Masculine is not a Gender: Evidence from Italian

Pietro Baggio, Queen Mary University of London

The two questions that this talk aims to answer, within a constructivist framework (cf. Embick 2010, Bobaljik 2011, Borer 2013) and with focus on Italian data, are the following:

(1) Is grammatical gender encoded on a functional head in the Extended Projection of the noun (e.g. Gen^0), or on a categorising head (i.e. a nominaliser n^0)?

(2) What is or are the feature(s) responsible for encoding grammatical gender?

I will propose that gender is encoded on a nominaliser n^0, agreeing in part with Kramer (2015). I will further suggest that gender in Italian should be represented via the binary feature [±FEM], and that it is only realised indirectly, "piggybacking" on the PF realisation of number (cf. Carstens 1997 et seq. on Bantu noun class).

Gender displays some puzzlingly hybrid properties (cf. Carstens 2005, Acquaviva 2009, Armelin 2014, 2015, Acquaviva 2018, Déchaine 2018, Mathieu 2018, a.o.). For example, it has both typical properties of "derivational" morphology (categorisers in DM, or *c-functors* in Borer's (2013) terminology), insofar as it tends to be root-selected and lack any stable formal semantic function, and of "inflectional" morphology (functional heads or *s-functors*), e.g. insofar as it participates in nominal concord.

For the current purposes, I will concentrate on clear cases of *uninterpretable* gender, with inanimate nouns. In order to determine whether gender is on a nominaliser or a functional head, I will follow Borer's (2013, 2014) observation that the first functional head of an Extended Projection delimits the domain of non-compositional content (cf. Moskal 2015 for a PF analogue): if gender is on a nominaliser, it may be transparent to non-compositional meaning assignment. Indeed, there are nouns with non-compositional meaning that requires both the plural head (Div^0, following Borer 2005, Mathieu 2012, 2014) and the gender-encoding head, which I independently argue to be lower:

(3) gemell-o → **gemell-i**
twin-MS twin-MPL
'twin → twins or **cufflinks**'

(4) vicinanz-a → **vicinanz-e**
closeness-FS closeness-FPL
'closeness → **neighbourhood**'

So-called "double plurals" offer a particularly rich set of data in support for the existence of non-compositional plurals where gender is included in, but does not delimit, the domain of content non-compositionality:

(5) fus-o → fus-i / **fus-a**
spindle-MS spindle-MPL spindle-FPL
'spindle → spindles(M) / **purr(F)**'

Another argument for the nature of gender as a nominaliser emerges by looking at its relationship with diminutives (*-ino*) and affectives (endearing *-uccio/-etto* and pejorative *-accio*) (cf. Armelin 2014, Cinque 2018). As a general rule, adding diminutives and affectives to a noun can never alter its original gender:

(6) a. matit-a → matit-in-a/*-o, matit-acci-a/*-o, matit-ucci-a/*-o
pencil-FS pencil-DIM-FS/-MS pencil-END-FS/-MS pencil-PEJ-FS/-MS
b. piatt-o → piatt-in-o/*-a, piatt-acci-o/*-a, piatt-ucci-o/*-a
dish-MS dish-DIM-MS/-FS dish-END-MS/-FS dish-PEJ-MS/-FS

Assuming that selection is local, and that each root may select the gender value that it occurs with, the above data leads to the conclusion that gender is *closer* to the root

than the diminutive or affective (7), even though its overt realisation (the gender-number portmanteaus *-o/a/...*) is in fact more peripheral linearly (an issue I come back to).

(7) $[\,[\,[\,[\sqrt{ROOT}\,]\ \mathrm{X}^0_{GEN}\,]\ \mathrm{X}^0_{DIM/AFF}\,]\ \mathrm{Div}^0\,]$

If gender is closer to the root that the diminuives/affectives, any word where non-compositional content *includes* the diminutives/affectives, across gender, will demonstrate again that gender is transparent for non-compositional content assignment, thereby behaving like a categoriser. Assuming the underlying structure in (7), this is borne out:

(8) copert-a → **copert-in-a**
blanket-FS blanket-DIM-FS
'blanket → **book cover**'

(9) pan-e → **pan-in-o**
bread-MS bread-DIM-MS
'bread → **sandwich**'

(8)-(9) show that gender behaves like a categoriser, rather than a functional head, insofar as it does *not* delimit the domain of content assignment.

Given my previous observation about the mismatch between the structural locus of gender for the purposes of local selection, and where gender overtly appears, I will suggest a solution based on Carstens' (1997) approach to Bantu noun classes. I will propose that the overt morphemes that appear to realise gender are in fact realisations of Div^0, where plurality is encoded. Gender is a nominaliser with the binary "noun class" feature [±FEM]. This feature then spreads across the extended projection via concord, which I formalise with the operation Agree (Chomsky 2000, 2001, cf. Toosarvandani & van Urk 2014, *contra* Bayırlı 2017). The realisation at PF of Div^0, whether plural or singular, will crucially depend on whether [+FEM] or [–FEM] has spread to it.

(10) $[\,[\,[\,\sqrt{ROOT}\,]\ n^0_{[\pm\mathrm{FEM}]}\,]\ \mathrm{Div}^0_{[\mathrm{FEM}:\_]}\,]$

As is clear from my proposal, summarised in (10), I will suggest an asymmetry between the values "masculine" and "feminine": I propose that the former is simply a morphosyntactic default (valued at PF as [–FEM]) in the absence of the latter (cf. Preminger 2014).

I conclude by analysing four linguistic phenomena where the asymmetry between "masculine" and "feminine" gender appears, explaining how they support my proposal:

(i) There are overt [+FEM] nominalisers in Italian (e.g. "femininisers" *-essa* and *-ice*), but no masculine equivalents.

(ii) Whenever gender *is* interpreted, only feminine gender makes a semantic contribution, while masculine is always semantically vacuous (cf. Sauerland 2003). Any apparent interpretability of the masculine is the result of an implicature due to pragmatic competition with a contentful feminine form (cf. Armelin 2014 for a similar idea that gender interpretability relies on some kind of *contrast*).

(iii) In rare cases, augmentative *-one* may alter the original gender of a noun. Importantly, this possibility is unidirectional: a feminine noun may become masculine, but *not* vice versa. I provide evidence that in these cases *-one* attaches directly to the root, supplanting $n^0{}_{[+\mathrm{FEM}]}$, and resulting in the PF default [–FEM] (masculine).

(iv) The singular form of "double plurals" is always masculine. I will argue that this is a case of *contextual categorisation* (Borer 2014), where the root directly combines with functional heads without any nominalisers, resulting in default masculine.