

THE PROBLEMATICS OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER OF NOUNS IN ROMANIAN GRAMMARS

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Abstract

In Romanian descriptive grammars, noun inflection is a controversial chapter. However, grammarians agree that the noun has the known grammatical categories: gender, number and case, and that gender is not a criterion for inflection, since it is an intrinsic feature of the noun.

This paper presents an exploration of the gender subcategories of the noun, as illustrated in the three modern Romanian grammars, and describes both the motivated or unmotivated classification of nouns into the gender subcategories - masculine, feminine and neuter, as well as the general morphological, syntactic and semantic expression of this grammatical category.

Thus, an undeniable feature of the gender of the noun is its fixed character because each noun has a gender feature, by which it falls into one of the three subcategories, each of them having its own inflection, characterized by homonyms and specific combinations of desinences. Moreover, there are also nouns whose inclusion in a particular gender subcategory is closely related to the expression of semantic distinctions imposed by natural gender.

Key words

Grammatical gender, specific contexts, common gender, personal nouns, epicene nouns.

1. Classifying gender by meaning

In Romanian, according to the three grammars, nouns are divided into three gender subcategories: masculine, feminine and neuter.

The authors of GA₁ insist upon assigning gender to nouns according to their meaning by presenting examples of nouns for each gender. Thus, they consider as masculine those nouns that designate male beings and objects, which by resemblance to the former ones, are also considered masculine, recognizable because they use *un* (one) in the singular and *doi* (two) in the plural when counting them: *(un) băiat* – *(doi) băieți* ((one) boy – (two) boys). Masculine nouns are classified according to meaning into the following

categories: common and proper names of male beings (*vițel*=calf, *câine*=dog, *bărbat*=man, *Alin*); names of mountains (*Ceahlău*, *Parâng*), names of trees (*prun*=plum tree, *păr*=pear tree), some names of flowers and plants (*usturoi*=garlic, *trandafir*=rose), some names of things (*perete*=wall, *buștean*=log), names of coins (*dinar*, *dolar*=dollar, *galben*=gold coin), names of the letters of the alphabet (*d*, *e*, *f*), names of the months of the year, of music notes and of most of the digits (*aprilie*=April, *mi*, *sol*, *(un) cinci*=(one) five)¹.

What is more, these linguists state that feminine nouns are those names of female beings and objects, which by analogy with these ones are also considered feminine, recognizable in the singular by *o* (one) and in the plural by *două* (two): (*o*) *femeie* – (*două*) *femei* ((one) woman – (two) women). Hence, they classify them into the following categories: common and proper names of female beings (*fată* =girl, *Mioara*), names of things (*pătură*=blanket, *pernă*=pillow), names of fruit and most names of flowers (*prună*=plum, *lalea*=tulip), names of days, of times of the day and of seasons (*marți*=Tuesday, *seară*=evening, *iarnă*=winter), names of countries, continents and islands (*Spania*=Spain, *America*, *Sicilia*=Sicily), names that express feelings (*teamă*=fear, *iubire*=love) and names of actions often derived from long infinitives (*trimitere*=reference/referral, *citire*=reading).

They do the same for the neuter gender, which includes nouns that designate inanimate objects and some collective and generic names, except from some nouns which designate animate beings, formally identified by the fact that they use the word *un* (one) in the singular and the word *două* (two) in the plural when counting them. These words fall under the following thematic categories: most names of objects (*creion*=pencil, *tablou*=painting), names of senses (*văz*=sight, *miros*=smell), names of actions derived from supine (*ronțăit*=nibbled, *curățat*=cleaned), names of matter and of features that do not have a plural form or have a different meaning in plural (*curaj*=courage, *frig*=cold), names of some sports and games (*baschet*=basketball, *șah*=chess), names of some winds (*austru*, *crivăț*), and some names of animate beings (*macrou*=mackerel, *tist*=commander/officer)².

¹ GA₁, 1966, p. 58.

² GA₁, 1966, p. 59.

GALR₁ draws up this classification just for inanimate nouns, by bringing supplementary information about the peculiarity of the noun to express, through the category of gender, content features concerning sex differences (masculine/feminine) by resorting to the dissociation of animate from inanimate names. The authors point out the fact that semantic oppositions “*can explain the grammatical gender of some nouns*”³. In fact, according to these grammarians, many nouns fall arbitrarily into gender series, apart from semantic reasons, and thus, there are several types of grammatical gender inconsistencies with the natural gender:

a) [-Animate] → neuter: *animal*, *dobitoc* (beast), etc. The number of animate neuter nouns is low, that is why it mainly includes generic nouns, “*but there is a tendency for it to expand through neologisms with individual reference: star, VIP*), etc”³.

b) [-Animate] [-Sex] → masculine: *covrig* (bagel), *perete* (wall), etc.

[-Animate] [-Sex] → feminine: *casă* (house), *macara* (crane), etc.

2. Grammatical gender

GA₁ researchers highlight the difference in sex in humans and animals in two ways:

a) through different words for each of the two beings of opposite sex: *bărbat-femeie* (man-woman), *frate-soră* (brother-sister), *unchi-mătușă* (uncle-aunt);

b) by creating new words by adding suffixes to nouns of the opposite gender, a process called “*motion*”, and thus, the resulting nouns are called “*mobile*” nouns⁴:

- feminine nouns formed from masculine ones using the following suffixes: **-ă** → *bătrân-bătrână* (old man-old lady), *bunic-bunică* (grandfather-grandmother), **-iță** → *actor-actriță* (actor-actress), *frizer-frizeriță* (barber-lady barber), **-că** → *cobian-cobiancă* (male from Cobia-female from Cobia), *sătean-săteancă* (male villager-female villager), **-oaică**

³ GALR₁, 2008, p. 66: “*pot motiva genul gramatical al unor substantive*”; “*dar se observă tendința sa de extindere prin substantive neologice cu referință individuală: star, vip etc.*” – original Romanian version.

⁴ GA₁, 1966, p. 62.

→ *leu-leoaică* (lion-lioness), *zmeu-zmeoaică* (dragon-dragoness), *-easă* → *cofetar-cofetăreasă* (male pastry chef-female pastry chef), *mire-mireasă* (bride-groom), *-esă* → *duce-ducesă* (duke-duchess), *conte-contesă* (count-countess);

- masculine nouns formed from feminine ones using the following suffixes: *-oi* → *vulpe-vulpoi* (fox-vixen), *rață-rățoi* (duck-drake), *-an* → *ciocârlie-ciocârlan* (male skylark-female skylark), *gâscă-gâscan* (goose-gender).

According to GALR₁ authors the two previous groups mentioned in GA₁ belong to a single category called “*nouns that form pairs differentiated by gender, masculine/feminine, corresponding to sex distinctions*”⁵. In contrast, GALR₁ linguists add a new group to the series of nouns whose grammatical gender matches the natural gender, namely: nouns with a single gender form, “*corresponding to some referential features*” (“*corespunzătoare unor particularități referențiale*”)⁶. They consider that the following types of nouns can be distinguished among nouns with single gender structure:

- only masculine nouns that refer to people whose features are associated with the male gender: *bariton* (baritone), *tenor*, etc. or with exclusively male occupations/status (in a certain era): *pașă* (pasha), *voievod* (voivode), *popă* (priest), *latifundiar* (landowner), etc.

- exclusively feminine nouns, denoting people with features associated with the female sex: *gravidă* (pregnant woman), *soprană* (soprano), etc. or with predominantly female occupations: *casnică* (housewife), *moașă* (midwife), *soră (de caritate)* (nurse), etc., less frequently feminine non-personal animate nouns: *cloșcă* (hen), *matcă* (queen bee), etc.⁷.

GBLR authors claim that nouns do not switch gender, as seen in the words chosen for demonstration: *student* (male student) and *studentă* (female student), which they consider to be two distinct nouns, “*the feminine one*

⁵ GALR₁, 2008, p. 66 : “*substantive care alcătuiesc perechi diferențiate ca gen, masculine / feminine, raportate la distincțiile de sex*” – original Romanian version.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ GALR₁, 2008, p. 67.

being formed from the masculine one using the motional suffix ”-ă”⁸. The researchers point out the fact that nouns designating animate and inanimate referents have, in most cases, motivated gender (i.e. the natural gender of the referent). Thus, in the case of masculine or feminine animate nouns, they notice that there is sometimes a correspondence between the grammatical gender marked by desinences and the referent’s sex ((*băiat*=boy, *fată*=girl), while other times, although they have a feminine desinence, animate nouns reflect the natural gender (*tată*=father, *popă*=priest, *agă*=aga). In the case of the neuter gender, which generally includes inanimate nouns (*pat*=bed, *stilou*=pen, *creion*=pencil), they notice that it also includes a number of animate nouns (*animal*=animal, *popor*=people, *star*).

2. Contexts for recognizing genders

According to GALR₁ grammarians noun gender classes “are characterized by the selection of certain adjectival contexts (*proper, participial, pronominal adjectives*)”.⁹ GBLR authors support this classification and assign nouns to genders based on their distribution in the context of a determiner with distinct forms for gender and number, such as *acest* (this): masculine: *acest cal* (this horse), *acești cai* (these horses), feminine: *această pernă* (this pillow), *aceste perne* (these pillows), and neuter: *acest stilou* (this pen), *aceste stilouri* (these pens), or in the context of a four-form adjective (*bun*=good, *frumos*=beautiful). They conclude that only the contexts *această* (this) and *acești* (these) select just one form: *pernă* (pillow) and *cai* (horses), respectively; that is why they are considered *specific*, in other words, they are specific to the feminine and masculine, and any noun that appears in one of these contexts is feminine or masculine. In contrast, the contexts *acest* (this) and *aceste* (these) are considered to be *non-specific* by the authors, since they are common for both masculine and neuter nouns in the singular and for feminine and neuter nouns in the plural. Thus,

⁸ GBLR, 2016, p. 50 : “*cel de genul feminin fiind format cu ajutorul sufixului motional „-ă” de la cel masculin*” – original Romanian version.

⁹ GALR₁, 2008, p. 64 : “*se caracterizează prin selectarea anumitor contexte adjectivale (adjective propriu-zise, participiale, pronominale)*” – original Romanian version.

only the association of the two *non-specific* contexts can lead to telling apart the class of neuter nouns (*acest stilou*=this pen, *aceste stilouri*=these pens)¹⁰.

In her work “*O gramatică a limbii române altfel*” researcher Isabela Nedelcu states that “*due to its formal identity in the singular with the masculine and in the plural with the feminine, the neuter has not been considered a distinct gender by some researchers*”¹¹, but in order to argue that the neuter is a distinct gender, semantic-referential and morpho-syntactic arguments can be brought. A semantic-referential argument mentioned by this author is that neuter nouns designate inanimate referents, except for some generic nouns (*animal*=animal, *fotomodel*=model, *model*), or collective ones (*popor*=people, *cârd*=crowd), as opposed to masculine and feminine nouns, which can designate animate and inanimate referents.

GALR₁ authors point out that a small number of nouns allows only one of the four types of adjectival contexts:

- a) *acest curaj*, ~ *handbal* etc.; this courage, ~ handball, etc.
- b) *această loialitate*, ~ *făină* etc.; this loyalty, ~ flower, etc.
- c) *acești lapți*, ~ *pantaloni* etc.; these fish testes, ~ trousers, etc.
- d) *aceste aplauze*, ~ *tărățe* etc.¹² these applause, ~ bran, etc.

Thus, they consider that nouns that correspond to one of the gender-specific contexts type (c) / (b) are in the masculine or feminine, while nouns that exclusively accept one of the gender-specific contexts common to masculine and neuter (a) or to feminine and neuter (d) cannot be placed in any gender class, being considered “*arhigenuri*”¹³ (archegender) with incomplete paradigm, by the absence of either the plural form, if they exclusively accept context (a), or of the singular form, if they exclusively belong to context (d). GBLR grammarians hold the same view and consider that due to the paradigm flaw and gender nonspecificity, these nouns belong to the masculine-neutral *arhigen* (*curaj*=courage, *spate*=back) or feminine-neutral *arhigen* (*aplauze*=applause, *viscere*=viscera)¹⁴.

¹⁰ GBLR, 2016, p. 51.

¹¹ Gabriela Pană Dindelegan (coord.), 2021, p. 241: “*din cauza identității formale la singular cu masculinul și la plural cu femininul, neutrul nu a fost considerat un gen distinct de către unii cercetători*” – original Romanian version.

¹² GALR₁, 2008, p. 64.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ GBLR, 2016, p. 51.

3. Common gender

Specialists in the morphology of the Romanian language from GA₁ underline the agreement between gender and sex in personal names, present in common names: *bărbat-femeie* (man-woman), *tată-mamă* (father-mother), *unchi-mătușă* (uncle-aunt), *băiat-fată* (boy-girl), in personal proper nouns: *Cătălin-Cătălina*, *Florea-Floarea*, as well as in some masculine nouns (names of occupations) from which a feminine form was formed, designating the female person who has the same occupation: *doctor-doctoriță*, (doctor-female doctor), *sudor-sudoriță* (welder-female welder), *școlar-școlăriță* (schoolboy-schoolgirl). On the other hand, they state that there are situations where the agreement between gender and sex is not achieved, like for nouns in which the feminine form is not fixed, resulting in a more frequent use of the masculine form: *maistoriță* (forewoman), but also *maistru* (foreman), *sondoriță-sondoră* (female assistant driller), but also *sondor* (male assistant driller), or some masculine nouns, also used in relation to women who fill in these positions or do these jobs: *electrician* (electrician), *frezor* (milling machine operator), *mecanic* (mechanic), *medic* (doctor), *ministru* (minister), *rector* (rector), *tehnolog* (technologist). Moreover, they observed that by canceling the agreement between gender and sex with suffixes, some nouns have an affective nuance, which can be derogatory, for example, *fată-fățoi* (girl-sissy boy): “Dintr-atâtica s-o făcut coșcoge **fățoi**”¹⁵ (“From such a little boy he turned into such a **sissy boy**”); others emphasize their pejorative meaning when used in the feminine form to refer to a male like the noun “*nătăfleață*” (ninny) said about a man, which is more derogatory than “*nătăfleț*” (blockhead, silly): “Aș fi o **nătăfleață** să dau cu piciorul norocului” (“I would be a **ninny** to blow chance”).¹⁶

If in GA₁, the agreement between gender and sex in personal nouns is reviewed extensively, in GALR₁ and GBLR researchers present the appearance of a subclass of interference of masculine with feminine, called *common gender*. Thus, according to GALR₁ authors, a restricted group of “affective” derived or compound nouns: *dințișor* (little tooth), *fluieră-vânt*

¹⁵ GA₁, 1966, p. 63.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

(idler), *papă-lapte* (milksop), *târâie-brâu* (slacker), etc. allow all four types of adjectival contexts:

- (a) *acest păpă-lapte, fluieră-vânt* etc.; *this milksop, idler*, etc.;
- (b) *această păpă-lapte, fluieră-vânt* etc.; *this milksop, idler*, etc.;
- (c) *acești păpă-lapte, fluieră-vânt* etc.; *these milksop, idler*, etc.;
- (d) *aceste păpă-lapte, fluieră-vânt* etc.¹⁷ *these milksop, idler*, etc.;

Thus, the above mentioned authors consider that the occurrence of these nouns in adjectival contexts specific to both masculine (c) and feminine (b) is an indicator they belong to *common gender*, which does not behave differently, but which can be determined based on context both in the masculine and in the feminine (*A fost totdeauna un păpă-lapte.*, *Elena, ești o nătăfleată.*) (*He/She has always been a milksop.*, *Helen, you are a ninny*)¹⁸.

4. From “personal gender” to “personal nouns”

In traditional grammars such as GA₁ and GALR₁ we find references to the “*personal gender*”, which includes “*proper and common nouns that designate people and personified animals*”¹⁹ Over time this vision has changed because GBLR authors refer to “*personal nouns*”. However, all three grammars point out the two following features of masculine and feminine proper and common nouns, which fall into this gender:

- a. taking the morphological criterion into consideration, marking oblique cases in singular when the noun is individualized by using the definite proclitic article *lui*: *mingea lui Marin* (Marin’s ball), *(îi) dau lui Marin* ((I) give to Marin)²⁰;
- b. taking the syntactic criterion into consideration, marking the direct object using the preposition *pe*: *văd pe tata* (I see *pe* my father), *pe Marin*, *pe mama* (*pe* my mother), *pe Maria*,²¹ etc.

¹⁷ GALR₁, 2008, p. 65.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ GA₁, 1966, p. 59: “*substantive proprii și comune care denumesc persoane sau animale personificate*” – original Romanian version.

²⁰ GBLR, 2016, p.74.

²¹ GALR₁, 2008, p. 68.

A peculiarity of “personal gender” in GA₁, which is not found in modern grammars is that by adding diminutive or augmentative suffixes to personal proper names they retain their gender: *George* (masculine) – *Georgică* (masculine), unlike common nouns which change gender: *fată* (feminine) – *fătoi* (sissy boy) (masculine)²².

GALR₁ authors state that “*personal gender is not a well-established sub(class) of nouns within the gender category*”²³ due to the fact that its features are not homogenously present in all personal nouns, common or proper, and the specific expression of some common and proper nouns is related in particular to individualization by naming personal or non-personal animate nouns, thus, falling in the common/proper distinction. They highlight a feature of the “*personal gender*” that is also to be found in GA₁, namely the addition of the possessive pronominal adjective to the non-articulated form of kinship names: *frate-meu*, (my brother), *soră-mea* (my sister), *maică-mea* (my sister), *tată-meu* (my father), etc.; this feature of “personal nouns” is no longer mentioned in GBLR. In contrast, GALR₁ and GBLR add a new morphological trait to this class, namely using specific desinences to mark the vocative: *Ioane*, *Mario* etc.

Unlike traditional grammars, GBLR specialists design a lexico-semantic classification of nouns in which they include the “*personal nouns*” in the group of non-prototypical nouns, “*whose special meaning is related to a series of grammatical features, different from those of the common ones*”²⁴, together with mass, abstract, collective, relational, postverbal, post-adjectival and proper nouns. As noticed above, GBLR linguists have kept the morphological and syntactic features of “personal gender” presented in GA₁ and GALR₁, and have made a point by adding a series of additions. Thus, they claim that the morphological and syntactic features of this class are not a regular trait of all personal names. One of the reasons is that the genitive and dative of individualized personal nouns (which are not masculine proper nouns) can be expressed by using the enclitic article: *tatei* (to my father), *popii*

²² GA₁, 1966, p. 60.

²³ GALR₁, 2008, p. 68: “*genul personal nu reprezintă o (sub)clasă de substantive clar constituită în cadrul categoriei de gen*” – original Romanian version.

²⁴ GBLR, 2016, p. 71: “*al căror sens special se corelează cu o serie de particularități gramaticale, diferite de ale celor commune*” – original Romanian version.

(to the priest). Moreover, they state that the vocative can be homonymic with the nominative (*tată* =father, *Ion*, *Maria*), while the direct object can occur without the preposition *pe*: „*Îl caut pe copil / Caut copilul*” (I am looking for the child/The child is what I am looking for”)²⁵.

5. Epicene nouns

GA₁ authors state that for some animals the difference in sex is not relevant, as their name has the same form for both sexes; this is what we call “*epicene*” nouns. Within this category they include nouns that are used only in the masculine: *bâtlan* (heron), *cocostîrc* (crane), *dihor* (ferret), *elefant* (elephant), *future* (butterfly), *guzgan* (rat), etc. and nouns that are used only in the feminine: *cămilă* (camel), *lebădă* (swan), *privighetoare* (nightingale), *prepeliță* (quail) etc., with the mention that if needed, feminine and masculine forms can also be formed for nouns like *cuc-cucă* (male cuckoo bird - female cuckoo bird), *barză-bărzo* (male stork - female stork)²⁶.

GALR₁ authors make a much broader classification of *epicene* nouns, which includes the following categories:

- animate personal nouns of both sexes, classified as masculine: *ministru* (minister), *soldat*, (soldier) *critic literar* (literary critic),²⁷ etc.;
- animate personal nouns of both sexes, classified as feminine: *persoană* (person), *victimă* (victim), etc.;
- animate personal nouns of both sexes, classified as neuter: *fotomodel* (model), *model*, etc.;
- non-personal animate nouns of both sexes, classified as masculine, from the following semantic groups: names of (wild) animals, birds, fish and insects: *râs* (linx), *șoim* (hawk), *somn* (catfish), *purice* (flea), etc.;
- non-personal animate nouns of both sexes, belonging to the feminine, from the following semantic groups: names of animals, birds, fish and insects: *hienă* (hyena), *nevăstuică* (weasel), *dropie* (great bustard), *cegă* (sterlet), *libelulă* (dragonfly), *viespe* (wasp) etc.;

²⁵ GBLR, 2016, p. 74.

²⁶ GA₁, 1966, p. 63.

²⁷ GALR₁, 2008, p. 67.

- non-personal animate nouns of both genders, classified as neuter: *animal*,²⁸ etc.

Given this classification, GALR₁ linguists consider that the natural gender of animate nouns can be updated through contextual epicene nouns (in agreement or disagreement with the grammatical gender), through postposed determiners displayed in pairs: *cangur-mascul* / *cangur-femelă* (male kangaroo/ female kangaroo), etc., through motional (occasional) derivation: *jderoaică* (female marten), *vrăbioi* (male sparrow),²⁹ etc. More than this, they have put forward the idea that epicene nouns, whose features are the indifference to the expression of sex differences, and exclusive categorization in a gender subcategory: masculine, feminine or neuter, are distinct from common gender nouns.

Conclusions

The main feature of gender in nouns is its precise nature. Thus, we can notice that there are three grammatical genders: masculine, feminine and neuter, each of them subordinating inflectional classes established both based on specific homonyms and combinations of desinences and by expressing semantic distinctions. For nouns with two gender forms, which are ambiguous when it comes to categorizing nouns as masculine, feminine or neuter, each of the two forms has a fixed gender, representing a variant of the noun's classification in one of the gender subcategories.

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²⁸ GALR₁, 2008, p. 68.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

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