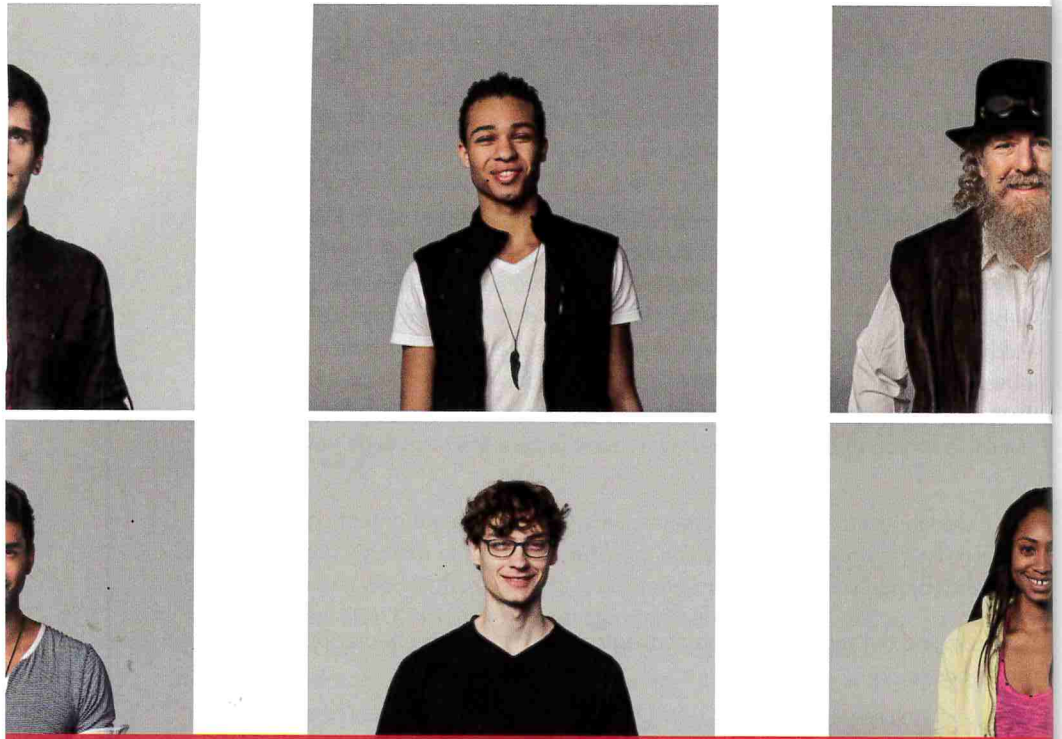

Chapter 2
Language and gender

In this chapter you will:

- Learn how English grammar, lexis and semantics present ideas about gender
- Consider how specific language choices can create gendered meanings
- Explore how changing social attitudes to gender have altered language use

2.1 Introduction

As you saw from Chapter 1, linguists have recently paid greater attention to how language itself can produce and reproduce gender. In this chapter we will explore some of the historical presentations of gender in English lexis and grammar. We will also look at some of the more recent shifts in English usage that have occurred as a result of changing social attitudes both towards women's roles and gender identity. Here our focus is not on modes of communication (for example, speech and writing) but on two significant aspects of gender and language:

- Firstly, that in one major sense, gender can be seen as purely grammatical (gender as the property of a language). Although not true for all languages, in English masculine and feminine gender can be expressed through pronoun choice; the third-person singular 'he' or 'she' expresses two genders.
- Secondly, language is a system that offers speakers and writers choices by which they can present their attitudes to gender. Through their language choices, speakers and writers can present their attitudes to gender.

As you read this chapter, keep in mind two important questions:

1 Does the language we use *influence* social reality and *affect* the way people think about gender?

2 Does the language we use simply *reflect* our society and *mirror* the way people think about gender?

2.2 Defining gender: it's all in the name

A good place to start considering how we view gender is with dictionary definitions. A useful way to start you thinking about some of the issues raised earlier about gender bias and inequality in language is to undertake a simple search of online definitions of man and woman. Look at Table 2.1, which shows definitions and examples of language use for the nouns *man* and *woman* from the Cambridge Dictionary.

Table 2.1: Cambridge Dictionary (online) definitions for *'man'* and *'woman'*

	Man	Woman
1	an adult male human being *The men's champion in the 400 metres* *Steve can solve anything – the man's a genius.*	an adult female human being *She's a really nice woman.*
2	a male employee	a wife or female sexual partner *Apparently, Jeff has a new woman.*
3	military members of the armed forces who are not officers	women in general
4	a male servant	used to form nouns describing certain types of women or women with certain jobs *Englishwoman, chairwoman*
5	a marketing, advertising etc. man	
6	a husband or male sexual partner	
7	US informal used when talking to someone, especially a man	
8	US slang 'the man' a person or group that has power and authority	

These definitions are related to particular roles in society in addition to relationships with and to others. Even in the definitions there appears to be a bias, both in the number of different layers of defining a man and a woman and in the ordering of these. You might have seen that the woman's role as a wife or a sexual partner appears further up the list than the corresponding male role as a husband or sexual partner. Even the examples presented to the reader subtly suggest different characteristics associated with being a man or woman. The dictionary uses the statement 'she's a really nice woman' to illustrate their definition of 'woman'. Here not only does the adjective 'nice' modify the noun 'woman' but the adverb 'really' acts as an intensifier in the noun phrase. This suggests that 'niceness' is a desirable personal quality for women. In contrast,

the exemplifications for the noun 'man' focus on men's success over others, and intelligence. Look at the noun phrases 'men's champion' and 'a genius' and see how the verb phrase 'can solve' presents men as being able to give answers to problems. You might also have noted that there are far more definitions given for 'man', perhaps suggesting that there is so much more to say about men's roles and qualities.

KEY TERMS

Noun phrase: a group of words built around a noun

Verb phrase: a group of words built around a head (main) verb

The dictionary also offers suggestions for how the word 'man' is used in informal spoken discourse. Sometimes it can be an almost generic address as in 'Hey man, how are you?' or, by choosing the definite article 'the' to precede 'man', it can express power and importance. In contrast, the ways that 'woman' can be used in speech appear to be more negative. The *Oxford English Dictionary* says that 'woman as a form of address can be used emphatically to indicate contempt, impatience', as in 'Get on with it, woman'. So linguistic equality is not just in writing but also in our informal spoken usage and this bias in language will be the focus of the next sections.

2.3 Male firstness: word order and generic terms

One of Dale Spender's key points in her book *Man Made Language* (1980) is that language is very man-centric, reflecting men's historical dominance over all areas of public and private life. Her evidence for this is the language rules created by the English grammarians from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. These rules centred around the ideas that:

1 The male term should always come before the female one

2 Male terms should be the generic ones used to refer to all people regardless of gender and used as the 'norm'.

The first 'rule' centres on the custom in English that males tend to be mentioned first. If you address a letter to a couple in Britain, convention says that the envelope should be addressed to 'Mr' and 'Mrs' in that order. An older social practice that has mainly died out today was to use the man's name in the address, as in 'Mr and Mrs Ronald Jones'. Even now, if you search for address

writing advice on the internet, it will offer this version as a traditional (and by implication correct) form of English social etiquette. This 'male firstness' still lives on in the Anglican marriage service. You can see this in Text 2A, an extract from the Church of England Marriage Service.

Text 2A

> Marriage is a gift of God in creation
>
> through which husband and wife may know the grace of God.
>
> It is given that as man and woman grow together in love and trust,
>
> they shall be united with one another in heart, body and mind
>
> Extract from the Church of England Marriage Service

The second 'rule' focuses on the ways that a male term can be used to represent all human beings regardless of their gender. To illustrate this, look at these two very famous examples.

- 'That's one small step for (a) man, one giant step for mankind.' (US astronaut Neil Armstrong's speech on landing on the moon in 1969)
- 'Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, "This was their finest hour."' (Prime Minister Winston Churchill's 1940 wartime speech to the British people)

These generic uses of 'man' are now considered very old-fashioned. In English, it's not only nouns that can be used generically. For example, in the statement 'a baby cries when he needs either food or comfort', the male pronoun 'he' here stands for all male and female babies. This type of grammatical gender is language specific, not appearing in some other European languages (such as the Uralic ones like Hungarian and Finnish) or even within the same Indo-European group of languages, since Farsi and Turkish do not use gendered pronouns.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Gendered pronouns

Using an internet search engine, research other languages that both use and do not use gendered pronouns. You could also look at languages that use/do not use gendered nouns.

As you do this, reflect on how grammatical gender might shape our response to the questions you were asked to consider at the start of this chapter:

- Does language influence or reflect our social reality and our views of gender?
- What assumptions could we have about languages that do not have grammatical gender?
- Does the lack of grammatical gender reflect different attitudes to gender and identity in those cultures?

2.4 Marking gender

To show how in English we can 'mark' words for gender in other ways than just by using pronouns, look at the following examples.

1 A nurse asked a patient how they were. He said, 'Are you feeling better today?'

2 The pilot taxied the plane down the runway. She called Air Traffic Control to confirm that they had permission to take off.

3 The Duke and Duchess of Cambridge raised money for charity.

4 'Are you an actress?' she was asked. 'No', she replied. 'I'm an actor.'

Think about how you responded to these. In the first two examples, did the work-related references to a 'nurse' and a 'pilot' seem to go naturally with the pronouns used? Would you have modified the occupational terms with 'male nurse' and 'female pilot'? Did you notice in examples 3 and 4 that the references to the women's title ('Duchess') and job role ('actress') contain the extra suffix *-ess*?

So by marking words either by their meaning or grammatically, we can show gendered power relations. The unmarked (or usual) term is often symbolically more powerful than the marked term. We'll be exploring these in more detail but, as an overview, we can mark terms by:

- adding suffixes to words to show that the female term has been derived from the male. English first names include examples of this. For example, *Charles/Charlotte* and *George/Georgina*
- using asymmetry, where the meanings of the address terms are not equal. For example, *master* and *mistress*
- associating job roles with a particular gender.

KEY TERMS

Unmarked term: the regular or usual form of the term

Marked term: the unusual form of the term, often shown by an additional suffix

2.4.1 The power of inflections

We have already started to look at how gender can be marked grammatically in English by inflectional endings such as *-ess*. These symbolise the female versions, for example in occupational roles such as *actress* and *waitress*. In this way it is clear that the unmarked form is usually male, although this is not exclusively the case. Most of these gendered suffixes originate from French and Latin, but have been affected by political correctness, where writers and speakers take steps to avoid sexist use of language.

And so through changing attitudes to sexist language, these suffixes have begun to die out. For example, 'actor' is used very consciously in the media to describe women in the acting profession in an equal manner to men. This perceived equality, however, may not be matched in the real world: there are still reported pay inequalities between male and female Hollywood actors!

But it's not just the suffix that can show inequality and present women as inferior. It can also be in the connotations of the different terms used. To show this, we can use the example of the job titles that were used for an air flight attendant. Women in this role used to be called an 'air stewardess' or 'air hostess'. Many felt that the meanings of these did not compare to those of the male counterparts, 'steward' and 'host'. You can see this from the dictionary definition given for 'steward/stewardess' in Text 2B. Note how a 'steward' is presented as in charge and is an organiser of a variety of different types of events, yet a 'stewardess' is someone who serves others in very specific situations.

Another gendered suffix *-ette* became quite popular with the British media in the 1990s. They used this suffix to denote a certain type of woman, mainly negatively. The coinages 'bachelorette' and 'ladette' were used to describe women who adopted behaviours seen by society as more masculine, like drinking, having more casual relationships with men and swearing. A British-designed TV programme *Ladette to Lady* contained the message that such women can (and should) be transformed into ladies. Here the associations with the address form 'ladies' are that this is an ideal for women and women should be 'ladies'. In this show, the contestants were taught the skills of being 'a lady'. These included being taught the right way to speak and behave, and creative skills like flower arranging and sewing.

Text 2B

steward

- **a person whose job it is to organize a particular event, or to provide services to particular people, or to take care of a particular place:**
  Stewards will be inspecting the race track at 9.00.
  If you need help at any time during the conference, one of the stewards will be pleased to help you.
- (FEMALE stewardess,) **a person who serves passengers on a ship or aircraft**
- UK **a person who organizes the supply and serving of food at a club:**
  He's the steward of the city of Wakefield's Working Men's Club.

Cambridge Dictionary (online) definition for 'steward'

KEY TERM

Coinage: the invention of a new word or phrase

Interestingly, the *-ette* suffix is used for two other purposes: as something smaller in size, as in 'kitchenette', or as imitation, for example 'leatherette'. It does not appear to be a leap to make a connection between these and the third purpose: to denote women. Obviously the most famous usage from a feminist perspective is 'suffragette'. This movement started in the late nineteenth century in Britain to obtain rights to vote for women but also reflected similar movements in America. Look at Text 2C, an extract from an American anti-suffragette leaflet titled 'Origin and Development of a Suffragette':

Text 2C

At 15 a little pet.

At 20 a little coquette.

At 40 not married yet!

At 50 a suffragette.

Extract from an anti-suffragette leaflet, 'Origin and Development of a Suffragette'

In this, the implication is evident that for all her teasing and flirtatiousness at twenty, her lack of success with finding a husband makes her into a suffragette. This change is signalled in the nouns 'pet' and 'coquette' (a French word) modified by the adjective 'little' to describe the younger girl. Following this with the negative 'not' and the exclamative implies that she is unwanted by a man and that her last resort is to become a 'suffragette'.

2.4.2 The power of meaning

One way to signify gender lexically is through gender-specific compounding. Here two words are put together, most commonly with one being 'male/man' or 'female/woman'. Earlier we suggested that the marking of gender usually highlights where women are either inferior to their male counterpart, or where it is not the norm for women to perform this role. There are clearly some exceptions, but even these indicate that certain jobs are perhaps associated most frequently with a specific gender. Job titles like 'nurse' might be preceded by 'male', therefore identifying this role as performed mainly by women. Indeed, in her article, 'What Language Barrier?' published in *The Guardian*, Deborah Cameron explores how the 'difference model' that we looked at in Chapter 1 is still a widespread view (Cameron 2007). Cameron discusses Simon Baron-Cohen's argument in his book The Essential Difference (2003: 287) that people with a female brain 'make the most wonderful counsellors, primary school teachers, nurses, carers, therapists, social workers, mediators, group facilitators or personnel staff'. This, he says, is because they have empathy, an attribute he clearly associates with women. Using these beliefs, it therefore stands to reason that if a man does the job, the occupational role 'nurse' needs to be preceded by 'male'.

KEY TERM

Compounding: the process of word formation that joins together two or more existing words to make a new word

Other recent compounds have focused on men and these can show changing attitudes to men and masculine behaviours:

- 'Man bag' and 'man bun' mark the nouns 'bag' and 'bun' as more connected with women. Yet they also show that changing attitudes to men and fashion have affected male appearance and their accessories.
- 'Man cave' and 'he man' call upon more traditional ideas of masculinity, presenting men as still essentially hunter-gatherer cavemen.
- The 1980s phrase 'new man' suggested a type of man with a completely different attitude to traditional gender roles. 'New man' came to mean a man who embraced domestic roles and participated in them wholeheartedly. The reverse of this might be seen in a compound like 'career woman' that expressly highlights the type of woman who views her job role outside of the home as an important ongoing part of her life.
- Gender-specific compounding can also be used to mock. The phrase 'man flu' is a prime example that highlights the stereotype of men exaggerating any medical ailment they have. Another recent coinage is 'mansplaining', a blend of *man* + *explaining*, that has come into regular usage to describe a popular, rather than academic linguistic, view of men's verbal behaviour. This is the Cambridge Dictionary's online definition: 'to explain something to someone in a way that suggests that they are stupid; used especially when a man explains something to a woman that she already understands'.

KEY TERM

Blend: a word formed from two or more parts of other already existing words

2.4.3 Addressing men and women: distinguishing titles

English titles and address terms demonstrate both the marking of gender and the lexical foregrounding of social asymmetry. The terms 'Mr', 'Mrs' and 'Miss' are signifiers of gender but for women they do even more, signalling marital status. 'Mister and 'Mr' do not denote a man's marital status unlike 'Mrs' and 'Miss' that, as titles, identify whether a woman is married or unmarried. Feminists in the 1970s did proffer an alternative 'Ms' for women to use if they wanted to avoid specifying marital status but it did not really become a popular option. Interestingly all three are abbreviations of the same historical title 'mistress'. British honorifics, as in 'Duke' and 'Duchess' or 'Viscount' and 'Viscountess' still retain the older suffixation that has disappeared from job titles like actor. Perhaps as these titles are associated with status, class and a past aristocratic feudal system, as well as used only for a small elite group of people, there is not the pressure to change them.

KEY TERM

Honorifics: a title or word expressing respect when used to address someone

In predominantly English-speaking countries, a patronymic family name system is adopted. In this a woman takes over the man's surname on marriage and

resulting children take on this male surname as the family name. For girls, this becomes their 'maiden name', historically representing their sexual status, and the identity they lose on marriage. This is not to say that this is legally enforced and women can opt to keep their own name. In other cultures and languages, there are different approaches. Spanish naming systems seem to use a more even-handed approach as a child has a first, given name followed by two family surnames – those of both the father and mother. It used to be that it was the male surname first but gender equality laws now allow parents to choose the order. And, on marriage, women do not change their name.

One aspect of gendered language that Robin Lakoff's research highlighted was the semantic inequality and asymmetry between terms used about men and women. Lakoff cited words like *master/mistress* and *bachelor/spinster* as illustrating these. *Master* has connotations of power and control and *mistress* has a meaning of a woman with whom a man is having a sexual relationship whilst he is married. This is an example of semantic derogation, as the female term has taken on more negative connotations.

KEY TERMS

Patronymic: the element of a person's name that is based on the name of one's father, grandfather or other male ancestor

Semantic derogation: a process by which a word's meaning becomes more negative over time

2.5 Patterns and metaphors

Another way to look at how language shows our attitudes to gender is to see how we put different words together into reoccurring patterns. What happens is that these patterns seem natural to us and we overlook the gender stereotypes and bias being shown. You can practise this idea by asking yourself which of these words seem to go better with 'woman' or 'man':

- pretty
- handsome
- elegant
- powerful

You probably put 'pretty' and 'elegant' with 'woman' and 'handsome' and 'powerful' with 'man'. But ask yourself why you did this. There is no logical reason for women to be considered 'pretty' and not 'handsome'.

Metaphors too can help to reinforce stereotypes that already exist. Making repeated comparisons between certain objects and women and men means that we begin to associate these comparisons with something natural. We therefore believe that these comparisons are real and truthful.

KEY TERM

Metaphor: a structure that presents one thing in terms of another

2.5.1 Collocation: words that 'naturally' go together

We can also associate ideas about masculine and feminine qualities with particular words. As you read this list of words, mentally separate them into those you associate with masculine ideas and those you associate with feminine ideas:

surrender empathy logic focus nurturing tenderness patience

independence control loving discipline radiance direction strength

This list of words seems quite arbitrary and unscientific but corpus linguistics as a research tool allows linguists to quantify the patterns that they can find. And by studying corpora containing real-life language examples from a variety of text sources, researchers can identify repeated patterns. In the small-scale study of these words, you may have divided them like this (Table 2.2):

Table 2.2: Words associated with feminine and masculine ideas

Feminine	Masculine
surrender	direction
empathy	logic
nurturing	focus
tenderness	discipline
patience	independence
loving	control
radiance	strength

But through looking at patterns in a significantly greater number of texts of different types, we may find a larger discourse about gender in society. We will be exploring corpora as a methodology for gender study in Chapter 5 but Paul

Baker's (2006) exploration of the terms 'bachelor' and 'spinster' in the British National Corpus shows how focusing on just two words can highlight the way that society views men and women.

Baker applied the concept of collocation, looking for words that seem to naturally occur with 'bachelor' and 'spinster'. In his study, one of Baker's conclusions was that 'eligible' was a common collocate of 'bachelor' and 'elderly' was a frequent collocate of 'spinster'. Perhaps unsurprisingly Baker also found positive discourse prosody, where most of the words closely associated with 'bachelor' present men in a good light. For 'spinster', he found that there was negative discourse prosody.

KEY TERMS

Collocation: a word or phrase that is usually combined together with a greater frequency than chance

Discourse prosody: the ways that seemingly neutral words can be seen as having negative or positive associations through frequent use in collocations

ACTIVITY 2.1

Categorising women

In an article from *The Daily Telegraph*, British journalist Radhika Sanghani (2017) listed 25 words that she believes are only ever applied to women. She cites examples of their use in political contexts, campaigns by celebrities such as Beyoncé and research done by *Fortune*, an American business magazine. The list contains the following words:

Airhead	Ambitious	Abrasive	Bitchy	Bolshy
Bombshell	Bossy	Breathless	Bridezilla	Bubbly
Curvy	Ditsy	Emotional	Frigid	Frumpy
High-maintenance	Hormonal	Hysterical	Illogical	Pushy
Sassy	Shrill	Voluptuous	Whinging	Working mum

You might want to look up the meanings of these words first, or you can read her article for the definitions that she gives. Once you're confident with the meanings, categorise them into different semantic fields. Here are some suggestions but you might think of others:

- emotions
- appearance
- behaviours.

Finally, reflect on the findings from your categorisations. What conclusions can you draw about views about women's characteristics and traits? What attitudes to women are being expressed?

KEY TERM

Semantic field: a group of words that fulfil the same kind of role and function in speech and writing

2.5.2 Metaphor: expressing ideologies

In their study of metaphor, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson state that 'in all aspects of life, not just in politics or love, we define our reality in terms of metaphors and then proceed to act on the basis of the metaphors' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 158).

This supports the ideas raised in the introduction to this chapter that language can either influence our social reality or reflect it. Undeniably, metaphors have an ideological and an evaluative effect in the judgements that we make as we use them, as we will show with some examples.

KEY TERM

Ideological: relating to a system of ideas

Linguist Janet Holmes (1994) highlights how animal metaphors for women are pervasive by demonstrating how a chicken metaphor can apply to all stages of a woman's life. She writes:

> The chicken metaphor tells the story of a girl's life. In her youth, she is a chick, and then she marries and begins feeling cooped up, so she goes

to hen parties and cackles with her friends. Then she has her brood and begins to hen peck her husband. Finally, she turns into an old biddy. (Holmes 1994: 337)

Certain animals seem to be associated with a particular gender in English. Women may be associated more with the nouns 'vixen' (a female fox), 'bitch' (a female dog) and 'bird' (which in itself is not a gendered label in English) and in adjectival form as being 'cat(ty)' or 'fox(y)'. Men might be connected more with the nouns 'rat' and 'stag'. Then, if we think about what these connote, women seem to be judged in these animal references by their behaviours towards others, as in being a 'bitch' to someone and by their appearance. For men, the connotations seem to refer to sexual behaviours. An older term for a man with sexual success would have been a 'stud' or 'stallion' referring to a male horse. Some can be applied to both men and women like 'he's a rat' and 'she looks ratty' but there is clearly some inequality in their application. The animal term, when applied to a man, links to behaviour, whereas when used for women it offers a negative comment about their physical attractiveness. Some well-known sayings, like 'are you a man or a mouse' and 'he's a pussy' make unfavourable connections to both men and women. Whilst the first example has no direct connection to women, it calls upon an understanding of a mouse's timidity and assumes that this is not a desirable masculine trait. The second example has more of a gendered focus as the noun 'pussy' is often used informally as a taboo and derogatory term for women's genitalia. The insult could be interpreted in two ways: either comparing a man to a cat, using the colloquial synonym 'pussy' and suggesting that the 'cats' are cowards and weak; or comparing a man to a woman and suggesting that this makes him less of a man. In the latter version, 'pussy' acts metonymically to represent the whole notion of a 'woman'.

KEY TERMS

Synonym: a word that has equivalent meaning to another word

Metonymy: references to things or concepts not by name but by something closely associated with them

Food is another common source for metaphors about women. As with the animal ones, you may not recognise some of the terms used as most originated from slang and informal usage and they may have now dropped out of regular usage. Here are some of the words that have been used:

crumpet tart sweetie honey sugar

You probably noticed that there seems to be a semantic field of 'sweetness' in some of the terms and the corresponding association with women and

the desirability of this as a feminine trait or as a way to stereotype women. 'Crumpet' and 'tart' are both related to women in a sexual sense. 'She's a bit of crumpet' alludes to her as sexually desirable to a man and 'tart' refers to a woman deemed promiscuous and judged for her sexual behaviour. Some of these words, like 'crumpet', may be specific to British English as it refers to a savoury cake popular as a snack. Equally, in American English 'honey' and 'sugar' are used as terms of endearment, arguably used for any person regardless of gender. Comparing women to food appears to be cross-cultural and, globally, studies have found this in languages as diverse as Japanese and Tunisian Arabic.

2.6 Cleaning up language

Social shifts to more of a political correctness view of language and the recognition that there are more diverse gender identities have impacted English in a variety of ways:

- The use of non-gendered pronouns
- Making job titles gender neutral
- Particular communities taking back and reusing more positively the negative words used against them.

2.6.1 Neutralising gender: generic forms and the issues of pronouns

Synonyms like 'people' and 'everybody' have successfully replaced 'man' and 'mankind' but attempts to make pronouns gender neutral are still ongoing. There are options that you might use to avoid specifying one gender by using *s/he* or the plural *they*, even if this would not be grammatically correct. For people who think that the gender binary of *male/female* is too simplistic or who do not identify themselves as a man or as a woman, the third-person pronoun issues become more complex. Linguist John McWhorter (2015), in an article on the American broadcasting network CNN's website, asserts that English should adopt the new non-gendered pronoun options proposed on the Gender Neutral Pronoun Blog (www.cambridge.org/links/escgen6004). This blog suggests the following pronoun use (Table 2.3):

Table 2.3: Non-gendered pronoun options

Subject pronoun	*ze* (or *zie*)	*Ze walked home*
Object pronoun or determiner	*zir/hir*	*Ze text hir* *Hir book*

Possessive pronoun	*Zirs* or *Hirs*	*That book is zirs/hirs*
Reflexive pronoun	*hirself* and *zirself*	*Ze finds zirself/hirself late for work*

ACTIVITY 2.2

Exploring attitudes to gender

Create a short questionnaire to find out about people's current attitudes to gender and language use.

- You could ask questions about attitudes to gendered pronouns and to specific words used about men and women.
- You can either look back to earlier in the chapter and select words that we have explored or you could think of some of your own.

If you are not a native speaker of English, you might do the equivalent for your own language to see how attitudes and patterns of associations with gender are similar or different to English. Remember to be ethical in your questionnaire design – anonymise the people involved but find out their age and gender/gender identity as this will be interesting. Collate the responses. What conclusions can you draw?

2.6.2 Gender equality and renaming

A significant social change in women's occupational roles and changing attitudes to discrimination have led to the retitling of job roles in a less gendered fashion. Institutions and professions have been particularly careful about retitling job roles so that gender is not being marked.

Here are some ways that these have been achieved:

- 'Headmaster/headmistress' has become 'principal' or 'headteacher'
- 'Fireman/firewoman' has become 'fire fighter'
- 'Policeman/policewoman' has become 'police officer'.

In these, the old practice of using suffixation to denote gender through adding 'man' or 'woman' to the job function has been replaced with more gender neutral terms. In Chapter 1, section 1.7, you were introduced to Deborah Cameron's discussion of the 'verbal hygiene' movement. The desire to clean language up is often laughed at for some of its over-the-top euphemisms – such as school dinner ladies being rebranded as education centre nourishment

consultants – but in taking gender out of titles there is no longer any suggestion that certain jobs are just for men.

2.6.3 Taking it back: reclaiming words

Many of the insults and taboo words used pejoratively to label minority groups are being reclaimed by the very communities they described and disparaged. This reclamation involves words being used in ways that are more culturally acceptable and positive to the affected community. In gender terms, the reclaiming of female-focused terms that appear sexist or misogynistic is having mixed success. 'Bitch' is now used (arguably) as a sisterhood term in female rap music or by a female friend to female friend. 'Butch' as a pejorative term for lesbians or heterosexual women seen as looking more masculine, has also undergone the same process and is now used within the lesbian community to describe gender identity and/or relationships. The terms 'butch' and 'femme' initially seemed to reinforce the *masculine/feminine* binary in valuing male and female characteristics but these are used by the community to show the different possible relationship configurations: 'butch-femme', 'butch-butch', etc.

Another taboo word 'slut' is having mixed success with reclamation. Calling a woman a 'slut' has always judged women by their sexual behaviour, although the word itself underwent a semantic shift. In previous meanings from earlier centuries it denoted a woman with low standards of cleanliness and a kitchen maid. Famously in 2011 a global protest movement sought to reclaim the word from its association with women's appearance as a justification for sexual violence and organised a series of 'slutwalks'. This started from a Canadian policeman's comments to university students that women should not dress like 'sluts' if they did not want to become victims of sex attacks.

KEY TERMS

Reclamation: the cultural process of removing negative associations with a particular term that has been used by a dominant group against a specific, less powerful social group

Pejorative term: a judgemental term that usually implies disapproval or criticism

Semantic shift: the changing of a word's meaning in a radically different way from its original use

Recently two English women from Essex, a county in the south-east of England, have started campaigning to remove the compound word 'Essex girl' from the

Oxford English Dictionary (OED). Using change.org, a people-led way to air protests and views and gain popular support, the women used the slogan 'I am an Essex girl' to try and reclaim this phrase. If you want to find out more about their complaints, put their slogan into a search engine.

By looking at the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition, you might see why they are concerned. The OED lists the behaviours and qualities associated with being an Essex girl:

> **Essex girl n. [after Essex man n.]** Brit. derogatory a contemptuous term applied (usu. joc.) to a type of young woman, supposedly to be found in and around Essex, and variously characterized as unintelligent, promiscuous, and materialistic.

Although the OED recognises the joking nature of its usage, the women are arguing that the presence of the term in a well-respected dictionary encourages people to believe that all women from Essex are like this.

2.7 Conclusion

We started this chapter by looking at older presentations of gender in language and it is evident that much has changed. As women's roles have moved outside the home and their occupational choices have grown, language has adapted and job titles have become less gender-specific. Likewise there is more awareness of the impact of gendered language, with shifts in pronoun usage to be less male-specific showing that there is no longer a male supremacy, and also recognising the modern complexities of gender identity. Perhaps where there is still more scope for change is in terms of the words that we associate with gender and the meanings and beliefs behind these. The fact that there have been significant shifts in usage seems to suggest that changes to the social reality are now *reflected* in the language we use, although these changes were brought about in more deliberate ways as a society to shape and *influence* the ways that we think.

Wider reading

You can find out more about the topics in this chapter by reading the following:

Baker, P. (2008) *Sexed Texts: Language, Gender and Sexuality*. London: Equinox.

Mills, S. and Mullany, L. (2011) *Language, Gender and Feminism*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Sunderland, J. (2006) *Language and Gender: An Advanced Resource Book*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Chapter 3
Gender and representation

In this chapter you will:

- Understand the concept of representation
- Explore the ways that gender can be represented in different text types
- Be introduced to ways that gendered social actors can be represented
- Investigate the notion of gendered discourses