Language and Gender

We attach meanings to things in the physical world by categorizing, naming and typifying. An interesting complication is that one category (female human beings) can have multiple names (woman, female, lady) with different connotations (or typifications).

In English, most words for women have some negative connotation:

"Woman" and "girl" have both been used as synonyms for "prostitute. "Girl" also connotes childishness.

"Lady" was used in the 18th century to describe higher class females (as opposed to "women") and may be considered polite by older generations. However, it sounds patronizing to many younger people.

"Ma'am" connotes age in a way that "sir" doesn't. "Gal" sounds patronizing in a way that "guy" doesn't.

"Female" "is now regarded as a mildly contemptuous equivalent for woman [that strong-minded *female* is here again]" (WNWD, 4th ed.)

Through the process of *semantic derogation*, words for women are debased:

Spinster: from "tender of a spinning wheel" to a derogatory term for an unmarried woman

Hussy: from "female head of household" to "woman of low morals"

Tart: from term of endearment to "promiscuous woman"

Biddy: from term of endearment to "annoying (and usually old) woman"

In English, words for women have more negative connotations than words for men:

Manly: having the qualities generally regarded as those that a man should have; virile; strong, brave, resolute, honorable, etc.

Womanly: like a woman, womanish

Masculine: having qualities regarded as characteristic of men and boys, as strength, vigor, boldness, etc.; manly; virile

Feminine: having qualities regarded as characteristic of women and girls, as gentleness, weakness, delicacy, or modesty

Effeminate: 1. having the qualities generally attributed to women, as weakness, timidity, delicacy, etc. 2. characterized by such qualities; weak; soft; decadent, etc.

(Source: Webster's New World Dictionary, 4th ed, 1999. Macmillan.)

Also compare: "governor—governess," "master—mistress," "patron—matron," "sir—madam," "bachelor—spinster."

Other examples of linguistic sexism in English include:

Male generic language: "he" meaning "he" or "she," "mankind," "freshman."

Spotlighting: highlighting of gender to draw attention to gender expectations: "lady doctor," "woman lawyer," "male nurse."

Women's names and titles draw attention to their relationships with men, e.g., Mrs., Miss, Mrs. John Smith.

Greater vocabulary (and with more negative connotations) to describe promiscuous women than promiscuous men.

Note also that men and women are described as "opposite sexes," not "different sexes" or "complementary sexes."

Media and Gender

Renzetti & Curran summarize research on three types of media

<u>Newspapers and magazines</u>: Newspapers, like other media, are guilty of symbolic annihilation, "symbolically ignoring, trivializing, or condemning" women. Men receive more coverage. Coverage of women is more likely to mention the person's sex (spotlighting), physical appearance, and marital status or parenthood. Most newspaper jobs, especially at higher levels, are held by men. Women's magazines are more focused on relationships and appearance than men's magazines.

<u>Television</u>: There are fewer women than men on prime-time television. Women are young, thin, attractive, and (un)dressed provocatively. Women are portrayed as preoccupied with romantic relationships. Women are more likely to be identified with their relationship (or lack thereof) with men; men with their careers. Minorities are underrepresented on television.

<u>Advertisements</u>: "For male consumers the message is typically to buy a particular product and get the 'sweet young thing' associated with it, whereas for female consumers the message is to buy the product in order to be the 'sweet young thing.'" Women are more likely than men to be depicted in "subordinate" poses, to be merely decorative, and to sell household products and less likely to be in positions of authority or to do voice-overs. Minorities, older people, and gays/lesbians are underrepresented.

What about Cause and Effect?

R&C discuss three perspectives regarding the connection between media and violence.

   1. Cathartic effect: violent media reduces violence by allowing viewers to release tensions.

   2. Modeling effect: violent media teaches people to behave violently.

   3. Catalytic effect: views violence in terms of probabilistic causation. Violent media may act as a catalyst if other conditions are present.

The first two perspectives are psychological theories of individual behavior. The third perspective is a more sociological theory. (Sociological theory is generally probabilistic and doesn't attempt to predict individual behavior.)

A social problems approach, which is used by Berns, focuses not on how media make people do things, but on how media may influence people's thinking about social problems (or how people use media to understand social problems).

According to a symbolic interactionist approach, people act toward things based upon the meanings those things have for them. Thus, people's response to media will depend upon the meaning of the media to them and how this meaning relates to other meanings (their purpose for the media, identity, ideology/world view, cultural values, etc.)

Thus, one person may react to a violent media depiction as a good idea to try, a second as something to enjoy, a third as something to be protested, a fourth as something to be studied, and a fifth as something to be turned off (because it is boring, offensive, doesn't live up to other depictions, etc.).