Briefing 5 – Gender in Latin

1. Gender

Like many other languages, including English, Latin has a well developed sense of gender, which is categorised into three groups: Masculine, Feminine and Neuter. For nouns, Masculine and Feminine are largely aligned with biological gender (sex), but not completely:

- Identified men and women *are* recognised as masculine and feminine respectively;
- But **infans** (*infant* or *child*) is neuter in gender, much as we would talk in English as a baby on non-specific sex as *it*. (It is also in German – *das Kind,* as is a young girl *das mädchen*).
- Some animal nouns have a fixed gender, e.g. **fēlēs** *cat* (fem), **būbō** *eagle owl* (masc), **strix** *screech owl* (fem) and **animal** *animal (neut)*
- Some animals have a gender that is masc/fem depending on whether the sex is known (default masculine), e.g. **canis** *dog* (masc or fem)
- Animals and humans are sometimes represented by nouns that are either 1ˢᵗ declension (fem) or 2ⁿᵈ declension (masc), e.g. **fīlius** or **fīlia** *son* or *daughter* (masc or fem), **servus** or **serva** (*slave* or *slave-girl*) masc or fem, **equus** or **equa** *horse* or *mare* (male/female or female). (There is a separate word for a stallion, **cēlō**, masc.) The 2ⁿᵈ declension form is used when the sex is unknown or unimportant.

All nouns have a gender , and this is not always obvious from the meaning, although some rules exist

2. Declensions and gender

Most 1ˢᵗ and 5ᵗʰ declension nouns are female. However:

- Some proper nouns (names of people or places) are 1ˢᵗ decl., e.g. Sulla, Catilina;
- Common masc 1ˢᵗ decl nouns are **nauta** *sailor* (masc), **agricola** *farmer* (masc);
- In the 5ᵗʰ declension, **diēs** *day* **meridiēs** *midday* are male (**diēs** as a special day is female).

Nearly all 2ⁿᵈ declension nouns with nominative ending in **-us** are male. All 2ⁿᵈ declension nouns with nominative ending in **-r** are male. However, **humus** *ground,* **populus** *poplar tree* and a few others are fem. All 2ⁿᵈ declension nouns with nominative ending in **-um** are neuter.

Almost all 4ᵗʰ declension nouns with nominative ending in **-us** are male; exceptions include: **manus** *a hand*, **porticus** a porch. All 4ᵗʰ declension nouns with nominative ending in **-u** are neuter.

Verbal infinitives are undeclinable nouns; they and other undeclinable nouns e.g. **nefās** *a wrong* are taken as neuter

3. Neuter nouns

All neuter nouns (2ⁿᵈ, 3ʳᵈ, 4ᵗʰ declensions) have the same nominative, vocative and accusative cases, in singular and plural.

All neuter nouns (2ⁿᵈ, 3ʳᵈ, 4ᵗʰ declensions) end in **-a** for nominative, vocative and accusative plural.

4. Agreement of pronouns and adjectives

When a pronoun or adjective represents or describes any noun, it must agree with the gender of the noun, that is, use the ending appropriate to the gender of the noun, independent of the declension of the noun.

When there is more than one noun involved, and one is masculine, the combined gender is taken as masculine.

In many cases, the pronoun or verb is the only means of identifying the gender of the noun: for example, **haec canis** would mean *this* (female) *dog*.

A pronoun should be translated into English according to English gender rules.

- **magna strix est** – *it is a large owl* not *she is a large owl* (assuming that you did not know the owl's sex)
- **hoc infans puella est et pulchrum est** – *this* (neut) *child* (neut) *is a girl* (fem) *and she is beautiful* (pulchrum is neuter, agreeing with original noun **infans**)

5. Other Latin words

All **particles** (conjunctions, adverbs, prepositions) do not decline at all.

Verb forms other than prepositions do not decline and therefore do not change at all with gender, <u>unless</u> they include a participle. For example:

- **fēlēs timet būbōnem et būbō timet fēlem** puella – *The cat fears the owl and the owl fears the cat*
- **fēlēs a būbōne visa est et būbō a fēlem vīsus est** – *The cat was seen by the owl and the owl was seen by the cat* (**visa est** and **vīsus est** are 3rd person sing of the past perfect passive tense)
- **puellae locūtae sunt** – The girls spoke (**loquor, loquī, locutus sum** – *I speak* – deponent verb)