

Two sides

‘Gender-neutral forms can obscure difference and inequality’

They, them, their, theirs. In an ever more inclusive world, language is changing too. *Resource* talks to gender studies researcher Margreet van der Burg and Menno Sedee, final editor at the Dutch daily *NRC*, about the limits of inclusive language and images in science and journalism. Text Willem André • Photo Margreet van der Burg: Guy Ackermans • Photo Menno Sedee: Bram Belloni



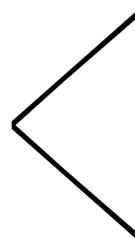
Should we say actor or actress? He or they? Which photos shall we use? We consulted two experts. Sedee is a freelance final editor at *NRC* and collaborated on an LGBT style guide for that newspaper. Van der Burg is a senior researcher in Gender Studies and the WUR-wide gender+ integration project leader for the EU project Gender-SMART.

Sedee: ‘The core of our style guide is: we write with respect for everyone and use people’s preferred pronouns, but at the same time, we don’t want to confuse the reader. With non-binary pronouns like they /them/their we still usually find that we need to explain. Gender-neutral language is also about gendered names of occupations. We tend to choose the masculine form as the neutral form. But is that really neutral? In Dutch, for example, if you say *politicus* for politician, most people picture a man. So I think that pre-

cisely by using the feminine form *politica*, you contribute to emancipation.’

Van der Burg: ‘I always add “man” and “woman” to neutral forms of language, or hint at whether the people in question are women or men. Research shows that you don’t break down the stereotyping in our heads by bringing back old feminine forms like “actress” or “manageress”. They just conjure up old associations with difference, like “farmer’s wife”. Women involved in agriculture want to be called women farmers, not farmers’ wives. That’s how they emphasize their contemporary identity. I also specify “male farmers” if I’m referring exclusively to men. I think we should acknowledge and name difference and inequality, and be transparent and specific. Gender-neutral forms can obscure that.’

Sedee: ‘Every day we print all the pages of the next day’s paper. Then the editor-in-chief and the photo editors look at this overview, partly to see if there are enough women in the paper. You’re on thin ice here, because you interview someone



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Menno Sedee

‘You don’t break down stereotyping by bringing back old forms like actress or manageress’

Margreet van der Burg

because she’s an expert, not because she is a woman. But sometimes you are more inclined to give a man prominence in the photo than a woman. At such times, your bias becomes visible.’

Van der Burg: ‘An element of conflict remains. You want to reflect reality while at the same time doing justice to diversity. Think of our *dies natalis*. If you photograph the front row of the procession of professors, you see mostly older men, because it goes by seniority. If you take a photo further down the cortège, you will see more women, and the same goes for student speeches. You can put together a collage. Making a conscious choice relates to the question of which realities you see and consider important and why. To me it’s more interesting to look for the scope for that kind of nuance and creativity than to play the policeman and point out everything that’s wrong.’

Resource: How do you feel about the discussion about ‘women who menstruate’ as opposed to ‘people who menstruate’?

Sedee: ‘I think the two can coexist. It’s OK to write “people who menstruate” if that is relevant. In medical contexts, for example, it is relevant to be precise. But that doesn’t mean you can never say “woman” again. Activists can make an issue of this, but if you’re rigid about it, that’s grist to the mill of people who wail that “you’re not allowed to say anything anymore”. But in general, respecting the rights of minorities doesn’t mean taking anything away from majorities.’

Van der Burg: ‘People are frustrated that it is taking so long to create a more inclusive society. I would say “women who menstruate” is fine. But that does refer to a subset because there are also women who don’t menstruate and there are menstruating people who don’t identify as women. It is certainly important to understand that. It’s a shame there is such a fuss about it because there are better uses of our time.’

Sedee: ‘The world is not always diverse. Suppose you were to have this conversation about the fire service. The fact is that there are not many female firefighters. So should you still choose a woman for the photo, in order to break the stereotype? The same goes for non-binary pronouns. On the one hand, you want to describe everyone as they identify themselves, but in society at large, these pronouns are rarely used and people are not at ease with them yet. We’re beginning to get used to they/them/their, but suppose another pronoun is added next year, like “xi”, say? I don’t think NRC will adopt that straightaway. But newspapers are part of society, so they too play a role in getting people used to new terms.’



Van der Burg: ‘In sectors where women are underrepresented, you can place the situation in a broader context. You might, for example, comment that there are only men in certain army barracks. You can’t change the facts, but you can draw attention to them.’

Sedee: ‘Totally gender-neutral language is not necessarily the goal. Many people derive much of their identity from their gender, and that includes transgender people. Trans women, for example, have often fought hard to get to be women or to get an “f” in their passport. If people were to be addressed on the train as “passengers” instead of “ladies and gentlemen”, they might feel deprived of the chance to be addressed according to their gender. Now, it’s no big deal on the train, but it would be if gender were to disappear altogether.’

Van der Burg: ‘You should aim to be empirically correct, transparent and specific. Particularly by being specific, you can expose stereotyping or inequality. To that end you should definitely choose not neutral forms but gender-sensitive or -specific forms.’ ■

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