

Gender Shifts in the History of English

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1 Defining English gender

1.1 Introduction

In the fifth century BC, according to Aristotle's account, Protagoras first created the labels *masculine*, *feminine*, and *neuter* for Greek nouns, and language scholars have been trying to explain the relationship of grammatical gender categories to the world around them ever since.¹ Protagoras himself, apparently anxious that the grammatical gender of nouns and the sex of their referents did not always correspond in Greek, is said to have wanted to change the gender of Greek *menis* 'anger' and *peleks* 'helmet,' both of which are feminine nouns, to masculine because he felt the masculine was more appropriate given the words' referents (Robins 1971 [1951]: 15–16). Despite Aristotle's subsequent proposal of grammatical reasons for nominal gender classes, the original labels persisted in the descriptions of gender in classical grammars – and, therefore, in all the later Western grammars modeled on them – and these labels have created the pervasive misperception that grammatical gender categories in a language reflect a connection between male and female human beings and masculine and feminine inanimate objects. The terms deceptively imply a link between the categories in the natural gender system of Modern English – in which there is a clear correlation between masculine and feminine nouns and biological traits in the referent – and the categories in the grammatical gender systems of other Indo-European languages; in fact, these two types of systems are distinct. The shift of English from a grammatical to a natural gender system is highly unusual and involves a complex set of related grammatical transformations in the language.

Despite their descriptive labels, noun classes in a grammatical gender system, unlike those in a semantic gender system, do not correspond to conceptual categories, no matter how creative the grammarian. In other words, there is no way

¹ For more detailed descriptions of the Greek and subsequent Latin treatments of grammatical gender, see Robins (1971 [1951]) and Vorlat (1975). Vorlat provides the most comprehensive treatment of early English grammars (1586–1737) currently available, grounding these works in the classical tradition from which they stem and identifying areas of grammatical conservatism and innovation.

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(or at least no linguistically justifiable way) to explain why in French a table is feminine and a necklace masculine based on the features of the referents (e.g., the appearance of the table or the shape of the necklace). Yet in languages with two or three grammatical genders and the misleading labels *masculine*, *feminine*, and *neuter*, it can seem only logical to equate grammatical gender and biological sex – especially when there often is a correlation between grammatical gender and biological sex for nouns describing human beings (grammatical gender is not always arbitrary). But attempts to do so, particularly for inanimate objects, usually yield little more than nonsense.

The mysteries of how European languages such as German, French, Spanish, or Italian categorize nouns as masculine, feminine, and neuter are at best a source of amusement and more often a source of bafflement and frustration for Modern English speakers, who are often unaware that their own language used to have these same kinds of noun categories. To English speakers, having been brought up in a linguistic universe where sexless objects are almost always *it*, it can seem arbitrary and absurd to talk about such objects with language normally reserved for male and female human beings and perhaps for animals. And the idea that grammatical gender is not supposed to “make sense,” that it is semantically arbitrary, often makes even less sense. Grammatical gender categories serve to divide the nouns in a language into formal classes, which serve as the basis for agreement with other elements in the sentence (e.g., adjectives, pronouns, verbs). They seem as natural and functional to native speakers of these languages as any other grammatical feature. It is the terminology that is deceiving: *gender* no longer simply means ‘kind,’ and *masculine*, *feminine*, and *neuter* cannot serve unambiguously as generic labels for word classes. In response, linguists have attempted to develop specific, less ambiguous terminology for gender systems in the world’s languages, as the following section describes.

The natural gender system of Modern English – in which only nouns referring to males and females generally take gendered pronouns and inanimate objects are neuter – stands as the exception, not the rule among the world’s languages. In this way, the descriptive term *natural* for Modern English implies a pervasiveness that is, in this case, inappropriate: the English gender system is unusual in the family of Indo-Germanic languages, as well as among Indo-European languages more generally. Indeed, one does not have to turn back too many pages in the history of English to find a grammatical gender system: Old English (750–1100 or 1150 AD) had grammatical gender categories very similar to those of Modern German, its “sister” language. (“Sister” is a gendered reference that may have an etymological motivation, for although Old English *spræc* ‘language’ is a masculine noun, the Old French word *langue*, from which *language* is derived, is a feminine noun.) Old English had three grammatical genders – masculine, feminine, and neuter – and all inanimate nouns belonged to one of the three classes, sometimes for morphological reasons but often for no obvious reason. For example, *Englaland* ‘land of the Angles’ is a neuter Old English noun (its root *land* is a neuter noun), but *mægð* ‘tribe, race, country’ is feminine, and *cynedom* ‘kingdom’ is masculine

(the suffix *-dom* is masculine); synonyms often have different genders (*ecg* ‘sword’ is feminine, while *sweord* ‘sword’ is neuter), which underscores the fact that this gender system is not principally meaning-driven. (There also exists a subset of Old English nouns that appear with inflectional morphology associated with two or three different gender classes – e.g., the masculine-feminine noun *se* ‘sea.’) By the time of “Chaucer’s English” or most dialects of Middle English, however, the “early English” with which Modern English speakers are most familiar, the English grammatical gender system is all but gone.

While recent work on gender has clarified much of the relevant terminology, the term *natural gender* has to date not been adequately explained. It is here that a historical perspective, as presented in this book, has much to offer. Examining the historical development of the English gender system provides a new understanding of the development of natural gender. This chapter, drawing on a range of earlier scholarship devoted to defining linguistic gender and the Modern English gender system specifically, frames important possible ways to redefine natural gender for English. It is only within this context that we can make sense of the gender shift in the history of English, of the variation still present in the system today, and of what it means for the masculine to be unmarked in the grammar and lexicon.

1.2 Definitions of linguistic gender

Gender in language, which can be referred to by the general term *linguistic gender*, can be defined at the most basic level as a system of noun classification reflected in the behavior of associated words (Hockett, quoted in Corbett [1991: 1]). Stated differently, the essential criterion of linguistic gender is taken to be *agreement* (also known as *concord*), or systematic and predictable covariance between a semantic or formal property of one grammatical form and a formal property of another. Gender only exists if grammatical forms with variable gender (e.g., adjectives, pronouns, numerals) regularly adopt forms to agree with grammatical forms of invariable gender, usually nouns (Fodor 1959: 2). Given this definition of linguistic gender, there is no determinable limit to the number of genders possible in language, and in the known languages studied to date, linguists have recorded gender systems ranging from two to over twenty gender classifications.² We see this kind of gender agreement in French in the sentence:

² Speakers of many Western languages tend to have a limited view of gender, restricting it to the familiar two- or three-gender systems of Indo-European languages. And they are often supported in this by language authorities. For example, the second edition of the *OED* privileges Indo-European gender systems in its definition of grammatical gender. The primary definition begins: “Each of the three (or in some languages two) grammatical ‘kinds’, corresponding more or less to distinctions of sex (and absence of sex) in the objects denoted . . .” It is important to note with respect to this first definition that, in fact, the treatment of sexless nouns – many of which are grammatically masculine or feminine – does not usually correspond to distinctions of sex in these systems. For sense (b) under this definition, the editors provide the explanation:

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French: Une petite boîte est arrivée de Paris.
'A small box has come from Paris.'

Within the noun phrase, the indefinite article *une* and the adjective *petite* both appear in the feminine form to agree with the feminine noun *boîte* 'box,' and the past participle of the verb (*arrivée*) also takes the feminine *-e*.

Old English demonstrates very similar types of agreement patterns both inside and outside the noun phrase. For example, in this highly contrived Old English sentence:

Old English: Seo brade lind wæs tilu and ic hire lufode.
'That broad shield was good and I loved her' (literally: 'her loved').

The demonstrative pronoun *seo* 'the, that' and the adjectives *brade* 'broad' and *tilu* 'good' appear in their feminine form to agree with the feminine noun *lind* 'shield'; in the second clause, the shield is then referred back to with the feminine pronoun *hire* 'her' in accordance with the noun's grammatical gender. As the Modern English translation demonstrates, this kind of grammatical agreement for gender has been lost; only the personal pronouns still mark gender and it is semantically, not grammatically, based.

The role of personal pronouns in systems of linguistic gender has remained something of a question mark. Agreement in gender usually involves a noun and associated adjectives, demonstrative pronouns, definite and indefinite articles, possessives, or verbs, although it also occurs with, for example, associated adverbs and numerals. Anaphoric pronouns, referring back to noun phrases headed by gender-marked nouns (e.g., *hire* 'her' in the Old English example above), could hypothetically be argued to agree with the referent, not the preceding antecedent noun phrase, so that the covariance of the noun and personal pronoun are not grammatically linked but both dependent on the extralinguistic referent (Cornish 1986).³ This theory, however, cannot explain anaphoric pronoun concord in most grammatical gender systems because there is no "natural" gender

By some recent philologists applied, in extended sense, to the 'kinds' into which sbs. [substantives (nouns)] are discriminated by the syntactical laws of certain languages the grammar of which takes no account of sex. Thus the North American Indian languages are said to have two 'genders', animate and inanimate. With still greater departure from the original sense, the name 'genders' has been applied to the many syntactically discriminated classes of sbs. in certain South African langs.

If one takes the "original sense" of the word back to the Latin *genus* 'race, kind,' it applies as well to the grammatical categories in North American Indian languages as it does to those in French or in English.

³ The distinction between anaphora and deixis is fairly complex and fuzzy around the edges. There appears to be no maximum allowable distance between an antecedent and its anaphoric pronoun, and the farther the pronoun occurs from its antecedent, the harder it becomes to differentiate it from a deictic pronoun. *Anaphora* is traditionally defined in contrast to *deixis*, based on the differentiation between intralinguistic and extralinguistic reference (Huddleston [1984: 274–84] well exemplifies this traditional approach). Anaphoric pronouns are dependent on their linguistic

link between the referent and the nouns that describe it; in other words, the gender of a noun – on which the anaphoric pronoun depends for agreement – is not necessarily predictable from any features of the extralinguistic referent. Most scholars, therefore, consider the control of anaphoric pronouns by their antecedents to represent a form of grammatical agreement; it is clear that the same gender categories, be they grammatical or semantic, apply for pronominal agreement as elsewhere in the grammar, although their pattern of application may differ on the continuum of grammatical to semantic agreement.⁴ (This idea is discussed in detail below in the description of Corbett’s agreement hierarchy.) Given this inclusive definition of agreement, languages in which gender surfaces only in the personal pronouns (e.g., Modern English) would still be regarded as possessing a gender system; Corbett (1991: 5) labels these *pronominal gender systems* in order to emphasize their unique (and contested) status.

context for interpretation; they are anaphoric to the antecedent, and their gender, therefore, reflects the linguistic gender of the noun or noun-phrase acting as the antecedent. Deictic pronouns are situation-dependent and refer outside the linguistic context to the “real world” referent. Cornish (1986), however, argues that purely syntactic explanations of anaphora are insufficient; anaphoric agreement patterns cannot be adequately explained using only syntactic rules and constraints because anaphora is fundamentally a discourse phenomenon: not only does its domain exceed the sentence, but it carries specific discourse functions, which are as predictable as syntactic constraints and can override them. Anaphora presupposes a common pre-existing focus and it serves as a mechanism for the *maintenance* of a common object of focus within a discourse. Deixis involves the introduction of a new object of focus within the discourse, so it serves to *shift* the pre-existing focus to a new object, which will become the focus of the subsequent stretch of discourse (and hence a possible object for anaphora). These alternate definitions of anaphora and deixis do not rely exclusively on the notion of an antecedent because, as he argues, it is not a necessary or sufficient condition for anaphora:

The discourse entity to which the anaphor refers . . . need not, however, have been explicitly introduced by linguistic means within the discourse model which each participant is constructing as the discourse progresses: it may have been derived via an inference on the basis of some such explicitly realised linguistic expression, or via the participants jointly focusing upon some perceptually available entity within the context-of-utterance, or it may already have been available through general or specific socio-cultural real-world knowledge, or simply by being an issue of continuing mutual concern to the participants involved. (Cornish 1986: 3)

According to this definition, the power of anaphoric elements to “refer back” need not be limited to the syntactic structure. The distinction between intralinguistic and extralinguistic reference remains fundamental to this definition of anaphora and deixis, but intralinguistic reference is extended to include larger elements of discourse. The studies in this book, which are entirely text-based, do not necessarily require this wider discourse-based definition of anaphora, but it does benefit from its flexibility in determining a pronoun’s antecedent or basis for agreement. See Newman (1997: 63–116) for a valuable, more detailed discussion of anaphora and theoretical accounts of pronouns.

⁴ An alternative framework for analyzing these patterns is the distinction between *lexical* and *referential* gender (cf. Dahl 1999: 105–106). Lexical gender can be semantically, formally, or idiosyncratically determined; referential gender is dependent on the characteristics of the referent. This distinction is perhaps particularly useful in analyzing animate nouns in a grammatical gender system, when lexical gender and referential gender may conflict.

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Gender, although a common feature in languages throughout the world, is not essential to language; many languages have never had gender systems and others have lost them with no lethal repercussions. Ibrahim (1973: 26) describes gender as a secondary grammatical category (i.e., one that is not vital to the proper functioning of the language), or, less neutrally, as an “unessential category, which serves no useful purpose that cannot be served by some other means”; unlike other secondary grammatical categories such as tense and number, linguistic gender is a category with no “authentic relation” to conceptual categories. This statement demands qualification. Corbett (1991), in the most comprehensive cross-linguistic study of gender systems to date, equitably concludes that noun classification often corresponds to biological distinctions of sex, although frequently it does not. He defines two basic types of gender systems: (1) strict semantic systems (here referred to as *semantic gender*), in which the meaning of the noun determines its gender and, conversely, in which aspects of a noun’s meaning can be inferred from its gender; (2) formal systems (here referred to as *grammatical gender*), in which large numbers of nouns do not follow semantic assignment rules and their assignments depend on formal criteria, either word-structure (derivation and inflection) or sound-structure. Even in formal systems, in which the bulk of gender assignments rest on morphological and phonological factors, there is a semantic core to the system; in this way, all linguistic gender systems are at some level semantic, although in only some systems is meaning sufficient for gender assignment (Corbett 1991: 8). Dahl (1999: 101) postulates as a universal property of gender systems that there is a general semantic-based principle for assigning gender to animate nouns.⁵ The assertion

⁵ The fact that all gender systems are at some level semantic has led many scholars to postulate that linguistic gender originates in conceptual categories of sex and this initial logical order was only later made chaotic by linguistic developments (e.g., sound changes, analogy). Through the early twentieth century, the most popular explanation of the origin of grammatical gender was that it represented the personification of objects by “primitive man.” Ibrahim (1973: 50) decisively dismisses this romantic notion:

[G]ender in its origin was an accident of linguistic history, and that as a grammatical category gender owes its emergence and existence to various linguistic (and no extralinguistic) forces. We have seen how phonetic changes, morphology, and syntax worked together in some languages to bring about gender. . . . [G]rammatical gender is merely a means for classifying nouns according to their suffixes without, in the beginning, any allusion to sex; the sex reference of gender was always posterior to the emergence of grammatical gender.

The question of the origin of grammatical gender is too complex a matter to be discussed in any depth here. Two of the most thorough works written on the subject are Fodor (1959) and Ibrahim (1973), both of which summarize much of the scholarship that precedes them. The juiciest bone of contention between Fodor and Ibrahim is whether the three genders of Indo-European arose simultaneously (as Ibrahim argues, based on work by Lehmann and Brugmann) or whether there was initially a separation of animate and inanimate, after which the former category further divided into masculine and feminine (first suggested by Meillet and promoted by Fodor). Weber (1999), returning to and rethinking a theory proposed by Brugmann in 1897 that the Indo-European

that grammatical gender categories have *no* authentic relation to conceptual ones may, therefore, be misleading.

Where does the term “natural gender” fall in this dichotomous classification system of formal and semantic gender? Corbett (1991: 9) defines a *natural gender system* as synonymous with a strict semantic one: “a system where given the meaning of a noun, its gender can be predicted without reference to its form.” Given the very different and widespread use of this term in most gender scholarship, particularly work focused on English, it is preferable to define natural gender systems as a subset of strict semantic ones: a tri-partite gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) in which the classification of nouns corresponds for the most part to the real-world distinctions of male animate (or male human), female animate (or female human), and inanimate (or non-human). In other words, while semantic gender systems are predictable based on features of the referent, the relevant features are not necessarily biological sex, and the categories can be much more numerous. For example, Dyirbal, a language spoken by Aboriginal Australians in North Queensland, has four genders, in which men are categorized with kangaroos, bats, the moon, etc.; women with the sun, water, fire, bandicoots, etc.; all edible fruit with the plants that bear them, wine, cake, etc.; and meat, body parts, most trees, and many other objects comprise another class (for a summary, see G. Lakoff 1987: 92–96). These are semantic classes, but not ones that native English speakers would predict. Other languages with semantic gender systems (e.g., the Bantu languages) have between ten and twenty noun categories. So the three-gender “natural” system is only one type of semantic gender system.

Given the semantic core in all gender systems, it seems logical to assume that strict semantic systems are more common – especially if one happens to be a native English speaker, for whom grammatical systems often appear absurdly arbitrary. But, in fact, semantic gender systems comprise a comparatively small percentage of the languages of the world,⁶ and grammatical gender is not as arbitrary as it may first appear. Erades (1956: 9) typifies the prejudice of Modern English speakers against the unfamiliar mechanics of formal agreement when he dismisses grammatical gender as a “largely traditional, archaic, perhaps essentially primitive system of prescriptions and taboos. A part of the linguistic reality, no doubt, but a dead part, a petrification.” He has, either intentionally or unintentionally, translated Meillet’s description “dénuée de sens” in reference to grammatical gender (cited in Erades 1956: 9) as ‘nonsensical’ rather than

feminine originally functioned to form abstracts and collectives, argues that gender corresponds to the basic distinction [± particularized]. She explains: “[G]ender has the function of qualitatively more precisely defining a quantity. Gender offers the opportunity to refine the crude perspective of number – singular versus plural – into distributive versus collective plural. It is this aspect of quantity that links gender so closely to number” (Weber 1999: 506).

⁶ Corbett (1991) notes that there are several strict semantic systems in the Dravidian family and others “scattered about” (e.g., in the Australian Aboriginal language Diyari and in the Germanic language English).

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‘non-semantic.’ Grammatical gender is not a set of memorized prescriptions – the facts argue against it (Corbett 1991: 70–104). Native speakers make no or few mistakes with noun gender, borrowed words regularly acquire gender, and speakers can consistently assign gender to invented words (see the study of Italian gender in Ervin 1962). In the languages with grammatical gender systems studied to date, the gender of at least 85 percent of nouns is predictable by morphological or phonological information required and stored independently in the lexicon (Corbett 1991: 68).

Another fairly predictable characteristic of grammatical gender systems is that for animate nouns, when formal and semantic features – specifically biological sex – conflict, semantic gender (i.e., the gender of the referent, sometimes referred to as referential gender, as opposed to lexical gender) usually prevails, either for both attribute and pronoun agreement (e.g., Russian *djadja* ‘uncle,’ which is feminine in form but requires masculine agreement) or only for some select types of agreement (e.g., German *Mädchen* ‘girl’). Corbett labels this latter group *hybrid nouns*, and he has done ground-breaking work on their patterns of agreement. Hybrid nouns do not follow the agreement paradigm of one gender, nor do they alternate between two or more consistent gender paradigms. Their agreement (i.e., grammatical or semantic) depends on the type of agreeing form involved (the *target*). To return to the example of German *Mädchen*, the type of agreement it elicits depends on whether the target is an attribute, in which case it follows grammatical gender and is neuter in form, or whether the target is a personal pronoun, in which case it can either follow grammatical gender (neuter *es*) or follow semantic gender (feminine *sie*). These nouns typically arise when semantic and formal assignment rules conflict, and Corbett argues that it is possible to specify or predict agreement given the target in question. He has created a model called the “Agreement Hierarchy” (shown below), in which, moving from left to right, there is a consistently increasing likelihood of semantic agreement.⁷

The Agreement Hierarchy

attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun

The agreement pattern of *Mädchen* perfectly exemplifies this system, as do Spanish titles for men, which require the feminine for attributes but take the masculine elsewhere (see Corbett 1991: 225–60 for more examples and explanation). Moving from left to right along the hierarchy, there is increasing flexibility in reference, so that the congruent form of personal pronouns can follow either

⁷ Newman (1997: 92–93) provides a revised interpretation of Corbett’s hierarchy within the framework of Barlow’s Discourse-Linking Theory. He quotes Barlow (1992: 224) on the distinction of pronouns from other agreement targets: “Moving to the right, the more likely it is that the targets will contribute new properties; the more likely it is that the targets will be associated with multiple mappings; and the more likely it is that agreement targets will indicate salient properties of the described object.”

formal or semantic rules (as with *Mädchen*). Certain nouns in Modern English demonstrate the varying levels of rigidity and flexibility in the two right-hand categories (the other two categories are not applicable to Modern English): for a word such as *ship*, the anaphoric pronoun has the potential to fluctuate between *she* and *it*, but the relative pronoun is restricted to *which* or *that*, not *who*. (The form of agreement chosen can be influenced by the spoken or written register, sociolinguistic variables, and pragmatic considerations.) The personal pronouns, situated on the far right of the hierarchy, are both the most tenacious targets, for they retain gender agreement longest when the system is being lost from a language, and the most volatile targets, for they are, as Corbett (1991: 242) phrases it, “the major initiator of changes in the balance between syntactic and semantic gender.”

This description of how personal pronouns function as agreement targets perfectly captures their role in the transformation of the English gender system. As grammatical gender erodes in the noun phrase in early Middle English and remaining gendered forms in the noun phrase potentially take on new discourse functions (see Jones 1988), the personal pronouns are the only forms to retain gender, and they shift to natural gender. Pronominal gender systems, in general, tend to favor a shift to semantic assignment. The form of anaphoric pronouns can be determined either by the form of the antecedent or by the semantic features of the antecedent/referent; in a system with no attributive agreement and with the potential for nouns of different genders all denoting one referent, the pressure is on the pronouns to follow semantic assignment rules (Corbett 1991: 247). The deictic use of personal pronouns only enhances this tendency towards semantic agreement. In Modern English, the personal pronouns alone retain linguistic gender and it is clearly semantic gender agreement that they follow – but in modern scholarship on English, this seems to be where scholarly agreement on the gender system ends.

1.3 Proposed models for the Modern English gender system

The Modern English gender system is clearly based on semantic criteria, unlike its Indo-European ancestors. Many Indo-European languages other than English have witnessed a noticeable decay in the original grammatical gender system, although few are as dramatic as English (Ibrahim 1973: 84–86).⁸ The triple-gender system has been maintained in, for example, German and some of the Slavic languages. It has been reduced to a two-gender system in the Romance languages, and it has disappeared in Persian. Ibrahim (1973) notes that the neuter was always only “vaguely” distinguished from the masculine; its paradigm of inflectional endings often differed in only two cases, so the merger of the two gender classes did not involve the restructuring of entire paradigms. The shift from

⁸ While decay is the overall trend in Indo-European gender systems, there have been a few languages, notably those in the Slavonic group, which have added subgenders to the system (Corbett 1991: 2).

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grammatical to natural gender renders English unusual among Indo-Germanic languages. Having lost most nominal and adnominal inflectional endings by the Middle English period, English has become a pronominal gender system, in which the personal pronouns *he/she/it* reflect a triple-gender system and the relative pronouns *who/which* distinguish only between the animate and the inanimate. While many speakers and scholars have remarked on the system's superficial simplicity, those who have tried to describe the system in detail have been struck by its complexity. As Erades (1956: 2) states, "[T]he gender of English nouns, far from being simple and clear, is complicated and obscure, and the principles underlying it are baffling and elusive, no less, and perhaps even more so, than in other languages."

Such a statement might seem absurd given that most nouns in Modern English follow the traditional semantic formulation of the system in which pronominal gender corresponds to distinctions of "real-world" biological sex. But most is not enough: the key to understanding the natural gender system in Modern English lies in the exceptions, the inanimate nouns that can take gendered pronouns and the human or other animate nouns that can take *it*. As Erades correctly notes, these exceptions do not prove the traditional rule of natural gender, but rather they prove the rule wrong (although *rule* is probably too strong a word to apply to natural gender agreement in any circumstances). The natural gender system is not a simple one-to-one correspondence between biological sex and linguistic gender with scattered exceptions. Theoretical notions of gender in other disciplines complicate the role of biological sex in the construction of gender in useful ways here; and they support the argument that, in fact, the exceptions to the system as traditionally defined form patterns that need to be addressed in any formulation of the system, because English speakers are consistently inconsistent in their choice of gendered pronouns according to strict natural gender rules (see, for example, Marcoux 1973).

The difficulty in describing the English system is two-fold. First, the traditional idea that gender is a fixed property of the word must be abandoned, along with the idea that, on a grander scale, all gender systems must operate in perfectly similar ways (Joly 1975: 238). Second, the new formulation of the gender system must be based on features that may not be immediately obvious either to speakers or linguists because there are few formal clues. Whorf (1956) draws the important distinction between overt and covert grammatical categories: an overt category is one having a formal mark that is present in every sentence containing a member of the category (e.g., English plural); a covert category includes members that are marked only in certain types of sentences. (Whorf labels the distinctive treatment required in such environments "reactance.") In English, gender is a covert category marked only by the reactance of singular third-person pronouns and the relative pronouns *who/what/which* (which indicate animacy). Despite this limited presence in the surface structure of English syntax, gender is nonetheless a grammatical category and requires a systematic analysis of the patterns of anaphoric pronoun use for clues about the structure of the categories within the

system. Intuitive assumptions about the relationship between sex and gender are not sufficient, for while biological sex is a good indicator of gender class, it is not absolutely predictive.

The exceptional nouns, those that can flout the biological sex-linguistic gender correlation, have traditionally been divided into two basic types: conventionalized references and emotive (or affective) references. The conventional gender assignments of certain inanimate nouns seem to hold irrespective of the attitude of the speaker, and they are fairly consistent within speech communities (e.g., *ship as she*). Proper names could be included in this category, given that their genders are learned and conventional, and they apply even when the name is used for an inanimate object (Whorf 1956: 90–91). Whorf argues strongly that English gender represents a grammatical category because the distinctions it creates are not always natural, non-cultural differences, but they must instead be learned; he lists a series of exceptions, which has been heavily cited in subsequent literature on linguistic gender:

Nor would knowledge of any 'natural' properties tell our observer that the names of biological classes themselves (e.g. animal, bird, fish, etc.) are 'it'; that smaller animals usually are 'it'; larger animals often 'he'; dogs, eagles, and turkeys usually 'he'; cats and wrens usually 'she'; body parts and the whole botanical world 'it'; countries and states as fictive persons (but not as localities) 'she'; cities, societies, and corporations as fictive persons 'it'; the human body 'it'; a ghost 'it'; nature 'she'; watercraft with sail or power and named small craft 'she'; unnamed rowboats, canoes, rafts 'it,' etc. (Whorf 1956: 90)

Whorf's attempt at gender categorization, however, potentially muddles the situation more than clarifies it. With the phrase "as fictive persons" appearing throughout the description, Whorf undermines the distinction between conventional gender, personification, and colloquial variation due to emotive gender assignments. Personification accounts for some gendered references to inanimates, particularly in literary registers of the language; here allegory and poetic diction effectively create gendered objects. And occasionally these uses pervade more colloquial registers, but the bulk of gendered inanimate references occur in everyday speech with no conscious personification. While the use of *she* for *nature* seems fairly clearly conventional, the use of *he* for dogs, to pick one example, is more problematic because the pronoun references for dogs have more potential to fluctuate from *it* to *he* and for many speakers, also to *she*, depending on the dog, the circumstance, and the speaker. The choice of pronoun depends greatly on the psychological and sociological attitude of the speaker toward the referent as well as the attributes of the referent. Much of the twentieth-century scholarship on Modern English gender recognizes the dependence of English gender on speaker attitudes (e.g., Svartengren 1927, Erades 1956, Kanekiyo 1965, Joly 1975, Vachek 1976, Morris 1993), but the research comes to dramatically different conclusions about the implications of this dependence, ranging from the

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assertion that English has no system of gender to the formulation of multiple formal gender classes.

Structuralist attempts to describe Modern English gender have often required the creation of new classification systems with categories based on the personal and relative pronouns that can be applied to a given noun: for example, Strang (1970: 95) proposes seven gender classes and Kanekiyo (1965) outlines twelve (e.g., *he-they-who*; *she-they-who*; *he/she-they-who*; *it-they-which*; *it/he/she-they-who/which*). Joly (1975: 234) dismisses these theories as “no more than a methodical arrangement of facts previously collected by traditional grammarians.” They cannot provide a description of any larger systematic pattern; they can account for which pronouns are required by certain nouns, but they cannot account for how or why nouns have been classified in this way. As justification for his new classification system, Kanekiyo pushes the idea of gender variability to its limit and thereby destroys the possibility of effectively describing a *system*. He initially claims that there is no clear correlation of gender with sex: the choice of the pronoun depends not on characteristics of the noun or of its referent, but depends instead entirely on speaker-dependent factors, which are variable and unpredictable. Kanekiyo (1965: 235) qualifies this last assertion by stating that there exists “some element” of semantic consistency based on sex, animateness, size, shape, and speaker attitude: for example, “nouns *obviously* denoting male human beings and animals are *usually* referred to by *he*” (italics added).

Erades (1956), in the face of the same speaker-based variation in gender, concludes that, in fact, English has no gender at all, a conclusion echoed by Markus (1988: 242) and cited by Greenbaum (1996: 583). English gender cannot be a system of concord between nouns and pronouns because not only do nouns never overtly mark gender (which is not always the case since, for example, the suffix *-woman* unambiguously marks feminine nouns) but also antecedent nouns do not always grammatically appear before anaphoric pronouns (according to the strictest definition of anaphora, as discussed above). In this case, Erades explains, if gender were a system of concord, it would be between pronouns and ideas (notional gender); but clearly gender is not even inherent in ideas because it fluctuates from speaker to speaker. With such a dependence on speaker attitudes, English gender, while “alive” in the language, cannot be regarded as a system: “Can we speak of gender in a language where the same may at one moment be masculine, at another feminine or [sic] 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”; the “system” is that pronoun reference varies with the mood, temper, frame of mind, and private circumstances of the speaker (his or her psychological attitude), which are usually neutral (hence English gender’s apparent stability) but not always so: “The old schoolbook rule to the effect that a male being is a *he*, a female being a *she* and a thing an *it* only 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*" (*ibid.*: 10).

In his comparisons of English to French and German, Erades makes no distinction between grammatical and semantic gender systems, implying that there is one grammatical gender system and those languages that do not comply have no system at all; in addition, by limiting anaphora to antecedents present in the syntax, he too quickly dismisses the possibility of English nouns carrying gender. Erades claims that gendered pronoun reference is based on "momentary and individual psychological associations" in the mind of the speaker, with no discernible patterns in individual or community usage. Erades rightly emphasizes speaker attitudes and the variability inherent in the English gender system, but he too sweepingly abandons systematicity in favor of speaker whims. Contemporary sociolinguistic research has shown that speech patterns within communities are often systematic and explicable given information about extralinguistic factors. In short, speaker-based theories are not inherently irregular.

The recognition of its variability is a crucial component to understanding Modern English gender, but 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. English gender is not a completely "momentary," unpredictable phenomenon, a fact that Vachek nicely summarizes in his account of gender's sociolinguistic predictability: "The fact is that if all factors that co-operate in determining the pronominal reference are 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 [sic] 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 describe the semantic and extralinguistic factors determining English pronoun reference, most of which postulate emotional involvement on the part of the speaker, have met with limited success. Svartengren, one of the earliest scholars to study Modern English gender variation in detail, examines exceptional uses of feminine pronouns in the "homely style" of speech or the "vernacular" (as opposed to literary language). Working from the premise that the use of the feminine for inanimate objects is an American phenomenon that has influenced British English, he devises three categories of objects that can take the feminine: (1) concrete things made or worked upon by man [sic], e.g., machinery, industrial plants, receptacles, motors, rooms, houses, money, roads; (2) substantive actions, abstract ideas, e.g., "whooping her up"; (3) nature and natural objects not worked upon by man. The feature that unifies the categories is that the use of *she* reflects emotional interest on the part of the speaker, a bond of living and working together: "[W]e must come to the conclusion that the emotional

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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).⁹ While Svartengren’s dismissal of personification as the root of “exceptional” gender references and his conclusions about the emotional uses of gender are productive, they inappropriately limit these uses to the feminine and ignore larger patterns of gender agreement including exceptional masculine and neuter references.

Subsequent attempts to pinpoint the factors determining emotive gender references have often proposed that masculine and feminine references to inanimate objects reflect negative and positive attitudes on the part of speakers toward the referent. Vachek (1976), noting that exceptional gendered associations cluster around some typical invariants and have social values, formulates a scale with a neutral, unmarked reference between two polar extremes for positive and negative feelings toward the facts of any given reality. About 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 femine [sic] *vs.* masculine features regarded as typical of each of the two sexes. (Vachek 1976: 388)

Traugott (1972) concurs with this model of the affective gender system, also assuming the correlation between feminine and positive, masculine and negative to be transparent. The consensus is that for animate nouns, the masculine and feminine are both unmarked (and only one is possible), which means there is no polar opposition available for emotive reference. Speakers can, therefore, express

⁹ According to late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century grammarians, there were lists of nouns (other than humans and animals) that took the feminine in the “homely style.” But Svartengren claims that these lists do not match the usage patterns he has discovered; he argues this use of the feminine is a fairly modern phenomenon, possibly with “slender roots” in Elizabethan England, and he explains that the gendered usage by Milton and Dryden is personification due to literary associations (i.e., it is not colloquial) and the emotional function is only vaguely present. The line between colloquial usage and personification is difficult to draw and perhaps harder to defend, and Svartengren’s assertion about the modernity of such gender usage cannot account for the long history of flexibility and fluctuation that has characterized the natural gender system throughout the history of English. Joly rejects the idea of gender fluctuation as an American development, stating, “Parallel developments point to a common origin: in other words, the tendency to use *she* (or *he*) for inanimate nouns, and conversely *it* for animates, was a possibility already included in the system of gender when the English-speaking community started breaking up in the seventeenth century” (Joly 1975: 233). The material presented in Chapter Four confirms this statement, proving that the tendency was more a reality than a possibility, long before the seventeenth century.

negative feelings toward an animate referent by downgrading him or her to *it*, and all other positive or negative feelings must be inferred from context.

The associations between feminine and positive, masculine and negative are not, however, obvious. Feminine references can reflect positive emotions toward a referent, but they also can reflect negative attitudes, about, for instance, frailty or weakness; in addition, masculine references can be positive about, for example, size and strength. The polar positive/negative distinction these scholars try to delineate is too neat, sharp, and simplistic (see Mathiot [1979] for a more detailed study of referential gender that blurs this dichotomy).

Joly (1975), combining structuralist principles and speaker involvement, downplays the role of the sex distinction in his description of the gender system.¹⁰ According to his model, 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 explain the fluctuation in the gender of discourse, Joly relies on speaker attitudes and perceptions of the referent:

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)

Likewise, when a human is deprived of power and/or personality, speakers use *it*. Joly distinguishes two degrees of power within the field of animation: major power (masculine) and minor power (feminine). So, he argues, the choice of a gendered pronoun for an inanimate is not based on sex distinction but power distinction, and 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. All fluctuations in gender reflect speakers’ emotional attitudes, from affection to contempt.

The theoretical weakness with this model lies, once again, in the attempt to reduce the semantic and sociolinguistic factors involved in English gender assignment to definable binaries, such as powerful–powerless. Morris (1993)

¹⁰ Joly relies heavily on Gustave Guillaume’s dichotomy between *tongue* and *discourse*, in which *tongue* is a closed set of conditions in a language that allows an unlimited number of consequences at the level of *discourse* – a framework that echoes Saussure’s original distinction between *langue* and *parole*. His representation of gender in *tongue* includes the possibility for gender changes in pronoun reference which then appear in the gender of discourse. Interestingly, these fluctuations occur more often in direct speech and interlocution, showing the effect of standardization on narratives; speech exemplifies a gender of discourse which adapts to situational and extralinguistic facts. But the fluctuations are not completely free, as they are limited by the finite number of possibilities incorporated in *tongue*.

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makes a useful move in relabeling the referent as the *denotatum*, in order to contrast it with the *designatum*, or the speaker's extralinguistic mental construal of the object. This distinction allows the useful separation of biological traits in the denotatum from individual speakers' experience or impressions of it, and it is on the latter conception that gender assignment is based. But Morris, while rightly emphasizing speaker experience in the assignment of gender, still relies on binaries in the analysis of "exceptional" gender references, in this case based on predictability or lack thereof.

It is impossible to pinpoint precise factors in gender assignment, although it is very possible to recognize patterns. As importantly, there is no reason to postulate a dichotomy between natural (unmarked) gender and affective gender in English (cf. Baron 1971, Traugott 1972). To do so is to treat the fluctuations in gender as exceptional, as excluded from the base or unmarked system. Instead, the formulation should involve only one system, which incorporates "unmarked" and "marked," "neutral" and "emotive," "natural" and "unnatural" gender references. This one system for English gender can be described as semantic, with the understanding that not all of semantics can be broken down into componential binaries. In a well-pointed reminder, Corbett (1991: 32) remarks 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 outside observer." And they may be even less obvious to insiders trying to describe their own language.

1.4 A re-understanding of Modern English gender

Beyond all the specific features that scholars have tried to isolate over the years to explain variation in Modern English gender references lies the broader concept that gender in the language reflects the social constructions of gender learned, maintained, and perpetuated by speakers. This description of linguistic gender clarifies the correlation between gender as defined in other academic disciplines and gender as it should be defined in the grammar of Modern English. It re-defines the terms by which gender in Modern English is a semantic category. In feminist theory, it is a given that social constructions of gender represent combinations of features inherent in "reality" and of society's attitudes toward those features. Members of a given culture or society create the categories of masculine and feminine and determine what those ideas represent. They are not fixed categories – they fluctuate through time, by context, and by speaker. There is, however, consistency in the core features generally attributed to these categories (e.g., biological sex) and in the shared beliefs and attitudes about them within a culture. This description of the semantic categories in a natural gender system corresponds to the formulation of semantic prototype theory described by George Lakoff (1987), drawing heavily on work by Eleanor Rosch. In this model, categorization is a matter of both human experience and imagination: "of perception, motor activity, and culture on the one hand, and of metaphor,

metonymy, and mental imagery on the other” (G. Lakoff 1987: 8). Both fuzzy and radial categories, as defined by Lakoff, have central members and fuzzy boundaries, which allow for partial membership and variability, just as we find in Modern English gender categories.

Four decades ago, Ervin (1962) recognized this correlation between gender in the language (semantic gender) and gender in the culture.

Taking gender as an example, there is an anatomical distinction, but we assign sex by these ultimate criteria only at birth or with animals. Most of the time we judge human sex on the basis of secondary, imperfectly correlated contrasts such as size, type of clothing, hair style, and voice. Finally, cultural experience and verbal practice differentiate the sexes and the masculine or feminine nouns which refer to them. We may therefore expect to find three different bases for meanings which might be generalized: (a) sexual symbolism associated with anatomical differences or sexual relations; (b) physical properties varying in their correlation with sex, such as size; (c) cultural associations such as contrasts in beauty, slowness, laziness, and stability. Within a given culture, we can predict systematic contrasts in meaning between masculine and feminine words with no animate referent. (Ervin 1962: 253)

The three different bases of gender assignment Ervin lists are fundamental to cultural constructions of gender, and it is not surprising, therefore, to find them reflected in linguistic distinctions of gender. While they closely correlate to sex, they are not wholly dependent on it, and they carry the potential for synchronic and diachronic variation. Suzanne Romaine (1999: 73–82) also creates a series of connections between notions of femininity and the feminine gendering of inanimate objects (e.g., cities, like women, being in need of conquest). Neither, however, pushes as hard as is possible on the obvious connection to theoretical social constructions of gender – an overarching concept beyond lists of features and examples – nor does either take a historical perspective on the question, which in fact helps to reveal this theoretical connection for the modern system.

“Animacy” tends to be assumed as a given entity in distinguishing genders – if not cross-culturally, at least inter-culturally – but it is not nearly so stable a concept. For example, the Ojibwa gender system relies on animacy, but their notions of animacy are not the same as ours (e.g., snow, snowshoes, and cooking pots are animate), which clearly reflects a different culture and world view (Romaine 1999: 69–70).¹¹ Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1994: 182–84) note that animacy distinctions in the early Modern English period were different from those today, as higher animals as well as trees, water, and various human body parts were often seen as animate, which allowed for more frequent gendered reference to

¹¹ Dahl (1999: 101) describes the hypothesized “animacy hierarchy” HUMAN > ANIMAL > INANIMATE and postulates that “animacy” with respect to gender assignment may be defined differently, cutting off at different points in the animacy hierarchy.

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these non-human antecedents. If, as Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg argue, the choice between personal and non-personal gender is determined by whether a being is felt to possess characteristics associated with a member of the human race, then the choice between genders should be similarly determined; the assignment of gender will, therefore, correspond to some degree to contemporaneous constructions of gender in the culture, which may not be immediately obvious to speakers or to historical linguists.

Laqueur (1990: 134–42), in his history of the body and gender, points out that sex as defined in early modern England shows greater similarities to what today would be called gender, because biological, anatomical differences between men and women were inextricably intertwined with gendered characteristics. One of the two was not necessarily seen as more fundamental or “biological” than the other. This lack of a distinction between essential gendered traits and biology may provide one explanation for how certain inanimate nouns were classified as masculine or feminine in Early Modern English and earlier, after the semantic gender system had taken hold. Although these inanimate objects did not have any biological sex, they could exhibit a sufficient number of characteristics associated with one sex to be “naturally” classified under that gender.

Ben Jonson provides an extended list of gendered inanimate nouns in his description of early Modern English gender in the *English Grammar* (1640):

Of the *Genders* there are sixe. *First*, the *Masculine*, which comprehendeth all *Males*, or what is understood under a *Masculine species*: as *Angels, Men, Starres*: and (by *Prosopopoeia*) the *Moneth's, Winds*, almost all the *Planets*. *Second*, the *Feminine*, which compriseth *Women* and *femal species*: *I'lands, Countries, Cities*, and some *Rivers* with us: as *Severne, Avon. &c.* *Third*, the *Neuter*, or *feined Gender*: whose notion conceives neither *Sexe*; under which are compriz'd all *inanimate* things; a *ship* excepted: of whom we say, *shee sayles well*, though the name be *Hercules*, or *Henry*, (or) the *Prince* . . . *Fourth*, the *Promiscuous*, or *Epicene*, which understands both kinds: especially when we cannot make the difference; as, when we call them *Horses*, and *Dogges*, in the *Masculine*, though there be *Bitches*, and *Mares* amongst them. So to *Fowles* for the most part, we use the *Feminine*; as of *Eagles, Hawkes*, we say, *shee flies well* . . . *Fift*, the *Common*, or rather *Doubtful gender*, wee use often, and with elegance: as in *Cosin, Gossip, Friend, Neighbor, Enemy, Servant, Theefe*, &c. when they may be of either *Sexe*. *Sixt*, is the *Common of three Genders*: by which a *Noune* is divided into *Substantive* and *Adjective*. For a *Substantive* is a *Noune of* one only gender, or (at the most) of two. And an *Adjective* is a *Noune of* three *Genders*, being always in the infinite. (Jonson 1972 [1640]: 57)

Jonson's assertion that English has six gender categories may seem absurd enough to dismiss the entire description, but it must be contextualized: the early English grammarians, such as Jonson, were working within the fairly constrictive classical grammar tradition, which compelled them to copy or mold Latin grammatical

categories to fit English usage. In constructing the masculine as representing the “male sex and that of the male kind” and the feminine as the “female sex and that of the female kind,” Jonson and other grammarians seem to assume various inanimate nouns fall into these gendered “kinds” (Curzan 1999). Personification, residual confusion, and classical allegory are not sufficient explanations, as many scholars now recognize in discussions of similar fluctuation in the Modern English gender system. An alternative explanation is that what the early grammarians label “kind” is synonymous with what today is labeled “gender”; in other words, “kind” refers to the socially constructed attributes assigned to a given sex.

What is also striking about Jonson’s description is the correlation of his list of exceptional nouns with similar lists of exceptional nouns in Modern English. As Chapter Four describes in more detail, Jonson’s list includes many nouns that also prove to be exceptions in the diffusion of natural gender through the lexicon in early Middle English. In sum, there appears to be a lexical subset of nouns, which will be referred to as *resilient nouns*, that retain gendered references with greater tenacity than other nouns throughout the history of English. It is a semantic category, and it is difficult to define with exactitude: it is comprised of nouns such as *sun*, *moon*, *earth*, *city*, *month*, and *church*, which continue to take masculine and feminine pronouns through Middle English and even into Early Modern English. The consistency of these exceptions goes beyond *prosopopeia* ‘personification,’ to use Jonson’s terminology; clearly a level of systematicity underpins these fluctuations in gender, and it is linked to contemporaneous social constructions of animacy and gender in the English-speaking community. In any description of Early Modern English and Modern English, it is more productive to consider these nouns as *part of*, rather than as *exceptions to*, the English gender system.

1.5 Conclusion

Much of the current work on Modern English gender maintains that pronoun selection depends on speaker attitudes and involvement as well as cultural prototypes; the facts presented here suggest that all of these factors in turn rest on the same foundation: the concepts of sex and gender held by language users and the society in which they express themselves. 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. The criterion of animacy is now more heavily weighted so that gendered characteristics are often subsumed under non-personal reference, but they still surface in the well-documented gendered references to inanimate nouns throughout the spoken language and occasionally in the written language as well. These gendered references

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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 social concepts of sex and gender.

Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (1994) refer to the English gender system as *notional gender* in an attempt to move away from the misconceptions bound up with the description *natural gender*, and this new terminology may better capture the psychological and social aspects of gender assignment in the language.¹² It is possible, however, and I think pragmatically preferable to retain the description *natural gender* with the understanding that its definition rests not purely on biological sex but instead on social concepts of sex and gender, and the flexibility in reference that this system allows speakers is natural and highly patterned. The argument that changing erroneous or offensive terminology relating to an issue is a necessary component to changing conceptions about the issue itself is certainly a valid one. Changing accepted forms of language is a way to shape how speakers linguistically formulate or articulate their ideas, even if it does not immediately alter the ideas themselves. Conscious language change is not always successful, particularly if it is not supported by a strong political or social movement. As a result, employing specific new terminology to suit one particular agenda can obscure the more important points motivating the shift in terminology. In this case, given the clear correlation between linguistic and social gender, and the growing understanding of what the latter involves, the description *natural gender* for the English language could naturally come to encompass and appropriately refer to both biological sex and the social constructions engendered by it.

Corbett (1991: 32), as quoted above, notes that semantic gender categories reflect the world view of speakers, and while these categories in Modern English cannot be broken down into binary features for analysis, it is possible to predict variation to some extent given knowledge of extralinguistic factors. 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.

¹² Jespersen (1924: 55, 230) introduces the term *notional categories* as opposed to syntactic ones in his description of English gender, but it quickly becomes apparent that he is making no distinction between notional and natural gender for English: “I am chiefly concerned with the relation between notional (that is, in this case, natural) and grammatical categories, and shall try to show how here and there languages have in course of time developed other and more rational groupings than the old traditional ones” (Jespersen 1924: 230).