The Declension of Bloom: Grammar, Diversion, and Union in Joyce's *Ulysses*

Robin Goralka
University of California, Berkeley
English
Class of 2013

Abstract: *James Joyce's novel* Ulysses *applies the ambiguities of classical grammar and syntax to the English language in order to multiply meanings. He introduces the idea of subjective and objective genitives to illustrate the reciprocal love between a mother and a son. In addition, he declines the name of the character Bloom as a neuter noun rather than a masculine. Reading Bloom as a neuter character connects him to ideas of sterility and childlessness, since a sterile woman is also described in the book as being neuter. This conflation of the feminine and the neuter foreshadows Bloom's transformation into a woman in the 'Circe' chapter, where his name is declined as a neuter noun. The flux of gender in this chapter is also seen in the character Bella/o, who switches between feminine and masculine pronouns. However, the necessity of the grammatical neuter circumscribing Bloom's gender as simultaneously masculine and feminine is evidenced by the inability of Bella/o's end-word gender signifiers to represent more than one gender at once. Therefore, Joyce borrows from classical grammar to introduce concepts that English cannot illustrate. In* Ulysses*, the application of classical grammatical forms is used to unify meanings that are contradictory or inexpressible in conventional English grammar.*

James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, published in its entirety in 1922, is both a sequel to *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and Joyce's attempt to "render the myth *sub specie temporis nostri* but also to allow each adventure (that is, every hour, every organ, every art being interconnected and interrelated in the somatic scheme of the whole) to condition and even create its own technique"[1]. Just as this goal presents the book both as a whole body and as a set of discrete episodes, the novel itself often presents the reader with a choice between two concurrent but insoluble stories. The book begins once from the perspective of Stephen and again from the perspective of Bloom. Its middle presents 'Wandering Rocks', an episode from *Jason and the Argonauts*, as an alternative to Homer's *Odyssey*. The novel even ends twice, drawing Stephen and Bloom's story to a close in 'Ithaca', and then introducing Molly's monologue in 'Penelope'. Such divergence is present in a variety of ways throughout the novel, one of which is the book's allusions to classical grammar. Joyce uses this grammar to introduce ambiguity and to multiply the meanings of his words. This ambiguity introduces situations where the same words can be read with opposite senses and both readings are grammatically valid. As linguistic distinctions between opposing concepts break down, *Ulysses* presents a text in which there is no clear grammatical distinction between a thing and its opposite.

Joyce introduces these linguistic ambiguities within the opening triad of the book. One such example is within novel's third chapter, which is defined in the schematic plan of *Ulysses* as 'Proteus', and has 'philology' as its art[2]. In this chapter, Stephen's internal monologue contains the sentence "Then he was aware of them bodies before of them coloured"[3]. The unusual syntax of this thought forces the reader to consider its grammatical structure as a potential insight into its meaning; however, the insight that such a reading provides is far from unambiguous. One way to understand the sentence is: "then he was aware of them [as] bodies

1 p. 271 Joyce, James. *Selected Letters of James Joyce*. Ed. Ellmann, Richard. London: Faber and Faber, 1975.

2 p. 56 Platt, Len. *James Joyce: Texts and Contexts*. New York, NY : Continuum, 2011. In Joyce's schema, each chapter is assigned a Homeric parallel and an art, as well as a scene, hour, symbol, and technique. Most chapters are also assigned a part of the body, and some are given a particular color.

3 p. 37 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.

before [he was aware of] them coloured", meaning that Stephen was aware of the colour of things before he was aware of them as bodies. Another way to take the sentence is: "*then* he was aware of them [as] bodies *before* of them coloured", which has the opposite meaning; Stephen is aware of bodies before colours. Because Joyce deliberately arranges the sentence so that there is no clear sign which could clarify its meaning, both readings are valid. However, it is not possible to establish one of them as more correct than the other. Such ambiguity is one way that Joyce creates a sense of fluidity in this chapter, playing off of the idea that Proteus is an oceanic deity. In this way, the chapter's narrative style is not just a stream of consciousness, where one thought flows into the next. Instead, the thought patterns are more like waves upon a shore, flowing backward and forward, each set reasonably similar and yet not the same as the one before it. This fluidity creates a sense of unity between the type of language used and the cultural and historical context Joyce ascribes to it with the title 'Proteus.'

Joyce examines the ambiguities of grammar from a similarly fluid perspective. Twice in the novel, Stephen comments on "Amor matris: subjective and objective genitive"[4], first when imaging how one of his students was raised, and later on when concluding that it "may be the only true thing in life"[5]. The phrase *amor matris* is Latin for "love of a mother". *Matris*, the Latin word for "mother", is in the genitive case, and *amor*, the Latin word for "love", is a noun that represents the verbal action "to love". Genitives attached to verbal adjectives can have either subjective or objective meaning. Taken subjectively, *amor matris* refers to the love felt by a mother, "love of a mother," or "mother's love". The objective meaning of the phrase is the love directed towards the mother, "love for a mother". In translation, context is used to determine whether a genitive is subjective or objective. However, Joyce does not present *amor matris* as a translational quandary. Rather than asking the reader to determine which genitive is in use, Stephen declares that the phrase has both meanings: *amor matris* is both subjective and objective. Furthermore, Stephen's insistence on the presence of the objective meaning can be read as an attempt to assuage his guilt over not returning to Ireland until after his own mother's death, an insistence that he *does* have love for his mother. The use of the conjunction "and" rather than the conjunction "or" allows the same phrase to contain opposite grammatical meanings, in this case both the giving and receiving of love.

Another window into the dissolution of the distinction between subjective and objective is seen in the chapter 'Circe'. As the Watch come after Bloom, they chant "Bloom, of Bloom, for Bloom, Bloom"[6]. The preposition "of" is the standard marker of the genitive case. In addition, because the preposition "for" can also be used to translate the dative case, this phrase follows the paradigm for neuter nouns in Greek and Latin (although with respect to Latin, the ablative is left out). The standard order in which cases are learned is nominative, genitive, dative, accusative; for neuter nouns, the nominative and accusative cases are always identical. Because they are both the same in the declension Joyce gives us, "Bloom" can be taken as a neuter rather than a masculine noun. Moreover, the use of the prepositions "of" and "for" echoes both the subjective and objective meanings of *amor matris*. "Love of a mother" and "love for a mother" are parallel to the constructions "of Bloom" and "for Bloom".

This echo is particularly resonant because the morphologically homophonous cases of a neuter noun, the nominative and accusative, are used for the subject and direct object of a sentence, respectively. Because it is declined like a neuter noun, "Bloom" looks the same

---

4 pp. 28, 207 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.
5 p. 207 *Ibid.*
6 p. 453 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.

whether it is the subject or the object of the sentence. Therefore “Bloom”, like *amor matris*, is able to represent both subjective and objective meanings. In other words, it is able to represent both a concept and its opposite simultaneously.

The idea of “Bloom” being a neuter noun with both subjective and objective meanings gains added force because of the context in which it appears. In the chapter ‘Circe’, grammatical concepts seem to be punning on sociological concepts that share the same name. For example, Stephen says of a woman that he “Addressed her in vocative feminine. Probably neuter. Ungenitive”[7]. While the construction “vocative feminine. Probably neuter” does have a grammatical basis[8], following it with the word “ungenitive”, a pun on the genitive case, makes it clear that the definition of neuter being used is not, or at least not only, the grammatical one. The words “neuter” and “ungenitive” both imply a lack of sexual function. In addition to grammatical gender, neuter can also refer to a lack of functional sex organs; the word genitive comes from the Latin verb *gignere*, “to beget”. Although it is possible to read this comment grammatically, it is clearly alluding to the concept of sterility. This pun on “neuter” can be extended to Bloom, who has begotten no sons and does not engage in procreative sex. Declining “Bloom” as a neuter noun implies what Stephen’s comment makes explicit.

The implications of Bloom as neuter take on additional meanings within the context of the chapter ‘Circe’, and continue to play off of the confusion between feminine and neuter address in Stephen’s comment. In this chapter, Bloom undergoes a transformation of gender, being first referred to as “a finished example of the new womanly man”[9] and then being referenced with female pronouns in the scene with Bella/o, who shifts from the feminine -a to the masculine -o[10]. Bloom’s declension as a neuter noun takes place in the very same chapter where he is temporarily transformed into a woman. Like the suggestion of Bloom as neuter, this transformation occurs primarily through linguistic cues, such as the use of feminine pronouns. Similarly, Bella/o’s changing gender is evidenced by a change in the vowel that terminates her name. These cues used to express gender result in inconsistency because characters’ genders are in a state of flux.

A definitive classification of Bloom must contain both masculinity and femininity simultaneously, since he is shown to inhabit both. This classification ends up being inscribed within the concept of the neuter. However, expressing this concept within a primarily English-language novel presents a difficulty. The example of Bella/o shows that gendered word endings can only express one gender at a time and therefore cannot completely express the neuter. English pronouns do not efficiently express the idea of a neuter person, because although there is a neuter pronoun, English has a much sharper distinction between pronouns used for people and pronouns used for things. While people are rarely neuter in Latin, various objects can have a masculine or feminine gender. In English, the correlation between “natural” and grammatical gender is more strictly followed. Objects are not “he” or “she” unless anthropomorphized, and a person is not “it”. Joyce borrows from classical grammar in order to introduce the concept of a neuter person and applies it to Bloom by declining his name. Through this declension, masculine and feminine are combined in each utterance of the word “Bloom” in the chapter in which Bloom is suggested to be not only the “everyman”, but the “every human”.

---

7 p. 587 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.

8 The phrasing implies a confusion between feminine and neuter nouns. Such confusion would be possible in the vocative case between a neuter plural and a feminine singular a-stem noun, both of which would end in a short ‘a’.

9 p. 493 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.

10 pp. 525-532 Joyce, James. *Ulysses*. Vintage International, New York: 1961.

By borrowing from the classical tradition as well as its grammar, *Ulysses* encourages double readings and divergent meanings on the basic level of grammar just as much as it does through the structure of the book as a whole. Multilingualism and the exploitation of linguistic underpinnings are commonplace in Joyce's later novel *Finnegan's Wake*, which plays with at least sixty different languages through songs, jokes, and multilingual puns[11]. In *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce sought to "unite as many languages as possible in a kind of Babelian stew: 'All the languages are present, for they have not yet been separated. It's a tower of Babel... The history of people is the history of language'"[12]. Although *Ulysses* is not Babel, it does contain a similar tendency towards unity that is reflected in the way Joyce borrows from Latin. Both *amor matris* and the neuter "Bloom" bring disparate positions to a point of convergence. Grammatical convergences such as these parallel the convergences of characters throughout the novel, particularly Bloom's reunion with his wife, Molly. Molly's chapter 'Penelope' suggests a renewal of the relationship between her and her husband before they were separated emotionally by the loss of their son. The novel ends with the single word which serves as a refrain throughout Molly's chapter: 'Yes'. The use of Latin grammar in *Ulysses* foreshadows the Babelian mix of languages Joyce later creates in *Finnegan's Wake*. It also acts as a base of origin to which separated ideas can return to be united. Son can return to mother, woman to man. The unity achieved at the end of the book is conveyed all along by the words that comprise it.

---

11 p. 92 Bulson, Eric. *The Cambridge Introduction to James Joyce*. University Press, Cambridge: 2006.
12 p. 100 *Ibid.*