Language and gender

VOCABULARY PRACTICE
UPPER-INTERMEDIATE | B2

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 Match each precise term with its definition.

1 generic masculine ____	**a** the traditional use of masculine forms to represent people of any gender
2 markedness ____	**b** the linguistic phenomenon whereby one form is treated as the neutral default and another as a specially marked exception
3 semantic derogation ____	**c** the historical process by which female-referring terms acquire more negative connotations than their male equivalents
4 lexical asymmetry ____	**d** an unequal or inconsistent pattern in how male and female terms are structured or used within a language
5 gender-fair language ____	**e** language deliberately designed to represent genders equally, avoiding unnecessary asymmetry
6 grammatical gender ____	**f** a grammatical classification of nouns into categories such as masculine, feminine or neuter, often unrelated to actual sex
7 natural gender ____	**g** gender assigned based on an entity's actual biological sex rather than arbitrary grammatical category
8 epicene pronoun ____	**h** a pronoun usable regardless of the referent's gender
9 androcentric language ____	**i** language structured around a male perspective as the implicit norm
10 gender marking ____	**j** the linguistic marking of gender on a word, such as adding a suffix to indicate female reference

2 Choose the word with the most suitable connotation.

1 For masculine forms traditionally used to represent everyone: generic masculine / gender-neutral form.

2 For one form treated as the default and another as marked: markedness / equal treatment.

3 For female terms acquiring more negative connotations over time: semantic derogation / semantic elevation.

4 For unequal structuring of male and female terms: lexical asymmetry / perfect symmetry.

5 For language deliberately designed to represent genders equally: gender-fair language / androcentric language.

6 For grammatical categories like masculine/feminine unrelated to sex: grammatical gender / natural gender.

7 For gender based on actual biological sex: natural gender / grammatical gender.

8 For language structured around a male perspective as the norm: androcentric language / gender-fair language.

3 Complete the gender-language collocations with one word.

1 the generic _____ (= masculine used for everyone)

2 linguistic _____ (= one form treated as default, other as marked)

3 semantic _____ (= female terms acquiring worse connotations)

4 lexical _____ (= unequal structuring of gendered terms)

5 promote _____-fair language (= designed to represent genders equally)

6 _____ gender (= grammatical category, e.g. masculine/feminine)

7 an _____ pronoun (= usable regardless of gender)

8 _____-centric language (= structured around a male perspective)

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4 Complete the case notes with words and phrases from the box.

androcentric language | epicene pronoun | gender-fair language | gender marking | generic masculine | grammatical gender | lexical asymmetry | markedness | natural gender | semantic derogation

Case A: Traditional style guides once recommended the 1 _____ as the default when a person's gender was unknown or irrelevant.
Case B: Linguists studying 2 _____ note that masculine terms typically function as the unmarked, default category, while female-specific terms are treated as the marked exception.
Case C: Historical analysis reveals 3 _____ affecting several originally neutral female-referring words, which gradually acquired negative connotations absent from their male equivalents.
Case D: Researchers documented broader 4 _____ across the vocabulary, with far more negative terms available for describing women than equivalent men.
Case E: Style guides increasingly advocate 5 _____, deliberately avoiding unnecessary gender asymmetry throughout formal writing.
Case F: Languages differ in how they encode 6 _____, some assigning arbitrary categories to every noun regardless of actual sex, while English relies mostly on 7 _____ instead, reflecting an entity's actual biological sex where relevant.
Case G: Singular 'they' functions as an 8 _____, usable regardless of the referent's gender.
Case H: Critics describe some traditional grammar rules as reflecting 9 _____, structured implicitly around a male perspective as the norm, visible partly through inconsistent patterns of 10 _____ across the lexicon.

5 Read the text and answer the questions briefly.

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Semantic derogation and gendered vocabulary

Historical linguists studying semantic derogation have documented a striking pattern: many English words originally referring neutrally to women have, over centuries, acquired negative or sexualised connotations absent from their male equivalents, even when both words originally shared essentially parallel meanings. This asymmetric pattern of pejoration appears remarkably consistent across the historical record, occurring far more frequently for female-referring terms than for comparable male-referring vocabulary, a pattern too systematic to attribute plausibly to coincidence alone. Sociolinguists argue that this documented asymmetry reflects broader historical power imbalances between genders rather than any inherent property of the words themselves, since the same linguistic processes that produced this pattern could equally have operated in the opposite direction under different social conditions.

1 What striking pattern have historical linguists documented? _____

2 What did these female-referring words originally share with their male equivalents? _____

3 How consistent does this pattern appear across the historical record? _____

4 What does the text say is too systematic to attribute to coincidence alone? _____

5 What do sociolinguists argue this documented asymmetry reflects? _____

6 What could have happened under different social conditions, according to the text? _____

6 Rewrite each sentence using the word in capitals. Do not change the meaning.

1 The masculine form was traditionally used to represent everyone. GENERIC MASCULINE

_____

2 The female term gradually acquired more negative associations than the male one. SEMANTIC DEROGATION

_____

3 The language was structured around a male perspective as the norm. ANDROCENTRIC LANGUAGE

_____

4 The pronoun could be used regardless of the person's gender. EPICENE PRONOUN _____

OVER TO YOU

Write a 120-150 word account analysing how semantic derogation has affected gendered vocabulary historically, distinguishing observation from sociolinguistic interpretation.

[ ] Use at least twelve target expressions. [ ] Control connotation carefully. [ ] Avoid unsupported assumptions.

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ANSWER KEY

1 Precise terms

1 a 2 b 3 c 4 d 5 e 6 f 7 g 8 h 9 i 10 j

2 Connotation

1 generic masculine 2 markedness 3 semantic derogation 4 lexical asymmetry 5 gender-fair language 6 grammatical gender 7 natural gender 8 androcentric language

3 Collocations

1 masculine 2 markedness 3 derogation 4 asymmetry 5 gender 6 grammatical 7 epicene 8 andro

4 Case notes

1 generic masculine 2 markedness 3 semantic derogation 4 lexical asymmetry 5 gender-fair language
6 grammatical gender 7 natural gender 8 epicene pronoun 9 androcentric language 10 gender marking

5 Reading - suggested answers

1 That many English words originally referring neutrally to women have acquired negative or sexualised connotations absent from their male equivalents.
2 Essentially parallel meanings.
3 Remarkably consistent.
4 This asymmetric pattern of pejoration.
5 Broader historical power imbalances between genders.
6 The same linguistic processes could equally have operated in the opposite direction.

6 Rewriting - possible answers

1 It was the generic masculine. 2 The term underwent semantic derogation.
3 The language was androcentric. 4 It was an epicene pronoun.

Over to you

Answers will vary. Check lexical precision, appropriate connotation and separation of fact from inference.