(Grammatical) gender troubles and the gender of pronouns
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Background: Gender features are peculiar in that they play three disparate roles: They classify lexical nouns, more or less arbitrarily, but not completely so; they also unambiguously mark sex on some animate nouns – but not all – and on some pronouns and other constituents built around empty nouns. Finally, they mark dependencies within DPs – a matter that is often overlooked.

With respect to the classifying function, gender features behave more or less like the elusive inflectional class features; this would perhaps suggest they are uninterpretable (Alexiadou and Müller 2007).

With respect to the function of marking natural gender and animacy, gender features typically reflect a cognitively salient property of the concept expressed by the np, they are hence interpretable. If gender is located on n, as in Lowenstamm (2008), the long-standing intuition that gender is a feature of nouns is captured, making it a feature of the nominaliser, not of the acategorial root. More generally, the fact that natural gender and animacy are marked, often morphologically, on the noun itself, is not without theoretical interest: colour and weight, among others, are also cognitively salient but do not from the basis of noun classification (“gender”) systems.

With respect to gender marking dependencies in concord (cf. Carstens 2000), little has been said. Unlike Number agreement, which involves an Agree relation between an uninterpretable / unvalued feature and an interpretable one on Num, gender concord does not necessarily do so. Thus, feminine gender on the noun krisi (‘crisis’) below can hardly be claimed to be interpretable.

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(1) afi i nea krisi  
    this.FEM the.FEM new.FEM crisis.FEM  
    “This new crisis.”
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The consistent disparity between semantic and grammatical gender is dealt with in Kramer (2009), where semantic gender is understood as interpretable and grammatical gender as uninterpretable. In the absence of semantic gender features, concord will occur with grammatical gender features. Atkinson (2015) provides a way to resolve potential gender concord conflicts in languages like French, by positioning semantic gender features on a head higher than the one hosting grammatical ones: thus, if semantic gender is absent, grammatical gender lends itself for the purposes of concord, becoming a Goal for Agree.

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(2) a. [uGen] PROBE ... [iGen] GOAL ... [uGen]  
    Agree with semantic gender  

   b. [uGen] PROBE ... [uGen] GOAL  
    Agree with grammatical gender
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The problem: Against this background, a serious question is what kind of gender is encoded on empty nouns at the core of pronominals (Postal 1969; Panagiotidis 2002). Gender on pronouns is important because it restricts their reference, as discussed in Heim (2008). Beginning from languages like English, empty nouns within pronouns – actually bare nominalisers without a root complement (Panagiotidis 2014, sec. 4.5) – seem to encode only semantic gender: he is male, she is female and it neither and/or inanimate. However, a look at other pronominal systems, e.g. in Romance, reveals that the situation is more nuanced: whereas gender marking on strong pronouns is unambiguously semantic, encoding sex and animacy, gender on pronominal clitics is grammatical, even in contexts where clitics are not used anaphorically.

An account: Building on Kramer (2009), I propose that grammatical gender features are uninterpretable and thus distinct from semantic gender features, which are interpretable. I moreover depart from Atkinson (2015), who argues semantic gender ([iGen]) features to be hosted on n, the nominaliser, and grammatical ones ([uGen]) on the root, something that cannot be the case if roots are acategorial (Arad 2005; Acquaviva 2009; Borer 2009; Acquaviva and Panagiotidis 2012; Harley 2014). Moreover, this idea is impossible to implement exactly because strong pronouns mark semantic gender in the absence of any root.

Bringing together the accounts of Cardinaletti & Starke (1999) and Déchaine & Wiltschko (2002), we can however claim that strong pronouns contain more projections than pronominal clitics. This would lead us to a state of affairs where grammatical gender ([uGen]) is indeed marked on
n, as in Lowenstamm (2008), a fact also true of empty nouns involved in certain types of nominal ellipsis, cf. Panagiotidis (2003). However, strong pronouns, just like animate nouns bearing semantic gender ([iGen]), would contain an extra layer on top of nP, an animacy projection akin to Picallo’s (1991) GenP:

(2) Anim [iGen] > n [uGen]

Finally, marked structures in Greek and Brazilian Portuguese slang usage (Lazzarini Cyrino, Gabbai Armelin, and Minussi 2013) suggest that indeed semantic gender features are divorced from the actual lexical noun, and they are most likely hosted in a head of their own.

References