The Purview Effect: Feminine Gender on Inanimates in Halkomelem Salish[1]

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1 Introduction

Halkomelem is a Central Salish language spoken by around sixty elders in southwestern British Columbia, Canada. The data used in this study are based on fieldwork with speakers from the Island dialect, Hul'q'umi'num', whose territory extends from Nanoose to Malahat on Vancouver Island and to the neighboring small islands. Halkomelem has been described as having a natural gender system: singular female humans take feminine determiners and other nouns take masculine determiners. However, feminine gender "leaks" onto hundreds of inanimate nouns, especially if they fit into certain semantic categories, as discussed in section 2. Interestingly, feminine gender is optional for feminine inanimates as they often also appear with masculine determiners. This raises the question: when will an inanimate appear in the feminine gender?

Research based on texts and elicitations has revealed three factors that affect gender choice. The first is the sex of the speaker, as discussed in section 3. The second is the sex of the possessor of a noun, as discussed in section 4. The third is the cognitive setting in which the NP occurs, as discussed in section 5. The Halkomelem data show that NPs that come into the feminine purview are more likely to appear with feminine determiners.

[1] Thanks to the Halkomelem speakers who provided data for this project, especially Ruby Peter, Bill Seward, and the late Margaret James. Thanks to Zoey Peterson and Charles Ulrich for editorial assistance. Funding was provided by SSHRC, SFU, and Jacobs Research Fund.

2 Halkomelem Gender

Morphologically, Halkomelem has two genders—masculine and feminine. Halkomelem encodes gender on determiners (articles and demonstratives) and the pronouns and auxiliaries formed from them. For simplicity, we limit examples in this paper to NPs with determiners. The masculine and feminine forms of the proximal and distal articles in the Cowichan sub-dialect are given in Table 1:[2]

Table 1: Masculine versus feminine articles

	MASCULINE	FEMININE
PROXIMAL	tᶿə	θə
DISTAL	kʷθə	łə

The use of gender is illustrated in the following table giving the articles used with proximal human NPs:

Table 2. Proximal articles and gender of animates

	MALE	FEMALE
SINGULAR	tᶿə swəy̓qeʔ ‘the man’	θə słeniʔ ‘the woman’
PLURAL	tᶿə səẇəy̓qeʔ ‘the men’	tᶿə słənłeniʔ ‘the women’

The feminine determiner *θə* is used with singular female nouns, and the masculine determiner *tᶿə* is used elsewhere, including with nouns referring to plural females. Thus, the masculine serves as the default gender in the sense of Corbett (1991:205).[3]

Halkomelem has been described as having a natural gender system: singular female animates take feminine determiners, and other nouns take the default determiner (Galloway 1993, Suttles 2004). This generalization seems to be supported by data in which inanimate nouns appear with masculine determiners:[4]

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[2] The Cowichan sub-dialect is spoken in the vicinity of Duncan, British Columbia. The form of determiners vary from village to village in Halkomelem and is one of the main shibboleths used to identify where a speaker is from.

[3] Most languages with two-way systems are like Halkomelem in that, when there is convergence, the masculine serves as the default gender Corbett (1991:195).

[4] The following abbreviations are used in glossing the data: 1: first person, 2: second person, 3: third person, AUX: auxiliary, DIM: diminutive, DT: determiner, F: feminine, FUT: future, IMP: imperative, LCTR: limited control transitive, LNK: linker, MIT: mitigative, N: nominalizer, NEG: negative, OB: oblique, PERF: perfect, PL: plural, POS: possessive, PRFX: prefix associated with fluids, PRO: pronoun, REFL: reflexive, SG: singular, SUB: subject, TR: general transitive.

(1) ʔəwe:č q̓ʷaqʷ-ət tᶿə θqet ʔə tᶿən̓ sq̓əməl̓,
NEG.2SG.SUB hit-TR DT tree OB DT.2POS paddle
ʔəẇ hakʷ-əš č ʔal̓ tᶿə šq̓ʷqʷəm.
LNK use-TR 2SG.SUB MIT DT axe
'Don't hit the tree (M) with your paddle (M)! Just use the axe (M)!'[5] (BS)

However, our data show that feminine gender "leaks" onto hundreds of inanimate nouns, for examples the words for 'car', 'house', 'coat', and 'fire':

(2) łiq̓-t θən̓ snəxʷəł ʔə θə leləm̓!
move-TR F.DT.2POS canoe OB F.DT house
'Move your car (F) closer to the house (F)!' (RP)

(3) nem̓ łə šem-ət θən̓ kəpu ʔə θə həy̓qʷ!
go IMP dry-TR F.DT.2POS coat OB F.DT fire
'Go and dry your coat (F) by the fire (F)!' (RP)

As Gerdts (2009) elaborates, feminine gender forms a complex semantic network, selecting objects on the basis of their size, shape, and function. Most feminine inanimate nouns fit into the following semantic categories: buildings, containers, small round objects, flexible objects, fluids and abstract objects associated with the metaphor of flowing (*song, story, dance*), and forces of nature.[6] So, for example, the following inanimates are feminine:

(4) šxʷimelə 'store', sme:nt 'rock', cəlqamaʔ 'raspberry', ləpat 'cup', telə 'money', stekən 'sock', qʷłəy̓šən 'shoe', šyat̓q̓ʷəsəm̓ 'facecloth', sʔit̓ᶿəm 'dress', ləx̌ʷtən 'blanket', x̌ʷil̓əm̓ 'rope', səm̓šaθət 'sun'

In contrast, most objects—especially those referring to long, large, flat, or rigid objects—are masculine, for example:

(5) šq̓ʷqʷəm 'axe', q̓ʷaqʷəstən 'club', q̓əẇə 'cane', sq̓əməl̓ 'paddle', θqet 'tree', ləplaš 'board', x̌əl̓tən 'pencil', šewəq 'carrot', lətem 'table', šc̓eən̓əctən 'chair', t̓amən 'wall', təməxʷ 'ground'

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[5] Note, to aid in following the discussion, I have placed an (M) for masculine or an (F) for feminine after the translations for some of the relevant nouns.

[6] Thus, Halkomelem is fairly typical of languages that have semantic gender systems (Lakoff 1987).

An added degree of complexity to the gender system is that inanimate NPs show a great deal of fluidity in how they are marked for gender. In neutral situations, masculine nouns do not appear with feminine determiners.

(6) tᶿə/*θə təməxʷ
DT/F.DT ground
'the ground'

In contast, inanimate feminine nouns regularly appear with determiners of either gender.

(7) tᶿə/θə snəxʷəɬ
DT/F.DT canoe
'the canoe'

In fact, the occurrence of feminine determiners with inanimate nouns is relatively rare, especially for some speakers. It is thus worthwhile to approach the issue from the point of view of actual usage of determiners in texts. For example, in four hours of recorded stories, Samuel Tom used feminine determiners on inanimate nouns only eight times and on only four different nouns, each of which also appeared with masculine determiners.[7]

Table 3: Masculine vs. feminine for four nouns in Samuel Tom's texts

		MASCULINE	FEMININE
sme:nt	rock, mountain	10	3
t̓iẇiʔəɬ	church	3	1
telə	money	2	3
həẏ̓qʷ	fire	1	1
TOTAL		**16**	**8**

In sum, inanimate nouns can be classified as masculine or feminine according to which determiner they appear with in neutral situations. However, the issue of gender is complicated by the fact that feminine determiners are not obligatory for feminine inanimates, which often appear with masculine determiners instead. Furthermore, sometimes inanimates that test to be masculine in

[7] Wayne Suttles recorded Samuel Tom of Malahat in 1962, when Mr. Tom was 102 years old. Ruby Peter and Donna Gerdts transcribed and translated these texts in 2004. Thanks to Sarah Kell for her help with this project.

neutral situations appear with feminine determiners. This raises the question: when is an inanimate likely to appear in the feminine gender? The following sections provide some observations on this issue.

3 Sex of the Speaker

One important factor in determining the use of gender on inanimates is the sex of the speaker. Anecdotally, speakers mention that use of feminine on inanimate nouns is something that women speakers tend to do. Text counts show that female speakers do use more feminine determiners than males. For example, we can contrast the overall use of masculine versus feminine determiners in four hours of texts by Samuel Tom with four hours of texts from Ruby Peter.[8] These results show the preponderance of masculine determiners and the relative rarity of feminine determiners for both male and female speakers. Nevertheless, the female speaker used feminine determiners in 15% more cases.

Table 4: Gender of determiners in four hours of texts

	MASCULINE		FEMININE		**TOTAL**
Samuel Tom	1256	95%	72	5%	1328
Ruby Peter	1390	80%	340	20%	1730

Turning specifically to the topic of inanimates, we can see a difference when we compare the use of determiners with inanimates by Samuel Tom, see Table 3 above, and Sophie Micheal.[9] In thirty-four minutes of texts, Mrs. Micheal used feminine determiners on five inanimate nouns, and one of them, *həy̓qʷ* 'fire', did not appear with a masculine determiner.

Table 5: Masculine vs. feminine for five nouns in Sophie Micheal's texts

		MASCULINE	FEMININE
leləm̓	house	1	3
həy̓qʷ	fire	0	5
šyəm̓tən	belt	2	1
skʷeyəl	day	1	3
st̓iləm	song	2	1
TOTAL		**6**	**13**

[8] Ruby Peter of Quamichan has recorded many hours of texts and I just randomly selected four hours of them in order to compare her speech to Samuel Tom's.

[9] Sophie Micheal's texts were also collected by Wayne Suttles in 1962.

Even though Sophie Micheal's recordings are one-twelfth the length of Samuel Tom's, she used more feminine inanimate nouns.

In sum, text counts support the impression that female speakers use feminine gender more often than males do. Thus, Halkomelem appears to be another Native American language exhibiting sex-based inflectional differences, like Koasati (Haas 1944, Kimball 1990), Yana (Sapir 1949), Gros Ventre (Flannery 1946), Lakhota (Trechter 1996), and Mexicano (Hill 1987). In particular, Munro (1998) reports sex-based differences in uses of gender on inanimates in Garifuna.

4 Inanimates and Possession

Another factor influencing the use of gender on inanimates is the sex of the possessor of the noun. For example, the abstract noun *sne* 'name' appears in the masculine gender if the possessor is male:

(8) nił kʷθə/*łə sne-s nə-s-ƛ̓i? k̓ʷənəs təl̓-nəxʷ.
3PRO DT/F.DT name-3POS 1SG.POS-N-want DT.1POS.N know-LCTR
'I'm trying to remember his name.' (RP)

However, if it is possessed by a female, then it can appear with a feminine determiner:

(9) nił kʷθə/łə sne-s nə-s-ƛ̓i? k̓ʷənəs təl̓-nəxʷ.
3PRO DT/F.DT name-3POS 1SG.POS-N-want DT.1POS.N know-LCTR
'I'm trying to remember her name.' (RP)

The long object *šəptən* 'knife' appears only with masculine gender when possessed by a male:

(10) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə/*łə šəptən-s tθey̓ swiẇləs?
AUX where DT/F.DT knife-3.POS DT boy
'Where is that boy's knife?' (MJ)

However, when the possessor of the knife is female, it can appear instead with a feminine determiner:

(11) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə/łə šəptən-s θey̓ q̓emi??
AUX where DT/F.DT knife-3.POS F.DEM girl
'Where is that girl's knife?' (MJ)

It is clear that it is the sex of the possessor, not the speaker, that is relevant because both examples (10) and (11) were uttered by the same female speaker (Mar-

garet James). Furthermore, we can rule out the possibility of a copying rule whereby the gender of the possessor is copied onto the head noun, since we also see the same effect in examples with first and second person possessors:

(12) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə-nə /*łə-nə c̓q̓ʷalstən?
AUX where DT-1SG.POS/F.DT-1SG.POS fork
'Where is my fork?' (BS)
[male speaker/possessor]

(13) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə-nə /łə-nə c̓q̓ʷalstən?
AUX where DT-1SG.POS/F.DT-1SG.POS fork
'Where is my fork?' (RP)
[female speaker/possessor]

(14) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə-nə /*łə-nə səẇal̓əm̓??
AUX where DT-1SG.POS/F.DT-1SG.POS toy
'Where is your toy?' (RP)
[female speaker, male addresse/possessor]

(15) ni? ʔəncə kʷθə-nə /łə-nə səẇal̓əm̓?
AUX where DT-1SG.POS/F.DT-1SG.POS toy
'Where is your toy?' (RP)
[female speaker, female addressee/possessor]

Thus, we see that some erstwhile masculine nouns can appear with feminine determiners when possessed by a female person.

To my knowledge, the phenomenon of the possessor determining the gender of the head has not been reported for other languages of the world. The converse—the possessor agreeing with the head—is fairly common cross-linguistically.

5 Cognitive Setting of the Noun

We have also observed the same speaker using both masculine or feminine gender on the same noun, even within the same section of narrative, depending on the way the speaker perceives the object. The speaker uses feminine gender on a noun if a particular setting highlights an aspect of the noun that is associated with feminine gender, e.g. its smallness, roundness, fluidity, etc.

Thus, for example, we see a table, being wide, hard, and rigid, is masculine, but a diminutive table is marked feminine: [10]

(16) nem̓ ceʔ ʔaθ tᶿə ləɬem ʔə θə ʔəxʷiṅ liɬ̓ətem̓.
go FUT lengthen DT table OB F.DT little table.DIM
'You will lengthen the table (M) by adding the small table (F).' (RP)

The word for 'road' is canonically masculine, since it is conceived of as long, thin, and rigid (17), but it can also be marked feminine when a road is being described as unusually curvy (18):

(17) ƛ̓əlim̓ ʔəẇ sθəθek̓ʷ tᶿə/*θə šeɬ.
really LNK straight DT/F.DT road
'The road (M) is very straight.' (RP)

(18) naʔət xʷiʔ pay-θət tᶿə/θə šeɬ.
AUX.DT unusual bend-REFL DT/F.DT road
'The road (M/F) is unexpectedly curved.' (RP)

Water when it is contained is marked masculine (19), but, when it is running water acting as a force of nature, it is marked feminine.

(19) naʔət wəɬ xʷ-c̓iməm tᶿə t̓əməẇləč ʔə tᶿə qaʔ.
AUX.DT PERF PRFX-full DT tub OB DT water
'The tub is almost full of water (M).' (MJ)

(20) ʔeʔəθ wəɬ hik̓ʷ θə qaʔ wəɬ qʷəɬqʷəɬ tᶿə qʷəqʷiɬiʔ.
AUX.F.DT PERF flood F.DT water PERF drift.PL DT log.PL
'The high tide (F) has drifted the logs to shore.' (RP)

In sum, a Halkomelem speaker uses either masculine or feminine gender on the same noun, even within the same section of narrative, depending on the cognitive setting.[11]

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[10] French grammarians have noted associations between the size of an object and its gender in sets of related terms such as *la chaise* ('chair')/*le fauteil* ('armchair'), *la maison* ('house')/*le masure* ('mansion'), *la route* ('road')/*l'autoroute* ('highway'), where the feminine member is smaller than the masculine one (Romaine 1999:82).

[11] Payne (1998) classifies Maasai nouns into three types—masculine, feminine, and those that swing either way depending on "the speaker's construal of the intended referent".

6 Conclusion: The Purview Effect

Halkomelem gender is somewhat unusual in that inanimates exhibit fluidity of gender marking, unlike European languages where "the gender of a noun, qua lexical item, is decided once and for all, rather than on each occasion when the noun is used" (Dahl 2000:110).[12] Halkomelem nouns in the feminine purview can be marked feminine. These include (i) nouns referring to singular female humans, (ii) nouns referring to inanimate objects that are semantically feminine (based on their size, shape, or function), (iii) nouns that appear in a context that is feminizing, i.e. cognitively perceived as being feminine in size, shape, or function, (iv) inanimate objects that belong or relate to a female, and (v) feminine inanimate nouns spoken by a female.

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[12] Algonquian languages also show some fluidity in gender agreement; see Dahlstrom (1995), Dahl (2000), Goddard (2002), and references therein.

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