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When words have gender troubles

In many languages nouns have a gender, feminine or masculine (French) as well as neutral (German) and as soon as I start considering it, I am amazed by this absurdity. When nouns have a gender, it's nothing but a source of trouble, and a language, that does not give a gender to nouns like English can do very well without it.

In French (my language) ›chair‹ is feminine (une chaise) and ›carpet‹ masculine (un tapis), ›coat‹ is masculine (un manteau) and ›window‹ feminine (une fenêtre). Normally, I never think of it, but whenever I dwell on it, anthropomorphic qualities associated with objects start appearing, and they are male or female. I know it's meaningless, just an effect of my imagination, but I can't help it. When I think of nouns related to abstractions (la beauté, la révolution, la science, la justice...) they're often feminine, and I immediately imagine women as allegories, like in 19th century paintings, scantily dressed or baring their breasts. Is that a consequence of gender in nouns or just habitual sexism: the use of the female body for the male gaze on the one hand, and the depersonalization of women made to represent, not their own self, but an abstraction, on the other?

Normally, I never think of the gender in nouns in my own language, it's just there, as meaningless as it should be. When I learned a new language (Italian), I realized how difficult it is to remember, nearly impossible, because

there are no rules to be found why a noun should be masculine or feminine but there are so many rules to be applied for grammatical correctness with the right gender for each noun. What a waste of mental energy!

So why do nouns have a gender? Why this or that gender? Why in this language and not in that one? In linguistics of the structuralist branch (de Saussure) they would say it's ›the arbitrary nature of the sign‹. How a meaning (the signified) is connected to a word, its letters, its sounds (the signifier) is arbitrary: there is no good reason why. Not that they know for sure, but what they mean is: ›Move on, that's not a good question!‹. One can research etymologies, the historical tracking of words and languages, follow movements of populations and compare the evolution of the idioms, but this is just contingency, the hazard of human life. Searching for the origins of human communication leads to metaphysical beliefs, the quest of a unique language given by god and spoken by all humans, like in the story of the Tower of Babel.

So we don't know why nouns have a gender, or if they should or not. And we can't ask god: he's the only one to know but he won't tell us...

In another branch of the philosophy of language, in the theory of ›speech acts‹, we don't consider what words mean or what they are made of, but what they do, what they perform in the world. In ›How to do things with words‹, the famous book by Austin, he introduces the notion of the performativity of language. We don't know why nouns have a gender, or if they should, but we can tell how it influences us and acts on our imagination and our perception of the world. In this way we can trace gender preconceptions and observe them.

In French, the word ›gender‹ (le genre) was only used to qualify words, and for people, it was ›sex‹ (c'est une personne de ›sexe‹ masculin

ou féminin). When you fill in a form, after name and age you check in the box F or M for ›sexe‹. To me, the idea of confusing sex and gender feels quite inappropriate, as if I had to tell about my sexuality to an administration.

The war on words concerning sex and gender is raging in France. Those who believe in ›sexe‹ think there are only two, – male and female – like god made us. They accuse those who use the word ›genre‹ to turn ›sexe‹ into an arbitrary notion changeable at will, a mask or a masquerade. They want to forbid school teachers to help loosen gender stereotypes and see the so-called ›théorie du genre‹ as a great evil and a danger for their kids, their family and their traditions. They might be the same people who believe that there was only one language in the origin, created by one god, their own god, certainly. The only thing we can agree on is that the word ›gender‹ (le genre) applies to words, even when words don't necessarily need to have a gender.

But some words do: And here we enter a much heated field of debate in french: the case of words for professions. Normally there is a masculine and a feminine version ›un ouvrier, une ouvrière‹ (a worker), ›un étudiant, une étudiante‹ (a student), ›un infirmier, une infirmière‹ (a nurse). So far, so good. But for highly qualified or prestigious professions, only the masculine version is being used, whatever the gender of the person is: ›le docteur, le médecin‹ (the doctor), ›l'ambassadeur‹ (the ambassador), ›l'auteur‹ (the author). When there exists a female version of the word, it might either mean something else: ›la médecine‹ is the field of activity, or ›la doctoresse‹ is a word in use in the 60's for a female house doctor, but certainly not for the owner of an academic doctor diploma. Not only is it socially harder for women to reach highly qualified professions, but when you get there, language will invisibilize you as a woman. Some professions have newly created feminine versions, like ›l'autrice‹ for a female author, but using it feels like waving a big feminist protest banner and will probably take some decades to feel normal, if it ever does.

There's a grammatical rule in French called ›the masculine wins over the feminine‹ (le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin) which applies to the gender of words. For example you might have ten white chairs ›dix chaises blanches‹

(feminine) and one white armchair ›un fauteuil blanc‹ (masculine), put them together and it will make ›dix chaises et un fauteuil blancs‹, so the word for white will have the masculine and plural version ›blancs‹ although there's only one masculine object. Not fair, is it? But language specialists would say: no use to call this rule sexist, the gender in words is an abstraction and a grammar rule is made to unify the usage of words among all users, that's just a rule! But see how the rule feels when one male student will turn a group of hundred female students into ›les étudiants‹ (masculine)!

And then I'm not even talking the new form of spelling (l'écriture inclusive) meant to include feminine and maculine in the same word, producing ›les ouvrière.e.s‹ or ›les étudiant.e.s‹. It's hardly used at all, but remarkably, we've only heard about it through the outraged reactions of rejection. Clearly some people would much rather keep the women inside a group totally invisible.

French language has turned into a battlefield of sexism and the best you can do about it is to laugh.

Take *Roberte Larousse*, (robertelarousse.fr) a non-existing female person made by combining the name of two popular dictionaries ›le Robert‹ et ›le Larousse‹. Her aim is to feminize ALL the words in French, transforming ›le Français‹ into ›la Française‹, a new form of the same language, in which they translate known texts, create performances or make text posters.

One example is the work ›La Ferme des Animales‹, derived from ›La Ferme des Animaux‹ (Animal Farm), a series of posters presenting proverbs or expressions using animals, male by default, and turned into female by the art of *Roberte Larousse*. ›Entre chien et loup‹ (between dog and wolf) refers to the late hour of the day, the dusk, when you can't distinguish a dog from a wolf. Make it ›entre chienne et louve‹ (between bitch and she-wolf) and feel how different the implications are.

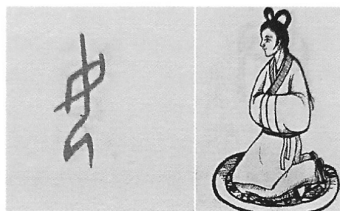
›Je donne ma langue au chat‹ (I give my tongue to the cat) is an expression used in children games meaning ›I can't guess the riddle, tell me the solution‹. Now say ›je donne ma langue à la chatte‹ (I give my tongue to the she-cat/pussy) hear it resonate, and don't withhold your smile. Here humour is key to the

game. Anne Laforêt and Cécile Babiole, the artists behind *Roberte Larousse* don't explain anything, they let the performativity of language work on your imagination.

Recently when I showed this work to my chinese art students it immediately stimulated their own investigation on how sexism is embedded in chinese. They showed me how in ›Jiaguwen‹ (oracle bone script) the pictographic script which is the ancestor of modern chinese characters, ›woman‹ 女 is represented like a body kneeling, with arms crossed, typically a submissive position.

They also explained how the key character for woman 女 combined with other characters forms insults and other pejorative expressions. They were so shocked by their discoveries that, as an artistic action and with youthful passion they attacked their dictionary with scissors to remove all that degrades women.

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Art gives the power to explore language but also to intervene with it, even with sacred texts. See what Yael Kanarek is doing, with art and jewish religion, all in one. The study of Torah encourages the finding of new meanings in old texts. After a decade of Kabbalah study and practice, Israeli-American artist Yael Kanarek has been rewriting the Torah in Hebrew and English to reveal the feminine divine in Hebrew sacred texts. She calls it »The Regendered Bible« »Beit Toratah« (Her Torah), www.beitto-ratah.org. In my Facebook live feed, I sometimes catch a group of people, mostly women, talking on a Zoom interface and discussing interpretations of old hebrew texts and their translation. Swapping the genders in the story of our origins, we can read that a woman was created first and then a man came out of her body. It sounds so much in conformity with mammal reproduction that you come to wonder what a strange inversion patriarchal phantasy has produced.

Our western mythologies commonly attribute male gender to the sun and female to the moon, and so are the words in French (le soleil, la lune) and in several languages. But not in German (die Sonne, der Mond) How come? The linguistic principle of the arbitrary nature of the sign should inspire indifference to this apparent contradiction, but I hear that some german feminists would want it changed so that the gender of the words would reflect their customary symbolism. Personally I would rather exercise my imagination to see the sun as female and the moon as male, would it be only to practice mentally gender flexibility.

That was all about genders in the usual binary version. The notion of a non-binary gender opens a whole space for the creation of new words. If a gender can be reduced to a set of pronouns, a new set of pronouns can represent the existence of other forms of gender. In English ›they/them‹ embraces the multiplicity inside the identity but creates a confusion between singular and plural. In French ›iel/iels‹ is a remix of ›il‹ and ›elle‹. Each language invents a different verbal form for this new gender, each version creating surprises and rejections. We are only at the beginning of a whole new series of gender troubles in words...