Chapter 5

Gender Changes in the Language

Abstract

The total grammatical feminine markedness in Hebrew led to claims of linguistic sexism and attempts to introduce changes. This chapter reviews changes that can be seen in Modern Hebrew and discusses other efforts currently underway to achieve a more egalitarian language. Explanations are suggested for some successful changes, as well as for other unsuccessful attempts.

Language Change or Social Change?

Linguistic changes related to the use of gender undoubtedly have social motivations. Although in some cases they could occur as a consequence of linguistic simplification, they are, for the most part, a conscious change brought about by a social problem. The quest to change sexist features in language was initiated by female linguists in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the rise of feminist movements and continues to this day, albeit with little success.

When arguing in favor of changing language and eschewing sexism, Pauwels (1998b) describes the different approaches of linguists and feminists toward imposed changes. Those who believe that language cannot be artificially changed, as it only reflects society, claim that linguistic reform will not help solve the problem of social sexism. Therefore, they do not propagate the need for linguistic changes, but prefer to promote social change in the attitude toward gender equality. Others, who believe that language changes can influence social and cultural practices, argue in favor of linguistic intervention. Change supporters include those who believe that while language reflects social reality, it also helps construct it and, therefore, language change can contribute to social change. Although the linguistic intervention we have witnessed in different languages in recent decades did not bring about major achievements, it has helped heighten awareness.

Ehrlich and King (1992) assert that introducing non-sexist terms into the language will not necessarily lead to true egalitarian usage. They do not recommend abandoning language reform, but argue that such a reform can only be effective when implemented within a non-sexist speech community. The condition for real success is institutional support as well as the support of social
subgroups. Moreover, the success of attempts at gender-based language reform depends on the socio-political context in which it occurs. In other words, if a society still maintains sexist values and attitudes, the introduction of a non-sexist language will not prove effective.

It could be argued that Hebrew is a unique case, because as opposed to most of the languages covered in gender research, it is totally marked, and therefore limited, by grammatical gender. Nevertheless, as Hellinger (1988) points out, the presence or absence of grammatical gender is not a sufficient criterion to determine the odds of a linguistic change, whether by feminization or neutralization of the language. Other arguments that must be taken into consideration are: (1) historical developments, (2) syntactic consequences such as agreement, (3) rules of word-formation and productivity of said rules, and (4) referential and semantic asymmetries in pairs of feminine and masculine terms.

Moreover, linguistic considerations do not supply enough information to be able to predict changes or to determine which strategy should be adopted. Thus, in addition to the aforementioned arguments, we should take the following non-linguistic factors into consideration: (1) the relationship between the sexes in the speech community, (2) the state of women’s movements, and (3) the official language policies. It appears that there is a need for both kinds of criteria, linguistic and non-linguistic, to attain any achievements and to make changes possible.

Jespersen (1922: 346–348) has already discussed the lack of a gender-distinctive pronoun in English to express a person's sex. When describing the different ways this problem could be resolved, he mentions (1) ‘the cumbrous use of he or she,’ (2) the use of ‘he’ alone, adding that “has been legalized […] that in all acts words importing the masculine gender shall be deemed and taken to include females,” and (3) “the sexless but plural form they may be used […] the substitution of the plural for the singular is not wholly illogical.”

When referring to English grammar, Jespersen (1949) mentions the generic forms ‘you,’ ‘they’ and ‘one.’ In his explanation for the use of ‘one,’ he states, “But then the English-man would feel inclined to substitute someone for one, and then go on with he, etc., or else to use the generic you” (p. 158 [my emphasis, MM]). We can see that when dealing with English speakers, he only mentions the man, and even when writing about the generic pronoun, he considers the masculine ‘he’ as the main form. In the following section, he deals with the ‘designation for a human being’ (pp. 158–161), and these are the possibilities he offers: a man, a fellow, a body, a person, an individual, a woman / a girl. When illustrating the use of ‘a person,’ he adds in brackets ‘most frequent in the mouth of a woman’ (p. 160). He also explains the disappearance of gender