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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: [\pm human], [masculine/feminine], and [\pm 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 connotations 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.

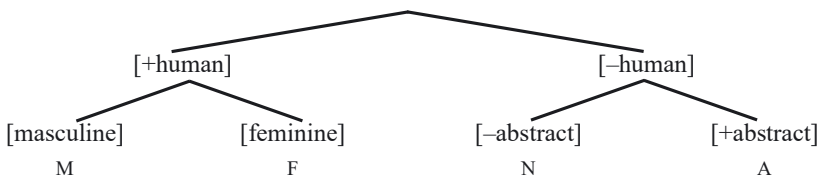


Figure 1: Semantic features and structure of the Laal gender system.

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

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], <j> = [ʝ], <ua> = [ɔ ~ ɯa], <ia> = [ɛ ~ ɪa], <VV> = [V:].

- (1) a. *wúlè/wúlè* ‘rhinoceros’ d. *gār-āl/gār-ī* ‘Acacia spp.’
 b. *miàn/mèn-ú* ‘hoe’ e. *mīw/mīw* ‘liver’
 c. *súgl-é/súgúl* ‘guineafowl’ f. *nīni/yīnān* ‘woman’

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).

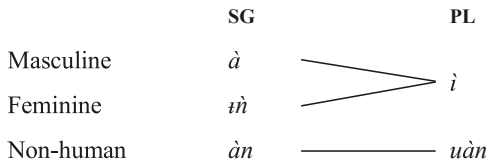


Figure 2: Gender agreement in the pronominal subsystem.

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. *já* masculine singular
 b. *jí* feminine singular
 c. *má* neuter singular
 d. *yá* neuter plural
 e. *yí* 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 *yí* 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.

	SG	PL
Masculine	<i>já</i>	<i>yí</i>
Feminine	<i>jí</i>	<i>yí</i>
Neuter	<i>má ~ yí</i>	<i>yá ~ yí</i>
Abstract	<i>yí</i>	<i>yí</i>

Secondly, there is a split in the morphological expression of non-human agreement along the [\pm 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 *yí* 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 *yí*, 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).

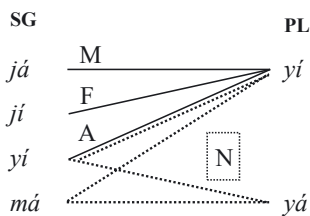


Figure 3: Gender agreement in the functional word subsystem.

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.

Pronoun	AGR	Functional word	SG	PL
à	1	<i>já</i>	AGR1: masculine	AGR5: human
ìn	2	<i>jí</i>	AGR2: feminine	AGR6: neuter
àn	3	<i>má</i>	AGR3: neuter	AGR7: non-human
ì	5	<i>yí</i>	AGR4: non-human	
uàn	7			6

Figure 4: Laal agreement classes.

- (3) a. AGR1:
nāārā já dāṅ kán || já yìr- -ár
 man.M CON.M.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3M.SG
 ‘That man (previously mentioned), I know him.’
- b. AGR2:
nūnī jí dāṅ kán || já yùr- -ù
 woman.F CON.F.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3F.SG
 ‘That woman, I know her.’
- c. AGR3:
biāāg yí/má dāṅ kán || já yìr- -àr
 dog.N CON.NH.SG/N.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.SG
 ‘That dog, I know it.’
- d. AGR4:
*mūw-āl yí/*má dāṅ kán || já yìr- -àr*
 custom-SG.A CON.NH.SG/*N.SG ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.SG
 ‘That custom, I know it.’
- e. AGR5:
yīnān/wūrā yí dāṅ kán || já yìr- -rī
 women/men.H CON.PL ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3H.PL
 ‘Those women/men, I know them.’
- f. AGR6:
būg-āny yí/yá dāṅ kán || já yùr- -àr³
 dog-PL.N CON.PL/N.PL ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.PL
 ‘Those dogs, I know them.’

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 [yīrā -uàr] → /yū̄r-àr/ ‘know-them (NH)’ in (3f-g), versus [yīrā -àr] → /yīr-àr/ ‘know-it’ in (3c).

- g. AGR7:
mīiw-ūr *yí/*yá* *dāŋ* *kán* || *já* *yūr-* *-ār*
 custom-PL.A CON.PL/*N.PL ANAPH DEF 1M.SG know 3NH.PL
 ‘Those customs, I know them.’

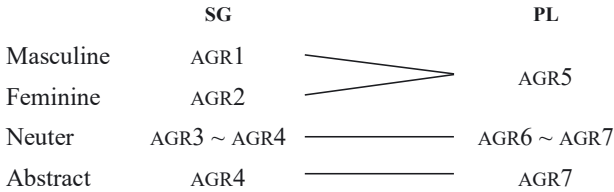


Figure 5: Gender, number, and agreement classes in Laal.

Note that abstract nouns cannot be said to be transnumeral, since (i) they are sometimes marked for number (e.g. *mīiw-āl/mīiw-ūr* ‘tradition’ in (3d) and (3g) above), and (ii) they trigger the use of different pronominal forms in the singular and plural, even when invariable (e.g. *lââ* ‘folktale(s)'), as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Abstract agreement in the singular and plural.

	Noun		Connective	Subject pronoun
SG	<i>mīiw-āl</i> ‘tradition’,	<i>lââ</i> ‘folktale’	<i>yí</i>	<i>ân</i>
PL	<i>mīiw-ūr</i> ‘traditions’,	<i>lââ</i> ‘folktales’	<i>yí</i>	<i>uân</i>

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.

Table 3: Laal subject and independent pronouns.

		Gender	Subject	Independent		
SG	1	M		<i>já</i>		
		F		<i>jí</i>		
	2		ò		<i>uǎy</i>	
		3	M	â	<i>ǎy</i>	
			F	ìn	<i>ìní</i>	
			NH	àn	<i>àní</i>	
PL	1E			<i>ùrú</i>		
	1i			<i>ǎŋ</i>		
	2		ùn		<i>ùnún</i>	
		3	H	ì	<i>ìrí</i>	
			NH	uàn	<i>uàní</i>	

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/ (< *ε) and /ua/ (< *ɔ) to /a/ in non-stem-initial position.

Table 4: Laal object and possessive suffixes.

		Gender	Object		Possessive
			N-series	R-series	
SG	1		- <i>ân</i>	- <i>âr</i>	- <i>âr</i>
	2		- <i>uân</i>	- <i>uâ</i>	- <i>â</i>
	3	M	- <i>ân</i>	- <i>âr</i>	- <i>âr</i>
		F	- <i>ôn</i>	- <i>ô</i>	- <i>ô, -òg</i>
	NH	- <i>ân</i>	- <i>âr</i>	- <i>ân</i>	
PL	1E		- <i>nùrú ~ -nũ</i>	- <i>nùrú ~ -rũ</i>	- <i>rú</i>
	1i		- <i>nǎŋ</i>	- <i>nǎŋ ~ -rǎŋ</i>	- <i>rǎŋ</i>
	2		- <i>nũŋ</i>	- <i>nũŋ, -rũŋ</i>	- <i>rũŋ</i>
	3	H	- <i>nìrí ~ -nĩ</i>	- <i>nìrí ~ -rĩ</i>	- <i>rí</i>
		NH	- <i>uân</i>	- <i>uâr</i>	- <i>uân</i>

(4)		‘show him, her...’	‘catch him, her...’	‘his, her... shoulder’
3SG	M	<i>bír-ân</i>	<i>pír-âr</i>	<i>bàg-âr</i>
	F	<i>býr-ùn</i>	<i>púr-ù</i>	<i>bòg-ò</i>
	NH	<i>bír-àn</i>	<i>pír-âr</i>	<i>bàg-àn</i>
3PL	H	<i>bír-nìrí ~ bír-nĩ</i>	<i>pír-nìrí ~ pír-rĩ</i>	<i>bàg-rí</i>
	NH	<i>býr-àn</i>	<i>púr-âr</i>	<i>buàg-àn</i>

Finally, Laal has three independent pronouns expressing dative, inalienable possession, and alienable possession, which consist of a morphological base (/n-/ , /n²/, and preposition /dē/ ‘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.

		Gender	Suffixes	Dative	Inalienable possessive	dē ‘at’ & Alienable possessive
SG	1		- <i>ī</i>	<i>nī</i>	<i>nì</i>	<i>dēē</i>
	2		- <i>ā</i>	<i>nā</i>	<i>nâ</i>	<i>dāā</i>
	3	M	- <i>ār</i>	<i>nār</i>	<i>nâr</i>	<i>dāār</i>
		F	- <i>òg</i>		<i>nòg</i>	<i>dòòg</i>
	NH	- <i>àná</i>		<i>nàná</i>	<i>dāàná</i>	
PL	1e		- <i>ùrú ~ -ũ</i>	<i>nùrú ~ nũ</i>		<i>dòòró</i>
	1i		- <i>ǎŋ</i>	<i>nǎŋ</i>		<i>dǎŋ</i>
	2		- <i>ũŋ</i>	<i>nũŋ</i>		<i>dõŋ</i>
	3	H	- <i>ìrí ~ -ĩ</i>	<i>nìrí ~ nĩ</i>		<i>dèèrí</i>
		NH	- <i>uàná</i>	<i>nuàná</i>		<i>duàná</i>

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-ò/ ‘her shoulder’ in (4) above), with /n/ pronouns in all other cases, e.g. /bōrī nùg/ ‘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 /dē/ ‘at’, is used in a connective construction (cf. Section 3.3.1).

- (5) *ì huár nār m̄ ná-ár m̄ pāy*
 3H.PL.S send DAT:3M.SG (say)that mother-3M.SG EVID be.sick
 ‘They sent him; [a messenger who said] that his_i mother is sick.’
 [120407-001:19]

- (6) *nyàw má dōdòg/dèèrì*
 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)

Table 6: Semantics and agreement classes in the functional word subsystem.

	Semantics	Agreement class
/ja/	Masculine singular	AGR1
/ji/	Feminine singular	AGR2
/ma/	Neuter singular	AGR3
/ya/	Neuter plural	AGR6
/yi/	{ Non-human singular All plural	AGR3, AGR4 AGR5, AGR6, AGR7

⁶ The quotative marker *m̄* ‘say’ introducing quotes/reported speech is homophonous with the quotative evidential *m̄* (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).

Table 7: Gender-sensitive functional words in Laal.

	CON* H	FOC L	INDF L-n	INDF2 HL-nan	TOP M[rd]-ŋ	DEM1 HM[rd]-ŋV _{copy}	DEM2 LH[rd]-ŋV _{copy}
/ja/	<i>já</i>	<i>jà</i>	<i>jàn</i>	<i>jánàn</i>	<i>juāŋ</i>	<i>juáŋā</i>	<i>juàŋá</i>
/ji/	<i>jí</i>	<i>jì</i>	<i>jìn</i>	<i>jínàn</i>	<i>jūŋ</i>	<i>júŋū</i>	<i>jùŋú</i>
/ma/	<i>má</i>	<i>mà</i>	<i>màn</i>	<i>mánàn</i>	<i>muāŋ</i>	<i>muáŋā</i>	<i>muàŋá</i>
/ya/	<i>yá</i>	<i>yà</i>	<i>yàn</i>	<i>yánàn</i>	(* <i>yuāŋ</i>)	<i>yuáŋā</i>	<i>yuàŋá</i>
/yi/	<i>yí</i>	<i>yì</i>	<i>yìn</i>	<i>yínàn</i>	(* <i>yūŋ</i>)	<i>yúŋū</i>	<i>yùŋú</i>

*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: /nyàw + H/ 'house + CON' = [nyàw], transcribed *nyáw'*, /muāŋ + H/ 'people + CON' = [muāŋ], transcribed *muāŋ'*.

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.

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 **yuāŋ* and **yūŋ* 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.⁷ 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.

NOUN _i	Modifier	Numeral	DEM	DET	Inf. Str.
	– Connective construction:		DEM1 _i	– INDF1 _i	– FOC _i
	con _{N_i} + modifier			– INDF2 _i	– TOP _i
	(incl. con _{N_i} + predicative DEM2 _(ŋ))			– DEF	– TOP (non-gendered)
	– Genitive				

7 In particular: (i) a few invariable elements are ignored, (ii) not all elements are compatible with one another, and (iii) some may appear in a different order under specific conditions.

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 modifier⁸

a. nīnī_i [jī_i lá]
 woman. FCON.F.SG Gori
 ‘a woman from Gori’

b. biāāg_i [má_i nām já láá]
 dog.N CON.N.SG my.brother.M.SG CON.M.SG be.little
 ‘my younger brother’s dog’

(8) (Ordinal) numeral modifier⁹

nō_i [já_i īsī nīrī]
 person.H CON.M.SG two POSS:3H.PL
 ‘the second man (among them)’¹⁰

(9) Adverbial modifier

sūwá_i bān [yī_i dāhā gī mār]
 Arab.H EMPH CON.PL there in river
 ‘the Arabs who are over there [on the island] in the river’ [121108-KX3:56]

(10) Modifying prepositional phrase

wūm-āny_i nūg [yī_i kī bārī nūg]
 sibling-PL.H POSS:3F.SG CON.PL at back POSS:3F.SG
 ‘her younger sisters’ (lit. her sisters who are behind her) [140310-KN2:46]

⁸ For the semantic difference between the connective and genitive constructions, cf. Boyeldieu (1982a: 1–98, 1987).

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. *nāārā_i* [jā_i ò kú èèn]
 man.M CON.M.SG 2SG.S see yesterday
 ‘the man that you saw yesterday’
- b. *yār_i* [yí_i já ény diààn]
 place.A CON.NH.SG 1M.SG.S stay there
 ‘the place where I live’ (lit. the place which I live there)
- c. *biāāg_i* [má_i láá]
 dog.N CON.N.SG be.small
 ‘a small dog’ (lit. a dog which is small)
- d. *āy_i* [jā_i juàṅá_i] ḿé nyíní...
 3M.SG.IND CON.M.SG DEM2.M.SG EVID come
 ‘[When] this one here came...’ [121111-AK3:152]

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 *āy já juàṅá* ‘he who is right here.’ Headless connective constructions, illustrated in (12), are attested and frequent (see also (26a) and (27)).

- (12) [já múnúnj néér] lē kàw Kànà Gūn
 CON.M.SG engender my.mother CONTR be.called (name)
 ‘As for [the man] who fathered my mother, his name was Kana Gun.’
 [120405-AK3(4):14]

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) *nō_i* [já_i Táná] [já_i sá àmál] juāṅ_i...
 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 ...’
 [170703-KN2:548]

¹¹ For an explanation of the masculine agreement triggered by the noun *nō* ‘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, DEM1, is used both adnominally (14a) and as a substitute of the noun (14b). The second one, DEM2, is predicative, and illustrated in (12d) above.

- (14) a. *bàmsà_i* *yúŋū_i* *kán*
float.N DEM1.PL DEF
‘these floats’ (speaker pointing at multiple floats) [121110-KG1:30]
- b. *juáŋā_i* *mál* *páw-àr_i* ||
DEM1.M.SG shoot fellow-3.M.SG.POSS
juáŋā_i *káw* *mál* *páw-àr_i*
DEM1.M.SG too shoot fellow-3.M.SG.POSS
‘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 *kán*¹², illustrated in (3) above, and two indefinite determiners which agree in gender and number with the noun they determine: a simple indefinite determiner (INDF1), and a partitive indefinite determiner (‘a certain X out of a group of Xs’; INDF2), whose paradigms are shown in Table 7 above. These are illustrated in (15) and (16) respectively. Note that INDF2 may also be used pronominally, as shown in (16), if the parenthesized noun *nō* ‘person’ is ignored.

- (15) *nyuàál_i* *màn_i* *dìààn*¹³ *kàw* *jíndà*
grass.N INDF1.N.SG (be)there be.called grass.sp
‘There is a grass called *jíndà*.’ [121110-KG1:61]
- (16) (*nō_i*) *jánàn_i* (*nìrì*) *nyíní* *cuàrà*
person.H INDF2.M.SG POSS:3H.PL come search-2SG.O
‘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) *[bà̀wà̀r_i já_i dēē já_i múnúnj bà̀r]*
 my.gfather.M CON.M.SG POSS:1SG CON.M.SG engender my.father
juā̀nj_i ná-ár_i jǐ dā̀ār_i í jégrú
 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...)
 [120405-AK3(2):56]

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 *nū̀nj* (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 *yà̀w* ‘language’, with which the use of invariable *nū̀nj* is the only option (agreement is shown in parentheses; see also (30)).

- (18) *[yà̀w_i d̄míl kán] nū̀nj_(i) ò mí ínɣ*
 language.A Barma DEF TOP 2SG.S EVID stay
dǎ dā̀ní ò mí nduáy-àn_i
 where then 2SG.S EVID learn-NH.SG
 ‘[He asked:] The Barma language, where did you learn it?’
 [120405-AK3(4):73]

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) *yí dā̀nj [wūrā̀_i] yì_i mí tēé kí bēē*
 CON.NH.SG ANAPH man:PL(H) FOC.PL EVID IPFV do or
[yīnā̀nj_j] yì_j mí tēé kí
 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?’
 [120405-AK3(1):152]

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.

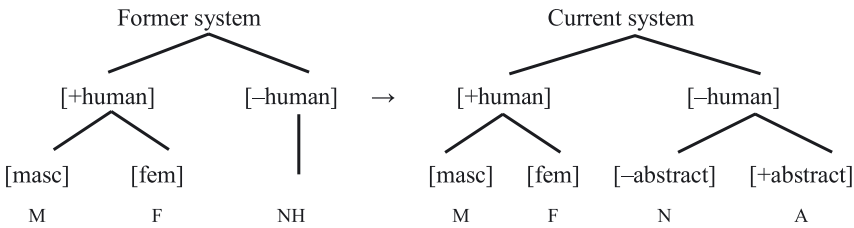


Figure 6: Historical semantic evolution of the Laal gender system.

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

Table 9: Historical evolution of Laal agreement classes.

a.	Former system				→	b.	Current system					
	SG		PL				SG		PL			
M	<i>ja</i>	—	<i>à</i>			M	<i>ja</i>	—	<i>à</i>	<i>yi</i>	—	<i>i</i>
F	<i>ji</i>	—	<i>ìn</i>	<i>yi</i> — <i>i</i>		F	<i>ji</i>	—	<i>ìn</i>			
						A	<i>yi</i>	>	<i>àn</i>	<i>yi</i>	>	<i>uàn</i>
N	<i>ma</i>	—	<i>àn</i>	<i>ya</i> — <i>uàn</i>		N	<i>ma ~ yi</i>	>		<i>ya ~ yi</i>	>	

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 *muáηā*, never the /yi/ form *yúηū*. 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. *nūnī_i* *jí_i* *gūdā*
 woman.F CON.F.SG be.big
 ‘big woman (lit. woman that is big)’
- b. *nāārā_i* *já_i* *gūdā*
 man.M CON.M.SG be.big
 ‘big man’
- c. *biāāg_i* *má_i* *gūdā*
 dog.N CON.N.SG be.big
 ‘big dog’
- d. *biāāg_i* *má_i/*jí_i* *nūnī* *má_i/*jí_i* *gūdā*
 dog.N CON.N.SG/*F.SG woman.F CON.N.SG/*F.SG be.big
 ‘big female dog’
- e. *biāāg_i* *má_i/*já_i* *nāārā* *má_i/*já_i* *gūdā*
 dog.N CON.N.SG/*M.SG man.M CON.N.SG/*M.SG 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 *biāāg* ‘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 *nūnī* ‘woman’ or *nāārā* ‘man’ respectively, as shown in (21).¹⁵

- (21) *[biāāg_i má_i [nūnī_i jí_i gūdā]]*
 dog.N CON.N.SG woman.F CON.F.SG 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. *nō* ‘person:sg’ and *jè* ‘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.

- (22) *bà-à* *í* *nō_i* *já_i* *dǎ*
 father-2SG.POSS IDEN person CON.M.SG where
wò *ná-á* *í* *nō_i* *jǐ_i* *dǎ*
 and mother-2SG.POSS IDEN person CON.F.SG where
 ‘Where was your father from, and where was your mother from?’ (lit. your father/mother is a person from where?) [170703-KN2:5-006]

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_i* *jà_i* *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. **nō má/yí dǎ* and **jè mà/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. *wò* *Dààr Gūn_i* *juān_i* *bà-à_{r_i}* *kàw* *yá*
 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. *wò* *Fálmátà_i* *jūn_i* *hásà* *ìn_i* *dǎ*
 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.

- (25) a. jòó_i-nǔñ' *dǒŋ* *yí*/**má*_i *Járu*
 origin.A-2PL.POSS:CON POSS:2PL CON.NH.SG/*N.SG (name)
 'your lineage, the Jaru' [120405-AK3(2):5]
- b. *í* mē_i *bàn* *yí*/**má*_i *rāāg* (...) *à*
 IDEN death.A EMPH CON.NH.SG/*N.SG God Q
 'Is it God's (i.e. natural) death [that killed them]?' [120405-AK3(2):34]
- c. làà_i *yí*/**yá*_i [...] *ò* *mé* *sá* *nìrì* *nūñ*
 tale.A CON.PL/*N.PL 2SG.S EVID take DAT:H.PL TOP
 'the folktales that you told them' (the translator is here referring to a series of tales told the day before by the interviewee)
 [120405-AK3(3):1]
- d. wógàd_i *yí*/**má*_i *bàl-à* *mé* *nūñ*...
 time.A CON.NH.SG/*N.SG husband-2SG.POSS die TOP
 'When your husband died, ...' [120405-AK3(4):56]
- e. bē_i *bàn* *yí*/**má*_i *cáá*
 war.A EMPH CON.NH.SG/*N.SG long.ago
 'the very war [that took place] a long time ago' [120405-AK3(5):13]
- f. dūrār_i *yí*/**má*_i *càrè* *gúrùs* *dìààn*
 work/use.A CON.NH.SG/*N.SG search:GER money (be)there
 'There is a pecuniary use.' (talking about a tree whose many products can be sold and generate income) [121125-AK1:28]
- g. yār_i *yí*/**má*_i *ì* *cìnyì* *dìààn* *nūñ*...
 place.A CON.NH.SG/*N.SG 3H.PL.S leave.PL there TOP
 'The place that they came from, ...' [170630-KD1:9]

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' (< *sěny* '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 *pàlâl* 'harpoon' (< *pál* 'to fish') in (26b).

- (26) a. *yí* *dāñ* *í* sènyél_i *yí*/**má*_i *Ráábè 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. pàlâl_i *má*/*yí*_i *dēē*
 harpoon.sp.N CON.N.SG/NH.SG POSS:1SG
 'my harpoon'

The abstract form of the connective is used in the headless connective construction *yí dāŋ*, 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 bə̀əw-ə̀r ká-à̀n] yì/*mà já
 CON.NH.SG/*N.SG gfather-1SG.POSS do-3NH.SG.O FOC.NH.SG/*N.SG 1M.SG.S
b̄ilā
 speak
 ‘It is what my grand-father used to do that I [will] talk about.’
 [120331-DK1:48]

- (28) ò yìrà má/*yí à íny dīà̀àn 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) [ì nyúni sēw]ᵢ yì/*màᵢ bēē ì míwì
 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 *nūŋ* is used here, for lack of dedicated /yi/ and /ya/ forms of the topic marker, cf. Table 7).

- (30) wò ìrí || [ì nyíní]ᵢ nūŋᵢ/*muāŋᵢ || í bēébé
 and 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

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