GRAMMATICAL GENDER AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Gênero gramatical e relações sociais

Guilherme Ribeiro Colaço Mäder[1]

Heronides Moura[2]

mader@inventati.org

heronides@uol.com.br

ABSTRACT: In this paper we explore the influence that social relations beyond gender/sex have on the grammatical genders of some languages, and how these social relations add to the criteria for classifying nouns in different grammatical genders based on the principle of sexual distinction. We also show how certain types of social relations affect nouns referring to male and female humans differently, but behave in a reasonably homogeneous way in languages of different families and in distant geographical regions.

KEYWORDS: linguistic gender; social gender; typology.

RESUMO: Neste artigo exploramos a influência que relações sociais para além de gênero/sexo têm sobre os gêneros gramaticais de algumas línguas, e como essas relações sociais juntam-se aos critérios mais comuns de classificação dos nomes em diferentes gêneros gramaticais com base no princípio de distinção sexual. Ademais, mostramos como certos tipos de relações sociais afetam diferentemente nomes referentes a seres humanos do gênero masculino e seres humanos do gênero feminino, mas agem de maneira razoavelmente homogênea em línguas de diferentes famílias e em áreas geográficas bastante distantes entre si.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: gênero linguístico; gênero social; tipologia.

INTRODUCTION

This article will discuss how the grammatical category of gender relates to social categories other than gender/sex and how this intersection can occur in different ways

---

[1] PhD candidate in Linguistics; Federal University of Santa Catarina – UFSC.

[2] Professor at Federal University of Santa Catarina and researcher in linguistics with productivity grants from the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq).

for men and women. Our aim is to show that the so-called gender category not only indicates opposition between masculine and feminine, but is also used to establish a series of social distinctions. Among the social differences indicated by this grammatical category, we will analyze marriage and puberty in section 2 and freedom and slavery in section 3.

One factor that seems to be independent of gender/sex is the distinction between infants and adults. In some languages with sex-based gender systems that have more than two grammatical genders, infants can be referred to in the neuter gender. In English, it is possible, though not very common, to refer to an unborn or newborn child using the neuter pronoun *it*. In German, *Kind* 'child' is a neuter noun, and in Greek, *παιδί* 'child' is also a neuter noun.

There is an analogous phenomenon in languages that use classifiers. In Maonan, a Tai-Kadai language spoken in the Guangxi province of China (near the Vietnamese border), there is one numeral classifier for nouns that refer to humans (*ʔai¹*) and another for those that refer to animals (*tɔ²*). The latter is also used for children (and in some cases for women, as will be shown later) (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 192).

Besides the obvious gender/sex distinction, for women, age and/or marital status can influence the choice of grammatical gender in some languages. For men, grammatical gender may also be influenced by freedom, slavery, and foreignness.

1 MARRIAGE AND PUBERTY

In some Southern Polish dialects, married women are referred to and refer to themselves using the feminine gender, whereas single or young women are referred to and refer to themselves in the neuter or masculine gender, depending on the dialect (examples from Corbett 1991: 100). In most of these dialects, young or single women refer to themselves and are referred to in the neuter gender:

(1)   a. Zuzię poszło.neut

'Zuzia has gone'

b. jo było.neut na grziby

'I was mushrooming'

And in some of these dialects, which are spoken near the former Czechoslovakian border, instead of the neuter, masculine is used in reference and self-reference to young or single women:

c.   Hanik prziszoł. masc
       'Hania came'
d.   jo szoł.masc
       'I was going'

The shift from masculine or neuter (self-)reference to feminine (self-)reference occurs immediately after the marriage ceremony (Corbett, 1991, p. 100-1).

In the Northern dialects of Konkani, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the state of Goa, India, the neuter gender is used for younger women and the feminine gender is used for older women (relative to the speaker). For example, the 3rd person singular neuter pronoun *tɛ̃* usually refers to a younger woman, while the 3rd person singular feminine pronoun *ti* refers only to an older woman. The noun *bayl* 'woman' is feminine when referring to an older woman and neuter when referring to a younger woman (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 83; Corbett, 1991, p. 100-1).

In Lak, a Nakh-Dagestanian language spoken in the Republic of Dagestan (Russian Federation), there are four grammatical genders: genders I and II include male and female rational beings, respectively; gender III includes most animate and inanimate non-rational beings; and gender IV includes everything else. However, gender II (rational female) is only used for older women. Younger women are referred to in gender III (Corbett, 1991, p. 25-6).

The German noun *Mädchen* 'girl' is neuter[3] and, like all diminutives, it requires neuter agreement with articles and adjectives, although it can anaphorically take the 3rd person feminine pronoun. There is a tendency to choose the feminine pronoun (*sie*) for girls 18 years or older and the neuter pronoun (*es*) for younger girls (from 2 to 12 years old) (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 16).

---

[3] The noun *Weib* 'wife' (currently disused, having pejorative connotations) is also neuter.

In Cantabrian, a language spoken in the autonomous community of Cantabria, Spain, Holmquist (1991, p. 60) comments on a case, reported by Ralph J. Penny, in which an informant uses the masculine expression *hiju míu* 'my son' to refer to his 12-year-old daughter.

And in the aforementioned Maonan language, older relatives such as aunts and grandmothers are referred to with the numeral classifier *ʔai¹* (human classifier), as are women of higher social status, e.g. professionals such as teachers and public servants, as well as those initiated in shamanic practices. Women without a high position in the social hierarchy are referred to using the numeral classifier *tɔ²* (animal classifier) (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 192).

It should be pointed out that age and marital status (single or married) can influence the usage of grammatical gender for women (feminine being used only for married or older women) in some languages, while these do not appear to be relevant factors when using the masculine grammatical gender to refer to men in any language. Moreover, the influence of marital status or age on grammatical gender in reference to women is analogous to the asymmetry observed in the courtesy title system for men and women in many Romance languages. For women, two treatment pronouns exist, one for older or married women and one for younger or single women, although in many languages this category is now falling out of favor. For men, there is only one courtesy title (see Table 1 below)[4].

Table 1 – Courtesy titles in some Romance languages

	Feminine		Masculine
	Married/older	Single/younger	
Portuguese	senhora	senhorita	senhor
Spanish	señora	señorita	Señor
Italian	signora	signorina	Signore
French	madame	mademoiselle	Monsieur
Romanian	doamnă	domnişoară	Domn

[4] This system has been changing recently, with disuse of pronouns for single or younger women (as well as in English, with the introduction of the pronoun *Ms*.), creating greater symmetry between genders.

The literature offers several explanations of why women are referred to with different grammatical genders depending on age or marital status.
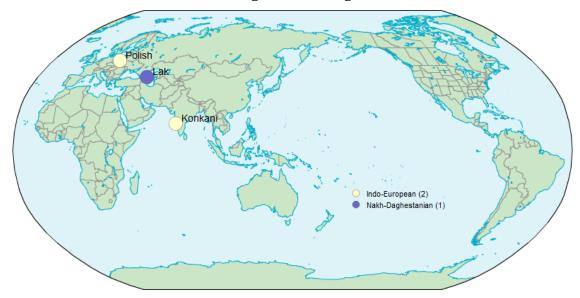
In the case of Polish, the use of neuter or masculine gender (depending on dialect) for single or young women is explained by the use of hypocoristics and patronymics to refer to these women. Hypocoristics follow the typical declension of masculine nouns: *Hania* (feminine name) > *Hanik* (hypocoristic); while patronymics follow the typical declension of nouns of the neuter gender: *Heczę* 'daughter of Heczko'. These nouns, rather than belonging to the feminine gender according to semantic criteria (i.e. referring to females), belong to the masculine and neuter genders, respectively, due to morphological criteria (hypocoristics follow the typical declension of masculine nouns, while patronymics follow that of the neuter nouns). Thus, referring to women in the masculine and neuter would have eventually altered the semantic core of these genders, and hence of the system as a whole (Corbett, 1991, p. 100-1).

In the case of Konkani, which preserves the typical Indo-European grammatical gender system (masculine, feminine and neuter), the neuter noun *čeḍũ*, which originally meant 'child', came to mean 'girl', but maintained agreement with the neuter gender. Other nouns referring to young women were eventually attributed neuter agreement, and thus the semantic core of this grammatical gender changed. Neuter is now used for younger women, and feminine is reserved exclusively for older women.

In Lak, the same process occurred. This language has the typical gender system of Caucasian languages, with four classes: gender I includes rational males; gender II, rational females; gender III, other animate beings and most inanimate ones; and gender IV includes everything else. The noun *duš* 'girl/daughter' belongs to gender III instead of gender II, as would be expected by the semantic criteria of grammatical gender attribution. By analogy, other nouns referring to young women have also become gender III. As in Konkani, the semantic organization of the Lak grammatical gender system has changed because of certain nouns, perhaps only one originally, which, although referring to women, belonged to the neuter gender (Corbett, 1991, p. 100-1).

These explanations, however, raise the question: Why do these processes occur with nouns that refer to women and not in those that refer to men? It is curious that, on

the one hand, these same processes took place in languages that are quite distant geographically and genetically[5], while, on the other hand, the resulting grammatical gender systems closely resemble the courtesy title system in which gender, age, and marital status intersect in languages that do not make this distinction grammatically, such as Romance languages (see Table 1, above, for courtesy titles that distinguish women according to marital status, and Figure 1, below, which shows the geographical distribution of languages that make this distinction grammatically).

Figure 1 – Languages that classify married/older and single/younger women in different grammatical genders

2 FREEDOM AND SLAVERY

Another interesting case is the intersection of biological gender categories with other social categories such as free vs. enslaved men or foreigners.

In some languages, freedom, slavery or foreignness for men seem to affect their belonging to the masculine grammatical gender, although these conditions do not seem to affect the feminine.

---

[5] Konkani and Polish have a common origin because they belong to the Indo-European family, but this origin dates back thousands of years. Lak, however, belongs to another language family.

In Latin, the neuter gender also included, in addition to nouns for inanimate beings, a noun for 'slave', *mancipium*. In the Slavic languages, the personal/animate subgender[6] initially included only nouns referring to free adult men (Corbett, 1991, p. 98-9; Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 83). In Lokono, an Arawakan language spoken in northern South America, there are two grammatical genders, masculine and feminine, but men from other tribes are generally referred in the feminine (Pet, 2011, p. 14; Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 104). In Setswana, a Bantu language spoken in Botswana, some peoples of other ethnicities, such as the Bushmen, were referred to in the 5/6 gender, whose semantic core is inanimate beings, substances such as mud or dirt, and abstract nouns[7] (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 192).

Mattoso-Câmara (1959, p. 131) notes that the Latin neuter, used mainly to indicate inanimate things, is also used in the noun for 'slave' *mancipium*, for a slave is someone reduced to an object. His interpretation matches the social position of the slave in Varro's classification (*De re rustica*, 1:17.1. trad. Hooper; Ash, 1934), due to latter's comments on the division of agricultural instruments: "instrumenti genus uocale et semiuocale et mutum, uocale, in quo sunt serui, semiuocale, in quo sunt boues, mutum, in quo sunt plaustra" (the class of instruments which is articulate, the inarticulate, and the mute; the articulate comprising the slaves, the inarticulate comprising the cattle, and the mute comprising the vehicles).

A little later (ibid., 1: 17.3), Varro refers to slaves using the neuter noun *mancipium*:

(2)　　　Mancipia esse oportere neque formidulosa neque animosa
　　　　　'Slaves should be neither cowed nor high-spirited'

Regarding the personal/animate subgender in Slavic languages, which is present at different stages of development in various dialects of this family, some clarifications

---

[6] The personal/animate subgender in Slavic languages is characterized by a syncretism between the forms of the genitive and the accusative in human/animated nouns. Nouns denoting inanimate beings have formal syncretism between nominative and accusative, as do nouns of the neuter gender.

[7] This usage has changed over time, and reference to them in gender 5/6 is considered misuse. Instead, they should be referred to in gender 1/2, the typical grammatical gender of humans in Bantu languages (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 192).

are needed. This grammatical subgender is characterized by syncretism between the accusative and genitive cases, in contrast to syncretism between the accusative and nominative cases for the impersonal/inanimate subgender (Huntley, 1980). In Russian, for example, each of the three genders (masculine, feminine, and neuter) is subdivided into animate and inanimate (Corbett, 1991, p. 42–3, 98–9, 161–8). The personal/animate subgender most likely emerged as an indirect consequence of a phonetic erosion process in Old Eastern Slavic[8], with the loss of the final consonants of the nominative singular {-os} and the accusative singular {-om} of masculine nouns of the *o-stem declension. This loss of morphological case markers, coupled with a word order determined by the informational structure of the utterance rather than syntactic relations, impeded the disambiguation of utterances in which the functions of subject and object were both performed by nouns referring to persons or animate beings (prototypical agents). Some of these masculine nouns of the *o-stem declension came to present a formal syncretism between the accusative and genitive cases as a means of avoiding the subject-object ambiguity caused by the loss of morphological differentiation between the nominative and accusative cases in a process of differential object marking[9]. Thus, the reason this grammatical subgender emerged can be explained functionally by the need to distinguish between the subject and object in potentially ambiguous situations, e.g. when the object is a definite animate being that presents the prototypical characteristics of the subject function (Bratishenko, 2003).

However, this genitive-accusative syncretism did not apply equally to all masculine nouns of the *o-stem declension. The usage of the genitive-accusative depended on certain factors, such as definiteness, individuality (proper or common noun), age (adult or non-adult), and personhood (personal or non-personal). These factors formed a scale: at one pole, (definite) personal proper nouns, and at the other, indefinite non-personal common nouns (see Moura et al., in this issue). For the former, it was almost categorical that the genitive-accusative was used for the direct object

---

[8] Also called Ancient Russian, predecessor of the Russian, Belarusian and Ukrainian languages.
[9] This genitive-accusative syncretism in Slavic languages is an instance of the differential object marking phenomenon (Bossong, 1991). This phenomenon occurs in several languages, including Spanish, where direct objects referring to humans are preceded by the preposition *a*. In Portuguese, there is a remnant of this phenomenon, which was once more common in the language (Pires, 2017), especially when the name *God* functions as a direct object.

function, whereas for the latter, the nominative-accusative was used for the same function. For nouns in the middle of this scale, the status of being free or a slave appears to be relevant, as the following example shows (Bratishenko, 2003, p. 88):

(3)   аже   *холопъ*   оударить   *свободна*   *моужа*
       [aže   xolopǔ   udaritǐ   svobodna   muža]
       'if a *slave*(nom./acc.=subject) attacks a *free man*(gen./acc.=object)'

Since prototypical objects tend to be inanimate, while prototypical subjects tend to be animate, there is a natural difficulty in distinguishing subject and object when personal/animate nouns are used non-prototypically, i.e. as objects. In example (3) above, the subject is *холопъ* [xolopǔ] 'slave', while the object is *свободна моужа* [svobodna muža] 'a free man'. If the object were in the nominative-accusative, the meaning of the statement would most likely be understood in reverse, for a slave was considered less human than a free man (Bratishenko, 2003, p. 88). In the master-slave relationship frame, the normal scenario is for the former to assault the latter as a form of punishment, while the opposite scenario deviates from the expected. Therefore, it is necessary to mark the object 'a free man' differentially (*свободна моужа* [svobodna muža]).

However, the same noun *холопъ* [xolopǔ] 'slave' works as a subject if the object is an animal. Consider (4) below (example from Bratishenko, 2003, p. 88):

(4)   аже   *холопъ*   *ѡбѣльныи*   выведеть   *конь*   чии   любо
       [aže   xolopǔ   obělǐnyi   vyvedetǐ   konǐ   čii   ljubo]
       'if *a full slave*(nom./acc.=subject) takes away somenone's *horse*(nom./acc.=object)'

As the noun *холопъ* [xolopǔ] 'slave' stands closer to the prototypical agent and *конь* [konǐ] ´horse´ is only animate (non- personal), there is no room for ambiguity in this case and hence the object is not differentially marked, as was the case in (3). To sum up, in the hierarchy of personhood, a slave is lower than a free man and higher than a horse.

In Lokono, restricting the masculine grammatical gender to the men of the tribe itself while using the feminine gender for men of other tribes can be explained by a property of the grammatical gender system of this language that acts in parallel to the referent's gender: the masculine gender indicates endearment and greater cultural importance, while the feminine gender indicates disdain and lesser cultural importance (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 44-7). The author gives some examples of how the masculine gender is used with positive connotations (ibid., p. 46,):

> Animals and birds which are thought of as having a 'positive personality' are masculine – they include turtles and hummingbirds. Domestic animals to which speakers have a special attachment, for instance, a dog, are masculine; however, one's neighbour's dog (whom one does not particularly like) is more likely to be feminine. Nice and cute animals are masculine, while bigger animals are feminine.

The relation between cultural importance and subjective assessment (endearment/disdain) in Lokono grammatical gender is also used when referring to men who do not belong to the speaker's tribe. Men from other tribes are generally referred to in the feminine, while the masculine is used for men belonging to the speaker's tribe. However, a man from another tribe with whom the speaker is friends will be referred to in the masculine, while a man of the same tribe who is despised by his peers will be referred to in the feminine (Aikhenvald, 2016, p. 104).

CONCLUSION

After describing these facts regarding the usage of grammatical gender in interaction with social categories other than gender/sex, an important observation should be made. Certainly, the ancient Romans and the Slavic peoples in the Middle Ages had no doubt that slaves were human beings. Similarly, there is no doubt that speakers of languages that distinguish between married (or older) women and single (or younger) women are aware that marriage does not change a woman's gender. However, it is interesting to note what is common to these categorizations: they are grammatical usages that serve as a means of situating human beings on different levels of a scale of "humanness" or "personhood", and their relative positions on that scale, as well as the

criteria used for classification, correspond to their place and their roles in the social hierarchy.

While there is no doubt that the patricians in ancient Rome recognized that their slaves belonged to the human genus, the use of a neuter noun (*mancipium*) to denote them, as well as other terms commonly used to denote inanimate beings (e.g. *instrumentum*)[10], reveals how position on the social scale interacts with position on the humanness scale. Similar reasoning could apply in contemporary society to the use of the term *human resources* to designate workers. They are another type of "resource", on a par with natural resources, material resources, mineral resources, water resources etc. Usage of the word *resource* implies a capitalist understanding that no longer considers nature as the environment in which we live, but as a means of producing wealth. When applied to ourselves, the term is analogous to Varro's use of *instrumentum* when discussing the means necessary to manage a farm.

There is a hierarchy among the feminine and masculine categories, with the masculine at the highest pole of the humanness scale. This intersection between masculine and humanness may in some cases be mirrored in the grammatical gender.

Apart from the well-known association between the animate/humanness, definiteness, personhood and agency scales in functionalist-oriented linguistic studies (agents tend to be definite, animate, and human, cf. Moura et al. in this issue), recent findings in psycholinguistics (Esaulova, Y.; von Stockhausen, L., 2015) indicate that gender is also a relevant factor: nouns of the masculine grammatical gender are processed faster in the role of agent than in the role of patient, in contrast with nouns of the feminine grammatical gender.

This interaction between different classification principles in grammatical gender systems has already been noted by Mattoso-Câmara (1959, 131-2). This author comments on Wilhelm Schmidt's four classification principles:

> 1) the "vital", which divides beings into animate and inanimate; 2) the "personal", which separates them into persons (rational) and things (non-rational); 3) the sexual, which creates masculine and feminine genders; 4) the numerical, which deals with the apparent form of beings, especially the possibility of subjecting them to enumeration. However, the balance of these

---

[10] Cf. Lewis (2013) about the use of the word *instrumentum* in Varro's *De re rustica*.

> rigid theoretical lines is broken by adding a 5th line, from which arise "rich and complex systems that may or may not result from a combination of two or more of the aforementioned systems or from other special criteria" (Mattoso-Câmara, 1959, p. 131, our translation).

Mattoso-Câmara also notes that these systems often interact, and points out the overlapping of the "sexual" system (masculine and feminine) in the social hierarchy:

> [...] [Schmidt's] first four systems do not often appear in isolation [...]. Neither does the distinction between persons and things impede the distinction between superior and inferior beings (hierarchical system) within the values of the social hierarchy [...]. There are so many interferences between animate objects (i.e. people, males, superiors) on the one hand, and inanimate objects (i.e. things, females, and inferiors) on the other, that systemic distinctions are not carried out in practice: in the Latin neuter, the notion of "inanimate" predominates, but it includes a noun for "slave" - *mancipium*, since he is a man reduced to an object, just as in English the neuter, which seems to obey a concept of "thing" as opposed to "person" includes nouns for children - *child*, *baby*, etc., because they are subordinate to adults and thus "inferior", which agrees with the criterion that makes the nouns for "women" in Gondi and other Dravidian languages of India fall into the inferior gender or *lower* class (Mattoso-Câmara, 1959, p. 132, our translation).

These different patterns of how gender/sex categories and other social categories affect the attribution of grammatical gender operate differently for men and women and are probably related to the different weight these factors have on men and women, e.g. the importance of marriage and reproduction of the species in the social condition of women, and the importance of social rights for men (i.e. the exclusion of slaves or foreigners, and in almost every society until recently, women as well). It should also be pointed out that, just as the categorization of sex is an anthropological universal (Brown, 1991), so too are:

(a) the institution of marriage;

(b) classification according to age;

(c) the domination/submission relationship, i.e. the distinction between free and slave[11];

(d) ethnocentrism and the distinction between one's own ethnic group and outsiders.

---

11 Cf. Gamkrelidze and Ivanov (1995, p. 397 et seq.) On the "free/not free" distinction in Proto-Indo-European language and culture: "The category of earthly people, or mortals, is in turn divided into two basic subclasses, the free and the non-free. The Proto-Indo-European character of this division is revealed by comparative analyses of the relevant terms in various Indo-European branches".

As shown in this article, these anthropological universals can also manifest themselves grammatically in some languages, together with gender/sex distinctions. Items (a) and (b) intersect with the feminine gender category, while items (c) and (d) intersect with the masculine gender category. This is further evidence of how the relation between language and culture manifests itself in grammar.

REFERENCES

AIKHENVALD, A. Y. **How Gender Shapes the World**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

BOSSONG, G. Differential object marking in Romance and beyond. **New analyses in Romance linguistics**, p. 143–170, 1991.

BRATISHENKO, E. Genitive-accusative and possessive adjective in Old East Slavic. **Scando-Slavica**, v. 49, n. 1, p. 83–103, Jan. 2003.

BROWN, D. **Human Universals**. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.

CORBETT, G. G. **Gender**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

ESAULOVA, Y.; von STOCKHAUSEN, L. Cross-linguistic evidence for gender as a prominence feature. **Frontiers in Psychology**, v. 6, set. 2015.

GAMKRELIDZE, T. V.; IVANOV, V. V. **Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans**: A Reconstruction and Historical Analysis of a Proto-Language and Proto-Culture. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995.

HOLMQUIST, J. C. Semantic Features and Gender Dynamics in Cantabrian Spanish. **Anthropological Linguistics**, v. 33, n. 1, p. 57–80, 1991.

HOOPER, W. D.; ASH, H. B. On **Agriculture**. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1934.

HUNTLEY, D. The evolution of genitive-accusative animate and personal nouns in Slavic dialects. In: Fisiak, J. (Ed.). **Historical Morphology**. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1980. p. 191–212.

LEWIS, J. P. Did Varro Think that Slaves were Talking Tools? **Mnemosyne**, v. 66, n. 4-5, p. 634–648, 2013.

MATTOSO-CÂMARA, J. **Princípios de lingüística geral**: como introdução aos estudos superiores da língua portuguesa. 3ª edição, revista e aumentada. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Livraria Acadêmica, 1959. (Biblioteca Brasileira de Filologia, 5).

MOURA, H; SANTOS, V; VARASCHIN, G; SALIMO, C. Telicity, Definiteness and Animacy: the factors behind Transitivity and DOM (this issue).

PET, W. J. A. A Grammar Sketch and Lexicon of Arawak (Lokono Dian). Dallas: **SIL International**, 2011.

PIRES, A. A **Marcação Diferencial de Objeto Em Português**: Um estudo sintático-diacrônico. Master's thesis. Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Campinas, 2017.