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# She, He or It? Is it a Matter of Gender or Something Else? A Look into Children and Teens' Literature

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## *Abstract*

In the last couple of decades, there have been numerous studies on gender renewal, all of them stressing the relevance of conceptual categories, such as animacy and individuation, in the transition towards (more) semantic systems. These studies mainly focus on the emergence of new gender system and on pronominal agreement strategies. The phenomenon of gender variation concerns the change of gender assignment and also co-exists within fully-grammaticalised and/or standardised gender systems. This paper deals with gender assignment variation in English children's literature, where the factors ruling gender assignment apparently diverge from those claimed in traditional grammar. Examining a more marginal phenomenon, i.e. multi-gender nouns in the history of English, I propose to show how gender is not too different from other nominal categories, and its assignment is a matter of semantic-pragmatic agreement. Accordingly, individuation still plays a major role in the gender systems of English varieties and informal register.

*Keywords:* Agreement, Anaphora, Co-reference Marking, Grammatical Gender, Semantic Gender

## *Introduction*

In the last decades there has been an increasing interest in gender assignment across languages, especially in the way semantic and morphosyntactic factors interact in gender marking. Since Hockett's famous definition, gender has been described as a classificatory property of nouns "reflected in the behaviour of associated words" (1958, 231), linguistic gender occupies an intermediate position between semantics and morphosyntax: gender as a class-feature is a fixed property of nouns, stored in the lexicon and assigned according to language-specific rules (Corbett 1991), but at the same time, it is a morphosyntactic property that becomes visible in context through agreement. In other words, linguistic gender plays an important role both in

nominal classification (see gender assignment) and in co-reference tracking in discourse (see gender agreement). Gender assignment and gender agreement do not always match, for instance when strict syntactic criteria are overcome by semantic-driven choices in context.

This is particularly evident in systems which underwent or are undergoing a “resemanticization” (Wurzel 1986), i.e. those (predominantly) formal systems which change into, or are changing into, (more) semantic systems. A case in point is English, whose gender assignment got fully semanticized, although Old English (henceforth OE) shared the same grammatical tripartite system as Proto-Germanic and Indo-European. The loss of the original system was gradual and due to various factors: the loss of nominal endings reduced the importance of grammatical gender or made it difficult to distinguish, thereby creating room for other (semantic and pragmatic) factors to come into play, such as individuation, which played a determining role in the case of multi-gender nouns in OE and in Middle English (henceforth ME), and in the restructuring of the English gender system according to purely semantic features.

In the present paper, I intend to analyse how contemporary English gender system works, particularly in children and adolescents’ literature, showing that gender agreement rules established in traditional grammars are often disattended. Contrarily, the properties of the referent individuated in the diachronic change of the English gender from formal to semantic marking seem to be still effective: non-neuter gender is associated with highly individuated referents, while neuter gender is preferred for lowly individuated referents. This would further prove that gender assignment in English is more complex than generally assumed, and at the same time, that gender itself is not a peculiar nominal category, but it aligned perfectly with number and case.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 1 concerns some terminological issues regarding the double nature of gender, i.e. gender assignment vs. gender agreement, overt vs. covert gender marking; syntactic vs. semantic agreement, NP-internal vs. NP-external agreement. Section 2 illustrates multi-gender nouns in the data from OE and ME, and the factors on which they depend, and Section 3 deals with gender system and gender fluctuations in contemporary English with a special attention paid to children literature. Finally, the last Section provides some conclusions and suggests possible interpretations.

### *1. Gender Assignment and Gender Agreement*

Before dealing with English gender marking, it might be worthwhile spending few words on gender assignment and agreement cross-linguistically and introducing some useful terminology.

As a classificatory property of nouns, gender is a nominal feature which is stored in the lexicon and depends on language-specific rules which can be either formal (phonological or morphological) or semantic (Corbett 1991). Roughly speaking, formal systems are those whose gender assignment rules depend on the form of the noun rather than its meaning, namely the phonological or morphological features of the noun. Examples can be German and Russian. In German, derivatives affixes determine the gender of the noun: for instance, derivatives in *-chen* are neuter, while those in *-ismus* are masculine and those in *-ung* are feminine (Köpke and Zubin 1986), independently of their meaning. In Russian, gender marking is mainly established on the base of the inflectional class the noun belongs to: nouns belonging to class I are masculine, those belonging to class II and III are feminine and the remaining nouns are neuter (Corbett 1991, 40). By contrast, semantic systems are those systems where gender assignment is controlled by semantic factors, such as animacy, sex, shape, origin, function, etc. An example of a strict semantic system, where the meaning of a noun is sufficient to determine its gender,

is Kannada, a Dravidian language: here nouns denoting male humans are masculine, those denoting female humans are feminine, and so are also deities, demons and heavenly bodies, while all remaining nouns, including those denoting infants and animals, are neuter – e.g. *appa* “father”, and *candra* “moon” are masculine, *amma* “mother” is feminine, and *na:yi* “dog” is neuter (Sridhar 1990). Semantic rules can be less intuitive and much more complex: the title of a famous book by Lakoff, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* (1987), was inspired by the noun class system of the Dyirbal language,<sup>1</sup> where the nominal class (class II) referring to female humans also includes “water”, “fire” and “fighting” belong to class II, those which refer to non-flesh food belong to class III and all remaining nouns belong to the residual class IV (Dixon 1982, 306-12). It is worth specifying that there are no strict formal gender assignment systems, but only “predominantly formal” ones (Corbett 1991, 7-69; Aikhenvald 2003, 20-28), because no gender system exclusively relies on formal rules. In German, for example, Köpke and Zubin (1986) noticed that masculine and feminine genders always mark the nouns referring to male and female adults respectively for both domestic and game animals, while neuter gender associates both with not sex specified generic terms and juvenile terms. Similarly, in Russian, sex-differentiable nouns are assigned gender, depending on their natural gender. In other words, a universal property of gender systems and nominal classification as a whole is: “there is always a semantic core to the assignment” (Corbett 1991, 8), and this “semantic core” primarily involves animacy, i.e. animate vs. inanimate, and possibly other connected dichotomies like human vs. non-human and male vs. female.

As already stated in Hockett’s definition, the gender properties of a noun can be visible on the noun itself or show up through agreement (1958). In the former case, gender is overtly marked on the noun, because it is determined by phonological and morphological elements, such as affixes or morphological endings. For instance, in Italian the occurrence of the *-a* and the *-o* endings are enough to identify the noun *bicicletta* as feminine and the noun *libro* as masculine respectively (ex. 1). Contrarily, when the gender is covert, the form of the noun gives no clues for the identification of the class the noun belongs to, and gender only reveals through its agreement patterns. The German words *Tisch* and *Schachtel* have no formal properties on which one can assess their gender, which emerges in the selection of agreement elements, i.e. the masculine (*der*) and feminine (*die*) definite articles respectively (ex. 2).

(1) Italian

- a. *la bicicletta rossa*  
“the red bicycle”
- b. *il libro rosso*  
“the red book”

(2) German

- a. *der alte Korb*  
“the old basket”
- b. *die alte Schachtel*  
“the old box”

<sup>1</sup> Dyirbal nominal classes are four: class I includes nouns referring to male humans and non-human animates, class II nouns referring to female humans, water, fire and fighting, class III nouns referring to non-flesh food while all remaining nouns belong to the residual class IV (Dixon 1982, 306-12).

An extreme case of covert gender system is represented by English, a language with a sex-based semantic system in which gender marking shows up exclusively in pronominal agreement. Girl is feminine, while boy is masculine and book neuter only insofar as the coreferential pronoun is “she” (ex. 3). Since there are no morphosyntactic features in the noun phrase which would point to the gender of the noun – the is the uninflected and invariable definite article –, one talks of NP-external gender agreement to be distinguished from the NP-internal gender agreement where the morphological shape of the constituents of the phrase reveals the gender of the noun.

(3) English

*The girl finished the book and gave it to the boy living next door although she knew he didn't like reading.*

Since agreement also appears in overt gender systems – in Italian the noun *bicicletta* selects the feminine definite article *la* and the *-a* ending in the adjective *rossa*, while the masculine gender of *libro* is further confirmed by the masculine definite article *il* and the *-o* ending in the adjective *rosso* – and it is necessary in covert gender systems, it is justifiably considered as the most reliable cue to determine the gender of a noun. Nevertheless, this is not always the case: sometimes the same noun can take variable agreement patterns, which goes against the implicit assumption that each noun is assigned to one and only one gender.

### 1.1 Factors Fulfilling Gender Agreement

Although it is undisputable that agreement is a kind of identity function, i.e. “a relation between words that share a morphosyntactic feature” (Matthews 1981, 247), it is indeed true that “semantics and pragmatics also have a large role” in it (Corbett 1994, 203).<sup>2</sup> When morphosyntactic and semantic-pragmatic features collide, gender assignment and gender agreement mismatch. The prototypical example is the German noun *Mädchen* “girl”, formally neuter, but triggering variable pronominal agreement patterns, as shown in (4): agreement can not only depend on the lexical gender of the noun (4a) – accordingly, the definite article (*das*) and the relative pronoun (*das*) are neuter –, but can also reflect the semantic properties of the entity referred to (4b), i.e. a female human – *sie* is the feminine singular personal pronoun.

(4) German

a. *Das Mädchen, das ich gesehen habe* (Corbett 1991, 228)

“The girl I saw”

b. *Schau dir dieses Mädchen an, wie gut es/sie Tennis spielt*

“Do look at this girl, see how well she plays Tennis” (Batliner 1984, 849)

In both (4a) and (4b), discourse coherence is not compromised, but in (4a) the syntactic agreement is “consistent with form” – German diminutives in *-chen* are neuter –, while in (4b) the choice of *sie* depends on the “gender assigned by semantic assignment rules” (Corbett 1991,

<sup>2</sup> Corbett (1994, 1998, 2006), Anderson (1988), Lapointe (1988) and Barlow (1992) had already pointed to the complexity of agreement as a morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic phenomenon. See also Pollard and Sag 1994.

226); in other words, it is a semantic agreement.<sup>3</sup> According to Corbett, semantic factors can overrule syntactic constraints not arbitrarily, but along a hierarchy, i.e. the Agreement Hierarchy, according to which the probability for a certain noun to trigger semantic agreement increases as much as the distance between the noun and the agreement target:

ATTRIBUTIVE < PREDICATE < RELATIVE PRONOUN < PERSONAL PRONOUN

Hence, semantic agreement is more probable for distant targets like personal pronouns, while NP-internal targets, i.e. articles and attributive adjectives, in principle show syntactic agreement with the noun.

What is really happening here is the clash between the “lexical” gender and the “referential” gender of a noun. According to Dahl, “whereas referential gender is in principle always semantic, lexical gender may be motivated by semantic and/or formal factors or be assigned on an arbitrary lexeme-specific basis” (2000, 106). In case like (4b), there is a conflict between lexical and referential gender, rather than a conflict between formal and semantic agreement: in other words, “formal agreement is more probable if the target is a NP-internal adjective than if it is an anaphoric NP agreeing with another NP” and “the propensity for lexical agreement would be greatest when the role of the head noun of the NP is most salient, that is in NP-internal agreement” (2000, 110).<sup>4</sup> For this reason, *Mädchen* can trigger both lexically driven neuter gender and semantically motivated feminine gender on pronouns.

If alternative gender marking depends on the referential gender of the noun, beside animacy or sex, any relevant semantic property associated with a certain referent may be responsible for the emergence of non-syntactic agreement patterns. Although this should primarily appear with the linguistic item at one end of the hierarchy, i.e. pronouns, it should not be totally excluded for the positions at the other end: that is, one cannot run out the possibility of NP-internal semantic agreement.

## 2. Multi-Gender Nouns

There are instances of gender fluctuations that cannot be explained through the Agreement Hierarchy. The so-called “multi-gender nouns” are a case in point. Corbett calls “multi-gender nouns” those nouns that “can take all the agreements of more than one consistent pattern” (1991, 183) depending on “pragmatic or semantic reasons” (181). The instances Corbett offers mainly relate to the issue of animacy and sex, rather than pragmatics or semantics. As a matter of fact, a prototypical example of multigender noun is Archi *lo* “baby”: it is assigned gender I when referring to male entities, gender II when referring to a female referent, and gender IV singular or gender I/II plural when referring to an entity whose sex is unknown or irrelevant. Corbett identifies other instances of “multi-gender nouns” in homonymy, borrowings or a change in the gender system: for example, the French pair *le livre* “the-M book” vs. *la livre* “the .F pound” (homonymy), the English loan *interview* that entered the French vocabulary in the nineteenth century and was assigned both feminine and masculine gender, and many nouns in Babanki, a Bantu language, which fluctuate between class III and class V as a consequence of a transition phase where the class III is supplanting class V (183).

<sup>3</sup> Nouns like *Mädchen* are described by Corbett as “hybrids” since they can trigger more than one agreement pattern, depending on different assignment rules, i.e. syntactic vs. semantic (1991, 183).

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Corbett 1991, 2006; Barlow 1992; Croft 2013.

Cases of multiple assignment are, however, much more common than usually supposed, both diachronically and synchronically. They are not always explainable according to Corbett's criteria because gender fluctuation cannot be accounted for by semantic factors such as animacy or sex, does not concern homonymy or borrowing, and happens when there is no apparent change in the gender system. At a synchronic level, a case in point could be contemporary Dutch, where it is generally assumed that NP-internal agreement regularly depends on the lexical gender of the noun (syntactic agreement). Nevertheless, as clear in (5), not all Dutch nouns can be unequivocally assigned to one gender class – the *de*-class (common gender) and the *het*-class (neuter gender) –, since there are nouns that display “double gender”, i.e. they can combine both with the common gender definite article *de* and with the neuter gender definite article *het*: in particular, the noun *krat* is syntactically neuter and, accordingly, in (5a) is modified by *het* and referred to by the neuter pronoun *het*, but in (5b) *krat* takes the common gender determiner *de* (Semplicini 2012).

(5) Dutch

- a. *Amstel kondigde onlangs aan dat de 25 centiliter flesjes in een kartonnen krat worden verkocht. Op de flesjes en het krat zit geen statiegeld, dus je hoeft er niet mee naar de winkel om het terug te brengen.*  
 “Amstel has recently announced that the 25-centiliter bottles will be sold in a paper crate. For the bottles and the:N crate there isn't any surcharge, so you do not need to return it: N to the shop”.
- b. *Met die wetenschap kon ik ook stoppen met de drank. ik drink af en toe nog wel een biertje of een breezer of een wijntje, maar ik ben geen slaaf meer die naar de krat wandelt!*  
 “With this awareness I was also able to stop drinking too. I drink just a bier or a breezer or a wine now and then, but I am no longer a slave searching for the: C crate!”
- c. *hoe 't geconserveerd wordt* (referring to the common gender *nous olijfolie*)  
 “how it is preserved”

According to Semplicini, the gender fluctuation is due to the different conceptualization of the referent as a bounded one (by metonymic association), i.e. the bottle contained in the crate. This phenomenon is taking place in a phase of the language when Dutch is ongoing a process of resemanticization on the level of NP-external agreement. Therefore, the common gender mass noun *olijfolie* “oil” (ex. 5c) triggers semantic pronominal gender (Audring 2009, 85-88).

The present state of Dutch resembles quite closely different diachronic phases of the English language, a language that shows a completely renewed gender system based on semantic criteria, though less stable than assumed in grammatical descriptions (see below). A thorough analysis of the factors of multigender nouns in the history of English could throw some light on the semantic and pragmatic factors at play in gender resemanticization processes in general and on gender agreement fluctuation in contemporary English varieties but also in some textual genre such as children and teens' literature.

### 3. Old English

OE had a formal system of gender assignment which inherited the Indo-European tripartite distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter gender. To be more precise, nouns are assigned gender on the base of their morphological structure. In fact, the gender of a noun is dependent on the presence of derivational suffixes or on the declensional type: suffixes such as

*-lac* or *-et* mark neuter gender, suffixes such as *-ð/ðu* (\*-iþō), *-ung*, \*-īn, \*-jō, *-nes*, *-estre* and *-wist* belong to the feminine gender, and *-apl*-oð, *-dom*, *-end*, *-els*, *-ere*, *-had*, *-scipe* are all masculine. Moreover, there are still declensions which select a particular gender, according to the Pro-Germanic system: for instance, the OE strong noun declensions in *-ō-* and in *-ǣ*<sup>5</sup> only comprise nouns of feminine and masculine/neuter gender respectively (e.g. *stan-stanes* PL *stanas* “stone” or *wif-wifes* PL *wifu* “wife” which are masculine and neuter respectively as an *-ǣ*-stem noun vs. *giefu-giefe* pl. *giefā-giefe* “gift” which is feminine, being an *-ō*-stem noun).

Notwithstanding the maintenance of the three-gender system, OE nouns were not overtly marked for gender: it was only visible by the selection of specific exponents for case and number as well as in pronominal reference (Waxenberger 1996, 29). As shown in (6), stating that the OE noun *lind* “shield” is feminine is only possible having a look at its agreement targets, i.e. the feminine ending of the strongly inflected adjective *tilu*, the feminine determiner *seo* and the feminine third person pronoun *hire*:

- (6) *Seo brade lind wæs tilu and ic hire lufode*  
 “that broad shield was good and I loved it”

Though the OE system is undisputedly considered to have formal – namely morphological – gender, OE nouns did not behave consistently. The first type of deviance depends on the predominance of the natural gender of the referent over grammatical gender in NP-external (ex. 7). The masculine noun *wifman* “woman” in (7a) shows an internal syntactic agreement – *ænne* is the masculine accusative form of the indefinite article – but triggers NP-external semantic agreement, i.e. feminine pronoun *heo*. Similarly, non-neuter nouns referring to inanimate entities, such as *arch* in (7b), could select an anaphoric neuter-gendered pronoun, while maintaining a syntactic agreement within the NP.

- (7) a. *Gewohrte of ðam ribbe ænne wifman and axode Adam hu heo hatan sceolde.*  
 “(he) created from the rib a woman and asked Adam how to call her (lit. how she should be called)” (ÆCHom i.14.21)  
 b. *Wyrce þe nu ænne arc gebref hit eall*  
 “Prepare now an arc, roof it all” (ÆCHomi. 20.31)

Although less frequent, semantic agreement can also take place internally to NP as in ex. (8): the occurrence of *seo*, the feminine definite article, in front of the masculine *wifman* “woman” as well as the presence of the neuter *ðæt* in combination of the masculine abstract noun *morþ* “death” can be accounted for the natural gender of the referents that exceeds over their grammatical gender.

- (8) a. *seo wifman*  
 “the woman” (Jud. 4.21)  
 b. *He hogode on ðæt micle morþ me forweorpan, forlætan and forlædan*  
 “He intended to throw me in the great death, to abandon and seduce” (Cd. 32 Gen. 691)

<sup>5</sup> See Campbell 1959 (§§ 570-84 and §§ 585-98) for the definition of strong declension as “*ǣ*-nouns” and “*ō*-nouns”. The perspective followed in traditional OE grammars is Proto-Germanic, even if these two strong noun classes have corresponding declensional types in Proto-Indo-European. It is worth recalling, however, that the gender of most OE nouns is not predictable from their morphology: e.g. a strong noun ending with a consonant in the nominative singular could belong to any of the three genders.

There are indeed nouns whose entries in the dictionary are associated with two or three genders.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the nouns *sæ* “sea” and *wyrht* “fate” could be both feminine and masculine; *æfen* “evening” could be both masculine and neuter, and *sloh* “slaughter” could be of all three genders (Kitson 1990, 185).

However, this phenomenon has been largely ignored or, if mentioned, usually explained in relation to a late confusion in the inflectional systems (Campbell 1959, 222; Brunner 1962, 236). As argued by Kastovsky, the OE gender system was “already put into jeopardy” (2000, 79). Not only were many inflectional forms no longer gender-specific, but the case system itself was breaking down: once the inflectional endings had become ambiguous,<sup>7</sup> the inflectional classes became so unstable that many words could fluctuate from one class to the other and, at the same time, some nominal classes began to be gender-specialized: nouns belonging to the *-u-* class (which originally included nouns of all three gender) tended to become masculine, while those belonging to the *-i-* class (which also included nouns of all three gender originally) were increasingly becoming feminine. Such a gender polarization of declensional classes can be due to a weakening of the original formal gender assignment system and seen as a sign of some sort of gender reanalysis, where the semantic properties of the referent become predominant.

In many cases, such as exx. (6 and 7), the gender fluctuation is easily justified by means of Corbett’s hierarchy, but not always, although it is never random. Indeed, at least three factors are identifiable, beside animacy vs. inanimacy. A second factor concerns the nominal category of number: i.e. grammatically neuter nouns referring to inanimates might acquire non-neuter gender if they were in their plural forms such as in ex. (9b) – e.g. *toll* is neuter and accordingly is modified by the neuter definite article *þæt*, but *-as* in *tollas* is the plural masculine accusative of the *a*-declension:

- (9) a. *and Ælfric Hals nam þæt toll for ðæs kynges hand*  
 “and Ælfric Hals took the impost for the king’s hand” (Chart. Th. 635, 24)  
 b. *Hy arerdon tollas*  
 “They established tributes” (Chr. 1086)

Another context influencing gender fluctuation concerns the semantic role of the referent. As it is clear in (10), non-neuter gender correlates with the feature [+agent], while the opposite gender value, namely neuter, associate with the trait [-agent]: *deofol* is grammatically masculine and semantically linked to animacy, but in (10a), where it expresses the patient of the action of dragging, it combines with the neuter definite article; contrarily, in (10b) the neuter grammatically *mod* is associated with a non-neuter definite article, and is the agent of the event.

- (10) a. *heo þæt deofol teah, breostum in bryrded, bendum fæstne, halig hæpenne*  
 “she dragged the devil along, inspired within her breast, fast in fetters, the holy the heathen” (Jul. 534)

<sup>6</sup> The number of multi-gender nouns in OE is relevant. For instance, the Old English Dictionary (ed. by Clark) lists under the letter A, 72 nouns out of which 21 have more than one gender.

<sup>7</sup> Although gender leveling in datives, ablatives and genitives is not rare in Old languages (see Latin for example), in OE the phenomenon affects cases and genders at the same time: the *-an* ending could be genitive or dative singular of any gender (weak declension). At this stage, the three-way gender distinction is still upheld, but mainly distinguished by the co-occurrence of determiners, adjectives and so on. The only exception was constituted by the *-as* ending that always stood for masculine plural (Waxenberger 1996; Kastovsky 2000).



- b. *Him se mæra mod getwæfde bælc forbigde*  
 “the excellent mind took courage from them and bent their pride” (Cri. 987 Cd. 4)

Finally, the specificity of the referent is generally signalled through non-neuter gender, as shown by *geniht* “abundance” in (11a), which is generally neuter as clear in (11b), where it also has a generic reading.

- (11) a. *Hy beoþ oferdrencte on ðære genihthe ðines huses*  
 “they got drunk on your house’s abundance” [Ps (Thorpe 1835) 35.8]
- b. *Wenst ðu ðæt se anweald and ðæt geniht seo to forseonne*  
 “Do you think that power and abundance are to despise?” [Bo (Sedgefield 1899) 33.75.11]

The contrast between specific and generic interpretation is further confirmed by anaphorical chains like in (12), where the feminine noun *adl(e)* “sickness” takes neuter gender (*þæt*) when associated with new information, while non-neuter (feminine) gender (*seo, þære*) is triggered once the referent has become the discourse topic:

- (12) *Sum eawfast wer wæs eac yfele gehæfd [...] and he ðærrihte þæt adl gestilde. Ne seo adl ðam deaðe ne forestæpð ac ge geseoð þæt se sylfa deað þære adl yldinge forhradað.*  
 “A pious man also was very sorely afflicted [...] and straightway stilled the sickness. Not the disease does anticipate the death, but you see that the same death prevents the prolonging of the disease”. (ÆCHom ii 10.89.277)

One can conclude that gender fluctuation in OE involve both NP-external and NP-internal agreement. Whereas external agreement seems to be sensitive to the semantic properties of the entity named, non-syntactic internal agreement involves more general conceptualizations, such as the semantic conceptualization in terms of determinateness or the pragmatic conceptualization of discourse referents in terms of semantic roles and in terms of given-new information.

### 3.1 Gender Assignment in Middle English

By the early thirteenth century,<sup>8</sup> the tendencies observed in OE become the rule. If in OE grammatical gender is often more easily determinable from the forms of the modifiers, in ME gender is no longer possible to be formally determined, neither from the noun itself nor from its modifiers such as adjectives and determiners. The definite article is the invariable *þe* in all genders and numbers. *Þet* still lingers on as a variant for the definite article as well as the most prevalent form of demonstrative pronoun for both inanimate and animate singular nouns (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1996, 28): e.g. *Peteadiemeiden, Margarete bi nome* (B34 44:20).<sup>9</sup> Already in late OE the plural feminine/neuter *-e* is the dominant adjectival ending for all genders (Baker 2003, 8.3), thus the presence or lack of *-e* simply indicating the distinction between strong and weak adjectives.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning that after the Norman Conquest English was not written for more than a century: in Southern areas the vernacular attestations began around 1170, whereas for Northern dialects we have to wait for the middle of 13<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>9</sup> Trans.: that blessed maiden, whose name was Margaret.

Anaphoric pronouns seem to retain the OE gender system at least for some time after the loss of gender within the noun phrase (Stenroos 2008, 459), since the pronominal anaphoric form often (but not always) agrees with the gender of the noun: according to Stenroos, within the group of nouns referring to inanimates, approximately fifty percent of anaphoric pronouns is consistent with the OE gender system. Looking at the instances of inconsistency, it is clear that the gender assignment system has changes towards a different classification: pronominal reference to animates could be predicted from the natural gender of the referent, while about 38% of original masculine nouns and 29% of original feminine nouns referring to inanimates are exclusively referred to by the neuter pronouns (*hit*)<sup>10</sup> (ex. 12) (Semplicini and Vezzosi 2017). In (13) *weole* (masculine) and *ehte* (feminine) refer to the abstract concept of “wealth”, and are accordingly referred to by the neuter pronoun *hit*. *Weole* and *eht* “wealth” not only are inanimate, but also conceptualized as an uncountable quantity. At a closer look, it is noticeable that those nouns with unexpected neuter anaphoric reference both have an inanimate and mostly uncountable referent, i.e. *fylð* “filth”, *rinde* “bark”, or abstract, i.e. *behas* “vow”, *betacnung* “significance”, *higð* “effort”, *tidung* “tiding” etc.

- (13) a. *Þus is iwitan þin weole;wendest þet hit þin were*  
 “thus your wealth has departed; you thought that it was your own” (Nicene Creed)
- b. *Þe zitsere þe biset his iponc on his ehte; he bið þes deofles bern buten he hit iswike.*  
 “the greedy man who places his thought on his wealth; he is the devil’s child unless he gives it up” (Lam1)

Other factors influence the choice of the referential pronoun. Originally feminine or masculine nouns referring to inanimate referents retain syntactic agreement with their anaphoric pronouns preferably, when the referents are highly individuated. In (14a) *fles* (OE masculine noun) refers not to a lump of meat, but to a body and is referred to by means of a masculine pronoun (*he*). The same semantic and pragmatic features prompt the apparent maintenance or occurrence of gendered pronouns, probably independently of the original gender of the noun, in case of personifications as in (14b) where modesty (*eadmodnesse* is an OE feminine noun) is attributed agent-like behaviour, or as in (14c), where the referent of *lilie*, a feminine noun, is viewed as an individual and, accordingly, is described as having a face and countenance.

- (14) a. *Þin owene fleshe þat sholde ben þin frend, He doþ þe rapest falle*  
 “your own flesh that should be your friend, is the first to bring you down” (Digby 86)
- b. *Eadmodnesse eadiliche bi-giled ure lauerd huded eauer hire god: schaweð ford hire pouerte*  
 “modesty cheats our Lord in a blessed way [...] always hides her wealth; shows forth her poverty” (Caius)
- c. *Þe lilie myd hire fayre wlite [...] Bid me myd hire fayre bleo þat ich schulle to hire fleo*  
 “the lily with her beautiful face [...] begs me with her fair countenance that I should fly to her” (J29)

<sup>10</sup> In the analysis, identifying copular clauses are excluded, although some instances might be ambiguous. In copular clauses, the occurrence of a neuter pronoun would be of no meaning (see e.g. Harbert 2007). Therefore, the cases of (*hit*) referring to a previous (close) masculine or feminine referent are exclusively considered.

The selection of the anaphoric pronoun in ME is systematic if one looks at the way how the referent is conceptualized. It is then not surprising at all that when *neddre* “snake” refers to the devil, it requires a masculine pronominal anaphor (15a), that sexually undetermined young animals, as *brid* (a masculine noun in OE), are all neuter (15b) or that the gender of *child* shifts from neuter according to its syntactic agreement to non-neuter, when it refers to an active individual (15c).

- (15) a. *Eue heold I parais long tale wið þe neddre; talde him al þe lecum*  
 “Eve had a long conversation with the serpent in paradise, and told him the entire lesson” (Cleo, *AncreneRiwle*)
- b. *Þat fule brid þat pie and crowe hit to-drowe*  
 “the foul chick (so) that the magpie and crow tore it to pieces” (Cotton, *Owl & Nightingale*)
- c. *Þis child weox & al folk hit wes leof; þa he cuðe gan & speke...*  
 “this child grew up and it was dear to all people; then he could walk and speak” (LayAa)

### 3.2 Introducing the Notion of “Individuation”

Gender shifts in OE and in ME do not seem to be random or chaotic: indeed, conflicting gender choices correspond to a conceptual distinction which goes beyond animacy or sex, and more generally reflect a broader distinction, i.e. individuated vs. non-individuated entity (Sasse 1993; Vogel 2000). This factor becomes more and more stronger in the gender marking system as nominal inflection weakens and loses in transparency.

The notion of individuation involves both semantic and pragmatic features and can be better explained as a series of interacting dichotomies, as displayed below:

[+ individuated]	[- individuated]
countable	uncountable
referential	non referential
topical	non topical
agent	patient
specific	generic
known	unknown
familiar	non familiar

Tab.1 – Individuation as a semantic-pragmatic concept

In other words, OE and ME nouns increasingly select non-neuter gender if their referents are explainable in terms of the labels on the left, but they more frequently trigger neuter gender if the entities involved have properties that stand on the right: non-neuter gender is often associated with plurality, i.e. countability (see (9)), agentive power (exx. 10 and 15), and specific interpretations (exx. 11, 12 and 15a), while neuter gender associates with the opposite values, i.e. uncountability (ex. 13), patient role (exx. 10 and 15b) and generic reference.

#### 4. Gender Marking in Contemporary English

English gender is an extreme instance of semantic systems “where semantic factors are sufficient on their own to account for assignment” (Corbett 1991, 8), more precisely of natural systems, i.e. where masculine gender is attributed to male referents and feminine gender to female referents (9). As a matter of fact, Jespersen (1933) includes English in the group of languages assigning gender according to “nature”, that is, on the sexual differentiation of the referent and not on “grammar”: accordingly, in one group the opposition is among male, female and sexless entities and in the other among masculine, feminine and neuter words.

English nouns, determiners and adjectives are traditionally said to have no inflectional nor morphological features indicating gender, because even such morphological derivative suffixes as those in *host-ess*, *lion-ess*, *usher-ette* or *hero-ine*, are no longer productive. In other words, gender is not an inflectional category in English; that is, there are no other formal clues on the base of which one can identify the gender of a noun,<sup>11</sup> and is essentially semantic. Moreover, it is covert and shows up through NP-external agreement. The criteria according to which gender is assigned are of two kinds: animate vs. inanimate for *wh-* words – e.g. *whol/whom* vs. *which* – and human vs. non-human, further divided into male vs. female, for (personal and reflexive) pronouns – e.g. *shel/he* vs. *it*. “Gender in English nouns may be described as ‘notional’ or ‘covert’ [...] that is, nouns are classified not grammatically, but semantically, according to their co-referential relations with personal, reflexive, and *wh-* pronouns” (Quirk *et al.* 1985, 314).

- (16) a. The tutor<sub>i</sub> <female/male> wants the students<sub>m</sub> <female,male> who<sub>m</sub> were at the lesson to go and see her<sub>i</sub>/him<sub>j</sub>  
 b. The teacher wants the pupils<sub>j</sub> who<sub>j</sub> were at the lesson to finish their<sub>j</sub> homework  
 c. The dog<sub>j</sub> which<sub>j</sub> got missing for a week looked as if he<sub>i</sub>/she<sub>i</sub>/it<sub>i</sub> needed a good brush.  
 d. The car<sub>j</sub> which<sub>j</sub> Paul<sub>m</sub> parked next to his<sub>m</sub> garden had a scratch on its<sub>j</sub> side.

Since there is no one to one correspondence between these two criteria, structuralists have identified sets of several gender classes according to the patterns of pronominal co-reference: for example, Strang (1970, 95) proposes seven gender classes, Payne (2006, 713-14) four – personal masculine (*whol/he*), personal feminine (*whol/she*), non-personal neuter (*which/it*) and non-personal feminine (*which/she*) – while Quirk *et al.* (1985, 314) detects ten classes – *brother* (who-he), *sister* (who-she), *doctor* (who-duel she/he), *baby* (who-she/he/it; which-it), *family* (which-it, who-they), *bull* (which-it, (who)-he), *cow* (which-it, (who)-she), *ant* (which-it (hel she)), and *box* (which-it). Others neglect the agreement with *wh-* words and simplify into three noun classes: single-gender, dual-gender and triple-gender common nouns “according as they are compatible with just one, with two, or with all three of the core singular pronouns *he*, *she*, *it*” (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 489).

These approaches have been rejected as they are nothing but “methodical arrangement of facts previously collected by traditional grammarians” (Joly 1975, 234) and do not account for how or why nouns have been classified in a certain way. As Erades points out, “the gender

<sup>11</sup> There are neither morphological endings nor suffixes nor phonological features that indicate the gender class a noun belongs to. However, natural gender can be marked lexically (e.g. *boy* vs. *girl*, *buck* vs. *doe*, *bride* vs. *bridegroom*, *king* vs. *queen*, *nephew* vs. *niece*) or by adjuncts or gender-specific modifications (e.g. *he-goat* vs. *she-goat*, *male-frog*, *female-frog*, *buck-rabbit* vs. *doe-rabbit*, *tom-cat* vs. *tabby-cat*; but also *boyfriend* vs. *girlfriend*, *policeman* vs. *police-woman* etc.).

of English nouns, far from being simple and clear, is complicated and obscure, and the principles underlying it are baffling and elusive, no less, and perhaps even more so, than in other languages" (1956, 2). The English natural gender system indeed allows some exceptions. It is well known that a country may be referred to as *her* – e.g. Nigeria is a great country. Her citizens are very industrious; Britain called on her allies to help fight the threat – when it is regarded as a political, economic and cultural unit,<sup>12</sup> and so may a ship, a boat, a car or physical entities such as the earth. This kind of exceptions are, however, quite conventionalized, rather the “rule” is learned together with the language itself. Other well-known instances of deviations from the core uses of the pronouns *he*, *she*, and *it*, which are not conventionalized and blurredly defined as emotive (or affective) references concerning the use of *it* with human referents such as *child*, *baby* or the use of *he/she* with animals, “more likely with pets, domestic animals, and creatures ranked high in the kingdom of wild animals” (2002, 489). Either case falls within an extensive understanding of the biological or sex criterium: in examples like (17a), *it* is admissible as the sex is unknown or unspecified; the use of *she/he* instead of *it* in (17b) and (17c) is easily explainable with the fact that pets' biological sex is known to the owner and high-ranked animals are both often described according to their role within their community, which strongly depends on their sex and this is probably also the reason their gender is lexically marked.

- (17) a. The child<sub>j</sub> learns the language of its<sub>j</sub> environment.  
 b. Fido<sub>i</sub> looked as if he<sub>j</sub>/\*it<sub>i</sub> needed a good brush.  
 c. The lioness<sub>j</sub> takes care of her<sub>j</sub> cubs.

There is a further unexpected use of the third person singular pronoun. In the following examples, the standard rules of gender agreement are apparently disregarded:

- (18) a. I can understand why they took the silverware. But why did it take my piggy bank? (Mathiot 1979, 11)  
 b. I love wisdom more than she loves me.  
 c. Here she comes! (Paddock 1991, 30, referring to an approaching weather front)  
 d. Where's the pen? [...]  
     Oh there he is, in my pocket, it's in my pocket. (BNC, KC5)  
 e. A: What are the names of the other plants?  
     B: They don't have names.  
     A: Not even this one? (about a cactus in bloom)  
     B: No. He's just a spindly thing.  
     A: And Elisabeth? (about a violet)  
     B: Oh, but she's lovely. (Mathiot 1979, 20)

Many scholars have argued that this type of gender reference “indicates a higher degree of interest in or empathy with the referent” on the side of the speaker (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, 489), as the choice of the pronominal form depends both on the psychological and

<sup>12</sup> As geographical units, the names of countries are treated as neuter – e.g. Looking at the map we see France here. It is one of the largest countries in Europe – whereas, if used to denote sports teams, they are treated as collective nouns, thus, their referring pronoun is *they* and the verbal agreement is in plural – e.g. France have improved their chances of winning the Cup.

sociological attitude of the speaker towards the referent and on the properties of the referent itself (e.g. Svartengren 1927; Joly 1975; Morris 1993, Curzan 2003).

The old schoolbook rule to the effect that a male being is a *he*, a female being a *she* and a thing an *it* applies when the speaker is emotionally neutral to the subject referred to; as soon as his language becomes affectively coloured, a living being may become an *it*, this or what and a thing a *he* or *she*. (Erades 1956, 10).

[I]n the intimate pattern, the same entity may be referred to with either one of the three pronominal forms by the same speaker. (Mathiot and Roberts 1979, 7).

Scholars agree that in these cases, as in (18), the speaker transfers some features prototypically associated with humans to inanimate entities (as it happens in personification) or vice versa properties of inanimates to animate referents. What features are responsible of such shift is still a matter of debate. For some, a masculine and a feminine reference to inanimate objects would reflect the speaker's negative or positive attitude towards the referent respectively:

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 a 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. (Vachek 1964, 190-91)

Others see the non-neuter reference towards inanimates as a process of upgrading, whereas the opposite would be a way of downgrading the referent of the noun (Traugott 1972). In this perspective, the gender fluctuation could also reflect a difference in power: the masculine reference signals a major power, the feminine a minor power and the neuter no power at all.

In English, whenever the speaker feels that an object or any inanimate notion possesses some kind of power, the neuter anaphoric pronoun *it* may be replaced by one of the two animate pronouns *he* or *she* pertaining to the sphere of humanity which is the proper sphere of power. (Joly 1975, 254)

Accordingly, in case of a human referent, the replacement of the anaphoric animate pronoun would indicate a loss of power, prestige or respect.

All these interpretations have something in common: they explain gender fluctuation with post hoc interpretations according to a sex-based theory of gender assignment. According to Curzan:

Instances of gendered anaphoric pronouns that cross biological lines are not exceptions to an underlying “real” or “unmarked” system of natural gender; they are part of a natural gender system which is natural because it corresponds to speaker's ideas about and constructions of gender in the world about which they speak. (2003, 30)

Even if, as Corbett reminds us, “the criteria may not be immediately obvious to an outsider observer” (1991, 32), the choice of the pronoun, i.e. whether gendered or neuter, must obey some cognitive, semantic or pragmatic principles shared by speakers so that mutual comprehension and successful communication are guaranteed. Investigating gender fluctuation in children and adolescents' literature seemed to be a promising step to identify the semantic core of gender marking.

#### 4.1 Gender Marking in Children and Adolescents' Literature

A pioneering study on gender marking in children's literature is the corpus-based research on personification, conducted by MacKay and Konishi (1980), who investigated the use of gendered pronouns to refer to non-human antecedents in an anthology of children's literature. Unexpectedly, they found that the pronominal reference was not always consistent with the rules of prescriptive grammar. On the contrary, out of the approximately 450 pronominal references to animals, 82% were masculine and feminine, while the singular neuter pronoun occurred in only 18%, and to fantasy creatures 97% were masculine or feminine and 3% neuter and even more striking in 6 instances out of 26 cases did speakers use a "human" pronoun to refer to things. In all cases, the masculine pronouns outnumbered the feminine and the occurrence of gender markers with non-humans was linked to the following variables in this sequence: personification, centrality, the nature of the antecedent, and the nature of the attributes (MacKay and Konishi 1980, 151ff). In their explanation, the presence of gendered pronouns is traced to some sort of metaphorical extension of the properties that culturally define the concepts of male and female. Although this interpretation might be applicable most of the times, it remains unclear why the reader could be able to successfully retrace the antecedent in 19 cases of MacKay and Konishi's sample, where animate and inanimate pronouns are used interchangeably with the same referent. My investigation started from this question and tried to give a different answer to gender fluctuation, which could account for gender switch and, more generally, to propose a redefined meaning of gender marking in English.

##### 4.1.1 Corpus and Methodology

The corpus comprises 25 books ranging from the late nineteenth to the first decade of the twenty-first century with the only exception of the new and complete edition of *Nursery Rhymes*. The selection had to respond to two main requirements: to include texts dedicated to children in the pre-school and early school stages and texts instead aimed at adolescents, i.e. readers with a different level of education; to have a diachronic perspective, a comparison between nineteenth and early twenty-century classical literature and contemporary literature.

Group I [10 books for 0-6 years old children, some of which specifically dedicated to those children who are beginning to read]:

Storie-Jean Agapith (2003), *Shooflies*; Storie-Jean Agapith (2003), *Mr. Coyote meets Mr. Snail*; Anonymous (2022), *The Book of Nursery Rhymes*; Anonymous (1980), *Read it to Yourself series – Wizard of Oz*; Anonymous (1988), *Mr Toad of Toad Hall*; Britt Allcroft (1984), *Thomas The Tank Engine and Friends: 1. Thomas, Percy and the coal; 2. Saved from scrap*; Britt Allcroft (1984), *Thomas's Christmas Party*; Britt Allcroft (1990), *Thomas down the Mine*; Raymond Briggs (1988), *The Snowman*; Joan Stimson (1989), *Story time for six year olds: 1. Smart Alec, 2. Just in Time, Dance of the dolphins, Mavis and the pet sitter; 3. The robot, 4. A circus tale*.

Group II [5 books belonging to classical children literature]:

Lewis Carrol (1865), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*; Kenneth Grahame (1908), *The Wind in the Willows*; AA. Milne (1926), *Winnie-The-Pooh*; A.A. Milne (1928), *The House at Pooh Corner*; C.S. Lewis (1950), *Chronicles of Narnia. The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*.

Group III [10 books, more specifically intended to adolescent readers]:

Elisabeth Beresford (1964), *Awkward Magic*; Enid Blyton (1971), *Mr Pink-Whistle's Party*; Enid Blyton (1997), *Happy Days! The Adventures of Blinke and Flip*; Roald Dahl (1980), *The Twits*; Roald Dahl (1982), *The BFG*; Roald Dahl (1988), *Matilda*; Roald Dahl (1990), *Esio Trot*; Ted Hughes (1963), *How the Whale became and Other Stories*; C. Everard Palmer (1978), *A Dog Called Houdini*; J.K. Rowling (1998), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

To test gender fluctuation, attention has been paid to pronominal reference with non-human and in particular inanimate antecedents. The antecedents are classified according to the macro-categories used in MacKay and Konishi's study (1980) with the addition of an extra-class for natural phenomena. Given the fact that nouns for animals can be lexically specified for gender – e.g. *hen* vs. *cock*, *she-beaver* vs. *he-beaver* –, their impact on the total of the animal nouns has been checked and turned out to be negligible in that they occur sixty-four times out of 7932 tokens. Therefore, they have not been excluded from the general picture.

Antecedent	<i>He</i>	%		<i>She</i>	%		<i>It</i>	%		Total
Animal	7176	90		312	4		444	6		7932
Fantastic Creatures	1201	63		292	15		414	22		1907
Inanimates	119	99		1	1					121
Natural phenomena	2	4		42	93		1	2		45
Abstracts	19	44		3	6		22	51		43
TOTAL	8504	85		650	6		902	9		10056

Tab. 1 – Gendered and ungendered pronouns reference with non-human antecedents

Unsurprisingly, the results confirm the findings of MacKay and Konishi's study (1980) with the high predominance of the male pronoun over the female one for almost every class. This outcome is partly due to masculine roles played by the majority of characters: there are 184 male characters against 31 female characters, besides 50 unspecified. This figure becomes more interesting if intersected with the factor of centrality: only 8 female characters are central, while 44 males are the protagonists, not to mention the neuter characters, which are by far the less central. Actually only one central character is always referred to by *it*: the griffin. Looking to the properties attributed to the referent of male vs. female pronouns, the results obtained are not too discrepant from MacKay and Konishi's (1980), except for the persistence of neuter pronominal reference with animals, and the prevalence of female gender over both male and neuter ones with natural phenomena. Therefore, I have decided to look for a different feature [ $\pm$  individuated] and see whether it could make sense of the alternation between gendered and ungendered pronouns in a more exhaustive way. To do that, special attention has been paid to the instances of gender switch.



#### 4.1.2 Individuation as a Criterium for the Selection of the Pronominal Reference

Given the definition of personification as a process in which “abstractions, animals, ideas, and inanimate objects are endowed with human form, character, traits or sensibilities” (MacKay and Konishi 1980, 151), it is self-evident that, whenever something is personified, it acquires a gendered reference. One might as well say that personification is recognised thanks to pronominal reference. In children books, especially those directed to the youngest “reader”, this is the most dominant rhetorical figure and the main reason for the occurrence of *he/she* with non-human characters, be they animals, fantastic creatures, natural phenomena or inanimates.

- (19) “‘I feel so tired’, Percy puffed as he pulled into the station. ‘Have a drink’, said the driver. ‘Then you’ll feel better’”. (*Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends*, 17)

Prosopopoeia is also one of the causes for gendered pronoun reference, but not the only one in both classical children and adolescents’ literature, where the picture is less even as narrative strategies are less transparent and more elaborated. In table 1, the gender pronoun outdoes the neuter by far, but *it* is possible for any semantic class: with animals it is quite uncommon, inanimates and fantastic creatures trigger it more frequently, and with abstracts *it* is the most common choice. This ratio is what one might expect because table 1 also includes the literature for very young readers. But, the percentages do not change to such an extent to subvert the absolute proportions if the token-frequency is limited to classical children and adolescents’ books (see Tab. 2): the male pronoun is still the most frequent, followed by the neuter and then by the female. The gap between the male pronoun and the neuter one is different due to the fact that in children books prosopopoeia involves animals and objects more frequently than in other text-types. Accordingly, the percentage of male reference with animals is lower, and the number of inanimates with unusual gender marking is much smaller.

Antecedent	<i>He</i>	%	<i>She</i>	%	<i>It</i>	%	Total
Animal	2532	82	142	5	401	13	3076
Fantastic Creatures	835	65	166	13	285	22	1286
Inanimates	25	100					7
Natural phenomena	2	4	42	93	1	2	45
Abstracts	17	43	3	7	19	50	39
TOTAL	3411	76	353	8	706	16	4453

Tab. 2 – Pronoun choice in reference with non-human antecedents in Classical children and adolescents’ literature

More in detail, *it* occurs 16% of the total pronominal references towards animates, abstracts, and natural phenomena, against 85% of *he*. Like table 1, the neuter pronoun slightly exceeds the male pronoun with abstracts, occurs with fantastic creatures every five male pronoun (22%), and increases its frequency up to 13% with animals.

The least frequent pronoun is the female, which is never in alternation with neither other gender, except for one case (ex. 23c). The female gender is always motivated by the attributes given to the entities and, once associated to a noun, it is consistently governed by it. More precisely, regardless of type, size or breed, animals constantly have a feminine reference if they clearly represent or are described as female; likewise, female fantastic creatures are unquestionable woman-like, such as the ghost *Moaning Myrtle* and the *White Witch*; the moon is female, according to the Germanic cultural and traditional conception of this celestial body. This is not the case of *he* or *it* which often alternate with the same referent.

Looking at the class of animals, even if provided with properties, capabilities or behaviours prototypically attributed to humans the anaphoric pronoun could be *it*. This happens with 26 nouns (ex. 20).

- (20) a. And a Canary<sub>i</sub> called out in a trembling voice to its<sub>i</sub> children, “Come away, my dears! It’s time you were all in bed!” (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 39)  
 b. “ ‘You can talk to snakes!’ ‘I know’, said Harry. ‘I mean, that’s only the second time I’ve ever done it. I accidentally sent a boa constrictor<sub>i</sub> on my cousin Dudley at the zoo once – long story – but it<sub>i</sub> was telling me it<sub>i</sub> had never seen Brazil and I sort of set it<sub>i</sub> free without meaning to. [...]’”. (*Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, 212)

Among these, 10 are little animals for either age (puppies, cubs, kitten, chicks, etc.) or dimensions. At first sight, one could argue that *it* is more likely to occur with those animal antecedents for which Standard grammars prescribe the neuter reference (exx. 21a and 21b). However, this point is less convincing when applied to (21c), where the antecedent is one of those few nouns lexically marked for gender – *hen* is feminine –, and it is unsustainable if confronted with ex. (22), where the animal is neither central nor more personified than those in ex. (20) or in ex. (21).

- (21) a. An enormous puppy<sub>i</sub> was looking down at her with large round eyes, and feebly stretching out one paw to touch her. “Poor little thing!” said Alice, in a coaxing tone, and she tried hard to whistle to it<sub>i</sub>; but she was terribly frightened all the time at the thought that it<sub>i</sub> might be hungry, in which case it would be very likely to eat her up in spite of all her coaxing. (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, 29)  
 b. I has a pet bee<sub>i</sub> that makes rock and roll music when it<sub>i</sub> flies. (*The BFG*, 111)  
 c. “ ‘A hen! A hen<sub>i</sub> in my kitchen!’ said the cook, and took up a broom to chase it<sub>i</sub> out. ‘Where did it<sub>i</sub> come from? We have no hens here!’ ”. (*Mr. Pink-Whistle’s Party*, 128)  
 d. At any rate, as they walked off their fur was all standing up on their backs and their tails ware bristling – like a cat<sub>i</sub>’s when it<sub>i</sub> sees a strange dog. (*The Chronicles of Narnia*, 58)
- (22) a. As they looked, the sleepy little fellow<sub>i</sub> [a bird] stirred uneasily, woke, shook himself and raised his<sub>i</sub> head. They could see the gape of his<sub>i</sub> tiny beak as he<sub>i</sub> yawned in a bored sort of way, looked around, and then settled his<sub>i</sub> head into his<sub>i</sub> back again. (*The Wind in the Willows*, 74)  
 b. When they were quite ready, the now triumphant Toad led his companions to the paddock and set them to capture the old grey horse<sub>i</sub>, who, without having been consulted, and to his<sub>i</sub> own extreme annoyance, had been told off by Toad for the dustiest job in this dusty expedition. He<sub>i</sub> frankly preferred the paddock, and took a deal of catching. (*The Wind in the Willows*, 30)  
 c. She picks up the little dog<sub>i</sub> and takes him<sub>i</sub> into the house. (*Wizard of Oz*, 5)

In other words, neither the mechanisms associated with personification nor the principles of standard grammar seem to be sufficient to consistently account for the pronoun choice with animal referents. The puzzle gets less confused if one considers the macro-feature [ $\pm$  individuated] that seems to have played a significant role in the restructuring process of the English gender system. In exx. (20), (21) and (22), a particular gender is assigned to a particular noun, that is, there is a one-to-one relationship, and the assigned gender depends on a particular aspect of individuation. The relevance of the individuation factor is even more evident in gender shift, where the same noun shows agreement with more than one gender in the same context. As a matter of fact, 98% of *it*-occurrences is linked to one of sub-features under [- individuated], in particular to the indefinite article – i.e. [non-topical], [unknown] or [generic] as in (21d) –, whereas the occurrence of *he* correlates to one of the sub-features under [+ individuated], mainly [+ topic], [+known], [specific], but also [countable]. In (23) the alternation between *he* and *its* depends on the shape of the entity they refer to: when it has no physical borders like the dream, or is shapeless like Whale-Wort after having put too much weight, the author chooses *it*, whereas she/he prefers *he*, when the referent is visualised into a shape, and thus becomes individuated: the shapeless dream acquires the shape of the box it is in; the narrator knows that what seems to the characters a lump of meat is a whale and has a specific shape that cannot be seen by the other creatures because it is too big to be contained in their sight. In other words, when depicted as substance, i.e. [uncountable] entities, *it* is selected, whereas *he* is chosen as soon as the entity can be counted.

- (23) a. The nastier the dream, the angrier it is getting when it is in prison, the BFG said. It is the same as with wild animals. If an animal is very fierce and you is putting it in a cage, it will make a tremendous rumpeldumpus. If it is a nice animal like a cockatootloo or a foggelfrump, it will sit quietly. Dreams is exactly the same This one is a nasty fierce bogrotting nightmare. Just look at him splashing himself against the glass!". (*The BFG*, 85-86)
- b. By the next morning, Whale-Wort stretched right across the road and his side had pushed the kitchen wall into the kitchen. He was now longer and fatter than a bus. When God saw this, he called the creatures together. "Here's a strange thing," he said, "Look at it. What are we going to do with it?"

Gender shift often implies a change in the conceptualisation of the referent: the entity *he* refers to is conceptualised as either [familiar], [specific] or [known], whereas the neuter signals that the entity is felt as [non-familiar], [generic], [unknown] or even downgraded to the level of objects. Accordingly, gender fluctuation mirrors changing perspectives towards the same referent (as in ex. 24).

- (24) a. "And yet I wish I could show you our cat Dinah, I'd think you'd take a fancy to cats, if only you could see her. She is such a dear quiet thing," [...] "How queer it seems," Alice said to herself, "to be going messages for a rabbit! I suppose Dinah'll be sending me on message next!" And she began fancying the sort of thing that would happen:" "Miss Alice! Come here directly, and get ready for your walk" [...] Only I don't think," Alice went on, "that they'd let Dinah stop in the house if it began ordering people like that!" (*Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, 43-44)

- b. “Third time this week!” he roared across the table. “If you can’t control that owl, it’ll have to go!” Harry tried, yet again, to explain. “She’s bored,” he said. “She’s used to flying around outside. If I could just let her out at night [...]” (*Harry Potter and The Chamber of Secrets*, 7)
- c. “Make it talk,” Matilda said [...] Suddenly the parrot said, “Hullo, hullo, hullo.” It was exactly like a human voice. Matilda said, “That’s amazing! What else can it say?” “Rattle my bones!” the parrot said, giving a wonderful imitation of a spooky voice. “He’s always saying that,” Fred told her. “What else can he say?” Matilda asked. “That’s about it,” Fred said. “But it’s pretty marvellous don’t you think?” “It’s fabulous,” Matilda said. “Will you lend him to me just for one night?”. (*Matilda*, 43)

Alice always refers to her cat with the feminine pronoun as her faithful and only playmate, except in one case (24a) when she imagines that Dinah no longer acts as a friend, but is a sort of despot that gives cruel orders to Alice herself. By selecting a different pronoun, one realises that Alice does no longer acknowledge Dinah as her cat and therefore downgrades her to a generic animal. Also in (24b), the pronoun fluctuates from neuter to feminine according to the type of relationship the animal has with Harry and his uncle respectively. The feminine pronoun signals Harry’s intimacy with the owl while the neuter marks the attitude of Harry’s uncle towards the animal, who treats it as an object that has to be either got rid of or changed if it does not work. In (24c) Fred refers to his parrot with the gendered pronoun as one would expect since it is his pet. Matilda, on the other hand, switches from the neuter to the masculine pronoun as soon as she develops an interest in the qualities of the parrot and sees the parrot as a possible instrumental ally for the success of her plan.

If the semantic contribution of gender consists first and foremost in the expression of the degree of referent conceptualisation as [+ individuated], it is not surprising that it can become a narrative strategy. Indeed, in many cases, the fluctuation of genre signals turn-overs between the omniscient narrator – using *it* – and the character – using *he* (ex. 25).

- (25) a. “He’s only a – stray, and I’ve adopted him. Please let me keep him please. He’s quite tame, honestly.” Mr Chatter looked from Joe’s pleading, rather tired face to the Griffin which was doing its best to appear pathetic. Its ears went down and its tail dropped. Slowly it flattened itself onto the hot pavement and a faint smell of Rosey-Pol filled the air. (*Awkward Magic*, 30)
- b. “Erroll!” said Ron, taking the limp owl from Percy and extracting a letter from under its wing. “Finally – he’s got Hermione’s answer. I wrote to her saying we were going to try and rescue you from the Dursleys. (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, 53)
- c. Mrs Silver did just that, and in half a minute she was back holding the tortoise in both hands and waving it above her head and shouting “Guess what, Mr Hoppy! Guess what! He weighs twenty-seven ounces! He’s twice as big as he was before! (*Esio Trot*, 49)

As a narrative strategy, gender fluctuation can also be an instrument for internal focalisation, i.e. to signal to the reader that what is narrated coincides with the character’s perception, i.e. that the event is reported as the character perceives it. The passage in (26) is structured in two levels: on one, there is the narrator depicting the story from her/his own external perspective, marked by the grammatically codified use of pronouns; on the other, through the use of gendered pronouns, the author warns that the perspective has changed: as if the narrator identifies with the character, from that point on the facts are narrated from her/his point of view, rather than from the narrator’s.

- (26) The massive specimen that was carrying Harry made its way down the steep slope, towards a misty domed web in the very centre of the hollow, while its fellows closed in all around it, clicking their pincers excitedly at the sight of its load. Harry suddenly realised that the spider which had dropped him was saying something. It had been hard to tell, because he clicked his pincers with every word he spoke. "Aragog!" it called. "Aragog!" (*Harry Potter and the Chambers of Secrets*, 297-98)

In conclusion, in this text-types, gender marking meets different criteria than the biological sex-opposition: it expresses at what degree of individuation the referent is conceptualised, or classified. The more individuated – concrete, salient, topical, known, specific, familiar – a referent is or is conceptualised the more likely the chosen gender value is non-neuter, alike what one notices in the intermediate phases of English gender restructuring process.

### *Conclusions*

Discourse co-reference tracking is based on agreement and gender is often thought of a means of establishing and keeping co-reference along the discourse. Therefore, the pronominal reference must be based on principles shared by all the speakers to guarantee the felicity of the co-reference between antecedent and pronoun and thus of the communication. In the case of English, the traditionally assumed criterium is the biological sex-distinction within animates, which are in turn distinguished from inanimates. There are many instances in which this distinction does not apply or at least applies but in a very fancy way. Such deviation from the standard rules of gender assignment is often explained in terms of metaphorical extension or interpretation of the basic semantic feature of biological sex.

The comparison of the mechanisms underlying OE multi-gender nouns and ME gender assignment with the contemporary English "semantic agreement" reveals so many undoubted commonalities that they cannot be accidental. Rather, they uncover the core classificatory function of gender marking.

Once lexical (grammatical) gender cannot be recovered, as it was in OE where grammatical gender was already largely impaired, speakers begin to rely on semantic-pragmatic agreement to make reference clear accordingly. OE pronominal reference and multi-gender nouns show the emergence of a new semantic distinction: not only humans are referred to by masculine and feminine pronouns depending on the sex of the referent, but inanimate entities preferably take either non-neuter gender when conceptualized as individuated, i.e. specific and concrete objects, or neuter gender when perceived as low individuated, i.e. substances and abstracts. The same parameter holds good for the explanation of the maintenance of OE original grammatical gender within inanimate entities. Gender marking in OE and ME somewhat encodes the degree of the individuation of the referent. More interestingly, it accounts for the so-called semantic or referential agreement as well as the phenomenon of gender fluctuation, which is particularly frequent in children and adolescents' literature.

This division of labour between non-neuter and neuter gender recalls the Indo-European original two-gender system which discriminated between individuated and non-individuated entities (Ostrowski 1985). If it is difficult to argue that what is observed in English is a remnant of reconstructed Proto-Indo-European, the pervasive persistence of this opposition nevertheless supports the hypothesis that it represents a universal cognitive distinction, on which speakers rely to keep reference track in discourse, in case morphology is no longer a reliable cue to ensure discourse coherence.

The historical phases of the English language and the present day uses of referential pronouns prove that sex-based gender assignment is the extreme case of the more general semantic and pragmatic principle [ $\pm$  individuation] on which speakers construct the classification of a discourse referent.

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