

## THE NUMBER OF GENDERS IN POLISH

GREVILLE G. CORBETT  
*University of Melbourne*

### *Introduction*

In a recent article, Wertz (1977) reviews the question of the number of genders in Polish.<sup>1</sup> He considers previous answers to the question: three genders ((Klemensiewicz 1965: 51)), five (Mańczak 1956), six (Brooks and Nalibow (1970: 137)) and himself proposes seven as the correct solution. It is interesting that an apparently straightforward question should be open to debate, and that there should be such a variety of answers. Naturally, different assumptions as to the nature of gender may produce different analyses; however, as gender is reflected in syntax at a superficial level it is relatively easy to test the adequacy of an analysis. I intend to show that even if we accept Wertz's assumptions, his seven-gender system is unable to handle the surface facts of agreement in Polish. More generally, the split between gender in the singular and gender in the plural, which Wertz and other scholars propose, is untenable.

### *Data and analysis*

If we consider nominative case forms of different nouns in Polish, we find that modifying adjectives take three different forms, which justifies the division of the nouns into three genders:

duż-y stół	duż-a książka	duż-e okno
'large table'	'large book'	'large window'
masculine	feminine	neuter

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written during the tenure of a Research Fellowship at the University of Melbourne, for which I am grateful to the Council of the University. Thanks are also due to Roland Sussex and Wayles Browne for their comments on earlier versions of the paper.

The three classes are traditionally labelled masculine, feminine and neuter. Within the masculines, different agreement forms occur with nouns of different classes in the accusative case:

Nominative	duż-y stół	duż-y koń
Accusative	duż-y stół	duż-ego konia
Genitive	duż-ego stołu	duże-go konia
	'large table'	'large horse'
	inanimate	animate

While *stół* and *koń* share the same attributive and predicative agreement forms when in the nominative, in the accusative case they differ: with *stół* the agreeing form is as for the nominative, with *koń* it is as for the genitive. The majority of nouns in this class refer to humans or animals and so this class is called 'animate'. However, as Wertz points out, there are many nouns which are morphologically animate though they refer to inanimates. Given the large number of nouns in the class and the large number of potential modifiers which can show the distinctive agreeing form, Wertz considers that it is justified to talk of a 'masculine animate gender'. It could be argued that as the distinction is limited to one of the main genders the term 'sub-gender' would be more appropriate. Or, in a feature approach, animacy might be viewed as a feature whose appearance depends on the combination of other features. For present purposes let us accept Wertz's position and, on the basis of the agreement forms for the accusative singular, accept the postulated masculine animate gender. We will also leave aside the question of whether gender, including animacy, can be derived from elsewhere (from the semantic characterization of a lexical item). Our purpose will be simply to establish how a noun must be labelled in order for correct agreements to be assigned.

So far we have recognised four genders: masculine animate, masculine inanimate, feminine and neuter. When we turn to the nominative plural we find evidence for another subdivision. The form in *-i* (with possible consonant alternation, in this instance *ż~z*) is used with a subset of the masculine animate gender, while the form in *-e* is used with all other nouns:

duż-i mnisi	but: duż-e konie, stoły, książki, okna
large monks	large horses, tables, books, windows

The nouns found in this special category refer to humans; it can therefore be labelled the masculine personal gender, the remaining masculine animates may be assigned to the masculine animal gender. We thus have an additional gender, giving a total of five: masculine personal, masculine animal, masculine inanimate, feminine, neuter. This, as Wertz reports, is Mańczak's answer

to the question of the number of genders in Polish. Others, such as Brooks and Nalibow (1970 : 137) and Schenker (1964 : 15), treat the gender system in the singular as separate from that in the plural. Wertz presents and himself accepts this view. It is based on the fact that there is no gender category in one number which has an exact match in the other. If this approach is adopted then six genders must be recognised: masculine animate, masculine inanimate, feminine and neuter in the singular, and masculine personal and non-masculine personal in the plural. Before discussing the merits of this analysis let us first consider the complicating class which Wertz introduces, which leads him to postulate a seventh gender.

While the nouns which take the agreeing form *duż-i* in the plural refer to masculine humans, there are some masculine humans not included in the category and those take non-masculine personal modifiers. These are generally treated as a matter of stylistics or semantics but, as Wertz (1977 : 60) argues forcefully, this approach is inadequate as there are some nouns which, while referring to masculine humans, regularly take non-masculine personal agreement. (For discussion of the masculine personal category see Rothstein (1976 : 248—50), Tixomirova (1979)). Nor is membership in the group predictable. These cannot be simply assigned to the non-masculine personal class as we shall see when we consider the accusative case forms:

NOM	duż-i	mnisi	duż-e	karły	duż-e	konie	duż-e	stoly
ACC	duż-ych	mnichów	duż-ych	karłów	duż-e	konie	duż-e	stoly
GEN	duż-ych	mnichów	duż-ych	karłów	duż-ych	koni	duż-ych	stołów
		'large monks'	'large dwarfs'	'large horses'				'large tables'
	I		II		III			IV

When in the accusative plural, *karzel* (II), like *mnich* (I), requires the same agreement form as for the genitive plural; it is therefore distinct from all the other classes and must be recognized as a separate gender: Wertz labels it the 'devirilized' gender. As he accepts the split between singular and plural he proposes seven genders: four in the singular: masculine animate, masculine inanimate, feminine and neuter; and three in the plural: masculine personal (I above), devirilized (II) and non-masculine personal (comprising III and IV above, as well as feminines and neuters). If *karzel* is recognised as a special type, but the singular-plural split is not considered relevant, we would have six genders: masculine personal (I), masculine devirilized (II), masculine animate (III), masculine inanimate (IV), feminine, and neuter.

Let us now consider the justification for the widespread practice of considering gender separately for the singular and plural. Given that it increases the number of genders (giving seven instead of six) the onus is on those who favour this move to show its advantage. Certainly in terms of assigning the

correct argument features, the analysis which gives each noun a single gender is adequate. Furthermore, the criterion for deciding to treat gender in the singular as separate from gender in the plural is dubious. By the same reasoning, the lack of correspondence of forms, one could give a different number of genders for direct and oblique cases. However, the crucial evidence which shows that gender should not be split between singular and plural comes from the form of predicate agreement with subjects consisting of conjoined nouns. Consider the following sentences (Brooks 1973 : 62):

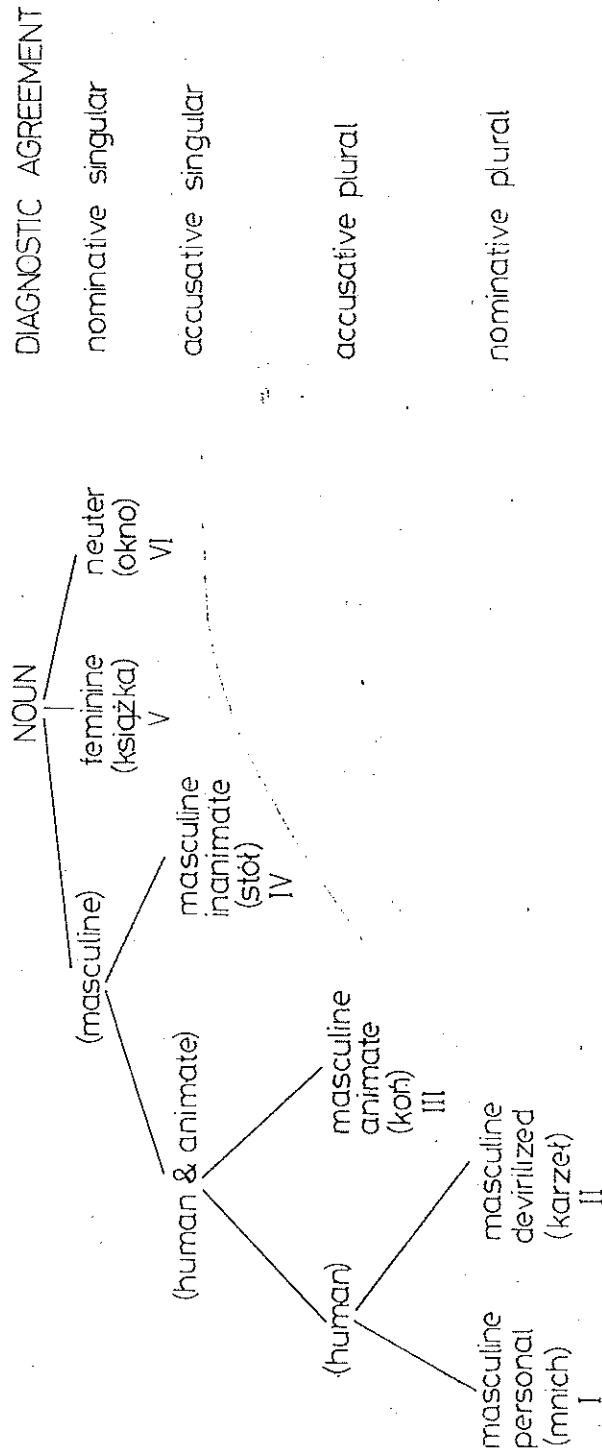
- (1) Pan i dziecko szli ulicą  
 Man and child went along street  
 (2) Kot i jagnię spały przed domem  
 Cat and lamb slept before house

In both sentences the subject consists of two singular nouns, one masculine animate and one neuter. In terms of the four 'singular genders' they are identical. But the agreement forms shown by the verbs are different: *szli* is a masculine personal form, while *spały* is a non-masculine personal form. The basic rule, given by various writers, is that if one conjunct of a compound subject is masculine personal, then the predicate will be masculine personal.<sup>2</sup> The point is that for agreement rules to operate correctly, *pan* and *kot* must be differently marked, even when they are in the singular, as shown by sentences (1) and (2). Thus the separation of gender in the singular and plural cannot be maintained, and we must reject the seven-gender system. To account for Wertz's data we should return to the six-gender system outlined above. It is repeated schematically on page 87.

<sup>2</sup> This rule can be found in numerous works. There are, however, examples in which the masculine personal forms can be used even when none of the conjuncts in the subject is masculine personal. These are discussed in Doroszewski (1962 : 237), Buttler et al. (1971 : 332), Brooks (1973 : 61) Rothstein (1973 : 313-14; 1976 : 250) and Corbett (1982). The following example is taken from Doroszewski (1962 : 237):

- (i) Hania (f) i Reks (m) bawili się piłką  
 'Hania and Reks played with ball'

Reks (Rex) is a dog; there is therefore no masculine personal conjunct in the subject but nevertheless the masculine personal form is used in the predicate. The generalization to cover sentences of this type seems to be that the masculine personal form can be used in the predicate providing the subject is masculine and personal on aggregate; the features referred to may be syntactic or semantic. Thus in the sentence above, *Hania* is semantically personal (i.e. refers to a human) and *Reks* is syntactically masculine. While this conclusion is surprising, it should be possible to account for the data using an approach based on features, with rules governing the possible combinations of features. If we try to account for these data using the approach of Wertz we still cannot escape the necessity to mark nouns like *pan* as personal in the singular. If, however, we restrict ourselves to the straightforward cases, then the six-gender approach is adequate and seven-gender approach is not.



DIAGNOSTIC AGREEMENT

nominative singular

accusative singular

accusative plural

nominative plural

(The heading 'diagnostic agreement' refers to the agreement form which justifies the separation of the genders on that line).

As has been shown, we can account for Wertz's data and also for the predicate agreement in examples like (1) and (2) by using six rather than seven gender markers. In assessing the six-gender system we should first consider two objections Wertz raises to combining singular and plural in this way. First, he claims that nouns like *chłopisko* 'big fellow' can be neuter in the singular and devirilized in the plural (1977: 62). This combination is not covered by any of our six classes. He also states (1977: 62) that their plural can also be non-personal. However, as Macjusovič (1975: 61) indicates, this noun has two agreement possibilities in the singular as well, not only neuter but also masculine; *ten wielki chłopisko* 'this big fellow' (for confirmation see Buttler et al. (1971: 136). There is therefore no need to link neuter singular and devirilized plural; nouns of the type described by Wertz can be analyzed as having two possible genders, devirilized (II above) or neuter (VI). The second objection concerns *pluralia tantum* such as *nożycki* 'scissors' and *usta* 'mouth'; if singular and plural are combined, these must be assigned to a gender, even though they lack the singular forms to determine which one. We could, of course assign them to a special gender (as Zaliznjak does in Russian (1967: 66—80)). Alternatively, they could be assigned to the most likely of the six classes (they require irregular marking in any event and so non-existing forms will not be generated). Clearly they cannot belong to genders I or II, as agreements for the accusative are not the same as for the genitive. Any of the remaining gender assignments would give the correct agreement of results; it seems best to assign them by analogy of form, e.g. *usta* to class VI, given that many neuters take the nominative plural ending-*a*.

The data can therefore be accounted for using the six-gender approach. There are, however, grounds for doubting whether this is the best approach. Simply labelling Polish nouns for one of these six genders fails to capture the similarities between the subdivisions of the traditional 'masculine' gender. In particular the accusative-genitive syncretism is ignored — it would 'cost' no more in terms of labels if devirilized nouns showed accusative-dative syncretism of agreeing forms and animate nouns showed accusative-instrumental syncretism. (The same objection would apply equally to the approach splitting singular and plural — there the fact that the syncretism of the same cases applies in singular and plural is left out of account). This suggests that a feature approach (as in Rothstein (1973: 310); and, for other Slavonic languages Corbett (1980)) is preferable. However, that is a separate issue. Our aim has been to show that, even accepting Wertz's data and assumptions, the seven-gender system is inadequate to account for the agreement facts of Polish (as indeed are other accounts which split gender between singular and plural). The data can be handled using a more economical six-gender system.

## REFERENCES

- Brooks, M. 1973. "Rola liczby i rodzaju przy zgodzie niektórych podmiotów z orzeczeniem". In Matejka, L. (ed.). 1973. 59—66.
- Brooks, M. Z. and Nalibow, K. L. 1970. "The gender of referentials in Polish". *International Journal of Slavic Linguistics and Poetics* 13. 136—42.
- Buttler, D., Kurkowska, H. and Satkiewicz, H. 1971. *Kultura języka polskiego. Zagadnienia poprawności gramatycznej*. Warszawa: PWN.
- Chvany, C. V. and Brecht, R. D. (eds). (1980). *Forms and meanings: morphosyntax in Slavic*. Columbus: Slavica.
- Corbett, G. G. 1980. "Animacy in Russian and other Slavonic languages: where syntax and semantics fail to match". In Chvany, C. V. and Brecht, R. D. (eds). 1980. 43—61.
- Corbett, G. G. 1982. "Resolution rules for predicate agreement in the Slavonic languages". *Slavonic and East European Review* 60. 347—78.
- Doroszewski, W. 1962. *O kulturę słowa. Poradnik językowy*. Warszawa: PIW.
- Gorškova, K. V. and Širokova, A. G. (eds). 1971. 11 *Slavjanskaja filologija: sbornik statej*. Moskva: Izd. Moskovskogo universiteta.
- Klemensiewicz, Z. 1965. *Podstawowe wiadomości z gramatyki języka polskiego*. Warszawa: PWN. (Quoted from Wertz 1977:50).
- Macjukovič, J. V. 1975. *Morfologičeskij stroj sovremennogo pol'skogo literaturnogo jazyka. Čast' I: Imena (suščestvitel'noe; prilagatel'noe, čislitel'noe)*. Leningrad: Izd. Leningradskogo Universiteta.
- Mańczak, W. 1956. "Ile rodzajów jest w polskim?". *Język polski* 36/2. 116—21.
- Matejka, L. 1973. *American contributions to the Seventh International Congress of Slavists: Warsaw, August 21—27, 1973*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Rothstein, R. A. 1973. "O roli kategorii gramatycznych w ogólnej teorii języka: kategoria rodzaju". In Matejka, L. (ed.). 1973. 307—14.
- Rothstein, R. A. 1976. "Uwagi o rodzaju gramatycznym i cechach semantycznych wyrazów". *Język polski* 56. 241—54.
- Schenker, A. M. 1964. *Polish declension: a descriptive analysis*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Tixomirova, T. S. 1979. "O nelično-mužskix formax suščestvitel'nyx mužskogo lica v sovremennom pol'skom jazyke". In Gorškova, K. V. and Širokova, A. G. (eds). 1979. 162—78.
- Wertz, C. A. 1977. "The number of genders in Polish". *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 19. 50—63.
- Zaliznjak, A. A. 1967. *Russkoe imennoe slovoizmenenie*. Moscow: Nauka.