

Gender Assignment of Anglicisms in French

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Modern English does not distinguish the grammatical gender of nouns. The French language has two grammatical genders: masculine and feminine. What happens to Anglicisms that enter French? In the process of borrowing, the so-called “masculine tendency” seems to operate: Most Anglicisms including *meeting*, *remake* and *show* are assigned to the masculine gender. Anglicisms denoting women become feminine: *call-girl*, *suffragette*. Words containing suffixes that are feminine in French (*efficiency*, *inflation*) as well as certain words that can be associated with feminine referents also take the feminine gender. *Pomme* ‘apple’ is feminine in French. This explains why *golden* and *granny*, which refer to species of apple, become feminine in French. We come across inconsistencies and hesitations in daily usage. We also take a short look at gender assignment of Anglicisms in Modern Norwegian.

1. Introduction

Most languages of the world distinguish the category of grammatical gender. Genders divide nouns into formally and semantically motivated groups. The number of classes depends on the criteria that serve as the basis of classification. In certain exotic languages, general semantic categories like *plant*, *animal*, *edible*, etc. may constitute genders, as in Mandarin Chinese.

2. The role of grammatical gender

It constitutes the basis of pronominal reference. In French, for example, *homme* ‘man’ is masculine (= m.), which corresponds to its natural gender, that is why it can be replaced by the masculine personal pronoun *il* ‘he’. *Femme* ‘woman’ is feminine (= f.) and can be referred to by the feminine personal pronoun *elle* ‘she’.

Grammatical gender governs adjectival, pronominal and sometimes even verbal agreement. In the French phrase *cette table ronde* ‘this round table’, the noun *table* is feminine, which is why the attributive adjective *rond* ‘round’ takes the feminine form *ronde*. The demonstrative adjective, which usually occurs in

post-nominal position in French, also becomes feminine (*cette*), in contrast with the masculine forms *ce*, *cet*.

By far the most important function of grammatical gender, however, is to assign nouns into various declension types. For example, in Latin, *mare* ‘sea’ was neutral. In Old English, the gender of nouns was grammatical, not natural or biological. The Old English words for both ‘woman’ (*wif*) and ‘child’ (*cild*) were neuter. Old English *wifmann*, also meaning ‘woman’, was masculine, and *hlæfdige* ‘lady’ was feminine. *Hunta* ‘huntsman’ was masculine, *tid* ‘time; hour’ was feminine and *treow* ‘tree’ was neutral.

3. Markedness

When languages are described, the morphologically simpler and more frequent form is treated as the base form within a category. The other forms are given with reference to the base form. Generally, the singular is considered as unmarked, and the plural is the marked form. In the French gender system, masculine is the unmarked form. The feminine form is considered as the morphological variety of the masculine: *le prince* ‘the prince’ // *la princesse* ‘the princess’. The unmarked masculine form takes the suffix *-esse* to form the marked feminine form *princesse*.

4. Is the assignment of grammatical gender predictable?

In *Language* (1933:280), Bloomfield claims: “There seems to be no practical criterion by which the gender of a noun in German, French, or Latin could be determined.” By contrast, Tucker et al. (1977) quoted in Corbett (1991:57–61) prove that gender assignment is coherent in French. There are more exceptions than in other languages, but the rules form a clear system. The major rules are phonological. It does not suffice to focus only on the last phoneme of a particular word; in some cases we must also take into account the penultimate and the antepenultimate phonemes. If we do so, the grammatical gender of any French noun can be predicted with a hundred per cent accuracy.

5. The change of grammatical gender within the history of a language

The grammatical gender of certain words may change within the history of a particular language. In Classical Latin, *flos*, *florem* ‘flower’ was masculine. In French, *fleur* is feminine. Also in Classical Latin, *arbor* ‘tree’ was feminine, perhaps because trees were associated with the ideas of maternity and fertility. Already in Old French and similarly in Modern French, *arbre* is assigned to the masculine class. In the 16th century, owing to the growing familiarity with Classical Latin, the original masculine gender was also used. This type of hesitation, which only comes to an end in the 17th century, can be observed in the case of other “transgender” nouns as well. Modern French *art* (m.) ‘art’,

from Latin *ars* (f.) is frequently feminine. In the 16th and 17th centuries, words of learned origin like *épithète* ‘epithet’ and *horreur* ‘horror’ are used either as masculine or feminine, but both will take the feminine gender afterwards. The deverbial noun *échange* ‘exchange’ alternates between masculine and feminine, but is finally fixed as masculine in gender.

6. The change of grammatical gender in the process of borrowing

Borrowing often leads to the change of the gender of the borrowed items. According to Hock (1991:401), “gender assignment seems to operate in terms of the following parameters:

1. Formal criteria;
2. general semantic criteria;
3. considerations of the gender of semantically related native words;
4. a ‘default class’ to which words are assigned if none of the other criteria provides a solution.”

Latin *fenestra* ‘window’ developed into French *fenêtre*. The feminine gender of the Modern French word corresponds to that of the Latin etymon. But why is Modern German *Fenster* ‘window’ neuter? It can be traced back to the same Latin word. Among other words, Old Norse used the compound word *vindauga* to refer to ‘window’. For the sake of gaining a better understanding, I “modernize” the form of the Old Norse word into what it would be in its Modern German form: **Windaugē*. It is an endocentric compound: *der Wind* ‘wind’ + *das Auge* ‘eye’. Since the morphological head of the compound word is neuter, the whole compound takes the neuter gender: **das Windaugē*. In the meantime, the borrowed word *Fenster* ousted the **vindauga* form in German, the latter, however, continued to serve as a semantic model and determined the neuter gender of *Fenster*. English *window* reflects the same compound; over time its second element has become opaque.

7. Grammatical gender in the history of Indo-European languages

Grammatical gender is a major category of the Indo-European languages. Linguistic change affected these languages differently. Old English distinguished the three grammatical genders of nouns, adjectives and pronouns. By the end of the Middle English period (15th century), the noun abandoned the category of grammatical gender in favour of natural gender. In Modern English, grammatical distinctions of gender are mainly confined to the third-person singular (personal, reflexive and relative) pronouns.

Following the collapse of the Latin three-gender system, in Romance languages such as French, nouns fall into two gender classes: masculine and feminine. Anglicisms that enter other languages appear to conform to the rules of the borrowing languages. To what grammatical gender are Anglicisms allotted in French? The rest of the present paper focuses on this issue.

8. The proportion of feminine Anglicisms in the history of the French language

Data supplied by Nymannson (1995:96) indicate that the percentage of feminine Anglicisms is gradually decreasing in French. They represented 24.7% of all the Anglicisms borrowed in the 17th century, 16.1% in the 18th century, 14.6% in the 19th century and, finally, they amounted to only 12.7% in the 20th century. These data clearly show that words borrowed from English tend to be assigned to the masculine class. The masculine tendency can be explained by the neutralization of the differences of the grammatical genders. Anglicisms were automatically interpreted as masculine in French. As a result, their grammatical gender can, to a large extent, be predicted: *le jazz, le jogging, un drink, un thriller, un avatar*. Certain Anglicisms that refer to persons can be used both as masculine and feminine words: *coach, fan, free-lance, skinhead, snob, teenager*.

9. Factors influencing the feminization of Anglicisms

9.1. Natural gender is preferred for persons.

Anglicisms that refer to women usually take the feminine gender: *la barmaid, la business-woman, la call-girl, la first lady, la girl-friend, la girl-scout, la majorette, la rock queen, la suffragette, la vamp, la working woman*.

9.2. Inanimate referents take the gender of an existing French word.

Inanimate referents are usually allocated to the unmarked, that is, the masculine gender unless some special factor prevails: *le copyright, le derby, le folklore*. Such a factor can be what Humbley (1974:67) refers to as *attraction homonymique*: An Anglicism may take the gender of a French word that has similar form and etymology. English *check-list* becomes feminine as an Anglicism in French since *liste* ‘list’ is feminine. *Dose*, the morphological head of English *overdose*, is identical in form and meaning with the French word *dose*. The Anglicism *overdose* as well as its variety *surdose*, partially nativized by means of a French prefix, are both feminine. The feminine gender of *science-fiction* agrees with that of the French word *fiction* ‘(work of) fiction’.

9.3. Semantic analogy in general

Certain Anglicisms may become feminine if they can be associated with a feminine word in French. *Les sixties* ‘the sixties’ is feminine, since *année* ‘year’ is feminine in French. French dictionaries uniformly classify the Anglicism *country music* as a feminine word, since its morphological head *music* corresponds to the French feminine word *musique*. However, if *country* is used elliptically to refer to the whole phrase, it can be both masculine and feminine.

Golden, *granny (smith)* and *starking* denote various species of apple. They become feminine on the analogy of the French feminine word *pomme* ‘apple’. The French word *bière* ‘beer’ is feminine. This may explain that *ale* and *lager* take the feminine gender.

9.4. Semantic analogy in the case of compounds

Compounds of English origin may take the gender of the obvious French equivalent of the last element of the Anglicism. The second element of the Anglicisms *cover-story* and *detective story* corresponds to the feminine word *histoire* in French, which is why the Anglicism is attributed to the feminine class. In spite of the fact that French speakers are aware of the foreignness of these expressions, there is a constraint to assign grammatical gender to them and integrate them into the system of the French language. *Fashion victim* (1995) is a fairly recent Anglicism in French. *Victime*, the corresponding French word with a slightly different spelling, accounts for the feminine gender of the Anglicism.

9.5. Semantic analogy in the case of shortened forms

Accepted shortenings may preserve the feminine gender, since they are used side by side with the full forms: *la sitcom* < *situational comedy* “*comédie*” (f.), *la rave* < *rave party*, *rave music* “*partie*” (f.), “*musique*” (f.).

9.6. Semantic and phonological analogy

Nymansson (1995:105) supposes that *house* [’aus] < *house music* [’ausmjuzik] is feminine, possibly because for French speakers unfamiliar with English, the phonetic form of *house* and *épouse* [uz] may appear similar. This preserves the feminine gender. In French, the majority of words ending in the phoneme [v] belong to the feminine gender. The pronunciation of *rave* resembles that of *relève*. Nymansson is of the opinion that *rave* will remain feminine.

9.7. Analogy motivated by suffixes

Owing to the particularities of the development of the English and French languages, a considerable number of words of the two languages are identical. Anglicisms may belong to this group as well. Suffixes spelt identically but pronounced differently obviously correspond to each other. In French, certain suffixes are always feminine: *–ence/–ance*, *–ion/–tion*, *–ette*. Whenever the English word ends in a suffix that is feminine in French, the Anglicism will become feminine. The grammatical feminization of French *performance* is motivated by the analogy of French words like *alliance*, *correspondance* and *renaissance*. *Efficiencie*, modelled on English *efficiency*, a term used in economics, is feminine, since *confidence*, *exigence*, *patience*, *science*, etc. are

feminine in French. Some Anglicisms contain the French diminutive suffix –*ette*, which refers to the feminine form. It goes without saying that *disquette* and *kitchenette* are attributed to the feminine gender.

10. Gender assignment in Norwegian

The following overview relies heavily on Graedler (2002). Historically, Norwegian has a three-gender system, with masculine, feminine and neuter genders. This is reflected in most of the traditional dialects and in the *Nynorsk* variety, whereas in the *Bokmål* variety, masculine and feminine are regarded as one common gender. The neuter gender is treated separately. From the point of view of gender assignment, the interesting question is when Anglicisms become neuter, in contrast to the common gender. In *Bokmål*, the unmarked form is the masculine, and between eighty and ninety per cent of the borrowed nouns are assigned to this class. Gender assignment seems to be based mainly on semantic principles; for instance, animacy almost invariably results in masculine gender in new words: *call girl*, *he-man*, *bitch*, *pitbull*.

Formal features also have an impact on gender assignment. In case of conflict, semantic features seem to overrule the formal ones.

1. Monosyllabic words tend to become neuter: *kick*, *scoop*, but *look* (m.).

2. Endings:

2.a. Some derivational endings are identical (–*er*, –*ing*) or similar (–*sjon*, –*tion*) in English and in Norwegian. Here analogy seems to be quite strong. Words with these endings take common gender: *farmer*, *doping*, *audition*.

2.b. Words ending in –*ment* are neuter in Norwegian. And that is also the gender favoured by most English loans: *understatement* (n.), *gentlemen's agreement* (n.) as well as loans from French: *appartement* (n.)

Anglicisms with inanimate referents may take the same gender as the native equivalent: *race* is neuter on the analogy of Norwegian *løp* (n.) ‘race, running event’. Sometimes the source of analogy is purely speculative: *cover* (n.) is neuter, perhaps on the analogy of *omslag* ‘cover’. *Mappe* (m.) could also have served as the source of the analogy. In that case, Norwegian *cover* ought to be masculine.

11. Summary

The majority of the Anglicisms that enter French are assigned to the masculine gender. The number of feminine Anglicisms is gradually decreasing. Gender assignment varies in some cases: *sex-shop*, *trade-union*. Sometimes dictionaries provide contradictory information. In most cases, semantic factors motivate gender assignment, but in a number of cases we come across inconsistencies.

Morpho-phonological factors influence gender assignment when Anglicisms end in certain suffixes. There seems to be no perfect hierarchy between the aforementioned criteria. The Anglicism *holding* tends to be masculine, similarly to other Anglicisms ending in –*ing*. Since it is a shortened form of *holding*

company, it can be interpreted as ‘company’, that is ‘*société, forme, maison*’, which are all feminine. This possible interpretation accounts for the occasional allocation to the feminine gender.

We also investigated gender assignment in Norwegian. We found that it functioned along remarkably similar lines.

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