

NOUN PHRASE INTERNAL GENDER AGREEMENT
IN LATE OLD ENGLISH AND EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH

AGNIESZKA PYSZ

Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań

ABSTRACT

The focus of the current paper is on the phenomenon of noun phrase internal gender agreement, as observed in the 12th century manuscript E of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, namely the *Peterborough Chronicle* (Bodleian MS. Laud Misc. 636). The language used by the scribes of the *Chronicle* is often held to be a "microcosm" (Jones 1988) of extremely powerful innovations characterising the transition from Old English to Middle English.

The mechanisms of intra-noun-phrase gender agreement operating in "classical" West Saxon *Schriftsprache* are usually described as strictly formal in nature. The earliest occurrences departing from the formally determined congruence have been attested in the northern texts from the late 10th century, notably the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Durham Ritual*. In the course of time, a gradual increase in the number of gender conflicts affected the dialects of the Midlands, whence it spread further southwards (Millar 2002). Notwithstanding numerous attempts to explicate the above developments, the exact reasons which led to the eventual collapse of the Old English gender system have not been fully unearthed to date.

Rather than taking an explanatory stance, the analysis made for the purposes of this paper aims to present the quantitative distribution of nominal phrases with "wrong" gender agreement occurring in the *Peterborough Chronicle*, a representative piece of transitional prose. In this way, it will be seen whether the language of the *Chronicle* can be viewed as bearing witness to a proliferation of gender miscongruences in the period in question.

0. Introduction

The transition from Old English to Middle English has long been recognised as a period in which the English language underwent serious changes in its structure. One such change was the "failure to show on many occasions the expected gender triggered congruence between attributive words and the nouns with which they [were] in construction" (Jones 1988: 10). A heated debate over the reasons for this apparent confusion followed.

Numerous attempts have been made to offer more or less viable explanations for the cases of “wrong” gender agreement. Thus, for instance, according to the *Genuswechsel* theory the innovative use of attributive forms testified to lexical gender reclassification (i.e. gender change). However, neither masculinisation (Clark 1957; see also Baron 1971: 125; Mustanoja 1960: 51) nor neutralisation (Ross 1936; see also Baron 1971: 125; Millar 2000: 256-257; Mitchell 1985: §§63, 68) nor the triumph of sex over gender (e.g. Mitchell 1985: §69) nor foreign influence (e.g. Mustanoja 1960: 45-48; Pervaz 1958: 157) proved to be successful in accounting for the instances of gender mismatch.¹ At present, the views expressed by Jones (1988), who relies on the temporal refunctionalisation of determiner morphology, are considered the most valid though still, as the author himself admits, speculative.

Although the current paper focuses on intra-noun-phrase gender miscoherence, its aim is far from explanatory, i.e. it does not seek to offer further reasons for the occurrences of gender mismatch. Instead, it sets out to establish, in descriptive and quantitative terms, the actual scale on which the phenomenon of NP internal unhistorical gender agreement can be observed in the selected piece of transitional prose, namely the *Peterborough Chronicle* (Bodleian MS. Laud Misc. 636).

With this view in mind, the paper has been divided into three parts. Part 1 delineates the most crucial assumptions behind NP internal gender agreement, as it operated in “classical” OE. Part 2 presents the statistical results yielded by an analysis of gender agreement between head nouns and their premodifying demonstratives. Part 3 in turn offers a few remarks summarising the results of the study.

Two important methodological provisos with regard to the analysis ought to be spelled out. Firstly, the assumption is made that one deals with unhistorical gender agreement if a substantive traditionally associated with a particular gender appears in construction with a demonstrative whose form is identical with a demonstrative form of a different gender.²

It follows that innovative demonstrative forms which cannot be unambiguously ascribed to any gender will be omitted from the scrutiny. Secondly, even though the category of gender was closely interlocked with that of case, the sole focus of the analysis will be on the former.

¹ Other explanations, usually considered *ad hoc* and therefore treated with caution, attributed unhistorical gender agreement to peculiarities of individual scribes, production errors (Jones 1988: 133), personification (Mustanoja 1960: 48-51; Pervaz 1958: 161), *Reimassoziation* (von Glahn 1918: 17), *Begriffsassoziation* (Pervaz 1958: 67).

² See further remarks in Part 2.

1. NP internal gender agreement in Old English: A brief sketch

As standard handbooks maintain, nouns in OE were distributed among three gender classes: masculine, feminine and neuter. The division itself as well as the criteria according to which nouns gravitated towards one of the three genders have often been discussed with a focus on their inherent irrationality. Perhaps a corollary to this is that some linguists prefer to look at nouns as belonging to large noun groupings, not necessarily grounded on gender distinctions (Jones 1972: 112).

With regard to OE, the integrity underlying the firm gender allocation of nouns has been challenged, among others, by Lass (1997). Casting some doubts on the question of what it means that a noun “has” or “belongs to” a particular gender, he stated that “[t]he best we can say ... is that ... any given noun was *mostly* or *usually* a member of some particular class” (Lass 1997: 108; emphasis mine). However, since the current paper is intended neither to refute conventional views nor to propose revolutionary ones, the ensuing discussion will continue to employ the long-standing gender nomenclature.

One can argue whether or not the division of OE nouns into genders was merely “a useless complication of the grammar” (Bradley 1964: 48), constituting a superfluous hindrance at the level of production (Trudgill 1999: 141). Yet, it can be scarcely doubted that such a division had far-reaching implications.³ On the one hand, nouns constituted central elements of NPs and as such they dictated the ultimate choice of attributive shapes. That is to say, they evinced a controlling potential, conditioning the selection of surface forms of attributive elements. To use the terminology deployed by Corbett (1991, 2001), nominal heads functioned as the so-called “controllers”, whose features determined the form of the respective targets.⁴

On the other hand, notwithstanding the central position of the head (= “nucleus”) in the nominal phrase, the role of adnominal premodifiers (= “satellites”) should not be underestimated. After all, the specific gender feature of the head noun manifested itself first and foremost in adnominal shapes. Among these, the most telling information was provided by simple article-like and compound demonstratives.⁵ It is thus thanks to demonstrative forms that a foothold will be gained for the subsequent analysis of their relations with the accompanying heads.

³ On the functions of gender as well as its relation with agreement see Kilarski (2001: 26-30) and the references cited there.

⁴ Cf. Hockett’s (1958: 231) definition of genders as “classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words”.

⁵ See, for example, Berndt (1982: 117), Dekeyser (1980: 98), Kastovsky (1999: 712), Markus (1988: 244), Paddock (1988: 380), Traugott (1972: 87).

According to received knowledge, the workings of intra-noun-phrase gender matching in "classical" West Saxon seem to have been fairly straightforward in that they required demonstrative elements to comply with the formal, as opposed to semantic, gender of their controlling noun. As a result, it is often generalised that "[i]n noun phrase internal inflection ... grammatical gender agreement [was] obligatory" (Baron 1971: 120).⁶ Even Jones (1988: 103, 105), though largely pre-occupied with demonstrating numerous instances of gender miscongruence, is ultimately compelled to admit the apparent scarcity of departures from formal gender matching in the OE texts he examines. Yet, in the course of time a general increase in gender confusion (Markus 1988: 246) could be observed.

2. NP internal gender agreement in the *Peterborough Chronicle*

The empirical findings included in the ensuing paragraphs pertain exclusively to two key-elements of a nominal phrase, namely a head noun and a premodifying demonstrative, whether or not accompanied by a "weak" adjective.⁷ Thus, inflectional suffixes appearing on adjectives and nouns will not be taken into account. It also seems natural not to examine plural demonstrative forms for the reason that they did not carry gender distinctions. Further, excluded from the study are NPs with adjectives functioning as noun equivalents e.g. *Eustatius þe iunga* (1088: 72) or *þe oðer* (1087: 23), constructions involving ellipsis e.g. *se abbot of Baðon 7 þe of Perscoran* (1087: 161) as well as phrases headed by nouns typically associated with more than one gender e.g. *seo lyft* (1110: 12).

While analysing the statistical data provided by the *Peterborough Chronicle* one needs to take into account the specific nature of this textual material. Written over an extended period of time by different scribes, the manuscript can by no means be treated as a seamless whole. On the basis of paleographical evidence the *Chronicle* is usually subdivided into three major parts, namely Text A, comprising the annals from 1070 till 1121, Text B, covering the entries 1122-1131 and Text C, 1132-1154. The discussion below will accordingly follow this well-established division.

2.1. Text A (1070-1121)

Chronologically speaking, Text A, the so-called copied annals of the *Chronicle*, is the least remote from the Anglo-Saxon era. Although Clark (1970) describes the language of its scribe as "inscrutably conventional" (Clark 1970: xlv), the figures subsumed in Table 1 show that the rules operating in the NP internal domain do not always conform to the OE conventions.

⁶ See also Joly (1975: 246), Mustanoja (1960: 45), Namai (2000: 776), Traugott (1972: 84).

⁷ This is because, as has already been mentioned, demonstratives counted as the most reliable source of information about both gender and case of a noun.

Table 1. Distribution of NP constructions: D. + (Adj.) + Head Noun in Text A of the *Peterborough Chronicle*

MASCULINE H.N.			FEMININE H.N.			NEUTER H.N.						
m.D.	non-m.D.	other	f.D.	non-f.D.	other	n.D.	non-n.D.	other				
sc	277	3	seo	11	se	1	pet	48	se	3	pan	2
þes	28	6	þeos	1	þam	4	ðet	1	þa	3	þe	2
þæs	51	5	þære	27	þet	3	þis	29	þes	6	þeosan	1
ðæs	1	1	ðære	1	þisne	1	þæs	11	þone	2	þeoses	1
þysses	1	1	þisre	1	þonc	3	þises	33	ðes	1	þi	1
þam	94		þa	25			þyses	3			þisan	7
ðam	8		þas	6			þam	28			þison	17
þisum	1						ðam	4			þyson	1
þone	78						þisum	37			ðisan	1
ðone	1						þissum	2				
þisne	1						þysum	2				
	541	15		72			ðisum	3				
		15		72				201				33
											15	
Total: 906 (100%)												

Note: The following abbreviations are consistently employed henceforth: m. (=masculine), non-m. (=non-masculine), Adj. (=adjective), f. (=feminine), non-f. (=non-feminine), D. (=demonstrative), n. (=neuter),

Out of altogether 906 phrases involving a head noun preceded by a demonstrative, the vast majority (i.e. 856 phrases) incorporate demonstratives conveying the traditional gender distinctions. The remaining 50 constructions involve innovative demonstrative forms, which could not be regarded as gender specific.

Among the phrases headed by a masculine head 94.75% of constructions involve a congruent masculine demonstrative shape. 2.62% of the phrases are found to ally with a non-masculine demonstrative, either feminine <seo>, <pa>,⁸ <paere> or neuter <pet>⁹ and they are treated as instances evincing gender incongruence.

The relevant constructions with a feminine head include 83.72% of the phrases consisting of a feminine head preceded by a typically feminine demonstrative. 13.95% of NPs incorporate a non-feminine demonstrative: masculine <se>, <pisne>, <pone>,¹⁰ neuter <pet> or masculine/neuter <pam> and thus demonstrate a breach of formal gender matching.

As regards the phrases headed by a neuter noun one encounters 80.72% of NPs which comply with the traditional gender agreement rules. The instances of gender mismatch, which incorporate a non-neuter demonstrative, either masculine <se>, <pes>, <des>, <pone>, or a feminine <pa>, amount to 6%.

According to the simple token count, Text A incorporates 42 phrases manifesting unhistorical gender agreement, which account for 4.63% of all NPs occurring in this part of the manuscript.

2.2. Text B (1122-1131)

This part of the *Chronicle*, also referred to as the First Continuation, is assumed to have been written at intervals by the hand of the scribe responsible for committing Text A (Shores 1971: 16). The data yielded by the analysis of this part are subsumed under Table 2.

As was the case with Text A, the majority (i.e. 317) of constructions occurring in Text B involve demonstrative forms which can be regarded as gender specific on account of their morphological identity with the OE paradigmatic options. The phrases incorporating gender indistinctive demonstrative shapes <pe>,¹¹ <de>, <pon>, <pane> and <dis> occur 14 times.

⁸ Jones (1988: 158) treats <pa> forms as orthographic equivalents of <pe>.

⁹ For possible reasons behind the unetymological use of <pet> forms see Jones (1988: 4.2-4.4).

¹⁰ For possible reasons behind the unetymological use of <pone> forms see Jones (1988: 4.5-4.7).

¹¹ Although Jones (1988: 157) mentions that the attributive <pe> was used in classical OE as the marker of the ergative and usually animate arguments, the form cannot be, however, viewed as gender specific.

Table 2. Distribution of NP constructions: D. + (Adj.) + Head Noun in Text B of the *Peterborough Chronicle*

m.D.	MASCULINE H.N.			FEMININE H.N.			NEUTER H.N.		
	non-m.D.	other		f.D.	non-f.D.	other	n.D.	non-n.D.	other
se	117	1	5	1	6	1	11	4	4
bes	38	8	1	7	2		1	3	1
þæs	4	5	2		2		13	18	
des	4	2			1		1	1	
þam	1				3		1	16	
þone	29				2		1	1	
ðone	6							1	
	199	16	8	8	16	1	28	50	5
Total: 331 (100%)									

Out of the phrases headed by a masculine head 89.24% of constructions abide by the formal matching of gender. 7.17% incorporate a non-masculine demonstrative, feminine <seo>, <þa>, <ða> or a neuter <þet> and these apparently violate the principles of formal gender matching.

The relevant phrases with feminine heads include 32% of constructions showing historical gender agreement. In as many as 64% of NPs the noun is premodified by typically non-feminine demonstrative forms, i.e. either masculine <se>, <þes>, <þone>, ¹² <ðone> or neuter <þet>, <þis>. Gender distinctions cannot be determined in 4% of the phrases.

Among the phrases headed by a neuter noun one encounters 33.73% of instances with historical gender matching. A lack of gender agreement applies to 60.24% of constructions. They incorporate masculine <se>, <þes>, <ðes>, <þone>, <ðone> or feminine <þa>, <ða>, <þeos> demonstrative shapes.

Taken together, Text B employs 82 constructions breaching the principles of historical gender matching. This group constitutes 24.77% of the count.

2.3. Text C (1132-1154)

This part of the *Chronicle* is also known as the Second or Final Continuation. The relevant quantitative data are presented in Table 3.

Even a cursory glance at the figures suffices to show that the repository of gender distinctive demonstratives employed by the scribe appears fairly meagre; such forms appear 26 times. In contrast, gender indistinguishable forms, i.e. <þe>, <þæ>, <te>, <the> amount to as many as 97 records.

Among the constructions featuring a masculine head there is an isolated remnant of the original masculine paradigm, namely the nominative <se> form. 6 phrases are found to incorporate a non-masculine demonstrative form, i.e. feminine <þa> or neuter <þat>, <ðat>, <þis>. Thus, one can speak of 7.23% of the phrases manifesting gender incongruence.

There are 11 phrases featuring a feminine head. One employs a typically feminine demonstrative <þære>, one occurs with a neuter <ðat> while the rest employ gender indistinctive forms. Therefore, in this group unhistorical gender agreement can be seen in 9.09% of the constructions.

Upon turning to NPs with neuter head nouns, one is faced with not a single example of gender conflict between a noun and a preceding demonstrative form. That is, if gender distinctive demonstratives are used, they never fail to comply with the principles of formal gender matching.

¹² For an account of unhistorical uses of <þone> in Text B, focused on the polemic with Clark's (1970) treating them as instances of "false archaism", see Jones (1988: 148-151); cf. Millar (2000: 173, fn. 11).

Table 3. Distribution of NP constructions: D. + (Adj.) + Head Noun in Text C of the *Peterborough Chronicle*

m.D.	MASCULINE H.N.			FEMININE H.N.			NEUTER H.N.		
	non-m.D.	other	f.D.	non-f.D.	other	n.D.	non-n.D.	other	
sc	1	19	1	1	2	1	1	2	
	þa	te	þære	ðat	te	þæt	te	2	
	þat	the			þe	bat	the	2	
	þis	þe				ðat	þe	8	
	ðat	þæ				þis			
	1	6	1	1	9	17	0	12	
Total: 123 (100%)									

All in all, Text C includes altogether 7 instances (i.e. 5.69%) of phrases manifesting unhistorical gender agreement.

3. Concluding remarks

The aim of this paper was to determine the extent to which the historical principles of NP internal gender agreement were preserved in the *Peterborough Chronicle*, whose language is held to be a "microcosm" (Jones 1988: 129) of the perplexing innovations characterising the transitional period. The thought underlying the study was to establish whether the language used by the scribes of the manuscript bears witness to a proliferation of gender miscongruences at that particular time.

In order fully to assess the results of the analysis the quantitative data for all three parts of the *Chronicle* have accordingly been laid out in Table 4.

On the whole, the recorded instances of NP internal gender agreement can be broadly grouped into the following three patterns:

- a) constructions involving demonstrative forms associated with the same gender as the accompanying head noun (> historical gender agreement),
- b) constructions involving demonstrative forms associated with a different gender than the accompanying head noun (> unhistorical gender agreement),
- c) constructions involving demonstrative forms which cannot be unambiguously classified as representative of any gender class (> others).

Though such a simplified division is not entirely without shortcomings, it nevertheless facilitates the viewing of the relevant phenomena in an orderly, albeit static, way. On the one hand, the statistical data corroborate two well-established views. Firstly, the number of constructions manifesting historical gender matching is on the decrease (89.85% in Text A, 71% in Text B and 15.45% in Text C). Secondly, there is a marked increase in the occurrence of constructions employing gender indistinctive forms (5.52% in Text A, 4.23% in Text B and 78.86% in Text C). On the other hand, however, when the instances of "wrong" gender agreement are considered it emerges that their actual level of incidence is not particularly high (4.63% in Text A, 24.77% in Text B and 5.69% in Text C).

Concluding, though the results of the analysis indicate that the occurrences of gender mismatch in the *Chronicle* were not numerous, they nevertheless do not invalidate the obliteration of the grammatical gender system. After all, the incidence of both phrases with unhistorical gender agreement and those employing gender indistinctive demonstratives (10.15% in Text A, 29% in Text B and 84.55% in Text C) corroborate the gradual collapse of the category of gender. Moreover, it is reasonable to expect that the scale of disintegration would turn out to be larger if the category of case, which played a significant role in this process, were taken into account.

Table 4. NP internal gender agreement in the *Peterborough Chronicle* (Text A, Text B, Text C).

	Historical gender agreement	Unhistorical gender agreement	NPs with gender indistinctive D.	Total
Text A	814 (89.85%)	42 (4.63%)	50 (5.52%)	906 (100%)
Text B	235 (71%)	82 (24.77%)	14 (4.23%)	331 (100%)
Text C	19 (15.45%)	7 (5.69%)	97 (78.86%)	123 (100%)

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