

Gender assignment in Danish, Swedish and Norwegian: a comparison of the status of assignment criteria

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1. Introduction

The present paper is concerned with gender assignment criteria in three Scandinavian languages – Danish, Swedish and Norwegian – applied to loan nouns borrowed from English. Specifically, I would like to focus on the following quantitative aspects of gender assignment: first, the differences in the share of individual genders within the three languages, and second, the contribution of individual assignment rules within the genders. In addition, two other questions will be addressed: the degree to which the assignment of loanwords is regular, given the analysed criteria, and the relative importance of the criteria.¹

In the following, I will begin with a brief description of the gender systems in the four languages and the gender assignment criteria that have been postulated in the analysis. In addition, an overview will be given of the corpus of loanwords and the types of analysis used in the study. This will be followed by a discussion of the results for selected assignment criteria.

2. Gender in English, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian

It has often been remarked that English loanwords provide a rewarding material for the analysis of gender assignment as Modern English has semantic (or pronominal) gender only. In contrast, nouns borrowed into the Scandinavian languages are assigned to their grammatical gender systems: a two-gender system of common and neuter gender in Standard Danish and Swedish, and a three-gender system of masculine, feminine and neuter in Norwegian Bokmål. This variety of Norwegian may also be treated as a two-gender system (cf. Graedler 1996).²

¹ For a more detailed discussion of the assignment of English loanwords in the three Scandinavian languages, see Kilarski (forthc.), and Kilarski and Krynicki (in press). Gender assignment in the Scandinavian languages has been addressed in the recent literature by, e.g., Braunmüller (2000), Hansen (1995) on Danish; E. Andersson (2000), Dahl (2000), Fraurud (2000), Kuhn (1985), Källström (1995, 1996) on Swedish; and Enger (2001, forthc.), Graedler (1996), Trosterud (2001) on Norwegian.

² This brief account obviously does not exhaust the picture: English has often been described confusingly as a language lacking gender; also, it appears that the semantic rules taken for granted in English may not be realised in the same way in dialects (cf. Paddock 1991 and Siemund 2003). In turn, Scandinavian languages present a complex

3. Gender assignment criteria

Three types of assignment criteria have been considered: semantic, phonological and morphological:

- a) semantic: 4 broad criteria: personal and non-personal animate as the semantic basis or core of gender (cf. Aksenov 1984; Corbett 1991; Greenberg 1966), together with abstract and concrete, further divided into 17 semantic fields such as sports, foodstuffs, garments; semantic criteria also include analogies between loanwords and synonymous native nouns, e.g., Da., Sw. *meeting* n. (Da. *et møde*, Sw. *ett möte*);³
- b) phonological: number of syllables, CV structure, selected initial and final sequences of consonants, and analogies with homonymous native nouns, as in the cognate Da., Sw., Nw. *back* c./m. (Da. *bag*, Sw., Nw. *bak* c./m.);
- c) morphological: inflectional, based on plural declension,⁴ derivational, based on suffixation (33 suffixes were analysed) and the derivation of acronyms and deverbal nouns, e.g., *run* and *take-off*, and finally compounding (with an English loanword as the base, e.g., Sw. *cocktailparty*, *gardenparty* n. – cf. Sw. *party* n.).

4. Corpus and types of analysis

The corpus consists of 3,796 English nouns, borrowed into the three Scandinavian languages in the following numbers: 2,728 in Danish, 2,037 in Swedish and 2,527 nouns in Norwegian. In majority the borrowings come from the post-war period; around 400 loans date from the 18th and 19th centuries (cf. Sørensen 1997, pp. 3-4). In addition, 8 nouns can be traced back to Old English, e.g., Da. *båd*, Sw. *båt* (cf. OE *bāt*, ModE *boat*). These however have been excluded due to the marked differences in the structures of all the languages involved. In terms of loanword types, included are direct loans only; other types such as hybrids, loan translations, semantic loans and pseudo- or indirect anglicisms have not

system of adjectival and pronominal agreement (see, most recently, Dahl 2000, Enger 2001 and Källström 1996); further, we deal with considerable dialectal variation involving standard and non-standard varieties.

³ The following abbreviations will be used: c. (common), m. (masculine), f. (feminine) and n. (neuter).

⁴ For reasons of space we cannot tackle here the question whether the gender of a loanword is assigned on the basis of the indefinite plural ending or vice versa, i.e. whether gender is motivated by inflection or vice versa. For a compromise approach, together with an overview of the arguments, see Doleschal (2000), Enger (2000), and Zubin and Köpcke (1981).

been considered. The corpus has been compiled from a selection of six monolingual dictionaries and dictionaries of anglicisms.⁵

As mentioned above, the present paper is primarily concerned with quantitative aspects of the assignment of English loanwords. The contribution of individual genders and assignment rules has been accounted for by way of quantitative analysis. In addition, a discriminant function analysis, an extension of the multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), has been used to determine the degree of regularity in gender assignment and the relative contribution of the assignment criteria. For a discussion of the analysis and the assumptions behind it, see Kilarski and Krynicki (in press) and Kilarski (forthc.).

5. General results

5.1 Results of the quantitative analysis

Table 1 presents the distribution of English loanwords and native nouns in the three languages.⁶

Table 1. Distribution of loanwords vs. native nouns

		common	neuter	
Danish	loan	85.3	14.7	
	native	75	25	
Swedish	loan	90.4	9.6	
	native	75	25	
		masculine	feminine	neuter
Norwegian	loan	91.1	0	8.9
	native	65	24	11

The results confirm the findings of earlier studies, with a clear overrepresentation of common and masculine nouns among loanwords, at the expense of feminine gender in Norwegian and neuter gender in the three languages. Compare, e.g., the figures of 85.3% and 90.4% vs. 75% for common nouns in Danish and Swedish, and 91.1% vs. 65% for

⁵ For Danish: Sørensen (1997) and *Retskrivningsordbogen* (1996); for Swedish: Seltén (1993), *Svenska akademiens ordlista* (1996) and *Nationalencyklopedins ordbok* (1999); and for Norwegian: Graedler and Johansson (1997).

⁶ The data for the native lexicon are based on Hansen (1995) and Sørensen (1995) for Danish; A.-B. Andersson (1992) and Källström (1996) for Swedish; and Trosterud (2001) for Norwegian.

In order to facilitate the comparison with native nouns excluded are nouns which vacillate in assignment and nouns without an assigned gender. Their share ranges from 19.9% in Danish to 22.7% in Swedish and 25.3% in Norwegian.

masculine nouns in Norwegian. Notice also that none of the loanwords in Norwegian have been assigned feminine as their only gender.⁷

5.2 Results of the discriminant analysis

The expansion of common and masculine genders is also reflected in the results of the discriminant function analysis (see Table 2).⁸ The model tests how well the proposed criteria classify the data in the corpus. The cases used to train the model were also applied in the *post hoc* classification procedure. The table presents the percentage of correctly classified cases for the individual genders.⁹

Table 2. Results of discriminant analysis for Danish, Swedish and Norwegian

percentage of correctly classified cases	Danish		Swedish		total
	common	neuter	common	neuter	
Danish	95.35	19.47	95.35	19.47	71.91
Swedish	98.50	2.72	98.50	2.72	67.39
Norwegian	masculine	feminine	neuter	unassigned	total
	97.08	0.00	0.00	11.83	67.66

The overall percentage of correctly classified cases – 67.39% in Swedish and 67.66% in Norwegian to 71.91% in Danish – suggests only a partial regularity in gender assignment, based on the selected criteria. If we look at the results for the individual genders, we can see a better classification rate for common and masculine genders, with 95.35% for common as opposed to 19.47% for neuter gender in Danish. The figures for

⁷ There are however 11 nouns that vacillate between masculine and feminine.

⁸ The following variables were evaluated: a) semantic: PERSONAL, NON-PERSONAL ANIMATE, CONCRETE, ABSTRACT; b) phonological: POLYSYLLABICITY, PENULTIMATE PHONEME LENGTH, LAST PHONEME LENGTH, NUMBER OF FINAL CONSONANTS, FINAL GLOTTAL STOP IN DANISH; and HOM/SYN (gender of homonym or synonym); c) morphological: DEVERBAL NOUN WITH PARTICLE, DEVERBAL NOUN WITHOUT PARTICLE, SUFFIX, PLURAL, BASE GENDER. Note that some of the variables were not accepted due to a violation of one of the assumptions of the analysis, e.g., BASE GENDER discussed in §6.4.4. In all, 11 variables were accepted for Danish, 12 for Swedish and 7 for Norwegian.

⁹ In the following, the term “case” is used as loanwords appear in the classification in configurations which include alternative forms, e.g., in plural inflection. Thus while the terms case and loanword are not equivalent, the results of the classification of cases are equivalent to the classification of loanwords (for details see Kilarski and Krynicki (in press) and Kilarski (forthc.)).

Swedish show an even lower rate for neuter gender (2.72%); even more strikingly, no feminine and neuter cases in Norwegian have been classified successfully. The higher rate for neuters in Danish, and a lower one in Swedish and Norwegian will be reflected below, e.g., in the behaviour of mass nouns.

The low results for neuter and feminine genders indicate that nouns which belong to these genders show no or few characteristic features that would enable the model to classify them as such – instead, they are grouped together with common and masculine nouns. In the following, I want to show that these results can be attributed to the unequal pull of the genders, or rather the assignment criteria associated with these genders.¹⁰

6. Gender assignment criteria

6.1 Semantic assignment

We begin the discussion of assignment criteria with the assignment of animate and mass nouns (see Table 3).¹¹

Table 3. Assignment of animates and mass nouns

	semantic criterion	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	animate	96.8	3.0	0.2	525
	mass	47.7	19.5	32.9	149
Swedish	animate	96.2	3.2	0.6	345
	mass	63.7	15.8	20.5	146
		masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	animate	96.9	2.9	0.2	420
	mass	88.7	5.6	5.6	124

The vast majority of semantic rules are associated with common or masculine gender. A clear example is provided by animate nouns among which common or masculine nouns constitute 96%. Exceptional are typically collectives with formal or semantic similarity with a native equivalent, e.g., Da., Sw., Nw. *band* n., along with the last elements of compounds, e.g., Da. *egghead*, Sw. *skinhead* n. (cf. Da. *hoved*, Sw. *huvud* ‘head’ n. – but Da., Nw. *skinhead* c./m.), and animates assigned neuter on the basis of their suffix, e.g., Da., Nw. *establishment* (cf. native *-ment* n.). In contrast, only a few semantic criteria are associated with neuter gender:

¹⁰ For an interpretation of gender assignment in terms of default see, e.g., the recent Corbett and Fraser (2000), and Rice and Steinmetz (2000).

¹¹ Here and in the following tables the figures are given only for the share among nouns with an assigned gender.

among mass nouns the share of neuter nouns is slightly larger, between 5.6% in Norwegian, up to 15.8% in Swedish and 19.5% in Danish, along with an increase in vacillation, again up to 32.9% in Danish. Such vacillation is very uncommon among animate nouns – cf. Da. *follow-up*, Sw. *smolt* c./n. and Nw. *wildcard* m./n.

Animate and mass nouns contain the prototypical members of the two genders, where the animates constitute the semantic core of gender. These results may also be interpreted in terms of the animacy hierarchy (cf. Dahl 2000). Whereas native animates may appear in the neuter gender, e.g., lower animals and nouns with sex-neutral reference, the cut-off point between nouns assigned by way of this criterion and the residue appears to have moved down among loanwords: from higher animals vs. lower animals and the residue – to animate vs. the residue.

6.2 Phonological assignment

Likewise, most phonological features contribute to the assignment of common or masculine gender. As an illustration, consider the assignment of monosyllabic nouns in Table 4.

Table 4. Assignment of mono- and polysyllables

	type	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	mono	68.8	21.3	10.0	400
	poly	83.1	12.2	4.7	1,898
Swedish	mono	82.4	12.3	5.3	358
	poly	88.4	8.3	3.2	1,270
	type	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	mono	80.3	10.1	9.7	457
	poly	88.5	7.9	3.6	1,512

Monosyllables behave differently in selected areas of the lexicon, e.g., in their derivation and plural inflection. However, contrary to previous suggestions as to a correlation between monosyllables and neuter gender,¹² the ratio of common/masculine vs. neuter nouns shows instead a straightforward assignment to common or masculine gender in Swedish and Norwegian. The assignment of monosyllabic nouns in Danish is less conclusive, with a slightly larger share of neuter nouns.

¹² See, e.g., Graedler (1996, p. 141) for Norwegian; cf. also Arndt (1970, p. 251) and Carstensen (1980, p. 64) for German.

6.3 Homonymy and synonymy

As regards associations with a native synonym and homonym, both clearly contribute to common or masculine assignment. Table 5 shows the distribution of gender among nouns with a Danish and Swedish homonym of common gender, or a Norwegian homonym of one of the three genders or a vacillating one.

Table 5. Association with a native homonym

	gender of homonym	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	common	90.8	4.8	4.4	229
	neuter	26.9	63.0	10.2	108
Swedish	common	92.8	5.6	1.6	125
	neuter	50.9	45.3	3.8	53

	gender of homonym	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	masculine	94.5	2.2	3.3	182
	feminine	100	0	0	1
	neuter	48.5	38.1	13.4	97
	vac. (m./n.)	44.4	11.1	44.4	9
	vac. (m./f.)	97.1	0	2.9	35

The gender of a native homonym is significant for nouns of both genders only in Danish: among nouns with a common homonym the proportion of common to neuter nouns appears to be more in favour of common gender (90.8% vs. 4.8%), as compared with nouns with a neuter homonym (63% vs. 26.9%). In contrast, in Swedish and Norwegian, nouns with a neuter homonym are actually more likely to be assigned common/masculine gender. In addition, in Norwegian nouns with a feminine homonym take masculine gender, with the exception of one vacillating noun.¹³

The native equivalents are typically cognates: the following elements are the most productive ones in cases of partial homonymy in Danish: *-back* (*bag* c.), *-ball* (*bold* c.), *-board* (*bord* ‘table’ n.), *-house* (*hus* n.), *-set* (*sæt* n.) and *-word* (*ord* n.). Analogous examples appear in the other languages.

¹³ I.e. *file* (also *fil*) – cf. Nw. *fil* ‘document’ m./f. *Bloody Mary* and *Marie* is the only case of homonymy with a feminine noun in Norwegian.

6.4 Morphological assignment

6.4.1 Inflectional assignment

Turning to inflectional assignment, if we leave aside the question as to the motivation of gender and inflection, we can see a straightforward correlation between gender and plural. The results in Table 6 are shown for nouns with an assigned gender and a single plural ending.

Table 6. Selected plural endings

	plural	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	<i>-e</i>	98.1	1.1	0.7	269
	<i>-(e)r</i>	88.3	7.6	4.1	658
	<i>-(e)s</i>	75.3	17.6	7.1	295
	zero	43.6	42.6	13.8	94
	<i>-or</i>	100	0	0	26
	<i>-ar</i>	100	0	0	224
Swedish	<i>-(e)r</i>	97.5	0.8	1.7	353
	<i>-s</i>	95.6	2.9	1.5	68
	zero	51.1	44.4	4.5	133
	<i>-n</i>	0	72.7	27.3	11
	plural	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	<i>-e</i>	99.5	0.5	0	215
	<i>-(e)r</i>	96.7	0.4	2.9	483
	<i>-(e)s</i>	86.5	7.1	6.5	155
	zero	33.3	50.0	16.7	72

If we first look at the plurals in Danish and Norwegian, nouns in *-e* and *-(e)r* will typically appear among common or masculine nouns, as opposed to the zero plural, associated with neuter nouns, especially in Norwegian. Likewise, in the more complex Swedish declension, plurals in *-(V)r*, i.e. *-or*, *-ar*, *-er*, *-r*, appear almost exclusively among common gender nouns, in contrast to neuter nouns in *-n*. As regards Swedish nouns with the zero plural, we may also associate them with the neuters, as the exceptions can be accounted for by productive semantic or derivational rules.¹⁴

And finally, the English plural *-s* may be treated as a well-established choice in the three languages; the figures for Swedish show an association comparable to nouns in *-(V)r*. The strong correlation between gender and inflection reflects the large discriminating power of the variable in the discriminant analysis to which we will return in §7 below.

¹⁴ These are primarily nouns in *-are*, nouns of measurement and collectives. Note also that zero plural as indicated in a dictionary may also reflect an incomplete assimilation of the loanword.

6.4.2 Suffixation

The second type of morphological criteria involves the derivation of a loanword. As an example, consider the assignment of selected suffixes, shown below in Table 7. Again, these rules typically favour common or masculine gender: the two most productive suffixes *-er* and *-ing* are associated with these genders in the three languages. In contrast, there are relatively few typically neuter suffixes, and in most cases they are unproductive, e.g., *-ment* and *-ery*.

Table 7. Selected derivational suffixes

	suffix	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	<i>-er</i>	97.1	2.0	0.9	442
	<i>-ing</i>	97.1	1.4	1.4	138
	<i>-ment</i>	10	70	20	10
	<i>-ery</i>	37.5	62.5	0	8
Swedish	<i>-er</i>	98.5	1.5	0	260
	<i>-ing</i>	98.0	2.0	0	101
	<i>-ment</i>	0	80	20	5
	<i>-ery</i>	40	60	0	5

	suffix	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	<i>-er</i>	97.7	1.8	0.5	393
	<i>-ing</i>	92.2	0	7.8	103
	<i>-ment</i>	14.3	57.1	28.6	7
	<i>-ery</i>	37.5	62.5	0	8

Some of these nouns have attracted much attention as they provide clear examples of conflict between semantic and morphological assignment. The conflict may be resolved in favour of semantics, as in Da., Sw. *meeting* n., morphologically common but semantically neuter (cf. Da. *et møde*, Sw. *ett möte*), or Da. *gentleman's agreement* c., morphologically neuter but semantically common (cf. Da. *aftale* 'agreement' c.). Less frequently, it may be resolved in favour of derivation, e.g., in Da. *elektorat* 'electorate', *captive* 'insurance company' n. – both semantically common but morphologically neuter (cf. native *-at*, *-iv* n.).

6.4.3 Assignment of deverbal nouns

Another derivational criterion involves deverbal nouns. The assignment of deverbal nouns without particle, or abstract monosyllables, e.g., Da. *check/tjek* n., Sw. *check* c., Nw. *sjekk* m. 'control', is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. Assignment of deverbal nouns without particle

	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	30.3	51.4	18.3	109
Swedish	72.6	20.2	7.1	84
	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	57.0	24.8	18.2	121

We can see a relatively strong correlation with neuter gender in Danish: out of 109 assigned nouns 51.4% are neuter, as opposed to 30.3% of common gender. The criterion is less conclusive in Norwegian, while a clear correlation can be found with common gender in Swedish. This group is relatively unstable, which is shown by the high share of vacillating nouns, especially in Danish and Norwegian. Thus the distribution of deverbal nouns without particle only partly reflects the neuter assignment rules suggested for native nouns in Swedish (Källström 1996), and English loanwords in Danish (Hansen 1995; Sørensen 1973) and Norwegian (Graedler 1996).

In several cases gender helps to differentiate pairs of homonyms, e.g., between the abstract and concrete senses in Da., *check/tjek* ‘control’ n., borrowed after WWII, as opposed to *check* ‘banking check’ c., an early 19th century loan (cf. Sørensen 1973: 50).¹⁵

6.4.4 Compounding

I would like to finish the overview of assignment rules by looking at one other morphological rule – the assignment of compound nouns. Table 9 shows the correlation between the gender of the base (common/masculine, neuter or vacillating) and the distribution of gender among the derived compounds.¹⁶

¹⁵ Along with the semantic and morphological contrast, notice the distinct pronunciation: *check/tjek* /tjɛg/ n. vs. *check* /ʃɛg/ c.

¹⁶ The analysis involves only associations with bases which have been borrowed from English and which appear in the corpus; associations with native bases have been treated as partial homonymy, as in §6.3 above. They are treated synchronically and may not reflect the actual process of derivation.

Table 9. Assignment of compounds

	gender of base	common	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Danish	common	95.1	3.8	1.1	185
	neuter	8.5	85.1	6.4	47
	vacillating	75.0	25.0	0	8
Swedish	common	96.7	3.3	0	92
	neuter	13.3	86.7	0	15
	vacillating	100	0	0	2

	gender of base	masculine	neuter	vacillating	total assigned
Norwegian	masculine	97.7	1.8	0.6	171
	neuter	14.3	85.7	0	28
	vacillating	80	20	0	5

While the base of a compound emerges as a clear predictor of gender, it does so to a different degree depending on its gender. There appears to be a stronger correlation for common bases: in Danish gender is preserved in 95.1% of common bases as opposed to 85.1% of neuter bases, and analogously in Swedish and Norwegian. Likewise, vacillation in the gender of the base is more likely to be resolved in favour of common or masculine gender, Da. *biofeedback* c. : *feedback* c./n., Sw. *dragshow*, *liveshow* c. : *show* c./n., Nw. *finishing touch* m. : *touch* m./n. Notice also that homonymy or synonymy with a native base will reappear in compounds as in, e.g., Danish *-back* (*bak* c.), *-deck* (*dæk* n.), *-fjæs* (*ansigt* ‘face’ n.) and *-house* (*hus* n.). These tendencies again reflect the stronger pull of common or masculine gender.

7. Results of the discriminant analysis

By way of a summary, consider the results of the stepwise discriminant analysis. Table 10 shows the results for the three criteria of the highest discriminating power in each language; Wilks’ lambda stands for the relative discriminant power of the variable.¹⁷

¹⁷ See fn. 8 for the list of the variables evaluated.

Table 10. Relative discriminant power of selected variables

	variable rank	variable name	Wilks' λ
Danish	1	PLURAL	0.81
	2	DEVERBAL NOUN WITHOUT PARTICLE	0.76
	3	ANIMATE	0.74
Swedish	1	PLURAL	0.93
	2	SUFFIX	0.92
	3	POLYSYLLABICITY	0.91
Norwegian	1	PLURAL	0.82
	2	CONCRETE	0.80
	3	HOM/SYN	0.79

Plural inflection has the greatest discriminating power in the three languages: note the comparable values of the lambda for Danish and Norwegian (0.81 and 0.82) and a higher value for Swedish (0.93). Perhaps surprisingly, semantic criteria turn out to have a relatively weak discriminating power, with the criterion animate ranking third in Danish and concrete second in Norwegian. The variable HOM/SYN, a complex of semantic and phonological criteria, only ranks third in Norwegian. It is thus the formal variables whose contribution is the most substantial, including two other morphological variables: DEVERBAL NOUN WITHOUT PARTICLE and SUFFIX, and POLYSYLLABICITY as a phonological variable.

8. Conclusions

In conclusion, we have seen that the vast majority of assignment criteria contribute to the assignment of common gender in Danish and Swedish and masculine gender in Norwegian. In contrast, only isolated examples can be found of criteria associated with neuter gender, and none with feminine in Norwegian. It appears to be the case that English loanwords show a marked increase in comparison with the native lexicon in terms of type frequency for common and masculine genders and the assignment rules associated with these genders. While the present data have not been analysed diachronically, these tendencies observed in the borrowed lexicon may indicate an ongoing expansion of common and masculine gender in the three Scandinavian languages.

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