists between "la secrétaire médicale" and "Madame le secrétaire perpétuel" as in the case of Hélène Carrère d'Encausse of the Académie française. This debate occupied all of 1984, and the Académie française said on 14 June 1984 that it was impossible to make grammatical changes. Supported by Claude Lévi-Strauss and Georges Dumézil the Academy said that such an equivalency between the grammatical gender of a word and the sex of a person was based on a misinterpretation and cited words like "la table" and "le fauteuil," where the choice is arbitrary. But the Academy ignored the existence of words like "boulangère" and "boulangère."

In 1998 the "loi sur la parité dans la vie publique" was passed and people started making the distinction between "Madame la ministre" and "Madame le ministre." Women in the Jospin government (8 out of 26) started to feminize their title (3). The Academy weighed in once again, but this time 2 commissions were appointed by President Jacques Chirac. They found that there were no obstacles to feminizing the names of professions except perhaps political and juridical ones. "France, j'écris ton nom..." a guide "à la féminisation des noms des métiers, titres, grades et fonctions" was published in 1999 at La Documentation française. The use of the feminine was officially accepted, but limited to individual and private designations. The use of the masculine was kept in generic expressions like "les salariés." This means that one is not supposed to write "les salariés et les salariées."

So the battle continues. To read the story of how the Academy decided to render "male midwife" and was overtaken by the usage of "le" or "la sage-femme" you will have to read the entire article by Catherine Vincent. In the meantime "Aux armes, citoyennes!"

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