Semantic gender diversity
in Arabic heights, categories, and (dis)placements

Gender in Arabic varieties is normally thought as bi-valued: feminine (marked) and masculine (by default), despite the fact that it expresses various non-equivalent oppositions, which can have semantic content, or being simply formal. In what is taken to be the semantic ‘core’ opposition (at least in western descriptions), natural (notional or conceptual) gender is seen as expressing a sex-based opposition of animate nPs, as in kalb/kalb-at (‘he-dog’ and ‘she-dog’). Then the residue is assigned a gender value randomly, as conventional, non-motivated, or non-constructed. But there are a number of regularities of gender assignment which can be motivated on interpretive grounds. Among those, we explore classifier gender, collective and plural gender, gender of abstract nPs, all which are not interpreted along the animacy hierarchy, but rather with regard to individuation, quantification, size, evaluation, abstraction, etc. To account for these insufficiently acknowledged gender patterns and meanings, a richer system of (un)interpretable features associated with gender needs to be introduced in the grammar, to account for gender ‘complexity’, construed as an interrelation between distinct simple-layered systems.

Second, although Gender is traditionally thought of as a characterizing nominal feature (as a typical n categorizing device), non-nominal categories are also gendered. Thus, Gender contributes to the interpretation of adjectives as intensive, augmentative, diminutive, or evaluative, etc., in ways that parallel its contribution to the interpretation of gendered nominals (though with significant differences). Moreover, events can also be gendered as countable units, etc. The transcategorial character of Gender should then be taken into account, in parallel to its (dominant) nominality, and in comparison with transcategorial Number.

Third, with respect to the so-called displacement property of gender agreement, its distribution along the many semantic or formal flavors, or its overriding (or resolution) in ‘mixed’ or multiple gender agreements, an enriched system of features and architecture is also needed to describe and theorize interrelations of gender forms and meanings.

Adopting a minimalist Distributed Morphology model of grammar. I will argue for the relevance and motivation of five layers or ‘heights’ of gender syntax and interpretation: (a) conceptual (root R gender), (b) categorizing (Cat or n gender), (c) classifying (Cl gender, associated with the count-mass distinction), (d) number (Num gender, relevant for interpreting pluratives, collectives, and plurals), and (e) discursive-referential (D gender, based on both the properties of the referent, and its discursive interpretation in D or C). By examining old and new patterns of gender in Arabic varieties and Germanic and Romance, establishing new descriptive generalizations, and reconciling Grimm/Wright’s and Brugmann/Brockelmann’s views on the origins of gender, we hope to show that research on gender should extend appropriately to all kinds of nominal classification, including noun classes, classifiers, and number.
Some references
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