A NOTE ON BRETON PLURALIZATION AND THE ELSEWHERE CONDITION*

Anderson (1986) has argued that Breton 'double plurals', though apparently disconfirming the Elsewhere Condition, can be brought into conformity with it if they are viewed as deriving from basic collective nouns rather than from plural nouns. This solution is here shown to be unworkable: on the one hand, certain double plurals derive from forms with transparently plural morphology; moreover double plurals counterexemplify the Elsewhere Condition even if they are assumed to derive from basic collectives, since the latter are not distinct in their morphosyntactic feature content from ordinary plurals. Plural diminutives present similar difficulties, since their formation requires the successive application of two rules whose application is predicted by the Elsewhere Condition to be disjunctive. Besides suggesting that the Elsewhere Condition cannot be maintained in its strongest form, the Breton evidence raises questions about the existence of a strict division between inflectional and derivational morphology.

In 'Disjunctive Ordering in Inflectional Morphology', Stephen Anderson (1986) surveys a number of apparent counterexamples to the Elsewhere Condition within the domain of inflectional morphology, but argues that in each case, the apparent conflict can in fact be resolved. One type of counterexample which he discusses is the Breton double plural formation. Here, I shall demonstrate that Anderson has greatly underestimated the range of difficulties presented by pluralization in Breton: not only are Breton double plurals and plural diminutives genuinely problematic for the Elsewhere Condition – they actually raise questions about the validity of the distinction between inflection and derivation.

1. INFLECTIONAL MORPHOLOGY AND THE ELSEWHERE CONDITION

The so-called Elsewhere Condition has a long history in formal linguistics, and has been invoked to account for rule interactions at various levels of linguistic structure. In its most general form, the Elsewhere Condition can be stated as follows:

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Whenever one rule is more specific than another in the sense that the forms subject to the first constitute a proper subset of those subject to the second, the application of the more specific rule precludes the later application of the more general, less specific one. (Anderson 1986, p. 4)

As Anderson points out, the Elsewhere Condition has two important consequences for the applicability of rules of inflectional morphology:

1. Rules that specify the realization of some set of [inflectional] features...prevent the later application of other rules whose SDs refer to a proper subset of those features.
2. Stems that are lexically characterized for some set of features block the operation of rules specifying a (non-null) subset of those same features.

He observes that double plural nouns in Breton appear to counterexemplify consequence (II), but argues that the conflict is merely apparent.

2. Anderson’s Interpretation of the Breton Double Plural

Many Breton nouns have three distinct forms: a singular, a simple plural, and a double plural. In such cases, the double plural is frequently the result of adding the plural suffix -ed or -où to the simple plural form. (The suffix -ed joins with animate nouns, and -où generally with inanimates, though also with animate nouns under certain circumstances.) If a noun has a double plural alongside its simple plural, the latter is often an irregular form; in (2a), for example, the simple plural form lern is distinguished by means of an unproductive internal vowel modification. Similar examples are given in (2b–d).

(2) singular: simple plural: double plural:
   a. louarn ‘fox’ lern lerned
   b. gavr ‘goat’ gevvr gevred
   c. houarn ‘iron’ hern hernioù
   d. troad ‘foot’ treid treidoù

1 Modern Breton comprises four principal dialects, each of which shows a good deal of internal variation of its own; thus, not all of the forms cited are attested in all dialects. For detailed discussion of the cited forms, see Trépos (1957, 223 ff.). Forms are cited in standard Breton orthography; note that ch represents a voiceless palatal fricative and that c'h represents both a voiceless velar fricative and a voiced glottal fricative.