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Gender-inclusive or not? Covert gender patterns in Georgian

Abstract: This chapter seeks to find out whether various occupational terms are gender-inclusive or not, and, hence, whether and how the gendered division of labor is reflected in Georgian as a genderless language. In genderless languages, that is, those having no grammatical gender, we can investigate covert gender. This approach assumes that a referent of a generic animate noun, denoting a human being, and related semantic markers may be regularly associated with only (or mainly) either a male or female individual. The analysis is based on a pilot study applying a questionnaire including twenty Georgian stimulus terms (occupational terms with neither word-formation nor semantic clues to disclose a possible gender of a referent). The main results are the following: (1) male and female interpretations of the stimulus terms have demonstrated whether and how gender-inclusive they are; (2) a genderless grammar does not necessarily provide for gender neutrality in the perception of personal nouns; (3) languages may be similar in terms of having genderless grammars; however, words of these languages with identical referential meanings may not be readily associated with one and the same gender and may or may not be gender-inclusive.

Keywords: covert gender, gender-inclusive, genderless language, Georgian, occupational terms

1 Introduction

All the four Kartvelian (South Caucasian) languages are genderless, Georgian (ISO 639–3: geo/kat; Glottolog: nucle1302) among them. However, a genderless grammar does not necessarily provide for gender neutrality in the perception of personal nouns and for them being gender-inclusive. Hence, one is likely to observe covert gender in such languages. This is to say that a referent of a generic animate noun, denoting a human being, may be regularly associated with only (or mainly) either a male or a female person. Therefore, identification of pertaining associations will allow relating them to linguistic dimensions of gendered division of labor in a respec-

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tive language community, as well as whether and which generic nouns are inclusive or not.

The chapter focuses on covert gender patterns in Georgian as a genderless language, describing a pilot study. The study is based on a questionnaire including twenty Georgian stimulus terms, lexical items referring to human beings (occupational terms) with neither morphological nor semantic clues to refer to a possible gender of a referent. Its results display both male-only and female-only interpretations, as well as mixed ones. These interpretations correspond to the actual gendered division of labor in the Georgian-speaking community, since male- or female-only and mixed interpretations are an outcome of the presence of statistically significantly more men or women in respective professions. The fact that the stimulus terms are generic does not imply that they are necessarily gender-inclusive.

In order to find out whether the interpretations are associated with referential (denotational) meanings of individual stimulus terms or something else, I contrasted the data with those from Turkish as a genderless language. With respect to both similarities and distinctions between the interpretations of the same occupational terms in the two languages, I arrived at the finding that words with the same referential meaning are not readily associated with the same gender in different genderless languages and are not equally inclusive or inclusive at all.

2 Gender-related linguistic items: In-/exclusive

2.1 Gender marking and the dominance effect

Irrespective of the fact that textbooks try to warn their readers against associating the grammatical category of gender and socio-culturally constructed gender, when we look at common nouns referring to human beings, what we witness is that these two phenomena do associate with each other in a host of cases (cf. Khaznadar 2002).

Moreover, the grammatical category of gender has been regarded to have its origins in the ancient mythological thought. For instance, back in 1772, in his *On the Origin of Human Language*, Herder deemed the grammatical category of gender to pertain to the primitive animist worldview. In the scholar's opinion, when primitive humans tried to understand the essence of the world and of their own being, they personified animals, plants, earth, stones, water, natural and supra-natural forces into men and women, into kind and evil, gods and goddesses (1966: 133). Some contemporary scholars too dwell upon similar relations and associations with respect to gender bias and sexism in language (for an overview, see Durrer, 2002).

However, can grammars tell us anything about the communities their speakers live in? Some answers to this question can be traced to the intersectionality between grammatical gender and social gender. In almost all languages with sex-based classes of nouns, the feminine has been analyzed as playing a secondary role in the gender system, that is, the masculine is presented as unmarked while the feminine is presented as marked (thus, it is derived from the supposed masculine base) (Baron 1986). The phenomenon in point has been referred to as 'dominance' since medieval Arabic grammarians have introduced this term (see, for instance, Suleiman, 1999; Guellouz, 2016).

This dominance effect has manifested itself in different areas, notably with the use of the so-called generic masculine to refer to mixed groups. It can also be visible in case-marking. For instance "Modern Standard German and its dialects including Pennsylvania Dutch and closely related Yiddish" lacks "any morphological distinction between nominative and accusative cases for feminines" (Krifka 2009: 141) and this is described as "remarkable": "This is not only unique within Germanic languages, but also quite remarkable from a typological and functional viewpoint, *under the plausible assumption that feminine NPs do not differ in animacy from masculine NPs*" (Krifka 2009: emphasis added).

His detailed and rigorous discussion of the loss of the nominative/accusative distinction for feminines (Krifka 2009: 9–27) envisions all the diachronic steps and possible explanations for this disappearance. He concludes that grammatically speaking the category 'female human beings' functions in the same way as the category 'inanimate', possibly because of hegemony: "In any case it is quite possible that an element of sexism played a role in these developments and influenced a core part of the grammar" (Krifka 2009: 31).

Another sexist view on grammar is evidenced in widespread instances of the markedness-unmarkedness relations in various languages as far as word-building is concerned (Beard 1995). As a normative rule, an unmarked form is thought as a base denoting predominantly male referents (or may have a generic meaning), whereas feminine ones are then considered to be derived from them.

2.2 Gendered division of labor in language

Another case in point is the opposition between the masculine-feminine for various occupations. The differences go beyond grammatical gender, since we argue that social gender and sex roles influence word meaning and word formation. Therefore, we are very likely to come across the term *working wife* but much less often, if ever, than *working husband*: "The language also still bears traces of the cultural norm of women as house-wives and men as workers outside the home; thus *working wife*

and *working mother* are, to say the least, more likely to occur than *working husband* and *working father*" (Malmkjaer 2002: 306).

As for social gender and professions, I have to turn to instances of what is called *default gender*, whenever words, marked as masculine and feminine, refer to different social values. For example, if we consider the Russian pairs *akušer*.MASC/*akušerka*.FEM 'obstetrician'/'midwife' and *texnik*.MASC/*texnička*.FEM 'technician'/'cleaning woman', the prestige attached to male professions is obvious. Even though this imbalance between the patterns of lexical and referential gender can be subject to change over time, a number of nominal profession pairs in various languages demonstrate a certain hierarchy in the gendered division of labor, i.e., male = superior vs. female = inferior.

It is noteworthy how Georgian displays almost the same hierarchy of duties and domains when referring to male and female beings, albeit it is a genderless language. Indeed, similar morphological patterns (noun + noun) bear a different social value depending on whether respective words refer to male or to female beings, as is illustrated in Examples (1) and (2):

(1) mama- saxl- is- i
father- house- GEN- NOM
'headman, monitor'

(2) dia- saxl- is- i
mother- house- GEN- NOM
'housewife'

These two examples are typical linguistic representations of how labor was/is divided in terms of gender in respective language communities.

It is worthwhile to quote Otto Jespersen: "in Munda-Koh it is considered indecent to speak of a married woman except in the dual. She is, as it were, not to be imagined as being without her husband" (Jespersen 2006: 194, footnote 1). Truly enough, a number of publications have recorded the tendency to refer to women according to their relation to men, but less frequently vice versa (for instance, Lakoff, 1973; Pauwels, 1996): "a majority of (modern) industrialized societies, including English- and Dutch-speaking societies operate with a patrimonial system of naming and of marking ancestry (...). The practice of marking women as 'property' of men culminated in the naming conventions used by and for married women, especially in English-speaking countries, i.e., 'Mrs John Smith', in which a woman was merely identified as the 'mistress of a certain man'" (Pauwels 1996: 154f).

Thus, the fact that languages, despite their genetic affiliations, typological features, and/or area-based characteristics, reflected existing division of labor between genders to a certain extent, can be considered a widespread phenomenon.

3 Covert gender in Georgian as a genderless language

Georgian is one of the Kartvelian (South Caucasian) languages. Like its genetic sisters (Megrelian, Laz, and Svan), there is no grammatical gender in the Georgian language; even the 3rd person pronouns are gender-neutral. According to the Language Index of Grammatical Gender Dimensions developed by a group of scholars (Gygax et al. 2019), there are five basic language groups: 1. grammatical gender languages, 2. languages with a combination of grammatical gender and natural gender, 3. natural gender languages, 4. genderless languages with few traces of grammatical gender, 5. genderless languages. Georgian, pertaining to Group 5, lacks most of the grammatical devices available in languages of the other groups; however, this in no way implies that it is neutral in terms of gender equality.

Based on the contrastive study of typologically very distinct languages (i.e., Standard Average European English vs. Amerindian), Whorf distinguished between overt and covert categories, referring to them as pheno- and cryptotypes, respectively (Whorf 1945: 5). Phenotypes are classical morphological categories with explicit grammatical meaning and formal indication, that is, a morpheme, while cryptotypes are covert categories, being based upon the semantic and syntactic features of words with no explicit morphological expression, but essentially instrumental for the construction and understanding of utterances; they influence the collocation of a given word with other ones in a sentence. “Another type of covert category is represented by English gender. Each common noun and personal given name belongs to a certain gender class, but a characteristic overt mark appears only when there is occasion to refer to the noun by a pronoun in the singular number” (Whorf 1945: 3).

As for genderless languages (such as Georgian, Hungarian, Finnish, Turkish, Japanese, etc.), one is likely to observe covert gender. This is to say that, as already stated above, a referent of a generic animate noun, denoting a human being, may be regularly associated with only (or mainly) either a male or a female person; therefore, identification of pertaining associations will allow us to relate them to linguistic dimensions of gendered division of labor in a respective language community, as well as whether and which generic nouns are gender-inclusive or not.

In order to have a clear-cut and well-documented view of the aforementioned dimensions, and with respect to some preceding investigations on covert gender patterns in genderless languages (see, for instance, Braun 1997, 1998, 1999; Engelberg 2002; Vasvári 2011), I launched a pilot study of a new dataset from Georgian.

4 The pilot study: Data and analysis

Since the present chapter is aimed at identifying covert gender patterns in Georgian which is a genderless language, it is important to note that the data (selected from *Explanatory Dictionary of the Georgian Language* in eight volumes Chikobava 1950–1964) include words referring to human beings (occupational terms) with neither morphological nor semantic clues to refer to a possible gender of a referent. Hence, words similar to Example (1), Example (2), as well as to the following in Examples (3) and (4) were not included:

(3) med- da- Ø
med[icine]- sister- NOM
'nurse'

(4) k'ar- is- k'ac- i
door- GEN- man- NOM
'butler'

Twenty stimulus terms were selected. The questionnaire was organized as presented in Table 2. The study was conducted in Tbilisi, the capital city of Georgia, in 2014–2021. There were one hundred subjects (61 females and 39 males) with an age range between 22 and 70 years.

As a cover story, the participants were told that the occupation terms were from a screenplay and that their task was to first-name the characters. Along the stimulus terms there were two columns for Variant 1 and Variant 2 in order to allow both male and female interpretations. The detailed results are presented in Table 3.

The results show that 10 items were given a male-only interpretation (see 4), while 4 items received female-only interpretations (see 5). The rest of them received both male and female interpretations (6 items, cf. Table 1). This demonstrates that speakers display to have very clear stereotypes regarding who should have which professional occupation in society. Overall, more social roles are readily assigned to men than women. Hence, the stimulus terms are generic but hardly gender-inclusive.

Tab. 1: Distribution of female, male, and female and male interpretations.

item	translation	female int.	male int.	both int.
p'olicieli	'police officer'	2%	92%	6%
garemovač're	'street vendor'	61%	28%	11%
menežer	'manager'	45%	41%	14%
ekimi	'(medical) doctor'	15%	9%	76%
mocek'vave	'dancer'	24%	8%	68%
molare	'cashier'	99%	0%	1%

Not surprisingly, male-only interpretations included items such as *t'aksis mzğoli* 'taxi driver', *mesaate* 'watch-maker', or *inžineri* 'engineer', while female-only interpretations concerned items such as *masc'avlebeli* 'teacher', *mdivani* 'secretary', or *damlagebeli* 'cleaning person'.

Once again, these interpretations correspond to the actual gendered division of labor in the Georgian-speaking community, since male- or female-only interpretations are an outcome of the presence of statistically significantly more men or women in the respective professions. More teachers are female than male and more men are employed as engineers than women, for instance. Typical mixed interpretations include professions which used to be traditionally less open to females, such as *menežeri* 'manager' and *ekimi* '(medical) doctor', as we see in Table 1. This indicates that perception does evolve with fluctuating gender roles in a particular community.

In order to find out whether the interpretations are associated with denotational meanings of individual terms or something else, a contrastive analysis of these data with those from other genderless languages may yield notable results. Turkish seems to be an appropriate counterpart for several reasons: (i) Turkish and Georgian are both genderless languages; (ii) Turkish- and Georgian-speaking communities have long lived side by side, and they have much in common (alongside with differences). Indeed, Braun (1997) launched a study on Turkish, her questionnaire including some occupational terms, and a comparison of both studies can therefore inform us about differences in social gender representations in two grammatically genderless languages.

What I want to shed light on is that words with the same referential meaning cannot be readily associated with the same gender in different genderless languages; e.g., in Braun's study: "[o]ne group of stimulus-terms involved occupations which represent typically male domains", e.g., "*police officer*, *street vendor*, *taxi-driver*". These terms were interpreted as male by the majority of the respondents. The stimulus *polis* 'police officer', was interpreted as male by 98% of the subjects, and both male and female by only 1%. Similarly, *işportacı* 'street vendor' was in-

terpreted as male by 94% of the subjects and as inclusive by only 1% (Braun 1999: 192).

However, in my data, *p'olicieli* 'police officer' appeared to be slightly more inclusive (female 2%, male 92%, both 6%) than the Turkish equivalent noun; while *garemovač're* 'street vendor', the Georgian equivalent of the Turkish *işportacı*, had received predominantly female interpretations (female 61%, male 28%, both 11%). Such findings shed more light on peculiarities of the gendered division of labor in respective communities, and, hence, in-/exclusiveness of respective terms.

5 Concluding remarks

What can be inferred from the discussion above should be spelled out as the following:

1. Male and female interpretations of the stimulus terms have demonstrated whether and how gender-inclusive individual stimulus terms are.
2. A genderless grammar does not necessarily provide for gender neutrality in the perception of personal nouns, particularly, of occupational terms, as far as there may always be some gender-based divisions of labor in society, and, hence, it is somehow reflected in language.
3. Languages may be similar with respect to having genderless grammars; however, this does not imply that words of these languages, with identical referential meanings, will be readily associated with one and the same gender and will (not) be gender-inclusive.

The present survey and its results are in no way exhaustive; however, it will serve as a platform for future, more in-depth explorations of the problem in point. For instance, it is interesting to find out how participant gender affected the results. Based on the "self-imagery hypothesis" (Martyna 1978; McKay and Fulkerson 1979), we know that individuals frequently interpret generics to agree with their own gender. Therefore, in my further surveys, I will consider not only gender but also age, educational and rural/urban backgrounds of the participants alongside various statistical data.

6 Appendix

Tab. 2: Questionnaire, transcribed and translated version.

no.	item and translation	variant 1	variant 2
1.	*masc'avlebeli* 'teacher'		
2.	*okromč'edeli* 'goldsmith'		
3.	*p'olicieli* 'police officer'		
4.	*garemovač're* 'street vendor'		
5.	*menežeri* 'manager'		
6.	*mdivani* 'secretary'		
7.	*damlagebeli* 'cleaning person'		
8.	*t'aksis mʒǧoli* 'taxi driver'		
9.	*ekimi* '(medical) doctor'		
10.	*arkit'ekt'ori* 'architect'		
11.	*durgali* 'carpenter'		
12.	*mocek'vave* 'dancer'		
13.	*moč'idave* 'wrestler'		
14.	*ektani* 'paramedic'		
15.	*mesaate* 'watch-maker'		
16.	*inžineri* 'engineer'		
17.	*pexburteli* 'footballer'		
18.	*avt'obusis mʒǧoli* 'bus driver'		
19.	*molare* 'cashier'		
20.	*mok'rive* 'boxer'		
	Age:		
	Gender:		
	Full name (not mandatory):		

Tab. 3: Questionnaire, general results.

no.	item and translation	female int.	male int.	both int.
1.	*masc'avlebeli* 'teacher'	100%	0%	0%
2.	*okromč'edeli* 'goldsmith'	0%	100%	0%
3.	*p'olicieli* 'police officer'	2%	92%	6%
4.	*garemovač're* 'street vendor'	61%	28%	11%
5.	*menežeri* 'manager'	45%	41%	14%
6.	*mdivani* 'secretary'	100%	0%	0%
7.	*damlagebeli* 'cleaning person'	100%	0%	0%
8.	*t'aksis mʒğoli* 'taxi driver'	0%	100%	0%
9.	*ekimi* '(medical) doctor'	15%	9%	76%
10.	*arkit'ekt'ori* 'architect'	0%	100%	0%
11.	*durgali* 'carpenter'	0%	100%	0%
12.	*mocek'vave* 'dancer'	24%	8%	68%
13.	*moč'idave* 'wrestler'	0%	100%	0%
14.	*ektani* 'paramedic'	100%	0%	0%
15.	*mesaate* 'watch-maker'	0%	100%	0%
16.	*inžineri* 'engineer'	0%	100%	0%
17.	*pexburteli* 'footballer'	0%	100%	0%
18.	*avt'obusis mʒğoli* 'bus driver'	0%	100%	0%
19.	*molare* 'cashier'	99%	0%	1%
20.	*mok'rive* 'boxer'	0%	100%	0%

Tab. 4: Questionnaire, items with male interpretations only.

no.	item	translation
2.	*okromč'edeli*	'goldsmith'
8.	*t'aksis mʒǧoli*	'taxi driver'
10.	*arkit'ekt'ori*	'architect'
11.	*durgali*	'carpenter'
13.	*moč'idave*	'wrestler'
15.	*mesaate*	'watch-maker'
16.	*inžineri*	'engineer'
17.	*pexburteli*	'footballer'
18.	*avt'obusis mʒǧoli*	'bus driver'
20.	*mok'rive*	'boxer'

Tab. 5: Questionnaire, items with female interpretations only.

no.	item	translation
1.	*masc'avlebeli*	'teacher'
6.	*mdivani*	'secretary'
7.	*damlagebeli*	'cleaning person'
14.	*ektani*	'paramedic'

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