

**Interrelation of grammatical gender and inflectional class:
A case study of Russian ‘common gender’ nouns**

There are two conflicting claims concerning correlation between grammatical gender and inflectional class of Russian nouns. Some claim that grammatical gender can be predicted from inflectional class (Corbett 1982, 1991; Corbett & Fraser 2000). In contrast, others claim that inflectional class can be predicted from grammatical gender (Crockett 1976, Thelin 1975). However, there is a class of nouns in Russian — the so-called “common gender” nouns — which cannot be accounted for in any of these proposals.

Common gender nouns denote individuals, like *s’irot-á* ‘orphan’ and *sudj-á* ‘judge’ that can trigger either masculine, or feminine agreement (1a–b). Compare with other Russian nouns that can trigger only masculine or only feminine agreement (2–3).

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| <p>(1) a. bol’š-ój s’irot-á
big-MASC.N.SG orphan-N.SG (MASC; CLASS II)
‘big orphan’</p> | <p>b. bol’š-ája s’irot-á
big-FEM.N.SG orphan-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
‘big orphan’</p> |
| <p>(2) a. bol’š-ój j’únoš-a
big-MASC.N.SG young-N.SG (MASC; CLASS II)
‘big young person (male)’</p> | <p>b. *bol’š-ája j’únoš-a
big-FEM.N.SG young-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
‘big young person (male)’</p> |
| <p>(3) a. bol’š-ája n’án’-a
big-FEM.N.SG nurse-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
‘big nurse’</p> | <p>b. *bol’š-ój n’án’-a
big-MASC.N.SG nurse-N.SG (MASC; CLASS II)
‘big nurse’</p> |

Common gender nouns differ from other Russian nouns, because their grammatical gender cannot be predicted from inflectional class and vice versa, their inflectional class cannot be predicted from grammatical gender. For example, in (1a–b), the common gender noun *s’irot-á* ‘orphan’ belongs to the inflectional class II, which is evident from the inflectional suffix *-a* (only class II nouns have the inflectional suffix *-a* in Russian). Nonetheless, it can be either masculine or feminine, which is evident from either masculine (1a) or feminine (1b) agreement. With this respect, the question arises: What is so special about common gender nouns, which sets them apart from all other nouns?

I propose that the difference between common gender nouns and other Russian nouns is that the former are unmarked for grammatical gender, while the latter are marked for either [MASC], or [FEM] (4a–c).

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| <p>(4) a. $\begin{array}{c} n \\ \swarrow \quad \searrow \\ n \quad \sqrt{\text{sud}'}\text{-} \\ \quad \quad \text{'judge'}$</p> | <p>b. $\begin{array}{c} n_{[\text{masc}]} \\ \swarrow \quad \searrow \\ n_{[\text{masc}]} \quad \sqrt{\text{j}'\text{unoš-}} \\ \quad \quad \text{'young male'}$</p> | <p>c. $\begin{array}{c} n_{[\text{fem}]} \\ \swarrow \quad \searrow \\ n_{[\text{fem}]} \quad \sqrt{\text{n'an'-}} \\ \quad \quad \text{'nurse'}$</p> |
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This proposal makes the following predictions. First, in case of common gender nouns, either masculine or feminine agreement can be used when they refer to an individual whose sex is unknown. However, when the sex of an individual is known, one or the other agreement will be used. This prediction is borne out (5a–b).

- (5) a. bol'š-ój s'iroť-á (referring to a male individual)
 big-MASC.N.SG orphan-N.SG (MASC; CLASS II)
 'big orphan'
- b. bol'š-ája s'iroť-á (referring to a female individual)
 big-FEM.N.SG orphan-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
 'big orphan'

Second, in case of other Russian nouns, we predict that it would not matter whether the sex of an individual they refer to is known or not. If they are marked for [MASC], they will only trigger masculine agreement, regardless of the sex of an individual they refer to. Similarly, if they are marked for [FEM], they will only trigger feminine agreement. This prediction is borne out (6a–b).

- (6) a. bol'š-ája n'án'-a (referring to a male individual)
 big-FEM.N.SG nurse-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
 'big nurse'
- b. bol'š-ája n'án'-a (referring to a female individual)
 big-FEM.N.SG nurse-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
 'big nurse'

I show in detail how the current proposal works with respect to Russian expressive suffixes. First, I argue that expressive suffixes cannot be marked for grammatical gender in Russian. Instead, they are marked for the inflectional [CLASS II]. Second, I argue that the grammatical gender of a derived word can be predicted from the inflectional class of an expressive suffix; which gives additional evidence for the first claim discussed above (grammatical gender can be predicted from inflectional class). Third, I illustrate how this works with respect to common gender nouns. I argue that since common gender nouns are unmarked for grammatical gender, their gender cannot be predicted from the inflectional class of an expressive suffix. Thus, a derived common gender noun with an expressive suffix will always trigger either masculine or feminine agreement (7), just as it does without an expressive suffix (1).

- (7) a. bol'š-ój s'iroť'-ín-a (referring to a male individual)
 big-MASC.N.SG orphan-EXPR-N.SG (MASC; CLASS II)
 'big orphan (expressive)'
- b. bol'š-ája s'iroť'-ín-a (referring to a female individual)
 big-FEM.N.SG orphan-EXPR-N.SG (FEM; CLASS II)
 'big orphan (expressive)'

References

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