# Introduction

"I think she's got it!" exclaimed a participant at the American Dialect Society's annual meeting in January 2000, after the final vote for the "Word of the Millennium." The early candidates for the honor ranged from the lofty (*truth*, *freedom*, *justice*) to the academic (*science*), from the political (*government*) to the seemingly mundane (*the*). The debate was heated, with members concerned whether the vote was based on the words themselves or on the concepts that the words represented. Rather late in the discussion, the word *she* was proffered and it quickly began to gain momentum – perhaps oddly parallel to what *she* seems to have done in medieval times when it entered the language. *She* gathered support from all sides: *she* represents a linguistic innovation of this millennium (*she* is first cited in 1154 AD); the introduction of *she* is change at the very core of the English vocabulary; the mysterious origins of *she* seem best explained as a combination of distinctive phonological processes in English and the effects of language contact, a crucial force in the history of English; *she* as a feminine linguistic marker represents a fundamental social category and its ascendance can be seen as symbolic of the gains by women at the end of the millennium; and *she* allows us to celebrate the pronoun, a type of mundane function word that tends to get taken for granted, albeit a critical linguistic building block. And *she* did get it. *She* prevailed over all rivals to be crowned Word of the Millennium.

*She* is just the kind of word that is the focus of this book.

### The study of gendered linguistic forms

With the election of *she* as the word of the millennium, a personal pronoun gained the kind of recognition and acclaim usually reserved for open class or content words – not everyday function words like pronouns. While much of English vocabulary has been studied extensively, the first comprehensive book on Modern English personal pronouns, written by Katie Wales, was not published until 1996. As Wales's book demonstrates, personal pronouns in English are fascinating both linguistically and socially. Take, for example, the current confusion over phrases such as "between you and _ (me?/I?)": this confusion and the resulting

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variation exemplify a change in progress throughout the pronoun system as speakers struggle to distinguish contexts for subject and object forms, as well as the stigmas that speakers are willing to attach to those who "misuse" their pronouns. In fact, the history of personal pronouns is as interesting as their current status in the language, as the mysterious appearance of *she* in 1154 AD suggests, and to understand the critical workings of the largest gender shift in the history of English, from grammatical to natural gender, we must examine the third-person singular forms.

In Modern English, the third-person singular pronouns *he, she*, and *it* are the only grammatical forms to retain or maintain the gender system. As such, they have been the focus of sexist language debates as well as definitional debates, as explained in Chapter One: does Modern English have a true linguistic gender system when it is upheld only by these pronouns and seems to correspond to biological sex? As Chapter Two demonstrates, the shift in gender systems, from grammatical to natural gender, has also been a focus in the creation and main-tenance of historical ideologies about English, from notions of progress and linguistic imperialism to counter-claims of creolization. Chapters Three and Four examine how these third-person pronouns came to carry natural gender in the history of English, unlike their Old English predecessors *he* 'he,' *heo* 'she,' and *hit* 'it,' which carried grammatical gender. In other words, these chapters address the question of when *he* and *she* became restricted to animate beings (as well as when *he* became a default pronoun) and when *it* came to refer to all inanimate things – or at least almost all things.

Pronouns should not steal all the attention away from content words in exam-ining the history of gender and gender shifts in English. The lexical items that refer to men and women, as well as girls and boys, have also been the source of much modern debate and are in need of historical contextualization. For example, generic *man* is often paired with generic *he* in discussions of the masculine as un-marked in English, and the gender binary reflected in *he/she* plays out in perhaps even more dramatic ways in the lexicon, as masculine and feminine words often follow notably different semantic paths over time.

Now that English follows a natural gender system governing personal pronoun agreement, there is only a subset of nouns that "carry gender" at all – and this is almost entirely semantic, because they refer to gendered beings. (There are also some morphologically gendered suffixes such as *-woman*, *-man*, *-ess*.) The focus of Chapter Five is a subset of these – a set of common words that have been used to refer to men and women, boys and girls since Old English, as well as some of the more contemporary synonyms (although I will argue that there is no such thing as a "true" synonym). These formally "invisibly" gendered nouns – gendered because their animate referents are gendered – provide a different perspective on how attitudes about gender can and have played out in English, not only in the construction of masculine and feminine categories but also in the positive or negative meanings that words in these categories tend to acquire.

At the heart of this book, Chapters Three, Four, and Five, are three studies that examine linguistic shifts related to gender in the history of English, all related to the overall shift of English from a grammatical to a natural gender system. The studies also focus on the linguistic histories of these three features of Modern English usage because they are often the focus of discussion and debate about how gender plays out in the language: the use of generic *he* to refer to people of unknown or unspecified gender; the use of *he* and *she* as well as *it* to refer to inanimate objects; and the semantic shifts and asymmetries in male–female word pairs (e.g., *man* and *woman*, *bachelor* and *spinster*).

This book works from the premise that we should not take the language of gender for granted. These linguistic forms have complex, interesting, and sometimes controversial histories; and as Suzanne Romaine (1999: 293) points out: "Debates about language are really about issues of race, gender, class, or culture." The history of gender in English, of the gender categories assumed and/or revealed in the language and of the words used to refer to men and women, reveals syntactic, semantic, and cultural forces at work as the language changes. The findings in the following chapters put language in the foreground, examining the linguistic forms and categories and reconsidering the role that gender plays and has played in how we categorize, name, and refer to the world and specifically to men and women. Gender proves to be a very productive focal point for what it reveals not only about grammatical mechanisms and language change but also about cultural attitudes.

### The context of language and gender research

The topic of "language and gender" is becoming almost commonplace, with a proliferation of published books and college courses on the subject. The focus is more often on discourse rather than grammar; when there is a treatment of gendered or generic language, it rarely takes a historical perspective. Overall, questions such as whether or not there is such a thing as "women's language" and how gender plays out in conversational interaction and rhetorical style have attracted the most attention. As a case in point, a book published in 1998 titled *Rethinking Language and Gender Research* focuses entirely on investigations of speech communities and the ways in which researchers need to re-examine the gender dichotomies that tend to underlie the questions they pose. The goals and arguments of the articles in this book provide important insights about the development and direction of the field; and, in fact, they apply not only to discourse but also to gender categories in language itself. In this case, as in so many others, the gender of the speakers steals the limelight from gender in the language spoken.

This emphasis highlights the new, now prevalent meaning of gender as a category of animate beings related to biological sex. I was, in fact, intrigued to read Mary Talbot's introduction to her book *Language and Gender* (1998), in which she writes: "In linguistics and language learning, the label 'language and

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gender' sometimes causes a bit of confusion because people naturally think of gender as a grammatical category. Not in this book. Gender, in the sense I am using it here, is a social category, not a grammatical one" (Talbot 1998: 3). My experience is the opposite: what confuses people about gender in language is their assumption that gender is a human trait, not an arbitrary linguistic category. So while Talbot's book is about gender as a purely social category, this book will attempt to negotiate between the two: gender as a social construct/category and gender as a linguistic construct/category – and how and when the two should be put in dialogue.

#### A gap in existing scholarship

Theoretical models and insights in linguistic theory and in feminist theory all too rarely inform each other, particularly in the more traditional areas of language study such as historical linguistics. (Feminist theory has made more successful inroads in newer areas such as discourse analysis.) Yet each has much to gain from the other. As the following chapters demonstrate, understandings of gender in feminist theory can help to rethink concepts of gender in language. And an understanding of the history of gendered linguistic forms can help to reread the role and meaning of gender in the language of our cultural texts.

At the most fundamental level, *gender* itself often remains ill-defined in linguistic theory. The word *gender*, popularized by modern feminist theory as a way to distinguish socially constructed meanings of masculine and feminine from biological designations of sex, became a buzzword in late twentieth-century academia. As such, *gender* is now often used indiscriminately to replace the perceived "politically incorrect" word *sex*, thereby obscuring or obliterating the originally intended (and always politically correct) distinction between the two. The distinction is also pervasively misunderstood or dismissed. The second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), often viewed as one of our most authoritative sources on the language, itself seems to treat the distinction between sex and gender as a trivial one; the definition (3b) of *gender* reads: "In mod. (esp. feminist) use, a *euphemism* for the sex of a human being, often *intended* to emphasize the social and cultural, as opposed to the biological, distinctions between the sexes" (italics added). Gender is no euphemism, and the distinction that it creates between the biological and the social is critical, in linguistic theory as elsewhere. Sex is biological, "a matter of genes, gonads and hormones," as Mary Talbot puts it (1998: 7); gender is socially constructed, involving sets of traits that we learn and perpetuate as "masculine" and "feminine." The *OED* editors seem to prefer traditional linguistic definitions of gender as only a system for categorizing nouns (see Chapter One). And while there are important distinctions to be made between linguistic gender and other forms of gender at times, there are also important connections to be made.

Few linguists outside discourse analysis have pursued the connection between feminist descriptions of gender in other academic disciplines and traditional

descriptions of gender in linguistics, but the link is obvious and crucial, especially in studies of the English language. The gender constructs in the English language reflect social constructs of gender in the world of its speakers; if gender in the language is isolated from its extralinguistic motivations, it proves impossible to explain in all its variation, both synchronic and diachronic. As the next few chapters describe, the recognition of this connection between linguistic and extralinguistic gender requires a redefinition of "natural gender," and this revised definition immediately helps to explain the exceptions in the Modern English gender system and the patterns visible in the rise of natural gender in the history of English personal pronouns.

### Approach of this book

The contents of this book blend the empirical and the literary, the theoretical and the anecdotal. I find these approaches complement each other. I have drawn on different methodologies and theoretical approaches, from corpus linguistics to prototype theory, from historical syntax to sociolinguistics to feminist theory. As this book crosses traditional disciplinary boundaries, I hope it will be as informative to trained linguists and literary scholars as it is to more general readers interested both in gender and in language change.

Some feminist linguistic scholarship that addresses questions of gender in the English language has been fairly criticized for its generalizations about patriarchy and language control, for the sometimes strident tone and agenda that can seem to determine the direction of the scholarship.[1] While this book tackles some of the same controversial issues, I hope that the nature of the historical linguistic analysis presented here is not vulnerable to such a critique. The goal of historical linguistic scholarship is to unravel and seek to explain the complexity of language change. The complexity of speech communities and the nature of most language changes makes clear the difficulty and undesirability in most cases of "assigning responsibility" for particular changes to particular speakers, particularly at the conscious level. The relationship of prescription to language change otherwise occurring in the speech community is an interesting and fruitful area of inquiry within historical language study, and one that proves to be relevant to several of the linguistic changes discussed in this book.

These statements are not meant to deny that I am in some way politically invested in this work. No historian, linguistic, cultural or otherwise, is ever a

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[1] One common target of such critiques is Dale Spender's well-known book *Man Made Language* (1985), which attempts to expose the connection between patriarchy and the language – a language that Julia Penelope has referred to as the "Patriarchal Universe of Discourse." Mary Daly's *Wickedary* (1987) works from the premise that women cannot find a place or voice in this language created and dominated by men. Many of these works are discussed in more detail throughout the book; I mention them here as evidence for how inflammatory the kind of material that appears in this book has proven to be for some scholars in the field and how tangled the relationship of language, attitudes, beliefs, and social structures can become.

completely impartial observer, and one could argue that this may not even be entirely desirable. Scholarly investment does not indicate bad scholarship; in fact, one could argue that the best scholarship requires investment on the part of the researcher. Romaine (1999: xiii) eloquently defends this scholarly stance: "I do not accept the accusation . . . that personal and political commitment to a topic means it cannot be treated as a serious academic discipline." As scholars in language and gender research, as in many other disciplines, have articulated, we must recognize that we all bring particular questions and perspectives to bear on the material we study and simultaneously strive to provide the most accurate analysis possible. In the field of historical linguistics specifically, particularly when working with a topic such as gender, it is critically important to work carefully with the language and with the relationship of language to speakers, within the linguistic frameworks established for how we believe language functions, both structurally and within speech communities.

### Organization of the book

No book should or could claim to tell the entire story of gender in the history of the English language. In this book, I have chosen to focus on three developments in English that are all related to the larger shift in English from a grammatical to a natural gender system, two focused on grammar and one on lexicon:

- the development of personal pronoun reference to animate beings;
- the loss of grammatical gender and the related rise of natural gender in personal pronouns referring to inanimate objects;
- the semantic shifts in the lexical fields of words for 'man,' 'woman,' 'girl,' and 'boy' – the lexical forms that most clearly retain gender semantically in a natural gender system.

While the focus here will be on language, it quickly becomes apparent that these linguistic developments are intertwined with and reflective of cultural and social developments for English speakers. They become a site from which to view other phenomena such as some of the repercussions of heavy language contact and mixing in the history of English, sexist social structures and practices, and English speakers' attitudes toward their own language. In this way, these studies complement Dennis Baron's valuable book *Grammar and Gender* (1986), which examines how attitudes toward men and women become attitudes about language.

Chapter One lays the groundwork by exploring the thorny issue of defining gender in the first place. It begins with a general review of the scholarship on linguistic gender as well as specific theoretical models for the Modern English gender system, in order to expose the ways in which we need to rethink the definition of gender in English. It may seem odd that the apparently "simple" gender system of Modern English has been the source of such scholarly confusion

and frustration; it is the exceptions to the rule – the inanimate nouns that can still be referred to with gendered pronouns – that have proven so difficult to explain. Personal pronouns now carry the weight of the history of English gender, and by examining how the "natural" gender system of these pronouns came to be, we can come to a better understanding of what the variation in the system means, both linguistically and socially.

Chapter Two begins with a critical survey of the ways in which the loss of grammatical gender and the emergence of the modern gender system have been framed in histories of English. This historiography shows the ways in which gender often blurs the lines between the linguistic and the social, and the ways in which the descriptions in these histories reveal underlying ideologies and belief systems. This survey sets the stage for a discussion of how to rethink the framework for the history of English – both ideologically and linguistically – in order to explain the gender shift and semantic changes that gendered words have undergone.

The discussion of gender then takes a more empirical turn to look specifically at the history of English personal pronouns (the only forms to retain gender agreement in Modern English) and of English gendered nouns for people (the nouns that clearly retain semantic gender in Modern English). In a broad linguistic context, Chapters Three and Four are devoted to historical syntax, specifically the transition from grammatical to "natural" gender in the history of English ("natural" being a term that will be problematized in Chapter One) and its repercussions in Modern English. The corpus-based study presented in Chapter Three historicizes the generic pronoun question by providing a broader examination of agreement patterns between pronouns and nouns referring to human beings in Old and Middle English. The chapter ends with a survey of grammatical prescription on the pronoun question to frame the debate historically and provide perspective on the ways in which attitudes about gender can play out in descriptions of gender in the language.

Chapter Four, also based on a corpus study of pronouns, offers historical linguists a new model for understanding the English gender shift from grammatical to natural gender. It focuses specifically on when and how English lost grammatical gender in the singular third-person pronouns *he, she*, and *it*, used anaphorically to refer back to gendered nouns. The gradual loss of Old English inflectional endings, all of which served to mark case, gender, and number, is clearly a major factor in the loss of the grammatical gender system: once noun phrases no longer overtly marked gender, personal pronouns were left as the only grammatical forms carrying gender, and by the end of Middle English (at the latest), they were following natural gender. The findings of this study clarify when and how the personal pronouns shifted away from grammatical gender agreement and how our understanding of "natural" gender is historically contingent. These facts about the grammatical progression of the shift in the personal pronouns also contribute important new evidence to the ongoing discussion about the influence

of language contact in the dramatic changes between Old and Middle English, as well as to theoretical work in historical syntax.

Chapter Five turns from pronouns to nouns, from grammar to the lexicon, from syntax to semantics, in order to examine the history of a core set of terms used to refer to men and women, boys and girls. The study serves to historicize the debate about generic *man*, often linked to generic *he*, and about the sexism of words such as *girl* when applied to women. The premise of this chapter, like those that precede it, is that we can better understand the history of individual words within a broader context of related forms, and this chapter specifically examines the ways in which the masculine–feminine gender binary plays out in the core of the lexicon. It also pulls together a range of more technical linguistic scholarship in an attempt to create more accessible histories of semantic change with real implications for modern concerns about gender and language, both in public debates and in feminist scholarship. The chapter focuses first on words for younger gendered beings, specifically *boy* and *girl*, *child*, *knave*, *knight*, *maid*, *maiden*, and *wench*, as well as other more peripheral terms. The discussion then turns to general terms for adult gendered beings, treating in particular the words *man* and *woman*, *wife* and *husband*, *bachelor* and *spinster* and other fundamental gender pairings, as well as words such as *lord* and *lady*, *harlot*, *hussy*, *hag*, and *crone* as their histories become intertwined. Looked at in the wider context of their lexical fields, the histories of these words reveal patterns of semantic change that are simultaneously fascinating and potentially disquieting in what they reveal about our beliefs and attitudes about men, women, and children. Woven into this chapter are examinations of the treatment of these terms in a historical range of dictionaries, often compared with evidence of actual usage from both literary and more vernacular texts.

The concluding chapter addresses the ways in which these historical questions are playing out in the debates about Modern English. The chapter briefly comments on attempts to "reform" the language so that it will be less sexist as well as a commentary on these very efforts. From a historical perspective, feminist language campaigns have been surprisingly successful as political agendas and linguistic changes have fallen into line. This final chapter considers the implications of calling particular terms, from generic *he* to *history*, sexist, as well as the implications of these studies of gender in the history of English for feminist work on language. The historical framing of these issues, in the final chapter and throughout the book, aims to provide a critical perspective for speakers participating in attempts to change the language and for speakers whose language is changing, as well as the linguists who study these very speakers and their language.

### A note on terminology

I have intentionally not played with the word *history* in the title. This book, as it works to describe the development of gender in the history of the language,

is not designed as an attempt to set an agenda for feminist language reform. This is not to say that this material is not relevant to language reform movements or that this book is completely apolitical. The motivation behind this book is to provide the historical information that can contextualize current debates about gender, as well as sexism, in the language and debates about language reform. This book works to explain how, for example, the pronouns *his* and *her* have been used differently over time, and why "reforming" a word like *history* is an example of an ahistorical (mis)understanding of sexism in the language. (The word *history* was borrowed into English in the fourteenth century, adapted from the Latin *historia*.) I do not want to deny the potential rhetorical effects of this word, but I also do not want to ignore the fact that opponents of language reform often gather their ammunition from this kind of re-parsing of history (italicized or not).[2]

Readers will also notice that I use the term *gendered*, an adjective derived from a verb with which not all speakers – let alone lexicographers or spell checkers – feel comfortable. But *gender* as a verb effectively captures the ways in which scholars such as Judith Butler have argued that gender is a kind of performance – sets of repeated behavior through which we create gendered selves and perpetuate gender categories. In this way, the functional shift of this word in the language, from a noun to a verb, reflects new ways in which scholars have conceptualized gender in the world. The adjective *gendered* also serves as a convenient means of categorizing the set of linguistic forms that carry gender in a given language.

### A note to the reader

A reader can "read" this book in a number of ways. A reader with linguistic training can read the material as presented. For readers less familiar with the history of the English language, the more general background on the history of English included in Chapter Two, although far from comprehensive, should provide a historical linguistic context for the detailed analysis of earlier stages of the language presented later in the book. In addition, Appendix 1 provides useful background on the history of English personal pronouns. A specialized reader may choose to concentrate on Chapters Three through Five, which include the empirical studies. In addition, Appendix 2 contains technical information about the Helsinki Corpus and about the methodology used for the studies in

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[2] Deborah Cameron justifiably disagrees with me on this point, asking why feminists should not play with language for political ends. As she writes: "*Herstory* is an excellent word, pointing out with wit and elegance that history has too often been the story of men's lives . . ." (1990: 111). I do not want to discourage speakers from deliberately playing with words for political ends or deny that speakers may easily misparse this word as a sexist compound; as a historical linguist, however, I find myself reluctant to extend language reform in such a way, when most speakers will not know to distinguish this deliberate wit from more serious attempts to create a more generic or gender-equitable language.

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Chapters Three and Four. While the material in Appendices 1 and 2 is situated at
the end of the book so that the results of the studies themselves can be highlighted
in the chapters, I encourage readers to turn to the appendices for this background
information. Throughout the book, readers will find brief summaries of relevant
studies and a wide range of references so that they can further pursue questions
of particular interest about language as well as language and gender.