

He/Man Rhetoric

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2000 - Privacy Protection Policy: Nowhere to Hide?

Round one at the first tournament of the year has just started. Mike is listening to his partner read the 1AC that they spent all of August and most of last night crafting. He looks down at his pre-flows, especially proud of the morality contention they have designed including the most explanatory and rhetorically powerful pieces of evidence they could find. He waits in anticipation for the 1N to stand up, thinking, "Bring it on."

Following her usual approach to an organized and effective 1NC, Alysia has already assembled the strategy she worked on over the summer against this affirmative, ready to pummel her opponents with specific link arguments and solvency turns. Suddenly, though, during the morality contention, she notices that something is wrong. Uncertain at first, then progressively angry and upset, she looks through the 1AC evidence, whispers something to her partner, and pulls out another shell, adding it to the top of the 1NC stack. She begins her speech with the Kritik of He/Man Language, which points out the 1AC's use of the universal "he" when referring to morally worthy beings and includes a piece of evidence outlining the devastating effects of sexist language as well as her own narrative about how she feels shut out of debate rounds in which it is used.

As he listens to the shell, Mike is also uncertain, then progressively angry and upset. He had read through Kant all by himself, mastering the philosopher's arguments and writing his own extension blocks. Did she really think he was sexist because of the language someone used long ago? Could he apologize to her? Should he apologize to the judge? What would people think when they heard that he was an offensive bigot??

This situation may become more and more common as debates over the language choices included in evidence or speeches, most often termed "kritiks of rhetoric," increasingly become part of many teams' strategies. The kritik of he/man language, widely introduced for the first time in the college debate circuit during the 1999-2000 season, has presented momentous issues that affect the entire debate community. In part, it is a sign of the continuing struggle against any type of exclusion in the community, and it has raised awareness about societal structures such as privilege that perpetuate discrimination and silence many voices inside and outside the world of debate. Even the most cautious and liberal-minded debate participants find themselves using he/man language at times, proof that this issue extends beyond any single debate round into the lived experiences of every coach, judge, and debater.

To some, the growing popularity of this argument represents a shift away from "traditional" policy debate towards narratives and testimonials which reveal and relate the personal, emotional impacts of arguments. To others, the kritik of he/man language provides an essential way to challenge sexism which would otherwise barely be noticed except for a perfunctory apology. Even those who remain uninterested in running this argument should prepare themselves for discussions and debates about it as it spreads from college to high school debate. At a minimum, this article aims to provide an introduction to both sides of the he/man debate in order to provide a basis for running and answering the kritik. Hopefully, it will move the debate beyond the knee-jerk reactions for and against the position, to allow you to formulate your own standards when dealing with it.

Before turning to an examination of the arguments supporting and opposing this argument, its premises must be understood. Both the newness and variations of the kritik of he/man language mean that it is still in development (at least to a greater degree than, say, the politics disadvantage, a position with which the kritik is often contrasted as the community discusses different types of debates). For this reason, no set structure of the kritik exists, nor does it seem likely that one will soon appear. The team presenting the argument may be either negative or affirmative and uses it to respond to language they feel is sexist and exclusionary. Usually, they present an A subpoint which identifies the he/man language, a B subpoint that explains the harm of this language which may be a piece of evidence, a personal statement, or both, and a C subpoint that contains an impact calculus or answers the question, "So what?" This is only one suggestion, however, and many teams have lengthened or shortened the position, sometimes including more evidence or a longer narrative of the impact this language has within the debate round.

As with virtually any position, the link and standards for evaluating this kritik remain debatable. However, because it is a relatively new argument, this is a critical time for individuals, teams, and even the community to consider the standards we apply to this position. These efforts are especially important because of the personal, emotional nature of the he/man kritik. Before running this argument, it is useful to consider what constitutes offensive language and how to understand the impact of the kritik.

Determining the boundaries of acceptable (and therefore unacceptable) uses of language constitutes a starting point, as this should affect one's decisions to run the kritik. Generally, the clearest manifestations of sexist language occur when "he" or "man" are used to describe all people; for example, when philosophers use the generic or universal "he" in formulating their principles. The literature supporting the kritik of he/man language argues that this rhetorical strategy promotes patriarchal thinking, representing men as the only beings worthy of consideration and rendering women invisible, excluding them even from the human race. The use of "mankind" presents similar problems because it portrays all people as men. (On the other hand, you should keep in mind that there are many respondents to this position who believe that the universal he is appropriate and even warranted.) The issue becomes slightly less clear when dealing with words that are considered terms of art, such as "the Renaissance man" or "brinkmanship," as some linguists and scholars trace these expressions back to patriarchal roots and others believe that they have been separated from these origins. There are other uses of "he" or "man" that are (debatably) more acceptable. For example, a quote from a person who uses "he" or "He" to describe their conception of a higher being may not necessarily reflect the exclusion of women, or should at least be considered and researched as a separate issue. A debate also exists about whether narratives should be held to different standards than academic writing, meaning that a quote from a person on the street or someone's story may not violate the kritik to the same degree as a political science professor's statements. In a final example, authors or debaters may use the term "congressman" when referring to an individual member of congress who self-identifies as a man. Although many prefer the more inclusive "congress member" or "congressperson," most people agree that this is not as blatantly offensive as many of the previous examples.

Next, we must examine the implications of the he/man kritik. When running this argument, it is important to decide upon a specific impact calculus. One often-voiced complaint is that these debates are not only difficult to participate in but hard to decide. Judges are often frustrated because debaters do not adequately develop or articulate standards or warrants for the impacts they advance. To date, three ways of dealing with sexist language have emerged. Many believe that an apology may be adequate, as it

attempts to recognize and redress the damage produced by he/man language. Most often, this apology is strengthened by throwing the offensive piece of evidence out of the round. Those who support an apology do so for three main reasons. First, it raises awareness about the damaging impacts of sexist language, perhaps not to the extent desired by some of the kritik's proponents, but at least to a large degree. Some people believe that accepting an apology is the best course of action because it does not force a choice between remaining silent on the issue and sacrificing the rest of the debate. Second, an apology may heal the wounds of both teams more effectively than the ballot. Cross-examination, prep time, and speech time can all be used to reach out to the other team and make personal amends that might be lost in a contentious post-round discussion. Third, a rejection of the apology may drive the losing team to feel hostility towards the kritik team and argument because they believe they were unfairly treated. Opponents of the apology as a solution argue that the damage has already been done, that teams could continue to use he/man language and just apologize every time the kritik is run, and that speaker point deductions or the loss of the round are superior ways to weigh the kritik.

Judges and debaters alike have also considered the loss of speaker points as another possible impact of the kritik. This may be especially appropriate if a debater refers to a self-identified woman as "he" many times in the course of a debate. Those who support this remedy believe that the deduction of speaker points most directly targets the offending debater without punishing the partner, who may not be at fault. In certain circumstances, even when this kritik (or any other kritik of rhetoric) is not run, judges may deduct speaker points for excessively offensive language such as sexist or racial slurs in order to force the debater to realize how harmful her or his actions were. Except for these situations, however, speaker points are either not deducted or are deducted for other reasons, such as poor argumentation.

Finally, several arguments support the loss of the round as the impact to the use of he/man language. First, the use of the ballot provides argumentative legitimacy to the kritik. In order for debaters to seriously consider the issue and change their ways, they must lose the round. This argument enjoys a significant amount of success because of the newness of the kritik. Second, pioneers of this position such as Rachel Saloom from West Georgia argue that treating the kritik as a voting issue "just like any other issue" may make it seem less personal. She draws this analogy: many people consider it completely acceptable, and even mandated, to vote against teams who lose the violation and standards of a theory argument. For example, if a team proves that an affirmative is not topical and that the negative standards are best, the judge will virtually always agree that the negative should win the ballot. Hence, if a team running the kritik wins that their opponents used sexist language and that this language is harmful inside and outside the round and therefore the most important consideration, they should win the round. Another often-used analogy is that the kritik is like a straight-turn, and that opposing teams can't simply ignore or "kick out of" their use of he/man language. Finally, the exclusionary effects of this language often speak for themselves, and debaters often read persuasive evidence or make their own personal statements about the invisibility it produces which convince the judge to vote for them out of understanding and solidarity.

On the other hand, opponents argue that the ballot should not be the impact for three basic reasons. First, it is not the same as other issues because it does not fall within the realm of theory. Unlike conditionality or topicality, there are impact discussions within the literature that draw out reasons for why the use of the universal he may be acceptable or even preferred. Unlike debates over rhetoric, debates over theory produce the rules of the game, which come before any other issue because they determine the

very nature of the debate. Other analogies used by those who run this kritik only prove that it should be weighed against other issues in a substantive manner. For example, if it is really like a straight turn, the advocates of the kritik must prove that it outweighs the other arguments in the round; they cannot expect to win the round just because they turned one disadvantage. Second, other remedies may be more appropriate and may also avoid the overly harsh punishment of the ballot. As discussed above, many people believe that discarding pieces of evidence is punishment enough, and that an accompanying apology or docking of speaker points will teach them their lesson. In fact, they argue that the penalty of a loss may drive teams to reject the kritik as a legitimate argument, undermining its very basis. Third, many argue that the kritik destroys freedom of speech in debate round, censoring those who make mistakes and accidentally say "he" or read a piece of evidence with the word "man." This often compounds debaters' frustration at having their language choices labeled sexist because they do not feel that they should lose the round for a slip-up.

Other, related issues continue to challenge the debate community. Many people feel uncomfortable with the kritik because they do not believe that an argument as emotionally significant as this one should be sacrificed to strategic concerns. As previously noted, some coaches and debaters are concerned about a dramatic shift in the community, not only towards kritiks, but also towards the personalization of arguments in the form of narratives and testimonials. Put bluntly, many characterize this style of debate as "whining and weeping" and believe that the tears and emotional reactions of debaters running this argument cow the judge into submission, essentially manipulating them into voting for the kritik. This makes the consideration and possible adoption of standards by debaters running the argument even more important. In order to guard against perceptions of the he/man kritik as "strategic crying," it is crucial to come up with a strong and defensible position, making careful choices about when to run the kritik, when and why to accept apologies or to call for the use of the ballot, and how to promote an inclusive and productive discussion about he/man language.

Hopefully you have not read through this article without thinking of one last helpful hint: if you do not want to find yourself on the defensive against this kritik, don't use he/man language. Some people have made this decision based purely on strategic concerns, but I would like to think that others are swayed by the idea that it can be extremely hurtful to many participants, and choose to carefully examine their evidence to determine whether or not it uses exclusionary language. I understand and can relate to frustration about the way this argument is often run; however, I believe these concerns may be misguided. Although it is difficult to make predictions about trends in the community, arguments such as the kritik of he/man language serve important functions that will not necessarily displace strategies based on disadvantages, case turns, or even inherency. It has already raised tremendously important issues in the community that go far beyond the ones detailed in this article. The process of change is almost always painful, whether this change lies in the introduction of new argument forms, the way we view the ballot, or the struggle to invite, accept, and celebrate diversity among participants. However, I am optimistic that these challenges will bring greater vitality and inclusivity to the community, qualities which will reward us long after the conclusion of this season.

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