

Gender/gender

Gender in Icelandic (and beyond) raises intriguing problems for the understanding of *phi*-features (Chomsky 1995 and related work).

[I] An interesting (well-known) fact is that noun gender in most gender languages is commonly formal rather than “natural”. Although natural gender is found for many “higher” animates, most nouns have formal gender, not (obviously) related to semantics. Thus, Icelandic *bátur* ‘boat’, *kaflí* ‘chapter’ are masculine (M), *skúta*, ‘yacht’, *bók* ‘book’ are feminine (F), *skip* ‘ship’, *blað* ‘(news)paper’ are neuter (NT), etc. Comparison with other three gender languages, e.g., German, suggests that semantics play a marginal role in **noun gender** assignment (cf., e.g., NT *Boot*, *Buch*) – raising the question of what mechanism governs it.

[II] Another poorly understood (but well-known) fact is that pronominal gender reference is commonly based on formal gender: *bátur*, *skúta*, *skip* are referred to as *hann* ‘he’, *hún* ‘she’, *það* ‘it’, respectively, etc. There are no (evident) M/F/NT semantics in gender reference of this sort – raising the question of what kind of mechanism governs **pronoun gender** assignment/reference. Three well-known approaches to pronominal coreference will be discussed: The NP-deletion approach of Postal 1966 and, e.g., Elbourne 2005, the NP-movement approach of Kayne 2002, and the (standard generative) accidental coreference approach of Lasnik 1976, Grodzinsky & Reinhart 1993 and others. A revised „nonaccidental“ version of Grodzinsky & Reinhart 1993 is proposed, whereby coreference involves pragmatic/grammatical *edge computation*.

[III] A third intriguing fact is that non-gendered (1/2 person) pronouns trigger obligatory gender agreement of predicates, much as gendered pronouns and nouns do. Thus, a male speaker would say *Ég var sterkur*.M.SG, ‘I was strong’, while a female speaker would say *Ég var sterk*.F.SG, even though *ég* is unmarked for gender (a well-known fact in many other gender languages).

[IV] A commonly unnoticed fact, on the other hand, is that these predicate agreement facts extend to infinitives, as in *Ég reyndi [að vera sterk*.F.SG] ‘I tried to be strong’ (stated by a female speaker), even in cases where there is no overt antecedent of the predicate gender, as in *Þá var gott*.NT.SG [að vera svona sterk.F.SG] lit. ‘then was good to be so strong’ (stated by a female speaker), meaning ‘then it was good for me (a female) to be so strong’.

This paper aims at a coherent understanding of these issues by developing an approach that distinguishes between *abstract Gender* and *morphological gender*, the leading idea being that

abstract Gender is indexical, a *sameness integer* (see Baker 2003:104), entering control and sameness relations in all languages but triggering (variable) morphological marking in only gender languages. The paper furthermore develops the idea (inspired by Seriopolo & Wiltschko 2010 and others) that we need to distinguish between idiomatic n-gender and indexical D- and C-gender, the latter being edge linkers in the sense of Sigurðsson 2014.

Conclusion I: The machinery of the syntactic intra-clausal derivation is “autonomous and independent of meaning”, as Chomsky’s famously stated in *Syntactic Structures* (1957:17). However, edge computation of gender (including resolution, cf. Wechsler 2009) suggests that syntax restarts from zero at any additional phase border in discourse, computing edge relations anew. The interplay of discourse and syntax thus combines phase-phase linearization or succession and structural (hierarchical) phase-internal computation.

Conclusion II: Like other edge linkers, gender is *always silent in situ* – with potentially observable effects at distance.

References

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