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On the exponence of gender in the Irish DP[*]

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1 INTRODUCTION AND PRELIMINARIES

1.1 GOALS

For a language with two gender values, Irish has a surprising amount of morphological variation and instability, which emerges when looking closely at the dialects which collectively make up the language. We owe to Ó Siadhail (1984) an early formulation of the problem, which identified the key aspects of this irregularity: some nouns vary in gender value across dialects, some have alternative values in the same dialect, some display genitive endings that are characteristic of one gender value but trigger a mutation on following adjectives that expresses the other value, and some have different values (evidenced by the form of the article) in the nominative and in the genitive. In addition, the choice of the gender value for pronouns anaphoric to a DP is often not dictated by morphological agreement with the antecedent but determined on semantic grounds. The following sections will illustrate these categories with several examples; however, since more recent research has considerably sharpened the picture, my main goal will not be to describe the phenomenon. I will rather address the question of what these data can tell us about the competence underlying such puzzling behaviour. A truly satisfactory theory would model the Irish competence in such a way as to predict the boundaries of non-deterministic variation: where gender may fail to determine a certain spell-out, where it may not, and above all, why this is so. As a contribution towards that goal, this paper aims to show that the instability in the exponence of gender in the Irish DP coexists with a significant core of systematicity. This can only be appreciated if we draw a clear distinction between the two types of exponence in question, namely initial mutation (mainly lenition) and phonologically overt exponents. The latter, namely articles and nominalizing suffixes, act as overt exponents which directly spell out a gender value. Initial mutation, on the other hand, is a piece of the Irish morphological system (a morpheme, in the sense introduced by Aronoff 1994; see Luís and Bermúdez-Otero 2016) which has several functions, only one of which

is the marking of a configuration of gender agreement inside DP. Its realization is subject to a number of constraints, particularly complex in the case of the complement of a lexical noun. It is this relation between mutation and gender agreement that is subject to a significant weakening; when gender has a different realization, its systematic morphological realizations are stable. An empirically successful theory must account for this state of affairs.

1.2   Irish - How many systems?

Not many grammatical properties can be attributed to Irish as a unitary system of native linguistic competence, and gender marking is not one of them. It is true that all modern varieties oppose two gender values, through a system of morphological oppositions which is clearest in pronouns. It is also true that the exponents for articles and nouns/adjectives are uniformly the same, namely lenition and choice of a special feminine form for some lexical items (including the article); and that the bulk of nouns continues to have the gender value it had in previous historical phases, making allowance for the disappearance of the neuter (predictably, old neuters figure frequently in the list of nouns whose gender value does not align with that of other varieties). Still, we cannot analyze the morphology of gender in Irish as if it was a subpart of a single linguistic system. Irish is a set of native dialects surrounded by a much greater number of speakers with varying standards of fluency, most of whom look to the official standard as a reference point. When we approach Irish as an I-language, the store of tacit knowledge which constitutes native competence, the problems come into focus. If descriptions are sufficiently detailed, they display a significant amount of nouns whose gender value varies; it is not rare to find nouns which must be described as having both gender values. The same unusual variability often characterizes the initial lenition which feminine nouns would normally trigger on a following adjective. Particularly significant are cases where usage is explicitly said to be inconsistent: to consider a single example, Ó hUiginn (1994: 563) reports that in Connacht Irish *cleachtadh* 'habit, practice' is shown to be masculine by the lack of lenition after the definite article (*an cleachtadh*) but as feminine by the lenition it triggers on the onset of a following adjective like 'good' (*cleachtadh mhaith*) (also noted in Ó Siadhail 1984: 174). A model of the native competence of individuals and speech communities, then, cannot just deterministically link gender value and certain patterns of exponence, without also making room for this sort of variability.

For this reason, our empirical focus will be not on how gender is expressed in any one variety, but how much in this exponence can *fail* to be expressed, or the extent to which non-deterministic choices are tolerated. Our goal is to obtain a sharper picture of the extent of this grey area — in particular, to determine its boundaries.

1.3 Grammatical and semantic gender

Discussion of gender in Irish is typically bound up with the issue of "semantic" gender assignment in pronominal anaphora: while a pronoun referring to a preceding DP generally takes the same gender value, this can be overridden. In (1), the DP *cailín deas* is grammatically masculine (as shown by the lack of initial lenition on the adjective *deas*),[1] but it is resumed by a feminine pronoun *í*; and in (2), the noun *ainm* 'name' is preceded by the feminine variant of the article *an*, which does not insert a -*t*- in front of the initial vowel, yet the pronoun resuming it is the masculine *é* (both examples from Ó Sé 2000: 87):[2]

(1) Cailín deas is   ea   í
    girl   nice COP PRED 3SG.F
    She is a nice girl.

(2) Is é   an ainm a   bhí   uirthi   ná Móire
    COP 3SG.M the name PRT be.PST on.3SG.F PRT Móire
    Her name was Móire.

This phenomenon is undoubtedly significant, but it concerns the choice of a gender value in anaphora, as opposed to its realization in DP. Like the well-known parallel phenomena in languages like German (*das* [neuter] *Mädchen ... sie* [fem.], 'the girl ... she'), it shows that a value arising from the interpretation of DP can override the value determined (syntax-internally) by agreement between D and N, when it comes to determining the gender value imposed by a DP to a referentially dependent pronoun. However, this does not mean that the gender of D is chosen on the basis of meaning, rather than on the basis of grammatical agreement with N. It is the value of DP as a whole, as agreement controller, which in such cases is determined semantically; but D itself is regularly realized according to the value determined by N: *das Mädchen*, never *die [fem] *Mädchen*. This is not a particularly insightful or novel observation, but it should be remembered in order to avoid taking facts like (1)-(2) as evidence that grammatical gender is superseded by semantic gender. As the in-depth discussion of Lindau (2016) makes clear, it is better to think that the featural makeup on D in such cases has the full complement of values, those determined by morphological agreement ("concord") and those determined by semantics ("index"; Lindau 2016: 978 usefully explains it as 'the grammaticalized content of the semantic denotation of the noun'). Since cases like (1)-(2) are quite frequently reported for all varieties of Irish, the conclusion to draw is that pronominal anaphora often disregards the morphological marking on D but this marking is still there.

It bears stressing that the pattern shown in (1)-(2) is not evidence that a gender value is attributed on the basis of "natural" gender, as if it was an objective categorization opposed to a language-internal one. This is because nouns for inani-

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[1] *Cailín* is grammatically regularly masculine, despite its meaning, because it is formed with -*ín*, which is here a noun-forming suffix and not a noun-modifying diminutive one; see 4.1 below).

[2] I use the following abbreviations: COP = copula, F = feminine, GEN = genitive, M = masculine, POSS = possessive, PRT = particle, PST = Past.

mates too can enforce or favour feminine agreement with pronominal anaphora, as (2) shows with the noun *ainm*. The personalization of inanimate nouns like *bád* 'boat', *carr* 'car', *geansaí* 'jersey', and even of recent borrowings like *rólar* 'roller', all referred to by feminine pronouns, was one of the subcategories identified by Ó Siadhail (1984: 176) for inanimate nouns, alongside non-personalized cases like *áit* 'place' and *uair* 'hour' which are resumed by masculine pronouns despite being grammatical feminine. But there is nothing "natural" in associating feminine with certain inanimate referents: semantics does play a role in gender assignment, but it is not extra-linguistic properties of the referents that determine a value.

Having clarified the role of the semantic motivation of gender value in pronominal anaphora, I will now focus on the grammatical, language-internal aspects of this category; in particular, on the determination and expression of gender value inside DP.

2 The empirical problem

2.1 Gender morphology in DP: the neat picture

Outside of the pronominal system, the masculine-feminine opposition has a morphological realization in the singular of the definite article (Irish has no indefinite article, and there is no gender opposition in the plural), and in the shape of attributive adjectives agreeing with the noun. Articles define the paradigm shown and exemplified in (3):

(3)   definite article

	Nominative/accusative case	Genitive case
masculine	*an* *an t-* before vowels	*an* + lenition of following consonant (when applicable) *an t-* before initial *s-*
feminine	*an* + lenition of following consonant (when applicable) *an t-* before *s* + vowel or sonorant	*na* *na h-* before a vowel

	Nominative/accusative case	Genitive case
masculine	*an bata* 'the stick'	*an bhata* 'of the stick'
	an t-athair 'the father'	*an athar* 'of the father'
	an saol 'the life'	*an tsaoil* 'of the life'
feminine	*an chiaróg* 'the beetle'	*na ciaróge* 'of the beetle'
	an tseiod 'the jewel'	*na seiode* 'of the jewel'
	an aimsir 'the weather'	*na haimsire* 'of the weather'

The contextual changes triggered by the articles interact with the inflectional variability of lexical stems, so that for example *seoid* becomes *seoide* in the genitive. Adjectives have their own inflectional behaviour: some are invariable, others change in form depending on number, and some depending on gender too. A more general, and for us more relevant, exponent of gender for adjectives is the lenition of the initial consonant, which accompanies feminine singular attributive adjectives. Given the order 'article – noun – adjective', the lenition on the adjective can be seen both as a marker of DP-internal feminine agreement, and as an effect of the linearly preceding noun. Some illustrations are provided in (4):

(4)   *Masculine noun + adjective*

  a. *an fear mór – an fhir mhóir*   'the big man – of the big man'

  b. *an fear maith – an fhir mhaith*   'the good man – of the good man'

  c. *an scéal cáiliúil – an scéal chailiúil*   'the famous story – of the famous story'

  Feminine noun + adjective

  a. *an tseoid bheag – na seoide bhige*   'the small jewel' – 'of the small jewel'

  b. *an bhean cháiliúil – na mná cailiúla*   'the famous woman – of the famous woman'

  c. *an aimsir Éireannach – na haimsire Éireannaí*   'the Irish weather – of the Irish weather'

2.2   Gender morphology in DP: the messy picture

The phenomena that make the morphology of gender in Irish DPs less than systematic can be summarized under the following three headings:

- oscillations in gender value for nouns

- oscillations in gender value for a given noun, according to case

- misalignment of the exponents of feminine gender (lenition and realized morphology)

The first heading does not refer to cases where an opposition in gender expresses two semantically distinct readings, distinguishing what can be legitimately viewed as two homonymous, inflectionally identical nouns (like *mám*, masculine as 'mountain pass', feminine as 'handful', or *ráth*, masculine as 'earthen rampart', feminine as 'shoal of fish'; Ó Curnáin 2007: 506 identifies such a semantic split between the masculine and the feminine use of *méid*, respectively as 'amount' and 'size'). The oscillation consists instead in nouns that have the same meaning but can occur with either gender value. This sort of anomaly is prominent enough to have been recorded even in descriptions of the (artificially codified) standard. The official standard originally issued in 1958 (*an Caighdeán Oifigiúil*, CO), followed by the official 1978 dictionary by Ó Dónaill, mentions distinct genitive forms of the masculine *talamh* 'earth', namely the masculine *talaimh* and the feminine *talún*. What is an isolated exception in the standard, however, takes different proportions in the dialects, which alone reflect native states of linguistic competence. Ó Siadhail (1989: 147) lists the following examples of nouns that are masculine in some dialects but feminine in others:

	Noun	dialects, N is masc	dialects, N is Fem
	ainm 'name'	Donegal, Connacht	Munster
	asal 'donkey'	Donegal	Connacht, Munster
(5)	*condae* 'county'	Connacht, Kerry	Muskerry, Donegal
	mí 'month'	Munster	Donegal, Connacht
	páighe 'pay'	Munster	Donegal, Connacht

Some other cases involve very minor changes in form:

	gaineamh 'sand'	Connacht, Teelin	Erris, Munster (*gainimh*)
(6)	*paráiste* 'parish'	Connacht, Kerry	Muskerry (*paróiste*), Donegal
	tubaiste 'disaster'	Donegal, Connacht	Munster (*tubaist*)

More specific descriptions reveal more cases where the gender value in one dialect contrasts with the value of others, or the 'standard' (typically in the sense of all other varieties). In his overview of Munster varieties, Ua Suilleabháin (1994) discusses among other discrepancies the feminine *ainm* 'noun, name', *dlí* 'law', *guth* 'voice', *srian* 'bridle'. For Ulster, Hughes (1994: 629) reports that *tír* 'land, country' is usually feminine but fails to lenite the following adjective in the fixed phrase *tír mór* 'mainland'.

More interesting are the cases where *both* gender values are reported as current, in the same dialectal area: Ua Súilleabháin mentions *iúna* 'wonder', *brí* 'strength' (fem. in Corca Dhuibhne, masc. or fem. in Muskerry), and the series of loanwords *tae* 'tea', *siúcra* 'sugar', and *béile* 'meal'; in addition, he mentions *loch* 'lake', which Ó Siadhail (1989: 147) calls 'a particularly good example', where 'the genitive singular fluctuates from dialect to dialect between the feminine *na locha, na loiche* and the masculine *an locha* with no discernible pattern'. As for

the Connacht dialect, the classic description of the variety of Cois Fharraige by de Bhaldraithe (1977) states on its very first page that a few nouns have two genders, listing the following examples: *aistir* 'journey', *cleachtadh* 'habit, practice', *deatach* 'smoke', *éisteacht* 'hearing', *eolas* 'knowledge', *fad* 'length', *leabhar* 'book', *méid* 'amount, size', *oiread* 'amount', *talamh* 'earth'. The overview of Connacht dialects by Ó hUiginn (1994: 562) also discusses *am* 'time', and adds the observation 'like some of these words, they take the masculine form of the article, but often the feminine form of the adjective after them, for example *an cleachtadh* but *cleachtadh mhaith, an t-eolas* but *eolas mhaith*' [translation PA]. Ó Siadhail (1984: 174) noticed that this irregular feminine pattern of lenition triggered by a usually masculine noun takes place in the absence of an article:

> It is significant that in all the examples I have found of a lenited adjective following an otherwise masculine noun the noun is always indefinite. I have come across no examples such as **an aistir mhaith, *an eolas maith*.

As we will see directly, however, even this subregularity proves less than absolute when the analysis is more detailed. The more recent and vastly more detailed (four volumes) single-dialect description by Ó Curnáin (2007) features far longer lists, with five pages devoted to nouns that are feminine and three pages for nouns that are masculine in the Connacht dialect described, but have the opposite value elsewhere or in closely related dialects (vol. I, 497-502, 503-505). In several of the nouns listed, masculine or feminine are in fact both recorded.

The next two headings are more important. Ó Curnáin (2007) explicitly discusses the pattern of 'gender dependent on case' (p. 505), where a noun has the morphology of one value in the nominative/accusative case but that of the opposite value in the genitive. For instance, *leabhar* 'book' is regularly masculine in the genitive, but which can be masculine or also feminine in the nominative/accusative (the example produced is an *leabhar dhubh sin* 'that black book'. Ó Curnáin also mentions *talamh* 'earth', *trinse* 'trench', and especially in fixed collocations *am* 'time', *scéal* 'story', and *Gleann* 'valley', the last in a placename). Even more striking is the simultaneous presence of masculine and feminine morphology side by side. Such is the case of *cleachtadh*, which 'takes the masculine article, i.e. *an cleachtadh*, but like a feminine noun, lenites a following adjective. This is very common in the phrase without the article *cleachtadh mhaith*' (Ó Curnáin 2007: 506). The same happens with *iomaire* 'ridge', in the phrase *an t-iomaire mhór* 'the big ridge' (Ó Curnáin 2007: 504; masculine article, feminine lenition on the adjective *mór*; this represents a counterexample to the generalization tentatively put forward in Ó Siadhail 1984).

What matters, then, is not so much that a few or many words vary in gender assignment across the dialects (in itself, a natural state of affairs), but that the exponence of gender value is often irregular and sometimes inconsistent, to the point of making it problematic whether a noun really has a unique gender value in a single, quite homogeneous dialectal variety, or indeed in individual competences. Ó Curnáin (2007: 500-501) is explicit on this point when noting, for in-

stance, that 'in query both *sábh maith* and *sábh mhaith* were offered' ['good saw', masculine and feminine respectivelyPA], or that a speaker is hesitant between *an iascach* and *an t-iascach* ['fishing, fishery'] and 'actually self-corrects'. This last example should be related to the masculine *an t-* in the phrase *an t-iomaire mhór*, mentioned a few lines above. Together, they show that the instability does not concern just the juncture between noun and adjective, but also that between article and noun. It is interesting that most cases of exceptional, irregular feminine lenition by a noun are attested when the noun is not preceded by an article, as noted by Ó Siadhail; but this is only a tendency and does not seem to be mandated by some grammatical principle.

2.3   Older and younger speakers

The corpus study of Frenda (2011) adds another dimension to these interim conclusions. It contrasts the marking of feminine gender in two corpora, one 'older', linguistically conservative (it is a selection from the 1964 study edited by Wigger 2000), and one 'contemporary', taken from Raidió na Gaeltachta (Irish-language state broadcasting station) and other media sources between 1997 and 2007. One important result that emerges from this comparison study is first of all the sharp increase in semantically-based pronominal anaphora, where a pronoun resumes a DP using the gender motivated by the corresponding discourse referent and not by the grammatical gender of DP. This datum, however significant in itself, does not impinge on the status of gender morphology inside DP.

More relevant here is that the contemporary corpus evidences a decrease in feminine agreement between article and noun, with 88% of the cases (136 out of 155). By contrast, the percentages of correct article agreement in the older corpus were 98% for masculine and 97% for feminine, and more significantly, also the contemporary corpus showed correct masculine agreement in 97% of the cases.[3] By agreement is meant the congruence between form of the article and assumed gender of the noun; this does not distinguish between initial mutation (lenition, t-prefixation) and shape of the article itself (*an* or *na*).

The sharpest mismatch between the two corpora concerns gender agreement on attributive adjectives. Frenda notes that these are infrequent in both, and in practice display agreement (feminine) only by means of initial lenition, since only eleven tokens in both corpora displayed agreement by a distinct stem form (six and five for the older and the contemporary respectively). After again disaggregating a few proper names, the difference between the two corpora is stark: adjectives agree in feminine gender (i.e. are lenited) with a feminine noun controller 28 times out of 31 in the older corpus, or in 90% of cases, but only 8 times out of 19 in the contemporary one, or in 42% of the cases. Incidentally, even 'masculine agreement', which in this case is simply lack of any marking, is not 100% in either corpus: 47 out of 50 times and 49 out of 54 times).

Some caution is needed before drawing conclusions from Frenda's figures, of course, and not only because the relevant potential agreement targets are a small

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[3]Proper names were disaggregated and shown to be not statistically significant.

number (the results are statistically relevant within the corpus, but we cannot a priori know how representative the sample is of the spoken Irish of the relevant generations). Firstly, in the light of the variation in gender assignment for nouns shown by Ó Curnáin (2007) (occasionally even with the same speaker), some instances of wrong agreement might simply go back to a non-standard gender assignment. Secondly, the data conflate together initial mutation and choice of article form, but the two types of exponents might be partly decoupled (I will develop this suggestion later on). The lack of lenition on adjective or noun is taken as correct masculine agreement, in the appropriate context; but it could as well signal the lack of any morphological marking, as Frenda acknowledges in response to a referee (he also adds, correctly, that the gender opposition would still be morphologically active, in view of the other cases). This observation generalizes: in many cases gender may simply fail to be expressed, something which Ó Curnán (2007: 497) also draws attention to by pointing out that 'cases of nonlenition are often ambiguous as to gender, particularly when there is a possibility of homorganic nonlenition'.

Still, two important results remain: first, lenition of an attributive adjective after a feminine noun seems decidedly recessive; second, this contrasts with the realization of agreement between noun and article (in both forms it takes, lenition noun and form na of the article), which also fails sometimes but generally holds its ground.

The tendency towards nonlenition of attributive adjectives after feminine nouns contrasts with the situation reported by Ó Curnáin (2007: 1736) for a homogeneous local variety: 'Feminine singular nouns, not inflected for genitive case, regularly lenite attributive adjectives, less regularly nouns.' We should also note that a case like *an t-iomaire mhór*, with masculine *an-t* and feminine *mhór*, goes against the tendency reported by Frenda (2011): either the noun is masculine, and then the lenited adjective is an overapplication of feminine lenition; or it is feminine, and then what is deviant here is the agreement with the article.

However, the contrast might not be as sharp as it seems. Ó Curnáin takes into account the fact that several nouns have a non-standard masculine gender value; his hinting that nonlenition could say nothing about gender is important, because Frenda's data might follow from lenition being generally less regular in general, more than from gender not being grammatically represented. Ó Curnáin (2007: 506) clearly identifies a reduction of feminine gender marking in nominals as a feature of younger speakers (born after 1960). Interestingly, however, he calls this 'gender depletion': it is not as if masculine and feminine were grammatically equivalent choices, and one is encroaching on the other, but rather that gender marking usually means feminine marking, and this surfaces less and less frequently.

I will develop this line of interpretation, but with an important twist motivated by Frenda's data. The fact that lenition between articles and nouns survives better than that between nouns and adjectives, *in proportion* (so, making allowance for the fact that the second configuration is much less common), is not easily compatible with the idea that what is disappearing is the feminine

gender. Because if it were so, we would expect to see a generalized rise of masculine morphology, with many more cases of 'wrong' masculine article in front
of feminine nouns, like *an t-iarnáil* 'the [masc] iron' cited by Ó Curnáin (*ibid.*)
for a speaker who otherwise follows the older practice of treating as feminine
loanwords in *-áil*, like *an ghesáil* 'the [fem] guessing'.

3   A PUZZLE

The preceding section should have made clear that gender is undoubtedly still
a morphological category of Irish nominals, but its exponence has oscillations
and inconsistencies which are definitely not usual for an inflectional category. In
particular, the fact that the morphological reflexes of feminine gender are much
better preserved on articles than between nouns and adjectives, speaks against a
simple interpretation of this situation as a system in flux. Stated in these terms,
the situation may be unclear, but not particularly puzzling. However, two facts
make it harder to make sense of it.

3.1   No gender instability with derivational suffixes

The first is that some nominalizing suffixes determine a grammatical gender
value for the DP in a way that does not admit overriding, no matter how unstable gender morphology might be (cf. already Ó Siadhail 1984). Of course, many
nouns that are not (or no longer synchronically analyzed as) suffixed also have
just one fixed gender value across all dialects. But when a value is associated to a
suffix, rather than a lexical noun, it is a grammatical fact about the morphology
of the language as a system, not a separate piece of knowledge for each word the
suffix appears in. Establishing exactly which suffixes do and don't allow gender
variation would obviously be a major undertaking, across all dialects. But some
candidates can be advanced with confidence: the agentive *-eir, -eara, -óir* (*-tóir,
-teoir, -adóir*), *-í, -ire* would seem to be consistently masculine; the individualizing *-án* seems also regularly masculine, while *-óg* is its feminine counterpart (see
Ó Siadhail 1984: 173 for a similar list). Ó Curnáin's (2007: 497-501, 503-505) five-
page and three-page lists of irregularly feminine and masculine nouns notably
lack items with those suffixes, in contrast to other suffixes (like those deriving
abstract nouns in *ú, -acht, -as*) which admit either gender value. Cases like *altóir*
'altar', *buaí* 'buoy', and *ráipéar* 'rapier' are clear loanwords, where the ending is
arguably not a separate suffix in the structure of the word. The one exception is
scológ 'freeholder farmer' (p. 505), which however is attested as masculine only
in the compound versions *seanscológ* and *scoloigín*. In sum, although stating that
certain suffixes never admit alternative gender values is very easy to disprove,
I will claim that at least some suffixes indeed have this property. The feminine
-ó is probably the safest, and the clearest illustration. It used to be a diminutive,
as shown by pairs like *both* 'hut' - *bothóg* 'shanty, cabin' (beside *bothán*), but it is
no longer productive in that capacity (Doyle 1992: 122-130). Its function is that of

deriving nouns for individual entities characterized as small, from nouns (as in *bábóg* 'doll' from *báb* 'baby', or *béalóg* 'gap, muzzle, mouthful' from *béal* 'mouth') or from adjectives (*bog* 'soft' - *bogóg* 'shell-less egg'; *ciar* 'dark' - *ciaróg* 'beetle'). It is consistently feminine. Derivations like *meabhróg* 'thoughtful girl' from *meabhair* 'mind' or *plandóg* 'shapely woman' from *planda* 'plant' suggest a female-denoting function; however, Ó Curnáin's overview of Irish word formation (2016: 2796) explicitly characterizes it as predominantly 'non-personal', adding that it is particularly common in Ulster varieties (some examples are *tonnóg* 'duck', *beachóg* 'bee', *sopóg* 'sheaf', *bachóg* 'sprout'). In sum, a reasonably common noun-forming suffix expresses the feminine gender value consistently and yet independently of semantic motivation (it is compatible with, but not restricted to, female reference).[4] But then it is not nouns in general, as a lexical category, which are losing gender as a lexically fixed grammatical property.

3.2   No male-female pairs

A second consideration that points in the same direction is not just morphological but also semantic in nature. It seems to be a fact (a claim subject to falsification) that Irish simply lacks what Harris (1991) called 'mated nouns'. These are pairs of nouns for animate referents which have the same stem, but opposed gender values corresponding to male and female reference. The two nouns may differ in inflection, like the Spanish *el niño - la niña* 'the boy - the girl', or have identical shape but only differ in gender value, like Spanish *el testigo - la testigo* 'the (male) witness - the (female) witness' or French *le journaliste - la journaliste*. Bearing in mind the variability of gender assignment we have seen, it is striking that person- or animal-denoting nouns should not be the most likely candidates for creating gender-opposed pairs. Yet, of all nouns that can be masculine or feminine (most inanimates), none to my knowledge has turned into a lexical pair where the gender value strictly corresponds to biological sex. In fact, some facts suggest precisely that the gender of D cannot be decoupled from that of N and based on the reference of DP. One of the nominalizations in *-óg* just discussed is *piteog* 'effeminate man, sissy', from *pit* 'vulva' (Ó Curnáin 2016: 2794). De Bhaldraithe (1977: 3) also mentions this derivation (translated in the glossary as 'man interested in women's affairs'), adding that this is a 'word which is only said with men' [translation PA]; it immediately precedes another derivation where grammatical gender conflicts with natural gender, namely *raibiléara* 'harlot', a masculine derivation which 'is only said with women'. A noun like *piteog*, referring to an animate individual which is necessarily male (as a matter of lexical concept, not accidentally) is surely the best candidate for having semantic gender override grammatical gender. Yet this does not seem to happen (see also *bológ* mentioned in footnote 5). These cases parallel the Italian derogatory feminine term *checca* 'effeminate male homosexual' which Percus (2011: 192) recognizes as incompatible with his generalization that, in Italian, nouns entailing

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[4] Ó Curnáin (2016: 2796) also mentions the Ulster loanword *bológ* 'bullock' (a male referent).

maleness (unlike 'person') are feminine.[5] The conclusion is clear: Irish grammar cannot just select the gender value of a DP on the basis of the semantic motivation of gender assignment. No matter how unstable gender morphology might be, the semantic value expressed on D cannot be detached from the value morphologically expressed on N; there is no *le / la journaliste*.[6]

The puzzle, then, stands in these terms. On the one hand, the gender assignment of nouns is unstable in significant parts of the nominal lexicon, and feminine gender marking shows signs of being quite often suspended specifically on nouns, as opposed to articles. On the other hand, there are no signs that grammatical gender on nouns is being replaced by a semantically-determined assignment of value based on the reference of DP; on the contrary, Irish lacks constructions where gender is determined at DP level overriding the grammatical gender on the noun, something which happens in other languages.

4   Making (some) sense of the puzzle

The solution I propose is more a reinterpretation, which seeks to do justice to the generalizations considered, than an explanation of all the data. It rests on two assumptions:

- gender is a grammatical property of Irish nouns, also represented on articles and adjectives by agreement

- nouns are not syntactic atoms, but have an internal structure which is syntactically represented

The first assumption states that, despite all signs of instability, gender should still be seen as a grammatical feature operative inside DP, and has not been reduced to an English-style DP-level categorization for referents. This was motivated in the previous sections and will not be argued for in what follows. We can now focus on the second proposition.

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[5]Percus (2011: 192) opts to keep the generalization but interpret the entailment as referring to entities that are 'either females or like females in certain relevant respects'. This plays down the fact that such terms highlight precisely the contrast between the referent and the gender value of the noun: the fact that the noun refers to males is not linguistically irrelevant but essential for lexical meaning.

[6]The apparent lack of 'mated nouns' is one of the factors that make it difficult to resort to ellipsis phenomena to investigate the status of gender on nouns. In the general absence of pairs where gender minimally distinguishes readings like 'uncle-aunt', 'male-female teacher', or 'actor-actress', we cannot use patterns like 'He is a good N_{MASC}, but she is also [a good N_{FEM}] to test whether the gender marking can be teased apart from the noun under ellipsis (see Merchant 2014 for a study of Greek which concludes that not only does the status of gender different across lexical classes, but ellipsis itself is in fact two distinct phenomena). Another factor is that the Irish pronominal equivalent of 'one' is *ceann*, which to my knowledge is never sensitive to the gender of its antecedent. That said, it is likely that a study of noun ellipsis in Irish will find alternative ways to bring some facts to bear on the issue. I thank Jason Merchant for this insightful suggestion, which I cannot pursue here (but might be pursued by others).

4.1 THE GENDER OF NOMINALIZING SUFFIXES

The second assumption addresses the theoretical question posed by suffixes like *-óg*. Plainly, there are suffixes that impose a gender value; the problem is how to model the observation that the value in these cases is stable, while in other cases (nouns built with other suffixes or underived) it is not. If we assume, with Borer (2005) and Harley (2014) (and by now many others), that lexical categories like nouns are by definition structurally complex objects built around a category-free root, we can follow De Belder, Faust, and Lampitelli (2014), and Déchaine et al. (2014) and analyze diminutives in nominalizing function as realizations of a morpheme that qualifies the root as a noun. Since such diminutive-nominalizers often specify a count interpretation (cf. French *glace* 'ice' - *glaçon* 'ice cube/fragment'; German *Brot* 'bread' - *Brötchen* 'bread roll'; Italian *zucchero* 'sugar' - *zuccherino* 'sugar cube'), we can associate it with the general function of 'Division of reference' in Borer's (2005) structure. In Irish, as in other languages, these morphemes impose a gender value to the noun. When the same *-óg* morpheme expresses only a diminutive content, as in *cnapóg* 'little lump' from *cnap* 'lump', it is still marked as feminine (as a morphological property of the affix) but it realizes a higher evaluative node. This is schematically represented in (7) and (8):

(7) [D ... [Number ... [Evaluation ... [Division ... root]]]]
  -óg [Fem]   *ciar-*

(8) [D ... [Number ... [Evaluation ... [Division ... root]]]]
  -óg[Fem]   *cnap-*

Déchaine et al. (2014) and De Belder, Faust and Lampitelli (2014) have pursued the same insight, centred on an inner and an outer locus for diminutive morphemes (with relevant differences: the latter source, in particular, cogently argues that the innermost diminutive appear on other categories too, and so are not really nominalizers). These analyses converge on distinguishing two functions for diminutives, noun-forming and noun-modifying; and it stands to reason that the former should determine a gender value.

The nominalizer *-óg*, then, acts like a light noun which encodes feminine. The same holds of those suffixes that rigidly correlate with one gender value. Other nouns lack this type of morpheme: either they contain nominal suffixes which do not unambiguously specify a gender value, or they have no distinct morphemes in their structure. In this case, a gender value is associated with the whole complex that makes up the noun, but without being the content of any specific morpheme (I will return to lenition directly); in short, gender has no direct exponent, as these nouns do not formally encode their gender value through a grammatical element. When the association with a gender value is a property of the whole word, it can be reinforced by regularities in form, like the often-cited tendency to associate palatal word endings with feminine, or in meaning, as in effects of semantic contiguity (so that a noun may take over the gender of a semantically close noun). But these are generalizations that arise

from the usage of words, sharply different in nature from gender-form pairings that are explicitly part of the grammar.

This, then, is what the articles and gender-specific suffixes have in common: they both directly spell out a gender value (in addition to the rest of their content). By contrast, the noun endings compatible with masculine or feminine may be more or less strongly associated to one value, but they do not realize it as an exponent realizes a grammatical feature.

4.2   Initial mutations: Lenition

Initial mutations, and specifically lenition, have different properties, which make it a different type of exponent than a segmental morpheme like the suffix *-óg* or the form of the genitive article *na*. Like nasalization, lenition is a multi-purpose marker used to express a variety of grammatical contents, triggered by morphemes as diverse as preverbal particles, lexical verbs, prenominal particles (possessive and vocative), articles, and lexical nouns.[7] There are lexical exceptions in some of these uses, and especially in the case at hand it is not always clear whether a noun displays no lenition (on its onset, following the article an, or on the onset of a following adjective) because it is masculine rather than feminine as expected, or because lenition simply fails to apply (see Ó Curnain's 2007 comment cited above in section 2.3). The issue is further complicated by subregularities like the fact that adjectives in placenames are often unlenited (*Leitir Mór, Sraith Salach*, cited by de Bhaldraithe 1977: 273; see 5.1 below). In addition, the realization of initial mutation is sensitive to linearity in a way that sets it clearly apart from segmental exponents. It is well known that an intervening adverb blocks the regular lenition induced on the adjective *maith* 'good' by a feminine noun like *Gaeilge* 'Irish (language)', as shown in (9); however, Ó Siadhail (1989: 117) contrasts this intervention effect with a datum like (10) from the Donegal variety (in the context of a discussion about 'continued lenition' which is described as happening 'in a few cases'):

(9)   Gaeilge mhaith   – Gaeilge réasúnta   maith
      Irish   [LEN]-good – Irish   reasonably [NON-LEN]-good
      good Irish – reasonably good Irish

(10) Gaeilge iontach   mhaith
      Irish   wonderfully [LEN]-good
      very good Irish

Finally, a following adjective is lenited much more regularly than a following noun (a genitive dependent). This is because when a common noun specifies a feminine noun (for proper names see 5.1 below), an asymmetry arises between expressions of a part-of relation, which do not generally lenite (as in (11)), and

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[7]Carnie (2008: 7) aptly distinguishes four subtypes of lenition, rather than defining one and then stating the idiosyncrasies that arise in different morphosyntactic contexts.

other genitive constructions which do (as in (12); both taken from de Bhaldraithe 1977: 262-263):

(11) Adharc pocaide
      *horn   billy-goat.*GEN

      A billigoat's horn

(12) Deoch bhainne
      *drink   milk.*GEN

      A drink of milk

This asymmetry is well documented, and indicates that the lenition on a dependent noun must be sensitive to syntactic and semantic factors which break down this configuration into a number of distinct subcases; see de Bhaldraithe (1977: 262-266), Ó Siadhail (1989: 121), Ó Sé (2000: 61-63), and especially Ó Curnáin (2007: 1737-1747). The distribution is complicated and probably less than systematic, since de Bhaldraithe also lists on the same page *aimsir gaoith anoir* 'weather of-wind from East', with no lenition, and *aimsir bháistí* 'weather of-rain', with lenition. Whatever underlying pattern explains the alternating presence and absence of lenition in this configuration, in the sources just mentioned it reflects a genuine property of native linguistic competence. This stands out clearly when it is contrasted with the occurrence of lenition on adjectives, as witnessed in the same sources. For these reasons, I will set aside the whole issue of lenition marking on a dependent genitive noun, which varies according to independent (if, for this writer, unclear) syntactic and semantic factors. What matters more directly for the question of gender marking is instead the lenition of attributive adjectives; and in this connection we have seen that lenition is relatively regular in traditional varieties, but is infrequent and shows strong signs of collapsing judging by the data in Frenda (2011).

All of these properties suggest that lenition has an indirect relation with the realization of gender; not only because it also realizes other grammatical contents, but because even as an exponent of gender it prone to being omitted, or overgeneralized, or realized only on one link of the agreement chain rather than on all agreeing elements. Gender involves the choice of forms in an agreement configuration, and gender values identify agreement classes. There is, then, a purely morphological side to it (the forms selected) and a syntactic side (the agreement configuration). In syntactic terms, we can represent the structure containing the noun controller and the two potential targets for gender agreement in the following standard notation, where the controller values the feature representations of the targets D and Adj (I specify the case on D as genitive, but it could be nominative/accusative):

(13) $[\, D_{[Gen:\_\_,Num\_\_,Case:Genitive]} \,] \, [\, N_{[Gen:Fem,Num:Sg]} \, Adj_{[Gen:\_\_,Num\_\_]} \,]]$
      $\rightarrow$
      $[\, D_{[Gen:Fem,Num:Sg,Case:Genitive]} \,] \, [\, N_{[Gen:Fem,Num:Sg]} \, Adj_{[Gen:Fem,Num:Sg]} \,]]$

These featural representations are spelled out by the appropriate morphemes, and the lexical root in the case of N and Adj (where N is a shorthand for a more complex structure, as discussed in 4.1 above). A form like na realizes gender, number, and case on D (in case the feature values are feminine, singular, and genitive), but otherwise gender does not find a specific morphological realization (excepting the specific feminine forms of the adjective, nowadays rare, illustrated by *bhige* in (4) above). In particular, N lacks a dedicated exponent for this feature, unless it contains a suffix explicitly marked for a gender value, like -*óg*. My suggestion is that lenition should be seen as a morphological formative which is conditioned by (among other triggers) the feminine gender value on the feminine singular form of D, N, and Adj (for D, also nominative/accusative), but which can fail to be expressed even though the feature value is still syntactically present. As a secondary exponent (Noyer 1997), it accompanies the morphological spellout of an abstract lexical and syntactic representation, specifying word forms in ways that can only take effect when the abstract representation has been linearized as seems natural for a morpheme that is only visible as a sandhi phenomenon. Lenition, as a specification of word forms, is then a reflex of the feminine gender value on a whole agreement chain, and only becomes *the* exponent of this feature value when no other morphemes spell it out on the same chain; for instance, in a structure like *an bhean bhocht* 'the poor woman'. This, I think, is the difference between lenition and the more usual exponence of feminine by means of morphemes like *na* and -*óg*; it is in principle a side-effect of the marking [Gender: Feminine], and in this sense it is more loosely related to this marking than inherently feminine morphemes. It can, then, be subject to oscillations in use, independently of the truly feminine morphemes and of the syntactic marking [Gender: Feminine] on the whole DP (as long as this is recoverable on at least some element). So, for instance, in (12) lenition may fail to appear, while the feature value is there and conditions the choice of the article form *na*. In addition, lenition may surface only on some of the chain links on which it is licensed: supposing that it may appear on N but not on D (which by hypothesis is still feminine), this would model what happens in inconsistent phrases like an t-eolas ('the knowledge', no lenition) but *eolas mhaith* ('good knowledge', with lenition on the adjective following *eolas*), without needing to posit two distinct gender assignments for the noun.

4.3   Initial mutations: generalizing the approach

The idea that lenition is not a direct sign of feminine gender, and so that if it is missing it does not mean that the gender is not feminine, effectively would allow us to reinterpret a significant part of the attested instability in gender marking as instability in the realization of the featural input, and not as genuine oscillation in gender assignment. The approach generalizes: once the principle is accepted that initial mutations are a different sort of exponent from dedicated morphemes, with a looser relation to morphosyntactic features, we can look in the same way at other juncture phenomena, other than lenition, which likewise seem to denote

an irregular choice of gender value according to the tables in (12).

If a speaker hesitates between an *t-iascach* and *an iascach* ('the fishing') in the same utterance, as Ó Curnáin reports (2007: 500), it is possible that the first form of the article *an t-*, simply recruited the prevocalic *t-* of the masculine as a hiatus-avoiding strategy, rather than being a genuine gender marker. It certainly seems more plausible that speakers should hesitate about such sandhi phenomena, than about the gender of nouns. The same would apply to the string *an t-iomaire mhór* (see 2.2 above), where the two apparently contradictory markings appear side by side.

The hypothesis that lenition may be to some extent decoupled from feminine gender is of course still compatible with the idea that feminine is simply lost in some (or many) cases. Ó Curnáin (2007: 506) identifies a tendency towards 'gender depletion' for younger generations of speakers, resulting in feminine being no longer realized because it is simply no longer there. There is no need to dispute this interpretation, as long as the data are compatible with a generalized masculine morphology and do not at the same time suggest that feminine is still there, but only partially expressed. The (intended) strength of the reinterpretation I have offered is that it allows us to account for some of these more puzzling data, not only because the lack of lenition does not automatically imply lack of feminine gender, but also because it could be D or N that fail to lenite despite being feminine. If Ulster varieties usually treat *tír* 'land' as a feminine (genitive *na tíre*), but feature an irregularly non-lenited adjective in the phrase *tír mór* 'mainland', literally 'big land' (see again 2.2 above), it seems more plausible that lenition is simply suspended, especially in similar collocations, rather than thinking of an unstable gender value for this noun. In particular, a generalized retreat among younger speakers from the lenition triggered by N, as opposed to that triggered by D, would model the pattern found by Frenda (2011), with feminine gender agreement between N and Adj much less frequent than that between D and N (respectively 42% versus 87%, discounting the few proper names).

Again I must emphasize that this is not intended to explain away all the grey areas in Irish gender marking as an only apparent puzzle, because many cases are still better viewed as inconsistent assignments of gender value. Ó hUiginn (1994: 563), for a final example, cites for Connacht the two forms of the noun *bróigín*, formed by the diminutive *-ín* on the feminine (in *-óg*!) noun *for* 'shoe': in the nominative, the suffix regularly retains the gender of the base noun, resulting in the feminine *an bhróigín* (with lenition on N triggered by the article). But he adds that the genitive of the same noun behaves like a masculine in the phrase *barr an bhróigín* 'the tip of the shoe' where lenition appears on *both* nominative and genitive, so it does not surface too little but, if anything, too much; the morphologically feminine noun in question simply has a masculine genitive (in that phrase).

This sort of cases might suggest that lenition too, like t-insertion, might sometimes act just like a sandhi phenomenon detached from the exponence of gender, especially in common collocations like *cleachtadh mhaith*. Such sequences, then, would no longer count as evidence for a feminine value of the noun. I sug-

gest that this is probably the correct interpretation in at least some cases, but with the essential qualification that it cannot be accepted as an explanation without independent reasons for thinking that the noun is not feminine. Otherwise, simply claiming that lenition, effectively, doesn't count in some cases (the problematic ones) would deprive the proposed interpretation of all predictive power. As I don't have independent evidence to bring to bear, I will simply mention this possibility without pursuing it.

Gender marking on Irish nominals is, objectively, messy. I have proposed an interpretive framework that can help make sense of this messiness: the irregularities concern some nouns more than others because of their morphological make-up,[8] and they have substantially to do with lenition not appearing where it would be expected to. Alternative interpretations, especially the restatement-like position that, on the face of the facts, it is more economical to simply accept inconsistent gender assignments, should explain why this does not happen when initial mutation is not an exponent. I have not proposed that the irregularity is an epiphenomenon, but I have suggested that it would not be so common if nominal gender did not rely so much on initial mutations and other sandhi phenomena for its realization.

5   Towards a theoretical proposal

The analytic perspective suggested faces the challenge of organizing the often inconsistent data in a coherent model of grammatical competence. As a step towards that goal, this final section argues that the unsystematic application of lenition is an independent fact, and it briefly frames the analysis proposed in terms of the abstract structure of Irish nouns as morphological words.

5.1   The instability of nominal lenition

I have claimed that the morphology of gender in Irish nominals looks so unsystematic because its exponence relies so much on lenition, and lenition is by itself unstable as an exponent. In working towards a theoretical account of Irish nominal gender, it is important to stress that this is an independently given datum, not a stipulation.

In (9)-(10) (section 4.2) we hinted at the fact that lenition triggered on an adjective by a preceding noun is sensitive to linearly intervening adverb. This well-known intervention effect (Ó Siadhail 1989: 117) shows by itself that word-initial mutation can be suspended in a way that would be unusual for affixal morphological markers. But it is also well known that lenition is sensitive to lexical choices. Ó Siadhail's all-dialect overview (1989: 114, 117) lists *méid* 'amount', *Dé* 'day (in names of the days of the week), and *tí* 'place, dwelling-place' as regularly un-lenited (see 2.1 above for Ó Curnáin's more precise statement about *méid*); in ad-

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[8] The case of *bróigín*, nominalized with *-ín*, finds an echo in the irregularly feminine *na cailín* 'of the girl', which Ó Curnáin (2007: 505) calls 'most aberrant'.

dition, the lenition of the attributive second noun in a sequence Noun 1 - Noun 2 [genitive] is sometimes suspended, especially in traditional petrified phrases like *crích Banba* 'the land of Banba', or where the first noun has quasi-prepositional value, as in *lár mí an Meithimh* 'the middle of June'. These are fixed collocations, and therefore they have a special status; still, by itself being a fixed collocation does not necessarily cancel the internal syntactic structure of a lexicalized phrase (proper names are certainly not immune from lenition). In addition, many fixed collocations, even petrified as place-names, preserve genitive forms, like *Drom Domhnaigh* (Dromdowney), County Cork, 'the ridge of the church', from *domh-nach* 'church' (`https://www.logainm.ie/719.aspx`).

These data independently confirm the conclusion reached in the past section: lenition realizes gender in a fashion that is less regular and systematic than affixes. It makes sense, then, to attribute a substantial role in the attested instability of nominal gender morphology to the instability of lenition (and other mutations) as a morphological marker. At least some of the puzzling cases where a noun seems to have masculine value (without lenition) after the nominative/accusative article *an*, and feminine (with article *na*, again without lenition) in the genitive, may well have this explanation. In other cases too, a noun that is syntactically marked feminine, with the corresponding forms of article, might fail to trigger lenition on a following adjective simply because lenition is suspended. This is not the explanation for all cases, as noted, but I propose it is a part of it.

5.2 Lenition and the morphological structure of nouns

We can go one more step towards a theoretical proposal. Let us not forget that the instability in question concerns not gender morphology in general but specifically the exponence of gender in DPs (in the sequence *Det N Adj*). But it does not extend to pre-nominal possessive particles, which in the third person involve *only* alternative initial mutation effects (except in front of vowel-initial nouns, the pronunciation of the particle *a* in fact coincides with that of the article forms spelled *an*):

(14) a. A   peann
          poss pen
          Her pen

      b. A   pheann
          poss [LEN]pen
          His pen

      c. A   bpeann
          poss [NAS]pen
          Their pen

Granted that lenition and initial mutations are less than totally deterministic as morphological exponents, how are we to make sense for the additional observa-

tion that this concerns so specifically articles, nouns, and post-nominal adjectives inside DP, but not possessives?

The answer I suggest is that the Irish gender opposition is perfectly sound in the pronominal system as a determination of morphemes (including possessives) that express a referential index, but it is receding from the representation of nouns and, possibly less strongly, of articles, as morphological words. It is not as a global morphophonological phenomenon that mutations are becoming less regular (at least not for native competent speakers), but as formants in the representation of words as morphological objects; specifically, of nominal words, nouns and adjectives. This statement encapsulates the claim that lexical items are represented as structured symbols not only as syntactic objects, but also as abstract morphological objects which feed phonological realization. While this is assumed by, or is at least compatible with, most approaches to morphology, it is not a claim universally accepted. It is implied, for instance, by those analyses that follow Harris (1991) in positing word-markers as vocalic right edges of lexical words, required for morphological well-formedness: such would be the final *-o*, for instance, which in Italian closes off a noun endowed with the feature values of masculine and singular, like *cavallo* 'horse', but also a non-inflected adverb like *quando* 'when'. Such formants are mandated by the morphology of the language, and not by syntax or phonology, witness the numerous consonant-ending loanwords like sport or pus (also masculine and singular) which are syntactically inflected for pronominal features but do not realize them morphologically through a vocalic ending (see Acquaviva 2009). In a similar vein, we can view the initial lenition triggered by feminine singular non-genitive nouns as a constituent of a linearized morphological representation:

(15)
| *syntax* | > | *morphology* | > | *phonology* |
| YEAR[f.sg] | | bliain[LEN] | | /bʲlʲiə nʲ/ (+ lenition) |

For a word like *bliain* 'year', the information that the gender value is feminine is not encoded by a feminine affix (or through the choice of a declension class associated with feminine by default). It rather surfaces as a juncture effect, as a global property of the word in certain phonological and syntactic environments. My hypothesis is that this property, represented as [LEN] in (16), is obliterated much more easily in these circumstances than in the case of nouns ending in a suffix that consistently spells out the feminine value, like *-óg*. The formant [LEN], in other words, is stable on words that are *morphologically* marked as feminine, where it is a side effect of feminine marking. But where a gender value is not explicitly marked by a suffix, it ends up having no direct exponence. Ultimately, this is because Irish nominal morphology does not seem to define declension classes that are truly consistent in the choice of gender (see Carnie 2008), especially when one considers the extremely reduced two-case paradigm and the fact that genitive forms are used less and less.

Articles are different. As functional words, they associate directly a featural content with a form, which is unique for a given choice of feature values. There is no lexical, word-depending variability in morphological structure. We then

predict that lenition and other initial mutations should prove more stable as an exponent of gender agreement between article and noun, than between noun and adjectival modifier. Still, the instances of missing or 'wrong' mutation triggered by articles call for some explanation, over and above the fact that lenition can be suspended. The missing piece of explanation might lie in the demorphologization of such mutations after articles, which increasingly often are used as phonotactic juncture elements rather than gender exponents. This would be consistent both with the evidence (occasional) for hesitation and inconsistent choices by speakers, and with the theoretical claim that articles should retain more robustly than lexical nouns the property of triggering a mutation on a following word onset.

6   Conclusion: Gender, syntax, and morphology

The morphology of noun gender in Irish is significantly unsystematic in the speech of the most competent native speakers. In the face of this, it makes sense to think that this category has changed its status in the morphology of the language, with a shift towards a semantically-based system. In current theoretical parlance, this would be analyzed as a shift in the role of gender from concord- to index agreement (see Lindau 2016). The foregoing sections have articulated reasons for believing that this seemingly plausible interpretation is not correct. Even though gender can be assigned on a semantic rather than purely morphological basis in pronominal anaphora (and even in this case, the semantic classes do not reduce to sex), a morphological gender opposition is still robust in Irish grammar, also in the morphology of articles, nouns, adjectives. The irregularity evidenced by various sources in recent varieties is an undeniable fact; but it centres, I have argued, on the distribution of initial mutations, specifically lenition. This suggests a weakening between this type of exponence and the expression of gender value, rather than a weakening of the gender category. The change is morphological, not morphosyntactic.

A conclusion like this, correct or incorrect, could not be stated without a clear distinction between the syntactic and the morphological dimension of a phenomenon like gender. The need for both dimensions of representation, then, is the broader theoretical conclusion arising from our narrowly-focused study. More specifically, I have claimed that the abstract representation of a word that feeds phonological spell-out, with its full complement of features, can differ from the representation we know as 'morphological word'. It is not just that lenition may fail to apply; it may fail to apply especially when its trigger is a lexical noun. I have proposed that this reflects a gradual shift in the morphology of Irish nouns, whose morphological representation (unlike that of possessive particles, for instance) can lack the ability to trigger lenition. The latter is understood as a property of words as morphological (not syntactic) objects, like having an inflectional ending or a prefix, or a word-closing affix. As a result, the morphology of gender on N is different from that on D, although the two share the same

feature values. But such an asymmetry is not surprising. In realizing the same set of inflectional features, determiners often define morphological paradigms organized differently from those of lexical nouns (and adjectives). French is an illustration. Here, determiners oppose an invariable plural (*les, ces* /le/, /se/) to a gender-differentiated singular (*la - le, ce-cette* /la/ - /lə/, /sə/ - /sɛt/). By contrast, adjectives, personal pronouns and those nouns that have a masculine and a feminine alternant either have no opposition (like *joli, jolie, jolis, jolies*, all /joli/), or they primarily oppose masculine and feminine, and only in some cases specify a number form inside a determinate gender value, like *nouveaux* /nuvo/, which can only be masculine and plural. This is shown in (17)-(18):

(16) French determiners: primary number opposition, secondary gender opposition
le, ce, mon - les, ces, mes

MASC SG	MASC PL
FEM SG	FEM PL

lə, sə, mõ	
la, sɛt, ma	le, se, me

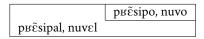(17) French nouns/adjectives: primary gender opposition, secondary number opposition
plein, écrit, il/elle - plein<z>, écrit<z>, il<z>/elle<z>

MASC SG	MASC PL
FEM SG	FEM PL

plɶ̃, ekʁi, il
plɛn, ekʁit, ɛl

(18) *principal, nouvel - principaux, nouveaux*

MASC SG	MASC PL
FEM SG	FEM PL

	pʁɛ̃sipo, nuvo
pʁɛ̃sipal, nuvɛl	

This familiar example shows that there is nothing unusual in having morphology organize differently across D and N the syntactic featural information shared between the two. But the difference is not to be construed as if the non-morphological information were automatically semantic in nature. The Irish facts, especially with the constant feminine gender of male-denoting nouns like *piteog* (see 3.2), clearly show that what lies behind the weakening of gender morphology on nouns is not a reduction to semantic-based assignment. This is relevant to current debates about gender in natural language, which distinguish between an interpretable and a purely morphological value for this category. A more nuanced approach would distinguish the mechanisms for gender assignment, which may be based more on the form or on the content of a linguistic representation, from the properties of the representation itself. Within these properties, gender has a syntactic and a morphological facet. The instability of Irish nominal gender, I have argued, concern the latter.

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