In German . . . every noun has a gender, and there is no sense or system in the distribution; so the gender of each must be learned separately and by heart. There is no other way. To do this one has to have a memory like a memorandum-book. In German, a young lady has no sex, while a turnip has. Think what overwrought reverence that shows for the turnip, and what callous disrespect for the girl . . . :

Gretchen: Wilhelm, where is the turnip?
Wilhelm: She has gone to the kitchen.
Gretchen: Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden?
Wilhelm: It has gone to the opera.

. . . a tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female—tomcats included, of course; a person’s mouth, neck, bosom, elbows, fingers, nails, feet, and body are of the male sex, and his head is male or neuter according to the word selected to signify it, and not according to the sex of the individual who wears it—for in Germany all the women wear either male heads or sexless ones; a person’s nose, lips, shoulders, breast, hands, and toes are of the female sex; and his hair, ears, eyes, chin, legs, knees, heart, and conscience haven’t any sex at all. The inventor of the language probably got what he knew about a conscience from hearsay.

Mark Twain, (1880) “The Awful German Language”

. . .

The confusions that occupy us arise when language is like an engine idling, not when it is doing work.

Wittgenstein (1953), Philosophische Untersuchungen
1 Introduction

In his humorous account of the “awful” German language, Mark Twain draws attention to a puzzle posed by many of the world’s languages: grammatical gender. As often as not, the languages of the world assign objects into seemingly arbitrary (and often seemingly sexist) noun classes that lack any transparent purpose (Corbett, 1991). Historically, this led some scholars to conclude that grammatical gender is senseless: William of Ockham considered gender to be a meaningless, unnecessary aspect of language, an obvious candidate for his famous razor; Baudouin de Courtenay described gender as a deformity, an unfortunate historical accident that was responsible for a range of human afflictions, including nightmares, pathological behavior, erotic and religious delusions, and sadism (Kilarski, 2007). Few other linguists have held noun class to be responsible for all of the world’s ills; but few have warmed to its virtues either. The consensus is neatly summarized by Leonard Bloomfield (1933): “[t]here seems to be no practical criterion by which the gender of a noun in German, French, or Latin [can] be determined.”

Not only have gender systems been branded as meaningless, but they are fiendishly difficult for non-native speakers to learn, a state of affairs that prompted the developmental psychologist Michael Maratsos (1979) to conclude:

The presence of such systems [German gender] in a human cognitive system constitutes by itself excellent testimony to the occasional nonsensibleness of the species. Not only was this system devised by humans, but generation after generation of children peaceably relearns it.

While many linguists have reconciled themselves to the idea that gender has evolved its negative consequences for no reason, Charles Darwin was less sanguine about such matters: “The sight of a feather in a peacock’s tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick,” he famously wrote.1 In the 1800’s, Darwin’s pursuit of evolutionary explanations for such apparent anomalies revolutionized our understanding of biology. Indeed, his ruminations on the peacock’s tail helped develop the theory of sexual selection: Darwin hypothesized that while the extravagance of the male peacock’s train might prove hazardous to its health, females would often opt for mates with more ornate plumage, leading to reproductive success for showier males. Hence even the seemingly ‘absurd’ and risky feather display of a male peacock might still have an adaptive purpose. In this

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1 Letter 2743—Darwin, C.R. to Gray, Asa, 3 Apr (1860), Darwin Correspondence Project.