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► **To cite this version:**

Sebastian Fedden. Women, houses, and plural objects? - Homophony in the Mian Gender System. Robyn Loughnane, Cara Penry Williams and Jana Verhoeven (eds.). In *between wor(l)ds. Transformation and translation*, 6, pp.183-198, 2007, School of Languages and Linguistics Postgraduate Research Papers on Language and Literature, vol. 6. hal-03618113

HAL Id: hal-03618113

<https://hal.science/hal-03618113>

Submitted on 24 Mar 2022

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Women, houses, and plural objects? – Homophony in the Mian Gender System

Sebastian Fedden
University of Melbourne

Prepublication version. Please cite from:

Fedden, Sebastian. 2007. Women, houses, and plural objects? – Homophony in the Mian gender system. In Robyn Loughnane, Cara Penry Williams and Jana Verhoeven (eds.), *In between wor(l)ds. Transformation and translation*. School of Languages and Linguistics Postgraduate Research Papers on Language and Literature, vol. 6, 183-198. Melbourne: University of Melbourne, School of Language and Linguistics.

This paper discusses two alternative analyses of the Mian gender system, which shows pervasive homophony in its gender/number markers, for instance the agreement forms for singular females and plural inanimates are identical. This form of syncretism across features is called polarity. The first analysis establishes four genders as agreement classes defined by sets of agreement markers: masculine, feminine, and two neuter genders. Second, a two-class system consisting of only a masculine and a feminine gender plus a distinction between animate and inanimate referents will be proposed. Such a two-gender system has to assume that for inanimates a switch in number can result in a switch in gender and vice versa. Because of this conflation of gender and number the two-gender analysis will be rejected for Mian in favour of the first.

Keywords: agreement, article, gender, homophony, number, Papuan, polarity, syncretism

1 Introduction

In this paper¹ I discuss two alternative analyses of the Mian gender system, which displays pervasive homophony in the paradigm of gender/number markers. More specifically, the gender-marking noun clitic =*e* is used for male animates in the singular but also for singular inanimates, while the clitic =*o* is used for singular female animates, plural inanimates, and a mixed bag of masses, weapons, tools, intangibles, and for nouns denoting abstract notions, none of which allow a number contrast to be expressed. Thus, the situation we are facing in Mian involves syncretism across the features number and gender for most inanimates. Such a form of syncretism is commonly called polarity. The alternative analyses of Mian gender discussed in this paper are:

- (1) Genders are established as classes of singular-plural pairs formally defined by sets of agreement markers. These agreement patterns define four genders: masculine, feminine, and two neuter genders.

¹ I thank Claudia Wegener for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

- (2) A two-class system consisting of only a masculine and a feminine gender plus a distinction between animate and inanimate referents. In such a system, masculine inanimates express a change in number by a change in gender and vice versa.

The first analysis treats gender and number as distinct phenomena and keeps them separate whereas the latter approach conflates the categories gender and number in some instances, and therefore should be rejected.

2 Gender marking

Mian is a Papuan language of the Ok family (Healey 1964), spoken in Sandaun Province, Papua New Guinea. The Ok family of languages is well-established within the Trans-New Guinea family of roughly the same order as Germanic or Romance within Indo-European (cf. Healey 1964, Wurm 1982, Pawley 2005). Mian, like the closely related Ok languages Telefol and Tifal, has a category ‘gender’; i.e. nouns are lexically specified for the gender they are assigned to and require agreement patterns associated with their gender (Corbett 1991, Aikhenvald 2000).

Before we can discuss the complexity of the Mian gender system, we have to examine the morphosyntactic means by which gender is expressed in Mian. Nouns in argument position or used as a possessive modifier are usually followed by a pronominal copy which is segmentally identical to the free pronouns and which cliticizes to the noun². Example (1) illustrates nouns in subject and direct object position. Example (2) shows the use of a noun as a possessive modifier. Possession in Mian is not marked morphologically but is syntactically determined: the possessor precedes the possessed. In the following examples the formatives in question and subject pronominal marker on the verb are informally glossed:

- 1) *naka=e* *ěil =o* *kan* *haa+bi-e=be*
 man=he pig=she follow roam.IPFV+AUX.IPFV-he.SBJ=DECL
 ‘The man is following the sow around’
- 2) *naka=e* *ěil =o*
 man=he pig=she
 ‘the man’s sow’

Prima facie, these pronominal copies look much like overt gender markers, viz. *=e* for masculine and *=o* for feminine gender. In a language with overt gender marking one would expect the gender marker to appear on every (or almost every) noun regardless of other factors. However, unlike overt gender (or noun class) markers in Bantu languages and many Australian languages, there are contexts in which Mian nouns occur in their bare form, which suggests that we are not dealing with overt gender

² Free pronoun forms all have high tone: *é* ‘he’, *ó* ‘she’ and *í* ‘they’. Pronominal copies are in the process of losing their tone. In Mian discourse, one encounters pronominal copies both with and without inherent tone. For ease of exposition, I will assume this paper that pronominal copies are inherently toneless.

markers (or at least not with fully grammaticalized ones) but rather with determiners. There are several contexts in which a noun occurs in its bare form:

- (a) in the nominal citation form; e.g. *naka* ‘man’, *ěil* ‘pig’
- (b) when the noun is used non-referentially, which is the case for:
- first elements in noun-noun compounds, e.g. *wan+am* [bird+house] ‘platform for hunting birds’
 - generic terms which are used to classify animals and plants, e.g. *wan tolim* [bird eagle] ‘New Guinea eagle’
 - under negation, e.g. *imen blim* [taro not.exist] ‘there’s no taro’
 - in comparisons, e.g. *ěil dikin* [pig like] ‘like a pig’.

This evidence suggests that the pronominal copy functions as an article marking the noun as definite or indefinite-referential but is left out if the noun is used non-referentially.³

Hence, I conclude that Mian does not mark its nouns overtly for gender but rather requires the article to agree in gender with its noun. My data indicates that the Mian article is on the way of becoming a purely classificatory gender marker. Although the form without article is the preferred choice under negation, as in *as blim* [wood not.exist] ‘there’s no wood’, one also finds *ase blim* [wood=ART not.exist] with the same meaning⁴.

Within the NP, the gender of a noun is marked on articles, demonstratives and adjectives. Outside the NP, cross-referencing pronominal affixes on the verb agree in gender with subject, indirect object, and (for some verbs also) direct object. All these instances of gender agreement are ‘mechanical’. As gender is fixed for most nouns the formatives on the agreement targets are predictable from the gender of the noun. The possibilities for agreement according to semantic gender are limited to some nouns referring to human beings and higher animals (e.g. pigs, dogs, etc.) for which differences in sex are either obvious or important. When the referent of such a double-gender noun changes, e.g. from a male pig to a female pig, will the gender change, and concomitantly the agreement.

As the agreement markers on other agreement targets besides the article show the same patterns of homophony, I will confine the following discussion of agreement patterns to articles agreeing in gender and leave out agreement on other NP constituents and on the verb.

³ Mian requires generic nouns to be followed by the plural form of the article; e.g. *amakdimō wan=i tlomabbio* [sometimes bird=ART.PL will.come] ‘Sometimes birds will come’.

⁴ Greenberg (1978) showed that across languages the definite article often winds up as a gender marker on the noun after going through a grammaticalization process during which it is increasingly used both as a definite article, indicating ‘the N’, and an indefinite specific article, indicating ‘a specific N’ or ‘a certain N’. When the use of the article becomes a function of the syntactic construction in which the noun appears (e.g. negation), the original contrast between the form with article and the form without article is lost and the distinction becomes redundant. At this point the form with article usually starts to spread to all contexts. If this form becomes universal in the language, the former article has become a classificatory gender or noun class marker on the noun (Greenberg 1978: 63).

Mian has three formally distinct toneless⁵ clitic articles =*e*, =*o*, and =*i*, which pattern as follows:

(a)	<i>naka=e</i>	‘a/the man’	<i>naka=i</i>	‘(the) men’
(b)	<i>unǎng=o</i>	‘a/the woman’	<i>unǎng=i</i>	‘(the) women’
(c)	<i>imen=e</i>	‘a/the taro’	<i>imen=o</i>	‘(the) taros’
(d)	<i>am=o</i>	‘a/the house’	<i>am=o</i>	‘(the) houses’

Homophony or syncretism in the gender system of a language is not an unusual phenomenon cross-linguistically (cf. Baerman et al. 2005). However, such a situation gives rise to an uncertainty as to how many genders there actually are in the language, or to rephrase this question from the perspective of the linguist, how many genders Mian should be analysed as having.

The patterns of homophony can be interpreted in two ways. Either we establish one gender for each of the nouns *naka* ‘man’, *unǎng* ‘woman’, *imen* ‘taro’, and *am* ‘house’ and state the cases of syncretism or we assume that for some nouns a change in number means a change in gender. In the rest of this paper, I will discuss how these two analyses divide the Mian nominal vocabulary and point out the merits and problems of these approaches.

3 Four-gender Analysis

Following Corbett (1991), who defines genders as congruence classes formally defined by sets of agreement markers, one could set up four genders (sets of agreement markers are given in brackets):

- Masculine (=e, =i), e.g. *naka* ‘man’
- Feminine (=o, =i), e.g. *unǎng* ‘woman’
- Neuter 1 (=e, =o), e.g. *imen* ‘taro’
- Neuter 2 (=o, =o), e.g. *am* ‘house’

Masculine, feminine, and neuter 1 genders are semantically quite transparent classes. For all three genders a contrast in number can be encoded. Neuter 2 is semantically more heterogenous and there is no number contrast. The relevant gender assignment criteria are summarized in Table 1 below.

⁵ ‘Toneless’ means that synchronically clitic articles are not specified for tone. If the noun has a simple L or H tone, it is copied onto the clitic. If the noun is specified for a contour LH, LHL, or HL the last element in any of these melodies is assigned to the clitic; thus /^Lnaka=e/ surfaces as [nàkàè] and /^{LH}unǎng=o/ as [ùnǎngó].

Assignment criteria		Gender	
Animate	Human	Sex	Masculine (e.g. <i>naka</i> 'man')
	Animal (Sex readily discernible or relevant)		Feminine (e.g. <i>unaŋg</i> 'woman')
	Animal (Sex not readily discernible or irrelevant)	Conventionalized gender	Masc. (e.g. <i>tolim</i> 'eagle')
			Fem. (e.g. <i>koboļ</i> 'cassowary')
Inanimate	Count nouns (e.g. <i>měñ</i> 'string bag', <i>imen</i> 'taro')	Neuter 1	
	Liquids, body fluids/wastes, substances (e.g. <i>aaí</i> 'water'; <i>ilem</i> 'blood', <i>as</i> 'wood')		
	Place (e.g. <i>am</i> 'house', <i>mon</i> 'old garden', <i>dafab</i> 'summit')	Neuter 2	
	Mass (e.g. <i>afobeing</i> 'goods, property', <i>moni</i> (TP) 'money')		
	Body decoration (e.g. <i>eit</i> 'decoration', <i>baasi</i> 'pig's tusk')		
	Weather phenomena (e.g. <i>sok</i> 'rain', <i>ayung</i> 'cloud')		
	Illness (e.g. <i>kweim</i> 'fever', <i>houhou</i> 'cough')		
	Intangible/abstract (e.g. <i>áns</i> 'song'; <i>wasi</i> 'warfare')		
	Verbal nouns (e.g. <i>fumino</i> 'the cooking')		
	Tools and weapons (e.g. <i>kaawá</i> 'steel axe'; <i>skemdáng</i> 'knife')		

1. Assignment criteria (Four-gender analysis)

Nouns denoting humans are assigned to masculine and feminine genders on the basis of biological sex. The same applies to all mammals which live in close contact with humans, mainly pigs and dogs, and for some birds where plumage is indicative of sex. In all other cases (birds with identical plumage, lesser mammals, amphibians, fish, etc., when sex is not immediately recognizable or relevant), nouns are assigned to either masculine or feminine.

In the Papuan (Sepik hill) language Alamblak (Bruce 1984) lesser animals and inanimates are assigned to the feminine gender on the basis of roundness or squatness. It seems as if the squatness criterion also has some relevance for the assignment of some lesser animals in Mian⁶. Thus, turtles, tortoises, scorpions, spiders, short fish and small, roundish cockroaches, echidnas and the squat, flightless cassowary are invariably feminine. However, for some animals roundness/squatness does not seem to be relevant as an assignment criterion.

Thus, animate nouns are well-behaved in terms of gender assignment. They are either masculine or feminine in the singular and there is a distinct agreement form for animate plurals in =*i*, where the gender contrast is neutralized. The extension of the pronominal plural form /i/ to nouns is attested in several TNG languages, for example in the closely related Ok languages, but also in Marind (Drabbe 1955) and much further away in Bunak, a language from the Timor-Alor-Panta group (Schapper 2006).

⁶ Contrary to Alamblak, in Mian roundness or squatness is irrelevant as a gender assignment criterion for inanimate nouns.

The main difference between the two neuter genders in Mian is countability. Neuter 1 can again be subdivided into two subsets:

Count nouns for which there is a number contrast, e.g. *imen* ‘taro’. The form in =*e* refers to exactly one real world entity, while the form in =*o* refers to more than one distinct real world entities.

Liquids like *aai* ‘water’, or body fluids like *ilem* ‘blood’, and body wastes like *al* ‘faeces’, but also substances such as *fuĩ* ‘tobacco’ and *as* ‘wood’. Here, the distinction is between small and large quantities of a given substance. Note that in English all of these are usually treated as mass nouns which can only be counted by means of a mensural classifier, e.g. *two litres of water, a jot of blood, five bundles of wood*. In Mian such nouns are formally treated as count nouns.

Neuter 2, on the other hand, contains:

- nouns denoting masses
- nouns referring to locations and landmarks
- weather phenomena
- intangibles and abstract notions (such as illnesses, forms of magic, and verbal nouns)

Apart from these, neuter 2 also contains some nouns which refer to discrete (countable) real-world entities, such as houses and some tools and weapons. As there is no possibility to mark a number or quantity contrast for neuter 2 nouns (*am=o ye bi-o=be* [house=ART.N2 there exist-N2.SBJ=DECL] can both mean ‘there’s a house’ or ‘there are houses’ depending on context), lexical numerals have to be employed to count N2 nouns, e.g. *am=o asu ye bi-o=be* [house=ART.N2 two there exist-N2.SBJ=DECL] ‘there are two houses’⁷.

Table 2 summarizes the agreement patterns on the article, which formally define the four genders.

Gender	Agreement patterns		Example
	Singular	Plural	
Masculine	= <i>e</i>	= <i>i</i>	<i>naka</i> ‘man’
Feminine	= <i>o</i>		<i>unǎng</i> ‘woman’
Neuter 1	= <i>e</i>	= <i>o</i>	<i>imen</i> ‘taro’
Neuter 2	= <i>o</i>		<i>am</i> ‘house’

2. Agreement patterns on article (Four-gender analysis)

The homophony patterns of the agreement markers in table 2 suggest an alternative analysis, namely to treat all nouns which take =*e* as masculine, while all nouns which are followed by =*o* are feminine. Such a two-gender analysis will be explored in the next section.

⁷ Counting neuter 2 nouns using numerals is only possible if the noun refers to discrete real-world entities, such as houses, weapons and tools.

4 Alternative analysis: Masculine vs. Feminine

Gender systems are not a particularly common phenomenon in Trans-New Guinea languages and if they do occur they are usually analysed as two-class systems with a masculine and a feminine gender (cf. Wurm 1982: 80). The closely related Ok language Telefol, for instance, is described by Healey (1965: 31-2) as having two genders (masculine and feminine)⁸. To claim that the Mian gender system has four genders is therefore contrary to the received opinion as to how Trans-New Guinea languages classify their nominal vocabulary.

An alternative analysis with only two genders and an animate-inanimate distinction was sketched in Foley (1986: 81), where he captures the homophony in the Mian gender agreement patterns by calling everything that is followed by the *e*-article ‘masculine’ and everything that takes the *o*-article ‘feminine’. The *i*-form is restricted to plural animates and shows gender syncretism. Table 3 sets out the agreement patterns on the article for a two-gender analysis.

Gender	Agreement patterns		Example
	Animates		
	Singular	Plural	
Masculine	= <i>e</i>	= <i>i</i>	<i>naka</i> ‘man’
Feminine	= <i>o</i>		<i>unǎng</i> ‘woman’
	Inanimates		
Masculine	= <i>e</i>		<i>imen</i> ‘taro’
Feminine	= <i>o</i>		<i>imen</i> ‘taro’, <i>am</i> ‘house’

3. Agreement patterns on article (Two-gender analysis)

Consequences of this analysis are (i) a fundamental difference between animate and inanimate nouns in terms of behaviour of gender and number and (ii) an intricate connection or association between gender and number/quantity for inanimates. Animates have a gender contrast in the singular and a plural in =*i*, whereas for some inanimates (neuter 1 in the four-gender analysis above) a contrast in number or quantity is expressed by means of a contrast in gender. For all other inanimates (neuter 2 in the four-gender analysis) gender markers give no indication of number. Table 4 gives the assignment criteria for the two-gender analysis. For animates, the criteria are identical to the ones used in the four-gender analysis. For inanimates, they change considerable because we have to allow for a gender change in certain inanimates in order to express a change in number or quantity.

⁸ In Telefol, animate nouns are assigned to either masculine or feminine on the basis of biological sex, whereas inanimates usually receive their gender depending on the size of the referent/real-world object. Small referents are masculine, large ones feminine.

Assignment criteria		Gender	
Animate	Human	Sex	Masculine (e.g. <i>naka</i> ‘man’)
	Animal (Sex readily discernible or relevant)		Feminine (e.g. <i>unaňg</i> ‘woman’)
	Animal (Sex not readily discernible or irrelevant)	Conventionalized gender	Masc. (e.g. <i>tolim</i> ‘eagle’) Fem. (e.g. <i>koboł</i> ‘cassowary’)
Inanimate	Count nouns (e.g. <i>měň</i> ‘string bag’, <i>imen</i> ‘taro’)	Number/quantity	E.g. <i>imen</i> ‘taro’ or <i>aai</i> ‘water’ are either masculine or feminine depending on number/quantity
	Liquids, body fluids/wastes, substances (e.g. <i>aai</i> ‘water’; <i>ilem</i> ‘blood’, <i>as</i> ‘wood’)		
	Place (e.g. <i>am</i> ‘house’, <i>mon</i> ‘old garden’, <i>dafab</i> ‘summit’)	Feminine	
	Mass (e.g. <i>afobeing</i> ‘goods, property’, <i>moni</i> (TP) ‘money’)		
	Body decoration (e.g. <i>eit</i> ‘decoration’, <i>basi</i> ‘pig’s tusk’)		
	Weather phenomena (e.g. <i>sok</i> ‘rain’, <i>ayung</i> ‘cloud’)		
	Illness (e.g. <i>kweim</i> ‘fever’, <i>houhou</i> ‘cough’)		
	Intangible/abstract (e.g. <i>áns</i> ‘song’; <i>wasi</i> ‘warfare’)		
	Verbal nouns (e.g. <i>fumino</i> ‘the cooking’)		
Tools and weapons (e.g. <i>kaawá</i> ‘steel axe’; <i>skemdáng</i> ‘knife’)			

4. Assignment criteria (Two-gender analysis)

Foley’s analysis is based on the description of Mian gender found in Smith and Weston (1974). As far as the formative /o/ is concerned, Smith and Weston only use the term ‘feminine’ for animate nouns. They go on to say that inanimates “are classified according to size or quantity” (Smith and Weston 1974: 41f.); i.e. plural inanimates (or quantities) and nouns whose referents are considered to be of large size also take /o/ (Smith and Weston 1974: 42):⁹

kaawá-o ‘steel axe’
imen-o ‘large taro, quantity of taro’

It is well-known that size can be an assignment criterion for gender (cf. Aikhenvald 2000, Foley 1986). So it could indeed be the case that *kaawá* ‘steel axe’ is assigned to the feminine because it is considered to refer to a large object. The noun *kaawá* would then be subject to the Mian rule that inanimates do not have a plural in /i/. However, contrary to Smith and Weston’s claims I cannot confirm that this assignment strategy

⁹ Note that Smith and Weston (1974) analyse the formatives which agree in gender as class-marking suffixes. In quoting Smith and Weston’s examples I maintain their notation (i.e. a dash indicating affixation) although I analyse these formatives as clitic articles. While the syntactic status of the gender-marking formatives has an impact on whether we want to speak of overt gender marking or not, it does not influence the question of how to come to grips with the Mian gender system.

has any relevance for large tokens of some type of object that comes in all shapes and sizes, like taro or string bags. My data suggests that one taro can only ever be referred to with *imen=e* ‘a/the taro’ regardless of size. In order to express that a certain taro tuber is big, a modifying adjective, e.g. *sum* ‘large, big’, has to be used; thus *imen=e sum=e* ‘a/the big taro’. On the other hand, *imen=o* can only mean ‘(the) taros’. Therefore, size does not seem to be a predominant assignment criterion for inanimates in contemporary Mian.

According to Smith and Weston, the other assignment criterion for inanimates apart from size is quantity. The gender contrast is between *-e* for singular or small quantity/ number and *-o* for plural or large quantity/number. Although the assignment criterion “quantity” is widespread in mensural and sortal classifiers and is also attested for classificatory verbs (cf. Aikhenvald 2000: 293, 300), it does not figure predominantly in gender systems. Yet, in Mian we have seen that for homogenous substances, like liquids, differences in the agreement pattern correlate with differences in quantity; e.g. *aai=e* ‘some water’ vs. *aai=o* ‘much water’.

A similar example comes from the Papuan language Manambu, where mass nouns are assigned to their gender (masculine or feminine) on the basis of quantity (Aikhenvald 1998). Hence, it seems plausible to assume that in Mian homogenous substances are assigned to their gender on the basis of quantity. However, for most inanimates, namely those which refer to discrete objects, the contrast is clearly not between small and large quantities (as Smith and Weston claim), but rather a contrast between one and more than one object, in other words, a contrast in number. Thus, an inanimate noun with *=e* can only refer to a single entity; e.g. *imen=e* ‘a/the taro’ / *‘a small amount of taro’¹⁰.

A two-gender analysis for Mian entails that the feminine gender contains—apart from female animates—also plural inanimates, such as *imen=o* ‘(the) taros’, large quantities of substances, such as *aai=o* ‘much water’, and inanimates for which there is no singular-plural distinction, such as *am=o* ‘(the) house(s)’ and *kaawá=o* ‘(the) steel axe(s)’. Parallel to Lakoff (1987), who characterized the members in the feminine class in the Australian language Dyirbal¹¹ as “women, fire, and dangerous things”, one could describe the Mian feminine as comprising “women, houses, and plural objects”.

5 Polarity

Syncretism of forms across features is called polarity. In the Mian case, we are dealing with gender polarity, i.e. for (countable) inanimates a change in number

¹⁰ Some speakers actually claim to “know” what gender a noun has; i.e. they can say for a given noun whether it is *naka* ‘man’ (i.e. masculine) or *unǎng* ‘woman’ (i.e. feminine). So when asked about the gender of a singular discrete entity (woman, steel axe, house) they would say they are feminine. However, this does not seem to be common knowledge but quite restricted to a few speakers who worked with the SIL linguists Smith and Weston and who therefore might be biased by their analysis. Furthermore, no speaker (whether co-worker of Smith and Weston or not) would ever maintain that a form such as *imen=o* ‘(the) taros’ is *unǎng*, that is feminine. Neither would they say this about a large quantity of a liquid, e.g. *aai=o* ‘much water’. In both cases they would just say *homon* ‘a lot of’. There is an important caveat though. As gender systems are known to be largely unconscious, gender judgments are unreliable and thus cannot be taken at face value.

¹¹ Dixon (1972) uses the term class II.

means a change to an agreement pattern associated with a different gender; e.g. *imen* ‘taro’ in the plural shows the same agreement patterns as feminine nouns.

The term ‘polarity’ was originally introduced by Carl Meinhof (1912) to denote situations in which in a “given system of two terms (grammatical features) and two exponents, values and exponents can be inverted.” (Lecarme 2002: 110).

For a (two-class) gender system this means that any given noun has a certain gender (e.g. masculine or feminine) in the singular with concomitant agreement patterning whereas in the plural the same noun is used with the agreement patterns of the other gender (as used in the singular). Polarity systems have been reported for Cushitic languages, e.g. Somali (Serzisko 1982, Saeed 1999). The agreement markers for Somali are set out in table 3. The definite article is used for illustration (cf. Saeed 1999: 112).¹²

	Singular	Plural
Masculine	<i>-ka</i>	<i>-ta</i>
Feminine	<i>-ta</i>	<i>-ka</i>

5. Somali definite article

In the Somali polarity system, there are two categories, gender and number, and two markers, *-ka* and *-ta*. Changing the value of one of the categories causes the marker to change, whereas the marker remains the same if both values are changed (Corbett 1991: 196). Such systems of full or genuine polarity are comparatively scarce. Systems of ‘partial polarity’ seem less rare and can, for example, be found in Serbo-Croat. Table 4 illustrates agreement patterns of the predicate agreement marker (Corbett 1991: 197).

	Singular	Plural
Masculine	∅	<i>i</i>
Feminine	<i>a</i>	<i>e</i>
Neuter	<i>o</i>	<i>a</i>

6. Serbo-Croat predicate agreement markers

Feminine and neuter are in a relation of partial polarity in Serbo-Croat because the feminine singular form is identical to the neuter plural form (meaning that agreement is marked following the pattern for the feminine singular), whereas the neuter singular and feminine plural forms are not identical¹³.

¹² Not all Somali nouns take part in the polarity system. So-called internal plurals, which are formed by duplication of the final consonant and insertion of accented *-á*, are not polaric; e.g. *áf* (masc.) ‘mouth’ vs. *af-á-f* (masc.) ‘mouths’ (cf. Lecarme 2002: 117).

¹³ Note that by analysing the Serbo-Croat case as partial polarity, one has to extend this notion to include any two genders within a system which can potentially be larger (cf. Corbett 1991: 197). Reh (1983, 1985) describes a highly complex system of polarity for the Niger-Congo language Krongo which has three genders in the singular: masculine, feminine, and neuter. In the plural, gender marking can (i) stay the same, (ii) change to an agreement pattern associated with one of the other genders (as used in the singular), or (iii) change to an agreement pattern that is only used in the plural. Attested combinations are given in the following table. Note that all instances of polarity are only partial.

Singular	Plural
Masculine	Masculine
Feminine	Masculine

The two analyses presented in this paper make profoundly different assumptions about what polarity actually is.

For the four-gender analysis, polarity is a descriptive term for a situation in which a noun in the plural follows the agreement pattern associated with another gender in the singular without assuming that the gender of the noun actually changes with a change in number, thus creating a special form of syncretism which cross-cuts features. Corbett (1991: 196) uses the term in this sense. For Mian, this means that we analyse four genders and state that feminine and neuter 1 are in a relation of partial polarity with each other (as in table 5; repeated from table 2):

Gender	Agreement patterns		Example
	Singular	Plural	
Masculine	= <i>e</i>	= <i>i</i>	<i>naka</i> ‘man’
Feminine	= <i>o</i>		<i>unǎng</i> ‘woman’
Neuter 1	= <i>e</i>	= <i>o</i>	<i>imen</i> ‘taro’
Neuter 2	= <i>o</i>		<i>am</i> ‘house’

7. Agreement patterns on article

In Mian, as in Serbo-Croat, polarity is only partial because the feminine singular form is identical to the neuter 1 plural form, while the neuter 1 singular form is not identical to the feminine plural form.

The second, two-gender analysis understands polarity as a grammatical principle which allows nouns to change their gender as a means of changing their number. This, however, has severe consequences for linguistic theory which usually assumes gender and number to be two distinct categories or features. In the final section of this paper I will give an evaluation of a two-gender analysis for Mian taking into account its merits but also the theoretical issues arising when one treats polarity as a grammatical principle.

6 Evaluation

An analysis of the Mian gender system as a two-class system not only makes sense of the striking patterns of homophony in the agreement markers by treating =*e* and =*o* as exponents of the masculine and the feminine gender, respectively. It also seems to recommend itself by making explicit a plausible historical connection between the classes of singular feminine animates and inanimate plurals.

It is well-known that for some classical daughter languages of Proto Indo-European (PIE) suffixes in the feminine singular (nominative) and the neuter plural (both nominative and accusative) are identical, namely *-ā̄*; e.g. Latin *femin-ā̄* ‘woman’ (feminine singular); *don-ā̄* ‘presents’ (neuter plural¹⁴). The widely accepted account

Feminine	Plural gender
Masculine	Plural gender
Neuter	Masculine
Neuter	Feminine
Neuter	Neuter
Neuter	Plural gender

¹⁴ The singular form is *don-um* ‘present’.

for this homophony is that in early PIE and pre-IE, neither of which had a category ‘gender’¹⁵, there was a single collective form marked with **-h*¹⁶ which expressed low individuation later developing into the feminine singular and the neuter plural form. The marker **-h* was (among others) in opposition to **-s*, which had an individualizing force and a specific meaning (cf. Lehmann 1958: 189-90) and later became the masculine form.

Similarly, in Mian the masculine marker =*e* is used to refer to individual, singular objects (whether animate or inanimate), whereas the feminine marker =*o* is associated with a collective meaning. Apart from marking plural inanimates and large quantities of homogenous substances, =*o* can also be found in situations involving animate referents, namely in dyadic terms (as in 3), which refer to relations rather than individuals. Here, the collective form marked with =*o* exists alongside a plural form in =*i* (as in 4):

- 3) *i* *dab=o*
 3PL same_sex_siblings_dyad=COLL
 ‘the (two) brothers’
- 4) *i* *dab=i*
 3PL same_sex_siblings_dyad=PL
 ‘the (two) brothers’

Regardless of the common diachronic origin and the homophony patterns in nominal inflection in Latin, no one would claim that plural neuter nouns in the nominative and the accusative are assigned to the feminine gender. This is because the homophonous *-ā*-suffixes belong to different inflectional paradigms. A neuter noun in the plural is declined *donā* (nominative) ‘presents’, *donōrum* (genitive), *donīs* (dative/ablative), *donā* (accusative), whereas feminine plurals are declined *feminae* (nom.) ‘women’, *feminārum* (gen.), *feminīs* (dat./abl.), *feminās* (acc.).

The parallelism of homophony patterns in Latin and Mian may well be accidental. We simply do not know enough about earlier stages of New Guinea languages to confidently make claims that a former collective category was the source for the marker =*o*. What the example from Indo-European shows, though, is that homophony in certain formatives can point to historical relatedness. This, however, does not necessarily mean that we should synchronically identify these formatives as exponents of the same category.

Above, we have seen that an analysis of Mian gender in terms of masculine and feminine gender entails that we have to accept that for animate referents gender operates independent of number, whereas (at least) for inanimates which allow a number opposition a contrast in number or quantity is expressed by means of a contrast in gender. In such a system a change in number results in a change in gender and vice versa, basically conflating the categories number and gender for these inanimate nouns.

¹⁵ It is assumed for IE that gender as a system of agreement is an innovation in late PIE times (cf. Lehmann 1974: 198).

¹⁶ In the course of the development of PIE this laryngeal was lost with compensatory lengthening of the preceding vowel (cf. Lehmann 1958: 195). Reflexes of this development can still be found in the feminine singular and neuter plural suffixes in Latin.

It is my view that such an analysis should be rejected in general and in Mian in particular because despite the patterns of homophony and a plausible historical scenario, in which *=e* was originally used to refer to individuals and *=o* to refer to collectives, gender and number are different phenomena and should therefore be kept separate in a synchronic description of a language. Gender is a lexical feature of a noun. Evidence for this assumption comes from the fact that assignment can be arbitrary and agreement is strict and consistent. Number, on the other hand, is usually not conceived of as a feature a noun is inherently specified for (barring e.g. suppletive plurals), but rather a feature of the NP as a whole in a certain context in which it is used to denote a plural referent. It might be possible to argue that in English most count nouns are inherently singular because the form of their lexical entry is identical to the singular form. In Mian, however, a lexical citation form, e.g. *naka* ‘man’, is completely unspecified for number. Only the addition of the determiners *=e* or *=i* clarifies whether one man or more than one is/are being referred to.

Although languages undoubtedly can show polarity effects and ‘gender polarity’ may be a convenient descriptive term for these phenomena, it is quite clear that polarity should be understood as a grammatical principle:

Irrespective of the empirical question of whether polarity systems are found in natural language, a polarity principle should also be rejected on conceptual grounds. It is hard to see how it could meet the design conditions on human language, or plausible assumptions about learnability. As a methodological position it is simply unworkable in that it allows for the use of contrasting gender values as exponents of plurality. What we have here, [...] is a fundamental conflation of two quite different notions: gender and number.

(Lecarme 2002: 113)

The two-gender analysis has ramifications for the structure of the Mian lexicon. Each of the two genders would contain both animate and inanimate nouns and the entries for animates would differ considerably from those for inanimates. While animate nouns can be specified for either gender (mostly depending on sex) and then regularly form their plural in *=i*, some inanimates, such as *imen* ‘taro’, would need a feature ‘polaric’, which indicates that the noun shows gender polarity when its number value is changed. We cannot assume a general rule that makes all inanimates polaric because feminine inanimates, such as *kaawá* ‘steel axe’, do not show gender polarity and therefore would have to be specified as invariant. Consequently, even a two-gender analysis has to recognize a sub-classification within each gender, in other words, it has to make reference to both gender and animacy to account for the gender and number behaviour of any given noun.

In summary, although a two-gender analysis can account for the patterns of homophony in the agreement markers and makes explicit the plausible historical relatedness of these markers, it is plagued by the fact that it has to assume polarity as a principle of Mian grammar. Furthermore, it is not more parsimonious than the four-gender analysis since it also has to rely on a four-way contrast. Hence, the solution I propose for Mian is to adopt the four-gender analysis because it permits us to keep

number and gender separate and rids us of the problem that we have to assume a polarity principle in Mian. Rather than saying that a given inanimate noun, such as *imen* ‘taro’ is masculine in the singular and feminine in the plural, this noun is lexically specified as neuter 1, which forces the article to be =*e* in the singular and =*o* in the plural. In other words, the correct agreement patterns follow directly from the lexical gender specification of the noun.

Abbreviations: 3—third person, ART—article, AUX—auxiliary, COLL—collective, DECL—declarative, IPFV—imperfective, N2—neuter 2, PL—plural, SBJ—subject.

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