Diana Hornoiu

The Category of Gender in Present-day English : Issues of Grammar and World View

Abstract*: This paper demonstrates that in Modern English gendered references depend on the context and register of discourse as well as the attitudes of speakers. Two interesting features, largely ignored by prescriptive grammar, can be identified in present-day non-dialectal spoken English. One is related to the influence the sex of the speaker has on the choice of the pronominal substitute. Thus, women are more likely to use masculine forms in a number of contexts where male speakers prefer their feminine counterparts, particularly in domains associated with gender-related behaviour (e.g. cars, tools, etc.). The other interesting feature is the use of the feminine pronoun she to refer to a hard-to-identify referent or to an entire situation, a usage shared by male and female speakers alike. This usage has been identified in basically all major varieties of English.*

Key words: *grammatical gender, gender assignment, pronominal substitutes, speakers' attitudes, present-day English*

1. Preliminary remarks

It has been argue that the grammatical category of gender has lost much of its weight in English primarily because it was a purely grammatical category without being grounded in reality (Leisi and Mair 1999:140). In Leisi and Mair's account of English gender, exceptional feminine and masculine nouns include names of countries and "machines men have a close emotional relationship with" (e.g. *motorbike*); these nouns are referred to as *adopted natural (psychological) gender*[1]. Additionally, the class of allegorical gender includes abstract nouns whose gender, according to the authors, is largely based on the gender associated with noun

[1] This category is traditionally known as **metaphorical gender** (*cf.* Kortmann 1999:83).

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

in the original classical language. Thus, *love* can be masculine (Lat. *amor*), *peace* feminine (Lat. *pax*).

More recently, Brinton (2000:105) follows the mainstream view that modern English has **natural gender** as opposed to its earlier grammatical gender. She states that English gender is generally a *covert category* in nouns, while the related category of *animacy* based on the oppositions *animate* vs. *inanimate* is expressed in personal, interrogative and relative pronouns (*what* vs. *who; which* vs. who). Interestingly, her account postulates an animacy-based classification: humans and higher animals, on the one hand, lower animal and inanimates, on the other. Animals thus appear on both sides of the scale. The cut-off point can vary on all levels of lectal variation (dia- , socio-, idiolect), depending on the speech event, context, speaker attitude, addressee, etc.

The most recent significant contribution to gender in modern English is Huddleston and Pullum's *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002). The authors' line of argument[2] is very much in Corbett's (1991) vein: since agreement is the defining criterion of gender and since English does show agreement, though in a very restricted way, it follows that English has gender, though it is not an inflectional category and not as strongly grammaticalized as in other language (Huddleston and Pullum 2002:485).

Typical wording can be found in the actual distributional properties of masculine he, feminine she, and neuter it. *He* and *she* referring to males and females respectively, *it* referring to "entities which are neither male nor female" are identified as the **core uses** of the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it*. As this definition of *it* excludes its use with animal and human antecedents, there is an extra section on these exceptional uses. With regard to non-human antecedents (nouns referring to animals), Payne and Huddleston (2002) state the following:

- *It* is generally used when the sex of the referent of unknown;
- *He* and *she* are "more likely with pets, domestic animals, and creatures ranked high in the kingdom of wild animals" (e.g. lions, tigers, etc.);
- The use of *he* and *she* "indicates a somewhat greater degree of interest in or empathy with the referent than does *it*"

It is the third factor that is remarkable and merits special attention, as this is what every native speaker would say in an impressionistic account and what has been the focus of socio-pragmatic approaches to gender for some decades (cf. Mathiot and Roberts 1979, Morris 1991), but what has not been taken up in prescriptive grammars so far[3]. With regard to use of *it* for human antecedents, the authors combine a traditional commonplace (*it* can be used to refer to babies) with an approach based on speaker's attitudes: used in such a manner, *it* tends to signal resentment and antipathy on the part of the speaker. Another special case they mention concerns the use of *she* with *inanimate non-female referents*. According to the authors, such usage is possible with the following categories of nouns: nouns denoting

[2] Gender is treated in chapter 5 "Noun and noun phrases" by John Payne and Rodney Huddleston, to whom "the authors" will refer in the remainder of the subsection that discusses Huddleston and Pullum's *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002).

[3] Biber et al. (1999) argue along the same limes, though not as consistently as Payne and Huddleston.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

countries, when considered as political, but not as geographical entities, and nouns denoting ships "and the like"

> Ships represent the classical case of this extended use of she, but it is found with other kinds of inanimates, such as cars. There is considerable variation among speakers as to how widely they make use of this kind of personification. It is often found with non-anaphoric uses of she: Here she is at last (referring to a ship or bus, perhaps), Down she comes (with she referring, say, to a tree that is being felled). Huddleston and Pullum (2002:484)

The extent to which personification is involved will be discussed in a later section. For the moment, it suffices to say that, in the absence of a referent, we can hardly be dealing with personification, as the pronoun is not used anaphorically. Personification cannot be involved when reference is made to an abstract idea or situation (as this is what most of the instances of *she* in their examples seem to refer to). Payne and Huddleston do approximate the actual situation by not trying to provide a grid or table that lists gender classes, a modern approach which makes it clear that almost 20 years have passed since the structuralist approach of Quirk *et al.* (1985).

2.1. The socio-pragmatic view based on speaker attitudes

Faced with speaker-based variation in gender, some linguists have dismissed the concept of gender in English and argued that, although "alive" in the language use, English gender cannot be regarded as a system (Erades 1956, Markus 1988). "Can we speak of gender in a language where the same may at one moment be masculine, at another feminine or neuter, and, let us mark it well, in the language of the same speaker and sometimes in one and the same sentence?" (Erades 1956:9). Erades concludes that English has no gender, unless the term is reinterpreted "beyond recognition". What Erades suggests is that the "system" amounts to variation in pronominal substitutes according to the mood, temper, frame of mind, and psychological attitude the speaker: "The old schoolbook rule to the effect that a male being is a *he*, a female being a *she* and a thing an *it* applies when the speaker is emotionally neutral to the subject referred to; as soon as his language becomes affectively coloured, a living being may become an *it*, *this* or *what* and a thing a *he* or *she*" (Erades 1956:10).

Erades (1956) rightly emphasizes *speaker attitudes* and variability inherent in the English gender system, but he too abandons its systematic nature in favour of speaker whims. Contemporary sociolinguistic research has shown that speech patterns within communities are often systematic and explicable in terms of information about extra-linguistic factors. In other words, speaker-based theories are not inherently irregular.

The recognition of its variability is a component that is instrumental in understanding grammatical gender in present-day English. However, it is equally important not to overemphasize unpredictability. Although biological sex is not absolutely predictive, there are regular, identifiable patterns that are both semantic and sociolinguistic. As Vachek (1976) has pointed out, if "all factors that co-operate in determining the pronominal reference are

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

duly considered and if their hierarchy is carefully established, the apparent confusion becomes clarified and the knotty relations disentangled. In other words, if the situation of the speaker and his approach to the extra-lingual reality he is handling are satisfactorily stated, his pronominal reference to this reality should be perfectly predictable" (Vachek 1976:389). There must be a system of gender, he concludes, if it can be so systematically manipulated; the gender category may not be strictly grammatical but it is *lexico-stylistic* (by which he seems to mean semantic and affective).

Attempts to predict the semantic and extra-linguistic factors determining English pronoun reference, most of which postulate emotional involvement on the part of the speaker, have met with limited success. Various studies aiming to identify the factors determining *emotive gender reference* have proposed that masculine and feminine references to inanimate objects reflect negative and positive attitudes on the part of speakers towards the referent. Noting that exceptional gendered associations cluster around some typical invariants and have social values, Vachek (1976) formulates a scale with a neutral, unmarked reference between two polar extremes for positive and negative feelings towards the facts of any given reality. With regard to these marked uses he states:

> The reason why the feminine set was chosen to refer to the positive kind of approach (signalling the thing referred to as amiable, intimately known, delicate, etc), while the masculine set serves to denote the opposite, negative kind of approach (signalling, in its turn, the concerned thing as huge, strong, unwieldy or generally unpleasant) is too obvious to need detailed specification – it reflects the common conception of the feminine vs. masculine features regarded as typical of each of the two sexes. (Vachek 1976: 388)

Other linguists (Traugott 1972) concur with this model of the **affective gender system** arguing that the correlation between feminine and positive, on the one hand, and masculine and negative, on the other, is transparent. As far as animate nouns are concerned, the consensus is that the masculine and feminine are both unmarked. Speakers can express their negative feelings towards an animate referent by *downgrading* him or her to *it*.

The correlations between feminine and positive, masculine and negative are, however, far from obvious. Apart from conveying the speaker's positive attitudes towards the referent, feminine references may also reflect negative attitudes about, for instance, frailty or weakness; similarly, masculine references can be positive when size and strength are considered[4].

Combining a structuralist approach and speaker's involvement, Joly (1975) downplays the role of biological sex distinction in his account of the English gender system. He proposes a model in which *animacy* and *humanity* are the top two parameters for determining gender, a reflection of fundamental distinctions in Indo-European, which are revealed once the language "did away with" morphological gender (Joly 1975:248). To account for gender-related fluctuations, Joly relies on speaker attitudes and perceptions of the referent:

[4] The polar positive/negative distinction is far from being as neat and sharp as these scholars suggest. For a more detailed study of referential gender that blurs this dichotomy, see Mathiot (1979).

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

> My contention here is that Modern English reproduces very consistently at least part of the Indo-European pattern of gender, viz. the basic opposition animate-powerful vs. inanimate-powerless. In English, whenever the speaker feels that an object or any inanimate notion possesses some kind of power, the neuter anaphoric pronoun it may be replaced by one of the two animate pronouns he or she pertaining to the sphere of humanity which is the proper sphere of power. (Ibid.:254)

The opposite applies as well, when a human being is deprived of power and/or personality and the anaphoric animate pronouns *he* and *she* are replaced by the neuter pronoun *it*. Joly further distinguishes two degrees of power: *major power* (masculine) and *minor power* (feminine). Thus, the choice of a gendered pronoun for an inanimate is not based, according to Joly, on biological sex distinctions but on *power distinctions*. Moreover, he argues that there is the tendency to use the lower power first for an inanimate (it is closer to its original no-power status) unless compelled to do otherwise. This vacillation in gender assignment reflects speakers' emotional attitudes, ranging from emotional involvement to contempt.

It is impossible to identify the factors instrumental in gender assignment, although it is possible to recognize patterns. On the other hand, postulating a dichotomy between natural (unmarked) gender and affective gender in English would mean treating the fluctuations as exceptional and thus excluding them from the base or unmarked system. More productive would be to devise a system that incorporates 'unmarked' and 'marked', 'neutral' and 'emotive', 'natural' and 'unnatural' gender references (cf. Baron 1971, Curzan 2003). Such a system for English gender can still be described as being semantic, though, as Curzan (2003) points out, not all of semantics can be broken down into componential binaries. This is in line with Corbett's (1991:32) reminder that in all semantic systems "it is important to bear in mind that the world view of speakers determines the categories involved, and that the criteria may not be immediately obvious to an outsider observer."

2.2. Special referent classes

In the course of this paper, it has been mentioned repeatedly that nouns which trigger gendered pronouns deserve a special status. The two major categories to be discussed in what follows are instances of personification and references to animals. Additionally, a specific use of feminine pronouns merits a closer investigation. This specific use will be labelled non-referential *she*.

2.2.1. Personification of inanimate entities

Personification can be defined as the figure of speech which attributes human qualities to non-humans and things (animals, plants, elements of nature, and abstract ideas). The entry for personification in *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage* (Burchfield and Fowler 1998) links the loss of grammatical gender with the rise of personification, citing examples from the *OED*:

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

> Personification arises partly as a natural or rhetorical phenomenon and partly as a result of the loss of grammatical gender at the end of the Anglo-Saxon period. In Old English a pronoun used in place of a masculine noun was invariably he, in place of a feminine noun heo (= she), and in place of a neuter noun hit (= it). When the system broke up and the old grammatical cases disappeared, the obvious result was the narrowing down of he to a male person or animal, she to a female person or animal, and it to nearly all remaining nouns. At the point of loss of grammatical gender, however, he began to be applied 'illogically' to some things personified as masculine (mountains, rivers, oak-trees, etc., as the Oxford English Dictionary has it), and she to some things personified as feminine (ships, boats, carriages, utensils, etc.). For example, the Oxford English Dictionary cites examples of he used of the world (14c.), the philosopher's stone (14c.), a fire (15c.), an argument (15c.), the sun (16c.), etc.; and examples of she used of a ship (14c.), a door (14c.), a fire (16c.), a cannon (17c.), a kettle (19c.), and so on. At the present time such personification is comparatively rare, but examples can still be found: e.g. Great Britain is renowned for her stiff upper lip approach to adversity; I bought that yacht last year: she rides the water beautifully; (in Australia and NZ) she's right; she's jake; she's a big country, etc. (The New Fowler's Modern English Usage)

A distinction should be drawn between **personification** in its own right and personification as a **sub-component of metaphor** (as in *the mouth of the river*). While the latter use occurs frequently in everyday speech, particularly in idioms and proverbs, we are concerned here with the former use only – which is, according to the *New Fowler's Modern English Usage* rare.

Personification is more common in **literary discourse** where abstract nouns frequently take as pronominal substitutes *he* or *she* (i.e. they are personified) (*cf.* Stefanescu 1988). The process of referring to a non-human entity as *he* or *she* (instead of the normative *it*) is known as **upgrading**[5]. A speaker makes use of upgrading to connote various degrees of positive involvement towards the referent.

Nouns such as *church*, *crime*, *fate*, *liberty*, *life*, *music*, *nature*, *science*, *wisdom* are feminine. Consider the following illustrations below:

(1) I love *wisdom* more than **she** loves me.
(2) *Crime*....**she** was not the child of solitude.
(3) *Music* with **her** silver sound.
(4) *Science* has failed because **she** has attempted an impossible task.
(5) Maupassant strips *life* of the few poor rags that still cover **her**. (Stefanescu 1988:178)

In fiction *names of towns* may be treated as feminine:

[5] The reverse process whereby the personal pronoun *it* is used to refer to persons is also possible. This process is known as **downgrading** and it connotes various degrees of *negative involvement* on the part of speaker, as in the following examples: I can understand why *they* took the silverware. But why did **it** take my piggy bank?

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

(6) In the third place, it is obvious that no very close or instructive analogy can be established between *Rome* in **her** relations with the provinces....

(7) *Paris* was **herself** again.

(8) *Oxford* taught as much Greek and Latin as **she** could. (Stefanescu 1988:177)

Names of *celestial bodies* can be masculine or feminine. *Mars* and *Jupiter* are masculine while *Venus* is feminine. *Sun* is masculine and so is *time* and *year*. *Moon* is feminine like the names of the *seasons*. In many cases the gender of nouns used in literary discourse depends on the nouns' corresponding gender in Latin (Kruisinga 1931).

In a corpus-based study on personification, MacKay and Konishi (1980) investigated the use of what they call "**human pronouns"** (i.e. *he*, *sh*e and their dative-accusative and genitive forms *him*, *her*, *his*, *hers*, respectively) to refer to **non-human antecedents**. The authors based their analysis on a database of approximately 35,000 pronouns collected from an anthology of **children's literature**. They distinguished three large classes of antecedents: *animals* (including real, imaginary, and toy animals), *fantasy creatures* (including imaginary beings such as fairies, ghosts, giants, and trolls) and *things* (including abstractions such as *thought* and *time*) (MacKay and Konishi 1980:151). Though designed as a study dealing with personification it soon turned out that personification played only a minor role when deviations from the prescriptive patterns occurred.

Their findings are highly unexpected in light of prescriptive grammarians' eyes: of the approximately 450 pronominal references to animals, more than 80% were masculine and feminine (with the masculine outnumbering the feminine by 3 to 1) while it occurred in only 18% of the examples. Next MacKay and Konishi classified the pronouns according to whether or not the antecedent was personified, assuming that personification would play a significant role in triggering non-neuter pronouns. Although, in general, this was found to be the case, the figures for the non-personified antecedents were surprising and unexpectedly high, as the **Table 1** shows.

Within the class of nouns denoting animals, personification could account for the use of a human pronoun in approximately half of the cases (234 of 452). In the non-personified cases, as shown in **Table 1**, a "human pronoun" was recorded in more than two thirds (69%) of the examples. This figure clearly shows that the pronoun *it* is rarely used to refer to animals. These figures for the *animal* class, however, stand in marked contrast to the figures for the classes including nouns referring to *fantasy creatures* and *things* which clearly follow the expected norm. All examples of fantasy creatures being referred to as *he* or *she* are instances of personification, and in only six cases did speakers use a "human" pronoun to refer to things.

Pronoun used					
	Total	*he*	*she*	*it*	
Nature of antecedent	N	N	%	N	%
Animals	218	150	69	68	31
Fantasy creatures	0	0	0	0	0

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

Things	26	6	23	20	77
Total	246	156	64	88	36

Table 1 The use of *he* and *she* vs. it for non-personified antecedents (based on MacKay and Konishi 1980:152)

Corpus-based studies of **everyday use of spoken English**, on the other hand, show that personification is generally restricted to the *telling of myths and legends* (Wagner 2003). Borderline cases between proper personification and dialect use of English include references to the phenomenon known also as *ignis fatuus* and jack-o'-lantern which can be seen at night as a pale, flickering light in meadows and marshy places and around which many popular superstitions cluster[6]. This phosphorescent light flitting at night over swampy ground is sometimes called "jack-o'-lantern or "Jackie the lantern" and referred to anaphorically as *it* or *he*.

It would be inappropriate to claim that personification is involved when a watchmaker refers to one of his watches as *he* or when the anaphoric pronoun *he* is used by a cider maker when referring to an apple. As Wagner (2003:120) argues in her corpus-based analysis of referential gender in English, these examples are typical of true dialect use deriving from a linguistic system that has nothing to do with personification. Her claim is supported by the provenance of masculine pronouns in these domains and the fact that personification has been associated with feminine forms, as can be seen from the following quote and the standard system described in the previous section:

> Many nouns are given variable gender, depending on whether they are thought of in an intimate way. Vehicles and countries are often called *she* as well as *it* (*She can reach 60 in 5 seconds*; *France has increased her exports*). Pets are often *he* or *she*. A crying baby may become *it*.
>
> It is not obvious why some entities are readily personified while others are not. Nor is it obvious why most entities are given female personifications. It is not simply a matter of feminine stereotypes, for *she* is used in aggressive and angry situations as well as in affectionate ones: guns, tanks and trucks which won't go remain *she*. (Crystal 1995:209)

The representation of ships as female is generally interpreted as personification, probably on the basis of the imagery of a ship as a womb-like container (*cf.* among others, McArthur 1992; Wales 2002). This interpretation is beset with problems, especially in dialect use of English. A corpus-based analysis of Newfoundland English, for instance, shows that fishermen would never use *it* to refer to their ships. It is therefore highly unlikely that

6 These eerie lights have given rise to many superstitions. Tradition varies as to their nature. Formerly these lights were supposed to haunt desolate and moorlands for the purpose of misleading travelers and drawing them to their death. Another superstition says that they are the spirits of those who have been drowned in the bogs, and yet another says that they are the souls of unbaptized infants. Science now attributes these ignes fatui to spontaneous combustion of gases emitted by rotting organic matter.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

personification is used in 100% of the cases (Wagner 2003:121). Wales (2002:333) argues similarly: "personification is obvious to general a label to cover what seem to be quite complex analogical or metaphorical hierarchies of salience according to such value(s) as occupation, local environment and climate and general relevance to human needs, as well as subtle forms of gender symbolism".

2.2.2. Animal referents

Another class of nouns that deserves special attention with regard to the degree of personification involved in gender assignment is that of nouns referring to animals. As we have already seen in the previous section, according to most grammars of modern and early stages of English the appropriate pronoun that should be used when referring to an animal is *it*, except for cases where the sex of the animal is known[7]. As we will see in this section, actual language use, however, cannot be more remote from this prescriptive statement. Even a cursory examination of speakers' linguistic behaviour shows that occurrences of *he* and *she* outnumber instances of prescribed *it* in **everyday spoken discourse**. In what follows we will discuss the findings of several corpus-based studies that addressed the issues of gender assignment and pronominal substitutes with nouns referring to animals.

Premature as it may seem, the first conclusion from these studies can be drawn here already: while hundreds of masculine and feminine pronouns referring to animals can be found, there is only a handful of neuter forms. Surprising as it may seem, a detailed investigation of additional corpus data dealing with this issue reveals that the observed pattern is the rule rather than the exception (*cf.* among others Marcoux 1973; Morris 1991; MacKay and Konishi 1980; Wagner 2003).

In a corpus-based study of students' use of personal pronouns in tag questions, Marcoux (1973) examined nouns referring to countries, ships, animals and humans. He found surprisingly high occurrences of [+ human] pronouns used to refer to animals of unknown sex, which would be against the prescriptive pattern that imposes the pronoun *it* as the appropriate pronoun that should be used when referring to an animal whose sex is unknown. Some of the sentences he used in his study are cited below, together with the pronominal forms that were recorded in the tags:

(9) My **dog** will eat anything. (*he* 88, *it* 5, *she* 3, aberrant 12)
(10) That **cat** looks hungry. (it 46, he 43, she 9, he/she 2, aberrant 8)
(11) This **canary** sings beautifully. (it 69, he 23, she 7, he/she/it 1, aberrant 8)
(12) Tweety, my **parakeet**, is sick. (she 42, he 40, it 14, he/she 2, aberrant 10)

The analysis leads Marcoux to the following conclusions. First, "the presence of a proper noun seems to encourage the use of either a masculine or a feminine pronoun rather than the neuter form" (Marcoux 1973:104). Second, the masculine pronoun is highly favoured over

[7] When the sex of the animal is known, the pronouns *he* and *she* can be used *alternatively*.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

the feminine one[8]. This latter tendency is corroborated by other empirical studies as well (*cf.* Morris 1991).

A cursory analysis of personal pronouns referring to animal antecedents in the spoken section of the BNC reveals the same pattern: the great majority of pronominal substitutes referring to such nouns as *dog* and *cat* were marked, as shown in **Tables 2** and **3**:

	N	%
masculine form	162	56.6
feminine form	23	8
neuter form	101	35.3
total	286	99.9

Table 2 Pronouns for antecedent *dog* in the spoken sample of BNC

	N	%
masculine form	88	52.7
feminine form	38	22.7
neuter form	41	24.6
total	167	100

Table 3 Pronouns for antecedent *cat* in the spoken sample of BNC

Although slightly different form Marcoux's findings, these surprisingly similar results support the expected pattern: masculine pronouns are the unmarked choice in spoken English when referring to a pet such as a dog or a cat. While it can be assumed that most of the instances of feminine pronouns referring to dogs are used by speakers who know that the dog in question is actually female, as **Table 3** shows, cats are more likely to be referred as *she* generically, presumably due to the prescriptive biological-semantic pattern: *dog* is neuter or [+ male] (as opposed to the feminine *bitch*); *cat* is neuter and [+female] (as opposed to the masculine *tom-cat*).

Pronoun switches are frequent and various emotive factors play a significant role in the choice of pronouns when referring to animals. An analysis of the BNC has shown that the owners of a cat are very likely to refer to the dog that chased their cat as *it* rather than *he* or *she*. This pronominal choice will enable them to signal not only their intimacy and involvement with their cat, but also distance towards the dog. The reverse pattern, on the other hand, holds for the owners of dogs. The following examples from **(13)** to **(15)** taken from BNC are representative of this pattern. In **(13)** a police officer is being questioned about dogs on the force. The fact that he himself has never owned such a dog and the rather formal nature of the speech event would account for his four uses of the neuter pronoun *it*. Once he gets emotionally involved though, talking about a dog becoming a member of the family of the leading officer, he switches to *he* in the two final references.

[8] It is unclear why the results for the two birds (canary and parakeet) differ to such a large extent. A possible explanation could be that a parakeet is more readily perceived as a pet; in other words, it is more prototypical category than a canary.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

(13)

….Alright? Next question. Yes young man.

[PS000]: What was it like when you had your police dog?

[PS1SF]: I never had a police dog. I've never had, never been on er the special force. A lot of people like it because basically the er when you look after a police *dog* **it** becomes your pet as well, you take **it** home with you and you take **it** to work with you, and you will have a police dog for sort of like **its** working life of seven or eight years, so basically you're gonna have **him** for seven to eight years and **he** becomes a fa- like a family pet.

In **(14)** a farmer is talking about fox hunting. Although reporting a rather general procedure, the speaker obviously has one specific dog in mind, which will explain why he uses *she* in all instances.

(14)

[PS2VX]: Aye. Aye. And erm say the fox had been in the ground, and the […] and the the young cubs, for about three or four days. And we used to hear somebody saying there was a vixen there and some and some young ones. […] we went up there with the dogs and let them in in to the burrow. Block everywhere, let them into the burrow. One *dog* would go in, and **she**'d just shake **her** tail and come back, you couldn't get **her** in afterwards because **she** knew that they'd cleared off.

In **(15)** the owner of the cat (PS1D1) uses masculine pronouns exclusively, while her friend (PS1CX) uses only neuter pronouns.

(15)

[PS1D1]: Come on puss, shh, shh, shh

[PS1CX]: Where's **it** gone Rebecca? Where's pussy *cat*?

[PS1D1]: puss, puss, puss puss

[PS1CX]: [laughing] Where's **it** gone?

[PS1D1]: Is **he** there? Can you see **him**? Can you see **him**?

[PS1CX]: Go out, out cat [shooing away]

Pets are more likely to be referred to as *he* rather than *she* or *it* when their sex is unknown. Thus the masculine pronoun still serves as generic. Generally, researchers agree that personal involvement seems to be the most relevant factor in pronoun choice.

> The use of *he* and *she* seems to signal personal involvement or empathy for the referent in the case of […] an owner of an animal, someone who is emotionally attached or values the referent, […] or someone attached to a specific animal. By the way of contrast, the use of *it* seems to signal lack of involvement or empathy with the referent in the case of […] [a speaker] who is not personally attached to the referent or wishes to devalue it, an entity which is acted upon, and finally a nonspecific animal or class of animals with which personal involvement is out of the question. (MacKay and Konishi 1980:155)

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

The cut-off point within the class of animals differs from speaker to speaker, depending on various factors such as profession, environment, etc. For someone who grew up in a large city and has hardly lived in the countryside, it is probable that only pets, or even just dogs and cats, can be referred to as *she* or *he*, whereas wild animals such as badgers, bears or foxes will be referred to as *it*. On the other hand, it is extremely likely that a farmer will refer to the animals on his farm as *he* or *she* or that a hunter will refer to a hunted animal and a fisherman to the fish in his catch as *he*.

To conclude this section, it should be pointed out that the prescriptive rules of grammar concerning the anaphoric use of pronouns referring to animals are hardly followed in everyday conversations. As some degree of personal involvement is usually present when speakers talk about animals, neutral pronouns are the *least* expected forms. Pets will hardly be referred to as *it*, unless they are talked about in a derogatory or detached manner. Other factors that may influence pronoun choice are the *saliency* of the animal in the discourse (i.e. *centrality* in MacKay and Konishi's terms, 1980:155), its *size* (the bigger the animal, the more likely the use of *it*), and various real or supposed attributes ('brave', 'wise' = male; 'weak', 'passive' = female, etc. see also the section on Mathiot and Roberts, 1979).

2.2.3. Non-referential *she*

A closer analysis of samples of both spoken and written English reveals an interesting pattern which is generally not mentioned in prescriptive grammars. This pattern is illustrated by the following examples:

(16) Watch out! Here **she** comes! (speaker is sea-sick)
(17) Here **she** comes!
(Paddock 1991: 30, referring to an approaching weather front)
(18) She's fine; **she**'s cool; **she**'ll be joe
(synonyms of 'It doesn't matter'; Orsman 1997:717)
(19) Well..it rolled in at my feet and he'd pulled t' pin out! I got out o' that hole faster than I went in, and up **she** went!
Middlesborough 027 (MidSL); explosion caused by a grenade (referred to as it)

In all the above examples the referent of the personal pronoun *she* is either difficult to identify or, more frequently, it refers to a general or concrete situation. This pattern can be found in all varieties of English, thereby pointing to the fact that it is not restricted to regional or social language use.

As the examples from **(16)** to **(19)** show, one of the major characteristics is the word order. More often than not, extraposition results in an output of the form **X-S-V** instead of **S-V-X**. **X** is usually realized by a spatial adverb such as *here* or *there*. Alternatively, the preposition of a prepositional verb is extraposed giving rise to patterns such as *up she V* or *down she V*. An analysis in terms of theme/rheme or given/new information is inappropriate in most cases. The fronted element, though usually containing new information, is generally not the topic of the utterance in question. Matters are further complicated by variations of this pattern such as *here/there PP she V* which seem to assume an almost idiomatic meaning,

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

making it impossible to attribute any type of information status such as theme/rheme or topic/comment to the individual elements at all. On the other hand, the pattern cannot be interpreted as signalling some feminine characteristics either. It is probable true that most people who use non-referential *she* are not aware of it. The construction seems to have found its place among all the uses of empty *it* that are common in everyday English conversations.

3. Gender in American English

3.1. The sociological view

In an influential article published in 1979 Mathiot and Roberts investigate the use of **referential gender** in American English. Adopting a sociological rather than purely linguistic approach to the category of gender, they use *attitudes* and *mental representations* to explain language use. They argue that speakers' choice of pronominal substitutes is based on specific sex roles that are manifested in language. Their data, collected over a period of 10 years, were grouped into two subsets: one illustrating the Los Angeles area and the other one, the Buffalo area. Their examples are taken from face-to-face conversations (Mathiot and Roberts 1979:5)[9].

Mathiot and Roberts identify two patterns of referential gender: **standard** and **intimate**. The latter accounts for the use of *he* or *she* for an inanimate referent or the use of *it* for a human being. Their data revealed that while the normative pattern predicts constant use of one pronominal form, "in the intimate pattern, the same entity may be referred to with either one of the three pronominal forms by the same speaker" (Mathiot and Roberts 1979:7).

The intimate pattern

As in the standard pattern, the intimate pattern evinces two basic oppositions in the choice of pronominal substitutes: *he* and *she* vs. *it*, on the one hand, and within this opposition, *he* vs. *she*, on the other hand. According to Mathiot and Roberts, the first contrast can be attributed to semantic **upgrading** (if *he* or *she* is used instead of *it*) or **downgrading** (if *it* is used instead of *he* or *she*). While the authors' assertion that upgrading in general corresponds to personification is debatable, their association of "positive involvement on the part of the speaker" seems an appropriate way to tackle the issue. Similarly, downgrading stems from speaker's negative involvement and applies to case of previously upgraded items as well (i.e. return to the standard pattern). Their analysis of the data revealed an unexpected high frequency of the intimate pattern which made them over-generalize when they argue that "it

[9] The authors do not specify whether the examples were elicited or they were taken from naturally occurring conversation. Moreover, the authors speak of "off" and "on" data collecting, meaning that they were not primarily concerned with systematicity.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

seems that any non-human entity can be referred to as either *he* or *she*, i.e. upgraded, without regard to its nature" (Mathiot and Roberts 1979:11).

While the contrast between *it*, on the one hand, and *he* and *she*, on the other, is relatively straightforward, much more variation occurs within the intimate pattern when it comes to the *he* vs. *she* opposition. The authors differentiate between *men's* and *women's* usage as they assume that differences in mental representation manifest themselves in the intimate pattern. **Tables 4** and **5** illustrate the meanings of *he* and *she* for men and women as they emerged from the authors' analysis:

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">'she'</td><td colspan="2">'he'</td></tr>
<tr><td>Men's mental image of women</td><td>Men's attitudes towards or feelings about women</td><td>Men's attitudes towards or feelings about themselves</td><td>Men's mental image of themselves</td></tr>
<tr><td>Prized possession</td><td>Appreciation</td><td rowspan="2">Respect</td><td rowspan="2">Brave, gallant</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Challenge to one's manhood</td><td rowspan="2">Eagerness, resentment, frustration</td></tr>
<tr><td>Reward</td><td>Pride
Sensual pleasure</td><td rowspan="2">Warm affection</td><td rowspan="2">Good-natured, A regular fellow</td></tr>
<tr><td>Beautiful</td><td>Admiration</td><td>Self-depreciation</td><td>Ugly</td></tr>
<tr><td>Incompetent (emotional, unintelligent, weak)</td><td>Contempt</td><td>Self-esteem</td><td>Competent (not emotional, intelligent, strong)</td></tr>
</table>

Table 4 Meanings manifested in men's usage of *she* and *he* within the intimate pattern (from Mathiot and Roberts 1979: 14)

Items in bold indicate areas where men and women differ in their attributed meanings, while they agree on all the other attributes. With regard to the shared meanings, the authors argue that "it is clear from even a casual knowledge of American culture that these meanings originate from men rather than from women" (Mathiot and Roberts 1979: 15).

To give an example of shared meanings consider the following example from Mathiot (1975:19); the example deals with the evaluative system of appearance and is based on the opposition ugly/beautiful. The notion of being beautiful corresponds to the feminine form *she*, the notion of being ugly corresponds to the masculine form *he*. The notion of being beautiful is manifested in a range of attributes such as 'dainty', 'delicate', 'slim', 'trim', 'sleek', 'graceful', 'elegant', 'young', 'clean', 'white', etc. The notion of being ugly is manifested in a range of attributes such as 'ungraceful', 'slow', 'awkward', 'bulky', 'large', 'loud'. The stereotypic attribution of beauty to women and ugliness to men is conspicuous in the following exchange between two girl room-mates:

(20)
A: What are the names of the other plants?
B: They don't have names.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

A: Not even this one? (about a *cactus* in bloom)
B: No. **He**'s is just a spindly thing.
A: And Elisabeth? (about a *violet*)
B: Oh, but **she**'s lovely
(Mathiot 1975:20)

An example of differentiated usage involving again the evaluation system applied this time to achievement potential shows that men's perception of their role in society is that of *competent* agent as opposed to women who are seen, by men, as *incompetent*. Women, on the other hand, conceive of themselves as mature, able to take care of themselves, while they regard men as infantile, even inconsequential.

'she'		'he'	
Women's mental image of themselves	Women's attitudes towards or feelings about themselves	Women's attitudes towards or feelings about men	Women's mental image of men
Mature	**Self-esteem**	**Cuddly affection** **Mild disparagement** **Pity** **Exasperation**	**Cute little fellow *** **Unconsequential *** **Helpless *** **A pain in the ass ***
Prized possession	Appreciation		
Challenge to one's manhood	Eagerness, resentment, frustration		
Reward	Pride Sensual pleasure		
Beautiful	Admiration	Self-depreciation	Ugly
Incompetent (emotional, unintelligent, weak)	Contempt	Self-esteem	Competent (not emotional, intelligent, strong)

Table 5 Meanings manifested in women's usage of *she* and *he* within the intimate pattern (from Mathiot and Roberts 1979: 16)

Mathiot and Roberts's analysis is beset with problems. Although they provide many examples to illustrate all the categories they identified, it seems that no clear-cut system of pronominal use can be developed, but rather an interpretation of more and less incidental facts. Moreover, it is unclear how many instances of the intimate pattern they found in their data. The examples given in the analysis itself add up to approximately 130, with masculine and feminine distributed fairly evenly. Taking into account the examples provided and the relevant forms included in the appendices (excluding the animals), the following picture

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

emerges: men use *she* or *her* about 40 times to refer to an inanimate entity, while not a single use of a masculine pronoun is mentioned; women, on the other hand, use masculine pronouns about 60 times to refer to an inanimate entity; additionally there are also approximately 10 instances of women using feminine pronouns to refer to inanimate entities. If these examples and figures can be taken as representative of male and female usage, an interesting conclusion can be drawn: when it comes to referring to inanimate entities, pronominal use in the intimate pattern depends on the sex of the speaker – where men prefer feminine pronouns, women will generally use masculine ones. However, despite this pattern in the use of non-neuter pronouns, this use is by no means systematic. Mathiot and Roberts provide numerous examples of spoken English in which speakers switch pronouns without any observable pattern within the same spate of talk:

(21) Do you realise how many times I have picked **him** up? **He** keeps slipping of the shelf. Next time this happens I'm going to leave **it** on the floor. See haw **he** likes it [referring to towel]

(22) What the hell is the matter with this thing? **It** just won't work for me! **He** usually isn't like that. [referring to typewriter]

Mathiot and Roberts (1979:33) interpret the shifts in the examples above as instances of attaching negative attributes to entities that have been previously upgraded. However, their assumption is relatively limited in its explanatory power, as it does not apply in all contexts. In the examples above the speaker's irritation is obvious, thus the use of *it* in all slots would have been consistent with the theory proposed by Mathiot and Roberts. The switch back to *he* is rather unexpected and inconsistent with their theory.

The pattern identified by Mathiot and Roberts in everyday language use in Los Angeles and Buffalo in the 1970s is by no means regional and related to this time span alone. This pattern can be extended to areas of the United States as well as the following examples taken from modern American fiction and movies or overheard in naturally-occurring conversation among Newfoundladers show:

(23) Ok, crack **'er** up! - from the movie *Titanic* USA (1997); the speaker is an American male, referring to the *safe* being brought up from the ocean floor

(24) Where is **she**? If **she** will give us the pleasure... there **she** is! - from the movie *The red violin*; the speaker is a male auctioneer, presumably Canadian, talking about a *violin* that is going to be auctioned; the turntable is not working properly, so the audience has to wait a bit for the violin

(25) Up **she** comes – picture subtitle taken from The Early Shopper, 14/10/96; the pronoun she refers to the *roof.*

Mathiot and Roberts' observation regarding the intimate pattern of pronominal use is similar to patterns identified by other linguists such as Svartengren in fiction in the 1930s, Morris in Canadian English in the 1990s and even Pawley in Tasmanian Vernacular English in the 1970s. Thus we can safely assume that this pattern of pronominal use is rather

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

prototypical of non-standard spoken English in general rather than a pattern restricted to a regional linguistic variety[10].

3.2. The vernacular view

In three essays very similar in content, Svartengren (1927, 1928, 1954), one of the earliest scholars to study Modern English gender variation in detail, investigated exceptional uses of feminine pronouns for inanimate referents. He based his study on works of American *fiction*. His database included 79 texts of contemporary American authors, among them such well-known names as Jack London and Mark Twain. His analysis revealed that there is a tendency for American fiction writers and the characters they portray to use feminine forms when referring to inanimate entities. Interestingly enough, a similar phenomenon does not occur for the masculine counterparts. A possible explanation for this state of affairs might be that he did not encounter strange masculine forms or, at least, they were far fewer that feminine ones and thus these forms did not deserve any comment. The non-existence, or at least the extreme scarcity, of masculine pronouns referring to inanimate entities in American fiction is in line with the pattern described above and supported by various dialectal studies that for the average speaker of American English the gendered pronoun of choice is feminine.

It is worth noting that all of the instances of feminine pronouns used to denote inanimate referents stems from males, either in direct speech or some sort of internal dialogue, or simply because the author is a man. Additionally, another noteworthy feature about Svartengren's study is that novels dealing with upper and middle class life contributed very little to his database. For him the phenomenon is clearly not geographically restricted but, at the same time, **vernacular** and **rural** in nature, opposing thus literary language. Thus his findings need to be treated with some caution. Svartengren himself is aware of the bias of his database when he argues that:

> Examples show clearly that it is a distinct *colloquialism* at home chiefly among men familiar with the stern realities of life and whose speech is *uninfluenced by literature* – this practically all over the United States and Canada. Most of the material [....] hails from *the fur, the timber, the miming, and the cow countries*, which may, or may not, represent the actual state of things, for we must add, works describing life in the industrial centers have been drawn upon only to a limited extent. (Svartengren 1927:113; my emphasis)

Svartengren (1927, 1928) lists several classes of nouns that take the anaphoric feminine pronoun and that, due to the diversity of referent nouns, should more appropriately be seen as a collection of nouns which often share no more than one semantic feature. Svartengren (1927:110) himself is well aware of this: "every attempt to confine to certain categories of nouns the instances when the feminine is to be used must be abortive". Working from the premise that the use of the feminine for inanimate objects is an American phenomenon that

[10] For an analysis of gender-related patterns of pronominal use in West Country and Newfoundland dialect corpora, see Wagner (2003).

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

has influenced British English, he identifies the following classes of objects that can take the feminine:

1. Concrete things made or worked upon by man:
- a) Machinery, industrial plants
- b) Hollow things, receptacles
  - i. Rooms, houses, and their uses
  - ii. Musical instruments
- c) Other things made, created, worked or worked upon by man
  - i. Various small object not
  - ii. Large scale undertakings
  - iii. Picture, film, newspaper
  - iv. Clothing, wooden leg
  - v. Food and drink
  - vi. Coins, money, amount of money, amount generally
  - vii. Organized body
  - viii. Districts
  - ix. Road, trail, distance
  - x. Natural resources exploited by man

2. Actions, abstract ideas:
- a) Actions
  - i. Expressions containing an imperative
  - ii. Other expressions denoting actions
- b) Abstract ideas
  - i. Pronoun referring to substantive mentioned
  - ii. No substantival propword

3. Nature and natural objects not worked upon by man:
- a) Nature
- b) Celestial bodies
- c) Geographical appellations
- d) Material nouns
- e) Seasons, periods
- f) Fire, temperature, weather conditions, ice, snow
- g) Human body and its parts

The feature that unifies these three categories is that the use of *she* reflects **emotional interest** on the part of the speaker, a bond of living and working together. Svartengren concludes that "the emotional character is the distinguishing feature of the phenomenon. Consequently, *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" (Svartengren 1927:109).

At this point one issue deserves particular attention. As we have already seen in the previous section, some of Svartengren's categories include items which are capable of

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

triggering feminine pronouns even in the **standard language** (e.g. nature, celestial bodies, cities, etc).

Svartengren supplies many examples illustrating the classes listed above, some of which are cited below:

(26) Start **her** off! (referring to making pancakes)
(27) Watch out! Here **she** comes! (speaker is sea-sick)
(28) "How do you like it, Tim?" "**She**'s is alright." "Fill **'er** up!" (refuelling a vehicle)

After having dismissed possible influence by foreign languages, the explanation Svartengren offers for the choices regarding the use of anaphoric gendered pronouns in spoken American English is grounded in the influence of other regional varieties. Svartengren argues that, although this phenomenon may have its origins in Great Britain, it is now American at heart "and is, no doubt, rather slowly invading British English as well, aided possibly by northern dialectal influence" (Svartengren 1927: 113).

Although Svartengren associates the choices of anaphoric pronouns outlined above with lower (working) classes, he does not dismiss them as wrong or a result of poor learning. Rather, he assumes that the "emotional character is the distinguishing feature of the phenomenon (Svartengren 1928:51) and subsumes it under the more general label of personification. He argues that emotional interest is "mirrored by the feminine gender" (Svartengren 1927:110) and the use of the personal pronoun *she* instead of *it* to refer to various classes of inanimate entities, such as tools, instruments, machinery, etc., can be accounted for in terms of the "familiarity and the feeling of companionship between the artisan and his tools" (*ibid*.). Svartengren's "emotional interest" amounts in fact to some form of personal involvement rather than personification in its strict sense.

4. Canadian English

In her doctoral thesis, Morris (1991) investigates the category of gender in modern Canadian English, drawing on both spoken and written data. Although her study is not corpus-based, it deserves consideration since it addresses all possible types of referents, from human to animals and inanimates, and it also includes personification and other relevant factors that may influence pronominal usage.

4.1. Animal denotata

Morris' criteria for assigning gender are very much in line with the factors that have been identified as crucial in previous research. Animals playing a particular role in discourse will be referred to as *he* or *she* rather than *it*. **Tabel 6** shows the categories that Morris distinguishes.

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

it	background, non-individual; generally accepted behaviour of species
he	foreground, specific; individual; behaviour different from expected norm/peculiar
she	behaviour typical of species

Table 6 Gender assignment for animal denotata according to Morris (1991)

Table 6 highlights two major traits that occur in studies investigated the catagorization of animals references according to gender:

- The major distinction between animate and inanimate reflected in the use of *it* vs. *he*/*she*
- The factor responsible for a change in the gender assignment pattern is pragmatic rather than grammatical: an animal that is foregrounded as the topic of a conversation will very likely be referred to as *he* or *she*.

In her data *he* rather than *she* is the most frequently used anaphoric pronoun to substitute for nouns denoting animals. Moreover, Morris relates the choice between *he* or *she* to the behaviour of the animal in question. The data Morris uses for her analysis shows that feminine pronouns referring to animals are rare in Canadian English. **Figure 1** shows the hierarchical system for assigning gender to nouns denoting animals according to Morris (1991:125):

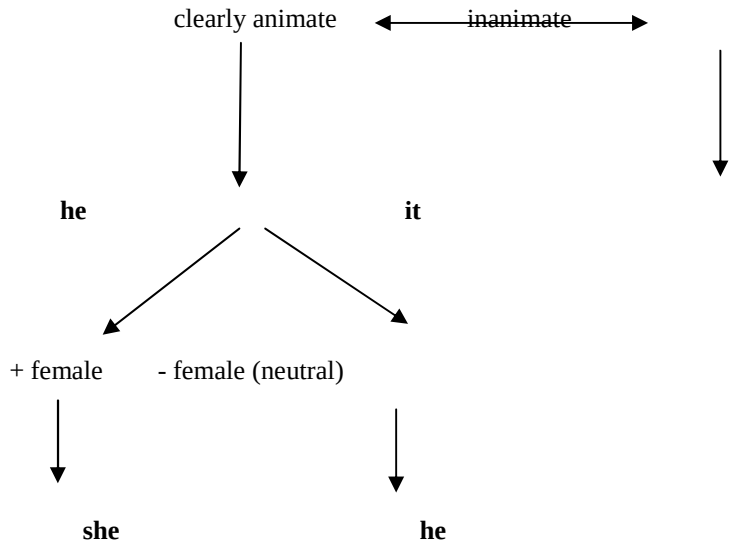


Figure 1 Gender assignment for nouns denoting animals in Morris (1991)

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

4.2. Biologically inanimate denotata

Morris' data show that, unlike the use of anaphoric pronouns referring to animals, inanimate pronominalization predicts the use of *she* rather than *he*. In her opinion, "*speaker familiarity"* is responsible for many of the instances of the feminine pronoun *she* used to refer to inanimate entities.

Very often, the feminine pronoun occurs in imperative sentences. Morris argues that the use of *it* would convey the sentence the illocutionary force of an order. The feminine pronoun *she*, on the other hand, has an inviting, "attenuating effect" (Morris 1991: 159). Such an *attenuating effect* can easily be assumed as an explanatory factor for the occurrences of non-referential feminine forms in general. Additionally, Morris contrasts the use of f*eminine* and *neuter* pronominal forms along another dimension:

she ⟶ particular denotatum, particular impressions of a given denotatum
it ⟶ concept/norm of that type of denotatum

What plays an important role in choosing the pronominal substitute is the prototypicality of a given referent. While a prototypical *denotatum* will generally be referred to as *it*, the speaker has the tendency to shift to a feminine form as soon as attention is called to anything peculiar or noteworthy about the referent.

Unlike the use of pronominal substitutes for animate *denotata* identified in Morris' data, masculine pronouns are basically non-existent for inanimate referents. She points out that "while *masculine reference to any type of inanimate denotatum is extremely rare*, no examples at all were found in which a native English speaker used *he* to represent an intangible, difficult-to-identify type of denotatum" (Morris 1991:164; my emphasis).

Based on the few examples of masculine pronouns referring to inanimate entities that she was able to collect[11], Morris establishes the following contrasts between the uses of *she* and *he*:

she ⟶ familiarity, well-known; predictable, foreseeable
he ⟶ maintains features of the unknown; less familiar, unpredictable, more individualistic

According to Morris (1991:175), "the primary function of pronoun gender" is "to represent and express the manner in which a speaker has formed his mental image of the denotatum". Overall, pronoun choice is thus largely based on **discourse-pragmatic factors**, and in Morris' system, generalizations or predictions are difficult, if not impossible, to make as it is predominantly the speaker's world view that influences the choice of a pronominal form.

---

[11] Morris' database for this category is rather small in comparison to other categories. Of the approximately 1,500 examples which make up her overall database, only 80 instances of masculine pronominalization are used to refer to inanimate entities. These include 15 instances of personification and about 30 examples taken from other authors' studies (*cf.* Morris 1991:166).

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

5. Conclusion

Much of the current work on Modern English gender shows that gendered references depend on the context and register of discourse as well as the *attitudes of speakers*, all of which are affected and in many ways determined by the social concepts of sex and gender. The way in which English language users make distinctions between *male* and *female* and between *masculine* and *feminine* in their *culture* will be reflected in the distinctions they make between *masculine* and *feminine* in their *language*, as long as the gender system is a semantic one. Like gender in society, gender in the English language represents a set of constructed categories, categories whose boundaries will change over time, reflecting the evolution of ideas about sex and gender.

Instances of gendered anaphoric pronouns that cross biological lines are not exceptions to an underlying "real" or "unmarked" system of natural gender; they are part of a natural gender system which is natural because it corresponds to speakers' ideas about and constructions of gender in the world about which they speak.

Sections **3** and **4** should have clarified a number of issues. Although the varieties and methodologies investigated could not have been more different, these studies have come to very similar conclusions. In everyday, casual spoken English, possibly world-wide, the pronoun of choice when referring to an inanimate noun and wishing to convey extra-linguistic information is a form of the feminine pronoun *she*[12]. Mostly, this extra-linguistic information has been identified as connoting some sort of **emotional involvement**, either positive or negative. In contrast, the pronoun signifying non-involvement or simply disinterest is the neuter pronoun *it* which is reserved in prescriptive grammars for inanimate referents.

The corpus-based studies discussed in this paper reveal another interesting feature that has been ignored by prescriptive grammars. The sex of the speaker may influence the choice of the pronominal substitute to the extent to which women are more likely to use masculine forms in a number of contexts where male speakers prefer their feminine counterparts, particularly in domains associated with gender-related behaviour (e.g. cars, tools, etc.). Although concrete nouns receive gendered reference more often than abstract ones, there seems to be no restrictions, semantic or otherwise, on the type of noun that can take a feminine form in anaphoric reference.

Another interesting feature of non-dialectal spoken English is the use of the feminine pronoun *she* to refer to a hard-to-identify referent or to an entire situation, a usage shared by male and female speakers alike[13]. This usage has been identified in basically all major varieties of English[14].

Ovidius University Constanta, Romania

---

[12] This choice is by no means a new development, as Svartengren's data indicate (1927, 1928, 1954).

[13] This pattern of pronoun choice identified in the spoken Standard described in sections 3 to 5 stands in sharp contrast to the dialect systems of Southwest England and Newfoundland, where the masculine pronoun he and its corresponding dative-accusative forms occur in a large percentage in the slots filled by the feminine pronoun (cf. Wagner 2003).

[14] In the Australian and New Zealand English systems this usage has been reported to be on the increase (Pawley 1995a, b).

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

References

Baron, Naomi S., (1971): "A reanalysis of English grammatical gender", in *Lingua* 27:113-140

Biber *et al*. (1999): *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman

Brinton, Laurel J., (2000): *The Structure of Modern English*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins

Burchfield, R.W. (ed.) (1998): *The New Fowler's Modern English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Corbett, Greville G. (1991): *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crystal, David, (1995): *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Curzan, Anne, (2003): *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Huddleston, Rodney D. and Pullum, Geoffrey K. (2002): *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Joly, A. (1975): "Toward a theory of gender in modern English" in A. Joly and T. Fraser (eds) *Studies in English grammar*. Paris: Editions universitaires, 227-87

Kortmann, Bernd, (1999): *Linguistik: Essentials*. Berlin: Cornelsen

Leisi, Ernst and Mair, Christian, (1999): *Das heutige Englisch: Wesenszüge und Probleme*. Heidelberg: Winter

MacKay, Donald and Konishi, Toshi, (1980): "Personification and pronoun problem" in *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 3: 149-163

Marcoux, Dell R. (1973): "Deviation in English gender" in *American Speech* 48: 98-107.

Markus, Manfred (1988): "Reasons for the Loss of Gender in English" in D. Kastovsky and G. Bauer (eds.) *Luick Revisited. Papers Read at the Luick-Symposium at Schloß Liechtenstein, 15.-18.9.1985*, Tübingen: Narr: 241-258.

Mathiot, Madeleine and Roberts, Marjorie (1979): "Sex roles as revealed through referential gender in American English" in Madeleine Mathiot (ed.), *Ethnolinguistics: Boas, Sapir and Whorf Revisited*. The Hague: Mouton, 1-47

McArthur, Tom, (1992): *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Morris, Lori, (1991): *Gender in Modern English: The system and its uses*, PhD thesis, Université Laval, Quebec

Orsman, H.W. (ed.), (1997): *The Dictionary of New Zealand English*. Auckland/ Oxford: Oxford University Press

Payne, John and Huddleston, Rodney D. (2002): "Noun and Noun phrases" in Rodney D. Huddleston and Geoffrey K. Pullum, *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Pawley, Andrew, (1995a): "Gender assignment in Tasmanian Vernacular English", Australian National University: unpublished draft

Pawley, Andrew, (1995b): "Some characteristics of Tasmanian Vernacular English", Paper presented at the Australian Linguistic Conference, Canberra, September, 1995

Quirk, Randolph *et al.* (1985): *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman

Stefanescu, Ioana, (1988): *English Morphology*, vol.2. Bucuresti: Tipografia Universitatii Bucuresti

Svartengren, T. Hilding, (1927): "The feminine gender for inanimate things in Anglo-American" in *American Speech* 3: 83-113

Svartengren, T. Hilding (1928): "The use of the personal gender for inanimate things" in Dialect Notes 6:7-56

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)

Svartengren, T. Hilding (1954): "The use of feminine gender for inanimate things in American colloquial English" in *Moderna Sprak* 48: 261-292

Traugott, Elizabeth Closs, (1972): *A History of English Syntax*. New York: Holt

Wagner, Susanne (2003): *Gender in English pronouns: Myth and reality*, PhD thesis, University of Freiburg

Wales, Katie, (2002): "Everyday verbal mythology: Pronouns and personification in non-literary English" in S. Scholz, M. Klages, E. Hantson and U. Romer (eds.) *Language, Context and Cognition*. *Papers in Honour of Wolf-Dietrich Bald's 60th Birthday*. Munchen: Langenscheidt-Longman, 327-335

BDD-A3709 © 2009 Ovidius University Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.58 (2026-11-16 17:12:43 UTC)