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The categorisation of nouns in English
historical linguistics. An overview

ABSTRACT. This paper is concerned with the current criticisms of traditional ways of categorising nouns in English historical linguistics. It presents an overview of the recent objections to the conventional classifications voiced by such scholars as Kastovsky (1995), Lass (1997) and Krygier (1998, 2001). The classifications of nouns in Old English and Middle English found in recognised handbooks such as Campbell (1959) or Wełna (1996) are based on the original, i.e. Indo-European and Proto-Germanic, terminations of the stem of nouns. The classifications of nouns in Early and Late Modern English concentrate on the nouns' development from the original categories. This kind of approach to English historical morphology has recently been criticised for being simplistic and diachronically biased, and a need for new and different classifications has been postulated. The present paper does not offer any alternative classification of English nouns, rather, it postulates the change in the attitude to the traditional morphological categorisations.

In order to establish a morphological or syntactic classification of nouns (or other linguistic items) in any historical period, one needs a class-defining criterion. In the case of nouns it may be their syntactic function or inflectional endings. Old English nouns have been classified by historical linguists according to the original, i.e. Indo-European and Proto-Germanic, terminations of the stem (Reszkiewicz, 1998 [1968]: 101). In Middle English the inflectional system of nouns disintegrated, but the ME nouns are still classified by most historical linguists on the same basis. Similarly, Early and Late Modern English nouns are usually analysed according to their development from OE classes. Such classifications

are found in recognised handbooks such as A. Campbell (1959), J. Wełna (1996) and are widely accepted and used for teaching Old and Middle English grammar at Universities. However, this kind of approach to English historical morphology has recently been criticised by such linguists as D. Kastovsky (1995), R. Lass (1997) or M. Krygier (1998, 2001) for being simplistic and diachronically biased. As M. Krygier (2001: 51) puts it: „With the development of linguistic knowledge its major principles should be and are questioned, as new theories, textual advances, and interdisciplinary studies open new vistas on old problems." The present paper is an overview of the current criticisms of the traditional categorisation of nouns in historical linguistics, as well as a voice in the discussion.

Old English and Middle Engliish nouns were classified by linguists about two hundred years ago and this classification has been generally accepted since then. On the basis of their stems, nouns have been classified into a vocalic (or strong) declension, comprising old stems ending in /-a, -o, -u, and -i/; and a consonantal (or weak) declension comprising old stems in /-n, -r, -nd, -iz, -az/, and old root stems. Within both the vocalic and consonantal declensions nouns have been grouped according to gender into masculine, feminine and neuter.

However, it has been recently pointed out by scholars that although the classification by 'gender-within-stem' is convenient and generally accepted, it is also highly problematic. R. Lass (1997: 104) observed that traditional handbooks (e.g. Campbell, 1959) list at least 25 nouns which are either of uncertain gender or are attested unambiguously in either two. These include:

a) Nouns of indeterminate gender *fleah* 'flea', *falod* 'fold' or *faroþ* 'sea near land';

b) Nouns attested both as masculine and neuter: *horh* 'rheum', *segel* 'sail', or *ellen* 'courage';

c) Nouns attested both as masculine and feminine: *byrele* 'cup-bearer', or *eowode* 'flock';

d) Nouns attested as both neuter and feminine: *wiht* 'creature' or *fulwiht* 'baptism';

e) Nouns attested in all three genders: *slōh* 'mire, *bismer* 'disgrace', *westenn* 'desert', and lytf 'air'.

According to R. Lass (1997: 105-106), one of the reasons for such complexity of 'gender and/or class' classification is that Old English was not a monolithic, codified standard language. A survey conducted in the 1950s revealed the existence of over 300 distinct dialect areas in England and in the Isle of Man, and there is no reason

to suppose that the situation was markedly different in the Old English period. Moreover, Proto-Germanic, on whose stems this classification heavily relies, was not 'dialect-free' either. One of the objections to traditional morphological classifications raised by M. Krygier (1998, 2001) is that they are diachronically biased. Accordingly:

> ..... in their search for God-given truths historical linguists tend to lose from their sight one basic premise, on which their research should be based – that the object of their study was once a living language, spoken in a real community. Therefore, rather than reflecting their assumptions about abstract properties of the language structure, any well-formed theory should attempt to re-create the synchronic competence of the native speaker (Krygier, 200: 52).

A. Bertacca (200: 73) suggests that implicative patterns may provide a solution, as the inflectional paradigms are based on implications. As Wurzel says, „there are no paradigms (except highly extreme cases of suppletion) that are not based on implications valid beyond an individual word" (Wurzel, 1984: 118, quoted in: Bertacca, 2001: 73).

Since no alternative model has yet been developed, the conventional classification remains the major source of knowledge about OE nouns. However, it needs to be considered with caution, and, to quote R. Lass, „it is never entirely safe to say that some particular noun N 'was an X-stem of gender G', we can only say that a 'given noun was mostly or usually a member of some particular class" (Lass, 1997: 108).

As already mentioned, the classification of nouns based on their original stem and gender is also applied in the analysis of Middle English nouns. In Middle English nouns, as well as other inflections, were in the process of simplification, and most nouns adopted the OE strong masculine ending *-as* as their plural marker. J. G. Newman (2001) claims that:

> The earlier distinctions of class may have lost significance in the course of Middle English when the inflectional system disintegrated, but for Early Middle English reference to stem classes is still fully relevant, and the same is true as regards the language of particular texts in the 14th century. This is reflected in instances like zero-plural forms among neuter *a*-stems, such as *word* 'words' and *thing* 'things', in the Southern texts of that period (Newman, 2001: 11).

In a parallel vein, R. Lass maintains that:

> The names are convenient as well as traditional, and do display historical relations. Further, at least within certain limits each identifies a declension type in a reasonably non-cumbersome way. That is, '*a*-stem' is more convenient than 'class whose masculine members in OE have -*as* in nom.-acc. pl. and whose masculines and neuters have -*es* in genitive sg'; and historically more illuminating than arbitrary numbering (like the first declension, etc. of Latin grammars) (Lass, 1997: 25).

It appears, therefore, that in the absence of a reliable synchronic classification of Middle English nouns, the traditional model is the only recourse for the student of the history of English. What needs to be altered is perhaps not the classification itself, as it still proves to be useful to scholars, but rather the attitude to it.

Although the conventional classification of nouns based on stems and genders may still be to some extent relevant to the Middle English system of nouns, it seems highly inadequate in the investigation of nouns in the period of Modern English, that is after 1500. Grouping nouns in classes on the basis of their earlier forms does not offer a realistic picture of the language of the period as the forms departed too far from the earlier model. In Early Modern English (1500-1650), when the forms of some nouns still showed the OE inflectional endings, it may be of some significance for historical reasons, but much less so in the period of Late Modern English (1650-1800) when there are only a few vestiges of the original declensions. In order to group nouns into classes in Modern English one needs a new class-defining criterion, based on the properties the nouns exhibited at the time. The criterion that seems appropriate for a synchronic description of nouns in the period is their countability.

The division of nouns into countable and uncountable is fundamental in Present-Day English, and it seems also applicable to Early and Late Modern English nouns. In its current shape it is based partly on semantic grounds; countable nouns being the names of divisible units, uncountables denoting indivisible concepts, and collectives referring to a group of people or objects treated as a unity. The semantic properties of these three groups of nouns are reflected in their morphological and syntactic behaviour, i.e. countable nouns are marked for singular and plural (*book/books, child/children*), with the exception of unmarked

plurals, such as *sheep, swine* and *deer*, which also belong here. They are used with singular and plural forms of verbs respectively, and when in the singular, they require a determiner to form a grammatically correct Noun Phrase (e.g. *A book is ...*). Noncount nouns, in contrast, are those which lack number marking (Denison, 1998: 96). They are used with singular verbs and do not require a determiner to form a grammatically correct NP (e.g. *Bread is ....*).

What is important in the classification of nouns into countable and uncountable is, as A. Downing and P. Locke (1992: 422) rightly point out that 'countability is not a binary system of mass nouns and count nouns, but a scale of varying degrees of potentiality for countness and massness'. Although the degrees of countability differed for a number of nouns throughout the period of Modern English, the grammatical markers of countability had a distributional pattern as today.

A. Marckwardt (1970) claims that the distributional pattern of *much* and *many* as indicators of quantity used with count and noncount nouns respectively, was formed throughout the Middle English period. Therefore, it seems legitimate to argue that it was well established in Early Modern English. The indicator of quantity *a great deal of* started to be used exclusively with noncount nouns in Late Modern English (Strang, 1970: 139). M. Rissanen (1999) points out that articles in Early and Late Modern English were used roughly in the same way as in Present-Day English, therefore, they can be treated as markers of countability as well.

A number of abstract and mass nouns which are considered indivisible today were regularly used in the plural in Early Modern English, for example *learnings, moneys, stealthes* (Görlach, 1991[1978]: 80) or *leisures, wisdoms, sleeps*, as in:

'We'll make our *leisures* to attend on yours'

(Merchant of Venice, I, i)

'your better *wisdoms*'

(Hamlet, I, ii)

'break not your *sleeps* for that'

(Hamlet, IV, vi)
(quoted after M. Schlauch, 1959: 95)

The treatment of some differed in the period of Late Modern English. These were, for example, *acquaintance* with reference to persons, *information, evidence, accommodation* or *advice*, as in:

'I shall not omit giving *informations* of the improvement or decay'

(Ironside in: *The Guardian* vol. II, 154)

'He is with all his acquaintance'

(Ironside in: *The Guardian* vol. I, 54)

'We will remove it by such *evidences* of our faith and devotion'

(Pepys 1678: 614)

The fact that the treatment of those nouns differed from the current one does not render the classification into count and noncount impossible in the periods. It only shows that the tendencies in their behaviour were different but it is more relevant to the inflectional patterns of nouns than the classification based on stems and grammatical gender.

To sum up, although the premises of the conventional categorisation of Old English and Middle English nouns based on their Germanic stems have recently been questioned for being simplistic and diachronically based, it seems the only option at present, as no alternative classification has gained acceptance. It needs to be treated with caution, though, rather than received as the 'God-given truth'. However, the same classification seems inadequate to categorise Early and Late Modern English nouns, whose inflectional patterns are close to those of Present-Day English. The classification which seems applicable here is the present-day division of nouns based on their countability.

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