
Un-bending the genders or 'Why don't they just get married?'

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A light-hearted dramatisation of gender mores, curiosity and current English usage

'Hello, Mrs Hinton, how's the family?' asks Mrs Nosey when I meet her in the street on Tuesday. Canny woman, that Mrs Nosey. She can't rightly remember if I have a son, a daughter or both. So she's asked the standard question which will elicit the maximum of information. She's a past master¹ at such interrogation.

'They're fine,' I reply. And then the devil gets into me. I can't resist. 'My son and his partner have bought a narrow boat.' Poor Mrs Nosey. I can tell the question is swirling round her brain: 'Partner? Partner? What sort of partner?' How is she going to find out the gender of this partner? She'll have to ask another question to find out. Here it comes:

'Oh, do they hire it out?' (For sub-text, read: 'Are they business partners?')

'No, they've both taken six months sabbatical leave and plan to cruise round the canals of England over the summer and autumn.' The ball is back in your court, Mrs Nosey. You now know that these two people are going to live in close proximity on a small boat for six months and you still have the problem of identifying the gender of my son's partner. I'm determined not to help you out. I tease a little longer:

'It shouldn't be too difficult for them.' I explain. 'They're both actors, so they should be able to find work when they get back to London in the autumn.' Mrs Nosey is perplexed. She knows that, these days, women in the acting profession like to be called 'actors' just like their male colleagues. How can she find out if my son is heterosexual or homosexual?² Well, I should not have underestimated the wiles of the woman. She lobs a question back over the net to me:

'Oh, what sort of roles do they specialise in?' Deuce.³

'They both started out in a little theatrical company touring schools and I believe the children loved the gnomes⁴ they played, although more recently they have been doing Shakespeare.' Forty-three to me, I believe, Mrs Nosey.⁵ But, why keep the poor woman in the dark? I relent: '... but more recently, Sybil has auditioned for the part of Ophelia and Victor hopes to work in films.'

Mrs Nosey's life would have been so much easier if Victor and Sybil were married. 'My son and his wife have bought a narrow boat,' would have immediately put her out of her misery. But no! These two relatively young people have decided not to marry. However, I cannot bring myself to refer to Victor's partner as his 'girlfriend'. She is, after all, nearly thirty-five years old and, with all due respect, no 'girl'. They have been happily together for over 14 years – longer than most marriages these days.

They have also rejected the idea of a civil partnership – but even the enlightened Civil



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Partnership Act of 2004 does not help our linguistic problem. On the one hand, I am delighted that there is the legal status of 'civil partner'. On the other hand, I sincerely hope that at the next (or any) party I attend, no-one will ever introduce their nearest and dearest to me by saying: '... and this is Jane (or Jim or whoever), my civil partner.' What an unromantic, clumsy and legalistic expression!

In our family it is my daughter, Amanda, who is the conventional one. She married her fiancé, Elliott Prynne, last year. That makes life easy for the Mrs Noseys of this world. But does marriage always manage to 'un-bend' the genders?

Imagine, if you will, Elliott's phone conversation with his father a few days before he took Amanda home for the first time to meet his parents: 'Dad, can I bring an accountant friend home for the weekend?' At the time, Amanda was, indeed, no more than a friend. She was, and still is, an accountant. Elliott's dad was either going to have to ask specifically if the friend was male or female, or he was going to have to wait to see the person in the flesh before he found out. An awkward wait for Mr and Mrs Prynne.

Amanda and Elliott are now married. This has made it easy for Mr and Mrs Prynne to clearly announce the gender of their son's significant other as they can simply refer to 'our daughter-in-law, Amanda'.⁶ But, hold on. There's one final linguistic conundrum! These modern young women have minds of their own – although very often can't make up those minds. As a young bride, Amanda had no desire to abandon her old, familiar, family name.⁷ Despite the expensive wedding ring on her finger, she could not bring herself to be called 'Mrs' anything or to change her name on her passport and other official documents. Her name, both professionally and privately, is

therefore 'Ms Hinton'. Pity Amanda's poor boss meeting Elliott, for the first time. Having spotted the wedding ring on Amanda's finger, he⁸ shakes Elliott firmly by the hand and confidently says: 'Nice to meet you, Mr Hinton.' The result must necessarily be a great deal of embarrassment all round and a great deal of explanation – or perhaps men married to modern businesswomen get used to letting such misapprehensions pass without comment.

Marriage may solve many, many legal, ethical, financial and practical problems, but perhaps it solves fewer linguistic problems than I had hoped.

Notes

1 Alas, Mrs Nosey cannot be a 'past mistress' as neither formal nor informal English allow her that feminine possibility. Given Mrs Nosey's strait-laced attitudes, I'm positive she is not anyone's 'former mistress' in the time-honoured tradition of Nell Gwynn or even of the present Duchess of Cornwall.

2 A matter of no interest to the majority of the population, but fascinating to the Mrs Noseys of this world.

3 In tennis terms, 'deuce' means that the opposing players are equal.

4 There must, of course, be lady gnomes, otherwise the species would be extinct. However, it is firmly fixed in the British psyche that gnomes are male.

5 In tennis terms, forty-three means that the player with 40 points has the better score in the game – but can still lose the match.

6 I'm afraid the family will not allow me to refer to my son's partner, Sybil, as my 'daughter outlaw'.

7 The term 'maiden name' would be more appropriate and more elegant at this point. It would also sound very old-fashioned. Maiden names, like maiden aunts, seem to have disappeared from the English language, if not from English life, some thirty or forty years ago.

8 Now why have I assumed that a boss would be a man rather than a woman?