

# Gender and animal nouns in selected web pages devoted to animal keeping and breeding

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This short article wants to be a contribution to the area of gender studies. The aim of my analysis is to add more information in order to help constitute an answer to this question: How is gender assigned to animal nouns in English? For the purpose of the present article I extracted a limited material from six web sites devoted to animal keeping and breeding. The language of my corpus is American English and the authors are veterinarians and both professional and amateur animal keepers. The language analysed contains veterinary advice, information to people about how to take care of a new pet, how to prepare a home for it (e.g. a terrarium), advice on feeding etc. The sites also include individual keepers' contributions, i.e. people writing about their pets, expressing their affection or even sorrow (when their pets fall ill or die), exchange opinions and experiences or boast with their animals' good results at exhibitions.

Most grammars of English do not pay much attention to the problem of animal gender. Within the scope of grammars written by Czech authors I looked for information in Dušková's *Mluvnice současné angličtiny na pozadí češtiny* (1988) which takes a comparative Czech – English approach. It is stated there that the gender system of English is based primarily on semantic criteria unlike Czech where gender is mainly a grammatical category (Dušková 1988:83). A similar view is expressed by Corbett (1991:7), who sees gender assignment as dependent on *meaning and form*. Corbett distinguishes between semantic (natural) gender systems and formal systems. Different languages belong to different systems which are often combined. English makes use of a predominantly semantic system. According to Dušková (1988:86), animals in English are generally neuter and are referred to by the pronoun 'it'. Deviations from this rule can occur due to *stylistic and emotive factors*. Hais (1991:61, emphasis and translation mine) states that '*with human beings (and sometimes with animals) gender corresponds with sex and is formally apparent only in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person sg. with personal and possessive pronouns (he – she, his – her)*'. According to Quirk (1985:317) gender distinctions with animal nouns are related to people's concern (e.g. pets). Higher animals like cock and hen can be male and female respectively. Lower animals like beetle, butterfly or snake are neuter (referred to by 'it'). Quirk also points out that lower animals can at times be regarded as higher animals. Swan (1996:219, my emphasis) states that '*People sometimes call animals he or she, especially when they are thought of as having personality, intelligence or feelings. This is common with pets and domestic animals ... "He" is sometimes used in cases where the sex of an animal is not known*'.

Another useful source of reference has been the dissertation *Gender and Animals* (1999) by Marianna Prčíková from the University of Prešov, Slovakia, whose topic is analysis of gender assignment with English animal nouns based on a corpus of literature for children.

For the purpose of the present article I contented myself with a much smaller corpus and selected texts involving the following animals: bird, cat, dog, fish, lizard, rabbit and snake. On the starting point of my analysis I expected that gender of animals whose sex is ‘naturally obvious’ (e.g. a dog or a cat) would more frequently be referred to as ‘he’/‘she’ rather than ‘it’. It is certainly easier, even for a specialist, to tell a he-dog from a bitch than this could be, for example, with a snake. Consequently, the question emerged what the case would be with assigning gender to animals like fish, birds or snakes? Will these be referred to as ‘he’/‘she’ or rather ‘it’?

We have to ask another question: Is there any relation between an animal’s real, natural sex and the grammatical gender? And if there is one, what relation is it? Dušková answers the question by stating there is no simple relation between the two notions: ‘*the use of “he” or “she” does not necessarily express the sex*’ (Dušková 1988:86, translation and double quotes mine).<sup>1</sup>

Within the corpus I analysed, grammatical gender and natural sex always correspond with animals like dogs, cats or rabbits whose sex is more or less easily detectable by both laymen and professional breeders or veterinarians. With dogs and rabbits gender is often expressed by lexical means using the nouns ‘bitch’, ‘buck’ or ‘doe’. Certain animal names do not indicate sex at the first sight (for non-natives speakers, at least). That ‘Tulip’ and ‘Petals’ are female rabbits, ‘TJ’ is male and ‘Ching Tu’ a Siamese buck is probably well-known to their owners only no to mention a lizard named ‘Don Quixote’ whose natural sex is not mentioned in the corpus. The lizard is, however, referred to by ‘he’. Some names are not gender-specific even for native speakers. This can be illustrated by the following gloss in an entry about a rabbit: ‘*Izzo - also calling a “she” ...*’<sup>2</sup> Many of them, on the contrary, express gender. ‘Gerte von Dornfeld’, for example, is a noble pedigree she-dog. Male rabbits are given names like ‘Buckaroo’, ‘Bucky’ or ‘Butterbean’, female ones are often called ‘Hesther’, ‘Emily’, ‘Teensy’ or ‘Jade’.

Examples (emphasis always mine):

*Gerte von Dornfeld ... had not been as effective as a producer until she was bred to Zalud.*<sup>3</sup>

*Buckaroo received his first leg at his first show at the Holland Lop Triple Crown!*<sup>4</sup>

Animals are also frequently referred to by metaphorical expressions such as ‘your furry friend’ for a dog and ‘feathered friend’ or ‘avian friend’ for a bird. It is frequently by means of such metaphors that a good opportunity to ‘legalise’ further use of masculine or feminine gender to personalise the animal is constituted.

Let us consider individual animal nouns now. *Dogs* are always masculine unless it is specified that a bitch is written about. This can be documented by the following example giving instructions to new dog owners:

*All your dog really needs to know ... are five commands: “Sit,” “Stay,” “Heel,” “Down” and “Come.” Once he’s mastered these skills, he’ll be less likely to pounce on guests, dash into traffic or run away in the park. He’ll be under your control.*<sup>5</sup>

In the following example 'she' is used to denote a bitch:

*We have a large, friendly dog that thinks she is a small dog.*<sup>6</sup>

Sometimes the race of the dog is given. Here again the predominant gender is the masculine:

*I once met a beautiful Irish setter in a park in New York City. He was tossing a tennis ball in the air with his mouth.*<sup>7</sup>

*Cesky Fousek is a multi-purpose gundog working with inborn joy in the fields, forests or water. He is easy to train and easy to lead.*<sup>8</sup>

The noun *rabbit* can be masculine as well as neuter:

*Wet dewlap is caused when a rabbit continually dips its head into a bowl of water. If your rabbit gets it, wrap a wet towel around him and hold him.*<sup>9</sup>

With the noun *reptile* the gender can either be masculine or neuter. Lizards and turtles are masculine. Snakes are, on the contrary, always neuter with the exception of the boa snake that is feminine. This could be explained as resulting from its similarity with the part of women's clothing accessory. There is one case within the corpus where even the prey of a snake is referred to by 'he'. Consider the following example about feeding a snake:

*Give your pet 24 hours to adjust to his new surroundings before offering him any food. At that point, offer him a small amount to try out. If he accepts it, give him more -- enough for an average-size meal. If the animal doesn't eat it within the first five minutes, remove it and try again the next day. Your pet can become stressed by the presence of potential prey if he's not ready to eat. In some cases, the prey may even attack the predator. (He's pretty stressed, too.)*<sup>10</sup>

Here, a 'he' used for a snake's prey can be explained as a result of the emotional factor (cf. Swan 1996:219).

In one single occurrence *fish* is of masculine gender:

*Do you know how to choose the correct food for your fish? Did you know that to understand his feeding habits, you need to know about the shape and placement of the fish's mouth?*<sup>11</sup>

The above example is the only one within the corpus where the noun *fish* is referred to as 'he'. In the remaining text problems are avoided by always using the plural 'they'.

The situation is quite interesting with *birds*. Here, a remarkable instability in gender assignment can be illustrated by the fact that all three genders are possible. The most frequent gender with birds is indeed the masculine. Let us analyse an interesting paragraph giving instructions to beginner bird keepers. Notice the way the author is 'hesitant' about gender starting first with the feminine, then going over to the masculine and finally returning to the feminine again:

*When you do finally find a place for your pet bird, be sure to give a few days of adjustment to the area before taking her out of her cage and socializing with her. This will help your bird adjust to the noise level, traffic, people and other pets in his new environment. Any change in your bird's routine can be the most stressful time in her life. This is when she will be most vulnerable to illness.<sup>12</sup>*

The sudden change in gender within a short passage is not easy to explain. There could be some speculation about the way the text was edited or we could simply admit that such things happen as a result of the above mentioned instability of the noun *bird* in terms of gender. More such examples would certainly be necessary in order to make a conclusion. Unfortunately, these are not to be found in my corpus. Prčíková (1999:103) experienced the possibility of all three genders with *bird* in her dissertation, too. In her corpus 116 occurrences were masculine, 20 feminine and 38 were of neuter gender.

Concluding from the material analysed, most of the animals that appear in my corpus are assigned the masculine gender. Rabbit, reptile, dog or lizard are predominantly masculine. Cat, bird and boa are mainly feminine. Fish occur in the masculine in one case only. In the remaining text fish are referred to with the plural 'they', thus avoiding gender specification. Snake is always neuter. Prčíková (1999:133), who analysed animal nouns in English fairy-tales, concludes with the statement that '*in the analysed English children's stories ... the masculine gender is the most frequent when referring to animals.*' My results can confirm this only partially. However, this could probably be a result of the fact that the size of my corpus is incomparably smaller than that of Prčíková. Generally speaking, it can be said that a tendency towards preferring the masculine gender with animal nouns is observable also in my corpus, too.

*The most important factor that influences gender assignment within my corpus is that of emotion, which, in my opinion, is crucial with gender assignment in English generally. If an animal is referred to without the emotive factor and with little personal interest (talking about the animal as 'some general animal') then it is likely to be assigned the neuter gender. On the contrary, the more people 'personalise' their animals, 'feel' with them and reveal their attitudes, the more likely they are to talk about animals as a 'he' or 'she', their feeling being openly expressed in their language. They tend to talk about their 'beloved pets' or 'friends' and give names to them. Compare Quirk's view, who puts the occurrence of 'he'/'she' with animals in connection with the degree of domestication (Quirk 1985: 317).*

Emotions play an important role when having to do with a disease as it is shown in the following two examples providing advice on rabbit care:

1. *Heat prostration is over heating. If your rabbit gets it, wrap a wet towel around him and hold him.<sup>13</sup>*
2. *Coccidiosis ... is almost always fatal. If rabbit lives, it should NEVER be bred.<sup>14</sup>*

The pronoun 'it' in the second example reveals that the author prefers not to show his/her emotion and wants to keep a distance. The result of a fatal disease is better described on 'some' indefinite rabbit referred to with the neuter gender than on a concrete animal. Heat prostration, on the contrary, is not so serious and one can speak about 'your rabbit' as 'he'.

In the following example, which is an instruction for people who have bought their first reptile pet, we can observe a gradual shift from the neuter gender in the beginning of the passage going over through the unmarked plural to a more personal and emotive masculine in

the second part. This is when ‘some new animal in the cage’ becomes a ‘domesticated’, definite animal to whom the owner has established a relationship.

*If you do choose to handle your pet, and it is your first reptile, make sure you are sitting down, preferably on the floor, and in a room with no distractions. Open the reptile's cage and, instead of grabbing the animal from above, scoop it from underneath. Sometimes, reptiles will mistake a friendly hand coming over them as a potential threat, so they could become fearful and possibly try to defend themselves. Be patient. Slowly pick the reptile up by supporting as much of its body as possible. Hold him in your hand (or hands) within the cage. Gently encourage him to walk from one hand to the other. If he jumps back down, or scurries away, that's natural. Better that he does that in his cage than around the room! Once he has calmed down a bit, try again. After a few attempts, possibly over a few days, the reptile will slowly realize that you are not a threat. Some will even seek attention. Once you are less jittery, and he is less fearful, try holding him outside his cage, while still sitting on the floor. Soon, you and your reptile will be able to take small trips around the room, then around the house. Always make sure you are completely supporting the animal, and have a firm, but gentle grip around his midsection before moving about the room.<sup>15</sup>*

## Notes

- 1 cf. also Quirk (1985:317)
- 2 online: <[www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/juniors.html](http://www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/juniors.html)>, cited 12.5.2002
- 3 online: <[zbartos.tripod.com/psi.htm](http://zbartos.tripod.com/psi.htm)>, cited 26.4.2002
- 4 online: <[www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/](http://www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/)>, cited 12.5.2002
- 5 The Doctors Book of Home Remedies for Dogs and Cats, online:  
<[www.petsmart.com/pet\\_library/home\\_remedies/introduction.shtml](http://www.petsmart.com/pet_library/home_remedies/introduction.shtml)>, cited 5.6.2002
- 6 Hamingson, A.: Our First Lizard: Setting Up a Home for a Bearded Dragon. online:  
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- 7 Hoffman, M.: DogSpeak Introduction.  
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- 8 online: <[www.geocities.com/avasi2000/cf.html](http://www.geocities.com/avasi2000/cf.html)>, cited 26.4.2002
- 9 online: <[www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/care.html](http://www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/care.html)>, cited 12.5.2002
- 10 Feeding Your Reptile in New Surroundings. online:  
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- 12 online: <[www.petsmart.com/articles/article%5F86.shtml](http://www.petsmart.com/articles/article%5F86.shtml)>, cited 5.6.2002
- 13 Diseases and Common Ailments. online at:  
<http://www.angelfire.com/or2/lopalot/diseases.html>, cited 12.5.2002
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- 15 Ewert, G.L.: Handling Your Reptile. online:  
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