



What's in a **Name?** A Lot, Actually.

Some widely used legacy terms for audio devices, which rely on metaphor to identify their function, are linguistic remnants of systems of oppression. Eliminating them would represent an important step toward a more inclusive industry.

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any of the technical terms we use today derive their names from long-antiquated cultural ideas. Consider “movie,” for example, a term dating to the earliest days of cinema, when simply seeing pictures that seemed to move was a novel concept. The technology of sound—which persists in deploying “male” and “female” to describe connectors, and “master” and “slave” for clocking systems—is no exception. Unlike movie, which still (if simplistically) provides a literal description of the underlying object, these sound terms are abstracted from their functions, relying on outdated metaphors as descriptors. It’s time for our industry to update its language.

The terminologies that we use to designate objects in our technical professions often have long and rich histories. Sometimes, these names are the result of product iteration, starting with a given name that evolves as the product itself evolves.

This connector was originally invented by James Cannon, and for a while, it was referred to colloquially as a Cannon connector (a term still heard, though rarely, in film/TV). Cannon marketed the “X” series. Users requested a latching mechanism, and the “X” connector was born (“X” for the “female” end of the connector). In 1960, a highly resilient synthetic rubber (resilience being the tendency of the rubber to once shaped to hold its shape well) was added to the connector, which became known as “XR,” a name that is still familiar to any audio professional today.

That same XLR connector is now part of an ongoing debate within the audio industry, which is centered on the rationalization of terminology for audio devices. Audio devices are often named with rational, descriptive terms (at least, as often as possible), but there remain some legacy terms widely used throughout the industry that rely on metaphor to identify their function. Unfortunately, some of these terms bespeak a legacy of social structures that have no place in an audio industry that needs to find ways to become more inclusive to participants outside its traditionally male-dominated professional base. (According to the

Audio Engineering Society, in 2016 professional membership was 7 percent female.)

“Gendering” Connectors

While the XLR itself may have derived its

name from the “X” which was a branding on function), a typical XLR connector—or any typical audio connector—is often described in terms of “male” and “female.” The exact insertion being the “female.” The exact

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Why is “gendering” a connector a problem? Two reasons—one socio-political and the other linguistic:

- Socio-politically, the use of traditional, cisgender, heteronormative terms to describe cable connections is redolent of the traditionally male-dominated history of the audio business. These terms impart stereotypes and assumptions onto a totally non-sexual relationship: signal interconnection in an audio system. If we, as an industry, want to create an inclusive environment, one that encourages people of all identities to join us, we should be at least a little concerned at the use of this language. These problems exist in the video

world, in telecommunications, in IT, and elsewhere.

- Linguistically, the use of gendered terms for audio connectors is flawed because it is metaphorical, and not literally descriptive. As audio and other tech-

complex, using terms that suggest function via metaphor is simply less effective than using terms that directly describe the function of the devices in question. The use of gendered terms for audio connectors is an area in which our industry (and other industries using similar, identical terms) can improve. A change in preferred terms can not only clarify our understanding of the function of the devices, but remove an archaic linguistic artifact of male domination.

Racism in Clocking

The second naming convention to examine is the convention for naming clocking settings in digital audio systems. All digital audio systems with multiple components need to be synchronized to a single sample rate, or errors will occur. These errors—called jitter—can cause clicks, pops, and audio dropouts to be heard or recorded.

In order to design digital audio systems are designed to serve as the main clock source, and that clock source is connected to all other digital

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