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Gender shifts in the history of English.
Anne Curzan.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
pp. 223 + xii.

Reviewed by Dániel Z. Kádár

Herbert Schendl (2001:9) defines 'the study of *ongoing changes* in a language' as one of the fundamental goals of historical linguistics. Curzan's book, which examines the historical development of the English gender system, is a work noteworthy not only for historical linguists, but also for experts of gender and language precisely because it attains the aforementioned objective. The book not only gives a well-argued description of the development of English linguistic gender – a fact that makes it a pivotal addition to earlier theories of the field (e.g. Corbett 1991) – but it also utilises its findings to contribute to the research on contemporary gendered language.

Gender shifts in the history of English has two features – one theoretical and the other methodological – that deserve particular attention. First, the book is a thought-provoking critique of linguistic theories. On the one hand, it shows the culturally/ideologically biased ways in which experts tend to treat seemingly 'neutral' or 'grammatical' issues, such as the matter of the 'correct' English generic pronoun(s). On the other hand, it also points out the problematic aspects of feminist theories that often neglect the historical background of certain linguistic expressions. It must be emphasised that Curzan's critical approach is a constructive one because she points out the weakness of other theories in order to raise questions that enable progress to be made in the field (in a manner similar to, e.g., Eelen's (2001) work on linguistic politeness

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theories). Second, the work examines historical data in a multidisciplinary way, involving philology, dialectology, sociolinguistics and many other fields. By utilising the approaches of several disciplines, the work effectively illustrates the complexity of factors that influence historical linguistic change.

Chapters 1 and 2, which follow a brief introduction, provide preliminary information about the topic of gender shift(s) (henceforth GS). Chapter 1 draws on several theories of the Modern English gender system (henceforth MEGS) in order to overview 'natural' English gender, and hence to provide a sufficient theoretical background to study GSs in the history of English. Such an overview is necessary because diachronic changes in a language become more perspicuous if one comprehends their contemporary outcomes. Furthermore, as the author notes, it is necessary to objectively define the proper place of MEGS among linguistic gender systems for many native speakers tend to adopt a biased view when discussing gender in Modern English.

Seemingly, the natural MEGS is very simple, that is, only nouns referring to males and females generally take gendered pronouns, while inanimate nouns are neuter. This is in contrast with the Old English gender system (henceforth OEGS) which 'had three grammatical genders – masculine, feminine, and neuter – and all inanimate nouns belonged to one of the three classes' (p. 12). Nevertheless, the 'simple' MEGS has proven to be problematic for many linguists. It is clear that in the natural MEGS – which is in fact only one type of semantic gender system – the personal pronouns clearly follow semantic gender agreement. There are, however, 'exceptional' cases, that is, 'the inanimate nouns that can take gendered pronouns and the human or other animate nouns that can take *it*' (p. 20). These cases, such as referring to a ship as *she*, referring to a dog as either *he* or *she*, or referring to a human being as *it*, can be only explained via the analysis of different diachronic and synchronic linguistic factors. As the author notes: 'pronoun selection depends on speaker attitudes and involvement as well as cultural prototypes [and] all of these factors in turn rest on the same foundation: the concepts of sex and gender held by language users and the society in which they express themselves' (p. 29).

Chapter 2 initiates the reader in the basics of the historical English GS by providing a critical overview of the ways in which histories of English treat the loss of grammatical gender and the emergence of the modern natural gender system. As becomes evident during the course of the chapter many theories present and interpret the English GS according to certain ideologies; thus, it is necessary to critically survey these theories and their ideologies in order to be able to objectively approach the issue of English GS.

The chapter first reviews some traditional and modern approaches to grammatical gender and its absence in MEGS. The survey illustrates that both pre-scientific works and modern standard histories of English tend to adopt

a fundamentally ‘nationalistic’ (p. 41) point of view about GS in English. In other words, they represent other languages that have grammatical gender as ‘illogical’ and praise MEGS as a ‘logical’ and – a fact that probably reflects the ideologised nature of these theories even more – ‘masculine’ system superior to others, and they represent the English as conscious developers of their own language. As a next step, the chapter examines the morphological explanations of the loss of grammatical gender and their problematic aspects. Finally, the chapter surveys some sociolinguistic theories of the English GS (e.g. dialectal approaches to English GS), and introduces the scholarly debate over the so-called Middle English creole question. The theory that the English GS was, at least partially, influenced by ‘external’ factors can answer many of the existing research questions.¹ Nevertheless, many histories of English refute the ‘suggest[ion] that English, with its prestigious position in the modern worlds, could be historically considered a creole’ (p. 48), and those theories that accept this view regularly apply a ‘selective treatment’ (p. 53), that is, they emphasise the influence of ‘prestigious’ languages (e.g. French), and they de-emphasise the possible influence of ‘less-prestigious’ ones (e.g. Old Norse).

Chapter 3 ‘examines specifically the nature of gender agreement in early stages of English between nouns referring to people and anaphoric personal pronouns to uncover the [...] history of the generic pronoun question’ (p. 60). In other words, the author carries out corpus-based research to examine the development of agreement patterns between person-denoting nouns and anaphoric personal pronouns in the period spanning Old English through Modern English. Furthermore, she utilises this research to track the development of the English generic pronouns, the choice of which has generated, and continues to generate, many feminist debates (i.e., can *he* be accepted as the ‘correct’ generic form?).

The chapter first demonstrates via the analysis of several examples that ‘the patterns of gender agreement for nouns and pronouns referring to people are much more stable historically than those referring to inanimate objects, and they provide the context for understanding the mechanics of the gender shift’ (p. 61). That is, although the OEGS was grammatical, in general there was a semantic correspondence between person-denoting nouns and anaphoric pronouns. This property of Old English, that is, ‘that there was another [natural] gender system in place and available’ (p. 69) supposedly became a subservient factor for the historical GS. After studying this issue the chapter examines the historical occurrence of generic pronouns: it becomes evident in the course of the analysis that although many pre-modern and modern grammatical theories claim that the generic *he* is the only ‘correct’ anaphoric form, Old English (and Middle English) texts often avoid applying the generic *he* to refer to females. The chapter is concluded by an in-depth analysis of the ‘grammaticalisation’

of *he* as the ‘only correct form’ according to the masculine ideologies of the grammarians.

Chapter 4 ‘examines the transition from the grammatical gender system of Old English to the semantic or natural gender system of Modern English, looking specifically at anaphoric personal pronoun reference to inanimate objects’ (p. 84). A fundamental claim of the author is that although the GS for inanimate nouns occurs only in late Old English or early Middle English, ‘the seeds of change are already present in Old English’ (p. 84).

The chapter begins with an overview of previous studies on the historical formation of the anaphoric personal pronouns that refer to inanimate objects. This is followed by a study of the gender agreement patterns in Old English. It becomes evident from the analysis that while in OEGS there was a strong tendency to follow natural gender agreement between nouns referring to humans and personal pronouns, ‘grammatical gender agreement remains strong for inanimate nouns in Old English’ (p. 91). Nevertheless, the ‘seeds’ – to use the author’s aforementioned designation – of GS can be found in OEGS. For instance, a typical factor that generates natural gender agreement in Old English texts is the distance between the anaphoric pronoun and the antecedent, that is, ‘the farther the pronoun from the antecedent noun or from the preceding anaphoric pronoun in a string of pronoun references, the higher the odds that it will follow natural gender agreement’ (p. 99). After surveying the various factors involved in the early appearance of natural gender agreement in Old English, the chapter examines the gender agreement patterns in Early Middle English. The author makes it evident via several analyses – which involve, amongst others, syntax and dialectology – that ‘the written language of this [...] period [...] record[ed] the mechanisms at work in the shift to natural gender in the anaphoric pronouns’ (p. 106). The last part of Chapter 4 studies the final outcome of the ‘naturalisation’ of the pronominal reference to inanimate nouns by analysing gender agreement patterns in later Middle English.

It must be noted that besides providing a diachronic overview of the GS for inanimate nouns, the author also utilises the analysis of Chapter 4 to address a number of modern gender issues, such as: (a) Why feminine pronouns are prevalently used in reference to inanimate objects; and (b) Which nouns have taken on conventionalised gender references in Modern English. Furthermore, with the aid of the diachronic analysis the author demonstrates that ‘the variation in gender reference to inanimate nouns in modern varieties of English is not simply “personification”’ (p. 131).

Chapter 5 examines ‘historical shifts for gendered words referring to humans, of both/all genders, in order to create a more complex picture and understanding of their historical semantic developments’ (p. 135). The author also makes use of this nominal analysis, which is a pivotal supplement for the pronominal

analyses of the previous chapter, to study the historical formation of gendered nominal pairs, such as *man/woman* and *bachelor/spinster*. The asymmetrical value of these gendered lexical pairs has been a topic of research for feminist linguistics since the publication of Robin Lakoff's well-known book (Lakoff 1975); however, few researchers have studied the historical formation of these words. The author traces their historical development in order to study a larger theoretical question, namely, 'the justification of applying/imposing gender binaries to/on the lexicon' (p. 135).

The chapter begins with an overview of historical semantics and the previous research of gendered nouns. This is followed by an analysis of words referring to boys and girls, which exemplifies the impressive complexity of the development of words for children in English. As a matter of fact, in the history of English many words have been adopted for both boys and girls because such nouns are open to gaining negative connotation, that is, as soon as a word became deprecatory a new one was used, which caused regular lexical changes. Furthermore, it becomes evident from the study that it is very difficult to treat *boy and girl* as 'symmetric' gendered expressions according to historical evidence: for instance, 'the word *girl* carried the meaning 'child' throughout most of the Middle English period' (p. 148). In the following sections the author, after surveying the histories of nouns referring to women in general, raises several questions of symmetry between gendered pairs. For example, as the examination of the historical development of *man and wife* shows, their pairing in Modern English is somewhat problematic because of the historical generic application of *man* that still has a potential influence on its modern application. The chapter concludes the examination of binary gendered nouns by noting that 'the histories of these words are more complex than some modern discussions allow – which is not to say that there are not fairly clear patterns, such as the derogation and sexualization of words referring to women' (p. 178).

The main body of the work is followed by a conclusion in Chapter 6 where the author elaborates the possible implications of her findings for a non-sexist language reform. The final part of the book contains two appendices: Appendix 1 surveys some of the early linguistic developments in English personal pronouns to provide background for the analyses in Chapters 3 and 4; Appendix 2 introduces the so-called 'Helsinki Corpus' – a well-known database of English historical linguistics – and the methodology of the textual research adopted by the book.

Possibly the only drawback of this work is that the author does not provide clear-cut conclusions for the chapters. Considering that the argumentation of the work is rather complex and indirect because the author simultaneously operates in the fields of historical linguistics and gender research, the lack of explicit summaries of the chapters' argumentation structures raises some

difficulties for the reader. In summation, however, *Gender shifts in the history of English* is a challenging study, which is of interest for both experts of feminist language research and historical linguists.

Note

- 1 In fact, in Chapter 4 the author convincingly argues that ‘creolisation’ is a strong expression to describe the influence of foreign languages, particularly Old Norse, on the English GS.

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