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The gender system of Laal

Abstract: This paper describes the gender system of Laal, a language isolate of Chad. Laal has a strictly semantic, partly sex-based gender system making use of three semantic features: [±human], [masculine/feminine], and [±abstract], defining four genders: human masculine, human feminine, neuter, and abstract. Gender is covert on nouns; it is marked only on agreeing pronouns and functional words. The morphological marking and structure of the gender system is different in pronouns and functional words. Seven agreement classes are defined by various conflations of gender and number categories in both pronominal forms and functional words.

1 Introduction

This paper is a description of the gender system of Laal using Güldemann and Fiedler's (2019) analytical categories. Laal is a language isolate spoken by ca. 800 people mainly in Gori and Damtar, two villages along the Chari river in southern Chad. The language was first brought to the attention of the scientific community in the 1970's by Pascal Boyeldieu, who described its phonology (Boyeldieu 1977), its nominal and verbal systems (Boyeldieu 1982a, 1987), and discussed its problematic classification (Boyeldieu 1982b).

Laal is a three-tone language with SVO word order and postnominal determiners and noun modifiers. The gender system of Laal is briefly discussed by Boyeldieu (1979: 5, 1982a: 8–11), who describes three genders: (human) "masculine", (human) "feminine", and "neuter" (= non-human). The present paper identifies a fourth gender. Agreement patterns indeed reveal that the non-human category is subject to a further distinction based on the semantic feature of abstractness.

All the data in this paper come from my own fieldwork on the language —a total of 15 months between 2010 and 2018. Examples without references come from elicitation. Many examples are taken from texts. The recordings and transcription of these texts are all available in the Laal collection of the online DOBES archive.[1]

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[1] URL: https://hdl.handle.net/1839/e926f02e-f490-46b2-bc04-561552386bb4. Short references to these texts are used in the article. Cf. the "Laal-filenames-shorthand-key" file in the "Description de l'archive laal / Description of Laal archive" folder in the archive for actual references.

Section 2 gives an overview of the gender system and agreement patterns. A detailed description of the morphological expression of gender is given in section 3, together with an overview of noun phrase structure. Section 4 describes the semantics of gender. Section 5 concludes.

2 Overview of the gender system

Laal has a partly sex-based system with a total of four genders: human masculine (M), human feminine (F), non-human neuter (N), and non-human abstract (A). It is a "strict semantic" system (Corbett 1991), i.e. agreement is not based on lexical or morphological properties of the noun, but exclusively on properties of its referent. The system can be straightforwardly described with four semantic features and two levels of distinction. A primary distinction is made between [+human] and [-human]. Two secondary distinctions are further made: a [feminine]/[masculine] sex distinction in the [+human] category, and a [±abstract] distinction in the [-human] category, as shown in Fig. 1. The semantics of these gender categories will be explored in §3.
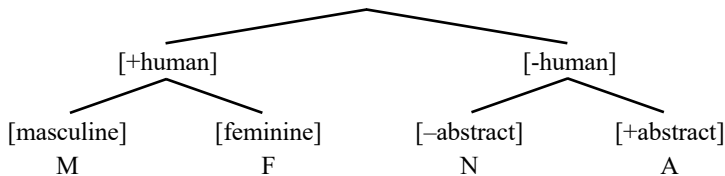

Figure 1: Semantic features and structure of the Laal gender system

The Laal gender system is covert, i.e. there is no gender morphology on nouns. Nouns are only marked for number, with over 30 different singular and/or plural suffixes, whose combinations with specific noun roots is unpredictable. Nouns can thus be invariable (1a), marked in the plural only (1b), in the singular only (1c), or in both singular and plural (1d). A few cases of suprasegmental alternations (1e) and suppletion (1f) are also attested.[2]

(1)a. *wúlè / wúlè*   'rhinoceros'   d. *gār-āl / gǝr-ī* 'Acacia *spp.*'
   b. *miàn / mèn-ú*   'hoe'   e. *mɨ̄ɨw / mìɨw*   'liver'
   c. *súgl-é / súgúl* 'guineafowl'   f. *nɨ̄ɨnɨ̄ / yīnān* 'woman'

This complex and irregular number-marking system is entirely independent of gender, and need not concern us here. Indeed, there is no gender morphology on nouns, hence no 'noun form classes' or 'deriflections' (Güldemann and Fiedler 2019) directly related to the morphological expression of gender. This is a clear illustration of the difference between noun form class and agreement class, and between deriflection and gender system.

Gender is only marked through agreement on pronouns and a number of functional words. One of the most complex aspects of the Laal gender system is the fact that the pronominal and functional word subsystems differ in both the morphological expression of gender categories, and the overall structure of the gender system in terms of agreement classes.

The pronominal subsystem consists of five agreement classes, resulting from the combination of three genders (masculine, feminine, non-human), and two number categories (singular and plural), with a conflation of masculine and feminine into a human gender in the plural (like in many languages, gender and number are morphologically conflated in Laal). Abstract and neuter are not distinguished in the pronominal subsystem, both being merged into a non-human category. This is summarized and illustrated with third person subject pronouns in Fig. 2 (cf. §3.1).

	SG	PL
Masculine	*à*	*ì*
Feminine	*ìn*	
Non-human	*àn*	*uàn*
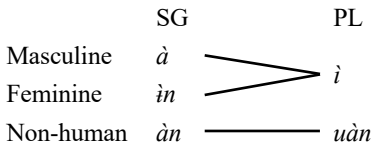
Figure 2: Gender agreement in the pronominal subsystem

Likewise, the function word subsystem is characterized by five agreement classes, illustrated with the form of the connective particle in (2) (cf. §3.2).

(2) a. *já*   masculine singular
   b. *jí*   feminine singular
   c. *má*   neuter singular
   d. *yá*   neuter plural
   e. *yí*   plural (all genders); non-human singular

As can be seen, the five agreement classes of the functional word subsystem are different from the five classes of the pronominal subsystem, both morphologically and semantically. First, while the pronominal subsystem is characterized by a strict one-to-one mapping between agreement class and gender category, as shown in Fig. 2 above, there is more confusion in the functional word subsystem, where some

agreement classes overlap. This is mostly due to the wide polysemy of the *yí* agreement class, which can be the morphological expression of all gender-number combinations except masculine and feminine singular, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Morphology of gender agreement in the functional word subsystem

	SG	PL
Masculine	*já*	*yí*
Feminine	*jí*	*yí*
Neuter	*má ~ yí*	*yá ~ yí*
Abstract	*yí*	*yí*

Secondly, there is a split in the morphological expression of non-human agreement along the [±abstract] dimension. Two agreement classes are indeed dedicated exclusively to neuter agreement: *má* (sg.) and *yá* (pl.). There are no classes dedicated to abstract agreement. Instead, abstract nouns trigger the exclusive use of the syncretic *yí* form in both singular and plural. The abstract and neuter genders, merged in the pronominal subsystem, are thus distinct in the functional word subsystem, albeit only minimally: both abstract and neuter nouns may trigger agreement in *yí*, but only neuter nouns can trigger agreement in *má* and *yá*. Gender agreement in the functional word subsystem is summarized in Fig. 3 below, where dashed lines stand for possible neuter agreement patterns in (quasi) free variation (cf. §3.4).
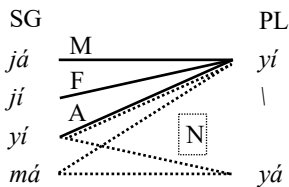

Figure 3: Gender agreement in the functional word subsystem
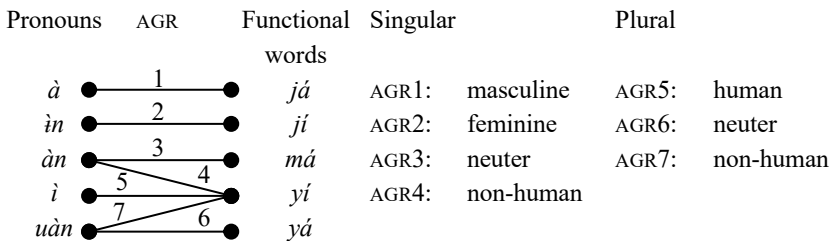

Figure 4: Laal agreement classes

Gender agreement patterns across the pronominal and functional word subsystems define a total of seven agreement classes, shown in Fig. 4. Fig. 5 summarizes the interplay between gender, number and agreement classes. The examples in (3) illustrate these agreement classes with the connective and third person object suffixes.

(3)a. AGR1:

    nāārā   *já*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já yìr-* *-ár*

    man(M)   CON.M.SG   ANAPH DEF   I know 3M.SG

    'That man (previously mentioned), I know him.'

  b. AGR2:

    nīīnī   *jí*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já yùr-* *-ù*

    woman(F)   CON.F.SG   ANAPH DEF   I know 3F.SG

    'That woman, I know her.'

  c. AGR3:

    ɓiāāg   *yí/má*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já yìr-* *-àr*

    dog(N)   CON.NH.SG/…N.SG ANAPH DEF   I know 3NH.SG

    'That dog, I know it.'

  d. AGR4:

    mīīw-āl   *yí/*má*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já yìr-* *-àr*

    custom-SG(A)   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG ANAPH DEF   I know 3NH.SG

    'That custom, I know it.'

  e. AGR5:

    yīnān/wūrā *yí*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já*   *yìr-* *-rĭ*

    women/men(H) CON.PL   ANAPH DEF   I   know 3H.PL

    'Those women/men, I know them.'

  f. AGR6:

    ɓīīg-āŋy   *yí/yá*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já*   *yùr-* *-àr³*

    dog-pl(n)   CON.PL/…N.PL   ANAPH DEF   I   know 3NH.PL

    'Those dogs, I know them.'

  g. AGR7:

    mììw-ùr   *yí/*yá*   *dā̃ŋ*   *kán* || *já*   *yùr-* *-àr*

    custom-PL(A)   CON.PL/*…N.PL   ANAPH DEF   I   know 3NH.PL

    'Those customs, I know them.'

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³ The low back rounded vowel /ua/ in the third person non-human plural (3NH.PL) object /-uàr/ ~ /-uàn/ is a diphthongized monophthong, phonologically equivalent to /ɔ/, and historically derived from *ɔ. In Laal, this vowel is strictly banned from non-stem-initial position, and any underlying /ua/ in this position is changed to /a/. The 3NH.PL object suffix is thus always realized /-àr/. The rounded nature of its vowel can clearly be identified by the fact that it triggers rounding harmony on the previous vowel, as in |yīrā -uàr| → /yùr-àr/ `know-them (NH)' in (3f-g), vs. |yīrā -àr| → /yìr-àr/ 'know-it' in (3c).

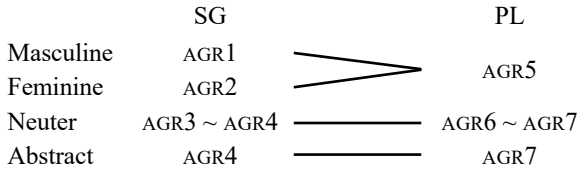|	SG		PL
Masculine	AGR1		
Feminine	AGR2		AGR5
Neuter	AGR3 ~ AGR4	——	AGR6 ~ AGR7
Abstract	AGR4	——	AGR7

Figure 5: Gender, number, and agreement classes in Laal

Note that abstract nouns cannot be said to be transnumeral, since (i) they are sometimes marked for number (e.g. *mɨ̄ɨw-āl/mììw-ùr* 'tradition' in (3d) and (3g) above), and (ii) they trigger the use of different pronominal forms in the singular and plural, even when invariable (e.g. *làà* 'folktale(s)', as summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Abstract agreement in the singular and plural

	Noun		Connective	Subject pronoun
SG	*mɨ̄ɨw-āl* 'tradition',	*làà* 'folktale'	*yí*	*àn*
PL	*mììw-ùr* 'traditions',	*làà* 'folktales'	*yí*	*uàn*

3 Morphology of gender and agreement

3.1 Gender morphology in the pronominal subsystem

Laal has a complex pronominal subsystem involving independent words (emphatic/independent pronouns), proclitics (subject pronouns), enclitics (dative, some possessive), and suffixes (object, some possessive). Subject and emphatic/independent pronouns are listed in Table 3 (person categories with gender distinctions are highlighted in grey in tables). As can be seen, the pronominal subsystem distinguishes three persons, with a systematic number distinction between singular and plural for all persons, and an exclusive vs. inclusive distinction in the first person plural.

Gender distinctions are attested with the first and third persons only. As seen in Fig. 2 above, the third person is characterized by a three-way masculine vs. feminine vs. non-human distinction in the singular, and a two-way distinction in the plural, where masculine and feminine are collapsed into one human category.[4]

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[4] The feminine vs. masculine distinction in the first person is attested only with subject and independent pronouns, and is likely an innovation, as clearly shown by (i) the difference in form between these two pronouns and the rest of the paradigm (they are the only two H-toned and

Table 3: Laal subject and independent pronouns

		Gender	Subject	Independent
SG	1	M	*já*	
		F	*jí*	
	2		*ò*	*uăy*
	3	M	*à*	*ăy*
		F	*ìn*	*ìní*
		NH	*àn*	*àní*
PL	1E		*ùrú*	
	1I		*ăŋ*	
	2		*ùn*	*ùnúŋ*
	3	H	*ì*	*ìrí*
		NH	*uàn*	*uàní*

The object and inalienable possessive suffix paradigms, shown in Table 4, are structured in the same way, with only one difference: there is no gender distinction in the first person singular. Two morphological series of object suffixes are attested. The N-series is default (it is the one employed with recently borrowed verbs, or foreign verbs used in code-switching), while the R-series is restricted to a limited number of verbs. This allomorphy is unpredictable. The third person object and inalienable possessive suffixes are illustrated in (4) below.[5]

(4)

		'show him, her…'	'catch him, her…'	'his, her… shoulder'
3SG	M	*ɓír-án*	*pír-ár*	*bàg-àr*
	F	*ɓýr-ùn*	*púr-ù*	*bòg-ò*
	NH	*ɓír-àn*	*pír-àr*	*bàg-àn*
3PL	H	*ɓír-nìrí ~ ɓír-nĭ*	*pír-nìrí ~ pír-rĭ*	*bɜ̀g-rí*
	NH	*ɓýr-àn*	*púr-àr*	*buàg-àn*

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consonant-initial subject and independent pronouns), (ii) the absence of gender distinctions in the first person singular in the other pronominal paradigms described below (object, possessive etc.), (iii) the absence of gender distinctions in the first person plural, and (iv) the absence of a difference between the subject and independent forms of the first person singular pronouns.[4] The resemblance of these two pronouns with the masculine and feminine singular determiner bases /ja/ and /ji/ described in §3.2 is striking, although it is unclear what the historical source of these two innovative pronouns is.

[5] Regular vowel harmony processes apply: the high vowel of the root raises the following mid vowel to [+high] (3F.SG), and a round vowel in the suffix rounds the root vowel (3NH.PL). Additionally, the diphthongized vowel /ua/ is reduced to /a/ in 3N.PL, by virtue of a general phonotactic rule simplifying the diphthongized low peripheral vowels /ia/ (< *ɛ) and /ua/ (<*ɔ) to /a/ in non-stem-initial position.

Table 4: Laal object and possessive suffixes

		Gender	Object		Possessive
			N-series	R-series	
SG	1		*-ə́n*	*-ə́r*	*-ə̀r*
	2		*-uán*	*-uá*	*-à*
	3	M	*-án*	*-ár*	*-àr*
		F	*-òn*	*-ò*	*-ò, -òg*
		NH	*-àn*	*-àr*	*-àn*
PL	1E		*-nùrú ~ -nŭ*	*-nùrú ~-rŭ*	*-rú*
	1I		*-năŋ*	*-năŋ ~ -răŋ*	*-ráŋ*
	2		*-nŭŋ*	*-nŭŋ, -rŭŋ*	*-rúŋ*
	3	H	*-nìrí ~ -nĭ*	*-nìrí ~ -rĭ*	*-rí*
		NH	*-uàn*	*-uàr*	*-uàn*

Finally, Laal has three independent pronouns expressing dative, inalienable possession, and alienable possession, which consist of a morphological base (/n-/, /n-ˋ/, and preposition /dẽ/ 'at' respectively) inflected for person, gender, and number with a specific set of suffixes, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5: Independent dative and possessives

		Gender	Suffixes	Dative	Inalienable possessive	*dẽ* 'at' & Alien. poss.
SG	1		*-ī*	*nī*	*nì*	*dẽē*
	2		*-ā*	*nā*	*nà*	*dāā*
	3	M	*-ār*	*nār*	*nàr*	*dāār*
		F	*-òg*		*nòg*	*dòòg*
		NH	*-àná*		*nàná*	*dààná*
PL	1E		*-ùrú ~ -ŭ*		*nùrú ~ nŭ*	*dòòró*
	1I		*-ăŋ*		*năŋ*	*dăŋ*
	2		*-ŭŋ*		*nŭŋ*	*dŏŋ*
	3	H	*-ìrí ~ -ĭ*		*nìrí ~ nĭ*	*dèèrí*
		NH	*-uàná*		*nuàná*	*duààná*

Note that inalienable possessive suffixes and /n-ˋ/ inalienable possessive pronouns are in arbitrary complementary distribution: inalienable possession is expressed with possessive suffixes with about 60 nouns only (mostly body parts and kinship terms, e.g. /bòg-ò/ 'her shoulder' in (4) above), with /n-ˋ/ pronouns in all other cases, e.g. /bə̄rī nùg/ 'her back' (cf. Boyeldieu 1982a: 29–32, 1987). Examples (5) and (6) illustrate the dative and alienable possessive pronouns. The latter, a

grammaticalization of the inflected preposition /dɛ̃/ 'at', is used in a connective construction (cf. §2.3.1).

(5)   *ì*   *huár*   *nār*   *mɨ́*[6]   *ná-ár*   *mɨ́*   *pāy*
     3H.PL.S   send   DAT:3M.SG   (say)that   mother-3M.SG   EVID   be.sick
     'They sent him$_i$ [a messenger who said] that his$_i$ mother is sick.'(120407-OO1:19)

(6)   *nyàw*   *má*   *dòòg/dɛ̀ɛ̀rí*
     house(N)   CON.N.SG   POSS:3F.SG/3H.PL
     'his/their (H) house'

3.2 Gender morphology in the functional word subsystem

The functional word subsystem includes seven markers belonging to different grammatical categories and agreeing in gender and number with the noun they determine, modify, or are coreferential with. These are the connective particle (CON) used for noun modification, the indefinite determiner (INDF1), the partitive indefinite determiner and pronoun (INDF2, 'one of X'), the ad/pronominal demonstrative (DEM1) and predicative demonstrative (DEM2), and the focus (FOC) and topic (TOP) markers. These elements are all derived from the combination of five morphological bases /ja ji ma ya yi/ and specific suprasegmental and/or segmental suffixes. As we saw in (2) above, these five bases are associated with different agreement classes defined by specific gender/number associations. This is summarized in Table 6. The syntax of these markers will be described in §3.3. The full paradigms for the seven agreeing functional words are shown in Table 7.

Table 6: Semantics and agreement classes in the functional word subsystem

	Semantics	Agreement class
/ja/	Masculine singular	AGR1
/ji/	Feminine singular	AGR2
/ma/	Neuter singular	AGR3
/ya/	Neuter plural	AGR6
/yi/	Non-human singular	AGR3, AGR4
	All plural	AGR5, AGR6, AGR7

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[6] The quotative marker *mɨ́* '(say) introducing quotes/reported speech is homophonous with the quotative evidential *mɨ́* (EVID) used at the beginning of the verbal domain within the quote. These are however two different markers. They are accordingly glossed differently. (cf. Lionnet 2017).

Table 7: Gender-sensitive functional words in Laal

	CON[7]	FOC	INDF	INDF2	TOP	DEM1	DEM2
	H	L	L-n	HL-nan	M[rd]-ŋ	HM[rd]-ŋV$_{copy}$	LH[rd]-ŋV$_{copy}$
/ja/	*já*	*jà*	*jàn*	*jánàn*	*juāŋ*	*juáŋā*	*juàŋá*
/ji/	*jí*	*jì*	*jìn*	*jínàn*	*jūŋ*	*júŋū*	*jùŋú*
/ma/	*má*	*mà*	*màn*	*mánàn*	*muāŋ*	*muáŋā*	*muàŋá*
/ya/	*yá*	*yà*	*yàn*	*yánàn*	*(*yuāŋ)*	*yuáŋā*	*yuàŋá*
/yi/	*yí*	*yì*	*yìn*	*yínàn*	*(*yūŋ)*	*yúŋū*	*yùŋú*

Note that the /ya/ and /yi/ forms of the topic marker are unattested (cf. §3.3.4). They might have been historically attested as *yuāŋ and *yūŋ respectively.

3.3 Noun phrase structure and gender agreement

A sketch of the Laal noun phrase structure is given in Table 8, slightly simplified for the sake of clarity and concision.[8] Functional words that agree with the noun are highlighted (see paradigms in Table 7 above), and agreement is shown with subscript indices. As can be seen, the noun is always the first element of the noun phrase. Modifiers immediately follow the noun (either a genitive modifier or a connective construction). Numerals follow modifiers, and are followed by demonstratives, definite/indefinite determiners, and topic and focus markers, in that order.

Table 8: Noun phrase structure and gender agreement

NOUN$_i$	Modifier		Numeral	Dem.	Det.	Inf. Str.
	- Connective construction:			DEM1$_i$	- INDF1$_i$	- FOC$_i$
	CON$_i$ + modifier				- INDF2$_i$	- TOP$_i$
	(incl. CON$_i$ + predicative DEM2$_{(i)}$)				- DEF	- TOP (non-
	- Genitive					gendered)

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[7] The connective marker also has a floating H tone allomorph, realized on the last mora of the immediately preceding word. It is inaudible when following a mora already carrying a H tone. This allomorph is systematically transcribed with an apostrophe: /nyăw + H/ 'house + CON' = [nyăw], transcribed *nyăw'*, /muăŋ + H/ 'people + CON' = [muăŋ], transcribed *muăŋ'*.

[8] In particular: (i) a few invariable elements are ignored, (ii) not all elements are compatible with one another, and (iii) some may appear in a different order under specific conditions.

3.3.1 Noun modification

I will focus exclusively on cases of modification which trigger gender agreement. Other cases are left aside, e.g. modification by a numeral, or a genitive construction (cf. Lionnet 2015).

Most nominal modifiers are introduced by a connective particle agreeing in gender and number with the head noun (cf. Table 7). This connective construction is used for noun modification by a variety of morphosyntactic categories, as illustrated in examples (7) through (11). Throughout this section, nouns triggering gender agreement are underlined, and agreement is shown with subscript indices.

(7)   Noun or noun phrase modifier[9]
  a. $\underline{n\bar{u}n\bar{u}}_i$ *[jí$_i$*   *lá]*
      woman   CON.F.SG   Gori
      'a woman from Gori'
  b. $\underline{\textit{ɓiāāg}}_i$ *[má$_i$*   *nɘ̀m*   *já*   *láá]*
      dog(N)   CON.N.SG   my.brother(M.SG)   CON.M.SG   be.little
      'my younger brother's dog'

(8)   (Ordinal) numeral modifier[10]
     $\underline{n\bar{o}}_i$ *[já$_i$*   *īsī*   *nìrí]*
     person(H)   CON.M.SG   two   POSS:3H.PL
     'the second man (among them)'[11]

(9)   Adverbial modifier
     $\underline{\textit{sùwá}}_i$ *bàn*   *[yí$_i$*   *dɑ̀ɲá*   *gɨ̀*   *mɘ̄ɘ̄r]*
     Arab(H)   EMPH   CON.PL   there   in   river
     'the Arabs who are over there [on the island] in the river' (121108-KX3:56)

(10)   Modifying prepositional phrase
     $\underline{\textit{wùm-àny}}_i$ *nùg*   *[yí$_i$*   *kɨ́*   *bɘ̄rī*   *nùg]*
     sibling-PL(H)   POSS:3F.SG   CON.PL   at   back   POSS:3F.SG
     'her younger sisters' (lit. her sisters who are behind her) (140310-KN2:46)

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[9] For the semantic difference between the connective and genitive constructions, cf. Boyeldieu (1982a: 1–98, 1987).

[10] There is no morphological difference between cardinal and ordinal numerals: a numeral is interpreted as ordinal when used with a possessive pronoun in a connective construction, as in (9).

[11] For the agreement triggered by *nō* 'person', see §4.1.

(11) Relative clause

   a. *nāārā̄ᵢ*   *[já́ᵢ*   *ò*   *kú*   *èèn]*
       man(M)   CON.M.SG   2SG.S   see   yesterday
       'the man that you saw yesterday'

   b. *yɔ̄rᵢ*   *[yíᵢ*   *já́*   *ɨ́ny*   *dîààn]*
       place(A)   CON.NH.SG   1M.SG.S   stay   there
       'the place where I live' (lit. the place which I live there)

   c. *ɓiāāgᵢ*   *[máᵢ*   *láá]*
       dog(N)   CON.N.SG   be.small
       'a small dog' (lit. a dog which is small)

   d. *ǎyᵢ*   *[já́ᵢ*   *juàŋáᵢ]*   *mɨ́*   *nyíní...*
       3M.SG.IND   CON.M.SG   DEM2.M.SG   EVID   come
       '[When] this one here came...' (121111-AK3:152)

Note that there are no adjectives in Laal: "property" words (Haspelmath 2012) belong to the verb category. They must thus be used in a relative/connective construction when modifying a noun, as in (11b). Similarly, the predicative demonstrative (DEM2), best translated as 'be here, be this one', must be used in a connective/relative construction when modifying a noun, with a meaning very close to English 'this X right here.' This is illustrated in (12d) above, where the speaker addresses the translator during an interview, and refers to the interviewer as *ǎy já juàŋá* 'he who is right here.' Headless connective constructions, illustrated in (12), are attested and frequent (see also (26a) and (27)).

(12) *[já́*   *múnúŋ*   *néér]*   *lē*   *kàw*   *Kànà Gūn*
       CON.M.SG   engender   my.mother   CONTR   be.called   (name)
       'As for [the man] who fathered my mother, his name was Kana Gun.'
       (120405-AK3(4):14)

A noun can be modified by several successive connective constructions, all of which are introduced by the same form of the connective agreeing with the head noun:[12]

(13) *nō̄ᵢ*   *[já́ᵢ*   *Táná]*   *[já́ᵢ*   *sá*   *àmál]*   *juāŋᵢ...*
       person(H)   CON.M.SG   (name)   CON.M.SG   take   chieftainship   TOP.M.SG
       'As for the man from the Tana clan who took the chieftainship...' (170703-KN2:548)

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[12] For an explanation of the masculine agreement triggered by the noun *nō* 'person', see §4.1.

3.3.2 Demonstratives

Laal has two gender-sensitive demonstratives. Both are *in-praesentia,* exophoric demonstratives, with the same semantics (in particular there is no distance- or person-based contrast); they only differ in terms of word class and usage. The first one, DEM1, is used both adnominally (14a) and as a substitute of the noun (14b). The second one, DEM2, is predicative, and illustrated in (12d) above.

(14)a. <u>bàmsà$_i$</u>   yúŋū$_i$ kán
   float(N)$_i$ DEM1.PL   DEF
   'These floats' (speaker pointing at multiple floats) (121110-KG1:30)

 b. *juáŋā$_i$*   *mál*   *páw-àr$_i$*   ‖
   DEM1.M.SG   shoot   fellow-3.M.SG.POSS
   juáŋā$_i$ *kə́w*   *mál*   *páw-àr$_i$*
   DEM1.M.SG   too   shoot   fellow-3.M.SG.POSS
   'This one shoots at his opponent, and this one also shoots at his opponent.'
   (pointing to the imagined positions of the warriors) (121029-NK2(3):134)

3.3.3 Determiners

Determiners in Laal are NP-final. Laal has an invariable definite determiner *kán*[13], illustrated in (3) above, and two indefinite determiners which agree in gender and number with the noun they determine: a simple indefinite determiner (INDF1), and a partitive indefinite determiner ('a certain X out of a group of Xs'; INDF2), whose paradigms are shown in Table 7 above. These are illustrated in (15) and (16) respectively. Note that INDF2 may also be used pronominally, as shown in (16), if the parenthesized noun *nō* 'person' is ignored.

(15) <u>nyuàál$_i$</u> *màn$_i$* *dìààn*[14] *kàw* *jíndà*
   grass(N) INDF1.N.SG (be)there be.called grass.sp
   'There is a grass called *jíndà*.' (121110-KG1:61)

(16) <u>*(nō$_i$)*</u> *jánàn$_i$* *(nìrí)* *nyíní* *cuàrá*
   person(H) INDF2.M.SG POSS:3H.PL come search-2SG.O
   'One (person) (of them) came looking for you.'

---

[13] This marker is described as a definite determiner here for the sake of simplicity. Its functions, which go beyond marking definiteness, are outside the scope of this paper.
[14] Locative predication is non-verbal in Laal.

3.3.4 Topic and focus

The topic and focus markers are always the last elements in the noun phrase. The topic marker is gender-sensitive (cf. Table 7): it agrees with the head noun of the topicalized NP, as shown in (17), where the topicalized NP is in square brackets.

(17) [bə̀ə̀wə̀r_i   já_i   dēē   já_i   múnúŋ   bə̀ə̀r]   juāŋ_i
      my.gfather(M) CON.M.SG POSS:1SG CON.M.SG   engender my.father TOP.M.SG
      ná-ár_i   jí   dã̄ār_i   í   jégrú
      mother-3M.SG.POSS   CON.F.SG POSS:3M.SG IDEN   Jegru
      'As for my paternal grandfather, his mother was [from the] Jegru [clan]' (lit. my grandfather who fathered my father…) (120405-AK3(2):56)

As mentioned in §3.2 above, the /ya/ and /yi/ forms of the topic marker are unattested in contemporary Laal. For nouns triggering the use of such forms, the only possibility for topicalization is the use of the gender-neutral topic marker *nūŋ* (which can be used in lieu of the gender-sensitive topic marker with the same function). This is illustrated in (18) with the abstract noun *yə̀w* 'language', with which the use of invariable *nūŋ* is the only option (agreement is shown in parentheses; see also (30)).

(18) [yə̀w_i   dìmíl   kán]   nūŋ_(i)   ò   mí   íny
      language(A)   Barma   DEF   TOP   2SG.S   EVID   stay
      də̄́   dāní   ò   mí   nduáy-àn_i
      where   then   2SG.S   EVID   learn-NH.SG
      '[He asked:] The Barma language, where did you learn it? (120405-AK3(4):73)

The focus marker (see full paradigm in Table 7) agrees in gender and number with the element being focused. This element may be a noun or noun phrase, as in (19) –or an entire clause, which triggers abstract agreement, as we will see in §4.2.

(19) yí   dãŋ   [wūrā_i]   yì_i   mí   tēé   kí   ɓēē
      CON.NH.SG   ANAPH   man:PL(H)   FOC.PL   EVID   IPFV   do   or
      [yīnān_j]   yì_j   mí   tēé   kí
      woman:PL(H)   FOC.PL   EVID   IPFV   do
      '[she asked:] that [tradition you mentioned], was it men who practiced it, or was it women who practiced it?' (120405-AK3(1):152)

3.4 Diachronic hypothesis

One of the most notable features of the Laal gender system is the discrepancy between the pronominal and functional word subsystems, described in §2 above. The pronominal subsystem is simpler, and most likely conservative —the object and possessive suffixes in particular can be considered relatively old, given their status as affixes and the high level of lexicalized suppletion that characterizes them. I hypothesize that the pronominal subsystem represents the former Laal gender system, i.e. a sex-based, three-gender system distinguishing feminine (human females), masculine (human males), and non-human (everything else). The abstract gender, which is formally absent from the pronominal subsystem, not characterized by a specific form in the functional word system (it uses the syncretic /yi/ form), and in general only minimally different from the non-human neuter gender, as we saw, can be argued to be a recent innovation, as illustrated in Fig. 6.
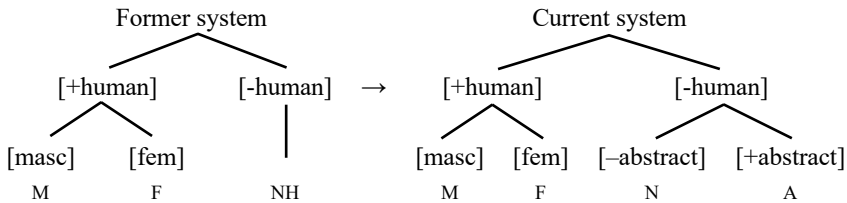
```
        Former system                        Current system
      _____|_____            _____|_____
     |                       |           |                       |
 [+human]              [-human]   →   [+human]              [-human]
   __|__                   |            __|__                 __|__
  |     |                  |           |     |               |     |
[masc] [fem]          [-human]      [masc] [fem]      [–abstract] [+abstract]
  M      F                NH           M      F             N            A
```

Figure 6: Historical semantic evolution of the Laal gender system

The former system must have been characterized by a conflation of masculine and feminine into a common human gender in the plural, like the current system, since there is no trace anywhere in contemporary Laal of a masculine/feminine distinction in the plural. This defines a total of five agreement classes, which used to correspond to the five third person pronominal forms, in a one-to-one correspondence with the five determiner bases /ja ji ma yi ya/. The evolution from this system to the current system is shown in Table 9, with the determiner bases and subject pronouns.

Two innovations occurred in the functional word subsystem. (i) The non-human gender category was split into a neuter/non-abstract gender (marked by the historical non-human markers /ma/ and /ya/) and an abstract gender, for which the already syncretic (masculine + feminine) /yi/ form was recruited. (ii) This form was also expanded to mark the neuter singular and plural categories, in (quasi-)free variation with /ma/ and /ya/ respectively (Table 9-b). The masculine and feminine genders are

the only ones that have resisted the expansion of the /yi/ form. This is not surprising, given the cross-linguistic salience of the human semantic category.[15]

Table 9: Historical evolution of Laal agreement classes

a. Former system

	SG		PL	
M	*ja* —— *à*		*yi* —— *ì*	
F	*ji* —— *ìn*			
N	*ma* —— *àn*		*ya* —— *uàn*	

→

b. Current system

	SG		PL	
M	*ja* —— *à*		*yi* —— *ì*	
F	*ji* —— *ìn*			
A	*yi* ⟩ *àn*		*yi* ⟩ *uàn*	
N	*ma ~ yi*		*ya ~ yi*	

The rationale behind the choice of /ma/ or /ya/ vs. /yi/ to make neuter (non-abstract) agreement is unclear. It seems that /yi/ is gaining ground and slowly replacing the other two markers, but not at the same pace for all the functional words listed in Table 7 above. The connective seems to be particularly impacted: the neuter forms *má* and *yá* are rather rare in natural speech, although they are still frequently given in elicitation. This is especially true of plural *yá*, extremely rare in natural speech, and used mostly by older people, as already noted by Boyeldieu (1982a: 8-10). This erosion of the neuter plural forms also affects the pronominal subsystem: third person neuter plural pronouns are often replaced with the neuter singular forms in natural speech, although speakers tend to correct themselves and give the neuter plural as "more correct" in elicitation.

Some functional words, however, do not seem to allow the /yi/ form to replace the neuter singular /ma/ form. For example, the neuter form of the demonstrative is always the /ma/ form *muáŋā*, never the /yi/ form *yúŋū*. The latter is thus always either a marker of abstract singular, or of general plural.

Furthermore, the replacement of /ma/ with /yi/ is not attested in all contexts. For instance, the connective *má* is still used to the exclusion of *yí* in headless connective constructions if the understood head is a non-human, concrete object or being (i.e. neuter) (cf. (28)).

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[15] If the /yi/ form were to definitively replace the /ma/ and /ya/ forms, the system would be much simplified: the abstractness distinction in the [-human] category would disappear, bringing the gender system back to a three-way masculine vs. feminine vs. non-human/neuter system, and there would be only three determiner forms left: masculine singular /ja/, feminine singular /ji/, and /yi/ for human (masculine/feminine) plural, and neuter singular and plural.

4 The semantics of gender in Laal

4.1 [+human] gender categories

The examples in (20) below, which consist in nouns modified by a connective/relative clause, show that the masculine vs. feminine distinction exists only for nouns with human reference. As seen in (20d-e), nouns referring to female and male animals, including for such high-animacy animals as dogs, are grammatically neutral.

(20)a. <u>nīīnī̄_j</u>   jí_i   gūdā
      woman(F)   CON.F.SG   be.big
      'big woman (lit. woman that is big)'

b.   <u>nāārā̄_j</u>   já_i   gūdā
      man(M)   CON.M.SG   be.big
      'big man'

c.   <u>ɓiāāg_j</u>   má_i   gūdā
      dog(N)   CON.N.SG   be.big
      'big dog'

d.   <u>ɓiāāg_j</u>   má_i/*jí_i   nīīnī   má_i/*jí_i   gūdā
      dog(N)   CON.N.SG/*…F.SG   woman(F)   CON.N.SG/*…F.SG   be.big
      'big female dog'

e.   <u>ɓiāāg_j</u>   má_i/*já_i   nāārā   má_i/*já_i   gūdā
      dog(N)   CON.N.SG/*…M.SG   man(M)   CON.N.SG/*…M.SG   be.big
      'big male dog'

The use of the feminine and masculine forms for the second connective in (20d-e) is only ungrammatical if this connective is meant to agree in gender with *ɓiāāg* 'dog', i.e. if the connective/relative clause 'which is big' is meant to modify 'dog'. The feminine or masculine forms are grammatical if they are understood as modifying the nouns *nīīnī* 'woman' or *nāārā* 'man' respectively, as shown in (21).[16]

(21)   *[ɓiāāg_j   má_i   [nīīnī̄_j   jí_j   gūdā]]*
      dog(N)   CON.N.SG   woman(F)   CON.F.SG   be.big
      'dog of a/the big woman'

---

[16] Nouns referring to non-human beings may trigger agreement in the masculine or feminine when personified, as is frequent in folktales.

Two words can be characterized as [+human] and underspecified for sex-based gender in the singular: e.g. *nō* 'person:SG' and *jè* 'who'. In such cases, the agreement depends on the sex of the actual referent, when known, as shown in (22).

(22)   *bà-à*   *í*   <u>*nō*</u>ⱼ   *já*ᵢ   *dɔ̃*
        father-2SG.POSS   IDEN   person   CON.M.SG   where

        wò   *náá*   *í*   <u>*nō*</u>ⱼ   *jí*ⱼ   *dɔ̃*
        and   mother-2SG.POSS   IDEN   person   CON.F.SG   where

        'Where was your father from, and where was your mother from?' (lit. your father/mother is a person from where?) (170703-KN2:5-006)

When the sex of the referent is unknown, as in most cases for *jè* 'who', the default agreement seems to be masculine, as in (23).

(23)   <u>*jè*</u>ᵢ   *jà*ᵢ   *kuáná*
       who   FOC.M.SG   give:2SG.O
       'who (masc.) is it that gave [it] to you? (121114-FD1:160)

The use of the [-human] neuter or abstract genders is not an option in such case, i.e. **nō má/yí dɔ̃* and **jè mà/yì kuáná* are ungrammatical.

    Proper names regularly trigger masculine or feminine agreement depending on the sex of their referent, as shown in (24).

(24)a.   *wò*   <u>*Dààr Gūn*</u>ⱼ   *juāŋ*ᵢ   *bà-àr*ᵢ   *kàw*   *yɔ̃*
        and   name(M)   TOP.M.SG   father-3M.SG.POSS   be.called   what
        'And Daar Gun, what was his father's name?' (121114-FD1:49)

    b.   *wò*   <u>*Fálmàtà*</u>ᵢ   *jūŋ*ᵢ   *hásà*   *ìn*ᵢ   *dɔ̃*
        and   name(F)   TOP.F.SG   now   3F.SG.S   where
        'And Falmata, where is she now?' (121114-FD1:140)

4.2 [-human] gender categories

As we saw in §2 and §3.4, the formal contrast between neuter and abstract is minimal, and most probably a recent development in the language. Given the partial overlap between the specifically neuter /ma ya/ forms and the syncretic /yi/ form of the functional words, it is sometimes difficult to identify the gender of a noun in a natural context of use. The only way to determine whether a noun is neuter or abstract is to establish that it triggers exclusive *yi*-agreement, and never *ma*/*ya*-agreement, which

can be done only through careful elicitation. After testing a selected set of nouns, it became clear that only nouns with abstract reference behaved in this way. A list of abstract nouns (underlined) is given in (25) for illustration.

(25)a. <u>jòó_i-nǔŋ'</u>   dŏŋ   yí_i/*má_i   Járú
       origin(A)-2PL.POSS:CON   POSS:2PL   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   (name)
       'your lineage, the Jaru' (120405-AK3(2):5)

   b. í   <u>mē_i</u>   bàn   yí_i/*má_i   rāāg (...)   à
       IDEN   death(A)   EMPH   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   God   Q
       'Is it God's (i.e. natural) death [that killed them]?' (120405-AK3(2):34)

   c. <u>làà_i</u>   yí_i/*yá_i [...]   ò   mɨ́   sá   nìrí   nūŋ
       tale(A)   CON.PL/*…N.PL   2SG.S   EVID   take   DAT:M/F.PL   TOP
       'the folktales that you told them [the translator is here referring to a series of tales told the day before by the interviewee]'(120405-AK3(3):1)

   d. <u>wógàd_i</u>   yí_i/*má_i   bàl-à   mé   nūŋ…
       time(A)   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   husband-2SG.POSS   die   TOP
       'When your husband died, …' (120405-AK3(4):56)

   e. <u>bē_i</u>   bàn   yí_i/*má_i   cáá
       war(A)   EMPH   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   long.ago
       'the very war [that took place] a long time ago' (120405-AK3(5):13)

   f. <u>dūrār_i</u>   yí_i/*má_i   còrò   gúrùs   dìààn
       work/use(A)   CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   search:GER   money   (be)there
       'There is a pecuniary use. (talking about a tree whose many products can be sold and generate income) (121125-AK1:28)

   g. <u>yɔ̄r_i</u>   yí_i/*má_i   ì   cìnyì   dìààn   nūŋ…
       place(A) CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG 3H.PL.S   leave.PL   there   TOP
       'The place that they came from, …' (170630-KD1:9)

Note that the abstract gender, like every other gender category in Laal, is strictly semantically determined, and does not depend on any lexical or morphological property of the noun. For example, deverbal nouns (suffix /-Vl/, partly irregular and frozen) trigger abstract agreement most of the time because in most cases they refer to abstract notions, e.g. *sènyél* 'battle' (< *sěny* 'to fight') in (37a). But some deverbal nouns refer to concrete objects or beings, in which case they trigger the agreement dictated by their semantics, e.g. neuter for *pàlàl* 'harpoon' (< *pál* 'to fish') in (26b).

(26)a. yí   dāŋ   í   <u>sènyél_i</u>   yí_i/*má_i   Ráábè   kán
       CON.NH.SG   ANAPH   IDEN   battle(A)   CON.NH.SG/*N   (name)   DEF
       'That is [the story of] the battle against Rabah.' (120405-AK3(5):53)

19

b. _pàlàlᵢ_   _máᵢ/yíᵢ_   _dē̃ē_
   harpoon.sp(N)   CON.N.SG/…NH.SG   POSS:1SG
   'my harpoon'

The abstract form of the connective is used in the headless connective construction _yí dã̄ŋ_, an anaphoric expression referring to the preceding statement, very frequent in discourse, as seen in (19) and (26a) above.

   Any time the understood head of a headless connective construction is semantically [-human, +abstract], the connective is obligatorily _yí_, and never neuter _má_ as in (27). In contrast, if the understood head is a concrete object or being, the connective is in the neuter from (28). This is one of the cases where the /ma/ form is used to the exclusion of the /yi/ form for neuter singular agreement (cf. §3.4).

(27) [yí/*má   bə̀ə̀w-ə̀r   ká-àn]   yì/*mà   já   ɓĩ̄lā
      CON.NH.SG/*…N.SG   gfather-1SG.POSS   do-3N/A.SG.O   FOC.NH.SG   1M.SG.S   speak
      'It is what my grand-father used to do that I [will] talk about.' (120331-DK1:48)

(28) ò   yìrà   má/*yí   à   íny   dîàǹ   à
      2SG.S   know   CON.N.SG/*…NH.SG   3M.SG.S   stay   there   Q
      '[Of these three houses,] do you know the one he lives in?'

Finally, abstract agreement is also triggered by full finite clauses when focalized or topicalized. Clause focalization is frequent in alternative questions, illustrated in (29).

(29) [ì   nyúnì sêw]ᵢ   yì/*màᵢ   ɓē̄ē   ì   míwì
      3H.PL.S   go   abroad   FOC.NH.SG/…N.SG   or   3H.PL.S   die
      'Did they go abroad, or did they die?' (120405-AK3(1):28)

Finite clause topicalization is used in paratactic constructions, usually conveying temporal (as in (30)), causal, or conditional semantics (the topic marker _nū̄ŋ_ is used here, for lack of dedicated /yi/ and /ya/ forms of the topic marker, cf. Table 7).

(30) wò   ìrí || [ì   nyíní]ᵢ   nū̄ŋᵢ/*muāŋᵢ || í   béébé
      and   3H.PL.IND   3H.PL.S   come   TOP/*TOP.N.SG   IDEN   blacksmith:PL
      'And them (the Jegru clan), [when] they arrived, they were Blacksmiths.' (170703-KN2:306)

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, Laal has a strictly semantic, partly sex-based gender system, making use of a primary distinction between human and non-human, and secondary distinctions within each of these two categories: masculine vs. feminine within the human category, and abstract vs. neuter within the non-human one. Gender is covert on nouns, and visible only through agreement on pronouns and functional words. The morphology of gender agreement and the structure of agreement classes is complex, most notably because of a discrepancy between the pronominal and functional word subsystems. This discrepancy is likely the result of two historical changes in the functional word subsystem: (i) the development of a neuter vs. abstract contrast within the non-human category (only minimally distinguished, but clearly established), and (ii) the extension of the historical marker of the human plural agreement class /yi/ to all agreement classes except masculine and feminine singular, in quasi-free variation with the now neuter-marking /ma/ and /ya/ markers. The current system is thus likely to have derived from a simpler, strictly sex-based system distinguishing three genders (human masculine vs. human feminine vs. non-human) and five agreement classes (feminine vs. masculine vs. non-human in the singular, human vs. non-human in the plural), and characterized by a one-to-one correspondence with five morphological markers in both subsystems.

Abbreviations

‖	Intonational break	GER	Gerund
1	First person	H	Human
2	Second person	IDEN	Identificational predicator
3	Third person	IND	Independent
A	Abstract	INDF	Indefinite
ANAPH	Anaphoric	IPFV	Imperfective
CON	Connective	M	Masculine
CONTR	Contrastive topic	N	Neuter
DAT	Dative	NH	Non-human
DEF	Definite	O	Object
DEM	Demonstrative	PL	Plural
EMPH	Emphatic	POSS	Possessive
EVID	Quotative Evidential	SG	Singular
F	Feminine	S	Subject
FOC	Focus	TOP	Topic

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