

Sex and Gender in Hindi

Jaralvilai Charoonrojn
This paper was presented in the

If someone comes and asks you what "gender" means, will you answer "sex"? Almost all people tend to give such answer. In many dictionaries, the definitions of sex and gender are similar. For example, gender is "the physical and/or social condition of being male or female, and sex is the state of being either male or female". (Cambridge International Dictionary of English) Roget's College Thesaurus also groups the word gender with many other synonyms of the word sex. It seems to many of us that gender sounds more formal than sex. We, therefore, ask our close friend "what sex is your cat?" instead of "what gender is your cat?" Is this the only difference between these two words?

1. What is sex?

It is much easier to understand what sex is. Sex is the biological characteristic of human and animals. Almost all animate living beings in the world are categorized to be either male or female, except for the case of hermaphrodites (plants, animals or humans that have both male and female sexual organs), which is a small exception and will not be discussed here. Non-living objects, for example, table, pen, song have no sex. We, also, will not deal with metaphorical sex, because it is not "real" sex. It is cultural bound and can vary from societies to others. For example, according to the mythology, the moon and the sun are husband and wife in Dyirbal society (An aboriginal tribe in Australia). (Lakoff, 1986) Consequently the moon is male like other husbands, while the sun is female like other wives. In Indian mythology, on the contrary, both the moon, soma (सोम) and the sun, sūrya (सूर्य) are male gods. (Knappert, 1995)

2. What is gender?

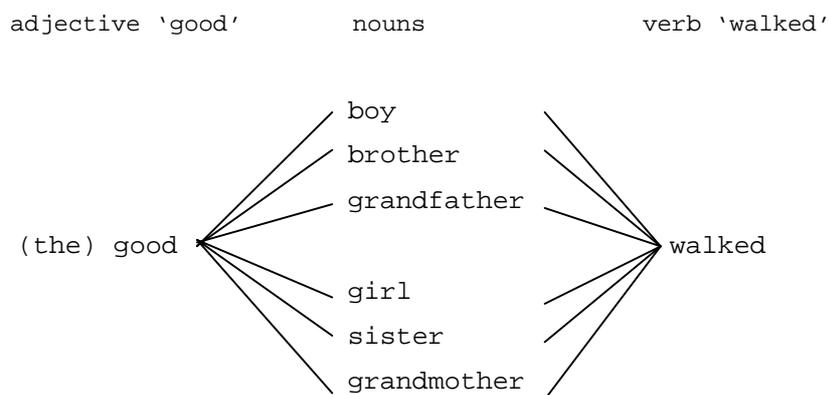
In some context, as mentioned above, gender and sex are the same, but in another context, they just correlate. Gender seems more difficult to understand. The word is also used as a technical term in grammar. Some languages have gender, and some do not. Hindi, French, Spanish, etc. have two genders, while Sanskrit, Pali, German, Romanian, etc. have three genders. Languages which do not have gender are Thai, Cambodian, Chinese, Indonesian, etc.

In languages with gender, all nouns are categorized into two or three groups called genders. The two genders that exist in all languages with gender are "masculine" and "feminine". The third gender called "neutral" is found only in languages with three genders. To speak those languages correctly, we must know

as what gender the noun we are referring to is categorized. Many elements occurring with noun, i.e. adjective, verb, article, pronoun, etc., change their forms according to gender of their head noun. We have to know the gender of the noun, so that we can choose the right form of those elements.

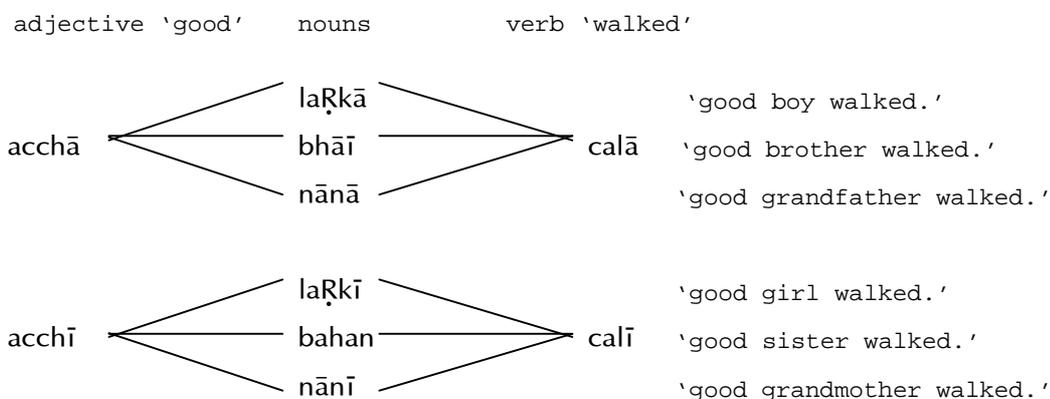
Let us compare languages with and without gender. Adjectives and verbs in Hindi, a language with two genders, always end with ā (आ) when its (singular) head noun is masculine, and end with ī (ई) when the nouns is feminine. We cannot form even short and simple sentences like 'the good boy walked' or 'the good girl walked' in Hindi correctly if we do not know the gender of the nouns. On the contrary, adjectives and verbs in English, a language without gender, never change their forms in this way. We can simply form this kind of sentences just by putting an adjective in front of a noun, and putting a verb after the noun. Consider these following sentences in English and Hindi:

English



In English, there is no gender categorization. Verbs and adjectives do not change their forms when occur with different nouns.

Hindi



The Hindi nouns mean, from above, 'boy', 'brother', 'grandfather', 'girl', 'sister', and 'grandmother'. They can be categorized into 2 groups; those whose adjective and verb end with ā, and those whose adjective and verb end with ī. The Noun in the first group, the first three nouns from above, are masculine. The ones in the second group are feminine. From this example we can see some relation between sex and gender that male are referred by masculine nouns, and female are referred by feminine nouns. Gender, therefore, is roughly called "sex in grammar" in the case of animate nouns.

That other elements change their form according to gender of noun is what we call gender "agreement". Linguists use existence of agreement as a criterion to judge whether a language has gender. Although a language shows that there is some categorization of nouns into groups, but there is no agreement according to the groups of nouns, the language is considered as a language without gender. (Zubin, 1992; Dixon, 1986; Corbett, 1991)

Someone may argue that English also has agreement, in the case of pronouns, and the language should be considered as a language with gender, as in:

I like my mother. She is very nice.
I like my father. He is very nice.
I like my shirt. It is very nice.

These sentences refer to objects with different sexes. The first sentence refers to "my mother", a female person, the second sentence refers to "my father", a male person, and the last sentence refers to "my shirt", an object without sex. The underlined pronouns have different forms according to the sexes of objects referred by the head nouns. It seems like an evidence of gender agreement, but, in fact, it is not. Pronouns¹ in English change their form according to sex, not gender, of the entities referred by the head noun.

This leads us to another difference between sex and gender. The meaning of sex can be defined clearly as a biological characteristic, while the meaning of gender cannot be defined clearly. Sometimes, as mentioned above, gender denotes sex, but sometimes it denotes size of the object and sometimes it denotes nothing. In his Hindi grammar book, McGregor (1977: 163-165) said that "words referring to animate beings often show variation in form² to denote male and female sex. Word referring to inanimate objects also occurs in pairs, feminine members of such pairs usually denote smaller or more delicate varieties of objects", as in

¹ Not all pronouns, but only the third person, singular pronouns; he, she, and it

² What McGregor called "variation in form" is, here, variation in gender.

	Masculine	Feminine
animate	lāṛkā 'boy'	lāṛkī 'girl'
	baṃḍar 'male monkey'	baṃḍarī 'female monkey'
	adhyāpak 'male teacher'	adhyāpikā 'female teacher'
	chātr 'male student'	chātrā 'female student'
inanimate	ghaṃṭā 'bell'	ghaṃṭī 'small bell'
	thāl 'large platter'	thālī 'platter'
	rassā 'rope'	rassī 'string'

It seems that, in some cases, gender denotes nothing, in other words, gender has no meaning. It is just a kind of elaboration in some languages, which has to be learnt by speakers, especially, non-native speakers, when the nouns are first encountered. *pustak* 'book', for example, is feminine, while *gulāb* 'rose' is masculine. It seems that no one can give any absolute explanation about gender determination in Hindi, and also in other languages with gender.

Gender does not always denote sex. Therefore, when we saw a Hindi sentence or phrase with, for example, feminine head noun and feminine agreement, we can tell only that the head noun in that sentence or phrase is feminine, but we cannot be sure that the sex of the objects referred by the head noun is female. English third singular pronouns, in contrast, tell us about the sex of the object. When we see the pronoun "she", we can be sure that the sex of the object referred by the pronoun is female³.

3. Language and Thought: Gender and Sex

Within linguistic theory, there is a hypothesis named "Sapir-Whorf hypothesis"⁴ or "The linguistic relativity hypothesis" which is the view that the language a person speaks influences his thought and perception. In my thesis (Charoonroj, 1997), I studied the relationship between gender, a linguistic category, and sex through interpretation of linguistic form used by Hindi and German speakers. This paper is intended to be an easy-reading summary of my thesis, however, here, I would focus only on the result from Hindi.

³ There are also some exception in case of the noun "ship" and specific name of ship, with which we always use the pronoun "she". The pronoun does not denote female sex.

⁴ named after two American linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf.

At first we should understand how language influences thought. Language is medium of communication. We use language almost all the time when we are communicating, or even when we are thinking, it seems like we are talking and discussing with ourselves. Vocabularies and grammar in our native language force us to think in a certain way.

If your native language is, for example, Thai, the way you see the world is shaped by Thai vocabularies and grammar. Thai verbs have no different form for past tense, present tense, future tense, progressive aspect, perfective aspect, imperfective aspect and even infinitive form, while English verbs have different form for each tense and aspect. The Thai verb นอน 'sleep', therefore, can be translated into English as "to sleep", "sleeps", "sleeping", "slept", etc. Thai pronouns have no different form for different sex and number. The Thai third person pronoun เข้าว, therefore, can be translated into English as "he", "she", "it", or "they". The Thai sentence เข้าวนอน (3rd person pronoun- sleep) is well-formed and complete in meaning for Thai speakers, although the first word tells nothing about sex and number of subject pronoun, and the second word tells nothing about time of the action 'sleep'. In English we cannot form a well-formed sentence with the exactly the same meaning as เข้าวนอน. English grammar forces us to mark sex and number of subject by choosing a pronoun from "he", "she", "it", or "they", and forces us to mark tense and aspect of the verb by choosing one from "slept", "sleep", "is sleeping", "was sleeping", "will sleep", etc. To be able to do so, English speakers must pay attention to sex, number and time of entities and events almost all the time they see the world, otherwise, they cannot speak, and perhaps cannot think in their language. Thai speakers, in contrast, are not forced by their grammar to do so. Although Thai speakers, as human being, can perceive sex, number, and time, they can ignore them and neutralize sex, time and number in sentences they form⁵. We always use our native language in communicating and thinking, what our native language forces us to do, therefore, permanently shapes the way we see the world. (for further detail see Sapir: 1949, Whorf: 1956, Lucy: 1992)

Categorization of nouns into genders is a phenomenon found in some languages. According to Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, it might have some influence on their speakers' thought. If gender simply denoted sex in all cases, or, at least, in case of animate nouns, it would not be very interesting. We can guess that the speakers of languages with gender might pay greater attention, relative to the speakers of languages without gender, to the sex of living beings around them almost all the time, because their language force them to show sex of the living beings they are referring to by obligatory marking. On the contrary, if gender denoted nothing in all cases, in other words, is arbitrary, it was also not interesting.

⁵ Thai speakers can mark and get all these information by context or from optional word(s) in sentences.

In fact, gender in language is more complex than that. Sometimes, as mentioned above, gender denotes sex but sometimes it does not. That gender, in some case, does not denote sex may lessen its meaning of "sex" in the other case. In other words, it makes the semantic relationship between gender and sex become more distant in case of animate beings and also in general case. Masculine nouns, for example, may not refer to only male animate beings but also to female animate beings, because the relationship between masculine gender and being "male" are not very close.

Does this simply mean gender denote nothing even in case of animate beings? No, there are evidences to support that gender still denotes sex. There are large numbers of noun referring to animate being that exist in pair of masculine and feminine nouns. If gender did not denote sex, speakers might choose gender for the nouns freely, but the fact is that one gender of each pair is unmarked (default) and can be used in place of the other, while the other, the marked one, cannot be used in place of the unmarked one. The words for 'cat' in Hindi, for example, exist in pair of masculine noun *billā* (बिल्ला) 'male cat' and feminine noun *billī* (बिल्ली) 'female cat'. In this case the feminine one is unmarked. Therefore, the feminine word *billī* can refer to both 'female cat' and 'male cat'. The masculine noun, *billā*, the marked one, can refer to only 'male cat'. Masculine gender in case of the Hindi word 'cat' is, therefore, still closely related with male sex. Some pairs of noun have feminine as unmarked gender, while the others have masculine as unmarked gender. Another example is the word 'dog' in Hindi. The word *kuttā* (कुत्ता) 'dog' has masculine as unmarked gender. *kuttā* (कुत्ता) 'male dog' can be used as 'female dog', while its counterpart, *kuttī* (कुत्ती) 'female dog' cannot be used as 'male dog'. Feminine gender for the word 'dog' is closely related with female sex.

That is, in case of animate being which belongs to the sex that does not correspond to the default gender of the noun referring to it, Hindi speakers can choose to mark gender according to grammar (i.e. choose the unmark gender and ignore sex of the animate being) or mark sex according to reality (perhaps corresponding to gender, but perhaps not). For native speakers, it seems very simple. They learn it by heart and hardly think where to mark gender and where to mark sex, but for non-native speaker it is very difficult to do so. To study how Hindi speakers mark gender or sex, I designed an experiment as illustrated in the following parts.

4. Experiment

The experiment was conducted in Bangkok, Thailand. Ten native Hindi speakers were recruited to be my informants. The language used during the experiment was English, which is a language without gender, to make sure that the language we use would not effect the way the informants marked gender. I selected 17 basic Hindi nouns, which refer to certain humans and animals and created cartoon pictures depicting them to be used

as an experimental tool. The 17 nouns were translated into English as

'musician' (masculine)	'friend' (masculine)
'teacher' (masculine)	'artist' (masculine)
'doctor' (masculine)	'farmer' (masculine)
'child' (masculine)	'baby' (masculine)
'cat' (feminine)	'ant' (feminine)
'mouse' (masculine)	'fish' (feminine)
'elephant' (masculine)	'dog' (masculine)
'sheep' (masculine)	'rabbit' (masculine)
'crocodile' (masculine)	

The sex of the living being in each picture does not correspond to the gender of the noun referring to it⁶. For example, kuttā(कुत्ता) 'dog' is masculine noun, so the cartoon picture for this noun showed a female dog.

The pictures and English words⁷ were shown to the informants, who were asked to write down 3-sentence description for each picture. The pattern of these sentences had been prepared, so that they contain all elements needed in analysis. Through this, we can see whether the informants marked the words in their descriptions according to grammatical gender or sex of specified living being. Some examples of pictures and their descriptions are as following.



ANT

- 1) यह चिंटी पतला है |
(yah ciṃṭī patalā hai)
'This ant is thin.'
- 2) यह बूढ़ा चिंटी पढ़ रहा है |
(yah būṛhā ciṃṭī paṛh rahā hai)
'This old ant is reading.'
- 3) वह लंबा है |
(vah laṃbā hai)
'He is thin.'

⁶ Sex of living beings in each picture was clearly shown by dresses and/or ornaments they wore.

⁷ All the words could not be shown in Hindi, because all Hindi nouns tell speakers about their gender. I wanted to see how Hindi speakers mark gender, so I did not give any clue about gender to my informants.

The four elements, which are shown in bold letters, are used in the analysis; 1) is predicative adjective⁸, 2) are attributive adjective⁹ and modal verb, and 3) is adjective occurring with subject pronoun. I did not consider the meaning of verbs or adjectives used by the informants. I consider only the suffixes placed after those four elements. (Masculine suffix is -ā, feminine suffix is -ī) I

The noun *ciṃṭī* 'ant' is feminine, the picture, therefore, depicts a male ant. From the example above, however, the informant who described the picture marked all the 4 elements as masculine gender (with -ī suffix) according to the male sex of the ant in the picture.



CROCODILE

- 1) यह म रम **पतला** है |
(yah magaramacch **patalā** hai)
'this crocodile is **thin.**'
- 2) यह **बुरा** म रम **उल ल रहा** है |
(yah **burā** magaramacch ul **rahā** hai)
'This **bad** crocodile **is** grasping a flower.'
- 3) वह **लंबा** है |
(vah **laṃbā** hai)
'He is **tall.**'

The noun *magaramacch* 'crocodile' is masculine. The picture, in contrast, depicts female crocodile. In this example the informant marked all the 4 elements as masculine gender (with -ā suffix) according to the grammar.



ELEPHANT

- 1) यह हा **ी पतला** है |
(yah hāthī **patalā** hai)
'This elephant is **thin.**'
- 2) यह **पतला** हा **ी चल रहा** है |
(yah **patalā** hāthī cal **rahā** hai)
'This **thin** elephant **is** walking.'
- 3) वह **ोटी** है |
(vah **choṭī** hai)
'She is **small.**'

This example contains one sex marking and three gender markings. The noun *hāthī* 'elephant' is masculine. This informant

⁸ an adjective which occurs in verb phrases. Here, it is preceded by verb hai (है) 'is'

⁹ an adjective which occurs as modifier of the head of a noun phrase. Here, it precedes noun in noun phrase.

marked 3 elements in sentences 1) and 2) with masculine suffix -ā according to the grammar, but marked the element in 3) with feminine suffix ī according to the female sex of this elephant.

The descriptions from informants were scored by number of marker. For example, the number of marker used by all informants in describing all pictures in this experiment is 17 (pictures) X 4 (markers for each picture) X 10 (informants) = 680. All markers an informant used in this experiment is 17 (pictures) X 4 (markers for each picture) = 68. The number of marker for each picture is 4 (markers for each picture) X 10 (number of informants) = 40.

5. Gender or Sex?

From the data I got, I found that, in general, Hindi speakers use more gender marking than sex marking. From all 680 markers used by all informants in all pictures, only 228 (34%) are sex markers, while 452 (66%) are gender markers.

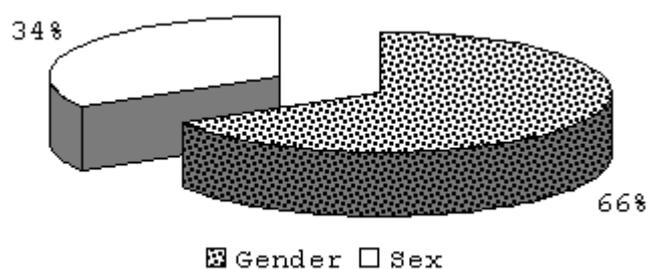


Figure 1

That gender marking is preferred to sex marking is also supported by preferences of each individual informant. Each speaker used 68 markers (for 17 pictures with four markers for each picture). Speakers who use 34 (50%) or more sex markers were considered as preferring to show sex of living beings they are referring to. The rest of the speakers were considered as prefer to follow their grammar and ignore to show sex of living beings. Seven from ten speakers preferred gender marking, and only three from ten preferred sex marking.



Figure 2

From the figure 2 above, it is remarkable that the ratios of gender marking to sex marking used by all informants other than the three ones who preferred sex marking are quite similar, that is, about 80:20. The such ratios from the rest three informants who preferred sex marking, by contrast, are quite varied and are different from the ratio from the majority of informant who preferred gender marking.

When I considered the markers used in describing each individual picture, I found that the majority of pictures, again, are described more according to gender than to sex. Each picture were described with 40 markers (each of ten informants used four markers per one picture). Among 17 pictures, only 3 pictures (picture of 'doctor', 'musician', and 'teacher') were described more with sex markers than with gender markers, another 3 picture (picture of 'friend', 'farmer', and 'sheep') are described equally with sex markers and gender markers. The rest 11 pictures were described more with gender markers than sex markers.

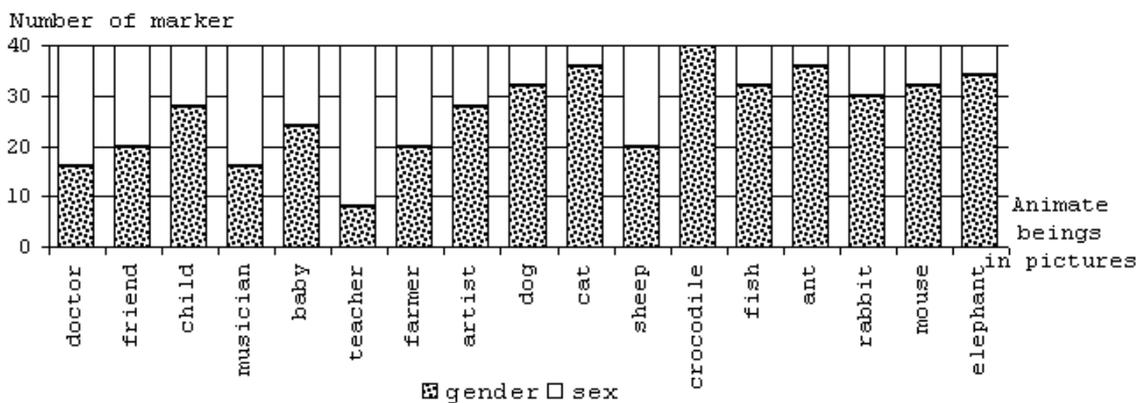


Figure 3

It is remarkable, again, that 5 from 6 pictures, which depict human beings, were described more with sex markers than gender markers, whereas 10 from 11 pictures, which depict animals, were described more with gender markers than with sex marker. Our exceptions, the pictures of 'child' and 'sheep' were described more with gender markers than sex markers and equally with gender markers and sex markers respectively.

If we ignore this small exception, we can infer that Hindi speakers prefer making sex of human beings to marking sex of animals. When they describe an animate being, they always follow their grammar, choose forms of adjective and verb according to gender of the noun referring to that animate being if it is an animal. If the animate being is human, it seems that they often, but not always, choose forms of adjective and verb according to sex of the human being. In my experiment, informant used gender markings and sex marking equally (50%, both 160 from 320) in case of human beings and used 81% (292 from 360) gender markings and 19 % (68 from 360)sex markings in case of animals as in figure 4 below.

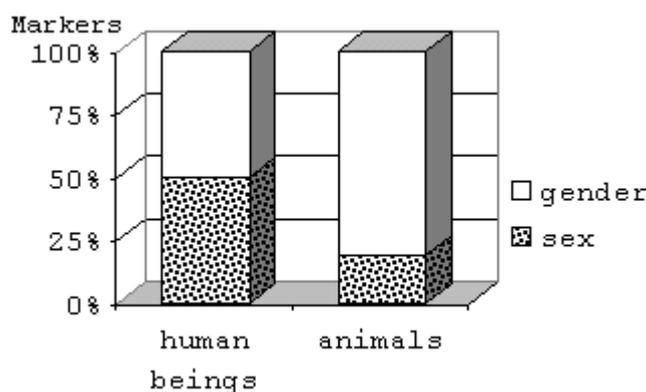


Figure 4

Why do Hindi speakers often use sex marking with human and seldom use with animal? The reason is, I think, that sex of human is much more important for us than sex of animal. For human beings, sex not only categorizes human beings into 2 groups according to biological characteristic, male and female, but also determines their social roles. Sex always determines our occupations, the way we dress, the way we speak etc. To interact properly, it is very important to know what sex is the person we are referring to, or talking with. Sex of animals, in contrast, is not so important. Animal lovers always talk to male animals in the same way they talk to boys and talk to female animals in the same way they talk to girls. We always name our pet according to its sex. However, all these things are optional. There is nothing seriously wrong, or nothing wrong at all, if we treat a male animal as a female one, or treat a female animal as a male one, whereas it may cause impoliteness or other problem if we treat a man as a woman, or treat a woman

as a man. This may force us to pay more attention to sex of human beings than sex of animals. I think this might be the same in any society, even among Hindi speakers. Linguistics form used by Hindi speakers, as a reflection of thought, clearly show that Hindi speakers mark sex of human beings more than sex of animals.

Conclusion

From the general result, it is clear that gender in grammar seems to be more important for Hindi speakers than sex in reality. When sex of an animate being does not correspond to gender of the noun referring to it, Hindi speaker prefers following their grammar by marking adjective and verb occurring with the noun according to the gender of the noun, not according to sex of the animate being. However, in referring to human beings, Hindi speakers seem to use gender marking and sex marking equally.

References

- Cambridge International Dictionary of English. 1996. Bath: Cambridge University Press.
- Charoonroj, J. 1997. The Relationship between Grammatical Gender and Sex in Hindi and German Speakers' World Views. Master's Thesis. Department of Linguistics, Graduate School, Chulalongkorn University.
- Corbett, G.G. 1991. An Approach to the Description of Gender Systems. In Arnold, D., et al. (ed.), Essays on Grammatical Theory and Universal Grammar. pp. 53-89. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dixon, R.M.W. 1986. Noun Classes and Noun Classification in Typological Perspective. In C. Craig (ed.) Noun Classes and Categorization, pp. 105-112. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Knappert, J. 1995. Indian Mythology. London: Diamond Books.
- Lakoff, G. 1986. Classifiers as a Reflection of Mind. In C. Craig (ed.) Noun Classes and Categorization, pp. 13-52. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Lucy, J. 1992. Language Diversity and Thought. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Roget's College Thesaurus. 1985. New York: Penguin Book USA.
- Sapir, E. 1949. Selected Writings of Edward Sapir in Language, Culture and Personality, in D.G. Mandelbaum (ed.) Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Whorf, B.L. 1956. Science and Linguistics, in J.B. Carrol (ed.) Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf. Cambridge: the M.I.T. Press.
- Zubin, D. A. 1992. Gender and Noun Classification. International Encyclopedia of Linguistics 2 :41-43.