Slavic meets Semitic: Nominal functional categories as underspecified heads

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The Slavic diminutive (DIM) morpheme (e.g., Czech -*ek*.M.SG, -*ka*.F.SG, -*ko*.N.SG etc.; henceforth, **K**) is homophonous with different morphemes: E.g., in Czech, the morpheme -*ka* is ambiguous between a DIM derived from a feminine (FEM) noun [jam-ka 'pit.F.SG-.**K**:F.SG; a small hole], a morpheme deriving socio-biological FEM from a masculine (MASC) noun [diplomat 'diplomat.M.SG' → diplomat-ka 'diplomat-**K**:F.SG, a female diplomat'], a nominalizer [sodová (voda) 'soda.ADJ (water)' → sodov-ka 'soda-**K**:F.SG, pop'], and a group forming morpheme [dvě děvčata 'two girls' → dvoj-ka děvčat 'two-**K**:F.SG girls.GEN, a group of two girls']. In addition, DIMs can yield a degree interpretation, and obtain additional pragmatic readings (affection etc.). Strikingly, the feminine morpheme (**F**) in Semitic, e.g., in Moroccan and Levantine Arabic (LA), and Hebrew, displays a parallel range of interpretations, with two important differences: **F** individuates [e.g., in LA: samak 'fish' → samak-i 'fish-**F**:SG, a unit of fish'], and cannot be a nominalizer. We argue that functional/interpretational variability in the nominal domain maps to PF uniformity via class of underspecified functional heads (Borer 2005), whose functional interpretation is determined by their syntactic position and environment (i* of Wood and Marantz 2015). The underlying syntactic underspecification triggers uniform PF realization despite varied syntactic/semantic behaviour, modulo independent differences of the surrounding nominal structures which account for the variation between Slavic and Semitic. Specifically, the proposal builds on work arguing for a connection between gender and DIM as classifiers (Zabbal 2002, Fassi Fehri 2003, Borer 2005), and argues that **K** and **F** are morphological realizations of a feature bundle corresponding to a nominalizing head (n), which is primarily based on gender. Different functions and interpretations arise from different attachments sites of n in the extended nominal domain, instead of a series of semantically specified functional heads (e.g., Fassi Fehri 2016, 2018a,b), or distinct morphemes (e.g., Borer & Ouwayda 2010). [For reasons of space, the following analysis mostly abstracts away from gender.]

Technically: CATEGORY CHANGE: Slavic n_K merges with the previously merged root and category head: [n_K [CAT $\sqrt{root}$]]. For this to obey structural economy, the new projection must differ from the primary merge one: a category change satisfies the economy condition. In contrast, Semitic roots are category-neutral (Arad 2003) and genderless (Kramer 2014). Analogically, there is no categorys-specific functional root that could yield a category change. DIMINUTIVES: We argue that the default interpretation of the light noun formation ([$n_{K/F}$ [CAT $\sqrt{root}$]]) is a DIM, construed as a bound interpretation (akin to nominal aspect). PRAGMATIC READINGS: A double DIM formation obeys structural economy only if it yields additional interpretations (Sichel & Wiltschko 2018). Double DIM thus yields a degree (based on the bounded nominal interpretation) or a pragmatic interpretation (affection). BIO-SOCIOLOGICAL GENDER: Valued gender can come to the derivation as an interpretable feature on D (Steriopolo & Wiltschko 2008, Kučerová 2018, Sigurðsson 2019), and agree with the unvalued gender of $n_{K/F}$, deriving the bio-sociological gender of **K** and **F**. GROUP FORMATION: The light noun configuration offers itself to a partitive-like function, yielding a group reading. Semitic nominals can lack the individuation layer: when n_F attaches to a non-individuated structure, the interpretation must be that of the whole. In Slavic, a group interpretation arises in the context of structures that lack individuation, e.g., quantifiers. INDIVIDUATION: Semitic has a class of genderless unindividuated nominals. When n_F attaches to the primary merge of such a nominal, the interface interprets **F** as an individuating functional head (Borer's DIV). This interpretation is absent in Slavic because the equivalent of a Number projection is always present, and the individuating interpretation is excluded by structural economy.