

Morphologically unmarked feminine nouns: from Biblical Hebrew to Modern Hebrew

In Classical Hebrew and other Semitic languages, some inanimate nouns govern constant feminine or variable feminine and masculine agreement without being marked by the feminine suffix $-a(t)$, e.g. *yād* 'hand', *ʔēbēn* 'stone', *ʔereš* 'land', *ḥereb* 'sword', *kōs* 'cup'; *šemeš* 'sun', *sīr* 'pot', *ḥāṣēr* 'yard'. Several Semitists have noticed that unmarked feminine nouns are always concrete and usually belong to particular semantic categories (Joüon & Muraoka 1991:494-495): Earth and its parts, some basic entities of nature, body members (especially paired), names of vessels and sharp instruments. I propose to consider them originally feminine and to explain their occurrences with masculine agreement by analogy with the vast masculine majority of unaffixed nouns, with gradual weakening of the semantic classification. For many nouns in the Bible there is no evidence of any gender agreement, and dictionaries traditionally classify them all as masculine according to their morphology if they are unaffixed. My hypothesis is that some of them were feminine, based on their marked meaning, and they indeed have feminine etymological parallels in other Semitic languages, e.g. *dālī* 'bucket' (دَلْوٌ in Arabic fem) and *romah* 'spear' (رُمْحٌ in Arabic fem). Some unaffixed nouns with the same meaning but derived from different roots in Classical Semitic languages can be all feminine, e.g. *derek* in Hebrew, *ṭarīq* in Arabic, *harranu(m)* in Akkadian 'road'. I propose specific reasons for the semantic markedness of these groups of nouns basing on the general typology of genders/noun classes (Corbett 1991, Lakoff 1987).

Subsequently, some lexically feminine nouns, such as *kōs* 'cup', turn masculine in post-biblical Hebrew. On the other hand, some nouns are masculine in the Bible but feminine in the Mishna (Elqayam, 1983), especially names of body parts, e.g. *kābēd* 'liver', *pānīm* 'face'. This phenomenon demonstrates different choices between the contradicting morphological and semantic tendencies in different dialects of the Classical Hebrew language. The Arabic data provides a similar picture (Procházka 2004).

In Modern Hebrew, only a small number of very frequently used nouns inherited lexically feminine gender from the earlier historical periods, but "live" semantic criteria (other than male vs female natural gender) are not productive anymore. The only exception is the names of paired body parts and adjacent objects. The nouns *risim* 'eyelashes' and *ʿagilim* 'earrings' have feminine agreement in colloquial Modern Hebrew of its younger speakers, but only in the plural form.

I am interested to hear comments from general Afro-Asiatic linguist's point of view.

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