Variation in gender for evaluative purposes

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In many languages, a change in gender is used for evaluative purposes of quantity (small vs. big) and quality (good vs. bad) (di Garbo 2013). Many languages encode evaluation and size (diminutives and augmentatives) by shifting a noun from one gender to another.

In Alamblak (Sepik Hill family, spoken in Papua New Guinea), variation in gender is used to indicate that the referent is of unusual size. For instance, the word for 'house' is normally used with a feminine suffix –*t*(1a), but an unusually long house is used with a masculine suffix –*r* (1b).

(1) *Alamblak*
    a. kuñ-**t**   b. kuñ-**r**
    house-FEM   *house-MASC*
'house'   'unusually long house' (Aikhenvald 2012: 57f)

In Shona (a Bantu language, spoken in Zimbabwe), a language unrelated to Alamblak, the noun class prefix is replaced to indicate an unusual size. For instance, the word for 'child' is normally used with a noun class 1 prefix *mŋ*– (2a), but the word for a 'fat child' is used with a different noun class 7 prefix *c*– (2b).

(2) *Shona*
a.**mŋ**-anab. **c**-ana
NOUN.CLASS1-child   *NOUN.CLASS7-child*
    'child'   'a fat child'   (Fortune 1955: 95)

It is interesting to note that diminutivization is expressed in Shona in a different way. To express a small size, the noun class 13 (diminutive noun class) prefix *ka*– attaches before the original noun class prefix without replacing it, as shown in (3b).

(3) *Shona*
a.   **mŋ**-ana b. **ka-mŋ**-ana
    NOUN.CLASS1-child   *NOUN.CLASS13- NOUN.CLASS1-child*
    'child'   'a small child'   (Fortune 1955: 95)

Thus, in (1b) and (2b), a change in gender happens by *replacing* a gender/noun class affix. This process is similar in Alamblak and Shona, although these languages are genetically unrelated and use different affixes (suffixes vs. prefixes) to change gender. However, in a single language Shona, two different processes take place. In (2b), a different noun class prefix replaces the original noun class prefix, while in (3b), a noun class prefix is simply added to it.

With this respect, the following question arises: how do we account for similarities in different languages (Alamblak and Shona) on the one hand, and differences in a single language (Shona), on the other hand?

I propose that gender does not instantiate a uniform morpho-syntactic category; instead, it is syntactically heterogeneous and occupies different positions in a syntactic tree.

The proposed formal system of gender distinguishes between word-formation from √roots and word-formation from syntactic categories (or already categorized √roots), which captures the differences between various types of gender both cross-linguistically and within a single language. Thus, In Alamblak, the gender affixes attach directly to a √root, and thus, it has a single place of attachment. In Shona, the noun class prefixes can attach either to a √root, or to a noun category (already nominalized

√root), and thus, it exhibits syntactic variation in the place of attachment in a syntactic tree.This system can account for the process of gender overriding which is especially important for understanding languages with mixed gender systems.

References

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