

REPLIES AND DISCUSSIONS

THE FUNCTION OF LINGUISTIC GENDER: A DISCUSSION

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MK: In your recent paper published in the last volume of *PSiCL* (Trudgill 1999) you discussed a number of functions of natural and grammatical gender. On the basis of the opaque character of these functions, and the fact that gender is likely to be lost in situations involving language contact and unlikely to be reintroduced during creolisation, you concluded that gender is a peripheral category.

PT: That is correct. My discussion was based on the observation that pidgin languages do not in their initial stages demonstrate any of the phenomena that we are used to referring to as grammatical categories. However, if creolisation occurs and native speakers therefore need to use the originally pidgin language for all purposes, then these grammatical categories either reappear quite rapidly, or the function that they performed will be executed in some other rather obvious way, such as word order. This does not apply to gender, which does not reappear, and whose function is not, apparently, performed in any other way either, raising the whole issue of whether it had any significant function at all.

MK: In the same volume, in a review article of a book on the topic (Kilarski 1999), I suggested that the problem should be discussed in more detail. Here I would like to review the functions you gave and make some general comments. To begin with, among the functions of natural gender you considered the indication of the sex of the speaker and of a third person, with the former being less functional and a consequence of the latter.

PT: For the most part my queries concerned grammatical gender. However, I also pointed to natural gender as being problematical in some cases: I argued that indicating the sex of a third person is rather obviously functional, even though, unlike the indication of person, it cannot be a function of the greatest importance, since many languages do without it. On the other hand, it seems to me that indicating the sex of persons most normally present, i.e. first and second persons, is not at all obviously functional, which is presumably why creoles do not do this.

MK: In addition, you mentioned the use of natural gender to indicate speaker attitudes in emotively laden changes of gender.

PT: I mentioned this as a minor and derivative function.

MK: Both natural and grammatical gender, you said, act as cohesive devices, in such cases as disambiguation between the antecedents (see Zubin and Köpcke 1981), reference tracking (see Foley and Van Valin 1984), and in the processing of strings of words into phrases, where gender helps to establish syntactic relations between words (see Heath 1975, 1983).

PT: All languages need and therefore have such devices, but my argument was that gender was a peculiarly inefficient way of doing this, particularly if a language has only two or three genders. This is presumably, again, why creoles do not have gender.

MK: Another related psycholinguistic function that you suggested is that gender may be an additional tool in recall, in the processing of nouns marked for a particular gender. Also, since gender assignment rules may overlap with other semantic criteria, gender may acquire secondary semantic functions and convey such distinctions as that of size. And finally, you mentioned gender in personification in the language of poetry and literature.

PT: The word "secondary" is the crucial one for me here.

MK: Exactly. Let's take a closer look at some of these secondary functions. I agree that in the case of indicating speaker attitudes by a different assignment we are dealing with a minor function. Notice that the changes of upgrading and downgrading can occur both in animate and inanimate nouns. Contemptuous forms like the following are not restricted to German and Polish: *G die Tunte*, Pol. *ciota* 'male homosexual' both f. rather than the expected m., and *G das Weib*, Pol. *babsko* 'female', with n. assignment instead of the expected m. and f. genders respectively (for German examples see Zubin and Köpcke 1981: 445). This is obviously related to animation and personification, which, by the way, is not restricted to literature, as Fodor (1959: 206) claims, quoted in your article.

PT: These examples do not persuade me to delete the label "minor". Recall that my main discussion concerns not natural but grammatical gender. In homophobic societies, male homosexuals are not infrequently referred to as "she"; natural gender does this (rather unpleasant) job just as well as grammatical gender.

MK: You also discussed the possible role of gender in recall, which is closely related to its role in the organisation of the lexicon. We deal here with two kinds of associations: on the one hand, the application of the same assignment rule may group together words in the same semantic field. In such cases the superordinate noun can be assigned to the same gender as the subordinate nouns, e.g., in the semantic associations between Danish, Swedish and Norwegian *bil* 'car' c. gender, and the names of vehicles borrowed from English which are assigned to c. gender.

PT: I find this argument more persuasive, though I have to point out that Standard Danish has only two genders and that far more words are of common gender than neuter gender, so that on statistical grounds alone no strong conclusions can be drawn from this.

MK: Consider then examples of such clustering in languages with more complex gender systems, e.g., in Traditional Dyrbal (Australian) with its gender III for non-flesh food, or the proverbial dangerous things in gender II (I know, gender in Dyrbal has been reduced ...). On the other hand, contrary assignments may help distinguish between items in the same perceptual field, in what has been described as lexical polarisation (Malkiel 1957-1958). Examples include divergent assignments to homonyms in such anglicisms in Danish as *check* 'banking check' c. gender vs. the n. gender *check* 'control', and the use of gender to disambiguate between words with referents in the same context with some relevance to human needs (see Heath 1975 and Zubin and Köpcke 1986).

PT: This is a handy little derivative function which, however, deserves the label "minor" in that it is operative in only a very small number of cases: how many such pairs out of the tens of thousands of lexical items in Danish are distinguished in this way?

MK: Well, I can think of a few dozen pairs, so yes, it is a secondary function. What also happens is that the gender of super- and subordinate nouns may be covered by two separate assignment rules. In these German examples the superordinate nouns are all assigned to n. gender: in categories of foodstuffs, e.g., *das Lebensmittel* 'foodstuff', *das Getränk* 'drink', and nouns with a general reference, e.g., *das Ding(s)* 'thing', *das Gerät* 'gadget' (Zubin and Köpcke 1981: 444). What we get then in the same semantic field are two contradictory tendencies: towards association of words of the same gender as opposed to disambiguation through contrast in gender. Zubin and Köpcke (1981: 447) interpret them as a contrast between motivated and arbitrary gender assignment; motivated because we tend to associate between items, and arbitrary because we tend to differentiate between items in the same perceptual field: "We thus view the balance between motivated and arbitrary gender assignment as a minimax solution to the competition between communicative function on the one hand, and limitations of memory and recall on the other."

PT: Do you not think that Zubin and Köpcke are trying to have their cake and eat it? And in any case the fact remains that in languages like German and Polish and French, grammatical gender assignment is to an enormous degree still arbitrary. If it were not, French-based creoles would presumably have retained gender.

MK: Well, I suppose they are, but still I think that it makes sense to view such assignments in terms of tendencies. Now while we are on the subject of arbitrariness, I do not have any figures for Polish yet, but Mel'čuk (1958 [1974]) claims for example that the rules he postulated for French account for 86% out of a sample taken from frequency dictionaries. Admittedly, these are rules based on the phonological form of words, but still, we can no longer say that French gender is arbitrary. In the case of German, I find this a gross exaggeration: "The presence of such systems in a human cognitive system constitutes by itself excellent testimony to the occasional nonsensibleness of the species. Not only was this system devised by humans, but generation after generation of children peaceably relearns it." (Maratsos 1979: 232).

So grammatical gender may acquire residual meanings. Such associations are obviously notoriously difficult to demonstrate and open to discussion. The accounts of gender in terms of the opposition active : passive would easily fill a thick volume, beginning with Greek philosophers. In just one example out of many, Damourette and Pichon (1911: 395) claimed that a *sexuiseblance* ('sexual resemblance') to a 'beautiful mature woman' is behind the f. gender of *F une automne* 'autumn'. More recently, Ervin (1962) described the different connotations of masculine and feminine words in Italian, and Zubin and Köpcke (1984) and Mills (1986) analysed German gender using the semantic differential technique. Zubin and Köpcke contrasted masculine and feminine compounds formed with *-mut* in German, e.g., *der Hochmut* 'arrogance' and *die Anmut* 'gracefulness', in terms of the opposition "extroversion" : "introversion". They suggested that these contrasts may reflect more general polarities "... in our understanding of personality and affect which influences the assignment of a gender on the one hand, and influences our stereotypic attitudes about maleness and femaleness on the other" (1984: 94).

In addition, we can give other examples where gender distinctions take on secondary functions. The case of *G das Mädchen* demonstrates the possibility of an overlap between semantic and morphological assignment. Bantu languages provide a nice illustration of such secondary functions. Consider the following examples: in Swahili *ki-ti* 'wooden stool' and *m-ti* 'tree' (Corbett 1991: 44) gender prefixes of classes 7 and 3 differentiate between different lexical items conveyed by the same root. In addition, prefixes can convey a range of other meanings: from *nyoka* 'snake' a diminutive can be formed with a gender 7 prefix *ki-*, e.g., *ki-j-oka* 'tiny snake'; likewise, an augmentative is formed with gender 5 prefix *ji-*, e.g., *j-oka* 'giant snake' (Corbett 1991: 44).

PT: This is all very interesting, but notice your terms "residual" and "secondary".

MK: Yes, these are secondary functions. The Swahili examples are particularly instructive in the expression of number. The close correlation between gender and number is captured both in synchronic and diachronic terms in Greenberg's Universal 36: "If a language has the category of gender, it always has the category of number." (Greenberg 1963: 74).

PT: But not vice versa is the point.

MK: Right, which proves that gender may be thought of as less "central" than number. This correlation is also of a morphological nature as both categories may be expressed by the same elements. As is well known, such use of prefixed gender markers for number takes place in Swahili, e.g., in *kikapu* 'basket' vs. *vikapu* 'baskets', where *ki-* and *vi-* are prefixes of classes 7 (sg.) and 8 (pl.) respectively (Corbett 1991: 44). Such a pairwise arrangement appears in the form of separate prefixes attached to the noun and adjective, and in pronominal and verbal agreement.

Consider also the phenomenon of "polarity" in Cushitic, where the sg. : pl. opposition is signalled through the change of m. and f. genders (Meinhof 1910; Serzisko 1982). Definiteness could also be regarded as an additional function but in fact it is a function inherent in gender. An example can be provided from Gurma (Voltaic) where gender markers function as markers of definiteness, e.g., *niti-ba*

'men' vs. *ba niti-ba* 'the men' (Greenberg 1978: 55). In addition, Swahili gender markers can be used for emphasis (Claudi 1985: 71-72). Similar developments occur when prefixes reinforce suffixes (Voltaic), when suffixes reinforce prefixes (West Atlantic, cf. Westermann 1947; Childs 1983) and when prefixes reinforce other prefixes (in the pre-prefix vowel in Bantu) (Greenberg 1978: 54-58). (The role of definiteness in gender is closely related to the possible sources of gender markers – we will get back to this later.)

PT: I do not find it especially relevant to include Bantu noun classes in this discussion. It is true that they are often referred to as "genders" but they have only a slender connexion to sex, and are much less arbitrarily semantically based in many cases.

MK: Well, I do not think we should draw a distinction between genders and noun classes – both possess agreement and both have a semantic basis, which, however – as you said – is differently realised, since noun class languages do not have to be sex-based.

PT: I still think we should draw a distinction. My point here is that the semantic basis of gender systems in the Indo-European languages is enormously less obvious than the semantic basis of Bantu noun classes.

MK: In any case, if we consider all these functions, we do get a rather opaque picture of the functions of natural and grammatical gender.

PT: Yes.

MK: In your paper you suggested that "[t]he only way we can explain these phenomena satisfactorily would appear to be historically." (1999: 148). It appears that all that we can see in gender synchronically – like most of the functions here outlined – is secondary (Claudi 1985 and Heine and Claudi 1986 have made the same point). In that case it is perhaps more useful to try and bring the two perspectives – diachronic and synchronic – together.

PT: I can agree to that.

MK: Apart from that, I believe that it is not very felicitous here to talk of "grammatical systems being the regular systems that they are" (Trudgill 1999: 147). Genders, just like other categories, are not really "regular". Rather, instead of trying to analyse gender within the straightjacket of single gender systems (or as natural as opposed to grammatical gender), we should analyse it in terms of individual semantic distinctions that make up these systems. Dahl (1999) suggests that "elementary gender distinctions" are useful not only in a crosslinguistic analysis but also provide us with a set of tools in a description of the development of gender through grammaticalisation.

PT: Well, if you can do it, I would be very happy to see how you would manage this. My point here would be that, in spite of the derivative and minor and secondary functions you have outlined, the semantic bases of gender at least in modern Indo-European languages is deeply opaque and probably largely non-existent.

MK: An important feature of gender is that gender distinctions can be made differently in different parts of grammar. Think of Indo-European gender, which can be analysed both synchronically and diachronically in terms of the distinctions an-

imate : inanimate and male : female. You have mentioned the pronoun system in Norwegian Bokmål (1999: 138). An analogical situation appears in Danish and Swedish, and it shows very nicely how gender is realised in a different way in the adjective and the pronoun. By and large, adjectives have common and neuter forms (we may safely disregard feminine forms in Bokmål), while pronouns distinguish between *han*, *hun/hon*, *den* and *det*. The point is that here gender shows up in layers, which really begins to make sense from the point of view of grammaticalisation. Those Bantu examples are also relevant here since noun classes and genders can be seen as stages of grammaticalisation, one of the parameters being the greater fusional character of gender markers (see Lehmann 1982). Such a perspective could help us avoid having to make statements such as that "it is not at all clear what [grammatical] gender is for" and that gender is a category that has "an explanation but no function" (Trudgill 1999: 140, 149).

PT: I am happy to modify this to the extent of saying that any functions grammatical gender may have are relatively minor and peripheral.

MK: What happens is that gender distinctions have a number of central functions that are based on the distinctions male : female or animate : inanimate, in the indication of the sex or animacy of a human or animal. Gender distinctions may then spread out in layers of grammaticalisation.

PT: But it is not at all clear how – or why – this happens, is it?

MK: We have mentioned the role of definiteness in the rise of gender markers. Greenberg (1978) described the process along the following stages: demonstrative (or a 3rd person pronoun) > definite article > non-generic article > noun/gender marker. Ultimately, gender can develop from nouns, which is demonstrated by recent studies of the rise of gender in African languages. Heine and Vossen (1983) demonstrated how in Eastern Nilotic f. gender markers developed through grammaticalisation of the noun 'girl, daughter', by way of the head noun of a genitive construction. Likewise, in her study of Zande (Niger-Congo), Claudi (1985) described the development of gender marking from lexemes by way of personal pronouns, along the following path: 'man', 'woman', 'thing' > pronouns 'he', 'she', 'it' > pronominal gender markers. We can also mention the rich evidence from the Daly group (Australian), where gender markers were derived from superordinate nouns (see Greenberg 1978: 74; Tryon 1974: 289-294). Such generic use of concepts where one member stands for all members of the class may be seen in terms of a metaphorical process, where metaphor leads to grammaticalisation and creation of morphosyntax, including gender. Claudi and Heine (1986) referred to such metaphors as *categorial* metaphors, in which a relation or property is conceptualised in terms of a concrete concept. In our case, the transfers involved may be that of QUALITY < OBJECT or QUALITY < PERSON. And finally, the source of gender can also lie in locative expressions: in Maa (Eastern Nilotic) place gender marker

can be derived from locative phrases like 'here place', where the initial adverb functions like a demonstrative (Heine and Claudi 1986).¹ Notice again that these phenomena start to make sense if we treat them as layers of grammaticalisation, rather than "regular" systems, which they hardly are.

PT: These examples are relevant and interesting to my inquiry only to the extent that they concern the development of (as I would say – arbitrary) grammatical gender as opposed to natural gender – which is not at all, I think.

MK: Gender distinctions may also take on secondary meanings, as in the examples we have observed above, where an original gender distinction takes on new meanings such as size. A semantic gender assignment rule can also be blurred through the influx of nouns without clearly identifiable assignment criteria, with the additional effect of weakening the rule ("Trojan horses" in Corbett's (1991) terms). So you are right in saying that what we get in agreement are bonus functions, e.g., in reference tracking in Yimas (Foley and Van Valin 1984).

PT: I am glad you agree. By the way, the development of agreement rules is also something we do not understand very well.

MK: They illustrate the development of gender markers, and it is up to the assignment rules whether they will assign gender on semantic or formal grounds. Also, what is at the beginning a semantic gender system may in time change to say a morphological one. It seems then that we are asking the same questions, such as "why ... do languages have grammatical gender?" (Trudgill 1999: 143). But our perspectives are different. Your perspective is useful for our understanding of gender within "a Chomskyan perspective", and in earlier structuralist studies like Bloomfield (1933) and Fodor (1959).²

PT: I must confess that I have never thought of myself as coming from a Chomskyan perspective.

MK: No offence. What I meant was "formal", as in such structurally-based studies. The problem is that such formal accounts do not possess the right tools to describe the cognitive reality behind grammatical categories (I have discussed the

¹ See also Givón (1976), Sankoff (1977) and Lehmann (1982) for accounts of the rise of agreement markers.

² **MK:** In such a context you quote Hickey's description of grammatical gender as a category "not guided by semantic needs" (Hickey 1999). You go on to say that "... if it were, he asks, why would we find languages such as modern Swedish and Danish which do not distinguish between masculine and feminine grammatical gender at all but simply between neuter and "common" gender (historical masculine and feminine combined)?" But this is surely a distorted argument since in these languages the original distinction masculine : feminine has been lost due to morphological levelling; just like in the pidgin languages you described, gender distinctions may appear in different areas in the grammar, and depend on any morphological or phonological changes that could affect their exponents.

PT: I do not see that it is distorted – Danish indeed used to distinguish between masculine and feminine – so did English – but they no longer do so is the point. I don't see how you can use historical arguments here.

clash between semantically- and formally-based accounts of gender elsewhere – see Kilarski, in press for details).

PT: Do you really think cognitive linguistics has the right tools for giving a good account of the cognitive bases for arbitrary grammatical gender assignment? Surely that would be tantamount to claiming that you can predict and explain why every noun in, say, Polish has the gender that it does. I challenge you to do this.

MK: No, I am not going that far. Corbett says that “[w]e are still some way from understanding how gender systems arise” (1991: 310). I am not saying that the whole story has been told,³ but we now have a pretty good idea of how this has happened in a number of languages, and of the underlying similarities in the rise of different grammatical categories. This is why we are no longer dealing with a phenomenon that can be described as “perplexing, puzzling, mysterious” (Trudgill 1999: passim).

PT: I remain unconvinced of the cognitive reality behind Indo-European gender systems. How can they be arbitrary, as they largely are, and cognitively real at the same time?

MK: In the case of “grammatical gender”, or in languages where gender is assigned on a phonological or morphological basis, the rules are not that arbitrary – we have already talked about that (when it comes to Polish, I would be tempted to take you on). These formal rules work in a different way, and this fact should be acknowledged. In your paper you concluded that with the increase in language contact, “languages with large numbers of afunctional grammatical devices will become less numerous, and indeed it is not entirely impossible that linguistic gender, except perhaps for natural gender in the third person, will one day disappear from the languages of the world, never to return.” (1999: 150). I agree that gender is a less “central” category than say number (cf. Greenberg’s Universal 36, quoted above), and true, it may be reduced in language contact situations.

PT: Not “may be” – *is!*

MK: Granted, but this does not exclude the possibility of new gender distinctions appearing in different areas of grammar.

PT: OK, you have a point here. The Heine, Vossen and Claudi studies are interesting and do indeed suggest that I may have exaggerated – the word “recent” which you used is especially important. Let me retreat to a position where I say that the development of *grammatical* gender is likely never to occur again.

MK: And this does not exclude the possibility of new gender distinctions appearing in different areas of the lexicon. This happens in Tok Pisin *hosman* ‘stallion’ vs. *hosmeri* ‘mare’; any other more complex means would require more complex

³ The present state of research on the rise of Indo-European gender nicely shows that Hirt (1927: 320) was obviously too optimistic in claiming that a comprehensive explanation of the issue was within easy reach.

morphology (which does not mean that we cannot have gender in highly analytic languages – see Claudi 1985: Chp. 4).

PT: I do not accept this Tok Pisin example as relevant since this is clearly simply a matter of natural gender in the lexicon, like “manager” and “manageress”, or indeed “man” and “woman” which, as you will recall, I do not find problematical.

MK: The real reason such predictions are not very fortunate is that they ignore the flexibility in the expression of grammatical categories, something which results from the rich metaphorical base of grammar, as in the recently developed genders we have discussed above.⁴ We have also seen it illustrated in the different ways in which a grammatical category can be grammaticalised in the same language.

PT: Writing this as I am in francophone Switzerland, I have to say that I fail to see any rich metaphorical base behind the fact that in French “chair” is feminine and “stool” is masculine (or is it the other way round – I can never remember). Anyway, thank you for this fascinating discussion, and maybe you will be around to see the development of grammatical gender in at least one Creole language. I do not think I will.

MK: I suppose I am too much of an optimist. But thanks very much for this dialogue – it was certainly good to share these thoughts with you.

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⁴ Lass (1997) is making a related point with respect to homophony.

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