



Foreword



The present issue contains a selection of papers from the workshop *Exploring grammatical gender*, held in Vienna on February 9th and 11th, 2012, during the 15th International Morphology Meeting (IMM15). These papers were revised and prepared for publication according to the standards of LS. The workshop was organized by the three guest editors of this special issue; a call for papers was sent out through the Linguist List, inviting papers on a broad range of topics concerning the study of grammatical gender (theoretical issues in the description of gender systems; controller genders and target genders; the domain of gender agreement; conditions on gender agreement; gender assignment; the diachronic evolution of gender systems; gender in contact, in language acquisition and under attrition). We received 30 proposals, and selected 10, plus two alternates, to be presented at the workshop. Greville G. Corbett was the only invited speaker, and presented a paper entitled *Is gender special?*, which articulated a treatment of grammatical gender within Canonical Typology (see [Corbett, 2011, 2012](#); [Brown et al., 2013](#) and references there).¹

Among the several topics mentioned in our call for papers, authors have chosen mainly to deal with agreement phenomena, which constitute the main topic of at least three of the seven papers appearing in this special issue (Josefsson, Karatsareas, Rodina), and figure prominently also in Audring's general overview. Three authors (or groups of authors) chose instead to describe in detail the gender system of specific languages which are puzzling in different ways: Amharic (Kramer), Shona (Déchaine et al.), Romanian and Albanian (Giurgea). These languages add to those covered in the other papers (in particular, Danish, Greek, Russian, Swedish) so as to provide a colorful mosaic of empirical data, which the reader will find discussed in the following pages.

While the articles themselves are ordered alphabetically by their authors' names, the order in which we introduce them briefly in what follows is loosely thematic.

Jenny Audring's paper addresses the relationship between the grammatical category of gender and a language's complexity (a hotly debated topic in recent morphological research).² According to Audring, there are three dimensions along which gender systems can be evaluated and then can be said to be more or less complex with respect to each other: the number of gender values, the number and nature of assignment rules, and the amount of formal marking on targets of gender agreement. Audring illustrates the three dimensions separately, and then addresses the question whether 'more complex' along each of these dimensions equals 'more difficult' for a language user or learner. Her answer is that, while complexity of values (i.e., a large vs. small number of different genders) and complexity of gender assignment rules (i.e., many rules of various kinds – semantic, morphological, phonological – each accounting for a relatively small set of nouns vs. only a few very general and straightforward assignment rules) indeed make a gender system more difficult to acquire, the opposite is true for complexity of formal expression of agreement. The more numerous agreement targets are in a language L, the earlier is gender acquired by learners of L as L1. A correlation also holds between complexity of expression of agreement and complexity at the other two levels: languages that have reduced the amount of agreement targets (such as English and Dutch, where agreement is shown only on pronominal targets) have consequently reduced the number of genders and/or the complexity of gender assignment rules, which have become few and based on very simple semantic factors, such as sex and animacy. Apparently, scarcity of agreement, realized only on pronominal targets, is insufficient to allow speakers to acquire and maintain a system with a large number of genders and of assignment rules. Audring therefore proposes that a typological correlation holds between lack of complexity in agreement marking and lack of complexity on the other two dimensions investigated.

¹ The paper provided invaluable food for thought to all workshop participants – which we acknowledge gratefully – though we knew in advance that Greville Corbett was not going to submit it for publication in this special issue. Also some other papers that were presented at the Vienna workshop were not eventually submitted: Hans-Olav Enger (University of Oslo), *Scandinavian pancake sentences – again* (see [Enger, 2013](#)), Peter Siemund and Florian Dolberg (University of Hamburg), *From lexical to referential gender: An analysis of gender change in medieval English based on two historical documents* (see [Siemund and Dolberg, 2011](#)), Michelle St-Amour (University of Toronto), *Feature interactions in Russian grammatical gender assignment*.

² See [Dahl \(2004, 2009\)](#), the Surrey Morphology Group project on morphological complexity (<http://www.surrey.ac.uk/englishandlanguages/research/smg/researchprojects/morphologicalcomplexity/>) and the references in Audring's paper.

A case study in change in gender agreement is provided by Petros Karatsareas, who describes the three-gender system of the Pontic dialects of modern Greek showing that they have modified gender agreement through a shrinking of syntactic agreement, which has been yielding to semantic agreement in several contexts. The expansion of semantic agreement is argued to have progressed stepwise, in compliance with the predictions made by the Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett, 1979, 1991, pp. 225–260; 2006, pp. 206–237). Thus, while personal and relative pronouns switch first to semantic agreement (with neuter being selected with both masculine and feminine nouns denoting inanimate objects), pronominal determiners within the NP are the stronghold of (masculine or feminine) syntactic agreement with such nouns. The change is also shown to have been sensitive to the Individuation Hierarchy (Sasse, 1993, p. 659): thus, among the values of the category number, the plural (being the value characterized by lesser individuation) is affected first by the change to semantic agreement. Replacement is also shown to have progressed more swiftly with feminine than with masculine controllers, which correlates with the fact – Karatsareas convincingly argues – that a great many abstract nouns are formed with suffixes specified for feminine gender, so that this gender was particularly prevalent among nouns not denoting humans and, consequently, more prone to be seized by the change under discussion. Karatsareas also compares the change which occurred in the gender system of Pontic Greek with other reported cases of emergence of a semantic system superseding a previous syntactic one (spoken Dutch, Asturian and northern Castilian dialects). He finally argues that the spread of semantic agreement, as observed in Pontic, paved the way for the eventual loss of gender in related dialects (Cappadocian, Pharasiot), both in contact with (genderless) Turkish.

Semantic agreement is also key to Yulia Rodina's acquisitional study on Russian, which analyzes how children gradually approach an adult-like competence with respect to the mastery of gender agreement with two kinds of hybrid controllers: diminutives of women's names in *-ok/-ik* (such as e.g. *Lenok*, from *Lena*) and profession titles like *vrač* 'physician' or *buxgalter* 'bookkeeper', when employed to denote women. Since in Russian inflectional class is a very reliable predictor of a noun's gender, and since both the categories of nouns investigated belong to inflectional classes associated with masculine gender, a mismatch arises between masculine agreement, which would be required syntactically, and feminine agreement, driven by semantic specification, given the female referents. Both kinds of nominals are rare in both caregiver's and children's natural speech – Rodina demonstrates – so that corpus data are of little help. Therefore, an experiment was devised in order to elicit semi-spontaneous occurrences of the relevant instances of agreement. The results show that semantic agreement is predominant in caregivers' responses (98% for *-ok/-ik* diminutives, 79% for profession titles), whereas children below 4 years of age mostly apply syntactic (i.e. masculine) agreement with those nouns (86% and 81%, respectively). Semantic agreement then gains ground in the production by children aged between 5;1 and 6;5, more swiftly so with *-ok/-ik* diminutives (38%) than with nouns like *vrač* (73%). Both the delayed spread of semantic agreement and its different pace with the two classes of nominals under consideration are explained appealing to external factors, viz. an initial lack of social awareness, which is then resolved as the child matures cognitively and socially.

Gunlög Josefsson's paper addresses an issue that has been widely discussed in studies on gender agreement: Scandinavian so-called pancake sentences, such as *Pannkakor är nyttigt*, lit. pancake(c)-C.PL be.PRS healthy.N 'Eating pancakes is healthy' (p. 62). She puts forward arguments against Enger's (2004) analysis, that views neuter agreement on predicates in sentences with non-neuter subjects as an instance of semantic agreement (in the sense of Corbett). According to Enger,³ neuter agreement occurs when the subject is inanimate and/or low on the Individuation Hierarchy. According to Josefsson, instead, the neuter in the predicate of these sentences in Swedish is an instance of syntactic agreement: in her analysis, the subject of pancake sentences is headed by a null neuter classifier. She draws a parallel with varieties of Danish in which a neuter classifier has phonetic realization, and argues that the development of neuter classifiers spread from Danish to Swedish in the course of the 20th century.

Ruth Kramer's paper develops an analysis of the Amharic gender system in the framework of Distributed Morphology (DM). From DM she adopts the idea that gender is a feature on *n* rather than on lexical roots; in her view, there are two kinds of gender feature values in Amharic, interpretable (*i*) and uninterpretable (*u*); besides, a *n* need not combine with a gender feature value, it can be "plain": nouns formed by roots combining with a plain *n* will display the default gender of a given language. The full set of possible *n* types assumed by Kramer is the following: *n i* [+ FEM], *n i* [– FEM], *n u* [+ FEM], and plain *n*. In Amharic, most nouns denoting animates have a grammatical gender that correlates with the natural gender of their referent; these nouns are accounted for assuming that their root combines with either *n i* [+ FEM] or *n i* [– FEM] (indeed, many nouns are so-called "same root nominals", such as *tāmari-w* 'the male student' and *tāmari-wa* 'the female student', where the same root can combine with both *n i* [+ FEM] and *n i* [– FEM]). Most inanimate nouns, or nouns denoting animates whose sex is unknown or irrelevant, are analyzed as combining with plain *n*, and receiving masculine gender by default. There remains a handful of exceptionally feminine nouns: a few nouns denoting animals which are feminine even when the sex of the referent is unknown, and a few feminine nouns denoting inanimates. Kramer analyzes these nouns as formed by combining a root with *n u* [+ FEM], i.e., as carrying an uninterpretable gender feature. Amharic differs from other languages displaying feminine nouns denoting inanimates or animates of unspecified sex only in the number of nouns of this kind it has: while languages like, e.g., Spanish have many feminine inanimates, Amharic has only a few, and there is evidence that younger speakers are losing the possibility of having nouns licensed under *n u* [+ FEM], and are treating these nouns as same root nominals, which are masculine by default, and feminine only if they refer to a female referent. Amharic diachrony shows the development of a by now almost completely semantic, sex-based, gender assignment

³ Whose most recent contribution on the topic (Enger, 2013) was presented at the workshop.

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