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The gender system of Laal

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Abstract: This paper describes the gender system of Laal, a language isolate of Chad. Laal has a strictly semantic, partly sex-based gender system making use of three semantic features: [±human], [masculine/feminine], and [±abstract], defining four genders: human masculine, human feminine, neuter, and abstract. Gender is covert on nouns; it is marked only on agreeing pronouns and functional words. The morphological marking and structure of the gender system is different in pronouns and functional words. Seven agreement classes are defined by various conflations of gender and number categories in both pronominal forms and functional words.

Keywords: abstract gender; agreement; gender; human/non-human; sex-based gender

1 Introduction

This paper is a description of the gender system of Laal using Güldemann and Fiedler’s (2019) analytical categories. Laal is a language isolate spoken by ca. 800 people mainly in Gori and Damtar, two villages along the Chari river in southern Chad. The language was first brought to the attention of the scientific community in the 1970’s by Pascal Boyeldieu, who described its phonology (Boyeldieu 1977), its nominal and verbal systems (Boyeldieu 1982a, 1987), and discussed its problematic classification (Boyeldieu 1982b).

Laal is a three-tone language with SVO word order and postnominal determiners and noun modifiers. The gender system of Laal is briefly discussed by Boyeldieu (1979: 5, 1982a: 8–11), who describes three genders: (human) “masculine”, (human) “feminine”, and “neuter” (= non-human). The present paper identifies a fourth gender. Agreement patterns indeed reveal that the non-human category is subject to a further distinction based on the semantic feature of abstractness.

All the data in this paper come from my own fieldwork on the language – a total of 15 months between 2010 and 2018. Examples without references come from

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elicitation. Many examples are taken from texts. The recordings and transcription of these texts are all available in the Laal collection of the online DOBES archive.¹

Section 2 gives an overview of the gender system and agreement patterns. A detailed description of the morphological expression of gender is given in Section 3, together with an overview of noun phrase structure. Section 4 describes the semantics of gender. Section 5 concludes.

2 Overview of the gender system

Laal has a partly sex-based system with a total of four genders: human masculine (M), human feminine (F), non-human neuter (N), and non-human abstract (A). It is a “strict semantic” system (Corbett 1991), i.e. agreement is not based on lexical or morphological properties of the noun, but exclusively on properties of its referent. The system can be straightforwardly described with four semantic features and two levels of distinction. A primary distinction is made between [+human] and [–human]. Two secondary distinctions are further made: a [feminine]/[masculine] sex distinction in the [+human] category, and a [±abstract] distinction in the [–human] category, as shown in Figure 1. The semantics of these gender categories will be explored in Section 3.

![Figure 1: Semantic features and structure of the Laal gender system.](image)

The Laal gender system is covert, i.e. there is no gender morphology on nouns. Nouns are only marked for number, with over 30 different singular and/or plural suffixes, whose combinations with specific noun roots is unpredictable. Nouns can thus be invariable (1a), marked in the plural only (1b), in the singular only (1c), or in both singular and plural (1d). A few cases of suprasegmental alternations (1e) and suppletion (1f) are also attested.²

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¹ URL: https://hdl.handle.net/1839/e926f02e-f490-46b2-bc04-561552386bb4. Short references to these texts are used in the article. Cf. the “Laal-filenames-shorthand-key” file in the “Description de l’archive laal/Description of Laal archive” folder in the archive for actual references.

² Transcription follows IPA standards with the following exceptions, usual in Africanist linguistics: <y> = [j], <ü> = [y], <ɛ> = [ŋ], <ua> = [ɔ ~ u̯a], <ia> = [ɛ ~ ɪa], <VV> = [Vː].
This complex and irregular number-marking system is entirely independent of gender, and need not concern us here. Indeed, there is no gender morphology on nouns, hence no ‘noun form classes’ or ‘deriflections’ (Güldemann and Fiedler 2019) directly related to the morphological expression of gender. This is a clear illustration of the difference between noun form class and agreement class, and between deriflection and gender system.

Gender is only marked through agreement on pronouns and a number of functional words. One of the most complex aspects of the Laal gender system is the fact that the pronominal and functional word subsystems differ in both the morphological expression of gender categories, and the overall structure of the gender system in terms of agreement classes.

The pronominal subsystem consists of five agreement classes, resulting from the combination of three genders (masculine, feminine, non-human), and two number categories (singular and plural), with a conflation of masculine and feminine into a human gender in the plural (like in many languages, gender and number are morphologically conflated in Laal). Abstract and neuter are not distinguished in the pronominal subsystem, both being merged into a non-human category. This is summarized and illustrated with third person subject pronouns in Figure 2 (cf. Section 3.1).

\[
\begin{array}{c|c|c}
\text{SG} & \text{PL} \\
\hline
\text{Masculine} & ã & ì \\
\text{Feminine} & â & ì \\
\text{Non-human} & ân & uàn \\
\end{array}
\]

*Figure 2: Gender agreement in the pronominal subsystem.*

Likewise, the functional word subsystem is characterized by five agreement classes, illustrated with the form of the connective particle in (2) (cf. Section 3.2).

(2) a. jā masculine singular  
b. jì feminine singular  
c. mà neuter singular  
d. yâ neuter plural  
e. yì plural (all genders); non-human singular

As can be seen, the five agreement classes of the subsystem are different from the five classes of the pronominal subsystem, both morphologically and semantically. First, while the pronominal subsystem is characterized by a strict one-to-one mapping between agreement class and gender category, as shown in Figure 2
above, there is more confusion in the functional word subsystem, where some agreement classes overlap. This is mostly due to the wide polysemy of the ǐ agreement class, which can be the morphological expression of all gender-number combinations except masculine and feminine singular, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Morphology of gender agreement in the functional word subsystem.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SG</th>
<th>PL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>já</td>
<td>yí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminine</td>
<td>jí</td>
<td>yí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuter</td>
<td>má ~ ǐ</td>
<td>yá ~ yí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ǐ</td>
<td>ǐ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secondly, there is a split in the morphological expression of non-human agreement along the [±abstract] dimension. Two agreement classes are indeed dedicated exclusively to neuter agreement: má (SG) and yá (PL). There are no classes dedicated to abstract agreement. Instead, abstract nouns trigger the exclusive use of the syncretic ǐ form in both singular and plural. The abstract and neuter genders, merged in the pronominal subsystem, are thus distinct in the functional word subsystem, albeit only minimally: both abstract and neuter nouns may trigger agreement in ǐ, but only neuter nouns can trigger agreement in má and yá. Gender agreement in the functional word subsystem is summarized in Figure 3 below, where dashed lines stand for possible neuter agreement patterns in (quasi) free variation (cf. Section 3.4).

![Figure 3: Gender agreement in the functional word subsystem.](image)

Gender agreement patterns across the pronominal and functional word subsystems define a total of seven agreement classes, shown in Figure 4. Figure 5 summarizes the interplay between gender, number and agreement classes. The examples in (3) illustrate these agreement classes with the connective and third person object suffixes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>AGR</th>
<th>Functional word</th>
<th>SG</th>
<th>PL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>à</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>já</td>
<td>AGR1: masculine</td>
<td>AGR5: human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ìh</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>jì</td>
<td>AGR2: feminine</td>
<td>AGR6: neuter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>án</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>mà</td>
<td>AGR3: neuter</td>
<td>AGR7: non-human</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>yì</td>
<td>AGR4: non-human</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uàn</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>yà</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4:** Laal agreement classes.

(3) a. \textit{AGR1:}

\[\text{náárá já dàŋ kán || já yìr- -án} \]
\[
\text{man.M CON.M.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3M.SG}
\]

‘That man (previously mentioned), I know him.’

b. \textit{AGR2:}

\[\text{nìñì jì dàŋ kán || já yùr- -ù} \]
\[
\text{woman.F CON.F.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3F.SG}
\]

‘That woman, I know her.’

c. \textit{AGR3:}

\[\text{bìàág yì/ mà dàŋ kán || já yìr- -án} \]
\[
\text{dog.N CON.NH.SG/N.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.SG}
\]

‘That dog, I know it.’

d. \textit{AGR4:}

\[\text{mìw-âl yì/*mà dàŋ kán || já yìr- -án} \]
\[
\text{custom-SG.A CON.NH.SG/*N.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.SG}
\]

‘That custom, I know it.’

e. \textit{AGR5:}

\[\text{yìnàn/wùrâ yì dàŋ kán || já yìr- -rì} \]
\[
\text{women/men.H CON.PL ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3H.PL}
\]

‘Those women/men, I know them.’

f. \textit{AGR6:}

\[\text{bìùg-àny yì/yà dàŋ kán || já yùr- -àn³} \]
\[
\text{dog-PL.N CON.PL/N.PL ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.PL}
\]

‘Those dogs, I know them.’

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3 The low back rounded vowel /ua/ in the third person non-human plural (3NH.PL) object /-uàr/ ~ /-uàn/ is a diphthongized monophthong, phonologically equivalent to /ɔ/, and historically derived from *ɔ*. In Laal, this vowel is strictly banned from non-stem-initial position, and any underlying /ua/ in this position is changed to /a/. The 3NH.PL object suffix is thus always realized /-àr/. The rounded nature of its vowel can clearly be identified by the fact that it triggers rounding harmony on the previous vowel, as in /yìr- -àr/ → /yùr- -àr/ ‘know-them (NH)’ in (3f–g), versus /yìr- -àr/ → /yìr- -àr/ ‘know-it’ in (3c).
3 Morphology of gender and agreement

3.1 Gender morphology in the pronominal subsystem

Laal has a complex pronominal subsystem involving both independent words (emphatic/independent pronouns, subject pronouns, dative pronouns, some possessive) and suffixes (object, some possessive). Subject and emphatic/independent pronouns are listed in Table 3 (person categories with gender distinctions are highlighted in tables). As can be seen, the pronominal subsystem distinguishes three persons, with a systematic number distinction between singular and plural for all persons, and an exclusive versus inclusive distinction in the first person plural.
Gender distinctions are attested with the first and third persons only. As seen in Figure 2 above, the third person is characterized by a three-way masculine versus feminine versus non-human distinction in the singular, and a two-way distinction in the plural, where masculine and feminine are collapsed into one human category.4

The object and inalienable possessive suffix paradigms, shown in Table 4, are structured in the same way, with only one difference: there is no gender distinction in the first person singular. Two morphological series of object suffixes are attested. The N-series is default (it is the one employed with recently borrowed verbs, or foreign verbs used in code-switching), while the R-series is restricted to a limited number of verbs. This allomorphy is unpredictable. The third person object and inalienable possessive suffixes are illustrated in (4) below.5

Table 3: Laal subject and independent pronouns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Independent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG 1</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>já</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>jí</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ì</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>ì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>īn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH</td>
<td>ān</td>
<td>ānī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL 1E</td>
<td></td>
<td>ùrú</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1í</td>
<td></td>
<td>ā̀n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>ā̀n</td>
<td>ā̀ǹnù</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>ī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH</td>
<td>uān</td>
<td>uānī</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gender distinctions are attested with the first and third persons only. As seen in Figure 2 above, the third person is characterized by a three-way masculine versus feminine versus non-human distinction in the singular, and a two-way distinction in the plural, where masculine and feminine are collapsed into one human category.4

The object and inalienable possessive suffix paradigms, shown in Table 4, are structured in the same way, with only one difference: there is no gender distinction in the first person singular. Two morphological series of object suffixes are attested. The N-series is default (it is the one employed with recently borrowed verbs, or foreign verbs used in code-switching), while the R-series is restricted to a limited number of verbs. This allomorphy is unpredictable. The third person object and inalienable possessive suffixes are illustrated in (4) below.5

4 The feminine versus masculine distinction in the first person is attested only with subject and independent pronouns, and is likely an innovation, as clearly shown by (i) the difference in form between these two pronouns and the rest of the paradigm (they are the only two H-toned and consonant-initial subject and independent pronouns), (ii) the absence of gender distinctions in the first person singular in the other pronominal paradigms described below (object, possessive etc.), (iii) the absence of gender distinctions in the first person plural, and (iv) the absence of a difference between the subject and independent forms of the first person singular pronouns. The resemblance of these two pronouns with the masculine and feminine singular determiner bases /ja/ and /ji/ described in Section 3.2 is striking, although it is unclear what the historical source of these two innovative pronouns is.

5 Regular vowel harmony processes apply: the high vowel of the root raises the following mid vowel to [+high] (3f.SG), and a round vowel in the suffix rounds the root vowel (3NH.PL). Additionally, the diphthongized vowel /ua/ is reduced to /a/ in 3N.PL, by virtue of a general phonotactic rule simplifying the diphthongized low peripheral vowels /ia/ (< e) and /ua/ (< o) to /a/ in non-stem-initial position.
Finally, Laal has three independent pronouns expressing dative, inalienable possession, and alienable possession, which consist of a morphological base (/n-/, /n̥-/, and preposition /ɗē/ ‘at’ respectively) inflected for person, gender, and number with a specific set of suffixes, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Independent dative and possessives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Suffixes</th>
<th>Dative</th>
<th>Inalienable possessive</th>
<th>dē ‘at’ &amp; Alienable possessive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SG</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-i</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>nì</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-ā</td>
<td>nā</td>
<td>nā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 M</td>
<td>-ār</td>
<td>nār</td>
<td>nār</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>-ōg</td>
<td>nog</td>
<td>nog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NH</td>
<td>-ānā</td>
<td>nānā</td>
<td>nānā</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PL</td>
<td>1e</td>
<td>-ūrā ~ -ū</td>
<td>nūrā ~ nū</td>
<td>dūūrō</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1i</td>
<td>-ān</td>
<td>nān</td>
<td>nān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-ān</td>
<td>nān</td>
<td>nān</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 H</td>
<td>-irī ~ -ī</td>
<td>nīrī ~ nī</td>
<td>dēērī</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>NH</td>
<td>-uānā</td>
<td>nuānā</td>
<td>nuānā</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note that inalienable possessive suffixes and /n-/ inalienable possessive pronouns are in arbitrary complementary distribution: inalienable possession is expressed with possessive suffixes with about 60 nouns only (mostly body parts and kinship terms, e.g. /bòg-ó/ ‘her shoulder’ in (4) above), with /n-/ pronouns in all other cases, e.g. /bārī nūg/ ‘her back’ (cf. Boyeldieu 1982a: 29–32, 1987). Examples (5) and (6) illustrate the dative and alienable possessive pronouns. The latter, a grammaticalization of the inflected preposition /ɗē/ ‘at’, is used in a connective construction (cf. Section 3.3.1).

(5) i huár nār nf6 nā-ár nē pay

3H.PL.S send DAT:3M.SG (say)that mother-3M.SG EVID be.sick

‘They sent him [a messenger who said] that his mother is sick.’

[120407-001:19]

(6) nyaw mā dōog/dēēri

house.N CON.N.SG POSS:3F.SG/3H.PL ‘his/their (h) house’

3.2 Gender morphology in the functional word subsystem

The functional word subsystem includes seven markers belonging to different grammatical categories and agreeing in gender and number with the noun they determine, modify, or are coreferential with. These are the connective particle (CON) used for noun modification, the indefinite determiner (INDF1), the partitive indefinite determiner and pronoun (INDF2, ‘one of X’), the ad/pronominal demonstrative (DEM1) and predicative demonstrative (DEM2), and the focus (FOC) and topic (TOP) markers. These elements are all derived from the combination of five morphological bases /ja ji ma ya yi/ and specific suprasegmental and/or segmental suffixes. As we saw in (2)

\[\text{Table 6: Semantics and agreement classes in the functional word subsystem.}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semantics</th>
<th>Agreement class</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ja/</td>
<td>Masculine singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ji/</td>
<td>Feminine singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ma/</td>
<td>Neuter singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ya/</td>
<td>Neuter plural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/yi/</td>
<td>Non-human singular</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All plural</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 The quotative marker mē ‘say’ introducing quotes/reported speech is homophonous with the quotative evidential mē (EVID) used at the beginning of the verbal domain within the quote. These are however two different markers. They are accordingly glossed differently (cf. Lionnet 2017).
above, these five bases are associated with different agreement classes defined by specific gender/number associations. This is summarized in Table 6. The syntax of these markers will be described in Section 3.3. The full paradigms for the seven agreeing functional words are shown in Table 7.

Table 6: Gender-sensitive functional words in Laal.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CON*</th>
<th>H</th>
<th>FOC</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>INDF L-n</th>
<th>INDF2 HL-nan</th>
<th>TOP HM[,]ηVcopy</th>
<th>DEM1 HM[,]ηVcopy</th>
<th>DEM2 LH[,]ηVcopy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>/ja/</td>
<td>jǎ</td>
<td>jà</td>
<td>jǎn</td>
<td>jánan</td>
<td>juǎn</td>
<td>juǎnǎ</td>
<td>juǎná</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ji/</td>
<td>jī</td>
<td>jì</td>
<td>jīn</td>
<td>jīnǎn</td>
<td>jūn</td>
<td>jūnǎ</td>
<td>jūnǎ</td>
<td>juǎná</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ma/</td>
<td>má</td>
<td>mā</td>
<td>mān</td>
<td>mānǎn</td>
<td>mǔn</td>
<td>mǔnǎ</td>
<td>mǔnǎ</td>
<td>mǔnǎ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/ya/</td>
<td>yá</td>
<td>yà</td>
<td>yǎn</td>
<td>yǎnǎn</td>
<td>(*yǔn)</td>
<td>yǔnǎ</td>
<td>yǔnǎ</td>
<td>yǔnǎ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>/yi/</td>
<td>yí</td>
<td>yì</td>
<td>yǐn</td>
<td>yǐnǎn</td>
<td>(*yǔn)</td>
<td>yǔnǔ</td>
<td>yǔnǔ</td>
<td>yǔnǔ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The connective marker also has a floating H tone allomorph, realized on the last mora of the immediately preceding word. It is inaudible when following a mora already carrying a H tone. This allomorph is systematically transcribed with an apostrophe: /nya+w + H/ ‘house + con’ = [nya+w], transcribed nya+w; /mu+ñ + H/ ‘people + con’ = [mu+ñ], transcribed mu+ñ.

Note that the /ya/ and /yi/ forms of the topic marker are unattested (cf. Section 3.3.4). They might have been historically attested as *yu+ñ and *yu+ñ respectively.

3.3 Noun phrase structure and gender agreement

A sketch of the Laal noun phrase structure is given in Table 8, slightly simplified for the sake of clarity and concision. Functional words that agree with the noun are highlighted (see paradigms in Table 7 above), and agreement is shown with subscript indices. As can be seen, the noun is always the first element of the noun phrase. Modifiers immediately follow the noun (either a genitive modifier or a connective construction). Numerals follow modifiers, and are followed by demonstratives, definite/indefinite determiners, and topic and focus markers, in that order.

Table 8: Noun phrase structure and gender agreement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NOUN</th>
<th>Modifier</th>
<th>Numeral</th>
<th>DET</th>
<th>Inf. Str.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Connective construction:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DEM1</td>
<td>- FOC1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>con† + modifier</td>
<td></td>
<td>- INDF1</td>
<td>- INDF2</td>
<td>- TOP1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(incl. con† + predicative dem2o)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- DEF</td>
<td>- TOP (non-gendered)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.3.1 Noun modification

I will focus exclusively on cases of modification which trigger gender agreement. Other cases are left aside, e.g. modification by a numeral, or a genitive construction (cf. Lionnet 2015).

Most nominal modifiers are introduced by a connective particle agreeing in gender and number with the head noun (cf. Table 7). This connective construction is used for noun modification by a variety of morphosyntactic categories, as illustrated in examples (7) through (11). Throughout this section, nouns triggering gender agreement are underlined, and agreement is shown with subscript indices.

(7) Noun or noun phrase modifier
   a. ṵiŋí, [jí, lá] woman. FCON.F.SG Gori ‘a woman from Gori’
   b. ɓiäag, [má, nəm já láá] dog.N CON.N.SG my.brother.M.SG CON.M.SG be.little ‘my younger brother’s dog’

(8) (Ordinal) numeral modifier
   nō, [já, ísi níri] person.H CON.M.SG two POSS:3H.PL ‘the second man (among them)’

(9) Adverbial modifier
   sůwá, băn [yí, dāŋá gə mər] Arab.H EMPH CON.PL there in river ‘the Arabs who are over there [on the island] in the river’

(10) Modifying prepositional phrase
     wům-ány, nūg [yi, kí bərī nūg] sibling-PL.H POSS:3F.SG CON.PL at back POSS:3F.SG ‘her younger sisters’ (lit. her sisters who are behind her)

9 There is no morphological difference between cardinal and ordinal numerals: a numeral is interpreted as ordinal when used with a possessive pronoun in a connective construction, as in (8).
10 For the agreement triggered by nō ‘person’, see Section 4.1.
(11) Relative clause

a. \[\text{nàârà}_i \ [\text{já}_i \  \dot{o} \  \text{kú} \  \dot{èèn}]\]
   \[\text{man.M CON.M.SG 2SG.S see yesterday}\]
   ‘the man that you saw yesterday’

b. \[\text{yùrd}_i \ [\text{ýí}_i \  \dot{já} \  \dot{íny} \  \dot{diààn}]\]
   \[\text{place.A CON.NH.SG 1M.SG.S stay there}\]
   ‘the place where I live’ (lit. the place which I live there)

c. \[\text{biàáag}_i \ [\text{má}_i \  \dot{láá}]\]
   \[\text{dog.N CON.N.SG be.small}\]
   ‘a small dog’ (lit. a dog which is small)

d. \[\text{ãý}_i \ [\text{já}_i \  \dot{juàŋá}_i] \  \dot{mì} \  \dot{nyíñí}…\]
   \[\text{3M.SG.IND CON.M.SG DEM2.M.SG EVID come}\]
   ‘[When] this one here came…’

Note that there are no adjectives in Laal: “property” words (Haspelmath 2012) belong to the verb category. They must thus be used in a relative/connective construction when modifying a noun, as in (11c). Similarly, the predicative demonstrative (DEM2), best translated as ‘be here, be this one’, must be used in a connective/relative construction when modifying a noun, with a meaning very close to English ‘this X right here.’ This is illustrated in (11d) above, where the speaker addresses the translator during an interview, and refers to the interviewer as \text{ãý já juàŋá} ‘he who is right here.’ Headless connective constructions, illustrated in (12), are attested and frequent (see also (26a) and (27)).

(12) \[\text{já} \  \text{múnúŋ} \  \text{néér} \  \dot{lē} \  \dot{kàw} \  \text{Kànà Gun}\]
   \[\text{CON.M.SG engender my.mother CONTR be.called (name)}\]
   ‘As for [the man] who fathered my mother, his name was Kana Gun.’

A noun can be modified by several successive connective constructions, all of which are introduced by the same form of the connective agreeing with the head noun:11

(13) \[\text{nò}_i \ [\text{já}_i \  \text{Tàná}] \ [\text{já}_i \  \dot{sá} \  \dot{àmàl}]\]
   \[\text{person.H CON.M.SG (name) CON.M.SG take chieftainship TOP.M.SG}\]
   ‘As for the man from the Tana clan who took the chieftainship …’

---

11 For an explanation of the masculine agreement triggered by the noun nò ‘person’, see Section 4.1.
3.3.2 Demonstratives

Laal has two gender-sensitive demonstratives. Both are in-praesentia, exophoric demonstratives, with the same semantics (in particular there is no distance- or person-based contrast); they only differ in terms of word class and usage. The first one, $\text{DEM}_1$, is used both adnominally (14a) and as a substitute of the noun (14b). The second one, $\text{DEM}_2$, is predicative, and illustrated in (12d) above.

(14) a. $\text{bàmsà}_i$ yúnū $\text{kán}$

\begin{tabular}{lll}
float.N & $\text{DEM}_1$.PL & DEF \\
\end{tabular}

‘these floats’ (speaker pointing at multiple floats) [121110-KG1:30]

b. $\text{juáŋā}_i$ mál pāw-àr$\text{i}$

\begin{tabular}{lll}
$\text{DEM}_1$.M.SG & shoot & fellow-3.M.SG.POSS \\
$\text{juáŋā}_i$ & k̲w & mál pāw-àr$\text{i}$\\
$\text{DEM}_1$.M.SG & too & shoot fellow-3.M.SG.POSS \\
\end{tabular}

‘This one shoots at his opponent, and this one also shoots at his opponent.’ (pointing to the imagined positions of the warriors) [121029-NK2(3):134]

3.3.3 Determiners

Determiners in Laal are NP-final. Laal has an invariable definite determiner $\text{kání}^{12}$, illustrated in (3) above, and two indefinite determiners which agree in gender and number with the noun they determine: a simple indefinite determiner ($\text{INDF}_1$), and a partitive indefinite determiner (‘a certain X out of a group of Xs’; $\text{INDF}_2$), whose paradigms are shown in Table 7 above. These are illustrated in (15) and (16) respectively. Note that $\text{INDF}_2$ may also be used pronominally, as shown in (16), if the parenthesized noun $\text{nō} ‘\text{person}’$ is ignored.

(15) $\text{nyuàál}_i$ mān$\bar{i}$ diààn$^{13}$ k̲w jīndà

\begin{tabular}{llll}
grass.N & $\text{INDF}_1$.N.SG & (be)there & be.called grass.sp \\
\end{tabular}

‘There is a grass called jīndà.’ [121110-KG1:61]

(16) (n̲ō) jánàn$\text{i}$ (n̲ir̲ī) nyíní cuàrá

\begin{tabular}{llll}
person.H & $\text{INDF}_2$.M.SG & POSS:3H.PL & come search-2SG.O \\
\end{tabular}

‘One (person) (of them) came looking for you.’

$^{12}$ This marker is described as a definite determiner here for the sake of simplicity. Its functions, which go beyond marking definiteness, are outside the scope of this paper.

$^{13}$ Locative predication is non-verbal in Laal.
3.3.4 Topic and focus

The topic and focus markers are always the last elements in the noun phrase. The topic marker is gender-sensitive (cf. Table 7): it agrees with the head noun of the topicalized NP, as shown in (17), where the topicalized NP is in square brackets.

(17) \[bêteshr, jāi dēē jāi mūmū bədr]\nmy.gfather.M CON.M.SG POSS:1SG CON.M.SG engender my.father
jaŋi nā-ārī jī dāārī i jēgrū
TOP.M.SG mother-3M.SG.POSS CON.F.SG POSS:3M.SG IDEN Jegru
‘As for my paternal grandfather, his mother was [from the] Jegru [clan]’ (lit. my grandfather who fathered my father…)

As mentioned in Section 3.2 above, the /ya/ and /yi/ forms of the topic marker are unattested in contemporary Laal. For nouns triggering the use of such forms, the only possibility for topicalization is the use of the gender-neutral topic marker nūŋ (which can be used in lieu of the gender-sensitive topic marker with the same function). This is illustrated in (18) with the abstract noun yâw ‘language’, with which the use of invariable nūŋ is the only option (agreement is shown in parentheses; see also (30)).

(18) \[yâw, dımū kān] nūŋ(ı) ɔ mí īny\nlanguage.A Barma DEF TOP 2SG.S EVID stay
dā ɗānī ɔ mí nduã-ànī
where then 2SG.S EVID learn-NH.SG
‘[He asked:] The Barma language, where did you learn it?’

The focus marker (see full paradigm in Table 7) agrees in gender and number with the element being focused. This element may be a noun or noun phrase, as in (19) – or an entire clause, which triggers abstract agreement, as we will see in Section 4.2.

(19) \[yî dân [wûrã] yī mí tɛɛ kî bɛɛ\nCON.NH.SG ANAPH man:PL(H) FOC.PL EVID IPFV do or
[yînã] yîj mî tɛɛ kî
woman:PL.H FOC.PL EVID IPFV do
‘[she asked:] that [tradition you mentioned], was it men who practiced it, or was it women who practiced it?’
3.4 Diachronic hypothesis

One of the most notable features of the Laal gender system is the discrepancy between the pronominal and functional word subsystems, described in Section 2 above. The pronominal subsystem is simpler and most likely conservative – the object and possessive suffixes in particular can be considered relatively old, given their status as affixes and the high level of lexicalized suppletion that characterizes them. I hypothesize that the pronominal subsystem represents the former Laal gender system, i.e. a sex-based, three-gender system distinguishing feminine (human females), masculine (human males), and non-human (everything else). The abstract gender, which is formally absent from the pronominal subsystem, not characterized by a specific form in the functional word system (it uses the syncretic /yi/ form), and in general only minimally different from the non-human neuter gender, as we saw, can be argued to be a recent innovation, as illustrated in Figure 6.

The former system must have been characterized by a conflation of masculine and feminine into a common human gender in the plural, like the current system, since there is no trace anywhere in contemporary Laal of a masculine/feminine distinction in the plural. This defines a total of five agreement classes, which used to correspond to the five third person pronominal forms, in a one-to-one

Figure 6: Historical semantic evolution of the Laal gender system.

The gender system of Laal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Former system</th>
<th>b. Current system</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SG</strong></td>
<td><strong>PL.</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>ja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>ji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>ma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
correspondence with the five determiner bases /ja ji ma yi ya/. The evolution from this system to the current system is shown in Table 9, with the determiner bases and subject pronouns.

Two innovations occurred in the functional word subsystem. (i) The non-human gender category was split into a neuter/non-abstract gender (marked by the historical non-human markers /ma/ and /ya/) and an abstract gender, for which the already syncretic (masculine + feminine) /yi/ form was recruited. (ii) This form was also expanded to mark the neuter singular and plural categories, in (quasi-)free variation with /ma/ and /ya/ respectively (Table 9b). The masculine and feminine genders are the only ones that have resisted the expansion of the /yi/ form. This is not surprising, given the cross-linguistic salience of the human semantic category.14

The rationale behind the choice of /ma/ or /ya/ versus /yi/ to make neuter (non-abstract) agreement is unclear. It seems that /yi/ is gaining ground and slowly replacing the other two markers, but not at the same pace for all the functional words listed in Table 7 above. The connective seems to be particularly impacted: the neuter forms má and yá are rather rare in natural speech, although they are still frequently given in elicitation. This is especially true of plural yá, extremely rare in natural speech, and used mostly by older people, as already noted by Boyeldieu (1982a: 8–10). This erosion of the neuter plural forms also affects the pronominal subsystem: third person neuter plural pronouns are often replaced with the neuter singular forms in natural speech, although speakers tend to correct themselves and give the neuter plural as “more correct” in elicitation.

Some functional words, however, do not seem to allow the /yi/ form to replace the neuter singular /ma/ form. For example, the neuter form of the demonstrative is always the /ma/ form muáŋá, never the /yi/ form yúŋū. The latter is thus always either a marker of abstract singular, or of general plural.

Furthermore, the replacement of /ma/ with /yi/ is not attested in all contexts. For instance, the connective má is still used to the exclusion of yí in headless connective constructions if the understood head is a non-human, concrete object or being (i.e. neuter) (cf. (28)).

14 If the /yi/ form were to definitively replace the /ma/ and /ya/ forms, the system would be much simplified: the abstractness distinction in the [–human] category would disappear, bringing the gender system back to a three-way masculine versus feminine versus non-human/neuter system, and there would be only three determiner forms left: masculine singular /ja/, feminine singular /ji/, and /yi/ for human (masculine/feminine) plural, and neuter singular and plural.
4 The semantics of gender in Laal

4.1 [+human] gender categories

The examples in (20) below, which consist in nouns modified by a connective/relative clause, show that the masculine versus feminine distinction exists only for nouns with human reference. As seen in (20d–e), nouns referring to female and male animals, including for such high-animacy animals as dogs, are grammatically neutral.

(20) a. \( \text{nīnī} \) jī gūdā
\( \text{woman.F} \) \( \text{CON.F.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘big woman (lit. woman that is big)’

b. \( \text{nāā} \) rā jā gūdā
\( \text{man.M} \) \( \text{CON.M.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘big man’

c. \( \text{biāā} \) má gūdā
\( \text{dog.N} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘big dog’

d. \( \text{biāā} \) má/*jī nīnī má/*jī gūdā
\( \text{dog.N} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG/*F.SG} \) \( \text{woman.F} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG/*F.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘big female dog’

e. \( \text{biāā} \) má/*jā nāā rā má/*jā gūdā
\( \text{dog.N} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG/*M.SG} \) \( \text{man.M} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG/*M.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘big male dog’

The use of the feminine and masculine forms for the second connective in (20d–e) is only ungrammatical if this connective is meant to agree in gender with \( \text{biāā} \) ‘dog’, i.e. if the connective/relative clause ‘which is big’ is meant to modify ‘dog’. The feminine or masculine forms are grammatical if they are understood as modifying the nouns \( \text{nīnī} \) ‘woman’ or \( \text{nāā} \) ‘man’ respectively, as shown in (21).

(21) \( \text{[biāā} \) má \( \text{nīnī} \) \( \text{ji} \) gūdā]]
\( \text{dog.N} \) \( \text{CON.N.SG} \) \( \text{woman.F} \) \( \text{CON.F.SG} \) \( \text{be.big} \)
‘dog of a/the big woman’

Two words can be characterized as [+human] and underspecified for sex-based gender in the singular: e.g. \( \text{nō} \) ‘person:SG’ and \( \text{jē} \) ‘who’. In such cases, the agreement depends on the sex of the actual referent, when known, as shown in (22).

---

15 Nouns referring to non-human beings may trigger agreement in the masculine or feminine when personified, as is frequent in folktales.
When the sex of the referent is unknown, as in most cases for jè ‘who’, the default agreement seems to be masculine, as in (23).

(23)  jè  jài  kuáná
      who  FOC.M.SG  give:2SG.O

‘Who (M) is it that gave [it] to you?’

[121114-FD1:160]

The use of the [-human] neuter or abstract genders is not an option in such case, i.e. *nô má/yí dô and *jè má/yì kuáná are ungrammatical.

Proper names regularly trigger masculine or feminine agreement depending on the sex of their referent, as shown in (24).

(24) a.  wô  Dààr Gûni  jûŋi  bâ-àri  kâw  yô
      and  name.M  TOP.M.SG  father-3M.SG.POSS  be.called  what

‘And Daar Gun, what was his father’s name?’

[121114-FD1:49]

b.  wô  Fâlmâtà  jûŋi  hâsâ  inî  dô
      and  name.F  TOP.F.SG  now  3F.SG.S  where

‘And Falmata, where is she now?’

[121114-FD1:140]

4.2 [-human] gender categories

As we saw in Sections 2 and 3.4, the formal contrast between neuter and abstract is minimal, and most probably a recent development in the language. Given the partial overlap between the specifically neuter /ma/ and /ya/ forms and the syncretic /yi/ form of the functional words, it is sometimes difficult to identify the gender of a noun in a natural context of use. The only way to determine whether a noun is neuter or abstract is to establish that it triggers exclusive yi-agreement, and never ma/ya-agreement, which can be done only through careful elicitation. After testing a selected set of nouns, it became clear that only nouns with abstract reference behaved in this way. A list of abstract nouns (underlined) is given in (25) for illustration.
Note that the abstract gender, like every other gender category in Laal, is strictly semantically determined, and does not depend on any lexical or morphological property of the noun. For example, deverbal nouns (suffix /-Vl/, partly irregular and frozen) trigger abstract agreement most of the time because in most cases they refer to abstract notions, e.g. sènyél ‘battle’ (< sèny ‘to fight’) in (26a). But some deverbal nouns refer to concrete objects or beings, in which case they trigger the agreement dictated by their semantics, e.g. neuter for pàlàl ‘harpoon’ (< pál ‘to fish’) in (26b).

(26) a. yí dúŋ i sènyél yí/*máí Ràábè kán
   CON.NH.SG ANAPH IDEN battle.A CON.NH.SG/*N (name) DEF
   ‘That is [the story of] the battle against Rabah.’ [120405-AK3(5):53]

b. pàlàl má/yí déé
   harpoon.sp.N CON.NS/NH.SG POSS:1SG
   ‘my harpoon’
The abstract form of the connective is used in the headless connective construction *yí dàn*, an anaphoric expression referring to the preceding statement, very frequent in discourse, as seen in (19) and (26a) above.

Any time the understood head of a headless connective construction is semantically [-human, +abstract], the connective is obligatorily *yí*, and never neuter *má*, as in (27). In contrast, if the understood head is a concrete object or being, the connective is in the neuter form (28). This is one of the cases where the /ma/ form is used to the exclusion of the /yi/ form for neuter singular agreement (cf. Section 3.4).

(27) \[yí/*má bàwàrà ká-àn] \[yí/*má jà\]

CON.NH.SG/*N.SG gfather-1SG.POSS do-3NH.SG.O FOC.NH.SG/*N.SG 1M.SG.S bìlà

speak

‘It is what my grand-father used to do that I [will] talk about.’

[120331-DK1:48]

(28) \[ò yìrà má/*yí à ény diààì à\]

2SG.S know CON.N.SG/*NH.SG 3M.SG.S stay there Q

‘[Of these three houses,] do you know the one he lives in?’

Finally, abstract agreement is also triggered by full finite clauses when focalized or topicalized. Clause focalization is frequent in alternative questions, illustrated in (29).

(29) \[ù nyùnì sèw] \[ù nyùnì ì bëë ì mìwì\]

3H.PL.S go abroad FOC.NH.SG/N.SG or 3H.PL.S die

‘Did they go abroad, or did they die?’

[120405-AK3(1):28]

Finite clause topicalization is used in paratactic constructions, usually conveying temporal (as in (30)), causal, or conditional semantics (the topic marker *nùŋ* is used here, for lack of dedicated /yi/ and /ya/ forms of the topic marker, cf. Table 7).

(30) \[wò ìrí ]|| [ù nyùnì] \[ù nùŋ*muàŋi ] || i bëëbëë\]

3H.PL.IND 3H.PL.S come TOP/*TOP.N.SG IDEN blacksmith:PL

‘And them (the Jegru clan), [when] they arrived, they were Blacksmiths.’

[170703-KN2:306]

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Laal has a strictly semantic, partly sex-based gender system, making use of a primary distinction between human and non-human, and
secondary distinctions within each of these two categories: masculine versus feminine within the human category, and abstract versus neuter within the non-human one. Gender is covert on nouns, and visible only through agreement on pronouns and functional words. The morphology of gender agreement and the structure of agreement classes is complex, most notably because of a discrepancy between the pronominal and functional word subsystems. This discrepancy is likely the result of two historical changes in the functional word subsystem: (i) the development of a neuter versus abstract contrast within the non-human category (only minimally distinguished, but clearly established), and (ii) the extension of the historical marker of the human plural agreement class /yi/ to all agreement classes except masculine and feminine singular, in quasi-free variation with the now neuter-marking /ma/ and /ya/ markers. The current system is thus likely to have derived from a simpler, strictly sex-based system distinguishing three genders (human masculine vs. human feminine vs. non-human) and five agreement classes (feminine vs. masculine vs. non-human in the singular, human vs. non-human in the plural), and characterized by a one-to-one correspondence with five morphological markers in both subsystems.

**Abbreviations**

Abbreviations follow the Leipzig glossing rules, except the following:

- || intonational break
- A abstract
- ANAPH anaphoric
- CON connective
- CONTR contrastive topic
- EMPH emphatic
- EVID quotative evidential
- GER gerund
- H human
- IDEN identificational predicator
- IND independent
- NH non-human
- O object
- S subject

**References**


