



Kotimaisten kielten tutkimuskeskus  
Forskningscentralen för de inhemska språken  
Research Institute for the Languages of Finland

# **Man, woman or me? Conflicting identities as evidenced by cross-gender name changes**

Antti Leino <aleino@kotus.fi>

September 6, 2011



## **Sex and gender**

### **There are two**

- Biologically, there are women and men
  - everyone learns this as a child
- Social gender grounded in biological sex
  - legal gender
  - gender roles
  - presentation
- Names typically gender-specific
  - in Finland a legal requirement since 1945



## Sex and gender Medically not so simple

- Intersex conditions
  - not completely of one sex chromosomally / anatomically
  - several very different conditions
  - c. 1.7 % of live births
  - ambiguous genitals c. 0.05 %
- Transsexuality
  - mismatch of anatomical sex and mental gender
  - traditionally a psychiatric diagnosis, but this is changing
  - inborn, strong correlation with brain structures
  - c. 0.03–0.1 %



## Sex and gender

### Socially even less simple

- Gender  $\neq$  sex
  - gender equality: which differences are needed, which should be fought?
  - genderqueer: people consciously outside the binary
- Not all names are gender-specific
  - 2.2 % of Finnish names gender-neutral<sup>1</sup>
  - 57.9 % female, 39.9 % male

---

<sup>1</sup>Gender distribution in the Population Information System more even than 95/5%



## Names and identity

### Identity?

- The condition of being a single individual
  - I am the same person as the ICOS assistant secretary
- Who or what a person or thing is
  - I am an adjunct professor in Finnish
  - I am blond
- The condition of being identified in feeling, interest, etc.; identification *with*.
  - I am a Finn
  - I am a science fiction fan



## **Names and identity**

### **Names contribute**

- A proper name (supposedly) identifies the person uniquely
  - except most personal names are not unique
  - and a single person can use different names
- A name gives hints as to various characteristics
  - ethnical or cultural background
  - gender
- One's name is highly personal
  - part of self-identity
  - neurolinguistically special



## Names and identity

### So?

- Conflict between the gender of one's name and
  - one's gender identity
  - one's legal gender
  
  - different types of gender variance
  - changes in a name's gender distribution
- Is this common?
- What happens when one's name is in conflict with one's self-identity?



## **Cross-gender name changes**

### **Population data**

- Finnish Population Information System
  - set up in 1969
  - Finnish citizens and permanent residents
- Here, a subset
  - extracted in early 2002
  - current and oldest known names
  - current sex



## Cross-gender name changes

### Name changes

- Names in three categories
  - male / female: over 95 % of bearers of this sex
  - neutral: a minority of at least 5 %
- People in the Population Information System
  - with Finnish as their native language
  - grouped by their birth decade
- Changes where at least one name is in a different category
  - changing just one name is enough
  - definition of 'neutral' is not perfect



## Cross-gender name changes

### Number of changes

born	f → n	f → m	n → f	n → m	m → f	m → n
1900	10	12	12	19	11	4
1910	41	33	70	81	24	18
1920	66	43	148	141	34	31
1930	50	49	132	120	34	23
1940	64	30	83	65	17	23
1950	72	22	51	27	25	27
1960	80	38	32	15	37	23
1970	65	67	25	32	19	28
1980	40	10	26	34	7	25
1990	19	3	29	58	9	36



## Cross-gender name changes

### Complete gender changes

born	f → m	m → f	f → n	m → n
1900	2	3	1	0
1910	4	2	4	3
1920	5	2	5	1
1930	6	2	6	3
1940	7	11	9	2
1950	11	21	4	5
1960	25	30	8	3
1970	21	11	8	0
1980	2	1	2	6
1990	0	1	0	2
Total	83	84	47	25



## Cross-gender name changes

### Different types of changes

- Away from gender neutrality
  - especially with people born in the 1920's & 1930's
  - typically, dropping one name
    - in the early decades, neutral names like *Kaino* or *Vieno*
    - also, some mixed-gender names
    - in the 1960's, *Jani* became male
    - in the 1970's, *Mirka* became female



## Cross-gender name changes

### Different types of changes

- Towards gender neutrality
  - mostly formal adoption of nicknames
    - hypocoristic forms, e.g. *Ami* < *Aimo* / *Amalia*
  - sometimes 'real' gender change
    - neutral names can be freely adopted
    - gender neutrality can be the real goal
- Gender change
  - most common with those born in the 60's and 70's
    - older groups had it harder
    - younger mostly still minors (data from 2002!)
  - first cases already in the oldest group



## Feelings and considerations Supplementary data

- Survey during May–July 2011
  - web questionnaire
  - announced at various trans support forums<sup>2</sup>
  - 68 answers (37 male, 19 female, 18 other)
- Questions regarding
  - feelings towards one's old name
  - criteria for choosing the new one
- Possibly interviews as a next step

---

<sup>2</sup>thanks to the Trans Support Centre in Helsinki, and others who published the link



## Feelings and considerations

### Old name

- Three questions
  - did the old name feel like your own
  - was it easy to let go of it
  - did it feel sad to let go
- Scale: 1 = not at all – 5 = very much

	median	average	variance
felt like own	1	2.2	2.3
easy to let go	5	4.2	1.7
sad to let go	1	1.9	1.6

- In other words, mostly a great desire to change (as expected)



## Feelings and considerations

### Criteria for new name

- Eight criteria: the name should
  - be beautiful
  - feel like one's own
  - attract attention
  - not attract attention
  - have the correct gender
  - not have the wrong gender
  - be right for the age group
  - resemble the old one
  - be the one the parents would have given
- Scale: 1 = didn't matter – 4 = very important



## Feelings and considerations

### Criteria for new name

	median	average	variance
beauty	2	2.5	0.8
own	4	3.7	0.3
attention	1	1.3	0.3
no attention	2	2.0	0.8
right gender	4	3.6	0.3
not wrong gender	4	3.4	0.9
age	2	1.9	0.8
similar to old parents	1	1.8	0.9
	1	1.6	0.6

- Again, no big surprises: most important that the name
  - feels like one's own
  - is the right gender and not the wrong



## Feelings and considerations

### Notable correlations

- Old name felt like one's own vs.
  - age: 0.20
  - easy to drop it: -0.57
  - sad to drop it: 0.41
  - new resembles it : 0.46
  - new has the right gender: -0.37
- Gender: being female vs.
  - age: 0.50
  - new name should be beautiful: 0.29
  - new name should feel one's own: -0.22



## Summary

- No big surprises
  - Gender congruence appears important
    - cissexuals change away from cross-gender names
    - transsexuals see the right gender / absence of the wrong gender as very important
  - The more attached one is to old name the harder it is to change it
    - some correlation with age, too
  - Beauty is more important to women than men
- **Gender is so important an aspect of identity that a wrongly gendered name does not feel one's own**



# Thank you Questions?

