

# Gender in English pronouns – Myth and reality

Susanne Wagner

Gender as a grammatical category manifests itself in modern English primarily in form of pronominal gender agreement (*he, she* vs. *it*), based on "natural" (biological) criteria. A number of non-standard varieties, however, show gender assignment rules based on a mass-count distinction in nouns, where count nouns can be referred to anaphorically with "gendered pronouns" (i.e. *he, him; she, her*), whereas mass nouns only employ neuter *it*.

Such "gendered pronouns" are found in two varieties in particular, namely traditional "West Country" (Southwest) dialects and (West-Country based) Newfoundland English. In these varieties, neuter pronouns are traditionally only employed for mass nouns, while count nouns trigger masculine forms. In modern spoken English, however, the "gendered pronoun" of choice is feminine rather than masculine. As a result, linguists investigating gender assignment in English today are faced with three interacting and sometimes conflicting systems:

- 1) The Standard English system, at least in writing, demands neuter pronouns for inanimate nouns, while humans (or animate entities in general) are either *he* or *she* according to sex. There are only few exceptions to this rule. For example, ships and some other vehicles can be feminine metaphorically.
- 2) In the traditional West Country system, based on a semantic distinction in the referent nouns (mass vs. count), mass nouns trigger neuter forms, while count nouns use masculine pronouns. Feminine forms only occur with humans (women).
- 3) In basically all varieties of spoken English, speakers use feminine forms in particular when they want to imply a certain degree of emotional involvement (positive or negative) with what is being said. This use seems to extend not only to concrete, but also to abstract references, such as situations or circumstances.

The examples in (1) to (8) shall serve to illustrate all of the above-mentioned uses.

- (1) That is a dead teat with no milk into **en**. (38 Do 3, book III)
- (2) We call **en** a peeth [well]. (36 Co 6, book IV)
- (3) He used to say, Put **un** [candle] where ye can zee '**im** [candle] and I can zee '**im** [candle] as well. (TRWBM 70)
- (4) <u Int>  
Those flat irons interested me too because they had a handle that would come off, removable handle, why was that?  
<u Inf>  
Da's for you put one on da stove now and you put two on da stove and when dey get warm you put da handle in you take and ah ah when **he** [iron] when **he** [iron] get cold off you put **he** [iron] on you put your handle in t' udder one **he** [iron] be warm see, **he**'d [iron] be hot and you'd take **en** [iron] and you'd iron your clothes den and while one be, while one be warmin' da t' udder be coldin', time be coldin' off see. (MUNFLA 70-003: C0626)<sup>1</sup>
- (5) I joined in the first hall was down dere and den they build this one is down there now and they build **he** [hall/house] in 19-, in 1921 I believe they build **it**, I joined in the other one, I joined in 1917, in the ole lodge. (MUNFLA 71-131: C1034)<sup>2</sup>
- (6) ... press them like that and you'd see your thumb mark in them or any apple really when **he**'s [apple] ripe, wadn't it, but when **he**'s [apple] not ripe **he**'s [apple] hard, isn't **he** [apple], ... (SRLM 62)
- (7) *Ok, crack 'er up!* <sup>3</sup>
- (8) Watch out! Here **she** comes! (speaker is sea-sick) (Svartengren 1928, ex. 139)

<sup>1</sup> Collector Victor DuPree (1969).

<sup>2</sup> Collector Kinsley Welsh (1971).

<sup>3</sup> From the movie *Titanic* (USA 1997); the speaker is (presumably) an American male, talking about the safe being brought up from the ocean floor.

This thesis analyses "gendered pronouns" in different corpora. The data collected for the *Survey of English Dialects* (cf. Orton *et al.* 1962-1971) are used to establish a basis of comparison for the more modern oral history data analysis. Both the published SED Basic Material as well as the incidental material from the fieldworker notebooks contain a wealth of examples illustrating gender assignment in traditional West Country dialect. When looking at the distribution of "gendered pronouns", one can clearly identify a core area (Cornwall and West Devon) and spread zones, which reach into Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Herefordshire, and other adjoining counties. The analysis of the SED data showed that a) (West) Cornwall, which has sometimes been denied its West Country status, clearly has to be included under that header, and that b) the status of Somerset is problematic. Although researchers agree on its belonging to the core Southwest, the SED data, both from the Basic and incidental material, contradict such findings. SED informants from Somerset are much less traditional in their speech patterns than many of their "colleagues" from counties further east and north, such as Wiltshire or Gloucestershire.

The analysis of oral history material from Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Wiltshire reveals that the traditional system, although slowly giving way to the StE system (*he* ⇔ *it*), has remained largely intact, at least in older rural speakers, who form the core of the corpus informants. Also, it can be shown that the traditional West-East continuum is not the only relevant one when analysing gender assignment: The comparison of material from northern locations with southern ones in the Southwest shows that the southern localities are much less traditional than their northern counterparts. A general influence from London, Southeast from the West Country, is the most likely explanation. Moreover, the analysis of semantic source domains for nouns triggering "gendered pronouns" shows that these have remained surprisingly stable over time. Most frequently, "gendered pronouns" refer to tools and instruments, a domain that had already been identified as relevant in the respective 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature (cf. e.g. Barnes 1844, 1886<sup>2</sup>; Elworthy 1875, 1877, 1886).

The material from Newfoundland is remarkably different from the West Country material in some, but surprisingly similar in other aspects. A result we expected based on the very traditional nature of Newfoundland English is that Newfoundland speakers adhere to the traditional West Country system of gender assignment more strongly than their fellow speakers in the mother country. In other words, "gendered pronouns" are more frequent in Newfoundland than they are in Southwest England. A rather unexpected tendency is the following: While British speakers seem to be shifting (or have already shifted) from the traditional dialect system (⇔ masculine forms) towards the (written) standard system (⇔ neuter forms), Newfoundland speakers seem to prefer the spoken standard system (⇔ feminine forms) rather than the StE (neuter) system. This can be concluded from the higher frequency and more even distribution of feminine pronouns in the Newfoundland corpus material.

Based on what is known about Newfoundland settlement history, the present state of gender assignment in West Country Newfoundland dialect(s) can be explained as follows: Settlers brought with them the (strict) system that has been described in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature on (English) West Country dialects. Although contact between them and other settler groups was relatively restricted, it must have existed to a certain extent. None of the varieties the West Country settlers came into contact with used masculine forms in the same manner as their mother lect. Where the pronominal system *did* offer a choice, it was between neuter and feminine rather than neuter and masculine forms. In some domains of usage, contact with speakers of other dialects as well as with standard speakers resulted in a (or possibly two) shift(s) in the traditional paradigm: Neuter forms became the "unmarked" choice in some domains, and only when a special need for emphasis was felt to play a role (⇔ discourse-pragmatic factors), non-neuter forms were selected (⇔ approaching StE). For some semantic

domains, feminine forms as they were used in other dialects and were also possible in some instances in StE, began to compete with the traditional masculine forms. As a result, Newfoundlanders today use standard *it* alongside dialectal *she* and West Country *he*. All these factors come together to form a unique system that is conservative in some aspects and modern in others.

One feature that seems to play a role in all of the investigated varieties is that native speakers of English are obviously not very happy about the ubiquitous status that *it* has assumed in their mother tongue. Although we can only make educated guesses about the exact reasons behind the individual phenomena, all speakers choose to employ personal pronouns other than "neuter", non-distinct, semantically empty *it* if they want to add "feeling" to an utterance, no matter if the emotion to be conveyed is positive or negative. The "natural gender system" of StE thus seems to be on its way to becoming a "pragmatic gender system" in the Spoken Standard, where forms marked for gender are used according to the different requirements, emotionality and general circumstances of the situation.

In certain domains of use, the gender chosen by speakers of modern "Spoken Standard" varieties depends on extralinguistic factors such as the sex of the speaker (⇒ particularly cars, etc.), professional background (⇒ "gendered pronouns" = non-professional), emotional attitude (generally, neuter forms = disinterest, negative attitude), etc. The traditional systems, on the other hand, are based on intralinguistic gender assignment rules (⇒ semantic domains of nouns). As both systems can be employed at the same time, a diffusion is not only likely, but expected. As a result of the preference of traditional dialects for masculine and that of modern dialects for feminine forms, the mixture of systems looks like free variation to an outsider.

## References:

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Gender-neutral pronouns are great because they allow you to speak to and about individuals without making what might be incorrect assumptions about their gender. Just because someone appears feminine or masculine doesn't mean they are a man or a woman, after all—they could be agender or nonbinary, or simply differ from your expectations of what a man or a woman looks like. Using gender-neutral pronouns allows you to include all people when you speak, and encourages others to do the same. We Need More Gender Neutral Kids' Clothes. My three-year-old son had been wearing his Paw Patrol T-shirt for 2008. Pronominal Gender in English: A Study of English Varieties from a Cross-Linguistic Perspective. London: Routledge. Siemund, Peter and Dolberg, Florian. 2011. From lexical to referential gender: An analysis of gender change in medieval English based on two historical documents. *Folia Linguistica Historica* 45(2). 489–534. Siewierska, Anna. 2011. Gender distinctions in independent personal pronouns. 2004. *Gender in English Pronouns: Myth and Reality*. Accessed 22 December 2011. Wahrig-Burfeind, Renate. 1989. *Nominales und pronominales Genus im nördlichen Nordseegebiet: Eine areallinguistische Untersuchung*. Munich: Tübingen. Bechert, Johannes. 1982. *Grammatical gender in Europe: An areal study of a linguistic category*. 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.[15] It should also be noted that relative and interrogative pronouns do not encode number. "Gender in English pronouns: Myth and reality" (PDF). Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. Cite journal requires `|journal=` (help). Gender-neutral pronouns are defined by the LGBT Resource Centre as providing an identity for a singular person who does not identify as he/him or she/her. Now, in English, the word "they" is used as a gender-neutral singular pronoun - even though some critics argue that "they" should really only be used to refer to plural nouns. But these identifiers are nothing new and have actually been used throughout the history of literature. Examples of the singular "they" being used to describe someone features as early as 1386 in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tale*