CH. 2: When to Use Female Nouns?

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TYPES OF DISCRIMINATION
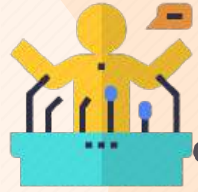
Linguistic discrimination

Classism

Religious discrimination

Agesim

Sexism

Racism

Today's topic is the use of feminine nouns such as "actress" and "comedienne." These days, people often see such terms as **sexist**, but it's also common to hear at least some of them. So what exactly are the modern rules for using such terms? Actually, this isn't a matter of grammar. It's about writing to minimize the potential for readers to **draw conclusions** you don't want to convey.

It could be worse. In some languages, most nouns have different forms for different sexes. For example, in Spanish, a male lawyer is an *abogado*, and a female lawyer is an *abogada*. Furthermore, in some languages, even verbs can have different forms, depending on the sex of their subject. In Hebrew, *raa* means "saw" for masculine subjects, while *raata* means "saw" for feminine subjects. In Mandarin Chinese, a man can "marry" a woman, but a woman can only "be married to" a man.

Even in English, there used to be more female-specific nouns than there are now. Centuries ago, people used now-obsolete nouns such as "teacheress," "soldieress," and "ministress." The fact that English has mostly abandoned female-specific nouns like these is probably part of the reason that the remaining ones tend to attract attention.

Other Languages Have More Feminine Nouns

A. Analyze the Reading

Find these sentences in the reading. Write *M* next to the main ideas and *S* next to the supporting details and examples.

S-E In Hebrew, *raa* means "saw" for masculine subjects, while *raata* means "saw" for feminine subjects.

S-D Furthermore, in some languages, even verbs can have different forms, depending on the sex of their subject.

M Even in English, there used to be more female-specific nouns than there are now.

S-E Take the word "author."

S-D Her point is that sexism in society makes it easy to send messages in our word choice that we don't intend to send.

6. **M** Unfortunately, even if you follow this guideline of using gender-neutral noun forms in most cases, and gender-specific nouns only when sex is relevant, the problem remains.
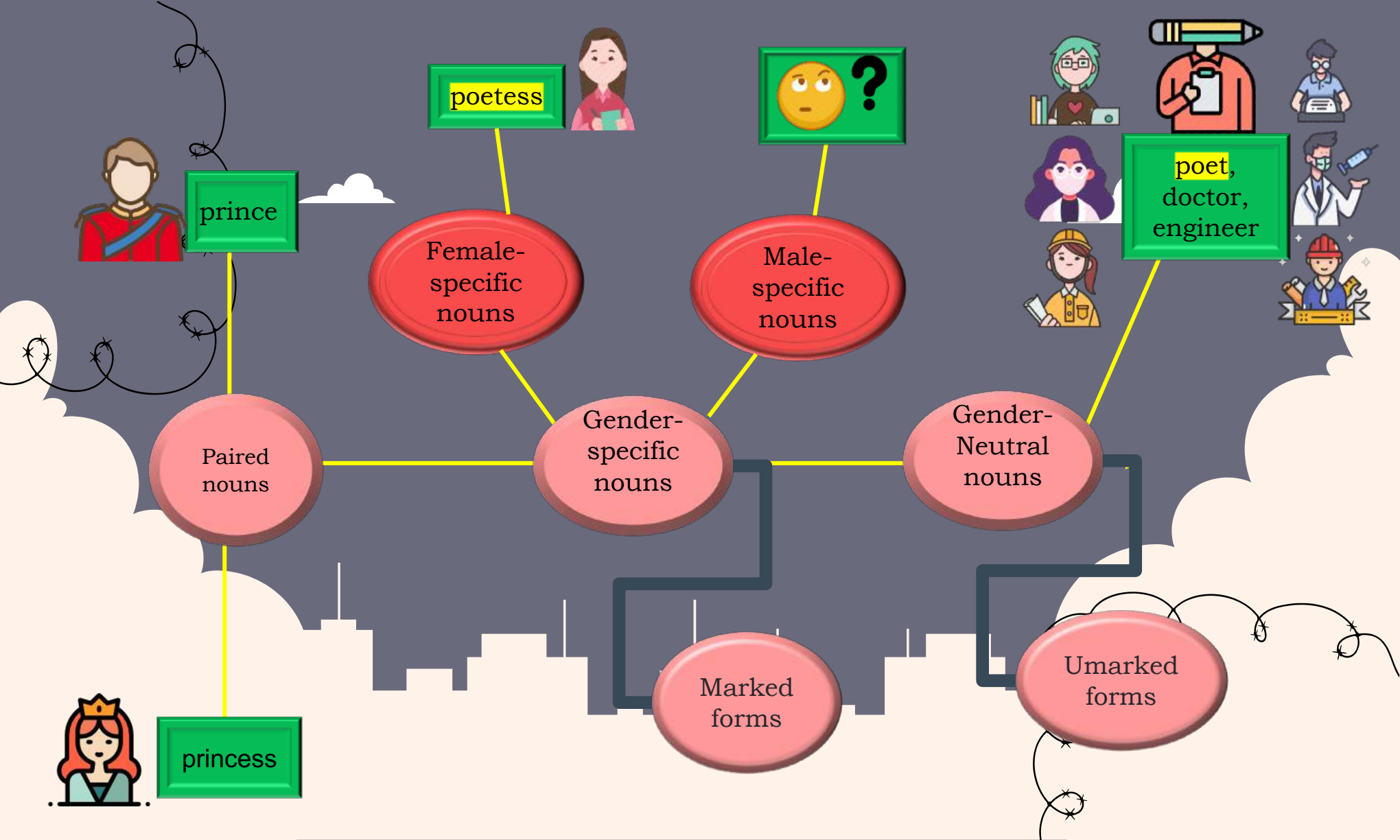
S-E Another case in point: "actress."

S-D In these cases, avoid referring to a person's sex if possible, and if it's not, carefully assess the usage of your audience.

Paired Nouns Are OK

Sometimes male- and female-specific nouns don't suggest problematic messages. Pairs such as "prince" and "princess," "duke" and "duchess," "abbot" and "abbess" are unobjectionable. In these pairs, the male-specific term never refers to both males and females. Even though it might be convenient to have a word to refer to any child of a king or queen, "prince" can only mean a king or queen's son. So, if the sexes are treated equally, each one having its own term, the female-specific term is probably OK.

prince

poetess

poet, doctor, engineer

Female-specific nouns

Male-specific nouns

Gender-specific nouns

Gender-Neutral nouns

Paired nouns

Marked forms

Umarked forms

princess

Some Gender-Neutral Nouns, Such as "Flight Attendant" Have Become Standard

The next-easiest cases are those where a gender-neutral term has become popular. In recent decades, gender-neutral terms, such as "firefighter," "police officer," "mail carrier" and "flight attendant" have gained currency. Definitely use these.

Problems Arise When a Noun Exists to Call Out Only One Sex

The troublesome cases are when we have one term that can refer to either sex, and another that refers only to women. Take the word "author." It can refer to men or women in a sentence such as, "Our agency represents many authors." But if you use "author" to refer to writers of either sex, and the exclusively feminine "authoress" to refer to female authors, you now have a way of referring specifically to female authors, but no way of referring specifically to male authors. The implication is that most authors are male, and that it's worth pointing out when one of them isn't. As *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* says, "The marked term suggests some difference in status and may imply lower standards or achievement."
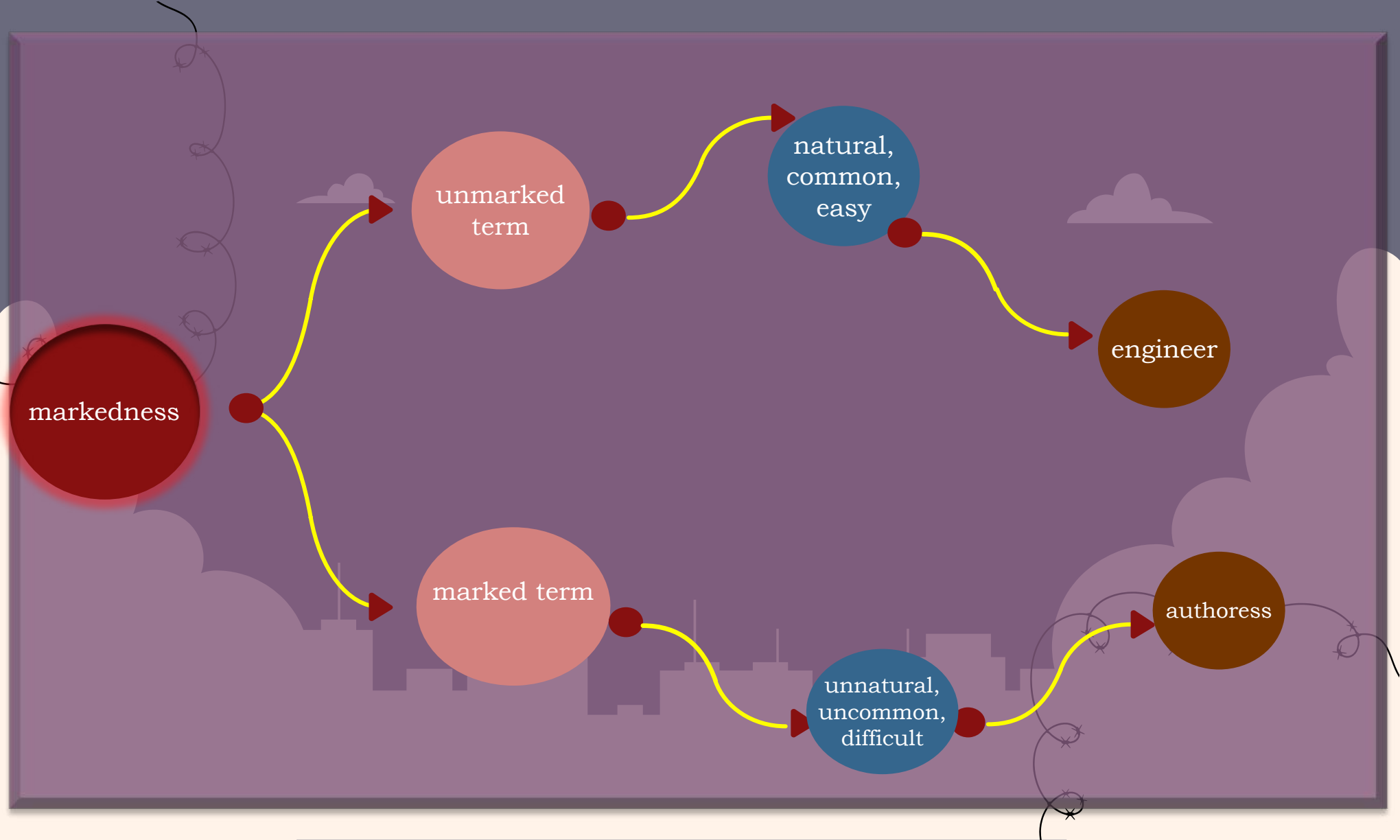
Is There Ever a Good Reason to Write "Female Doctor"?

This issue comes up even when there aren't gender-specific terms. For example, "doctor" can be either masculine or feminine. Sally McConnellGinet, a linguist at Cornell University who specializes in language and gender, advises, "If you write 'female doctor,' then ask yourself why you want to emphasize that a certain doctor is a woman. Do you write 'male doctor' in similar contexts?" Her point is that sexism in society makes it easy to send messages in our word choice that we don't intend to send.

Make Sure Your Words Are Relevant

     The guideline suggested in *Garner's Modern American Usage* and The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary of English Usage* is to avoid using a gender-specific noun unless sex is relevant to the discussion. Usually it isn't. Sex doesn't typically matter when you're talking about doctors or authors, for example.

     But what about when sex is relevant? Another case in point: "actress." Male and female actors usually play different kinds of roles, so it's useful for people in show business to make this distinction. If "actress" saves them from having to use "female actor," why not use it?

Unfortunately, even if you follow this guideline of using gender-neutral noun forms in most cases, and gender-specific nouns only when sex is relevant, the problem remains. You'll end up using female-specific terms to talk specifically about women, but where's the analogous male-specific term? If there isn't one, you may still be sending a message that a woman doing some job is surprising news. And indeed, although there is sometimes a good reason to use the word "actress" that hasn't stopped it from acquiring negative connotations, as we're told by a contact in the industry.

In cases like these, where linguistic change is ongoing, the usage of the audience you're writing for can be a good guide. If a certain community uses "actress" where they are clearly not devaluing women's acting, feel free to do likewise. If they insist on "actor" across the board, you may want to follow suit.

doctor/nurse

illness

hospital/needle

blood

vampires/bats

murders/wars

death

incompetent

unable

pathetic

female doctor

unintelligent
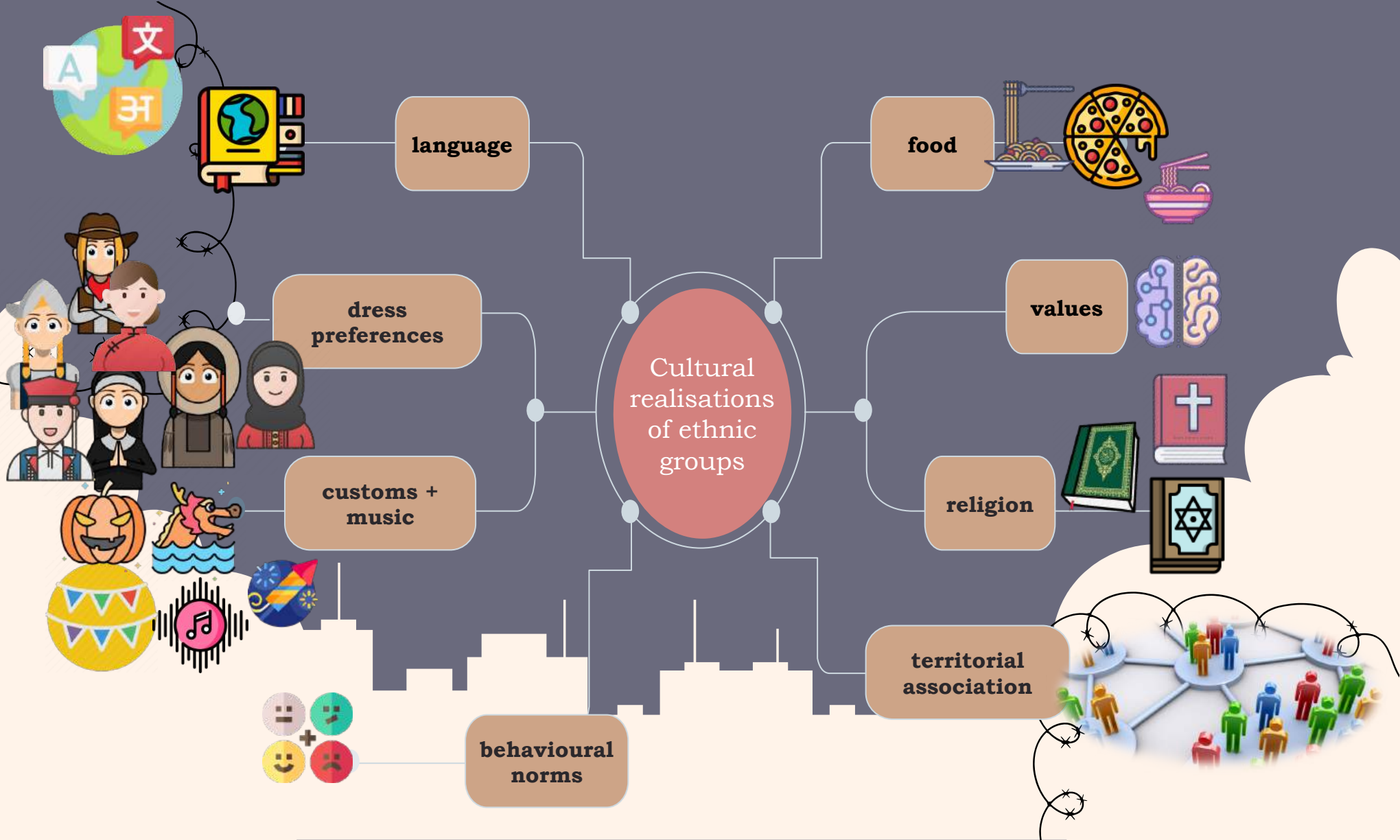
fraud

inferior

What's this? ??

Summary

   If there's a gender-neutral term in general use, use it. If there's not, but so the masculine and feminine nouns each stay in their own territory, then use them. Be careful when one term can refer to either sex, another term refers only to women, and no term refers only to men. In these cases, avoid referring to a person's sex if possible, and if it's not, carefully assess the usage of your audience. But remember that these "rules" are just shortcuts: what matters is getting across the messages you want to send and trying to block those you don't.

Race vs Ethnicity

Race is a socially meaningful collection of people who decide they are important and share obvious and identifiable biological traits. On the other hand, **ethnicity** is a shared cultural background that concentrates on both biological and genetic perspectives. Ethnicity can also be identified by focusing on someone's religious and political beliefs. The main difference between race and ethnicity is shared biological traits versus a shared cultural background.

Cultural realisations of ethnic groups

- language
- dress preferences
- customs + music
- behavioural norms
- food
- values
- religion
- territorial association

Comprehension

A

1 **Identifying the Author's Purpose** The purpose of the article is to ___.

(A) educate

(B) persuade

(C) entertain

(D) tell a personal story

B

3. **Scanning for Details** According to the reading, in ___, the form of a verb can depend on the gender of its subject.

(A) English

(B) Hebrew

(C) Japanese

(D) Spanish

C

2. **Finding the Main Idea** A main idea of this article is that ___.

(A) many languages have feminine nouns

(B) you should never use a feminine noun instead of a masculine or gender-neutral noun

(C) you should use the type of noun that best expresses your meaning

(D) in English, there used to be more feminine nouns than there are now

Comprehension

4. Scanning for Details An equivalent noun pair like "prince" and "princess"

Ⓐ is always OK to use

Ⓑ is never OK to use

Ⓒ is not common in most languages

Ⓓ has gained currency recently

6. Scanning for Details According to the author, when you aren't sure whether it's OK to use a female noun, you should ___.

Ⓐ always use the male-specific term

Ⓑ think about your audience

Ⓒ try to find a different word to use

Ⓓ ask your audience what they're comfortable with

5. Scanning for Details Using a term like "authoress" to refer to female authors can cause problems because ___.

Ⓐ some people might not know the word

Ⓑ the term may become obsolete

Ⓒ it's not a common term

Ⓓ it suggests that female authors have lower status

Using Female and Gender-Neutral Nouns

Some nouns that used to be common, like *weatherman* and *stewardess*, are gender-biased. Gender-neutral terms were created to replace them. Look at this list of gender-biased nouns and their gender-neutral forms.

Gender-biased term	Gender-neutral term
weatherman	meteorologist
businessman	businessperson, business executive
fireman	firefighter
waiter/waitress	server
steward/stewardess	flight attendant
congressman	congressperson, congressional representative
salesman	salesperson, sales associate
repairman	repairperson
foreman	boss, leader, foreperson
mankind	humankind

Comprehension

| potential | imply | relevant | exclusively | avoid | gender-neutral |

1. Using the term "female doctor" instead of simply "doctor" can __imply__ that there is a difference between male and female doctors.

2. Before using a female noun, you should always consider whether or not it conveys your message correctly. Otherwise, you have the __potential__ to express the wrong message.

3. __Gender-Neutral__ terms like "flight attendant" are always acceptable.

4. Female nouns do not occur __exclusively__ in English. They also exist in other languages.

5. Sometimes it's OK to use terms like "actress." That's when the gender of the person is __relevant__ to the discussion.

6. Try to __avoid__ using gender-specific nouns when you are not trying to differentiate between men and women.

Comprehension

A. Replace each boldfaced noun with the appropriate gender-neutral noun. Use the plural form of the noun when necessary.

1. Have you seen any **salesmen** _____ (salesperson) _____ in this store? I've been in here for 15 minutes, and I can't find anyone to help me.

2. The invention of the automobile had an enormous effect on the development of **mankind** ___ (humankind) _____.

3. Our **congressman** ___ (congresspreson) ___ gave a speech in front of city hall to encourage people to vote for her in the election next month.

4. John is the **foreman** ___ (leader) _____ here. He'll show you around when you start work tomorrow.

5. The **stewardesses** ___ (flight attendant) _ have asked us to stay seated until the plane comes to a complete stop.

Comprehension

B. Match each gender-biased term with its gender-neutral form.

1. **e** chairman   **a.** news reporter

2. **d** brotherhood   **b.** prehistoric person

3. **a** anchorman   **c.** childcare provider

4. **f** cowboy   **d.** kinship

5. **g** manning   **e.** chairperson

6. **b** caveman   **f.** rancher

7. **c** nanny   **g.** staffing

Comprehension

C. Complete each sentence with a noun from the box on page 20 or from Activity B. Use the plural form of the noun when necessary.

1. My neighbor's kitchen caught fire yesterday. Ten __firefighters__ came and put the fire out.

2. Will you call a __repairperson__? The washing machine is broken again.

3. You'd better wear a warm coat. The __meterologist__ on the news said it's going to snow tonight.

4. Hi, I'm Alan and I'll be your __server__ this evening. Can I start you off with something to drink?

5. Someone left a briefcase under the table. I saw three __business executives__ having a meeting here a minute ago. It might belong to one of them.

6. We need to increase __staffing__ in our warehouse. We don't have enough employees to keep up with the workload.

7. Jan decided to go back to work after she had a baby, so she hired a __childcare provider__

8. The archaeologists found evidence that __prehistoric persons__ lived in the area over 10,000 years ago.

9. I need a __sales associates__ to help me with this dress. I'm not sure what size I wear.

10. I feel a strong __kinship__ with my friend Elena. She's like a sister to me.

Comprehension

Supporting Main Ideas

Writers usually focus on a few main ideas in a piece of writing. Then they use interesting details and examples to support these main points. These **supporting details** and **examples** help the reader to understand and appreciate the writer's main ideas.

Example

It could be worse. (*main idea*) In some languages most nouns have different forms for different sexes. (*supporting detail*) For example, in Spanish, a male lawyer is an *abogado*, and a female lawyer is an *abogada*. (*supporting example*)

Watch Your Language

To communicate your ideas clearly, it's not only important to use the right vocabulary, it's also important *not* to use words that might offend your audience.

(1) Your audience may be less likely to want to hear what you have to say or read what you have to write if your language is potentially offensive.

In recent decades, this fact has brought about the necessity of politically correct terminology.

(2) In English, there are certain terms that you may want to avoid when referring to people's ethnicities or economic status.

For example, the term "oriental" is offensive to some people.

(3) Instead, you should use the word "Asian;' or the term for people from a specific country, such as "Japanese" or "Korean:'

When referring to the native people of North America, the term "Indian" is considered politically incorrect and has been replaced with the term "Native American." And when referring to countries that don't have a lot of money or industry, the term "developing country" is preferred over "third-world country."

(4)
There are also politically correct terms for different groups of people.

For example, people tend not to use the term "handicapped person" anymore. Instead, they use the phrase "people with disabilities." When referring to elderly people, it's more polite to say "seniors" than "old people."

(5) It's also important to refer to adult women as "women" rather than "girls."

Of course, sometimes you may find yourself talking to a group of people who aren't bothered by these terms that are considered politically incorrect, and you yourself might not find these terms offensive. But it's still useful to be aware of the differences for those times when your audience is sensitive to politically incorrect terminology.

What is the singular "they" and why should you use it?

When readers see a gendered pronoun, they make assumptions about the gender of the person being described (Gastil, 1990; Moulton et al., 1978). Many styles advocate for the singular "they" because it is inclusive of all people and helps writers avoid making assumptions about gender.

STOP
SEXISM

When to use the singular "they"?

Writers should use the singular "they" in two main cases: (a) when referring to a generic person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context and (b) when referring to a specific, known person who uses "they" as their pronoun.

When referring to a generic person whose gender is unknown or irrelevant to the context, use the singular "they" as the pronoun. For example, if you use nouns like "person," "individual," or "everyone" or phrases like "every teacher" or "each nurse" in a sentence, use the appropriate form of the pronoun "they" as needed.

"When a person talks too much, he learns little."

"When a person talks too much, he/she learns little."

"When a person talks too much, they learn little.."
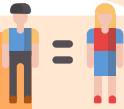
When to use the singular "they"?

I didn't see **the person** who stole my wallet. *He* reached into my backpack and ran away.

I didn't see **the person** who stole my wallet. *They* reached into my backpack and ran away.

I didn't see **the person** who stole my wallet. *She* reached into my backpack and ran away.

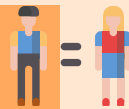I didn't see **the person** who stole my wallet. *He/She* reached into my backpack and ran away.

When to use the singular "they"?

This person stole my wallet. I am sure **they** did it **themself**.

This person stole my wallet. I am sure **they** did it **themselves**.

This person stole my wallet. I am sure **he/she** did it **himself/herself**.

Discussion & Writing

- Language is constantly changing. New words are always being introduced, and existing words often start being used in new ways. For example, young people often use words and expressions that their parents don't understand. With a partner, make a list of these words and expressions. You can include examples from English or any other language that you know.

Discussion & Writing

- Write a paragraph about two or three words and expressions that are new. In your paragraph, explain what these words and expressions mean and when they are used.

EXAMPLE

There are a few expressions that my friends and I use and my parents don't understand. For example, my friends and I often say "no drama" when someone apologizes for something. It means "that's OK" or "it's not a problem." My mother wanted to know what it meant, so I told her. Then she tried to use it once. It sounded so funny when she said it...