

Test: Comprehension

5c, Tue, 1 May 2007

Name: _____

Sometimes it's hard to be a woman

Adapted from *The Guardian*, 8 November 2003, by Alexander Chancellor.

On the internet, there is a new website that claims to be able to tell you, with 80% accuracy, whether a piece of writing has been done by a man or by a woman. It uses a computer programme developed by a team of Israeli scientists after an exhaustive^o study of the differ-

very thorough; looking at every detail

5 ences between male and female use of language. One of their findings is that women are far more likely than men to use personal pronouns ("I", "you", "she", etc), whereas men prefer words that identify or determine nouns ("a", "the", "that") or that quantify them ("one", "two", "more"). According to one of the

10 authors of the project, this is because women are more comfortable thinking about people and relationships, whereas men prefer thinking about things. But the self-styled "stylometricians", in creating their gender-identifying algorithm, have been at pains^o to avoid the obvious.

to put a lot of effort into doing sth correctly

15 The algorithm pays no attention to the subject matter of a piece of writing, or to the occurrence in it of words that might suggest a greater interest by one sex or the other, such as "lipstick" or "bullets". Instead, it looks for little clues that both writers and readers would probably fail to notice, such as the number of personal pronouns used.

20 The website is called the Gender Genie, and its address is bookblog.net/gender/genie.html. To discover whether an article has been written by a man or by a woman, all you have to do is to paste it into a window on the website and then ask it for its opinion. Having done

25 this, I can confidently inform you that Julie Burchill is a man. In fact, according to the Gender Genie, all the supposedly^o female columnists of the Guardian are, in fact, men, with the one exception of Catherine Bennett, who just scraped through^o to womanhood with a female score of 1,788 against a male one of 1,774. The following all came out as definitely male: Zoe Williams Polly Toynbee, Madeleine Bunting, Suzanne Goldenberg, Marina Hyde, Jackie Ashley, Naomi Klein and Ros Coward. To those I have missed out^o, I

according to what is generally thought or believed but not known for certain to succeed in doing sth with difficulty

30 apologise, but I suspect they, too, would turn out to be men. But what of the male columnists? They, by contrast, were nearly all correctly identified as men. I submitted examples of the work of, among others, Simon Hoggart, Peter Preston, George Monbiot, Jonathan Freedland, David Aaronovitch, Mark Lawson and Matthew Norman. The Gender Genie agreed that they were all fellows. The

to fail to include sb

35 exceptions were Gary Younge (who, with a female score of 1,417 and a male score of 1,406, was almost perfectly androgynous^o) and, I am sorry to say, me. Actually, the Gender Genie cannot quite make up its mind about me. It seems to regard me as male, except when I am writing about my puppy, Polly, when effeminacy^o takes over. So my promise, given last week – that I would never again mention Polly in

40 this column – was obviously a sensible one (even though I seem to have just broken it).

having both male and female characteristics

a state of being very soft

Given the Gender Genie's hopeless record in identifying the sex of the Guardian's women columnists, it is tempting to write it off as a piece of rubbish. But it's not quite possible to do that, for its guesses
50 have proven accurate in 72% of cases, which may be less than the 80% claimed, but is quite impressive all the same.

Maybe it just shows that Guardian women do not conform to the stereotypical perception^o of the differences between male and female uses of language. Maybe it shows that this newspaper's women
55 columnists, unlike the women columnists on other publications, are not mainly interested in personal relationships. In *My Fair Lady*, Professor Higgins sings, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" If he had only met a few of the Guardian's female writers, he might have found that a woman can be just like a man when it comes to the
60 matters that interest her.

PS I have just made a final check, and am glad to tell you that the Genie is absolutely certain that the author of all the above is male.

*the way you notice things,
especially with the senses*

Vocabulary

1. Say in your own words (full sentences!) what the following words and phrases in the context of the article mean:

differences (4-5)

a clue (18)

an article (22)

opinion (24)

exception (27)

to apologise (33)

rubbish (49)

to be impressive (51)

2. Give an opposite word / an antonym for:

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able (1)

attention (15)

to fail (19)

personal (19)

hopeless (47)

certain (62)

3. Give a synonymous word / a synonym for:

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likely (6)

to discover (22)

nearly (34)

to make up one's mind
(41-2)

accurate (50)

final (61)

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