

# Re: Gender in language

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- *From:* benlizross <benlizro@xxxxxxxxxx>
  - *Date:* Sat, 30 Sep 2006 08:36:55 +1200
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foggytown wrote:

Richard Herring wrote:

In message  
<1159415188.210497.285940@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>,  
Peter T. Daniels <grammatim@xxxxxxxxxx> writes

Picasso wrote:

What is the purpose of gender in language?  
It only makes it harder to  
learn, particularly for English speakers that  
don't have to deal with  
this nuisance. Who gives a damn if a house  
in French or Spanish is  
feminine or a poem is masculine???

For one thing, so that you can tell which adjective goes with  
which  
noun.

... but only when the nouns are of different genders in the first place,  
which is not something you can rely on in languages with only two or  
three to choose from. You need languages with lots and lots of genders  
for that to become a compelling reason.

Not every language requires words to appear in as rigid a  
sequence as  
English does.

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## Re: Gender in language

Richard Herring

Back on point . . . I think the real question is condensed to: why was the concept of gender established (by whatever language did it first) to begin with? (Disregarding the improbability of parallel language evolution, some culture was most likely the first to categorize nouns into "x" different types, albeit possibly not intentionally or even consciously.)

No, gender-type systems have evolved in many different parts of the world, and there's no reason to think it all started in just one place. Greville Corbett's book in the Cambridge red series is a good survey.

What purpose was served? What factors could make a

culture actively decide, or even passively accept, that it was a "good" thing to make their language more difficult for their young to learn and for, say, foreign trading partners to understand?

Because they can. Because it makes your own language more distinctive from your neighbours'. Because it makes it harder for outsiders to understand. See Thurston on "esoteric" vs "exoteric" languages in Melanesia.

But on the specific question of gender, let's look at what makes it seem difficult. You can learn the words for "spoon" and "plum" and "library" in French without having to worry about gender. It's when you have to put them in phrases that things get tricky, because words associated with them (articles, demonstratives, adjectives) have to vary their form according to the classes of noun that we call "genders". This means that, a long time ago, somebody started tagging these associated words to indicate what kind of noun they were modifying. This may often be redundant, but redundancy is a normal feature of language. (Why do we have to change "this" to "these" in "this dog/these dogs"?) And as others have pointed out, it has some advantages. It allows for greater flexibility of word order. And the copying of information makes the tagged words richer in information, so for example if we dispense with the noun, "this/feminine" is more informative than just "this".

Just some ideas.

Ross Clark

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