

Meccanismi grammaticali di selezione del genere nelle lingue flessive

Gender in Grammar: Theory, History, and Policy

Sapienza University of Rome, 13–14 February 2025

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Grammatical mechanisms of the gender value selection in inflectional languages

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Summary of the presentation

- Many linguists feel uncomfortable with some recently proposed **language reforms** aimed at changing the grammar of gender towards a greater inclusivity and parity
- To be more incisive in the debate, linguists must investigate more deeply the **rules of gender assignment** in the grammar, and the phenomenon of the inflectional category in general
- I approach this problem within the ***multi-stratal grammar*** (which will be briefly introduced), which shows how gender values may be assigned at different times and on different linguistic levels
- The proponents of reforms are unaware of this diversity

Main question to address

- Gender assignment is meant synchronically (in the discourse), rather than diachronically:
 - “why does a given word-form take a M rather or a F ending in a given context?”
 - rather than: “why is this lexeme M or F?”
- There are multiple mechanisms of such assignment
 - located in different areas of the grammar
 - restricted to different classes of lexemes

Multiple senses of “gender”

Some examples

- The notion of “gender” becomes a different object depending, among others, on the class of lexemes involved
 - gender of nouns: inherent, sometimes referential
 - gender of adjectives: inflectional, selected by agreement, rarely referential, sometimes “contextual”, sometimes “conventional”
 - (the latter two will be explained later)
 - gender of pronouns: sometimes inherent and referential; sometimes inflectional and selected by agreement or anaphora

Multiple senses of “gender”

Only a terminological issue?

- ➔ The term *gender* comes from Aristotle’s philosophy
- ➔ It has been misinterpreted as referring to sex too soon
- ➔ Had we used the term *class* (like in Swahili), or something similar, no conflict would have arisen
 - identity battles cannot be fought over the choice between, say, “nominal class 3” and “nominal class 5”
- ➔ However, today we have to face this terminological indeterminacy
 - I use the *multi-stratal* approach in such respect

Multi-stratal grammar

Brief introduction

- My apologies for the didactic style of this part of my presentation
 - ...I only want to promote the multi-stratal approach
- More on this:
 - Igor Mel'čuk, *Cours de morphologie générale* (5 vols), Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1993–2001
 - Anna Polivanova, [Logical foundations of grammar], Moscow: Higher School of Economics Press, 2022
- I'll consider Italian examples, with a special focus on adjectives

Multi-stratal grammar

Brief introduction

- Grammar is an algorithm that transforms text into meaning
 - the goal is to retrieve the meaning of a given text, or to construct a text for a given meaning
- The algorithm functions by steps, called **levels**
 - each level is a formal **representation** of the utterance
 - there are **rules** that rewrite each representation to the next one
 - e.g.: rewrite a phonetic transcription into a phonological one

Multi-stratal grammar

Architecture of the levels

- Levels form the **stack** of representations
- There are two **starting levels**, on the opposite ends of the stack:
 - **text level** (phonological or phonetic representation, L_φ)
 - **meaning level** (semantic representation, L_σ)
- Another fundamental level is the **grammatical level** (L_γ)
 - stands halfway between L_φ and L_σ
 - obligatory in inflectional languages

Multi-stratal grammar

Architecture of the levels

L_σ	a collection of predicates and their arguments
	↑ ↓
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]
	↑ ↓
L_γ	a string of inflectionally marked lexemes
	↑ ↓
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]
	↑ ↓
L_φ	a string of phones (speech sounds)

Multi-stratal grammar

Architecture of the levels

L_{σ}	IDEAS THAT THE SPEAKER WANTS TO COMMUNICATE
	↑ ↓
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]
	↑ ↓
L_{γ}	ALL THE NEEDED LEXEMES PLUS THE GRAMMATICAL CHARACTERISTICS
	↑ ↓
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]
	↑ ↓
L_{φ}	EFFECTIVELY UTTERED SEQUENCE OF SPEECH SOUNDS

Multi-stratal grammar

Some observations on levels

- We don't know how to represent meanings, so for convenience we use English translational equivalents as symbols of lexical meanings
- Levels above L_γ are **syntactic**, those underneath are **segmental**
- Each level may perform more than one goal
 - thus, syntactic levels construct the constituents
 - but they also assign **inflectional marks** to the constituents
 - My claim: **not all the marks are assigned at the same time**

Multi-stratal grammar

Architecture of the levels: an example

L_σ	PAST(<i>ENTER</i>)	ENTER(<i>GIRL</i>)	INDET(<i>GIRL</i>)	NICE(<i>GIRL</i>)
		↑	↓	
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]			
		↑	↓	
L_γ	ESSERE _{3SgPres}	+ ENTRARE _{fSgPart}	+ UN _{fSg}	+ BELLO _{fSg} + RAGAZZA _{Sg}
		↑	↓	
⋮	[other levels and rewriting rules]			
		↑	↓	
L_φ	[ε en'tra:ta 'u:na 'bella ra'gattsa]			

Inflectional categories

in general

- An inflectional category is a **collection of inflectional marks**; some examples (with reference to Latin):
 - case = {Nom, Gen, Dat, Acc, Abl}
 - gender = {M, F, N}
 - number = {Sg, Pl}
- Inflectional categories **classify** word-forms in such a way that
 - they are interfaced with syntax
 - they are interfaced with phonology

Inflectional categories

Rules of assignment

- Inflectional marks are assigned to lexemes by **assignment rules**
 - these rules are applied during the rewriting from one level to another
- Rules may be of different nature
 - **semantically driven** rules
 - **grammatically driven** rules
 - with many subtypes

Inflectional categories

Rules of assignment

- Semantically driven rules are those where a certain mark is chosen because of the communicative intention; e.g.:
 - number of nouns in countable contexts (one object or many objects?)
 - *Mi piace il quadro_{sg} di Miró. ≠ Mi piacciono i quadri_{pl} di Miró.*
- Grammatically driven rules may be:
 - agreement-based
 - anafora-based
 - contextual
 - conventional

Inflectional categories

Rules of assignment

- **Agreement-based** rules assign an inflectional mark to a word-form based on the grammatical characteristics of another word-form
 - adjectival number:
 - *questo_{Sg} quadro_{Sg} di Dalì ≠ questi_{Pl} quadri_{Pl} di Dalì*
- **Anaphora-based** rules assign an inflectional mark to a word-form based on the characteristics of some word-form outside the sentence domain
 - number of adjectives and verbs with null subject:
 - *Sono_{Pl} già tutti_{Pl} arrivati_{Pl}.*

Inflectional categories

Rules of assignment

- **Contextual** rules assign a determinate inflectional mark in a class of contexts, with no agreement involved
 - nominal number in non-countable (non-arithmetic) contexts:
 - *Il prezzo del grano_{Sg} / dei legumi_{Pl} è aumentato.*
- **Conventional** rules assign a determinate inflectional mark based on a social convention, rather than a grammatical mechanism
 - adjectival feminine agreement with masculine professions
 - *l'avvocato_M incinta_F [from the web]*

Assignment rules for gender

Gender of nouns

- Gender in common nouns: inherent, semantically uninformative
 - inherited from the lexicon:
 - *finestra*_F, *libro*_M
- Gender in paired masculine/feminine nouns: highly referential
 - given by the whole lexemes, not assigned by a rule
 - if I am speaking about a woman, I'll pick AMICA, STUDENTESSA, etc.
 - if I am speaking about a man, I'll pick AMICO, STUDENTE, etc.

Assignment rules for gender

Gender of adjectives

- Adjectival gender assigned by agreement
 - syntactically relevant, semantically uninformative
 - *questa_F finestra_F, questo_M libro_M*
- Adjectival gender assigned by anaphora
 - referential, e.g. with the null subject
 - *È arrivata_F finalmente!*

Assignment rules for gender

Gender of adjectives

→ Adjectival gender may be also assigned semantically

- *la cantante*_F ≠ *il cantante*_M

- assuming that *cantante* is an adjective, not a noun

Assignment rules for gender

Gender of adjectives

- Adjectival gender assigned by the context
 - syntactically irrelevant and semantically uninformative
 - *Mi è andata_F male!*
 - *Si è portati_M a pensare che...*
- Adjectival gender assigned by a social convention
 - referential by design
 - *l'avvocato incinta_F*

Assignment rules for gender

Gender of pronouns

→ Pronominal gender:

- referential if anaphoric (especially when it substitutes the subject):

- *Lei_F è già arrivata.*

- syntactic if selected by agreement

- *Questo libro non lo_M conosco.*

- uninformative if contextual

- *Non me la_F prendo con te.*

Assignment rules for gender

Where are the rules located in the stack of representations?

Level	Nouns	Adjectives	Pronouns
L_σ = Semantic intention (referential gender)	AMICO/AMICA	AVVOCATO INCINTA _F CANTANTE _{M/F}	LUI/LEI
[possibly some other levels and rewriting rules occur]			
Constituents formation (agreement gender)		<i>una_F → ragazza_F</i>	<i>lo_M conosco</i>
[possibly some other levels and rewriting rules occur]			
Marking of what remains unmarked (contextual gender)		<i>non si è sicuri_M</i>	
L_γ	all adjectives have been assigned a gender mark		

Assignment rules for gender

Summing up

1. The construction of the sentence starts by selecting elements with referential value; only referential gender is already marked
2. At a certain step (=level), for the sake of constituency, the agreement is implemented on the majority of adjectives (agreement-based gender)
3. Right before the L_v , all the unmarked adjectives get marked for gender (here the context-based gender assignment occurs)
4. Being this an inflectional language, at L_v all inflected word-forms must be fully marked by all the relevant inflectional categories

What about a reform?

Analysis of proposals

- We may believe, or not, into the stack of representations, but
 - there are certainly several different rules that describe the assignment of the gender values in an inflectional language
 - depending on the assignment mechanism, the gender performs different functions in the utterance
 - and it is only a disgrace that one and the same term *gender* is used with reference to all this different things
- Any reform must take into account this complexity
 - which is often not the case

First example: new pronouns

English and beyond

- The gender of English pronouns is fully referential
 - it cannot be agreement-based since there is no gender agreement in English
 - such words as *he* and *she* effectively refer to a certain state of affairs (human beings of opposite sex)
 - newly coined pronouns aim at describing a previously unseen state of affairs (based on new self-identifications, real or not)
 - creating new words for new things modifies the lexicon, not the grammar, and is a relatively easy reform

First example: new pronouns

English and beyond

- Transferring the idea of new pronouns to such a language as Italian may become problematic
 - Italian pronouns are more integrated into grammar
 - the antecedent of anaphora may be an inanimate object
- On the other hand, though, Italian reformed the polite pronoun from *Voi* (2Pl) to *Lei* (3SgF)
 - which is not so unlike using *they* instead of *he/she*

Second example: new endings

The case of the “schwa-ending” in Italian

- What the proponents of the “schwa-ending” seem to say is naïf and indeterminate:
 - the vowel /o/ is “too masculine”, the vowel /a/ is “too feminine”, therefore let’s use the vowel /ə/ at the end of our words so that everyone is happy (including non-binary people)
- Also, note that: «two opposing tendencies emerge: the visibility of each gender vs. the neutralization of all gender distinctions. The use of forms with -ə has shifted from being adopted to give visibility to non-binary gender identities to being used to neutralize all gender distinctions, encompassing women, men, and non-binary individuals within a single form» (A. Thornton 2022)

Second example: new endings

The case of the “schwa-ending” in Italian

- Now, with regard to the “schwa-ending”, we are not discussing
 - psychological and social aspects thereof
 - is everyone effectively happier?
 - phonological and morpho-phonological aspects thereof
 - can one deliberately introduce a totally new phoneme in a language?
 - how does this ending affect the phonological shape of themes, articles etc.?

Second example: new endings

The case of the “schwa-ending” in Italian

- We are only concerned with the morphological aspects of it
 - how is the complex gender machinery affected by this new ending?
 - is it a new mark of the category (if yes, how is it called?), or just a variant (like *uno* and *un*)?
 - which one of the many meanings of *gender* is intended?
 - does it functionally redefine every occurrence of agreement gender as a case of referential gender?

Second example: new endings

The case of the “schwa-ending” in Italian

- The proponents of the “schwa-ending” hardly address these questions
- The idea rapidly evolved into using the schwa-ending as a means of virtue signaling
 - like the ⟨k⟩ in the “leftist” tradition
 - hence such forms as *andiamə*
 - because schwa is anyway more “inclusive” than -o, so let’s use schwa everywhere