

# Gender Markedness and Defaults Workshop

July 26, 2023

This workshop will examine issues of how grammatical gender is represented in natural language, with special attention on asymmetries between different categories (e.g. feminine vs. masculine vs. neuter), including “default” behaviors exhibited by certain gender categories. The workshop will bring together researchers working on different dimensions of these issues, including acquisition, the morphology/syntax interface, and semantics. Four invited speakers will present their work.<sup>1</sup>

Coffee and light snacks will be provided; lunch will not.

## Schedule

|               |                                                                        |
|---------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 10:00 – 10:30 | COFFEE, OPENING REMARKS                                                |
| 10:30 – 11:30 | <b>Sigríður Mjöll Björnsdóttir</b> (Universität Konstanz)              |
| 11:30 – 12:30 | <b>Ruth Kramer</b> (Georgetown University)                             |
| 12:30 – 2:00  | LUNCH BREAK (lunch not provided)                                       |
| 2:00 – 3:00   | <b>Elena Anagnostopoulou</b> (University of Crete)                     |
| 3:00 – 3:15   | COFFEE BREAK                                                           |
| 3:15 – 4:15   | <b>Giorgos Spathas</b> (Leibniz-Zentrum Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft) |
| 4:15 – 4:45   | DISCUSSION, CLOSING REMARKS                                            |

## Titles and Abstracts

**Sigríður Mjöll Björnsdóttir** (Universität Konstanz)

**Title:** Discovering grammatical gender with – or without – a default

**Abstract:** Grammatical gender has puzzled linguists for centuries. The diverse patterns instantiated by gender systems cross-linguistically have raised important questions about the nature of linguistic generalizations beyond gender. In this presentation, I approach these issues from the perspective of the child learner: Given the highly language-specific nature of the grammatical gender category, how are young children able to extract the relevant generalizations in the light of limited and sparse input data? Moreover, the ability of children to form generalizations in gender acquisition has been shown to vary cross-linguistically: In some languages, children demonstrate early attainment of the target gender system and their “errors” are characterized by

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over-generalization. In other languages, children show a protracted development characterized by lexical conservatism. These discrepant findings have raised key questions about the nature of the acquisition process itself: Does the acquisition of grammatical gender involve learning rules? If so, how are these acquired? How does the learner tease apart rules from exceptions? Alternatively, learning gender involves matching the statistical distribution of the input data. Both approaches face the question of how default genders are established – or not – based on the child’s language experience. To address these questions, I present a study on the acquisition of grammatical gender in Icelandic, using corpus-based and experimental methods. I discuss the findings against cross-linguistic findings in gender acquisition and their theoretical implications.

**Ruth Kramer** (Georgetown University)

**Title:** Different Number, Different Gender: Comparing Romanian and Guébie (joint work with Hannah Sande)

**Abstract:** Many languages contain nouns that seem to have different genders in the singular and in the plural. In this paper, we investigate two languages with this kind of “ambigeneric” noun: Romanian (Romance; Romania) and Guébie (Kru; Côte d’Ivoire). Romanian is well-known for its ambigeneric nouns, traditionally referred to as neuter, but ambigeneric nouns in Guébie have not been previously studied. While Guébie is unrelated to Romanian, and its gender system is based on different features, the ambigeneric nouns in the two languages are strikingly similar. Building on the analysis of Romanian in Kramer 2015ab, we argue for a unified Distributed Morphology analysis of ambigeneric nouns in Romanian and Guébie. Specifically, we claim that (i) ambigeneric nouns lack gender features, and (ii) the ambigeneric pattern is generated through a handful of Impoverishment operations. We show how alternative approaches to ambigeneric nouns face empirical and conceptual challenges in accounting for Romanian and Guébie. Overall, the analysis supports the cross-linguistic approach to gender features developed in Kramer 2015a, where “neuter” nouns lack gender features, and it provides evidence in favor of a Distributed Morphology approach to ambigeneric nouns in general.

**Elena Anagnostopoulou** (University of Crete)

**Title:** Coordination Resolution and Markedness in Three-Gendered Languages (joint work with Luke Adamson)

**Abstract:** Many three-gendered languages have in common that some nouns are assigned *notional* gender – where the value of gender correlates with the interpretation of the noun – and some nouns are assigned *arbitrary* gender – where there is no such correlation. Strikingly, however, such languages do not always pattern together in how they resolve agreement with gender-mismatched coordinated nominals. If coordination resolution reflects feature representation, variation across languages with similar gender categories presents a puzzle. We hypothesize that resolved agreement with gender-mismatched human and inanimate coordinated nominals is predictable from how properties like animacy and individuation are encoded within a language’s gender system. Focusing on Greek and contrasting patterns in Icelandic and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian (BCS), we capture resolved agreement patterns through i) an interpretable vs. uninterpretable feature distinction, ii) a feature-geometric account à la Harley and Ritter 2002; and iii) universal coordination resolution mechanisms we refer to as *percolation* and *conversion*. Our account crucially differs from others in lacking all-purpose default insertion, and we are therefore better able to capture cases of ineffability. Our system correlates resolution with other language-internal properties for gender agreement across the three languages we investigate, in addition

to capturing complex patterns of resolution that have not been fully appreciated. This account has implications for the representation of gender, particularly as it connects to markedness and interpretation.

**Giorgos Spathas** (Leibniz-ZAS)

**Title:** Towards a single feature gender system: the case of Greek

**Abstract:** In many languages with a grammatical gender system, gender assignment on nominals seems to be determined at least partially by semantic factors. So whereas gender assignment (as reflected by gender agreement with the determiner) appears to be arbitrary/ conventional in the case of the inanimate Greek nouns in (1), it appears to be notional/predictable in the case of, e.g., the Greek variable-gender noun *jatros* ‘doctor’ in (2), where *fem* indicates that the DP refers to a female doctor and *masc* indicates that the DP refers to a male doctor. Although different implementations can differ considerably, this distinction is standardly taken to reflect a certain type of duality in the gender system itself. Syntactically active nominal gender features are either ‘grammatical’/ ‘uninterpretable’/ ‘concord’, as in (1), or ‘semantic’/ ‘interpretable’/ ‘index’, as in (2).

- (1) o *dhromos* ‘the.masc road’ / i *leoforos* ‘the.fem highway’ / to *monopati* ‘the.neu trail’
- (2) o *jatros* ‘the.masc doctor’ / i *jatros* ‘the.fem doctor’

In this talk I first provide evidence that Greek variable gender-nouns like *jatros* ‘doctor’ are in fact not specified for gender and that the relevant gender inferences originate not with the nominal itself (the controller of gender agreement) but rather with the targets of agreement in gender features. If so, the initial motivation for assuming a dual-gender system is weakened. Focusing on Greek, I lay out the basic ingredients of a truly single-feature gender system (i.e. a system with a single syntactically active gender feature that makes no use of any of the above-mentioned distinctions) and proceed to re-examine some of the main arguments that have been presented in favor of dual-gender systems. I discuss so-called ‘semantic gender agreement’, nominal ellipsis, and coordination resolution.