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# NOTES ON GENDER IN MODERN ENGLISH

Grave doubts have not infrequently been voiced about the existence of the category of gender in Modern English. It has been rightly urged that in concrete ModE contexts the difference of gender in nouns finds no formal expression in the nouns themselves or in the articles or adjectives attached to them attributively or predicatively, but is only evidenced by the differences of the personal pronouns *he/him* — *she/her* — *it* (and the corresponding possessives *his* — *her/hers* — *its*) referring to the nouns.[1] All the same, normative grammars keep to the well-known traditional rule stating that the nouns denoting male beings should be classed as masculines, those denoting female beings as feminines, and those referring to inanimate objects as neuters.[2] This traditional approach was heavily attacked, eight years ago, by a well-known Dutch Anglicist, Dr P. A. Erades.[3] His arguments deserve to be examined here at some length because the radical standpoint taken up in them can throw some light on the issue of the English gender in an unprecedented manner.

Dr Erades quotes a number of instances, taken from modern prose, in which the nouns appear to be referred to by pronouns different from those required by the traditional rules. In some of his examples, nouns denoting a person are referred to by the pronoun *it* (*its, itself*), in others, nouns denoting inanimates are referred to by the pronouns *he* or *she*. Most of these instances are of the types not unknown to previous research (they are regularly associated with the presence of affective or emotional factors in the concerned utterances),[4] but they have have invariably been treated of by that research as exceptions to the main rule. Unfortunately, a thorough and comprehensive linguistic explanation of these exceptions in the framework of the main rule has, to our knowledge, hardly ever been worked out. And this is exactly where Dr Erades starts his critical analysis. "A maxim of ancient Roman law", he says, "laid it down that the exception proves the rule; in grammar it is the other way about: the exception only proves that the rule is wrong" (p. 3). Dr Erades himself, on the basis of the analysis of his materials, comes to the conclusion that the factors determining the "pronominal reference generally called gender" in ModE.

"a. are not determined by the noun to which the pronoun refers...;

b. are neither conditioned by the idea expressed by the noun;

c. are dependent on extra-linguistic factors in the mind of the speaker, the precise nature of which is often unknown, but which can be stated to be individual, variable and often unpredictable" (p. 11).

In facing Dr Erades' arguments one can readily admit that the situational diagnosis of the exceptions to the usual distribution of the pronouns referring to the nouns (or to the general content of the statement, should such a noun not be expressly mentioned) is perfectly sound. The linguistic evaluation of the diagnosed situation, however, appears to be inadequate. We will try to show that Dr Erades' evaluation

suffers from disregarding the hierarchy of linguistic values, and that this disregard is due to the lack of structuralist viewpoint. At the very ouset, however, it should be noted that in our discussion we will deliberately leave aside such "exceptions" to the general rule of pronominal reference as are manifestly due to sheer conventional tradition and so do not reflect any vidid, actual approach to the reality to be communicated. In other words, we do not propose to discuss the traditional feminine gender of the names of the countries, such as Britain, France, Poland, etc., of the names of ships (Lusitania, Leviathan, etc.) or of symbolic or personified usage due to survivals of old mythologies (such as *Sun* m., *Moon* f., *Death* m., and the like). We will, however, base our observations on those "exceptions" which constitute a living force in the language and which prove thus to be productive in it, being capable of reoccuring in new situations analogous to those in which the practice has firmly established them. To put it differently, we will be concerned here with those instances in which the "shift of gender" is motivated by affect or emotion.

An attentive reader of Dr Erades' arguments and materials will easily realize that also the Dutch scholar bases his arguments, for the gratest part, on instances of the last-mentioned category. As Dr Erades himself points out, the use of the neuter referential pronoun *it* about a noun denoting a living being (especially a human being) is motivated by affective colouring — sometimes felt as disdain, sometimes as endearment. Similarly, the use of the pronouns *he* or *she* about a noun denoting an inanimate object has again an affective motivation — positively sympathetic in the latter case, less sympathetic or even unsympathetic in the former. Dr Erades very aptly remarks that the use of referential *he* for males, *she* for females and *it* for things "only applies when the speaker is emotionally neutral to the subject referred to" (p. 10). The strange thing is, however, that Dr Erades did not realize one vital fact; that it is exactly the uncommon (i. e. the very opposite to the "emotionally neutral") application of referential pronouns which acts as a signal of the strong emotion with which the concerned utterance has become associated. Obviously, Dr Erades has barred his way to the realization of this fact by declaring that the system of pronominal reference underlying the affectively coloured usage "is essentially based on momentary and individual psychological associations" (p. 11). Still, however important the psychological side of the problem may be, one certainly should not overstress the individual character of the implied associations. For all their individual oscillations, the said associations cannot be denied to cluster around some typical invariants, ascertainable in all idiolects of the given language, and thus endowed with social values. And it is exactly these social values that are reflected in language, a notoriously social institution; the individual oscillations lacking such social value find no primary means of expression in language.

To put the matter in more concrete terms, the two basic invariants of the affective approach to the facts of extra-lingual reality are obviously the positive *vs.* negative "feeling" towards that reality. When referring to an inanimate object, both these polar types may be satisfactorily expressed: as only one of the three sets of pronouns available for referential purposes (viz the set *it — its — itself*) is employed for the unmarked, i. e. emotionally neutral kind of reference, the remaining two sets (viz *he/him — his — himself*, and *she/her — her(s) — herself*) can be utilized for the marked, i. e. emotionally positive or negative kinds of reference. The reason why the feminine set was chosen to refer to the positive kind of approach (signalling the thing referred to as amiable, intimately known, delicate, etc.), while the masculine set serves to denote the opposite, negative kind of approach (signalling, in its turn,

the concerned thing as huge, strong, unwieldy or generally unpleasant) is too obvious to need detailed specification — it reflects the common conception of the feminine *vs.* masculine features regarded as typical of each of the two sexes.

In referring to an animate object (mainly to a person), however, the polar differentiation between the positive and negative approach cannot be carried through by pronominal means, as only one of the sets of pronouns available for referential purposes can be utilized to denote affective or emotional approach, viz. the *it*-set; the other two sets, *he* and *she*, must serve the unmarked, emotionally neutral kind of reference. Under these circumstances, the *it*-set can only signal the presence of the emotional, non-neutral kind of approach to the person referred to, and the decision of whether the approach is to be evaluated as positive or negative must be left over to the factors of context, including the general situation in which the set has been employed.

A special case is, of course, constituted by the pronominal reference to nouns denoting small children and animals. In such instances, neuter reference is commonly resorted to for the simple reason that the sex of the concerned individual is either unknown or irrelevant (e. g., *baby, fly, cat,* etc.). Feminine or masculine reference signals some interest of the speaker in the individual referred to (cf. Erades p. 7), but the chosen gender need not necessarily tally with the actual sex of the individual: there may be, again, some interference of emotional factors, such as in Dr Erades' case of the dog (see above, Note 4). Besides, in the last-mentioned instances — and undoubtedly in many others — the resulting reference may be due to yet another interference, viz. to that of deliberate personification, the outcome of which may vary according to who is effecting it (man or woman, or child). Finally, it should not be forgotten that these personifications may often be effected on traditional, conventional lines; even these conventions, however, can fairly well be squared with the above-noted tendencies governing pronominal reference to nouns denoting inanimate things: bigger and stronger animals rank most frequently as masculines, while smaller, gentler animals (especially singing birds) prevalently rank as feminines. And again, this tendency may be interfered with by the other tendency noted above, viz. one which, for emotional reasons, refers to animate nouns by the pronoun *it* (which sometimes signals disdain, at other times, however, endearment). Such referential procedure may also be applied to nouns denoting personified animals — here obviously belongs E. Kruisinga's[5] example *ittie doggie — it shall have its tea,* from Mrs Gaskell, quoted also by Dr Erades. The emotional motivation of neuter pronominal reference in the last-mentioned case is guaranteed by the hypochoristic suffix *-ie,* twice used in the sentence, and even added to the referential pronoun *it.* It is only too obvious that this sort of *it* has a status vastly different — and much more sophisticated — from the status of *it* which is used in referring to animals whose sex is either unknown or immaterial.

It appears, then, that the pronominal reference, though often rather individual, cannot be denoted as dependent on extra-lingual factors in the mind of the speaker which "can be stated to be individual, variable, and often unpredictable" (Erades, p. 11). The fact is that if all factors that co-operate in determining the pronominal reference are duly considered and if their hierarchy is carefully established, the apparent confusion becomes clarified and the knotty relations disentangled. In other words, if the situation of the speaker and his approach to the extra-lingual reality he is handling are satisfactorily stated, his pronominal reference to this reality should be perfectly predictable.

Another remark is needed in this connection. Dr Erades is certainly right in urging that English, by its origin an Indogermanic language, "shows numerous features pointing to a devolution from its prototype" (p. 11). This is naturally equivalent to saying that, in the course of its development, English was increasingly abandoning the old synthetic type of grammatical structure, often called inflexional, and was gradually adopting the analytic type of that structure.[6] Still, the unusual application of gender phenomena for the purpose of signalling affective or emotional approach to facts of extra-lingual reality is not so alien to the synthetic, inflexional type of language as Dr Erades appears to be inclined to believe. In Czech, for instance, which represents a very typical specimen of the highly synthetic, inflexional kind of language, one can find, in emotionally coloured utterances, such combinations of nouns with preceding adjectival atributes as violate the gender concord, otherwise obligatory in combinations of that kind. Thus, e. g., *kluk* (m.) *hloupá* (f) 'a silly boy', *chlap* (m.) *špatná* (f.) 'a bad fellow', etc.[7] It is, of course, true that this exceptional type of combination remains isolated in Czech and that no further extension of it seems probable. Besides, it should be noted that the main signal of emotion in the above Czech examples is obviously not so much the acquisition by the adjective of the unexpected feminine ending but rather the violation of gender concord, otherwise obligatory in Czech. For all that, however, there can hardly be any doubt that even here, in a language typically synthetic, use has been made of such application of gender as is otherwise unknown in the language for the purpose of signalling affective or emotional approach.

Any worker in the structurally directed analysis of language will easily recall a fairly large number of instances in which language employs, for affective or emotional purposes, those of its means which have not been utilized for the purpose of common, i. e. non-emotional, communication. Examples of the kind may be quoted from various structural levels of many lagnguages. A couple of instances may be mentioned here from English itself.

It is commonly known that the English phonological system of to-day, when serving the purposes of common, non-emotional communication, does not utilize functionally the quantitative differences of the length of consonant phonemes. In other words, distinctions such as [f] — [f:], [n] — [n:], [l] — [l:], and the like, are not capable of distinguishing "intellectual" word meanings. Put still differently, [f:], [n:], [l:], etc. do not implement separate phonemes in ModE. On the other hand, it is well known that the long consonants of the said type are amply used in ModE as signals of affective, emotional approach to the communicated reality — see instances like [n:ou], [ai 'l:ʌv it], etc.[8] Obviously, the same principle is here at work as in the above-analysed ModE usage of pronominal reference indicating gender of nouns: language means not employed by the unmarked, purely communicative style of the language are at the disposal of the marked, i. e. emotionally coloured style.

Another notorious means signalling the emotional approach of the speaker to the extra-lingual reality is the word-order of the type Adverb — Verb — Subject, which is unknown to (and even banned in) the unmarked communicative style — see well-known instances like *Up flew the ball, Out rushed the men in a great hurry,* etc. — Finally, the same principle is at work in the onomatological sphere when, to signal the emotional approach of the speaker, the determining and the determined nominal elements exchange their respective parts, so that the word denoting quality is made into a basic noun, while the word denoting the bearer of that quality is expressed by an appositional attribte, joined to the basic noun by means of

a preposition (see, e. g., *this devil of a man, that box of a house, my fool of a doctor*, etc.). The uncommon flavour of such word combinations is naturally due to the unusual onomatological procedure, utilizing a pattern unknown in the unmarked, purely communicative style, in which the word denoting quality regularly constitutes the determining, adjectival element, while the part of the determined element is commonly played by the noun referring to the bearer of that quality.

Many more examples of the kind could be quoted from English as well as from other languages. But even those few that have been adduced here will have provided a satisfactory, more general framework within which our above comment on gender phenomena in Modern English will sound still more convincing. Moreover, there is another interesting observation that intrudes upon the analyst: the signalling by language means of the emotional approach of the speaker to a certain piece of extra-lingual reality takes for granted the existence of a well-established "normal" pattern of language elements (on all levels of the language) and of their configurations, normal in the sense that it serves the purposes of unmarked, non-emotional reference to extra-lingual reality. For it is only by way of contrast with this well-established pattern that emotional approach may be efficiently signaled by the speaker and recognized as such by the listener. In addition to this, there is one interesting conclusion that must be drawn from the said observation, viz. that the emotional usage is closely linked to the non-emotional within one and the same language, inasmuch as the means employed by the one and by the other are found, at least in the essential points, to be mutually complementary.

If this is so, another essential consequence must be drawn: in analysing a language, equal attention should be paid to the means employed both by the unmarked, non-emotional, and by the marked, emotional, styles, for in mutually confronting the two the basic structure of the language is due to stand out with particular clearness. To go back to the fundamental topic of the present paper, the problem of gender in ModE, it appears obvious from our, however sketchy, analysis that the often doubted existence of the category of gender in ModE is manifestly vindicated exactly by the contrastive use in which gender differences are being utilized for signalling emotional approach. Clearly, both the fact of the utilization of these differences in the marked style, and the remarkable complementariness of this utilization in the marked and unmarked styles cannot but be regarded as clear evidence showing that the differences of gender are indeed recognized as existing in the language — if they were not, they could not be so systematically and so delicately manipulated. In any case, the problem of the existence of the category of gender would be much more complicated and much more difficult to solve, if the instances of the shift of gender for emotional purposes were unknown in the language. The category of gender may not be strictly grammatical (as no indices of it can be ascertained on the forms of the nouns themselves), but its existence as a lexical — still better, lexico-stylistic — category cannot be reasonably doubted.

It only remains to be added that consistent regard to the part played by emotional factors in language and to the patterns reflecting the operation of these factors may often throw new light also on the historical development of individual languages. And it is only fair to recall, in this particular context, that exactly Prof. Václav Machek was one of the very first scholars to realize the importance of taking such factors into account in etymological research work. His remarkable monograph on the formation of emotive expressions, published more than three decades ago,[9] will always bear most eloquent testimony to this fact.

## NOTES

[1] See, e. g., I. Poldauf, *Mluvnice současné angličtiny [Grammar of Present-Day English]* II, Prague 1958, pp. 86ff.

[2] Cf., e. g., E. Kruisinga, *A Handbook of Present-Day English*, II/2,[5] Groningen 1932, pp. 96ff.; O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles*, VII, Copenhagen 1949, Chapter V; recently, J. Sledd, *A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, Chicago ... 1959, pp. 213, 215.

[3] P. A. Erades, Contributions to Modern English Syntax, V: A Note on Gender, Moderna Språk (Stockholm) 15, 1956, pp. 2—11. Discussion to the paper ibid., pp. 446—448.

[4] See, e. g., a husband referred to as *it*, professional reference to a chimney as *she* by the sweep, etc. Some of the registered instances, however, present some less known interesting features, especially those which concern the names of animals. To quote one of them at least: "In an English family I know, the dog, a bitch, is to the master of the house a *he* and *old boy*, to his wife a *she*, while the children are divided in their allegiance" (p. 7).

[5] Op. cit., p. 106.

[6] Some problems connected with the analytic type of Modern English and its historical development were considered in our study *Some Less Familiar Aspects of the Analytical Trend of English*, Brno Studies in English 3, Prague 1961, pp. 9—78.

[7] For more information on this type see, most recently, T. Michalsen—S. Štech, *A Few Remarks on the So-Called Emotive Feminines in Czech*, Scando-Slavica 8, 1962, pp. 182—190.

[8] Cf. Ida C. Ward, *The Phonetics of English*,[4] Cambridge 1945, p. 164. — Many instances of this kind of consonantal quantity may be found registered in modern conversational plays, e. g. in G. B. Shaw's comedies, where the long quantity of consonants is indicated by doubling the corresponding letter (e. g., *llove*, *nno*).

[9] V. Machek, *Studie o tvoření výrazů expresivních [A Study on the Formation of Emotive Expressions]*, Facultas philosophica universitatis Carolinae Pragensis, Práce z vědeckých ústavů 36, Prague 1930.

## POZNÁMKY O GRAMATICKÉM RODU V NOVÉ ANGLIČTINĚ

Často se pochybuje o existenci gramatického rodu v nové angličtině, poněvadž jediným svědectvím o něm se zdá to, že na jednotlivá na. substantiva se odkazuje některým z osobních nebo přivlastňovacích zájmen, jež — alespoň v jednotném čísle — rod rozlišují. Holandský anglista P. A. Erades rozborem známých „výjimek" v zájmenných odkazech dokonce stroze popírá existenci gramatického rodu v angličtině. Dovozuje, že zájmenný odkaz na substantivum se neřídí činiteli objektivními, ale subjektivní situací v mysli mluvčího, tedy faktory individuálními a nepredikabilními.

Strukturně pojatý rozbor anglických zájmenných odkazů však vede k závěru, že i tu lze zjistit pevnou zákonitost. I zde, jako v jiných jazykových rovinách a situacích, příznakový emocionální styl využívá záměrně těch možností, které v stylu bezpříznakovém, ryze sdělném, zůstaly nevyužity, popř. prostředky stylu bezpříznakovému běžné upravuje pro své potřeby v nové strukturní konstelace, takže pak snadno a jasně signalizují emocionální zaměření promluvy. Je třeba zdůraznit, že při tom jde o jazykové hodnoty běžné a společné všem mluvčím daného jazykového společenství, nikoli tedy o nepostižitelná fakta individuální psychologie.

Z rozboru vyplývá nejen skutečná existence kategorie gramatického rodu v dnešní angličtině (alespoň jako kategorie lexikální, ev. lexikálně stylistické), ale i obecnější závěr: při analýze jazykového systému je třeba věnovat prostředkům stylu emocionálního nemenší pozornost než prostředkům stylu ryze sdělného, poněvadž teprve srovnáním s prostředky stylu příznakového mohou prostředky stylu základního, bezpříznakového, vystoupit s dostatečnou jasností.