

Language and gender

The term **gender** refers to the socially constructed categories **male** and **female**, and *not* to such grammatical categories as ‘masculine’, ‘feminine’, ‘neuter’.

The study of language in relation to gender has **two main foci**.

1 - it has been observed by many linguists that men and women *speak differently*;

2 - it has been observed by many feminists and by some linguists that men and women *are spoken about differently*, and it is often claimed that the language is discriminatory against women.

Differences in male and female language use began to be noticed at least as early as the seventeenth century in the societies visited by missionaries and explorers, and the interest these differences caused often led to claims that in some societies men and women spoke completely different languages.

This is, of course, an overstatement!!

What tends to happen to varying degrees in various societies is that *the gender of a speaker will determine or increase the likelihood of choices of certain* phonological, morphological, syntactic, and lexical *forms of a language* while precluding or diminishing the likelihood of certain other choices.

a. Gender - exclusive differences

b. Gender – preferential differences

The gender-exclusive/ gender-preferential distinction probably reflects a distinction between societies in which gender roles are more strictly defined and societies in which they are less strictly defined.

a. In 1665 the French writer Rochefort described the language of the Carib Indians, who lived in the Lesser Antilles in the West Indies.

The men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce for themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men

never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if the women had another language than the men.

When the Caribs came to occupy the islands, these were occupied by an Arawak tribe which they exterminated completely, with the exception of the women, whom they married in order to populate the country. Now, these women kept their own language and taught it to their daughters...But though the boys understand the speech of their mothers and sisters, they nevertheless follow their fathers and brothers and conform to their speech from the age of five or six.

b. that female speakers tend to use more **prestige forms** than males

(Prestige varieties are those varieties which are generally considered, by a society, to be the most "correct" or otherwise superior variety.)

1. In all styles, women tend to use fewer stigmatized forms than men.
2. In formal contexts, women seem to be more sensitive to prestige patterns than men.
3. Lower-middle-class women make major shifts in style; in the least formal style, they use a high proportion of the stigmatized variant, but in more formal styles, they correct their speech to correspond to that of the class above them.
4. Use of non-standard forms seems to be associated not only with working-class speakers, but also with *male* speakers.

In a study, women using RP¹ were considered more fluent, intelligent, self-confident, adventurous, independent and *feminine* than women with a regional accent. In addition, RP-accented women were also rated as being more *masculine* (judges had to rate each speaker for both masculinity and femininity on a nine-point scale). This may seem contradictory, but if masculinity and femininity are seen as two independent dimensions, then individuals have the choice of both characteristics.

What is the explanation for this?

¹ Received pronunciation –standard English pronunciation in UK, where it enjoyed high social prestige until 1960s, when an openness towards varieties of English occurred.

Women, who occupy socially insecure positions, are seeking to appropriate some of the status attached to being an RP-speaker. In other words, a woman speaking RP may have greater access to traditionally male territories (jobs, activities...).

In addition to differences in syntax, morphology, and pronunciation, men and women differ in terms of *communicative strategies*.

When men and women converse, for instance, men tend to interrupt very frequently and are slow to provide supporting responses to women's speech turns. Women, on the other hand, use more **facilitative tags** than men, that is, tags which help a conversation to move along smoothly, and more *yes/no* questions, which can, of course, also help to keep a conversation going.

Men also generally talk more than women.

This clearly contradicts the popular belief that women talk more than men, and Spender² explains that the reason that it *seems* to us that women speak more than men, even though studies show that it is the other way round, is that men are *expected* by the culture in general to talk, while women are expected to remain silent.

When women do talk, therefore, it is more noticeable than when men talk.

These gender-related differences in speech patterns are acquired by children as they learn to speak just as other gender stereotypes (how boys should behave and how girls should behave) and cultural values in general are learnt along with language.

2. Are spoken about differently

The attitudes transmitted through language may either help to reinforce the *status quo*, or they may be a factor in changing it. It is possible to argue that the belief that standard English has been transmitting since the eighteenth century is that males are the species and women the subspecies, thus making it appear natural that males should be dominant. The main aspect of

² Dale Spender, Australian feminist scholar and writer.

English usage normally mentioned in support of this argument is the use of *man* and *he* as **generic** as terms referring to the entire species — to all of human kind.

Use of *man* and the male pronouns as generics is usually justified on two grounds: (1) it is an ancient rule of English grammar; and

(2) everybody knows that in generalizations, the male terms are meant to include females.

Neither claim appears to stand up to scrutiny.

In Old English, *man* meant ‘person’ or ‘human being’, and was equally applicable to either sex. It is used in this way in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, where, for instance, Ercongota, the daughter of a seventh-century English king, is described as ‘a wonderful man’.

English, at that time, had *wer* for ‘adult male’ and *wif* for ‘adult female’. The combined forms *wæpman* and *wifman* meant, respectively, ‘adult male person’ and ‘adult female person’.

Over time, *wifman* evolved into *woman*, and *wif* narrowed in meaning to ‘wife’. *Man* narrowed in meaning in replacing *wer* and *wæpman*.

The change in the meaning of *man* from broad to narrower, is similar to the way in which *deor* and *heafon* have narrowed from meaning ‘animal’ and ‘sky’ to meaning ‘deer’ and ‘heaven’ with the importation to English of the words *animal* and *sky*.

Later writers, like William Caxton, Shakespeare, and Chesterfield used *they* to refer to the species: ‘Each of them should...make *themselves ready’ (Caxton); ‘God send everyone their heart’s desire’ (Shakespeare); ‘If a person is born of a gloomy temper...they cannot help it’ (Chesterfield).

However, the evidence appears to suggest that the terms in question are **false generics**. If they were true generic terms, there should be nothing odd about sentences like *Man breastfeeds his young; man suffers in childbirth*, *Diana Nyad became the first man to swim from the Bahamas to Florida*. Studies like that of Schneider and Hucker (1972) provide empirical evidence against *man* as a generic.

They asked two groups of college students to select from magazines and newspapers, pictures to illustrate a sociology text book. One group were asked to find illustrations for headings like *Industrial man; Political man; Urban man*. The other group's headings were of the type *Industrial life; Political life; Urban life*.

In a majority of cases, students of both sexes chose pictures of males to illustrate the titles including the term *man*, while choosing pictures including both sexes to illustrate the *life* titles. This shows that the term *man* is semantically loaded in favour of males, that is, it makes users think predominantly of males.

This has been solved, in language, by the replacement of such words as tennis man, policeman, fireman, with the more politically correct tennis player, police officer, fire fighter.

What is the situation in your mother tongue or in other languages that you speak?