Within a given language, it is a matter of empirical fact that not every nominal expression comes to be specified for every possible gender class. Consider French: some expressions, such as those in (1-2), alternate between masculine and feminine gender and a corresponding change in meaning occurs. Others, such as the expressions in (3) and (4), while intuitively in a similar natural class to those in (1) and (2), do not alternate—even with the addition of semi-regular gender morphology.

(1) a. le dindon (masc.)
   ‘the male turkey’
   b. la dinde (fem.)
   ‘the female turkey’

(2) a. le diesel (masc.)
   ‘diesel fuel’
   b. la diesel (fem.)
   ‘diesel car’

(3) a. le perroquet (masc.)
   ‘the parrot’
   b. #la perroquet(te) (fem.)
       
(4) a. le biocarburant (masc.)
   ‘biofuel’
   b. #la biocarburant(e) (fem.)

A completely satisfying account of how any given expression comes to have a particular pattern of specification has been elusive. In this talk, I provide evidence from French to back up the following claims: (1) gender is a feature on a nominalizing head, n; (2) syntactic combinatorial processes are responsible for producing the pairing between n and a lexical root, √; (3) however, contra claims in the literature, the combinatorial process pairing n and √ is unbounded—that is, syntactic licensing conditions do not enforce specification restrictions; (4) instead, all restrictions on gender specification are a function of interpretation at the semantic interface.

The claim that the locus of gender is the nominalizing head has been taken up by many authors working on a variety of languages (most recently in Kramer 2014, to appear on Amharic). The common thread of these arguments is a push to systematize the relationship between pairs of expressions with overlapping phonological forms and semantic signatures that differ (minimally) in syntactic category or features. Under this analysis, in (1a) and (2a), n hosts a masculine gender feature that respectively dominates the roots √DIND and √DIESEL. In (1b) and (2b), n hosts a feminine feature and respectively dominates the same two roots. In the case of (1), this alternation corresponds to a male versus female change in denotation. In the case of (2) this corresponds to something slightly more semantically opaque, but in an important sense related.

To capture the differences between (1) and (2), I follow claims from Kramer (2014, to appear) that a binary split between masculine and feminine is not sufficient to account for the differences between gender that is aligned with biological sex and gender that is not. Instead there is a four-way split: [M], grammatically masculine with a male denotation (e.g. 1a); [F], grammatically feminine with a female denotation (e.g. 1b); [m] grammatically masculine with no denotation (e.g. 2a); and [f], grammatically feminine with no denotation (e.g. 2b). Therefore, there are four instances of n corresponding to each of the four features. In Kramer’s account, the difference between F/M and f/m is formalized through interpretability: the former features are interpretable at the semantic interface thus denote biological sex, while the latter features are illegible and thus ignored. However, under this definition of interpretability, we cannot account for pairs such as those in (2). If we treat them as having the same decompositional properties as the pairs exemplified in (1), then we would have to say that uninterpretable gender, which is invisible at LF, is affecting the semantic interpretation of the root. I therefore adopt the following idea: all four types of gender are active and can condition interpretations at the semantic interface, specifically at the Encyclopedia, but only F/M themselves are interpreted.

Regardless of formalization, we must ask how to limit the pairing between these four types of n and any given root. Following the claims of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993, et seq), it follows that a syntactic operation, such as Merge, is responsible for forming n and √ into a set. From here two possible scenarios are conceivable: (1) that the particular n-√ parings put
together via Merge are restricted, therefore expressions such as (3b) and (4b) will never be formed by the grammar; or (2) $n$-$\sqrt{n}$ pairings are unrestricted and the interfaces enforce the gaps.

The first option has been pursued by a number of researchers. A key element of this type of analysis is to pin down the nature of the root to determine what sort of restrictions are tractable. If roots were syntactically differentiated according to their semantic or phonological signatures, we could conceive of building selectional restrictions on Merge that use this information. But, recent work by Harley (2014) building on insights from Acquaviva (2009) provides convincing evidence that roots are not individuated in syntax according to their phonological or semantic features, instead adopting an indexical system. This results in selectional restrictions in syntax being unformable in terms of semantic or phonological information. To create a syntactic selectional restriction, it seems we must resort to listing which indexes go with a particular $n$, essentially reverting to a lexicalist account and losing many of our generalizations.

Building further on Acquaviva and Harley’s work, Kramer (to appear) constructs an account of “licensing conditions” that veers towards scenario two. Kramer’s analysis splits up licensing conditions into semantic conditions, the interpretation of a root in context via the Encyclopedia, and arbitrary conditions, essentially idiosyncratic conditions on Vocabulary Insertion. In essence, due to the aforementioned formulation of interpretability where non-sex-aligned gender is invisible to the semantic component, Kramer is forced to create one set of conditions that govern most animate referring nouns—the semantic conditions—and an additional set that governs all other nouns—the arbitrary conditions. However, given my evidence for the activity of all gender at the semantic interface, we can entertain the possibility that all the responsibility of restricting specification falls to the success or failure of interpreting roots in context at the Encyclopedia.

There are a number of conceptual and empirical reasons for thinking this is the right direction to head, at least for French. First, we would dispense of all pre-interface listings of roots: all idiosyncrasies would fall under the component already designed to handle idioms and semi-systematic interpretations. Second, it’s not at all clear that the phonological (or morphological) component fails to realize novel gender-root pairings as strings of sounds and morphemes, where the semantic component does indeed fail to assign meaning in these cases—see examples (2b) and (3b). Third, we see both rapid diachronic changes and synchronic changes in the specification of gender covarying with the availability of a semantic interpretation, while the morphophonological signatures are static. The most recent example of this has been feminine gendered and female denoting expressions for occupations derived from historically masculine forms.

References


