

On the contact-induced emergence of grammatical gender

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There is as yet no comprehensive account of the behavior of grammar gender (GG) under the conditions of language contact. A particularly intriguing question is whether an originally GG-less language can acquire GG via language contact. Field (2002: 192) counts the genesis of GG among the cross-linguistic rarities whereas Matras (2009: 174) argues that “[g]ender may also be introduced into a language along with borrowed forms.” Gardani (2012: 77) even considers GG to be relatively easy to copy. GG as defined by Corbett (1991) manifests itself in agreement of noun (= controller) and attribute (= target). In Thomason’s (2001: 71) borrowing scale the copying of agreement patterns is possible only in prolonged and intensive language contact situations. Aikhenvald (2000: 388) assumes that “[b]orrowing of an agreement system is extremely rare” but mentions two cases herself (Ayacucho Quechua and Ilokano). Stolz (2012: 94–104) discusses (potential) evidence of examples of GG-less languages copying GG from their partner in a given contact situation. The data are often inconclusive since the illustration of the phenomenon is restricted to isolated words or NPs so that it is not always possible to rule out codeswitching.

What is needed is a cross-linguistic inventory of all those cases which (presumably) attest to the genesis of GG in contact situations involving a donor language with GG and a replica language without GG. Especially telling are instances like (1)–(4). In these sentences, feminine GG is marked overtly on the target (bold): adjectives in (1)–(3) and definite article in (4). The controller (underlined: pronoun in (1), nouns in (2)–(4)) is neither a copy nor marked for gender. For Karaim (Csató 2001: 18), Yucatec Maya, Tetun Dili (Hajek 2006: 170–171), and (Correntinean) Guaraní alike, these feminine forms contrast with (originally) masculine forms to yield a binary paradigm.

- (1) Karaim (Éva Csátó p.c.) [donor: Russian]
*Ol e-d’i inteligent**n-a**.*
3SG COP-PAST.3SG intelligent-F
‘She was intelligent.’
- (2) Yucatec Maya (Chamoreau 2012: 84) [donor: Spanish]
*Bek’ech-it-**a** u y-íts’in.*
thin-DIM-F A3SG POS-younger_sister
‘His/Her younger sister is slim.’
- (3) Tetun Dili (Bible Tetun Dili, Hahuu / Jénesis 12:14) [donor: Portuguese]
*ema sira haree feto nee bonit-**a** lahalimar.*
person PL see woman DEM.PROX pretty-F really
‘[...] the people saw this really pretty woman’.
- (4) (Correntinean) Guaraní (Cerno 2010: 26) [donor: Spanish]
*Ani na re-‘u mamíta **la** so’o!*
NEG.IMP PAR 2-eat mammy DEF.F meat
‘Don’t eat the meat, mammy!’

In the talk further evidence from e.g. (Lekeitio) Basque, (Erzya) Mordvin, Chamorro, etc. is analyzed. Three questions are paid special attention:

- (a) Is GG-agreement possible without the participation of lexical copies in a given construction (i.e. do copied gender-markers attach to autochthonous stems)?
- (b) Is GG-agreement copied only if massive borrowing of nouns and adjectives occurs?
- (c) Does GG-agreement start with human nouns?

The talk marks the point of departure of a project which investigates the fate of GG in language contact situations. It contributes not only to the research program dedicated to GG but also to language contact studies in general.

Abbreviations: A = a-set, COP = copula, DEF = definite (article), DEM = demonstrative, DIM = diminutive, F = feminine, IMP = imperative, NEG = negative, PAR = modal particle, PL = plural, POS = possessive, PROX = proximal, SG = singular

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