

Jack H. David Jr.

Dr. S. Morrison

ENG 3319

Fall 1997

What is Man?

Language is one of most important attributes of the human race. Language makes it possible for a person to share thoughts and feelings with others. Language makes it possible for information to be passed from one generation to the next. In all known human spoken languages, this is accomplished using small units of intelligible sound called *words*. Even a single word can unlock great mysteries about the people who use it or have used it in the past. I have chosen to research the word *man*, because it is one of the most primal concepts of human existence. *Man* is one of the words that *Homo Sapiens*, the only known sentient species on this planet, uses to describe itself.

I. Etymology

The word *man* dates back to the Old English period. Alternate spellings include *mann*, *monn*, *mon*, *manne*, and *mane*. The primary definition of *man* is simple: a human being, irrespective of sex or age. In many Old English instances, and in a few of later date, the word *man* is used explicitly as a designation equally applicable to either sex. In gender designations, the words *wer* and *wéþman* referred to a male person and *wif* and *wifman* was a female person (OED IX-284). Incidentally, the word *wer* survives in the word *werewolf*—literally *man-wolf* (OED XX-158).

Even in Modern English, there is an important and interesting use of *man*, in the singular, without an article, and often with a capital letter, to describe the whole human

race, the human species, or mankind (Williams 155). Thus, *a man* or *the man* would refer to a male adult person, but *man* without an article would refer to the *race of man*.

The oldest known written occurrence of the word in the denotation of *human being* is found in AD 971 in *The Blickling Homilies*:

Heofonrices duru...belocen standeþ þurh þa ærestan *men*.

The next occurrence was in 1000 in Ælfric's *Grammar*:

Hic et haec homo...æƷðer is *man* Ʒe wer Ʒe wif.

The use of the word *man* to represent an *adult male person* is also found in Old English. The earliest occurrence, also in 1000, is found in Ælfric's *Lives of the Saints*:

He... sæde hyre Ʒewislice hwæt heo *man* ne wæs

It is next seen in this sense in 1200 in *The Ormulum*:

Ʒho wass hanndfesst an god *mann* þatt Josæp wass Ʒehatenn (OED IX-284)

Other uses of the word *man* include *husband*, or *manservant*, and it is used as a verb as in *to man a ship*, or other denotations meaning *to furnish men for work* (OED IX 286-290).

There are several cognates of the word *man* in other Germanic languages. The word appears in Old Friesian as *man* or *mon*, Old Saxon as *man*, Dutch as *man*, with the plural as *manne* or *mannen*, Old High German as *man*, Middle High German as *mann*, and Modern High German as *mann*, with the plural *männer*. It also appears in Old Norse as *maðr* or *mæðr* and Swedish as *man* with a plural of *mannon*. In all Teutonic languages, the word had the twofold sense of *human being* and *adult male human being* (OED IX-284).

II. Sanskrit

I discovered that the word *man* is actually much older than Old English or even other Germanic languages; I found a form of the word in Sanskrit. The people who spoke Sanskrit descended from one of several Indo-European tribes that are believed to have migrated to India from Eastern Europe in the second millennium BC. Other Indo-European tribes moved into western and southern Europe and the Middle East. The Europeans, then, share a common ancestry with the Aryans who settled in India (Hopkins 10).

During the eighteenth century, Sanskrit, the ancient speech of the Hindus, began for the first time to attract the attention of European scholars. In 1767, Coeurdoux, a French Jesuit pointed out certain resemblances between the European and Sanskrit languages. In 1786 Sir William Jones described Sanskrit as being “of wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisitely refined than either, yet bearing to both of them a stronger affinity, both in the roots of verbs and in the forms of grammar, than could have been produced by accident.” Jones also believed that “no philologist could examine all three, [Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit] without believing them to have sprung from some common source which, perhaps, no longer exists” (Barfield 7).

The Hindus look back to a great teacher called *Manu*. Hindu sacred language and literature reveal a prehistoric belief among certain classes of society that Manu was the originator of their culture and religion (Barfield 83). In fact, Manu was considered to be the ancestor of all mankind (Klostermaier 47). According to the legend, as found in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*, from Brahmā, the creator, was born Manu, who soon noticed

that he was alone, and divided into two beings, one male and the other female, from whom sprang the entire human race (Klostermaier 111, 120). *Manu* is also the root of the Sanskrit word for *man*. The Sanskrit word for the human race is *mānusa*, whereas the word for a male person is *manusya*.

There is also another series of Sanskrit words derived from the *manu* root that refer to thinking, cognition, and codes for living such as *manas* (mind), *manasa* (sense or understanding), and *mantra* (sacred text, spell, charm) (Perry 208).

The use of the word *manu* as the name of the personage, and in the derivative words that represent humanity and cognition, are found in writings *at least* as far back as the *Mānava-dharma-Sāstra* (The Laws of Manu) from the second century BC (Hopkins 74), and may even date back as far as 900 BC (Klostermaier 418).

There are two interesting points about the word *man*, as it appears in different Indo-European languages. The first, is that wherever the word appears, it bears the double meaning of *human being* and *member of the male sex*; the second is that it is associated with *thinking* (Barfield 83-84). The latter connotation has eventually found its way into Modern English words such as *mental*, and *mind*. The etymology of the word *man* suggests the inner reason for this, for it hints that the essential function of the human being—is to think (Barfield 84).

III. The Bible

The dominant religion of a society would naturally have a profound effect on the language. The Sanskrit words that I have mentioned came from *Manu*, who was a religious figure. The inhabitants of the British Isles were first introduced to Christianity in the late 6th century AD (Baugh 80). For the next 800 years, the Christian Bible was

only available in Latin, and then only the clergy and the well-educated could read it. The first translation of the Bible in English by John Wycliffe and his associates was not available until the 14th century (Baugh 152). The introduction of the first Bible in English is responsible for at least 1000 new words entering the English language (Baugh 180). The King James Version of the Bible was completed in 1611, and is the version to which I will now refer.

IV. The Old Testament

The way that words are used in religious texts help to evolve the meanings of the words beyond their original etymology; such is the case with the word *man*. In the Old Testament, there are at least eleven different Hebrew words that were translated by the King James translators into the word *man*. The two Hebrew words most commonly used were אָדָם (‘âdâm) (Strong HbD-120), which is the Hebrew word for *human being, or mankind*, and יָשָׁר (‘îysh) (Strong HbD-376) which means an *individual male person*.

The Hebrew word ‘âdâm or *human being* was also the name of the first man, Adam, according to the Bible. When there was only one human on the Earth, *the man* and *the human race* really were the same thing!

The Hindu legend of *Manu* is actually very similar to the Hebrew legend of *Adam*. Both were the *first man* in their respective mythologies, both “split” into male and female beings (of course in a slightly different way), and both of their names came to represent the entire human race. The fact that their names are slightly similar may be a coincidence—then again, maybe not.

The word ‘âdâm (human race) was translated as *man* in the following scriptures:

And God said, Let us make *man* in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God

created *man* in his own image; in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them (Genesis 1:26-27).

He hath shewed thee, O *man*, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God (Micah 6:8).

The word 'îysh was translated as *man* (adult male person) in the following scriptures; note the inclusion of the article *a*:

Therefore shall *a man* leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife, and they shall be one flesh (Genesis 2:24).

And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a *man* speaketh unto his friend (Exodus 33:11).

Another Hebrew word that was translated as *man* was שׂוֹנֵי (šōnî) (Strong HbD-582) which means *mortal man*:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained. What is *man*, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of *man*, that thou visitest him? For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour (Psalms 8:3-5).

In the first instance, *man* was translated from šōnî or *mortal man*; in the latter, the *son of man* was translated from 'âdâm—literally *son (descendant) of Adam*.

A few of the other Hebrew words that were translated as *man* are בֵּן (bên) (Strong HbD-1121) or *son*, בַּעַל (ba'al) (Strong HbD-1167) which is *master or husband*, and גִּבּוֹר (geber) (Strong HbD-1397) or *warrior*.

V. The New Testament

In the New Testament, the Greek language also had separate words for *human being* and *male person* that were translated as *man*. The Greek word ἀνθρώπος (anthrōpōs) (Strong GrD-444) means *human being* and ἀνὴρ (anēr) (Strong GrD-435) is an *individual male person or husband*.

Scriptures in which *anthrōpōs* (human being) is translated as *man* include:

And Jesus answered him saying, “It is written than *man* shall not live by bread alone but by every word of God” (Luke 4:4).

But the natural *man* received not the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Scriptures in which *anēr* (male person) is translated as *man* include:

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child; but when I became *a man*, I put away childish things (1 Corinthians 13:11).

Blessed is *the man* that endureth temptation; for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him (James 1:12).

A few of the other Greek words that were translated into *man* in the New Testament include *νεανίσκος* (*nēaniskōs*) (Strong GrD-3495) which means *young man*, and the words *μηδεῖς* (*mēdiēs*) (Strong GrD-3367) and *τίς* (*tis*) (Strong GrD-5100) which both mean *person*.

VI. The Feminist Argument

When I began the research on the word *man*, one of my goals was to debunk the feminist position that the use of the word to represent the entire human race is sexist. However, after reading some of the arguments of feminist writers, I am not so convinced.

I have shown that in Old English, *man* in its original denotation means *the human race* and that a few years later it also was used to represent an *adult male person*. I have also shown that in Sanskrit, Hebrew, and Greek there are different words for the dual concepts of *human being* and *adult male* that are now represented in English as *man*. The question that some feminists ask is—“so what?”

Sally McConnel-Ginet gives a convincing argument:

In discussing feminist suggestions for various linguistic changes, even linguists have sometimes forgotten the rule they avowedly adopt for themselves: Do not prescribe how people *should* speak, but describe how they *do* speak. The present state of a language

must be considered on its own terms, without reference to past states of which present traces may or may not exist.

To counter the suggestion that *man* is not adequately generic, etymology is often brought forth inappropriately. It is true that *man* derives from a genuinely generic form that designated human beings with no opposition to a form designating female human beings. These historical facts are of interest insofar as they provide some guide as to kinds of change that can occur, but they do not establish the current “genericness” of *man*. There is considerable evidence that *man* does, in many contexts, fail to be genuinely no-sexed. The history of earlier uses is simply beside the point (10-11 edited).

Wendy Martyna observes that the question of the *generic masculine* has been a focus of feminist concern. Words such as *he* and *man* have had to play two roles, conveying both specific references to males, and generic references to human beings.

Martyna claims that the *generic masculine* is faulted on three counts. First, its *inequity*: the non-parallelism between the male and female terms. Thomas Paine’s Rights of Man encompasses both male and human meaning, but Mary Wollstonecraft’s Rights of Woman can encompass female meaning alone. As the Association for Women in Psychology contends, “We should not countenance a language that refers to all humans as males.” Second, its *ambiguity*: the difficulty of determining whether a particular use of *he* and *man* is meant to include or exclude females. Third, its *exclusiveness*: those instances in which the generic masculine clearly excludes a female interpretation (as in, “Automation is *man*’s effort to make work so easy that women can do it all”). The National Institute of Education is among the many agencies that have adopted guidelines for avoiding *he* and *man* in order to counteract “the impression presently embedded in the English language that people in general are of male gender” (69-70).

I must admit that they have a valid point. Etymology alone is not enough to clearly understand the denotations and connotations of a word as it perceived by the majority of people who hear and use the word. Far more important than a word’s etymology, history, or dictionary definition is its usage and how people *hear* the word

(Maggio 176). Not everyone reads dictionaries, or having read them, uses words the way they are defined there (Maggio 176). I believe that any sensitive person living in the latter 20th century should avoid the use of *man* as a generic masculine and use terms that are truly gender neutral such as *person, people, one* or *humanity*.

VII. Conclusion

The educated minority cannot expect the general population to have knowledge of word origins that are a thousand years old. On the other hand, many people of average intelligence and education *do* read the King James Version of the Bible, and should be aware that the thousands of scriptures in which the word *man* appears do not necessarily exclude half of the entire human race. It is also an unfair assumption that the writers of great literature of past centuries were all sexists who deliberately excluded women in their use of *man*, despite the modern perception of the word. I believe that writers such as Shakespeare were very much aware of the dual nature of the word *man* (but that could be another whole paper).

I have only scratched the surface of the history of the word *man* and the many subtle changes it has endured on its odyssey through the Indo-European languages. Each and every person who uses the word in writing and speaking will continue to add to its meaning.

Works Cited

- Barfield, Owen. History in English Words. New York: Doubleday, 1926.
- Baugh, Albert C., and Thomas Cable. A History of the English Language. 4th ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice, 1993.
- Hopkins, Thomas J. The Hindu Religious Tradition. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1971.
- Klostermaier, Klaus K. A Survey of Hinduism. Albany, NY: State U. of New York Press, 1989.
- Maggio, Rosalie. The Nonsexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender-Free Usage. Phoenix, Az: Oryx, 1987.
- Martyna, Wendy. "The Psychology of the Generic Masculine," Women and Language in Literature and Society. ed. McConnell-Ginet, Sally, et al. New York: Praeger, 1980.
- McConnell-Ginet, Sally. "Linguistics and the Feminist Challenge," Women and Language in Literature and Society. ed. McConnell-Ginet, Sally, et al. New York: Praeger, 1980.
- Perry, Edward D. A Sanskrit Primer. Boston: Ginn, 1885.
- Simpson, J.A., and E.S.C. Weiner. The Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Strong, James. The New Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible. Nashville, TN: Nelson , 1990.
- Williams, Raymond. Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. New York: Oxford, 1976.