

How gendered language shapes the way we see the world

November 29 2017, by Ella Tennant



Credit: NastyaSensei from Pexels

"But ol' man river,

He jes' keeps rollin' along!"

Is water male or female – and does it really matter? Unlike languages such as French, Spanish and German, English does not allocate gender to words. Although some things, ships and countries for example, often have feminine associations, there are no grammatical rules to make something either male or female.

Cognitive research has suggested that [language](#) and the way people use it has a profound influence on how we see the world. Water, for example, is often more associated with concepts of femininity – the river Ganges (Ganga) is well-known as a [feminine sacred symbol](#) of Indian culture in addition to being a central source of survival – but in the famed Hammerstein and Kern song, Ol' Man River, the river Mississippi is portrayed as a man.

The feminine Ganges symbolises [faith, hope, culture and sanity](#) – and, since the beginning of time, "she" has been as a source of livelihood for millions of people. By contrast, the endless, uncaring flow of the "old man" Mississippi is seen as a [metaphor for the struggles and hardships](#) of the men forced to work on it.

Making the world with words

The allocation of a specific gender to an object or feature of our landscape might not be a result of [conceptual categorisation](#) and this is supported by an examination of noun classes and "gender shifts" across different grammatical systems. Is a French car (female) different in any way to a Spanish (male) car or is it just a question of grammar without connotation or semantics?

It might be reassuring to learn that gender categories did [once exist in English](#) (from around 750AD), but although linguists do not know why, these gender distinctions began to slowly disappear, first in the north of England and, by the time that Chaucer was writing in Middle English,

English grammar had become simplified.

The power of language and the importance of gender neutrality in English played a dominant role in [mid-20th century feminist discussion](#) which was inspired by French structural linguists (male) such as the Swiss linguist [Ferdinand de Saussure](#), whose work focused on the patterns and functions of language as a system of signs, and post-structuralists such as [Michel Foucault](#), [Jean Baudrillard](#) and [Roland Barthes](#), who allocated importance to the meaning conveyed within the signs and symbols and believed that our realities are created by the languages we use.

Through their work, the theory of gender neutrality gained wider attention – along with the idea that conscious changes to language might support gender equality. [Feminist analysis](#) of the English language led to the idea that language has the power to create and enforce gender determinism and the marginalisation of the feminine.

While in French, in the name of inclusivity, there is currently a move away from the use of the masculine as the default for nouns, the reverse is occurring in English in order to provide gender neutral words and labels.

Jeanne Moreau will be "une actrice" and Vanessa Redgrave "an actor". In both cases, these are major steps towards gender inclusivity. In both languages, the words and the semantic gender empower the writer or speaker who uses them. But does gendered language affect our perceptions of the world – and our sense of selves and culture?

Tongue twister

If the language we use and the way in which we use it shapes how we think, school children with inquiring minds should never have been

castigated for asking why there were no women in history books filled with the exploits of "man". Gendered discourse patterns are shaped in childhood and this has [often been cited](#) as the source of miscommunication between the sexes.

As the names and labels we use form our perception of the world around us, grammatical gender categories: masculine, feminine and neutral, have been a source of frustration for linguists since [their creation by Protagoras](#) in the fifth century. Not only was there a division between languages with gendered noun classes and those without, but beliefs about sexuality informed this decision.

According to [Chomsky's theories on language](#), popular in the 1960s and 1970s, there is a universal grammar – and languages do not significantly differ from one another. This does not, however, consider how language may be used as a marker or indicator of the speaker's cultural identity which can be projected and shaped with sexual metaphor and gendered words.

But what of the river? Water possesses a magical quality which enables it to absorb our imaginings and projections – the perfect gender fluid shapeshifter. Our understanding and experience of water is deeply personal – and for this reason it is often easily equated with spirituality, sexuality, mysticism and the soul. As a physical force, water can [reflect and reinforce gender inequality](#): in terms of economics, work and spiritual and social interaction, women's and men's relationship with and activities around water are often very different.

The contrast between the Ganges and the Mississippi demonstrates this to some extent and shows that we do project our sense of self and personal experience on to the way we communicate and that we use gendered words to do this. As a naturally evolving language, English provides freedom for expression beyond the confines of [gender](#) rules –

not only as a means of communication, but also as a representation of cultural identity.

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