The syntax of gender features

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Current theories of syntax tend to treat φ-features fundamentally differently than other syntactic features, both in terms of their geometry and the types of syntactic relations they enter. An illustrative example is special theories of agree that allow for feature value comparison or a reconciliation of multiple valuation sources (Béjar, 2000; Deal, 2015, 2022, among others), in a striking deviation from the original formulation of Agree in Chomsky (2000, 2001). Yet, there are no special theories of agree for case, *wh*-features, or Edge Features.

The special treatment of φ-features is particularly obvious with the gender feature. In general, syntactic features do not require to have an overt morphological counterpart (case in English, number or tense in languages that morphologically don't mark them. . .). Yet, we tend to assume that a language has a gender feature only when we see a morphological reflex of it.

Moreover, the post-syntax centered approach reveals itself in the syntactic implementation of gender (and other φ-features). An idea expressed in the syntactic literature is that the gender feature is located on a functional head in the vicinity of the root (to capture lexical semantic connections), and that this location is stable throughout the syntactic derivation. Cross-linguistic variations attested in the gender systems are then attributed to morphological realizations. A methodologically nuanced and well worked-out example of such an approach is Kramer (2015), building on a more syntax-centered approach of Ritter (1991, 1993) and others. Yet, the restrictions on the syntactic distribution of gender features in gender systems attested cross-linguistically, appear more varied than expected under such a locational uniformity.

To demonstrate, let us consider approaches that treat gender as a classifying device, as in Borer (2005) and other work. These approaches predict that gender should be in the complementary distribution with other classifying devices such as the division feature in Borer's system. This prediction is borne out in language like German or English that have a three-way gender distinction in singular but no gender marking in plural. However, other gender systems, for example, some Slavic languages and Arabic do not display the same complementarity. One could account for the German-like pattern by asserting that the lack of gender marking in plural is syncretism but that turns the syntactic prediction into a random morphological fact. Alternatively, approaches recognizing the complexity of gender realizations, such as Acquaviva (2014) that restricts gender to a late insertion of an indexical feature on the nominal root do not expect restrictions on the syntactic distribution. Yet, gender does syntactically interact with other features.

This paper proposes a syntax-centered theory of gender. The guiding idea is that if gender is a syntactic feature, then it should display properties of a syntactic feature, separable from its post-syntactic realizations (morphological realizations and semantic interpretations). The methodological consequence is that we need to investigate structural configurations in which the gender feature interacts with another element in a morphologically non-local (non-adjacent)

environment that displays syntactic locality restrictions, including relativized minimality effects etc.

In particular, I will argue that φ-features are not syntactically special but their bundling configurations may yield opaque morphological realizations. The case study will be the gender system of Czech, in a comparison to Arabic and Germanic languages. I will argue that the gender feature can – and does – undergo feature movement that results in feature bundling with features of higher functional projections. The empirical profile of these bundling configurations presents a methodological conundrum: I demonstrate that some of the diagnostics used in the literature to probe the gender feature in fact target other features the gender feature bundles with. To uncover the underlying narrow syntax feature structures our diagnostics must carefully separate post-syntactic reflexes from their syntactic underpinning.

Moreover, I will demonstrate that feature movement correlates with grammaticalization stages of an older gender system, independently attested in Slavic and Afro-Asiatic languages. I model grammaticalization as a process that creates a more complex functional structure, both syntactically and semantically (e.g., von Fintel 1995). Specifically, I follow Roberts and Roussou (2003) in assuming that the process of grammaticalization is technically based on head movement. Since functional heads are bundles of features or maybe a single feature, I suggest that grammaticalization can arise via feature movement as well

The overarching goal of this paper is thus twofold: to propose a syntax-centred analysis of the gender system, and to propose a methodological framework for separating morphological and semantic effects of features from their syntactic representation. Even though the system is design for a language-specific configuration, its syntactic properties lend themselves to making a variety of cross-linguistic predictions. Moreover, the proposal has consequences for the general theory of syntax: once we take the syntactic implementation of φ-features seriously, special syntactic theories for interactions with these features might no longer be necessary.