Features such as person, number and gender are commonly associated with triggering agreement relations. However, little attention has been given to the behaviour of gender and number and their role in predicative sentences with generic subjects through literature. Although gender is usually seen as an intrinsic feature of the noun and of obligatory agreement in Portuguese, its licensing shows some constraints in such language. Brazilian Portuguese shows a non-canonical behaviour in sentences like (1) and (2). Foltran and Rodrigues (2013) assume that the sentences in (1) and (2) are derived from different structures: in (1), the agreement pattern is the result of a neuter agreement with a small clause in the subject position, while in (2), the lack of agreement is due to the presence of a DP subject whose agreement features are absent. The authors claim that there is semantic selection involved in subject agreement in copular sentences. Thus, in sentences like (1), the predicate selects as one of its argument a semantic category, a situation, which has a particular syntactic realization (a small clause). On the other hand, for sentences like (3) and (4), they advocate that DP subjects are defective, not showing index features, which is argued to be responsible for external agreement (cf. Pollard and Sag, 1994). I will assume here that the sentences like (1-4) can be analysed as any other that shows canonical agreement. The difference lies on the fact that a DP may have a different feature configuration and that leads to different outputs. To explain this mechanism, we adopt the idea that a DP is the result of feature composition and the consequence of such composition entails a relativized syntax. I will assume that a feature geometry is relevant not only to morphologic purpose, such as the pro-form realization, but it is also crucial to syntax. Adopting a feature geometry (Béjar, 2003, 2008), the subset/superset relation would be responsible for the feature activation in the probe. The subjects of the predicative in (1) and (2) do not have the D layer in their feature hierarchy, and a non-valued predicative is the result. The licensing of such element is done by valuing the available dominant node, [ ] (cf. (5)). The impossibility of valuing such features is what entails the superficial failed agreement. The determinerless subject does not trigger any specification on the predicative and its reading is generic (cf. Borer, 2005). The contingent relation between number and gender then can be explained by means of movement inside this structure (see (6)). Assuming Borer (2005)’s DP structure, I propose that the predicative lacks some layers and cannot be valued for gender and number in the absence of a D probe in the subject, since the head , which contains D, is empty in (1-4). According to this analysis, bare plurals have a classifier phrase, which is responsible for portioning out “stuff”. The absence of a quantifier phrase in this case is connected to the fact that both weak determinerless mass and plurals lack a quantity interpretation, as seen in (7). The absence of D is also responsible for blocking gender agreement outside the DP, since this feature is located within D.

(1) Maria bêbada é chato /chata.
   Maria drunkFEM.SG copulaSG annoyingMASC.SG/ annoyingFEM.SG
(2) Crianças é divertido /*divertida.
   ChildrenFEM.PL copulaSG funnyMASC.SG/*funnyFEM.SG
(3) Alunas que bebem é chato /chata.
   StudentsFEM.PL that drink.PL is annoyingMASC.SG/*annoyingFEM.SG
(4) Crianças pequenas é divertido /*divertida.
   ChildrenFEM.PL littleFEM.PL is fun-MASC.SG/*funnyFEM.SG
(5) [ [ p[rtcl]s[pmr]t[addr][D[def][spcfl]][indv[#group][class[fem]]]]
(6) [ [ u ] [class] [ ... [ [sub[#pl][class]]] ]
   [ [class] [class] [ ... [ [load[#pl][class]]] ]]
(7) [p[pl] (e) pr[div] (e) DIV [NP criança]] = crianças

References