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# Sex and Syntax

In one of his loveliest but most enigmatic poems, Heinrich Heine describes the yearning of a snowy pine tree for a sunburned oriental palm. In the original, the poem runs like this:

Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam Im Norden auf kahler Höh'. Ihn schläfert; mit weißer Decke Umhüllen ihn Eis und Schnee.

Er träumt von einer Palme, Die, fern im Morgenland, Einsam und schweigend trauert Auf brennender Felsenwand.

The quiet despair of Heine's poem must have struck a chord with one of the great melancholics of the Victorian period, the Scottish poet James Thomson (1834–1882, not to be confused with the Scottish poet James Thomson, 1700–1848, who wrote *The Seasons*). Thomson was especially admired for his

translations, and his rendering remains one of the most oft quoted of the many English versions:

A pine-tree standeth lonely In the North on an upland bare; It standeth whitely shrouded With snow, and sleepeth there.

It dreameth of a Palm Tree Which far in the East alone, In mournful silence standeth On its ridge of burning stone.

With its resonant rhymes and its interlocked alliteration, Thomson's rendering captures the isolation and the hopeless fixity of the forlorn pine and palm. His adaptation even manages to remain true to Heine's rhythm while apparently following the meaning of the poem very faithfully. And yet, despite all its artfulness, Thomson's translation entirely fails to reveal to an English reader a pivotal aspect of the original poem, perhaps the very key to its interpretation. It fails so decidedly because it glosses over one grammatical feature of the German language, which happens to be the basis of the whole allegory, and without which Heine's metaphor is castrated. If you haven't guessed what that grammatical feature is, the following translation by the American poet Emma Lazarus (1849–87) will make it clearer:

There stands a lonely pine-tree In the north, on a barren height; He sleeps while the ice and snow flakes Swathe him in folds of white.

He dreameth of a palm-tree Far in the sunrise-land, Lonely and silent longing On her burning bank of sand.

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In Heine's original, the pine tree (der Fichtenbaum) is masculine while the palm (die Palme) is feminine, and this opposition of grammatical gender gives the imagery a sexual dimension that is repressed in Thomson's translation. But many critics believe that the pine tree conceals far more under his folds of white than merely the conventional romantic lament of unrequited love, and that the palm may be the object of an altogether different kind of desire. There is a tradition of Jewish love poems addressed to the distant and unattainable Jerusalem, which is always personified as a female beloved. This genre goes all the way back to one of Heine's favourite psalms: 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. . . . If I forget thee [feminine], O Jerusalem, may my right hand wither, may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth.' Heine may be alluding to this tradition, and his lonely palm on her ridge of burning stone may be a coded reference to the deserted Jerusalem, perched high up in the Judaean hills. More specifically, Heine's lines may be alluding to the most famous of all odes to Jerusalem, written in twelfth-century Spain by Yehuda Halevy, a poet whom Heine revered. The pine tree's object of desire 'far in the East' may be echoing Halevy's opening line, 'My heart is in the East, and I am in the furthest West.'

Whether or not the poem is really about Heine's despair at reconciling his roots in the Germanic North with the distant homeland of his Jewish soul is a mystery that may never be resolved. But there is no doubt that the poem cannot be unlocked without the genders of the two protagonists. Emma Lazarus's translation transfers this sexual basis into English, by employing the pronouns 'he' for the pine tree and 'her' for the palm. The price Lazarus pays for this faithfulness is that her translation sounds somewhat arch, or at least artificially poetic, since in English it is not natural to speak of trees in this way. But unlike English, which treats inanimate objects uniformly as 'it', German assigns thousands of objects to the masculine or feminine gender as a matter of course. In fact, in German there is nothing the slightest bit poetic about calling inanimate objects 'he' or 'she'. You would simply refer to a *Palme* as 'she' whenever you spoke of her, even in the most mundane chit-chat. You'd explain to your neighbours how you got her half price in the garden centre a few years ago and then unfortunately planted her too close to a eucalyptus, how his roots have disturbed her growth, and how she's given you no end of trouble since, with her fungus and her ganoderma butt rot. And all this would be related without a hint of poetic inspiration, or even of self-consciousness. It's just how one speaks if one speaks German – or Spanish, or French, or Russian, or a host of other languages with similar gender systems.

Gender is perhaps the most obvious area where significant otherness is found not just between 'us' and exotic tropical languages, but also much closer to home. You may spend nine lives without ever meeting a speaker of Tzeltal or Guugu Yimithirr. But you would have to go to great lengths to avoid meeting speakers of Spanish, French, Italian, German, Russian, Polish, or Arabic, to name just a few examples. Some of your best friends may even be gendered. Are their thought processes affected by this aspect of their language? Could it be that the feminine gender of the German *Palme* affects how a German thinks of a palm tree even beyond the artifice of poetry? As surprising as it may seem, we shall soon see that the answer is yes and that there is now solid evidence that gender systems can exert a powerful hold on speakers' associations.

'Gender' is a loaded word these days. It may not be quite as risqué as 'sex', but it runs the risk of engendering serious misunderstandings, so it is helpful to start by clarifying how linguists' rather dry use of this word diverges from that of everyday English and also from that of some of the trendier academic disciplines. The original sense of 'gender' had nothing to do with sex: it meant 'type', 'kind', 'race' – in fact, 'gender' has exactly the same origin as the words 'genus' and 'genre'. Like most serious problems in life, the latter-day diversity of meanings for 'gender' has its roots in ancient Greece. The Greek philosophers started using their noun *génos* (which meant 'race' or 'type') to refer to one particular division of things into three specific 'types': males (humans and animals), females, and inanimate things. And from Greek, this sense passed via Latin to other European languages.

In English, both senses of 'gender' - the general meaning 'type' and

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the more specific grammatical distinction – coexisted happily for a long time. As late as the eighteenth century, 'gender' could still be used in an entirely sexless way. When the novelist Robert Bage wrote in 1784, 'I also am a man of importance, a public man, Sir, of the patriotic gender', he meant nothing more than 'type'. But later on, this general sense of the word fell into disuse in everyday English, the 'neuter' category also beat a retreat, and the masculine–feminine division came to dominate the meaning of the word. In the twentieth century, 'gender' became simply a euphemism for 'sex', so if you find on some official form a request to fill in your 'gender', you are unlikely nowadays to write 'patriotic'.

In some academic disciplines, notably 'gender studies', the sexual connotations of 'gender' developed an even more specific sense and started being used to denote the social (rather than biological) aspects of the difference between women and men. 'Gender studies' are thus concerned with the social roles played by the two sexes rather than with the differences between their anatomies.

Linguists, on the other hand, veered in exactly the opposite direction: they returned to the original meaning of the word, namely 'type' or 'kind', and nowadays use it for any division of nouns according to some essential properties. These essential properties may be based on sex, but they do not have to be. Some languages, for example, have a gender distinction that is based only on 'animacy', the distinction between animate beings (people and animals of both sexes) and inanimate things. Other languages draw the line differently and make a gender distinction between human and non-human (animals and inanimate things). And there are also languages that divide nouns into much more specific genders. The African language Supyire from Mali has five genders: humans, big things, small things, collectives, and liquids. Bantu languages such as Swahili have up to ten genders, and the Australian language Ngan'gityemerri is said to have fifteen different genders, which include, among others, masculine human, feminine human, canines, non-canine animals, vegetables, drinks, and two different genders for spears (depending on size and material).

In short, when a linguist talks about 'gender studies' she is just as

likely to mean 'animal, mineral, and vegetable' as the difference between men and women. Nevertheless, since the research on the influence of grammatical gender on the mind has so far been conducted exclusively on European languages, in which the distinction between masculine and feminine nouns dominates the gender system, our focus in the following pages will be on the masculine and feminine, and more exotic genders will make only a passing appearance.

The discussion so far may have given the impression that grammatical gender actually makes sense. The idea of grouping together objects with similar vital properties seems eminently reasonable in itself, so it would be only natural to assume that whatever criteria a language has chosen for making gender distinctions, it will abide by its own rules. We would expect, therefore, that a feminine gender would include all, and only all, female human beings or animals, that an inanimate gender would include all inanimate things, and only them, that a vegetable gender would include, well, vegetables.

There are in fact a handful of languages that do behave like that. In Tamil, there are three genders - masculine, feminine, and neuter - and you can pretty much tell which gender any noun belongs to given its obvious properties. Nouns denoting men (and male gods) are masculine; those denoting women and goddesses are feminine; everything else objects, animals (and infants) - is neuter. Another straightforward case was Sumerian, the language spoken on the banks of the Euphrates some five thousand years ago by the people who invented writing and kick-started history. The Sumerian gender system was based not on sex but on the distinction between human and non-human, and nouns were assigned consistently to the appropriate gender. The only point of indecision was with the noun 'slave', which was sometimes deemed human and sometimes assigned to the non-human gender. Another language that can be said to belong to the elite club of logical gender is English. Gender is marked only on pronouns in English ('he', 'she', 'it'), and in general such pronouns are used transparently: 'she' refers to women (and occasionally to female animals), 'he' to men and to a few

male animals, and 'it' to everything else. The exceptions, such as 'she' for a ship, are few and far between.

There are also some languages, such as Manambu from Papua New Guinea, where genders might not be entirely consistent, but where one can at least discern some basic threads of rationality in the system. In Manambu, masculine and feminine genders are assigned to inanimate objects, not just to men and women. But apparently there are reasonably transparent rules for the assignment. For instance, small and rounded things are feminine, while big and longish things are masculine. A belly is feminine, for example, but a pregnant woman's belly is spoken of in the masculine gender once it has become really big. Intense things are masculine, less intense things feminine. Darkness is feminine when it's not yet completely dark, but when it becomes pitch black it turns masculine. You don't have to agree with the logic, but at least you can follow it.

Finally, there are those languages, such as Turkish, Finnish, Estonian, Hungarian, Indonesian, and Vietnamese, that are entirely consistent about gender simply because they have no grammatical gender at all. In such languages, even pronouns referring to human being do not bear gender distinctions, so there aren't separate pronouns for 'he' and 'she'. When a Hungarian friend of mine is tired, he sometimes lets slip things like 'she is Emma's husband'. This is not because speakers of Hungarian are blind to the difference between men and women, only because they are not in the habit of specifying the sex of a person each and every time the person is mentioned.

If genders were always as straight as they are in English or Tamil, there would be little point in asking whether a gender system can affect people's perception of objects. For if the grammatical gender of every object merely reflected its real-world properties (man, woman, inanimate, vegetable, etc.), it could add nothing to anyone's associations that was not there objectively. But as it happens, languages with a consistent and transparent gender system are very much in the minority. The great majority of languages have wayward genders. Most European languages belong in this degenerate group: French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, Romanian, German, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, Russian, Polish, Czech, Greek. Even in the most erratic gender systems, there is usually a core group of nouns that are assigned grammatical gender in a consistent way. In particular, male human beings almost always have masculine gender. Women, on the other hand, are much more often denied the privilege of belonging to the feminine gender and are relegated to the neuter gender instead. In German, there is a whole range of words for women that are treated as 'it': *das Mädchen* (girl, the diminutive form of 'maid'), *das Fräulein* (unmarried woman, the diminutive of *Frau*), *das Weib* (woman, cognate with English 'wife'), or *das Frauenzimmer* (woman, but literally 'lady chamber': the original meaning referred to the living chambers of the lady, but the word started to be used for the entourage of a noble lady, then for particular members of the entourage, and hence to increasingly less distinguished women).

The Greeks treat their women a little better: while their word for girl, *korítsi*, is, just as you would expect, of the neuter gender, if one speaks about a pretty buxom girl, one adds the augmentative suffix *-aros*, and the resulting noun, *korítsaros*, 'buxom girl', then belongs to the . . . masculine gender. (Heaven knows what Whorf, or for that matter Freud, would have made of that.) And if this seems the height of madness, consider that back in the days when English still had a real gender system, it assigned the word 'woman' not to the feminine gender, not even to the neuter, but, like Greek, to the masculine gender. 'Woman' comes from the Old English *wīf-man*, literally 'woman-human being'. Since in Old English the gender of a compound noun like *wīf-man* was determined by the gender of the last element, here the masculine *man*, the correct pronoun to use when referring to a woman was 'he'.

The habit of European languages to misplace human beings – especially from one sex – in the wrong gender may be the most offensive element about the system. But in terms of the number of nouns involved, this quirkiness is rather marginal. It is in the realm of inanimate objects that the party actually gets going. In French, German, Russian, and most other European languages, the masculine and feminine genders extend to thousands of objects that are by no stretch of the imagination male or female. What, for instance, is particularly feminine about a Frenchman's beard (*la barbe*)? Why is Russian water a

'she', and why does she become a 'he' once you have dipped a tea bag into her? Why does the German feminine sun (*die Sonne*) light up the masculine day (*der Tag*), and the masculine moon (*der Mond*) shine in the feminine night (*die Nacht*)? After all, in French, he (*le jour*) is actually illuminated by him (*le soleil*), whereas she (*la nuit*) by her (*la lune*). German cutlery famously spans the whole gamut of gender roles: *Das Messer* (knife) may be an it, but on the opposite side of the plate lies the spoon (*der Löffel*) in his resplendent masculinity, and next to him, bursting with sex appeal, the feminine fork (*die Gabel*). But in Spanish, it's the fork (*el tenedor*) that has a hairy chest and gravelly voice, and she, the spoon (*la cuchara*), a curvaceous figure.

For native speakers of English, the rampant sexing of inanimate objects and occasional desexing of humans are a cause of frustration and merriment in equal measure. The erratic gender system was the main charge in Mark Twain's famous indictment of 'The Awful German Language':

In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl. See how it looks in print – I translate this from a conversation in one of the best of the German Sunday-school books:

GRETCHEN: Where is the turnip?

WILHELM: She has gone to the kitchen.

GRETCHEN: Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden?

WILHELM: It has gone to the opera.

Twain was inspired by German grammar to write his famous 'Tale of the Fishwife and Its Sad Fate', which he pretended to have translated from German quite literally. It begins like this:

It is a bleak Day. Hear the Rain, how he pours, and the Hail, how he rattles; and see the Snow, how he drifts along, and of the Mud, how deep he is! Ah the poor Fishwife, it is stuck fast in the Mire; it has

dropped its Basket of Fishes; and its Hands have been cut by the Scales as it seized some of the falling Creatures; and one Scale has even got into its Eye, and it cannot get her out. It opens its Mouth to cry for Help; but if any Sound comes out of him, alas he is drowned by the raging of the Storm. And now a Tomcat has got one of the Fishes and she will surely escape with him. No, she bites off a Fin, she holds her in her Mouth - will she swallow her? No, the Fishwife's brave Mother-dog deserts his Puppies and rescues the Fin – which he eats, himself, as his Reward. O, horror, the Lightning has struck the Fish-basket; he sets him on Fire; see the Flame, how she licks the doomed Utensil with her red and angry Tongue; now she attacks the helpless Fishwife's Footshe burns him up, all but the big Toe, and even SHE is partly consumed; and still she spreads, still she waves her fiery Tongues; she attacks the Fishwife's Leg and destroys IT; she attacks its Hand and destroys HER also; she attacks the Fishwife's Leg and destroys HER also; she attacks its Body and consumes HIM; she wreathes herself about its Heart and IT is consumed; next about its Breast, and in a Moment SHE is a Cinder; now she reaches its Neck - He goes; now its Chin - IT goes; now its Nose - SHE goes. In another Moment, except Help come, the Fishwife will be no more....

The thing is, for Germans none of this is even remotely funny. It is so natural, in fact, that German translators struggle to render the passage's particular brand of humour. One translator solved the problem by substituting the tale with another one, which he called 'Sehen Sie den Tisch, es ist grün' – literally 'look at the table, it is green'. If you find you are having a sense of humour failure yourself, then remember that what one really ought to say in German is 'look at the table, *he* is green'.

Twain believed that there was something specially debauched about the German gender system and that among all languages it was unusually and peculiarly irrational. But that belief was based on ignorance, because if anything it is English that is unusual in *not* having an irrational gender system. And at this point, I ought to declare a conflict of interest, since my mother tongue, Hebrew, assigns inanimate objects to the feminine and masculine genders just as erratically as German or

French or Spanish or Russian. When I go into a (masculine) house, the feminine door opens onto a masculine room with a masculine carpet (be he ever so pink), a masculine table, and feminine bookcases full of masculine books. Out of the masculine window I can see the masculine trees and on them the birds, which are feminine regardless of the accidents of their anatomy. If I knew more about (feminine) ornithology, I could tell by looking at each bird what biological sex she was. I would point at her and explain to the less initiated: 'You can tell she is a male because of that red spot on her chest and also because she is larger than the females.' And I would not feel there was anything remotely strange about that.

Wayward genders are not confined to Europe and the Mediterranean basin. If anything, languages further afield, which have a larger number of gender categories, have even more scope for erratic assignments, and hardly any such language fails to make ample use of the opportunity. In the Australian language Dyirbal, water is assigned to the feminine gender, but in another aboriginal language, Mayali, water belongs to the vegetable gender. The vegetable gender of the neighbouring Gurr-goni language includes the word *erriplen*, 'aeroplane'. In the African language Supyire, the gender for 'big things' includes, as one would expect, all the big animals: horse, giraffe, hippopotamus, and so on. All? Well, almost: one animal wasn't considered big enough to be included and was assigned instead to the human gender – the elephant. The problem is not how to find more such examples, it is how to stop.

Why do so many languages develop irregular genders? We don't know much about the infancy of gender systems, because in most languages the origin of gender markers is entirely opaque.<sup>\*</sup> But the few clues we do

have make the ubiquitous irrationality of mature gender systems appear particularly peculiar, because all the signs suggest that in their early days genders were perfectly logical. There are a few languages, especially in Africa, in which the feminine gender marker looks rather like a shortened version of the noun 'woman' itself, and the inanimate gender marker resembles the noun 'thing'. Likewise, the vegetable gender marker in some Australian languages looks rather similar to the noun . . . 'vegetable'. It stands to reason, therefore, that gender markers started out in life as generic nouns such as 'woman', 'man', 'thing', or 'vegetable'. And if so, it seems plausible that they would have originally been applied only to women, men, things, and vegetables, respectively.

But with time the gender markers may start being extended to nouns beyond their original remit, and through a series of such extensions a gender system can quickly be brought out of kilter. In Gurr-goni, for example, the vegetable gender came to include the noun 'aeroplane' through a perfectly natural sequence of little steps: the original 'vegetable' gender marker must first have been extended to plants more generally, and hence to all kinds of wooden objects. Since canoes are made of wood, another natural step would have included them in the vegetable gender as well. Since canoes happened to be the main means of transport for the speakers of Gurr-goni, the vegetable gender was then widened to include means of transportation more generally. And so, when the borrowed word *erriplen* entered the language, it was quite naturally assigned to the vegetable gender. Each step in this chain was natural and made perfect sense in its own local context. But the end result seems entirely arbitrary.

The Indo-European languages may also have started with a transparent gender system. But suppose, for instance, that the moon came to be included in the masculine gender because he was personified as a male god. Later, the word 'month' developed from the word 'moon', so it was only natural that if the moon was a 'he' a 'month' would also be a

<sup>\*</sup> Gender markers are the elements that indicate the gender of a noun. Sometimes, the gender markers can be suffixes on the noun itself, as in Italian *ragazz-o*, 'boy', and *ragazz-a*, 'girl'. Alternatively, the gender marker can appear on adjectives that modify the noun or on definite and indefinite articles. In Danish, for example, one cannot see on the nouns *dag*, 'day', and *hus*, 'house', themselves that they belong to separate genders, but the difference appears on the indefinite article and the adjective: *en kold dag*, 'a cold day', but *et koldt hus* 

<sup>&#</sup>x27;a cold house'. Gender can also be marked on verbs: in Slavic languages such as Russian or Polish, a suffix -a is added to some verbs when the subject is feminine. And in Semitic languages such as Maltese, a prefix t shows that the subject of the verb is feminine (*tikteb*, 'she writes'), while the prefix j indicates that the subject is masculine (*jikteb*, 'he writes').

'he'. But if so, then words for other time units, such as 'day', can also come to be included in the masculine gender. While each step in this chain of extensions may be perfectly natural in itself, after two or three steps the original logic has become opaque, and so masculine and feminine genders can find themselves applied to a range of inanimate objects for no intelligible reason.

The worst thing about this loss of transparency is that it is a selfpropelling process: the less consistent the system becomes, the easier it is to mess it up even further. Once there are enough nouns with arbitrary genders, children struggling to learn the language may stop expecting to find reliable rules based on the real-world properties of objects, so they may start looking for other types of clues. For example, they can start guessing what gender a noun has on the basis of what it *sounds* like (if X sounds like Y, and Y is feminine, then maybe X is feminine as well). Incorrect guesses by children may initially be perceived as errors, but with time such errors can stick and so before too long any trace of the original logic can be lost.

Finally, it is ironic that when a language loses one gender out of three the result may actually increase the waywardness of the system rather than decrease it. Spanish, French, and Italian, for instance, lost the original neuter gender of their Latin forebear, when the neuter coalesced with the masculine. But the result only ensured that *all* inanimate nouns are randomly assigned to the masculine or feminine genders.

Nevertheless, the syndrome of genus erraticum is not always an incurable illness in a language. As the history of English can attest, when a language manages to lose not just one gender but two, the result can be a radical overhaul that eliminates the erratic system altogether. Until the eleventh century, English had a full-blown three-gender system just like German. English speakers from the eleventh century would not have understood what Mark Twain was bemoaning in his 'Tale of the Fishwife and Its Sad Fate', since for them a wife (wif) was an 'it', a fish (*fisc*) was a 'he', whereas fate (wyrd) was a 'she'. But all this changed during the twelfth century.

The collapse of the Old English irregular genders had little to do with improving standards of sex education. The reason was rather that the gender system had critically depended on the doomed system of case endings. Originally, English had a complex case system similar to that of Latin, where nouns and adjectives appeared with different endings depending on their role in the sentence. Nouns of different genders had different sets of such case endings, so one could tell from the endings which gender a noun belonged to. But the system of endings rapidly disintegrated in the century after the Norman Conquest, and once the endings had disappeared, the new generation of speakers hardly had any clues left to tell them which gender each noun was supposed to belong to. These new speakers, who grew up into a language that no longer gave them sufficient information to decide whether a carrot, for example, should be addressed as a 'he' or a 'she', fell back on a radical and highly innovative idea, and started to call it an 'it' instead. So over a period of just a few generations, the original arbitrary gender system was replaced by a new one with transparent rules, whereby (almost) all inanimate objects came to be referred to simply as 'it'.

Still, a few wily nouns, especially feminine ones, managed to escape the mass sterilisation. Mark Twain, who was outraged by the bestowal of femininity upon German turnips, would have been surprised to learn that the same custom was still practised in England only three centuries earlier. A medicinal manual published in London in 1561, *The Most Excellent and Perfecte Homish Apothecarye or Homely Physick Booke for all the Grefes and Diseases of the Bodye*, offers the following confection against hoarseness: 'He that is become hoorse lately, let him roste a rape [turnip] in ashes or upon the fyre till she be all black, then pare her clene and eate her as warm thou canst.'

In dialectal varieties of English, some gendered nouns survived for much longer, but in the standard language a great tide of neuters flooded the inanimate world, leaving only a few isolated nouns bobbing about in their femininity. The slow but sure iticisation of English can be said to have come to its final mooring on 20 March 2002. For the maritime world, that particular Wednesday seemed no more eventful than any other Wednesday. *Lloyd's List*, the newspaper of the shipping industry, published its daily pageful of dispatches on casualties, accidents, and acts of piracy at sea. Among others, it mentioned the ferry *Baltic Jet* en

route from Tallinn to Helsinki, which 'had a fire in her port side engine room at 0814, local time'; the tanker *Hamilton Energy* departed from Port Weller Docks in Canada after 'repairs were made to damage suffered when she was in contact with a Saltie. The accident snapped the rudder post and drove her propeller shaft through her gearbox and smashed her engine casting off.' Elsewhere in Canada, a shrimp trawler got stuck in pack ice, but the owner said that 'there is a possibility she can be started up and steamed under her own power'. A day, in short, like any other.

The real ocean-shaking news was reported on a different page, stowed away in the editorial column. Kissed by the punning muse, the editor announced under the headline 'Her today, gone tomorrow' that 'we have taken the simple yet significant decision to change our style from the start of the next month and start referring to ships as neuter rather than female. It brings this paper into line with most other reputable international business titles.' Reactions from the public were stormy, and the paper was overwhelmed by letters to the editor. An irate Greek reader wrote: 'Sir, only a bunch of crusty, out of touch, stuck up Englishmen would dream of trying to change the way we've spoken of ships for thousands of years as "she". Get out of there and go tend to your gardens and hunt foxes, you arrogant ass holes. Sincerely yours, Stephen Komianos.' But not even this silver-tongued plea convinced *Lloyd's List* to change her course, and in April 2002 'she' fell by the quayside.

# GENDER AND THOUGHT

Languages that treat inanimate objects as 'he' or 'she' force their speakers to talk about such objects with the same grammatical forms that are applied to men and women. This habit of he-ing and she-ing objects means that an association between an inanimate noun and one of the sexes is shoved down the speakers' ears whenever they hear the name of this object, and the same association is pushed up their throats whenever they have occasion to mention his or her name themselves. And as anyone whose mother tongue has a gender system will tell you, once the habit has taken hold and the masculine or feminine association has been established, it is very difficult to shake it off. When I speak English, I may *say* about a bed that 'it' is too soft, but I actually feel 'she' is too soft. She stays feminine all the way from the lungs up to the glottis and is neutered only when she reaches the tip of the tongue.

As a basis for serious investigation, however, my professed feelings towards beds hardly constitute reliable evidence. It is not just the anecdotal nature of this information that is the problem, but the fact that I have not provided any proof that the 'she' feeling is anything more than tongue-deep – a mere grammatical habit. The automatic association between an inanimate noun and a gendered pronoun does not, in itself, show that the grammatical gender has exercised any deeper effect on the speakers' thoughts. It does not show, in particular, whether speakers of Hebrew or Spanish, which treat beds as feminine, really associate with beds any womanly properties.

Over the last century, various experiments have been conducted with the aim of testing precisely this question: can the grammatical gender of inanimate objects influence speakers' associations? Probably the first such experiment was conducted at the Moscow Psychological Institute in pre-revolutionary Russia. In 1915, fifty people were asked to imagine each day of the week as a particular person, then to describe the person they had pictured for each day. It turned out that all participants envisaged Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday as men but Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday as women. Why should this be so? When asked to explain their choice, many of them could not give a satisfactory answer. But the researchers concluded that the answer could not be unrelated to the fact that the names for Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday have a masculine gender in Russian, whereas Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday are feminine.

In the 1990s, the psychologist Toshi Konishi conducted an experiment comparing the gender associations of speakers of German and of Spanish. There are quite a few inanimate nouns whose genders in the two languages are reversed. The German air is a she (*die Luft*) but *el aire* is he in Spanish; *die Brücke* (bridge) is also feminine in German but *el puente* is masculine; and the same goes for clocks, flats, forks,

newspapers, pockets, shoulders, stamps, tickets, violins, the sun, the world, and love. On the other hand, *der Apfel* is masculine for Germans but *la manzana* is feminine in Spanish, and so are chairs, brooms, butterflies, keys, mountains, stars, tables, wars, rain, and rubbish. Konishi presented a list of such nouns with conflicting genders to German and to Spanish speakers and asked the participants for their opinions on the properties of those nouns: whether they were weak or strong, little or big, and so on. On average, the nouns that are masculine in German but feminine in Spanish (chairs and keys, for example) got higher marks for strength from the Germans, whereas bridges and clocks, which are masculine in Spanish but feminine in German, were judged stronger on average by the Spanish speakers.

The simple conclusion from such an experiment would be that bridges do have more manly connotations for Spanish speakers than for German speakers. However, one possible objection to this inference is that it may not be the bridge itself that carries such connotations – it may only have been hearing the name together with the masculine article *el* or *un*. In this interpretation, when Spanish and German speakers simply look at a bridge, their associations may not be affected at all, and it may be only in the moment of speech, only through the act of saying or hearing the gender marker itself, that a fleeting association with manliness or womanliness is created in the speaker's mind.

Is it possible, therefore, to get round the problem and check whether womanly or manly associations for inanimate nouns are present even when the gender markers in the relevant language are not explicitly mentioned? The psychologists Lera Boroditsky and Lauren Schmidt tried to do this by repeating a similar experiment with Spanish and German speakers, but this time communicating with the participants in English rather than in their respective mother tongue. Although the experiment was conducted in a language that treats inanimate objects uniformly as 'it', the Spanish and German speakers still showed marked differences in the attributes they chose for the relevant objects. German speakers tended to describe bridges as beautiful, elegant, fragile, peaceful, pretty, and slender; Spanish speakers as big, dangerous, long, strong, sturdy, towering.

A more radical way of bypassing the problem was designed by the psychologist Maria Sera and her colleagues, who compared the reactions of French and Spanish speakers but used pictures of objects instead of words. As two closely related languages, French and Spanish mostly agree on gender, but there are still sufficiently many nouns that diverge: the fork, for instance, is la fourchette in French but el tenedor in Spanish, and so are cars (la voiture, el carro) and bananas (la banane, el plátano); on the other hand, French beds are masculine (le lit) but Spanish ones are feminine (la cama), and the same goes for clouds (le nuage, la nube) and butterflies (le papillon, la mariposa). The participants in this experiment were asked to help in the preparation of a film in which some everyday objects come to life. Their task was to choose the appropriate voice for each object in the film. They were shown a series of pictures, and for each one they were asked to choose between a man's voice and a woman's voice. Although the names of the objects were never mentioned, when French speakers saw the picture of a fork, most of them wanted her to speak in a woman's voice, whereas the Spanish speakers tended to choose a male voice for him instead. With the picture of the bed, the situation was reversed.

The experiments described above are certainly suggestive. They seem to show that the grammatical gender of an inanimate object affects the properties that speakers associate with this object. Or at least what the experiments demonstrate is that the grammatical gender affects the responses when speakers are actively requested to indulge their imaginations and come up with associations for such an object. But this last point is in fact a serious weakness. All the experiments described so far suffer from one underlying problem, namely that they *forced* the participants to exercise their imaginations. A sceptic could argue with some justification that the only thing the experiments proved was that grammatical genders affect associations when the participants are coerced unnaturally to dream up properties for various inanimate objects. In the worst case, one could parody what might be going on in a participant's mind as something like: 'Here I am being asked all sorts

of ridiculous questions. Now they want me to think up properties for a bridge – goodness me, what's next? Well, I'd better come up with something, otherwise they'll never let me go home. So I'll say X.' Under such circumstances, the first property that comes to a Spanish speaker's mind is indeed likely to be more manlike than womanlike. In other words, if you force Spanish speakers to be on-the-spot poets, and extract properties of bridges out of them, the gender system will indeed affect their choice of properties. But how can we tell whether the masculine gender has any influence on speakers' spontaneous conceptions of bridges, even outside such exercises in poetry on demand?

In the 1960s, the linguist Susan Ervin tried to downplay the element of creativity with an experiment that involved Italian speakers. She relied on the fact that Italian has very diffuse dialects, so even a native speaker would not be at all surprised to encounter entirely unfamiliar words in an unfamiliar dialect. Ervin invented a list of nonsense words that sounded as if they could be the dialectal terms for various objects. Some of these ended in -o (masculine) and the others in -a (feminine). She wanted to check what associations these words would evoke in Italian speakers but did not want the participants to realise that they were indulging in creative imagination. So she told them they were going to see a list of words from an Italian dialect that they didn't know, and she pretended that the aim of the experiment was to check whether people could guess correctly the properties of words merely by the way they sound. The participants tended to attribute to the -o words similar properties to those they attributed to men (strong, big, ugly), whereas the -awords tended to be described with properties that were also used for women (weak, little, pretty). Ervin's experiment showed that associations were affected by the grammatical gender even when the participants did not realise they were indulging in creative imagination and assumed that the question before them had a correct solution. But while this experiment went some way towards overcoming the problem of subjective judgements, it still did not solve the problem completely, since even if the participants were not aware of being coerced to produce associations on demand, in practise this is exactly what they were required to do.

In fact, it is difficult to imagine how one could design any experiment that would completely bypass the influence of subjective judgements. For the task requires nothing less than having one's cake and eating it too: how can any experiment measure whether grammatical genders exert an influence on speakers' associations, without soliciting these speakers for their associations? A few years ago, Lera Boroditsky and Lauren Schmidt found a way to do exactly that. They asked a group of Spanish speakers and a group of German speakers to participate in a memory game (which was conducted wholly in English, in order to avoid any explicit mention of the genders). The participants were given a list of two dozen inanimate objects, and for each of these objects, they had to memorise a person's name. For example, 'apple' had the name Patrick associated with it, and 'bridge' had the name Claudia. The participants were given a fixed period of time to memorise the names associated with the objects, then tested on how well they had managed. A statistical analysis of the results showed that they were better at remembering the assigned names when the gender of the object matched the sex of the person, and that they found it more difficult to remember the names when the gender of the object clashed with the sex of the person. For example, Spanish speakers found it easier to remember the name associated with 'apple' (la manzana) if it was Patricia rather than Patrick, and they found it easier to remember the name for a bridge (el puente) if it was Claudio rather than Claudia.

Since Spanish speakers found it objectively more difficult to match a bridge with a woman than with a man, we can conclude that when inanimate objects have a masculine or feminine gender, the associations of manhood or womanhood for these objects are present in Spanish speakers' minds even when they are not actively solicited, even when the participants are not invited to opine on such questions as whether bridges are strong rather than slender, and even when they speak English.

Of course, one could still object that the memory task in question was fairly artificial and at some remove from the concerns of everyday life, where one is not often called upon to memorise whether apples or bridges are called Patrick or Claudia. But psychological experiments often have to rely on such narrowly circumscribed tasks in order to tease out statistically significant differences. The importance of the results is not in what they say about the particular task itself but in what they reveal about the effect of gender more generally, namely that manly or womanly associations of inanimate objects are strong enough in the minds of Spanish and German speakers to affect their ability to commit information to memory.

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There is always room for refinement and improvement in psychological experiments, of course, and those reported above are no exception. But the evidence that has emerged so far leaves little doubt that the idiosyncrasies of a gender system exert a significant influence on speakers' thoughts. When a language treats inanimate objects in the same way as it treats women and men, with the same grammatical forms or with the same 'he' and 'she' pronouns, the habits of grammar can spill over to habits of mind beyond grammar. The grammatical nexus between object and gender is imposed on children from the earliest age and reinforced many thousands of times throughout their lives. This constant drilling affects the associations that speakers develop about inanimate objects and can clothe their notions of such objects in womanly or manly traits. The evidence suggests that sex-related associations are not only fabricated on demand but present even when they are not actively solicited.

Gender thus provides our second example of how the mother tongue influences thought. As before, the relevant difference between languages with and without a gender system is not in what they *allow* their speakers to convey but in what they habitually *force* their speakers to say. There is no evidence to suggest that grammatical gender affects anyone's ability to reason logically. Speakers of gendered languages are perfectly able to understand the difference between sex and syntax, and are not under the illusion that inanimate objects have biological sex. German women rarely mistake their husbands for a hat (even though hats are masculine), Spanish men are not known to confuse a bed with what might be lying in it, and animism does not seem to be more widespread in Italy or Russia than in Anglo-Saxonia. Conversely, there is no reason to suspect that speakers of Hungarian or Turkish or Indonesian, which do not make gender distinctions even on pronouns, are in any way constrained from understanding the finer points about the birds and the bees.

Nevertheless, even if grammatical gender does not restrict anyone's capacity for reasoning, that does not make its consequence any less severe for those immured in a gendered mother tongue. For a gender system may come close to being a prison-house nevertheless – a prison-house of associations. The chains of associations imposed by the genders of one's language are all but impossible to cast off.

But if you native speakers of English are tempted to feel sorry for those of us who are shackled by the heavy load of an irrational gender system, then think again. I would never want to change places with you. My mind may be weighed down by an arbitrary and illogical set of associations, but my world has so much to it that you entirely miss out on, because the landscape of my language is so much more fertile than your arid desert of 'it's'.

It goes without saying that genders are language's gift to poets. Heine's masculine pine tree longs for the feminine palm; Boris Pasternak's *My Sister Life* can work only because 'life' is feminine in Russian; English translations of Charles Baudelaire's 'L'homme et la mer', however inspired, can never hope to capture the tempestuous relationship of attraction and antagonism that he evokes between 'him' (the man) and 'her' (the sea); nor can English do justice to Pablo Neruda's 'Ode to the Sea', in which the (masculine) *el mar* strikes a stone (*una piedra*) and then 'he caresses her, kisses her, drenches her, pounds his chest, repeating his own name' – the English 'it caresses it, kisses it, drenches it, pounds its chest' is not quite the same.

Needless to say, genders cheer up the everyday life of ordinary mortals too. Genders may be a nightmare for foreign learners, but they do not seem to cause any serious trouble to native speakers, and they make the world a livelier place. How tedious it would be if bees weren't 'she's' and butterflies 'he's', if one didn't step from feminine pavements to masculine roads, if twelve masculine months didn't crowd inside one feminine year, if one couldn't greet Mr Cucumber and Lady Cauliflower in the proper way. I would never want to forfeit my genders. Along with Aunt Augusta, I would rather say to the English language that to lose one gender may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness.