

Appendix 4 – Term Paper

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Pronominal Gender in Children's Fiction

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1. Introduction

The pronominal system of Modern Standard English distinguishes three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter. The criteria according to which they are distributed are humanness (animacy) and the sex of the referent. What follows from this is that male humans are referred to with the masculine pronoun *he* and female humans are referred to with the feminine pronoun *she*, while, with a few exceptions, almost all other entities are referred to with neuter *it*.¹ Systems like this are called natural gender systems. In contrast, pronominal systems like that of the German language include entities with no natural sex within the sex-related categories. Therefore, it is admittedly not easy to learn, but at least easy to decide which pronoun to use i.e. in reference to antecedents with no natural gender or unknown sex (Der Stuhl (masc.), Die Katze (fem.)). In the English language, the circumstances are different. When e.g. talking about animals of unknown sex, the most conventional way would be to refer to them with the inanimate pronoun *it*. It is, however, also possible to use the masculine or the feminine pronouns. What are the criteria according to which this distribution is governed? One hypothesis that has been set up by Siemund (Siemund, 2008) is that the choice of pronouns crucially depends on the degree of individuation of the referents. The most important objective of this research is to determine whether this assumption proves to be consistent. Furthermore, the interchangeable usage of gender-specific and gender neutral pronouns in reference to animals and monsters of unknown sex is going to be analyzed. The study is based on a work of children's fiction, namely A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*. Children's fiction in general, and this piece in particular, was chosen as this paper's object of study since it features a great number of different animals and monsters and therefore serves as a good empirical basis.

The paper will be organized as follows: The pronominal gender system as established in Modern Standard English will be outlined in chapter 2, while chapter 3 deals with the Hierarchy of Individuation. Hereafter, major claims on the choice of gender-specific pronouns over neuter ones will be set up in chapter 4. The paper will

¹ All cases of the pronouns are going to be noted, but, going forward, for simplicity's sake, *his*, *him*, and *himself* will be assumed under *he*; *hers*, *her* and *herself* under *she*; and *its* and *itself* under *it*.

then go on with the analysis of *Winnie-the-Pooh* in chapter 5. For this the collected data will be presented, evaluated and analyzed. The findings of the study are going to be summarized in chapter 7.

2. Modern Standard English

The criteria according to which pronouns are distributed in Modern Standard English are humanness (animacy) of the referent and the sex of the referent. This shows that the pronominal gender system of Modern Standard English has a clearly semantic basis. The use of the masculine pronoun *he*, the feminine pronoun *she* and the neuter pronoun *it* is determined by the qualities of the referent. There are no gender distinctions in the plural of the third person, in the first person or in the second person.

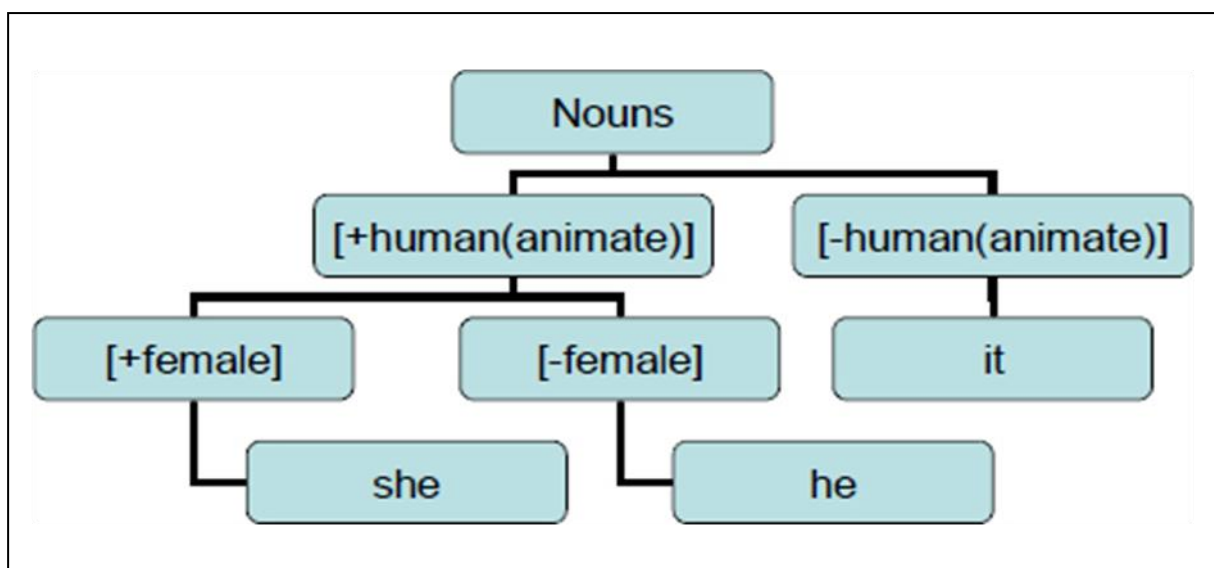


Figure 1 Pronominal Gender in Modern Standard English (Siemund, 2008: p.148)

The *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language* (Siemund: p.152) distinguishes nine classes of gender, which can be seen in figure 2. The fact that there are nouns of variable gender, leads to variations in the system of pronominal gender. These variations will be described in the following. Dual gender nouns that do not specify the sex of the referent give rise to some inconsistencies concerning the choice between the masculine and the feminine pronouns. Since humanness of

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the referent is not questioned with nouns like parent, cousin, servant etc.,
the neuter pronoun it is not taken into consideration here.

| | Gender Class | Example | Pronoun |
|--------------|----------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|
| animate | male | father, brother | who - he |
| | female | mother, sister | who - she |
| personal | dual | doctor, teacher | who - he/she |
| | common | baby, child | who - he/she/it which - it |
| | collective | family, police | who - they which - it |
| non-personal | higher male animal | bull, dog | which - it (who) - he |
| | higher female animal | cow, cat | which - it (who) - she |
| | lower animal | ant, flea | which - it (he/she) |
| inanimate | inanimate | box, table | which - it |

Figure 2 The Gender System of English

This is not the case with common gender nouns. Nouns like child, baby or infant allow reference with either masculine, feminine or neuter pronouns. The decision between the animate and inanimate pronouns depends on the degree of specificity of the reference. Specific reference like that of a mother to her child is combined with animate pronouns, while generic reference generally makes use of the inanimate one.

Animals can be referred to by all three pronouns. However, there are some distributional rules. Masculine and feminine pronouns tend to be used for higher (domestic) animals, whereas neuter it is used for lower animals. Furthermore, animal nouns can be divided into three gender classes: Higher male animals, which are referred to with the masculine pronoun *he*, higher female animals, which are referred to with the feminine pronoun *she* and lower animals which are referred to with the neuter pronoun *it*. If the sex of the animal under consideration is unknown, it is also possible to refer to it with the masculine pronoun *he*.

In addition, there is some variation concerning the distribution of animate and inanimate pronouns in the description of inanimate objects in Modern Standard

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English. Animate pronouns sometimes tend to be used for inanimate objects. Examples of this are countries, ships and cars, which are often referred to with the feminine pronoun. An important factor governing the distribution of animate and inanimate pronouns in reference to all nouns is the Hierarchy of Individuation which will be explained in the following chapter (cf. Siemund: p. 147-174).

3. Hierarchy of Individuation

All entities may be ordered along a so-called Hierarchy of Individuation as shown in figure 3.

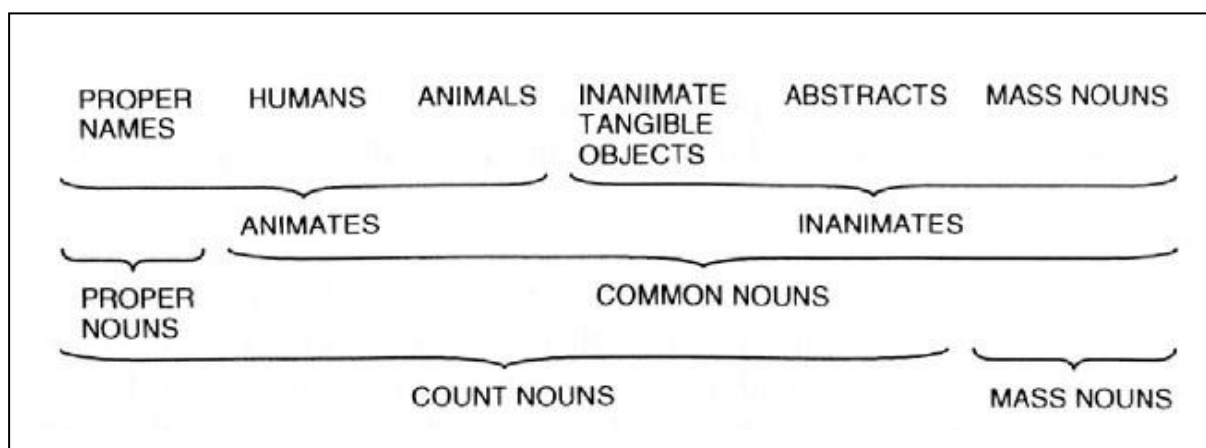


Figure 3 The Hierarchy of Individuation

Proper Names are on the very left of the scale since they refer to highly individuated entities. By contrast, mass nouns are on the very right of the hierarchy since they are mostly not individuated at all. Descriptions of animals as well as tangible objects are located at the intermediate position on the scale. Abstract nouns are located between inanimate nouns and mass nouns because they can both be countable and uncountable.

The entities referred to by the nouns on the left side of the hierarchy are picked out with the animate pronouns *he* and *she*, while the nouns on the right side are referred to by the inanimate pronouns *it*. As Prof. Peter Siemund has argued in his book *Pronominal Gender in English*, the “animate pronouns like *he* and *she* encroach upon the Hierarchy of Individuation from the left extending their domain of usage to the right while neuter *it* proceeds in the opposite direction i.e. from right to

7. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to determine whether the Hierarchy of Individuation governs the choice of animate over inanimate pronouns in children's fiction. Moreover, it also set out to examine how the choice between gender-specific and gender-neutral pronouns is approached.

One of the more significant findings to emerge from both examinations is that the hierarchy has a major influence on the choice of animate over inanimate pronouns in children's literature. This result becomes especially apparent when regarding the interchangeable usage of masculine and neuter pronouns. However, our findings suggest that nearly all of the variables of Mackay and Konishi are closely related to the Hierarchy of Individuation.

A second major finding was that a preference of masculine pronouns over feminine and neuter ones is quite common in children's fiction. A possible explanation for this observation might be that both main characters, of Winnie-the-Pooh as well as

Yukon Ho!, are of masculine gender. Furthermore, all of the feminine antecedents represent possibilities for future matrimony, indicate a maternal or other relational connection to characters or are stereotypical examples of femininity. However, future research on this issue needs to be undertaken and might be more suitable for the fields of gender studies or sociolinguistics.

8. Bibliography

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