

Battle of the genders

RESPONDING to my column on gender and language, Folker Liebenow wrote that while he found it interesting, he felt I had misused the term "gender", which he defined as "a grammatical term referring to the gender of a noun or a thing". I should have used the term "sex" to refer to people, he claimed.

He is, of course, correct in saying the term "gender" can be used to refer to different grammatical categories in a language. French has two grammatical categories or genders for nouns (le fauteuil for armchair versus la chaise for chair), and German has three (der Hund for dog, die Schnecke for snail and das Kind for child).

Other languages have even more genders or noun categories. Swahili has at least six categories, and Dyirbal, a fast-disappearing Australian Aboriginal language, has four. Linguists suggest these categories reflect the way their speakers perceive the world, though, of course, they may not be conscious of this.

And the cultural meanings associated with the categories tend to get forgotten. The reasons that the French classify armchairs in one category and chairs in another are lost in the mists of time. Similarly, in Dyirbal the reason why the words for "woman", "sun", "fire" and "knives" are categorised together (as the same gender) is a deeply cultural matter which it is impossible for the few remaining speakers to explain. (Incidentally, the striking title of the book *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* records this association.)

Today these four Dyirbal noun categories are fast collapsing into two by those who still speak this dying language, one for animate nouns and one for inanimate nouns. The cultural basis for the distinctions has all but disappeared.

Linguists mourn the death of languages partly for this reason. With language death we lose the possibility of understanding differ-



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

ent ways of encoding cultural knowledge and different ways of thinking.

Extending the notion of noun categories a little further, Maori makes a distinction between "a" words and "o" words. The distinction relates to the concepts of possession and control and, while it most obviously affects nouns and possessive pronouns, it has ramifications beyond grammar. Understanding which category particular words belong to, or which pronoun

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form to use is a cultural matter, and it typically takes some time before Maori language learners grasp the distinction.

Language provides a means of encoding a community's knowledge, beliefs, and values — its culture. The areas of experience which are important to cultures tend to get encoded in their languages. If the Maori language is lost, or even if the "o" v "a" distinction disappears, we could lose another means of understanding the way human beings think and organise the world.

Returning to Folker Liebenow's letter to *The Dominion Post*, the grammatical meaning of the term

"gender" is not its only meaning. For social scientists, "gender" also refers to a socio-cultural category. When studying human behaviour, it is useful to distinguish between behaviours that are mainly attributable to biological or sex differences — giving birth and breast-feeding — as opposed to learned behaviours — wearing a dress or riding side-saddle. Learned behaviours are influenced by social and cultural norms and can be altered and challenged. So, in the recent film *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, we first see Cate Blanchett riding "side-saddle" in a riding dress befitting a demure queen. Later, as a warrior queen, she sits astride her horse in full armour. This is gendered, not biologically determined, behaviour; she deliberately adopts a more masculine posture when she leads her troops to war.

The distinctions are often blurred, of course. We associate higher pitch with women's voices and lower pitch with men's, and while these differences have a biological base (after puberty men's vocal cords are on average heavier and thicker than women's), there is also a cultural component.

Pre-adolescent boys generally use lower pitch than is justified by their height and weight — presumably because they observe that men generally use lower pitch than women, and they are keen to be perceived as "masculine" rather than "feminine".

Clearly this is a matter of degree rather than of absolute categories. And even biological categories are often not as clear-cut as we might like to think... but that is the topic of another column.

If you find gender and language issues interesting, see the web page advertising our International Gender and Language Conference to be held in Wellington in July — vu.ac.nz/igala5.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz