

Women, houses, and plural objects? Homophony in the Mian gender system

This paper discusses two alternative analyses of the Mian gender system. The Mian language (Papuan, Ok family, Sandaun province, PNG) has a category ‘gender’; i.e. all nouns are assigned to one gender. Gender is overtly marked on the noun itself and shows up on other elements in the clause (e.g. demonstratives and pronominal affixes on the verb), which mechanically agree in gender with the noun.

The Mian gender system shows a considerable degree of homophony (not an unusual phenomenon cross-linguistically), which gives rise to an uncertainty as to how many genders there actually are in the language, or to put it differently, how many genders Mian should be analyzed as having.

As far as overt gender marking is concerned, there are three (toneless) suffixes *-e*, *-o*, and *-i*, which pattern as follows:

<i>naka-e</i>	‘man’	<i>naka-i</i>	‘men’
<i>unǎng-o</i>	‘woman’	<i>unǎng-i</i>	‘women’
<i>imen-e</i>	‘taro’	<i>imen-o</i>	‘taros’
		<i>am-o</i>	‘house(s)’

Following Corbett (1991), for whom genders are classes of singular-plural pairs formally defined by sets of agreement markers, one could say that Mian has 4 genders, namely masculine (*-e*, *-i*), e.g. *naka* ‘man’, feminine (*-o*, *-i*), e.g. *unǎng* ‘woman’, neuter 1 (*-e*, *-o*), e.g. *imen* ‘taro’, and neuter 2 (*-o*), e.g. *am* ‘house’. It might be possible to fuse the neuter genders into a single neuter category and treat nouns like *am* ‘house’, which do not distinguish formally between singular and plural, as neuter plurals.

Genders are semantically quite transparent. Animate nouns are assigned to ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ genders on the basis of biological sex. The main difference between the neuter genders is countability. Neuter 1 contains count inanimates, whereas neuter 2 contains pairs, masses, intangibles, like illnesses, and abstract notions; but also some nouns which refer to singular discrete objects, such as houses and some tools and weapons.

An alternative analysis with only 2 genders was sketched in Foley (1986), where he tried to capture the homophony in the Mian gender markers by calling everything that takes *-e* ‘masculine’ and everything that takes *-o* ‘feminine’; *-i* is restricted to animate nouns. A consequence of this analysis is a fundamental difference between animate and inanimate nouns. Animates have a gender contrast in the singular and a plural in *-i* (where this contrast is neutralized), whereas for inanimates a contrast in number IS a contrast in gender. They are assigned to their gender on the basis of quantity.

Foley’s analysis entails that the feminine gender in Mian contains (apart from female animates) plural inanimates (such as *imeno* ‘taros’) and inanimates for which there is no singular-plural distinction (such as *amo* ‘house’).

This alternative analysis raises the question in how far homophony of linguistic units (which might point to historical relatedness) should influence their classification: Do we really want to claim that the feminine gender in Mian contains “Women, houses, and plural objects”?