

## SEMANTICS OF GENDER MARKED NOMINATIONS OF PERSON IN ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** The English language is a member of the Indo-European family of languages which had also influenced its grammar. The language is a complex system that was developing for long centuries and this development is still in progress. The development of English was influenced by some other languages, their grammar and vocabulary. Not only other languages and their impact on English had caused the development of gender marked nominations of person but also the changing society. Most of the world countries, not only English speaking, are based on principles of patriarchal society. Therefore, the majority of gender marked nominations of person is of male gender, however, feminism has contributed to development of new nominations of person in such sphere as profession or occupation. The research is based on the semantics of the sample of 660 gender marked nominations of person and their categorization into twelve semantic groups.

**Keywords:** gender, gender marked nominations of person, gender component, category of gender, semantics

### 1 The category of gender in grammar and semantics

The status of gender category had been influenced by some other languages and their grammar. If we trace in the history of the English language we will find different categories of gender in different periods of the development of this language. While many Indo-European languages have grammatical gender, English is normally described as lacking of this type of gender, although in the Old English period it was a very productive inflectional category. Gender was no more inflectional category in Modern English.

The development of gender marked nominations of person was also influenced by the development of society and by changing roles of males and females in society. Also the rise of feminism had impact on the development of new nominations marked by gender, especially in the employment sphere. In the process of the language development gender had changed its status in grammar and semantics. Tracing in different periods of language development we come to know about the changes and uses of gender category from grammatical in Old English period to natural in Modern English to nowadays.

"The English gender system is unusual in the family of Indo-Germanic languages, as well as among Indo-European languages more generally."<sup>1</sup>

#### 1.1 Category of gender and its changing status

In order to focus on gender in grammar and semantics in different periods of development of the English language we must research the history of its development.

A. Curzan<sup>2</sup> states that Old English, dated back to 750-1100 or 1150 AD, had grammatical gender categories very similar to those of Modern German, its "sister" language.

According to T. Rastorgyeva<sup>3</sup> Old English nouns had three grammatical or morphological categories: number, case and gender. Nouns distinguished between three genders: Masculine, Feminine and Neutral, but strictly speaking this distinction was not a grammatical category; it was merely a classifying feature accounting, alongside other features, for the division of nouns into morphological classes. Gender in Old English was not always associated with the meaning of nouns. Nouns were distinguished according to their structure rather than meaning. Sometimes a derivational suffix referred to a noun and placed it into a certain semantic group. In case of the nouns denoting the human being the grammatical gender did not necessarily correspond to sex: alongside Masculine and Feminine nouns denoting males and females there were nouns with "unjustified"

gender as it is seen on the following examples: OE *widruwa*, masc. ('widower') - OE *widowe*, Fem. (NE widow); OE *spinnere*, Masc. (NE spinner) - OE *spinnestre*, Fem. ('female spinner'; note NE spinster with a shift of meaning) and nouns like OE *wif*, Neut. (NE wife), OE *mæzden* Neut. (NE maiden, maid), OE *wifman*, Masc. (NE woman, originally a compound word whose second component -man was Masc.).

In Old English gender was primarily a grammatical distinction; Masculine, Feminine and Neutral nouns could have different forms, even if they belonged to the same stem (type of declension). The division into genders was in a certain way connected with the division into stems, though there was no direct correspondence between them, some stems were represented by nouns of one particular gender, others embraced nouns of two or three genders.

According to A. Curzan<sup>4</sup>, Old English had three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter, and all inanimate nouns belonged to one of the three classes, sometimes for morphological reason, but more often for no obvious reason.

T. Rastorgyeva<sup>5</sup> says the later simplification of noun morphology affected the grammatical categories in different ways and to a varying degree. Gender in Old English as a classifying feature (not being a grammatical category proper) disappeared together with other distinctive features of the noun declensions. While the declension system played a certain role in the decay of the Old English declension system, in Late Old English and Early Middle English nouns were grouped into classes or types of declension according to gender instead of stems. Later development of 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries brought that gender of nouns was deprived of its main formal support - the weakened and levelled endings of adjectives and adjective pronouns ceased to indicate gender. Semantically, gender was associated with the differentiation of sex and therefore the formal grouping into genders was smoothly and naturally superseded by a semantic division into inanimate and animate nouns with a further subdivision of the letter into males and females.

To prove this here is the example from Chaucer's time when gender was already a lexical category, like in Modern English, nouns are referred to as "he" and "she" if they denote human beings and as "it" when they denote animals or inanimate thing:

*She wolde wepe, if that she saw a mous,  
Cought in a teppe, if it were deed or bledde.*

*She* points here to a woman while *it* replaces the noun *mous*, which in Old English was Feminine. ('She would weep, if she saw a mouse caught in a trap, if it was dead or it bled.')

A. Curzan<sup>6</sup> states that the natural gender system in Modern English, where only nouns referring to males and females generally take gendered pronouns and inanimate objects are neuter, stands as the exception, not the rule among the world's languages.

In other periods of the English language development gender remained the lexical (semantic) category.

"Gender in language, which can be referred to by general term linguistic gender, can be defined at the most basic level as a system of noun classification reflected in behaviour of associated words."<sup>7</sup>

Therefore the essential criterion of the linguistic gender is taken to be agreement (or concord), or systematic and predictable covariance between a semantic or formal property of one grammatical form and a formal property of another. This is the example from Old English:

<sup>4</sup> Curzan, A.: Gender shifts in history of English. Cambridge University Press, 2003. p.12

<sup>5</sup> Rastorgyeva, T.: The History of The English Language. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Moscow : Moscow High School, 2003. p.224

<sup>6</sup> Curzan, A.: Gender shifts in history of English. Cambridge University Press, 2003. p.14

<sup>7</sup> Hockett, Ch. F.: A Course in Modern Linguistics. New York: the Macmillan Company, Sixth Printing; (1963), 1958. p.150

<sup>1</sup> Curzan, A.: Gender shifts in history of English. Cambridge University Press, 2003. p.12

<sup>2</sup> Curzan, A.: Gender shifts in history of English. Cambridge University Press, 2003. p.12

<sup>3</sup> Rastorgyeva, T.: The History of The English Language. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Moscow : Moscow High School, 2003. p.96

*Seo brade lind was tilu and ic hire lufode.  
That broad shield was good and I loved her. (literally 'her loved')*

The demonstrative pronoun *seo* 'the, that' and the adjectives *brade* 'broad' and *tilu* 'good' appear in their feminine form to agree with the feminine noun *lind* 'shield'; in the second clause, the shield is then referred back to with the feminine pronoun *hire* 'her' in accordance with the noun's grammatical gender. As the Modern English translation demonstrates, this kind of grammatical agreement of gender has been lost, only the personal pronouns still mark gender and it is semantically, not grammatically based.<sup>8</sup>

According to G. Corbett's<sup>9</sup> comprehensive cross-linguistic study of gender system noun classification often corresponds to biological distinctions of sex, although frequently it does not. In the case of English, there is the type of strict semantic system (referred to as semantic gender) where the meaning of the noun determines its gender and, conversely, where aspects of a noun's meaning can be inferred from its gender.

Gender is not only associated with grammar, but it is also a social construct which can be described as the political, social and cultural significance attached to the biological differences between men and women.

*"Gender describes the characteristics that a society or culture delineates as masculine or feminine. In sociological terms 'gender role' refers to the characteristics and behaviours that different cultures attribute to the sexes."*<sup>10</sup>

## 1.2 The status of gender component in word meaning

*"The study of how meaning is encoded in a language is the central business of semantics, and it is generally assumed that its main concern is with the meaning of words as lexical units."*<sup>11</sup>

D. Lančarič<sup>12</sup> states that meaning is a linguistically encoded idea or a message content that is to be transferred from the mind of the speaker/writer to the mind of the listener/reader. It concerns various linguistic forms, and it is differently classified with respect to their relationship to the referent as well as to the language user, his attitudes, social role, etc.

According to P. Kvetko<sup>13</sup> there are two types of word meaning: grammatical and lexical one. In grammatical meaning, the component of meaning is expressed by inflectional endings, individual forms or some other grammatical devices, e.g. word order. For example the words "boys, houses, pens", etc., though denoting different objects, have something in common. This common element of the words (expressed by the ending -s) is the grammatical meaning of plurality. As to the lexical meaning, comparing word-forms of one and the same word, we find out that there is another component of meaning - identical in all forms of word, i.e. the meaning of the base (or root) in a set of inflectional forms, e.g.: *go, goes, went, going, gone* (in this case: the component denoting the process of movement). This is the lexical meaning - the component of meaning proper to the word as a linguistic unit, i.e. recurrent in all the forms of this word. The lexical meaning may be understood as a set of basic semantic components (semantic features - *semes*).

*"A sememe can be decomposed into semantic components, also called semes. Hence, the sememe is a complex or hierarchical configuration of semes, which corresponds to a single meaning of a lexeme. The method used in this connection is called componential analysis."*<sup>14</sup>

As D. Lančarič<sup>15</sup> points, this analysis consists of identifying some general conceptual categories of expression and of finding some common of different semantic features between words on the basis of which the words are organized into semantic fields and in this way there can be established a whole system of relationships, such as concrete, abstract, static, dynamic, animate, non-animate, etc. The essential purpose of the componential analysis is to identify certain general conceptual categories or semantic principles which find expressions in the particular components. Among such categories are: state, process, causality, class, membership, possession, dimension, location, etc.

Table 1 shows examples of semes that can be found in words *bachelor* and *wife*:

Table 1  
Semantic structure of words *bachelor* and *wife*

semes	<i>bachelor</i>	<i>wife</i>
male	+	-
female	-	+
human	+	+
adult	+	+
married	-	+
unmarried	+	-

*"Componential analysis works by comparing and contrasting words within a semantic field, that is, a set of words in single conceptual domain, such as kin, parts of the body, colours, or verbs of motion. A notation of semantic components (also called markers, features or semes) is devised to summarize the similarities and contrasts in the most economical way, a procedure analogous to distinctive features analysis in phonology."*<sup>16</sup>

As P. Štekauer<sup>17</sup> says here should be emphasized that semantic components are theoretical constructs, e.g. (+HUMAN), (+ANIMATE), (-CONCRETE), etc., included into semantic theory to designate language invariant but language linked components of a conceptual system that is part of the cognitive structure of the human mind. Semantic components are symbols for the fundamental language relevant features of objects of the extra-linguistic reality. They reflect the structuring of the reality by means of language.

E.g.: *woman* can be represented as the conjunction of the semantic components HUMAN, FEMALE and ADULT. In this example we are interested in the gender component of word *woman* which is FEMALE.

## 2. The material under study

The empirical material was selected from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary edited by A. S. Hornby<sup>18</sup> (Hornby, A. S., 2005, 7<sup>th</sup> edition). A number of lexicographic criteria were applied to form the language corpus, for example:

1) the lexicographic markers of human being *a person who...*, *somebody who...*, *used to say that someone is...*, *a word for...* in the definitions;

2) words, which indicate the gender of the referent, i.e. *a man who...*, *a woman who...*, *a male, a female, a girl, a boy, etc.*

For example:

*Medicine man*: *a person who* is believed to have special powers of healing especially among Native Americans (OALD).

In the definition of this word the first criterion is seen - *a person who*... The word itself shows the gender marked nomination by the use of the word *man* that is the second criterion.

*Widow*: *a woman* whose husband has died and who has not married again. (OALD)

<sup>8</sup> Curzan, A.: Gender shifts in history of English. Cambridge University Press, 2003. p.17

<sup>9</sup> Corbett, G. G.: Gender. Cambridge University Press, 1991. p.302

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.med.monash.edu.au/gendermed/sexandgender.html>

<sup>11</sup> Widdowson, H. G.: Linguistics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p.53

<sup>12</sup> Lančarič, D. Linguistics for English Language Students. Btislava : Z-F LINGUA, 2008. p.51

<sup>13</sup> Kvetko, P.: English Lexicology. Trnava : Univerzita Sv. Cyrila a Metoda, 2005. p.46

<sup>14</sup> Štekauer, P.: Essentials of English Linguistic. Prešov : SLOVACONTACT, 1993. p.65

<sup>15</sup> Lančarič, D.: Linguistics for English Language Students. Btislava : Z-F LINGUA, 2008. p.51

<sup>16</sup> Goddard, C.: Componential analysis. University of New England, 2009. p.58

<sup>17</sup> Štekauer, P.: Essentials of English Linguistic. Prešov : SLOVACONTACT, 1993. p.71

<sup>18</sup> Hornby, A. S.: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. Oxford University Press: 7th edition, 2005.

In the definition of this word we can see the second criterion – a woman who. The word woman also denotes that a woman is a human being that is the first criterion.

The semantic structure of the sample of 660 gender marked nominations of person under study was analysed. These words have the same integrating semes of human being and gender. They differ in the nature of the differentiating semes. In the course of the analysis on the basis of the differentiating same nature the words under study were arranged into the following lexical-semantic groups: Occupation, Behaviour, Relatives, Religion, Age, Social status, Activities, Relationships, Appearance, Titles/forms of address, Sexual orientation and Others. Table 2 shows the number of words in each of these groups, the percentage and examples of gender marked nominations of person for each lexical-semantic group.

Table 2

Lexical-semantic groups of GNP				
№	Lexical-semantic groups	Number of words	%	Examples
1	Occupation	170	26	<i>aircraftwoman, butler, cleaning lady, door man, escort, fireman, Girl Friday, herdsman, jillaroo, lectrice, waiter</i>
2	Behaviour	84	13	<i>adventurer, bounder, caveman, dandy, fishwife, gorgon, heel, jessie, libertine, nebbish, queen bee</i>
3	Relatives	58	9	<i>amma, bhai, cousin sister, didi, father, grandma, half-brother, maiden aunt, uncle</i>
4	Religion	53	8	<i>abbot, bishop, clergywoman, deacon, elder, friar, goddess, lama, monk, nun</i>
5	Age	42	6	<i>boy, chica, damsel, geezer, laddie, missy, old dear, spinster, wench</i>
6	Social status	36	5	<i>archduke, baronet, count, dauphin, empress, king, marchioness, prince, queen</i>
7	Activities	36	5	<i>alderwoman, bellboy, craftswoman, fieldsman, horsewoman, majorette</i>
8	Relationships	29	4, 5	<i>baw, common-law husband, fiancé, girlfriend, homeboy, moll, old lady, wife</i>
9	Appearance	23	3, 5	<i>adonis, beardie, cracker, doll, English rose, frump, gamine, hunk, manikin, witch</i>
10	Titles/forms of address	20	3	<i>boyo, cock, guv, lady, matey, missus, mzee, sir.</i>
11	Sexual orientation	11	2	<i>homosexual, fairy, gay, ladyboy, lesbian, nancy, queer</i>
12	Others	98	15	<i>attaboy, bloke, chola, dame, enchanter, freemanson, gal, head boy, Jane Doe, madman, widow</i>
	Total	660	100	

## 2.1 Opposition of male and female

“The gender opposition female – male is a common opposition in animate nouns. There are many pairs of nouns of which one term is used for the female referent and the other for the male referent. We find this for example in the domain of animals (e.g. dog and bitch) or for terms that denote a profession (e.g. actor

and actress). In many cases one of the two opposite terms has a double function: not only does it refer specifically to the female or male member, but it can also refer, in a neutral way, to the kind as a whole. This is the case, for example, in the pair actor-actress. In (1) actor is used to refer to both to the male and female performer (at least, there is no indication that the site is only meant for males). In (2) actors is opposed to actress and specifically refers to males.”<sup>19</sup>

Table 3 represents quantitative characteristics of the lexical-semantic groups in terms of the gender seme nature.

Table 3

Lexical-semantic group	Male words		Female words		Total number of words in groups	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Occupation	95	56	75	44	170	100
Behaviour	57	68	27	32	84	100
Relatives	28	48	30	52	58	100
Religion	39	74	14	26	53	100
Age	14	33	28	67	42	100
Social status	19	53	17	47	36	100
Activities	16	44	20	56	36	100
Relationships	13	45	16	55	29	100
Appearance	5	22	18	78	23	100
Titles/forms of address	15	75	5	25	20	100
Sexual orientation	8	73	3	27	11	100
Others	63	64	35	36	98	100
<b>Total (words)</b>	<b>372</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>288</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>660</b>	<b>100</b>

As it is seen in the table 3 the number of male gender marked nominations of person in English prevails and makes 371 lexical units or 56 % of the total number of GNP. The number of female nominations of person is 289 words which is 44 % of total. It can be explained by the androcentric nature of the English language. The percentage of male nominations is the highest in the group Titles/forms of address (75% - *boyo, gentleman, lord, Mac, mister, sir, etc.*) which can be caused by the patriarchal basis of the society where men were the leading heads. Another productive groups are Religion (74% - *abbot, cardinal, god, monk, priest, etc.*) and Sexual orientation (73 % - *homosexual, fag, lady boy, nancy, queer, etc.*). The least productive group is the group Appearance with 22% (*Adonis, beardie, dreamboat, manikin, hunk, etc.*).

The most productive group according to the percentage of female words is Appearance with 78 % (*barbie doll, cracker, doll, English rose, female fatable, witch, etc.*) which can be caused by the fact that ladies are considered the fair or beautiful sex. Another productive groups are Age with 67% (*babushka, bachelor girl, chit, colleen, missy, etc.*) and Activities with 56 % (*jurywoman, horseman, choirgirl, huntress, marksman, etc.*) of female words. The least productive group in terms of percentage of female words is the group Titles/forms of address with 25 % (*gentlewoman, lady, ma'am, miss, missus, etc.*).

Interesting is also the fact that there is not a great difference in number of male and female words pointing to occupation (only 12%). This can be caused by the rise of feminism in the beginning of the 19th century the continuing stream of which has brought into use new words pointing to women. Nowadays we can also speak about political correctness. In this respect new words were created to point neutrally to both sexes, for example – instead of chairman and chairwoman there is a new neutral term – chairperson. The same happened with policeman and policewoman where the neutral word is just police officer or law enforcement officer. According to political correctness also the words containing the component *-man* were replaced: mankind to humankind, man-made to artificial and many others.

<sup>19</sup> Zwarts, J., Hogeweg, L., Lestrade, S., Malchukov, A.: Semantic markedness in gender opposition, blocking and fossilization. STUF - Language Typology and Universals: Vol. 62, No. 4, (2009). p.330

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