

Rosemarie Lühr: Gender agreement in Indo-European

Hittite shows that the "genericum", as a noun referring to people underspecified for gender, is a typical case where the need for a special gender marker for the feminine sexus can arise in a language. If a language has three genders like German the "genericum" is the masculine in Indo-European, if it has two genders like Hittite with common gender and neuter the "genericum" is the common gender. When looking for "generica" and corresponding feminines in other Indo-European languages from synchronic perspective, primarily the productive inflection types and word formation patterns come into question. However, in Vedic the nominal *a-* and *ā-*stems are no candidates for this. At best one can find animal terms that could point to a "genericum":

- (1) *ajā-* 'he-goat' *aj-ā́-* 'goat'
 áśva- 'horse' *áśv-ā-* 'mare'

Probably there are so few *a-* and *ā-*stems designations for creatures of the masculine and feminine sexus in the Rigveda, because the suffixes *-a-* and *-ā-* were not used as means of word formation anymore in Vedic Sanskrit but as indicators of inflection and agreement markers for pronouns and adjectives. The question of how this could have taken place has been dealt with by many scholars. A new proposal for Vedic Sanskrit was made by Lühr (2012). There it could be shown that abstract nouns which represent a personified concept may have been the starting point.

As Vedic has already been subject to investigation, Homeric Greek is now to follow in this paper. The study takes a synchronic approach. It will be examined whether the underlying concepts of abstract *ā-stem* nouns can develop agent qualities so that the nouns could be reinterpreted as denotations of female persons. Such qualities are volitional involvement in an event or state, sentience or perception, causing an event or change of state in another participant or movement relative to the position of another participant. The textual environment is decisive here. In the next step, pronominal reference has to lead to a reinterpretation in order to obtain the feminine gender with feminine agreement markers. The main point of the paper is that the assignment of the feminine gender to the *ā-*stems is of semantic origin. Afterwards a syntactization took place and inherent semantics was replaced with syntactic agreement. If the Greek data support the findings for Vedic Sanskrit, it can be assumed that similar developments also occurred in Indo-European.

References

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