# A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CATEGORY OF GENDER IN ENGLISH AND ROMANIAN AND ITS ROLE IN ENGLISH TEACHING/LEARNING

**Marina TETERIN,**
*Alecu Russo State University of Bălţi*

***Rezumat:*** *În articol este analizată, în mod comparativ, categoria genului în limbile engleză şi română. Utilizarea neobişnuită, nemotivată şi chiar ilogică a genurilor masculin, feminin şi neutru în limba engleză este deseori legată de personificare, „upgrading" sau „downgrading", precum şi de pronumele generic „he". În limba română, genul substantivelor este o categorie morfologică; prin urmare, substituirea prin pronumele „el" sau „ea" a substantivelor care denotă animale sau obiecte neanimate este o normă, fără orice devieri sau înţelesuri conotative. Deşi o neînsemnată atenţie se acordă categoriei genului în gramaticile tradiţionale ale limbii engleze, utilizarea pragmatică şi stilistică a genului este un aspect important de competenţă lingvistică şi predare sau învăţare a limbii.*

***Cuvinte-cheie:*** *atribuirea genului, sistemul semantic de gen, alegerea pronumelor, sistemul formal de gen, perspectiva pragmatică sau stilistică, acordul gramatical, marcherii morfologici de specificare a genului, structuri co-referenţiale, genul comun, personificare, substantive epicene.*

***Abstract:*** *The article analyses the category of gender in English and Romanian. Unusual, not motivated and even illogical use of the masculine, feminine or neuter gender in English is often related to personification, 'upgrading' or 'downgrading', as well as with generic 'he'. In the English language, the use of the personal pronouns 'he' and 'she' with nouns denoting animals, plants or inanimate objects is more expressive than in Romanian. It is a more attention-attracting phenomenon creating a certain psychological effect and providing foregrounding. In Romanian, the gender of nouns is a morphological category; therefore, the use of the pronouns 'he' or 'she' with nouns denoting animals or things is a norm, without any deviation or connotative meanings. Although little attention is paid to the category of gender in traditional grammars of English, pragmatic and stylistic gender usage is a significant aspect of linguistic awareness and language teaching or learning.*

***Key-words:*** *gender, teaching, learning, category, personification.*

There seem to be two major, sometimes competing systems for assigning gender in the world's languages. On the one hand, there are SEMANTIC SYSTEMS, "where semantic factors are sufficient on their own to account for assignment"[97]. Various features are used as the basis for gender assignment in such systems. Systems where masculine gender is attributed to males and feminine gender to females are often called "natural gender systems"[98]. Criteria for such systems are widespread; often, the general division is one between human and nonhuman, and humans are divided into male and female in turn[99]. Sometimes the dividing line is animate – inanimate instead of human - nonhuman. English might be an example, as animals (particularly domestic animals) are usually masculine or feminine according to sex; however, there are other factors that may influence pronoun choice (e.g. conventions of children's stories[100]).

A more complex system can be found in Algonquian languages: Most of these have two genders, with a basic animate – inanimate contrast. An additional factor for gender assignment is POWER: powerful and/or dangerous things (although inanimate) usually belong to the animate gender, i.e. are grammatically animate[101]. In Caucasian languages, a count - non-count distinction seems to play a role; for example, liquids and abstracts (non-count, non-rigid) belong to the same gender[102]. Cross-linguistically, "[t]he feature animate is particularly pervasive" in semantic gender systems[103].

On the other hand, there are FORMAL SYSTEMS, where formal criteria (usually phonological, e.g. in Romanian, or morphological, e.g. in Russian) determine gender to a large extent[104]. It is important to note that neither strict semantic nor strict formal systems seem to exist. Most of the world's languages make use of mixed systems, but even in formal systems "gender always has a basis in semantics"[105]. Thus, when conflicting rules exist, semantic considerations normally take precedence[106].

---

[95]www.ateg.org/
[96]Swan, S. *A Critical Look at the Communicative Approach* //ELT Journal 39(1), 1985, P. 37.
[97]Huddleston, Rodney D, *Introduction to the Grammar of English,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. P. 8.
[98]ibidem, p. 9.
[99]ibidem, p. 11.
[100]ibidem, p. 12.
[101]ibidem, p. 20.
[102]ibidem, p. 24-30.
[103]ibidem, p. 31.
[104]ibidem, p. 37.
[105]ibidem, p. 63.
[106]ibidem, p. 66.

**1.1. The distinction "masculine" / "feminine" / "neuter" in English**

According to Lyons[107], gender "plays a relatively minor part in the grammar of English". One can appreciate that there is some justification for Lyons' statement, but it is still sweeping, none the less. The issue of gender marking in the NP (noun phrase) in relation to pronouns in present-day English is not a simple one; and, viewed from a broader pragmatic and stylistic perspective than the strictly grammatical; it is in fact quite complex.

At first glance, however, it might seem that gender in modern English is a relatively straightforward category to discuss, in comparison with the phenomenon in many other languages; indeed, in many text-books for both native and non-native speakers of English it is barely mentioned, if at all. Unlike modern German and Old English, for example, pre-modifiers in the NP (determiner, adjective) do not have to 'agree' by grammatical concord with the gender of the noun; and unlike German and Old English again, the nouns of modern English are not assigned a 'grammatical' gender class of 'masculine', 'feminine' and 'neuter' (etymologically meaning 'neither'), with or without gender-specific morphological markings. Instead, it is commonly stated, and has been since eighteenth-century grammarians like James Harris following Aristotle's model, that modern English has a 'natural' or 'logical' system of gender. This is no longer a grammatical category, or even a lexical one, but semantic, based largely on biological sex differences, and hence really significant only for human and animal reference.

So all nouns referring to females are logically or naturally assumed to be 'feminine' in gender; or to have 'female reference'. Nouns referring to male beings or creatures are naturally assumed to have 'male reference'; and everything else (other animals, plants, objects, places, abstract qualities, etc.) is assumed to be 'unmarked' for gender (unlike the nouns of such types in Old English or German). As far as the noun is concerned, therefore, as Erades[108] argues, the category of gender does not really apply any more; except that there is a finite (and ever shrinking) number of nouns (mostly with human and female reference) where, morphologically speaking, gender is marked by specific lexical affixes (e.g. *princess, heroine,* also *business-man-woman, boy-/ girl-friend,* etc).

Gender is still discussed by grammarians like Quirk*,* however, under the heading of 'the noun'; and it is still regarded by most grammarians as a grammatical phenomenon, however 'covert'[109]. It is seen as applicable to Modern Standard English primarily because of the singular 3PPs (and also reflexives and possessives: chapter 7), in respect both of their forms and of their function as co-referring items with nouns. As in Old English, *he* (OE *he*) is prototypically indexical of a male human being, *she* (from ME; OE *heo*) indexical of a female human being; and *it* (OE *hit*)*,* as a 'non-personal' form refers to everything else, both non-human and inanimate.

Accordingly, when one of these 3PPs is used to refer to what an NP in the co-text or context also refers to, it is also 'naturally' or 'logically' selected according to the corresponding biological sex of the referent, if it has one. Gender marking in the NP can be argued, therefore, to be a grammatical category, or more precisely a syntactic, as distinct from morphological, category, on the grounds that it may be recognized by such congruent co-referential patterning:

NP [male reference] – he [masculine]

NP [female reference] – she [feminine]

NP [non-personal reference] – it [neuter]

The general rule goes that the choice between the three terms of gender in English is primarily determined by the sex properties of the referent. But gender assignment can also be determined, to a limited extent, by "[...] the speaker's attitude to the referent"[110]. This entails that, contrary to the rule of natural gender, linguistic gender and biological sex do not always match regularly[111]. Masculine and feminine reference can thus be selected for sexless entities on an arbitrary basis as a result of what has been defined as "a certain emotional attitude", or "a strong feeling of affection" [1, p. 11], just as neuter reference can be selected for animate entities which have a perfectly clear sex specification. This kind of gender assignment, which has sometimes been called 'metaphorical gender', leads to several special cases of gender assignment.

**1.2. Nouns classification by gender type in English**

The resulting system of gender reference can be summarized following seven different genders depending on the type of reference nouns may admit. Rather than interpreting the following as a classification of seven different types of gender, as originally proposed, this is a brief list of the possible gender assignments that nouns may admit based on their referents. Thus, whereas some nouns can only have one type of reference ((1), (2) or (3)), others are double-gender ((4), (5), (6)), or multiple-gender nouns ((7)):

(1) Masculine only: for male human beings *(father, boy, king).*

(2) Feminine only: for female human beings *(mother, girl, queen).*

(3) Neuter only: inanimate (non-sexed) objects *(book, tree, room).*

(4) Masculine or feminine: male or female human beings. These have been described as 'common gender', or 'dual gender', and usually are nouns in '-er' *(driver, employer, singer),* '-ian' *(servant, inhabitant, vegetarian),* or '-ist' *(loyalist, artist, typist)*[7].

(5) Masculine or neuter: male animals *(billy-goat, ram, bull, drake, boar, cock),* and personifications of certain objects of the human physical or mental universe (sun, *river, summer, winter, love, death, time, war).*

(6) Feminine or neuter: female animals *(nanny goat, ewe, sow)*, personifications of certain objects of the human physical or mental universe *(moon, earth, night, day, spring, world),* countries and cities *(England, China, India),* certain abstract concepts *(faith, virtue, fortune, peace, liberty, mercy, wisdom),* certain mechanical objects with which the speaker has a strong emotional attachment *(ship, engine, locomotive, plane, car).*

(7) Masculine, feminine or neuter: animate beings whose sex is indeterminate *(baby, infant, child, cat, dog).* This is often the case of young children or lower animals (fish, birds, reptiles, insects, etc).

**1.3. The distinction "masculine" / "feminine" / "neuter" in Romanian**

*In the semantic plan of noun's constant – it's lexical theme – lexical meaning co-exists with lexico-grammatical one of the second grade, that is gender; the noun bărbat is of masculine gender, floare of feminine gender and templu of neuter gender* [4, p. 44].

In nouns gender is a semantic categoty and partially has semantic nature. It is a semantic category because each noun as a lexical unit has a definite gender, stable semantic component. Gender has a semantic nature because, at least with some part of nouns, it reflects a linguistic interpretation of certain characteristics of objects from extralinguistic world.

From the point of view of gender the nouns of Romanian first of all are devided into two big groups:

• *animate*: nouns that denote objects included in the dynamics life-death: *o băiat, fată, ciocîrlie, fluture, peşte, arbore, floare, zmeu* etc.;

• *inanimate*: nouns-names of objects that don't know the dynamics life-death: *be geam, mauzoleu, stilou, tren, vagon, zmeu* (de hîrtie) etc. Also here are included collective nouns such as *trib, popor, neam* etc., which denote entities situated in the perspective of the dynamics life-death, but only on the level of components; or nouns like *braţ, picior, nas, gît, călcîi, cioc* etc., names of entities included in the perspective life-death on the level of the whole whose parts they are.

---

[107]Welte, Werner, *Nouns and noun phrases* //R. Dirven and Y. Putseys, eds., *A User's Grammar of English: Word, Sentence, Text, Interaction. Part A,* Frankfurt am Main: P. Lang, 1989, P. 283.

[108]Lyons, J., *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, CUP, 1968.

[109]Huddleston, Rodney D, *Introduction to the Grammar of English,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. P. 169.

[110]Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., Svartvik, J. *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, London: Longman, 1985. P. 289-290.

[111]Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., Svartvik, J., *A university grammar of English,* Longman, 1982. P. 99.

This difference of semantic nature isn't duplicated by diffferentiating characteristics of grammatical nature. Only one part of animate nouns have some distinctive grammatical features: proper antroponomastic nouns; these form a subgroup representing what is called a personal gender.

General distinctive features of grammatical order are introduced by the action of biological principles masculine and feminine in differentiating of objects denoted by nouns. The action of these principles reorganizes the distinction animate-inanimate, determining the formation of three classes of nouns:

a) nouns – names of objects that don't know the action of biological principles masculine and feminine *(tron, stilou, tom)*, or nouns that are characteriyed by the abolition of these principles in their linguistic interpretation *(popor, animal)*;

b) nouns – names of objects that are subject to the action of the masculine principle;

c) nouns – names of objects that are subject to the action of the feminine principle**.**

These three noun classes form the semantic nucleus of the three genders in Romanian: neuter, masculine and feminine. However in each of the three noun classes are also included nouns whose semantic feature of gender doesn't have the origin in the reflection of extralinguistic reality.

The most homogenous is the class of neuter nouns. First of all it comprises nouns – names of inanimate objects. Besides, here are included some animate nouns from the class of collective nouns, that are called ambigene from the perspective of componenets of the denoted: *popor, trib, grup, colectiv* etc. and some more animate nouns that denote some species which in linguistic interpretation are placed beyond gender identity: *animal, dobitoc, mamifer, gasteropod* etc.

Thus in the class of neuter nouns are included nouns with two negative semantic features: „-animate" and „-masculine vs feminine".

In the class of masculine and feminine nouns are included nouns with two positively realized semantic features: "+animat" and „+masculin vs feminin": *băiat, fată, dine, vulpe* etc. and nouns with different realization of the two features: "-animate" and „+masculine vs feminine".

The nouns characterized by negative feature „ -animate" are disctrubuted from the point of view of their semantic relation in an arbitrary way in two other gender classes: *"masculine": buton, electron, stîlp* etc., "feminine": *corabie, fereastră, fotografie, mască* etc.

Among nouns with both features positively realized, only some develop gender feature inside semantic relation based on two biological principles: nouns that denote living beings: "masculine": *bărbat, elefant, iepure, leu* etc. and "feminine": *femeie, furnică, vulpe* etc.

Other nouns marked by the feature „ +animate" are grouped in masculine or feminine classes depending on other factors (language history, stylistic strtucture of language, sistemic character of language): *rudă, persoană, iarbă* etc. Some nouns are included in semantic relation based on a definite archaic vision and constantly, nouns that denote objects from the plants world: there exists constant correlation between pairs *pom - fruct* and the relation „masculin – feminin": *vişin-vişină, nuc-nucă, păr-pară, prun-prună.* One exception is the noun *măr,* masculine as the tree name, neuter as a fruit name. In the same perspective, of a subjective interpretation of the extralinguistic world, are included nouns denoting flowers; the majority are of feminine gender: *floare, lalea, floarea soarelui, crizantemă, muşcată* etc. But there are also quite numerous masculine nouns: *crin, trandafir, toporaş* etc.

Among nouns that denote living creatures only part of them realize gender as a semantic category, with a stable gender semantic feature, which can be included in a bipolar opposition, according to two principles: *masculine* and *feminine.*

From this point of view nouns that denote living beings are:

a) *correlative*: they form pairs *masculine-feminine* according to polarity of the denoted 'objects';

b) *epicene*: they don't differentiate linguistically the bipolar reality of denoted 'objects'.

In correlative series of gender are included nouns that belong to the semantic field ,human' and nouns denoting the world of animals, in general, that enter the sphere of direct people's knowledge and are characterized by duplicating of biological distinction with other distinction, especially economic one.

The opposition *masculine-feminine* is realized lexically: *bărbat-femeie, băiat-fată, cerb-căprioară, bou-vacă, bunic-bunică, copil-copilă, leu-leoaică, doctor-doctoriţă, croitor-croitoreasă, poet-poetesă, curcă-curcan, cioară-cioroi, director-directoare, traducător-traducătoare, nepoţel-nepoţică, viţel-viţică.*

Epicene nouns are characterized by absemce of the opposition of gender; in linguistic interpretation of the world of living creatures the speaker remains indifferent to sex distinction, either because this distinction is not perceived by empiric knowledge, or because the speaker is interested in the species itself. As a result the nouns were included in one gender or another, due to language history:

• masculine: *crocodil, dinozaur, dromader, elefant, fluture, melc, pescăruş, peşte, rac, rinocer, struţ, şarpe, şoim* etc.

• feminine: *albină, balenă, cămilă, ciocîrlie, furnică, girafă, libelulă, molie, privighetoare, ştiucă* etc.

Some nouns denoting humans also are included here:

• masculine: *sugar, nou-născut, urmaş, ghid, critic literar, istoric literar, muzeograf* etc.

• feminine: *rudă, călăuză, persoană* etc.

Learners of the English language are usually taught traditional, i.e. unmarked or covert gender system without little consideration of the animateness gradation or connotative meaning. English textbooks neither include the analysis of the stylistic function of the English gender not encourage investigating the non-normative cases found in different contexts of written and spoken usage.

Quirk *et al.* point out that "English makes very few gender distinctions. Where they are made, the connection between the biological category 'sex' and the grammatical category 'gender' is very close, insofar as natural sex distinctions determine English gender distinctions. Many other linguists do not recognize English gender as a grammatical category but also define it according to biological sex distinctions. It is stated that nouns denoting things, phenomena, plants, and animals are neuter and nouns referring to human beings can be either masculine or feminine.

The difficulties in using English gender correctly for foreign learners, in our case Romanian, arise from different systems of gender category in both languages. In the Romanian language gender is a grammatical category with syntactic consequences throughout the grammar, i.e. with pre-modifiers in the noun phrase (determiner or adjective) being in agreement by grammatical concord with the gender of the noun, e.g.: *ochi albastru, floare albastră, creion albastru, elevul cel bun, casa cea înaltă, lacul cel albastru.* The agreement by grammatical concord is observed in plural, e.g.: *ochi albaştri, flori albastre, creioane albastre,* also partly in number, e.g. *doi studenţi – două studente.* The nouns of the Romanian language are assigned a grammatical gender class of masculine and feminine with the help of certain endings (*a consonant, -u, -i,* etc. for masculine and neuter genders, *-ă, - a, -e, etc.* for feminine gender) for every animate or inanimate thing, every phenomenon or notion.

In modern English derivational suffixes defining gender are not productive. Morphologically marked gender is observed in *god - goddess, hero -heroine, host - hostess, waiter - waitress, steward - stewardess, widower - widow* and some other nouns. But such morphological marking is not regular and forming of the nouns *friendess or *clerkess is not possible. In English there is a so called personal dual gender (e.g. friend, doctor, criminal, foreigner, etc.) used for both male and female reference. For clarity in certain contexts gender is marked by specific lexical affixes such as *-man, -woman, boy-/girl-,* etc. (e.g.: *girlfriend/boyfriend, businessman/businesswoman).* But the main indicators of gender remain to be personal pronouns *he, his, him, she, her, it* and *its.*

In conclusion, it could be said that English gender distinctions are not as obvious as have sometimes been assumed. The difficulties to use English gender correctly for the Moldavian learner arise, on the one hand, from the different systems of gender category in English and Romanian and, on the other hand, from the connotative use of personal pronouns *he, she* and *it* indicating masculine, feminine and neuter gender accordingly. Deviation in English gender is often linked with certain pragmatic and stylistic connotations, such as personification, 'upgrading, 'downgrading', generic he, etc.

Though our students are mostly taught traditional, 'unmarked' gender system without any consideration of the animateness gradation, they should be encouraged to investigate and understand the pragmatic and stylistic use, the connotative meanings of the non-normative cases encountered in different kinds of written and spoken discourse.

**Bibliography:**
1. Baugh, Albert C., Cable, Thomas, *A History of the English Language,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1993.
2. Bărbuţă, I., Cicală, A., Constantinovici, E., Cotelnic, T., Dîrul, A. *Gramatica uzuală a limbii române.* Chişinău: Litera, 2000.
3. Iordan, I., Robu, V. *Limba română contemporană*. Bucureşti: Didactică şi pedagogică, 1978.
4. Irimia, D. *Gramatica limbii române*. Bucureşti: Polirom, 2000.
5. Corbett, Greville G., *Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
6. Erades, P.A. *Contributions to Modern English Syntax, V: A note on gender* //Moderna Sprak 15, 1956.
7. Frawley, William, *Linguistic Semantics,* Hillsdale, N.J.: L. Erlbaum, 1992.