

# How do you tell the difference between men and women?

## Peter Trudgill



email: [newsdesk@archant.co.uk](mailto:newsdesk@archant.co.uk)

I was recently reading Donna Tartt's novel *The Goldfinch*. I can't have been reading it very carefully, because it took me a couple of chapters before I realised that the narrator – the "I" – was a man and not a woman.

If the book had been written in Polish – not that I can actually read Polish – I would have twigged much sooner. The first phrase in the whole book is "While I was...". In Polish, a female narrator would have written "I was" as *byłam*, while a man would have written *byłem*. In Polish, past-tense verbs – even for first-person "I" forms – differ according to whether they refer to males or females.

In English we mark the gender difference for third-person pronouns – he is for males and she for females. How else, you might ask, could it possibly be? But it doesn't have to be like that. In Finnish, there's no distinction at all between he and she – "se" means both. The same is true of Turkish, where the word for s/he is "o".

How do they manage? How do people understand what a Finnish speaker means? Well, maybe French-speaking people would like to know how we manage without their two different words for they – "ils" for males, "elles" for females. And



■ Polish speakers use different past-tense verbs according to whether they refer to males or females. This picture shows a demonstration taking place in Warsaw, the capital of Poland.

Spanish speakers might like to know how English speakers manage without two different words for plural you: they have "vosotros" (male) and "vosotras" (female). They even have different words for we – "nosotros" and "nosotras" – and they probably find it rather odd that we don't.

And Polish speakers would certainly want to know how we can tell what sex a fictional first-person narrator is supposed to be (clearly, some of us can't!).

But to go back to the question: if a Finnish speaker says "se", how do listeners know if they're talking about a man or

a woman? Well, sometimes they don't. But usually it's rather obvious, because pronouns like he, she and they refer to people who've already been mentioned, or whose identity is clear.

When my Norwich schoolmates and I had summer jobs fruit-picking out in the country, we sometimes noticed how local women, arriving first thing in the morning, might address their fellow villagers by saying things like: "Know what he say to me last night?"

They didn't have to specify who "he" was. Even we could work that out.