

snippets

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Contents

1. Andreea Nicolae, Patrick D. Elliott and Yasutada Sudo. *Pair-list readings of conjoined singular which-phrases.*
2. Rick Nouwen. *Presuppositions of superlatives with neg-raisers.*
3. Philippe Schlenker. *Gestural presuppositions.*
4. Yasutada Sudo. *Japanese nominal conjunction only has the split reading.*
5. Susi Wurmbrand. *Does gender depend on number?*
6. Ed Zoerner and Brian Agbayani. *Stripping, deletion and in subordinators.*



A common assumption is that formal or grammatical gender is an uninterpretable property of nouns (the masculine gender of *Tisch* ‘table’ in German has no effect on interpretation), whereas natural or semantic gender is interpretable (the feminine gender of ‘lioness’ has an effect on interpretation). Formal gender features then are the prime candidate for features that are uninterpretable (they have no relevance for the semantic computation) and lexically specified (i.e., valued in current feature systems). Such a feature combination is impossible in Chomsky’s (2000, 2001) feature system, but it is possible in a feature system as proposed in Pesetsky and Torrego (2007), Bošković (2009, 2011), or Wurmbrand (2012, 2014). If formal gender features on nouns are uninterpretable and valued, a question arising is what happens to those features—do they simply delete freely (Bošković 2009, 2011) or are there any formal requirements even on those features (Pesetsky and Torrego 2007)? If the latter is correct, given that there is no interpretable counterpart to formal gender features, the licensing element cannot be gender but must be another property of the nominal domain. While there are many factors to consider, the following generalization may point towards a dependency between gender features and an interpretable feature, namely number: formal gender is only possible in languages that also show number marking in the nominal domain.

Using WALS, a typological search shows that there is a correlation between languages involving formal gender and plural marking. The two relevant features coded in WALS are ‘Systems of gender assignment’ (Feature 32A) and ‘Coding of nominal plurality’ (Feature 33A). There are three types of languages regarding gender assignments: languages with no gender, semantic gender, and semantic and formal gender. The latter is the relevant one for the current purpose. As for nominal plural marking, there are 8 types of languages. Combining these two features yields 46 languages that display semantic and formal gender (see Figure 1 below). Of these languages, 10 mark the plural via a prefix, 27 via a suffix, 6 via mixed morphological plural, and two via a clitic. There is only 1 language that is listed as involving formal gender and no plural marking—Oromo. In Table 1 it is shown that, even assuming that Oromo is indeed to be classified as lacking plural (but see below), the ratio of languages that do not have any plural marking is significantly lower in the class of languages that involve formal gender.

Although the different ratios of ‘no plural’ languages in Table 1 are already suggestive that the combination of formal gender and lack of plural is cross-linguistically highly marked, it may, in fact, be possible to make a stronger claim if the following facts are taken into consideration. Citing from the grammar below, it appears that plural marking does exist in Oromo, but for some reason, it is not always used.

Owens (1985): “5. 6.2 Nouns. Noun plurals are quite rare. Most nouns lack them altogether. Human nouns are the most likely to have them, though even where they

exist they are not always used (5.3.2). The two most common given are -óotá and -ání. [...]. These may be added to noun roots, as in the above examples or may combine with a stem alternate [...]. There may be other plural suffixes -- ‘-lée was one given, jaalá ‘friend’, jaaláa-lée, magaláa-lée ‘markets’. In general, however, morphological plurals are perhaps even less used in Harar Oroma than in Booran (Andrzejewski, 1960). A few nouns have suppletive plurals.”

If the existence of plural as stated in the above grammar is sufficient justification for assuming that Oromo has number marking in the syntax, the only case of a language with formal gender and no plural marking disappears.

The cross-linguistic generalization that languages with formal gender always also involve number marking is unexpected if formal gender features (dis)appear freely (note that this is a typological generalization about languages and not necessarily about specific constructions). It is expected, on the other hand, if uninterpretable gender features (even when they are valued) require a formal dependency with another interpretable nominal feature, namely number. The nature of this dependency is yet to be determined.

Figure 1: WALS Combined Feature 32A and Feature 33A

| Systems of Gender Assignment / Coding of Nominal Plurality | | Number of languages |
|--|---|---------------------|
| | Semantic and formal / Plural word | 0 |
| | Semantic and formal / Plural tone | 0 |
| + | Semantic and formal / Plural suffix | 27 |
| | Semantic and formal / Plural stem change | 0 |
| + | Semantic and formal / Plural prefix | 10 |
| | Semantic and formal / Plural complete reduplication | 0 |
| + | Semantic and formal / Plural clitic | 2 |
| + | Semantic and formal / No plural | 1 |
| + | Semantic and formal / Mixed morphological plural | 6 |

Table 1: WALS Ratios of “No plural” languages

| | No plural | % |
|--|-----------|-------|
| All languages | 98/1066 | 9.19% |
| Total of languages coded for 32A & 33A | 18/203 | 8.87% |
| Only ‘No gender’ languages | 11/117 | 9.4% |
| Only ‘Semantic gender’ languages | 6/40 | 15% |
| Semantic and formal gender | 1/47 | 2.17% |

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