What you pluralize is not how you pluralize: On the individuation properties of Italian -a nouns, and their morpho-syntactic consequences

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Italian has a class of nouns that are masculine in singular but masculine or feminine in plural, depending on how their plurality is interpreted. These so called -a nouns, historically Latin neuters, typically denote body parts, measures, parts of something, and other relational properties (e.g., braccio ‘arm’, labbro ‘lip/edge’, or muro ‘wall’). This class was previously characterized as a special inflectional class. However, according to Acquavivia (2008) they are lexical plurals.

Semantic properties: I argue that the characterization of this class as lexical plurals misses an important semantic generalization, namely, that the feminine plural does not denote individuated atomic entities of the sort regular plurals do. Instead, these nouns denote plurality of relations (body parts, relations to a space etc.) (Sternefeld 1998; Beck and Sauerland 2000; cf. Lasersohn 2011). In contrast, if the same lexical items form plural from individuated atomic entities, their plural is regular, i.e., masculine. For instance, when we count fingers as attached body parts, their plural is feminine, while the individuated plural, i.e., fingers physically separated from the body, is masculine. That not all -a nouns may form masculine plural is a side-effect of their lexical semantics: not all nominal concepts can be individuated. In other words, even though -a nouns do not form a lexical semantic natural class, they do have a common semantic denominator: the lack of individuation.

Syntactic implementation: I argue that the lack of individuation has morpho-syntactic consequences. I follow Borer (2005) in that there is a formal dependency between the counter functional head and the divisional head. The regular masculine plural results from [ +COUNTER, +DIV] feature configuration, while the feminine plural results from [ +COUNTER, −DIV] feature configuration. I argue that the systematic switch from masculine to feminine arises from a defective φ-Agree of the D head, in parallel to defective Agree in the T domain. While D is able to get valued as plural, the [−DIV] feature acts as a defective goal which prevents D from agreeing in gender with n (cf. Chomsky 2000; Anagnostopoulou 2003; Rezac 2008). The defective nature of the failed Agree (Preminger, 2009) yields a marked gender feature valuation (feminine).

Predictions: (i) If the irregular pattern arises because of the lack of a division function within the DP, we expect to find a regular plural agreement if there is an outside source of individuating plurality. One place to look at is a nominal conjunction. As argued in Munn (1993); Bošković (2009); Bhatt and Walkow (2013), conjunction creates individuating plurality. Thus we expect that if we take a singular -a noun and conjoin it with another noun, the resulting plurality will treat the -a noun as masculine, without any change in its semantics. As the following examples from Acquavivia (2008) show, this prediction is borne out. In Standard Italian if a singular masculine noun conjoins with a singular masculine noun, the resulting agreement is masculine plural. As (1-a) confirms, -a nouns are no exception. Similarly, if a singular masculine noun conjoins with a singular feminine noun, the resulting agreement is masculine plural. Again, as we can see in (1-b), -a nouns behave as regular masculine nouns. Crucially, even when we conjoin two singular -a nouns, the resulting agreement is masculine plural, as in (1-c), even though each of them would trigger feminine agreement if pluralized indenently.

(1) a. [il dito e il piede] che sono stati amputati /*state amputate the finger and the foot that have been amputated.MASC.PL /*FEM.PL
(ii) If the feminine plural ending arises via defective Agree, D – which is the labeling source and in turn the source of $\phi$-feature valuation for anaphoric elements – lacks individuation and is valued for feminine and plural. Furthermore, we know that relational properties can become an argument of a distributive predicate; however, they cannot be directly counted by an individuating numeral such as ‘one.’ Thus the prediction is that a distributive anaphoric element will be able to get valued by such a D. In contrast, an individuating anaphoric element will not. Both predictions are borne out as the following examples from Acquavivia (2008) demonstrate. As already discussed in Lepschy and Lepschy (1988); Bach and Jensen (1990) and Maiden and Robustelli (2000), if a distributive quantifier such as ‘each’ anaphorically refers to an -a noun, as in (2), the form of the distributive element is feminine singular. This means that the anaphoric element is able to obtain its gender value from D. (Since this is a lexically distributive operator, the singular number feature is assigned from the lexicon.) In contrast, even though -a nouns can be counted, as in (3), their plurality cannot be used as an antecedent for the individuating numeral ‘one,’ as plural D of -a nouns lacks individuation. Consequently, Agree with D fails. As we can see in (4) speakers cannot establish what gender ‘one’ should have. This is exactly what we predict under the proposed account based on defective Agree.

(2) a. le uova FEM.PL costano sessanta centesimi each.FEM.SG l’una FEM.SG /*l’uno MASC.SG
the eggs.FEM.PL cost 60 cents each.FEM.SG /*MASC.SG
b. le braccia di di Ugo sono one.FEM.SG longer.FEM.SG una più lunga dell’altra
the arms.FEM.PL of Ugo are one.FEM.SG longer.FEM.SG than the other.FEM.SG
/*uno più lungo dell’altra
/*one.MASC.SG longer.MASC.SG than the other.MASC.SG
‘Ugo’s arms are one longer than the other’

(3) volevo due uova, e me ne hanno date tre
I-wanted two eggs.FEM.PL, and me they have given.FEM.PL three.FEM.PL
‘I wanted two eggs, and they gave me three’

(Acquavivia, 2008, 147, (5.32))

(4) a. volevo due uova, e me ne hanno date una
I-wanted two eggs.FEM.PL, and me they have given.FEM.PL one.FEM.SG
b. volevo due uova, e me ne hanno dato uno
I-wanted two eggs.FEM.PL, and me they have given.FEM.PL one.FEM.SG
‘I wanted two eggs, and they gave me one’

(Acquavivia, 2008, 147, (5.33))