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Международное сотрудничество в области науки и образования для решения глобальных проблем современности: от глобальной конкуренции к всемирной интеграции

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AN OVERVIEW ON GENDER PROBLEM IN MODERN ENGLISH

Abstract

The object of the present linguistic study is the linguistic phenomenon of gender as a grammatical category of the English noun. We witness an upsurge of interest to the problem nowadays in the context of the prescription of gender-fair English. Gender-fair (neutral) English language has gained support from major text-book publishers and academic groups. Our assumption is gender in Modern English is a relatively straightforward category to discuss as has already been indicated, modern scholars writing in Modern English are highly influenced by traditional accounts on gender.

Introduction

Gender in English nouns maybe described as “notional” or “overt” in contrast to the “grammatical” or “overt” gender of nouns as in French, German, and Russian. We tried to make a survey with a critical eye on the grammarians assumptions who deeply studied the problem such as Quirk’s system English has nine gender classes which is open to discussion. A more contemporary approach to gender in English can be found in Biber’s, Huddleston and Pullum’s, Brinton’s works. A dew attention to the gender problem in English is given in the studies of great Russian linguists such as: Smirnitsky A. I., Iliysh A. B., Veyhman G. A. and others. Some of the most interesting changes that have taken place in the English language over the last 30 years have been driven by two desires to unzip the disputed issue of gender as the

grammatical category of the English noun in present day English and to avoid, if not to banish, sexism in the language.

One aspect of English is certainly easier than in some languages is gender. In German, for example, nouns can be masculine, feminine and neuter, and the learner has to know which in order to choose the right article, pronoun and adjective ending (the same with the Russian language) for example, and for no apparent reason, a spoon is a he, a fork is a she, and knife is an it (der Loeffel, die Esabel, and das Messer). In English it is easy: males are a He, females are a She and ships and everything else are It. However, this does not mean there is never any problem in choosing the correct pronoun though it might seem that “gender” in Modern English is relatively straight forward category to discuss in comparison with the phenomenon in many other languages.

In many text-books for both native and non-native speakers of English it is barely mentioned, if at all [11, p. 20-28]. Katie Wales expresses the idea, everyone, be they amateurs or linguists, native or non-native speakers, would agree with, without a second thought-gender is an, at most, marginal category of Modern English.

For centuries, it has been largely equaled and confused with the biological category of sex, making it difficult to speak of “gender” in English at all. However, a look at Modern reference grammars reveals that obviously tradition is stronger than common sense-gender has always been a category (formal or functional) of English, and no one dares (yet) to let go of it completely. Now let’s have a look at grammarians’ views on gender in Modern English.

Quirk gives the following definition to gender: “By gender is meant a grammatical classification of nouns, pronouns, or other words in the noun phrase, according to certain meaning-related distinctions, especially a distinction related to the sex of the referent” [8, p. 303; p. 148-60].

Equating the existence of gender with the existence of gender-specific pronouns poses a problem. We enter a circle of argument and counter-argument if we claim that English has gender because it has pronouns that show gender distinctions - the traditional argumentation would go the opposite way and claim that the distinctions in the pronominal systems only exist because the nominal referent carries the feature “gender”, which in turn has to be mirrored in the pronominal system(s).

The patterns of pronoun coreference for singular nouns give us a self of nine gender classes as illustrated by Quirk:

a) animate-personal (male - brother, boy; female - sister, girl; dual - doctor; teacher); generic (common - baby; collective - family); impersonal (higher male animal - bull; higher female animal - cow; lower animal - ant);

b) inanimate - box, table.

According to Quirk English has nine gender classes which reveal a high degree of overlap with each other. None of the sub-categories is sufficient for assigning gender to a noun. The author applied some sort of hierarchy to arrive at the above classification in which humanity>sex>animation>pronoun choice are accepted as the basis of the system. Male/female gender distinctions in animal nouns are maintained by people with a special concern (e.g. with pets). No reference is made to the fact that animals are generally ‘he’ in spoken language. Our concern is with

“professional” language use that includes terminological differentiation, e.g. dog-bitch.

Another exceptional noun class mentioned is that of country names, which can be used with neuter gender (geographical unit) or feminine (political/economic units) pronouns... On the well-known use of feminine pronouns referring to ships, perhaps towards which we have an intense and close personal relationship. For example: That’s a lovely ship (Titanic). What is she called? In nonstandard and Australian English, there is extension of ‘she’ references to include those of antipathy as well as affection e.g. She’s an absolute bastard, this truck.

A more contemporary approach to gender in English can be found in Longman’s Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber, 1999) [1, p. 20-22] incorporating, as the title suggests, considerable amounts of material from spoken language for the first time and thus complementing rather than substituting Quirk (1985). Biber states that “Gender is a less important category in English than in many other languages”. It is closely tied to the sex of the referent and chiefly reflected in co-occurrence patterns with respect to singular personal pronouns.

Biber and his colleagues are well aware of the fact that gender is a problematic category in Modern English. Thus their insightful caveat about oversimplifying matters: “However, gender is not a simple reflection of reality: rather it is to some extent a matter of convention and speakers choice and special strategies may be used to avoid gender specific reference at all”. Biber largely discusses pragmatic motivations for pronoun choice, such as the use of specifically gender-marked forms on the one hand or avoidance on the other (e.g. chairman/woman is chairperson). The grammarians state that personal reference expresses greater familiarity or involvement. Non-personal reference is more detached. Expressions for young children (infant, baby, child) and animals (pets in particular) offer a three-way choice. An exceptional status is once attributed to nouns denoting countries and ships, which offer a two-way choice (personal ‘she’ and non-personal ‘it’). Although grammarians “account comes much closer to the actual facts we observe in the realization of Gender in English today, they fail to offer explanations for the exceptional cases, most of which they do not even mention e.g. why is it possible at all to use ‘she’ when referring to a ship”.

Let us introduce the most recent effort in the field, Huddleston and Pullum’s Cambridge Grammar of the English language [7, p. 71-77; 90-120] by way of quoting the following “It is important to distinguish carefully between the semantic and extralinguistic terms ‘Male’ and ‘Female’. Until relatively recently it was usual to make a parallel distinction” between gender (grammatical) and sex (extralinguistics). Some grammarians continue their argumentation very much in Corbett’s vein [3, p. 1347-1353] agreement as the defining criterion of gender. English does show agreement, though in a very restricted sense - English has gender; though it is not an inflectional category and not as strongly grammaticalized as in other languages. Though some of the assumptions of Pullum and Huddleston take a very clear position in assessing the category, which is refreshing and helpful compared with the earlier descriptions. Typical wording can be found in the actual distributional properties of masculine ‘he’, feminine ‘she’ and neuter ‘it’. He and she referring to “entities which are neither male or female” are identified as the ‘core

uses' of 'he', 'she' and 'it'. In the case of animate non-human (animal) antecedents, scientists state the following:

- 'It' is generally used when the sex is unknown.
- 'He' and 'She' more likely with pets, domestic animals and creatures ranked high in the kingdom of animals (e.g. lions, tigers).
- The use of 'He' or 'She' indicates a somewhat greater degree of interest in or empathy with the referent.
- The use of 'It' with human antecedents: 'It' can be used with babies [5, 6].

We are also aware of extended usage of 'She'. We are informed that such usage is possible with two categories namely with 'countries' and 'ships'. 'Ships' represent the classical case of this extended usage of 'she', but it is found with other kinds of inanimates, such as cars. There is considerable variation among speakers as to how widely they make use of this kind of personification. It is often found with non-anaphoric uses of she. Here she is at last (referring to a ship) down she comes (with she referring, say to a tree that is being felled). It should be clear that the descriptions of gender in modern reference grammars are highly unsatisfactory in a number of respects. They either do not reflect actual language use, or they mix traditional with modern interpretation, which adds to the confusion rather than helps clarify it. The authors describe an idealized version of gender assignment in written standard English, thus ignoring the importance of a mostly spoken reality.

Description of gender in various works

An overview of the problem of category of Gender in the works of Western linguists (Grammarians)

The dominating view on Gender is that gender in English has lost much of its weight primarily because it was purely grammatical category without any solid basis in reality. Brinton [2, p. 426] follows the view stating that Modern English has 'natural gender' apposed to 'grammatical gender'. She also notes that 'gender is really a covered category' in nouns. While a related category of animacy (animate/inanimate) is not only expressed in personal, but also in interrogative and relative pronouns (what vs who, which vs who).

The interesting in her classification are the postulated animacy groupings: humans and higher animals on the one, lower animals and inanimates on the other scales. For example: he, she, who - human; tiger, lion - higher animals; ant, fly - lower animals; it, which - inanimates.

It is a description in an almost forgotten grammar of English that comes up again and again in publications on the status of gender in Modern English.

George Curme's English Grammar was first published in 1925, it was never intended as groundbreaking work, but served as a basic college grammar. Curme's introductory remarks in gender read as follows: "Gender is a distinction in the form of words to indicate sex. There are two kinds of gender in English: natural gender and the gender of animation" [4, p. 63-94].

What is really noteworthy about Curme's description is his category of a "gender of animation", which he explains as a sort of remnant from Old English times (and its grammatical gender) that has developed a life of its own: "The old habit of associating lifeless things with sex continued and in our plays. Mood with

their animated feelings still has strong sway". The author distances himself strongly from identification of animation from personification.

Close in his reference Grammar for students of English (1979) claims that nouns and pronouns, besides being animate and inanimate, can also be personal (human) and non-personal (animal or inanimate objects) e.g. we say: "Who was on the platform?" if we expect a personal noun as an answer, "What was on the platform?" if we expect a non-personal one. The author distinguishes between three types of gender: masculine, feminine, neuter. Thus he asserts that gender distinctions between male and female are based on natural gender and purely lexical in its character. Ralph's 'The sentence and its parts. A grammar of contemporary English [9, p. 528] is no exception to this point of view: Contemporary English does not have true gender. But in Modern English choice among the 3rd person singular pronoun forms he, she, and it normally on the basis of personality and sex or lack of them, and choice between such nouns as 'boy' and 'waiter', on the one hand, and 'girl' - 'waitress' on the other is ordinary on the basis of sex. Thus a kind of gender does make itself felt, if not true grammatical gender. So, we may see the growing concern of most grammarians towards the issue hard to treat the category of gender of the English noun not as a grammatical item, but mostly as lexical one.

An overview of the problem of category of Gender in the works of Home grammarians

The problem of grammatical gender of the English noun also takes the central position in the works of home domestic scholars as a disputable category of the English noun. A whole ten pages of A. E. Smirnitsky's theoretical morphology of English are devoted to proving the non-existence of gender in English [10, p. 139-148] either in the grammatical, or even in the strictly lexico-grammatical sense. The only sign which allows us to talk about category of gender of the English noun is its relevance to the 3rd person singular pronouns he, she and it. According to Smirnitsky we can only speak only about the well-known semantic classification of words based on the division on animate and inanimate referents with the further subdivision of animate referents corresponding to their biological sex. On these grounds appears the secondary classification based on cultural and historical tradition (e.g. love - he, peace - she, ship - she etc.) in other words, in Modern English the gender category of the English noun relies not on grammatical but on semantic, cultural and historic principles.

Conclusion

We gave review of scientific achievements worldwide in the studies of the grammatical gender of the English noun; presented new tendencies in the field of linguistic studies of gender category and its consequences on language structure conditioned by the feminist language planning; defined the renewed role of the pronoun in the constructions of the English language; compiled a glossary of gender-neutral occupational terms in order to reduce the negative effects of sexist language and assumptions. Thus, the aim to investigate the impact of gender policy on the structure of modern English language has been achieved. We also hope the

discussion presented here will be a topic of further research and valuable asset in establishing equal opportunities for every individual of human race.

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