

Workshop : Grammatical gender in diachrony

Mots-clefs : Diachrony; Typology; Grammatical gender; Nominal classification; Morphosyntax

Organisateurs :

- Neige Rochant – neige.rochant@unil.ch – Université de Lausanne
- Marc Allasonnière-Tang – marc.allasonniere-tang@mnhn.fr – CNRS - Museum d'Histoire Naturelle

Description :

Languages can rely on various strategies to categorize nouns in the lexicon (Seifart 2010; Kemmerer 2017a). Grammatical gender, whose definition used for this workshop encompasses noun class systems, is one of the most common of these strategies (Corbett 2007). In gender systems, each noun of the lexicon is assigned to a specific category manifested by grammatical agreement patterns (Corbett 1991), with gender marking on elements associated with the noun in the noun phrase and/or the verb phrase, e.g. on the adjectives or verbs. The term ‘noun class’ tends to be used for languages with a larger set of categories in which other semantic features (such as humanness, shape, or plants) are primary.

Grammatical gender has attracted much attention from multiple areas of linguistics, e.g., typology (for its distribution and structural variation: Corbett 1991; Aikhenvald 2000; Grinevald 2000; Kilarski 2014), psycholinguistics (for the cognitive structures supporting it: Contini-Morava & Kilarski 2013: 291–293), neuroscience (for how it is processed: Kemmerer 2017a,b), sociolinguistics (for how it reflects sociocultural gender: Hall 2002; Aikhenvald 2016a). This interest may be attributed to the wealth of information grammatical gender provides regarding human cognition and cultures by reflecting how the human brain categorizes its experience. This sphere of knowledge can be supplemented by the study of the evolution of gender systems, which is all the more interesting as the latter are held to result from long evolutionary chains and are in this sense “among the more clearly mature elements of language” (Dahl 2004).

Although gender systems of the world have been extensively studied in synchrony, the origins and details of their development remain highly hypothetical. The questions that still may be asked for a given subset of related languages pertain to multiple aspects of the evolution of gender:

1. Locus of gender-marking, e.g.: where was gender first marked and how did it spread to other parts of speech? Where is gender marked with higher diachronic stability?

2. Inventory of gender categories, e.g.: which gender categories are older, which have developed later on and how?
3. Gender assignment, e.g.: how and why does a lexeme change its gender? How did a gender become dominant?

Some of these questions have been investigated for the Indo-European family and several of its branches (Carling & Van Epps 2019; Carling et al. 2021; Allasonnière-Tang & Dunn 2020), among others. It is generally held, for example, that the feminine gender emerged from an original two-gender (animate/inanimate) system in early Indo-European (Luraghi 2011). Besides, typological hypotheses on the development of gender systems in general have been made. For instance, the most frequent trajectory involves several-stage grammaticalization from lexical nouns that develop into classifiers (Grinevald 2002; Aikhenvald 2016b). From then on, it has been proposed that classifiers can be repeated within the noun phrase or beyond, which gives rise to agreement via intermediate stages (Corbett 1991: 310–312; Givón 1976), e.g. as a result of the recruitment of classifying demonstrative pronouns as third-person personal pronouns (Greenberg 1978). Hence, gender typically starts from within the noun phrase (Tang & Her 2019). On the other hand, Luraghi (2011) established a correlation between the way a gender system arises and its primary function, arguing that systems born from the grammaticalization of classifiers fulfill a classificatory function and are primarily non-sex based, whereas those performing a referent-tracking function are born from the establishment of agreement following different morphosyntactic behavior of groups of nouns and are often sex-based. As regards the development of the motivations for gender assignment, it is believed that all gender systems start out as semantics-based (Audring 2016). Furthermore, the enrichment and reduction of gender systems has been shown to proceed in cross-linguistically predictable ways (Demuth et al. 1986; Marchese 1988; Priestly 1983), with the birth of new agreement targets frequently resulting from grammaticalization, new gender values arising by reanalysis of existing morphological markers (Corbett 1991: 313–314) or being lost by syncretism or loss of the markers (very common in Indo-European, e.g. Polinsky & Van Everbroeck 2003) while distinctions are typically retained longest on personal pronouns (Corbett 1991: 143) and, in languages that lost grammatical agreement, gender markers generally still being found on nouns (Kießling 2018). Finally, the role of intra- and extra-linguistic factors in the evolution of gender systems has been little researched. Seifart (2018) proposed that semantically more opaque classification is less likely to diffuse through language contact. In addition, Allasonnière-Tang et al. (2021) showed that gender systems spread more by historical language expansion than classifier systems, which spread more by feature diffusion because they are less grammaticalized.

The evolution of gender in families other than Indo-European is less researched, though many hypotheses of development have been put forward for several families. For instance, Plaster & Polinsky 2007 proposed that gender developed from earlier noun classifier systems in several languages of Australia. Among the rare studies involving quantitative methods, Di Garbo & Verkerk (2022), a typological investigation of northwestern Bantu gender, suggests that

animacy-based agreement contributes to the erosion of gender-marking and spreads in ways that are suggestive of a hierarchy of syntactic integration between nouns and adnominal modifiers. Another study by Rochant, Allasonnière-Tang & Cathcart (2022) investigated the evolutionary trends of noun class marking in Atlantic (Niger-Congo) using phylogenetic comparative methods.

This workshop aims to foster discussion on the diachrony of gender (including so-called ‘noun class’) systems in language families and/or areas from a typological perspective. It intends to bring together perspectives from different language families (including and beyond Indo-European) and different approaches, whether qualitative or quantitative.

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