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The contribution of pronominal gender to the representation of a hybrid linguistic identity

LAURE GARDELLE

Abstract

The present study looks into linguistic hybridity in American literature at the turn of the twentieth century, more specifically into the representation of standard and nonstandard American English. The two varieties differ, among others, in their use of pronominal gender: the feminine is more frequent in references to inanimates in the nonstandard language. Although this difference was widely used by American authors at the time, it has been very little studied. Focusing on Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, this article seeks to determine the pattern of use of the feminine in the work.

Introduction

This study looks into the use of pronominal gender (*he, she, it*) in nonstandard American English as it was represented in literature at the turn of the twentieth century. While the use of nonstandard American English in the fiction of the time is very frequently mentioned (see for instance Kersten 92), research on the specific issue of the nonstandard use of pronominal gender is virtually non-existent: the only study on the topic appears to be Svartengren (1927). In order to allow for more detailed analyses, the present paper focuses on one work: John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which depicts the Joads, of Oklahoma, travelling to California. This fictional text will not be treated as a corpus for determining criteria of gender use in authentic contexts. Rather, the aim is to show how gender contributed to a literary construction of linguistic identity as hybrid at the turn of the twentieth century—"hybrid" is understood here as "composed of different elements" (OED).

Defining the nature of American linguistic identity has always been a major concern in the country, ever since the colonial era. Before the Independence, what prevailed was a purist attitude, with the language of England as the model (Longmore 279). In the aftermath of the War of Independence, this attitude began to be challenged by the more hybrid view of nationalist intellectuals, who regarded language as the embodiment of the values of the people (*ibid.* 303). To them, America should have a perfected language because it was destined to be the seat of science and human glory. That perfected language should be a hybrid, in that it should blend the "worthy" parts of the language of England with innovations that would reflect the genius of the people (*ibid.* 304). One particularly active reformer among those was Noah Webster, who produced the first American speller, grammar and dictionary. He suggested improvements on the language of England in order to simplify irregularities, as shown in this passage from his *Collection of Essays and Fugitiv Writings*: "The following Collection consists of Essays and Fugitiv Peeces, ritten at various times, and on different occasions, az wil appeer by their dates and subjects" (1).

In the late 19th century, following the Civil War, the representation of American linguistic identity evolved further, this time in literature: authors popularized the use of nonstandard language—also called "vernacular" or "dialect". The mode became so popular that Hamlin Garland speaks of "a cult of the vernacular in 1888", with authors such as Mark Twain (Kersten 93). The tradition continued well into the twentieth century, with, among others, John Steinbeck. The use of nonstandard language in literature was not just the result of more tolerance towards registers, but truly part of the representation of American linguistic identity: it was valued positively, as "true dialect", whereas at the same time, what is now known as

“ethnic dialect” was condemned as “the broken English of partly Americanized immigrants” (*ibid.* 94).

Those works typically display a hybrid representation of linguistic identity: the narrator and possibly some characters express themselves in standard American English, while most protagonists speak the nonstandard language. The latter is distinguished from the standard variety by occasional differences in pronunciation (such as “pitcher” for “picture” [Steinbeck 46]) and by the use of colloquial vocabulary (such as “Jesus-jumper” [*ibid.* 31]), but the two varieties differ chiefly by differences in grammar, such as “don’t know nothin’” (*ibid.* 13). It is to this last category that differences in the use of pronominal gender belong. More specifically, gender in nonstandard American English is characterised by a higher frequency of the feminine (*she / her*) for inanimates (Gardelle 624).

After a statistical overview of gender in *The Grapes of Wrath*, we turn to the few existing studies in order to confront them to the corpus and account for Steinbeck’s uses.

Gender in *The Grapes of Wrath*: overview of the data

As in authentic utterances, differences in gender use between standard and nonstandard English only concern references to inanimates. For these, the neuter is the sole gender used in the standard passages, while the nonstandard extracts show both the neuter and the feminine—with 163 occurrences of *she* or *her* (ie. 37% of nonstandard references to inanimates) against 374 of referential *it* in a sample of the first 180 pages. The use of the feminine, therefore, contributes significantly to the representation of American linguistic identity as hybrid, as made up of two irreconcilably different varieties. The occurrences of the feminine fall down into the following categories (figures in the chart indicate the number of occurrences):

Man-made objects	98	spare parts of truck 37
		vehicles 34 (= truck 23, car 9, bulldozer 2)
		tools 3
		[others] 24 (= house 13, pillow 7, flashlight 2, fence 1, well 1)
Abstract inanimates	32	[identified:] 9 (= crime 5, journey 2, fight 1, preaching 1)
		[not clearly identified:] “things in general”, “the topic at hand” 23
Food	17	meat 15, pork leg 1, syrup 1
Natural elements fashioned by man	13	soil / land 4
		[others] 9 (= cave dug by character 5, tomb dug in the

		ground 4)
Body parts	2	leg 2
Natural elements	1	bush 1

The highest frequency is achieved by vehicles and their spare parts, followed by “things in general” / “the topic at hand”, as in extract (1) below, and by references to houses, as in (2):

1. (59, “things in general”) Night after night in my bunk I figgered how she’d be when I come home again. I figgered maybe Grampa or Granma’d be dead, an’ maybe there’d be some new kids.
2. (30, house) Ol’ Tom’s house can’t be more’n a mile from here. Ain’t she over that third rise?

More generally, the feminine is used mostly for concrete referents (131 out of 163), especially man-made, but it is also found occasionally with natural elements and, more frequently, with abstract inanimates.

Beyond the data shown in the chart, the sample yields only 9 cases of gender variation for the same referent: 7 cases of a switch from *it* to *she*, and 2 of a shift from *she* to *it*. Only 1 shows more than one series of variations, in references to a pillow—the reason for such variation will be examined in the last section:

3. (Steinbeck 46) He got all of it back—all but a sofa pilla, velvet with a pitcher of an Injun on it. Albert claimed Grampa got it. Claimed Grampa got Injun blood, that’s why he wants that pitcher. Well, Grampa did get her, but he didn’t give a damn about the pitcher on it. He jus’ liked her. Used to pack her aroun’ an’ he’d put her wherever he was gonna sit.

Secondly, the complement form *her* is much more frequent than subjectal *she*, with 116 occurrences against 47. This figure, however, does not appear to be significant: the ratio of complement *it* to subject *it* yields approximately the same result. Finally, as in authentic uses, all occurrences were found with male speakers, probably for reasons of social acceptability.

Existing explanations for the use of *she* in nonstandard English (authentic and fictional uses)

There appear to be only two specific studies of gender in nonstandard American English: one on fictional uses (Svartengren, 1927) and one on authentic uses (Mathiot, 1979). The distinctive use of pronominal gender is not mentioned, for example, in Murray and Simon’s study of the specificities of colloquial American English (401-427). In comparison, the more frequent use of *he* / *she* for inanimates is widely documented for other dialects of English (Trudgill, Siemund), and has been mentioned in grammars for “colloquial English”¹ since Sweet, in 1892. The criterion initially offered by grammars was personification: for instance, Sweet notes that “names of things are often personified in colloquial speech” (43). This

¹ As was shown above with the labels “vernacular”, “nonstandard” and “dialect”, which are regarded as more or less equivalent, the boundary between colloquial speech and dialect is not always clearly defined or definable today.

criterion is first rejected in 1925 by Kruisinga, who states: “I have even heard the pronoun *him* in reference to a chemical tabloid. Of course there need be no question of personification here” (108). However, he does not offer an alternative explanation.

It is against this background that the first study of nonstandard American English was conducted by Svartengren, whose corpus spans 75 different works of fiction. He does not reject the notion of personification, but shows it to be a consequence of an emotional relationship to the referent:

4. *she (her)* does not so much mark the gender of a more or less fanciful personification—though there are more than traces of such a thing—as denote the *object of an emotion*. [...] It is the *emotional interest* that is mirrored by the feminine gender. It is the *sympathy* born of living and working together, of good understanding, and the warm feeling of interest, admiration, surprise, of dependent respect and awe that find their expression in this *she* (110, italics mine)

It, by contrast, mentions a fact, coldly and more or less indifferently. Svartengren notes that in his corpus, only male speakers use nonstandard *she* for inanimates; he concludes that the feminine is “a kind of sublimated and attenuated sexuality, which is not confined to what is womanlike but open to anything that takes a man’s fancy” (84).

Svartengren’s study is subsequently cited in Jespersen’s 1942 grammar, which concludes that in colloquial (but not specifically American) English, the criterion for *he* and *she* for inanimates is a “strong personal feeling of affection” (213). In the US, Curme qualifies the notion of personification with the criterion of “mild personification” used in “moments of vivid feelings” (1931: 554). In 1960, Kruisinga and Erades explain the feminine with inanimates in English (not specifically American English) as an indicator of a “personal relationship” to the referent “in emotionally charged language” (450). From the 1970s, nonstandard and colloquial English are no longer mentioned in grammars, and only one study focuses on gender in American English: Mathiot, in 1979. Working on authentic uses, she retains the criterion of personification: to her, using an animate gender for an inanimate results from an upgrading operation, which for a non-human entity means “assimilating it to a human being” (11). She links the personification process to personal involvement on the speaker’s part, “from mild interest to passionate attachment” (11).

This overview raises three questions for the study of nonstandard American English as used by Steinbeck. On the one hand, is the concept of personification relevant? “Personification” will be understood here as the projection of human traits or of sentience (MacKay and Konishi 151). If it is relevant, is it the ultimate criterion? And does the use of *she* always stem from admiration, respect or sympathy, as Svartengren or Jespersen suggest?

Uses of the feminine in *The Grapes of Wrath*

Personification does apply to most uses of the feminine in *The Grapes of Wrath*, but not to all of them: in the sample, it can be considered to account for around 140 occurrences (i.e. over 85%) of the feminine. The exact figure is difficult to determine, as the context only rarely confirms that there is personification. It does prove personification, for example, in the following extracts:

5. (43, house) Le’s look in the house. She’s all pushed out a shape. Something knocked the hell out of her.

“Knock the hell out of her” represents the house as a living being.

6. (108, meat) Prob'ly wouldn' hurt that meat to git her right down in salt.

The verb "hurt" always selects an animate object.

7. (46, problem) Ain't been nobody here for three-four months, an' nobody's stole no lumber. [...] That ain't right. That's what was botherin' me, an' I couldn't catch hold of her.

With the predicate "catch hold of", the referent becomes concrete and seems to move of its own accord; the use of the feminine, therefore, can be interpreted as personification. These few examples show that any type of inanimate might be personified, whether man-made (5) or of natural origin (6), and whatever its size (from a piece of meat to a house). Moreover, all the personifications in these examples, as in the rest of the corpus, are the result of a special relationship between the speaker and the referent, originating in various feelings: attachment (5), familiarity (6), or a more negative one in (7), where the referent is construed as nagging the speaker.

In most contexts, unlike these extracts, there are no contextual elements to prove that there is personification; yet often, the figure can still apply. It is the case in particular with cars, trucks and spare parts, as in (8):

8. (62, car. The speaker is a car dealer) Like to get in to see that one? Sure, no trouble. I'll put her out of the line.

Car dealers are often said to project personality on the vehicles, so that even though there are no other contextual elements to prove it, the use of *she* could be interpreted as a such a projection, and thus as personification.

Personification is less certain, yet cannot be ruled out, for another few utterances, such as (9):

9. (62, cave) "By God, I bet I know," cried Joad. "Is it a cave in the bank?"
"That's right. How'd you know?"
"I dug her", said Joad. "Me an' my brother Noah dug her. Lookin' for gold we says we was, but we was jus' diggin' caves like kids always does."

The feminine could be regarded as projecting an element of animacy on the referent: *her* could be replaced, for instance, by "that *baby*", as in another extract, from a book by American author Michael Connelly (19):

9b. (videotape) "I was wondering if I could borrow the TV for a little while."
McCaleb held up the videotape. Lockridge's eyes lit up.
"Be my guest. Pop that baby in there."

In (9b), as in (9), no element other than the noun *baby* indicates personification. Note that here again, what matters with this personification is not so much a "human" image as conveying familiarity. Similarly, in (10), *that baby* (for instance) could not be excluded as a substitute for *her*:

10. (12, journey. Truck-driver to hitch-hiker to whom he is giving a lift) "Goin' far?"
"Uh-uh! I'd a walked her if my dogs wasn't pooped out."

Again, however, what matters is the expression of familiarity and mastery.

The concept of personification becomes more problematic in cases where it is particularly attenuated—if it is personification at all—, as in (11):

11. (114, syrup) ‘Tom, I got a half a bottle soothin’ sirup I got for Winfiel’ when he had them earaches. Think that might work? [...]’
‘Might,’ said Tom. ‘Get it, Ma. We’ll give her a try.’

It is not impossible to say that *her* indicates personification, in the sense that the referent is viewed as having a capacity for action: its effect on the sick person. But what the feminine shows first and foremost is that instead of being just an object among others, the syrup is now viewed as special by the speaker, because of that power it might have, whether or not one uses the concept of personification.

Finally, the concept of personification does not apply in at least 17 occurrences, and possibly up to 23. For instance, one reads:

12. (49, the topic) “They’re all at your Uncle John’s”, Muley said quickly.
“Oh! All at John’s. Well, what they doin’ there? Now stick to her for a second, Muley. Jus’ stick to her. In jus’ a minute you can go on your own way. What they doin’ there?”
13. (56, fight for which he was sent to jail) “We was drunk”, Joad said softly. “Drunk at a dance. I don’t know how she started. An’ then I felt that knife go in me, an’ that sobered me up. Fust thing I see is Herb comin’ for me again with his knife. They was this here shovel leanin’ against the schoolhouse, so I grabbed it an’ smacked ’im over the head.”

It is difficult to consider the topic or the fight as having human traits or sentience in those extracts. Rather, in (12), the referent is raised above the set of prototypical inanimates because it is viewed as special—here, of special importance—by the speaker: he betrays his anxiety. Similarly, in (13), *she* signals that the fight is raised above inanimates to foreground the fact that it is of special importance to the speaker: it led him to jail. By using *it*, he would have implied that the fight was fundamentally just one event among others. Through gender, a hierarchy is established among inanimates: the shovel is referred to as *it*.

We can conclude from these examples, like Svartengren, that personification, even when it does apply, is not the ultimate criterion for the use of *she* / *her* with inanimates. What all the examples share, rather, is an upgrading operation: the speaker emphasizes that the referent should not be classified together with prototypical inanimates, and raises it above that set to foreground a special relationship to it. Personification is just one mode of realisation of that upgrading. Why does upgrading trigger a change in pronominal gender? Gender in English classifies referents along two subsets, by the so-called animate genders (masculine / feminine) on the one hand and by the neuter on the other. The prototypical members for the animate genders are humans (at least human adults) and, for the neuter, things. Humans being typically regarded as superior to things, the animate genders rank higher than the neuter, so that with inanimates, upgrading yields an animate gender.

In the sample corpus, it should be added that all occurrences of *she* for inanimates occur for referents that are discourse topics—in other words, as what the sequence in which they occur is about (Keenan and Schieffelin 380). This may be a constraint, and could account for the gender variations in (3), reproduced here as (14):

14. (46) He got all of it back – all but a sofa pilla, velvet with a pitcher of an Injun on *it*. Albert claimed Grampa got *it*. Claimed Grampa got Injun blood, that’s why he wants that *pitcher*. Well, Grampa did get *her*, but he didn’t give a damn about the pitcher on *it*. He jus’ liked *her*. Used to pack *her* aroun’ an’ he’d put *her* wherever he was gonna sit.

Down to the italicized occurrence of “pitcher”, the discourse topic is how Albert recovered his belongings; the pillow, being just one of the set of belongings, is referred to as “it”. “Well” then marks a shift in the discourse: the pillow becomes the new topic. From then on, it is referred to as *her*, to stress its pivotal importance to the story. The shift back to *it* (*the pitcher on it*) signals temporary distancing: “didn’t give a damn” temporarily downgrades the object.

If discourse topic status was indeed a constraint for the use of *she*, it could be due to the fact that otherwise, the speaker showing more distance from the referent cannot at the same time foreground a special relationship to it. Indeed, any form of distancing triggers the neuter, as in (15):

15. (146, grave) ’F we leave a grave, they’ll have *it* open in no time. We got to hide *it*. Level *her* off an’ we’ll strew dry grass. We got to do that.

In the first two sentences, the speaker draws theoretical conclusions (*if, got to*); in so doing, he places himself at a distance from the referent. Conversely, in the next sentence, he shifts to the imperative (*lever her off*), calling for immediate action on the referent; in this now direct relationship, *her* foregrounds familiarity and maybe mastery.

Conclusion

Steinbeck’s use of the feminine in nonstandard references to inanimates is consistent: it always signals that the referent is upgraded, in other words, raised above the prototypical set of inanimates in order to foreground a special status in the eyes of the speaker. The operation might stem from various emotions (and not just sympathy or affection, as Svartengren or Jespersen suggested) or just to emphasize particular importance.

This finding raises two questions. First, does the hybrid use of gender, with *it* in the standard passages, as opposed to *it* and *she* in nonstandard speech, display two different gender systems? The answer is no: a study of gender in English (Gardelle 480) shows that in the standard variety as well, using *he* or *she* for animals or inanimates is the result of upgrading (see also Siemund 104). For example, an informant speaking standard English was heard saying “Here she is!” about a museum (Cannock, England, 2010). The difference is one of degree: in nonstandard American English, especially among male speakers, it appears to be much more acceptable and therefore more common to relate to inanimates rather than keep more clear-cut boundaries between humans and objects. The use of the feminine (rather than the masculine) can be construed, as Svartengren suggests, as a form of attenuated sexuality, the prototypes for the feminine gender being women.

The second question is whether the nonstandard American English of the novel obeys the same criteria as authentic uses, or whether Steinbeck projected the standard system onto his representation of dialect. It is at least close to authentic uses: for Mathiot (1979), the criterion for those is also upgrading. But the novel only shows occurrences of the feminine, whereas Mathiot finds instances of *he* for inanimates, at least in Los Angeles and New York state. The masculine is also recorded in Cassidy’s *Dictionary of American Regional English* (Siemund 118). The feminine, therefore, might be overrepresented in Steinbeck’s novel; but the absence of masculine pronouns might also be due to the contexts in which the author uses animate pronouns. Further studies are needed, therefore, both for fictional and authentic occurrences.

A comparative approach would then enable to better understand the representation of linguistic identity in American fiction.

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