

**GENDER AND NUMBER IN POLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY**

Jan P. van Eijk

Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria

1. INTRODUCTION

Polish is a member of the Slavic branch of the Indo-European language family. Like most Slavic languages, Polish is highly inflected; it formally recognizes the categories person, number, gender and case. In the following I will discuss the Polish gender system, which is attested in nouns, pronouns and adjectives, and in the past tense (past tense forms are historically participles). The Polish gender system has a peculiar feature in that it distinguishes three genders in the singular (masculine, feminine, and neuter), but two in the plural: male persons vs. all other forms. The gender distinctions in the singular do not reflect any natural distinction in the non-linguistic world, but the plural gender distinction does reflect a natural distinction (or at least a distinction that is verifiable in the non-linguistic world). In other words, Polish shifts from a language-internal parameter in the singular to a language-external parameter in the plural. These facts are discussed in sections 2-4 below. In section 5 I will discuss gender and number in some other languages.

A few remarks on Polish orthography and pronunciation are in order: *cz* and *ć* both resemble English 'ch' (as in *church*), but *cz* and *ć* are different from each other both phonemically and phonetically (*cz* being palatal, and *ć* alveolar); *dź* and *dz* are the voiced counterparts of *cz* and *ć* respectively; *sz* and *ś* are the fricative counterparts of *cz* and *ć*, while *ż* and *ź* are the fricative counterparts of *dź* and *dz*; (before vowels other than *i* we write *ci*, *dzi*, *si*, *zi* instead of *ć*, *dź*, *ś*, *ź*; before *i* we write *c*, *dz*, *s*, *z*); when not before *i*, the letter *c* stands for a sound that resembles English 'ts' as in 'kits', while *dz* is the voiced counterpart to *c*; *s* and *z* are as in English, but more dental. The phoneme *ł* is pronounced as a 'dark l' (as in English 'pill'), or as a grooved variant of bilabial 'w' (as in English 'win'); *l* is pronounced as a 'clear l' (as in English 'lip'); *w* is pronounced like 'v' in English 'vixen'. Polish vowels, with broad phonetics, are the following: *a* [a], *e* [ɛ], *y* [ɨ], *i* [i], *o* [ɔ], *u* (written *ó* in some morphemes) [u], *ę* [ɛ̃] (resembling the vowel of French *chien*, and *ą* [ɔ̃] (resembling the vowel of French *bon*). The combination *rz* is pronounced like *ż* between vowels or adjacent to a voiced consonant, but like *sz* elsewhere. The combination *ch* (written *h* in some morphemes) is the velar

fricative [x]. The phoneme *ń* is pronounced like the Spanish *ñ*, while *n* is pronounced like the English 'n', but more dental. The phoneme *j* is pronounced like 'y' in the English 'yes'. Save for a few systematic exceptions, stress always falls on the penultimate syllable. For details on Polish pronunciation see Corbridge-Patkaniowska 1971: 1-7.

2. NOUNS: SINGULAR

Polish nouns distinguish three genders in the singular: masculine, feminine and neuter. As is usual in Indo-European languages, these genders do not reflect natural (sexual) distinctions in the non-linguistic world. For example, the words *mężczyzna* 'man' and *Jagiełło* (a man's name) are feminine. Names of lifeless objects and concepts are divided about equally over the masculine, feminine and neuter categories, rather than being restricted to the neuter category. There are seven cases: nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, instrumental, locative and vocative. For the purposes of this article it is sufficient to consider only the nominative (N) and genitive (G) cases. The most common pattern is as follows: *masculine*: N ends in a consonant, G in *a*; *feminine*: N in *a* (except for male proper nouns in *o*), G in *y*; *neuter*: N in *o*, G in *a*. Examples:

Masculine:

	'sir'	'farmer'	'shoe'
N	<i>pan</i>	<i>chłop</i>	<i>but</i>
G	<i>pana</i>	<i>chłopa</i>	<i>buta</i>

Feminine:

	'socialist'	'voivode'	'woman'	<i>Jagiełło</i>
N	<i>socjalista</i>	<i>wojewoda</i>	<i>kobieta</i>	<i>Jagiełło</i>
G	<i>socjalisty</i>	<i>wojewody</i>	<i>kobiety</i>	<i>Jagiełły</i>

Neuter:

	'tree'
N	<i>drzewo</i>
G	<i>drzewa</i>

A number of masculine nouns have *-u*, rather than *-a*, in the genitive (e.g., *las* 'forest' → *lasu* 'of the forest'; see Corbridge-Patkaniowska 1971: 61-62, Damerau 1967: 25-26, and Westfal 1956 for discussions of this matter). For other stems with deviating forms in the nominative and genitive, and for the remaining cases (dative, etc.) see Damerau 1967: 23-48.

3. NOUNS: PLURAL

In the plural we have the following forms: (a) *nominative* masculine and feminine nouns referring to a male person select

-owie or -i (distribution unpredictable);¹ masculine and feminine nouns not referring to male persons select -y, and neuter nouns select -a; and (b) genitive: -ów for all masculine nouns, plus feminine nouns referring to male persons; feminine nouns not referring to male persons, and neuter nouns, drop the final vowel of the nominative singular to obtain the genitive plural:

Masculine:

	'sirs	'farmers'	'shoes'
N	panowie	chłopi	buty
G	panów	chłopów	butów

Feminine:

	'socialists'	'voivodes'	'women'	Jagiello's
N	socjaliści	województwo	kobiety	Jagiello's
G	socjalistów	województw	kobiet	Jagiello's

Neuter:

	'trees'
N	drzewa
G	drzew

The change *st* → *śc* in *socjalista* → *socjaliści* is regular.

Rather than maintaining the division masculine-feminine-neuter in the presentation of the plural, as is done above (and in a number of grammatical descriptions of Polish), it is far better to recognize only two genders in the plural: 'male persons' vs. 'all others'. Thus we obtain:

Male persons:

	'sirs'	'voivodes'	Jagiello's	'farmers'	'socialists'
N	panowie	województwo	Jagiello's	chłopi	socjaliści
G	panów	województw	Jagiello's	chłopów	socjalistów

Others:

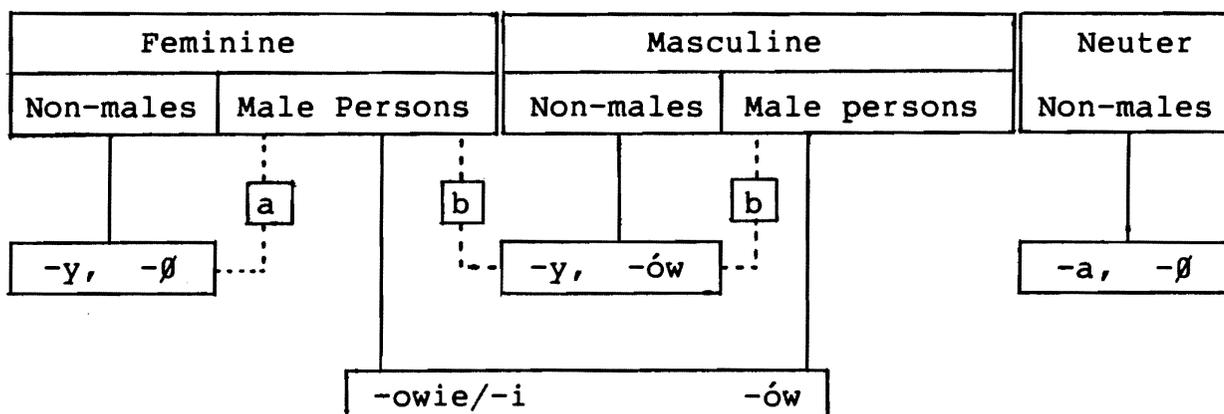
	'shoes'	'women'	'trees'
N	buty	kobiety	drzewa
G	butów	kobiet	drzew

¹ The distribution between -owie and -i is partially predictable in that -owie is quite often used with terms that express a (relatively high) rank or a family relationship; however, there is no complete predictability (for example, *biskup* 'bishop' has the plural form *biskupi*): see Corbridge-Patkiouwska 1971: 75-76 and Bisko et al. 1966:77 for further information. The ending -i has the allomorphs -e and -y (the latter arises under different morphophonemic conditions than -y of the 'non-male' form and should not be confused with the 'non-male' -y.)

What we have here is not merely a grammatical shift from three genders in the singular to two genders in the plural, but a cognitive shift as well: from a language-internal classification in the singular, which does not reflect any natural classification, to a language-external classification in the plural, i.e. a classification which reflects a viable way to divide persons and objects in the natural (non-linguistic) world. The division 'male persons' vs. 'all others' is repeated in the plurals of adjectives, pronouns, and past tense forms; see section 4.

There are two exceptions to the assignment of 'male person' forms; the first exception is trivial, the second very insightful: (a) a few feminine nouns referring to male persons have regular feminine forms in both N and G, or in one of these grammatical cases; for example, *mężczyzna* 'man' has *mężczyźni* N ('male person' plural), *mężczyzn* G (feminine plural); *sierota* 'orphan' (which refers only to a male orphan, because adjectives modifying it are in the masculine form; see section 4) has *sieroty* N, *sierot* G (feminine forms); see Damerau 1967: 37 for details; and (b) masculine nouns referring to male persons can select 'non-male' (besides regular 'male person') forms in the plural in order to express a pejorative connotation; usually these cases concern words that already have a pejorative tinge, e.g. *chuligan* 'hooligan' → *chuligany* (besides *chuligani*), *kat* 'henchman, executioner' → *katy* (besides *kaci*, with the regular change *t* → *c*); see Damerau 1967: 29, and note also *żyd* 'Jew' → *żydzi* 'Jews' (with the regular change *d* → *dz* in the 'male person form') vs. *żydy* 'kikes'; feminine pejorative nouns referring to male persons select only the 'non-male' forms, e.g. *gadula* 'chatterbox, wind-bag' → *gaduly*, *niezdara* 'duffer, oaf' → *niezdary* (see Damerau 1967: 37).

The plural formations of nouns may be summed up as follows (unbroken lines indicate regular forms, dotted lines indicate exceptions):



(a) non-pejorative (irregular exceptions to 'male person' plurals); and (b) pejorative forms.

4. ADJECTIVES, PRONOUNS AND PAST TENSE FORMS

The division 'male persons' vs. 'non-males', which is found in the plural of Polish nouns, is even more evident in the plurals of adjectives, pronouns and past tense forms (the latter are historically participles, with gender indication). Whereas plural nouns distinguish -y vs. -a nominative forms and -ów vs. ∅ genitive forms in the 'non-male' category, and -owie vs. -i nominative forms in the 'male person' category, we only have 'male persons' vs. 'non-males' (without further subdivisions) in the plurals of adjectives, pronouns and past tenses. (The singular of adjectives, pronouns and past tense forms distinguishes the three traditional genders.) Examples:

'new':	<u>Singular:</u>		<u>Masculine</u>	<u>Neuter</u>	<u>Feminine</u>
		N	nowy	nowe	nowa
		G	nowego		nowej

	<u>Plural:</u>		<u>Male persons</u>	<u>Non-males</u>
		N	nowi	nowe
		G	nowych	

'this'	<u>Singular:</u>		<u>Masculine</u>	<u>Neuter</u>	<u>Feminine</u>
		N	ten	to	ta
		G	tego		tej

	<u>Plural:</u>		<u>Male persons</u>	<u>Non-males</u>
		N	ci	te
		G	tych	

'was'	<u>Singular:</u>		<u>Masculine</u>	<u>Neuter</u>	<u>Feminine</u>
			był	było	była

	<u>Plural:</u>		<u>Male persons</u>	<u>Non-males</u>
			byli	były

(Past tense forms do not distinguish cases.)

Masculine singular forms of adjectives, pronouns and past tenses are used with (1) all nouns (masculine or feminine) that refer to a male person, and (2) all masculine nouns that do not refer to a male person. In all other cases the gender of the noun determines whether the adjective, pronoun, or past tense form is feminine or neuter. Examples:

- (a) *ten dobry pan* 'this good (dobr-) gentleman'
- (b) *ten biedny sierota* 'this poor (biedn-) orphan'
- (c) *ta dobra kobieta* 'this good woman'

(d) *to dobre drzewo* 'this good tree'

In the plural, 'male person' forms of adjectives, pronouns, and past tenses are used when the head of the construction refers to a number of male persons, or to at least one male person plus other persons. When the head makes no reference to any male person, 'non-male' forms are used. Examples:

- (e) *ci ciekawi panowie* 'these curious (ciekaw-) gentlemen'
- (f) *te ciekawe kobiety* 'these curious women'
- (g) *te nowe buty* 'these new shoes'
- (h) *panowie byli ciekawi* 'the gentlemen were curious'
- (i) *Adam i Jan byli ciekawi* 'Adam and John were curious'
- (j) *Adam i Ewa byli ciekawi* 'Adam and Eve were curious'
- (k) *kobiety były ciekawe* 'the women were curious'
- (l) *Ewa i Agata były ciekawe* 'Eve and Agatha were curious'

Note also:

(m) *państwo byli ciekawi* 'the ladies and gentlemen were curious'

(although *państwo* 'ladies and gentlemen' is formally a neuter singular noun).

For details on constructions employing plural nouns and adjectives, pronouns and past tenses see Bisko et al. 1966: 78-80, 228-230; Corbridge-Patkaniowska 1977: 77; and Damerau 1967: 57.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER LANGUAGES

The grammatical and cognitive aspects of Polish singular and plural genders have two implications for the study of gender and number in other languages; (1) the reduction of three singular genders to two plural genders in Polish could be paralleled by similar reductions in other languages; and (2) languages apparently do not enjoy complete liberty in the way they classify the outside (non-linguistic) world; rather, they must in some form recognize divisions that do occur in the outside world.

As for the first point, i.e. reduction of genders in the plural, it seems that most Indo-European languages either maintain the formal and classificatory complexity of the singular, or they simplify matters. (It is possible that plurality itself is felt to be a complicating factor, to be compensated for by simplifying matters elsewhere.) For example, Spanish definite articles distinguish two genders (feminine vs. masculine) in the singular and plural, and a third number (collective) which does not distinguish feminine from masculine. (The third number is employed only by adjectives and possessive

pronouns, plus a few other forms.)² Hence we have:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>	<u>Collective</u>
<u>Feminine</u>	<i>la casa</i> 'the house' <i>la mia</i> 'my X'	<i>las casas</i> 'the houses' <i>las mias</i> 'my X-es'	<i>lo mio</i> '(that which is) mine'
<u>Masculine</u>	<i>el libro</i> 'the book' <i>el mio</i> 'my X'	<i>los libros</i> 'the books' <i>los mios</i> 'my X-es'	

Hence in Spanish the situation is equally complex in the singular and plural, but simplified in the collective number.

French articles distinguish two genders in the singular (feminine vs. non-feminine), but they indicate only one gender in the plural:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<u>Feminine</u>	<i>la maison</i> 'the house'	<i>les maisons</i> 'the houses' <i>les jardins</i> 'the gardens'
<u>Non-feminine</u>	<i>le jardin</i> 'the garden'	

Dutch and German reduce their gender systems from two and three respectively in the singular to one in the plural. The following are examples of Dutch, which has *-en* and *-s* (in

² The adjectives and possessive pronouns that occur with *lo* are always formally identical to singular masculine forms (which means that Spanish distinguishes only two genders and numbers - masculine and feminine, and singular and plural - outside the system of definite articles). The article *lo* is in some grammars described as a neutral article, implying that Spanish has three genders. I do not agree with that analysis, but this is not the place to pursue this matter. For further information on Spanish genders see Bello and Cuervo 19(?): 419-420, Calvert 1974: 10-12, Mason 1967: 212, and Scarlyn Wilson 1973: 26-28.

unpredictable distribution) as plural markers:³

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<u>Neuter</u>	<i>het land</i> 'the land' <i>het station</i> 'the station'	<i>de landen</i> 'the lands, countries' <i>de stations</i> 'the stations'
<u>Non-neuter</u>	<i>de man</i> 'the man' <i>de jongen</i> 'the boy'	<i>de mannen</i> 'the men' <i>de jongens</i> 'the boys'

The following are examples of German:⁴

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
<u>Feminine</u>	<i>die Frau</i> 'the lady, woman'	<i>die Frauen</i> 'the ladies, women' <i>die Herren</i> 'the gentlemen' <i>die Betten</i> 'the beds'
<u>Masculine</u>	<i>der Herr</i> 'the gentleman'	
<u>Neuter</u>	<i>das Bett</i> 'the bed'	

In Chinook, a non-Indo-European language, we have two genders in the singular of the pronominal system ('feminine' vs. 'non-feminine'), but one single gender in the non-singular numbers (viz. partitive, dual, plural). See Silverstein 1972: 396-400 (section 3.7).

³ Dutch also has an unproductive plural ending *-eren* which is limited to a few neuter nouns (for example, *het kind* 'the child' → *de kinderen* 'the children'). For details on Dutch plural formation see Van Haeringen 1979: 19-38.

⁴ German plural formation is very complex, as it employs other endings besides *-en* (e.g., *-er*, *-e*, with or without umlaut of the stem). Certain nouns form their plurals only by applying umlaut. There is no predictability on the basis of singular gender as to what plural device a noun will employ.

As for point (2) above, the observation has been made that languages enjoy a large measure of freedom in the way they classify and describe the outside (non-linguistic) world, and that human beings are strongly influenced in their perception of the world by the language they speak: see, e.g., Hjelmslev 1970: 96-112, especially 104 (in this connection see also Lepschy 1972: 70-71); Whorf 1976: 112-124, 134-159; and Sapir (as quoted in Whorf 1976: 134). However, the case of the Polish plural vs. the Polish singular shows us that a language occasionally 'corrects' its own classification systems when these get too much out of sync with the natural organization of the non-linguistic world.⁵ Remarkably, this 'correction' seems to take place largely outside the awareness of the speakers.⁶ (Most speakers of Polish are probably not aware of the fact that *-owie/-i* vs. the other endings mirrors a distinction in the non-linguistic world, although they are of course aware of the existence of male persons besides all other beings; on the other hand, the pun-like nature of 'non-male' forms for male persons hints at some subconscious awareness of the function of the 'non-male' vs. 'male person' forms - see the end of section 3; note also the use of masculine forms of adjectives, pronouns and past tenses in combination with feminine nouns referring to male persons - see section 4.) It is the task of linguistics to find out (1) to what degree a language can use classification systems to describe the outside world without these systems corresponding to any natural division in the outside world, and at what point 'corrective measures' are taken by a certain language to restore the balance between that language and the world, and (2) to what degree speakers are aware of the mechanics mentioned under (1),

⁵ In this connection, one might also mention the case of diminutives in Dutch and German. As is shown in the main text of section 5, Dutch has two genders (neuter and non-neuter), while German has three (neuter, masculine and feminine). With regard to terms for animate beings, neuter terms in both languages usually refer to the young or immature of a species, as in German *der Mann* 'the man', *die Frau* 'the lady, woman', and *das Kind* 'the child'. This system falls apart when applied to terms for inanimate objects or concepts, which are unpredictably masculine, feminine or neuter, as in *der Fluss* 'the river' (masculine), *die See* 'the lake' (feminine), and *das Meer* 'the sea' (neuter). However, Dutch and German diminutive terms are all neuter, which re-establishes the neuter category as the receptacle of immature or small beings. The following are examples from German, where diminutives are formed with the suffix *-chen*, which requires umlaut in some stems: *das Männchen* 'the little man', *das Kindchen* 'the little child', and *das Flösschen* 'the little river'.

⁶ Most speakers of Dutch are not aware of the fact that non-neuter nouns shift to the neuter category when they are diminutivized. I presume that this holds true for German speakers as well.

and to what degree their awareness (if any!) influences these mechanics.

In summation, it seems reasonable to say that the study of any language (or of language in general) should not limit itself to the formal aspects of that language, but should also study the semantic and psycholinguistic aspects of the structure of that language. Such an integrated view of the formal, semantic and psycholinguistic aspects of language could be labelled 'cognitive linguistics'.

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