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GENDER SHIFTS IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH BY ANNE CURZAN, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003. PP. 223. ISBN 0-521-82007-3

In *Gender Shifts in the History of English,* Anne Curzan makes an attempt to analyse the reasons for, and complex processes influencing the change of the original *grammatical gender system* existing in the English language into a *natural gender system*. The variety of texts included in the *Helsinki Corpus* forms the basis of the study, however, the author also makes reference to numerous other sources. Moreover, Curzan's research includes knowledge of the fields of corpus linguistics, prototype theory, historical syntax, sociolinguistics and feminist theory. Although Curzan addresses a very complicated subject matter, her volume is edifying not only to trained linguists and literary scholars but also to readers fascinated by gender and linguistic changes.

At the very beginning of the book Curzan incorporates Fodor's (2003) explanation of the term gender stating *gender exists if grammatical forms with variable gender (e.g. adjectives, pronouns, numerals) regularly adopt forms to agree with grammatical forms of invariable gender, usually nouns*. Hence, the first chapter aims at explaining the importance of grammatical gender in the Old English language leading to the masculine-feminine distinction not only among animate nouns but also inanimate ones. Thus, the classification of nouns under either of the categories, which was of vital importance in Old English, is beyond the understanding of Modern English speakers since inanimate objects are not used with anaphoric pronouns *he* or *she*. Furthermore, the author presents various approaches to the Modern English gender system, displaying the relation between the gender and the speakers' attitude, emotions and the social situation. Gender is viewed not as a system, on the contrary, it is seen as the kind of agreement that is variable and inconsistent. Since the representation of masculine-feminine categories relies heavily on the speakers' attitude as well as the culture of a given society, then the term *natural gender* serves its duty as long as we account for it as referring to social concepts of sex and not only biological sex.

The following two chapters are devoted to the discussion on the gender shift; that is the abandonment of grammatical gender in place of natural gender. Furthermore, it is the dramatic linguistic change between Old English and Middle English that is focused on, namely the loss of inflectional endings as well as the influence of borrowings upon the nature of the English language. The author does not fall far short of contradicting pre-scientific attempts at explaining the notion of grammatical gender. On the one hand, they treat gender as the obligatory component of the language, on the other hand, they conclude that the natural gender is as obvious to the native speakers of English as the grammatical gender concord is to the speakers of the German language. In addition, the author considers the sociolinguistic viewpoint claiming that the progress of language continually leads to the standardising of English. However, we must not forget about various dialect and foreign interferences constantly influencing the language that begin to appear in the Middle English period and which are not treated as part of the huge progress of English. The process that began the loss of inflectional endings, the loss of grammatical gender and the influx of borrowed words raises the question of the Middle English *Creole* language, a language with incomplete status, instead of examining how contact with other languages influenced the development of English.

Despite the fact that we can clearly state the loss of grammatical gender is due to internal development, there are numerous external reasons connected to the dramatic history of English and the British Isles themselves. The efforts to standardise the language allowed the abandonment of the grammatical gender and lead to the development of a language based on rational, natural gender. Both trained linguists and language observers praise the advantages of the loss of the grammatical concord making the language more pleasant for native speakers, whereas students of the English language are able to feel more comfortable and confident in using English rather than any other language.

The aim of the third chapter is to present the changes in the English gender system, as well as the gender agreement between the animate nouns and anaphoric personal pronouns in the early English. In addition, the question of generic pronouns is raised. It is evident that the gender agreement for nouns and pronouns referring to people is more stable historically than for inanimate objects. Nonetheless, we can clearly observe that Old English is not strictly connected with the use of grammatical gender system. On the contrary, there is a strong tendency among nouns to use natural gender agreement in anaphoric pronouns. The study of generic pronouns reveals that both generic *he* and *they* have a long history in the language. The generic *he* appears as early as the Old English language for linguistic and social reasons. Although the generic *they* is introduced in the same period it is often recognised as an error that needs to be paraphrased when in reference to singular nouns, a colloquialism used in

the spoken language or the solution to pronoun problem optionally appearing in the written language. The fact of rejecting the singular generic *they* suggests a certain separation between the written and the spoken language.

In the remainder of her work, the author examines certain historical syntactic changes influencing the diffusion of the natural gender, the change that begins very early in the language and whose consequences are observed in the later stages of the language. The appearance of innovative but not necessarily natural gender is determined by various syntactic changes, namely reanalysis, extension, distance, lexical field consideration and the proximity of nouns semantically similar but gender varied in a given part of discourse. The presence of certain nominal suffixes, especially feminine ones, shows a tendency to the use of natural gender agreement in the anaphoric pronouns. Furthermore, the study of the historical texts in the *Helsinki Corpus* implies that the extension of natural gender to inanimate nouns, taking place at the turn of the Old English and Middle English period, corresponds with a strengthening of the distinction between animate and inanimate nouns. However, the gender shift is not only due to grammatical factors but also discursive ones including *thematic prominence*.

In addition, Curzan's aim is to show the history of nouns referring to human beings and prove that it is as complex as that of anaphoric pronouns. Moreover, the author addresses gender and semantic *pejoration* especially of the terms for men and women. The study is based on feminist scholarship, providing evidence that the terms referring to females undergo *pejoration* more frequently than male referential terms. Another argument is the existence of a larger number of derogatory terms for women than for men. Moreover, the process of *sexualizing* of words for women leads to negative connotations, semantic developments and extension to other groups defined by sexuality. However, it also leads to the use of *animal metaphors* to refer to females, which are highly sexualized and derogatory according to the feminist view. Finally, Curzan presents the implications of *symmetry* versus *asymmetry* in semantic change explaining that the variety of meanings of the words for children, women and men complicates the notion of symmetry in the lexicon since the masculine-feminine pairings are not stable or necessarily symmetric over time.

Over all, the aim of the volume is not only to present the development of gender in the English language but also to give some implications about sexism in the history of the language. Heavy focus is placed on the language in the feminist movement since it is the tendency for the language to reflect social structures and attitudes, hence it is easier to change the language in contrast to attitudes. Despite the resistance to any kind of language reform, the feminist movement has made progress in introducing changes in the norms of accepted linguistic behaviour not only in writing but also in speech. As the author concludes *one of the greatest successes of feminist language reform has been*

politicizing language choices, raising consciousness, and problematizing sexist form (Curzan 2003:188). Although language reforms attempt to hasten language change, social change still takes a pre-eminent role.

On the whole, the work under review is characterised by eclecticism, for Curzan refers to a wide range of theories and schools. The author perceives language as *a social instrument* (Curzan 2003:184) and speakers of the language play a crucial part for the writer because, without them, language neither exists nor changes. These are the speakers who use their mother tongue every day in order to negotiate certain linguistic choices and to solve the problem of ambiguity.