Review of: "Grammatical Aspects of Feminatives Through the Ukrainian Prism"

Artemij Keidan[1]

1 Sapienza University of Rome

A philosophical premise

The Author assumes that linguists should lead the process of language innovation:

> If there is a social demand for feminatives, there should be professional researches carried out on the grammatical, stylistic, and semantic preconditions for the use of these.

This is a legitimate, and also widespread, assumption. However, as a linguist, I don't feel like agreeing on it. I think, linguistics is to languages in the same way as biology is to living beings: a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive, discipline. There is no "secret wisdom" on how a language should be shaped, that only linguists possess. Languages evolve and gain new forms and categories on the ground of a social agreement, which is governed by the same rules as those that govern the free marked: speakers decide whether accepting an innovation, or rejecting it, regardless what the specialists say.

Indeed, it is practically impossible to force speakers to use certain words or grammatical forms mandatorily. Thus, during the Fascism in Italy, the government tried to substitute English and French borrowings with Italian neologisms purposedly coined on such occasion: the fact is that some of these neologisms remain in the everyday use even today (e.g. *tramezzino* for 'sandwitch'), while others have been long time forgotten (e.g.*bevanda arlecchina* for 'cocktail'). The speakers autonomously decided which to keep and which to refute.

Also, imposing artificial constraints on how the language should innovate (such as the criteria from the terminology theory that the Author applies to the Ukrainian feminatives) does not sound very convincing to me. The fact that speakers use certain words or grammatical categories fully legitimates their use.

Many meanings of "gender" in grammar

Contemporary debate on the gender in language is, unfortunately, flawed by some fundamental mistakes or misconceptions. The term "gender" is unfortunate as it is used in at least three or even four different meanings.

1. **Nominal gender** (aka **classifying gender**[1]) devides all nouns into arbitrary groups (or classes, as in many African languages, with up to 15 such "genders"), based on their morphological form (the endings they take). The gender category has values that are often called "masculine" and "feminine", but this terminology is highly misleading. There is nothing "masculine" in masculine nouns, with the exception of a small number of nouns referring to masculine referents (similarly for the feminines), in case they effectively belong to the masculine grammatical gender, which is not even always the case.

2. **Syntactic gender** devides all nouns into arbitrary groups based on their syntactic behaviour (in particular, their agreement). Very often syntactic gender devides nouns differently than the classifying gender (as when feminine nouns take masculine agreement, or vice versa).

3. The gender of the adjectives (aka **modifying gender**[1]) is also essentially syntactic. It is only due to an unfortunate historical misunderstanding that the ajectival wordforms are descrived as assuming the same gender values as the nouns they agree with. This is a highly misleading viewpoint. The adjectives assume certain forms that fit with the syntactic gender of the nouns they agree with; however, the adjectival forms are neither masculine, nor feminine, they are just forms.

4. **Referential gender** belongs to the lexical semantics of indicative pronouns, and some nouns, i.e. the fact that a word refers to a masculine or a feminine human being. Cf.: *He did it!* ~ *She did it!*

5. **Anaphoric gender** is manifested when pronouns are used anaphorically rather than deictically. Like in: *Someone got inside my appartment, I can hear **him**!*

The Author makes a confusing statement when he claims the following:

> *Let us pay attention to the fact that there appear nouns, pronouns, and verbs (in the past tense) that do not have a definite gender: dity ('children), batjky ('parents'), etc.*

It is not clear at all, what kind of "gender" he is referring to here. I think, a linguist should be more precise in defining his/her topic, especially when addressing a general audience.

Author's main proposal

> *Thus we may conclude that the language practice requires recognition of the **general gender** (Ukr. zaghaljnyj rid, Rus. oguljnyj rod), which is a combined gender like the common one and acts in place of the masculine in the generalizing function (Vakulenko 2018).*

Again, not clear what kind of gender the Author is referring here to. What is the change that he proposes? Where is this change located?

By the way, I suggest not use the Russian word огульный as it has strongly negative connotations, unsuitable for a grammatical term.

> *In contrast to the common gender, the general gender combines simple genders using the logical "OR" instead of the "AND".*

Most of the speakers do not even know the difference between a logical AND and a logical OR. I am afraid, you will simply fail in explaining your innovation to the speakers.

> *Note that the rise of such combined genders is a consequence of the language's tendency for the grammatical gender to disappear.*

This is a far reaching assertion. The Author should elaborate more on it.

Specific observations

> *Therefore, the words ending with "-kynja" are not natural (organic) to the Ukrainian language.*

It seems to me that киня suffix for feminine nouns is not rare at all in Ukrainian[2] But I may be mistaken not being a specialist in Ukrainian.

> *Though the female professors at the Ca' Foscari Venice University appear as "Professoressa", the masculine endings "-i", "-o" are kept in their surnames: Cerasi, Cesiri, Masiero, Santulli, Tosi, Turano*

This is a mistake, Italian surnames are formally neither masculine, nor feminine. The typical termination *-i* is not a masculine plural ending, but simply an inherited formative going back to Latin genitive singular masculine termination *-i*, which, however, in no way refers to the gender of the person who bears that surname. Etymologically it is explained as the genitive form of the name of the person's father. Thus, a person named Marco Mattei, during the Middle Ages, would have been inscribed as *Marcus filius Matthei*, literally 'Marcus, the son of Mattheus'; same for the females:*Anna filia Matthei* 'Anna, the doughter of Mattheus'. Eventually the word filius 'son' or filia 'daughter' had been dropped and the *-i* ending word started to function as a surname.

The Author is partly correct in foreseeing a patriarchal tradition here, but the issue is in the patronymics, rather than in the *-i* ending per se.

Other Italian surnames can have different terminals, but in no case such endings refer to the person's gender or sex. They are just frozen nouns or adjectives, with their own grammatical gender value, which sometimes is masculine and some other times can be also feminine, cf. such surnames as *La Bella*, *Fontana*, *Serra* and many others.

References

1. a, b A. A. Зализняк. (1967). *Русское именное словоизменение.* Москва: Наука.

2. ^ Olena Synchak and Vasyl Starko. (2022). *Ukrainian Feminine Personal Nouns in Online Dictionaries and Corpora.* COLINS-2022: 6th International Conference on Computational Linguistics and Intelligent Systems, May 12–13, 2022.