

Mass/count and grammatical gender in Romance

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The mass/count distinction intersects with the analysis of the gender systems in several interesting ways. Across Romance, two varieties/dialect areas have attracted most interest in this respect, viz. Central-Southern Italo-Romance and Asturian (Northern Ibero-Romance). Both kinds of systems feature a set of agreement targets called traditionally ‘neuter’, as exemplified in (1) with the dialect of Macerata (Central Marche) – where the ‘neuter’ definite article form *lo* contrasts with M *lu* and F *la* – and in (2) with the dialect of Lena (Central Asturian), where the ‘neuter’ form of the adjective (*fri-o*) contrasts with M *fri-u* and F *fri-a*:

(1)	gender	countness	det	N	Adj	Maceratese
a.	F	count	<i>la</i>	<i>ma</i>	<i>ggrɔss-a</i>	‘DEF.F.SG big hand’
b.	N	mass	<i>lo</i>	<i>pa</i>	<i>ggrɔss-o</i>	‘DEF.F.SG big (loaf of) bread’
c.	M	count	<i>lu</i>	<i>ka</i>	<i>ggrɔss-u</i>	‘DEF.M.SG big dog’

(2)	gender	countness	det	N	Adj	Central Asturian (Lena)
a.	F	count	<i>la</i>	<i>casa</i>	<i>fri-a</i>	‘DEF.F.SG cold house’
b.		mass		<i>tsiche</i>	<i>fri-o</i>	‘DEF.F.SG cold milk’
c.	M	mass	<i>el</i>	<i>café</i>	<i>fri-o</i>	‘DEF.M.SG cold coffee’
d.		count		<i>pie</i>	<i>fri-u</i>	‘DEF.M.SG cold foot’

While the two types of systems are often dealt with as though they were instances of ‘similar’ phenomena (e.g. in the typological survey of mass/countness by Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2004: 1069), there are obvious differences, the most striking one being the fact that, in Asturian, masshood cuts across the gender contrast seen in (2) on the definite article, while in Central-Southern Italo-Romance all nouns assigned to the neuter (and thus selecting the article form *lo* in Maceratese in (1b)) are mass.

In this talk, I shall argue that the way in which mass/countness impacts on the gender system is radically different in the two kinds of systems. In particular, I shall show that in both the neuter is a value of the category gender (contra, e.g., Ledgeway 2009: 150; 2012: 105; Maiden 2011: 170-2 for Central-Southern Italy and Corbett 2000: 124-6 for Asturian), but in Asturian this is just one of two concurrent gender features (cf. Fedden and Corbett 2016 for a recent typology of such systems). Central-Southern Italo-Romance, on the other hand, shows a more conservative unitary gender system, inherited from Latin, where the neuter, as exemplified in (1b), is a morphosyntactic feature value, rather than a purely semantic subdivision of the masculine gender, as argued by the authors mentioned above (and by several others). Crucial evidence to demonstrate this comes from morphosyntactic change (in particular, the rise of dedicated forms of the indefinite article, which would be hardly expected to occur with nouns which are defined as [–count], since apart from ‘universal sorter/packager’ effects – cf. e.g. Pelletier 1975: 456, 2012: 14; Bunt 1985: 11, Koptjevskaja-Tamm 2004: 1065, etc. – mass nouns do not occur with indefinite articles cross-linguistically) as well as from a recent neurolinguistic study on one dialect of this area, whose preliminary results I am going to address.

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