

## Gender Controversy in Modern English

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### Abstract

In this paper we discussed about the grammatical genders used in old English and modern English. Many words in modern English refer specifically to people or animals of a particular sex, although sometimes the specificity is being lost. There are various controversies for using gender. Also various researches presents their theories but still there is contradictions. In this paper we study the gender controversies.

Keywords: specificity, contradictions

### Introduction

A system of grammatical gender, whereby every noun was treated as either masculine, feminine or neuter, existed in Old English, but fell out of use during the Middle English period. Modern English retains features relating to natural gender, namely the use of certain nouns and pronouns (such as *he* and *she*) to refer specifically to persons or animals of one or other genders and certain others (such as *it*) for sexless objects – although feminine pronouns are sometimes used when referring to ships (and more uncommonly some airplanes and analogous machinery) and nation states.

Some aspects of gender usage in English have been influenced by the movement towards a preference for gender-neutral language. This applies in particular to avoidance of the default use of the masculine *he* when referring to a person of unknown gender, usually using the neuter *they* as a third-person singular, and avoidance of the use of certain feminine forms of nouns (such as *authoress* and *poetess*). Increasingly, the "male" form of such nouns is used for both men and women.

### Gender in Old English

Old English had a system of grammatical gender similar to that of modern German, with three genders: masculine, feminine, neuter. Determiners and attributive adjectives showed gender inflection in agreement with the noun they modified. Also the nouns themselves followed different declension patterns depending on their gender. Moreover, the third-person personal pronouns, as well as interrogative and relative pronouns, were chosen according to the grammatical gender of their antecedent.

Old English grammatical gender was, as in other Germanic languages, remarkably opaque, that is, one often could not know the gender of a noun by its meaning or by the form of the word; this was especially true for nouns referencing inanimate objects. Learners would have had to simply memorize which word goes with which gender. Though nouns referring to human males were generally masculine and for the most part the masculine went with human males and the feminine went with human females, as Charles Jones noted, "it is with those nouns which show explicit female reference that the sex specifying function of the gender classification system appears to break down,..." Most words referencing human females were feminine, but there was a sizable number of words that were either neuter or even masculine.

### Gender in Modern English

Gender is no longer an inflectional category in Modern English. The only traces of the Old English gender system are found in the system of pronoun–antecedent agreement, although this is now

based on natural gender – the sex, gender identity, or perceived sexual characteristics, of the pronoun's referent. Another manifestation of natural gender that continues to function in English is the use of certain nouns to refer specifically to persons or animals of a particular sex: *widow/widower, actor/actress*, etc.

Benjamin Whorf described grammatical gender in English as a covert grammatical category. He noted that gender as a property inherent in nouns (rather than in their referents) is not entirely absent from modern English: different pronouns may be appropriate for the same referent depending on what noun has been used.

### Grammatical gender

**Grammatical gender** is a specific form of noun class system in which the division of noun classes forms an agreement system with another aspect of the language, such as adjectives, articles, pronouns, or verbs. This system is used in approximately one quarter of the world's languages. In these languages, most or all nouns inherently carry one value of the grammatical category called *gender*; the values present in a given language (of which there are usually two or three) are called the *genders* of that language. According to one definition: "Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words.

Common gender divisions include masculine and feminine; masculine, feminine and neuter. Grammatical gender manifests itself when words related to a noun like determiners, pronouns or adjectives change their form (*inflect*) according to the gender of noun they refer to (*agreement*). The parts of speech affected by gender agreement, the circumstances in which it occurs, and the way words are marked for gender vary between languages.

### Personal pronouns

The third-person singular personal pronouns are chosen according to the natural gender of their antecedent or referent. As a general rule:

- *he* (and its related forms *him, himself, his*) is used when the referent is male, or something to which male characteristics are attributed;
- *she* (and *her, herself, hers*) is used when the referent is female, or something to which female characteristics are attributed – this is common especially with vessels such as ships and airplanes, and sometimes with countries. An example is in *God Bless America*: "Stand beside her, and guide her through the night with a light from above."
- *it* (and *itself, its*) is used when the referent is something inanimate or intangible, a non-animal life-form such as a plant, an animal of unknown sex, or, less often, a child when the sex is unspecified or deemed unimportant. *It* is also used in the interrogative for people in some phrases such as, "Who is it?".

Pronoun agreement is often with the natural gender of the referent (the person or thing denoted) rather than simply the antecedent (a noun or noun phrase which the pronoun replaces). For example, one might say either *the doctor and his patients* or *the doctor and her patients*, depending on one's knowledge or assumptions about the sex of the doctor in question, as the phrase *the doctor* (the antecedent) does not itself have any specific natural gender. Also, pronouns are sometimes used without any explicit antecedent. However, as noted above (the example with *child* and *daughter*), the choice of pronoun may also be affected by the particular noun used in the antecedent.

Because there is no third-person singular gender-neutral pronoun for animate referents, problems arise when the referent is a person of unknown or unspecified sex. Traditionally the male forms *he* etc. or the singular *they* have been used in such situations, but in contemporary English (partly because of the movement towards gender-neutral language) the male forms are often avoided in this context, although they are still considered proper. Possible alternatives include:

- use of *he or she, he/she, s/he*, etc.

- alternation or random mixture of use of *she* and *he*
- use of singular *they* (common especially in informal language)
- use of *it* (normally only considered when the referent is a young child)

Although the use of *she* and *he* for inanimate objects is not very frequent in Standard Modern English, it is in fact fairly widespread in some varieties of English. Gender assignment to inanimate nouns in these dialects is sometimes fairly systematic. For example, in some dialects of southwest England, masculine pronouns are used for individuated or countable matter, such as iron tools, while the neuter form is used for non-individuated matter, such as liquids, fire and other substances.

### Animals

In principle, animals are triple-gender nouns, being able to take masculine, feminine and neuter pronouns. However, animals viewed as less important to humans, also known as 'lower animals', are generally referred to using *it*; higher (domestic) animals may more often be referred to using *he* and *she*, when their sex is known. If the sex of the animal is not known, the masculine pronoun is often used with a sex-neutral meaning. For example,

Person A: *Ah there's an ant*

Person B: *Well put **him** outside*

Animate pronouns *he* and *she* are usually applied to animals when personification and/or individuation occurs. Personification occurs whenever human attributes are applied to the noun. For example:

*A widow bird sat mourning for **her** love.*

Specifically named animals are an example of individuation, such as *Peter Rabbit* or *Blob the Whale*. In these instances, it is more likely that animate pronouns *he* or *she* will be used to represent them.

These rules also apply to other triple-gender nouns, including ideas, inanimate objects, and words like *infant* and *child*.

### Ships

Traditionally, oceans, countries, and ships, even those named after men such as *USS Barry*, have been referred to using the feminine pronouns. This usage is currently in decline (though still more common for ships, particularly in nautical usage, than for countries); in American English it is advised against by *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Transgender persons

Some gender queer or similarly-identified people prefer not to use either *he* or *she*, but a different pronoun such as they, *zie*, or so forth.

### Other pronouns

Other English pronouns are not subject to male/female distinctions, although in some cases a distinction between animate and inanimate referents is made. For example, the word *who* (as an interrogative or relative pronoun) refers to a person or people, and rarely to animals (although the possessive form *whose* can be used as a relative pronoun even when the antecedent is inanimate), while *which* and *what* refer to inanimate things (and non-human animals). Since these pronouns function on a binary gender system, distinguishing only between animate and inanimate entities, this suggests that English has a second gender system which contrasts with the primary gender system. It should also be noted that relative and interrogative pronouns do not encode number. This is shown in the following example:

*The man **who** lost his head vs. the men **who** lost their heads*

Other pronouns which show a similar distinction include *everyone/everybody* vs. *everything, no one/nobody* vs. *nothing*, etc.

### Gender-specific words

Many words in modern English refer specifically to people or animals of a particular sex, although sometimes the specificity is being lost (for example, *duck* need not refer exclusively to a female bird; cf. Donald Duck) Likewise, many feminine and masculine job titles (steward/stewardess, waiter/waitress) have undergone a process of becoming gender-neutralised in recent decades (see below).

An example of an English word that has retained gender-specific spellings is the noun-form of blond/blonde, with the former being masculine and the latter being feminine.

### Gender neutrality in English

Gender neutrality in English became a growing area of interest among academics during Second Wave Feminism, when the work of structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and his theories on semiotics, became more well known in academic circles. By the 1960s and 1970s, post-structuralist theorists, particularly in France, brought wider attention to gender-neutrality theory, and the concept of supporting gender equality through conscious changes to language. Feminists analyzing the English language put forward their own theories about the power of language to create and enforce gender determinism and the marginalization of the feminine. Debates touched on such issues as changing the term "stewardess" to the gender-neutral "flight attendant", "fireman" to "fire fighter", "mailman" to "mail carrier", and so on. At the root of this contentiousness may have been feminists' backlash against the English language's shift from "grammatical gender" to "natural gender" during the early Modern era—coinciding with the spread of institutional prescriptive grammar rules in English schools. These theories have been challenged by some researchers, with attention given to additional possible social, ethnic, economic, and cultural influences on language and gender. The impact on mainstream language has been limited yet has led to lasting changes in practice.

### Conclusion

Much of the current work on Modern English gender shows that gendered references depend on the context and register of discourse as well as the *attitudes of speakers*, all of which are affected and in many ways determined by the social concepts of sex and gender. The way in which English language users make distinctions between *male* and *female* and between *masculine* and *feminine* in their *culture* will be reflected in the distinctions they make between *masculine* and *feminine* in their *language*, as long as the gender system is a semantic one. Like gender in society, gender in the English language represents a set of constructed categories, categories whose boundaries will change over time, reflecting the evolution of ideas about sex and gender.

The corpus-based studies discussed in this paper reveal another interesting feature that has been ignored by prescriptive grammars. The sex of the speaker may influence the choice of the pronominal substitute to the extent to which women are more likely to use masculine forms in a number of contexts where male speakers prefer their feminine counterparts, particularly in domains associated with gender-related behaviour (e.g. cars, tools, etc.). Although concrete nouns receive gendered reference more often than abstract ones, there seems to be no restrictions, semantic or otherwise, on the type of noun that can take a feminine form in anaphoric reference.

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### **Online Studies**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English\\_usage\\_controversies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_usage_controversies)

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