

Gender, meaning and arbitrariness: Evidence from Norwegian (and Swedish)

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Abstract

Despite some claims in the literature, even NP-internal agreement can be meaningful in Norwegian and Swedish, and the arbitrariness of lexical gender (also known as ‘formal gender’ or ‘syntactic gender’) in these two languages has been overstated. This shows up also in homonyms of different genders, which pattern in a way linked to animacy. Furthermore, not all pronominal gender agreement in these languages is meaningful, either. Although there are differences between pronominal gender agreement and other kinds of agreement, this is a difference in degree, not in kind, so we should not draw a sharp distinction between pronominal gender agreement and other kinds of gender agreement. The paper also contributes to the long-standing discussion on the redundancy and usefulness of gender: gender is not as outlandish and different from other grammatical categories (such as tense and number) as it may seem, since no grammatical category correlates directly with conceptual distinctions.

Keywords: gender, arbitrariness, agreement, animacy, homonyms, Norwegian, Swedish

1 Introduction

This paper will present arguments in favour of the view that even NP/DP-internal agreement can be meaningful. More specifically, lexical gender in Norwegian (and Swedish) is not as meaningless as it is sometimes considered to be – not even on the indefinite article (determiner). The paper also shows, in less detail, that pronominal agreement is not always as meaningful as is usually thought. Finally, the paper shows that an emphasis on the arbitrariness of gender can be misplaced and heuristically unhelpful and that gender is not so dramatically different from such categories as tense and number as it has seemed, since neither category mirrors conceptual categories directly.

Agreement in general and gender in particular are often seen as meaningless. This view usually entails setting pronouns aside, because at least some of them clearly have meaning. On this view, agreement is often seen as mere copying. While this view has come in for criticism (see e.g., Corbett 2006: 114ff for a summary), it remains influential, and even those who reject it will often talk of agreement in terms of ‘controllers’ and ‘targets’; this ‘implies a fairly mechanical, monodirectional syntactic process of feature replication’ (Haig & Forker 2018: 715). The view of agreement as mechanical copying is particularly tempting within the NP. Therefore, several scholars of different persuasions, discussing different languages (e.g., Papazian 1978; Palmer 1984; Lehmann 1988; Carstens 2000), draw a sharp line between agreement inside the NP and outside of it.

In this paper, we shall see that at *least some* agreement is meaningful – even inside the NP. Thus, drawing an absolute, sharp distinction between NP-internal and NP-external agreement can be positively unhelpful (cf. also Barlow 1999; Corbett 2006; Landau 2016). Despite appearances, semantic arguments do not give full support to a sharp distinction – at least not in Norwegian and Swedish. Thus, the arbitrariness of NP-internal agreement has sometimes been exaggerated in the Scandinavian literature.

The plan for this paper is as follows. After this introduction (Section 1), basic facts about gender systems in Norwegian and Swedish are laid out in Section 2. Section 3 outlines a widespread analysis of Scandinavian gender. This part draws on Teleman (1969; 1987), Josefsson (2013; 2014) and Åfarli, Nygård & Riksem (2022) in particular; they are clear and explicit representatives of a widespread view.

Section 4 presents arguments against the view outlined in Section 3, more specifically against the idea that lexical gender is arbitrary and meaningless in Scandinavian. The argument draws, amongst other things, on Bobrova's (2013) study of homonym pairs in Norwegian. Section 5 is devoted to the implications this has for our view of agreement and gender. I suggest that NP-internal agreement is sometimes meaningful and that there is some meaning in the gender of the determiner (5.1), that pronominal agreement is not invariably meaningful (5.2), and that gender is not quite as different from other categories as we may have thought (5.3). Section 6 summarises the paper.

2 Scandinavian gender systems

2.1 The many systems of Scandinavian

In this paper, we look at varieties of Mainland Scandinavian (North Germanic), primarily Norwegian, secondarily Swedish. These are languages of Norway, Sweden and Finland, but these languages – or dialects, depending on the definition – are not easily delimited from other varieties of Scandinavian (even if the written standards are).

There are many different dialects of Norwegian and two written standards, Bokmål and Nynorsk, and plenty of variation in both. In Bokmål, there are at least two somewhat different gender systems. In this paper, we focus on one only, which is close to the Swedish one, and thus relevant for sections 3–5. We shall also consider the 'classical' Nynorsk gender system, which is closer to the older stages with a traditional Germanic three-gender system. The Nynorsk system is described in Table 1. The system described in Table 2 may be the most common in written Bokmål, and it is close to the dialect of younger speakers in Oslo, for example.

Genders are defined as classes of nouns, reflected in the behaviour of associated words (Corbett 1991). In Norwegian, the associated words that are particularly relevant are adjectives, determiners, and pronouns, and so these are shown in the following Tables 1 and 2. In the varieties described in the following tables (as in most other Scandinavian varieties), the gender distinction is only relevant in the singular. Nouns inflect for definiteness, so that there is an indefinite and a definite form of each. The Nynorsk system in Table 1 shows a three-way gender distinction; masculine, feminine and neuter. In the Bokmål system in Table 2, masculine and feminine have merged, as it were, into a common gender. Compare Tables 1 (Nynorsk) and 2 (Bokmål)¹. Tables 1 and 2 show some possible noun phrases with relevant agreement 'targets', and then the pronoun that would normally be used to refer to these phrases.

¹ Tables 1 and 2 illustrate attributive adjectives only. Problems with predicative adjectives are only briefly mentioned in the text below.

Table 1. Associated words showing gender in one variety of Norwegian Nynorsk

	determiner	adjective	noun	pronoun, typically
Masculine, inanimate, indefinite	<i>ein</i> a.M 'a fine car'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.MF	<i>bil</i> car	<i>han</i> 'he'
Masculine, inanimate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.MF 'this fine car'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>bilen</i> car.DEF.SG[M]	<i>han</i> 'he'
Masculine, animate, indefinite	<i>ein</i> a.M 'a fine man'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.MF	<i>mann</i> man.INDF.SG	<i>han</i> 'he'
Masculine, animate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.MF 'this fine man'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>mannen</i> man.DEF.SG[M]	<i>han</i> 'he'
Feminine, inanimate, indefinite	<i>ei</i> a.F 'a fine file'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.MF	<i>fil</i> file.INDF.SG	<i>ho</i> 'she'
Feminine, inanimate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.MF 'this fine file'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>fila</i> file.DEF.SG[F]	<i>ho</i> 'she'
Feminine, animate, indefinite	<i>ei</i> a.F 'a fine woman'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.MF	<i>dame</i> woman.INDF.SG	<i>ho</i> 'she'
Feminine, animate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.MF 'this fine woman'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>dama</i> woman.DEF.SG[F]	<i>ho</i> 'she'
Neuter, inanimate, indefinite	<i>eit</i> a.N 'a fine smile'	<i>fint</i> fine.INDF.MF	<i>smil</i> smile.INDF.SG	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, inanimate, indefinite	<i>dette</i> this.N 'this fine smile'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>smilet</i> smile.DEF.SG[N]	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, animate, indefinite	<i>eit</i> a.N 'a fine child'	<i>fint</i> fine.INDF.N	<i>barn</i> child.INDF.SG	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, animate, definite	<i>dette</i> this.N 'this fine child'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>barnet</i> child.DEF.SG[N]	<i>det</i> 'it.N'

Table 2. Associated words showing gender in one variety of Norwegian Bokmål

	determiner	adjective	noun	pronoun, typically
Common, inanimate, indefinite	<i>en</i> a.C 'a fine car'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.C	<i>bil</i> car.INDF.SG	<i>den</i> 'it.C'
Common, inanimate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.C 'this fine car'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>bilen</i> car.DEF.SG[C]	<i>den</i> 'it.C'
Common, animate, indefinite	<i>en</i> a.C 'a fine man'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.C	<i>mann</i> man.INDF.SG	<i>han</i> 'he'
Common, animate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.C 'this fine man'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>mannen</i> man.DEF.SG[C]	<i>han</i> 'he'
Common, inanimate, indefinite	<i>en</i> a.C 'a fine file'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.C	<i>fil</i> file.INDF.SG	<i>den</i> 'it.C'
Common, inanimate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.C 'this fine file'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>fila</i> file.DEF.SG[C]	<i>den</i> 'it.C'
Common, animate, indefinite	<i>en</i> a.C 'a fine woman'	<i>fin</i> fine.INDF.C	<i>dame</i> woman.INDF.SG	<i>hun</i> 'she'
Common, animate, definite	<i>denne</i> this.C 'this fine woman'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>dama</i> woman.DEF.SG[C]	<i>hun</i> 'she'
Neuter, inanimate, indefinite	<i>et</i> a.N 'a fine smile'	<i>fint</i> fine.INDF.N	<i>smil</i> smile.INDF.SG	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, inanimate, indefinite	<i>dette</i> this.N 'this fine smile'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>smilet</i> smile.DEF.SG[N]	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, animate, indefinite	<i>et</i> a.N 'a fine child'	<i>fint</i> fine.INDF.C	<i>barn</i> child.INDF.SG	<i>det</i> 'it.N'
Neuter, animate, definite	<i>dette</i> this.N 'this fine child'	<i>fine</i> fine.DEF	<i>barnet</i> child.DEF.SG[N]	<i>det</i> 'it.N'

For adjectives and determiners, Table 2 shows a two-gender contrast in Bokmål, between the ‘common’ and the neuter. The same holds for the Swedish and Danish written standards. The ‘common’ in Bokmål represents, historically, a continuation of the masculine and feminine genders – cf. the Nynorsk data in Table 1, which, historically speaking, represent an earlier stage. Nynorsk is here like Icelandic, Faroese and Elfdalian in having a traditional three-gender system. The incipient syncretism between the masculine and the feminine gender also shows in Nynorsk, though; cf. the glossing MF in Table 1.

These days, the feminine is receding (except in pronouns) in many varieties of Norwegian (see e.g., Lødrup 2011; Busterud et al. 2019; Haug in prep.) and even more so in Swedish (see e.g., Rabb 2007; Van Epps & Carling 2017). The status of the definite singular suffixes (*-en*, *-a*, *-et*) has been the subject of much debate. In some varieties, such as the Nynorsk standard in Table 1, these elements correlate well with the other gender markers, such as determiners and personal pronouns. However, in other varieties, such as the Bokmål standard in Table 2, the suffixes do not correlate so well with the determiner. On the traditional assumption that genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behaviour of associated words, the suffixes *-en*, *-a* and *-et* are not seen as gender exponents in this paper; after all, suffixes are not words. Still, the definite singular suffixes are indications of gender, and this paper follows Enger & Corbett (2012) in showing the indicated gender in square brackets. (For further discussion, see e.g., Dahl 2000b; Enger 2004a; Lødrup 2011; Enger & Corbett 2012; Svenonius 2017 and references there).

The evidence from personal pronouns correlates with that of the determiners in the Nynorsk data in Table 1. In the Bokmål data in Table 2, by contrast, personal pronouns tell a different story than determiners. The pronouns display a four-gender contrast, determiners a two-gender contrast. The neuter gender pronoun *det* and the common gender pronoun *den* (both meaning ‘it’) typically signal reference to a non-human. They also indicate that the noun in question typically selects *et* [INDEF.NEUT] and *en* [INDEF.C] (both meaning ‘a’) respectively. Historically speaking, *den* is an innovation (see e.g., Davidson 1990 and Enger 2004b).

The pronouns *han* ‘he’ and *hun* ‘she’ typically signal a human referent, and that the noun selects *en* [INDEF.C]. The choice between *han* and *hun* typically depends on the sex of (human) referent. Higher animates such as dogs are in Bokmål often referred to with *den* ‘it.C’ (at least by those who do not own them). Essentially the same system is found in standard Danish and Swedish. To put it simply, there are four genders on pronouns, but not inside the NP. See Sections 3–5 below for complications, however.

Following Corbett (1991), Dahl (2000a), Wälchli & Di Garbo (2019), and others, we assume a ‘semantic core’ in the system. Importantly, this core does not relate exclusively to biological sex, but also to animacy (see Sections 3 and 4 for further discussion). This holds for gender systems in general, and for Scandinavian. Words for animates, human beings in particular, do not usually belong to the neuter gender in Norwegian (see Faarlund et al. 1997: 153f); *barn* ‘child’, included in the tables above, is a classic exception. In the Bokmål system in Table 2, they belong to the common gender, i.e., they take *en*, *fin* etc. (not *et*, *fint*, etc.). However, it does not follow that words for non-humans are restricted to the neuter. Compare the examples *bil* ‘car’, *fil* ‘file’ in Table 2 above.

2.2 Lexical vs. referential gender

As already noted, few nouns denoting humans are neuters, but some will take a neuter determiner. Examples include Norwegian Bokmål *postbud* ‘mail carrier’ (and the Nynorsk equivalent *postbod*), *vitne* ‘witness’; cf. *et postbud*, *et vitne* with neuter determiner. However, if Norwegians refer to a mail carrier or a witness they can see, they will usually avoid the neuter pronoun *det*, which may seem offensive, as if one is degrading the referent. In other words, these nouns are hybrids, in Corbett’s (2006) sense; they are not associated with an entirely consistent agreement pattern.

The *postbud* and *vitne* examples show that the semantics behind the gender system is clear in the pronouns, but less clear when it comes to the determiners. This is no surprise, typologically, given Corbett’s (2006: 206ff) Agreement Hierarchy. Figure 1 shows a simplified version of the hierarchy (taken from Enger 2013, based on Corbett 2006), containing three ‘pegs’ for three different kinds of agreement controllers:

← Attributive — Predicative — Personal pronoun →

Figure 1. Corbett’s Agreement Hierarchy, simplified version

For any controller that permits alternative agreements, the likelihood of referential (semantic) agreement will rise monotonically as we move towards the right along the Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 2006: 207). So, if referential agreement is possible on the predicative, it will be possible on the personal pronoun too, but not necessarily the other way around. Gender agreement is subject to the Agreement Hierarchy, whether it shows on attributives, predicatives or pronouns.

It is difficult (at first sight) to explain why the Norwegian Bokmål noun *postbud* ‘mail carrier’ should take the neuter determiner *et*, since it refers to an animate. Yet it is not difficult to explain why we would use the pronoun *hun* ‘she’ if referring to an obviously female mail carrier, or *han* ‘he’ if referring to an obviously male one.

On closer inspection, there is a non-semantic reason why *postbud*, in isolation, takes the neuter determiner. The word is a compound (*post+bud*), and compounds usually have the same gender as the last ‘member’ has in isolation. Thus, the reason why *postbud* is a neuter is probably that *bud* is neuter. The noun *bud* is polysemous. It can denote a person, a messenger, but a more central meaning is probably ‘message; bid; commandment’, and apparently, core meanings tend to ‘win’ in lexical gender assignment (see e.g., Enger 2010 for some discussion of this issue). The neuter on *postbud* is lexical gender, the lexically specified gender of the noun in isolation. It is to be contrasted with referential gender, the gender we may choose on the pronoun, for example. There is normally no choice of determiner, which reflects lexical gender. Lexical gender is also known as syntactic or formal gender; referential gender is also known as semantic gender.

For many nouns, especially the inanimate ones, there is no obvious semantic reason for their belonging to one lexical gender or the other – *bil* ‘car’, *fil* ‘file’ and *smil* ‘smile’ in Tables 1 and 2 are examples. (See also Urek et al. 2022.) Thus, gender assignment for such words must be accounted for by morphological or phonological generalisations (or, alternatively, it may be arbitrary). Morphologically complex words, such as *postbud*, make up a large part of the nouns, and their gender is close to predictable, when it comes

to determiners and adjectives. Thus, while the Norwegian gender system is far from transparent, it is certainly not entirely arbitrary, either.

‘Close to predictable’ may be a strange wording, but then, predictability and arbitrariness are tricky notions – as is the entire issue of arbitrariness in gender. Trosterud (2001) argues explicitly that the Norwegian Nynorsk gender system (cf. Table 1) is not arbitrary, that lexical gender assignment is rule-governed. Drawing inspiration from Corbett (1991) and from Steinmetz (1986), Trosterud posits no fewer than 50 rules. Of those rules, 28 are semantic, 9 are phonological, 10 are morphological, and three have a more general character (one of them says the masculine is the default). By Trosterud’s account, 94% of the nouns in the authoritative Nynorsk dictionary, *Nynorskordboka*, have rule-governed assignment. Trosterud’s paper is an important achievement, and thus, after 2001, the arbitrariness thesis on Norwegian gender must be viewed with suspicion.

At the same time, the paper has some weak points which illustrate how difficult the notion of arbitrariness can be. While accepting Trosterud’s main point, Enger (2002) argues that some rules lack independent evidence; they have no justification except to cover the data (and the alleged motivation behind some is implausible). Halse (2004) shows that some of Trosterud’s rules (especially some of the semantic ones) have little practical value. Parkkonen (2011) shows that the assumption that the masculine is the default can be too simple. All these authors agree that the gender system of Norwegian is not arbitrary. Urek et al. (2022), who also support the claim that the Norwegian gender system is not entirely arbitrary, find psycholinguistic support for some of Trosterud’s rules, but not for all, and, as so many before them, they point out that the rules are probabilistic.

While Kvinlaug (2011: 18) also agrees that gender assignment is basically not arbitrary, he points out that in the absence of a detailed presentation of the empirical data, it is hard to evaluate Trosterud’s claim about exactly 94% of the nouns being rule-governed. Kvinlaug also criticises the claim about an exact percentage being rule-governed, since Trosterud explicitly refrains from taking a stand on the interaction between the rules. Kvinlaug’s point is well taken: saying that sometimes formal rules win, sometimes semantic rules, making no claims about rule interaction, and then calling *both* possible outcomes ‘rule-governed’ does not seem entirely justified. Neither outcome is predicted, in the strict sense. On the other hand, as long as *some* plausible gender assignment rule bears on the outcome, it does not seem right to call the outcome arbitrary, either.

‘Predictability vs. arbitrariness’ is probably not the right way to frame the question of gender assignment (and may even be a case of what Langacker 1987 has dubbed ‘the rule-list fallacy’). Van Epps et al. (2021: 266) say that in the literature,

‘gender assignment is typically described in terms of rules, even though tendencies would be a more appropriate term. Gender assignment in general, as well as in our data, is highly variable and diverse, both synchronically as well as diachronically. Very few observed tendencies are exceptionless and would be seen as rules in the Neo-grammarian sense.’

Further arguments against the putative arbitrariness are easily found. As noted for *postbud* above, many compounds have the same gender as the ‘last member’ has in isolation. For example, *barneskole* ‘children’s school’ has the same gender as *skole* ‘school’ (common), not *barn*, while *skolebarn* ‘school child’ will have the same gender

as *barn* ‘child’ (neuter), and not *skole*. For many derivations, the gender is not arbitrary: The noun *lydighet* ‘obedience’ has the same gender as other derivations in *-het*, such as *kjærlighet* ‘love’, *spydighet* ‘sarcasm’. Norwegian Bokmål *forelskelse* ‘infatuation’ has the same gender as other derivations in *-else*, compare *forsnakkelse* ‘slip of the tongue’, *besvergelse* ‘incantation, curse’, *anfektelse* ‘doubt, contestation’. The gender for most morphologically complex nouns is thus not arbitrary, and these obvious descriptive generalisations are uncontroversial. While gender on simplexes is less predictable, compounds and derivations together make up a considerable part of Norwegian nouns. Given that the gender of compounds and derivations is largely non-arbitrary, the arbitrariness claim does not seem appealing.

3 Splitting the system?

Many scholars have argued that the Scandinavian gender system should be ‘split in two’, as it were. (See e.g., Teleman 1969, 1987; Josefsson 2009, 2013, 2014.) On their view, there is not one Scandinavian gender system, but two. The idea is that the gender agreement found on pronouns is meaningful, while the gender agreement inside the NP is meaningless. The latter kind of agreement is labelled formal gender, the former is labelled semantic or referential gender. This clearly resembles the description in Section 2, but an important difference is that the dichotomy referential-lexical is now in practice equated with positions on the Agreement Hierarchy. ‘Formal gender’ is explained by Josefsson (2009: 40) in the following way, using the neuter as an example:

‘the neuter feature has a dual nature. First of all it is a morphosyntactic feature associated with nouns, in other words a “lexical gender feature”. As such the neuter gender does not carry any meaning; there is simply no element of meaning shared by all neuter nouns.’

Formal gender is seen as asemanic, and Josefsson (2013: 13) says that it ‘is simply not possible to predict the formal gender of a noun on the basis of its meaning’.

An even more radical view is advocated by Åfarli et al. (2022: 638): ‘gender assignment to non-sex nouns in Norwegian seems in general to be arbitrary and conventional.’ Åfarli et al. apparently take biological sex to be the sole, semantic basis of Norwegian gender. The implication would be that it is arbitrary that, for example, *spion* ‘spy’ and *skotte* ‘person from Scotland’ (nouns denoting human beings that are neutral as to the sex of the referent) belong to the common gender in Norwegian Bokmål, as do their cognates (*spion*, *skotte*) in Swedish. This claim is hard to defend, since very few animate nouns belong to the neuter (cf. Section 2 and references there, see also, e.g., Trosterud 2001; Faarlund et al. 1997). In his monumental catalogue of changes in lexical gender from Old Norse to Modern Norwegian, Beito (1954: 81f) records a group of animate nouns that have changed from the neuter to the masculine (which, to simplify, corresponds to the common gender, diachronically), but no group of animate nouns that have changed in the opposite direction. Dahl (2000b: 586) flatly rejects claims about the non-semantic character of the Swedish common-neuter distinction, calling them ‘in fact false’. Dahl points out that ‘animate nouns strongly tend to be uter [=common, HOE]’. Compare Section 2 above. In an extensive empirical study of six North Scandinavian varieties, also Van Epps et al. (2021) find solid support for the role of animacy.

Teleman and Josefsson both take a less radical stand than Åfarli et al., acknowledging that animate nouns usually belong to the common gender, and that, in Swedish, mass nouns often belong to the neuter. In support of the importance of arbitrariness, Josefsson (2013) nevertheless adduces the eight pairs of homonymous Swedish nouns with different genders in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Eight homonym pairs in Swedish

Common gender noun	Translation	Neuter gender noun	Translation
<i>fax</i>	‘fax machine’	<i>fax</i>	‘fax message’
<i>bak</i>	‘butt’	<i>bak</i>	‘baking’
<i>visp</i>	‘whisk’	<i>visp</i>	‘stuff being whipped’
<i>lut</i>	‘lye’	<i>lut</i>	‘angle of a hill’
<i>kast</i>	‘caste’	<i>kast</i>	‘throw’
<i>pris</i>	‘snuff pouch’	<i>pris</i>	‘prize’
<i>e-mail</i>	‘e-mail (program)’	<i>e-mail</i>	‘e-mail (message)’
<i>as</i>	‘Norse god’	<i>as</i>	‘carcass’

The argument is as follows: ‘If we look carefully at the examples [...] we find no particular meaning component that is shared by the common gender nouns in the left-hand column or the neuter nouns in the right-hand column’ (Josefsson 2013: 13). Furthermore, ‘[i]n many cases, formal gender is simply arbitrary’ (Josefsson 2013: 5), and gender is assumed to be practically useless, in a way that other categories usually are not: ‘The whole purpose of formal gender morphophonology is [...] to make visible [...] other morphological categories’ (Josefsson 2013: 11; see also Davidson 1990: 148). Finally, it is claimed that ‘formal gender in Swedish does not have any meaning *per se*, but can be used to distinguish meanings conveyed by other morphological features’ (Josefsson 2013: 57).

Josefsson’s papers are admirably clear and explicit illustrations of a widespread view. We have already seen that Åfarli et al. (2022) push the idea of arbitrariness further than Josefsson does. Often, gender for nouns is described as not ‘interpretable’, in contrast to, say, number. We shall now consider counterarguments against the putative arbitrariness (some have already been presented in Section 2).

4 Lexical gender is non-arbitrary and meaningful, to some extent

4.1 Norwegian and Swedish homonyms

Homonyms of different genders are not restricted to Swedish; they are also found in Norwegian. Consider the examples in Table 4.

Table 4. Three homonym pairs in Norwegian

Common gender noun	Translation	Neuter gender noun	Translation
<i>fyr</i>	‘bloke’	<i>fyr</i>	‘lighthouse’
<i>rev</i>	‘fox’	<i>rev</i>	‘reef’
<i>gap</i>	‘joker, fool’	<i>gap</i>	‘gorge, mouth’

If gender (‘formal’ or ‘lexical’) really were 100% meaningless, there should be no discernible semantic pattern behind the distribution of gender on homonyms. Yet the three examples in Table 4 suggest a different story: The common is linked to words for animates, the neuter to words for inanimates. That is the ‘semantic core’ behind the Norwegian gender system, including pronouns. Compare Section 2.

However, the pattern in these three examples *could* be accidental. Josefsson’s treatment of the Swedish gender system suggests as much. On closer inspection, however, animacy is relevant for the Swedish examples in Table 3 as well, once we accept a somewhat broader understanding of ‘animacy’ than the literal one. Such a broader understanding is worth clarifying, even though it is far from original. More than three decades ago, Comrie (1989: 197ff) made it clear that the broad label animacy covers more than the literal sense of the word. On this broader understanding, animacy relates to several factors, including individuation, agentivity, definiteness, abstractness and even empathy.

Figure 2 presents a simplified version of the animacy hierarchy (whether the hierarchy should be seen as a question of degrees or steps need not concern us now).

Words denoting	English examples
Humans	<i>woman, boy</i>
Animals	<i>cat, badger</i>
Non-animate tangible objects	<i>chair, bottle</i>
Abstract nouns and masses	<i>philosophising, ethanol</i>

Figure 2. A simple animacy hierarchy

Animacy and individuation are related (Comrie 1989: 199). Sasse (1993) even prefers to talk of a hierarchy of individuation rather than of animacy. Animate entities (boys and cats, for example) tend to occur in clearly delineated packages, as it were, unlike abstract entities (philosophising) and masses (ethanol). Many people do not think of yeast or moss as animate, presumably partly because they are not delineated, partly because animacy also relates to empathy. Versions of the animacy hierarchy have even been called an ‘empathy hierarchy’ and a ‘me-first hierarchy’, reflecting the anthropocentrism behind it.

Animacy is also related to agentivity. Animate entities such as women and badgers tend to be more agentive than non-animate entities such as bottles and philosophising. This does not rule out the possibility of non-animate nouns being agentive, but such cases

are less common. If a forensic pathologist says of a murder victim that the *bottle killed him*, we will interpret *the bottle* as an instrument applied by the killer. Instruments are closer than products to being agentive. Næss (2007) suggests the term ‘force’ for such cases. Animacy is also related to concreteness. Abstract entities cannot be animate, and animate entities must be concrete.

Armed with a broader understanding of animacy, we can return to Josefsson’s pairs of nouns. The obvious case of animacy in the strictest sense being relevant is that of *as*, C ‘Norse god’ vs. *as*, N ‘carcass’. Gods are near the top of the animacy hierarchy, carcasses near the bottom, so it is unsurprising that the former word belongs to the common gender, the latter to the neuter.

Two less obvious examples are *fax*, C ‘fax machine’ vs. *fax*, N ‘fax message’ and *e-mail*, C ‘e-mail program’ vs. *e-mail*, N ‘e-mail message’. Clearly, there is no difference in animacy in the narrow sense of the word between machines/programmes on the one hand and messages on the other. None of them are alive. Yet a fax machine can ‘produce’, as it were a fax message, but not the other way around. In the same way, an e-mail program can ‘produce’ a message, but not the other way around. Machines and programmes are thus instruments and so closer to being agentive than messages are. The same difference holds for *visp*, C ‘whisk’ vs. *visp*, N ‘stuff being whipped’; a whisk is instrumental in creating that which is whipped. These are cases of ‘force’, then.

As for *bak*, C ‘butt’ vs. *bak*, N ‘(act of) baking’ there is, again, no difference in animacy in the narrow sense, but there is a difference in individuation and concreteness, in as much as the butt is more individuated and less abstract than is the act of baking. We have already noted that animates are more individuated and less abstract. The case for non-arbitrariness may seem weaker for the two instances of *pris*, but a snuff pouch (the masculine noun) is less abstract than a prize (the neuter noun). An intangible prize may be rare, but it is possible, an intangible snuff pouch belongs squarely to fiction. As for the two *kast*, a throw (the neuter noun) is more abstract than a caste (the common noun). As for the two *lut*, lye (the common noun denoting a strongly alkaline solution, typically sodium hydroxide or potassium hydroxide) is a mass, yet less abstract than an angle (the neuter noun).²

In short, out of Josefsson’s original eight examples from Swedish, the majority, perhaps all, relate to animacy in the broadest sense. If ‘formal gender’ really were 100 % meaningless, there should be no discernible semantic pattern behind the distribution of genders on homonyms. What the discussion above of homonym pairs in Norwegian and Swedish suggests, however, is exactly the opposite. The eight Swedish noun pairs in Table 3 were meant to illustrate the arbitrariness doctrine. The fact that, on closer examination, they rather undermine it seems significant. Yet the possibility remains that this was due to chance. Fortunately, Bobrova (2013) has carried out a more comprehensive study of Norwegian homonym pairs.

4.2 Animacy and common gender

Bobrova (2013) went through every single homonym pair (such as common gender *fyr* ‘bloke’ vs. neuter gender *fyr* ‘lighthouse’ in Table 4) in *Bokmålsordboka*, an authoritative dictionary of Norwegian Bokmål. This amounted to roughly 430 pairs. Briefly, she found

² A less semantic argument against arbitrariness is that the noun meaning ‘throw’ is a conversion (compare the verb *kasta* ‘throw’), and conversions are usually neuter in Swedish when they denote the action, common when they denote the instrument (Teleman et al. 1999: 60f, note 4). Thus, there is both semantic and formal motivation, so the example is not entirely arbitrary (and the difference between actions and instruments relates to animacy).

a statistically significant correlation between animacy/individuation on the one hand, and common gender on the other: ‘The semantic analysis supports the suggested correlation between gender and the animacy/individuation hierarchy’ (Bobrova 2013: iii, my translation).

Animacy and individuation are relevant to pronominal gender in Scandinavian, especially in a system like that of Bokmål (or Swedish), cf. Table 2. Part of the original motivation for ‘splitting’ the gender system in two, one part which is considered meaningful and one which is not, is that animacy and individuation were not seen as relevant for ‘lexical’ gender, but for ‘referential’ gender, cf. Section 3 above. Bobrova’s findings cast serious doubt on this argument.

If there is one place where we would expect to find support for the arbitrariness hypothesis for Scandinavian gender, it is with homonym pairs like Norwegian *fyr/fyr* (or Swedish *as/as*). The reason is that gender on simplexes is less predictable, in Scandinavian as in German (on German, see Köpcke 1982.) There is usually morphological motivation for the gender of morphologically complex nouns (see Section 2 above). By contrast, there is usually not formal motivation behind the gender assignment for homonymous simplexes. Norwegian has a relatively transparent orthography (less than Finnish, but much more than English), so the homonym pairs in Table 4 sound the same, at least to many speakers. Phonological motivation thus seems irrelevant for the gender assignment of most Norwegian homonyms. Morphological motivation also seems less likely for Norwegian simplexes: in the usual case, gender predicts plural inflection, and not the other way round (cf. Enger 2004a).

To repeat, if there is one place we would expect arbitrariness in the Norwegian gender systems, this is it. On its own home turf, then, the arbitrariness hypothesis is beaten. The argument based on ‘homonym pairs’ simply does not hold.

Yet arguments like those offered by Josefsson and Teleman are widespread, and we have seen that Åfarli et al. (2022) go even further. One may wonder why. Perhaps this is a version of what Langacker (1987; 2008: 13) has called ‘the exclusionary fallacy’. Given the clearly correct observation that not everything in Scandinavian gender is predictable or semantically motivated, scholars have gone to the other extreme, maybe because many linguists have frowned upon tendencies, at least until recently. Yet the positivist philosopher Hempel (1966) accepted tendencies even for the ‘hard’ sciences, so there is no obvious reason why linguists should have to reject them. We should look for ‘regularities, not rules’ (Dammel & Schallert 2019: 7).

Certainly, regularities do not cover everything in gender assignment (see also Fraurud 2000), but then, few observations about language are totally free from exceptions. Labelling a phenomenon arbitrary is simply unlikely to stimulate further research. The idea that gender assignment is (semantically) arbitrary should be examined just as critically as the idea that gender assignment is fully (semantically) regular. The fact that scholars do not understand the principles behind a certain phenomenon X is not sufficient argument for the conclusion that there are no principles behind X. The latter does not follow from the former, and the arbitrariness doctrine does not fare too well in this case. Bobrova found inspiration in Corbett’s (1991) approach, which is close to the opposite.

Let us now return to Josefsson’s (2013: 13) observation that it ‘is simply not possible to predict the formal gender of a noun on the basis of its meaning’. If ‘predict’ means ‘tell with full certainty’, the remark is entirely correct. Yet in that case, we cannot, for example, ‘predict’ the argument structure of a word based on its meaning, either

(cf. Haugen 2014; Hudson 2010: 286f), and at least to my knowledge, nobody has concluded that argument structure is completely arbitrary.

However, if ‘predict’ means ‘guess with a reasonable chance of being correct’, the argument does not hold. There is ample psycholinguistic evidence indicating that speakers can learn tendencies (cf. Dąbrowska 2004), so linguists should not dismiss tendencies light-heartedly. Often, language learning/acquisition is about tendencies, not foolproof predictions. Van Epps et al. (2021) find many tendencies in gender assignment in North Scandinavian, and they find diachronic evidence in support.

5 Meaningful NP-internal agreement and meaningless pronominal agreement

5.1 The gender on the determiner can be meaningful, as can other NP-internal agreement

There is another side to the issue of ‘meaning’ for homonyms of different gender. Compare Examples (1)–(4) from Norwegian Bokmål:

- | | | | | |
|-----|------------------------|--------------|-----------|-------------|
| (1) | <i>Jeg</i> | <i>ser</i> | <i>en</i> | <i>fyr.</i> |
| | I | see | a.C | bloke |
| | ‘I see a bloke.’ | | | |
| (2) | <i>Jeg</i> | <i>ser</i> | <i>et</i> | <i>fyr.</i> |
| | I | see | a.N | lighthouse |
| | ‘I see a lighthouse.’ | | | |
| (3) | <i>Båten</i> | <i>traff</i> | <i>en</i> | <i>rev.</i> |
| | boat.DEF | hit | a.C | fox |
| | ‘The boat hit a fox.’ | | | |
| (4) | <i>Båten</i> | <i>traff</i> | <i>et</i> | <i>rev.</i> |
| | boat.DEF | hit | a.N | reef |
| | ‘The boat hit a reef.’ | | | |

An important clue to the difference in meaning between the bloke and the lighthouse, between the fox and the reef respectively, is in the different determiners – *en* vs. *et*. The gender value on the agreement target is meaningful, in these cases.

An obvious objection might be that the gender is really in the noun and that the determiners merely reflect the gender of the noun, so that the ‘real’ difference is not between *en* and *et*, but between *fyr* I and *fyr* II. While such an objection is understandable, it does entail a claim that what listeners can hear or readers can see is meaningless, while what is meaningful is what listeners cannot hear – or readers cannot see. This seems unappealing. My claim is not that the noun has no bearing on the meaning difference, nor is it that the context does not play a role. The point is only that listeners have no reason to dismiss an obvious and easily perceivable clue to the difference between *fyr* I and *fyr* II, the determiner. Syntagmatically, the determiner (*en/et*) is an index, in Peircean terms, and as such, it is a sign. A particular determiner does narrow down the set of possible nouns that may follow, and speakers notice (see e.g., Heim et al. 2005; Miceli et al. 2002).

The fact that the gender is in the noun does not exclude it also being in the determiner. Langacker (1991: 187) rejects the assumption that ‘a marking cannot be meaningful if its occurrence is obligatory [...] if an element is obligatory, there is certainly a sense in which its occurrence is uninformative, but that is very different from saying that it has no semantic content’. In other words, ‘redundant’ is not the same as ‘meaningless’ (see also 5.3).

Enger (2013) presents three other arguments for meaningful gender inside the Scandinavian NP; we shall look at two of them. In Norwegian Nynorsk, which has a three-gender system (see Table 1), the lexical gender of *dørvakt* ‘bouncer’ is, perhaps surprisingly, feminine. In colloquial style, one may use a pronoun (alternatively a determiner³) attributively before the noun, and the choice does not depend on the lexical gender of the noun, but on the sex of the bouncer in question. Compare the Nynorsk examples in (5)–(6):

- (5) *Har du sett han nye dørvakta? Han er stor.*
 Have you seen he new.DEF.SG bouncer.DEF.SG[F]? He is big
- (6) *Har du sett ho nye dørvakta? Ho er stor.*
 Have you seen she new.DEF.SG bouncer.DEF.SG[F]? She is big

The reason for choosing *han/ho* is the same, whether *han/ho* is inside or outside of the NP.

In at least one variety of Swedish, described in the Swedish Academy Grammar (Teleman et al. 1999: 227), such examples as (7)–(8) are acceptable:

- (7) *Alexander, de-n ny-e chef-en, han är trevlig.*
 Alexander the-C new-DEF.M boss-DEF.SG[C] he is nice.C.SG
 ‘Alexander, the new boss, he is nice.’
- (8) *Alexandra, de-n ny-a chef-en, hon är trevlig.*
 Alexandra the-C new-DEF.F boss-DEF.SG.[C] she is nice.C.SG
 ‘Alexandra, the new boss, she is nice.’

The choice of *han* in (7) depends on the same factor as the choice of *nye*, animacy and sex of the referent, so *nye* is an example of referential agreement inside the NP.⁴

The claim that even NP-internal agreement can be meaningful finds support outside of Scandinavian. Corbett (2006) has presented considerable evidence, and we shall just consider one more recent example here. Belyaev et al. (2015) show that agreement on the NP-internal adjective can be meaningful in Russian and Italian. Their Italian example is given in (9):

- (9) *le bandiere rossa e bianca*
 the.PL flag.PL red.SG and white.SG
 ‘the red flag and the white flag [2 flags total]’

³ It is a moot point whether determiners and pronouns constitute one class or two for Norwegian, and, for that matter, Scandinavian. Kristoffersen (2000) and Halmøy (2016) reject the two-class analysis for Norwegian. Hansen & Heltoft (2011: 183) reject the two-class analysis for Danish. (Examples such as *han nye dørvakta* in (5) are best analysed as one phrase in Norwegian, and not two; see Enger 2013: 285.)

⁴ The fact that there is a particular masculine agreement inside the NP in (7) is clearly unusual in the Swedish agreement system overall. Nevertheless, the possibility is there.

The phrase refers to two flags in total, with the attributes ‘red’ and ‘white’ each holding of a different flag (i.e., not two Polish or Austrian flags). According to Belyaev et al. (2015: 29), there ‘is no direct number agreement between each adjective and the noun’; note that the adjectives are in the singular, the noun in the plural. And yet the ‘number marking on the adjectives makes a very clear semantic contribution to the interpretation of the phrase’.

To sum up, NP-internal agreement can be meaningful (as argued also by e.g., Corbett 2006 and Landau 2016), also in Scandinavian.

5.2 Pronominal agreement is not always meaningful

As noted above, part of the justification for ‘splitting’ the Scandinavian gender system is that lexical gender, found inside the NP/DP, is not semantic. We have seen that this does not hold. In a discussion of Italian gender and meaning, Percus (2011: 173) hits the nail on its head: ‘what seems to be the right approach for some cases just doesn’t seem to work for other cases’.

The other part of the justification for a split in Scandinavian is that pronominal gender is semantic. However, this does not always hold, either. As already mentioned, the Swedish gender system is in principle like that of Table 2, in that there are four genders in pronouns, but usually two elsewhere. Yet in their Swedish grammar, Holmes & Hinchliffe (2013: 4) note that ‘[n]ouns ending in *-a* [in the indefinite singular, HOE] which denote animals are often treated as feminine irrespective of their true gender [biological sex, HOE]: *råttan* – *hon* the rat – she, *åsnan* – *hon* the donkey – she’. (See also Teleman et al. 1999: 277.) So, if we wish to explain why *råttan* ‘the rat’ is referred to by the pronoun *hon* ‘she’, *musen* ‘the mouse’ by the pronoun *han* ‘he’, the account will involve the observation that *råtta* ‘rat’ ends in an unstressed *-a* in the indefinite singular and that *mus* does not. Ending in an unstressed *-a* can hardly be called a semantic property. Thus, it is not the case that pronominal agreement is always semantically motivated in Swedish.

In Norwegian, the noun *barn* ‘child’ takes a neuter determiner. This may relate to its semantics, but it is nevertheless a lexical fact; the near-synonym *unge* ‘child’ is a masculine in Nynorsk, a common gender noun in Bokmål. One can refer to *barnet* ‘the child’ with the neuter pronoun *det*, and Faarlund et al. (1997: 327-28) see this as a violation of the usual tendency for pronouns to agree according to natural sex. This indicates that pronominal agreement is not always semantically motivated in Norwegian Bokmål, either. Example (10) stems from a Bokmål novel from 2019 (*Festningsverket*, by David Lie):

- (10) *Guttebarnet, det slipper å drite seg ut.*
 boy-child.DEF.SG[N] it.N is.spared to shit itself out
 ‘The boy-child is spared from making a fool of itself (lit. shitting itself out).’

Since to refer to *guttebarnet* with *han* ‘he’ would count as referential gender agreement here, the use of the neuter pronoun *det* here reflects lexical gender.

Compare also the following Bokmål example in (11), a philosophical joke on solipsism:

- (11) *Vi er mange som tror vi er den eneste i verden.*
 we are many who believe we are the.SG only in world.DEF.SG[C]
 ‘We are many who think we are the only one in the world.’

Here, the second occurrence of the plural pronoun *vi* does not carry any ‘real plural meaning’. It is a case where the use of the plural is ‘meaningless’ even on a pronoun.⁵ In short, pronominal agreement is not always meaningful in Scandinavian; it can be fairly meaningless, in the same way as NP-internal agreement (if less often).

5.3 Comparing gender with other categories

In parts of the literature, gender comes out as strange, which is unfortunate. It is also seen as having no reasonable purpose, except to support other categories – that idea is also unappealing. Nevertheless, when gender comes out as so strange, this may be partly because gender sometimes has been treated in ‘splendid isolation’ (a tendency criticised also by Wälchli & Di Garbo 2019). Corbett (1991: 1) says that ‘[g]ender is the most puzzling of the grammatical categories’. This often-quoted remark may be correct, but it has sometimes been misread. Gender is not the *only* grammatical category that is puzzling: they all are, to some extent. Spencer (2002: 280) says that when it comes to being puzzling, gender ‘competes with verbal aspect’. Kürschner & Nübling (2011: 357) say that ‘declension seems no less puzzling’. Gender can at least in principle help in disambiguation (even if it rarely does so in practice, cf. Feist 2020). By contrast, declensions and conjugations are often held to be entirely pointless. (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010 argues for a different view, however.)

Let us compare gender values with values for an apparently ‘reasonable’ morpho-syntactic category, verbal tense. Tense is usually held to be a ‘meaningful’ category, so some might object: ‘There are puzzling things *within* tense, but it is hardly puzzling that languages regularly distinguish present from past. There are also puzzling things *within* gender. But worse than that, gender is puzzling *externally* – why have it at all? Particularly when plenty of languages manage without.’

Many languages manage without tense as well (or, for that matter, without most other grammatical categories). Dahl & Villupelai (2013) say that it ‘is only from a Eurocentric point of view that the marking of the distinction between present and past appears to be a necessary part of grammar. Languages may or may not distinguish [...] grammatically, and there is no clear majority for either alternative.’ We should not mistake the familiar for the inevitable. There is an advantage in taking a ‘Martian perspective’, i.e., to try to see language from outside (Carstairs-McCarthy 2010). While the distinction between present and past is common in European languages, an inflectional distinction between present and future is not, for example. The difference between this distinction and that between present and past would presumably not be obvious to a Martian.

Gender may not have an obvious *raison d’être*, but grammar is generally anthropocentric. The semantic core of gender is invariably related to animacy and to biological

⁵ In his grammar of Nynorsk, Venås (1990: 71) commented on what at the time was new feminism in society and language, where *-mann* ‘man’ in compounds was no longer seen as uncontroversially sex-neutral. Given a compound such as *fylkesmann* ‘county governor’, Venås comments that if the *fylkesmann* is a woman, it seems ‘unreasonable’ (*urimeleg*) to use *han* ‘he’. However, Venås adds as an afterthought that in such cases, where ‘natural [≈referential] gender’ and ‘grammatical [≈lexical] gender’ compete, usage has varied. This means that not all pronominal agreement has been referential in Nynorsk, either.

sex (cf. Section 2), and these properties are clearly important to human beings – in much the same way as the distinction versus the present and the past. Animacy is pervasive in grammar, and easily overlooked.

The Norwegian tense system is broadly comparable to the English one. There are two tenses in the strictest sense, viz. the present and the past. Neither correlates perfectly with ‘logical time’, as the following examples illustrate. Sentences (12)–(15) exemplify this for the present tense (all examples in Bokmål):

(12) *Akkurat nå går jeg på trikken.*
right now go I on tram.DEF.SG[C]

‘Right now I’m entering the tram.’ ‘Logical time’: right now

(13) *I går var vi i skogen. Plutselig kommer det en ulv.*
yesterday were we in forest.DEF.SG.C suddenly comes it a.C wolf

‘Yesterday, we were in the woods. Suddenly, a wolf emerges.’ ‘Logical time’: past

(14) *Tenk deg at du dør.*
imagine yourself that you.SG die

‘Imagine that you die.’ ‘Logical time’: hypothetical

(15) *I morgen går jeg på kino.*
tomorrow go I on cinema.INDF.SG

‘Tomorrow, I’ll be going to the cinema.’ ‘Logical time’: future

The present tense, then, covers all conceivable ‘logical times’. So what about the past tense?

(16) *Dette var god kaffe!*
this.N was good.INDF.SG.C coffee

‘This coffee tastes good!’ (right now, while I am drinking it)

‘Logical time’: right now

(17) *I går dukket det opp et nytt problem.*
yesterday popped it.N up a.N new.N problem

‘Yesterday, a new problem turned up.’ ‘Logical time’: past

(18) *Om jeg var en rik mann, [...]*
if I were a.C rich.INDF.SG.C man [...]

‘If I were a rich man, [...].’ ‘Logical time’: hypothetical

(19) *Da gikk vi, da!*
then went we, then!

‘It’s time we went!’ (as I have been telling you several times before this)

‘Logical time’: immediate future

The past tense *also* appears to cover all conceivable logical times, even though, admittedly, its use for ‘right now’ and ‘immediate future’ is much more restricted than what holds for the present. Recall now the arbitrariness claim for gender from Section 3. The argument was that there is ‘no particular meaning component that is shared by the common gender nouns [...] or the neuter nouns [...]’. In the same way, there is no particular meaning component shared by all and only the present tense forms or all and only the past tense forms.

We should treat gender more like tense in seeing both its semantic basis and the quirks. Even tense is not always fundamentally meaningful. Smith (2022: 63) makes the point well:

‘some functional or grammatical properties (such as gender and case) have no necessary extralinguistic correlate, whereas others (such as number and tense) appear to be correlated with independent conceptual notions, such as quantity and time. [...] However, the correlation of, say, number with quantity and tense and aspect with time is at best indirect.’

The past tense is semantically motivated, but it is not dictated by semantics. The same holds for the common gender in Swedish, for example, even if the common gender is less motivated by semantics than is the past. Also in Norwegian Bokmål, it is easy to see a semantic reason for most uses of, e.g., past tense, and not so easy for many uses of, e.g., the common gender. Yet a quantitative difference is not a qualitative one. My argument is trivial: grammatical meaning does not always make complete sense. Still, this trivial message seems necessary. The difference between gender and tense is a matter of degree: we are not dealing with a difference in kind.⁶

At this stage, another possible objection could be as follows: ‘Gender is not a grammatical category, the way tense is. The gender value for a particular noun is lexically fixed; the tense value for a particular verb will vary. Meaning, according to a venerable structuralist doctrine, lies in oppositions. Since gender does not vary for a noun, it is meaningless.’

On closer inspection, this objection does not hold. While the gender on a particular noun in language L need not vary, it varies *between* nouns. Otherwise, we would not say that language L has a gender system at all. Here is an analogy from forestry: Say that some trees in a wood are marked for being felled, e.g., with a big X. Others are unmarked (the default). The marking on each tree does not vary, yet it seems clear that the big X has a meaning.

Furthermore, an anonymous reviewer points out that in many languages of the world, ‘gender assignment is highly flexible and contextual’. It can contribute to reference construal in many African languages, for example (see Di Garbo & Agbetsoamedo 2018). Finally, the argument that gender does not vary excludes ‘hybrid nouns’ (Corbett 1991), and thus rests on controversial assumptions. The gender of many nouns does vary also in Scandinavian, if we consider more than the determiner.⁷

⁶ For further discussion of this point, see e.g., Smith (2022), O’Neill (2013) and Hecce (2020, 2023: 28 *et passim*).

⁷ In Norwegian Bokmål of a different kind than the one in Table 2, one may even find, if very rarely, semantically variable gender on the determiner (Enger 2015). We may find *ei lærer* ‘a.F teacher’ when reference is made to a woman, and *en lærer* ‘a.M teacher’ otherwise.

A comparison with number may help. Number on nouns is not as puzzling as gender, but number can be lexically fixed on nouns, just like gender. In Norwegian, several nouns occur practically only in the singular, and we may leave it open whether a plural can be formed at all, in natural speech. Examples include *dansing* ‘dancing’, *mjøl* ‘flour’, *oppdragsforskning* ‘commissioned research’. Conversely, another, smaller set of nouns occur practically only in the plural; these include e.g., *opptøyer* ‘riots’, *innvoller* ‘guts’. Thus, neither set of nouns will usually inflect for number. Clearly, there is a semantic motivation behind the absence of inflection. As for *mjøl* ‘flour’, mass nouns often do not pluralise, and as for *dansing* ‘dancing’, abstract nouns often do not pluralise. As for *opptøyer* ‘riots’ and *innvoller* ‘guts’, the English translational equivalents are also plural nouns. In short, lack of number inflection seems to be motivated by semantics. Yet this is hardly semantically predictable. For example, English *money* is a singular-only noun, just like German *Geld*, which means roughly the same thing. For many Norwegians, the translational equivalent noun *penger* is a plural-only noun, like the near-synonyms *kontanter* and *grunker*. Lack of number inflection is thus motivated by semantics, but it is not predictable. Besides plural-only nouns, there are plural-dominant nouns, so there are various relations a noun can have with number (see Corbett 2019 for extensive typological discussion). If meaning really lies in oppositions only, one is forced to claim that number is meaningful only for those nouns for which it is inflectional, and not for the rest. We may leave it to adherents of the structuralist doctrine to work out whether this implies that there is no semantic motivation behind cases of nouns that do not inflect for number.

The upshot is that we need not insist on either predictability or arbitrariness (either rules or lists), and that gender can be meaningful. There is an interesting convergence here with work in different research traditions. In a study in formal semantics, Percus (2011: 168) argues that ‘gender features on Italian nouns are associated with an interpretation, but there are ways in which the grammar manages to hide this fact’. Percus (2011: 167) defends ‘a view on which interpretable features can sometimes go uninterpreted. Gender features are among the elements that can do so’. Furthermore, in the framework of a ‘dual model of language’, Nordström (2024: 78) argues that both ‘semantic and grammatical [person-number-gender, HOE] agreement affixes represent semantically interpretable features’. As for the alleged ‘uselessness’ of gender (Section 3), languages can vary in many ways, and most grammatical features in any particular language L are probably dispensable. That does not support singling out gender. Rather, it indicates that ‘redundant’, from the linguist’s birds-eye perspective, cannot be equated with ‘meaningless’, from the perspective of language L or its users (cf. Langacker 1991: 187 and 379). Here is an illustration: Any linguist writing a paper will probably state the same main idea at least three times during the paper. It follows that two out of these three occurrences are redundant, strictly speaking, but it does not render them meaningless.

Some redundancy is probably necessary and useful in any human language, cf. Langacker (2008: 188): ‘Redundancy is not to be disparaged, for [...] every language makes extensive use of it. By providing the listener with extra clues, it helps ensure that a partially degraded message can still be understood’. Linguists tend to think of gender as an unnecessary complication, because speakers have to think of which gender to use, but listeners may sometimes be thankful for the disambiguating effect of gender. This is not to say that disambiguation is a primary function of gender, but it may be a convenient by-product (Feist 2020).

While linguists traditionally have aimed for redundancy-free descriptions, ‘it remains perfectly possible for speakers to have systematic redundant knowledge’

(Maiden 2016: 136). Some redundancy may even be useful to speakers, who are known to be less than perfect. Ackerman & Malouf (2015: 310) say that ‘[a]ll natural languages show a certain degree of what Baerman et al. [...] call “gratuitous” morphological complexity and Wurzel [...] describes as “ballast” in the linguistic system.’ On such a basis, it is not clear that gender is so special. There has been a tendency in the literature to treat gender in splendid isolation and as redundant and strange, yet gender is hardly more redundant or bizarre than, say, inflection classes or the German *Fugenelement* found in some compounds such as *Schafskopf* ‘head of mutton’, to mention but two examples.

Also Dolberg (2019: 25) presents arguments that ‘asserting gender to be non-functional or meaningless is simply untenable’. Dolberg concedes that ‘its effects are mostly moderate and its functions can generally be fulfilled by other means as well’, but this could also be said about many other grammatical categories. Verbal tense is, after all, also dispensable (cf. above).

6 Conclusion

We are used to agreement targets contributing meaning when they are in the pronominal domain, and less so when they are attributive. Yet it is not the case that gender agreement on determiners always is meaningless – as cases like *en fyr / et fyr* show. Here, the agreement target contributes even inside the NP. This seems problematic for the repeated claim that agreement in general and inside the NP/DP in Scandinavian in particular is without meaning. The idea of agreement as mere feature copying is in trouble when the ‘target’ is making an independent contribution in terms of meaning. My argument is thus in line with, for instance, Corbett (2006), Haug & Nikitina (2016) and Kibrik (2019).

The argument in this paper supports Corbett’s (2006) reluctance towards drawing a sharp line around the NP for agreement purposes. Equating the meaningful/meaningless distinction with some particular position on the Agreement Hierarchy remains less promising. Agreement is ‘a multifaceted phenomenon’ (Thorvaldsdóttir 2019), and since gender is defined by agreement, gender is multi-faceted too.

Even if we should not exclude some arbitrariness for lexical gender in Scandinavian, this arbitrariness has sometimes been overstated, and an emphasis on arbitrariness can be positively unhelpful, heuristically. Gender may be puzzling, but it is not quite as different from other categories as we may have thought.

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Abbreviations

C	common
DEF	definite
F	feminine
INDF	indefinite
M	masculine
MF	masculine/feminine
N	neuter
PL	plural
SG	singular

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