

Insights into the Category of Gender (with special reference to gender-marking avoidance strategies)

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Abstract

Gender is an issue that has long preoccupied linguists, and the category of gender is one of the still unsolved puzzles of linguistic science. There has never been a complete agreement between scientists with regard to gender origin, nor there is unanimity of opinion as to its function in different language systems and, in general, to its definition. The present study focuses on the origin and historical development of the category of gender, classification of languages according to gender types, the peculiarities of gendered and genderless languages, gender-marking avoidance strategies. Through the comparative method of analysis English and Armenian gender systems are compared with an aim to reveal the similarities and differences in terms of functions, gender indicators in proverbs, as well as types of reference.

Key words: *category of gender, gender systems, gendered and genderless languages, gender-marking avoidance strategies.*

Introduction

The word *gender* has been used since the 14th century as a grammatical term, referring to classes of noun as masculine, feminine, or neuter groups. Grammatical gender is a formal category, but it does not refer to the biological difference between man and woman; rather it is an integral part of the linguistic system and it also includes inanimate entities. This system is used in approximately one quarter of the world's languages. In 257 languages from different geographical areas and linguistic families, 112 are shown to have a gender system (Oxford Research Encyclopedia).

In linguistics grammatical gender is a specific form of noun class system in which the division of noun classes forms an agreement system with another aspect of the language, such as adjectives, articles, pronouns, or verbs. This system is used in approximately one quarter of the world's languages. In these languages, most or all nouns carry one value of the grammatical category called *gender*; the values present in a given language (of which there are usually two or three) are called the genders of that language (Gender, Wikipedia). Gender category is observed in such old languages as Sanskrit, Latin, Ancient Greek, Old Persian, Ancient Egyptian, etc.

According to the definition given in Oxford Online Dictionary (2019) gender is any class (typically masculine, feminine, common, neuter) of nouns and pronouns distinguished by the different inflections which they have and which they require in words syntactically associated with them. Grammatical gender is only very loosely associated with natural distinctions of “sex”.

The gender category cannot be perceived and comprehended unless we reveal certain notions such as gender types, classification of languages according to the mentioned types, the origin of the category of gender and its historical development, the peculiarities of gendered and genderless languages, gender-marking avoidance strategies, and some others.

Gender Origin and Classification of Languages

According to Gender Types

The origin of the grammatical category of gender in different languages is connected with the outlook and world view of ancient people. At the initial stages of world discovery people divided the inanimate objective reality according to fertility, movement and growth. The objects that give some kind of products, grow (up) or move from their initial position were considered to be feminine (earth, tree, water, sun, moon, etc.) and those that do not correspond to these criteria were considered masculine (Aghayan 2010:187). In the languages where the grammatical category of gender is better demonstrated, the difference is better seen, e.g. in Russian - *вода* (f), *луна* (f), *земля* (f) and *камень* (m), in Spanish - *la tierra* (f), *una flor* (f), *el agua* (f), etc.

Some languages do not have distinctions of the grammatical category of gender: these languages are called *genderless*. They lack gender-specific words, prefixes or suffixes. The Armenian language belongs to this group. According to the gender type, languages are divided into 5 groups – those that have:

- Masculine and Feminine – French, Hindi, Irish, Spanish, etc;
- Common and Neuter – Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, Dutch;
- Animate and Inanimate – Georgian, Sumerian, Elamite, etc;
- Masculine, Feminine and Neuter – Latin, Old English, Russian, etc;
- More than three genders – Polish, Czech, Bantu languages, etc. (List of Languages by Type of Grammatical Genders, Wikipedia).

According to J. Lyons (1968:283), gender “plays a relatively minor part in the grammar of English by comparison with its role in many other languages.” Following Aristotle’s model, J. Harris (in Teterin 2012) stated that modern English has a “natural” or “logical” system of gender. This is neither a grammatical category, nor a lexical one, but semantic, based largely on biological sex differences, and, therefore, sensible only for human and animal reference. Thus, all nouns referring to females are logically or naturally assumed to be feminine in gender (*she*). Nouns referring to male beings or creatures are naturally assumed to have male reference (*he*); and everything else (animals, plants, objects, abstract qualities, etc.) is assumed to be unmarked for gender (*it*).

Ilyish (in Tiv'jaeva 2012:4) states that not a single word in Modern English shows morphological meaning of gender. Thus, the word *sister* and *brother* do not show any difference in their morphological forms, but only in lexical meanings. Consequently, the difference between *actor* and *actress* is purely lexical. In other words, the category of gender should not be confused with the category of sex, as the latter is an objective biological category.

While some nouns in the English language can only have one type of reference, others are double-gender or multiple-gender nouns:

1. Masculine only: for male human beings (*father, boy, king*).
2. Feminine only: for female human beings (*mother, girl, queen*).
3. Neuter only: inanimate (non-sexed) objects (*book, tree, room*).

4. Masculine or feminine: male or female human beings. These have been described as “common gender”, or “dual gender”, and usually are nouns in *-er* (*driver, employer, singer*), *-ian* (*vegetarian*), or *-ist* (*loyalist, artist, typist*).

5. Masculine or neuter: male animals (*billy-goat, ram, bull, drake, boar, cock*), and personifications of certain objects of the human physical or mental universe (*sun, river, summer, winter, love, death, time, war*).

6. Masculine, feminine or neuter: animate beings whose sex is indeterminate (*baby, infant, child, cat, dog*). This is often the case of young children or lower animals (*fish, birds, reptiles, insects*, etc.) (Teterin 2012:160).

In Old English, all nouns were treated as either masculine, or feminine or neuter, this system fell out of use during the Middle English period. In Modern English the category of gender is mostly distinguished by personal pronouns (third person, singular): *he* – masculine, *she* – feminine, *it* – neuter. There are some other indicators:

- ✓ Certain words acting as sex-indicators: *girl-friend, boy-friend, Tom-cat, Jane-cat, billy-goat, nanny-goat, policewoman*,
- ✓ Bound morphemes indicating feminine gender: *actress, tigress, heroine*,
- ✓ Different words used for indicating the gender: *lady, queen, king, uncle, aunt*.

Modern Armenian, which is considered to be a genderless language, has similarities with English in terms of giving a gender to its gender-neutral vocabulary:

- ✓ Certain words acting as sex-indicators: *ւնզի (արու կուլ), հովատակ (արու ձի)*, etc.
- ✓ Suffix *-ուհի* indicating feminine gender of the nouns: *աշակերտուհի, բժշկուհի, գործավարուհի*, etc.
- ✓ Different words used for indicating gender: *օրհորդ, պարոն, տիկին, բէռի, բույր*, etc.

In the English language the 3rd person singular personal pronouns distinguish the genders, consequently, there are three pronouns *he* (for masculine), *she* (for feminine) and *it* (for neuter). Though nowadays in the

Armenian language the equivalent of *he/she* is gender-neutral *úu*, in Western Armenian the 3rd person singular pronoun once had two genders *úk* (f) and *úu* (m) (Aghayan 1976:1018).

In the English language animals are referred to as nouns of neuter gender even when their sex is known to the speaker:

*The **elephant** slowly lifted **its** trunk.*

*The **cat** was licking **its** body.*

*My **cat** is celebrating **his** 5th birthday today.*

*Peter's **puppy** is so sweet: **she** jumps on me every time*

I call on them.

Sometimes the choice of the gender is made by the author/speaker as it includes an emotional component, too:

***Titanic**, Giant White Star Liner Sinks After Collision*

*With Iceberg on **Her** Maiden Voyage.*

*Do you like my new **car**, isn't **she** beautiful?*

But when used in a purely geographical sense the gender choice of inanimate things or places may be referred to as *it* (Mkhitarian et al 2001:18):

***New York City** is the most populous city in the USA, **its** population reaches 8538 million.*

***Paris** is the capital of France. **It** is considered to be the city of love.*

In fiction these nouns get their gender according to the context and the author's taste:

***New York City** is the most fatally fascinating thing in America. **She** sits like a great witch at the gate of the country.*

(Johnson 2004:51)

I shall attempt no such supergatory task as a description of Paris. It impressed me as a perfect and perfectly beautiful city.

(Johnson 2004:72)

Paris was a universe whole and entire unto herself, hollowed and fashioned by history; so she seemed in this age of Napoleon III with her towering buildings, her massive cathedrals....

(Rice 1976:67)

Gender Markers in English and Armenian Proverbs

Being a purely linguistic category gender reveals a lot about human mind which is better seen when observing the wise truths handed from generation to generation as in the case of proverbs (the examples are taken from *English Proverbs and Sayings*, 1987). When studying English proverbs one may see the tendency of using the word *man* as the subject in most of them. This phenomenon is conditioned by the fact that for many centuries men have been the breadwinners and decision makers of the family and have been focused on:

No man is an island.

A man is the only animal that can be skinned more than once.

A man who marries twice is a two-time loser.

A man is known by his friends.

The word *man* is a proper indicator of masculine gender, but in the proverbs above it may also mean a human being in general. Yet, one cannot be certain what gender the proverb demonstrates or whether it wants to have a stress on gender or not.

Other proverbs already solve this kind of puzzles directly pointing to the gender by its meaning or a suitable pronoun:

*Marry a handsome **man** and you marry trouble.
The smart **man** knows how little **he** really knows.
Behind every great **man** there's a great **woman**.*

The words *humanity, human race, person, people* can be acceptable substitutions to avoid sexist language in some cases, though it changes the age-old wisdom to some degree:

*A dog is a **man's** best friend => A dog is **human's** best friend.
A good **man** is hard to find. => Good **people** are hard to find.
A **man** is known by his friends. => **People** are known by their friends.
Clothes make the **man**. => Clothes make **identity**.*

Being a gender neutral language, Armenian avoids this kind of misunderstandings even in similar proverbs. In Armenian translation the word *մարդ* stands for the word *man*. Generally, the word refers to masculine gender, but without a clear indicator one may understand as they wish:

*Մարդուն, հողից բացի, ոչ մի բան չի կշտացնի:
Ազահ մարդու փորը միշտ դատարկ կլինի:
Ժլատ **մարդը** բարեկամներ չի ունենա:
Մարը սարին կհանդիպի, **մարդը** մարդուն չի հանդիպի:*

Just like in English, in the Armenian language sometimes there is serene indicator:

*Արիությունը զարդարում է տղամարդուն:
Կնկան **էրիկը** մարդն է, մարդուն **էրիկը**՝ պարտքը:*

In the Armenian language there is another good way for avoiding gender indication – the use of substantivized adjectives:

Շրբ հիսարբ խոսում է, խելոքը լռում է:
Աղբատին ո՞վ է սվել արքայութուն:

Gender-Marking Avoidance Strategies

Sometimes in formal communication one faces different problems connected with sexist languages. When using cautious language people need some tips how to use appropriate pronouns or words. For example, in Spanish, Italian and other sexist languages when referring to a group of people it is grammatically correct to use masculine gender if there is at least one male representative. Only when the whole group consists of females the speakers use feminine gender e.g. *Las chicas comen en un café Italiano*. This sentence assumes that all the members of the group are female, while without a certain context one can never guess if the group members of the sentence *Los chicos comen en un café Italiano* are all male or there are representatives from both genders.

The English language speakers do not come up to this kind of misunderstanding, but they find themselves in other sorts of tricky situations. In the English language gender based errors are connected either with the 3rd person singular pronouns or with profession indicating nouns. Pronoun-related form of sexist writing occurs in a sentence such as:

*When a student goes to university, **he** should understand the importance of higher education.*

Such a sentence assumes that all the students are male. In a cautious language the speaker could use:

- ✓ *he or she or s/he or he/she instead of he, i.e. When a student goes to university, **he/she** should understand the importance of higher education.*
- ✓ *one instead of he, i.e. When a student goes to university, **one** should understand the importance of higher education.*
- ✓ *Another way of avoiding the sexist pronoun is to use they instead of he, i.e. When a student goes to university, **they** should understand the importance of higher education.*

- ✓ On the other hand, the speaker may not only change the pronoun but the number of the noun in the main phrase making it plural, i.e. *When students go to university, **they** should understand the importance of higher education.*
- ✓ Another solution is to avoid using gender pronouns and use nouns or neuter pronouns instead: *Ask **him** to be impartial. – Ask **your teacher** to be impartial.*

*When a **teacher** is motivating, **his** students will be more interested in studying the subject. – When **you** are motivating, **your** students will be more interested in studying the subject.*

*When a **teacher** is motivating, **his** students will be more interested in studying the subject. – When **we** teachers motivate, **our** students will be more interested in studying the subject.*

The complex diversity of linguistic units enables speakers/users to come up with avoiding structures even for already defined sexist avoidance techniques.

*Once the **doctor** is ready to operate, **he** or **she** must wash **his** or **her** hands.
– When ready to operate, **doctors** must wash their hands.*

- ✓ In the case of an inanimate object the use of indefinite article is also recommended. In different structures and contexts one may use the indefinite article to avoid gender based judgements, e.g.

*Who has left **a** book at cafeteria?*

*Someone dropped **a** purse in the street.*

As mentioned above, the second use of sexist language is connected with nouns such as *businessman, fireman, chairman*, etc. Nowadays, with the growth of awareness in the society women have started to occupy positions which were meant for men only in the previous centuries. In order not to hurt their feelings or worsen relationship with them one may find alternatives to some position names:

chairman => presiding officer

businessman => business executive

congressman => congressional representative

fireman => firefighter
stewardess => flight attendant

Conclusion

Being a linguistic category, gender reveals a lot about human mind, which is unconditionally reflected in the language. While awareness grows in the society, there is a growing need for some tips and strategies to avoid problems connected with sexist languages. Nowadays the flexibility of a language and the complex diversity of linguistic units enable speakers/users to come up with sexist avoidance techniques, i.e. avoid the use of gender displaying words and use neutral words and phrases instead to encourage equality and be linguistically polite by using cautious language.

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Սեռի կարգի շուրջ.**նշույթավորման խուսափողական ռազմավարություններ**

Սույն հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվել է սեռի կարգը՝ ծագման, պատմական զարգացման, ըստ սեռային տարբերակման լեզուների դասակարգման, ինչպես նաև տարբեր լեզուներում, մասնավորապես անգլերենում և հայերենում, սեռի արտահայտման առանձնահատկությունների առումով: Համեմատական վերլուծության մեթոդի միջոցով զուգահեռներ են անցկացվում անգլերենի և հայերենի գենդերային համակարգերի միջև՝ դրանցում որոշ նմանություններ ու տարբերություններ վեր հանելու նպատակով: Հատուկ ուշադրության են արժանացել ասացվածքներում սեռի արտահայտման եղանակները, սեռի կարգի ցուցիչները, ներկայացվել են դրանցից խուսափելու որոշ ռազմավարություններ:

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