Loss of grammatical gender and non-native acquisition

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Outline

1. Loss of genders vs. loss of gender.

2. Internal and external perspectives on gender loss.

3. Two case studies: Cappadocian Greek and Ossetic.

4. Historical data on language contact.

5. Signs of adult second-language learning.

6. Conclusions.

Loss of genders vs. loss of gender

- Gender reduction/reorganization:

  - From 3 to 2 members: Lithuanian, Latvian, Swedish, Danish, Spanish and other Romance languages, Pashto and other Iranian languages, Russian dialects, the Sele Fara dialect of Slovene (Priestly 1983, Matasović 2004).

- Complete loss of gender:
  - Elimination of the category, as in Armenian, Persian, Ossetic, Assamese, Bengali, English.

The rise and fall of genders

⊛ Processes traditionally viewed in an internal perspective (Fodor 1959, Ibrahim 1973, Greenberg 1978, Corbett 1991)

⊛ Rise:

Grammaticalization and morphologization processes leading from e.g.classifiers or classifying demonstratives through articles to gender / agreement affixes.

From differential object marking in an animacy-based system (as in PIE, cf. Luraghi 2011).

⊛ Loss:

Phonetic attrition of formal markers leading to reduction of genders and eventually their complete elimination.

Overall stability of gender

⊕ Despite its mostly arbitrary character (except *i.a.* for semantically based systems) and its alleged lack of functionality, gender is diachronically quite a stable category.

Gender is "un luxe linguistique sans relation avec la logique" (Bally 1926: 45).

"linguists designate gender as a secondary grammatical category since it is not vital for the proper functioning of any language" (Ibrahim 1973: 24).

⊕ Data from WALS (Corbett 2013): almost 44% of the languages in the sample (112 out of 256) have gender systems.

⊕ Dahl 2004: 198−201: the stability of gender relies on its functional value (for reference tracking, etc.).

⊕ Exceptions: Armenian, Persian, Ossetic, English…

Internal explanations

Middle English (Kastovsky 2000)

Loss of grammatical-gender distinctions in Middle English nouns as a complex process involving:

1. Phonetic attrition of word-final syllables.

2. A restructuring of the morphological system of the language triggered by the decay of nominal inflectional endings, itself caused by the phonetic attrition of word-final syllables.

3. Leveling of the inflectional endings of adjectives and other modifiers, which were no longer able to support a formal agreement system.

External (and mixed) explanations

Gender loss due to contact or at least accelerated by him:

"At the beginning of the [Middle English] period English is a language that must be learned like a foreign tongue" (Baugh & Cable 2002: 158).

"In the case of Middle English, the 'creole-like' features of inflectional reduction and loss of grammatical gender seem to have been incipient in the language and accelerated by language contact" (Curzan 2003: 53).

Cappadocian Greek

- A group of Greek dialects formerly spoken in Asia Minor (until the population exchange of 1923 between Greece and Turkey) and profoundly influenced by Turkish (Dawkins 1916).

- There are still speakers of Cappadocian Greek (of one of its varieties) in Northern and Central Greece.

- In Cappadocian Greek there are only "a few reminiscences of the original Greek gender distinctions" (Janse 2009:41).

Cappadocian Greek

Ulaghatsh	Standard Modern Greek	
do kalon do andra	*o kalos anđras*	'the good man'
do kalon do neka	*i kali jineka*	'the good woman'
do kalon do pei	*to kalo peđi*	'the good child'
da kalan da andres	*i kali anđres*	'the good men'
da kalan da nekes	*i kales jinekes*	'the good women'
da kalan da peija	*ta kala peđja*	'the good children'

Gender loss in Cappadocian Greek (1)

⊛ Internal factors (adapted from Karatsareas 2009: 221−223)

1. **Neutralization of gender distinctions in the plural (in Pontic)**

[+HUMAN]	[–HUMAN]
o kalos o andras 'the good man'	*to kalon o minas* 'the good month'
i kalesa i jineka 'the good woman'	*to kalon i kosara* 'the good chicken'
i kali i andres 'the good men'	*ta kala ta minas* 'the good months'
i kaleses i jinekes 'the good women'	*ta kala ta kosaras* 'the good chickens'

Gender loss in Cappadocian Greek (2)

2. Paradigm leveling in [–HUMAN] nouns (reconstructed process)

[+HUMAN]

o kalos o andras 'the good man'

i kalesa i jineka 'the good woman'

i kali i andres 'the good men'

i kaleses i jinekes 'the good women'

[–HUMAN]

to kalon to minas 'the good month'

to kalon to kosara 'the good chicken'

ta kala ta minas 'the good months'

ta kala ta kosaras 'the good chickens'

Gender loss in Cappadocian Greek (3)

3. **The contrast between grammatical gender and the [±HUMAN] feature is levelled in the modifiers. Neuter agreement in the modifiers is introduced for [+HUMAN] nouns (reconsructed process).**

[+HUMAN]	[–HUMAN]
to kalon to andras 'the good man'	*to kalon to minas* 'the good month'
to kalon to jineka 'the good woman' chicken'	*to kalon to kosara* 'the good
ta kala ta andres 'the good men'	*ta kala ta minas* 'the good months'
ta kala ta jinekes 'the good women' chickens'	*ta kala ta kosaras* 'the good

Other dialects in Asia Minor

Differences in the process of gender loss, that call for an explanation that necessarily includes contact.

"Gender loss was completed in some Cappadocian varieties but not in other Eastern Greek dialects like Pontic, despite the fact that the structural conditions for the change are found in them as well" (Karatsareas 2009: 225).

"In the case of Pontic, recall that language contact between Cappadocian and Turkish was far more intense and long-standing than language contact between Pontic and Turkish" (*ibid.*)

Contact effects

⊛ Features hinting at source-language agentivity (Van Coetsem 2000: 61):

"In the process of SL [source language] agentivity, within the complementary development of imposition and acquisition, the vocabulary of the RL [recipient language] is acquired, **the grammar of the RL is reduced, while SL grammatical material and an important part of the SL phonology are or may be temporarily transferred to**, i.e., imposed upon the RL".

1. Interdental fricatives realized as stops (*t*, *d*) or back fricatives in Cappadocian Greek, with frequent inconsistencies.

2. Rise of partial vowel harmony.

3. Morphological technique: cumulative > separative (Kusters 2003, Trudgill 2011, Igartua, forthc.)

Ossetic

- An IE (Iranian) language spoken in the Caucasus (two dialects, Iron and Digor).

- Historically influenced by Georgian, Nakh-Daguestanian languages, and Karachay-Balkarian).

- No grammatical gender (cf. Old Persian or Avestan)

Ossetic nominal declension

⚙ No inflectional classes / agglutinative character (cf. Old Persian or Avestan).

⚙ *bæx* 'horse'

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
NOM	*bæx*	*bæx-t-æ*
GEN	*bæx-ı*	*bæx-t-ı*
DAT	*bæx-æn*	*bæx-t-æn*
ALL	*bæx-mæ*	*bæx-t-æm* (cf. in Digor *gal-tæ-mæ* 'oxen')
INS/ABL	*bæx-æy*	*bæx-t-æy*
INESS	*bæx-ı*	*bæx-t-ı*
ADESS	*bæx-ıl*	*bæx-t-ıl*
EQUAT	*bæx-aw*	*bæx-t-aw*
COM	*bæx-imæ*	*bæx-t-imæ*

Contact effects

Features hinting at source-language agentivity (Van Coetsem 2000: 61):

      1. rise of glottalic consonants (stops and affricates).

      2. vigesimal counting system.

      3. development of a separative (agglutinative) structure   in the nominal declension.

      (but cf. the rise of a new equative case in *-au*, with a speficic   Turkic counterpart in Karachay-Balkar equative suffix *-ča*, cf.   Belyaev 2010: 310)

Other cases of gender loss under language contact

⊛ Armenian (Vogt 1988 [1945], Dum-Tragut 2009)

⊛ Persian (McWhorter 2007)

⊛ Mandres dialect of Albanian (Hamp 1965)

⊛ Tamian dialect of Latvian (Matthews 1956)

⊛ Some Scandinavian vernaculars in Jutland and Finland (Dahl 2004)

An asymmetry in diachrony?

- Loss of grammatical gender, apparently associated with external factors (contact). On the other hand, language contact does not always lead to the erosion of gender.

- Rise of grammatical gender, due to exclusively or predominantly internal factors (but cf. "Gender may also be introduced into a language along with borrowed words", Matras 2009: 174).

Basque   *tonto* (M) − *tonta* (F)   'silly'

        gixajo (M) − *gixaja* (F) 'poor' (Trask 2003)

        jainko 'god' (M) − *jainkosa* 'god'(F)

                          ←   MARGINAL GENDER

Chamorro *ihu* 'son' − *iha* 'daughter'

        bunitu (M) − *bunita* (F) 'nice' (Stolz 2012)

Types of contact

⚙ Trudgill (2009, 2011)

      LOW CONTACT   –   childhood bilingualism

      HIGH CONTACT   –   adult / second-language learning /

                                     non-native acquisition

⚙ Non-native acquisition (second-language or imperfect learning) seems to be behind processes like gender loss (as a trigger or as accelerating, but determinant, factor).

Dynamics of *high contact* (1)

- Ringe & Eska (2013: 73), based on Dawkins (1910, 1916):

  The inconsistencies in the reflexes of interdental fricatives in Cappadocian Greek are "a typical outcome of imperfect second-language learning by adults".

  Dawkins (1910: 289) had stated that 'in its phonetic changes Greek shews signs of having been adopted by Turkish speakers', and he attributed its subsequent 'grammatical decay' to its losing battle with Turkish in bilingual communities.

  The role of the so-called *Karamanlides* or *Karamanlis* (Greek Orthodox Christians, in their majority native speakers of Turkish) in developing and spreading the characteristic properties of Cappadocian Greek.

Dynamics of *high contact* (2)

- Johanson (2006), Thordarson (2009).

  Languages in contact with Ossetic: Georgian, Nakh.Daguestanian and Turkic languages (especially Karachay-Balkar).

  "Turkic languages have been a highly important part of the linguistic map of the North Caucasus for more than a millenium, both in bilingual daily communcation and as linguae francae and languages of prestige. The sound systems of the Turkic languages are comparatively simple (particularly in comparison with the North Caucasian languages), and from the outset not very different from those of Old Iranian. This may have made the acquisition of a Turkic dialect easier to an Ossetic-speaking population (and vice versa)." (Thordarson 2009: 82).

Conclusions

⚙ Not all the details of contact are always recoverable.

⚙ The data available point to adult second-language learning (non-native acquisition) as a key factor (probably determinant) in the process of gender loss in Cappadocian Greek and probably Ossetic (and this may be true of other cases as well).

⚙ Gender loss can be viewed as an instance of grammar simplification, a general process which seems to be crucially associated with second-language learning (Dahl 2004, McWhorter 2007, Trudgill 2009, 2011).

⚙ The conditions leading to contact-induced emergence of a (marginal) gender category in a genderless language require further research.

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