

# Language Awareness for Key Stage 3

## 6: Number and Gender

Key Terms	Optional Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number</li> <li>• Singular</li> <li>• Dual</li> <li>• Plural</li> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Masculine</li> <li>• Feminine</li> <li>• Neuter</li> <li>• Grammatical gender</li> <li>• Natural gender</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trial</li> <li>• Paucal</li> <li>• Person</li> <li>• Diminutive</li> <li>• Common gender</li> </ul>

- Introduction: Number and Gender
  - Today we will look at two categories that nouns (and pronouns) have: number and gender
  - We can start by considering the familiar number system of English
  - Other languages extend this system in various ways
  - Then we will go on to look at gender
  - Pronouns in English have a simple system of natural gender
  - Other languages have more complex systems of arbitrary grammatical gender
  - The gender systems in some languages can become very complex
- Number
  - In English, grammatical number is based on a distinction between singular and plural
  - There are several different ways of expressing this distinction
    - one bird → two *birds*
    - one sheep → two *sheep*
    - one goose → two *geese*
    - one ox → two *oxen*
    - one child → two *children*

### Activity 1:

Make a list of all the nouns you can find that make their plural without adding *-s*. How many different types can you find?

Singular	Plural	Difference

- Number does not have to be expressed as a two-way division between singular and plural
- Some languages have a three-way distinction between singular, dual, and plural
- The dual refers to groups of two

- One use for the dual is to describe things that come in pairs, like eyes and hands
  - *heîs poús*      *dúo póde*      *treîs pódes*      (Greek)  
‘one foot’      ‘two feet’      ‘three feet’
  - *ekaḥ pādaḥ*      *dvau pādau*      *trayaḥ pādāḥ*      (Sanskrit)
- There are languages that have even more number categories than these
- Some languages have a trial number, used for exactly three people or things (e.g. Larike, spoken in Indonesia)
  - *a’u*      *arua*      *aridu*      *ami*  
‘I’      ‘we two’      ‘we three’      ‘we’
- Other languages even have a paucal number, used for just a few people or things (e.g. Lihir, from Papua New Guinea)
  - *yo*      *gel*      *getol*      *gehet*      *ge*  
‘I’      ‘we two’      ‘we three’      ‘a few of us’      ‘we’
- Notice how English can still express the same meanings, even without special words
- Gender
  - Another category that nouns can have is gender
  - Gender in language is already familiar to you from pronouns in English
    - Where is John? Have you seen *him*?
      - A word like *him* has masculine gender
    - Where is Mary? Have you seen *her*?
      - A word like *her* has feminine gender
    - Where is their car? Have you seen *it*?
      - A word like *it* has neuter gender
  - In English, as in most Indo-European languages, personal pronouns only show gender in the third person (*he, she, it*)
  - There are some languages that show gender in other persons
  - For example, Arabic has separate masculine and feminine forms of the second-person pronoun (*you*)
    - *’ante*  
‘you’ (masculine)
    - *’anti*  
‘you’ (feminine)
  - Other languages, such as Turkish, have no separate gender forms at all
    - *o*  
‘he/she/it’
  - The sort of gender that we have seen in English is natural gender
    - To know which gender to use, you need only know whether you are talking about a person or thing that is male, female, or neither
  - The gender system in many languages involves grammatical gender
    - Each noun has its own inherent gender, which may or may not reflect anything in the real world
  - Examples from a language like German show how unpredictable grammatical gender can be
    - *der Rock*      —      masculine  
‘the skirt’
    - *die Rübe*      —      feminine  
‘the turnip’
    - *das Mädchen*      —      neuter  
‘the girl’
  - Why is a word like *Mädchen* neuter if it means ‘girl’?
  - The answer has to do with grammar

- **All** words in German ending with the diminutive suffix *-chen* are neuter
  - *der Bissen* → *das Bisschen*  
‘the bit’ ‘the little bit’
  - *die Magd* → *das Mädchen*  
‘the girl’ ‘the little girl’
  - *das Schaf* → *das Schäfchen*  
‘the sheep’ ‘the little sheep’
- You’ve seen that not all expressions of grammatical gender have to do with a distinction between male and female in the real world
- It’s also true that not all ways of distinguishing male and female in language have to do with grammatical gender
- One example of this is the suffix *-ess* in English, which you can see in pairs like *waiter/waitress*
- The words formed with *-ess* refer to females, but this is not quite the same thing as grammatical gender
  - *Mary* never drops any plates; *she*’s such a good *waitress*
  - *Mary* has sat here patiently for an hour; *she*’s such a good *waiter*
- If the difference between *waiter* and *waitress* were grammatical gender, you would have to use *waitress* in both sentences, since they both refer to *Mary*
- Instead, *waitress* has one very specific meaning: ‘a woman who waits at table for a living’. *Waiter* is used for everything else.
- In some languages, you can’t tell the gender of a noun by looking at the noun itself
- However, you can tell the gender of a noun by looking at determiners such as the definite article (*the*)
- This is the case in German
  - *der Zahn*  
‘the tooth’ (masculine)
  - *die Bahn*  
‘the route’ (feminine)
- In other languages the noun itself shows gender more clearly
- For example, in Spanish most nouns ending in *-o* are masculine, and most nouns ending in *-a* are feminine
- Gender is still shown on determiners as well
  - *el puerto*  
‘the port’ (masculine)
  - *la puerta*  
‘the door’ (feminine)

**Activity 2:**

In groups, take some time to think of any other languages that you might know. How many genders do these languages have? (Don’t look at nouns like *man/woman* or adjective pairs like *male/female*. See if there are multiple forms of the same adjective (e.g. *good*), or look at pronouns, such as *him/her/it* and determiners, such as *the/this/that*.)

Language	Genders

- In English and German there are three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter
- This is the gender system inherited by most Indo-European languages
- However, some languages have simplified the three-gender system in different ways
- Some languages no longer have separate neuter forms
- Instead, everything is divided between masculine and feminine
- This is true of most modern Romance languages (e.g. Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese)
- As you have seen, all these languages developed from Latin
- In the course of this development, all the Latin neuter nouns became masculine or feminine
  - *filum* → *le fil*  
‘thread’ (neuter) ‘the thread’ (masculine)
  - *mare* → *la mer*  
‘sea’ (neuter) ‘the sea’ (feminine)
- Other languages no longer distinguish between masculine and feminine
- Instead, they have a two-way distinction between common gender and neuter gender
- This has happened within the history of Dutch
- All the nouns that were originally masculine and feminine have been combined into a single common gender
  - *den hond* → *de hond*  
‘the dog’ (masculine) ‘the dog’ (common)
  - *de kat* → *de kat*  
‘the cat’ (feminine) ‘the cat’ (common)
  - *het paard* → *le fil*  
‘the horse’ (neuter) ‘the horse’ (neuter)
- It is even possible to have more than three genders
- Some languages, such as Swahili, divide up nouns into as many as six
  - mtu ‘person’
  - mti ‘tree’
  - tunda ‘fruit’
  - kisu ‘knife’
  - nguo ‘cloth’
  - uso ‘face’
- The underlined letters are the part of the word (if any) showing the gender
- Like the familiar Indo-European three-gender system, there are typical, central meanings for each class
- However, the gender of individual words can still be quite unpredictable
- What good is grammatical gender?
- Gender is not just a way of showing which things are for men and which things are for women
- Dividing words into different classes can make it easier to keep track of what is being talked about
  - *Tu voulais une chemise ou un pull, donc j’en ai acheté un/une*  
‘You wanted a shirt or a jumper, so I bought one’
- Gender also helps people classify information in ways unrelated to sex
- For example, in Indo-European languages, many feminine nouns that do not refer to people or animals refer to abstract concepts
- This means that if you encounter an unfamiliar feminine noun, you can use this pattern as a starting point to guess its meaning
- Although gender can be a useful way of classifying things, it is not necessary for communication

- As we saw, some languages, such as Turkish, have no grammatical gender at all, although they do still have specific words such as ‘man’/’woman’
- Many languages have simplified or lost grammatical gender over time
- For example, English originally had a system of grammatical gender more like German, but this developed into the simple natural gender system that we know today
- Conclusion
  - Number and gender are two types of properties that nouns can have
  - English has two number categories, singular and plural, but some languages have more
  - There are two types of gender, natural gender and grammatical gender
  - Natural gender is closely based on the real world, while grammatical gender is more arbitrary
  - English has three genders: masculine, feminine and neuter
  - Some languages have fewer genders, while others have more