THE USE OF GENDERED PRONOUNS
WITH ANIMAL REFERENTS IN ENGLISH

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Abstract

Speakers and writers of English can choose whether to mark a high level of sentience in a nonhuman animal by selecting the human and gendered terms (he, she, who) rather than the inanimate and ungendered terms (it, which). This paper reports an investigation of the Anglo-American literature to explore the extent to which speakers and writers use gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' where the antecedent is a nonhuman animal. We also attempt to identify pragmatic factors and metaphoric associations that trigger personalizing of animals in literature and everyday conversations.

Keywords: *gendered pronouns, animal referent, terms.*

Most grammars of modern English prescribe to use the pronoun 'it' when referring to an animal, except for cases when the speaker knows the sex of the animal. However actual language use shows a great divergence from this prescriptive statement. If we look at speakers' behavior, it appears that gendered terms *he* and *she* by far outnumber instances of 'it' in everyday casual speech.

When nonhuman animate entities are referred to, in English it is possible to use either the human and gendered terms *he, she,* and *who* or the inanimate and ungendered terms *it* and *which*). Dictionaries and grammars explain quite clearly the areas of choice between *he/she* and *it*. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad and Finegan describe the use of *he* and *she* as "personal reference," and of *it* as "non-personal"[1]. They point out the main semantic areas where the speaker has a choice (babies; "animals, especially pets"; countries; and ships). They also identify the meaning of the choice: "Personal reference expresses greater familiarity or involvement. Non-personal reference is more detached".

In most cases, researchers agree that personal involvement or a close relationship with the animal seems to be the most relevant factor in pronoun choice: "[T]he use of he and she seems to signal *personal involvement or empathy for the referent* in the case of [...] an owner of an animal, someone who is emotionally attached or values the referent, [...] or someone attached to a specific animal. By the way of contrast, the use of *it* seems to signal *lack of involvement or empathy with the referent* in the case of [...] [a speaker] who is not personally attached to the referent or wishes to devalue it, an entity which is acted upon, and finally *a nonspecific animal or class of animals* with which personal involvement is out of the question"[2].

Animacy is not a simple binary option. The way these pronouns are used in English demonstrates a scale of animacy, whose normal order places

humans at the top; animals second; moving machines (such as ships, planes and cars) third; and the plant and mineral world at the bottom. It may appear strange that moving machines are placed higher in this scale than living plants, but this is the English usage.

This scale of animacy reflects (and also shapes) an attitude to the way the world is structured. Where there is a choice (to use *he/she* or *it*) – whether with dogs or ships – a speaker's selection of one variant or another is meaningful. When a nonhuman is treated linguistically like a human, it raises the animacy status of the nonhuman, indicates to sentience (the ability of animals to feel, to be aware of what is going on), and places the nonhuman closer to the human.

This paper reports an investigation of the Anglo-American literature to explore the extent to which writers use gendered pronouns 'he' and 'she' where the antecedent is a nonhuman animal. In my own corpora, there are very few examples of *it* referring to an animal, while hundreds of masculine and feminine pronouns can be found. It may seem surprising at first, but a more detailed investigation of corpus data reveals that the observed pattern is the rule rather than the exception.

The class of animate creatures we call animals are situated at a rank lower than human beings. All animals have biological sex, since they can also be referred to by 'he' or 'she', though this is an extension of the scope of 'personal' reference. This is a possibility, but in practice it is a more complex issue.

Those few linguists who attempt to discuss the whole issue, commonly subdivide animals into two kinds, labeled in hierarchical terms: 'higher' and 'lower' animals[3]. However this is not a zoological or evolutionary distinction, but a culturally determined and anthropocentric one. Higher animals are those with which human beings have 'the closest connection', or those of special interest or use to people[4], e.g. pets, farm animals and race-horses. The owners regard their pets in particular as equal to humans, and capable of 'speaking'. Therefore these animals are most likely to be spoken to in direct address. This class often are denoted by specific lexical terms for the male and female of the species, as well as have co-referential probability with *he* or *she* rather than *it:* e.g. *cow/she, bull/ he, ram/he, ewe/she:*

(1) "Tom tied old *Whitey (cow)* to the back of his wagon and put *her* calf in the end of the box so *she* could see *her offspring* and not bellow for *it*" (Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, p. 19).

(2) "The *stallion* snorted as if *he* disagreed with Bettario's opinion of 'lucky'" (Anderson, *Ill Wind: The oil crisis has begun*, p. 244).

(3) "The *bitch* had been but a pup *herself* then, striving to make *her* place in the pack. …*She* had been his favorite, and he had felt something when he had to put *her* down with the rest" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo*, p. 62-63).

(4) "What happened, *Sally*?" he asked his black *mare*, but the horse only rolled *her* eyes at him and pulled at the bit. The thunder was close now, and *she* was nervous" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo*, p. 76).

(5) "It was a normal ritual, and the *dog*, whose name was *Beowulf*, took no interest in it. *He* lapped out *his* tongue in a yawn, raised *his* hindquarters and stretched. *He* had *his* own ritual: yawning, stretching, scratching, licking" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo,* p. 132).

(6) "*The horse* rolled *his* eyes as Stribling approached, and sidestepped until Stribling took up the trailing rains. "*He is called Xenophon*," said Stribling" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo*, p. 44).

(7) "That was a favorite fantasy of Nurse Angela's – she hated smoking; just the look of a cigarette dangling from anyone's mouth made her remember a French-speaking Indian who'd come to see her father about digging a well and had stuck his cigarette in one of her *cat's* faces, burning *its* nose! – the cat, an especially friendly spayed *female*, had jumped up in the Indian's lap. *The cat* had been named *Bandit* – *she*'d had the classic masked face of a raccoon" (Irving, *The cider house rules*, p. 8).

(8) "She was back on the farm in Battle Lake, Minnesota. She was nine years old and she could hear her *little red rooster, Mr. Barnes*, crowing at first light… *He* was just a little red rooster, overly pugnacious, an ingrate. *He* could have been a beautiful bird if *he* hadn't gotten into so many fights" (Jones, *I want to live!,* p. 686).

(9) 'The horse doctor had been trying to vaccinate *the bull* in the neck, but the rope through the ring in the bull's nose didn't keep the bull from tossing *his* head from side to side, knocking the horse doctor against the side of the chute" (Armstrong, *Sounder*, p. 60).

In these examples 'higher animals' such as *a cow, a horse, a rooster, a cat, a dog* are personalized by using co-referential pronouns *he* or *she*. The personification is intensified by the introduction of special terms for male and female species such as *dog/bitch, cow/bull, stallion/mare, rooster.* Besides, in most cases the animals are given male or female names corresponding to their sex: Mr. Barnes (rooster), Sally (mare), Beowulf (dog), Whitey (cow), Xenophon (horse).

If the speaker doesn't know the sex of the animal, a common term may be used (e.g. *horse* v. *stallion/mare); or there is the term with male reference used as the common term* (e.g. *dog),* or a term with female reference (e.g. *goose, duck).* If the sex is not known, there is a tendency to use *he* as the co-referential pronoun with such 'higher' animals, rather than *it,* cats are more likely to be *she* generically, as in:

(10) "Arching *his* neck and *his* forelegs, *a bright brown horse* drew a buggy crisply but sedately past; in the washed black spokes, sunlight twittered" (Agee, *A death in the family*, p. 98).

(11) "I always come back," she said. "Like *the cat* the man was always trying to get rid of in the song. He tied *her* to the railroad tracks and he threw *her* into the ocean with a rock, but *she* always came back the very next day" (Berriault, *Women in their beds*, p. 186).

Even where the sex of the animal is known to the speaker, however, *he* is favoured; or speakers may differ amongst themselves in their use of *he* or *she*[5]. Or else there can be fluctuation in pronoun choice by the speaker or amongst speakers, with *it* also occurring.

Pronoun switches are frequent, and a range of emotive factors are involved in the choice of pronouns referring to animals. For example, the owners of a cat (or "cat people") as a rule refer to the dog that chased their cat as *it* rather than *he* or *she,* conveying their emotional attitude or intimacy towards their cat, but at the same time signaling distance towards the dog. The reverse pattern is used by "dog people".

Such pronoun-switching requires further investigation. However, MacKay and Konishi[6] suggest seven possible reasons for pronoun-switching with animal reference generally. These motivations are a contrast between a character's perspective and the narrator's in a story, personal v. impersonal points of view, the owner's v. the non-owner's, emotional v. non-emotional involvement with the referent, positive v. negative evaluation, specific v. generic reference, active agent v. passive 'object'. A combination of factors may be involved. Note the following examples:

(12) "They left the house about eleven that morning after the McPheron brothers had finished the morning feeding… They set out in the bright cold day, riding in the pickup, the girl seated in the middle between them with a blanket over her lap… Once they saw *a lone coyote* in the open, running, a steady distance-covering lope, *its* long tail floating out behind like a trail of smoke. Then *it* spotted the pickup, stopped, started to move again, running hard now, and crossed the highway and hit a section of woven fence and was instantly thrown back but at once sprang up again and hit the fence again and at last in a panic scrambled up over the wire fence like a human man would, and ran on, loping again in the open, traversing the wide country on the other side of the road without once pausing or even slowing down to look back.
Is *he* all right? The girl said.
Appears like it, Raymond said.
Until somebody gets after *him*, Harold said, chasing after *him* in a pickup with coyote dogs. And shoots *him*.
Do they do that?
They do" (Haruf, *Plainsong*, p. 178-179).

(13) "*A black cat* approached from the other side of the street. For a while, *it* stood on the edge of the sidewalk and *its* green eyes looked straight at Bessie. Then slowly and cautiously *it* drew near. For years Bessie had hated all animals – dogs, cats, pigeons, even sparrows… But now Bessie felt love for this creature

that had no home, no possessions, no doors or keys, and lived on God's bounty. Before *the cat* neared Bessie, *it* smelled her bag. Then *it* began to rub *its* back on her leg, lifting up *its* tail and meowing. *The poor thing* is hungry. I wish I could give *her* something. How can one hate a creature like this, Bessie wondered" (Singer, ***The Key***, p. 499).

In these examples a combination of factors account for pronoun-switching, such as: a contrast between a character's perspective and the narrator's in a story, personal v. impersonal points of view, emotional v. non-emotional involvement with the referent. *The coyote* and *the cat* become personalized as people feel empathy to the animals. To show empathy means to identify with another's feelings, to emotionally put yourself in the place of another.

The distinction between 'higher' and 'lower' animals however is not absolute, and inevitably so, since it is a vague distinction in the first place. Monkeys are wild animals and are not obviously associated with human beings, as well as lions and tigers, although Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik[7] cite them under the heading of 'higher animals'. This is apparently because their sex differences are lexicalised *(lion(-ess), tiger/tigress),* and this lexicalisation may be presumed to indicate a particular human interest in these animals and not others. Many wild animals, however, are now familiar to human beings through zoos, but are not lexically marked in this way; others have more cultural relevance than lions and tigers, but may not be classified as 'higher animals' (e.g. rats and spiders which co-habit with humans; beavers and bears as the 'national' animals of North America). Here are some examples of personalizing wild animals:

(14) "She met Oscar Lutz with *a wild deer* which he had shot and killed in the timber a mile east of Stove Creek, - *a young buck* that, quivering and at bay, seemed the last survivor of *his* comrades that had once roamed the east-Nebraska country" (Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, p. 176).

(15) *"The deer, a doe*, had gone out into the new ice, all the way to the middle, and had crashed through. *She* would work *her* front legs up and prop *herself* on the ice that way, like a woman resting *her* elbows at a table, and then *she* would kick and thrash, trying to pull *herself* back up, but would crash through again and slide back into the water. Then *she* would resume swimming in circles and slide back into the water" (Bass, *The hermit's story*, p. 161).

(16) "I was reminded of a time I almost walked into *a female grizzly* with a nearly grown *cub*. How we had stood there posturing, how *she* had glanced down at *her cub* just that way, giving me the opportunity to let *her* know *she* didn't need to kill me. We could both go on our way" (Proulx, The Half-Skinned Steer, p. p. 777).

(17) "Gracious Jay, did you ever see one? *A panther*?"
"Saw one'd been shot."

"Goodness," Mary said.

"A mean-looking varmint."

"I know," she said. "I mean, I bet *he* was. ..." (Agee, *A death in the family*, p. 209).

In the examples (14) and (15) *'deer'* is the referent/antecedent of the pronouns 'he/she'. A special interest of humans to this animal is explained by the fact that *deer* is a 'national' animal in the North America. There are many different species of deer in the United States. Ranging in size, habitat, and habits, deer can be found in every continental state. In the example (16) *grizzly* is personalized. First, *grizzly bear* is also a 'national' animal in the US. Besides, it's a female with a cub which allows to use co-referential pronoun 'she'. In the examples (12) and (17) the wild animals *panther and coyote* are used with co-referential pronoun 'he'. In both examples 'he' functions generically as people don't know and in fact are not interested in the sex of the animals. Personalizing of these animals is accounted for by the fact that people living in the country are more familiar with wild animals. People may hunt them or may be forced to defend themselves against them. Hence the use of personal pronouns with wild animals.

Conversely, what are seen as domestic animals in western countries such as Britain and the United States, and hence 'higher animals' (e.g. dogs and cats), are elsewhere not, or are even regarded as pests. Monkeys have at least been kept as pets; but in fact almost any animal can be kept as a pet, so that almost any animal can thus be a 'higher animal':

(18) "Without a word the boy cut the strap at the *fawn*'s throat, and even while he was unloosing the piece around *her* neck, *she* darted from him lightly, gracefully, into the hazel-brush. ... With his head still averted the boy said tensely, "I found *her*... 'n' raised *her*... myself" (Aldrich, *A Lantern in Her Hand*, p. 20).

(19) "But his *monkey Grinn*, a present from the Queen, was dead; and also *Sjup the raccoon and the parrot who* had sat on his shoulder at meals and *the weasel who* wore a bell on *his* neck and hunted rats among the rocks" (Barrett, *Ship Fever and other stories*, p. 39).

In the examples above we see that *a fawn, a monkey, a raccoon, a parrot* and even *a weasel* are kept as pets, so all of them are personalized either through gendered pronouns or the animate relative pronoun 'who'.

Moreover, in the genres of children's literature and film and poetic diction any animal can be anthropomorphised (typically to a male) and given a name and story role: e.g. Babar and Dumbo the elephants, Mickey Mouse and Jiminy Cricket. It is all about a matter of perspective.

'Lower animals' are defined implicitly, and negatively, i.e. those having no special relevance to human beings, or having no close connection to them. As Quirk *et alii* state[8], they also tend to be animals where laypersons have no real knowledge about their sex, e.g. insects, snakes and fish. Therefore the pronoun *it* is the 'logical' or 'natural' pronoun to use (and

which is also most likely instead of *who*). In connection with this ignorance, another connotation of *it* is especially relevant here, namely its association with the 'alien', the unknown. Moreover, since the examples usually given also tend to be animals that are often least liked by human beings, e.g. insects and snakes, the use of *it,* which is also associated with negative emotiveness, is especially pertinent[9].

Some insects, however, are rather closely connected with human beings, inhabiting their homes or serving their interests (e.g. bees and silkworms). Reference by *he* or *she* is quite likely therefore: usually *she* by a sort of symbolic association of smallness[10]. However, in the following modern examples, either *he* or *she* is used by the speakers with reference to lower animals, signifying their empathy with them:

(20) "All the windows were open; in one of them, a *spider* had spun *her* web" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo*, p. 176).

(21) "When the *field mouse* poked *his* whiskered nose out of Wall Strutt's eyeholes, Old Priam showed his yellow teeth and laughed. The *field mouse* would sleep, waking on warm days to forage, and that summer would raise *his* family where once a man's thoughts made bitter passage" (Bahr, *The Year of Jubilo*, p. 299).

(22) "The *robin* had hold of a worm; *he* braced *his* heels, walked backward, and pulled hard. It stretched like a rubber band and snapped in two" (Agee, *A death in the family*, p. 299).

(23) "Rufus saw a giant *butterfly* clearly, and how *he* moved *his* wings so quietly and grandly, and the colors of the wings, and how *he* sprang up into the sky and how the colors all took fire in the sunshine" (Agee, *A death in the family*, p. 306).

(24) "The *catbird* stopped *her* fussing in the wilted lilac bush" (Armstrong, *Sounder*, p. 107).

In these examples the co-referential pronoun for a spider and a catbird is she and for a field mouse, robin and butterfly is he. The general tendency is to use the pronoun 'he' in the personification of 'lower animals'. As we see even butterfly is 'he'. This is due to the fact that 'he' is used as generic pronoun both in reference to people and animals whose sex is unknown or irrelevant. On the other hand, sometimes 'she' is used due to the metaphorical association of small, weak creatures with feminine gender.

Conclusions

The choice of gender in personifying animals, birds and other living beings is often based on biological sex differences. In most cases it depends on the speaker's or writer's attitude to a certain living being: big, strong, ugly, aggressive animals, birds are considered to be masculine and small, weak, gentle, with a maternal instinct are mostly feminine. Generally,

researchers agree that personal involvement appears to be the most relevant factor in pronoun choice.

The cut-off point within the class of animals differs among speakers, depending on their professions, background, environment, or similar factors. For someone who grew up in a big city/town and has never lived in the countryside, it is extremely likely that only pets, or even just *dogs and cats*, can be *he* or *she,* whereas a *badger or fox* (which the speaker may not ever have seen) will be an *it.* On the other hand, it is highly probable that a farmer will refer to the animals on his farm as *he* or *she*, that a hunter will refer to the hunted animal as *he*, the fisherman to the fish in his catch also as *he.*

We should thus conclude that the prescriptive rules in grammars regarding anaphoric pronouns to be selected to refer to animals are not applied in everyday conversations. Since some degree of personal involvement is commonly present when speakers talk about animals, neuter pronouns are the least expected forms. Pets will be *it*s only derogatorily, intentionally offensive or when talking about them in a detached manner. While the status of wild animals depends to a large extent on the speaker's 'civilization' background. Other factors that may influence pronoun choice are: a) saliency of the animal in the discourse ("centrality" according to MacKay and Konishi[11]); b) size (the bigger the more likely *he*[12]); c) and various (supposed or real) character attributes (brave, wise = male; weak, passive = female etc.[13]).

Notes
[1]Biber *et alii*, 1999, p. 317-18.
[2]MacKay *et alii*, 1980, p. 155.
[3]see Erades, 1975, p. 21-23; Quirk *et alii,* 1985, p. 109-110.
[4]Quirk *et alii,* 1985, p. 110.
[5]Erades, 1975, p. 21.
[6]MacKay *et alii*, 1980, p. 155.
[7]Quirk *et alii,* 1985, p. 109.
[8]Quirk *et alii,* 1985, p. 110.
[9]Wales, 1996, p. 143.
[10]see Poutsma, 1914, p. 325, MacKay *et alii*, 1980, p. 153.
[11]MacKay *et alii*, 1980, p. 155.
[12]*ibidem,* p. 153.
[13]*ibidem,* p. 154.

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