When We Speak of Plants

Right now, the language we use is under a microscope. Through such a lens, we can see the limitations of the English language when considering pronoun use. As language evolves and society progresses, we are finding the means to express what we want to say with more accuracy when it comes to concepts such as gender. Yet the language we use to refer to plants is still suffering from stunted growth.

In English, we have four genders to refer to nouns, with plants being examples of neuter nouns. This language takes into account the neutral gender of objects, in contrast with Romance languages, such as Spanish or Italian, where genders are attributed to objects. Referring to plants with the pronoun ‘it’ indicates that plants are objects, no different from a wooden table or a plastic spoon. But are plants merely objects?

In many indigenous languages, the role of animacy is also considered when referring to nouns, allowing an expression for the degree that the referent of the noun is sentient or alive. In the case of plants, this means it is acknowledged that plants are actually alive: they grow, they reproduce, and they feed from the sun and the earth. The Potawatomi are a Native American people who use a linguistic structure of animacy that acknowledges plants for being alive, in a way that we know but cannot express in the English language.

So, what happens when we fail to have the words to express the role of plants in our lives? When objectifying living beings, it gives way to disrespect and degradation. When we look at the treatment of nature by humans today, we can see the impact of this language as it distances and separates us from plant life. In fact, plants are part of our very being, just as much as the stars in the sky.

This failure of language means that some of us might struggle with this concept of connectedness; that we are intrinsically linked to the rest of the universe, and that our roots are firmly in the soil. It is plants which nurture and sustain us, but this does not mean we must exploit nature as a resource. The key here is reciprocity. In some Native languages, Robin Wall Kimmerer points out, the word ‘plant’ translates literally as ‘those who take care of us’. This speaks to the importance of giving back to the earth.

In searching for a viable alternative pronoun to incorporate into the English language, Kimmerer has suggested ‘kin’ from ‘ki’, derived from her native Anishinaabe language. The links she makes to sounds and language are fascinating; the word ‘kin’ epitomising the idea that living things are related to one another, and with an Indo-European root meaning ‘to give birth to’.

It is plants and nature that give us life, that give us the oxygen we need to breathe, that give us the food that fuels us. The earth deserves for us to be mindful of the magnitude of this gift. With our planet estimated at being 4.543 billion years old, it is vital for us to understand our place in its history and to protect its future. For if it wasn’t for our kin – our plants – we would not be alive today.