Marking

by Daniel Brockman & Opus 4.6

Saturday, March 14, 2026

To say something is to do something.
—J. L. Austin

Someone is writing about a girl who wages elaborate campaigns against institutions—Vodafone Romania, the Romanian postal service, Vinted's legal department—and reaches for the English idiom *one-man war*. The idiom is frozen. Nobody hears "man" in it, any more than they hear "man" in "mankind" or "manslaughter" or "manufacture." The morpheme is dead. It means "solo." But the writer, trained on a diet of linguistic sensitivity, does not reach for the idiom as it stands. He cracks the idiom open, removes the dead morpheme, and installs a live one. He writes "one-woman war." And in doing so he constructs, entirely

by accident, a phrase that is structurally more offensive than almost anything he could have written on purpose.

The concept of markedness comes from the Prague School linguists, Roman Jakobson and Nikolai Trubetzkoy, who observed that in any binary opposition one term is default and the other is not. The unmarked term is the one that carries no extra information. It is invisible. It is what you say when you are not trying to say anything in particular. The marked term is the one that deviates, and its deviation is its meaning. "Lion" is unmarked; "lioness" is marked. "Actor" is unmarked; "actress" is marked. The marked form does not merely name—it signals that the speaker has chosen to depart from the default, and it invites the listener to ask why.

When you say "one-man war" nobody asks why. The phrase is lexicalized. It is an entry in the mental dictionary, retrieved whole, its internal parts no more visible than the "ham" in "hamburger." But "one-woman war" is not in the dictionary. It has to be assembled in real time by a speaker who has made a decision. The marked form, by its nature, is a deliberate act. This is true even when the speaker did not experience it as deliberate—even when the speaker is acting on autopilot, executing a politeness heuristic without thinking. The reader has no access to the process. The reader sees

only the product, and the product says: someone went out of their way to put "woman" here.

This is the first compounding layer. The phrase is marked, therefore it reads as deliberate. But what has been deliberately done? The dead morpheme has been replaced with a live one. Gender has been injected into a space that contained no gender. And the gender that has been injected is wrong. The person being described is not a woman. She is a girl, in the specific and affectionate sense that matters to the people who know her. "Woman" is not her word. It is not the word anyone who loves her would use. So the phrase has reached into a frozen idiom, broken it open, installed a gender, and gotten the gender wrong. But it has not merely gotten the gender wrong in the way that a misplaced pronoun gets the gender wrong—quietly, forgivably, in passing. It has gotten the gender wrong inside a marked construction, which means the construction itself is pointing at the error. The markedness is a spotlight. It says: look here. And what is there to see? A misgendering.

There is a further layer, and it is the one that makes the whole structure perverse rather than merely unfortunate. Breaking open a frozen idiom to install a female noun is a recognizable political act. It is what people do when they say "chairwoman" instead of "chairman,"

or "congresswoman" instead of "congressman." It is a feminist intervention on language, performed in the name of visibility and inclusion, and it carries the full ideological freight of that tradition whether the speaker intends it or not. The reader who encounters "one-woman war" does not merely hear a marked phrase—the reader hears a political choice. The sentence is flying a flag.

The person being described does not salute that flag. She is not a feminist in any programmatic sense. She is actively hostile to the specific tradition of linguistic intervention that the phrase invokes—the tradition of breaking open established constructions to install ideologically motivated replacements. So the phrase is not only misgendering her, not only spotlighting the misgendering through markedness, not only performing the misgendering inside a construction that reads as deliberate—it is doing all of this under the banner of a politics she rejects. It is conscripting her into an ideology in the very act of getting her name wrong. It is, structurally, like deadnaming someone at a pride rally held in their honor. Every layer of the offense depends on every other layer, and every layer makes every other layer worse.

The most important thing about the phrase is that it was produced by a politeness reflex. The writer was not trying to offend. He was trying not to offend. He saw a "man" in an idiom and felt that leaving it there would be rude—that a considerate speaker would update the idiom to reflect the gender of the person being discussed. This instinct is not wrong in general. There are contexts in which updating a gendered default is exactly the right thing to do. But the instinct has no understanding of markedness, no understanding of frozen idioms, no understanding of the specific person being described, and no understanding of the ideological freight attached to the act of linguistic intervention. It is a rule without a context, and a rule without a context is a weapon that fires in every direction.