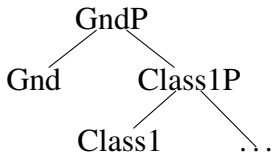
# Class meets gender in Italian and Spanish: A Nanosyntactic account

We provide novel answers to two traditional mysteries about grammatical gender (as well as new empirical generalisations):

- why is gender sometimes not interpreted? what is 'uninterpretable gender'?
- how can the gender properties of one morpheme determine the gender marking on another morpheme? (gender "agreement")

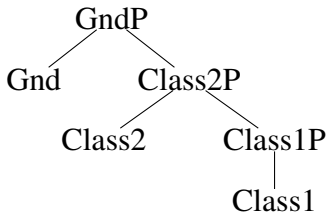
Gender interpretability is often considered optional: one and the same syntactic feature (eg. 'feminine') sometimes maps onto semantic interpretation, and sometimes (mysteriously) doesn't. We argue that this is a misdescription. Instead of always spelling out one and the same syntactic feature, the 'gender' morpheme is syncretic between two distinct and independently needed morphosyntactic notions: interpreted gender & declension class. Given the results of much recent work on syncretism, this indicates that the underlying morphosyntactic representation is:

(1)




Thanks to the superset theorem of Nanosyntax, (1) is syncretic between an (always) interpreted gender, and an (always) uninterpreted declension class marker. Since Nanosyntax features are unary and each terminal is a single feature, the representation of a different class marker will be structurally distinct from (2), and will compete with it, eg:

(2)




In the talk, we elaborate on the intricate details of how this system derives the 6 major types of (-o masc/class, -a fem/class, -e masc-or-fem/class) without any diacritic markers, purely based on structural differences.

The first, theoretical, result is thus that (Romance) gender is always interpreted - there is no such thing as 'uninterpretable gender'. There are only the independently neeeded notions of declension

class and interpreted gender. The technical payoff is a precise theory of the structure of each gender marker.

With the knowledge of what the underlying structures are, we can turn to the issue of "agreement" wrt these structures. Empirically, we need to distinguish two cases: (i) how is the suffix on the noun computed? (ii) how are the suffixes on adjectives/determiners computed. The difference is brought out most clearly by 'irregular' nouns, who agree in one class with Det/Adj but trigger another class as their suffix:

(3) a. l-a bell-a man-o (the-A.FEM pretty-A.FEM hand-O.MASC)

b. il bel' problem-a (the.M pretty.M problem-A.FEM)

We discuss problem (i) elsewhere, arguing for a Taraldsen-style solution: roots can spellout different sizes of syntactic structure, and class markers spell out 'what remains after the root has been spelled out'. The choice of class marker is thus determined by how big of a structure was spelled out by the root. Let's call this the 'complement set' solution. Let us then concentrate on problem (ii). The diminutive paradigm discussed by Bermudez-Otero (2012) is revealing, ie the suffix of 'irregular' nouns becomes regular after diminutives:

(4) a. [la mán-o] (the-A.FEM hand-O.MASC) [la man-áθ-a] (the-A.FEM hand-DIM-A.FEM)

b. [el proβlém-a] (the.MASC problem-A.FEM) [el proβlem-áθ-o] (the.MASC problem-DIM-O.MASC)

The diminutive suffix shows that the noun root contains the features triggering the regular thematic vowel / class marker. This fits well with the complement set solution: the presence of the diminutive stops the upwards spread of the root, allowing the suffix to spellout a lower chunk, which then surfaces as the regular thematic vowel. (We will expand on the details of the derivation which leads to this result.) This entails that the irregular root contains the 'regular' size as a proper subset. The fact that Det/Adj always agree with the 'regular' class now entails that Det/Adj always match with that proper subset of the root, rather than with the highest layer of the root.

How do Det/Adj come to agree with a proper subset of the noun-root? We will suggest that this is an instance of 'specifiers' (or complex heads) reduplicating the features of the main spine that they modify, as in Starke 2018.

# References

LAMPITELLI, N. (2014): Plural Isogloss and Linguistic Change: A Comparative Study of Romance Nouns, https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/001514; PASSINO, D. (2009): An Element-Based Analysis of Italian Nominal Inflection. In *Selected Proceedings of the 6th Décembrettes*; STARKE, M. (2018): Complex Left Branches, Spellout and Prefixes. In *Exploring nanosyntax*; TARALDSEN, T. (2009): *The Nanosyntax of Nguni Noun Class Prefixes and Concords*, https://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/000876.