

A Unified Morphosyntactic Approach of Gender and Class Across Languages

Karim Achab

University of Ottawa

kachab@uottawa.ca

In this presentation I investigate the gender system in Tamazight (Berber) and compare it with its counterpart in French and English. The choice of these three languages is not random; they illustrate the continuum representing the different extents to which the so-called gender system may be used across languages. Tamazight and English stand on the two opposite extremes while French positions in the middle. In Tamazight, the morphological system used to indicate feminine natural (or sex) gender and grammatical gender is also used to indicate KIND or CLASS categories such as diminutive/augmentative and singulative (or individuation). Masculine gender has become unmarked in this language (see Guerssel 1993 and Achab 2003). All nouns in Tamazight are prone to the diminutive/augmentative transformation. In French, the same morphological system used to indicate natural gender is also used to indicate grammatical gender while English is restricted to natural (or sex) gender only. Several questions, all of which are addressed in this proposal, arise with respect to the Tamazight data on the one hand and the differences between Tamazight, French and the English, including: (i) why and how did it become necessary to indicate grammatical gender in the languages which do?; (ii) how could the same morphological system, called gender, indicate the CLASSES identified above in Tamazight?; (iii) did such a morphological system start as a classifier, as a nominalizer or as natural gender marker before it was generalized to the different situations listed above?; (iv) how can we provide a unified approach accounting for all the various usages of the same morphological system in Tamazight (see above), as well as the differences between the three languages considered here?

Starting with the Tamazight data, I first defend the idea that the so-called gender system has a dual role, one of which is semantic and the other syntactic. I argue that it is a generic classifier whose role is to indicate CLASS or KIND (natural gender, diminutives and singulatives). For this reason, I henceforth refer to this “gender” morpheme as a CLASS morpheme. In contrast, grammatical gender does not refer to a KIND or a CLASS. How to solve this paradox? This is where the second role of this morpheme, syntactic in nature, steps in. I provide evidence from the language that the morpheme in question is nominal, which makes it a nominalizer when combined with a lexical ROOT. Without a nominalizer, a lexical ROOT cannot become a noun. Moreover, I argue that the internal structure of nouns also contains a functional category feature that needs to be identified at the interface level. This category feature corresponds to Marantz’ (2008) little *n*, also adopted by Kihm (2008). I argue that such a category feature needs to be spelled out morphologically by a lexical feature at the PF interface level. The idea of a functional feature getting identified by a lexical counterpart is similar to the idea of PROBE relation between a head and a specifier. The functional category feature being essentially nominal, it can be identified/probed by lexical elements that have the feature [+N] such as those referred to as CLASS in the literature across languages. With this in mind, let me now summarize the unified approach made in this proposal, better suited to account for all the various situations in Tamazight mentioned above where this morpheme is used on one hand, and for the differences between Tamazight, French and English on the other.

Adopting Marantz’s (2008) idea of little *n* as a root nominalizer, I argue that the nominalization process involved adds a morphological feature that makes it possible to distinguish between the ROOT, which lacks a category feature, and the noun which is [+N]. Theoretically, two possibilities are available to achieve such a result. One possibility is by resorting to a morpho-phonological device deprived of any semantics. This is for instance the strategy used in English in word pairs such as *present*, which is a verb if the stress is on the second syllable and a noun if it falls on the first syllable. The second possibility is by adjoining a nominal morpheme or affix. Some affixes have their own semantics when added to a lexical category such as nouns or verbs, in addition to their role as a nominalizer. This is the case of the suffixes *-er* and *-ee* in “employer” and “employee”. This is precisely the case of the Tamazight CLASS morpheme under discussion, which also

conveys semantics in addition to its [+N] feature. Getting inspiration from Marantz' (2008) "two places" approach for word formation, I argue that in the situation where semantics is involved (natural gender, diminutive / augmentative, singulative), the category *n* probes and merges with the CLASS morpheme that had merged with the lexical ROOT by virtue of its feature [+N]. Inversely, in the situation where no semantics is involved (pure grammatical gender), the category *n* probes and merges with a head determiner that dominates the bare noun. Like nouns, D also has a nominal feature (Chomsky 1995: 364). The two structures thus obtained are illustrated below as (1a) and (1b), respectively.

- (1) a. [DP D [*nP* [CLASS [ROOT]]]¹ b. [*nP* [DP D [CLASS [ROOT]]]]²

As far as the different available interpretations (i.e. whether it is natural gender, diminutive / augmentative or singulative), I argue that a lexical derivation is involved (in the lexicon). For instance, if a noun is already masculine, then adding the feminine class morpheme does not make it feminine but diminutive. Therefore, nouns enter the Syntax with their interpretable features already specified.

The same structures in (1) perfectly account for the French and the English data. In French the NP *femme* has an inherent interpretable gender feature [+FEM], in addition to its inherent syntactic feature [+N]. Therefore, the NP *femme* has the structure (1a). By contrast, a noun such as *table* does not belong to a natural class of female entities; therefore it does not carry the interpretable feature, although it carries a value which matches *la* rather than *le*. This supports the idea that valuation and interpretability are independent properties (Pesetsky and Torrego 2004; Picallo 2008). Accordingly, the structure of the DP *la table* will have the structure in (1b) rather than the one in (1a). In English, nouns and pronouns have natural gender but no grammatical gender; therefore, English nouns structure illustrated in (1a) where the *nP* dominates the complex [CLASS [ROOT]].

Finally, I show how the two structures illustrated in (1) above based on Tamazight, French and English, explains the morphosyntax of GENDER and CLASS in a wide range of other languages.

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¹ A similar structure [C class] [N n]] was already proposed for gender by a number of linguists among whom Picallo (2008) and Kramer (2014).

² A similar structure whereby a category including gender feature (phi features) dominates DP was proposed by Sauerland (2008).