Gender and number morphology in Tigrinya

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There is strong evidence for concluding that in languages with a gender/number inflectional system, i.e. more generally a nominal class one, inflectional exponents provide an interpretive contribution (Manzini and Savoia 2005, 2007, 2011, Kihm 2005, Dechaine et al. 2014, Kramer 2015 on Amharic) and hence can be equated to types of classifiers. Tigrinya nominal/adjectival morphology (cf. Tewolde 2002) provides us with the evidence that gender/number morphology has interpretive content which concurs to fixing the denotation of the noun. The syncretism of feminine and plural morphology cannot be captured in terms of traditional descriptive categories, strengthening the conclusion that different properties must be involved.

GENDER INFLECTION. In Tigrinya nouns lack any gender specification that on the contrary are systematically realized on the determiners and adjectives, distinguishing two different genders traditionally labeled ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’, which, however, can alternate on the same nouns, as in (1a). In a subset of nouns inflectional endings combine directly with the nominal stem, as in (2b-c); moreover, there are nouns specialized for animate female or male beings, as in (2d). Nouns of sexed animals can require a gender tied to their reference, as in (2). However feminine can also introduce a diminutive or evaluative (size or affect) meaning which overrides gender distinctions, bringing about something like ‘little/ lovely/ beloved cat’.

(1) a. ?it-i gæza hamlawai ?ijj-u
   the-m house green-m is-m
a’. ?it-a gæza hamlawæj-ti ?ijj-a
   the.f house green-f is-f
b. ham- u b’. ha-u
   father-in-law-m brother-m
c. ham- at c’ ha-ti
   mother-in-law-f sister-f
d. gwal d’. wæddi
   girl boy

(2) ?it-i /?it-a dimmu
   the.m /the.f cat

PLURAL INFLECTION. Plural morphology takes two main forms, namely suffixes –at (with phonetic modifications) or –ti, in (3a-c), and word internal rearrangement, i.e. ‘broken plurals’, in (3d), generally reproducing a CVWCV(C) template, possibly combining with the plural suffix –at or –ti.

(3) a. ?it-om sab-at / sab?u-t tsibux-at ?ijj-om
   those-pl person-pl / man-pl beatiful-pl are-pl
b. ?it-øn ani-s-ti tsibux-at / næwwah-ti ?ijj-øn
   those-fpl woman-pl beatiful-pl tall-pl are-fpl
c. ?it-om hatsar-ti wædd-at
   those-mpl short-pl boys-pl
d. ?ahìw-at d’. ?abk’il-ti
   brother-pl mule-pl (Tewolde 2002: 103)

Suffixes –at and –ti occur also as feminine inflections in some subsets of nouns/adjectives, as in (1) and (4).

(4) a. ?it-a saboi-ti tsibix-ti ?ijj-a
   the-f woman-f beatiful-f is-fsg
b. ?it-i səb?ai tsibux ?ijj-u
   the-m man-m beatiful-m is-msg
c. sibur d’ sibìr-ti d” sibìr-at

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broken-m broken-f broken-pl(m/f)

ANALYSIS. NUMBER. Following recent literature on nominal inflection (nominal class/ gender) we take it that gender morphemes correspond to elementary predicates (‘classifiers’) which are interpreted at the CI interface. We analyse the combination of a lexical base (stem) in $\sqrt{}$ and an inflectional ending in N, as in (5), where the lexical base, expresses predicative content. The inflectional element introduces descriptive content, restricting the lexical base prior to saturation by an operator (the Determiner, cf. Higginbotham 1985). As for the plural, we can treat it as a particular type of classifier, as in (5a), which along the line proposed by Manzini and Savoia (2011, 2012), Franco and al. (2015), is identified with a part-whole content notated ($\subseteq$). The stem is

(5) a. \hline
   $\sqrt{}$ & N & anas
   N & ti & sab
\hline
b. $\sqrt{}$ & N & [\subseteq]
   & [\subseteq]

($\subseteq$) says that subsets can be partitioned off the set (the property) denoted by the lexical base - and is therefore comparable to what Borer (2005) calls Div. In essence, the plural of count nouns corresponds to an aggregate of atoms/ individuals, whose subsets are sets of atoms in turn (Chierchia 2010). In other words yet, when ($\subseteq$) takes scope over the noun that it attaches to, e.g. ‘woman’ in (6), it contributes plurality to it by isolating a subset of the set (or set of sets) of all things that are ‘woman’.

(6) a. anas-ti ‘women’
   b. the x \quad [x \subseteq \{woman\}]
   i.e. ‘the x such that x is a subset of the set of things with the property ‘woman’

Plural inflection may be optionally left out if a numeral precedes a noun coinciding with a pure stem, as in (7a), though not if a quantifier precedes it, as in (7b). This confirms that stems in themselves are devoid of any number/ gender specification, i.e. they are not singular, and coincide with inherent lexical properties.

(7) a. k̃l̃t̃o k̃l̃bi / k̃l̃t̃o ?axlab-at \quad gojəj-u
   two dog two dog-pl \quad run-3pl
   b. bizwat axlab-at / *k̃l̃bi
   many dog-pl \quad dog

ANALYSIS: GENDER. It remains to be explained how the same morphemes that introduce the plural can also introduce a gender/noun class interpretation. So, -ti characterizes feminine alternants, in (5a) and -at occurs as a feminine suffix in examples like ham-at ‘mother-in-law’ in (1c). The strongest assumption is that the same part-whole inflection is present in the combinations where so-called feminine reading is selected. In other words -ti/-at preserve their interpretive content in all contexts where they occur. The problem is how ($\subseteq$) may be compatible with singular reference. In fact, if all that it does is predicate the divisibility (Borer) of a predicate (whole), then we expect to find it on some count singulars as well as on many plurals. Our proposal then is that inflectional elements do not coincide with masculine/feminine in the traditional sense of the term, but concern the representation of inherent qualities of referents, like sex, countability, extension etc. This would be valid also for masculine inflection. More precisely, given that masculine agreement can emerge with mass nouns as well, it is to be thought of as referring to an individual or a (part of) substance.

Another problem is why different stems select one of the possible interpretations. Kramer (2015) in analyzing Amharic proposes that stems are associated to a nominalizer n head identifiable with [+/-FEM] content, fixing the class of the noun. Masculine and feminine determiners are marked for these features and yield agreement. In Tigrinya as well, it will be the inherent properties of the stem, like / animacy/ countability/ concreteness etc., which will drive coupling with the inflection, that generally is a variable/ optional mechanism, as illustrated in (8a,b), except for the system of sexed/human nouns, where the two inflections align with the distinction based on sexual characters.
For completeness, we assume that stems which do not combine with inflection are interpretable independently of assigning them an abstract N category, as also illustrated in (8).

(8)  
\[
\text{a. } \text{DP} \\
\text{D} \quad \text{N} \\
\text{ʔɨt} \quad \text{a} \quad \text{gæza} \\
[(\subseteq)] \quad \text{[ind/part]}
\]

Finally, as for the status of N in (5), we can think that N introduces the \(x\) variable corresponding to the open argument of the predicate denoted by the stem, possibly combining with other classifiers (gender/number inflection), so that (5) is to be revised as in (9).

(9)  
\[
\text{a. } \text{N} \\
\text{N} \quad \text{Class} \\
\text{ti} \\
\text{anas} \quad \text{x} \\
[\subseteq] \\
\text{b. } \text{N} \\
\text{N} \quad \text{Class} \\
\text{at} \\
\text{səb} \quad \text{x} \\
[\subseteq]
\]