The return of the goddess.
Culture and gender in the history of romance languages

Maria MANOLIU-MANEA

Looking back at the last 3000 years of evolution within the Latin and Neo-Latin domains, one realizes with amazement that the distinction between males and females has steadily won the most important role in the grammar of gender. On the one hand, neuter gender has lost its phatic function and has been redefined, especially in the pronominal domain, as a marker of indifference to "natural gender" and/or "quantification". On the other hand, the opposition between masculine and feminine genders has taken over the entire paradigm of gender agreement. Moreover the suffixes expressing the distinction between males and females have constantly increased their functional yield, especially in the last half of the 20th century under the influence of social variables.

The present contribution aims at revealing the ways in which the evolution of the grammatical category of gender from Latin to Romance reflects the dramatic changes undergone by the semantic domain of "femaleness".

1. Animacy and Activeness

In Latin the feminine gender was a nominal distributional subcategory of the Animate. But in order to account for the members of this class, which included persons (*domina* approx. "mistress, lady of the house"), animals (*ursa* "she-bear") and even things (*terra* "earth", *domus* "house") the concept of "animacy" has to be considered in accordance with the Roman type of culture.

Latin gender oppositions were determined by the important role played by *activeness* in the interpretation of the state of affairs The term *activeness* is to be understood as a reflection of the "capacity of objects for influencing human life in positive or negative ways" (see Aristotle 1991; Meillet & Vendryes 1960; Manoliu 1999). The fact that neuter nouns always syncretize the subject case (nominative) with the direct-object case (accusative) can be accounted for only if neuter is considered as a distributional class of nouns reflecting a feature which deals with the incapacity of being actively and effectively involved in the event, i.e. [Passivity]. This feature seems to have been assigned as an inherent stem feature in neuter nouns (e.g. *saxum* "stone", *templum* "temple") but situationally (event-dependent) in non-neuters. These properties cannot be unrelated to the fact that neuter morphemes are identical with accusative morphemes in feminine or masculine nouns. Compare:

(1) neuter: NOM/ACC *templu**m***
"temple"

and

non-neuter: ACC : MASC: *servu**m*** and FEM: *femina**m***.
"servant" "woman".

Philologica Jassyensia, An I, Nr. 1-2, 2005, p. 69-85

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

The syncretism of the nominative (the case of the topic or of the subject par excellence) with the accusative (the direct-object case) reminds one of ergative languages. In a group of such languages, the ergative case is the marker of the noun expressing the "agent" or "doer" or "active force"[1]. The distinction between nouns carrying the feature [+Active] and those carrying the opposite feature is more important than the distinction between subject and object. A relic of this encoding may be illustrated by the following examples:

(2) Lat. *Marcus* *saxum* *movit*
Marcus: NOM stone: ACC moves
"Marc moves the stone"

and

(3) *saxum* *movit*
stone: NOM moves
"the stone moves",

where *saxum* has the same ending either as a direct object or as a subject, that is the ending ***-m***. In our opinion, the morpheme ***-m*** encoded the feature [Passivity] rather than a syntactic function such as direct object.

There is evidence to suggest that the ending ***-s*** originates in a nominative marker that occurred only with nouns carrying the feature [+Active] (see Wolfe 1980, and Lyons 1968.1: 356). Since, in modern times, activity is usually associated with animacy in the sense of [Living], the neuter has been interpreted by most modern grammarians as expressing the feature inanimate in the sense of "non-Living". In this way, many hypotheses dealing with the evolution of Latin gender in Romance have rested on a false identification of two different referential features, namely [Living] and [Active]. An interesting definition of such a feature may be found in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* under the name of δύναμις, δυνατόυ – άδυναμία, άδύνατον; in French translation, "puissance, capable – impuissance, incapable":

> "On appelle « puissance » le principe du mouvement ou du changement, qui est dans un autre être ou dans le même être en tant qu'autre. Par exemple, l'art de bâtir est une puissance qui ne réside pas dans la chose construite; au contraire, l'art de guérir, qui est une puissance, peut se trouver dans l'homme guéri, mais non en tant que guéri. Puissance signifie donc le principe, en général, du mouvement ou du changement dans un autre être ou dans le mémé être en tant qu'autre" (Aristote 1991: 101).

Our hypothesis emphasizing the role of [Activeness] in the gender classification of Latin nouns does not contradict the view that the development of *a grammatical gender* is not merely based on semantic motivations of one kind or another. According to the hypothesis advanced by Karl Brugmann (1897) and developed later by W.P. Lehmann (1958) and L. Fodor (1959), grammatical gender in Indo-European first

[1] In Foley and Van Valin (1984: 290-300) the usual term for an active participant is *doer*. It is the argument of a predicate that corresponds to the participant who performs, effects, instigates or controls the situation denoted by the predicate. The opposite term is the *undergoer,* which corresponds to the participant who does not perform, initiate or control any situation but rather is affected by it in some way.

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

developed through agreement. As Jakobson (1960) emphasized, agreement has a phatic function, insuring text coherence especially in languages with a relatively free word order that creates the possibility of inserting various constituents between a noun and its determiners. More specifically, similarity of linguistic function led to similarity of endings (i.e. agreement) between nouns and the corresponding adjectives and pronouns, without reference to sex or natural gender (see Ibrahim 1973). The semantic motivation was assigned later. It is far from easy to determine how far the semantic interpretation assigned to [±Feminine] and [±Passivity] in various Indo-European dialects remained in Latin – i.e. to what extent the idea that things might or might not be inherently passive or assimilated to men and women were still living and productive in Latin speakers. What is beyond doubt is that metaphors drawn from activity and sexuality were nurtured to their socio-cultural environment. One has only to think of the extent to which the forces of nature are represented in Latin mythology by men and women. As Socrates pointed out, we, humans, gave human bodies/forms to abstract concepts.

Due to a conceptual change in Late Latin and early Romance languages, the opposition Passive vs. Non-Passive ceased to be a part of the inherent semantic features of the noun. In other terms, referents ceased to be viewed as inherently passive or not. If it is difficult to understand the real causes of this change – which cannot be unconnected with the religious encounter of polytheistic and monotheistic interpretations of divinity or supernatural forces – the interest of such a hypothesis resides in its explanatory power. It can account for various phenomena which have not found satisfactory explanations in the current literature:

1.1. The degrammaticalization of the neuter gender

The so-called Romance neuter usually refers to two cases of agreement:

(a) The agreement between nouns and adjectives requires a masculine form in the singular and a feminine form in the plural.

(b) The neuter pronouns are not controlled by neuter nouns as was the case in Latin. Moreover, they occur when their referent is not connected with a noun belonging to either the masculine or the feminine distributional class (see Fernàndez 1951; Manoliu 1990b; Ojeda 1993).

Let us now consider each case of agreement:

(a) *The reinterpretation of neuter gender agreement as a mark of* "*indifference to natural gender differences*". In Romanian there is a special distributional class of nouns called "neuter nouns" that behave as masculines in the singular and as feminines in the plural. A similar distributional class may be found in other Romance areas as well (see Bonfante 1961), but only in Romanian have they reached a high degree of productivity and frequency: according to Cârstea (in Manoliu (ed.) 1970: 20), more than 22% of nouns are neuter, with a frequency of 21%. Unlike its Latin counterpart, the Romanian neuter is no longer concerned with the low degree of participation in the event, with [+Passive]. It is very likely that at a certain stage, the neuter forms were interpreted as a reflex of the feature [-Living], as is shown by the regrouping of several "animate" Latin nouns into the Romanian distributional class of neuters (see Ivănescu 1957). Compare:

(4)	Masculine		Neuter
	Lat. *ventus* "wind"	and	Rom. *vânt*
	Lat. *focus* "hearth"		Rom. *foc* "fire"

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

But the inclusion of collective animates such as *popor* "people", *neam* "people, ethnic group", *stol* "flock", *trib* "tribe", in the neuter distributional class can be accounted for by postulating a secondary semantic reorganization according to the "possibility versus impossibility of talking about gender distinctions", instead of [±Living]. In brief, neuter represents nowadays the neutral (or zero) term in the semantics of grammatical gender. In this way, Romanian conforms to the Romance type, in which the semantic domain of grammatical gender is reorganized around the features [Feminine], and [Masculine].

(b) *The pronominal neuter*. The regular agreement between neuter pronouns and their modifiers follows the masculine distributional class of nouns:

(5) Fr. *C'* *est* *beau,* *la* *neige*!
It is beautiful: MASC. SG the: FEM. SG *snow*
"It is beautiful, the snow!"

(6) Sp. *Aquello* *era* *lastimoso*
that: NEUT. SG was pitiful
"That was pitiful"

In fact, the neuter pronouns had been remotivated in different ways: for example, as markers of indifference to quantification, to natural gender or even as pragmatic markers[2]. According to a hypothesis that I hope I have demonstrated elsewhere (see Manoliu 1990b), the only invariant feature encompassing the variety of "effets de sens" actualized by French neuter demonstratives may be roughly defined as "the referent I am/you are talking about", or, more briefly, "this referent". If the feature [Indifference to the whole/part relation] may be considered among the features belonging to the intensionality of Romance neuter demonstratives in general, the feature [Non-Living] is limited pragmatically and socially to their intension in determined conditions (Manoliu 1990b: 111)[3].

The high frequency of French neuter demonstratives originates in the fact that they are expressions of intensions, of mental representations constructed by accumulating attributes (properties) in the discourse. In (7) *ça* is not co-intensional with its related NP.

(7) – *Qu'est-ce qu'on fait quand y a de la neige sur la péniche?*
– *On la pousse dans l'eau et ça fait floc.* (Queneau, *F.B.*: 181)
"– What one is supposed to do when there is snow on the canal-boat?"
"– One pushes it:fem.sg. into the water and it:neuter sg. goes 'plop'".

If the personal pronoun *la* had been used, it would have constructed a mental representation taking as its point of departure the properties of the "snow", to which the property "being on the canal-boat" was added. But *ça* creates a mental representation in which the properties of "the snow" as such do not count as much as the property added by the

[2] For French: see Boone 1987, for Spanish, see Fernandez 1951, Ojeda 1993, for Romanian, see Manoliu 1990b etc.

[3] A detailed examination of the relations between the linguistic model of Martin and Wilmet and current logical approaches in intensional logic is beyond the scope of this book. We would like however to emphasize that the distinction taking into account the difference between logical relations 'within a given utterance' and 'outside a given co-text' originates in the need to introduce contextual considerations in order to account for linguistic meaning variations, both at the level of semantic features (intension) and at the level of the domain of application to objects in the state of affairs the speakers are talking about (extension).

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

immediately mentioned predicate, i.e. "to be thrown into the water", since only this property is directly linked to the property introduced by the following predicate "going plop".

In (8) and (9), the neuter demonstrative is a pro-sentece, i.e. it carries the information of a whole sentence.

(8) Fr. *Garcia m'a expliqué, dit-il.* ***Cela*** *peut se faire. De toute façon,* ***ça*** *vous coutera dix mille francs* (Camus, *La peste*: 122)
"G. explained [it] to me. **It** [lit. that: Neuter] can be done. Anyhow **it** [lit. that] will cost you ten thousand francs".

(9) Sp. *Roman antés me queria mucho* […] *y* ***esto*** *es un secreto grande* (Carmen Laforet, *Nada*)
"Way back Roman used to love me very much […] and this is a great secret".

When referring to things, the gender of the pronoun is governed by the distributional class of nouns, even when the referent is present. For example, if one is talking about a book, one might say:

(10) Fr. *Prends- le!* or (11)Sp. !*Toma lo*!
Take- it: MASC. SG. ACC! Take- it: MASC. SG. ACC!
"Take-it!" "Take-it!",

using the masculine form of the pronoun because the corresponding nouns: Fr. *livre*, Sp. *libro* 'book' belong to the masculine distributional class, but

(12) Rom. *Ia- o*!
Take- it: FEM. SG. ACC!
"Take it!",

because *carte* "book" is assigning feminine gender. If the speaker does not want to specify the class of objects in question, (s)he can use special forms, such as neuter pronouns:

(14) Sp. ¡*Toma eso*!
Fr. *Prends ça*!
Take this: NEUT. SG. ACC!'
"Take this!"

The only trace of a specific agreement different from masculine or feminine is attested in Spanish, where the anaphoric personal and demonstrative pronouns take a neuter form: *ello*, *esto*, *ese*, *aquello*, when referring to a nominalized expression determined by *lo*.

(14) *Aspiro a que se piense aquí en* ***lo religioso*** *y se medite en ello* (Unamuno, in Coste and Redondo 1965: 200)
"I want people here to think of **what is religious** and to meditate upon it".

Whether or not one recognizes the existence of a neuter gender by virtue of the agreement of the substantivized expression and the corresponding personal/demonstrative pronoun, from a semantic point of view, the neuter article *lo* actualizes a very interesting semantic feature, that is the indifference to both gender and number oppositions [i.e. ±Countable]. In other words, the neuter NP in question is outside the scope of gender and number oppositions. It is for this reason that it is opposed to both masculine or feminine common nouns characterized by the feature [+Countable] (e.g., *el bueno* 'the good one') and abstract/mass nouns, characterized by the feature [-Countable] (e.g. *la bondad* 'the goodness').

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

1.2. The "feminization" of neuter gender

Another proof that the neuter lost any link with the feature [±Passive] is the fact that the plural neuter morpheme *-a* (cf. Lat. *corpus* "body" [NEUTER. SG., NOM/ACC], and *corpora* "bodies" [NEUTER. PLURAL, NOM/ACC] could be realigned semantically to its homophonous counterpart, i.e. the prototypical expression of feminine singular (cf. the most productive feminine declension: e.g. *domina* "mistress" [FEM. SG. NOM], the feminine demonstrative pronouns: *ea, ista, illa*, etc.). Expression launched by Spitzer (1941: 339-371), "the feminization of the neuter" encompasses a series of phenomena such as:

(i) *The reshaping of the agreement*. Several forms inheriting the neuter plural ending *-a* require feminine plural forms of determiners, adjectives, and pronouns:

(15) It. *L'* *uovo* *le* *uova*
the: MASC. SG egg the: FEM. PL eggs
"the egg" "the eggs"

(16) Rom. *un* *ou* *proaspăt* *ouă* *proaspete*
a: MASC/SG egg fresh: MASC. SG eggs fresh: FEM. PL
"a fresh egg" "fresh eggs".

The same type of agreement characterizes the collective plural (or dual) endings in Italian:

(17) *frutto* "fruit [MASC. SG]" -- *frutti* "fruit [MASC. PL]" but *frutta* "fruit [FEM. PL. COLL] at the end of the meal". Cf. *siamo alle frutta* "to be at the end of the meal"

le dita "the [FEM. PL. DUAL] fingers [of a hand]", *le ginocchia* "the [FEM. PL. DUAL] knees"

The remotivation of such endings as feminine markers is strong enough to determine the figurative combinations of nouns. Compare:

(18) Rom. *popor* *frate* *popoare* *surori*
people: MASC. SG brother people: FEM. PL sisters
"people-brother" "peoples sisters"

(ii) *Morphological replacement*. The plural ending in *-a* (or its variant *-ora*) was replaced by either the masculine (19) or by the typical feminine plural ending *-e* (< Lat. *ae*: cf. *dominae* "mistresses" [FEM. PL. NOM]) (20).

(19) It. *tempi* "times", *templi* "temples", Rom. *timpi* (music.)

(20) Lat. neuter *ossa* Rom. *oasele*
bones: NEUT. PL bones-the: FEM. PL

Cf. (21) V. Lat. *ossa* *exterae* (CIL, III: 9450: 7, in Rosetti 1986:129)
bones exterior: FEM. PL

A typical neuter ending in Romanian, *-uri* is the result of a morphological reanalysis of Latin pairs such as *tempus* "time" – *tempora* "times", in which *-ora* was seen as representing the morpheme of neuter plural. In old Rom. *-ora* became *-ură*, then final *-ă* was later replaced by *-e* (*-ure*: cf. *lucrure* "things"), and finally, *-e* was replaced by *-i*, the typical plural ending in Eastern Romance (22).

(22) Rom. *timpul* *timpurile*
time-the: MASC. SG times/the: FEM. PL

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

Cf. S. It. (Calabria) *fuocure.*

The so-called neuter ending -URI occurs also as a marker of the plural of variety with mass nouns:

(a) with feminine nouns:

(23) *mătase* "silk" – *mătăsuri* "silks"
brânză "cheese" – *brânzeturi* "cheeses"

or

(b) masculine nouns:

(24) *mezel* "sausage" – *mezeluri* "sausages"
vin "wine" – *vinuri* "wines"
porțelan "porcelaine" - *porțelanuri* "objects made out of porcelaine".

(iii) *The loss of the plural value*. Several neuter plurals have been reinterpreted as feminine singular forms, with which they shared the same ending, i.e. *-a*. For example, most nouns referring to fruit, whose form in *-a* could be viewed as representing a collective plural (cf. [25]) became feminine, once the idea of collective plural vanished (see (26)).

(25) Lat. *loca,* collective plural of *locus* "place", but *loci*, "places", regular plural.

(26) neuter: Lat. *pirum* "pear" – *pira* "pears"
feminine singular: Fr. *la poire*, It., Sp. *pera*, Rom. *pară* "pear", etc.

Even poetic plurals of abstract nouns such as *gaudium* "joy" were reinterpreted as feminine singular in some areas (cf. Fr. *la joie,* It. *la gioia*).

(iv) *The feminization of pro-sentences*. In some areas feminine pro-forms are used as pro-sentences, that is they refer to entire sentences (see Rom. *asta* "this" in (27)) or as indexicals referring to objects whose class is presented as unknown and therefore no noun controls the pronominal gender (see Rom. (28)).

(26) *E mereu în întârziere, şi **asta** nu-mi place*!
He is always late and this: NEUTER. SG. displeases me!

(27) *Ce-i **asta***?
"What is this?"

but see the agreement of the pro-phrase in question with an adverbial predicative noun, which proves that the pro-phrase in question is perceived as having a neutral meaning:

(28) a. *Asta* *nu-* *i* *bine*!
This not is well: ADV
"This is no good!"

and not

b. *Asta* *nu* *e* **bună/* **bun*
This not is good: FEM. SG/ good: MASC. PL

The feminine form of pronouns may be used in certain metaphorical expressions:

(29) Sp. ¡*A* *mi* *con **esas***!
to me: DAT with these: FEM. PL
"Don't give me that!" (Alvarez Quintero in Fernandez 1951: 166)

(30) Rom. *a* *luat* ***-o*** *la* *fugă*
has-he took it: FEM. SG at running
"he started to run"

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

1.3. [Dynamic] and [+Person] in Romance grammars

In Romance the feature [±Passive] can no longer govern the gender agreement, a syntactic phenomenon which, by definition, is intimately linked with the extensional and/or intensional features of the noun stems. But, as I hope to have demonstrated elsewhere (1990), interesting traces of the idea of "activeness" can be found in the grammatical structures of Romance languages. A feature that I have chosen to call [±Dynamic], combined with the feature [+Person], plays an important role – more important than [±Living] – in Romance discursive strategies. According to Manoliu (1987, 1990a), more than 80% of subjects are characterized by the feature [+Person] and more than 70% of topical subjects are characterized by the contextual feature [+Dynamic] (Manoliu 1990a: 332). [Dynamic] is defined as the contextually assigned feature dealing with the referent's contribution to the advancement of the event expressed by the verb. The choice of the subject, for example, depends on a relation typically conceived as a link between the semantic features [(the Most) Dynamic (participant)] and [+Person], on the one hand, and discourse hierarchies (topical) and syntax (word order) on the other hand. This correlation may be represented as follows:

Table 1:

discourse hierarchy:	+Discourse topic
inherent features:	+Person
contextual features:	+Dynamic /or [+the most active participant]
syntactic preference:	+Subject / Active Voice
word order:	sentence-initial position

This model is in agreement with various current functionalist hypotheses, which state that "in English and many other languages, the most unemphatic form of language and the one with the least assumptions makes the following correlations in a sentence (Traugott and Pratt 1980: 283):

Theme	Verb X
Agent	Verb x
DefNP (shared)	Verb (Indef)NP (unshared)
Subject	Verb X "

Comrie (1981) also considers that the animacy hierarchy is a complex intertwining of various factors rather than a single, linear hierarchy:

> "[…] the animacy hierarchy cannot be reduced to any single parameter, including animacy itself in its literary sense, but rather reflects a natural human interaction among several parameters, which include animacy in the strict sense, but also definiteness […], and various means of making an entity more individuated – such as giving it a name of its own, and thereby making it also more likely as the topic of conversation" (Comrie 1981: 192).

In our model, the term Agent – of a weak explanatory power due to the differences imposed by cultural variations – has been replaced by the two features [+Person] and [+Dynamic] that have the highest frequency in the subject position. Every language has grammatical devices to mark the fact that the speaker is departing from this typical correlation ((Manoliu 1999).

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

2. *Female* versus *Male*

2.1. Markedness and semantic features: [±Feminine] or [±Masculine]?

In symbolic logic, the extension of a noun refers to the domain of the objects to which the noun applies. On the basis of the domain of objects characterized in terms of gender properties, nouns may be assigned extensional features of gender. A system of three variables may be thus envisaged when one talks about the feature "female" and/or "male": a noun may apply either to:

(1) the domain of males, or

(2) the domain of females, or

(3) a domain composed of males and females.

On the basis of extensional features, intensional features (usually called **semes** or **inherent, non-contextual features**) of the noun may be defined. Features such as "female" vs. "male" may control the choice of gender in adjectives:

(31) Lat.	"female": Lat.	*femina*	*bon**a*** ...	***Ea***...
		woman	good: FEM...	She: FEM ...
	"male": Lat.	*uir*	*bon**us*** ...	***Is*** ...
		man	good: MASC ...	He: MASC...

In this case, the features Female or Male are introduced in the semantic non-contextual description of the stem. The marked (or the intensive) term (+) is characterized by the presence of a specific feature, while the unmarked (extensive) term (-) is characterized by the absence of the specific feature in question, which means that, contextually (in the discourse), the unmarked term may refer either to an individual lacking the property characterizing the marked term or to a set of individuals any one of which may or may not possess the feature characterizing the marked term. For example, in most structural approaches to Romance languages, [Feminine] is considered as the marked term of the opposition "male" vs. "female", and [Masculine] as corresponding to the unmarked term (termed as [-Feminine]), since certain nouns denoting males may also refer to a reunion of "males" and "females". For example, Rom. *om* "man" in an utterance such as *omul meu* "my man" refers to the "husband" and as such is the opposite of *femeia mea* "my wife". But in a phrase such as *om de ştiinţă* lit. man of science, i.e. "scholar" or in the plural *oameni* "people", lit. "men", it refers to "males" and/or "females":

(32) *În faţa conacului se strânsese o mulţime de oameni.*
"In front of the country mansion a lot of people were gathering".

Agreement within the area of living beings has also been considered favorable proof of the unmarked character of the masculine, for it is the masculine that appears in contexts in which the distinction is neutralized in both Latin and Romance:

(33) Lat.	*filius*	*et*	*filia*	*parentibus*	*cari*	*sunt*
	son: MASC	and	daughter: FEM	parents: DAT	dear:MASC/PL	are.

"the son and the daughter are dear to their parents"

But the feature [Feminine] can also occur in a position of neutralization. For example in the case of certain animals, such as "cat" (cf. Rom. *pisică* "cat" and *motan* "tom-cat") or

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

birds, such as "goose" or "duck", some languages may choose to use the name for female as the unmarked term: e.g. Rom *rață* "duck" (which requires a feminine adjective (34)).

(34) *rață albă*
duck white: FEM.
"the white duck"

(34) may refer to "males", "females" or a set of "males" and "females" together, whereas the masculine derivative form, *răţoi* "drake" is used only of "males". In French, one eats *(on mange de*) *la dinde* "turkey-female" and not *le dindon* "turkey-male". Moreover, there are languages in which the feminine gender may characterize the predicative adjective when the multiple subject combine non-living beings of masculine and feminine gender:

(35) Rom. *Poarta şi peretele sunt însorite.*
Door [FEM. SG] the and wall the[MASC. SG] are sunlit FEM.SG]
"The door and the wall are sunlit".

It is for these reasons that it is preferable to include both the [Masculine] and the [Feminine] in a universal list of noun semantic features. This hypothesis may also account for the cases in which the oppositions in question are not neutralized, i.e. the term for "male" cannot be used for females or vice-versa. For example, Fr. *garçon*, Rom. *băiat* "boy", never apply to "females", while Fr. *fille*, Rom. *fată* "girl" never refer to "males".

2.2. Natural gender

In the present model of noun stems, the feature [±Sexed] applies to nouns referring to sexed beings. This opposition is however based not merely on the referential world, but also on the speakers' interpretation of (or the interest in) talking about sex differences. Consequently stems characterized by [-Sexed] may refer to sexed entities without being linguistically marked for gender variations. The positive term, [+Sexed], reflects the sensitivity of the nouns to sex differences, while the negative term, [-Sexed], means that the stem in question says nothing about the gender characteristics of the referent. This does not mean that, in discourse, nouns marked [-Sexed] cannot refer to individuals of either gender. Stems characterized by the feature [-Sexed], such as Rom. *elefant* "elephant", *girafă* "giraffe", Fr. *écrivain* "writer", do not require such a sex specification when agreeing with their determiners. *Elefant* takes a masculine adjective, *girafă*, a feminine adjective or article, etc. They may be contextually compatible with such specification, but under a different form: cf. Fr. *femme écrivain* "woman-writer"; *femme docteur* "woman-doctor", etc. This compatibility may thus be captured by assigning to them the extensive (unmarked) term of the opposition, i.e. [-Sexed].

The features [±Sexed] and [± Female] do not always belong to the set of contextual or inherent features, even if the noun refers to living referents. For example, some nouns belonging to the feminine distributional subclass such as Fr. *personne* or Rom. *persoană* "person" may also refer to a male or to a group of people including males and females. The difference between the class of nouns represented by Fr. (*la*) *dinde* "turkey-female" or Rom. *pisică* "cat" and the class of nouns behaving like Fr. *personne* or Rom. *persoană* "person" consists in fact in the status of the feature [-Masculine]. In the further case, [-Masculine] belongs to the inherent features of the stem, while in the latest case (*personne, persoană* "person"), the feminine of the determiners is not governed by an

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

inherent feature referring to the sex of the person, since *persoană* is never used as the opposite of a term referring solely to "males". The fact that, in the discourse, Fr. *personne* or Rom. *persoană* may refer to a male or to a woman may eventually be captured by assigning the unmarked term [-Sexed] to its inherent semantic matrix but this has no impact on the choice of the grammatical gender.

2.3. Remotivation of gender morphemes

When combined with stems characterized by the feature [non-living] the difference between masculine and feminine genders can express difference in size:

(36)

Sp. *hoyo* "hole" – *hoya* "big hole"
canasto "small basket" (with a small opening)" – *canasta*
Fr. *grêle* "hail" – *grêlon* "hail-stone"
carafon "small carafe" – *carafe* "water bottle, carafe"
It. *buco* "little hole" – *buca* "hole, letter box"
gambo "stem" – *gamba* "leg" *il coltello /la coltella* "knife".

In some Spanish dialects such as Asturian, the difference between neuter and non-neuter expresses the opposition between [collective] and [non-collective] (Klein, Flora 1981)

(37) *pilu* "the hair as a collective entity" vs. *pelo* "(individual) hair"

3. Feminine gender and social equality

As the distribution of masculine and feminine nouns in Latin shows, a noun of feminine gender encoded a prototypical semantic feature related to the ideas of fertility, the mother's womb, life, which reminds us of the ancient goddesses of the Mediterranean area as well as of other ancient cultures. Compare:

(38) *terra* "earth", *arbor* "tree", like *femina* "woman"

whereas masculine encoded the idea of force, strength, etc.

(39) masculine: *ignis* "fire", *ventus* "wind", like *vir* "man", *servum* "serf", etc.

But even in Latin there were nouns which were indifferent to gender differences. Nouns such as Lat. *civis* "citizen" are called *nomina communia* (*common gender*, *epicene*), because they combine with masculine or feminine adjectives, pronouns or quantifiers, as dictated by the value "male" or "female" assigned to the referential variable, i.e. according to the gender of the person referred to because they denoted social status. Compare Lat. (40) a and b.

(40)Lat. a.	*cives*	*bona*	b.	*cives*	*bonus*
	citizen	good: FEM. SG		citizen	good:MASC. SG
	"good citizen" (a woman)			"good citizen" (a man)	

As it will be shown in what follows, the impact of social variables on gender assignment has imposed not only a way in which gender encodes semantic features but also the agreement strategies.

3.1. *Nomina communia* or common gender in Romance

It is quite obvious that our preference for keeping the Latin label of *nomina communia* for this distributional class is justified by the fact that its literary English translation *common nouns* has been already specialized in traditional grammars for the class of nouns opposed to *proper nouns*. The term *common gender*, which may be found in some Romance grammars, is no more appropriate because it could lead to considering

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

it as a distinct member of the grammatical category of gender, alongside the masculine and the feminine genders. But, if their syntagmatic behavior justifies the inclusion of such nouns into a special distributional class of agreement, there are no grounds for talking about a common gender as a morphological invariant of gender, since it does not have special morphemic expressions different from masculine and/or feminine morphemes. It is obvious that within a structural and functional framework, it cannot be shown that common gender is in paradigmatic opposition to the masculine and the feminine at the morphemic level.

(41) Fr. a.	*un*	*élève*	b.	*une*	*enfant*
	a: MASC	pupil		a: FEM	pupil
	"a pupil-male"			"a pupil-female"	

Here are some other examples:

(42) Fr. *un*/*une domestique* "servant", *élève* "pupil", *enfant* "child", *artiste* "artist"
Sp. *un/ una sabelotodo* "a [somebody who] knows it all"
Pg. *o*/*a jornalista* "a journalist"
It. *un*/*una nipote* "a nephew, niece", *amante* " a lover", *giornalista* " a journalist"
Rom. *un/o pierde-vară* " a lazybones"

As Table 2 shows, French has the highest number of *nomina communia*, when considered in terms of both their productivity and their frequency in the text (see Manoliu (ed.) 1970):

Table 2

	Fr.	Sp.	Pg.	It.	Rom.
Prod.	4,04%	0,54%	2,86%	0,54%	0,010%
Freq.	8,32%	2,13%	1,23%	0,66%	0,002%

3.2. Motion in Romance

3.2.1. *Suffixes*. Romance languages show an obvious preference for lexicalizing the feature "female" into suffixes, originating either in diminutives (such as *-ine*, *ina,* etc.) or denominations for wives of men with prestigious social status (such as *-esse*, *-essa*) e.g.:

(43) Fr. *speaker* "(radio) announcer" vs. *speakerine*;â
chameau "camel" vs. *chamelle*, etc.
Sp. *conde* "count" vs. *condessa* "countess" Pg. *actor* "actor" vs. *actriz* "actress"
gallo "cockerel" vs. *gallina* "hen" *pavão* "peacock" vs. *pavoa*
It. *pittore* "painter" vs. *pittrice* Rom. *ţăran* "peasant" vs. *ţărancă*
pavone "peacock" vs. *pavonessa* *tigru* "tiger" vs. *tigroaică*

Table 3: Nouns with gender suffixes:

Lg.	Frequency	Productivity
Sp.	39.62%	12.32%
It.	16.46%	3.07%
Fr.	15.60%	5.67%
Rom.	5.12%	8.59%

As shown in Table 3, Spanish occupies the highest rank, Italian and French, although less productive in terms of the number of stems combined with gender suffixes, present a rather high frequency in discourse (Manoliu [ed.] 1970).

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

3.2.2. *Masculine or Feminine*. The use of feminine suffixes for nouns referring to prestigious professions has not always received general acceptance. The idea the masculine has become a neutral term which makes no reference to natural gender has been nurtured for a long time by academic bodies such as *l'Académie française* or the *Real Academía Española.* There is even 18th-century evidence for this type of socio-linguistic rule in Queen Christina of Sweden's practice of signing herself:

(44) *nous, Christine, roi de Suède* or *Catherine le Grand*
"we, Christine, king of Sweden" "Katherine the: MASC Great" (Russian empress)

Even nowadays, in form of address, the masculine forms are preferred most of the time:

(45) Rom. *Doamnă doctor*
Madam doctor: MASC/SG
"Madam Doctor",

but see *doctoriță*, a feminine formed with the diminutive suffix *-iță* (cf*, fată* "girl"–*fetiță* "little girl"), which may be used when talking about a female-doctor.

In 1984, the then French Minister for Women's Rights, Mme Yvette Roudy, set up a special committee charged with the task of studying terminology relating to the vocabulary of women's activities. Its recommendations were published in the *Journal officiel* (March 15, 1986). In Quebec, the *Office de la langue française* has approved the text of a proposal entitled *Titres et fonctions au féminin*: *essai d'orientation de l'usage* (April 4, 1986). In Canadian French there is an increasing tendency to create specifically feminine forms (especially by adding an **-e** *muet*), such as *la professeure* "the professor", *l'auteure* "the author", *l'avocate* "the attorney", etc., on the basis of the corresponding masculine forms *professeur*, *auteur*, *avocat*, but hesitations still occur in the language of the media. Compare (46) and (47):

(46) *Mme. Cheryl Little,* ***avocat*** *du Centre de Refuge Haïtien, [...], a indiqué qu'elle tenterait d'obtenir les 500 millions de dollars du couple Duvalier...* (*France-Amérique*, 28.1-3 [1988]: 2).
"Madame C.L., **attorney** (MASC/SG) of the Haitian Center of Refugees [...], has indicated that she would try to obtain Duvaliers' 500 millions dollars".

(47) *Le Washington Post vient de consacrer un long article à Mlle Patricia Littlefield,* ***avocate*** *au ministère de la Justice à Washington qui a donné sa démission au Justice Department pour devenir* ***apprenti chef de cuisine*** *en France. Elle découvrit sa passion pour la cuisine française à Washington et devint même, pendant son travail au ministère,* ***apprentie*** *dans des restaurants washingtonians comme le Gaulois et le Pavillon* (*France-Amérique*, 6.9-2.7 [1987]: 14).
"The Washington Post has devoted a long article to Miss P.L., **attorney** (FEM/SG) at the Justice Department in Washington who has forwarded her resignation to the Justice Department in order to (go to France and) become **apprentice** (MASC/SG) **chef** in "(French) cuisine". She discovered her passion for French cuisine in Washington and became an **apprentice**

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

(FEM/SG) in Washington (working for) restaurants such as Le Gaulois and Le Pavillon, while working at the (Justice) Department".

If in (a) the masculine form is preferred, in (b), one year earlier, the feminine form is used to refer to a Ms. Patricia Littlefield.

See also a more recent Spanish example from the magazine *Linea Natural*, Argentina 9(203):

(48) *El 3 de setiembre en el Hotel Regente se llevó a cabo un desayuno de trabajo del Foro de Mujeres del Mercosur. Se inauguran así un ciclo de charlas mensuales con reconocidas protagonistas. Dicha presentación estuvo dedicada al tema: El avance de la mujer en lo politico y social. Fueron panelistas, Marisa River Albert,* ***Presidenta*** *del National Hispanic Institute y la* ***Embajadora*** *Ellen Sauerbrey, representante de los Estados Unidos de América par la Estatus de la Mujer ante la Comisóon de las Naciones Unidas.*

"On September 3 a working breakfast of the Forum of Women from Mercosur took place in the Hotel Regente. This inaugurated a cycle of monthly talks with renowned protagonists. The presentation in question was dedicated to the topic: The advancement of women in the political and social arenas. The panelists were: Maria River Albert, President [FEM] of the National Hispanic Institute and the Ambassador [FEM] Ellen Sauerberry, representative of the United States of America for the Status of Women before the Commission of the United Nations".

3.2.3. *Agreement and prestigious professions*. In contemporary Romance languages gender assignment in determiners of nouns denoting top rank professions takes into consideration a social variable allowing the control by referential characteristics:

(49) Comp. Fr. *Madame* ***le*** *professeur*.
Madam the: MASC. SG professor: MASC. SG
and Canad. Fr. *Madame* ***la*** *professeur****e***
Madam art: FEM. SG professor: FEM. SG

(50) Sp. ***la*** *primer ministro* *britanic****a*** (*La Vanguardia*, 08,1983)
the: FEM. SG Prime Minister: MASC. SG British: FEM. SG
"the British Prime Minister" (referring to Margaret Thatcher)

The extent in which feminine forms for members of highly prestigious professions are adopted varies from one area to another. Whereas Canada and Switzerland or Venezuela and even Argentina seem to be more inclined to use feminine forms, France and Spain are following a more conservative trend, probably because the impact of such highly ranked academic bodies such as *l'Académie Française* or the *Real Academía Española*, which continue to support the idea that masculine forms are neutral to natural gender differences, whereas the use of a feminine form would immediately activate the reference to sex distinctions.

Conclusions. Redefining grammatical gender

The changes undergone by grammatical gender in Romance languages were mainly triggered by social and pragmatic variables. Once an inherent semantic feature such as [±Passive] had lost its privileged status in gender agreement, the neuter gender lost its phatic function and was redefined especially in the pronominal domain as a marker of

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

indifference to "natural gender" and/or "quantification" (see Ojeda 1993; Manoliu 1994). The distinction between masculine and feminine had steadily won the most important role in the grammar of Romance gender and has two main functions: (i) a *phatic function*, i.e. it became the main criterion for subclassifying nouns into distributional classes, which constitute the input for agreement; and (ii) a *semantic function,* since it expanded in order to semantically remotivate the differences between "men" and "women" within the class of persons. The last function is a consequence of the fact that the concept of "femaleness" evolved from a model linked to the natural world, encoded in the semantic features of "fertility, rebirth", etc., to a model more socially oriented, encoded in the seme of "social equality".

Bibliography

Aristote, *Métaphysique*, 1-Livre A-Z, Traduction et notes par. J. Tricot [Bibliothèque des textes philosophiques], Paris, Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1991.

Beeching, K., *Women and language*, in *Women in Contemporary France*, Oxford, Berg, 2002.

Becquer, Annie et alii, *Femme, j'écris ton nom. Guide l'aide à la féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions*, Paris, CNRS INALF, 1999.

Bouchard, Pierre et alii, *La féminisation des noms de métiers, fonctions, grades ou titres au Québec, en Suisse romande, en France et en Communauté française de Belgique*, „Français & Société", 10, Bruxelles, Duculot, 2000.

Brugmann, Karl, *The Nature and Origin of the Noun Genders in the Indo-European Languages*; a lecture delivered on the occasion of the sesquicetennial celebration of Princeton University, trans. by E.Y.Robbins, [Princeton Lectures], New York, C. Scribner's sons, 1897.

Burr, Elisabeth, *Linguistic perspectives on the feminization of professional titles in Canadian French*, "British journal of Canadian Studies", 1998, Vol. 13 No. 1, p. 165-180.

Cameron, Debbie, *What has Gender got to Do with Sex?* in "Language and Communication", 5.1, 1985, p. 19-27,

Comrie, Bernard, *Language Universals and Linguistic Typology*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1981[1].

Corbett, Greville G., *Gender*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Diaconescu, Paula, *Structură şi evoluţie în morfologia substantivului românesc*, Bucharest, Editura Academiei Române, 1970.

Fernández Ramírez, Salvador, *Gramática española*, 1. Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1951.

Fleischman, S., *The battle of feminism and bon usage: instituting non-sexist language in French*, "The French Review", 1997, Vol 70, No. 6 (May), p. 834-844.

Fodor, L., *The Origin of Grammatical Gender*, "Lingua", 1959, 8, p. 1-41.

García, Erica, *The Case of Spanish Gender: Referential Strategies in Language Change*, "Neuphilologische Mitteilungen: Bulletin de la Société Néophilologique/ Bulletin of theModern Language Society", 1986, 87.2, p. 165-184.

García Meseguer, Alvaro, *El lenguaje y los sexos* in Monroy, Rafael (ed.), *Actas del primer congreso nacional de lingüística aplicada*, Murcia, Asn. Española de Ling. Aplicada, 1982, p. 237-252.

Giacomo-Marcellesi, G., *Comme la pensa la professoressa*, "Contrasts", 10, 1986.

Hall, Robert Jr., *The 'neuter' in Romance: a pseudo-problem*, "Word", 1965, 21, p. 421-427.

Hjelsmlev, Louis., *Animé et inanimé, personnel et non-personnel*, "Travaux de l'Institut de Linguistique", 1, Paris, 1956.

Ibrahim, Muhamed Hassan, *Grammatical Gender. Its Origin and Development*, The Hague, Mouton, 1973.

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

Klein, Flora, *Neutrality, or the Semantic Gender in a Dialect of Castillia*, in Cressey, E.W. and Dona Jo Napoli (eds.), *Linguistic Symposium on Romance Languages*, 9, Washington D.C., Georgetown University Press, 1981, p. 164-176.

Larivière, Louise-L., *Typologie des noms communs de personne et féminisation linguistique*, "Révue québécoise de linguistique", vol. 29, No. 2, RQL (UQAM), Montréal, 2002.

Lyons, John, *Semantics*. 1-2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Manoliu, Maria, M., *Changing Culture Changing Grammar: A cross-categorial Hypothesis on the Loss of the perfectum in Romance*, in Vogeleer, Svetlana, Walter De Mulder, Ilse Depraetere (eds.), *Tense and Aspect. The contextual processing of semantic indeterminacy* [Belgian Journal of Linguistics 12], Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1999, p. 103-127.

Manoliu-Manea, Maria, *The Ghost of the Agent in Romance*, in *Selected papers from the 8th International Conference on Historical Linguistics,* Lille, France, August 31 - Sept. 4, 1987, ed. by H. Andersen and K. Koerner, Amsterdam, Benjamins, 1990a, p. 327-338.

Manoliu-Manea, Maria, *French neuter demonstratives: evidence for a pragma-semantic definition of pronouns*, in *Variation and Change in French*, ed. by John N. Green and Wendy Ayres-Bennett, London/New York, Routledge, 1990b, p. 89-115.

Manoliu-Manea, Maria (ed.), *Quelques remarques sur la flexion nominale romane*. Ouvrage élaboré sous la direction de Maria Manoliu-Manea, par un collectif formé de: Mihaela Cârstea (roumain), Anca Giurescu (italien), Ecaterina Goga (espagnol), Sanda Reinheimer-Râpeanu (français), Olga Tudorică (portugais), Bucharest, Société Roumaine de Linguistique Romane, 1970.

Meillet, Antoine, Joseph Vendryes, *Traité de grammaire comparée des langues classiques*, 3e éd. rev. and compl. Par J. Vendryes, Paris, Champion, 1960.

Nash, Rose, *Jobs, Gender, and Civil Rights: Puerto Rican Spanish Responds to the Law*, "Word" (1982), Apr.-Aug., 33, 1-2, p. 81-95.

Niedzviecki, P., *Au féminin! Code de féminisation à l'usage de la francophonie*, Paris, Librairie Nizet, 1994.

Ojeda, Almerindo, *Linguistic Individuals*. [CSLI lecture notes, 311], Stanford, Center for the study of Language and Information, 1993.

Posner, Rebecca, *Non-topical human agent in Romance: A historical and pragmatic approach*, in Coman Lupu and Glanville Price (eds.), *Hommages offerts à Maria Manoliu-Manea,* Bucharest, Pluralia Logos, 1993, p. 100-121.

Poynton, C., *Language and Gender. Making the Difference*, Geelong, Victoria Deakin Univ. Press, 1985.

Romaine, Susanne, "Why women are supposed to talk like ladies: the glamour of grammar", in *Gender and Belief Systems.* Proceedings of the Fourth Berkeley Conference on Women and Language, Berkeley, Berkeley Women and Language Group, 1997.

Schafroth, Elmar, *Gender in French*, in *Gender across languages*, V. 3, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003, p. 87-117.

Rosetti, Alexandru, *Istoria limbii române de la origini până în secolul al XVII-lea*, Bucureşti, Editura Ştiinţifică, 1981.

Sarraute, Claude*, Madame le maire?*, "Le Monde" (rubrique "Sur le vif"), 1985.

Togeby, Knud, *Le neutre en roumain et en albanais,* CSP, 1953, 2.2, p. 121-131.

Tischer, A., *Madame l'ambassadrice*, "Le Monde" (05/09/98), 1998, p. 15.

Vasiliu, Emanuel, *Observaţii asupra categoriei genului în limba română*, SCL, 1960, 11.3, p. 769-70.

Wolfe, Susan J., *Gender and Agency in Indo-European Languages*, "Papers in Linguistics", 1980, 3 (4), p. 773-794.

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)

Le retour de la déesse.
Culture et genre dans l'histoire des langues romanes

L'évolution du genre grammatical dans les langues romanes reflète des changements profonds qui ont eu lieu dans les modèles culturels concernant la perception des traits tels que l'animé, le passif et le féminin. Dès que le trait sémantique [±Passif] a cessé d'être conçu comme un sème inhérent du nom et généralisé en tant que trait contextuel dicté par le type d'événement, le genre neutre (encodant la passivité, conçue comme incapacité d'influencé la vie humaine) a perdu sa fonction phatique et a été redéfini, surtout dans le domaine pronominal, comme marqueur de l'indifférence au genre naturel. Au contraire, la différence entre masculin et féminin a gagné progressivement en importance aux niveaux syntaxique et sémantique. Le modèle du genre latin encodant une différence définie par sa relation au monde naturel (où l'on conçoit le féminin comme symbole de la fertilité, renouvellement de la nature, etc.) a été remplacé par un modèle défini par le social, encodant l'égalité entre les hommes et les femmes.

University of California, Davis
USA

BDD-A723 © 2005 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 22:59:07 UTC)