Disagreement of feminine gender: historical perspectives

Junichi Toyota
University of Freiburg, Germany

Gender disagreement has been a topic of research for a long time. For example, German Mädchen ‘girl’ is grammatically neuter, although its actual referent is a female person. There are two types of disagreement: one is a grammatical norm, which is set as a rule, as in the case of German Mädchen ‘girl’ as a neuter noun. The other one is a purposeful choice, i.e. a speaker intends to make a disagreement in gender for social purposes. For example, an agreement with inanimate gender class for a young female to show politeness in Lak (Caucasian).

In this paper, I analyse the first case of disagreement. In order to explain such disagreement, I would like to draw attention to the historical development of the gender system and explain why some disagreements have emerged. I focus mainly on the modern Indo-European (IE) languages, but various typological data are incorporated in the synchronic analysis.

Cross-linguistically, feminine nouns and feminine referents seem to be the most likely target for the disagreement. My assumption is that the emergence of feminine markers is, as far as IE languages are concerned, later than masculine and neuter markers and this newness makes this gender class prone to the disagreement. As early as in Proto-Indo-European (PIE), the nominal gender is divided into two, active (animate entities) and inactive (inanimate entities). In addition to animacy, there are some further distinctions: whether an entity can initiate an action and whether an entity is productive. The feminine distinction (the suffix -a) emerged around the period when the diversion from PIE into its daughter languages took place. The earlier distinction was binary, and it then became ternary. In spite of the ternary distinction, the earlier binary distinction can still be found. For example, the name of a tree and its fruits still preserved the binary distinction, e.g. Latin pirus ‘pear tree’, malus ‘apple tree’ are considered active due to productivity (masculine), although the productivity is not assigned to the feminine nouns in these cases. Their fruits pirum ‘pear’, malum ‘apple’, on the other hand, are inactive (neuter), due to their lack of productivity.

The case in Latin shows an interesting insight in the current gender system: some features of earlier nominal distinctions, especially productivity, still play an important role in some cases. When productivity is assigned to the masculine noun, there is no disagreement, but once the feminine noun is involved, the disagreement occurs. In my view, this is why nouns referring to a female animate like ‘girl’ in various languages need a classification based on the ability to reproduce. Young female animates are considered incapable to reproduce, and therefore, they are not yet given a feminine status. In this sense, the agreement of words meaning ‘children’ to neuter is also accounted for by the lack of ability to reproduce.

In sum, the current disagreement in gender assignment can be explained more clearly once the characteristics of the earlier gender assignment system is taken into account. The neuter gender referring to ‘young girl’ or ‘small child’ is, therefore, due to the lack of ability to reproduce. Thus, the gender assignment system can be considered a type of grammatical phenomenon which is historically influenced.