

## Bending the Gender of Inanimate Nouns

Whoever has studied the grammar of the English language has certainly been introduced to the rule that animate nouns are expressed through use of the pronoun for male or female gender (depending on the referent's sex), while inanimate nouns are expressed by employing the pronoun for neuter gender. However, English has made room for exceptions and allows certain inanimate nouns, such as, *sun, moon, star, earth, sky, river, ocean, sea, ship, yacht, car* and *bike* (given in no specific order) to acquire metaphorical meaning and to legitimately appear in some contexts as animate nouns (sometimes capitalized) turning into male or female pronouns.

### Personification

Depending on the speaker's (or writer's) attitude towards the inanimate object, the gender of such nouns becomes changeable, yet not unpredictable. The word *personification* precisely embodies this feature of the language, since it refers to the vivid transfer of human traits to everyday objects or abstract nouns, hence the gender marked in the specific pronominal forms for males (*he, him, his*) or females (*she, her, hers*) represents the relationship between the person and the object in question. It allows enlargement of the poetic capacity of the language, so while on the one hand in Greek, Latin, French, Italian and German, the nouns *cloud, tree* and *snow* regularly appear in a fixed pronominal gender form, which makes it impossible to 'draw' a colorful picture and to reveal the three-dimensional beauty of the object, on the other hand English inanimates are thought to contain a perfect balance between their natural sex and linguistic gender (Baron 1986: 109). In a significant number of cases, even speakers of English tend to express their thoughts in sentences in which the inanimate nouns have become living beings by replacing the neuter gender with male or female gender, i.e. maleness or femaleness.

Teachers of EFL are quite hesitant when faced with teaching this issue. The majority of teachers merely stick to the prescriptive rule about pronominal forms with inanimates, shying away from everyday language. In addition, teacher's books don't face up to this dilemma. So why not try out activities for gender awareness of pronouns in the classroom and come to

conclusions of your own about the influence this issue has on pupils – you might be surprised by the results.

### **Transfer and Classification**

The unfixed and flexible nature of the gender of inanimate nouns means that it isn't wholly predictable in each and every case, yet research has come to the conclusion that more examples than not tend to stick to a certain gender. According to the observations of Michael Maittaire, who did thorough research on this topic as early as the beginning of the 18th century, "personifications of the usually neuter inanimate nouns of English are influenced by the languages from which we borrow our ideas" (Ibid: 111). For example, *sea* and *sword* are treated as masculine in English, whereas *city*, *ship* and *tree* are feminine not because they are seen as reflecting the outward characteristics of one sex or the other, but because these are the genders assigned to them in Latin, Greek or French. In this context, Romaine has added that a noun might belong to the female gender in one language, while in another be classified as male gender, which isn't an accurate indicator that the object changes its characteristics in both languages (2000: 119).

During the 17th century, in the initial stages of the standardization and purification of the English language by the linguists, even the existence of detailed prescriptive rules for correct use of pronouns of male and female gender wasn't enough to solve the issue of gender classification of inanimate pronouns. Nevertheless, there was a group of male linguists who elaborated on the topic of gender in their studies, and whose theories from today's perspective would arguably be questioned. One such example is John Fell (1784), who is quoted by Julia Penelope: "Moral qualities, such as *wisdom*, *truth*, *justice*, *reason*, *virtue*, and *religion*, are of the feminine gender. The fiercer and more disagreeable passions are masculine – the softer and more amiable are feminine. *Mind* is masculine, *soul* feminine. The *sun* is masculine, the *moon* feminine, the *Heaven* neuter – the *earth* is feminine; *mountains* and *rivers* are commonly masculine; *countries* and *cities* are feminine – and *nature*, as comprehending all, is feminine" (1990: 63).

## **Feminized Inanimates**

The existence of the rule that inanimate objects are always followed by the pronoun for neuter gender raises the issue of the users' illogical approach towards the English language to tolerate the use of the other two pronouns. It has been rightfully concluded that, when given the choice, most speakers in such cases don't select the 3rd person singular neuter pronoun *it* (and the other derived pronouns), but opt for the marked form for female gender *she* (and the other derived pronouns), when speaking about boats, ships, yachts (and other vessels) as well as cars, especially if these inanimates are in their own possession. Therefore the prescriptive rule has been broken, and even though it might be called an exception in its own right, it surely can't stick to this label for too long since so many speakers are currently employing it in their speech. Svartengren (1927) talks about *feminized inanimates* and the use of *emotional 'she'*, both terms accepted in the English language today and used as such (Baron 1986: 105, Langenfelt 1951: 90).

### **a) Hurricanes**

Inanimates that belong to this group and are worthy to be mentioned are *hurricanes* – placed here following the far-fetched assumption that hurricanes are considered to share the characteristic of destructiveness with the female sex, hence the names given to them. Lloyd delves into the reasons by explaining that “during World War II military meteorologists reverted to a system of naming, so using the convention of applying ‘she’ to inanimate objects such as vehicles, hurricanes were given female names” (2007: 117). Further explanation illustrates that in 1979, following the claims of sexism, male names were introduced by the World Meteorological Organization, which continues to oversee the practice of hurricane naming.

Lakoff gives an even more ludicrous suggestion (that she had previously read from other sources) – hurricanes should be renamed *himicanes*, “since the former appellation reflects poorly on women” (2004: 72). This is an example of ridiculous thinking that if truly existent, in my opinion, has distracted and side-tracked people from the more serious problems with the gender issue in the English language.

## **b) Ships**

It is not unfamiliar for the speakers of the contemporary English language to employ emotional 'she' as a replacement for the 3rd person singular neuter pronoun, when speaking or writing about ships, yachts and other vessels. Interestingly, in an article written by Hibberd and Woolcock it is stated that a huge and unexpected change will be brought to the English language used in *Lloyd's List*, the 276-year-old publication of the shipping industry which claims to be the world's oldest daily newspaper – "it is to abandon centuries of seafaring tradition by calling all vessels 'it' " (2002). In addition, they provide the reply given by Julian Bray, the editor of the newspaper, who writes that their intention is to bring the paper into line with most other reputable international business titles, which clearly follow the standard grammar for written English. This issue is further heated up by the reply of the spokesperson for the Royal Navy, who is persistent in his arguments that "ships are female because the ship was the only woman allowed at sea and thus treated with deference and respect." Only a short while afterwards did Bray succumb to the readers' negative reactions and return to feminizing ships in articles.

It's my opinion that awareness of both sides of such gender issues in language is necessary for full comprehension of the intricacies of English. However, those involved in the teaching process should be especially careful when transmitting such knowledge to students, always keeping in the mind the level which the specific lesson on gender is aimed at.

## **c) Miscellaneous**

One of today's leading authorities on questions of the English language, David Crystal, writes that there is an abundance of inanimate nouns that are changeable regarding the gender they express (in some occasions it might be male, in some, female), largely depending on the degree of closeness in the animate person-inanimate object relationship. This is absolutely true, and it can be exemplified through my own personal experience – being a female myself, in cases when my car lets me down I use the pronoun *he*, while more often I'm inclined to show it tenderness, which is when I freely employ *she*. In sentences, such as, ***She*** can reach 60 kpm in 5 seconds or France has increased ***her*** exports, it is clear from the contextual evidence that the speaker of these sentences shows kindness and care towards their car and country, respectively. Crystal adds that linguistics as a field is still in the dark as to a legitimate reason of why certain

inanimates become animates, and why they are given female personifications. “It is not simply a matter of feminine stereotypes, for *she* is used in aggressive and angry situations as well as in affectionate ones: guns, tanks, and trucks which won’t go remain *she*” (2003: 209). A noticeable novelty in recent years is a consistent male trend in personification in the realm of computing, where computers and other such devices are broadly referred to by pronouns of male gender.

## **Conclusion**

Apparently, gender isn’t as clear-cut as it seems. Research in EFL textbooks for elementary-school pupils has shown that the gender of inanimate nouns is depicted only through the 3rd person singular neuter pronoun, regardless of all the abovementioned cases of exceptions. An advisable course would be to fill in higher-grade pupils on the hidden aspects of gender, since at some point they will be curious as to why there are discrepancies in the textbook and the real-life English they hear and read every day. The approach and classroom activities will vary depending on the teacher, but accepting only the traditional views on gender in English pronouns and being deaf and blind to changes will undoubtedly do no good to either party.

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**Summary of the article:** It is a well-known rule that inanimate nouns in the English language are to be used with the 3rd person singular neuter pronoun. This article exemplifies the exceptions to this rule, some of which are controversial, with comments for EFL teachers.