

# The Syntactic Place of Gender: The View from Italian

The fundamental question, couched in a constructivist framework (cf. Embick 2010, Bobaljik 2011, Borer 2013), that this talk aims to answer is the following:

- (1) Is grammatical gender a functional head in the Extended Projection of the noun (e.g.  $\text{Gen}^0$ ), or a categorising head (i.e. a nominaliser  $n^0$ )?

I will propose, based on data from Italian, that the latter approach is correct, agreeing in part with Kramer (2015). I will further suggest that gender in Italian should be represented with the binary feature  $[\pm\text{FEM}]$ , and that it is only realised indirectly, via the realisation of number (cf. Carstens 1997 et seq. on Bantu noun class).

Gender displays some hybrid and puzzling properties (cf. Carstens 2005, Acquaviva 2009, Armelin 2014, 2015, Acquaviva 2018, Déchaine 2018, Mathieu 2018, a.o.). On the one hand, it has typical characteristics of “derivational” morphology (i.e. categorisers in DM, or *c-functors* in Borer’s (2013) terminology): it tends to be root-selected, it often seems to lack any clear semantic function, and seems to function instead as a syntactic marker of nominal status. On the other hand, like many functional heads (or *s-functors* in Borer’s (2013) terms) such as  $\text{Div}^0$ , where plurality is realised (Borer 2005), it participates in nominal concord.

For the purposes of this talk, I will concentrate on clear cases of uninterpretable gender with inanimate nouns. I will, however, suggest that a division between interpretable and uninterpretable gender is unwarranted: the claim that gender on [+animate] or [+human] nouns is interpretable, in fact, turns out to be only a tendency, as (2) and (3) show:

- |     |                               |     |                                    |
|-----|-------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------|
| (2) | un gatto / una rana           | (3) | un medico / una vittima            |
|     | a.MS cat.MS    a.FS frog.FS   |     | a.MS doctor.MS    a.FS victim.FS   |
|     | ‘a (male or female) cat/frog’ |     | ‘a (male or female) doctor/victim’ |

In order to determine whether gender is a nominaliser or a functional head, I will adopt Borer’s (2013, 2014) hypothesis that the first functional head of an Extended Projection delimits the domain for non-compositional meaning assignment (cf. Moskal 2015 for a PF analogue). If gender is a nominaliser, it may be “transparent” for the purposes of non-compositional meaning assignment, as is indeed the case. There are nouns with non-compositional meaning that includes the plural across the head encoding gender:

- |     |                                     |     |                                     |
|-----|-------------------------------------|-----|-------------------------------------|
| (4) | gemell-o → <b>gemell-i</b>          | (5) | vicinanz-a → <b>vicinanz-e</b>      |
|     | twin-MS    twin-MPL                 |     | closeness-FS    closeness-FPL       |
|     | ‘twin → twins or <b>cufflinks</b> ’ |     | ‘closeness → <b>neighbourhood</b> ’ |

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 non-compositionality:

- (6) 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:

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

$$(8) \quad [ [ [ \sqrt{ROOT} ] X_{GEN}^0 ] X_{DIM/AFF}^0 ] Div^0 ]$$

If gender is closer to the root than the diminutives/affectives, any word where non-compositional content *includes* the diminutives/affectives will demonstrate again that gender is transparent for non-compositional content assignment, thereby behaving like a categoriser. This is indeed the case:

- (9) copert-a → **copert-in-a** (10) pan-e → **pan-in-o**  
 blanket-FS blanket-DIM-FS bread-MS bread-DIM-MS  
 ‘blanket → **book cover**’ ‘bread → **sandwich**’

Assuming the underlying structure in (8), this shows 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  $Div^0$ , the head where plurality is encoded (Borer 2005, Mathieu 2012, 2014). Gender is a nominaliser with the binary “noun class” feature  $[\pm FEM]$ . 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* Bayırılı 2017). The realisation at PF of  $Div^0$ , whether plural or singular, will crucially depend on whether  $[+FEM]$  or  $[-FEM]$  has spread to it.

$$(11) \quad [ [ [ \sqrt{ROOT} ] n_{[\pm FEM]}^0 ] Div_{[FEM:\_]}^0 ] ]$$

As is clear from my proposal, summarised in (11), I will suggest an asymmetry between the values “masculine” and “feminine”. In particular, I will 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 three linguistic phenomena where the asymmetry between “masculine” and “feminine” gender appears, explaining how they support my proposal:

- (i) There are only  $[+FEM]$  overt gender nominalisers.
- (ii) In rare cases, augmentatives (*-one*) may change the original gender of the noun they attach to. Importantly, this possibility is unidirectional.
- (iii) The singular form of “double plurals” is always masculine.