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Contiguity and Similarity of Form and Meaning: A Paradigm of Grammatical Gender Change in Romance Languages

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Recent scholarly inquiries into the relationship between biological gender and gender used in speech have highlighted the importance of this area of linguistic research. One interesting but hardly explored topic in this domain is how words receive grammatical gender. There appear to be two separate methods of assigning grammatical gender—one for words with animate referents and another for words with inanimate referents. Where living things are concerned, the biological gender of the signified matches the grammatical gender of the signifier; for example, the words for mother, sister, and daughter are always feminine in any language with a masculine/feminine distinction. Thus semantics alone logically and consistently determines grammatical gender of words with animate referents.

However, it is more difficult to explain how inanimate (neuter) objects are assigned masculine or feminine grammatical gender. Traditional grammar posits that the assignment of grammatical gender to words for inanimate objects depends solely on the form of the word and has nothing to do with semantics. In Romance languages, inflections are the typical forms used to classify nouns by gender, but it is important to note the specific inflections that correspond to a given grammatical gender vary depending on the framework of the particular language. For example, in Spanish, feminine nouns commonly end in a written *a*, whereas the usual indicator of a French feminine noun

is the final *e*. Admittedly, there are many exceptions to these rules, such as French *orage*, m. 'storm'. Traditional grammar accommodates them merely by adding their particular endings (in this case, *age*) to lists of exceptional inflections.

Since the forms of words in Romance languages descended from Latin according to discernible patterns, it seems only logical that the grammatical gender of those words should have done the same. In other words, it should be possible to identify an overall pattern of grammatical gender change in addition to the known patterns of morphological change. However, according to the assumptions of traditional grammar, any question of how a language's particular framework of rules and exceptions came about is unanswerable.

The exceptions to the rules regarding inflection and grammatical gender illustrate another deficiency of the traditional grammar theory, which is that it entirely neglects the role of semantics in assigning grammatical gender to words with inanimate referents; for example, if a word has a close historical relationship to the natural (or semantic) gender, even if that tie is later lost or obscured, the grammatical gender of the word is unlikely to change. Latin *dies* m. 'day' is connected with Iuppiter, a male god or *deus* m. Spanish *dia*, a reflex of Latin *dies*, remains masculine because the original semantic tie to an animate masculine referent is stronger than the formal similarity to feminine Spanish words that end in *a*.

Table 1

	day	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Latin	<i>dies</i> m.							<i>dies dominica</i> m.
Italian	<i>giorno</i> m.	<i>lunedì</i> m.	<i>martedì</i> m.	<i>mercoledì</i> m.	<i>giovedì</i> m.	<i>venerdì</i> m.	<i>sabato</i> m.	<i>domenica</i> f.
Spanish	<i>día</i> m.	<i>lunes</i> m.	<i>martes</i> m.	<i>miércoles</i> m.	<i>jueves</i> m.	<i>viernes</i> m.	<i>sábado</i> m.	<i>domingo</i> m.
French	<i>jour</i> m.	<i>lundi</i> m.	<i>mardi</i> m.	<i>mercredi</i> m.	<i>jeudi</i> m.	<i>vendredi</i> m.	<i>samedi</i> m.	<i>dimanche</i> m.

Table 2

	month	January	February	March	April	May	June
Latin	<i>mensis</i> m.	<i>Januarius</i> m.	<i>Februarius</i> m.	<i>Martius</i> m.	<i>Aprilis</i> m.	<i>Maius</i> m.	<i>Iunius</i> m.
Italian	<i>mese</i> m.	<i>Gennaio</i> m.	<i>Febbraio</i> m.	<i>Marzo</i> m.	<i>Aprile</i> m.	<i>Maggio</i> m.	<i>Giugno</i> m.
Spanish	<i>mes</i> m.	<i>enero</i> m.	<i>febrero</i> m.	<i>marzo</i> m.	<i>abril</i> m.	<i>mayo</i> m.	<i>junio</i> m.
French	<i>mois</i> m.	<i>janvier</i> m.	<i>février</i> m.	<i>mars</i> m.	<i>avril</i> m.	<i>mai</i> m.	<i>juin</i> m.
		July	August	September	October	November	December
Latin		<i>Julius</i> m.	<i>Augustus</i> m.	<i>September</i> m.	<i>October</i> m.	<i>November</i> m.	<i>December</i> m.
Italian		<i>Luglio</i> m.	<i>Agosto</i> m.	<i>Settembre</i> m.	<i>Ottobre</i> m.	<i>Novembre</i> m.	<i>Dicembre</i> m.
Spanish		<i>julio</i> m.	<i>agosto</i> m.	<i>setiembre</i> m.	<i>octubre</i> m.	<i>noviembre</i> m.	<i>diciembre</i> m.
French		<i>juillet</i> m.	<i>août</i> m.	<i>septembre</i> m.	<i>octobre</i> m.	<i>novembre</i> m.	<i>décembre</i> m.

Table 3

	season	spring	summer	fall	harvest	winter
Latin	<i>tempus</i> m.	<i>ver</i> m.	<i>aestas</i> f.	<i>autumnus</i> m.	<i>messis</i> f.	<i>hiems</i> f.
Italian	<i>stagione</i> f.	<i>primavera</i> f.	<i>estate</i> f.	<i>autunno</i> m.	<i>messe</i> f.	<i>inverno</i> m.
Spanish	<i>estación</i> f.	<i>primavera</i> f.	<i>verano</i> m.	<i>otoño</i> m.	<i>cosecha</i> f.	<i>invierno</i> m.
French	<i>saison</i> f.	<i>printemps</i> m.	<i>été</i> m.	<i>automne</i> m.	<i>moisson</i> f.	<i>hiver</i> m.

Table 4

	fruit	tree	apple	apple tree	pear	pear tree	plum	plum tree
Latin	<i>frux</i> f.	<i>arbor</i> f.	<i>malum</i> m.	<i>malus</i> f.	<i>pīrum</i> m.	<i>pīrum</i> f.	<i>prunum</i> m.	<i>prunus</i> f.
Italian	<i>frutta</i> f. <i>frutto</i> m. /fig.	<i>albero</i> m.	<i>mela</i> f. <i>pomo</i> m. /fig.	<i>pomo</i> m.	<i>pera</i> f.	<i>pero</i> m.	<i>prugna</i> f.	<i>prugno</i> m.
Spanish	<i>fruta</i> f. <i>fruto</i> m. /fig.	<i>árbol</i> m.	<i>manzana</i> f.	<i>manzano</i> m.	<i>pera</i> f.	<i>peral</i> m.	<i>ciruela</i> f.	<i>ciruelo</i> m.
French	<i>fruit</i> m.	<i>arbre</i> m.	<i>pomme</i> f.	<i>pommier</i> m.	<i>poire</i> f.	<i>poirier</i> m.	<i>prune</i> f.	<i>prunier</i> m.

Table 5

	room	bedroom	attic	dining room	storeroom	guest room
Latin	<i>conclave</i> m. <i>cella</i> f.	<i>cubiculum</i> m.	<i>cenaculum</i> m.	<i>cenatio</i> f.	<i>cella</i> f.	<i>hospitium</i> m.
Italian	<i>sala</i> f.	<i>camera da letto</i> f.	<i>soffitta</i> f.	<i>sala da pranzo</i> f.	<i>dispensa</i> f.	<i>camera degli ospiti</i> f.
Spanish	<i>cuarto</i> m. <i>habitación</i> f.	<i>dormitorio</i> m.	<i>desván</i> m.	<i>comedor</i> m.	<i>despensa</i> f.	<i>cuarto de huéspedes</i> m.
French	<i>salle</i> f.	<i>chambre</i> f.	<i>grenier</i> m.	<i>salle à manger</i> f.	<i>réserve</i> f.	<i>chambre d'amis</i> f.

Due to the inadequacy of the traditional grammar theory, only a new paradigm can both account for the role of semantics in assigning grammatical gender to words with inanimate referents and explain a pattern of diachronic grammatical gender change. Concepts from Stephen Ullmann's studies of semantic change—namely, contiguity and similarity of form and meaning—help to delineate this pattern. (I will redefine these terms somewhat to suit the context of grammatical gender change.) Specifically, similarity of form and meaning coincide with diachronic gender similarity, whereas continuity of form and meaning occur in the presence of diachronic changes in grammatical gender.

The Italic branch of the Indo-European language family is a logical place to begin research on this topic. All of the languages in this branch have retained grammatical gender, and historical change can be traced from Latin to its daughter languages using attested rather than reconstructed forms. The preceding tables list the forms and genders of selected words in Latin, Italian, Spanish, and French. They form the database from which many of the examples and conclusions in this essay are drawn.

Similarity of Form

The simplest type of grammatical gender change is no change at all, but retention of the gender of the morphological form from which a given word derives. It is the most basic diachronic tendency of grammatical gender: if no other influences intervene, gender remains the same. This phenomenon is illustrated in the Latin *cella* f. 'room'; evidence not only of its morphological structure, but also of its grammatical gender is present in the Italian *sala* f. 'room' and French *salle* f. 'room'. A negative example is Spanish *cuarto* m. 'room', which is not derived from the Latin root *cella* f. and shares neither its form nor its gender.

It therefore seems that the more similar the form of a word is to that of its derivation, the more likely it is that the gender will be the same as well. The names of the months provide strong support for this conclusion. In Latin, the months of the year are adjectives modifying *mensis* m. 'month'. In order for the gender to agree, all of the months have grammatically masculine inflections. This synchronic close similarity of form results over time in remarkably similar forms in Spanish, French, and Italian and thus partially explains the consistent gender among the months of the year.

Similarity of Meaning

Words that can have the same referent are similar in meaning. For example, Spanish *cuarto* m. and *habitación* f. can both be translated 'room'; thus their meanings are similar. One way in which they are distinguished from each other is by a difference in grammatical gender; one is masculine, the other feminine.

Such gender distinctions must be retained diachronically in order to prevent intolerable synonymy between words. A cross-linguistic example is found in the terms for 'autumn' and 'harvest'. Historically, the two are semantically related; in fact, they are synonymous in some contexts. 'Harvest' meaning "the time of the harvest" is almost indistinguishable from 'autumn' because, at least in Europe, those two seasons always coincide. In order to prevent excessive similarity, the genders of the two words had to remain different; reflexes of Latin *autumnus* m. 'autumn' and *messis* f. 'harvest' have maintained their respective genders in Italian, Spanish, and French.

One might argue that the retention of the gender distinction in this example is due to similarity of form, not necessarily of meaning. Similarity of form and meaning do coincide in the Italian and French reflexes, so that it is difficult to say which is responsible for the retention of the original gender. However, Spanish *cosecha* f. 'harvest' is not morphologically related to the Latin *messis*. Similarity of form is therefore not involved in this example. Nonetheless, the same difference in grammatical gender that differentiates the Latin words for 'autumn' and 'harvest' appears in Spanish in order to make a similar distinction between *otoño* m. 'autumn' (which apparently did derive from the Latin *autumnus* m. 'autumn') and *cosecha* f. 'harvest'.

Another example of similarity of meaning in the absence of similarity of form is Latin *cella* f. 'room' or 'storeroom'. The words for 'room' in French and Italian are reflexes of *cella* that have kept the feminine gender. The terms for 'storeroom' in these languages—*réserve* f. and *dispensa* f., respectively—are not related to the Latin *cella* f. 'storeroom'. Their meanings, however, are the same. Therefore, this similarity of meaning causes the gender of Italian *dispensa* f. 'storeroom' and French *réserve* f. 'storeroom' to be the same as that of Latin *cella* f. 'storeroom'.

An interesting pair of words is Latin *cenaculum* m. 'attic' and *cenatio* f. 'dining room'. Both terms contain the free morpheme *cena* f., which

refers to the Romans' principal meal. Since meals were usually eaten on the upper floor of a Roman house, 'dining room' and 'attic' would have been very similar semantically, possibly referring to the same room. It is interesting to note that *cenatio* f. 'dining room', which is semantically more similar to the morpheme *cena* f., retained the gender of that root.

In the cultures in which Romance languages are spoken today, meals are no longer necessarily eaten on the upper floor of a house. Thus the semantic similarity between 'dining' room and 'attic' has been lost. Because there is no longer a need to retain the gender distinction between these words, their genders in French, Spanish, and Italian are varied.

Contiguity of Form

A look at the change in the grammatical gender of any word over time will reveal what semantic field it is in at any given point synchronically. Because Italian *frutta* f. 'fruit' and Spanish *fruta* f. 'fruit' are derived from Latin *frux* f. 'fruit', which is to say that their forms are similar, they have retained the feminine gender. One can also see that these terms for fruit are in the semantic field of specific, literal fruit because their grammatical gender also matches that of words with contiguous synchronic meanings—in this case, the subordinate terms 'apple', 'pear', and 'plum', which are also all feminine in Italian and Spanish. The same phenomenon is evident in French *arbre* m. 'tree'. It is an umbrella term for 'apple tree', 'pear tree', and 'plum tree', all masculine.

The exceptions to this rule demonstrate its limits. For example, in French *pomme* f. 'apple', *poire* f. 'pear', and *prune* f. 'plum' are subordinate and therefore contiguous in meaning to *fruit* 'fruit', which is masculine. A possible explanation for this anomaly is that in French the word 'fruit' itself is not part of the semantic field of specific fruits; it is above and outside of it. Perhaps 'fruit' is considered to be contiguous to superordinate terms such as 'food' or 'crop' more than to its subordinate terms.

Another exception shows that in French 'attic' may not be considered contiguous in meaning to other rooms. *Salle* 'room' is feminine, as are all of the other examples of rooms given in Table 5, except *grenier* m. 'attic'. (Although it obviously cannot be proven from the point of view of grammatical gender, 'attic' may not be part of the semantic field of 'room' in English

either). The morpheme *room* or *-room* is present in all of the examples except 'attic' given in the table.

Anomalies may exist in the paradigm outlined in this essay but perhaps cannot be discovered with such a narrow database. Future research should therefore first include a wider semantic range of terms in more Italic languages. Later, the hypotheses outlined here could be tested in other Indo-European and non-Indo-European languages with grammatical gender. If the paradigm is sound, it may eventually provide the basis for reconstructing grammatical gender in protolanguages.

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