

# Morphological ineffability due to feature conflicts: Gender and declension in Russian\*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is about morphological and semantic gender and how some combinations of these two can lead to ineffability in morphology. I will consider a number of cases from Russian, where a noun has conflicting gender features and will show that conflicts result in a realization failure in some case but not in others. I will show that the difference between these cases follows from markedness of features and the position in the structure where they are introduced. The analysis of these data contributes to our understanding of how morphological ineffability may emerge in essentially interpretive Distributed Morphology framework. I will start with the discussion of gender and declension in section 2, present the data in section 3, derive morphological ineffability in section 4 and show how the analysis captures the data in section 5.

## 2. Gender in declension

Gender and declension are related in many languages but as a rule there is no one-to-one correspondence between them, and the one cannot be fully deduced from the other. This is also the case in Russian that has three genders and four declension classes (see Corbett 1982). The relation between them is summarized in table in (1). It shows that mapping between declension and gender is simple in some cases, for instance, all class IV nouns are neuter, and also all neuter nouns belong to class IV. In other cases, the connection is less straightforward. For instance, feminine nouns are in classes II and III; class II mainly consists of feminine nouns but includes a small number animate masculine nouns as well.

(1) *Declension and gender in Russian*

Declension	I	II	III	IV
Gender	MASC	FEM, some animate MASC	FEM	NEUTR

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The correlation but no full correspondence between declension and gender can be captured if insertion of class exponents targets gender features directly. Since gender alone is insufficient to determine class, it is accompanied with phonological or formal features associated with a root. Declension is thus decomposed into simpler features, and gender is one of them (see Roca 1989, Harris 1991, Wiese 2004, Wunderlich 2004, Caha 2019, 2020). I will pursue this type of approach in what follows.

I assume that three genders in Russian arise from different combinations of binary gender features  $[\pm\text{fem}]$  and  $[\pm\text{masc}]$ ; see (2).

(2) *Genders in Russian*

FEM	MASC	NEUTR
$[+\text{fem}][-\text{masc}]$	$[-\text{fem}][+\text{masc}]$	$[-\text{fem}][-\text{masc}]$

Four declension classes are in turn formed out of  $[\pm\text{fem}]$  gender feature and a formal feature  $[\pm\alpha]$ ; see (3). The presence of  $[\alpha]$  or  $[-\alpha]$  follows from idiosyncratic properties of a root.

(3) *Decomposition of declensions in Russian*

Declension	I	II	III	IV
Specification	$[-\text{fem}][+\alpha]$	$[\text{fem}][-\alpha]$	$[\text{fem}][+\alpha]$	$[-\text{fem}][-\alpha]$

Class I with masculine nouns and class IV with neuter nouns have  $[-\text{fem}]$  feature. Classes II and III include feminine nouns and are  $[\text{fem}]$ . Classes I and III are specified for  $[\alpha]$ , and classes II and IV have  $[-\alpha]$ . Note that whereas features used in the decomposition are different, produced natural classes match those produced by the class decomposition suggested for Russian in Müller 2004 and Alexiadou and Müller 2008. They are argued to be best suited for capturing transparadigmatic syncretism (i.e., syncretism between declensions) because they require the least number of exponents possible.

Alternative approaches to declension and gender establish an indirect connection between them: Vocabulary insertion either exclusively targets separate class features (see Corbett 1982, 1991, Aronoff 1994, Alexiadou 2004, Müller 2004, Alexiadou and Müller 2008, Kramer 2015, Gouskova and Bobaljik 2021) or predominantly uses separate class features and refers to gender by insertion of a very limited number of exponents (see Halle 1992, 1994, Kučerová 2018). Declension class features can be connected to gender by means of implicational redundancy rules that supply gender on the basis of class or class on the basis of gender if a feature inserted by a rule is otherwise absent.

As I argued in Privizentseva 2021 approaches of this type cannot account for morphological ineffability that arises because of conflicting gender features. Such a pattern is attested in Russian with class I nouns that have grammatical masculine gender but denoting a female individual can trigger semantic feminine agreement. These data as well as a number of other configurations with conflicting features are presented in section 3, and the argument is summarized there as well.

### 3. Gender conflicts

The analysis of declension classes in Russian presented above tightens the relation between gender and declension so that inflection of classes I and IV realizes feature [–fem], and inflection of classes II and III realizes feature [+fem]. Consequently, class I and IV nouns must be non-feminine (masculine or neuter), and class II and III nouns must be feminine. There are however animate class II nouns that are masculine, class I nouns that can trigger semantic feminine agreement, and so-called common gender nouns. In this section, I will consider these data and show that the conflict in gender features leads to morphological ineffability only in one of these cases.<sup>1</sup>

Let's start with animate masculine class II nouns. They bear class II exponents in all cells of the paradigm and thus realize [+fem] feature by their inflection. At the same time, they trigger masculine agreement, feminine agreement is ungrammatical; see (4).

- (4) Ét-**ot**/\***a** star-**yj**/\***aja** mužin-a prišël/\*prišl-**a** pozdno.  
this-M/\*<sub>F</sub> old-M/\*<sub>F</sub> man-NOM came.M/\*came.F late  
'This old man came late.'

The second group consists of the profession denoting nouns that bear class I inflection and thus realize [–fem]. These nouns are masculine but allow for semantic feminine agreement if the referent is female (see Corbett 1991 and Gerasimova 2019, i.a.). Feminine agreement is illustrated in (5). Example (6) shows mixed agreement, where different agreement hosts within one sentence have different genders.

- (5) xoroš-**ij** / xoroš-**aja** vrač                      (6) Xoroš-**ij** vrač prišl-**a**.  
good-M good-F doctor                              good-M doctor came-F  
'the good doctor (female).'

The analyses of this phenomenon agree that there is an additional feminine gender feature in the noun phrase, and it is often assumed to be introduced higher in the nominal structure (see Asarina 2009, Pesetsky 2013, King 2015, Lyutikova 2015, Steriopo 2019 among others; see also Matushansky 2013, Smith 2015 for different views). The higher position of the feminine gender is motivated by height restrictions. First, feminine agreement is impossible with low classifying adjectives:

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<sup>1</sup>Russian has eleven further nouns that can be viewed as exceptions. First, ten neuter nouns (*vremja* 'time', *bremja* 'burden', etc.) bear an exceptional exponent /a/ in the nominative and accusative singular, class III exponent /i/ in the genitive, locative, dative singular, and class IV inflection in all other forms. Following Caha 2019:270-273, I assume that these nouns in fact belong to class IV in line with their gender. Differences in inflection are derived by readjustment rules that apply in the context of these ten roots. Second, noun *put* 'path' is masculine but takes class III exponent /i/ in the genitive, locative, and dative singular. Since all other exponents are from class I, I suggest that this noun belongs to class I (again, in accordance with its gender). The single exceptional exponent that is however spread over three cells in the paradigm is again due to a specific rule that refers to this root.



*Gender conflicts and ineffability*

semantic [+fem] feature also present on a noun. Note that locative exponents in classes I and II are segmentally identical but differ in their accentual properties: The class II exponent is underlyingly stressed, the class I exponent is not (see Melvold 1989).

(12) *Nominal inflection in Russian*

	SG				PL			
	I [-fem] [+α]	II [+fem] [-α]	III [+fem] [+α]	IV [-fem] [-α]	I [-fem] [+α]	II [+fem] [-α]	III [+fem] [+α]	IV [-fem] [-α]
NOM	∅	a	∅	o	[i]	[i]	[i]	a
ACC	a	u	∅	o	ov	∅	ov	∅
GEN	a	y	i	a	ov	∅	ov	∅
LOC	e	e	i	e	ax	ax	ax	ax
DAT	u	e	i	u	am	am	am	am
INSTR	om	oj	ju	om	ami	ami	ami	ami

Second, case number restrictions do not hold if the nouns is elided; see (13). Assuming that an elided part of a sentence is syntactically present but exempt from vocabulary insertion (see Merchant 2001 and Saab 2019 on nominal ellipsis), this shows that it is insertion of a nominal form that causes ungrammaticality, not agreement.

- (13) a. Pacienty žalovali<sup>s'</sup> na nov-**ogo** / nov-**uju**.  
 patients complained on new-ACC.M new-ACC.F  
 ‘{The previous doctor is good but} patients complained about the new one.’
- b. O nov-**om** / nov-**oj** my ne znajem.  
 about new-LOC.M new-LOC.F we not know  
 ‘{The previous doctor is good but} we don’t know about the new one.’

Morphological ineffability arising from conflicting features is a robust pattern (see Groos and van Riemsdijk 1981, Schütze 2003, Citko 2005, Dalrymple, King, and Sadler 2009, Asarina 2011, Bjorkman 2016, Hein and Murphy 2019, Coon and Keine 2020). If case number restrictions are due to the inability to insert a nominal exponent, as argued above, this provides an argument in favor of approaches where declensions are decomposed, and gender is targeted by vocabulary insertion. Implicational redundancy rules used to connect declension and gender in alternative approaches (see references above) are by their nature feature-filling so that they do not insert two class features (see Halle 1994, Aronoff 1994:74, Kramer 2015:239). Otherwise, elsewhere rules like [N, -Plural] → [class I] (see Aronoff 1994:74) could not exist. If in all cases only one class feature is inserted, and vocabulary insertion targets this feature, there is no source for ungrammaticality. If redundancy rules can supply two class features after all, then in order to resolve between conflicting class features an exponent must be underspecified for class altogether. This fails to derive the distribution of exponents in forms where class I is syncretic to class III, and class II is syncretic to class IV because both syncretic exponents must be not specified for class then.

More generally, this indicates that approaches employing primitive class features are poorly equipped to capture transparadigmatic syncretism.

The third group consists of common gender nouns. These nouns belong to class II so that their inflection realizes feature [+fem] but depending on the gender of their referent they can trigger masculine or feminine agreement. As shown in Iomdin 1980, common gender nouns are in fact not homogeneous in their properties and fall into three subtypes.

The first subtype is represented by nouns *sirota* ‘orphan’ and *kollega* ‘colleague’. They can refer to a female or a male individual and depending of this trigger feminine or masculine agreement correspondingly; see (14-15). Mismatches between gender of the referent and agreement are not allowed.

- |      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| (14) | nov- <b>uju</b> kolleg-u<br>new-ACC.F colleague-ACC<br>‘new colleague (female).’ | (15) | nov- <b>ogo</b> kolleg-u<br>new-ACC.M colleague-ACC<br>‘new colleague (male).’ |
|------|--|------|--|

The second subtype is represented by *zanuda* ‘bore’ and *obžora* ‘glutton’. These nouns have grammatical feminine gender and trigger feminine agreement independently of the gender of their referent; see (16a). Masculine agreement is possible with male referent; see (16b).

- (16) a. Brat / sistra Peti – izvestn-**aja** zanud-a.  
 brother / sister Petja’s known-NOM.F bore-NOM  
 Petja’s brother / Petja’s sister is a known bore.
- b. Brat / \*sistra Peti – izvestn-**yj** zanud-a.  
 brother / \*sister Petja’s known-NOM.M bore-NOM  
 Petja’s brother / \*Petja’s sister is a known bore.

The third subtype includes nouns like *starosta* ‘head boy/girl’. They are masculine by default but can trigger feminine agreement if they denote a female individual; see (17).

- (17) a. Naš-**ego** byvš-**ego** starost-u zovut Maša / Vanja.  
 our-ACC.M former-ACC.M head.boy-ACC is.called Masha / Vanja  
 Our former was called Masha (female name) / Vanja (male name).
- b. Naš-**u** byvš-**uju** starost-u zovut Maša / \*Vanja.  
 our-ACC.F former-ACC.F head.boy-ACC is.called Masha / \*Vanja  
 Our former was called Masha (female name) / \*Vanja (male name).

Unlike profession-denoting class I nouns discussed above, common gender nouns are not subject to case number restrictions. They are grammatical in all forms independently of the agreement they trigger.

To sum up, feature conflicts lead to ineffability with class I profession-denoting nouns but not with masculine class II nouns and not with class II common gender nouns.

#### 4. Morphological ineffability

In Distributed Morphology, structures are produced in syntax and undergo morphological realization in a post-syntactic component (see Halle and Marantz 1993). Vocabulary insertion proceeds according to the subset principle (see Halle 1997).

- (18) The subset principle:
- a. Compatibility: The item matches all or a subset of the grammatical features.
  - b. Specificity: Where several vocabulary items meet the conditions for insertion, the item matching the greatest number of features must be chosen.

Vocabulary insertion that is based on the Subset Principle cannot fail because of the presence of conflicting features. Suppose there is node  $N_1$  with features  $[+\alpha][-\beta]$ , and there is vocabulary item  $I_1 \leftrightarrow [+\alpha][-\beta]$ .  $I_1$  matches all features in  $N_1$  so it will be inserted. There is also another node  $N_2$  that has features  $[+\alpha][-\beta][f]$ . If there is no more specific item  $I_2 \leftrightarrow [+\alpha][-\beta][f]$ ,  $I_1$  will be inserted into  $N_2$  because the features of the vocabulary item match a subset of the features on  $N_2$ , identity of  $[f]$  plays no role; for instance, it can be  $[-\alpha]$  or  $[+\beta]$ , and it can contradict another feature in the node.

Nevertheless, ineffability arising from conflicting features is attested for various phenomena cross-linguistically (see references above). Most of existing approaches (see Asarina 2011, Bjorkman 2016, Coon and Keine 2020) assume that conflicting features are in two feature structures co-existing on one node, and that vocabulary insertion applies to each feature structure. The result is subject to a well-formedness constraint: A derivation converges if outputs of vocabulary insertion are phonologically identical and fails otherwise. Russian data presented in the previous section are however different in that a nouns does not have two full feature structures, there are two gender features but only one case and one number feature. Asarina (2011) suggests that in this case, all non-conflicting features must be copied and inserted into the feature structure with the second gender.

An approach that does not require duplicating all features is developed in Hein and Murphy 2019. They propose that feature sets that are to appear on one node are subject to operation of intersection so that the value for a conflicting feature is absent in the unified structure:  $[+\text{fem}] \cap [-\text{fem}] \Rightarrow [\text{fem}]$ . Vocabulary insertion of an item that is specified for this feature then introduces a new feature and thereby violates the Subset Principle. This runs into problems if there is a default maximally underspecified exponent because it can be always inserted without introducing new features. In what follows, I will present an alternative approach to ineffability in morphology. It relies on following assumptions.

First, vocabulary insertion applies cyclically (see Bobaljik 2000).

Second, lowering is one of the morphological operations. It alters the structure down in the tree (see Embick and Noyer 2001).

Third, lowering can counterfeed vocabulary insertion. According to the standard view morphology consists out of multiple modules so that the whole structure or its sizable part (e.g., a phase as understood in Chomsky 2000) is subject to rules from one block (e.g, morphological structure rules), and only after operations from this block have applied to the

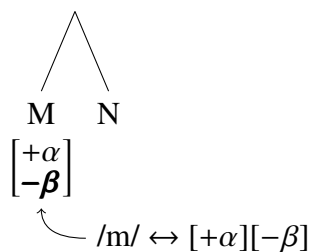
top-most node, operations from the next block (e.g., vocabulary insertion) can start applying. They are processing the structure anew, starting again from the bottom (see Halle and Marantz 1993, Arregi and Nevins 2012). As a consequence, all lowering operations apply before vocabulary insertion can start applying. I would like to reject modular architecture within morphology and assume that morphology is a single module that processes a structure supplied by syntax from bottom to top. Morphological operations are still ordered so that, for instance, impoverishment of a feature on a node applies before vocabulary insertion into this node but vocabulary insertion into the bottom node does not have to wait till impoverishment has applied to the top node. Under this approach, lowering that alters the structure down in the tree can target nodes to which vocabulary insertion has already applied. This allows to change features of a node after vocabulary insertion (cf. Dobler et al. 2011, Piggott and Travis 2017).

Fourth, the subset principle governs vocabulary insertion but also must hold between an item inserted in a node and features in this node throughout the derivation.

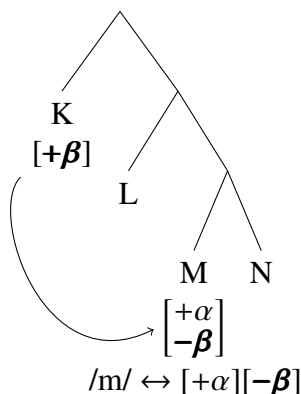
Fifth, if same features with different values are in one node, the more marked feature overwrites the less marked one. For binary features, a feature with a positive value is marked.

Morphological ineffability occurs if a more marked feature lowers to a node after vocabulary insertion has already applied to this node, and an inserted item is specified for this feature. Derivation in (19-21) illustrates this. In (19), Vocabulary Insertion applies to node M and inserts vocabulary item /m/ that fully matches features in the node. After this, morphological derivation goes on and encounters node K that has to lower to M; see (20). After lowering and subsequent fusion of two nodes, in the course of which the more marked feature  $[+\beta]$  overwrites the less marked feature  $[-\beta]$ , the structure is as in (21). Here node M has  $[+\alpha][+\beta]$  features but inserted vocabulary item is specified for  $[+\alpha][-\beta]$ . The structure violates the Subset Principle because the features on the vocabulary item are not in the subset relation to features of the corresponding node. The derivation crashes. According to this analysis, a contradictory feature cannot lead to ineffability if it is introduced into a node before vocabulary insertion or if it lowers after vocabulary insertion but is less marked so that it gets overwritten by features in the node.

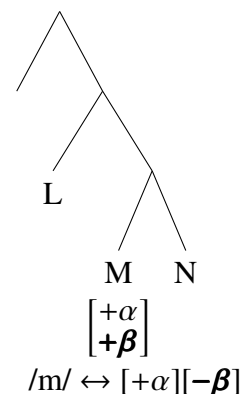
(19) *Insertion*



(20) *Lowering*



(21) *\*Subset*





Note that this analysis does not predict that lowering always counterfeeds insertion: In the derivation above, node M already has the feature that is to be lowered (albeit with a different value). It is thereby complete before lowering and can undergo vocabulary insertion.

## 5. Derivations

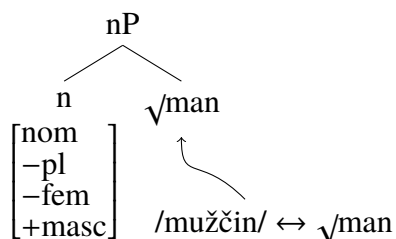
In Russian, nouns are specified for case, number, ‘class’ (i.e., gender and  $[\pm\alpha]$ ), and sometimes animacy. Since all nouns considered here are animate, I will not include this feature in derivations. For the sake of simplicity, I will also abstract away from a decomposition of case; see Müller 2004, Wiese 2004, Caha 2019 for some options. Since all nominal features are cumulatively realized by a single exponent, I assume that they appear on one node before vocabulary insertion, and it is the  $n$  head. Following Kramer 2015, gender originates on  $n$ . It is often assumed that number is introduced higher, in NumP (see Ritter 1991), and that case is assigned from outside of a nominal domain. To gather all features on  $n$ , I suggest that  $n$  has probes for number and case, and it receives values via Agree in syntax.

The complement of the categorizing  $n$  head is occupied by a root. Roots have no features (and also no diacritics that are also features); see Acquaviva 2009. Two mechanisms determine the distribution of features that are idiosyncratically tight to roots (cf. Embick 2010, Kramer 2015). First,  $[\pm\alpha]$  is not relevant for syntax so it is inserted in morphology by rules that apply in the context of certain roots; see (22). Second, gender is present in syntax and used for agreement so I suggest that it is insertion of exponents for roots that is contextually restricted as shown in (23). Roots that combine with different categorial heads have multiple restrictions, e.g, a root can be inserted in the context of  $n_{[+fem] [-masc]}$  or in the context of  $v$ . Note that this is not equivalent to endowing roots with features: Roots remain featureless; the same root is used in a verbal and in a nominal context. Restrictions on insertion also capture that, for instance, some roots can only occur in nominal environment, while others are used in both nominal and verbal contexts.

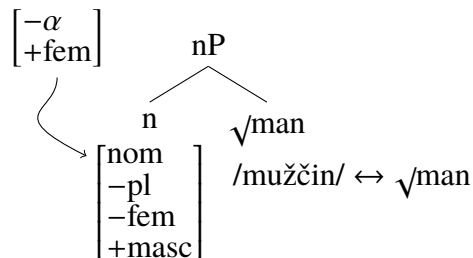
$$(22) \quad n \rightarrow n_{[+\alpha]} / [ \_ \{ \sqrt{\text{doctor}}, \sqrt{\text{table}} \dots \} ] \quad (23) \quad / \text{vra}\check{\text{c}} / \leftrightarrow \sqrt{\text{doctor}} / [ n_{[-fem] [+masc]} \_ ]$$

Let’s start analyzing gender conflicts with class II nouns that trigger agreement in  $[-fem]$   $[+masc]$  but realize  $[+fem] [-\alpha]$  by its inflection. Since these nouns trigger agreement in  $[-fem] [+masc]$ ,  $n$  has these features in syntax, and corresponding roots are inserted in their context; see (24). Next,  $[-\alpha]$  is added to the features on  $n$  in the context of the root. There is further a rule that inserts  $[+fem]$  feature in the context of such roots; see (25). Insertion of a root in the context of gender and subsequent insertion of gender in the context of this root derives the mismatch between syntactic and morphological gender. Note that contextual restrictions of vocabulary items are generally not restricted by the subset principle. This means that the later change of features in  $n$  cannot lead to its violation. Feature  $[+fem]$  inserted at PF is more marked than  $[-fem]$  feature coming from syntax so that the former overwrites the later producing the feature structure in (26). This feeds vocabulary insertion into  $n$ , class II inflection is inserted, and the derivation succeeds; see (27).

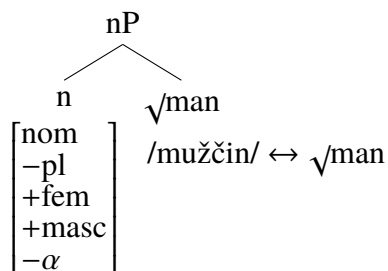
(24) *Insertion of root exponent*



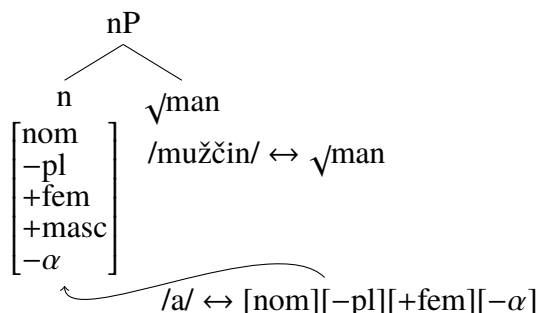
(25) *Insertion of morphological features*



(26) *Feature overwriting*

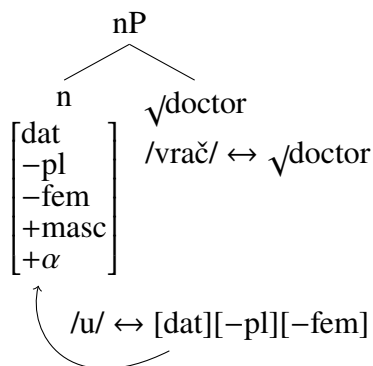


(27) *Insertion of nominal inflection*

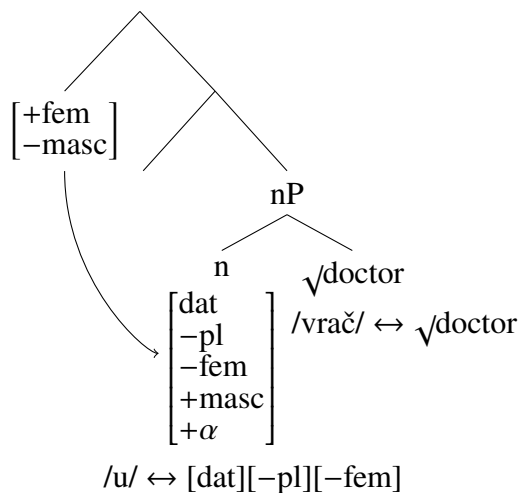


The derivation of profession-denoting class I nouns differs in that features of *n* are changed after insertion of nominal inflection. The *n* head has masculine  $[-fem][+masc]$  features, and the root is inserted in the context of these features. Then,  $[+α]$  is inserted in the context of the root. Vocabulary insertion applies to *n*; see (28). After this morphological derivation proceeds and encounters semantic feminine feature  $[+fem][-masc]$  in a higher nominal projection. Since *n* is specified for gender itself, it did not agree with semantic gender in syntax. Next, semantic gender lowers into *n* and has to be incorporated into its feature structure; see (29).  $[+fem]$  overwrites  $[-fem]$ . Since the inserted vocabulary item is specified for  $[-fem]$ , it violates the subset principle, and the derivation fails; see (30).

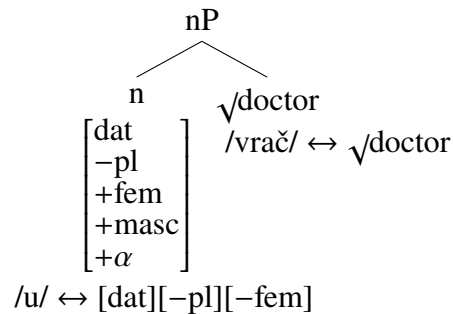
(28) *Nominal inflection*



(29) *Lowering*

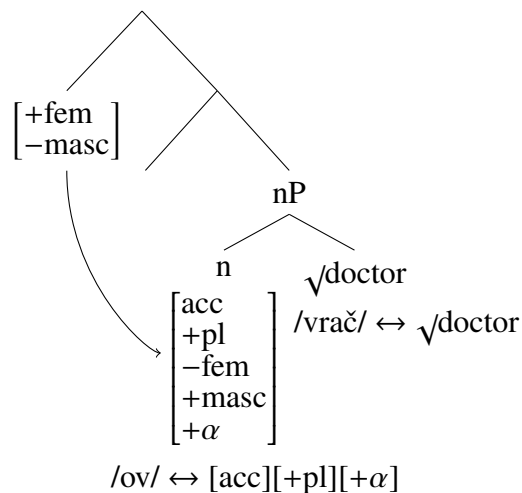


(30) \*Subset

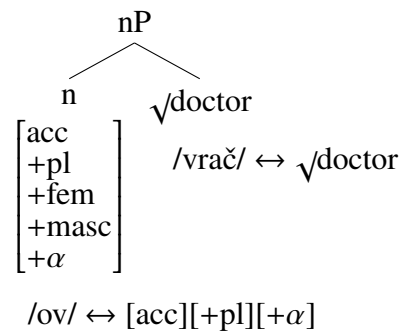


If an inserted vocabulary item is syncretic between classes I and III, it is underspecified for gender so that the subset principle is also satisfied after gender on *n* is changed; see (31-32). This derives the case number restrictions.

(31) Lowering



(32) <sup>OK</sup>Subset



Let's now turn to common gender class II nouns. Nouns from the first subtype trigger masculine or feminine agreement depending on the gender of their referent but have no default grammatical gender. Such nouns have masculine [-fem][+masc] or feminine [+fem][-masc] features on *n*. A root can be inserted in the context of either but triggers insertion of [-α] and [+fem]. Thus, if *n* has [-fem] feature, it is overwritten by a more marked [+fem]. As with class II masculine nouns, here the change in gender on *n* is induced by a node lower in the structure so it feeds vocabulary insertion.

Nouns of the second subtype have a default feminine gender and optionally allow for masculine agreement if a referent is male. Such nouns have [+fem][-masc] on *n*, and the semantic masculine gender [-fem][+masc] is higher in the structure. Such roots are inserted in the context of [+fem][-masc] and trigger insertion of [-α]. Vocabulary insertion of an exponent into *n* applies before semantic gender lowers but lowered [-fem] is less marked so it cannot overwrite [+fem]. Lowered [+masc] overwrites [-masc] but inflection does not realize [±masc], and the change in this feature does not violate the subset principle.

Nouns of the third subtype have masculine default gender and can trigger feminine agreement if a referent is female. Their derivation is parallel to the derivation of masculine class II nouns with the single difference that there are also semantic feminine features [+fem][−masc] in higher projections: *n* has [−fem][+masc], [+fem][− $\alpha$ ] are supplied in the context of the root, change in features feeds vocabulary insertion. Higher [+fem][−masc] lowers to *n* later but this does not alter its features because *n* has marked [+fem][+masc].

## 6. Summary

This paper discusses gender conflicts in Russian and shows that a derivation with conflicting genders is ineffable if one of the conflicting features is introduced after the node with another conflicting feature underwent vocabulary insertion, and the inserted exponent is specified for this feature. This is accounted for if lowering can be interleaved with vocabulary insertion, and the subset principle must hold between an inserted vocabulary item and features in the node throughout the derivation.

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