Productivity vs. predictability: evidence for the syntax and semantics of Animate gender in four Northeastern-area Algonquian languages

Conor McDonough Quinn
University of Maine

The Animate vs. Inanimate nominal gender distinction in Algonquian languages has long presented a challenge to predictive accounts, as many formal-grammatical Animates fall outside of the core domain of semantic animates, even as most plants are designated Inanimate, despite being describable with terms like 'live', 'grow', and 'die'. Discussions of Animate gender (generally considered the marked of the two) assignment standardly recognize areas of semantic generalizability, but emphasize an ultimately arbitrary, unpredictable character (LeSourd 1993:9).

This paper reports the results of an exhaustive survey of current lexicographic documentation combined with preliminary field research, covering four Northeastern-area Algonquian languages. For these languages at least, all evidence suggests that the Animate gender category is in fact quite dynamically synchronically productive---and far more predictable than not.

Most noteworthy, for the two languages for which in-depth native-speaker consultation is still possible (Passamaquoddy-Maliseet and Mi'gmaq), we provide a new body of data showing that speakers have a robust and largely consistent knowledge of the gender assignment of novel items---designata for which they know no pre-existing word---and of foreign (= English) word designata in general.

Presenting evidence from these two languages as well as Penobscot and Western Abenaki (now investigable only through their large extant documentary corpora), we suggest that this productivity proceeds not from some elusive single semantic "deep thread" that connects all grammatical Animates, but instead from a network of emergent prototypes (cf. Dahlstrom 1995) that form clusters or "families" of systematically (and in fact quite restrictedly) semantically related members.

This "family"-based model accounts well for why diachronic change in gender assignment across Algonquian proceeds not simply on an individual lexeme-by-lexeme basis, but by semantic cluster. For example, while the etymon for 'shoe' is generally Inanimate across Algonquian (and still in Western Abenaki), in the remaining three (geographically contiguous) languages, not only has it innovated a shift to Animate, but so have all the other terms for footwear. Examining this and several other cases of clustered gender shifts across languages, regions, and even dialects, we see that the determination of the formal Animate property applies primarily over semantic groupings within the lexicon, rather than solely over individual lexemes.

The same approach also accounts for stems that exhibit both Animate and Inanimate uses, with the Animate uses again readily tracking established "families". We observe for the first time close similarities to the English mass vs. count system, in that it too is productive and largely predictable, but
still tied closely to idiosyncrasy in lexicalization: e.g. the unpredictably specialized sense of count-noun 
"(a) speech" vs. mass "speech".

Overall, what we see in the four languages surveyed is a system that is neither perfectly predictable---
due to the inherent fuzziness of prototype-based assignment, whose variation in turn also feeds the
observed emergence and loss of semantic "family" clusters---nor particularly unpredictable, since both
pre-existing and totally novel nouns (or nominal designata) overall quite reliably track the established
prototypes.

In keeping with work like Kramer (to appear), we propose a tentative syntactic model in which Animate
status manifests through a dedicated light noun element tied to a gender-unspecified stem.

This mechanism allows one single stem to potentially lexicalize as either gender, with the Animate or
Inanimate light noun imposing (like English mass-count) a consistent semantic restriction on the
possible designatum of each, providing an interface component to the formal syntax, and establishing a
configuration that functions as a local maximal domain for lexicalized meaning.

We note that this model contributes not just to cross-linguistic theoretical analysis of nominal gender,
but also to current-day practical revitalization efforts. Heretofore, Algonquian gender has been
presented as a largely arbitrary, brute-force-memorized system. Recognizing that there is in fact much
more predictability than unpredictability radically facilitates learning both correct lexemic gender and
the complex morphosyntactic phenomena that build off of it, and demystifies what is generally
experienced as a baffling and intimidating obstacle for would-be new speakers.

References

Dahlstrom, Amy. 1995. Motivation vs. predictability in Algonquian gender. *Papers of the 26th
