Round Women and Long Men:  
Shape, Size, and the Meanings of Gender in New Guinea and Beyond

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Abstract. The concept of gender has three faces. Natural gender (N-gender, or sex), Social gender (S-gender), which reflects the social implications of being a man or a woman (or perhaps something in between), and Linguistic gender (L-gender). L-gender tends to mirror social and cultural stereotypes of S-gender. Recurrent correlations between shape, size, and L-gender choice are a feature of languages of the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. After a brief summary of L-gender and the principles of its choice across languages, a detailed analysis is offered of L-gender choice in Manambu, a Ndu language from the Sepik region. It is shown that gender assignment to humans correlates with N-gender and reflects S-gender status. Other nouns have no fixed gender. Their gender depends on the physical properties of the noun’s referent. We then turn to a cross-linguistic survey of other languages, in New Guinea and beyond, where shape and size are deployed as semantic parameters in L-gender choice. Further semantic correlates of gender assignment in the languages of the world include the roles of referents in myths, and salient properties correlating with the position of S-gender (especially relevant for L-gender choice and L-genders switches for humans).

1. Introduction. The multifaceted notion of gender pervades every aspect of life and of living. The way gender is articulated shapes the world of individuals, and of the societies they live in. But gender is not a unitary concept. It has three faces:

• Natural gender, or N-gender. This is what was until recently simply called “sex”—male versus female. A female is able to bear children, a male is not. N-gender entails anatomical and hormonal differences, linked to concomitant physiological and psychological traits.

• Social gender, or S-gender. This reflects the social implications of being a man or a woman (or perhaps something in between). In Simone de Beauvoir’s adage, “One is not born a woman but becomes a woman” (1949: 267). In many traditional societies of New Guinea, social manhood is achieved, and defined, through male initiation (see, e.g., Schieffelin 1977: 121–28; Silverman 2001); social womanhood used to be achieved through female initiation (see, e.g., Roscoe 1995). S-gender relates to contrasting social roles of the sexes, and how these are embodied in cultural practices and public ritualized behavior, including gender etiquette (in the spirit of Parker 1988), traditional knowledge, and social stereotypes.

• Linguistic gender, or L-gender. This is the original sense of the term “gender.” Nouns are divided into classes associated with different
morphological marking. The class that includes most words referring to females is called “feminine”; similarly for males and “masculine.” Gender classes are typically defined by their male and female members, but may extend beyond these. The ways in which animals, birds, insects, plants, and natural phenomena (such as thunder and wind) are assigned to genders may reflect roles in legend and reveal folk taxonomies (see Aikhenvald 2000, 2004, 2006; Dixon 1982; Corbett 1991).

The three kinds of gender interact with each other. Investigations of N-gender are relevant for the disciplines focusing on innate biological differences between men and women. They can also play a role in the conceptualization and linguistic realization of S-gender: physical attributes typical of N-gender come to be redeployed as tokens of S-gender, as, for example, high pitch may come to be associated with “female talk.” As Labov puts it, “the sexual differentiation of speakers is . . . not a product of physical factors alone,” but “rather an expressive posture which is socially more appropriate for one sex or another” (1972:304; see also Philips, Steele, and Tanz 1994). In a ground-breaking study of the physical features of women’s speech among the Tohono O’odham (a Uto-Aztecan group of Arizona and Mexico), Hill and Zepeda (1999) show how women (but not men) use pulmonic ingressive airstream in order to construct a special atmosphere of conversational intimacy, taking advantage of size differences between male and female vocal tracts; such sound production is easier to achieve with the smaller female larynx and pharynx. Similar phenomena of using N-gender features in order to construct an S-gender self have been described for numerous European languages and for Japanese (Uyeno 1971). A full study of the social functions of conventionalized correlations between N-gender and S-gender on a worldwide scale has yet to be undertaken.1

Some linguistic categories show strong correlations with cultural values, social hierarchies, and their conceptualization (perhaps more so than other categories). Imperatives and commands reflect social hierarchies (Aikhenvald 2010a). Meanings encoded within possessive structures often reflect the relationships within a society, and change if the society changes (for some examples, see Aikhenvald forthcoming).

Genders, and classifiers of all types, tend to mirror social and cultural stereotypes and patterns of human perception. Language planning, political correctness, and social change play a role in shaping gender and classifier systems, and social change and language planning may affect the composition of each of these systems (see Aikhenvald 2000:347–50, and references there). Grammatical gender—the essence of L-gender—is often instrumental in reflecting cultural and conceptual stereotypes. S-gender is reflected in the ways people use language to express gender roles. Different semantic parameters play various roles in reflecting S-gender stereotypes.

In this article, I focus on how physical features of the referent of a noun—shape and size—may play a role in the choice of L-gender, and what S-gender
and N-gender features they correlate with. Certain correlations of L-gender choice with shape and size are widespread among languages of the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea. We start with a brief summary of L-gender and the principles governing its choice across languages (section 2). As a detailed case study of a language where size and shape play a paramount role in gender assignment, we review the principles of L-gender choice in Manambu, a Ndu language from the Sepik area of Papua New Guinea, with a special focus on its cultural background (section 3) (elaborating on the discussion in Aikhenvald 2008a:116–22). The principles of gender choice in Manambu raise a variety of issues that have to do with the role of shape, size, and social status in gender assignment crosslinguistically. To address these, we turn to a crosslinguistic survey of other languages in New Guinea and elsewhere in which shape and size are deployed as semantic parameters in L-gender choice (section 4). Further semantic correlates of gender assignment, including the roles of referents in myths, and other important sociocultural associations relating to S-gender, are discussed in section 5. Brief conclusions are given in section 6.

2. Gender and noun class. The concept of L-gender can be traced to the Greek philosopher Protagoras in the fifth century BC, who divided Greek nouns into three classes: feminine, masculine, and inanimate (nowadays called neuter). This typical gender system is found in many Indo-European languages. (Latin had a similar system, but during historical change neuter nouns were redistributed between the other two genders giving the modern system of masculine and feminine in French and Italian.)

L-gender systems show some correlation with N-gender (or sex). But they go beyond N-gender in that feminine and masculine genders often include inanimate nouns with no connection to female or male sex, e.g., French *maison* ‘house’ (feminine), *château* ‘castle’ (masculine). L-gender can be realized overtly (if marked on a noun itself), covertly (through agreement on modifiers and sometimes also on verbs), or both. Examples (1a) and (1b) from Portuguese illustrate both principles. Genders are marked on nouns and on agreeing modifiers—the definite article and the adjective.

(1a) o menin-o bonit-o (Portuguese)
    ARTICLE.MASC.SG   child-MASC.SG   beautiful-MASC.SG
    ‘the beautiful boy’

(1b) a menin-a bonit-a (Portuguese)
    ARTICLE.FEM.SG   child-FEM.SG   beautiful-FEM.SG
    ‘the beautiful girl’

The semantic basis of L-gender may be a matter of some controversy. In many Indo-European languages, the meanings of genders are not at all straightforward. Modern Greek is a case in point.
Greek nouns are traditionally divided into three major classes, commonly referred to as masculine, feminine, and neuter. These classes reflect distinctions of what is typically referred to as grammatical gender [ . . . ] there is no straightforward class-meaning assignable for each noun class nor any direct correlation between biological gender and grammatical gender. For the most part, nouns referring to males are masculine, but there are many masculine nouns which have no biological gender (e.g. 'lófos 'hill') and there are neuter nouns that can refer to males (e.g. 'pedí 'child of either sex'); moreover, while many nouns referring to females are of feminine grammatical gender, there are neuter nouns (e.g. 'korítsi 'girl') and even some masculine nouns (e.g. the augmentative 'korítsaros 'pretty or buxom girl') that designate females, as well as many feminine nouns that have no biological gender (e.g. 'simbá¶ia 'sympathy'); finally, while neuter nouns are often inanimate things, some of the above examples ('pedí, 'korítsi) indicate clearly that this is not always the case. Thus, it seems preferable to treat the assignment of grammatical gender as an idiosyncratic fact about individual lexical items. [Joseph and Philippaki-Warburton 1987:152; for further details, see Macridge 1985:49–52]

Gender choice can be determined by the morphological form of the noun. In Greek, “to a certain extent, grammatical gender can be considered to be a property of stem-formatives involved in the formation of particular nouns. Thus, diminutives in -itsi are always neuter, augmentatives in -aros are always masculine, abstract nouns in -ja are always feminine and so on” (Joseph and Philippaki-Warburton 1987:152–53). This is very similar to the German Mädchen ‘girl’—the noun is neuter, as is required for nouns containing the diminutive suffix -chen, and the feminine referent may thus be referred to as ‘it’.

The role of the properties of the noun referent in L-gender assignment varies across languages. Still, no system of gender or noun class is completely devoid of semantic motivation. Even if a language has some nonsemantic principles of noun class assignment, there will always be a core where gender or noun class choice is made based on meaning. This core includes humans in some languages, and animates in others (for discussion and a typological perspective, see Aikhenvald 2000:275–83).

Principles of semantic assignment, or semantic choice, of genders can be rather complex. Dyirbal, spoken in North Queensland, Australia (Dixon 1972: 308–12), has four gender classes. Three are associated with one or more basic concepts: gender 1 corresponds to male humans and nonhuman animates; gender 2 corresponds to female humans, water, fire, and fighting; gender 3 corresponds to nonflesh food. Gender 4 is a residue class covering everything else.

Some nouns have a different gender from what one would expect given the normal associations between concepts and L-gender in Dyirbal. There are two principles that account for such cases. One is the MYTH-AND-BELIEF PRINCIPLE: an object can be assigned to a gender by its mythological association rather than
by its actual semantics. In Dyirbal, birds are classed as feminine by mythological association, since birds are believed to be the spirits of dead females. A cassowary (a large flightless bird) is feminine because it is a mythological woman (similarly to many New Guinea languages, as we see in section 5.1). The other is the IMPORTANT-PROPERTY PRINCIPLE: if a subset of a certain group of objects has a particular important property, e.g., being dangerous, it can be assigned to a different class from the other nouns in that group. Most trees without edible parts belong to gender 4, but stinging trees are placed in gender 2. Most fishes are in gender 1, but dangerous fishes are in gender 2. More broadly, L-gender (or noun class) assigned to a noun referent depends on how its meaning differs from that of other members of the same class. Here I apply the notion of important-property principle to account for nouns whose unexpected L-gender assignment can be explained by the semantic features of another L-gender class.

In some languages, most nouns are assigned to just one gender. This is the case in many familiar Indo-European languages, such as German. In other languages, different genders can be chosen to highlight a particular property of a referent. This is a feature of languages where gender assignment is strongly correlated with semantic properties. For example, in Dyirbal, variable class assignment is restricted to sex-differentiable animals. The correlation of class 1 with male and class 2 with female is obligatory for humans. Each name of an animal has a fixed class membership; however, exceptionally, noun class assignment can be changed to stress the sex of a particular animal, e.g., “to point out that a certain dog is male bayi guda can be used” (Dixon 1982:182). Usually, guda ‘dog’ belongs to class 2 (Dixon 1982:180), and so the unmarked usage would be balan guda. Very occasionally, changing noun class can create a pragmatic effect. In Dyirbal, yara ‘man’ belongs to class 1, and so would be referred to as bayi yara. However, Dixon (1982:166) reports that a hermaphrodite was once jokingly referred to as balan yara, with a feminine class 2 marker, pointing out his female characteristics. In this case, the manipulation of noun class realized in agreement has a pragmatic, as well as a semantic effect.

Change in gender class agreement can be employed to distinguish distinct lexical entries. In Anindilyakwa (Australia), dirija ‘dress’ is treated as feminine when understood as a piece of female clothing, but it is treated as a member of the inanimate m-class when seen as a material (Julie Waddy p.c. 1995). These nouns are said to have double or multiple gender, depending on their semantics. Such reclassification is often found in languages with semantic gender assignment involving parameters other than just sex or animacy. And in quite a few instances, such reclassification reflects parameters relevant for S-gender (as is seen below in sections 3.3 and section 5.3).

Genders and noun classes are part of a continuum of noun categorization devices, which also includes noun classifiers, numeral classifiers, and verbal, locative, and deictic classifiers (Aikhenvald 2000, 2004, 2006; Aikhenvald and
Green 2011). Physical properties, including shape, form, and size, are among the preferred semantic parameters for numeral, verbal, locative, and deictic classifiers. Physical properties are also relevant to gender and noun class assignment in a number of languages that have gender or noun classes.7

We now turn to a discussion of semantic principles of L-gender assignment system in Manambu, spoken in the Sepik area of New Guinea.

3. The semantic basis of gender assignment in Manambu. Manambu, a member of the Ndu family, is spoken by about two thousand people in five villages in the Sepik area of New Guinea. The major village is Avatip, the largest and strategically the most important; it boasts more knowledgeable orators than any other village. Malu is second in size and importance (there is a certain amount of rivalry between the two). Yambon (or Yuana:b) is the third largest; it is located further away and stands apart from the rest. There are minor dialectal differences between these three. Yawabak and Apa:n are offshoots of Avatip and Malu, respectively, and are smaller than the others.

Other members of the Ndu family are Iatmul, Abelam-Wosera, Boiken, Yelogu (or Kaunga), and Gala or Ngala (for a comprehensive description of Manambu, see Aikhenvald 2008a; for genetic characteristics of the Ndu family and its composition and language contact, see Aikhenvald 2008b).

The Iatmul are the most important ceremonial and trade partners for the Manambu, sharing numerous rituals and customs (and also spells and incantations) with them (see Aikhenvald 2008b for some details). Traditional trade with the Wosera involves Manambu women going up to Maprik to exchange their fish for Wosera goods, including string bags and, nowadays, also money (Jacklyn Yuamali Benji Ala and Ester Yuaya:b p.c. 2004).

Every Ndu language has two genders, masculine and feminine. As in most languages of the family, L-gender assignment in Manambu is based on meaning. It involves animacy and sex, and also correlates with the shape, form, and size of the referent.

The Manambu speakers are “gender-proud.” When asked what is special about their language, a few people replied “It is that everything in the world is either womanlike or manlike”—that is, L-gender is conceptualized as a salient feature of the language. The way in which the importance of gender is phrased (womanlike versus manlike) hints at a possible link between L-gender (especially of humans, and their attributes) and its S-gender correlates. I first discuss the formal properties of Manambu genders, and then turn to the principles of gender choice.

3.1. How to recognize the gender of a noun. Gender in Manambu is marked covertly; this means that it is not obvious from the form of the noun itself (the only exceptions are personal names, some of which have a gender-marking formative). Gender is recognizable through agreement of a noun with
modifiers (including demonstratives, adjectives, numeral ‘one’, relative clauses, and possession markers), and predicates. Agreement in gender is illustrated in (2), where the noun du ‘man’ triggers masculine agreement on the demonstrative, the adjective, and the verb. The gender markers are in bold within this section.

(2) *kɔ-da numa-da du wiya:m kwa-na-ɗ*
    this-MASC.SG big-MASC.SG man house.LOC stay-PRES-MASC.SG
    ‘This big man stays in the house.’

In (3), the noun *taːkw* ‘woman’ triggers feminine agreement (which is phonologically null, represented here by Ø) on the demonstrative, the adjective, and the verb.

(3) *kɔ-Ø numa-Ø taːkw wiya:m kwa-na-Ø*
    this-FEM.SG big-FEM.SG woman house.LOC stay-PRES-FEM.SG
    ‘This big woman stays in the house.’

As in many languages around the world, gender agreement is restricted to the singular number only. Nonsingular numbers—dual and plural—do not differentiate genders. The form of gender and number agreement markers on verbs, adjectives, and other modifiers is given in table 1. Note that the feminine gender has two forms, -Ø (i.e., phonologically null) and -l, which appear in different contexts. The form -Ø occurs with adjectives and demonstratives as modifiers, and -l appears in the nominal cross-referencing set when a demonstrative, an adjective, or a noun occupies the predicate slot (see Aikhenvald [2008a:113–15] for further details).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Manambu Gender and Number Agreement Markers</th>
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<tr>
<td>SINGULAR FEMININE: -Ø or -l</td>
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<tr>
<td>SINGULAR MASCULINE: -ɗ(ø)</td>
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<tr>
<td>DUAL: -ɓr</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLURAL: -ɗi</td>
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Personal pronouns distinguish two genders in the second and third persons singular. The forms are listed in table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2. Manambu Personal Pronouns</th>
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<tr>
<td>ŋaŋ</td>
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<td>ɗaŋ</td>
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<td>la</td>
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<td>dɔ</td>
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Gender is a useful device for keeping track of what is being talked about. Gender agreement helps disambiguate polysemous terms which can be used to refer to individuals of either male or female N-gender (“epicene” nouns, in traditional terminology [Aikhenvald 2000:41; Matthews 2007:124]). These include some kinship terms, such as ſám ‘younger sister, younger brother’, as illustrated in (4) and (5).

(4) numa-Ø ſám
    big-FEM.SG younger.sibling
    ‘big younger sister’

(5) numa-da ſám
    big-MASC.SG younger.sibling
    ‘big younger brother’

Gender-sensitive pronouns are useful in other aspects of communication—for instance, in identifying addressees of commands. The form a-war (IMPV-go.up) ‘go up!’ can be addressed to a man or to a woman. When a gender-sensitive pronoun is used, this sort of ambiguity does not arise, as in man a-war (you.MASC.SG IMPV-go.up) ‘you (man), go up!’ and ſam a-war (you.FEM.SG IMPV-go.up) ‘you (woman), go up!’

3.2. The unmarked feminine gender in Manambu. Feminine gender in Manambu can be expressed by a zero—that is, it can be considered unmarked formally (see the gender forms in table 1). A term in a system is considered formally unmarked if it can be expressed by zero (see Dixon 2010:235–41; Aikhenvald and Dixon 1998).

If all terms in a system except one are used in specific circumstances, and the remaining term occurs in all other circumstances, this term can be considered functionally unmarked. The feminine gender in Manambu is the functionally unmarked choice (for further details, see Aikhenvald 2008a:124–27). This form is used if the N-gender of the referent (or its other properties, such as size or shape; see section 3.3) are not known. A question ‘what is it?’ and its variants involve feminine agreement (unless one knows what to expect), as in (6) and (7).

(6) agua jap-al?
    what thing-3FEM.SG.NOM
    ‘What (object) is it?’

(7) agwal?
    what.3FEM.SG.NOM
    ‘What (event, happening) is it?’
Generic statements require feminine agreement. Example (8) is an example of a summarizing phrase, roughly translatable as ‘this is how things are’, or ‘this is how it is’. An expression like this one is often used as a pause filler, and in phatic communication.

(8) al-al
DEMONSTRATIVE_DISTAL_FEM.SG-3FEM.SG.NOM
‘This is how it is.’

Feminine, rather than masculine, is the functionally unmarked choice in a few languages scattered around the world. These include Jarawara (Arawá family) (Dixon 2004), a few other South American languages (Aikhenvald 2012), a few Australian languages, such as Wangkumara, the western dialect of Wagaya, Kala Lagaw Ya, and Murrinh-Patha (Alpher 1987:174; Breen 1976a: 336, 1976b:340, 590; Walsh 1976:150–56), and a number of Northern Iroquoian languages (Chafe 2004).

In contrast, masculine can be considered a functionally unmarked choice in many familiar Indo-European languages, where the masculine form is used to refer to a group of mixed sex, to generic referents, or to those whose sex is unknown. In Spanish, ellos ‘they (masculine)’ refers to a group consisting of only males and also a group of mixed sex. The form ellas ‘they (feminine)’ refers exclusively to a group consisting of females. Along similar lines, the masculine plural form les américains in French can refer to a group of males or to a group of mixed sex; its feminine counterpart, les américaines, refers only to a group of female Americans (Schane 1970; Corbett 1991:291; Aikhenvald 2000:54–56). In Russian, the fact that agreement with interrogatives and indefinites is masculine indicates that masculine gender is the functionally unmarked choice (Bulygina and Shmelev 1996:103; Rothstein 1973). Until recently, the masculine he was used as a generic pronoun in English.

The question of how—and whether—the use of feminine L-gender as a functionally unmarked choice may correlate with the position of women in a society in terms of their S-gender has been posed for Iroquoian and Australian societies (Alpher 1987:182–85; Brown 1975; Chafe 2004). We return to this issue in section 5.4.

3.3. How to choose a gender in Manambu. Gender assignment in Manambu is determined by the meaning of a noun referent. The exact principles correlate with the semantic profile of the referent. In general, small and roundish referents are feminine, and longish and biggish ones are masculine.

For most nouns, gender choice is not fixed; they can be assigned to the feminine gender or to the masculine gender, depending on how they are viewed by the speaker. As we see below, the exact semantic effects differ depending on the semantic group to which the noun belongs (summarized in figure 1). Gender
assignment to humans operates on principles distinct from those for other groups.

3.3.1. Humans. Gender assignment for human beings is based on N-gender, that is, the sex of the human referents:

- *du* ‘man’, *asa:y* ‘father’, *away* ‘mother’s brother’, and *gwa:l* ‘paternal grandfather’ are masculine;
- *amæy* ‘mother’, *ta:kw* ‘woman’, *ñamay* ‘mother’s sister’, *yawus* ‘father’s sister’, *nap* ‘mother’s older sister’, and *yæy* ‘paternal grandmother’ are feminine;
- nouns that have one form for both females and males (epicene nouns; see section 3.1), such as *ma:m* ‘older sibling’, *ñamos* ‘younger sibling’, *babay* ‘maternal grandparent’, *yanan* ‘child of one’s daughter’, and *gwa:l* ‘child of one’s son’, are assigned genders depending on the sex of the referent (see (4) and (5) above).

One of these terms, *babay* ‘maternal grandparent’, stands out from the rest. Compounds *babay-du* (maternal-grandparent-man) ‘maternal grandfather’ and *babay-ta:kw* (maternal-grandparent-woman) ‘maternal grandmother’ can be used to specify the sex of the grandparent, if one chooses to.

Terms of address that reflect clan membership form a special subclass of nouns in Manambu. These terms reflect totems of each subclan. Some of them are N-gender-specific, e.g., *Yaban* ‘term of address to a male member of the Maliau subclan’ (lit., ‘Iatmul man’), and *Yabenay* ‘term of address to a female member of the Maliau subclan’ (lit., ‘Iatmul woman’). Others can be used to address either a man or a woman belonging to the subclan, e.g., *Bap* ‘term of address to a member of any subclan of the Wulwi-ñaawi group’ (lit., ‘moon’), or *Tapwuk* ‘term of address to a member of the clan group Nambul-Samblap (lit., ‘chicken’). These terms can be used to address or talk about members of each particular clan or subclan. The terms ‘woman’ and ‘man’ can occur as secondary components of compounds to differentiate the N-gender of the person talked about, e.g., *babay* - *ta:kw* (moon+LK-woman) ‘a woman belonging to any subclan of the Wulwi-ñaawi group who can be addressed as *Bap’*, *babay* - *du* (moon+LK-man) ‘a man belonging to any subclan of the Wulwi-ñaawi group who can be addressed as Bap’. This suggests that the terms for ‘woman’ and ‘man’ can be considered exponents of feminine and masculine gender, respectively (these terms also occur with the word ‘child’ to differentiate the child’s sex; see section 3.3.2). Address terms that distinguish different gender forms, such as *Yaban* and *Yabenay*, do not form such compounds.

The adjective ‘old’ distinguishes two gender forms: *apan* ‘old (masculine)’ and *apaw* ‘old (feminine)’. These combine with terms for ‘man’ and ‘woman’, as in *apan du* ‘old man’ and *apaw ta:kw* ‘old woman’.
The principles here appear to be fairly straightforward. However, masculine and feminine gender assignment for human referents may be at odds with their N-gender, under special circumstances explainable through S-gender roles; this is discussed in section 3.3.9.

3.3.2. Babies and children. The gender assignment of babies and children is also determined by the N-gender, or sex, of the referent. That is, a girl would be referred to with feminine gender and a boy with masculine gender. However, the L-gender assignment is variable, depending on the child’s age and size. The phrase in (9), with feminine gender, may refer to a little girl, but can also refer to a little child, a baby, or a fetus of either sex. A male speaker of Manambu, reminiscing about the time when he ran away from school (he was about eight then), referred to himself by this phrase.

(9) kwasa-Ø ŋan
    small-FEM.SG child
    ‘little girl; young and small child, baby, or fetus (of either sex)’

The term ŋan in Manambu covers babies and children before puberty; it also refers to noninitiated men. In traditional New Guinea societies, children and noninitiated men are not considered full human beings who have achieved their social status within the community (see, for instance, Schieffelin 1977; Harrison 1990). That is, they have not yet acquired an S-gender identity. The overtones of the use of feminine L-gender for these referents are reminiscent of what we find for higher nonhuman animates and inanimates.

To differentiate between a girl and a boy (and also a daughter and a son), one can form a compound using ta:kw ‘woman’ or du ‘man’. The compound takwa-ŋan (woman+LK-child) means ‘girl, daughter’ and du-a-ŋan (man-LK-child) means ‘boy, son’. These compounds are reminiscent of the forms babay-du (maternal.grandparent-man) and babay-ta:kw (maternal.grandparent-woman) used to specify the sex of one’s maternal grandparent, and of some address terms (see section 3.3.1). However, the order of morphemes is different (see also the discussion of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ as exponents of N-gender of animates, in section 3.3.3).

3.3.3. Higher animates. Gender assignment for higher nonhuman animates is based on size, and occasionally, on sex. Within a given species of animal, larger individuals are assigned masculine gender, and smaller individuals are assigned feminine gender. A big dog (a:s), a big pig (ba:l), or a big wild fowl (sar) will be masculine, and a small one will be feminine. This is independent of the animal’s sex. So, a big pig will be referred to with (10a), no matter whether it is male or female.
And on the other hand, a small pig is referred to with feminine L-gender, as in (10b), again regardless of its sex. If the referent’s sex is more important in the discourse context, it overrides the size-based assignment; a small tomcat *pusi* was referred to with masculine gender, because his sex was known.

Alternatively, the sex of an animal can be specified, by adding *amæy* ‘mother’ to refer to a female, as in *amæy bal* ‘mother pig’, or *asa:y* ‘father’ to refer to a male, as in *asa:y bal* ‘father pig’. However, the use of ‘mother’ and ‘father’ does not unambiguously specify natural gender (unlike ‘man’ and ‘woman’; see the discussion of the terms for ‘maternal grandparent’ in section 3.3.1 above). The term *amæy* ‘mother’ appears in a number of expressions that do not have feminine reference, e.g., *amæy ta:b* ‘thumb’ (lit., ‘mother hand’), which can be masculine or feminine depending on its actual size. The word *asa:y* may refer to something bigger, or more important; it is commonly employed as an augmentative marker, especially though not exclusively with nonhuman referents, as in *numa-da asa:y nab* (big/long-MASC.SG father hair) ‘exceptionally long hair’ (always assigned to the masculine gender). With animates, it is ambiguous between ‘male’ and ‘big’; e.g., *a-da asa:y bal* (that-MASC.SG father pig) could mean either ‘that really huge pig’ or ‘that (big) male pig’. (For some examples and explanations of grammaticalization of kinship terms, see Heine and Kuteva 2002.)

Gender assignment for those higher animates who play a role in myth can be based on the myth-and-belief principle. The cassowary (*md*) is always referred to with feminine gender because cassowaries are conceived of as mythical women (who turned into cassowaries later). This association is widespread in New Guinea. There is a similar story about *mæ:n* ‘bird of paradise’, which also appears as a woman in myths (see section 5.1). The role of mythological association in L-gender assignment in Manambu is discussed in section 3.3.9.

### 3.3.4. Lower animates.

Gender assignment for lower animates—which include small mammals, crustaceans, insects, and also fishes—is determined by shape, size, and quantity. The N-gender (or sex) of lower animates is of no importance whatsoever. Lower animates whose characteristic shape is round are feminine, e.g., *gwa:s* ‘turtle’. I was told that spiders are roundish in their shape, and this is why *da:m ~ damda:m* ‘spider’ is assigned to the feminine gender.
Those lower animates that are long and thin are masculine, including *mu:* ‘crocodile’, and most snakes, e.g., *kabay* ‘snake’, *kanukaraki* ‘death adder’, and *kanuy* ‘python’. L-gender choice is fixed for nouns whose referents have characteristic round or long, thin shapes. It is ungrammatical to refer to a crocodile with a feminine form.

For most lower animates, smaller individuals are feminine, e.g., *kwakuli* ‘mouse, rat’, *jatau* ‘small bat’, *kwaij* ‘another bigger bat’, and *kobwi* ‘flying fox’. Large tokens of the species will be masculine.

Insects that appear in large quantities are masculine, e.g., *mapajapis* ‘little red ants’, *galajapos* ‘little black ants’, *ka:l* ‘mayfly’ (considered a delicacy); others are feminine, e.g., *sa:r* ‘fly’, *sa:m* ‘bee’. These are among the few cases where the L-gender of a noun has to be memorized.

### 3.3.5. Inanimates

The gender of inanimates is almost uniformly assigned on the basis of the size and shape of the object. Objects that are long, large, or both are treated as masculine, and those that are small, round, or both are treated as feminine. For example, *val* ‘canoe’ is masculine if big, and feminine if small; *væy* ‘spear’ is masculine due to its inherent long shape and size, but feminine when it is used to refer to a small spear or a shotgun.

The same principle operates for body parts, e.g., *ta:b* ‘hand, arm’ (masculine), ‘small finger’ (feminine), *wuliñ* ‘big nail’ (masculine), ‘small nail’ (feminine). A house that is not considered big is referred to as feminine, while a big house is masculine; for instance, Manambu people who have visited England agreed that Buckingham Palace is a “masculine type” house because it is big. (“Masculine type” is the way the Manambu talk about inanimate objects that are big enough to be assigned to the masculine gender.) The House of Parliament in Canberra was also judged big enough to be considered masculine. Along similar lines, men’s ceremonial houses known as *haustambaran* in Tok Pisin (Manambu *kara:b*, or *sa:y*), which are traditionally large and impressive, are also assigned masculine gender. The same principle applies to villages. A large village, such as Avatip, the main village where the Manambu reside, is referred to as (11).

(11)  \[ \text{kə-də} \quad \text{tap} \]
      \[ \text{this-MASC.SG village} \]
      \[ ‘\text{this (big) village}’ \]

A smaller village, such as Yawabak, or Apa:n, is referred to as (12).

(12)  \[ \text{kə-Ø} \quad \text{tap} \]
      \[ \text{this-FEM.SG village} \]
      \[ ‘\text{this (small, or not too big) village}’ \]
The Sepik River is wide and long and is referred to as *ka-da ṅab* (this-MASC.SG Sepik.River) ‘this (big) Sepik River’. Other rivers in the area are smaller. Once I asked a Manambu woman about the size of the Screw River (a tributary of the Sepik). She answered with the statement in (13). The implication was that it is a biggish river, but not huge, that is, big enough to be called “big,” but not sufficiently so to warrant masculine gender agreement.

(13) *Kabol numa gu-αl numa-da gu ma:*  
Screw.River big.FEM.SG river-3FEM.SG.NOM big-MASC.SG river NEG  
‘The Screw River is a big river (feminine), it is not a huge river (masculine).’

To refer to a longish road, one says (14). This can also mean ‘this is quite a long way to go’.

(14) *numa-∅ ya:b-al*  
big-FEM.SG road-3FEM.SG.NOM  
‘It is quite a long road, quite a long way to go.’

If the same noun refers to a very long road, it is reclassified as masculine, as in (15), which can also mean ‘it is a very long way to go’.

(15) *numa-da ya:b-ad*  
big-MASC.SG road-3MASC.SG.NOM  
‘It is a very long road, a very long way to go.’

In these instances, the choice of masculine gender is comparable to the use of augmentatives in other languages, such as Tariana (Aikhenvald 2003). Manambu has no special augmentative derivation.

Some inanimate referents have a typical shape and size, just like the lower animates in section 3.3.4 above. For instance, *ar* ‘lake’, *ba:d* ‘egg’, and *kabak* ‘stone’ are typically round and, hence, assigned to the feminine gender.

Body parts and parts of plants are assigned to L-gender depending on their size and shape. Thus, *ab* ‘head’, *ya:l* ‘stomach, womb’, and *kwati* ‘knee’ are typically feminine because of their round shape. Large size of any of these can be indicated through changing their gender to masculine. On the other hand, *mæn* ‘leg, foot’ is typically masculine because it is elongated; however, the leg of a small baby is feminine, because it is small.

In texts, change in gender is used to indicate increasing size. Example (16) comes from a story about a woman who becomes pregnant through an encounter with a taro plant. Her belly gets increasingly bigger and becomes really huge—then it is masculine (and was referred to, in an English commentary, as a “big masculine-type belly”).
After she’d become pregnant, her belly became big (feminine), after it became (big), it became here a very big (masculine) belly.

Gender switch can also be used metaphorically to describe situations which involve inanimate objects and body parts. ‘Head’ is feminine because of its round shape. It may be treated as masculine when a person has a headache, since the head then feels heavy and unusually big. This was the case in (17), where the speaker’s head began to ache because of a rising fever.

Referents with preferred masculine gender include bagwa‘kwal ‘necklace’, kwasabi ‘stringbag’, war ‘bigger stringbag’, and the loanword trausis ‘trousers’; all of these are typically long. If a referent that is typically masculine is small, feminine gender is appropriate; for example, a tiny baby’s clothing can be referred to with feminine gender, as in (18).

All trees are treated as masculine due to their height and vertical stance, and their fruit is feminine, independent of its shape, e.g., mi: ‘tree (generic)’ and mas ‘betel nut tree’ are masculine, while takami ‘fruit (generic)’ and mas ‘betel nut fruit’ are feminine. A big fruit can be reclassified as masculine.

A major feature of Manambu gender assignment that sets it apart from familiar Indo-European languages is the inapplicability of the notion of inherent gender for nouns with inanimate referents. Feminine or masculine gender is assigned to the noun depending on whether it refers to a small or to a large object. Gender agreement correlates with the object’s properties and is not fixed.10

3.3.6. Natural phenomena. For nouns denoting natural phenomena, gender assignment is based on how complete or intense the phenomenon is. Once again, there is no fixed gender for any natural phenomenon.
A natural phenomenon will be assigned feminine gender if it has not developed to its full extent. Thus, gan°b ‘morning’ will be treated as feminine if it refers to a time of the day when the morning has just dawned, as in (19).

(19) gan°b-al
    morning-3FEM.SG.NOM
    ‘It is just about morning (but still a bit dark).’

If it is light, and the morning has fully arrived, one would say (20).

(20) gan°b-ad
    morning-3MASC.SG.NOM
    ‘It is fully morning-time.’

A very dark night will be referred to as numa°da gan (big-MASC.SG night/darkness) with masculine L-gender, and a less dark, moonlit night as numa°φ gan (big-FEM.SG night) with feminine L-gender. A heavy rain (wa:l) and a strong wind (ma:r) are masculine, and a lighter rain or a gentler wind are feminine. Gender choice can correlate with how great the extent of a natural phenomenon is: tab ‘cloud’ and gol ‘raincloud’ are feminine if clouds are few, and masculine if the sky is overcast.

Physical states are treated similarly. For instance, ka:m ‘hunger’ is usually feminine, but if hunger is very intense, it triggers masculine agreement.

3.3.7. Time spans, mass nouns, and abstract nouns. Assignment of gender to time spans, mass nouns, and abstract nouns is determined by quantity, duration, and extent.

Nouns referring to time spans, such as sakar ‘time’, ná ‘day’ (also ‘sun’), and wik ‘week’ (a loan from Tok Pisin), to manner (sacd ‘manner; way’), and to language or voice (kudi) are normally feminine. Speakers describe time as operating in circular cycles. I was told that the reason why time expressions tend to be feminine is because cycles are “round.” Each of these can be reclassified as masculine if it is exceptionally prolonged; for instance, if something takes a very long time, ‘time’ can trigger masculine agreement.

The word ná ‘day’ is the same as ‘sun’. An important day can be assigned masculine gender (see section 3.3.8). The term for ‘year’, nabi, is typically masculine, the explanation for this being that “a year is so long.” The term for month, bap or ba:p (lit., ‘moon’), is typically feminine since the moon is feminine (see section 3.3.9). However, if its length is highlighted as important for the speaker, it can acquire masculine gender.

Gender assignment of mass nouns depends on the quantity of a substance. To refer to a small quantity of blood, one would say ko°φ ñiki (this-FEM.SG blood) ‘this small quantity of blood’. In contrast, to refer to a large quantity of blood (or bloodshed in a battle), one says ko-da ñiki (this-MASC.SG blood) ‘this large quantity of blood’.
The statement in (21a) implies that something is expensive (one has to pay “big” money for it), but not excessively so. ‘Money’ is big, but triggers feminine agreement if the quantity is relatively small. In contrast, the statement in (21b) refers to a large quantity of money, or something extremely expensive; this is reflected in the masculine agreement.

(21a) numa-Ø san-al
   big-FEM.SG money-3FEM.SG.NOM
   ‘It is biggish money.’

(21b) numa-do san-ad
   big-MASC.SG money-3MASC.SG.NOM
   ‘It is very big money (very expensive).’

Variation in gender assignment is a way of comparing referents in terms of size and quantity. Comparative constructions in Manambu are limited to a few adjectives and are rarely used (Aikhenvald 2008a:190—91), and gender choice, as in (21a) and (21b), can be considered a strategy to supplement it.

3.3.8. Celestial bodies. Celestial bodies are assigned gender according to the shape of the referent and also by mythological association.

Some celestial bodies and natural phenomena are assigned a gender that correlates with their customary shape or size. The rainbow (walimaudi) is masculine because it is long. The sun is feminine because it is round. However, if the sun is really hot, it is referred to with the masculine gender to reflect the intensity of its rays, as in (22).

(22) yap adakw numa-do ŋə ada
   breath stay.IMPV big-MASC.SG sun that.there.MASC.SG
   sa-na-d
   shine-PRES-3MASC.SG.SUBJ
   ‘Have a rest, the big sun is shining very strongly.’

As mentioned above, ŋə also means ‘day’. If a day is particularly important, one can refer to it with masculine gender. This leads us to a further set of factors involved in Manambu gender assignment: gender assignment based on the referent’s associations and its important properties. These are especially important in gender choice for other celestial bodies—the moon and the stars.

3.3.9. Association, and important properties in gender assignment. We can recall from section 2, that unexpected L-gender of a noun referent can be explained by semantic features this referent shares with another L-gender.

Two principles behind this gender choice are mythological association (similar to myth-and-belief principle; see Dixon 1972:308–12) and gender assignment
by important properties (similar to the “important property” principle; see Dixon 1972:308–12).

We saw in section 3.3.8 that mythological association plays a role in L-gender assignment of celestial bodies. Moon (bap) is feminine because it is conceived as a mythological woman; an alternative, endearing, name for it is bap-a-ta:kw (moon-LK-woman) ‘lady moon’.

Similarly, stars (kugar) are conceptualized as women belonging to the Wulwi-Ñawi clan group (associated with sun, moon, and light). No matter how big the moon or a star, they will never be referred to with masculine gender.

Masculine gender is associated with large size. Its assignment has, where appropriate, overtones of cultural importance. The place of the referent in the conceptual system of beliefs and rituals, and the ensuing ritual and its cultural weight and significance, are the important properties which determine the assignment of masculine L-Gender.

Just as in most Sepik societies, descent in Manambu society is strictly patrilineal. Consequently, the term gwalugw ‘patrilineal clan’ is masculine. Morphologically, gwal-ugw is the plural form of gwa:l used for ‘male or female grandchild through one’s son’ and ‘father's father’. However, nowadays the bare form gwalugw is not used in the meaning of ‘grandchildren’; the plural form gwalugw-bor (grandchildren-PL) ‘grandchildren’ is used instead. The term gwalugw is also used in the meaning of ‘ancestors’, or ‘one’s grandfather and great uncles (on paternal side)’. Overt marking of dual and of plural in Manambu is restricted to kinship terms and a handful of body part terms (see Aikhenvald [2008a:132–33] for an overview of number forms). The term gwalugw ‘clan’ has been reinterpreted as a form that can indifferently have singular, dual, or plural reference realized through agreement on adjectives, demonstratives, and verbs.

The Manambu are divided into three exogamous clan groups (which contain fourteen subclans detailed in Aikhenvald [2008a:11]; a somewhat different set is in Harrison [1990]). Subclans differ from each other in size. All the clan names are masculine, although a numerically small clan can be assigned feminine gender. This implies no disparagement of the subclan.

The centerpiece of Manambu culture is, traditionally, male cults (including initiation rituals, now obsolete). A man’s reputation and status depends primarily on esoteric knowledge of totemic names, names belonging to the subclan, spells, and myths. Male proficiency in these matters is crucial for men’s prowess in ritual debates, including debates about name ownership and ownership of land, and also in magic and sorcery. In the past, men’s central role used to depend on achievements in wars against neighboring groups and in head-hunting. This situation is very similar to what was described for the Western Iatmul, the Manambu’s major ceremonial partners (Aikhenvald 2009; see a summary of male initiation and cults in Roscoe 1995:79–80; Bateson 1958:124–29, 139; Hauser-Schäublin 1995; Metraux 1978; Silverman 1993:123). According
to the tradition, men have access to esoteric information concerning secret names and spells, and have the upper hand in political and ritual affairs. Women are not supposed to have access to highly valued traditional knowledge (though some of them in fact do), and are denied active participation in traditional activities such as the yam ritual, exposure to magic flutes, or name debates (also see Harrison 1990).

This traditional importance of “maleness,” or masculine S-Gender, is iconically reflected in the assignment of masculine gender with its overtones of cultural significance. Names of rituals are masculine. It is not appropriate to refer to Saki ‘name debate’ with feminine gender (notwithstanding the fact that name debates may involve female and male names). Similarly, Kokatap, the ritual which involves mortuary payments, is also masculine, no matter whether the deceased is a man or a woman (see Aikhenvald [2008:11–15], for discussion of these rituals, which are the major ones still performed).

Along similar lines, kara:b ‘large ceremonial house’ and sa:y ‘ceremonial house for uninitiated men’ are both masculine. Ceremonial houses in present day Avatip are smallish (much smaller than normal dwellings). But referring to a ceremonial house with feminine gender is considered unacceptable and even offensive.

Gender assignment based on cultural significance is relevant for terms to do with the art of speech. The term ma:j ‘story’ requires masculine agreement if it is a traditional story or if it refers to headhunting raids performed by men, no matter how long it is. If it refers to a casual story or a biography of someone, it is likely to be feminine. Similarly, bagw ‘performance, dance’ is masculine only when it refers to a traditional activity. A casual performance (such as a dance party organized by expatriates in Port Moresby) will be feminine.

Association with male and female S-gender attributes determines the L-gender of culturally important notions and objects. Certain concepts are inherently associated with females and are always assigned to the feminine gender. Others are associated with masculinity and trigger masculine agreement.

The notion of ja:m ‘a set of hereditary magical and ritual powers’ is personified as a named female spirit whose role is to punish incest and violations of the principles of exogamy (Harrison 1990:32). Each subclan has a væy, its ancestor, with a literal meaning of ‘spear’. The connotations of væy are masculine and phallic (which goes together with its elongated “masculine” shape), while ja:m is represented as a womb. Together væy and ja:m “signify the “male” and “female” aspects of a group’s social identity” (Harrison 1990:33). This agrees with the assignment of masculine and feminine genders to them.

It is traditionally believed that human bones (ap) are formed from father’s semen and transmitted agnatically. In contrast, blood (ñiki) derives from mother’s womb blood and is transmitted by matrification (Harrison 1990:33). Consequently, ap ‘bone’ is assigned masculine gender, while ñiki ‘blood’ is
usually feminine (unless it comes in large quantities; see section 3.3.7). The noun ap also carries the connotations of centrality and importance, another corollary of masculine gender. Thus, speakers derive the name of Avatip, considered the most important of the four Manambu villages, from ap-a tap (bone-LK village) ‘the strong, large, central village’ (lit., ‘the bone-village’).

In summary, ritual activities and kinship groupings associated with maleness are considered stronger and more culturally prominent. These features influence the masculine L-gender choice, based on extension by these important properties.

3.3.10. Explaining gender choice: myth-and-belief or size and shape? How do we determine a primary and a secondary reason for gender assignment? Both vay ‘spear’ and ap ‘bone’ are nouns with inanimate referents (see section 3.2.5). Their masculine gender can be thought of as based on their longish size and shape. Similarly, ya:l ‘womb, belly’ (which is typically feminine) is associated with women. Since it is also typically round in shape, its gender assignment can be attributed to a pervasive correlation between this shape and feminine gender. Moon and stars are mythological women, but they are also roundish in their shape.

Which comes first—gender choice by shape, or by mythology? Which is contingent upon the other? We can recall that ab ‘head’ is feminine, due to its round shape, and despite its perceived importance for mental processes (which correlates with masculinity as exponent of importance). This may imply that shape is also primary in the gender assignment of ‘spear’, ‘bone’, ‘womb; belly’, ‘moon’, and ‘star’, and that the cultural extension to masculinity or femininity is a corollary of the shape-based association.

Multiple semantic parameters and multiple motivations are operative in gender assignment. Different criteria converge and reinforce each other in choosing a semantically motivated gender.

3.3.11. Interim summary: gender assignment in Manambu. Figure 1 summarizes the principles of gender choice in Manambu for different semantic groups of referents.

Gender assignment by the important-property principle involves conceptualization of gender and the extension of male and female S-gender roles in the Manambu-specific cultural environment. That is to say, S-gender is relevant to the assignment of L-gender in these cases. These are exponents of the social side of gender distinctions: a clan is masculine because it is patrilineal; a culturally important story is masculine because men and men’s cults are the centerpiece of Manambu culture. That is, S-gender manifests itself in the variable assignment of L-gender to those notions that are easily identifiable with the Social Man and the Social Woman. Masculine S-gender is imputed to rituals associated with men.
For inanimates and lower animates (including children and uninitiated men), an assignment of gender that differs from the usual one implies some difference from their usual size and shape. For adult humans, with their established S-gender roles, changing L-gender means something else.

Figure 1. Gender assignment in Manambu.

3.4. “Masculine” women and “feminine” men. A noun with an adult human referent is assigned a fixed L-gender, depending on the N-gender, or sex, of a referent. Changes in L-gender assignment to adult humans directly correlate with the S-gender position of the referent. Two kinds of situation have been identified.

3.4.1. Humans downgraded to “inanimates.” In casual conversations (but hardly ever at village meetings), feminine L-gender can be used to refer to a male. A smallish, fat, womanlike man can be referred to with the feminine gender, as in (23).

(23) \( k\-\emptyset \quad num\-\emptyset \quad du \)
\( \) this-FEM.SG big-FEM.SG man
‘this fat, round man’ (smallish)

This can only be said behind the man’s back; treating adults as if they are inanimates and classifying them by shape and size (see section 3.3.5) is insulting and demeaning.\textsuperscript{12} Note that this is not the case for children (see section 3.3.1),
who are classified by size—children do not yet have an established S-gender identity.

A man displaying inappropriate social behavior can be referred to as ‘woman’. Example (24) was said about a man who remained in his wife’s village after getting married. According to the normal virilocal practice among the Manambu, he should have taken her away to his village. By staying in his wife’s village, he breached this practice, and thus behaved as if, in a sense, he were a woman.

(24) $k\ø\, ta:kw\, la:n\, ad$

\text{this-FEM.SG} \ \text{woman} \ \text{husband-3MASC.SG.NOM}

‘This (feminine) woman is (masculine) a husband.’

In (24), the man is referred to as a ‘this (feminine) woman’, but the agreement on the predicate is masculine. That is, masculine L-gender is used here to mark agreement with a feminine subject (where feminine L-gender would normally be expected). This mismatch in agreement makes speakers laugh. It emphasizes the grotesqueness of the culturally inappropriate situation of S-gender switch whereby a man shows patterns of social behavior associated with a woman—failing to live up to his S-gender status.

We can recall that a man’s ritual house cannot be referred to with feminine gender—this is rejected as potentially demeaning. Referring to a man’s house (or a ritual attribute) with feminine gender has pejorative overtones.

A woman who is too boisterous, large in size, and also imposing and "too big for her boots" (i.e., bossy) can be spoken of as in (25).

(25) $k\ø\, nuna\, ta:kw$

\text{this-MASC.SG} \ \text{big-MASC.SG} \ \text{woman}

‘this (unusually) big, boisterous or bossy woman’

This usage is derogatory and not something one would say to that woman’s face (except in the circumstances discussed in section 3.4.2). A woman is classified by her size, as if she were downgraded to the status of an inanimate referent, reflecting her inappropriate patterns of S-gender behavior.

On another occasion, the phrase in (25) was said of a woman who sported knowledge of totemic names, which is traditionally the domain of men. In terms of her S-gender status, she behaved inappropriately; hence, masculine gender was applied to her, with negative connotations.

How treating a woman as if she were a man may have a demeaning effect can be seen in an incident in which male initiation was applied to a woman in the Iatmul village of Palimbei (Hauser-Schäublin 1995:50–52). A girl who had inadvertently seen men blowing long flutes in a fenced-off enclosure (something a woman is not allowed to see) was gang-raped and then subjected to scarification and a shortened version of male initiation. The initiation was meant as a
severe punishment for a “crime” and stigmatization: the girl felt degraded and shamed, despite the fact that she had gained what was considered important ritual knowledge. It was as if she had lost her appropriate S-gender status. The girl never recovered from that experience.

3.4.2. Joking behavior and gender manipulation. Switches of L-gender do not have any demeaning or degrading effect in culturally authorized joking behavior between classificatory sisters-in-law—female ego’s brothers’ wives, kajal. Brother’s wives are female ego’s potential co-wives. Communication between such relatives is defined by joking behavior. A classificatory brother’s wife (in the village of Malu) explained the essence of the relationship to me, as in (26), once we had figured out who we were to each other.

(26) awarua rók kur-na-bran kajal kajal
each.other joke make-PRES-1DUAL brother’s.wife brother’s.wife
‘We make jokes between ourselves, brother’s wife (to) brother’s wife.’

A conventional way of jokingly greeting a brother’s wife is illustrated in (27).

(27) Ṽun wun-ȧọ ta:kw-ȧọ
you.FEM.SG I-LK-FEM.SG wife-2FEM.SG.NOM
wun Ṽun la:n-ȧọwun
I you.FEM.SG-LK.MASC.SG husband-1MASC.SG.NOM
‘You (feminine) are my wife, I (masculine) am your husband (feminine).’ (said by a woman to a woman)

Such pronouncements are typically accompanied by outbursts of laughter (and often followed by further mockaggressive remarks, e.g., ‘I (masculine) will kick your (feminine) fat stomach’). There is an L-gender mismatch in (27): masculine gender is marked on the predicate of the second clause (‘I am your husband’), but the agreement on the possessive ‘your’ is feminine. The “correct” way to say ‘I (man) am your husband’ is Ṽun-ȧọ la:n-ȧọwun (you.FEM.SG-LK-MASC.SG husband-1MASC.SG.NOM). The feminine cross-referencing here is part of the joke—a woman saying (27) presents herself as a kind of “female husband.” She is virtually assuming the S-gender identity of a patrilineal representative of her brother’s—and her own—clan (also see Harrison 1990:31). By jokingly assuming the male L- and S-gender identity, she takes the upper hand and demonstrates her mock superiority. This is realized through an anomalous gender mismatch, unacceptable in any other circumstances.

Switching genders in this context implies no deprecation of the referent. Rather, this is a direct reflection of S-gender identity manipulation reflected in anomalous gender use. Traditional women in the villages pride themselves on being able to produce elaborate “brother’s wife to brother’s wife” jokes; this is gradually becoming a mark of proficiency in cultural knowledge (which is gen-
erally on the wane; see Aikhenvald [2010b] on the loss of cultural knowledge among the villagers).

Culturally permitted gender switching is somewhat reminiscent of the Naven ritual described by Bateson (1958) for the closely related Iatmul (see also Houseman and Severi 1998). The ritual involved crossdressing and mock S-gender switching; it is hardly performed at present, and we have no record of how it used to correlate with L-gender use. (The Manambu used to have a reduced version of Naven [Harrison 1990], which is now all but forgotten.)

The female version of Naven has been described by Hauser-Schäublin (1995:49, 1977:83–95). Naven used to be performed whenever a male or female child undertook a gender-specific task for the first time. During the all-women Naven, women would dress as men and imitate aggressive and proud male behavior. As Hauser-Schäublin puts it, “Naven rites celebrate . . . sociocultural achievements” and “their transvestite aspects involve women structurally identifying themselves with their husbands” (1995:49). We know nothing about L-gender use in such rituals. Their existence confirms the cultural appropriateness of mock S-gender shifts in order to emphasize the person’s S-gender identity and patrilineal allegiance. Manambu joking relationships point towards a similar principle.

Correlations between a lack of cultural importance and small size in Manambu do not imply a subservient and secondary position of women in the society. Just as among the Iatmul (Roscoe 1995:81–82), Manambu men are indeed central to ritual activities, the authority of the patrilineal clan, and highly valued ritual knowledge (especially the knowledge of one’s ancestors and the totemic names associated with one’s clan). However, while men’s reputation and status are largely independent of women’s activities, men depend on women for day-to-day subsistence; a woman can starve a man out if she so chooses. A woman has no overt voice in ritual-political affairs, but she has significant powers within the household and the village (see Harrison 1990; Bateson 1958:147). A woman is not supposed to have an extensive knowledge of totemic names; in actual fact, many older women do possess this. Uterine connections (through one’s mother) are as important as patrilineal ones. The names bestowed by the patriclan are ritually important and are considered “main names.” The names bestowed upon a Manambu by their mother’s subclan are supposed to protect them from evil spirits while they are alive. During village meetings women are as vociferous as men (if not more so).

### 3.5. Interim conclusions.

L-gender choice in Manambu operates differently for nouns with human reference as opposed to the rest. Humans have a fixed gender. Gender manipulation of humans has culturally specific overtones. It may have to do with importance of the referent, but in many cases it serves as a way of deprecating him or her. Other nouns do not have a fixed gender. Gender choice depends on their physical properties, as shown in figure 1.
The principles of gender assignment clearly define nouns that refer to humans as a special subclass of nouns, opposed to nouns with other kinds of referents. L-gender for humans has unambiguous correlations with their S-gender and the consequent social expectations for men and for women. Applying the principle of “variable gender” to humans implies downgrading them to non-human status, and has pejorative, or derisory, overtones.

We now turn to a crosslinguistic investigation of the relations between physical properties and gender choice.

4. Shape and size in gender systems: looking further afield. In a number of languages across the world, noun referents can be assigned to a gender depending on their physical properties—size and shape. We can identify two types of situation: one where masculine gender is associated with large size and long slender shape, while feminine gender is associated with small size and roundish shape (section 4.1), and one where feminine gender is associated with large size, while masculine gender is associated with smaller size (section 4.2). In section 4.3, we summarize the recurrent shape and size parameters in gender choice and provide a tentative motivation for these.

By and large, physical properties are particularly salient in gender assignment of inanimates and lower animates. Nouns with human referents are typically assigned to masculine or feminine gender based on their N-gender. Gender reclassification of human nouns and higher animates may correlate with their roles in myths, and with cultural importance, value, and further parameters associated with male and female S-genders. These are surveyed in section 5.

4.1. Small round women and long slender men. Correlations of gender with the shape and size of a referent are found in a number of languages from the Sepik River Basin region. In all the Sepik languages discussed here, gender of the referent depends on the property the speaker wishes to highlight—that is, similarly to Manambu, there is no fixed gender.

Gender assignment for inanimate referents in Iatmul and Gala, from the Ndu family, correlates with the shape and size of the referent: long and large referents are referred to with masculine gender, and small and round ones with the feminine gender. The same principle has been observed in Kwoma, from the small Kwoma-Nukuma family, spoken next to Manambu, but not demonstrably related to it (Bowden 1997; Kooyers 1974; Ross Bowden p.c. 2007).

In Alamblak, from the Sepik Hill family, all nouns that denote females and short, squat, or wide objects are feminine and have a form marked with a feminine suffix -t. Tall, long, and slender objects are assigned to the masculine gender and take the masculine suffix -r. Terms for inanimate objects that host the feminine suffix include terms for house, fighting shield, and trees “which are typically relatively shorter and more squat than other trees.” Those that occur with the masculine suffix include “terms for arrows, signal trumpet, typically tall slender-growing trees, large string bag varieties, etc.” (Bruce 1984:97).
A noun can occur with an atypical gender suffix. This indicates that the object is unusual as to its size. The word for ‘house’ usually occurs with the feminine suffix. It can occur with the masculine suffix (kuñ-r [house-MASC]), indicating that the house is perceived as an unusually long one. If the term for a slit-gong drum is marked with the masculine suffix (nërwi-r), it indicates that the drum is “unusually slender, which implies that it was made incorrectly and does not sound good” (Bruce 1984:97).

The word for canoe, doh-r, is unusual in that it always occurs with the feminine marker –t, but is always treated as masculine in agreement, in accordance with its typically masculine slender dimensions. In contrast, gender switch in animate nouns indicates a referent with a different N-gender, e.g., yima ‘person’, yima-r (person-MASC) ‘man’, yima-t (person-FEM) ‘woman’.

Rules of gender choice in Sare (or Kapriman), another language from the Sepik Hill family, are more complex (Sumbuk 1999:109–23). Just as in Manambu, other languages from the Ndu family, Kwoma, and Alamblak, there are two L-genders, masculine and feminine. Nouns referring to men and male higher animates are invariably masculine, and those referring to women and female higher animates are feminine. Nouns referring to lower animates (including rats, birds, and insects) have variable L-gender: the same noun can have different genders depending on the shape and size of the referent. Small, short, or rounded referents are assigned to the feminine L-gender, and those animates that are big, tall, or slender belong the masculine L-gender (unless the sex of the animate referent needs to be differentiated). The choice of the L-gender of an inanimate referent is determined on the basis of shape and size. As in Alamblak, referents that are big, tall, long, or slender are treated as masculine, and those that are small, short, or squat are feminine. Some examples are shown in table 3.

Table 3. L-gender, Size, and Shape in Sare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Masculine: Big, Tall, Long, Slender</th>
<th>Feminine: Small, Short, Squat</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wuni-r ‘big house’</td>
<td>wuni-s ‘small house’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xudari-r ‘big axe’</td>
<td>xudari-s ‘small axe’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>seboxu-r ‘high table’</td>
<td>seboxu-s ‘squat table’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


As Sumbuk puts it,

how big, tall or high an object must be to be accorded one gender or the other is determined by the traditional expectation of the speaker with regard to a particular object. With regard to the size of things like houses, canoes and containers, it is the capacity of the referents of these nouns to hold persons or things that determines what gender the noun takes. If a house, for instance, has space enough only for a single family (parents, children and grandparents), then it would normally be described as a small house, thus taking the feminine
gender. If on the other hand, the house has a capacity for several families, then it would normally be described as a big house and be accorded the masculine gender. [1999:116]

That is, L-gender choice correlates with cultural expectations.

Similarly to what we have seen for Manambu, somewhat different principles of L-gender choice in Sare apply for different semantic groups of nouns. Gender choice for plant names depends on whether the plant is young or mature. A term for a young plant will belong to the masculine gender (even though such plants are typically small and short). A term for a mature plant (normally big and tall) will belong to the feminine gender, e.g., *popo-r* (pawpaw-MASC) ‘young pawpaw tree’, *popo-s* (pawpaw-FEM) ‘mature pawpaw tree’. Sumbuk hypothesizes that mature plants “are regarded as the female of the plants since they bear fruit,” and young plants, “despite being short and small, which are features that we would ordinarily associate with feminine gender, are regarded as masculine by the Sare because of their inability to bear fruit” (1999:117). A similar principle applies to nouns referring to fruit and seeds: those referring to mature fruit are feminine, and those referring to small immature ones are masculine, e.g., *gonxa-r* (banana-MASC) ‘immature banana’, *gonxa-s* (banana-FEM) ‘mature banana’, *popoyoika-r* (pawpaw-MASC) ‘immature pawpaw’, *popoyoika-s* (pawpaw-FEM) ‘mature pawpaw’. Here, the important property of maturity over-rides the shape- and size-based L-gender choice.14

Abau (Lock 2011:47–52) is an isolate spoken to the west of the Sepik River in the adjacent Sandaun Province. The choice of the two L-genders, masculine and feminine, for human beings, spirits, and domesticated animates (pigs and dogs) is determined by the N-gender of the referent: a male is always masculine, and a woman is always feminine. Gender choice of other animals is determined by the size of the referent: a large animal is masculine, and a small one is feminine. This appears to be the case both for species and for individuals. Large animals, e.g., *mu* ‘crocodile’ and *pareis* ‘wallaby’, are masculine and so are larger birds, e.g., *wayp* ‘eagle’ and *mowr* ‘hornbill’. A smaller bird, such as *sokua* ‘cockatoo’, is feminine.

L-gender choice for concrete inanimate referents depends on the referent’s dimensionality, consistency, extension, and length. An object with a flat surface that is not too voluminous is assigned to the feminine L-gender, e.g., *iha* ‘hand’, *sune* ‘foot’, and *nweyk* ‘ear’. The Abau consider all fishes flat, and they are thus assigned to the feminine gender. Objects that are “round from a two-dimensional perspective” are also feminine, e.g., *nhe* ‘bird’s nest’ and *kan* ‘a vine woven into a circle’ (Lock 2011:48–49). A green garden snake, *wonde*, is classed as feminine because it is often coiled up in the form of a circle. Objects that are regarded as three-dimensional are masculine, e.g., *su* ‘coconut’, *am* ‘breadfruit’, and *bal* ‘ball’ (a recent loanword). Liquids are assigned to the masculine gender, e.g., *hu* ‘water’, *nioh* ‘blood’, and *sueyr* ‘rain’. Long and large objects are masculine, e.g., *now* ‘tree’, *now-pay* ‘log’, and *iroum* ‘stick’. The generic word for
snake, *sok*, is also masculine because a snake is typically long. Smaller objects, such as *now-ku* ‘tree stump’, *ku* ‘axe’, and *seik* ‘knife’, are feminine.

The same noun can be assigned to the masculine or to the feminine L-gender depending on the speaker’s focus. For instance, *mein* ‘stone’ can come in different shapes and sizes. A flat and rounded stone will be assigned to the feminine L-gender and a large, three-dimensional one will be masculine. Different L-gender choice may correlate with the part of the object the speaker focuses on. Gender assignment to *youk* ‘paddle’ is a case in point. A typical Sepik paddle is very long and has a largish flat blade. If the Abau speaker refers to a tree as a future paddle (focusing on its extendedness), he refers to it with masculine gender; if he is talking about the blade of the finished paddle, he uses feminine gender. The Manambu use similar kind of paddles as do the Abau. In Manambu, however, *gus* ‘paddle’ is normally assigned to the masculine L-gender due to its long shape and large size, but a small child’s paddle can be referred to as feminine. This illustrates subtle differences in shape- and size-based assignment of L-genders in these two languages, spoken in adjacent areas.

L-gender choice for inanimate referents depends on the referent’s shape in Wära, an isolate from the Fly River region in New Guinea (Riisto Sarsa p.c. 1997): long objects are assigned to the masculine gender, while round objects, and objects consisting of multiple parts, are feminine. In Olo, from the Torricelli grouping in New Guinea, feminine gender is associated with “small nature” of the referent (McGregor and McGregor 1982:55).

Correlations between feminine L-gender and the size of the referent are widespread in Afroasiatic languages. In many of these, feminine L-gender marking is consistently homophonous with diminutive marking, so the overlap in semantics between feminine and small size is not unexpected (for a Proto-Afroasiatic reconstruction, see Diakonoff 1988:58). If an inanimate referent, such as ‘calabash’ in Galab (or Dasenesh, from the East Cushitic branch within Afroasiatic), is big, it is likely to be assigned to the masculine L-gender, as in (28a). If it is small, its L-gender is likely to be feminine, as in (28b).

(28a) *durum* (masculine) 
‘calabash’ (Sasse 1974:419) (Galab)

(28b) *dur(u)m–iti* (feminine) 
‘small calabash’ (Sasse 1974:419) (Galab)

The association between feminine gender and diminutive, on the one hand, and masculine gender and augmentative, on the other hand, is a pervasive feature of Wolaitta, Benchnon, Sheko, Dime, and Dizi, all from the Omotic family within Afroasiatic (spoken in Ethiopia; also see Seyoum 2008:43; Hellenthal 2010:153).

In (29a), from Wolaitta, masculine L-gender of a noun with a human referent (‘child’) indicates male sex, and in (29b) feminine L-gender indicates female sex.
(29a) naʔá-y y-iísi
child-MASC.NOMIN come-3MASC.SG.PERF
‘The boy came.’ (Amha 2012:444)

(29b) naʔ-íya y-áasu
child-FEM.NOMIN come-3FEM.SG.PERF
‘The girl came.’ (Amha 2012:444)

In (30a), the masculine L-gender of a noun with an inanimate referent, ‘tree’, indicates its large size; in (30b), the feminine L-gender of the same noun indicates the small size of its referent.

(30a) míttá-y kúnd-iísi
tree-MASC.NOMIN fall-3MASC.SG.PERF

(30b) mít-íya kúnd-áasu
tree-FEM.NOMIN fall-3FEM.SG.PERF
‘The little (feminine) tree fell.’ (Amha 2012:444)

In Maale, also Omotic, feminine gender is associated with diminution and young age, and the masculine marker indicates augmentative (Amha 2001:71–72).

Feminine L-gender with inanimate referents may have other connotations, to do with value and attitude. As shown in (31a)–(32b), feminine agreement with nouns with inanimate referents in Benchnon, another Omotic language, may indicate small size of the referent, as in (31b), or the speaker’s derogatory attitude, as in (32b).

(31a) két-àq-i
house-THIS.MASC-NOMIN.MASC
‘this (big) house’ (Rapold 2006:182)

(31b) két-àn-á
house-THIS.FEM-NOMIN.FEM
‘this (small) house’ (Rapold 2006:182)

(32a) tá tj’amá-i
I shoe-NOMIN.MASC
‘my shoe’ (Rapold 2006:182)

(32b) tá tj’amá-á
I shoe-NOMIN.FEM
‘my shoe I don’t care about’ (Rapold 2006:182)

In the Harar dialect of Oromo (from the Cushitic family within Afroasiatic), if the speaker wishes to “evaluate the referent as major,” the noun acquires
masculine gender marking (Clamons 1993:275). If a noun is assigned to masculine gender, but refers to something evaluated as minor, it may be treated as feminine for purposes of agreement. In eastern and southern varieties of Oromo, “if a speaker wishes to indicate that the referent is marked as augmented with respect to a particular aspect in the domain of discourse, [. . .] the noun may be treated as masculine” (Clamons 1993:275–76). The noun ablee ‘knife’ belongs to the feminine L-gender (it is marked with the final -ee that indicates feminine). In (33a), it triggers feminine agreement on the modifier tun (this.FEM) and the predicate doom-tuu (dull-FEM). In (33b), the same noun, ‘knife’, is assigned masculine gender. This is reflected in the agreement forms of the modifier and the predicate. The L-gender shift indicates that the knife is considered big by the speaker.

(33a) ablee-n tun doom-tuu  
knife-SUBJ.TOPIC this.FEM dull-FEM  
‘This knife is dull.’ (Clamons 1993:276)

(33b) ablee-n xun doom-aa  
knife-SUBJ.TOPIC this.MASC dull-MASC  
‘This (big) knife is dull.’ (Clamons 1993:276)

The choice of L-gender may correlate with evaluation. If the referent is considered cute, or regarded affectionately, it may trigger feminine agreement, as in (34a). A “nasty little thing” (Clamons 1993:276) requires masculine agreement, as in (34b).

(34a) waan-ti tun jiidh-tuu  
thing-FEM.SBJ.TOPIC this.FEM wet-FEM  
‘This (cute little) thing is wet.’ (Clamons 1993:276)

(34b) waan-i xun jiidh-aa  
thing-MASC.SBJ.TOPIC this.MASC wet-MASC  
‘This (nasty) thing is wet.’ (Clamons 1993:276)

Along similar lines, the same noun in Amharic can be “masculine or feminine according to whether its referent is considered to be large and distant (masculine) or small and intimate (feminine)” (Hoben 1976:287).

The overtones of L-gender in Amharic are similar to those in Omotic languages, but far from identical. Feminine gender in Oromo correlates with small size of the referent. However, in Benchnon, an Omotic language, “smallness” has derogatory overtones, while in Oromo diminution correlates with endearment, and masculine L-gender acquires negative connotations.

In Turkana, an East Nilotic language from Kenya, changing gender of a noun may correlate with the size of a referent (see Dimmendaal [1983:219–21] and similar examples from the related Maasai there). As shown in table 4, the
same root can occur with a masculine, feminine, or neuter prefix. The referent of
the masculine noun is big, the referent of the feminine noun is smaller in size,
and the referent of the neuter noun is very small.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MASCULINE</td>
<td>e-mor-ù</td>
<td>‘rocky mountain, big stone’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FEMININE</td>
<td>a-mor-ù</td>
<td>‘hill, stone’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NEUTER</td>
<td>i-mor-ù</td>
<td>‘pebble’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Along similar lines, in Camus, from the Maa subgroup of East Nilotic, small
objects are classed as feminine and large items are assigned to the masculine
gender (Heine 1982:205). In Khwe, a Central Khoisan language spoken in
Namibia (and also in Angola, Botswana, and Zambia), inanimate referents are
assigned to the masculine L-gender if they are long, high, narrow, pointed, big,
or strong, and to feminine L-gender if they are short, small, round, thick, broad,
gender assignment in Khwe). In Katcha, a Kadugli-Krongo language spoken in
the Nuba mountains in the Sudan, masculine L-gender includes long, thick, and
solid objects; feminine L-gender subsumes hollow, deep, flat, and thin objects.15

In each of these instances, the choice of feminine L-gender correlates with
small size, and also round (and sometimes thin and narrow) shape, of the refer-
ent for which N-gender is not available. Masculine L-gender is assigned to
objects that are large, long, strong, thick, and also narrow.

However, in a number of languages, large size is associated with feminine,
not masculine, L-gender. We can now examine this.

4.2. Large women and small men.  In a number of languages, large size (and
also squat, extended shape) is a correlate of feminine gender. Small size and
slender shape are a correlate of masculine gender.16

The choice of L-gender in Tiwi, an Australian language, is based on N-
gender for humans and animals: all male human beings and animals are
assigned to the masculine gender (and require masculine agreement) and all
female human beings and animals are assigned to the feminine gender (Osborne
1974:51).

L-gender assignment to inanimate entities is determined by physical size
and shape. The semantic features that correlate with the assignment of the mas-
culine gender are ‘small’, ‘straight’, and ‘thin’. The features that correlate with
feminine gender are ‘large’, ‘round’, and ‘ample’. These features are also used to
assign genders to those animals that play no role in the traditional mythology,
and whose sex is hard to determine. Similar kinds of objects or animals are
distinguished through L-gender choice—the smaller or thinner one is classed as
masculine and the larger one as feminine. Some examples are shown in table 5.
Table 5. L-gender in Tiwi

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASCULINE: SMALL, THIN</th>
<th>FEMININE: LARGE, ROUND, AMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>waliwalini 'small ant'</td>
<td>waliwalina 'large ant'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mia'ti 'small pandanus'</td>
<td>mia'ina 'large pandanus'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mun'kwani 'small stone axe'</td>
<td>mun'kwa'na 'large stone axe'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>man'tani 'small stick'</td>
<td>man'ta'na 'large stick'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fun'kwaliti 'narrow-headed spear'</td>
<td>awun'kiti 'broad-headed spear'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In Tiwi, “all trees are feminine [. . .] because they are large, round and ample compared with mere sticks which are all masculine” (Osborne 1974:51).

Similarly, size is one of the many semantic dimensions relevant for gender choice in Mali, a Baining language of East New Britain Province (Papua New Guinea). Lower animates and inanimates are assigned to the feminine gender if they are large in size. If they are of average size, they are assigned to the masculine gender, as shown in table 6.

Table 6. L-gender and Size in Mali

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASCULINE: AVERAGE SIZE</th>
<th>FEMININE: UNUSUALLY LARGE SIZE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thinem-ka 'a fish'</td>
<td>thinem-ki 'a big fish'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bang-ka 'a house'</td>
<td>bang-ki 'large building'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lulen-ga 'a dugout canoe'</td>
<td>lulen-gi 'a long dugout'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Correlations between large size and feminine gender have been described for a few other Papuan languages of New Guinea. In Yonggom, an Ok language spoken in Western Province, feminine gender assignment for inanimates is associated with large size, with masculine gender assignment being linked with elongated shape (Christensen 1995:9–10). Hamar appears to be unique among the Omotic languages of Ethiopia in that feminine L-gender is associated with large size while masculine L-gender indicates the opposite (Lydall 1988:78); we return to this in section 5.

Size and shape play a role in L-gender assignment for inanimates and lower animates in Cantabrian Spanish, also known as Montañés (Holmquist 1991). L-gender assignment for higher animates and humans generally follows their N-gender, or sex. We find pairs such as bellu ‘steer’ and bella ‘heifer’, lobu ‘male wolf’ and loba ‘female wolf’, and oveju ‘male sheep’ and oveja ‘female sheep’. Inanimates and lower animates that are either tall or of smaller size, of narrow shape, or of vertical orientation are assigned to masculine gender. Objects that are unusually large, wide, horizontal, or small and squat are feminine. Table 7 contains some examples.

A change in L-gender may correlate with the speaker’s attitude to the referent. Masculine gender implies a deprecatory attitude. The term oveju ‘male
sheep’ can be used in a derogatory sense to refer to a particularly meager exemplar of the species; a cattle raiser was reminiscing about a particularly bad meal he once had, consisting of a sheep’s head, a few green vegetables, and a few potatoes, and remarked that the sight of the head of that oveja (male sheep) “peering at him from the pot was something he would never forget.” In Spanish, the feminine form oveja is normally used in generic sense, and here “shock or humor” has resulted from the selection of the male form based not on the sex of the unfortunate animal, but as a “deprecative expression of the revulsion” felt by the speaker (Holmquist 1991:60).

**Table 7. Semantic Features in Gender Choice for Nouns in Cantabrian Spanish**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASCULINE</th>
<th>FEMININE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MALE</strong></td>
<td><strong>FEMALE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hiju ‘son’</td>
<td>hija ‘daughter’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SMALLER SIZE</strong></td>
<td><strong>UNUSUALLY LARGE OR AVERAGE SIZE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anguilu ‘very small eel-like fish’</td>
<td>anguila ‘eel’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tortu ‘small cake prepared in frying pan’</td>
<td>torta ‘larger cake prepared in oven’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>montón ‘stack (of hay)’</td>
<td>montona ‘very large stack of hay’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NARROW</strong></td>
<td><strong>WIDE</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>picu ‘metal spike’</td>
<td>pica ‘hammerlike instrument with wide head’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VERTICAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>HORIZONTAL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coteru ‘rising mountain meadow’</td>
<td>coter ‘mountain meadow (flat)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>castru ‘large protruding rock’</td>
<td>castra ‘large flat rock (horizontal)’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TALL</strong></td>
<td><strong>SQUAT, SMALL</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e.g., tree names:</td>
<td>e.g., fruit names:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manzanu ‘apple tree’</td>
<td>manzana ‘apple’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>naranju ‘orange tree’</td>
<td>naranja ‘orange (fruit)’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Along similar lines, hiju míu, literally, ‘my son’, was used to refer to a young girl about twelve years of age, who had not yet developed an adult female physique. A coarse and bumpy road would be referred to as masculine and a smooth one as feminine. There is a correlation between value of the item and its L-gender assignment.

The choice of gender for nouns with inanimate referents shows correlations with size in various forms of standard Spanish (Bergen 1980:52–54; also see the historical explanation there and in Priestly 1983; for L-gender in Standard Spanish, see Butt and Benjamin 2004:1–15). In many cases, the feminine form refers to a larger entity, e.g., garbanzo ‘chickpea’ (masculine), garbanza ‘large species of chickpea’ (feminine), panero ‘small basket’ (masculine), panera ‘large oval basket’ (feminine). In some cases, a masculine noun refers to a larger entity, e.g., barreno ‘large-size auger (a boring tool)’, barrena ‘auger’.
4.3. Physical properties in L-gender choice: a summary. Table 8 summarizes the recurrent semantic parameters of L-gender assignment for inanimates and lower animates based on physical properties. As we can see from the table, L-gender choice depends on a complex of physical features—shape, size, and also orientation. Assignment based on size is variable—in some languages, feminine L-gender is associated with larger objects and in others, with smaller ones (sections 4.1—4.2). Shape and orientation are more consistent across languages. Feminine L-gender tends to apply to objects that are round and squat, and also horizontal. Masculine L-gender applies to those that are narrow and elongated, and also vertical. Similarly to Manambu, fixed gender is characteristic of humans.

Table 8. Physical Properties in Feminine and Masculine Gender Assignment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEMININE L-GENDER</th>
<th>MASCULINE L-GENDER</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>short, squat, wide</td>
<td>big, tall, long, slender</td>
<td>Languages of the Sepik region (including Manambu, Iatmul and Gala from the Ndu family, Kwoma from the Kwoma-Nukuma family, and Alamblak and Sare from the Sepik Hill family); Afroasiatic languages (Cushitic, Omotic, Amharic [Semitic]); Eastern Nilotic; Khwe (Central Khoisan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>small, flat</td>
<td>large, tridimensional</td>
<td>Abau (isolate, New Guinea area)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>large, wide, round</td>
<td>small, straight, thin</td>
<td>Tiwi (Australian region)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>larger</td>
<td>smaller</td>
<td>Mali (Baining); Yonggom (Ok); Olo (Torricelli); Hamar (Omotic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>larger, wide, vertical, squat</td>
<td>smaller, narrow, tall</td>
<td>Cantabrian Spanish</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Dimensionality is a salient semantic parameter in noun categorization devices (or classifiers) of every type (for preferred semantic parameters in classifiers, see Aikhenvald 2000:306). Orientation (vertical versus horizontal) is a preferred semantic parameter for verbal classifiers, and especially classificatory verbs. A classificatory positional verb ‘sit’ can be used with referents judged to be squat and horizontal, including women. A classificatory positional verb ‘stand’ is used with tall, large, and vertical referents, including men. This type of system has been described for numerous Papuan languages, including Waris and Enga (Lang 1975; Brown 1981; further references in Aikhenvald 2000: 158—60, 166—68). A similar principle applies in Abelam, a language from the Ndu family that does not appear to have correlations between L-gender and shape or size (Wilson 1980).17

The parameters associated with masculine L-gender assignment can be conceived as involving phallic imagery. Objects associated with feminine L-gender
will then be in some sense the opposite; that is, the association between round
and feminine may well be related to the shape of a uterus or a pregnant belly.
Such “natural” L-gender choice is associated with the projection of characteristics
salient for typical representatives of female and male N-gender onto the
world in general. This is a kind of L-gender assignment based on the important-
property principle. The property itself is rooted in the cultural correlations of N-
gender.18

We now turn to the ways in which physical and other properties (associated
with N-gender) correlate with features of S-gender in L-gender choice.

5. L-gender choice in its further guises. As is discussed in section 2 above,
L-gender choice can be determined by the myth-and-belief principle (section 5.1),
or it can be assigned on the basis of important properties (section 5.2), in which
case S-gender typically plays a role (section 5.3). Does the marking of L-gender
correlate with S-gender status? This is addressed in section 5.4.

5.1. Myth-and-belief principle. Celestial bodies, such as sun and moon, and
some animates may acquire an N-gender identity in myths, where they also
display attributes of S-gender behavior. We can recall, from section 3.3.9, that in
Manambu, ‘moon’ is feminine and so are the stars.

In Kala Lagaw Ya (the Western Torres Strait language), all nouns denoting
males are masculine, with the remainder being feminine. The moon is assigned
to the masculine gender and the sun is treated as belonging to the feminine
gender (Bani 1987). This reflects a mythological identification of the moon as a
male and of the sun as a female, typical for many languages of the Australian
area (Alpher 1987:180). This is also typical of many languages in New Guinea:
the moon is believed to be a mythological man who engages in sexual intercourse
with women, making them menstruate (for similar beliefs in other societies, see
n. 11).

In Asheninca and Ashaninca Campa (Arawak languages from Peru), all
human males are masculine and all human females feminine. All inanimate
nonhumans are classed as belonging to the feminine gender. All nonhuman
animates are treated as masculine. But the Moon, cashiri, is masculine: it is a
mythical man, as is his son, the Sun, who is also masculine (see Payne 1989:130;
Romani Miranda 2004: chapter 4). Similarly, in Palikur, heavenly bodies (sun,
moon, stars, planets), thunder, and lightning belong to the masculine gender
because, according to traditional legends, they were once men.

L-gender assignment of birds can also be determined by their role in myth-
ology. In numerous languages of the Sepik region of New Guinea, the cassow-
ary—a large flightless bird—is feminine, even in languages where feminine L-
gender choice correlates with small size (e.g., Alamblak and Abau). In many
Sepik cultures, the cassowary is a totemic woman. In an important Abau crea-
tion story, a cassowary gives birth to a human child, and is thus an “honorary
female." Along similar lines, the cassowary in Dyirbal is feminine; it appears in the shape of a woman in myths (R. M. W. Dixon p.c. 2011).

The role of a noun’s referent in myths may serve as an explanation for its L-gender choice. Alternatively, the existing L-gender may influence beliefs, superstitions, and poetic metaphors evolved around an inanimate referent, which is then anthropomorphized and promoted to the status of an honorary human.

In many Indo-European languages, the choice of L-gender is determined by a combination of morphological, phonological, and also semantic principles. Every noun has to be assigned one L-gender (with very few exceptions). This is unlike languages of the Sepik area of New Guinea discussed in sections 3 and 4.1, where inanimates can be assigned to masculine or to feminine gender depending on the physical properties of their referent. The overtones of N-gender and S-gender are often imputed to nonhuman referents depending on their L-gender, as a kind of “gender metaphor.” In both Russian and Portuguese, the noun ‘death’ belongs to the feminine L-gender. In Russian, smert’ ‘death’ is personified as a woman (also see Rothstein 1973:464). And so it is in Portuguese; morte ‘death’ is often respectfully referred to as Dona Morte ‘Ms. Death’.

L-gender choice becomes a special stylistic device. This is often associated with an array of important properties.

5.2. Important properties in L-gender assignment. L-gender choice for inanimates may be dictated by specific features associated with the idea of femininity or masculinity. This can follow numerous lines.

We can recall that in Sare, a mature plant or fruit is assigned to the feminine gender, while a young plant or fruit will be masculine (section 4.1). This consistent principle of L-gender choice in Sare can be seen as a projection of N-gender properties (i.e., femininity associated with procreation), as proposed by Sumbuk (1999:117), a native speaker of the language. Similarly, Beachy suggests that ‘sun’ and ‘blood’ in Dizin, an Omotic language, are assigned to the feminine gender because they are “seen as life-giving” (2005:63). The association of feminine L-gender with N-women and motherhood rests on the important-property principle.

The important property in L-gender choice may be equated with physical features conceptualized as feminine or masculine. In Yangoru Boiken, a language related to Manambu, “size is a gendering dimension for referents.” Another important feature is hardness (an esteemed male quality in metaphorical terms): “ironwood is masculine because it is ‘hard’, hard-textured yam varieties are masculine, and softer tuber ones are female.” Masculine gender is associated with strength and importance (Roscoe p.c. 2007; 2001:290).

Gender choice on the basis of important property may be marked through derivation. Ilocano, a Western Austronesian language (Rubino 1997:75–76), has no L-gender realized through agreement. The N-gender of humans may be distinguished lexically through nouns lalaki ‘boy’ and babai ‘girl’. These lexemes
are used to distinguish natural gender of ambiguous terms, e.g., \textit{kabsat a lalaki} ‘brother’, \textit{kabsat a babai} ‘sister’. They can also occur with inanimates, highlighting semantic feature of strength and sweetness associated with masculinity and femininity, respectively. So, for example, \textit{basi a lalaki} ‘strong sugar cane wine’ is associated with masculinity and \textit{basi a babai} ‘sweet sugar cane wine’ with femininity.

Ket, from the Yeniseian family, distinguishes three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. Gender choice is only partially predictable from the meaning of the noun referent. In Vajda’s words, “in general, masculine-class items are perceived as having ‘greater vital force’ than feminine-class nouns” (2004:16) (see also Dul’zon 1968:64; Werner 1994, 1997:88–96). A growing tree belongs to the masculine class, but a log or a dry tree is feminine. Some trees (e.g., the birch) are feminine if crooked and masculine if straight. The meaning of gender choice shows a correlation with “cultural relevance, or economic importance, with terms for animals and things, which are valued higher, or are viewed as having more cultural or social significance than others,” more often ending up in the masculine than in the feminine class (Georg 2007:88–90).

When the referent of a noun has no N-gender, but does have some property that is a salient component of masculine or feminine S-gender, the noun referring to that entity can be assigned L-gender accordingly. L-gender assignment may correlate with social stratification, and thus reflect attributes of S-gender. We can recall, from section 3.3.9, that culturally important ceremonial and other objects in Manambu are invariably assigned to the masculine L-gender. Speakers of this language are aware of their gender, and often refer to unimportant stories as “woman-type” stories and to important ones as “man-type.” Masculine gender is assigned to culturally significant rituals, stories, and objects in numerous other languages spoken in societies focused on male activities and cults. A similar principle has been described for Galab (or Dasenech) (Sasse 1974), Khwe (Kilian-Hatz 2008:42), and also Angave, an Angan language from Papua New Guinea (Speece n.d.). Feminine L-gender covers weak, passive, insignificant objects.

Hamar, from the Omotic subfamily of Afroasiatic, is unusual for its family, in that feminine rather than masculine L-gender is used for important referents. In Lydall’s words,

feminine gender is used to indicate large and major things rather than small and unimportant ones, while masculine gender is used to indicate small and minor things rather than big and important ones […] Upon telling this to fellow linguists and anthropologists, I have been met with expressions of disbelief or astonishment. How can the Hamar have arrived at such a formula? How can a society in which men generally enjoy a higher status than women speak a language in which masculine gender is equated with smallness? [1988:78]

To explain this apparent puzzle, Lydall hypothesizes that in agricultural and other tasks in the life of the Hamar,
any event or enterprise requires, on the one hand, male initiative and determination, and, on the other hand, female performance and substantiation. Male initiative and determination is conceived of as small in scale, and occasional, while female performance and substantiation is large-scale and frequent. These ideas explain why the masculine form of nouns is used to indicate small, infrequently used or seldom found items, while the feminine form is used to indicate large, frequently used or commonly found items. [1988:89]

The ways in which L-gender choice can be manipulated can reflect the relative S-gender status of referents, especially humans.

5.3. Important properties and L-gender switches. A change in L-gender may indicate that the physical properties of the referent are unexpected or atypical (see sections 4.1 and 4.2). With regard to human referents, such switches in Manambu reflect inappropriate S-gender behavior of the referents. Cross-linguistically, this is not uncommon.

L-gender reversal in Amharic can have a comparable effect. A man can address another man with a feminine pronoun “as a term of insult, to belittle” him (Wolk 2009:131). Such derogatory connotations arise when an elderly person can address a male youngster as feminine. One can refer to a male enemy with a feminine pronoun, belittling him. Feminine pronouns were “often used to refer to rebel groups as a put-down” (Wolk 2009:131). Along similar lines, Hoben mentions that in Amharic, the second person singular masculine pronoun ante can be replaced with the corresponding feminine pronoun anci to indicate “anger or insult the person addressed” (1976:286). The form anci can also be used “in a humorously belittling sense for the smallest in a group of friends or for the clown of a group” (Hoben 1976:286).

Conversely, the use of a masculine pronoun when addressing a woman implies praise, the implication being that a woman is acting “like a man” and is thus “promoted” to a manly status (Pankhurst 1992:169).

In Russian, feminine and masculine genders can be manipulated for stylistic purposes. Rothstein comments on “the expressive use of nouns of feminine gender, especially hostile epithets, to apply to male human beings. Thus, it is more effective to call a man dura ‘idiot’, the form with feminine gender, than durak [the corresponding masculine form]” (1973:464). Conversely, a woman can be affectionately addressed with masculine gender; the author, a woman, has often been addressed as moj xorosij ’my good one (masculine singular)’ by other native speakers of the language.

L-gender choice for humans may correlate with the person’s S-gender status and also with his or her relationship to the speaker. Gender in Lokono (Arawak family, Guiana) has strong overtones of “respect” or “disdain” (Pet 1987:26–27). The masculine L-gender subsumes all males of the speaker’s tribe who are not despised, males who are not of the speaker’s tribe if they are friends of the speaker or if a relationship of mutual respect exists with the speaker, and animals, objects, and spirits “considered to be GOOD and DESIRABLE or when they
are protagonists in stories” (Pet 1987:26–27). The feminine L-gender covers all females of the speaker’s tribe, males of the speaker’s tribe who are despised, males who are not of the speaker’s tribe and who are neither friends nor despised, and any animal, object, and spirit not included in masculine gender.

In Lokono, animals and birds that are thought of as having a “positive personality” and are masculine include turtles and hummingbirds. Domestic animals to which speakers have a special attachment, such as a dog, are masculine; however, one’s neighbor’s dog is more likely to be feminine. Nice and cute animals are masculine, while bigger animals are feminine; e.g., the tapir is feminine because of its big size (van Baarle and Sabajo 1997).

Similar L-gender reversals expressing higher S-gender status are found in other South American languages. In Jarawara, an Arawá language from southern Amazonia, a woman can be referred to with masculine gender if she is particularly important in the society, or is close to the speaker. One narrator referred to his wife as ‘he’, as a mark of affinity and of respect towards her (Dixon 2004:287).

In Tariana, an Arawak language from the Vaupés River Basin in Brazilian Amazonia, a woman is normally referred to with feminine gender agreement on the verb, by the pronoun duha ‘she’, or by the female classifier –ma. The Woman-Creator or a particularly powerful woman is talked about as diha ‘he’ and requires a human classifier (–ite), just as any man would. The same was true of one particularly knowledgeable woman (the mother of my major consultants). In the mythology of the Tariana and their Tucanoan neighbors, women were the original owners of the magic Yurupary flutes, but they lost them and cannot even look at them any more. Women are denied access to the magic powers associated with the flute (and are often referred to as a dangerous “other”; see Aikhenvald 2003, 2012). However, a particularly respected and important woman is promoted to an honorary manhood. This is very different from L-gender switches in Manambu (section 3.4.1), which are derogatory in essence, reflecting inappropriate S-gender behavior.

L-gender switches for human referents may have an opposite effect. Switching L-genders in colloquial Amharic correlates with the attitude of the speaker towards the addressee. The feminine forms tend to be associated with affection and tenderness, if used among friends. Second person feminine pronouns are widely employed by men to address other men, for rapprochement, or as a way of expressing endearment (Wolk 2009:131–32; Pankhurst 1992). According to Hoben (1976:287), in Addis Ababa, but not in the countryside, male friends may address each other as anci ‘you singular feminine’, to express affection. This is reminiscent of how feminine L-gender assignment to lower animates and inanimates may have overtones of endearment and diminution (as we saw for Oromo in (34a) and (34b) above).

S-gender stereotypes associated with N-gender are reflected in the use of L-gender pronouns in some varieties of Modern English. Traditional grammarians
insist that English has “natural gender”—that is, that the choice of gender-sensitive third person singular pronouns is based on N-gender: she for women, he for men, and it for inanimates. However, in many varieties of English the situation is not that straightforward. Feminine she can have overtones of smallness (in agreement with the principles discussed in section 4). Masculine he can be used to express empathy (Wales 1996:143, 146–52). Speakers of American English may use he to refer to animals they have empathy for (Morris 1999:188). In some varieties of Australian English, she can be used to refer to unruly objects for which one has antipathy, as in (35).

(35) She’s an absolute bastard, this truck. (Wales 1996:139)

In the English poetic tradition,

“masculine”-marked words were grouped according to supposedly “manly” attributes (mostly positive) and “feminine”-marked words according to “womanly” attributes (some positive, many negative): such as strong, active, aggressive, powerful, clever, big fierce, giving (“manly”); versus weak, timid, passive, loving, soft, helpful, beautiful, small, moral, receptive (“womanly”).

[Wales 1996:148]

This constellation of semantic features of N- and S-genders as reflected in L-gender usage can be conceived as a kind of “sexist symbolism” (Baron 1986:94; see Yaguello 1979 for a similar approach to French).

In a comprehensive study of sex roles of men and women (i.e., their S-gender) as revealed through L-gender reference, Mathiot (1979) showed how role images of males and females are realized in the use of personal pronouns in English. The use of the pronouns he and she observed with inanimate referents in American English was found to correlate with a number of stereotyped features—part of the inherent image and role image American men and women have of themselves and of each other.

The semantic opposition BEAUTIFUL versus UGLY manifests men’s conception of women’s versus men’s appearance; and the semantic opposition manifesting men’s conception of women’s versus men’s achievement potential is INCOMPETENT versus COMPETENT. Thus, a beautiful flower is referred to as she, and an ugly cactus as he (Mathiot 1979:18–19) (cf. similar tendencies in Oromo, East Cushitic in Clamons [1993:277], and examples (34a) and (34b) above). A car referred to as a prized possession is she. An unruly storm is also she; and so is the troublesome refrigerator. In contrast, the inherent image and role image American women have of themselves and of men can be formulated in one semantic opposition: MATURE versus INFANTILE (Mathiot 1979:25). Thus, a chair that has lost its leg is he, and so is a typewriter that would not work.

The Tasmanian variety of English described by Pawley (2004) has certain rules that govern the choice of pronouns he and she with nonhuman referents. When the sex of a higher animal is not known, the animal is referred to as he; he
is also used of plants or parts of living plants, and any item of goods or portable
property (other than vehicles) that is viewed as trade goods rather than a per-
sonal possession. As Pawley puts it, “using ‘she’ for nouns referring to portable
goods (not vehicles) is a marker of ‘attachment’, or something one ‘manipu-
lates’” (2004:116). For instance, a soccer ball has been kicked into a tree. Player,
shaking the branch, says, ‘She’s stuck. Come down, you bitch!’” (2004:127).

The negative connotations of feminine L-gender surface in many derivation-
al forms belonging to feminine L-gender with feminine N-gender reference. As
Baron puts it,

feminine English nouns tend to acquire negative connotations at a much faster
rate than masculine or neuter ones, creating semantic imbalances in originally
parallel masculine/feminine pairs like fox - vixen and governor - governess.
Efforts on the part of feminists and usage critics to eliminate feminine nouns
like authoress in favor of unmarked equivalents on the grounds that the marked
terms are demeaning have been only partially successful. [1986:114—15]

Deprecatory overtones of femininity appear in further English expressions
such as female logic, old wives’ tale, old woman. In Australian English, one can
say he is a drama queen about a particularly fussy man. He is an old woman was
once used to refer to a now deceased linguist who was incapable of fulfilling his
editorial responsibilities and was worrying about every minute detail of a task
he was not up to. This is reminiscent of the deprecatory use of feminine L-gender
in Manambu (examples (23)—(25)), to refer to a man who is not up to the
standards of the S-gender expectations in the Manambu society. However,
unlike Manambu, English has no corresponding masculine equivalent. Saying
*She is a drama king or *She is an old man is not idiomatic.

Thus, L-gender can reflect the S-gender status of a human referent, in terms
of power and positive attributes associated with the S-gender status. In most
instances discussed, masculine S-gender—and consequently, L-gender—corre-
lates with importance and power (the only notable exception being Hamar). We
now turn to the next question: what can the linguistic expression of L-gender tell
us about S-gender relationships?

5.4. Markedness, status, and power. As mentioned in section 3.3.2, one
gender in a gender system may be functionally unmarked—that is, used for a
generic human referent (with N-gender unspecified), and also when the gender
of the referent is not known. Masculine gender has been described as the
functionally unmarked choice in Russian (Rothstein 1973, and references there);
feminine gender is functionally unmarked in Manambu (section 3.2).

Traditional practice in English was to employ the masculine L-gender pro-
noun he or man when no gender specification was intended, e.g., man is mortal.
The use of he for generic referents and those whose N-gender is not known has
been a controversial issue for some time. Until recently, he in English was
generally used as a term for human reference and also as the subordinate term for male reference (Alpher 1987). In recent years, it has become the norm that the generic unmarked pronoun they be generally used to avoid what was perceived as linguistic sexism. This is illustrated in figure 2.

Figure 2. L-gender pronouns in former and contemporary prescribed English usage.

Note that the generic they (with singular or plural reference) has been a feature of literary English since at least 1300 AD (Baron 1986; Bodine 1975; and the discussion and examples by Henry Churchyard at http://crossmyt.com/hc/linghebr/austheir.html). It has made its way into prescriptive usage as a component of politically correct language use (Mackay 1980, 1983; a summary of additional attempts to coin new, gender-neutral, pronouns can be found in Baron 1986). A similar principle applies to the use of man as a generic term in Modern English. Baron (1986) offers a history of attempts to get rid of man as a generic term seen as a reflection of S-gender-based male dominance. As Baron puts it,

Perhaps most troublesome to linguists, feminists and usage critics alike has been the use of the word man itself, in phrases such as the man in the street and compounds like mankind and chairman. Some authorities argue that man, at first a word in which both genders were combined, now refers primarily to males, while others claim that the neutral sense of man is not dead and that the word still retains the primary meaning ‘human being’. In any case, one must admit that in actual use it is often unclear whether man refers to people in general or to men only. [1986:137]

Nouns with feminine reference in Modern English are often derived from the masculine form, as in poet versus poetess or author versus authoress (further examples can be found in Baron 1986:112–36). Feminine formations are sometimes viewed by speakers as restrictive and even demeaning (similar overtones of feminine derivations in Russian are discussed in Rothstein 1973:461–62). The important point here is that speakers are aware of a connection between the use of forms with male N-gender reference and male dominance in traditional society is viewed as “sexist” language. The linguistic phenomenon—functional unmarkedness of masculine forms—is projected onto dominance in the sphere of S-gender stereotypes: the unmarked status of the masculine L-gender form is viewed as the expression of greater status and power of the S-gender masculine category. Language reforms aimed at restoring the balance between the use of
masculine and feminine forms reflect the social perception of N-gender, L-gender, and S-gender as being intertwined in this way.

What about languages in which feminine is the functionally unmarked choice? Applying the same logic, one would expect that women would enjoy a privileged S-gender status in such language communities. A rather striking, and oft-quoted, example comes from Iroquoian languages, known for their functionally unmarked feminine gender. As Chafe puts it for Seneca,

the masculine [third person subject prefix] morpheme [. . .] denotes a male human being. The feminine morpheme [. . .] either denotes a female human being or is an indefinite reference to people in general, translatable as people, they, one. The neuter morpheme [. . .] denotes either an animal or something inanimate. [1967:13]

How does the “distinctiveness” of the masculine gender forms as the functionally and formally marked choice in Northern Iroquoian languages (see Chafe [2004:99–104] for further discussion) correlate with the cultural patterns and the S-gender status of women? Sources on traditional practices in Northern Iroquoian societies (including the Huron, Seneca, and Onondaga) suggest that

sex roles were distributed in Iroquois society in such a way that men were conspicuous, often even flamboyant, and invested with decision-making powers, whereas women stayed in the background, a position from which they nevertheless exerted considerable influence on what men did. Women were neither unimportant nor undervalued. On the contrary, they were responsible for keeping life going, both from day to day and from generation to generation. The importance of women in Iroquoian culture has been emphasized by the anthropologist Cara Richards, who went so far as to exclaim, “If you must be born a woman, try to be an Onondaga.” [Chafe 2004:10]

According to Richards, the “relatively high status of Iroquois women” was reflected in matrilineal descent, and also in the facts that land belonged to women, and women were the ones who appointed the chiefs. The men “stood out as highly visible figures against this essentially female background” (1974:401). This matches the principles of L-gender marking across Northern Iroquoian languages, with their special marking for masculine gender and “its association of women with undifferentiated people in general” (Chafe 2004:106).

Data from other languages point in a different direction. In Jarawara, masculine is the functionally marked gender (Dixon 2004:186–87). It is used for reference to human males and other referents assigned to masculine L-gender. The functionally unmarked choice—feminine, or “nonmasculine”—is used for reference to human females (and referents belonging to the feminine L-gender), and also when there is no gender specification. But this does not imply that women are higher in status than men; as we recall from section 5, an important woman can be referred to with masculine gender, as if she were promoted to the status of an honorary male.
Challenges to the idea that there is a straightforward correlation between L-gender markedness and women’s social status come from further quarters. S-gender roles in many indigenous societies in North America can be described in terms similar to Northern Iroquoian, with men having high visibility. However, only some of these societies have developed feminine as the unmarked L-gender (see Chafe [2004:106-7], and especially the example of Caddo). A culture pattern may at some point in time have motivated the linguistic pattern, but the exact causal relationship is hard to discern.

Functionally unmarked feminine gender has been described for a number of Australian languages (Alpher 1987). It appears that societies in which many of these languages are, or used to be, spoken, cannot be regarded as “monolithic patriarchies” (see Bell 1983). Just as in Manambu, women have their defined place in the society and are in no way subservient to men. However, it is not clear how this correlates with the lack of linguistic markedness.

Correlations between functional markedness of L-gender and S-gender roles can be interpreted in two, mutually exclusive, ways. First, having masculine gender forms as a functionally unmarked category can be understood as a token of male dominance (and resisted). This is often assumed to be the case in Modern English and is reflected in the contemporary opposition to the use of terms with masculine referents as generic ones. Alternatively, having masculine gender as a special, marked category may be understood as a token of the special importance and particular visibility of males in cultural practices. This appears to be the case in Jarawara and in the Northern Iroquoian examples.

Cultural norms and S-gender status cannot be directly correlated with, or inferred from, linguistic form and markedness relations for L-gender. However, the choice of L-gender may reflect stereotypes and expectations associated with S-gender and N-gender. This is especially salient for human referents, with their defined social roles, and particularly so in languages whose speakers are aware of the meanings of genders.

6. To conclude. Gender as a biological natural feature of male versus female (N-gender) and gender as a social construct (S-gender) are both reflected in the choice and semantic assignment of linguistic gender (L-gender). L-gender itself is the division of noun referents into grammatical classes (typically realized in agreement). There are no unambiguous correlations between functional markedness of L-gender and S-gender roles and social prominence. However, in languages with predominantly semantic assignment of L-gender, speakers tend to show a degree of L-gender awareness. The Manambu of the Sepik area divide the world into male and female. Properties typical of N-gender are imputed to non-sex-differentiable objects. Overtones of significance stemming from the social status of males, perhaps grounded in the centrality of male cults, are imparted to any object considered “important.”
In Manambu, and in numerous languages of the Sepik region, humans are assigned a fixed gender determined by their N-gender. L-gender of other nouns is variable; they do not have a fixed, or inherent, gender. Gender choice depends on the shape, size, consistency, or extent of the object referred to. Assigning an L-gender different from the N-gender to a human in Manambu has strong pejorative, or jocular, overtones. Such a switch implies downgrading a human to a nonhuman, and depriving them of their social status defined in terms of S-gender.

A universal division of referents into humans and nonhumans in the Sepik region underlies this pattern of variable gender. Variable gender appears to be based on physical properties of nonhumans. To what extent this tendency is valid for other languages of the world remains an open question.

In languages where L-gender is assigned to noun referents based on shape, size, and orientation, a round shape or a horizontal orientation is always associated with the feminine gender. Elongated shape and vertical orientation are attributes of masculine gender. This can be understood as the transferral of phallic salient features of masculine N-gender to non-sex-differentiable objects. Languages differ as to whether smaller and larger objects are treated as feminine and masculine (sections 4.1 and 4.2).

Switching L-gender of human referents correlates with S-gender and the conventional roles of men and women in the society. This correlation agrees with the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, in its reformulation by John Carroll: “Insofar as languages differ in the ways they encode objective experience, language users tend to sort out and distinguish experiences differently according to the categories provided by their respective languages. These [. . .] will have certain effects on behavior” (Carroll 1963:12). L-gender is open to speakers’ awareness and introspection. Its meanings may be manipulated, on the basis of N-gender features for inanimates, and S-gender features for humans and objects associated with them (or elevated to human status). L-gender is prone to reflect stereotypes of S-gender concepts and it is sensitive to language planning and conscious manipulation. Its susceptibility to change in language-contact situations may be due to its interaction with social change.

Notes

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1. Further interactions between N-gender and S-gender can be found in the area of homosexual and transgender practices (see Barrett 2006). Traditionally, such practices are known to play a substantial role in numerous initiation and other rituals, including Naven, made famous by Gregory Bateson (1958) and further explored in the literature on Sepik cultures (e.g., Silverman 2001), and other rituals across New Guinea (Herdt 1987; Creed 1984). Cross-dressing of men as women during initiation ceremonies in the Sepik area and the Highlands of New Guinea is thought to be a way of getting initiates to acquire a proper male social identity—or masculine S-gender—and rationalizing sexual roles (usually characterized by male domination; Herdt 1987). However, these cultural practices do not appear to present any correlations with language use.

2. Here, as in all my previous work (e.g., Aikhenvald 2000:vii—viii), I use the term “referent of a noun” to mean “an individual or an entity being referred to by a noun”; I avoid shortcuts like “human noun,” using instead expressions like “nouns with a human referent.”

3. Some preliminary correlations between gender assignment and shape, size, and consistency of the noun’s referent were outlined in Aikhenvald (2000:276—78). Older sources on genders, such as Corbett’s (1991) textbook, do not mention any of these correlations.

4. When Europeans came to study African languages, they discovered larger gender-like systems with eight or more possibilities in languages like Swahili. These often did not include a masculine-feminine distinction. The term “noun class” came to be used for systems of this type; this term and “gender” are also often used interchangeably. To avoid confusion, I use only the term “gender” here. Further discussion of the terminology and its history can be found in Aikhenvald (2000, 2004, 2006a, 2011).

5. There is a considerable body of literature on agreement hierarchies and agreement in general (for an up-to-date bibliography, see Aikhenvald 2011). The number of genders distinguished in a language may depend on agreement types; for instance, a language may have one set of agreement markers on demonstratives and another one on adjectives (e.g., Heine 1982). For cross-linguistic surveys, see Aikhenvald (2000, 2004) and Corbett (1991).

6. L-gender can also be assigned on phonological grounds; see Aikhenvald (2000: 25—28).

7. This statement is based on my typological investigation of grammars of over seven hundred languages (expanded since Aikhenvald [2000], which was based on grammars of five hundred languages).

8. For personal names in Manambu and their form, see Aikhenvald (2008a:127—29). Names are very important in Manambu culture and are prized possessions of each subclan (see Harrison 1990).

9. Masculine and feminine genders are distinguished in second and third person in free pronouns, and in all the persons in bound pronouns (Aikhenvald 2008a:127—30). Only one Ndu language, Gala (or Swakap, formerly known as Ngala), distinguishes two genders for all persons in free pronouns.

10. The noun tenkyu ‘thank you’ (from Tok Pisin tenkyu) is a notable exception. It appears in a fixed collocation, numa apaw tenkyu (big.FEM.SG old.FEM thank.you) ‘thanks
so much’, where it always triggers feminine agreement. This noun may be said to have a fixed gender.

11. Moon is held responsible for women’s menstruation; it is said to inflict “moon sickness” upon women. Coincidentally, in other societies, e.g., among the Vaupés Indians of northeast Amazonia, Moon is also held responsible for female menstruation; but, since Moon is a mythical male, it is said to have sexual intercourse with women when they menstruate (Aikhenvald 2003, and my own fieldwork; also see section 5.1).

12. We can recall from section 2 that, in Dyirbal, yara ‘man’ can be used with the feminine class marker, instead of masculine, to point out the female characteristics of a hermaphrodite (see Dixon 1972:306–12, 1982:178–83). I am not aware of such examples in Manambu; there appear to be no hermaphrodites nor homosexuals in any of the Manambu settlements.

13. Note that the terms “uterine” and “matrilineal” have slightly different meanings. “Uterine” refers to a relationship between those who share classificatory mother(s), while “matrilineal” refers to a broader array of relatives on one’s mother’s side.

14. Unlike Manambu and Alamblak, gender choice can also be determined by the phonological shape of the noun. This applies to body parts for which shape is not relevant. Some derivations have a fixed L-gender (Sumbuk 1999:119–23).

15. Each language has additional complexities in gender assignment. For instance, in Khwe, all abstract nouns are feminine, and in Katcha, feminine gender can also be determined by the phonological shape of the noun. Here we concentrate only on shape-based parameters.

16. As has been pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, the languages discussed in this section seem to have fixed genders for each noun, rather than gender variation according to relative size or shape as discussed in sections 3 and 4.1. This potential correlation is an interesting issue that can only be addressed after more work has been done on the languages discussed in section 4.2.

17. The idea that women are bulky, heavy, and slow, in contrast to men, who are wiry, alert, and fast, may also be reflected in folk conceptualization. This is the case among the Kaluli of the New Guinea Highlands. And, indeed, as Schieffelin (1977:122–25) points out, these stereotypes are reflected in male and female behavior, and even appearance. Properties associated with men and “maleness” reflect the dominant Kaluli values.

18. The directions left and right may also have connotations associated with female, or feminine, and male, or masculine (e.g., see Heine 1982 on overtones of genders in Khwe). This apparently has to do with the right, or male, side being associated with “strong,” and left, or female, with “weak.” The role, and the meanings, of the notions ‘left’ and ‘right’ need to be investigated in the context of their usage. It is well known that many languages do not use ‘left’ and ‘right’ as orientation terms. The Manambu are a case in point. They have an absolute orientation system centered on the Sepik River. The terms ‘left’ and ‘right’ are used to describe sides of people’s bodies. The term aki-ta:b ‘left hand’ is also used to refer to one’s mother’s side in traditional payments, and the term mapa-ta:b ‘right hand’ is used to refer to father’s side. The correlations between left and right and N-gender or S-gender is a topic for another study.

19. Using a feminine form in Amharic may also have an opposite function. Men may use the feminine address form towards men whom they consider high in status (Wolk 2009:131–32). Gender reversal in Amharic may have an additional function, that of trying to deceive supernatural powers. If earlier children of a couple have died in infancy, the parents may address their daughter as ante ‘you masculine singular’ and their son as anci ‘you feminine singular’, in an effort to conceal the true identity of this child from the evil forces that attacked the previous children (Hoben 1976:288).
20. An association between feminine L-gender choice and endearment can be independent of shape- or size-based L-gender assignment. The feminine L-gender in Palikur, from the Arawak family (Brazil and French Guiana), is associated with positive evaluation, while the masculine goes together with negative feelings. Even though the rat is a small animal, it is assigned masculine gender because it is looked upon as dirty and bad. A cute little baby rat would be referred to as feminine. Turtles are usually feminine, but a turtle that is a nuisance and has to be got rid of would be referred to as masculine. All insects are masculine, in spite of their small size, according to an explanation by a native consultant, "because none of them are any good for food and all they do is bother people, eat crops, and cause sickness" (Aikhenvald and Green 2011:403).

21. In this article, I do not attempt to do justice to the substantial literature on "sexist" language and language reform, including Mills (2008), Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003), Pauwels (1991, 1998), Romaine (1999), and Cameron (2011), to name a few.

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