

## Test: Comprehension

5d, 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<sup>o</sup> study of the differ-  
5 ences between male and female use of language.

*very thorough; looking at every detail*

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<sup>o</sup> 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 pro-  
20 nouns used.

The website is called the Gender Genie, and its address is book-  
blog.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.

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

In fact, according to the Gender Genie, all the supposedly<sup>o</sup> female columnists of the Guardian are, in fact, men, with the one exception of Catherine Bennett, who just scraped through<sup>o</sup> to womanhood with a female score of 1,788 against a male one of 1,774. The follow-  
30 ing 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<sup>o</sup>, I apologise, but I suspect they, too, would turn out to be men.

*to fail to include sb*

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 exceptions were Gary Younge (who, with a female score of 1,417 and  
35 a male score of 1,406, was almost perfectly androgynous<sup>o</sup>) 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<sup>o</sup> 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° 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)	Differences means the way in which two people or things are not like each other.
a clue (18)	A clue is a fact or a piece of evidence (information) that helps you discover the answer to a problem.
an article (22)	An article is a piece of writing about a particular subject in a newspaper or magazine.
opinion (24)	The word "opinion" refers to somebody's feelings or thoughts about somebody or something, rather than the facts.
exception (27)	An exception is a thing that does not follow a rule.
to apologise (33)	To apologise means to say that you are sorry for doing something wrong or causing a problem.
rubbish (49)	The word "rubbish" describes things that you throw away because you no longer want or need them.
to be impressive (51)	If something or somebody is impressive they make you feel admiration, because they are very large, good, skilful, etc.

2. Give an opposite word / an antonym for:

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able (1)	unable
attention (15)	inattention
to fail (19)	to succeed; to pass (a test)
personal (19)	impersonal
hopeless (47)	hopeful
certain (62)	uncertain

3. Give a synonymous word / a synonym for:

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likely (6)	probable
to discover (22)	to find (out)
nearly (34)	almost
to make up one's mind (41-2)	to decide, to make a decision
accurate (50)	precise, exact
final (61)	last

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## Comprehension

In the following, make sure that you use **your own words** as far as possible. Use **formal language** (no contracted forms!) and formulate answers in **complete sentences!**

(50% substance, 50% language provided that content offers an answer to the question)

4. *How does the program find out whether a text has been written by a man or a woman?*

The program determines the sex of the author by examining the language of a text. Based on their findings that women are more likely than men to use words such as “I”, “you”, and “she” it counts the number of personal pronouns. Men seem to prefer words which identify, determine or quantify nouns. Therefore the program counts words like “the”, “a”, “two”, and “more” to determine a male writer.

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5. *What seems to be the psychological basis for this algorithm and what about the use of words such as “lipstick” or “bullets”?*

Psychologically, this algorithm is based on findings that women tend to think rather about people and relationships than things. In contrast, men focus on things rather than relationships.

The Gender Genie totally ignores the subject matter of a text and thus vocabulary such as “lipstick” or “bullets”.

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6. *What does the Gender Genie find out about the columnists of the Guardian newspaper?*

According to the Gender Genie all but one of the female Guardian columnists should be male. So the program mistakenly determines the authors of the columns as males. On the other hand, all of the male columnists were correctly identified with the exceptions of two—one being Chancellor himself.

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7. *How does the writer explain the results of Gender Genie with regard to the Guardian columnists?*

The writer suggests that the female columnists have been identified as males because they have established their own writing style which must be rather different from the traditional trends used in language by women. Moreover he argues that unlike other females, the female writers of the Guardian are not preoccupied with personal relationships in their writing.

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