Gender variations in genderless languages

An English / Cantonese comparison

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• Gender as the relationships between masculinity and feminity

• Gender: a social and semiotic construction
“Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis”, Joan Scott 1986

● Cultural available symbols
● Normative concepts
● Political frame
● Subjective identity

A primary way of **signifying** power **relationships**
Gender: a semantic category, structuralized through linguistic, semiotic and social dimensions.

Focus on the linguistic forms indexing the meaning of gender.
Hypothesis

1. Gender varies in societies through times and spaces. Societies *does gender*.

2. Doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987) is to build significations of masculine and feminine.
Hypothesis

A different linguistic indexing of gender signification in different languages

→ Gender is a *form*

A form: a transposable element (Rastier 2001)

→ Which linguistic realizations of the gender form?
The linguistic indexing of gender requires to look at different linguistic levels.

→ There is no language without gender

Gradation of gender structuralization (grammaticalization) (Huddleston & Pullum 2005)

→ A more or less structuralized semantic categorisation
Transposability:  
The need for a contrastive approach
Gender in English

Corbett (1991)
- Semantic level
- Lexical level
- Morphosyntactical level

Silverstein (1985)
- Reference
- Notion
- Forms

Motschenbacher (2010)
- Lexical
- Social
- Grammatical
- Referential
Gender in Cantonese
Gender in Cantonese

Matthews & Yip (1994)

- Lexical terms
- Composed terms: leoi-jisang
Gender in Cantonese

Matthews & Yip (1994)

- Morphological declensions
  - -lou3 (for masculine referent)
  - -poh4 (for feminine referent)
  - -jai2 (smallness, masculine/generic)
  - -léui5 (smallness, feminine)

- 2nd person singular pronoun: nei5
Corpus

30 speakers

20 sentences
Corpus

- Human-refered terms (nouns, pronouns)
- Different syntactical contexts (subject, object, genitive, singular/plural, ...)
- Non-human animate refered terms
- Generic terms
- Deictic
- Decoy sentences
Transposing the gender information:

- **Disambiguating** (to add gender)
- **Shunning** (to erase gender)
Pronouns

• 75%: 3d person singular pronoun kéuih

• 25%: Alternative strategies
  ○ Adding a feminine stem
  ○ Using Chinese (Mandarin) characters
  ○ Choosing a lexical form
Tony and Jenny are going to Macau.
He wants to try the egg tart there, while she wants to do some sightseeing.

- Nominal resumption (to maintain gender information without grammaticalization) → 12 speakers
- Shunning of gender information → 7 speakers
- Alternance of noun and pronoun → 9 speakers
He is a very nice guy

- Ungendered sentence → 20 speakers
- Masculine form (pronoun) → 7 speakers

Michard (1999):
★ Masculine primary signification: generic
★ Masculine secondary signification: male
★ Feminine primary signification: female
★ (Feminine secondary signification: human)
This actress speaks loudly

- Shunning gender → 9 speakers
- Maintaining of gender information by combination of 3 characters → 21 speakers

cf. Michard’s analysis
Her boyfriend is an American

- Neutral translation of *American* → 97%
- Adding of a masculine stem → 1 speaker
Conclusions

- Major tendency in Cantonese: unmarking gender
- The gender loss is morphosyntactical
- It is easier to shun the masculine than the feminine
Conclusions

No morphological edge for pronoun gendering
→ A linguistic potentiality of Cantonese

Further directions:
● The generic/masculine relationship and the emergence of a feminine pronoun
● Analytical tools: are compositional strategies morphosyntactical or morphological?
Thank you for your attention