

“She’s so Cute”:

Variation in Third Person Singular Pronouns Used for
Inanimate Referents



Outline

- Why did I choose this topic?
- What is variation in third person singular pronouns?
- How did I get to the conclusion?
- What did I find?

Why did I choose this topic? 🌿☀️

- Personal reasons
 - Sounds are difficult
 - People who annoy me in real life and on Instagram

Variation in third person singular pronoun 🔥

- When we expect someone to use the pronoun *it* about an inanimate referent, but instead they use a gendered pronoun.
 - “She’s so bomb”, she said, talking about a microwave meal 😍
- Focus: Female content creators’ variation and only the variation *she* 🌸
- Hypothesis: The female speaker will be more likely to use the animate pronouns *she*, *her*, or *hers* if she has some personal interest in or emotional involvement with the referent. Otherwise, the neuter pronoun is used invariably.

Linguistic Gender

- In Present Day English, the third person singular pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it* (and *they*) are the only grammatical forms to maintain the gender system, and nouns follow the natural gender system based on semantics.
- In Old English, gender was a grammatical category, and did not follow semantic meaning. Their assignment instead depended on formal criteria such as word structure or sound structure.
- The gradual loss of inflectional endings in Old English played a big part in the loss of grammatical gender and by the end of Middle English, natural gender had replaced it.

Conventionalized vs. Affective Reference

- Conventional gender assignment of certain inanimate objects → “resilient nouns”.
 - Fx when the words *ship* and *sun* are referred to with *she*.
- Affective gender assignment of inanimate objects involves personification and the choice of pronoun depends on psychological and sociological attitudes towards the referent and the attributes of the referent.
- Neither conventionalized or affective gender assignment are new phenomena, and both have been used as sexist language in the past.

Animate Pronouns in the Female Vlogging Community 🎥 🍿

- Vlogs
 - One of the characteristic features of vlogging is the **“conversational character”** as it reminds the viewers of **“interpersonal face-to-face communication”** (Burgess and Green 2009, 54).
 - The authenticity of vlogging is **“located in its excessive direct address, in its transparent amateurishness and in the sheer volume and immediacy of ‘conversational’ responses”** (Tolson 2010, 286).
 - Vlogging as a career path.
- I watched 5 hours of *YouTube* videos.
 - I recorded every instance of an inanimate object in the singular referred to with a pronoun, as well as the context, whether or not it is followed by a descriptive adjective or verb in the present progressive followed by an adjective (sometimes with an intensifier).



Results

Table 1 Variation in Pronouns for Inanimate Referents

	<i>She</i>	<i>It</i>	<i>She (%)</i>
Moya Mawhinney	11	82	12 %
Elena Taber	16	62	21 %
Total	27	144	16 %

Table 2 Variation for Gender Assignment for Food or Drink

	<i>She</i>	<i>It</i>	<i>She (%)</i>
Moya Mawhinney	7	22	24 %
Elena Taber	0	5	0 %

Table 3 Distribution of Pronouns for Inanimate Referents

	<i>She</i>	<i>It</i>	Total	<i>She (%)</i>
Food or Drink	7	27	34	21 %
Wardrobe Items	2	30	32	6 %
Plants	10	5	15	67 %
Books	0	19	19	0 %
University Assignments	0	19	19	0 %
Houseware and Furniture	3	23	26	12 %
Skincare and Haircare	1	16	17	6 %
Weather (Snowball, Sun)	3	3	6	50 %
Camera Equipment	1	2	3	33 %

Note: I only counted “objects” in relation to weather, not general discussion of the weather.

Table 5 Third Person Singular Pronouns Followed by a Positive Adjective

	Positive Adjective	No Positive Adjective	Positive Adjective (%)
<i>She</i>	16	11	59 %
<i>It</i>	26	118	18 %

Table 6 Objects Referred to as Both It and She

	<i>She</i>		<i>It</i>	
	Positive Adj.	No Positive Adj.	Positive Adj.	No Positive Adj.
Soup	2			2
Plant	3	2		1
Shirt	1			1

What did I find?

- The study supported my hypothesis that female speakers are more likely to use the animate third person singular pronouns *she*, *her*, or *hers* if she has some emotional and positive involvement with the referent, and will otherwise use *it* or *its*.
- It did not necessarily show that the female speaker will use the animate pronouns if she has a personal interest in the referent.
- I found that this new non-standard variation might share inheritance with the patterns found by other studies:
 - Pawley: the referent must be specific and important to the discourse and that the speaker must feel some sort of attachment towards the referent.
 - Mathiot: the speaker's view of their own gender is expressed in the pronouns they use for inanimate referents (and that female speakers think positively of their own sex).
 - "It is proposed that through the disregard of the rules of the normative pattern the speaker unconsciously expresses an alternative cultural conception of the nature of entities, more specifically of humanness, maleness and femaleness. The meanings conveyed through the intimate pattern are therefore all covert meanings." (Mathiot 1979, 7).
- *She* as a marker of identity → a celebration of femininity.