

# GENDER & LANGUAGE

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## LANGUAGE AND GENDER

- Our beliefs about gender are built into the way we use language.
  - Language both reflects our ideas about gender and also shapes the way we talk and think about it
- 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.)

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## GENDER IN THE DICTIONARY

- 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.

Webster's New World Dictionary, 4th ed, 1999. Macmillan.

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- Other examples of gender beliefs built into English include:
  - Men and women are “opposite sexes”
  - English uses male generic language, e.g., freshmen, mankind, “he” meaning “he or she”
  - Spotighting: unnecessarily highlighting a person’s gender, e.g., “lady doctor” and “woman lawyer” define women professionals as exceptions. Also, “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.

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# SEMANTIC DEROGATION

- 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”
- Semantic derogation is evident in male-female pairs like:
  - Governor-governess, master-mistress, patron-matron, sir-madam