

Language and Gender

We attach meanings to things in the physical world by categorizing, naming and typifying. An interesting complication is that one category (e.g., female human beings) can have multiple names (e.g., 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," "complementary sexes," "neighboring sexes."