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Language Reforms in English: Gender in Third-Person Pronouns

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One area of English where inventiveness is regularly at play is that of language reform, or at least of attempts at reforming the language. Unlike cases of individual creativity, where a single speaker toys with the language, with reform, the aim is from the start for the suggested innovation to spread, usually so that it might become part of the standard language.

In order to understand better what might be at work in such alterations of the language, the present study focuses on one area: that of pronominal gender. It is a case of grammatical change, as opposed to purely lexical innovation. The history of modern English shows regular attempts to alter pronoun use in the third person singular. One case concerns generic references to human beings, as some have tried to compensate for the lack of an epicene pronoun; the other concerns references to ships.

A closer look at those innovations shows an apparent paradox. Most of them have failed, whereas change *is* possible in the area of gendered third-person pronouns, as evidenced by natural change in the history of English: genitive *his*, which had been common to the masculine and neuter genders, became specialised in the former —while *its* was coined for the latter; gender came to be marked in subject *wh-* relative pronouns¹; further back, in Middle English, *she* replaced Old English *heo*. The paradox has been noted in other areas as well: as Ayto writes, “the most striking aspect of the various movements for the reform of the English language is how seldom and to how small an extent they have succeeded” (quoted in Fodor & Hagège 85). In other words, while reformers invariably seek to improve the language, while they base their wish for innovation on what they think are convincing arguments, and although they are sometimes backed by institutions of authority, the suggested improvements are rarely successful.

So what does it take for language reform to succeed, more particularly in the area of gendered third-person pronouns? The debate on how to refer to ships, which provoked numerous reactions, gives a first insight into the problem.

I. Reforming gender use: Lloyd’s List and references to ships:

¹ *Wh-* relative pronouns only show a twofold opposition; *gender* still seems an appropriate label, though, as use of *who* and *which* follows the distinction between the so-called animate genders (masculine and feminine) and neuter.

The impulse for reform came from *Lloyd's List*, the authoritative newspaper of the shipping industry, which has been in existence since 1734; the reform only concerned gender use in the paper, and never aimed at changing the overall language. Twice the editors have tried to shift pronoun use in references to ships from the traditional *she* to *it*: once in 1998 — so much protest ensued that the then editor, Leigh Smith, decided to restore *she*; then in 2002 —this time the new editor, Julian Bray, went through with the reform despite the wave of protest, although columnists are still allowed to go on using *she*.

1. Why reform?

Three arguments were given to support the reform.

For Leigh Smith, the driving force was to adapt gender use to modern journalistic practice: *it* had to be used in *Lloyd's List* because this was the pronoun used on television and on the radio. Bray also had this argument: “it may be a tradition to call ships ‘she’, but in standard journalistic practice ships should be referred to as ‘it’.” (Hamilton & Brown). Adapting to those standards is thus equated with modernity: “The shipping industry does need to move forward if it is not to risk becoming a backwater of international business. I decided that it was time to catch up with the rest of the world, and most other news organizations refer to ships as neuter.” (Bray, in Hibberd & Woodcock).

This reference to journalistic practice is to be related to the codes of practice for journalists, which seek to remove discrimination against all minority groups, including women. The issue of gender-fair language (which opponents term “political correctness”) is a sensitive one in all public institutions, including, for example, universities, which advise against the use of *she* for inanimates, whether they be ships, cars or countries. Bray himself alludes to this motive: “I can see why ‘she’ would suit a magnificent cruise liner but to a rusting old hulk it could be rather offensive.” (Hibberd & Woodcock).

The two arguments given so far —modernity and gender-fair language— were oriented towards the receiving end of the communication process: gender use is altered to adapt to its reception by the addressee. A final argument is speaker-oriented: reform is advocated to adapt to today’s representations of ships: “we see [the shift to *it*] as a reflection of the modern business of shipping. Ultimately they are commodities, they are commercial assets. They are not things that have character.” (Bray, in Wilson). In other words, the reform aims at making the gender system more strictly semantic, and is therefore based on the basic tenet that language should be a direct transcription of the extralinguistic world. This view of language is

shared, among others, by a number of journalists, whose articles on the topic equate gender, a grammatical phenomenon, and sex, a biological datum: “*Lloyd’s List* takes sex out of shipping” (*Independent*), “Move to take the sex out of ships sparks a mutiny” (*Times Online*), “Ships to lose their femininity” (CNN). This view is also reflected in many grammars of English over the centuries, where *he* is often said to be used for males, *she* for females, and *it* for things².

For the two reformers, therefore, a need for change occurs when the language does not coincide with the culture, whether this is understood as cultural representations or conventions. A look at the reactions, however, shows that this is not sufficient for innovation to be accepted by the community at large.

2. Reactions:

On both occasions, the suggested reforms met with a torrent of protest. According to BBC News, in 1998 only one correspondent came close to supporting the reform. People who did not see any objection to the reform probably would not have written; but the sheer amount of protest suggests that opposition was indeed widespread, all the more so as the press was often negative: “*Lloyd’s List* sinks the tradition of calling ships ‘she’” (*Telegraph*), “Ships are to be stripped of centuries of tradition and gender by being referred to as ‘it’ in the future” (*Sunderland Echo*), “This controversial decision to wipe out history’ was greeted with disdain by the Royal Navy” (*Times Online*).

Several reasons are given to reject the reform. First, the neuter gender would not be in keeping with the representation of ships, as a spokesman for the ferry company Cunard Line writes: “Ships have personalities and souls; we use ‘she’ instinctively.” (Hamilton & Brown). This argument, however, was only given in a small minority of replies. Another argument, advocated again in a few reactions, is a mistrust of gender-fair language. Hamilton & Brown, for instance, dismiss the reform as “an example of a creeping and unwelcome political correctness”.

But most of the time, *she* is advocated for a third reason: as usage, or more explicitly as a legacy from the past. Reform is then rejected on the grounds that traditions should be maintained. Even the Royal Navy, which is a body of professionals, uses this argument rather

² The idea of a strict correspondence between gender and sex is inherited from the analysis of Greek gender introduced by Protagoras in the 5th century BC. It made its way into the grammars of English through Latin, and is the only theory given by grammars until the 20th century. Even today, it can still be found, especially in non specialist grammars (see Gardelle 72 for further reference).

than one based on vivid representations: “The Royal Navy will continue to call its ships ‘she’ as we have always done. It’s historic and traditional.” (Hibberd & Woodcock). Such a reaction shows a view of language that is different from that of the reformers: for opponents, language does not necessarily transcribe *present-day* representations of life. There is a historical dimension, which is felt to be paramount; language has a collective dimension, which makes it wrong for one individual to interfere. Improvement does not consist of adapting language to culture, but in letting it evolve naturally. Research on language reform shows that this organic approach to language, as though English had a life of its own, is common among laypeople (Keller 8). What it shares with the reformers’ approach is the conviction that language is semantically motivated: opponents remain convinced that if *she* is used today, there must be a reason, although it is lost to present-day speakers. Why is this approach to language so common? It might be related at least partly to the language acquisition process: according to schema theories, a child, through exposure to utterances, constructs a synthesis of the notion, which governs meaning and use (Cordier & François 125). A possible hypothesis is that for the category SHIP and other related categories, the child, through exposure to *it* and possibly *she*, is led to create associations between the noun and gender potentialities – neuter and/or the feminine: when referring to a ship, an individual does not choose among the three genders each time. The use of *she* would then be felt to be natural, hence semantically motivated, while no rational motivation could actually be given.

Whatever the reason, what the reformers view as a need for language change is not viewed as a need by opponents. So what does it take to create a need for language change? A closer look at generic references to human beings provides elements of response.

II. Generic *he* and the idea of a common-gender pronoun:

The lack of an epicene pronoun in the third-person singular has been denounced by the feminists since the 1970s. The issue of the epicene pronoun, however, did not originate with the feminists: it has been a concern to grammarians and word coiners since the 18th century.

1. Why reform?

Before the 20th century, the argument given by would-be reformers was of a grammatical kind: they wished to improve linguistic efficiency and grammatical correctness. The movement started when some 18th century grammarians campaigned against the use of

they in generic references to males and females³, regarding it as a violation of the rule of agreement in number between the pronoun and its antecedent (Baron 191). Language was therefore viewed as an end, not just as a tool, and language improvement concerned only the system itself, independently of the extralinguistic world. Prescriptive grammars tried to impose *he* in generic references, but the need for a truly epicene pronoun was still felt by some.

For the feminists, the motivation for reform is very different: English is thought to reflect the prejudices of the male-centred society in which it has been shaped and used (Cameron, Romaine). By changing generic *he* (along with generic *man* for nouns), feminists hope to help put an end to the discrimination against women. As in the case of ships, language is regarded here as a direct transcription of the extralinguistic world and world views. It can therefore become a tool for the promotion of a cultural idea; for this reason, the feminist enterprise can be classified as linguistic activism (Aitchison 258).

The path towards reform followed two trends. One was the reassignment of an existing pronoun. *One* was advocated in generic references by at least four different people between 1770 and 1979, as in the following sentence: “Neither could take one’s eyes from the other.” (Baron 193). *It* was made into an epicene pronoun by the *Woman’s New World Dictionary* (1973) and by at least two other writers, who recommended sentences such as “The applicant signed its name”, following actual use of the pronoun for babies, as in “The baby was happy with its rattle” (ibid.). Finally, some abandoned the idea of an epicene pronoun altogether, and advocated the use of *she* in generic references, so that the typical human being should not systematically be a man.

The other trend to make up for the lack of an epicene pronoun was to coin a new one. At least seventy forms have been coined since the end of the 18th century (Baron 191ff.). Most of them are blends of the existing masculine and feminine forms, sometimes of the plural form as well; for instance *heshe* (acc. *hem*, gen. *hes*); *hizer*; *shy* (acc. *shem*, gen. *sheir*).

2. Reactions:

Coined pronouns have never spread to the point of becoming part of the standard language. Most of them have been individual initiatives, but one of them, which did receive official backing, also failed: *thon* (acc. *thon*, gen. *thons*), coined in 1884 by Charles Crozat

³ As in: ‘you are just as mean as you can be, to sneak up on a person and look at what they are looking at’ (Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. 1876. Introd. Lee Clark Mitchell. Oxford : Oxford UP, 1993: 146).

Converse, an American lawyer, to make communication more efficient in an era when time was money. *Thon* is a blend of *that* + *one*, and was designed specifically, thanks to this pattern and to its use of common sounds of English, to be appreciated by the public and hence adopted. *Thon* received the backing of two dictionaries: Funk & Wagnall's *Standard Dictionary* (1898), where it was listed until 1964, and Webster's *Second New International Dictionary* (1934; it was not listed in the third edition). Yet it failed. Opponents of coined pronouns advance two arguments: if English had needed a pronoun, it would have created one naturally; secondly, *he* is deemed valid by some in generic references because the masculine has always been the default gender (Baron 202).

As for the reassignment of existing pronouns, while *it* and *one* never proved successful, the more recent so-called *generic she* is more widely used. It can be the only pronoun used in generic references, or it can alternate, within the same document, with generic *he*; Croft, for instance, uses *she* for the generic speaker and for a generic child, and *he* for the generic hearer: "There is a problem here: the hearer cannot read the speaker's mind, but she can't read his." (95). However, *she* seems to be restricted to academic circles, where it is increasingly common, and to documents dealing with babies and small children and aimed at parents (Gardelle 509, Wales 123). Besides, even in the fields where *she* is used, it has to compete with existing linguistic means to avoid generic *he*. In academic circles, *she* is not even explicitly recommended by universities in their guidelines for non-discriminatory language. They opt for *he or she* (or *she or he*), which is labelled as cumbersome, or simply for means of rephrasing the sentence that avoid third-person singular pronouns⁴. Similarly, some parent-oriented websites use *they* rather than *she*. The prevalent trend, therefore, seems to be to resort to existing means rather than to adopt innovations⁵.

III. Can language inventiveness lead to language change in gendered pronouns?

One major point the present study has made is that individual innovation alone is not sufficient to trigger language change. Institutions (whether they be dictionaries or any form of authority) are necessary for propagation; and even they are not sufficient to trigger language change, because this implies a third stage, that of acceptance by a majority. This is confirmed by the history of English: while prescriptive grammars (another form of institution) tried to

⁴ Only one website among those visited recommends *they* (University of Tasmania).

⁵ It is hard to assess to what extent generic *he* is still used today. Conversations, fictional works and essays make little use of generic references, except for *everybody*, where *they* is usually used – but then the representation is potentially plural. As for the British National Corpus, it only records utterances produced in the 1990s.

eradicate so-called singular *they*, and while they condemned the use of relative *whose* for inanimates, both have survived over the centuries.

The study has also shown that acceptance (at least partial acceptance) of an innovation occurs only when the existing linguistic tool is felt to go *against* the representation wished for. That is why generic *he* is now viewed as problematic by many, whereas the use of *she* for ships is not. Appeal to a grammatical ideal is not sufficient to make a need for change felt; neither is appeal to writing standards or even to strict semantic motivation. Furthermore, the idea of stasis in language is an illusion, but what is correct in the layman's view is that language is not a direct transcription of the contemporary extralinguistic world. Such direct reading can lead to oversimplifications. For example, in references to ships, the use of *she* for a rusty tanker does not necessarily mean that the speaker is being derogatory to women, contrary to what Bray implied: despite jokes equating the maintenance costs or amount of paint needed for ships with those needed for women, a study of the representations of ships among sailors (where the use of *she* is most likely to be motivated, although it is not necessarily so) shows that the most fundamental representation is that of security, maybe of a ship like a mother's womb (Gardelle 609). The use of *she* in a given utterance, therefore, should not be read as semantically motivated strictly by the immediate context.

Finally, even in cases where a need for change is accepted by most, the study has shown that there seems to be a preference for a reassignment of existing tools rather than for innovation. This is confirmed by natural language evolution: when relative *wh-* pronouns came to mark gender, *who* was simply borrowed from the interrogative pronouns; similarly, in Middle English, the subject-form *she* was merely borrowed from one of the dialects of English. Moreover, a diachronic study shows that natural change is never sudden: *who* came to mark gender in relative pronouns over three centuries (15th-17th centuries), *its* after nearly four centuries (14th to the end of the 17th century⁶). It seems therefore that language, at least in the area of pronominal gender, cannot anticipate on cultural change – hence the failure of the feminist enterprise so far.

As a result, the conditions for the success of proposed language reforms in the area of pronominal gender have never been met in English, even though for generic references to people, there is now some acceptance of a need for change. This is not just because pronouns are mainly grammatical words; similar resistance to innovation can occur in the lexicon, as

⁶ The differentiation process between masculine and neuter genitive forms began in the 14th century, with various neuter forms in competition: *it*, *of it*, *thereof*, although the form *its* apparently only appeared in Modern English – in written documents at least. (Gardelle 270).

shown by some *-man* compounds (Baron 179). In other world languages, there are apparently only two countries in which a gender reform has been successfully imposed: in Norway and China; but they involved only written standards. In Norway, a third gender was introduced in one of the two written languages, Bokmål, in order to make it more similar to Norwegian dialects; but when writing Bokmål, Norwegians still have a choice of using three genders or just two (Elizabeth Lanza, personal correspondence, 2008). As for Chinese, gender was introduced in the third-person singular pronoun as part of the language reforms of the 1950s. One ideogram is now used for human males, one for human females, and one for all objects and animals (Alleton et al.). But all are pronounced similarly, like the original pronoun, so that it might constitute a merely conventional written addition rather than a change in the structure of the category itself.⁷

These findings relate more generally to the issue of the meaning of “language improvement”; Aitchison (252), for instance, wonders whether the desired endpoint of evolution is a language that makes the most use of the economy principle—but then objects that pidgins, which would be the best candidates, are not thought of as the most advanced languages. The question is a complex one (Breivik & Jahr, Bright, Brinton & Traugott, Hurford et al.), but the study of gender suggests that one factor at work is, ultimately, a sense that the language used is “right”—not necessarily in the sense that it conforms to grammatical rules, but in the sense that it advertises that the speaker belongs with a given group. For example, William Morris, who started a dyeing business, felt that his use of *it* in references to vats was inadequate among dyers; he therefore started using *she* in his diary, although such uses were initially conscious and overgeneralized (Gardelle 161). This sociolinguistic dimension is confirmed by a study by Milroy, who notes that individuals with strong ties in their social network maintain the linguistic conventions of that network, and that individuals with both weak ties to the network and ties to another network are those who introduce novel variants⁸.

⁷ The answers given by five informants proved inconclusive.

⁸ James Milroy, *Linguistic Variation and Change*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992 (Croft 179).

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