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► **To cite this version:**

Laure Gardelle. Pronoun activism and the power of animacy. Laura L. Paterson. The Routledge Handbook of Pronouns, Routledge, 2023, 9781032394749. hal-04483700

HAL Id: hal-04483700

<https://hal.science/hal-04483700>

Submitted on 29 Feb 2024

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Pronoun activism and the power of animacy

Laure Gardelle

This is only an author pre-print version of a chapter published in the *Routledge Handbook of Pronouns*, ed. Laura Patterson, 2023. Please consult the Routledge volume for the final version.

1. Introduction

When promoting a cause, speakers may make intentional and proactive choices in their use of language, and provide arguments to convince others to make similar choices. This attitude, when it involves pronouns, is known as ‘pronoun activism’ (e.g. Egginton 2018). The concept is primarily applied to ‘gender pronoun activism,’ that is, attitudes that challenge the binary opposition between the masculine and feminine genders for humans (see Part VI), but the aim of this chapter is to bring to light another feature of pronouns that is targeted by some activists: animacy, defined as the distinction between animates and inanimates or, more accurately, the distinction between humans, animals and inanimates.

Animacy matters because it is filtered by human perception. As such, it is not a binary category based on the feature [+/- alive], but ‘some kind of assumed cognitive scale extending from human through animal to inanimate’ (Yamamoto 1999: 1). This cognitive animacy scale, which places humans at the top, has a long history in Western thought, dating back at least to Antiquity, then on to the *Scala Naturae* of Scholastic philosophers and the medieval Great Chain of Being, and is still influential despite the Darwinian revolution (Marino 2010). It is so fundamental that it has repercussions on the grammar of some languages, along a corresponding linguistic scale known as the Animacy Hierarchy, the first modern description of which is attributed to Michael Silverstein in the 1970s (Corbett 2000). One version of it is the following: human > animate > inanimate > abstract (Siewierska 2004: 149). This Hierarchy has been found to affect categories such as ergativity, number, case, person, syncretism or gender, and occasionally word order (see Gardelle and Sorlin 2018 for an overview). For instance, in Georgian, the verb takes plural agreement if the subject is animate, but not if it denotes an inanimate (Smith-Stark 1974: 657). Animacy also interacts with other scales, especially the scales of empathy, person and definiteness (Siewierska 2004: 149).

An animacy effect such as the Georgian number split has never been perceived as a problem – so far at least. What activists target, rather, are cases in which the divide established by the Animacy Hierarchy runs directly counter to the world view they try to promote. This chapter

will focus on three cases for which pronouns are regularly mentioned. They concern the English language. First, some animal rights activists and ecolinguists reject the default use of *it* for animals, because it singles out humans at the top of a hierarchy. Secondly, in the abortion debate, pro-lifers challenge the use of the neuter for fetuses, because to them they are persons. Finally, among inanimates, feminists criticize the use of *she* for ships, hurricanes and the like, because of the associated connotations of the feminine gender, which they view as a remnant of male domination; they argue for a generalization of *it* instead. As with ‘gender pronoun activism’ mentioned earlier, these issues have to do with the linguistic gender system, but they concern the *he/she* vs. *it* component, rather than the distinction between *he* and *she*.

The rationale behind pronoun activism is that language influences the way we think, without our being aware of it. Linguistic gender itself is ‘a repository of beliefs’ which ‘tends to mirror social stereotypes and patterns of human perception’ (Aikhenvald 2016: 4). As such, it does not reflect reality so much as construct a view of it, so that conventions ought to be challenged when they convey inadequate world views (Heuberger 2017). Pronouns, and more generally language, are of course just one of several dimensions that require action, so that no one is merely a pronoun (or language) activist. But as language itself is ‘a form of social practice,’ with speakers perpetuating conventions and their asymmetries (Fairclough 2013), pronoun activists feel that changes in pronoun use are one way to make semantically motivated categories more transparent reflections of (adequate) world views.

Pronoun activism for animacy-related causes, as found among animal rights activists or ecolinguists, pro-lifers, and feminists, differs from activism against the binary masculine/feminine contrast for humans in two respects. First, there are no calls for changes to the pronominal paradigm itself (pronoun coinages), only for changes to conventions of use. Secondly, pronouns are not always as central: as we will see, the abortion debate, in particular, primarily involves categorisation by nouns (*preborn child* vs. *fetus*). This does not make animacy-related pronoun activism any less important to study, because it calls for a fine understanding of the relationship between world views and grammatical categories, and of what altering usage entails.

2. Critical summary of issues and topics

A key initial question is what exactly it takes for a conventional pronoun use to pose problems for activists. Because pronouns are grammatical words (as opposed to lexical), their primary contribution to discourse is functional – and as such, is not viewed as problematic. The feature of definiteness, for instance, merely gives instructions to access the referent in context, based on whether this referent is identifiable. A pronominal feature may become a locus of political activism if it has a further categorizing role – like gender in English. Even then, not all categorizations are considered problematic. For example, there are no societal issues about spatial deixis as encoded in English *this* vs. *that* (proximity to the speaker vs. distance). For a pronominal feature to become a problem, the categorization it establishes (or conventionally licenses) has to run counter to a world view. Pronoun activists have targeted two such features for animacy-related issues: person (on a single occasion, to my knowledge) and gender (especially in English).

The person feature, in most languages at least, establishes a distinction between the discourse roles of speaker (or a group that includes the speaker), addressee(s), and third parties (Siewierska 2004). As such, the referent of the first-person pronoun *we* is a plurality that has to include the speaker, but may be augmented with any other entities. The New Nature Writers, an organization which brings together scientists, travel writers, concerned citizens and others, noticed that in nature writing, these other referents were typically human. This use is a problem to them because it runs counter to the view of nature that they promote ('New Nature'), which is that 'all plants, animals, and people, all rivers, oceans, mountains, deserts, and forests, are connected,' so that humans are not the only perceivers or living beings in their environment (New Nature Writers 2022). As a result, New Nature Writers advocate the use of an inclusive *we* that brings together the narrator (or author) and nonhuman participants, in order to establish temporary relations of equivalence and bridge the default human/animal divide (Fairclough 2003, Stibbe 2015). For example, in (1), *we* and *our* bring the author and a bird together, which makes them members of a single category – identified later on as *creatures on earth* (Stibbe 2015: 116).

- (1) Together, in spite of our obvious differences, we were as bound as any two creatures on earth by something immeasurable – life itself (Woolfson 2013: 8).

Aside from this very restricted criticism against some uses of *we*, the most commonly targeted feature for animacy-related pronoun activism is by far gender. Beyond its major

reference tracking function (gender signals co-reference or syntactic dependence through agreement, Corbett 1991: 322, Aikhenvald 2016: 52), gender has a categorizing role: all gender systems have a semantic core, based on animacy, humanness or sex (Aikhenvald 2016: 65). Not all gender systems encode animacy-related contrasts. For instance, in Dizi, an Omotic language of Ethiopia, the feminine gender groups together nouns for females and diminutives, and the masculine is used for all other nouns, whether they denote animates or inanimates (Allan 1976, Corbett 1991: 11). A further distinction must be made between predominantly semantic systems, such as Dizi or English, and mainly formal systems such as French or German (Corbett 1991). In formal systems, gender is much more highly grammaticalized, so that the gender of individual nouns is not meaningful outside references to humans, deities and a minority of animals. For instance, in French, *fauteuil* ‘armchair_{MASC}’ does not entail that the referent is viewed as male-like, or *girafe* ‘giraffe_{FEM}’ that it is female or female-like. Gender for these nouns is largely assigned on phonological or morphological grounds; in that sense, it is arbitrary, despite occasional groupings (e.g. in German, nouns for cars are masculine, hyperonyms such as *Tier* ‘animal’ tend to be neuter, Kürschner 2020) or remotivation in cases of personification – personifications follow the gender of the noun, so that a *rose*_{FEM}, for instance, will be endowed with what is perceived as feminine qualities in poetry. As a consequence, French pronouns are not targeted by activists for animacy-related issues.

Conversely, the pronominal gender system of English undergoes criticism because gender selection depends on the conceptualization of the referent (hence the concept of ‘referential gender’). and because the primary distinction in the English gender system (*he/she* vs. *it*) follows the Animacy Hierarchy. It establishes a divide between humans at one end, referred to as *he* or *she* (more specifically humans viewed as persons, hence the possibility of *it* for babies in some contexts), and inanimates at the other end (the noun *thing* used non-metaphorically, for instance, is only compatible with *it*). This primary distinction is also reflected in relative pronouns (*who/which*) and, outside the gender system, in interrogative pronouns (*who/what*) and indefinite pronouns (*somebody/something*). This binary distinction, as we can see, does not cater specifically for animals. For them, there is ‘a high degree of variability’ (Corbett 1991: 12). By default, as they are non-human, *it* is more common: even when the sex is specified in the antecedent noun (e.g. *doe*), the neuter is still used in over 1/6 of cases (Gardelle 2012). But an ‘upgrading principle’ (Mathiot and Roberts 1979) may trigger the use of *he* or *she*, either because the animal is perceived as person-like (a proper

name excludes *it*), or out of interest or empathy (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 489). This upgrading principle is also at work for inanimates, for allegories or personifications but also, for a minority of speakers only, to emphasize interest or emotional involvement (such as familiarity, exasperation or enthusiasm). Examples include *She's a beauty!* for a motorbike or a satellite dish, *Is he washable?* about a bedspread in a shop, or even *She's snowing pretty good* to enthuse about the weather and prospects of great skiing (Svartengren 1927, Mathiot and Roberts 1979, Pawley 2002, Gardelle 2006, 2015a). Such uses are sometimes regional or dialectal (Pawley 2002, Siemund 2008), but the boundary with so-called 'standard' English is by no means watertight. There are also a few cases of conventionalized upgrading: grammars regularly record the use of *she* for ships, hurricanes or countries. For these, there is 'considerable variation among speakers,' with many using *it* (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 488); but in some communities of practice in particular, the neuter is less common. Examples are the Navy and maritime circles for ships, or historians for countries until the 1970s.

This animacy-based component constitutes the core of the English gender system, so that the masculine and feminine are sometimes grouped together under the umbrella term 'animate genders' (e.g. Siemund 2008). It is only once the choice to use an animate gender (rather than the neuter) has been made that the distinction between *he* and *she* comes in. This distinction is based on a contrast between male and female, and by extension, between supposedly male-like and female-like qualities. In addition, there are a few conventions, for which speakers do not actually choose which gender they will go for. For example, a ship, a hurricane or a country is conventionally referred to with *she* and not *he*; among allegories, Justice is conventionally a *she*, Death a *he*, with corresponding female and male figures.

As this brief description shows, a key element in the English gender system is that many antecedent nouns license agreement with not just one, but two or sometimes three genders (Huddleston and Pullum 2002). For instance, a bull may be referred to with *it* or *he*; a fish with *it*, *he* or *she*, regardless of sex, and so on. For all these referents, pronominal gender therefore carries contextual categorization, and is a matter of choice. Shared cultural representations lead to default choices; it is some of these defaults that pronoun activists challenge. We now turn to three case studies, to understand how pronoun activism fits in a broader fight for a cause.

3. Current contributions and research

3.1 Animal rights activists and ecolinguists

Animal rights activists and ecolinguists will be considered first because they challenge the top of the animacy scale (humans > animals), which, as we saw, is a cultural foundation in Western societies and underlies some components of grammar. Animal rights activists come from all walks of life; they promote a view of animals as sentient beings that have a right to be free of human exploitation. Ecolinguists are mostly academics, whose first aim, as described by the International Ecolinguistics Association, is ‘to develop linguistic theories which see humans not only as part of society, but also as part of the larger ecosystems that life depends on’ (IEA 2022). The fight of both groups is part of a broader environmentalist movement, which calls for a reassessment of humanity’s destructive relationship with nature and the environment (Shoreman-Ouimet and Kopnina 2015). To them, the idea that humans rank above animals, plants and minerals is an outdated anthropocentric view which leads people to consider nature primarily in terms of its usefulness to human beings (Heuberger 2017), and results in discrimination against other species (‘speciesism’). Language reflects this utilitarian anthropocentrism for animals, for instance, when it categorizes animals as ‘pets’, ‘livestock’ or ‘game’; when it has different terms for similar elements in humans and nonhumans (such as *eat/feed*, or *corpse/carcass*); when it fails to individuate animals, either through non-count grammar (e.g. *chicken, lamb*), possibly with a different word for the food and the living animal (*pork/pig*), or through lack of morphological variation (grammatically compulsory for *deer*; a common alternative to *-s* for *elk*; or an alternative chiefly restricted to contexts of hunting, shooting and conservation for *elephant*, as in *a herd of elephant* or *three elephant* – see Allan 1976: 103, Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 1588). It is as though each animal was just an easily replaceable specimen (Heuberger 2017, Sealey 2018).

Crucially for the present chapter, anthropocentrism is also manifest in the use of *it*, which erases sex distinctions and groups animals together with inanimates rather than humans (Heuberger 2017). As a result, some animal rights organizations, such as the Humane Society of the United States, propose to use the same pronouns for animals and humans, restricting the use of *it* to inanimates. When the sex is unknown, they advocate the same solutions as for humans (see 2): *they, he or she*, avoiding third-person singular pronouns, or other gender-inclusive forms.

- (2) Bats in houses can go unnoticed for years. Occasionally, a bat may accidentally find himself inside a home, flying around and landing on curtains or furniture. If you find

one in your house, don't panic. Most likely, you can send the bat on his or her way safely and humanely (Humane Society of the United States 2021).

Similarly, when the New International Version of the Christian Bible was revised to use gender-inclusive language (such as *people* instead of *men*), PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) asked the Committee on Bible Translation to use *he* or *she* instead of *it* for animals in their following edition (Sherrow 2013).

More recently, PETA has merged the fight for animal rights with fights against discriminations among humans, including the fight for gender equality: in 2021, the catchphrase on their welcome page (peta.org) read: 'Bigotry begins when categories such as race, age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, or species are used to justify discrimination.' The quest for continuity across species is sometimes also reflected in the extension of the word 'animal' to include humans, with the corresponding subclass of 'nonhuman animals.' This is controversial because *nonhuman* defines animals as what they are not (Moe 2014: ix). PETA, for instance, retains *animals* and *humans* on most of its website (e.g. 'The abuse that animals suffer at human hands [...] on its 'Animal Rights Issues' page), although one of its Teachkind resources takes *animal* as a hyperonym: 'humans (boy, girl, teacher, etc.) as well as other animals,' 'we use [*he/she*] when talking about living beings who are animals' (PETA 2022).

How would the suggested elimination of *it* for animals affect the grammatical gender system? It would require a major conscious effort on the part of speakers because it would change the prototypes at the very core of an internalized grammatical category: the prototypes for the animate gender classes would have to shift from humans alone (more specifically persons) to humans and animals. Still, the proposed change would not alter the broadest animacy-based criterion for gender assignment: the animate genders would continue to reflect some form of upgrading, in contrast to the neuter, which retains things as its prototypes. In this respect, the proposed change is potentially more easily acquirable than, for instance, the use of *it* as an epicene pronoun for human adults in sex-indefinite references. This was proposed by the *Woman's New World Dictionary* in 1973 in an attempt to replace the male-biased generic *he*. The idea was that *it* was used for some humans – as in *the baby was happy with its rattle* – and so could be extended to adults, with sentences such as *the applicant signed its name* (Baron 1986: 192). This proposal was too radical because it would have downgraded human adults in sex-indefinite references (going against the whole logic of the persons/things divide,

which automatically upgrades persons), while retaining the principle of upgraded persons in sex-specified references (e.g. *Mary was proud of her/*its promotion*).

Could the proposed systematic use of *he* and *she* for animals become standard English? Some ecolinguists and activists consider it misleading to regard ‘animals’ as a single step in the current animacy scale (Dahl 2000: 100). Permanent upgrading is relatively easy to achieve in animal rights discourse because it describes victims of human action (cases of cruelty, of animals killed for food, for scientific experiments, by pesticides), which favours individuation and feelings of empathy – besides, even a website such as *peta.org* shows very few gendered pronouns, because its non-specific statements are usually in the plural (e.g. *cows...they...*). But ecologist author Carl Safina (2017), for instance, suggests a distinction between what he calls ‘*who* animals’ such as elephants, which he defines as those animals that have social structures and aspire to higher rank, and others, like herrings, which he thinks of as ‘*it*’. On a more theoretical level, Heuberger (2017) identifies not one, but three possible stages for an egalitarian approach to nature, which he brings under the umbrella term ‘physiocentrism’. Animal rights discourse may be seen to correspond to the first stage: pathocentrism, which recognizes moral value only to beings that have a capacity to suffer (such as mammals, reptiles, fish, birds). One stage further, biocentrism extends moral value to all living beings, including amoebae and even plants – which undergo the same anthropocentrism as animals, from utilitarian categories (*weeds*) to non-count grammar (*clover*) (Heuberger 2017). The broadest approach, holism, includes nature as a whole, making existence the morally relevant criterion.

The broader the criterion, though, the less ‘people’s willingness to accept these philosophical views as the basis for a reform of language usage’, and there is no consensus among ecolinguists to date (Heuberger 2017). Stibbe (2012) even rejects the systematic proscription of *it* as political correctness. Adopting a global discourse analysis approach (after Fairclough 2003), he argues that it takes a whole combination of features to objectify animals. In (3), for instance, *it* is part of ‘a discourse of empathy and respectful distance’, and therefore does not in itself convey discrimination (Stibbe 2012: 5).

- (3) I stepped out from a clutch of trees and found myself looking into the face of one of the rare and beautiful bison that exist only on that island. Our eyes locked. When it snorted, I snorted back; when it lifted its shoulders, I shifted my stance; when I tossed my head,

it tossed its head in reply. I found myself caught in a nonverbal conversation with this Other (Abram 1996: 21).

Systematic upgrading by labelling the bison as *he* or *she* might even be regarded as a form of anthropomorphism – projecting human norms and patterns rather than seeing animals for what they are, and possibly denying them their differences in the process.

The issue of the best use of pronouns also echoes discussions as to the boundaries of the category of ‘persons’ in the philosophical sense, defined as ‘entities who possess a particular moral status’ (Chan and Harris 2011: 304). Chan and Harris (2011: 322), for instance, consider that paramecia and nematodes are ‘clearly not persons’, because they show no evidence of a capacity to value their own existence. A speaker who considers that a paramecia is not a person (philosophically speaking) is hardly likely to opt for systematic upgrading with *he* or *she*, because rejecting a sense of self in the animal goes against the semantic values of the animate genders.

The definition of what a ‘person’ is concerns entities beyond humans – animals, also transhumans, chimeras and animate machines, although there is no pronoun activism there (yet?) –, but it also concerns humans before birth (embryos, fetuses), which brings us to another case of pronoun activism: the abortion debate.

3.2 *The abortion debate*

The main linguistic issue in the abortion debate is how to name the embryo or, later on, the fetus, before birth. To pro-life activists, ‘embryo’ and ‘fetus’ are misnomers, because life begins at fertilization, and birth is only a ‘change in location’ (Live Action 2021). What others call an embryo or a fetus is an ‘unborn child’ or, as advocated by some more recently, a ‘preborn child’, a term which makes the coming birth more salient (Voice for Life 2014). In this perspective, unborn children are ‘the youngest among us’ (Live Action 2021), and ‘an unborn child is in fact a human person at conception’ (Illinois Right to Life 2021). This central naming issue has consequences for pronouns: whereas the standard pronoun for *embryo* and *fetus* is *it*, some pro-lifers argue against the use of *it*. Voice for Life (2014), for instance, advocates ‘Giv[ing] the preborn child a gender’ (more accurately, using an animate gender rather than *it*) as one of ‘ten ways you can reclaim language for LIFE’, that is, challenge conventions in language to ‘reinforce the humanity of the preborn child’ and thus

promote a pro-life attitude. This suggestion exploits the animacy-based component of the gender system, not the sex distinction:

- (4) Of course you don't know which gender the child is, however referring to the child as 'him' or 'her' validates the humanity of the child more than referring to the child as 'it.' For instance, instead of 'the abortionist rips the preborn child from out of its mother and throws it in the medical waste container,' try 'the abortionist rips the preborn child from out of her mother and throws her in the medical waste container'. (Voice for Life 2014)

This arbitrary ascription of a single gender runs counter to the values of *he* (male) and *she* (female) for humans, and is grammatically unrealistic. Another option, put forward for instance by O'Keefe (2004), is to follow the principles of sex-indefinite references to adults. Her example is *he/she* ('inserting a device into his/her head to suction the brain out, killing the child and collapsing his/her head...'), and other options include genderless solutions, such as repetition of the nominal group *the child* in the first sentence of extract (4) above. Note, however, that this sentence requires an effort because the repetition disrupts anaphora processing mechanisms: only a personal pronoun can indicate 'referential and attentional continuity' (Cornish 1999: 63, see also Gardelle 2015b).

Advocating the same pronoun uses as for human adults indirectly requires a change in references to (born) babies, where *it* is still found, especially in contexts of undifferentiation such as maternity hospitals (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 489). For instance, in its non-specific references, the website of the national Australian Government service 'Pregnancy Birth and Baby' (2021) reads 'your baby may have little hair on its head, but lots of soft body hair' besides 'Once your baby is stable, they may be transferred to the NICU or SCN.' The conventional use of *it* for babies does not mean that they are not viewed as human beings, of course, but probably derives from the idea that their ability to think and communicate, and perhaps their status as persons with moral rights and duties, are not fully fledged yet. This would be incompatible with pro-life arguments.

Conversely, pro-choicers focus on abortion as a human right for women (and sometimes, more recently, for any other pregnant parent, whether transgender or non-binary), because it involves issues of physical integrity, gender equality, health (access to safe, as opposed to clandestine, abortion) and the right to reproductive self-determination (e.g. Center for Reproductive Rights 2004). Even though the fetus is alive, early on it is not viable outside the

parent's body. The difference in conceptualization between pro-choicers and pro-lifers is particularly obvious in descriptions of the medical termination procedure. Where pro-lifers use 'the baby', pro-choicers and publicly funded institutions tend to reduce the fetus to inanimate matter with references to 'the pregnancy' (NHS 2021), 'the contents of the uterus' (Family Planning NSW 2021) or 'the uterine contents' (Our Bodies Our Selves 2014), even when they use 'the baby' elsewhere in articles on abortion. Any pronouns used to refer back to 'the pregnancy', for example, as a result of agreement, have to be *it*. Similarly, anaphoric pronouns for *embryo* and *fetus* are *it*, which is standard in English.

The two cases studied so far – animal rights and abortion – have one point in common: activists seek to shift the lines for third parties (animals, preborn children) that are viewed as voiceless victims. The final case of animacy-related activism in this chapter is different: feminist activists (mostly women) opposing the use of *she* for inanimate objects/concepts are part of the group that stands to be discriminated against. Here again, language is just one target for activism and animacy-related issues may be only of minor concern.

3.3 *Feminism and women as objects*

The conventionalized use of *she* for inanimates such as ships, cars and hurricanes is rejected by pronoun activists as derogatory and patronizing to women. To Thomson (2017), for instance, '[r]eferring to cars as 'she' promotes the ideology that women are objects; things to be seen as property owned by men. For many, this notion is subconscious. However, subconscious or conscious, it's detrimental'. Pronoun activists advocate the use of *it* instead. What is at stake here is not the status of cars, or ships, or hurricanes, but that of women: what seems to be a *she/it* issue is in fact an attack on the connotations of the feminine gender. Thomson's (2017) idea is that upgrading a car stems from a relationship of dominance that echoes, and perpetuates, the patriarchal relationship that some men have to women.

Cars, ships and hurricanes might seem anecdotal, but in fact they are illustrations of a more general pattern. A number of gender scholars have concluded that the choice of *he* or *she* when upgrading inanimates follows representations of men and women, and that it is partly sexist because it reproduces an asymmetric relationship in which men are the norm (Romaine 1997: 52). Looking at gender selection (*he* vs. *she*) for inanimates in informal American English, by both men and women, Mathiot and Roberts (1979) conclude that men tend to picture themselves as conquerors, to view other men as equals (buddies or opponents), but to

stand in a relationship of dominance towards women – who are viewed as either challenges (difficult to conquer, possibly uncontrollable; a source of eagerness or resentment) or rewards (beautiful, precious, prized possessions). Women, on the other hand, only seem to define themselves in relation to men. They regard themselves as emotionally superior and more mature than men, whom they tend to picture as infantile, but they also picture themselves as challenges and rewards, with potentially negative connotations.

Subsequent feminist research on gender use for inanimates has focused more specifically on the general feminist idea that language ‘has been made by men’ and conveys a patriarchal bias (Spender 1985: 52). To Morris (1997), *she* is used when the referent is felt to ‘fall into the realm of what is already known or what is predictable’, ‘probably’ because women are the less dominant group. *He*, conversely, is used when the referent is viewed as having a potential for unpredictability, such as a bullet that is key evidence in a police case. Romaine (1999) suggests that women are portrayed as the ‘other’ (outwardly civilized, but ‘harbor[ing] an essentially wild inner nature’, strange territory to be conquered and defeated), and applies the concept to inanimates for which *she* is culturally the only possible animate gender: ships, hurricanes, cities, nations, countries, nature and so on, as well as a number of allegories such as Justice, Chastity or Fortune.

It remains to be seen whether the feminist ‘dominance’ reading can account for all gender uses: if we consider hurricanes, to Romaine (1999) the feminine reflects a wild, uncontrollable nature, whereas to Morris (1997), it corresponds to a seemingly contradictory idea of predictability (causing the expected kind of havoc, probably). The wealth of evidence, however, makes the existence of a pattern of asymmetry and dominance undeniable, and the same asymmetry has been found outside pronominal gender, for instance in pairs of gender-differentiated terms such as *mistress/master*, *lady/lord*, or *spinster/bachelor*, where the terms referring to females have derogatory and/or unprestigious connotations (Spender 1985). The exclusive focus of pronoun activists on a dominance reading might have been further prompted by the potentially greater visibility of uses of *she* by men. Conventionalized uses of *she* in professional circles or among enthusiasts tend only to be recorded in traditionally men-dominated domains – for ships, yachts and catamarans, locomotives, racing cars, motorbikes, bells, dying vats, and so on – and they are given written visibility through the websites of individual enthusiasts, clubs or museums, or published diaries (Gardelle 2006). Male use of *she* in informal or dialectal conversation has also been made visible through dialogues in

American fiction (see the many examples in Svartengren 1927). Conversely, a thorough search of the Internet or fiction does not yield any record of *she* (or *he*) in traditionally female working environments (such as typewriters in secretarial pools or sewing machines in factories). It is also mainly male speakers who, in the same sources, are shown to use the phrase *she's a beauty* to express enthusiasm over entities as diverse as a motorbike, a pool table, a satellite dish or a prized pen (Gardelle 2006). The phrase *he's a beauty* does not yield a single occurrence for inanimates on the Internet. Hurricanes are not referred to as *he*, even when they have a male name (Romaine 1999: 76). Neither are ships, even when they belong to a category in *-man* (man-of-war, whaleman, Indiaman) or have an individual male name (together with a male figurehead in older ships) (Gardelle 2006). For instance, HMS Royal George is referred to as *she* (Daly 2017). The same goes for locomotives, so that Big Boys (Steam Locomotives 2021) and the Flying Scotsman (McLean 2015) are *she* (or *it*).

Given this asymmetry between the feminine and the masculine, the use of *she* is viewed by feminists as reflecting and perpetuating the subordination of women. This holds even when the feminine conveys potentially positive qualities, such as nurturing and maternal behaviour in references to ships, or affection towards a tool or a machine for a workman (Romaine 1999: 77). To pronoun activists, such conventionalized connotations define a set of supposedly female qualities which trap women in a limited number of roles. They fail to capture the more varied reality of women's identities, and prevent them from participating in any other ways (Tennant 2019). In addition, association to the feminine gender has given rise to sexist humour, such as 'Like a woman, a ship is unpredictable', or patronizing metaphors such as 'the old girl' and the lover (or love of one's life), found for ships and planes in some press articles about professionals, at least in the 1990s (Romaine 1999: 59) and 2000s (Gardelle 2006: 196). One example is a *Northern Echo* article entitled 'The buoyant lady in Brian's life', about retired Merchant Navy engineer Brian Stringer, in which we learn that 'The lady in his life is the Princess Royal, the Hartlepool lifeboat which between 1939-69 saved 94 lives' (*The Northern Echo* 2002).

Two classes of inanimates received wide media coverage, with lasting consequences on pronouns: hurricanes and ships. Hurricanes were the focus of feminist activism in the 1970s in the United States, especially under the influence of Roxcy Bolton (Roberts 2017). As a result, the practice of giving female-only names to hurricanes at the Weather Bureau was given up in 1978 for the Eastern North Pacific, and 1979 for the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico,

in favor of a strict alternation between male and female names (National Hurricane Center 2021). More recently, a number of universities and press stylebooks have included recommendations against the use of *she*. For instance, the Boston University guidelines on inclusive language (2021) state: ‘The gender-neutral pronouns *it* and *its* are preferred when making reference to a storm, regardless of name.’

As for ships, *Lloyd’s List*, the authoritative newspaper of the shipping industry, hit the headlines when editor Leigh Smith decided to use *it* instead of *she* in the paper, first in 1998 (causing so much protest that *she* was restored), and then in 2002 (when the new editor, Julian Bray, went through with the reform) (BBC News 1998, Judd 2002). More recently, Scottish Maritime Museum director David Mann sparked criticism in 2019 when, after signage vandalism in the museum (feminine pronouns were scratched out), he announced that *she* would no longer be used on new signs. He told journalists the policy was put into place before the signs were defaced (Baynes 2019), but the debate received media coverage as far away as New Zealand (Tennant 2019).

In both instances, publicized arguments against the loss of *she* came mainly from professionals (sailors and maritime museum directors). They are of two kinds. One is semantic motivation: the feminine is said to express ‘affection by sailors who see their vessel as a maternal protector’ (Davies 2019). This is indeed found in sailor poetry, which conveys pride towards the ship and praise for its courage in fighting the elements (Gardelle 2006). To professionals, therefore, these uses of *she* are not derogatory. To feminists, on the other hand, they are problematic when considered against the broader dominance pattern, in that they trap women in the role of the mother figure.

The other argument against the proscription of *she* is tradition. Where *Lloyd’s List* editors and other feminists see the shift to *it* as a token of modernity which conforms to the modern international practice of treating ships as commodities (Julian Bray in Wilson 2002, Richard Meade in Davis 2019), to opponents *she* is traditional and embodies a professional community’s identity. A Royal Navy spokesman describes the use of *she* as ‘not just a sentimental thing, but a part of culture’, while Pieter van der Merwe, general editor at the Greenwich Maritime Museum, says: ‘It is a chip out of the wall of a particular cultural sector. You can say it’s a small thing, but small things mount up. You actually lose the color of specialist areas if you destroy the language of them’ (Judd 2002). This sense of cancelled

culture probably also underlies the somewhat extreme reaction of Admiral Lord Alan West, former First Sea Lord of the Royal Navy, who describes the move towards the neuter as ‘an insult to generations of sailors’ (Horton 2019). These speakers do not call for a generalization of *she* among English speakers, but attempt to preserve a community’s practices against what they see as an unnecessary change imposed by outsiders.

To date, recommendations against using *she* for ships have been made by a number of universities and press stylebooks, as for hurricanes. For instance, the Associated Press stylebook (Goldstein 2005) reads: ‘Do not use this pronoun in references to ships or nations. Use *it* instead’. *Lloyd’s List* also has retained the neuter. But some press articles still have *she* when the ship’s name is specified (a specific study would be needed to assess the exact contexts; see for instance a *Guardian* article on the historical ship HMS Terror, Watson 2016), and many historical or museum websites still show *she* for ships and locomotives. Enthusiasts, too, have kept the feminine.

What are the implications of these data? There can be no reliable answer without a sociolinguistic study, but tentative hypotheses may be put forward. First, it seems that some speakers or institutions might be more easily convinced than others by feminist arguments. *Lloyd’s List* explicitly places representations conveyed by gender use above tradition; the Navy takes a more conservative stance. Secondly, even if any reform is an effort because speakers have to override acquired uses, it seems that pronoun change is less difficult for speakers for whom it is only a tradition (as for hurricanes in the press, or countries in history books, where *she* would now sound patriotic or archaic). To some professionals and enthusiasts at least, gender alternation seems to be meaningful. The existence of gender alternation between *she* and *it* in some articles or websites on ships, or on museum signage (for ships, but also for helicopters, U-boats or locomotives, Gardelle 2006), suggests a difference in perspective between *she* and *it*, with *she* conveying temporary upgrading of the referent. Ships, then, seem to be more than basic inanimates to those speakers. Similarly, names for private boats are typically inspired by loved ones; RAF planes in World War II included the *Defiant*, whose name does not convey supposedly female attributes, but reflects a form of emotional involvement and was also referred to as *she* (Allnutt 2017); ships and tankers still get blessed for good luck at ceremonial ship launchings, ahead of work fraught with danger at sea. Having institutionalized endorsements of *it* in the name of gender

discrimination could be a problem for such speakers, because it would deny them the possibility of upgrading, of expressing a personal relationship to the ship.

An alternative solution has been adopted by operators of tunnel boring machines, which are not mentioned in mainstream feminist critique but are often referred to as *she*, given exclusively female first names, and are blessed during a ceremony (Lawson 2012). Here again, the feminine conveys a maternal figure, according to Christopher Allen, construction manager for DC Clean Rivers: ‘[the blessing] has the connotation, if you treat her well, she’ll be good to you and she’ll save you and keep you safe’ (cited in Payne 2014). Thus, the operators retain the feminine and the representations conveyed by *she* as part of the broader discourse around the machines. This could be seen as a case of global discourse approach (the idea that a word by itself is not discriminatory; a whole environment is), as advocated by Stibbe (2012) for animal rights (see above). As such, broader representation has been achieved through public appeals to propose names for new tunnel-boring machines, with some being christened after famous women such as queens, scientists, cricket captains or a woman Premier, which has aroused public interest and pride in the machines (Lawson 2012 for Crossrail UK, Rail Projects Victoria 2021). For instance, a page of the Crossrail UK website (2017), entitled ‘Tunnelling giants: Ada and Phyllis’, reads:

- (5) The tunnels from Farringdon to Royal Oak were bored by Ada and Phyllis. These TBMs were named after Ada Lovelace, the world’s first computer programmer, and Phyllis Pearsall, who created the London A-Z. [...] Phyllis was the first Crossrail tunnelling machine to break ground on the project and also the first machine to complete her drive, arriving in Farringdon in October 2013. She was joined in Farringdon by sister machine Ada, who completed her journey in January 2014. (Crossrail UK 2017)

One advantage of this global approach is that it does not run counter to professional experience of the machines (upgrading remains possible), or tradition, but still works on the underlying problem: association of the feminine gender to inferiority. Instead, the global approach promotes pride in the machines and their operators, by involving the public in the naming and by communicating about them.

4. Future directions

These three cases of pronoun activism have shown how much language matters in social and political debates. Even a personal pronoun – an unobtrusive word that exists in the language primarily for a functional role – conveys world views when it carries referential gender. By challenging default views, activists bring issues such as animal rights, the right to life of embryos or fetuses, and gender equality into the public arena. In this respect, pronoun activism modestly contributes to raising awareness and triggering debates. There is further success for activists if the promoted views spread through society; one key question, which deserves further sociolinguistic research, is whether linguistic change actually facilitates social and political change – and if so, how much. This chapter has suggested that adjustments in pronoun use was highly dependent on adjustments of world views, rather than the other way round. The use of *he/she* in the abortion debate goes hand in hand with the adoption of the corresponding noun phrases (from ‘embryo’ or ‘fetus’ to ‘unborn/preborn child’), which itself depends on views on personhood. The systematic use of animate genders for animals seems to correspond to too radical a world view for animals such as cockroaches or paramecia, and more generally involves considering animals and humans as part of one broad category (cf. the phrase *humans and other animals*), which is currently a far cry from mainstream conceptualization. This is not even the view of animal welfare organizations, for instance, such as Save the Whales in the US or the Wildlife Trust in Britain, which retain *it* in non-specific references. Finally, advocating the neuter for ships and the like seems to have convinced institution leaders for whom the feminine was a tradition, more than referentially motivated; but for professionals and enthusiasts, such a change seems more problematic because, in addition to a sense of loss of tradition for a community of practice, generalizing the neuter in a navy-related institution (a merchant navy magazine or a maritime museum) seems to run counter to the upgrading principle in the gender system in their community.

A global discourse approach to language and discrimination may provide one alternative way of challenging discriminatory world views while not interfering with pronoun usage. In particular, further research is needed into current upgrading practises in jobs that used to be male-dominated but now have more women, such as positions in the Navy or the RAF. Such a study would have to consider pronouns, but also the general contexts in which they are used, to see if the global discourse has evolved, and why.

The case studies also demonstrated that issues about ‘animacy’ are in fact searches for definitions of who we are. There are moves to upgrade animals as persons, but not moves

towards having systematic *he* or *she* for plants as well, although technically they are animate and communicate: they are viewed as too different from us. Similarly, it is the top of the Animacy Hierarchy that is the focus of pronoun activism for ships and the like – what is at stake is really representations of women, rather than the status of ships or countries. The notion of ‘human being’ seems objectively definable as a species, but in fact it comes with a number of representations about personhood and about our place in the universe, which evolve over time and get challenged.

In particular, the last decades have seen major evolutions in our relationship to animals. When we look back at the 1960s, it seems incredible that in scientific research, the idea that animals have been conscious thought should have been proscribed as anthropomorphism (Sealey and Oakley 2013). Current animal rights activism seeks to further shift the lines at the top of the animacy scale. The category ‘animal’ requires further research in relation to pronoun activism, since it is definitely not a homogeneous class. In particular, actual and proposed gender use should be tested against the notion of ‘person’, considering the whole range of species, but also types of discourse – is there necessary distancing in scientific discourse, for instance; or how would systematic upgrading of animals as persons manage descriptions of the natural cycle of hunting animals feeding on prey, without conveying undue sympathy for the prey and judgment on the hunters? This perspective also calls for a fine thinking of the boundary between promoting animal rights and lapsing into generalized anthropomorphism (as in some children’s stories), which is what generalized *he/she* might actually convey.

Thinking about who we are also involves a refined understanding of those who were regarded as the norm: men, whose identities are as varied as those of women. In this chapter, a closer look at feminist readings of gender use for inanimates showed a focus on *she*, but Mathiot and Roberts (1979) record uses of both *she* and *he*, and a richer spectrum of representations than dominant men and dominated women. New research on how representations are conveyed by animate (gendered) pronouns is thus needed across a range of countries and languages. In particular, data collection and analysis of the use of *he* for inanimates is missing. The data are hard to find, but Gardelle (2006) reports one occurrence of *he* in an engineering meeting for a butterfly valve (‘This guy is not a butterfly, should he be a butterfly?’) and a few in fiction (e.g. for a fork in the BBC series *The Good Life*). Her informants (typically representatives from clubs for enthusiasts) remembered occasional uses,

such as ‘where has he got to?’ in reference to a teapot, or an English engineer’s colleague, a female secretary, exclaiming ‘Here she is!’ about a report.

Finally, the chapter raises the issue of who has the power to trigger or spread language (and societal) change. Activist organizations challenge usage or world views that used to be taken for granted, but they represent a minority of the general public, and are sometimes regarded as radical thinkers. Press stylebooks, academic guidelines, magazines, museums, may, however, offer further endorsement, offering guidance and possibly imposing changes in their communities of practice. Whether the speakers who adjust to those guidelines have the same pronoun uses beyond the immediate context of their correction, would be interesting to study. The role of public authorities, of peer pressure, of communities of practice, also deserves further research that would contribute to a better understanding of the complex web that influences individuals to choose particular pronouns.

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