

Grammatical gender in Manx: a re-evaluation¹

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1. Introduction

The nominal system of Manx Gaelic has two grammatical genders as in Irish and Scottish Gaelic. According to Broderick (1984–6 I: 25) grammatical gender had lapsed completely or almost completely in the terminal generation of speakers recorded during the twentieth century, with all inanimate nouns treated as masculine. However, scholars have been less certain as to the degree to which the gender system was preserved in the earlier stages of the language.

The study of Manx in general has been characterized by sweeping judgments, claiming overwhelming anglicization of the language's structure, as in the famous passage from O'Rahilly:

From the beginning of its career as a written language English influence played havoc with its syntax... Manx hardly deserved to live. When a language surrenders itself to foreign idiom, and when all its speakers become bilingual, the penalty is death.

(O'Rahilly 1932: 121)

Scholars who have examined Manx more closely such as Robert L. Thomson have taken a more nuanced view, but he too seems to start from an *a priori* assumption of decay as when he says:

Even in this text [Phillips' prayer book]...genders are beginning to some [sic] uncertainty and variability, which suggests that the system is about to disappear

(Thomson 1953: 15)

This seems to mean that in 1610, the approximate date of composition of Phillips' prayer book, grammatical gender was 'about to disappear'. Thomson further claims that:

It is hard to be certain whether the sense of gender was strong in early Manx; references to inanimate nouns by fem[inine] pronouns are not frequent and on the whole it looks as though they were referred to by masc[uline] pronouns perceived as neuter.

(Thomson 1986)

Broderick (1999) concurs in this judgement:

In Manx nouns may be divided into two genders: masculine and feminine; the former is unmarked. In C[lassical] M[anx] [i.e. 18th century] nouns can essentially be regarded as masculine unless there is evidence to suggest they are not. Even when an inanimate

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noun has clearly been marked as feminine, the pronoun marking it is only exceptionally the fem. *ee* (G[aelic] *i*)

(Broderick 1999: 106)

A simplification of the system of gender, number, and case marking was more or less complete by the Classical Manx period, if not before, resulting in only one gender (masculine), with some exceptions in the old feminine... This system continued into the period of Late Manx until the demise of Manx

(Broderick 1999: 165)

These significant losses in the morphophonology and morphology of Late Manx were already underway during the Classical Manx period, and because the application of initial mutation became gender-based... the loss of gender distinctions (also at this time) would necessarily lead to abandonment of lenition in due course.

(Broderick 1999: 167)

O’Rahilly himself has the following comment on gender in Manx:

In other ways, too, [besides loss of *t*- in masculine nouns after the article] genders have been rather badly confused

(O’Rahilly 1932: 119)

The problem with these judgements is that they are based on the scholars’ impressions and assumptions rather than on a quantitative analysis of the evidence of Manx texts, and the texts in fact show that the historically expected use of feminine pronouns as well as lenition are frequently retained. Thomson (1986) himself recognizes that gender may have been well preserved quite late, for he notes the mostly accurate marking of gender in Cregeen’s Dictionary (published c. 1835), but in the end he sits on the fence, declaring that ‘[t]he whole question is obscure’.

The questions to be answered essentially are as follows: at which stage, if at all, in the history of Manx did grammatical gender in inanimate nouns break down, and was it a gradual or a sudden process? Furthermore, if changes are observed, can probable causes be identified?

With some qualifications, the position taken by Thomson and Broderick in the works cited above is that the system of grammatical gender in Manx gradually declines throughout the attested history of the language, with feminine marking of inanimate nouns being restricted to a very small class of common nouns, insofar as it is preserved at all, until it reaches a point in the final speakers where all inanimate nouns are treated as masculine. Broderick goes so far as to claim that the loss of grammatical gender ‘was more or less complete by the Classical Manx period’ and that ‘[t]his system continued into the period of Late Manx until the demise of Manx’, which suggests that the lack of grammatical gender observed in the terminal speakers should also be found in the 18th century texts.

In this paper I will advance an alternative view, that the grammatical gender system was largely preserved until the mid-nineteenth century, only breaking down significantly in the language of the terminal semi-speakers, for reasons associated with the death of Manx as a

community and household language. In the sections which follow I will present evidence for this view and discuss probable causes in greater detail.

2. Methodology

The methodology chosen was to take samples of texts from different periods and count instances of expected gender concord (e.g. lenition of noun after article and attributive adjective after noun where the noun is expected to be feminine) and instances of lack of concord in each text, in order to work out the proportion of concord to lack of concord. Potential tokens in which the lenition / non-lenition or pronoun replacement was ambiguous (e.g. where case marking or natural gender must be taken into account) were excluded, as were those in which other factors (such as orthography, phonology, known variability in gender of particular nouns) made a decision on whether a particular token displayed expected gender marking or not difficult or impossible to make.

Fig. 1. Texts used in the study.

Text	Date	Approx. no. of words	Notes
Phillips' translation of the <i>Book of Common Prayer</i> (sample)	c. 1610	18,000	Only sizeable Early Manx text. Ed. by Moore and Rhŷs (1895).
Bible: Matthew's Gospel	1775	24,500	1819/1979 edition, identical with 1775 text (revised from 1748 edition) (cf. Wood 1896)
<i>Aght Giare Dy heet gys Tushtey as Toiggal jeh'n Chredjue Creestee Ayns Daa Ayrn</i>	1814	25,000	Catechism (Clague 1814), translation of Crossman (1806)
Articles, letters and dialogues in Manx from newspapers <i>Manks Advertiser</i> and <i>Mona's Herald</i>	1821–1872	13,000	For edition and notes, see Lewin (2014)
Edward Faragher. Stories and reminiscences.	1899 (b. 1831 d. 1908)	29,000	Last native writer. Ed. by Broderick (1981, 1982).
Thomas Christian	(b. 1851 d. 1930)	9,000	One of Marstrander's informants (cf. Broderick 1999: 221), from Maughold / Ramsey.
Ned Maddrell	(b. 1878 d. 1974)	5,000	Reputed last native speaker, from Glenchass / Cregneash.

3. Results

The results of the study are given in the table in Fig. 2.

Fig. 2. Percentages of gender concord in the texts with number of tokens

	Lenition		Pronoun replacement	
	Masculine	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine
Phillips' prayer Book	112/114 98.2%	27/30 90.0%	13/13 100.0%	11/15 73.3%
Matthew's Gospel	211/212 99.5%	109/111 98.2%	51/51 100.0%	18/31 58.1%
Aght Giare	238/242 98.3%	90/127 70.9%	29/29 100.0%	14/25 56.0%
Newspapers	88/110 80.0%	99/121 81.8%	29/29 100.0%	27/50 54.0%
Edward Faragher	280/282 99.3%	72/77 93.6%	73/73 100.0%	35/42 83.3%
Thomas Christian	94/108 87.0%	26/43 60.5%	51/56 91.1%	7/30 23.3%
Ned Maddrell	23/29 79.3%	5/14 35.7%	8/8 100.0%	0/14 0.0%

The key findings may be summarized as follows:

- Lack of concord is more frequent with expected feminines than expected masculines.
- In the expected feminines, concord is in all cases more frequent in lenition than in pronoun replacement (in most cases for expected masculines, the figures are close to 100% for both lenition and pronoun replacement)
- In all texts the percentage of instances in which concord is observed across both genders and both types of marking is over 50% except in Christian's and Maddrell's feminine pronoun replacement and Maddrell's feminine lenition.
- Thus, apart from the terminal speakers, all the producers of these texts observed gender concord in the majority of cases where it would be expected.
- There is no clear chronological pattern except that the figures for feminine marking in the terminal speakers is much lower than those for all the other texts. The nineteenth-century printed texts (*Aght Giare* and the newspaper extracts) in three out of four measures show less consistent gender concord than the seventeenth and eighteenth-century texts, but Edward Faragher's writings show the second highest percentage of expected lenition concord (after the Bible) and the highest percentage of concord in pronoun replacement with expected feminines out of all the texts.
- In the lexicon of seventeenth to nineteenth century Manx, between a quarter and just over a third of nouns in the lexicon were feminine and the rest were masculine.

Fig. 3. Frequency of occurrence of masculine and feminine nouns, with mean (newspapers excluded in calculation of mean)

	Lenition		Pronoun replacement	
	Masculine	Feminine	Masculine	Feminine
Phillips' prayer-book	80.6%	19.4%	54.2%	45.8%
Matthew's Gospel	65.9%	34.1%	73.9%	26.1%
Aght Giare	72.6%	27.4%	67.4%	32.6%
Newspapers	47.1%	52.9%	51.8%	48.2%
Edward Faragher	79.5%	20.5%	67.6%	32.4%
mean	74.7%	25.4%	65.8%	34.2%

Fig. 4. Numbers and percentages of individual masculine and feminine noun lexemes

Masculine	Feminine
233	108
68.3%	31.7%

4. Interpretation

If grammatical gender was strongly preserved in a speaker born in the early nineteenth century such as Faragher, then the biggest thing that we have to explain is why it appears to be almost entirely broken down (at least with respect to pronoun replacement) in the speech of Ned Maddrell, born a few decades later in the same community. According to Maddrell, he was acquainted with both Faragher and Faragher's father (Broderick 1984–6 I: 349) in his youth and he heard Manx from speakers as old as Faragher and older in his family and in the community, but it appears that he did not acquire grammatical gender, acquired it only rudimentarily, or lost it. Three possible explanations, or perhaps a combination of them, present themselves for the lack of grammatical gender (particularly, inanimate nouns marked as feminine) in the Manx of Maddrell and other terminal speakers:

- a) Language change induced by language contact
- b) Lack of practice in speaking Manx since youth
- c) Paucity of exposure to the language during acquisition in childhood

An important consideration is that all the terminal Manx speakers were bilingual in communities, and perhaps households, which even in their childhood were becoming increasingly English-dominant (Broderick 1999: 163–4, Miller 2007). In his youth Faragher would have been surrounded by a large proportion of monoglots or at least Manx-dominant speakers in a community where very little English was used, and would have been able to use Manx regularly through most of his life; but by the time Maddrell was growing up the linguistic environment of Cregneash had changed dramatically so that 'most of his contemporaries were brought up without Manx' (Broderick 1999: 75).

A considerable amount of research has been done on the topic of acquisition of gender in bilingual children in general (for summary see Unsworth et al. 2012: 1–8), and on successive bilinguals in particular. Carroll (1989: 576ff.) finds that, for English-speaking children who begin to learn French via immersion, an age of onset of four or five is a cut-off point for target-like acquisition of the French gender system; similarly Meisel (2009) claims that the optimal age for the acquisition of certain aspects of morphosyntax is before age four.

Unsworth et al. (2012), in their detailed study of Dutch-English and Greek-English bilinguals, find that age of onset is not the most important factor, pointing instead to overall quantity and quality of input. However, insofar as age is significant at all, they suggest that 'the relevant age should be much earlier than suggested by the results of earlier studies... that is, somewhere between birth and around age 2' (ibid.: 28). As they go on to note (loc. cit.):

[i]t is possible that what is crucial here is not age per se, but the existence of another developing linguistic system... In other words, whereas the 2L1 children acquiring English and Greek from birth will learn to use gender to classify nouns in Greek from the start, this may not be the case for (some of) the E[arly] S[uccessive] B[ilingual] children, who, when first exposed to Greek, already have a developing linguistic system that does not use gender as part of noun classification

(Unsworth et al. 2012: 28)

Applied to the Manx situation, it may be that already having a command of a language with no grammatical gender (English) may negatively affect, or prevent, the acquisition of the Manx gender system, especially if combined with low input quantity or quality.

Children acquiring Dutch, which like Manx is a language in which the morphological cues for gender are ambiguous or opaque and the default gender is much more frequent than the other (ibid.: 8–9), show a long delay in acquisition of the non-default neuter gender (ibid.: 30) in comparison to the default common gender; it is possible that a similar situation would have obtained in Manx. While the language was a full community language spoken mostly by monoglots and Manx-dominant or balanced bilinguals, acquisition of the feminine gender would have been successful and its intergenerational transmission stable, but in English-dominant bilinguals and semi-speakers, the cross-linguistic evidence as well as the empirical evidence from the terminal speakers suggests that it would have been vulnerable to loss.

The details of Maddrell's childhood exposure to Manx are thus of great importance in accounting for his lack of grammatical gender. According to Broderick (1999: 75), 'Maddrell told us [Broderick, David Clement and Walter Clarke] when we visited 17.08.1972 that he was born at the Corvalley, about a mile NE of Cregneash, and because of the size of his family was farmed out to relatives when he was about two and a half years' old to be brought up by an old aunt, Paaie Humman (Margaret Taubman) in Cregneash who had little or no English'. Maddrell's own reminiscences shed further light on the matter:

My mother and father never used to speak any Manx in front of us, but I got it from an old aunt.

(Broderick 1984–86 I: 463)

According to the 1881 census, Margaret Taubman was born c. 1808. She was therefore more than two decades older than Faragher and we may suppose that her control of gender was as good as or better than his. It is clear that Taubman was crucial in Maddrell's acquisition of Manx, that his exposure from other primary caregivers, in particular his parents, was limited, and that he began to acquire Manx later than English. Even if his age of onset for Manx was two and a half, the findings of Unsworth et al. suggest that this would be enough for his pre-existing knowledge of English to interfere with his acquisition of gender in Manx.

The fact that Maddrell acquired Manx as a second language and apparently imperfectly acquired certain features of it suggest that he should not be regarded as a 'full native speaker'. He might be more accurately regarded as a semi-speaker, though he undoubtedly had a high competence in many aspects of the language, was largely fluent and confident in his use of it, and made frequent use of complex syntactic structures such as clefting with the copula less

commonly attested in the speech of the other terminal speakers (Broderick 1999: 162). Dorian (1977) shows how variable the competencies and gaps in semi-speakers' command of a language can be, even between siblings close in age.

We might compare Wagner's (1956: 107) description of Maddrell and his contemporaries as 'speakers who may be called half-native speakers of Manx'. He states that '[t]he speakers, though brought up in English, proved to have retained the skeleton of a Manx language as spoken by their grandparents'. It seems that non-essential elements of this skeleton, such as gender, were prone to be missing.

Maddrell claims that his Manx was once better than his English, and that he became rusty once he went 'out into the world'. One might expect rustiness to affect fluency, recall of vocabulary etc., but it is doubtful whether it can explain the lack of an entire feature from the grammar such as grammatical gender. Dorian stresses the difficulty of diagnosing less blatant and more fluent semi-speakers in dying languages, but 'suspicious' and 'puzzling' absences in the grammar (Dorian 1977: 30) may be give-aways. As for Maddrell's evaluation of his own Manx as good (at least in the past), this is of course subjective and could reflect his own personal pride in the language and be a reaction to the interest shown in him by scholars. Furthermore, some semi-speaker features are not noticed by speakers themselves, as Dorian (1977: 30) notes in East Sutherland Gaelic:

Analogical leveling proved to be a stereotypical form of reduction in East Sutherland Gaelic, whereas morphophonemic confusions, which are rife in the speech of semi-speakers, seem to produce no comment.

(Dorian 1977: 30)

If the morphophonemic and morphosyntactic phenomena of grammatical gender marking were viewed in a similar way in Manx, it is possible that the loss of inanimate feminine marking went largely unnoticed by the Manx-speaking community.² After all, grammatical gender in Manx has quite opaque marking, has very low interpretability and its loss need not impede understanding at all. A speaker could in most other respects be fluent and expressive while failing to refer to books and beds as 'she' (cf. Broderick 1999: 167–8).

5. Rhÿs

John Rhÿs (1890) makes some pertinent comments on gender in nineteenth-century Manx. Unlike the terminal speakers, many of Rhÿs's informants can safely be described as full native speakers brought up in fully-functioning Manx-speaking communities, although their frequency of use of the language had often declined by the 1880s and 90s when they were interviewed. Rhÿs notes that Catherine Keggins of Cregneash, born 1811, and a member of the only household where Rhÿs records intergenerational transmission (Broderick 2016: 36, Rhÿs 1894: ix), 'unhesitatingly' used the female pronoun to refer to *grian* 'sun'. Similarly, the

² It is known that some features at least must have been, to use Dorian's (1977) terminology, 'stereotypical', but it is not clear what they were; we have testimony of speakers judging others' competency in the language in Sage Kinvig's statement that her husband said of her Manx that she was '*jannoo brooillagh jeh*' (making crumbs of it) (Broderick 1999: 6).

fisherman of Bradda, one of the last groups to use Manx consistently among themselves, are noted as having ‘very correct’ Manx and using the female pronoun for *grian*.

However, Rhÿs notes that William Killip of Clyeen, Michael, who is described as ‘one of the best readers I have heard of his language’, ‘does not understand it to make any difference of sense whether you say *beg* for *veg* for instance after *ożag* [‘oʒag] [‘bird’], and he would talk of the sun as *ē* [e:] and not *ī* [i:] although he would call it *y ghrian* with the mutation for the feminine’. Killip describes himself as a ‘yeoman farmer’ and is recorded as living with a non-Manx-speaking wife and having a servant. Being of a somewhat higher socioeconomic class, it is likely that his exposure to English was higher even in his youth than that of the lower-class fishermen and cotters, and that his use of the language was intermittent by the time Rhÿs visited. Mr. Caine of Braddan is described as using the masculine pronoun for ‘grian’, ‘though he was conscious of the fact that *y ghrian* should be feminine’. Rhÿs writes of this Caine that ‘he is beginning to lose the lost salient points of Manx phonetics and gradually and unawares giving way to the phonetics of English, which is the language he has used almost wholly for many years’.

These observations lend support to the view that grammatical gender survived in the nineteenth century in the Manx of full native speakers who were brought up in the strongest Manx-speaking households and communities, such as Cregneash, and continued to use the language frequently throughout their lives, while it might be less consistently retained, or even lost, among those with less exposure to and use of the language. Loss of the feminine gender is therefore not a gradual phenomenon of language change, but a result of language shift and inadequate acquisition and/or lack of socialization and active use among the final generations of Manx speakers. The evidence suggests that grammatical gender in Manx was fully maintained throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and in the stronger speakers of the nineteenth century.

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