The gender of abstract noun suffixes in the Brittonic languages

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Abstract: This article examines the gender of suffixes used for the derivation of abstract nouns in the Brittonic languages Welsh, Breton and Cornish. Their diachronic development is discussed against the background of several functional gender hypotheses. The theory underlying such hypotheses postulates that gender plays a role in the classification of the nominal lexicon, i.e. it classifies nouns according to the feature [±particularized] thus expressing nominal aspect. The effects of this classification can be observed in abstract nouns in Modern High German, but this feature is assumed to be ultimately inherited from Proto-Indo-European.

Although all Brittonic languages display remarkable similarities with regard to their nominal morphology, the gender of suffixes and the restructuring which each language underwent vary considerably among them. The association of feminine (and neuter) gender with abstractness had probably already been lost in Proto-Brittonic. Abstract nouns formed through suffixation are predominantly masculine in Welsh and Cornish, while Breton has a higher proportion of feminine suffixes largely due to French influence. In addition, Breton shows the emergence of a functional gender system within some parts of its lexicon.

1 Functional Gender Theories

Functional gender theories do not hold that nominal gender is either functionless or that its function is restricted to mere reference-tracking. On the contrary, they assume that gender plays a role in the classification of the nominal lexicon. The features determining this classification are still being discussed.

Unterbeck (2000: xviii, xxvi) proposes the following distinction: systems with noun classes, numeral classification and verbal classification display a classification system based on the features [+count/mass] and [+shape],

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1 I owe thanks to Claudia Letizia, M.A. for the linguistic correction of this text. Any remaining mistakes are, of course, my own responsibility.

2 Cf. e.g. Corbett 2000: 320ff. In the ModHG sentence Maria fotografierte Tobias vor dem Haus als er/sie/es 10 Jahre alt war ‘Maria photographed Tobias in front of the house when he/she/it was ten years old’, gendered third person pronouns allow one to distinguish between three potential antecedents.
whereas in gender systems the relevant features are [+count/mass] and [+sex]. The layman tends to regard [+sex] as the main feature and any other classifying feature seems to go largely unnoticed, at least on a conscious level, by speakers of gender languages. Therefore, as of today, these features have not yet been fully recognized and the question of whether they are cross-linguistically comparable or even identical has not been adequately addressed.

Weber (2000: 496) suggests that gender has a separate function that cannot be fulfilled by any other grammatical category. Only the existence of such separate function could explain the persistence of nominal gender in so many languages. Having surveyed a number of examples from languages belonging to different language families, Weber concludes that the function of gender lies in the “perspectivization” of nouns with regard to nominal aspect, more precisely with regard to the feature [±particularizing] (Weber 2000: 506, 2001: 113ff.).

This feature encompasses the differences implied by more traditional terms such as count nouns, mass nouns, collectives, concrete or abstract nouns, which express conceptual notions regarding [±boundedness], [±internal structure], [±delimitability] and [±divisibility].

Vogel (2000: 468) calls these features “quantifying” and subsumes them under the contrasting concepts of “individuality” and “continuativity”. The feature [+count] is linked to the principle of individuality, whereas the feature [–count] is linked to the principle of continuativity. Both concepts, which represent the opposite ends of a scale, are based on cognitive perception and have a strong influence on the nominal lexicon of any language. Nouns are conceptualized as individual or continuative nouns and these conceptualizations determine their morphological and syntactic properties. Moreover, their conceptual properties can be altered, i.e. speakers can shift from one conceptualization to another in order to transfer nouns belonging to one category into the other. Examples of such processes will be discussed below (1.1.1).

According to Weber (2001: 80), gender systems involve the binary opposition [±particularizing], i.e. they classify nouns according to the presence or absence of the feature “particularized”. This is best conveyed by two-

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