THE CASE OF THE UNMARKED GENDER IN LOANWORDS

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1. Introduction

In this paper I address the issue of how gender is assigned to English loan nouns borrowed by the Scandinavian languages, and in particular, the status of one of the postulated factors, the so-called unmarked gender. All of the languages in question have natural gender, reflected in the use of personal pronouns, as in the E *he, she, it* referring to humans, domestic animals and some inanimates, like the classic *ship*. However, English lacks grammatical gender, i.e. gender agreement in modifying adjectives and determiners. Therefore, when a noun is borrowed from English into a language observing grammatical gender, it has to be assigned to one of the genders in order to function in the system.

I will set the stage by introducing the contact situation, including a brief description of gender in the languages, and an overview of previous research in the field, with particular reference to the Scandinavian languages. In this part I will review some of the commonly given mechanisms that assign gender to native nouns and loanwords. Then I will focus on the unmarked gender, as one of such factors: I will outline the assumptions behind it, show how the factor has been applied, and finally discuss its descriptive and explanatory value.[1]

2. The category of gender in the languages

Some of the Scandinavian languages have undergone considerable mergers in the inflectional paradigms, and it is on the basis of the extent of such changes that we commonly divide the languages into two branches: the mainland lan-

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[1] The concept of 'explanatory value' brings to mind Lass (this issue).

guages (Danish, Swedish and Norwegian) and the insular languages (Icelandic and Faroese). The simplifications went furthest in the first group: Swedish and Danish have now a two-gender system, of common gender, formed through the merger of masculine and feminine, and neuter gender. In Norwegian we find m. and f. genders in both of the two varieties of Norwegian, Bokmål and Nynorsk. Still, in the case of Bokmål, the weak position of f. gender agreement suggests that we are again dealing with a two-gender system.[2] We find a more complex situation in the outlying areas, i.e. Iceland, the Faroe Islands, as well as a number of local dialects in Sweden and Norway; the insular dialects, Icelandic and Faroese, with greater stability in their morphology, have preserved the full three-gender system of m., f. and n.

3. Previous research on gender assignment

There has been a considerable amount of research on gender and gender assignment in the Germanic languages, including the Scandinavian group. Carried within a structural framework, they aimed at establishing factors/principles responsible for the assignment of gender to native nouns and loanwords.[3] These processes constitute the gender assignment system of the borrowing language: depending on the productivity of formal vs. semantic processes, we distinguish between formal and semantic mechanisms, with formal systems further divided into phonological and morphological (Corbett 1991). A possible question here is whether such mechanisms are at all applicable; unfavourable criticism has been provided *inter alia* by Jespersen (1924),[4] Bloomfield (1933),[5] and Møller (1933).[6] It seems however that there is enough evidence to the contrary, as it is demonstrated by the high consistency in gender assignment found among monolingual speakers.

Two general methodological points can be made here. First, as Corbett (1991) noted, loans have often been treated in isolation: such studies concentrated on identifying factors which would only assign gender to loanwords, instead of both loan and native nouns.[7] However, loanwords are subjected to the same processes as the native lexicon; in this way an identification of such factors contributes towards an account of productive processes in the borrowing language. In addition, a common explanatory device, to quote from Poplack et al. (1982), is for all comparable loans to "be masculine and the rest feminine, except when certain features are present, when the choice will be reversed, except for certain exceptions to these exceptions, and so on."[8] Rather than adopt such a deterministic framework, they rightly insist on a variationist approach, where gender assignment consists in "... the simultaneous contributions of a series of quantitative constraints on the assignment of gender ... which may all be active at the time of introduction of the loanword" (1982: 1).[9]

4. Gender assignment factors

I will now review these processes, beginning with semantic factors such as natural gender, and an association with a semantic class or a synonym in the borrowing language.[10]

4.1. Semantic assignment

a) Natural gender

As much as any formal features may influence the choice of gender, in all languages there is what Corbett (1991) describes as a semantic core to the assignment system. This semantic core results in the strong tendency for animate nouns to be assigned a non-n. gender (m. vs. f., or c.) according to the physiological sex. In Icelandic, which distinguishes between m. and f., m. gender is often extended to nouns denoting feminines. It seems to be a knockout factor across Scandinavian, overriding any other conditioning factor such as phonological shape, e.g.,

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[2] For example no determiners distinguish between m. and f. (cf. also Graedler 1996).

[3] For an overview of arguments in this discussion, cf. Corbett (1991), Poplack et al. (1983) and Welna (1976), as well as the studies referred to fn. 10.

[4] Jespersen claims that "it is certainly impossible to find any simple governing principle in this chaos", but later admits the presence of "... some semantic criteria ... in words of related meaning" (1924: 228-229).

[5] "There seems to be no practical criterion by which the gender of a noun in German, French or Latin could be determined" (Bloomfield 1933: 280).

[6] "... [E]s wäre aber völlig verfehlt, die Rolle der unberechenbaren Momente leugnen zu wollen. Diese nach keinen Gesetzen wirkenden Momente sind zu jeder Zeit und in jeder Sprache tätig" (1933: 61).

[7] Cf., however, Arndt (1970: 245-246).

[8] A similar unfortunate argumentation is found in Clausing (1986), a study of borrowings in American German and American Icelandic. It consists in an explanatory model, where the first factor to apply is natural gender, with the resulting residue covered in turn by an association with a congener, a morphological rule, the n. tendency and finally equivalency. However, this can only be accomplished after having partially levelled out the exceptions and nouns showing vacillation between genders and, finally, having ignored conflicting influences, which all strongly undermines its relevance.

[9] Another recent approach is that of Natural Morphology: following Wurzel (1989), the gender assignment mechanisms are interpreted in terms of universal and language-specific preferences. An identification of system-independent preferences -- occurring cross-linguistically -- and system-dependent preferences -- measured for a given borrowing language -- makes it possible to account not only for synchronic, but also diachronic aspects of gender assignment, which is interesting in the view of the loss of grammatical gender in English, and the merger of m. and f. genders in some Scandinavian languages.

[10] The following discussion is based on studies of various contact situations, both in Europe and in the immigrant communities in the United States and Canada, beginning with such early studies as Dodge (1898), Wilson (1898) and Flom (1903/1905). For relatively recent accounts of gender assignment in particular Scandinavian languages, cf. Sørensen (1973), Hansen (1995), Edlund – Hene (1992), Graedler (1996), Clausing (1986), and Clausén (1978). More detailed studies are available for German, cf. Gregor (1983) and Köpcke – Zubin (1984), and for Polish, cf. Fisiak (1975).

(1)   Da., Sw. *yuppie*, Nw. *yippie* 'yuppie' c.; Ic. *gœi* 'guy' m.

Exceptional assignments to the n. or f. gender include nouns with derogatory connotations, nouns with sex-neutral reference, and finally nouns with a pre-served English plural ending,[11] e.g.,

(2)   Da., Sw., Nw. *baby*, Ic. *beibí* 'baby' n.
       Sw. *skinhead* 'skinhead' n.; Ic. *blók* 'bloke' f., *frik* 'freak' f., Ic. *pönk* 'punk' n.

b) Semantic class

Another semantic principle is based on the association of an animate non-per-sonal or inanimate loanword with a single 'cover term' or a group of nouns forming a semantic class. Examples in (3) are given together with the accom-panying cover terms (cf. Sørensen 1973, Graedler 1996):

(3)   a. articles of dress, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. *blazer, cardigan* (Nw. *kardigan*), *jersey* (also n.) c.; native terms: Da. *beklœdning,* Sw. *beklädnad,* Nw. *bekledning* 'clothing' c.
       b. styles of music and dance, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. beat, jazz, soul c.; native terms: Da., Sw. musik, Nw. musikk 'music', Da., Sw.. Nw dans 'dance' c.
       c. games and sports, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. *bridge, cricket, golf, sport* c.; native terms: Da. *idrœt,* Sw. *idrott,* Nw. *idrett* 'sport'; Da. *leg,* Sw. *lek,* Nw. *leik/lek* 'game' c.
       d. beverages, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. *brandy, drink, tonic, whisky* c.; native terms: Da. *drik,* Sw. *dryck,* Nw. *drikk* 'drink' c.
       e. animals, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. *spaniel, pointer, terrier* c.; native terms: Da., Sw., Nw. *hund* 'dog' c.
       f. vehicles, e.g. Da., Sw., Nw. *caravan, jeep, pickup, truck* c.; nativ‾ terms: Da., Sw., Nw. *bil* 'car' c.
       g. boats, e.g. Da. *brig,* Sw., Nw. *brigg,* Da., Nw. *skonnert,* Sw. *skonert,* Da., Sw., Nw. *yacht* c.; native terms: Da. *båd,* Sw., Nw. *båt* 'boat' c.

(c) Semantic analogy

Finally, a borrowed noun can be assigned the gender of a semantically equivalent noun in the borrowing language. This factor was likened by Corbett (1991) to concept association which operates among native nouns. In her extensive study of English loans in Norwegian, Graedler (1996) shows that among loans with

a c. gender synonym, 74% are assigned c. gender with 26% assigned n. gender. The data for nouns with a n. gender is slightly less promising: c. gender is assigned to 36%, with n. to 64%.

(4)   Da., Sw., Nw. *derby* n.; Da., Nw. *race* (Da. also *rœs*) n. < Da. *vœddeløb,* Sw. *lopp,* Nw. *løp* 'race' n.
       Da. *joke* c. < *vittighed* 'joke' c. vs. Sw. *joke,* Ic. *djók* n. < Sw. *skämt,* Ic. *grin* 'joke' n.
       Da., Nw. *sound* c. < Da., Nw. *lyd* 'sound' c. vs. Sw. *sound* n. < *ljud* 'sound' n.

4.2. Formal assignment

4.2.1. Phonological assignment

Let's turn now to the formal side of the mechanism. A formal assignment rule would operate on the basis of phonological or morphological analogy with a native morpheme. Such associations can be made with a homophone, a termi-nation and a suffix.[12] In addition, I will comment on gender assignment on the analogy of a larger group of nouns, such as adverbal nouns.

a) Homophony

A phonological association with the gender of a homophone in the borrowing language can be likened to folk etymology, since the degree of similarity varies and is hard to establish. Some of the most interesting examples are provided here by cognates or earlier borrowings. To use again the data in Graedler (1996), among nouns with a Norwegian c. gender cognate 90.5% are c., and 9.5% n. A similar proportion applies to nouns with a n. gender cognate: 5% are c. and 95% n.

(5)   Da., Sw., Nw. *back* c. < Da. *bag,* Sw., Nw. *bak* 'back' c.
       Sw., Nw. *bush* c. < Sw. *buske,* Nw. *busk* 'bush' c.
       Da., Sw., Nw. *cape* c. < Da., Nw. *kappe,* Sw. *kappa* 'cape' c.
       Ic. *geim* 'game' n. < *gaman* 'fun' n.
       Da. *mart* 'market' n. < *marked* 'market' n. (Sørensen 1973: 50)
       Da. *kiks* 'cake' c. < Da. *kage* 'cake' c.; Ic. *cake* f. < *kaka* f.

b) Termination

A formal association can also operate on the basis of rhyme analogy between the final segments of the loan and those of a corresponding native noun. Such rhyme

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[11] Cf. Fisiak (1961) and Sørensen (1973) for accounts of these 'keps formations', or 'double-plurals'.

[12] Weina (1973: 30) introduces this useful distinction for the final element which is neither an ending nor a suffix, and points to examples of obvious errors due to confusion between the three.

analogy, according to Haugen (1969), can exist solely on phonetic grounds, thus presenting a problem obviously rather difficult to investigate, as in (6), e.g.,

(6) Am.Nw. *kru* 'crew' f. < *bru* 'bridge', *tru* 'faith', *ku* 'cow' f.
     Am.Nw. *står* 'store' n. < *hår* 'hair', *kår* 'conditions', *lår* 'thigh', *sår* 'injury' n. (Haugen 1969: 444-445)

A semantic association can however be seen in the case of compounds, in what is a variation of the previous factor, e.g.,

(7) Da., Sw., Nw. *copyright* c. < Da. *ret,* Sw. *rätt,* Nw. *rett* 'right' c.
     Da., Sw., Nw. *weekend* c. < Da., Nw. *ende,* Sw. *ända* 'end' c.

4.2.2. Morphological assignment

a) Suffix

Turning to morphological assignment, a clearly morphological association can be made between the suffix added to the stem of a loanword and a host suffix marked for a certain gender. As the data in Graedler (1996) shows, in the case of some suffixes there is a full correlation between the suffix and its gender, suggesting a strong influence on the assigned gender, e.g.,

(8)

Nw. suffixes	c. gender	n. gender
-*ing*	127	–
-*or*	28	–
-*tion, -sion, -ion*	28	–
-*ance, -ence*	10	–
-*er, (-ert, -ers)*	160	34
-*ment*	5	18
-*tel*	1	1

b) Grammatical analogy

Another more general morphological association has been postulated for a loan noun and a class of nouns. On the basis of what Aron (1930) first referred to as 'grammatical analogy', English monosyllabic nouns whose form is identical with verbal stems in the borrowing language are assigned n. in Danish and Norwegian, e.g.,

(9) Da. *bluff, check* (but c. as in *en check på 500 kr* 'a check for 500 krones'), *fix, flop, look, stress* (also c.), *trick/tricks, trip, zoom* (but c. in the meaning of 'camera zoom') n.
     Nw. *clash, krasj, dropp, fiks, jump, push, rush, stress, touch* n.

Nw. *rap* 'style of music' c. vs. *haiku-ræpp* n. 'act of rapping, poem' (Graedler 1996: 143)

4.3. Other explanations

I would like to finish the review of possible gender mechanisms by noting three further factors. These include the role of the gender assigned in an intervening – or link language (cf. Fisiak 1975) – as well as psychological or psychoanalytical factors proposed by Sachs (1953: 256), and Deroy's 'facteurs psychologiques' (1956: 258). On a less serious note, we could also mention 'fancy', as suggested by Wilson (1898).

5. The unmarked gender

In addition to these formal and semantic mechanisms, a third approach has been proposed. According to Haugen (1969: 448), the underlying assumption is that normally loan nouns are assigned to the statistically strongest gender, or the default/unmarked/productive gender: "In most languages for which the phenomenon has been studied a clear tendency is seen to assign lws. to one particular gender unless specific analogies intervene to draw them into other classes." For example, in German or Icelandic the majority of loans are m. unless a formal or semantic analogy happens to assign them to the f. or n. genders. Examples of such 'tendencies' are given below:

a) Danish
    c. (Hansen – Lund 1994, Hansen 1995)

b) Norwegian
    c. for European Norwegian (Stene 1945)
    m. for American Norwegian (Flom 1903/1905, Haugen 1969)

c) Swedish
    c. for American Swedish (Clyne 1975)

d) Icelandic
    n. for American Icelandic (Clausing 1986)

e) German
    m. for European German (Wilson 1898, Carstensen 1980), Natal German (Stielau 1980)
    f. for American German (Aron 1930, Reed 1942, Weinreich 1953, Clausing 1986), Australian German (Clyne 1967)
    n. for Nebraskan German (Sirks 1956)

The fact that a particular gender becomes unmarked was claimed to result from its numerical relationship with other genders. This argumentation thus rests on productivity and is the most commonly advanced explanation.[13]

In addition to such a statistically based relationship, a variety of criteria have been used. In an early paper, Aron (1930: 27) invokes a number of possible explanations to account for the 'feminine tendency', or the large number of f. assignments that he sees in his American German data. He suggests that "... when a person speaking American German was instinctively groping for gender ...", they would associate the English definite article with the German f. determiner die (pronounced as de) or, in the case of pl. nouns, e.g., reins, wages, it would be the pl. die that is associated with the f. determiner. A tendency based on the die-the similarity was later advanced by Clyne (1967), this time for Australian German; f. was again the unmarked gender.

Analogy was also brought up as an explanation. This time, however, the notion of analogy was extended from a formal or semantic association with a native equivalent in the borrowing language (as in the factors reviewed above), to an association with the loanwords already present in the lexicon[14]. Thus the processes that previously applied to borrowings, allocating them into the gender system – a 'habitual repository' as Haugen (1969: 441) referred to it – would reappear in any subsequent contact situation.[15]

Finally, an alternative explanation why a particular gender surfaces as unmarked was offered by Clausing (1986). In what ironically resembles the inability to account for individual gender assignments, he claims that it is precisely the lack of an equivalent that motivates the unmarked gender.[16]

6. Discussion

The unmarked gender as a factor is certainly appealing, because it accounts for a large number of nouns that are otherwise hard to classify. However, several objections can be raised against this rather embarrassing principle.

In the first place, it is always brought up ad hoc, as a last descriptive resource in those frequent cases when we simply cannot tell why a given word was assigned to this and not that gender. The evidence that such practice is a common one is provided in the discussion of gender assignment in Hock (1991): he concludes that we are dealing with a "... 'default' class to which words are assigned if none of the other criteria provides a solution", and so resorts to it himself.[17] Second, as the examples above show, conflicting criteria have been given for the same language, thus leading to conflicting results. For example, the criteria cited for German dialects include a semantic, graphemic, or morphological association; the similarity with the German determiner die, and a drift tendency in American German. Third, it resists any attempt at falsification: being a 'tendency', it does not allow for counter-examples, since every non-application is automatically subsumed as caused by a formal or semantic analogy.

And finally, any of the patterns of borrowing suggested for the Scandinavian languages and other languages could well be explained in terms of normal assignment mechanisms in the borrowing languages that apply to both native and loan nouns. In his review of the assignment of gender to borrowed nouns, Corbett (1991) concludes that the pattern of borrowing in Russian "... can be explained in terms of the normal assignment rules in Russian, without appeal to the extra criterion of assignment to the unmarked gender.[18] Some genders are then more productive because they are an indication of synchronic gender assignment rules in the borrowing languages. The unmarked gender, used to account for these rules, strongly appears to be an example of a dustbin category of no descriptive or explanatory power.

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[13] For a more detailed treatment, cf. Weinreich (1953), Haugen (1969) and Welna (1976).

[14] Cf. Heath (1984: 372-376) for an account of similar 'routines', or productive processes in morphology and phonology.

[15] A closely related factor, proposed for Togo Remnant languages, involves 'automatic assignment': according to Heine (1968), "... loanwords are allocated to a particular gender simply by virtue of their being loanwords." Corbett (1991) rejects this factor because of the involved duplication: to be automatically assigned, loanwords would first have to be identified as such, thus additional information would have to be provided.

[16] "... the neuter tendency can be explained in terms of arrested language development: loans borrowed at an early date are given the gender of their equivalents since these equivalents are still known, but newer loans are assigned the neuter gender because the equivalents have been forgotten. In short, the neuter gender is the gender of convenience for loans which, for whatever reason, have no equivalents. The strength of the neuter tendency in [American Icelandic] may reflect the degree of language decay among the informants, but this has yet to be demonstrated" (Clausing 1986: 116).

[17] Likewise, in her Norwegian data, Graedler (1996) is left with 26% of the tokens not accounted for, and is forced to conclude that "... the gender assignment of borrowed English nouns in Norwegian may best be accounted for by the notion of unmarked gender."

[18] Similarly, Poplack et al. (1982: 22) conclude that "... there is no clear evidence in [their] data that there is some underlying tendency independent of the shape and the meaning of the word for borrowed nouns to take on masculine gender."

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