Language matters. It defines the limits of our imagination. You don’t have to be a gender theorist to understand that if we have only two ways of referring to human beings – “he” or “she” – we will grow up thinking of people as divisible into those two categories and nothing more. So it is significant that, in late August, OxfordDictionaries.com – an online resource created by the publishers of the Oxford English Dictionary – added an entry for the gender-neutral title “Mx”.

This is how it’s defined: “a title used before a person’s surname or full name by those who wish to avoid specifying their gender or by those who prefer not to identify themselves as male or female”. Earlier this year, the OED added to its lexicon the word “cisgender”, meaning “not transsexual”. That matters, too, because without a word for it, you were either “trans” or you were “normal”.

Sweden has also recently added the gender-neutral pronoun “hen” to its dictionary. Pronouns such as “xe” and “they” (used to refer to a singular subject) are already in use in English as alternatives to “he” and “she”. Many conservatives and professional pedants are furious – it’s fussy, it’s far too politically correct and how are you supposed to pronounce “Mx”, anyway? So whose side should we be on?

By some accident of serendipity, the day I found out about all of this was also the day I met the feminist linguist Dale Spender. At 71, she is small and delicate and dangerous. She was dressed from head to toe in purple: a lilac handbag, bright violet shoes, an elegant silk dress in swirls of fuchsia and lavender. The activist and author of Man Made Language could be the embodiment of Jenny Joseph’s poem “Warning” (“When I am an old woman I shall wear purple . . .”) but Spender has worn the colour every day for decades, in honour of the suffragettes.

Swallowing my hero worship together with a lukewarm coffee, backstage at a writer’s festival, I asked Spender what she thought, as someone who has long pioneered the politics of women’s language, about the recent push towards a more gender-neutral vocabulary.

“It’s the same argument we had in the 1970s, when we started using ‘Ms’, ” Spender told me. The title “Ms” was promoted by feminists and widely adopted as an alternative to “Mrs” or “Miss” – the idea being that there was more to a woman’s life than her marital status. “So many of us were getting divorced and leaving bad marriages and we didn’t know how to refer to ourselves,” Spender said. “I wasn’t a ‘Miss’ any more but I definitely wasn’t a ‘Mrs’. They said the same thing back then – that ‘Ms’ was clumsy, that people didn’t know how to pronounce it. But how about ‘Mrs’ or ‘Mr’? They’re hardly obvious!”

Spender reminded me that the Oxford English Dictionary has always been run by men and that mainstream lexicography had a male bias – it wasn’t until 1976 that “lesbian” got an entry in what the feminist Mary Daly dubbed the “dick-tionary”. Spender is dismayed to see this kind of linguistic activism falling out of fashion – “We used to spend days coming up with new words for concepts that needed to be talked about” – and she was delighted that internet culture had brought it back with gusto.

“I love the word ‘mansplaining’,” Spender said. “It’s perfect. You know instantly what it means. And ‘manspreading’, ‘materrupting’ – did you know that in mixed-gender conversations, 98 per cent of interruptions are by men?”

There is nothing new about activists working to move language forward to create cultural change but it is easy to underestimate the effects of that change over time. Listening to Spender talk about the importance of “Ms” reminded me how radical a proposition it once was for women to claim their own names and titles after marriage. My mother retained what is still referred to as her “maiden” surname, Penny, and always used “Ms”. I remember asking as a child why she wasn’t a “Miss” or a “Mrs” and being told that she didn’t want the first thing people knew about her to be whether or not she was married. That seemed fair enough.

Why would a woman want to go around with a label on them that described who they belonged to – like a dog tag – when men didn’t have to? That didn’t seem fair.

Also, Penny was a much nicer surname and I made a note to adopt it myself when I was older.

Now that I’m the age my mother was when she had me, I am beginning to understand what an impression that simple, powerful statement made. I always understood that Mum was her own person first and a wife second and that I could be, too. My relationships with men didn’t have to be the core of my identity. The feminists of the 1970s and 1980s had to fight to make that possible but I grew up with that assumption, partly because of a simple act of linguistic activism. Perhaps the generation being born today will grow up with different assumptions: not just that women should be equal to men but that gender might not be the most important part of your identity. That’s an uncomfortable idea for a great many people, and that discomfort is at the heart of the predictable pedantry over “Mx”, “xe” and “they”.

We can only become what we can imagine and we can only imagine what we can articulate. That’s why language matters to our lives; that’s why little changes in grammar and vocabulary can affect the entire architecture of our political imagination. Today, signing “Mx” on an application form or an electricity bill is an act of linguistic rebellion but, tomorrow, it could be ordinary.

And that is how you change the world. Laurie Penny is a contributing editor of the New Statesman.