Language and gender

This guide is written for students who are following GCE Advanced level (AS and A2) syllabuses in English Language. This resource may also be of general interest to language students on university degree courses, trainee teachers and anyone with a general interest in language science.

What is it all about?

When you start to study language and gender, you may find it hard to discover what this subject, as a distinct area in the study of language, is about. You will particularly want to know the kinds of questions you might face in exams, where to find information and how to prepare for different kinds of assessment tasks.

To get you started, here is an outline of part of one exam board’s Advanced level module on Language and Social Contexts – there are three subjects, one of which is Language and Gender. The description reads:

In preparing this topic area candidates should study:

- the forms and functions of talk;
- gender themes in writing;
- historical and contemporary changes.

In particular, they should examine

- conversational styles
- representations in writing.

This is unobjectionable but not very helpful – essentially it tells you that you have to study spoken and written data. Very broadly speaking, the study of language and gender for Advanced level students in the UK has included two very different things:

- How language reveals, embodies and sustains attitudes to gender
- How language users speak or write in (different and distinctive) ways that reflect their sex

The first of these is partly historic and bound up with the study of the position of men and women in society. It includes such things as the claim that language is used to control, dominate or patronize. This may be an objective study insofar as it measures or records what happens. But it may also be subjective in that such things as patronizing are determined by the feelings of the supposed victim of such behaviour. Your patronizing me needs me to feel that I am patronized.

The second area of study recalls many discussions of the relative influence of nature and nurture, or of heredity and environment. Of this we can note two things immediately:

- education or social conditioning can influence gender attitudes in speaking and writing (for example, to make speech more or less politically correct), but
- there are objective differences between the language of men and that of women (considered in the mass), and no education or social conditioning can wholly erase these differences.
Is it easy or hard?

Studying language and gender is easy and hard at the same time.

It is easy because many students find it interesting, and want to find support for their own developing or established views. It is very easy to gather evidence to inform the study of language and gender. And it is easy to take claims made by linguists in the past (such as Robin Lakoff’s list of differences between men’s and women’s language use) and use these to assess language data from the present – we can no longer verify Lakoff’s claims in relation to men and women in the USA in 1975, but we can see if they apply now to men and women in our own country or locality.

It is hard, because students can easily adopt entrenched positions or allow passion to cloud a clear judgement – and what I have just written will tell those who did not know it already that this guide is written by a man! (That is opposing passion and reason and approving the latter.) Typically, students may mistrust a teacher’s statements about language as it is because these show a world in which stereotypes persist (as if the teacher wanted the world to be this way). On the other hand, any attempt to divide the world into two utterly heterogeneous sexes, with no common ground at all is equally to be resisted. As with many things, the world is not so simple – there are lots of grey areas in the study of language and gender. One example is sexuality – how far the speech and writing of gay men and women approximates to that of the same or the opposite sex, or how far it has its own distinctness.

Where to find out more

I hope that this guide gives a comprehensive treatment of the subject, but it is not exhaustive – and this subject is massive. So where can you find more?

For the most thorough account of the subject I have seen, go to Clive Grey’s Overview of Work on Language and Gender Variation at:

http://www.trk.elte.hu/hirnok/feminizmus/tematik/view/overview.html

This is not an easy account to follow, but it names all the important (and many obscure) researchers in this area of study, and should enable any student to find leads to follow. For a teacher who is unsure about the subject, and wants something more substantial than this guide, Clive Grey’s outline should be very useful. If you wish to use print texts, you might find the following instructive:

- David Crystal, Encyclopedia of the English Language, pp. 368-9
- Shirley Russell, Grammar, Structure and Style, pp. 169-175
- George Keith and John Shuttleworth, Living Language, pp. 220-223
- Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell, An Introduction to the Nature and Functions of Language, pp. 122-126
- Alan Gardiner, English Language A-level Study Guide, pp. 54-55, 94-95, 106-107
Using Internet technologies you may search for study materials. One very good resource is Susan Githens’ study of *Gender Styles in Computer Mediated Communication* at

- http://www.georgetown.edu/bassr/githens/covr511.htm

Using a search engine, you will soon find resources from some of the leading contemporary authorities on the subject – Susan Herring, Lesley Milroy, Dale Spender, Deborah Tannen and Peter Trudgill, for example. Deborah Tannen has done much to popularise the theoretical study of language and gender – her 1990 volume *You Just don't understand: women and men in conversation* was in the top eight of non-fiction paperbacks in Britain at one point in 1992.

If you have to investigate language for part of a course of study, then you could investigate some area of language and gender. This means that, in an examination, you will be able to quote from, and refer to, the things you have found, while much of your analysis of the language data will be good preparation for the examination.

**The forms and functions of talk**

In studying language you must study speech – but in studying language and gender you can apply what you have learned about speech (say some area of pragmatics, such as the cooperative principle or politeness strategies) but with gender as a variable – do men and women show any broad differences in the way they do things?

Before going any further you should know that the consensus view (the view agreed by the leading authorities at the moment) is that gender *does* make a difference. And Professor Tannen, for example, can tell you how. But equally you should know that this difference is not universal – so there will be men who exhibit “feminine” conversational qualities – or women who follow the conversational styles associated with men. Computer-mediated conversation (Internet relay chat, for example) is interesting because here people choose or assume their gender – and this may not be the same as their biological sex.

In *Living Language* (p. 222), Keith and Shuttleworth record suggestions that:

- women – talk more than men, talk too much, are more polite, are indecisive/hesitant, complain and nag, ask more questions, support each other, are more co-operative, whereas

- men – swear more, don’t talk about emotions, talk about sport more, talk about women and machines in the same way, insult each other frequently, are competitive in conversation, dominate conversation, speak with more authority, give more commands, interrupt more.

Note that some of these are objective descriptions, which can be verified (ask questions, give commands) while others express unscientific popular ideas about language and introduce non-linguistic value judgements (nag, speak with more authority).

In a teaching group, any one of these claims should provoke lively discussion – though this may generate more heat than light. For example, I am certain that I *don’t* swear, insult other men frequently or give commands, but I *do* talk about sport and can be competitive and interrupt. I cannot easily understand how one could talk about women and machines in the same way – unless this refers to quantifying statistics.

A teacher could invite members of a class first to judge themselves (as I have done above) against the relevant list, then against the list for the other sex. And finally they could attempt to judge others in the group (though they may not know all of them) or simply another male or female friend.
Robin Lakoff

Robin Lakoff, in 1975, published an influential account of women’s language. This was the book *Language and Woman’s Place*. In a related article, *Woman’s language*, she published a set of basic assumptions about what marks out the language of women. Among these are claims that women:

- **Hedge**: using phrases like "sort of," "kind of," "It seems like," etc.
- **Use (super)polite forms**: "Would you mind...," "I'd appreciate it if...," "...if you don't mind."
- **Use tag questions**: "You're going to dinner, aren't you?"
- **Speak in italics**: intonational emphasis equal to underlining words – so, very, quite.
- **Use empty adjectives**: divine, lovely, adorable, etc.
- **Use hypercorrect grammar and pronunciation**: English class grammar and clear enunciation.
- **Use direct quotation**: men paraphrase more often.
- **Have a special lexicon**: women use more words for things like colours, men for sports
- **Use question intonation in declarative statements**: women make declarative statements into questions by raising the pitch of their voice at the end of a statement, expressing uncertainty. For example, "What school do you attend? Eton College?"
- **Use “wh” imperatives** (e.g. "Why don't you open the door?")
- **Speak less frequently**
- **Overuse qualifiers** (e.g. "I Think that...")
- **Apologise more** (e.g. "I'm sorry, but I think that...")
- **Use modal constructions** (e.g. "can", "would", "should", "ought" -- "Should we turn up the heat?")
- **Avoid coarse language or expletives**
- **Use indirect commands and requests** (e.g. "My, isn't it cold in here?")
- **Use more intensifiers, especially so and very** (e.g. "I am so glad you came!")
- **Lack a sense of humour**: women do not tell jokes well and often don't understand the punch line of jokes

Some of these statements are more amenable to checking, by investigation and observation, than others. It is easy to count the frequency with which tag questions or modal verbs occur. But Lakoff’s remark about humour is much harder to quantify – some critics might reply that notions of humour differ between men and women.

Any student or teacher can readily test the claim about qualifiers and intensifiers. For example, keep a running score (divided into male and female) of occasions when a student qualifies a question or request with “just” – “Can I just have some help with my homework? Can I just borrow your dictionary? Can I just take the day off school?” Over about a year, keeping a (very unrepresentative) score of such comments occurring in language lessons, the uses by female students in my class outnumbered those by males (in the proportion of about 3 to 1). The sample included members of the teaching group (who were aware of the scoring but whose speech habits were not affected, seemingly, by their knowing this), and other students visiting for various reasons.
Deborah Tannen

Professor Tannen has summarized her *You Just Don't Understand* in an article in which she represents male and female language use in a series of six contrasts. These are:

- Status vs. support
- Independence vs. intimacy
- Advice vs. understanding
- Information vs. feelings
- Orders vs. proposals
- Conflict vs. compromise

In each case, the male characteristic comes first. What are these distinctions?

**Status versus support**

Men grow up in a world in which conversation is competitive – they seek to achieve the upper hand or to prevent others from dominating them. For women, however, talking is often a way to gain confirmation and support for their ideas. Men see the world as a place where people try to gain status and keep it. Women see the world as “a network of connections seeking support and consensus”.

**Independence versus intimacy**

Women often think in terms of closeness and support, and struggle to preserve intimacy. Men, concerned with status, tend to focus more on independence. These traits can lead women and men to starkly different views of the same situation. Professor Tannen gives the example of a woman who would check with her husband before inviting a guest to stay – because she likes telling friends that she has to check with him. The man, meanwhile, invites a friend without asking his wife first, because to tell the friend he must check amounts to a loss of status. (Often, of course, the relationship is such that an annoyed wife will rebuke him later).

**Advice versus understanding**

Deborah Tannen claims that, to many men a complaint is a challenge to find a solution:

“When my mother tells my father she doesn't feel well, he invariably offers to take her to the doctor. Invariably, she is disappointed with his reaction. Like many men, he is focused on what he can do, whereas she wants sympathy.”

**Information versus feelings**

A young man makes a brief phone call. His mother hears it as a series of grunts. Later she asks him about it – it emerges that he has arranged to go to a specific place, where he will play football with various people and he has to take the ball. A young woman makes a phone call – it lasts half an hour or more. The mother asks about it – it emerges that she has been talking “you know” about “stuff”. The conversation has been mostly grooming-talk and comment on feelings.

Historically, men’s concerns were seen as more important than those of women, but today this situation may be reversed and the giving of information and brevity are considered of less value than sharing of emotions and elaboration. From the viewpoint of the language student neither is better (or worse) in any absolute sense.
Orders versus proposals

Women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways – “let’s”, “why don’t we?” or “wouldn’t it be good, if we…” Men may use, and prefer to hear, a direct imperative.

Conflict versus compromise

“In trying to prevent fights,” writes Professor Tannen “some women refuse to oppose the will of others openly. But sometimes it’s far more effective for a woman to assert herself, even at the risk of conflict.”

This situation is easily observed in work-situations where a management decision seems unattractive – men will often resist it, while women may appear to accede, but complain subsequently. Of course, this is a broad generalization – and for every one of Deborah Tannen’s oppositions, we will know of men and women who are exceptions to the norm.

Professor Tannen concludes, rather bathetically, and with a hint of an allusion to Neal (first man on the moon) Armstrong, that:

“Learning the other's ways of talking is a leap across the communication gap between men and women, and a giant step towards genuine understanding.”

The value of Tannen’s views for the student and teacher is twofold.

- First, one can discuss them – to see how far they accord with observations and experience. Though it will be helpful for the teacher to prepare some examples to clarify the discussion.
- Second, the students can conduct investigations into one or more of these, to see how far they are true of a range of spoken data.

The male as norm

One of Deborah Tannen’s most influential ideas is that of the male as norm. Such terms as “men”, “man” and “mankind” may imply this. The term for the species or people in general is the same as that for one sex only.

One of these problematic assumptions is males as norm. If, in fact, people believe that men's and women's speech styles are different (as Tannen does), it is usually the women who are told to change. She says, “Denying real differences can only compound the confusion that is already widespread in this era of shifting and re-forming relationships between women and men”.

If we believe that women and men have different styles and that the male is the standard, we are hurting both women and men. The women are treated based on the norms for men, and men with good intentions speak to women as they would other men and are perplexed when their words spark anger and resentment. Finally, apart from her objection to women having to do all the changing, Tannen states that women changing will not work either. As Dale Spender theorized, women who talk like men are judged differently - - and harshly. A woman invading the man's realm of speech is often considered unfeminine, rude or bitchy.

Susan Githens
Report talk and rapport talk

Deborah Tannen’s distinction of information and feelings is also described as report talk (of men) and rapport talk (of women). The differences can be summarized in a table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk too much</td>
<td>Get more air time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak in private contexts</td>
<td>Speak in public</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build relations</td>
<td>Negotiate status/avoid failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlap</td>
<td>Speak one at a time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speak symmetrically</td>
<td>Speak asymmetrically</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interruptions and overlapping

Tannen contrasts interruptions and overlapping. Interruption is not the same as merely making a sound while another is speaking. Such a sound can be supportive and affirming – which Tannen calls cooperative overlap, or it can be an attempt to take control of the conversation – an interruption or competitive overlap. This can be explained in terms of claiming and keeping turns – familiar enough ideas in analysing conversation.

High-involvement and high-considerateness

Professor Tannen describes two types of speaker as high involvement and high considerateness speakers. High involvement speakers are concerned to show enthusiastic support (even if this means simultaneous speech) while high considerateness speakers are, by definition, more concerned to be considerate of others. They choose not to impose on the conversation as a whole or on specific comments of another speaker.

Tannen suggests that high-involvement speakers are ready to be overlapped because they will yield to an intrusion on the conversation if they feel like it and put off responding or ignore it completely if they do not wish to give way. In the British House of Commons, there is a formal procedure for this, whereby a speaker requests permission to take the turn (“Will you give way?”) and the speaker who has the floor will often do so (“I will give way”) – on the understanding that the intervention is temporary (a point of information or of order) and that when this contribution is made, the original speaker will have the floor again (that is, be allowed to stand and speak).
Gender themes in writing

Sexism

Language forms may preserve old attitudes that show men as superior (morally, spiritually, intellectually or absolutely) to women. Today this may cause offence, so we see these forms as suitable for change. But people may resist these changes if the new (politically correct) forms seem clumsy.

Non-sexist usage

Personal pronouns and possessives after a noun may also show the implicit assumption that the male is the norm. Many organizations (almost all American universities) publish guidelines for non-sexist usage. These can be very detailed in their examples, but here is a short outline.

Summary of Guidelines for the non-sexist use of language

When constructing examples and theories, remember to include those human activities, interests, and points of view which traditionally have been associated with females.

Eliminate the generic use of ‘he’ by:

- using plural nouns
- deleting ‘he’, ‘his’, and ‘him’ altogether
- substituting articles (‘the’, ‘a’, ‘an’) for ‘his’; and ‘who’ for ‘he’
- substituting ‘one’, ‘we’, or ‘you’
- minimizing use of indefinite pronouns (e.g., ‘everybody’, ‘someone’)
- using the passive voice [use sparingly]
- substituting nouns for pronouns [use sparingly]

Eliminate the generic use of ‘man’:

- for ‘man’, substitute ‘person’/‘people’, ‘individual(s)’, ‘human(s)’, ‘human being(s)’
- for ‘mankind’, substitute ‘humankind’, ‘humanity’, ‘the human race’
- for ‘manhood’, substitute ‘adulthood’, ‘maturity’
- delete unnecessary references to generic ‘man’
Eliminate sexism when addressing persons formally by:

- using 'Ms' instead of 'Miss' or 'Mrs.', even when a woman's marital status is known
- using a married woman's first name instead of her husband's (e.g., "Ms. Annabelle Lee" not "Mrs. Herman Lee")
- using the corresponding title for females ('Ms.', 'Dr.', 'Prof.') whenever a title is appropriate for males
- using 'Dear Colleague' or 'Editor' or 'Professor', etc. in letters to unknown persons (instead of 'Dear Sir', 'Gentlemen')

Eliminate sexual stereotyping of roles by:

- using the same term (which avoids the generic 'man') for both females and males (e.g., 'department chair' or 'chairperson'), or by using the corresponding verb (e.g., 'to chair')
- not calling attention to irrelevancies (e.g., 'lady lawyer', 'male nurse')

**Gender spotting**

Here are extracts from six texts published in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Can you identify the sex of the writer in each case? To find the answers, look at page 15 of this guide.

**Text A**

I deny not, but that it is of greatest concernment in the Church and Commonwealth, to have a vigilant eye how books demean themselves as well as men; and thereafter to confine, imprison, and do sharpest justice on them as malefactors. For books are not absolutely dead things, but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a vial the purest efficacy and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragon's teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. And yet, on the other hand, unless wariness be used, as good almost kill a man as kill a good book. Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye. Many a man lives a burden to the earth; but a good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life. 'Tis true, no age can restore a life, whereof perhaps there is no great loss; and revolutions of ages do not oft recover the loss of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse.

We should be wary therefore what persecution we raise against the living labours of public men, how we spill that seasoned life of man, preserved and stored up in books; since we see a kind of homicide may be thus committed, sometimes a martyrdom, and if it extend to the whole impression, a kind of massacre; whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elemental life, but strikes at that ethereal and fifth essence, the breath of reason itself, slays an immortality rather than a life. But lest I should be condemned of introducing license, while I oppose licensing, I refuse not the pains to be so much historical, as will serve to show what hath been done by ancient and famous commonwealths against this disorder, till the very time that this project of licensing crept out of the Inquisition, was caught up by our prelates, and hath caught some of our presbyters.
Text B

From this time my head ran upon strange things, and I may truly say I was not myself; to have such a gentleman talk to me of being in love with me, and of my being such a charming creature, as he told me I was; these were things I knew not how to bear, my vanity was elevated to the last degree. It is true I had my head full of pride, but, knowing nothing of the wickedness of the times, I had not one thought of my own safety or of my virtue about me; and had my young master offered it at first sight, he might have taken any liberty he thought fit with me; but he did not see his advantage, which was my happiness for that time.

After this attack it was not long but he found an opportunity to catch me again, and almost in the same posture; indeed, it had more of design in it on his part, though not on my part. It was thus: the young ladies were all gone a-visiting with their mother; his brother was out of town; and as for his father, he had been in London for a week before. He had so well watched me that he knew where I was, though I did not so much as know that he was in the house; and he briskly comes up the stairs and, seeing me at work, comes into the room to me directly, and began just as he did before, with taking me in his arms, and kissing me for almost a quarter of an hour together.

It was his younger sister's chamber that I was in, and as there was nobody in the house but the maids below-stairs, he was, it may be, the ruder; in short, he began to be in earnest with me indeed. Perhaps he found me a little too easy, for God knows I made no resistance to him while he only held me in his arms and kissed me; indeed, I was too well pleased with it to resist him much.

Text C

Dun Buy, which in Erse is said to signify the Yellow Rock, is a double protuberance of stone, open to the main sea on one side, and parted from the land by a very narrow channel on the other. It has its name and its colour from the dung of innumerable sea-fowls, which in the Spring chuse this place as convenient for incubation, and have their eggs and their young taken in great abundance. One of the birds that frequent this rock has, as we were told, its body not larger than a duck's, and yet lays eggs as large as those of a goose. This bird is by the inhabitants named a Coot. That which is called Coot in England, is here a Cooter.

Upon these rocks there was nothing that could long detain attention, and we soon turned our eyes to the Buller, or Bouilloir of Buchan, which no man can see with indifference, who has either sense of danger or delight in rarity. It is a rock perpendicularly tubulated, united on one side with a high shore, and on the other rising steep to a great height, above the main sea. The top is open, from which may be seen a dark gulf of water which flows into the cavity, through a breach made in the lower part of the inclosing rock. It has the appearance of a vast well bordered with a wall. The edge of the Buller is not wide, and to those that walk round, appears very narrow. He that ventures to look downward sees, that if his foot should slip, he must fall from his dreadful elevation upon stones on one side, or into water on the other. We however went round, and were glad when the circuit was completed.

When we came down to the sea, we saw some boats, and rowers, and resolved to explore the Buller at the bottom. We entered the arch, which the water had made, and found ourselves in a place, which, though we could not think ourselves in danger, we could scarcely survey without some recoil of the mind. The basin in which we floated was nearly circular, perhaps thirty yards in diameter. We were inclosed by a natural wall, rising steep on every side to a height which produced the idea of insurmountable confinement. The interception of all lateral light caused a dismal gloom. Round us was a perpendicular rock, above us the distant sky, and below an unknown profundity of water. If I had any malice against a walking spirit, instead of laying him in the Red-sea, I would condemn him to reside in the Buller of Buchan.
Text D

The great advantages which naturally result from storing the mind with knowledge, are obvious from the following considerations. The association of our ideas is either habitual or instantaneous; and the latter mode seems rather to depend on the original temperature of the mind than on the will. When the ideas, and matters of fact, are once taken in, they lie by for use, till some fortuitous circumstance makes the information dart into the mind with illustrative force, that has been received at very different periods of our lives. Like the lightning's flash are many recollections; one idea assimilating and explaining another, with astonishing rapidity. I do not now allude to that quick perception of truth, which is so intuitive that it baffles research, and makes us at a loss to determine whether it is reminiscence or ratiocination, lost sight of in its celerity, that opens the dark cloud. Over those instantaneous associations we have little power; for when the mind is once enlarged by excursive flights, or profound reflection, the raw materials, will, in some degree, arrange themselves. The understanding, it is true, may keep us from going out of drawing when we group our thoughts, or transcribe from the imagination the warm sketches of fancy; but the animal spirits, the individual character give the colouring. Over this subtle electric fluid,* how little power do we possess, and over it how little power can reason obtain! These fine intractable spirits appear to be the essence of genius, and beaming in its eagle eye, produce in the most eminent degree the happy energy of associating thoughts that surprise, delight, and instruct. These are the glowing minds that concentrate pictures for their fellow-creatures; forcing them to view with interest the objects reflected from the impassioned imagination, which they passed over in nature.

(*Footnote. I have sometimes, when inclined to laugh at materialists, asked whether, as the most powerful effects in nature are apparently produced by fluids, the magnetic, etc. the passions might not be fine volatile fluids that embraced humanity, keeping the more refractory elementary parts together--or whether they were simply a liquid fire that pervaded the more sluggish materials giving them life and heat?)

Text E

'Above all, my dear Emily,' said he, 'do not indulge in the pride of fine feeling, the romantic error of amiable minds. Those, who really possess sensibility, ought early to be taught, that it is a dangerous quality, which is continually extracting the excess of misery, or delight, from every surrounding circumstance. And, since, in our passage through this world, painful circumstances occur more frequently than pleasing ones, and since our sense of evil is, I fear, more acute than our sense of good, we become the victims of our feelings, unless we can in some degree command them. I know you will say, (for you are young, my Emily) I know you will say, that you are contented sometimes to suffer, rather than to give up your refined sense of happiness, at others; but, when your mind has been long harassed by vicissitude, you will be content to rest, and you will then recover from your delusion. You will perceive, that the phantom of happiness is exchanged for the substance; for happiness arises in a state of peace, not of tumult. It is of a temperate and uniform nature, and can no more exist in a heart, that is continually alive to minute circumstances, than in one that is dead to feeling. You see, my dear, that, though I would guard you against the dangers of sensibility, I am not an advocate for apathy. At your age I should have said THAT is a vice more hateful than all the errors of sensibility, and I say so still. I call it a VICE, because it leads to positive evil; in this, however, it does no more than an ill-governed sensibility, which, by such a rule, might also be called a vice; but the evil of the former is of more general consequence. I have exhausted myself,' said St. Aubert, feebly, 'and have wearied you, my Emily; but, on a subject so important to your future comfort, I am anxious to be perfectly understood.'
The progress of Catherine's unhappiness from the events of the evening was as follows. It appeared first in a general dissatisfaction with everybody about her, while she remained in the rooms, which speedily brought on considerable weariness and a violent desire to go home. This, on arriving in Pulteney Street, took the direction of extraordinary hunger, and when that was appeased, changed into an earnest longing to be in bed; such was the extreme point of her distress; for when there she immediately fell into a sound sleep which lasted nine hours, and from which she awoke perfectly revived, in excellent spirits, with fresh hopes and fresh schemes. The first wish of her heart was to improve her acquaintance with Miss Tilney, and almost her first resolution, to seek her for that purpose, in the pump-room at noon. In the pump-room, one so newly arrived in Bath must be met with, and that building she had already found so favourable for the discovery of female excellence, and the completion of female intimacy, so admirably adapted for secret discourses and unlimited confidence, that she was most reasonably encouraged to expect another friend from within its walls. Her plan for the morning thus settled, she sat quietly down to her book after breakfast, resolving to remain in the same place and the same employment till the clock struck one; and from habitue very little incommoded by the remarks and ejaculations of Mrs. Allen, whose vacancy of mind and incapacity for thinking were such, that as she never talked a great deal, so she could never be entirely silent; and, therefore, while she sat at her work, if she lost her needle or broke her thread, if she heard a carriage in the street, or saw a speck upon her gown, she must observe it aloud, whether there were anyone at leisure to answer her or not. At about half past twelve, a remarkably loud rap drew her in haste to the window, and scarcely had she time to inform Catherine of there being two open carriages at the door, in the first only a servant, her brother driving Miss Thorpe in the second, before John Thorpe came running upstairs, calling out,

"Well, Miss Morland, here I am. Have you been waiting long? We could not come before; the old devil of a coachmaker was such an eternity finding out a thing fit to be got into, and now it is ten thousand to one but they break down before we are out of the street. How do you do, Mrs. Allen? A famous bag last night, was not it? Come, Miss Morland, be quick, for the others are in a confounded hurry to be off. They want to get their tumble over."

"What do you mean?" said Catherine. "Where are you all going to?" "Going to? Why, you have not forgot our engagement! Did not we agree together to take a drive this morning? What a head you have! We are going up Claverton Down."

"Something was said about it, I remember," said Catherine, looking at Mrs. Allen for her opinion; "but really I did not expect you."

"Not expect me! That's a good one! And what a dust you would have made, if I had not come."
Writing for women

Below is an extract from a story, published in the weekly magazine Woman's Own, in June, 1990.

It had been so different three years ago, the night she'd met Stefan de Vaux. There'd been a party. Bella always threw a party when she'd sold a picture because poverty, she'd explained, was a great inspiration. She'd been wearing a brilliant blue caftan, her fair hair twisted on the top of her head, the severity of it accenting her high cheekbones, the little jade Buddha gleaming on its silver chain round her neck.

Claire, pale from England and the illness that had allowed her to come to Tangier to recuperate, had been passed from guest to guest - "Ah, you're Bella's cousin" - like a plate of canapés, she thought ruefully, attractive but unexciting. Until Stefan de Vaux had taken her out onto the balcony and kissed her.

"Well?" he'd said softly, in his lightly accented voice, letting her go at last, and she had just stood there, staring at him, at his lean, outrageously handsome face, his laughing mouth, amber brown eyes. "Angry? Pleased? Shocked?" And she'd blushed furiously, feeling all three.

What details of language in the story appear to reflect the writer’s expectations about the reader, in your view?

The text below comes from 101 ways to save money in wartime – a booklet published to give advice to families in the UK. This is part of an article called The “Slip a Day” Scheme.

Supposing that we take an ordinary middle-class family as an example; instead of Father giving Mother her housekeeping always on the same day he hands it over a day later each week. On Friday the first week, Saturday the second, Sunday the third, and so on. At the end of eight weeks she has an extra week's allowance in hand for the purchase of Certificates.

On an allowance of say £3 10s. per week, as much as £20 a year can be saved this way – and all Mother has to do is to adopt some of the economies suggested in Section 2, and make seven days' housekeeping money last for eight days. In a business family, if every adult member did the same, a very large sum could be accumulated without hardship.

• What attitudes to gender can you find in the language of this article?
• Does the language merely record and reflect the social attitudes of the time, or does it help perpetuate them?
Historical and contemporary changes

In 1553 the grammarian Wilson ruled that the man should precede the woman in pairs such as male/female; husband/wife; brother/sister; son/daughter. Clive Grey comments that:

Even in the Tudor period comments about the kind of language that was suitable for young women to aim at is evidenced. Vives (1523) De Institutione Christianae Feminae (On The Instruction of a Christian Woman) has observations on what appropriate was considered then appropriate language for the time...What is interesting about these early 'handbooks' is the specific reference to women - there are no corresponding publications where men are the audience for a book on 'improving' linguistic behaviour, indeed it is men who usually do the suggesting.

In 1646 another grammarian Joshua Poole ruled that the male should precede the female. This was both more 'natural', and more 'proper' as men were the 'worthier' sex.

John Kirkby ruled that the male sex was 'more comprehensive' than the female, which it therefore included. Nineteenth century grammarians reinforced the resulting idea of male superiority by condemning the use of the neutral pronoun they and their in such statements as, 'Anyone can come if they want'. Their argument was an insistence on agreement of number – that anyone and everyone, being singular, could not properly correspond to plural pronouns. Against this Professor R.W. Zandvoort (The Fundamentals of English Grammar on one card, Edward Arnold, London, 1963) allows either the male or plural form for an indefinite pronoun:

"Where sex is unknown, he or they may be used of an adult, he or it of children..."

Clive Grey notes that by 1900 publications tend to fall into two categories: "instructional advice for women wishing to improve their spoken and written English, and the rise and development of sex-specification in the language, of which pronoun usage is one aspect."

In 1891 E.C. Stanton published a Woman's Bible in the USA.

In 1906 James published an article in Harper's Bazaar entitled "The speech of American women".

In 1922, Otto Jespersen published a book containing a chapter on "women's language." "The Woman," describes differences in women’s compared to men’s speech and voice pitch. He describes women's vocabulary as less extensive than men’s and claims that the periphery of language and the development of new words is only for men's speech. Jespersen explains these differences by the early division of labour between the sexes. In his conclusion he claims that the social changes taking place at the time "may eventually modify even the linguistic relations of the two sexes".

As long ago as 1928 Svartengren commented on the use of female pronouns to refer to countries and boats. (The use of "she" to refer to motorcars – may seem typically male).

The first specific piece of writing on gender differences in language this century came out in 1944. This was P H Furfey's "Men's and Women's language", in the Catholic Sociological Review.
Names and titles

What are the conventions of naming in marriage? What are the titles for married and unmarried people of either sex? Why are stage performers often excepted from these “rules” (e.g. Dame Judi Dench is the widow of the late Michael Williams – she is not “Mrs. Williams”). In some European countries women are known by their father’s name rather than that of their husband – for example Anna Karenina in Russia or Elin Jonsson in Iceland. Is this better than the convention in the UK, or merely a different kind of sexism? It applies to men, too, who are known by their father’s name – Stepan Arkadyevich or Gunnar Jonsson.

Occupational lexis

Look at nouns that denote workers in a given occupation. In some cases (teacher, social-worker) they may seem gender-neutral. Others may have gender-neutral denotation (doctor, lawyer, nurse) but not g-n connotation for all speakers and listeners. Speakers will show this in forms such as “woman doctor” or “male nurse”. Listeners may not show it but you can test their expectations by statements or short narratives that allow for contradiction of assumptions (e.g. a story about a doctor or nurse depicted as the spouse of a man or woman, as appropriate).

You can try it out with this example story. See how many people find it puzzling.

A man was driving with his son, when the car was struck by another vehicle. The man was killed instantly, but his son, injured, was rushed to hospital. The surgeon came into the operating theatre, gasped and said: “But this is my son”.

Some listeners may not notice anything odd. If they are truthful some may admit to taking a little while to understand the story, and some may continue to find it puzzling until it is explained. You could vary the noun from “surgeon” to “doctor”, “consultant” or “anaesthetist” and so on, to see if this changes the responses. You could also rework the story thus:

A woman was driving with her son, when the car was struck by another vehicle. The woman was killed instantly, but her son, injured, was rushed to hospital. The theatre nurse looked at the surgeon, gasped and said: “But this is my son”.

Consider forms that differentiate by gender, in adding diminutive (belittling) affixes: actress, stewardess, waitress, majorette, usherette, and so on.

My son reports that at his school, 6th form students (many of them young men) are now employed as lunchtime supervisors for younger students. And what do they call themselves? “Dinner-ladies”.

Answers to gender-spotting task:

- A is John Milton’s Areopagitica, 1644; male
- B is Daniel Defoe’s Moll Flanders, 1721; male
- C is Dr. Samuel Johnson’s A Journey to the Western Isles, 1775; male
- D is Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, 1792; female
- E is Anne Radcliffe’s The Mysteries of Udolpho, 1794; female
- F is Jane Austen’s Northanger Abbey, written 1803, published 1818; female
Semantic non-equivalences

These are pairs of terms that historically differentiated by sex alone, but which, over time, have gained different connotations (e.g. of status or value) and in some cases different denotations. Examples include:

- Mrs, Ms/Mr;
- Miss/Master, Mr;
- Mistress/master;
- Governess/governor;
- Spinster/bachelor;
- Tomboy/sissy;
- Lady/Lord;
- Lady/gentleman;
- Dame/knight;
- Bride/(bride)groom;
- Madam/sir;
- Queen/king;
- Matron/patron;
- Husband/wife;
- Author/authoress;
- Dog/bitch.

You can easily explain these distinctions (and others that you can find for yourself). Howard Jackson and Peter Stockwell, in An Introduction to the Nature and Functions of Language (p. 124) do this quite entertainingly:

“A master is in control, but a mistress is kept for sex. Compare old master and old mistress. A bachelor is an approving term, but a spinster is a sad thing to be. Compare bachelor pad and spinster pad. A patron is a business client, but a matron is an old nurse. If a man has a client, he is a businessman; if a woman has a client, she is a prostitute. If a man is a pro, he is competent; if a woman is a pro, she is a prostitute. If a man is a tramp, he is a homeless scruff; if a woman, a prostitute.”

Patronizing, controlling and insulting

This is not just a gender issue – these are functions (or abuses) of language which may appear in any social situation. But they take particular forms when the speaker (usually) or writer is male and the addressee is female. In some cases the patronizing, controlling or insulting only works because both parties share awareness of these connotations. It is possible for the addressee not to perceive – or the speaker not to intend – the patronizing, controlling or insulting. Patronizing terms include dear, love, pet or addressing a group of adult women as girls. Note that calling men boys or lads is not seen as demeaning. (Why is this?)

Shirley Russell, in Grammar, Structure and Style (p. 174-5), argues that insulting is a means of control. She quotes Julia Stanley, who claims that in a large lexicon of terms for males, 26 are non-standard nouns that denote promiscuous men. Some have approving connotation (stallion, stud). In a smaller list of nouns for women are 220 that denote promiscuity (e.g. slut, scrubber, tart). All have disapproving connotation. Equally terms denoting abstinence – like the noun phrase “tight bitch” – are disapproving. In Losing Out Sue Lees argues that men control female behaviour by use of such terms, especially “slag”. Note that today both “dog” and “bitch” are used pejoratively of women. “Dog” denotes supposed physical unattractiveness, while “bitch” denotes an alleged fault of character.

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Beauty and appearance

Judging women by appearance is well attested by language forms. Blonde, an adjective of colour, becomes a noun, with connotations of low intelligence. Brunette has a similar origin, as has the compound noun redhead (no common term for a woman with black hair). Babe is both approving (beauty) and disapproving (intelligence). More strongly pejorative (about intellect) is bimbo. A male equivalent – himbo – has not passed into common use. (The software on which this guide is written accepts bimbo but not himbo as a known form.) Hunk (approving) and wimp (disapproving) apply to men criteria of strength and attractiveness, but neither has clear connotation about intelligence.

Crossing gender boundaries

Non-standard terms may cross gender boundaries. In the USA guys is sometimes used to denote mixed-groups (and occasionally in the UK, for example by the writer of this guide). Totty has been recorded to denote men. Bird is current for an attractive (young) man in East Yorkshire (female 6th former, 1997).

Appendix – example texts

"A strapper - a real strapper, Jane: big, brown and buxom..." (Mr. Rochester describes Blanche Ingram); 1847; Brontë, C., Jane Eyre, Ch. 20.

Perhaps I'll be a Mrs. Mopp./With dusters, brush and pan./I'll scrub and rub till everything/Looked clean and spick and span." 1979; Twinkle (comic for girls) Annual.

Girl Group seeks very attractive slim, fifth Member/Image a must. Age 18-22 only./ Vocals important./ Open auditions on/ Tuesday 12 January at Pineapple Studios. 1999; newspaper advertisement.

ATTRACTIVE ACTRESSES/required for/DENTAL PROMOTIONS. 1999; newspaper advertisement.

So Nick Harvey "is the son of a civil servant" (Poll for successor; January 21). What does his father do? 1999; Smithson, Philippa; letter to The Guardian.

The Rev Margaret Jones (Letters January 25) should know that when the word "man" appears in Holy Writ [i.e. the Bible] it refers to both genders. An instance appears at the commencement of Lent: "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and to dust thou shalt return." The insistence of differentiations between (sic.) gender only serves to tear man asunder. 1999; Reed, A.J.; letter to The Guardian.

[Ellen McArthur, second in the Vendée Globe Challenge] is to sail up the Thames to a hero’s welcome. 2001; BBC Radio 4, Today news, February 21st
Specimen exam questions

Question 1

Explain what you understand by the term "sexist language". How far do you think this term is still applicable to ways in which people use language in society today? In your answer you should refer both to examples and to relevant research.

Question 2

Describe some of the differences between the language used by male and by female speakers in social interaction. Explain why these differences might occur.

Question 3

Texts A and B are extracts from two conversations between a male and a female speaker. In Text A two friends are talking over a coffee at the home of one of them; in Text B the participants are strangers at a camping ground where the man is attempting to tune in to a weather station on his radio.

To what extent are these conversations representative of the way men and women talk with each other?

In your answer you should refer to any relevant research and also make use of some of the following frameworks, where appropriate:

• lexis
• grammar
• semantics
• pragmatics
• discourse structure.

Note: M = Male participant; F = Female participant; () indicates a brief pause; (-) indicates a slightly longer pause; words within vertical lines are spoken simultaneously.

I have not shown the texts used in this example question – for two reasons:

• they come from a book which is protected by copyright, and
• some teachers will want to use the question (it was on a real exam paper in 2001) for practice exams in school.

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