

The Features of a Bishop: A New Approach to Gender in BCS

INTRODUCTION. Consider the following **two puzzles**. **First**, there is a well-known subset of male-denoting nouns in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian (BCS) that have variable gender agreement: masculine in the singular, but either masculine or feminine in the plural; see (1)/(2).

- (1) Nov-i/*-a vladika je sazva-o/*-la sastanak. MASC SG AGR
 new-M.SG/*F.SG bishop AUX called-M.SG/*F.SG meeting
 ‘The new bishop called a meeting.’
- (2) Nov-i/-e vladike su sazval-i/-e sastanak. MASC/FEM PL AGR
 new-M.PL/F.PL bishops AUX called-M.PL/F.PL meeting
 ‘The new bishops called a meeting.’

We refer to this subset as *bishop* nouns (also *tata* ‘dad’, *papa* ‘pope’, *kolega* ‘colleague’, *sluga* ‘servant’, *komšija* ‘neighbor’, etc.). Because of their variable behavior, *bishop* nouns have been the focus of much previous morphosyntactic research (Wechsler and Zlatić 2000, 2003; Corbett 2010, 2015; Despić 2017; Puškar 2018; a.o.). Capturing their behavior has thus far required significant analytical machinery and sets of interlocked stipulations unique to these nouns.

Second, it is controversial how to properly characterize grammatical gender features in languages like BCS, which have a three-way gender system. Some previous work has argued for (3), where each gender is identified by two binary gender features: [+/-masc] and [+/-fem] (e.g., Despić 2016; Despić & Murray 2018; Privizentseva 2023; Matushansky 2025, a.o.). However, as (3d) indicates, one part of the typology is unattested: there are said to be no nouns in these languages that are [+fem][+masc].

- (3) a. [+fem][-masc] = feminine c. [-fem][-masc] = neuter
 b. [-fem][+masc] = masculine d. [+fem][+masc] = ??

PROPOSAL. We address both of these puzzles simultaneously, capitalizing on the strengths of previous proposals, while arguing that many of their drawbacks can be eliminated. We contend that BCS has the gender system in (3) where (3d) are the *bishop* nouns, derived by merging a set of roots with *n* specified for both [+fem] and [+masc] (see Kramer 2015, a.o., for gender features on *n*).

These features encode *grammatical* gender. There are also social gender features, which we assume to be located in a dedicated projection above *n*. When present, social gender features trigger the standard kind of hybrid agreement patterns attested in e.g., Russian (see e.g., Steriopolo & Wiltschko 2010; Pesetsky 2013). Hybrid agreement in this sense is orthogonal to the central puzzle of *bishop* nouns, since it does not vary depending on the features in its context; we omit further details for space and discuss the full picture in the presentation. Since *bishop* nouns have the gender features in (3d), they contain an overspecified gender feature bundle, which we argue must be reduced on agreement targets (Noyer 1997; Nevins 2011; Arregi & Nevins 2012; Keine & Müller to appear; see also Despić 2017 on BCS, though with a different feature specification and implementation). We propose that a *markedness-targeting* Impoverishment rule (Nevins 2011; Arregi & Nevins 2012) deletes [+fem] from a feature bundle that contains [+masc][+fem], (4). [+fem] is deleted because it is the more marked of the two gender features (Bobaljik & Zocca 2011; see also Despić 2017 on BCS); this generates the masculine singular agreement in (1).

- (4) **Impoverishment of Agr Targets in BCS:** [+masc][+fem] → [+masc]

Languages generally make fewer morphological distinctions between genders in plural agreement markers, i.e., plural agreement contexts generally result in the reduction of gender features (Greenberg 1966; Bobaljik 2002; Kramer & Sande 2023; for BCS, see Despić 2017). Thus, we propose that the gender specification of plural *bishop* nouns triggers (5), a common kind of *markedness-triggered* Impoverishment rule which deletes a gender feature due to the marked plural context.

- (5) **Impoverishment of Plural Agr Targets in BCS:** [+masc][+fem] → [+masc] / [+pl]
 [+fem] / [+pl]

Since (5) is triggered by the markedness of the plural context, and not the combination of gender features, either of the two gender features is deleted, generating the variable agreement in (2). As discussed in Despić 2017, there is variation in the extent to which different speakers accept masculine and/or feminine agreement in (2). We can account for this variability in two ways. First, some speakers may not have the rule in (5) at all, so they will choose masculine agreement consistently given (4). Additionally, we explore the possibility that (5) is a variable rule; variable rules are used in research on intra-speaker variation (e.g., Guy 1991) to model phenomena where a rule with an input and an output does not apply 100% of the time that the context matches the input (see also Nevins & Parrot 2010). This would allow us to account for the full spectrum of acceptability judgments for the pattern in (2).

RAMIFICATIONS. Our analysis is both simpler and empirically superior to existing alternatives. We show there is no need to postulate novel agreement-blocking mechanisms or non-standard arrangement of features on the nominal spine for BCS, with social gender identity lower than grammatical gender (contra Puškar 2018; cf. Kramer 2015, a.o.). We capture the fact that variable gender agreement in (2) is an intra-speaker phenomenon (as in Puškar 2018), contrary to Despić 2017, which captures (2) only as inter-speaker variation. Moreover, acknowledging the distinction between *markedness-targeting* vs. *markedness-triggered* Impoverishment rules gives us a handle on why the agreement is fixed in the singular and variable in the plural, and not the other way around.

Previous approaches have focused on the fact that *bishop* nouns are in declension class II, which is surprising because Class II otherwise contains grammatically feminine nouns. Our analysis predicts this fact, assuming that declension class features in BCS are assigned via rule at PF (see Kramer 2015 and sources cited there for advantages to this approach). If so, BCS only requires three ordered rules, (6) (we use Puškar 2018's description of BCS declension classes):

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|-----|----------------------------|--|
| (6) | a. [list of roots] → [III] | (e.g., <i>stvar</i> 'thing', <i>ljubav</i> 'love', <i>smrt</i> 'death') |
| | b. [+fem] → [II] | (e.g., <i>Marija</i> 'Mary', <i>lopta</i> 'ball', <i>vladika</i> 'bishop') |
| | c. default → [I] | (e.g., <i>Marko</i> 'Marco', <i>auto</i> 'car', <i>more</i> 'sea') |

Class III is assigned based on root identity, Class II by the presence of a feminine feature, and Class I to the remaining default nouns (which are all masculine or neuter). Because *bishop* nouns have a [+fem] feature in our approach, they are correctly assigned to Class II.

We also make correct predictions regarding agreement resolution with coordinated plural nouns. In BCS, if any number of plural animate nouns are coordinated, masculine gender will surface if any of the conjuncts are masculine. Feminine and neuter agreement are possible only if all conjuncts have feminine or neuter gender (e.g., Puškar 2013). With *bishop* nouns, we see masculine agreement even when the other conjunct is [+fem], (7).

- (7) Monahinje i vladike su sazva-i/*-e sastanak.
 nuns.F.PL and bishops AUX called-M.PL/*F.PL meeting
 'The nuns and the bishops called a meeting.'

This is expected on our analysis where *bishop* nouns have both [+masc] and [+fem], and also suggests that agreement resolution happens before Impoverishment. Conversely, Puškar (2018:296-7) claims that the [+fem] gender of plural *bishop* nouns is the only gender feature accessible to agreement when the number probe of the number/gender set probes first. In such derivations, the only two gender features available in the coordination in (7) would be [+fem], so feminine agreement should be possible.

CONCLUSION. Our new approach to *bishop* nouns in BCS explains their variable agreement properties more succinctly than previous approaches and makes more successful empirical predictions. It also unites the analysis of BCS *bishop* nouns, previously viewed as perhaps uniquely recalcitrant, with the analysis of similar gender agreement patterns in other languages, e.g., Romanian and Guébie (Kramer & Sande 2023), lending support to Impoverishment approaches to changes in gender agreement from singular to plural.

Selected references: ●Despić, M. 2017. Investigations on mixed agreement: Polite plurals, hybrid nouns and coordinate structures. *Morphology*, 27(3), 253-310. ●Keine, S. & G. Müller. to appear. Impoverishment. In *The Cambridge Handbook of Distributed Morphology*. CUP. ●Kramer, R. 2015. The morphosyntax of gender. OUP. ●Kramer, R., & Sande, H. 2023. Different number, different gender: Comparing Romanian and Guébie. *Glossa: a journal of general linguistics*, 8(1). ●Puškar, Z. 2018. Interactions of gender and number agreement: Evidence from Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. *Syntax*, 21(3), 275-318.