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On the Final [s] in “Folkloristics”

In a recent issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* Bruce Jackson pleads with folklorists to rid themselves of the term “folkloristics” (Jackson 1985). Toward the conclusion of his statement he addresses all of us passionately: “Let’s abandon this neologism with its pompous and misleading suffixes, this clumsy construct that does not propel us into the modern age but instead makes us appear slightly silly to anyone who knows the English language well” (1985:99–100). Three reasons have motivated Jackson to write his discourse on “folkloristics”: taste, collective self-presentation, and grammar. He finds this neologism unappealing; it damages the public image of the discipline; and grammatically “folkloristics” is an anomalous construction. Ob-

viously, the aesthetic basis for choice of words is not arguable; the concern for public image might well be a projection of one's self-image; but the grammaticalness of a word can be a subject for discussion. Jackson considers "folkloristics" to be "a noun with a double adjective suffix and no existence as a noun in the singular" (1985:99).

This linguistic diagnosis contains an error that could be of interest not only to folklorists but also to linguists and other people who know the English language well. Commonly it is assumed that in English there are three morphemes [s] that occur as suffixes: [s] that marks pluralization, [s] that marks the third person singular in the present tense, and the possessive [s]. But "folkloristics" and other words of a similar construction like "linguistics," "mathematics," "statistics," "aesthetics," and so forth demonstrate that in modern English usage there is a fourth morpheme [s] that occurs, as the former three, in a final position. This [s] is a derivational morpheme that changes an adjective into a noun in the singular. "Folkloristics" is not the plural of "folkloristic," as "linguistics," "aesthetics," and "mathematics" are not the plural of "linguistic," "aesthetic," or "mathematic." In modern English these latter words have no nominal existence, or as in the case of "mathematic" no existence at all. "Linguistic" and "aesthetic" are adjectives and the suffixation of the [s] changes them to nouns. In such cases as "mathematical" and "physical" the nominalization of the adjective takes place through the substitution of the nominalizing [s] for the morpheme [al].

The fourth morpheme [s] functions similarly to [ness] in "goodness" and to [ity] in "stupidity." All three morphemes [ness], [ity], and [s] change adjectives to nouns. The fourth morpheme [s] occurs only after the adjectival morpheme [ic]. When the morpheme [ic] is a suffix of a noun to begin with, as in "lyric," "comic," or "critic" the suffixation of an [s] marks pluralization.

Jackson's diagnosis of "folkloristics as a noun that has no existence in the singular" is not his own. Rather, it has entered the canon of dictionaries. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* describes words of similar morphology as "noun, plural, usually singular in construction" (1961:1317, 1393, 1749). Indeed, we usually say that "mathematics is a science," or, to quote the dictionary itself, "phonemics [is] a branch of linguistic analysis" (1961:1700). The a priori assumption that any suffix [s] that does not mark the third person singular in the present tense or the possessive is automatically a marker of pluralization has resulted in the assumption that substantives and abstract nouns in which the suffix [s] occurs are in the plural form. Consequently the dictionary has canonized an anomalous relation between form and function: words that appear as plural but function as singular. However, once the fourth morpheme [s] is identified as a nominalizer, it is possible to establish an agreement between form and function in words like "folkloristics." It is possible then to reverse Jackson's observation and consider "folkloristics" as a noun that has an existence only in the singular, and so far, does not occur in the English language in the plural.

The aesthetic, not grammatical, difficulty with the word "folkloristics" results from the fact that, contra Jackson, this is not "a noun with a double adjective suffix" (1985:99), but rather a noun with a triple suffixation: the morpheme [ist] to mark an agent (noun), the morpheme [ic] to mark an adjective, and the nominalizing morpheme [s]. In that regard I can concur with Jackson that, to the best of my knowledge, "no other discipline has a word quite like it" (1985:99), except, of course "linguistics" which Jackson suggests is the model for our own neologism to begin with (1985:95). Indeed, in most substantive and abstract nouns there are two separate rather than consecutively co-occurring suffixes, for the agent and the discipline. For example: mathematician/mathematics, aesthetician/aesthetics. Those words that accept the suffix [ist] to form an agent have an alternative nominalizing morpheme for the discipline or the profession. For example, there is morphemic substitution of [y] for [ist] as in "anthropology" and "anthropologist"; [ic] and [s] for [ist] as in "economics" and "economist"; or consecutive suffixation of

[ist] and [ry] as in “dentist” and “dentistry.”

But the uniqueness of “folkloristics” and “linguistics” does not make either word a grammatically inappropriate construction. Rather “folkloristics” is not only a grammatical formation, as demonstrated above, but it also makes common semantic sense. The adjective “folkloric” refers to the subject matter of the discipline, and hence “folklorics” would have been redundant, conveying the object of research as the term “folklore” itself does. Therefore, the omission of the morpheme [ic] rather than the addition of the morphemes [s] nominalizes the adjective. On the other hand “folkloristic” designates that which folklorists do and therefore “folkloristics” denotes the practice of folklorists.

There are, no doubt, historical, not only logical, reasons for the emergence of the nominalizing morpheme [s], particularly in the names of disciplines (but not only so, for example “histrionics”). Dictionaries, the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* among them, are very cautious in establishing the reasons for the apparent plural form and singular construction in the names of sciences. With clear uncertainty they allude to German and French influences. The *OED* proposes that “the French and English use of the plural in mathematics (known from the 16th century) seems [my emphasis] to have originated as an elliptic expression for ‘mathematic sciences’ ” (1933:234). This suggestion explains the morphology but not the construction. In modern English there is a word that has been formulated on the basis of an obvious similar ellipsis and ends with the morpheme [ic]. However when [s] is suffixed it is the pluralizer rather than the nominalizer [s]. For example, “comics” are used instead of “comic books” or “comic strips”; the word also occurs in plural construction as in “where are the comics?”

The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology offers an alternative historical explanation for this anomaly, considering [ics] as a single plural morpheme that occurs in the names of classical treatises and consequently the name of the treatise in the plural was adopted as the name of the entire discipline (Onions 1966:458). However, whatever the history of this form may be, in current English usage “folkloristics” is a “good Saxon compound” (Thoms 1846), patterned after the morphology of other English words that, in most cases, share the semantic field of human knowledge and the morphological structure of a two morphemic sequence [ic] and [s] in the final position. The formation of “folkloristics” demonstrates native creativity in the English language on a grammatically sound basis.

Notes

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