An Analysis of Variation and Stability in Gender Assignment to Nouns

The inflectional categories relevant to the noun behave quite differently as regards their “faithfulness” to the noun. While number and definiteness typically vary from one occurrence of the same noun to another (being singular or plural, definite or indefinite), gender does not vary in the same way and in fact seems to be a fixed property of each individual noun (a given noun always being neuter, for instance). Thus, it is not uncommon in formal analyses of the noun phrase to treat number and definiteness as categories that are syntactically assigned, whereas gender is taken to be an inherent property of the noun itself (see e.g. Julien 2005). In our paper, we will first argue that gender is in fact syntactically assigned in a manner similar to number and definiteness. Then, we will argue that there is still a grain of truth in the “inherent property” assumption, and we will try to flesh out an analysis that can mediate between the “inherent” and “assigned” construals of gender (and of the other inflectional properties of the noun).

We will first argue, based on root theory (Marantz 1997, De Belder 2011), that any grammatical property of a noun, even its word class category, is acquired syntactically. It follows that all inflectional features, even gender, are acquired syntactically and are not inherent to the noun itself. A structure that captures this intuition is sketched in (1), where n=noun (assigning word class category) and X=GEN(der), NUM(ber), and/or DEF(initeness), i.e. the inflectional categories that each may be fixed with a restricted set of values (m, f, n for GEN; sg, pl for NUM; def, indef for DEF).

(1)  

^  
X  
^  
n    ROOT

Empirical support for this “assignment” analysis as far as gender is concerned will be adduced from two domains. First, we will discuss languages, like the South Indian language Dakhini/Deccani (Mohiddin 1980), where (sometimes) the same noun can belong to different genders, and where the particular gender is signaled by an affix on the noun. The Norwegian feminine suffix –inne, like in malerinne ‘female painter’, will be discussed in the same vein. Next, we will discuss gender assignment in code-switching and borrowing of English nouns (no gender) into Norwegian (obligatory gender). Here we will consider data taken from American Norwegian (the Norwegian immigrant language in America from c. 1850 onwards). We argue that the essential difference between Norwegian and English is that Norwegian DPs have the gender assigning GEN functional category/projection, whereas it is absent in English. Therefore any English noun code-switched or borrowed into Norwegian must be assigned gender. In particular, we argue that an analysis assuming that gender is inherent to the noun itself will be problematic for the code-switching/borrowing data. Also, we will argue that (dialectal) variation in gender assignment in Norwegian (e.g. eit eple ‘an apple’, neuter, in some dialects; vs. ei eple ‘an apple’, feminine, in others) is unproblematic and consistent with our analysis.

In the second part of our paper, we will go into what we take to be the main challenge for our analysis, namely the problem why gender assignment is not flexible in the same way that number and definiteness assignment is. Traditionally, in the “assignment” approach to inflection, it is taken for granted that a lexical item (root) receives its inflectional features
from the appropriate functional heads (in the functional frame of then structure), i.e. that an inflectional value is fixed in X and subsequently assigned to the root. However, based on Nygård’s (2012) analysis of semantic number agreement phenomena (e.g. as in politiet er snille ‘the police are kind’), we argue that all inflectional categories (GEN, NUM, DEF) in the functional frame for the noun phrase are unvalued at the start of the derivation, although each “open” category of course makes available a restricted set of possible values. Then, we argue, the inflectional category acquires a particular fixed morphological value by a process called feature construal, where the conceptual properties of the lexical item (root) play an important facilitating role.

For instance, NUM makes two possible morphological values available (in Norwegian), namely sg and pl, and the actual value of NUM is fixed as either sg or pl, depending of the feature construal of the conceptual “numeric” content of the root as one or many (both construals are available on the basis of the conceptual content of countable roots). Thus, the conceptual content of the root contributes decisively to the choice of the morphological value among the restricted set of possible values made available by the category, and the fixed feature is in turn assigned to the root as a morphological feature. Concerning gender, GEN (in Norwegian) makes available three possible values: m, f, n. However, we argue that the actual fixation of the value as either m, f, or n is facilitated by what we assume is the conceptual “gender” category of the root, which, unlike the numeric conceptual property of a countable root, is relatively stable for each individual root. Thus, we get the seeming effect that morphological gender is inherent in the root, whereas it is in fact the “conceptual gender” that is inherent, and it is the conceptual gender that in turn facilitates the fixation of the morphological gender of GEN as either m, f, or n. We conclude that there is a grain of truth in the “inherent property” assumption viewed from a conceptual angel, even though all inflectional features are assigned as viewed from the morphological angel.

References: