Episode #335
A Turnip Is A Turnip | Genders in the English Language
24th Jan, 2023

[00:00:05] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are discussing genders.

[00:00:25] But not whether a person is a man, a woman, or another gender, or what pronouns one should use.

[00:00:32] But rather, genders in language, and specifically, we will focus on genders in the English language.

[00:00:40] 38% of the world speak a gendered language, meaning they group nouns into categories like masculine, feminine and neuter.

[00:00:50] English is something called a "natural gender language", meaning that

pronouns - he, she, and so on - do have a gender, but objects do not. A chair is a chair, it

isn't masculine, it isn't feminine, it's just a chair.

[00:01:05] So why is this?

[00:01:07] Why do most European languages give **inanimate**[1] objects genders, but

English does not?

[00:01:14] Has this always been the case?

[00:01:15] And is it really true that there are no genders in English?

[00:01:21] Let's get right into it and explore the surprising story behind genders in the

English language.

[00:01:29] When speaking about the German language, the American author Mark

Twain once said:

[00:01:36] "Every noun has a gender, there is no sense or system in **distribution**[2]."

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[1] non-living

[2] the way they are shared among the group of nouns

[00:01:42] "In German, a young lady has no sex, while a **turnip**[3] has. Think what

overwrought[4] **reverence**[5], [or great love] that shows for the **turnip**, and what

disrespect for the girl."

[00:01:57] Here, Twain **humorously**[6] voices his frustration at trying to understand the

German language and its seemingly random categorisation of words.

[00:02:08] As our German listeners will know, the German language has three genders:

masculine, feminine and neuter, or neutral.

[00:02:17] The word for a 'girl' is neuter, while the word for '**turnip**' is feminine.

[00:02:24] And Twain points out how strange this is, at least for an English-speaker, for a

speaker of a language without grammatical genders.

[00:02:34] Why should a **turnip** have a gender and a girl have none?

[00:02:39] A girl is clearly feminine, and a **turnip** is, well, it's a vegetable, it's neither

feminine nor masculine in terms of its gender.

[00:02:49] Twain isn't alone in being **baffled**[7], being confused, by this concept.

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[3] a root plant cooked as a vegetable

[4] with great care, detailed

[5] respect, admiration

[6] in a funny way

[7] confused

[00:02:55] It's a challenging one for anyone learning a new language, especially if their native language is a grammatically non-gendered one, like English.

[00:03:06] **On the flip side**[8], on the other hand, it can make English easier to learn than languages that do have grammatical genders, because you almost never need to worry about remembering what gender an object is in English.

[00:03:21] There are a few exceptions, which we'll touch on shortly, but as a general rule, you don't need to worry about whether a **turnip** is masculine, feminine, or something else. Or a tomato.

[00:03:35] Or a potato.

[00:03:35] Or a TV or a chair or a table. Or any object.

[00:03:40] As you'll know, non-human objects in English don't have a gender, which makes life easy.

[00:03:48] So, why is this, why do some languages have grammatical genders, and why is English not one of them?

[00:03:57] Well, we need to start by addressing the first question, of why some languages have genders, before we can get to the specific question of English.

[00:04:09] The first point to underline is that it helps to try to mentally separate the idea of grammatical gender from physical gender, and instead, to think of grammatical

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[8] on the other hand

gender more like a category, or a way of putting different types of words in different types of boxes, a way of organising language.

[00:04:32] Linguists believe that many gendered languages **stem from**[9] Proto-Indo-European, a language which existed around 6000 years ago.

[00:04:43] This was the **ancestor**[10] of European languages and Western and Southern Asian languages such as Hindi, Bengali or Kurdish.

[00:04:52] And Proto-Indo-European categorised nouns into two groups: a group for **animate**[11] or living things and a group for **inanimate** things, or objects.

[00:05:07] But over thousands of years many new languages **evolved**[12] and the categories for words changed, becoming far more varied.

[00:05:18] Words that had been **classed**[13] **merely**[14] as **inanimate** in Proto-Indo-European eventually became either masculine,

[00:05:26] feminine or

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[9] have developed from

[10] early version or system

[11] living

[12] developed, advanced

[13] put into a category, classified

[14] just, simply

[00:05:27] neuter.

[00:05:28] Why?

[00:05:30] Well, linguists believe that the reason for these changes in language can be **attributed**[15] to the various belief systems of countries affecting how they thought about objects.

[00:05:42] For instance, in the Siberian language Ket, masculine words are often items actually related to the culture's male-dominated activities like hunting and building.

[00:05:55] For instance, their words for fish and wood are both masculine.

[00:06:02] Meanwhile, words for more **domestic**[16] things such as illnesses, body parts and plants are often feminine, reflecting women's position that particular society.

[00:06:15] So, while these **inanimate** objects don't, of course, have a gender, in their language their gender **corresponds**[17] to the real-life people most associated with them.

[00:06:27] And the influence of real-life gender is also present in the Alamblak language of Papua New Guinea.

[00:06:34] In Alamblak, many masculine nouns include the words for snakes, arrows, and trees, long straight shapes.

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[15] connected, associated with

[16] relating to home or family

[17] matches or agrees with

[00:06:44] I'll leave you guess why that one might be.

[00:06:48] These examples show how cultural beliefs can affect language and the ways we think and **interact with**[18] words.

[00:06:56] And linguists believe that this sort of thing happening over many thousands of years slowly led to the evolution of European languages and their gender categories.

[00:07:08] But as any speaker of Spanish, German, French, Italian, or any other European gendered language will know, these cultural influences are often long gone.

[00:07:21] To go back to our example from Mark Twain, a **turnip** is feminine in German. It's also feminine in Italian, "la rapa". But it's masculine in French ["le navet"] and in Spanish ["el nabo"].

[00:07:38] If there's a cultural reason why a **turnip** should be feminine in German and Italian but masuline in French and Spanish, well, I have yet to find it.

[00:07:49] Instead, words tend to be categorised **phonetically**[19], words which sound the same can be **distinguished**[20] by their different genders.

[00:07:59] If we use the example of French or Italian, similar-sounding words often have the same gender.

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[18] are involved with, communicate with

[19] in a way relating to how they sound

[20] recognised, separated

[00:08:07] In French, for example, words ending in things like "ant" tend to be masculine, whereas words ending in -asse, -ace, or -esse tend to be feminine.

[00:08:20] And in Italian, words ending in an "o" tend to be masculine and words ending in an " a" tend to be feminine.

[00:08:29] But these are **guidelines**[21] more than **surefire**[22] certain rules, as any frustrated French or Italian learner will know all too well.

[00:08:40] Interestingly enough, some studies suggest that grammatical genders do actually make it quicker and easier for people to understand information.

[00:08:49] In other words, gender in language can give **clues**[23] to your brain that help it **retrieve**[24] information faster.

[00:08:58] For example, I'm sure you've had that annoying, **niggling**[25], feeling when you can't quite remember the correct word to describe what you mean.

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[21] general rules

[22] certain

[23] pieces of information or evidence

[24] find, recall

[25] worrying

[00:09:07] Well, linguists propose that grammatical gender can actually help to eliminate this, with the grammatical gender providing clues to your brain to help you **retrieve** a word.

[00:09:19] This is, of course, only one theory, and there's an equally valid argument to be made that genders in language make it more complicated to learn a language.

[00:09:30] After all, the most successful **artificial**[26] language in history, Esperanto, completely avoided gendered language altogether, with its creator believing that any benefits that gender might have once you had learned the language were **outweighed** [27] by the additional mental energy required to learn these genders in the first place.

[00:09:51] So, this brings us to English, a non-gendered language.

[00:09:57] Why doesn't it have grammatical genders, especially considering that there is so much European influence in the language?

[00:10:05] Well, it hasn't always been this way.

[00:10:08] It might surprise you to find out that up until the 11th century or so, English did have grammatical genders.

[00:10:18] Old English, or Anglo Saxon, had genders, every object was either masculine, feminine or neutral.

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[26] made intentionally rather than happening naturally

[27] less important than

[00:10:26] This language had been brought to the British Isles by the Saxons, who came from Northern Europe in the fourth century AD.

[00:10:35] After they settled in the South of England, Anglo Saxon quickly became the **dominant**[28] language spoken in the British Isles, so most people in Britain were speaking using grammatical gender.

[00:10:48] But just as one group of Northern European invaders brought genders with them, another group of Northern Europeans appeared several centuries later, and **unintentionally**[29] **wiped out**[30] the existence of genders in English.

[00:11:04] These were the Vikings.

[00:11:07] Now, you probably know the Vikings as **fearsome**[31] warriors, bringing with them a **reign**[32] of terror.

[00:11:14] But they also brought with them their language, Old Norse, when they started to settle in Britain in the late ninth century.

[00:11:23] Old Norse, like Anglo Saxon, did have genders.

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[28] most important, mostly used

[29] not on purpose, in a way that was not planned or intended

[30] removed, eliminated

[31] causing fear

[32] period of rule or great influence

[00:11:27] It had masculine, feminine and neuter.

[00:11:30] The problem was that the genders given to objects weren't always the same in the two languages.

[00:11:36] A **turnip** might have been feminine in Old English but masculine or neuter in Old Norse.

[00:11:44] Clearly, this made life confusing.

[00:11:47] So, over time, people in Northern England, where the Vikings first landed, started to leave out the gendered parts of their language.

[00:11:57] And this **trend**[33] slowly travelled down to the Anglo-Saxon south of England, and by the 11th century grammatical genders in English had, **by and large**[34], disappeared.

[00:12:09] A **turnip** became just a **turnip**.

[00:12:13] But there are some exceptions, some objects still do have genders in English, or at least, semi-genders.

[00:12:22] Now, this is not something you would learn in an English class, but it's interesting.

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[33] general change

[34] mostly, in general

[00:12:27] And this is the **concept**[35] of **metaphorical**[36] gender.

[00:12:32] For example, boats are often referred to as "she", they are feminine.

[00:12:39] If you were talking about the Titanic, let's say, you could say "she **set sail**[37] to America". You could also say "it set sail for America", which wouldn't be completely wrong, but it would sound very strange to say "he set sail for America".

[00:12:55] So, a boat is either "it" or it's "she", it's never "he".

[00:13:00] Interestingly enough, one theory about why this is, at least in the case of boats, is that it comes from the Latin word for boat, navis, which is feminine.

[00:13:12] Another is that there is this idea of a boat having a protective, **maternal**[38] role for its **crew**[39], or rather, her **crew**, and that's why boats are often given a gender.

[00:13:25] By the way, it's not wrong at all to call a boat simply "it", and indeed the Lloyds Register of Shipping, which knows a thing or two about boats, calls a ship "it".

[00:13:37] And it's not just ships that get given genders in English.

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[35] idea, principle

[36] not natural or grammatical, poetic

[37] began a trip by sea

[38] like a mother

[39] the group of people who work on boats

[00:13:41] Cars and machines are often feminine in English, but typically only when the person talking about them has some kind of close relationship with them.

[00:13:52] All that being said, this is a pretty **niche**[40], unusual, way of speaking, so **for all intents and purposes**[41], it is safe to assume that there are no genders used to describe objects in English.

[00:14:07] There are, of course, still gendered terms used to describe people.

[00:14:12] Now, this is perhaps **controversial**[42] territory we're getting into here, but the English language historically has male and female pronouns that are used to describe people - he/him, and she/her, with the third person plural, they, being used when the gender of a person is unspecified or unknown.

[00:14:36] And in English, nouns describing the job someone does have historically been slightly different depending on that person's gender.

[00:14:46] Headmaster or Headmistress.

[00:14:48] Policeman or Policewoman.

[00:14:51] Actor or Actress.

[00:14:53] Waiter or Waitress.

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[40] unusual

[41] in every situation or almost completely

[42] causing discussion or arguments

[00:14:55] In most cases, the male **variant**[43] is the dominant one, and the female version is an alternative.

[00:15:04] Clearly, this is **problematic**[44]. If a young girl only hears about policemen, or firemen, or postmen or businessmen, or even if a young boy hears these terms as standard, it suggests that these are things that can only be done by men.

[00:15:24] Over the past few decades, there has been a move to try to standardise these terms in English, to try to create more inclusive language.

[00:15:34] In some cases, the male **variant** is chosen as the standard, so there are, for example, no longer actors and actresses, simply "actors".

[00:15:46] In other cases, a new, non-gendered term is chosen, so there aren't Policemen and Policewomen, but rather police officers.

[00:15:56] All good so far.

[00:15:58] Perhaps even more strangely, in American English a decision has been taken to change the Spanish language, when used in English, so someone is no longer Latino or Latina, they are Latinx.

[00:16:14] The idea of creating an inclusive term does, it appears, come from a place of good intentions.

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[43] form, version

[44] causing problems or difficulties

[00:16:21] But this particular example of "Latinx" has largely been **ridiculed**[45] by the Hispanic population. Only 2-3% of Hispanic people reportedly use the term to describe themselves, and it has been criticised as an example of **linguistic imperialism**[46], of non-Spanish-speaking Americans changing Spanish to solve a non-existent problem.

[00:16:47] And as to the question of what is the effect of a language having grammatical gender or not, and what is the effect of English having gendered pronouns but not grammatical gender, well this is a **tricky**[47] one.

[00:17:03] There was a **prominent**[48] study from 2011 that looked at gender equality in 111 different countries and found that countries where gendered languages were spoken **tended to**[49] have lower levels of gender equality.

[00:17:18] So, if you live in a country that **assigns**[50] genders to objects, you are more likely to experience gender inequality.

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[45] laughed at, made fun of

[46] the transfer or imposition of the most used language to other people

[47] causing difficulty

[48] important

[49] were more likely to

[50] gives, sets

[00:17:27] You might think, well, if that's the case, then **presumably**[51] countries with no gender in their language would be **beacons**[52] of gender equality, would be great places in terms of equality between men and women.

[00:17:42] Some, Finland, for example, score very highly **on this count**[53]. Finnish is a language without any genders, neither grammatical nor in personal pronouns, and Finland is a country with high levels of gender equality.

[00:17:59] Others, Cameroon, China and Turkey, for example, do not. These countries don't use gendered language, but they don't score very well in terms of gender equality.

[00:18:12] Interestingly, countries where Natural Gender languages like English are spoken, where pronouns have gender but objects do not, score highest overall, they are generally the best places in terms of gender equality.

[00:18:27] Clearly, the language spoken in the country is only one **factor**[54] here, but it is certainly an interesting piece of research, and shows that even if your language has no

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[51] probably, apparently

[52] sources of guidance or inspiration, perfect examples

[53] as far as this is concerned, with regard to this

[54] fact that affects the result

inbuilt[55] gender inequality, it certainly doesn't mean that this will be the case for your society.

[00:18:46] So, what does this all mean for English learners?

[00:18:50] Well, not a lot, really..

[00:18:52] The good news for you is that grammatical gender is one less thing you need to worry about.

[00:18:58] When you talk about a **turnip**, call it it.

[00:19:02] When you talk about a chair, call it "it" too.

[00:19:06] And when you're talking about a boat, well the truth is that you can call it "it" as well.

[00:19:14] Ok then, that is it for today's episode on gender in language, and in particular, gender in English.

[00:19:22] I hope it was an interesting one, and that it might have left you thinking a bit about your native language.

[00:19:28] Did you grow up speaking a grammatically gendered language like French or Spanish, a non-gendered language like Turkish or Mandarin, or a naturally gendered language like English, Danish or Swedish?

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[55] existing as an original or very important part

[00:19:42] How do you think this affected you, and the society you grew up in?

[00:19:47] I would love to know, so let's get this discussion started.

[00:19:51] You can head right into our community forum, which is at

community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:59] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo

English.

[00:20:04] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Inanimate	non-living
Distribution	the way they are shared among the group of nouns
Turnip	a root plant cooked as a vegetable
Overwrought	with great care, detailed
Reverence	respect, admiration
Humorously	in a funny way
Baffled	confused
On the flip side	on the other hand
Stem from	have developed from
Ancestor	early version or system
Animate	living
Evolved	developed, advanced

Classed	put into a category, classified
Merely	just, simply
Attributed	connected, associated with
Domestic	relating to home or family
Corresponds	matches or agrees with
Interact with	are involved with, communicate with
Phonetically	in a way relating to how they sound
Distinguished	recognised, separated
Guidelines	general rules
Surefire	certain
Clues	pieces of information or evidence
Retrieve	find, recall
Niggling	worrying
Artificial	made intentionally rather than happening naturally
Outweighed	less important than

Dominant   most important, mostly used

Unintentionally   not on purpose, in a way that was not planned or intended

Wiped out   removed, eliminated

Fearsome   causing fear

Reign   period of rule or great influence

Trend   general change

By and large   mostly, in general

Concept   idea, principle

Metaphorical   not natural or grammatical, poetic

Set sail   began a trip by sea

Maternal   like a mother

Crew   the group of people who work on boats

Niche   unusual

For all intents and   in every situation or almost completely
purposes

Controversial   causing discussion or arguments

Variant　　　　　form, version

Problematic　　　　causing problems or difficulties

Ridiculed　　　　　laughed at, made fun of

Linguistic　　　　　the transfer or imposition of the most used language to other people

imperialism

Tricky　　　　　　causing difficulty

Prominent　　　　important

Tended to　　　　were more likely to

Assigns　　　　　gives, sets

Presumably　　　　probably, apparently

Beacons　　　　　sources of guidance or inspiration, perfect examples

On this count　　　as far as this is concerned, with regard to this

Factor　　　　　　fact that affects the result

Inbuilt　　　　　　existing as an original or very important part

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com