The Gender of Nouns

Lecture 4
Gender - a grammatical category of the noun, which reflects the biological category of sex of the noun referent.

- In Bulgarian - a masculine noun + the masculine form of an adjective.
- a noun in feminine + a different form of the same adjective - feminine
In Bulgarian nouns are marked for gender.

- Bulgarian category of gender is very strong.
- In ма̀са, ст̀ол we have gender, but not sex.

- ма̀са + common
  - animate
  - human
  + female

- жена + common
  + animate
  + human
  + female
The English category of gender can be said to be based on the functional oppositions of three categorical forms.

- These oppositions can be presented in the following way:
How do we know when to use he, she or it?

- names of human beings – male and female

- In terms of structure there is nothing in the form of the proper noun to signal the sex of the referent.
When such a name becomes the name of an inanimate object it still retains this feature in its semantic component no matter that it is not active, though another feature of the same nature /-sex/ predominates.

- + proper
- + sex
- + animate
- + human
- + female

- - proper
- - sex
- - animate
- - human
- + female
The personal pronouns **he**, **she**, **it** and the relative pronouns **who**, **which** are **gender-sensitive**:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>John is late</strong></td>
<td>~<strong>He</strong> is late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mary is late</strong></td>
<td>~<strong>She</strong> is late</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>John and Mary</strong> are late</td>
<td>~<strong>They</strong> are late</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Here the choice of pronoun is determined by the **sex of the person** being referred to.
- However, this distinction is lost in the plural.
Gender differences are also manifested in possessive pronouns (*his/*hers*) and in reflexive pronouns (*himself/*herself*).

- The natural distinctions reflected in such pairs as brother/sister, nephew/niece, and king/queen have no consequence for grammar.

- While they refer to specific sexes, these words are **not** masculine or feminine in themselves.
As for family names of humans the situation is different:

- the family name as such has the semantic features /+male/ and /+female/
- Depending on the referent one of them becomes active and the other passive.

- Mr Johnson (+male)
- Mrs Johnson (+female)
Sometimes the nouns in a pair are morphologically marked for gender.

- The marker is **not** considered to be a grammatical ending, but a derivational suffix:

  | masculine | → | feminine |
  | actor     | → | actress  |
  | hunter    | → | huntress |
  | lion      | → | lioness  |
  | hero      | → | heroine  |
  | widower   | ← | widow    |
  | usher     | ← | usherette |
Here are some more examples of nouns marked for GENDER

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine</th>
<th>Feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abbot</td>
<td>abbess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>czar</td>
<td>czarina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>duke</td>
<td>duchess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>Frances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>count</td>
<td>countess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tiger</td>
<td>tigress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gender Classes

- [+human] and [- human; + animate] fall into 2 groups as regards gender:

- Nouns with one single semantic feature for sex, either /+male/ or /+female/:
  - mother ↔ daughter
  - father ↔ son
  - bachelor ↔ spinster, maid
  - monk ↔ nun
Nouns with both semantic features for sex in binary opposition +/-male

- They cannot function simultaneously in one and the same linguistic context (usually denote an occupation or a status of the referent)
Common countable nouns with the semantic feature /+animate/ but /-human/. Nouns with one single semantic feature for sex, either /+male/ or /+female/.

- doe
- fawn
- stag
- buck
- mare
- filly
- stallion
- colt

drake ↔ duck  gander ↔ goose  ram ↔ ewe
Other nouns have **two semantic features for sex**: /+male/ and /+female/
Sometimes the speaker employs combinations of words to make the information clear:

**noun + noun**
- boyfriend – girlfriend
- doctor – lady doctor
- student – woman student
- buck-rabbit – doe-rabbit
- turkey-cock – turkey-hen

**adjective + noun**
- frog – female frog
- nurse – male nurse

**personal pronoun + noun**
- she-bear – he-bear

**name + noun**
- billy-goat – nanny-goat
To the gender class of higher organisms belong nouns denoting:

- a. names of countries
- countries are usually treated as **inanimate nouns**:
  Belgium is a small country, but **it** is thickly populated.
- If the country is referred to as a **political**, **cultural** or
  **economic power**, it can be substituted with the personal pronoun **she**:
  Germany managed to stabilize **her** economy in a comparatively short period of time.
- When the name of the country is used to refer to a **sports team**, it is treated as a **collective improper noun** and is substituted with **they**:
  Italy can be proud of **their** success.
b. names of vessels, machinery or toys

- they are usually treated as inanimate nouns:
  We were watching a ship in the distance. It was rolling sluggishly from side to side.

- some speakers substitute such nouns with personal pronouns referring to human beings. This is due to some personal involvement of the speaker with the noun referent:
  Have you seen my sloop, which is in the dock? Isn’t she a beauty?

- This phenomenon borders on personification.
Gender Bias in the Use of Gender Sensitive Pronouns

- The masculine pronouns *he, him, his* are not preferred to refer to an *unspecified individual*.

- *he or she*:
  Tell the next person who calls that *he or she* can make an appointment.

- *they*:
  What happens if someone changes *their* mind?