

Theoretical Analysis of Gender Category in English Grammar

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ABSTRACT

Grammar is one of the essential aspects of the language that is crucial to articulate the ideas in the mind. Gender category is one of the particular characteristics of certain languages and this article is devoted to analyze the theoretical perspectives and various views on gender category of English language.

Introduction

Currently, English language is getting popularity in all over the world and it has become main official language in many spheres of life. There are a number of effective approaches to teach grammar. Gender category is one of the distinctive features of some particular languages and this article is devoted to analyze the theoretical concepts and various views on gender category of English language.

Methods and materials

The term gender is used in this chapter mainly to refer to the social condition of being a man or a woman. For linguists, of course, the same word also means a grammatical category: in many languages, nouns are divided into gender classes and the classification shows their agreement with other words such as adjectives and pronouns. How this works in English is an appropriate question and will be discussed later on, but it is not the main subject of the chapter. Rather it will be considered a great many of ways in which the English language is influenced by gender in the 'men and women' sense.

Gender is an example of an incompletely connected grammatical system of classification. In many Indo-European languages the names of males are related to the masculine gender and of females to the feminine gender. Whether an animate-inanimate difference is made varies with the language. We are concerned here with the assignment of meaning to new items. Presumably, the connotations of gender difference should generalize to members of the masculine and feminine genders, even if the referent is abstract or inanimate.

Results

A system of grammatical gender, whereby every noun was considered as either masculine, feminine, or neuter, existed in Old English, but became out of use during the Middle English period; therefore, Modern English largely does not have grammatical gender. Modern English lacks grammatical gender in the sense of all noun classes requiring masculine, feminine, or neuter inflection or agreement; however, it does keep features relating to natural gender with particular nouns and pronouns (such as woman, daughter, husband, uncle, he and she) to refer specifically to persons or animals of one or other genders and neuter pronouns for sexless objects.

Also, in some cases, feminine pronouns are used by some speakers when referring to ships (and more uncommonly some airplanes and analogous machinery), to churches, and to nation states and islands.

Some characteristics of gender use in English have been affected by the push towards a desire for gender-neutral language. This employs in particular to the 21st-century prevention of the default generic he when relating to a person of unknown gender in favor of the neuter they as a third-person singular. Some traditional feminine forms of nouns (such as authoress and poetess) are also mostly avoided, with the male form of such nouns (author and poet) having got gender-neutral.

There is a widely accepted belief that this differentiation is consequential for the improvement and use of languages. Eighteenth-century commentators on English often implied to the differing roles played by men and women in improving the cultivation of the language or contrarily speeding its degeneration.

But a number of contemporary language and gender scholars have questioned the assumption that gender manifests itself linguistically through clear-cut binary differences – ‘men do this, women do that’ (see, e.g., Benor, Rose, Sharma, Sweetland, and Zhang 2002; Bergvall, Bing, and Freed 1997; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003; Hall and Bucholtz 1995).

They have argued that where researchers concentrate mainly on distinctions between men and women, they are distorting the picture in two ways: by downplaying the extent of similarity and overlap between the two groups, and by disapproving the variation that exists within each gender group. People are never just men or women, they are men and women of particular ages, classes, ethnic and geographical origins, occupational categories, social roles and statuses, religious and political beliefs.

Gender is no longer an inflectional category in Modern English. Traces of the Old English gender system are found in the system of pronouns. Nonetheless, Modern English assumes a "natural" interpretation of gender affiliation, which is based on the sex, gender identity, or perceived sexual characteristics, of the pronoun's referent. Exceptions to this generality are few and debatable, for example anaphoric she referring to ships, machines, and countries. 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, postman/postwoman.

These factors illustrate a series of possible bases of assignment, which could conflict with each other. Ideally, they should be ordered in terms of relative strength so that unambiguous predictions can be made. Haugen's statement that "all nouns become masculine unless they were associated with a homophonous feminine or neuter morpheme or a female creature" represents a statement of priorities of factors that permits prediction.

Discussion

These principles suggest that the ‘women are more standard’ claim only holds in certain circumstances: where a variable is not involved in any change and where there is change in the direction of the standard. Some of the most changes, however, referring a third possibility – change from below, which is not conscious and does not involve a move towards more standard pronunciation.

Linguist Benjamin illustrated grammatical gender in English as a covert grammatical category. He argued that gender as a property inherent in nouns (rather than in their referents) is not entirely absent from modern English, citing given names such as "Jane" and words like "daughter", which are normally paired with gendered pronouns even if the speaker does not know the person being referred to.

Linguist Robert A. Hall Jr. thought that these are simply examples of natural gender and not grammatical gender, as daughters are always female and people named Jane are overwhelmingly likely to be female. Moreover, if a person named Jane is a man, there is nothing grammatically incorrect with saying "Jane is bringing his friends over."

Pronoun agreement is generally 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.

When the antecedent is a collective noun, such as family or team, and the pronoun refers to the members of the group denoted rather than the group as a single entity, a plural pronoun may be chosen: compare the family and its origins; the family and their breakfast-time arguments.

The traditional grammatical category of gender, or gender classes of noun phrases, for example, is a formal distinction from the analytic perspective of reference and predication. In fluidly stratified societies in particular, Labov and others have discovered robust results of just this sort of statistical variability. Feminist theory of language, and its analysis and prescription for linguistic reform, seems correctly and accurately to perceive the pragmatic metaphorical relationship between gender identity and status, though much is cast into the rhetoric of power in a more abstract and less culturally situated form. The linguistic change to be considered has resulted in the contemporary configuration of a different aspect of the structure of Modern English, that of so-called person and number.

Conclusion

All in all, gender category in English language is one of the distinctive features of the language and there have been a number of opposing concepts and opinions on the topic of contentious debate, however, gender feature is getting less popular. Seemingly, this variation may get out of the language as time elapses.

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