

Margaret Doyle. *the A—Z of Non-Sexist Language*, 1st edition 1995, 112 pp. ISBN 0 7043 4430 0. London: The Women's Press Ltd. Price £6,99.

The race and gender *insensitivity* of much common English usage was memorably expressed by the Zimbabwean writer Dambudzo Marechera:

For a black writer the language is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duels with the language before you can make it do all that you want it to do. It is so for the feminists. English is very male. Hence feminist writers also adopt the same tactics (Veit-Wild 1992: 4).

Margaret Doyle, described as "a freelance writer and editor" in the book blurb, put together a small book called *the A-Z of Non-Sexist Language*. The trendy 'decapitalisation' of the first word of the title is not a misleading impression. No lexicographer myself, I am not convinced of the scholarly thoroughness of this publication, even though its earnestness is much in evidence. On p. 74 one is warned against using the term **prehistoric man**, presumably because it 'erases' the women of that period, but what the note tells one is that "*Prehistoric* is ambiguous as well as sexist (it can refer to any of a number of distinct time periods)" and then four lines down in the same entry Doyle lists the term "missing link" as one of the preferable alternatives! A similar impression of inconsistency and even incongruity is created when the reader is reassured that **female** is "Not a sexist term" because it "derives from *femella*, Latin for 'little woman'" (30). Surely the etymology suggests how ancient the (bad) habit of infantilizing women is. In the last sentence of this entry Doyle adds: "As a noun, though, in most contexts it retains its sense of non-humanness and is used mostly in relation to animals or statistics" (31). Here, too, Doyle sends mixed signals to the well-intentioned researcher after gender-sensitive language use.

To cite these examples is not to dismiss the worthiness of the undertaking in itself. Doyle's introduction makes entirely sensible points: that "sexist language is unclear and inaccurate, ... excludes more than half the population ... encourages destructive stereotypes" (3), also that "[u]sing inclusive language does not have to be clumsy" (2) and that "inclusive language [should not be] confused with euphemism" or caricatured "to discredit ... legitimate aspirations" (5). In the thesaurus-style listing of terms which follows, many entries make it (enlighteningly) clear how easy it is (where there's a will) to avoid bad (sexist) habits in English usage and contrarily reminds its readers how readily people slip into using such (avoidable) expressions. I cite one such entry:

career woman/girl There is no parallel for men. The term relies on a sexist distinction between 'real' work (i.e. paid and outside the home)

and home-based work (such as homemaking) — a distinction that is not made in relation to men. The term is ambiguous, as it is also sometimes used to distinguish between 'professional' and 'unskilled' or low-paid employment. In both cases, the subtext is that a 'career woman' sacrifices family for job. If career is important in the context, be specific — e.g. accountant. Otherwise, avoid (16).

This entry includes and illustrates the point made elsewhere — that in many supposed gender parallels women are called "girls" and men "men". Valid, too, are the warnings against using a word like "whore", crisply labelled "Offensive, and applied only to women" and the advice given as an "OPTION: [to use the word] prostitute (for male or female)" (106). As Doyle illustrates, sexuality tends to be used 'against' women and 'for' men. She writes: "*Nymphomania*, for example, is widely used ... The masculine 'equivalent', *satyriasis*, is rarely, if ever, heard" (6 — see also her "Topic Note" on "Sex Words", 94-95). As a general rule, she sensibly advises readers to "use the root form" (27) of career names, since "-ess and -ette suffixes" imply "that the female is somehow less important than the male" (26). But when Doyle, having warned readers against using "effeminate [as] A sexist term that associates femininity with weakness and passivity", gives us "flowery" and "chintzy" (25) as two of the supposedly acceptable alternatives, her advice seems snobbish and pointless.

In some comments, Doyle seems quite unreliable to this reviewer. It may be true, as we read under the entry *frigid*, that this term is "A sexist and insulting label used for women who cannot achieve orgasm", but that "its male 'equivalent', *impotent*, does not carry any connotations of neurosis" (33) is decidedly false and (I think) sexist in its own way. Nor can I go along with Doyle's suggestion that a commonly used word like *headmistress* (for example) "suffers from the illicit and sexual connotations of MISTRESS as used today" (37)!

A general principle operative in Doyle's line of work seems to be the admirable ideal of avoiding type-casting gender roles through language. She quotes from a British manual *Guidelines on Countering Sexism in Schools* which says that the three main ways in which language can be sexist are "'by stereotyping females and males, by excluding women and girls, and by classing women and girls as inferior'" (99). This is quite right. How deft and elegant non-sexist language may be can be seen from Doyle's entry under "Scouts No longer called Boy Scouts; one percent are girls ... 'A Scout is a brother to all Scouts' has become 'A Scout belongs to the worldwide family of Scouts'. Similarly, 'A Scout has respect for himself and for others' has become 'A Scout has self-respect and respect for others'" (89). I don't find the recognition which Doyle extends to a ludicrous alternative ("*ovarimony*"!) to the word *testimony* (having made the point that the term is "not sexist"), appropriate (96-97). Such uneven standards are to my mind one of the chief weaknesses of this book. Doyle does attempt to be consistent in advising the avoidance of *all* gender-

specific terms and her 'neutering' advice would have us cut out both **fatherland** (30) and **motherland** (61). The question is, of course, whether some of these practices would not merely impoverish and 'blandify' the English language — or, of course, make it (in *some* cases, I hasten to add) imprecise or confusing. Doyle's judgement that among the "new forms of address" *Ms* is "[t]he enduring invention" (39) is surely valid, though.

I like the way in which some of the entries in the A-Z listing give one a sense of the large range of (perhaps far more precise) alternatives for a term deemed sexist. Hence, as "Options" (i.e. possible replacements) for **machismo**, "courage, strength, mettle, bravado, muscle, pride, swagger, self-confidence, over-confidence, aggressiveness, potency" (51) are listed. Some other entries exhibit a paucity in the face of the rich resources of the English language, though. If we are to be cautioned against the sexism implicit in the expression **brotherly love**, "familial love, affection, platonic love" (15) seem to me inadequate and even inaccurate as alternatives — expressions that come to mind are humanity; humaneness; benevolence; generosity; kindness; charity [the New Testamental term]; a sense of communion; concern [for others]; care; community consciousness; social conscience; universal love; public spiritedness; a caring disposition.

In conclusion it needs pointing out that Doyle indicates her awareness of the point "that discrimination in society will not change simply by ridding our language of sexism" (2-3) and that using non-sexist language perhaps pays mere "lip-service to reform rather than addressing the very real problems of sexism in society, including discrimination, harassment, violence against women, and economic inequality" (3). Indeed. But then, one wonders whether excision of such a term as **abominable snowman** from the English language in favour of (Doyle's **OPTIONS**) "yeti [or] abominable snow creature" (9 — the second entry in her alphabetical listing) will do much to redress gender imbalance in the world at large.

Reference

Veit-Wild, Flora. 1992. *Dambudzo Marechera. A Source Book on his Life and Work*. Harare: University of Zimbabwe Publications.

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