

# The Linguistic Postulate and Derivational Thinking Packet

MJ Hardman

These five articles deal with the theoretical constructs *linguistic postulate* and *derivational thinking*.

The earliest article, "Andean Ethnography: The role of language structure in observer bias" deals with the concept of the *linguistic postulate* in detail and shows its functioning within ethnography.

The other four articles, all written more than ten years after the first, deal with the application of the concept of the linguistic postulate to English, contrasting English postulates with those of the Jaqi languages, and leading to the development of the concept of *derivational thinking*, which is the mutually reinforcing interplay of three of the linguistic postulates of English.

"The Sexist Circuits of English" was written for a general audience and is the easiest statement of the nature of derivational thinking.

"And if We Lose Our Name, then What About Our Land?" or, "What Price Development?" includes some of the original exploration of the derivational thinking construct; it was the earliest article written of the derivational thinking set.

"Gender Through the Levels" is the defining article; it is paired with two book reviews of Evelyn Fox Keller's work -- interesting to read with the derivational thinking framework in mind.

"Derivational Thinking, or, Why is Equality So Difficult?" focuses the derivational thinking construct on current problems and shows, briefly, how derivational thinking works for racism.

For one who is not a linguist, the set focusing on English might be read first, with the "Andean Ethnography" article coming last.

1978 "Andean Ethnography: The role of language structure in observer bias" in *Semiotica* 71-3/4, 339-372.

1996 "The Sexist Circuits of English" *The Humanist* March/April 1996 pp 25-32.

1994 "And if We Lose Our Name, then What About Our Land?" or, "What Price Development?" in *Differences That Make a Difference: Examining the Assumptions in Gender Research*, eds. Lynn H. Turner and Helen M. Sterk. Westport & London: Bergin & Garvey. pp 151-162.

1993 "Gender Through the Levels" in *Women and Language* Vol XVI no. 2 pp 42-49.

1993 "Derivational Thinking, or, Why is Equality So Difficult?" in *Seeking Understanding of Communication, Language and Gender*, ed. Carol Ann Valentine. CyberSpace Publishing Corporation. pp 250-263.

# Why we should say "women and men" until it doesn't matter any more

Guest Editorial: M.J. Hardman

They say that "and" is a conjunction where both sides are equal. They say that "men and women" sound better. When we say that maybe we could say "women and men," they say that we are indulging in "reverse discrimination." They also used to say that generic "he" really included us all. I want to suggest that we should say "women and men" until the whole social/cultural world changes such that it doesn't matter anymore. I say that *only* by saying "women and men" do we today have any chance of equality on both sides of that little conjunction "and." Let me tell you why.

In English, three grammatical patterns interact (see Hardman 1978, 1993a, 1993b, 1994, 1996) to reinforce each other:

- 1) number—singular and plural so that singular is the base form and plural is derived from singular.
- 2) ranking comparative—virtually all we say or do is ranked (e.g., the questions we mostly ask have to do with ranking: What did you like most at? What did you like best out of?)
- 3) sex-based gender—the masculine is the base and the feminine is derived therefrom.

This means that:

- 1) In English order matters. Therefore, what comes first is seen as first in the metaphorical sense — better, higher ranked. So in the phrase "men and women" women do indeed come second.
- 2) Women are perceived as being derived from men, feminine words are perceived as being derived from masculine, even when not true etymologically (e.g., "woman" from "man" and "female" from "male" — both false derivations etymologically).

Therefore, in the usual order, "men and women," women not only come second but are perceived as the additional appendage of the first item, as part of the derivation that the root carries with it.

In the phrase "women and men," on the other hand, because "women" comes first, women are *perceived*. Since within the structure of English "men" are not perceived as ever being derived from men<sup>1</sup>, but as always being the root, men are also perceived. Therefore, the phrase "women and men" comes as close as is possible in English to an equal listing of two items.

Because of derivational thinking, the phrase "women and men" does not put women in the spot previously occupied by men; we are not perceived as the root even if named first. Rather, the ordering of feminine first balances two perceptions, "first" and "derived." It permits women to occupy a spot where we are *not* perceived as the derivation of men, while men are perceived as being there fully nevertheless, because they are the root. Therefore, *both* women and men are perceived as present in a syntactic

*Communication, Language and Gender* (pp. 250-263). Cyberspace Publishing Corporation,

Hardman, M. J. (1994), 'And if we lose our name, then what about our land?' or, What price development? In L. H. Turner & H. M. Sterk (eds.) *Differences That Make a Difference: Examining the Assumptions in Gender Research* (pp. 151-162). Westport & London: Bergin & Garvey.

## Women and Language, Vol. XXII, No. 21,

Page 1

structure that comes as close to equality as is possible in English.

The ordering consequences apply not only to all other phrases as well as the one illustrated here, but to sentences, paragraphs, and discourse structures. Thus, for genuinely inclusive language, it must be "she or he." The other way around only allows us to be tacked on, as we always have been.<sup>2</sup> In sentences, if we discuss first what Mary did, and then what John did, Mary's activities won't sound like an addendum to John's, but rather both people will be perceived as having done something. In presenting, for example, research results, if we present women-related results first, then both sets of data will be heard.<sup>3</sup>

Derivational thinking pervades our perception and our thinking within English; constant energy is required if we wish to think otherwise.

### Notes

- 1 The regular failures of fictional attempts to switch sex roles is an example of the difficulty of altering this pattern. I know of only two successful efforts in this direction:  
Elizabeth Vonarburg's *In the Motherland / Maerlande Chronicles*, Bantam, 1992; translated from French by Jane Brierly; successfully makes feminine linguistically the root, with masculine derived therefrom in a griping epic-type novel.  
Gerd Brantenberg's *Egalia's Daughters*. The Seal Press, 1977, 1985, translated from Norwegian by Louis Mackey, is the only successful sex reversal I know of, a funny satire with women in control, men with restrictive clothing, etc.  
That both these books are translations from other languages into English says something about English. In the case of French, in terms of straight linguistic analysis, the masculine is derived from the feminine, by a subtractive morpheme—drop the final consonant; if nasal then nasalize the vowel, the feminine form is not predictable from the masculine. Because this is too radical, students, even today, still learn two lists for all adjectives — the masculine first and then the feminine! Forty years ago, I was involved in a project aimed at improving the teaching of foreign languages. We tried to introduce the feature of masculine derived from feminine to the teaching of French, to simplify learning. We failed. Derivational thinking was more powerful.
- 2 At a recent conference of an organization comprised almost entirely of women, the three male members asked that the language of the bylaws be changed from "she" to "he or she" to include them. After I explained what I have stated here, the group accomplished with unanimous vote the use of "she or he." Lately, a surprising number of women came to thank me and to say that they felt that the proposed change to "he or she" was in fact changing their organization from one of women to one dominated by men (all three of them!), but they hadn't known how to voice their concerns.
- 3 This has been a big problem in medical research, e.g., heart research. One example is that the artificial hearts were so constructed that they would not fit in a woman's body so that only men were candidates. When they finally did use one for a woman, it had to be "modified" (=derived) from the ones built for men.

### References

- Hardman, M. J. (1978). Andean ethnography: The role of language structure in observer bias." *Semiotica*, 71 (3/4) 339-372.  
Hardman, M. J. (1993a). Gender through the levels." *Women and Language*, Vol XVI, no. 2, pp. 42-49.  
Hardman, M. J. (1993b). Derivational thinking, or, Why is equality so difficult? In Carol Ann Valentine (ed.), *Seeking Understanding of*  
Hardman, M. J. (1996, March/April). The sexist circuits of English. *The Humanist*, pp 25-32

MJ Hardman is a professor of linguistic anthropology and a member of the women's studies faculty at the University of Florida.