
Gender decrease in English and the grammaticalization of nominal aspect

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This talk illustrates how historically emergent syncretisms across categories re-shaped the gender system and the associated nominal aspect in English. The intertwined processes illustrate the grammaticalization of nominal aspect whose count and mass aspects developed simultaneously.

Nominalizations are crucial in the investigation of the gender system of a language. Here, grammatical gender is understood as a category for countability (e.g. Werner 2012, following Brugmann 1897): masculine represents countable nouns as opposed to neuter, which stands for mass nouns, while the feminine represents abstract-collective nouns.

Gender in English is usually considered to have decreased due to the loss of inflectional morphology in Middle English (see Curzan 2003) resulting in a sex-based gender system despite ‘peaceful coexistence’ in Old English (Siemund 2013: 10f). However, random nominalization samples from the OED (Clark Hall/Merritt 1984) show that a gender confusion was taking place already in Old English. We find masculine semi-suffixations with *-hād* (e.g., *cild-hād*, M ‘childhood, infancy’), *-dōm* (e.g., *reccen-dōm* M ‘authority, governance’) or *-scipe* (e.g., *ten-scipe* M ‘inhabitant; population of a city’), which besides the usual individualized count nouns, also denote (typically, feminine) abstract-collective nominalizations (Werner 2012: 30ff).

Based on a case study of deverbal nominals we argue that the gender decrease in English was not due to the loss of inflection, but to its emerging syncretism with countability encoded in nominalizing suffixes, which resulted in grammaticalized nominal aspect.

References: Brugmann, K.. 1897. The nature and origin of the noun genders in the Indo-European languages. Scribner’s Sons. • Clark Hall, J. & Meritt H. 1984. A concise Anglo-Saxon dictionary. U Toronto Press. • Curzan, A. 2003. Gender shifts in the history of English. CUP. • Siemund, Peter. 2013. Pronominal gender in English. Routledge. • Werner, M. 2012. Genus, Derivation und Quantifikation. De Gruyter.