Sorry, but that's no lady — that's a woman

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

LAST week in the local dairy, a little girl pointed to another customer and declared in a clear, high-pitched voice: "Look, mummy — that woman's got a funny hat on." Her mother looked embarrassed and said quietly, "Ssh, don't point, Emma. The lady's hat is very nice."

Leaving aside the cultural issue of why pointing is considered rude, why did the mother correct the child's use of "woman" to "lady"? The answer is almost certainly that she felt that "lady" was more polite.

A trenchant British feminist, Deborah Cameron, has eloquently made the point that in language there are no neutral choices; every alternative is politically loaded. So when forced to choose a title, a woman's selection between Ms, Miss or Mrs indicates a political position. If you choose Ms, you are likely to be labelled feminist, divorcee or lesbian. If you choose Miss, you may be considered to be on the lookout for a man. And if you select Mrs, you indicate commitment to conservative social values. As one of our students recently commented, all this provides a real incentive to undertake a medical degree or a PhD in order to avoid these nomenclature issues and use the term Dr.

The same is true of the choice between "lady" and "woman". There is no neutral term; every choice conveys social meaning. Usually "lady" is felt to be more polite. Interestingly this is especially true in relation to less prestigious jobs: so "tea lady" but "woman doctor", "cleaning lady" but "woman judge". Here "lady" seems to be a kind of honorific term that ratchets up the politeness level when we have to refer to a job that lacks social status.

In other contexts, the term "lady" expresses negative social meanings. An analysis of the term "lady" in New Zealand English indicates that it is often used in contexts which trivialise or patronise the people referred to. Consider these examples from a database of New Zealand English: little old lady, grey-haired old lady, deaf old lady, and spinster ladies. And what about "lady editor", a "lady film star", a "ladies rugby team", and even "my good lady wife"? It is hard to take these women seriously when they are so obviously being patronised. What's wrong with the term "woman?" Comfortingly, there is statistical evidence that it is increasingly replacing "lady", especially in written language, reflecting a steady rise in the status of women in New Zealand society. No journalist in New Zealand would refer to Helen Clark as our first lady prime minister.

But there are other linguistic issues raised by the terms "woman" and "women". For some time, commentators on New Zealand English pronunciation have been noting the "merger" of these two words, sometimes calling it the "loss of the plural".

In an analysis of recent recordings, we found that even our oldest group of speakers failed to make a distinction over half the time. Younger speakers rarely pronounce these words differently. While the loss of a plural seems careless, there are some extenuating circumstances.

First, many words in English fail to distinguish singular and plural, such as sheep, antelope, etc — these tend to be huntable and edible animals, though we would not want to suggest this for woman/women.

Second, context frequently clarifies whether the speaker meant one or more than one (so complaints of ambiguity in "three women" may be misplaced).

Third, the merger of women and woman is a natural consequence of general vowel changes — while the weak second syllables are similar in many varieties, in New Zealand English the first vowels have also become more similar to one another.

Fourth, New Zealanders are not alone in this merger, which is reported in South Africa, Scotland, Ireland and elsewhere. Interestingly, these varieties have undergone similar sound changes that have brought the vowels in these words closer together.

Finally, note that spelling may also play a role, since the main pronunciation distinction would be on the first syllable, which is spelled identically. Some of our informants made a distinction on the second vowel instead, which is where the distinction was made in Old English, between wif-man ("female person") and wif-men ("female persons"), the linguistic ancestors of woman and women. Clearly women are an interesting group in New Zealand — both sociolinguistically and phonetically.

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