The interaction of gender and number: Evidence from syncretism and gender switch

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The gender system of a language is usually determined by inspecting the agreement patterns of its singular nouns. For example, Barasano (Tucanoan; Columbia) makes a three-way distinction in subject agreement on verbs for singular nouns: masculine, feminine and neuter. However, plural nouns often do not show the same gender distinctions as singular nouns. In Barasano, there is only a two-way distinction for agreement with plural nouns: one form for masculine and feminine nouns, and one form for neuter nouns. This talk aims to investigate two types of gender-number relationships from the perspective of Distributed Morphology: convergent gender-number systems (i.e., gender syncretisms) and crossed gender-number systems (i.e., gender switches). Both types have implications for morphological theory and syntactic theory.

A language is convergent when it makes fewer gender distinctions in the plural than in the singular, like Barasano subject agreement. I propose that languages with masculine/feminine gender syncretisms like Barasano generally have semantically-based gender assignment, and I show how this is predicted in a Distributed Morphology approach to syncretism. A language has a crossed gender-number system when at least some nouns seem to switch genders in the plural. I argue that, pace typological approaches, crossed systems are not a uniform phenomenon, and I develop full analyses of the crossed systems of Somali and of Romanian. Both Somali and Romanian provide evidence that gender features are syntactically located on the nominalizing head $n$, and not on the Num(ber) head, in line with recent theoretical and psycholinguistic approaches to gender features. Overall, the talk uses complex gender-number relationships to offer support for DM as a framework, make progress towards a theory of possible syncretisms, and provide novel corroborating evidence about the syntactic location of gender features.