

F=PL syncretism and default gender: case of Shughni agreement¹

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INTRO: Shughni exhibits an interesting syncretism in its verbal agreement morphology. For all intransitives, the verbal form for feminine singular agreement and plural agreement is the same in past and perfect (tables below show syncretism via color).²

		sitow ‘to stay’				vidow ‘to be’			
		PF		PST		PF		PST	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
SG	suǰ	sic	sut	sat	vuǰ	vic	vud	vad	vad
PL	sic	sic	sat	sat	vic	vic	vad	vad	vad

Table 1: Inflection of verbs vidow ‘to be’ and sitow ‘to stay’ in perfect and past

The morphological pattern may be summarized as masculine singular form being the most ‘marked’ one. There are languages with similar verbal inflection (discussed in Kramer 2015; Kramer and Teferra 2020), which share a certain grammatical quirk: feminine gender is the default one. Importantly, it is not the case in Shughni.

THE PROBLEM: Outside verbal agreement, Shughni grammar treats masculine gender as the default. For example, non-specific subjects like ‘someone’ only trigger masculine agreement on the verb (1). Additionally, pronouns with propositional antecedents bear masculine gender, which supports its default status (2).

- (1) *Ar čay ca tar mu komnata vuǰ/ *vic.*
 INDEF who COMPL EQ 1SG.O room be.PF.M be.PF.F
 ‘Someone was in my room’

- (2) *Malum idi ya ya-t. Fuk-aθ di fam-en.*
 clear that F.SG come-PST. all-ADV M.SG.OBJ know-3PL
 ‘It is clear that she came. Everyone knows it.’

These examples show that we cannot account for Shughni agreement morphology as straightforwardly as saying that feminine is the default morphological exponent.

ANALYSIS: Our analysis is done in the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle et al. 1993). We propose feature sets in (3) and rules in (5) to derive the pattern in Shughni. The feature decomposition of masculine and feminine into $[\pm\text{ANIM}]$ and $[\pm\text{FEM}]$ is diachronically supported by there being three genders in Shughni (due to its Iranian origins).

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²An anonymous reviewer suggests that this may be analyzed as a syntactic phenomenon: the relevant morphology tracks a ‘marked’ feature (either gender feature or number feature) whenever it is present on the argument of the verb. Even if that is on the right track, this does not explain the main puzzle we’re dealing with in this work: the syncretic realization of different features. The notion of marked feature is impossible to formalize in a syntax-based realizational model of morphology, so it does not suffice to say that the relevant form is inserted when the syntactic object bears a more ‘marked’ feature.

(3) Feature sets

- a. Masculine = [+ANIM][−FEM]
- b. Feminine = [+ANIM][+FEM]

(4) Impoverishment rule

$$[+ANIM] \rightarrow \emptyset / __[-PL][-FEM]$$

(5) VI rules

- a. Agr[+ANIM] \leftrightarrow -ic / $__T[PF]$
- b. Agr \leftrightarrow -uδj / $__T[PF]$
- c. Agr[+ANIM] \leftrightarrow -a- / $__T[PST]$
- d. Agr \leftrightarrow -u- / $__T[PST]$

Rule in (4) is an impoverishment rule, which (roughly) says that animate distinctions are neutralized in non-feminine singular contexts, which may represent the diachronic process of masculine and neuter collapsing into one gender (Rastorgueva 1975). Vocabulary Insertion rules in (5a-d) derive the morphological pattern: while masculine singular form is the default one (being the elsewhere option for Agr), the feminine-plural syncretic form is inserted for Agr with animate feature (which happens if the subject is feminine or plural, as per the impoverishment rule). Finally, we should note that we abstract away from the precise morphophonology of Shughni verbal inflection, so the realization forms in (5) are more of a sketch.

CONCLUSIONS: This paper's concern is the surprising nature of Shughni morphology wrt. our understanding of default gender: agreement morphology points at feminine being the default gender with gender distinction getting neutralized in plural. However, other tests for defaultness (gender when referring to an unspecified gender-wise entity) point at masculine being the default gender. Our analysis is based on two assumptions: (i) despite the synchronic evidence, genders in Shughni should be encoded with two binary features $[\pm ANIM]$ and $[\pm FEM]$; (ii) existence of the impoverishment rule in Shughni grammar, which neutralizes animacy distinctions for non-feminine nominals in singular. Both assumptions are diachronically grounded in Shughni's development of a two-gender system out of a three-gender one.

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