

The third gender of Old Italian*

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0. Introduction

Romance languages generally display a binary gender contrast (masculine vs. feminine), a fact which led many scholars to project back this situation onto Proto-Romance, thus assuming that a reduction of the original three-gender system of Latin had already occurred by that stage via the demise of the neuter.

In this paper, we will show that Old Italian (i.e. Old Tuscan)¹ had a three-gender system within which the neuter still qualified as a grammatical gender in its own right. To substantiate this claim, we will adduce evidence showing a) that there were three distinct sets of controllers, that each selected a separate agreement pattern; b) that to each one of those three controller sets, including the neuter, nouns were assigned which belonged to different productive inflectional classes; and c) that the neuter still selected at least one dedicated agreement formative – i.e., a formative not syncretic with either masculine or feminine inflections – thereby still displaying traces of its status as a target gender as it was in Latin.

These properties of the gender system of Old Italian, we contend, have been poorly understood so far, clouded by the widely held assumption that the change from three to two genders occurred already in Proto-Romance / Late Latin. The Old Italian facts, as we will show, are incompatible with this assumption and cumulate with evidence from other Romance branches to substantiate the reconstruction of an intermediate stage between the fully fledged Latin three-gender system and the modern Italian binary system.

The paper is organized as follows: in § 1, we introduce some basics for the analysis of gender systems, illustrating them with examples from Romanian, which is the most conservative among the modern standard Romance languages in this respect and thus proves instrumental for the introduction of the diachronic issue concerning the intermediate steps in the development from the Latin to the modern Romance gender system. In § 2, we shall briefly address contemporary Italian, to then move on to consider Old Italian, in § 3. This section is bipartite: in § 3.1, we enumerate the inflectional classes that were associated with the neuter gender in Old Italian, showing that some of them were productive throughout the Middle Ages, whereas, in § 3.2, we discuss the remnants of dedicated neuter agreement formatives that can still be observed in medieval Florentine (or, in other words, residues of the third target gender, a notion introduced in § 1), and compare them with their precursors in Late Latin texts from Tuscany. § 4 finally deals with the comparative Romance picture, briefly addressing varieties other than Old Florentine, to show that the persistence of dedicated neuter agreement was more robust and lasted longer in those systems.

While the main objective of the present research is language-specific, consisting in a novel description of the gender system of Old Italian, we argue in the conclusion (§ 5) that our investigation has broader methodological implications.

¹ The label ‘Old Italian’ refers, by a well-established convention reflected, for instance, in the title of the recent reference grammar by Salvi & Renzi (2010), to the Tuscan dialects – Florentine, in the first place – as documented in the late Middle Ages. While the earliest Florentine text dates back to 1211 (see Castellani 1958: 19-95) and the earliest vulgar document from Tuscany – the so called *Conto Navale Pisano* (see Baldelli 1973: 5-33, Castellani 1976: 123-148) – to the early 12th century, the rise of Florentine to the status of a shared standard language for the entire Italian peninsula is a later phenomenon, which was accomplished between the 15th and the early 16th centuries for formal usage, and only during the 20th century, after the political unification of the country, for everyday spoken use. Thus, for the medieval period focused on here, Old Florentine – also called, retrospectively, Old Italian since it is formally the ancestor of the modern standard language – is a daughter language to Latin on a par with, say, Old Neapolitan, Old Milanese, Old Venetian, etc.

1. Analyzing gender

In order to pave the way for our discussion of Old Italian, we first have to introduce minimal analytical tools, starting with the definition of gender:

- (1) “Genders are classes of nouns reflected in the behavior of associated words” (Hockett 1958: 231)

Another notion which is important for our present purposes is Corbett’s distinction (1991: 151) between controller and target gender:²

- (2) “We should ... differentiate controller genders, the genders into which nouns are divided, from target genders, the genders which are marked on adjectives, verbs and so on.”

This distinction is illustrated by Romanian, the only modern Romance standard language for which most current analyses, including Corbett’s (1991: 151), agree on assuming a three-gender system. Consider the data in (3), which illustrate gender agreement on both definite articles and (first class) adjectives:

	singular	plural	
(3)			
a.	<i>student-ul e bun</i> “the student is good”	<i>studenti-i sunt bun-i</i> “the students are good”	masculine
b.	<i>vin-ul e bun</i> “the wine is good”	<i>vinuri-le sunt bun-e</i> “the wines are good”	neuter
c.	<i>băutur-a e bun-ă</i> “the drink is good”	<i>băuturi-le sunt bun-e</i> “the drinks are good”	feminine

Although articles and adjectives only display two distinct sets of forms, one for the masculine (-*ul/-i*) vs. one for the feminine (-*a/-le*), three different agreement patterns emerge. These identify three distinct sets of nouns which satisfy the definition of gender in (1). The class exemplified in (3) by *vin* “wine” displays gender agreement like the masculine nouns in the singular and like the feminine nouns in the plural — a combination of agreement forms which differs from those used for masculine and feminine. Thus, by the definitions (1)-(2), the Romanian neuter qualifies as a third controller gender, also defined more traditionally as a *genus alternans* (or ‘alternating gender’), given the alternating syncretisms in singular vs. plural highlighted in (3). Its status as a full-blown gender is confirmed by the fact that the same gender agreement pattern exemplified by *vinul* is selected by a large number of nouns which belong to several inflectional classes, some of which are productive in contemporary Romanian. It can be added that, unlike in other Indo-European languages such as German, the Romanian neuter is semantically coherent as it includes exclusively nouns denoting inanimate entities (apart from class-denoting terms such as *animal*).³

² In the following, we will stick to these terms, which have both forerunners (Hockett’s 1958: 230 selective vs. inflectional gender) and successors (Corbett’s 2011: 459-460 non-autonomous vs. autonomous gender), since they are better anchored in current studies in morphological theory.

³ A three-gender analysis of Romanian is maintained by, e.g., Graur (1928); Bonfante (1964, 1977); Jakobson (1971: 187-189); Aikhenvald (2000: 45-46); Matasović (2004: 51-52); Igartua (2006: 60-61); Acquaviva (2008: 135-140). Two-gender analyses have also been proposed by, e.g., Hall (1968) and some others (cf. §5).

Given a three-gender analysis of Romanian, a further issue that arises is that of the diachronic relationship between the Latin and Romanian gender systems. While both languages have three genders, this, of course, does not imply that nothing has changed, since only in Latin did there occur three distinct sets of gender agreement targets, which reduced to two in Romanian. Thus, while Latin had three target genders, Romanian has (only) maintained three distinct controller genders.

This can be interpreted as an intermediate stage along the path which led to the binary gender contrasts otherwise observed in the modern Romance languages. As we will see, our analysis of Old Italian – to which we turn now – lends comparative support to this diachronic reconstruction.

2. Italian

Let us move on to analyzing the Italian facts. Referring back to the properties (a) to (c) listed in § 0, we can observe that in Latin they were all satisfied, including, crucially, (c), since neuter agreement was signalled in several paradigm cells by dedicated inflections on determiners, adjectives, participles etc. ('associated words', by the definition in (1)). Instead, in modern Italian, not only (c) but also (b) – viz. the existence of productive noun inflectional classes associated with the neuter – have long been lost. As for (a) – viz. the occurrence of three distinct sets of controllers selecting each a separate agreement pattern – the picture is not so clear-cut. In fact, some scholars (e.g., Merlo 1952; Bonfante 1961, 1964, 1977) have maintained that Italian too, like Romanian, does preserve a neuter gender, based on the three agreement patterns observed in (4):

	singular	plural	
(4)			
a.	<i>il naso è lung-o</i> “the nose is long”	<i>i nasi sono lung-h-i</i> “the noses are long”	masculine
b.	<i>il braccio è lung-o</i> “the arm is long”	<i>le braccia sono lung-h-e</i> “the arms are long”	?
c.	<i>la gamba è lung-a</i> “the leg is long”	<i>le gambe sono lung-h-e</i> “the legs are long”	feminine

As in (3), gender agreement is signalled by the determiner forms and the inflections of the first class adjective *lungo*. Formally, (4) is identical to (3). In particular, nouns like *il braccio / le braccia* (4b), behave like Romanian neuters such as *vinul / vinurile* in (3b) above. In spite of this, there is broad consensus that the Italian type *il braccio / le braccia* does not constitute a third distinct gender of its own (see, e.g., Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi 1994; Dressler & Thornton 1996: 5; D’Achille & Thornton 2003). The argument adduced is that, in contemporary standard Italian, unlike in Romanian, this kind of agreement is limited only to one inflectional class with a small number of members and has been progressively eroded over the last centuries.⁴

On the strength of this evidence, it is legitimate to regard modern Italian as a two-gender system, the way it is standardly done in reference typological work (see, e.g., Corbett

⁴ For reasons of space, we cannot touch upon further analyses of the data in (4b) in terms of derivation (Acquaviva 2008) or number (Togoby 1952). For discussion, see Loporcaro & Paciaroni (2011: 401-403). In (4b), this agreement pattern is exemplified with just one inflectional class. Note however that in contemporary Standard Italian also some nouns belonging to other inflectional classes (*il carcere / le carceri* “jail”, *il gregge / le greggi* “flock”, as well as *l’arancio / le arance* “orange”, *l’orecchio / le orecchie* “ear”) select the same agreement pattern. While this shows that the alternating agreement pattern (4b) still has some residual force of attraction, it hardly changes the overall picture since none of those lexemes belongs to productive inflectional classes.

2006: 245). Therefore, if contemporary Italian, unlike Latin, does not have a third gender, a change from three to two genders must have occurred: the issue is when and how this change has come about. In historical linguistics, issues of this kind are recurring and often difficult to solve. The difficulty is due to the fact that, in general, the description of diachronic change depends upon the analysis of the discrete synchronic states which correspond to the input and the output of the change, and that this analysis is likely to pose problems. Thus, for instance, the ascertainment of the number of values of a given feature may be no simple task, a point nicely made in Corbett’s discussion (2008: 1) of the case values of contemporary Russian. As for change in the number of values of the feature gender, one of the possible scenarios is that in which one of the genders, before being eliminated outright, gets depleted of lexemes to such an extent that it can be labelled an *inquorate gender* (Corbett 1991: 170ff.), that is, a gender which lacks a critical mass of lexemes large enough to allow considering it a wholly legitimate value of the gender feature. This is indeed what Igartua (2006: 60) maintains for the modern Italian type *il braccio / le braccia*.

In order to understand what has occurred in the development from Latin to Italian, we need to survey the diachronic development of the noun system and, in particular, to focus on the synchronic situation in Old Italian, with which the next section is concerned.

3. The gender system of Old Italian

For the sake of perspicuity, we will separately address first the Old Italian evidence for (the productivity of) inflectional classes featuring nouns whose gender value was the neuter (§3.1), and then the evidence for (residual) dedicated neuter gender agreement (§3.2).

3.1. Productivity of the inflectional classes tied to the neuter gender

In Old Italian, there were several inflectional classes whose members selected alternating agreement of the kind seen in (4b).⁵ Consider the full array of noun inflectional classes of Old Italian:⁶

(5) Noun inflectional classes in Old Italian and their relation to gender:

Class	Examples	Gender value	Gloss
-o / -i	<i>lo libro / li libri</i>	masculine	“book”
-a / -i	<i>lo poeta / li poeti</i>		“poet”
-e / -i	<i>lo fiore / li fiori</i>	feminine	“flower”
	<i>la siepe / le siepi</i>		“hedge”
-a / -e	<i>la casa / le case</i>		“house”
-o / -a	<i>lo dito / le dita</i>	<i>genus alternans</i>	“egg”
-o / -ora	<i>lo prato / le pratora</i>		“lawn”
-e / -ora	<i>lo nome / le nomora</i>		“noun/name”
-o / -e	<i>lo pomo / le pome</i>		“apple”
invariable	<i>la unghia / le unghia</i>	feminine	“nail”
	<i>lo dì / li dì</i>	masculine	“day”

⁵ This agreement pattern is exemplified in (5) in the greyed-out cells of the second column; note the older form of the singular definite article *lo dito* instead of modern Italian *il dito* (*lo* is nowadays selected only before initial geminate consonants and consonant clusters that are not exhaustively syllabified as onsets: e.g. *lo spreco* “the waste”).

⁶ For different arrangements of the inflectional classes in Old Italian, see Penello et al. (2010: 1389-1397), Gardani (forthc.), and D’Achille & Thornton (2003: 212). The display in (5) is purely qualitative and abstracts away from differences in quantitative robustness between the paradigms listed.

The crucial classes for our present discussion are greyed out in (5). The first of these, *dito / dita*, is the only one which has survived into the modern language. This class, as we said, has been losing members during the last centuries. However, at earlier stages, it was productive during several centuries. Gardani (forthc.) shows that the classes *dito / dita* and *prato / pratora* still display a fair degree of productivity between 1100 and 1400, a claim substantiated by the fact that the inflectional class *dito dita* a) was assigned to nouns converted from verbs, e.g. *grido / grida* “scream” (first attested before 1292) from *gridare*, *urlo / urla* “scream” (14th century) from *urlare*, and b) triggered class shift of nouns such as *anello / anella* “ring” (before 1292) from earlier *anello / anelli* < Latin *anellus -i* and *crino / crina* “horsehair” (1282) from *crine / crini* < Latin *crinis -is*. This satisfies the definition of productivity adopted there, as the force of attraction that inflectional patterns exert on new lexemes, both foreign and native, as well as on pre-existing paradigms of native lexemes (Dressler 2003: 31).

If we now consider productivity as an indicator of vitality of inflectional classes, and the genders fed by productive classes as vital genders, then we must assume for Old Italian three controller genders – viz. masculine, feminine, and neuter (the *genus alternans* associated with the greyed-out cells in (5)), as shown by the following scheme:

(6)

a.	Latin		Old Italian
	SG		SG
M	-us	I	-i
N	-um	H	-a
F	-a	III	-ae
		>	
			PL
M	-o	I	-i
F	-a	H	-e

Two observations are in order here. Firstly, the reconstruction summarized in (6a-b) (supported by the data in (5)), combined with the Romanian facts in (3), is at odds with the widely held assumption that the original Latin gender system had already shrunk to a binary contrast by Late Latin/Proto-Romance (see, e.g., Schön 1971: 4; Tekavčić 1980: II, 66; Alkire & Rosen 2010: 192; Rovai 2012: 116): rather, an intermediate stage such as that in (6b) must be assumed. Secondly, this reconstruction implies nothing as to exactly when the change from (6a) to (6b) – i.e. from a three-target-gender system to a three-controller-gender system – occurred. As we shall now see in §3.2, there is evidence that this change, in Old Italian, was completed much later than is usually assumed.

3.2. Remnants of neuter target agreement in Old Italian

A circumstance that had been overlooked until the recent study by Faraoni et al. (2013) is that, in Old Tuscan texts from the 13th-14th centuries, nouns of the third gender in (6b), which usually selected a feminine agreement formative on plural targets (e.g. *labbra vermiglie* “lips(N) red:F.PL”), could still trigger a dedicated agreement realized by a plural formative *-a* on adjectives and determiners. This is shown in the following examples:

- (7)
- a. *li denti minotetti / di perle son serrati; / lab[b]ra vermiglia, li color' rosati*
 “the small teeth / of pearls are made; / lips vermilion, / the colors like roses”
 (Chiario Davanzati, second half of the 13th century, Florentine; Menichetti 1965: 137)
 - b. *a guardare le detta castella et cassari*
 “to guard the said castles and turrets”
 (*Statuti Senesi* 1309-1310 (Gangalandi); Lisini 1903: I, 219)

- c. *la grave e continua spesa che quella mura richeggiono*
 “the heavy and continuous costs that those walls require”
 (*Lettere volterrane*, 1348-53; Della Valle 1982: 201)
- d. *poi che furono entrate nella letta, ciascuna s’infine di volersi levare a dire certe orazioni*
 “after they had got into the beds, all of them pretended that they wanted to stand up and say certain prayers”
 (Matteo Corsini, 1373, Florentine; Polidori 1845: 104)
- e. *Fuggiamo quinci acciò che non ci rovinino la bagnora addosso, ne’ quali ...*
 “Let us flee from here, lest the baths should fall upon our heads, wherein(PL) ...”
 (*Leggenda Aurea*, 2nd half of the 14th century, Florentine; Levasti 1924-1926: I, 119)
- f. *tutta la borgora di Melano misse al fuoco*
 “all boroughs of Milan did he set on fire”
 (*Leggenda Aurea*, 2nd half of the 14th century, Florentine; Levasti 1924-1926: III, 1580)
- g. *col suo sacco di grano su le reni [...] e scaricarono la sacca. Scaricate che l’ebbono [...]*
 “with his grain sack on the back [...] and they deposited the sacks. Once they had deposited them [...]”
 (Sacchetti, *Trecentonovelle*, 2nd half of the 14th century; Florentine, Pernicone 1946: 529)
- h. *acciò vadino nella castella e nelle ville che son dintorno*
 “so that they go to the castles and the lands around”
 (Bibbia (09), 14th-15th century, Tuscan; Negroni 1886: 84)

The paucity of attestations of this kind requires a word of caution though. Given the fact that this agreement pattern is realized by just one final vowel, it cannot be excluded a priori that one or the other of the examples in (7) is illusory – i.e. has arisen as a copying error. However, the hypothesis of mere material errors becomes less plausible when this kind of agreement appears on several different agreement targets (see, e.g., *tutta la borgora* in (7f)). On the other hand, plural agreement on verb forms ((7c, e, h)) and (relative) pronouns ((7e)) guarantees that what occurs there is the realization of a genuine (neuter) plural rather than a collection of instances of the well documented reanalysis of neuter plural as feminine singular (e.g. Italian *la foglia* “the leaf(F):SG”, from Latin *illa folia* “those/the leaves(N):PL”).

Further confirmation of the value of the Old Tuscan evidence just discussed comes from considering the data provided by other branches of medieval Italo-Romance and, more generally, from the inspection of the overall Romance picture, to which we shall turn in § 4. Before this, however, we shall take a step backwards and reconsider the Latin-Romance transition: obviously, the diachronic source of the agreement formative *-a* in (7) is the Latin neuter plural ending *-a* (e.g. *bona* “good:N.PL”), which apparently persisted into Italo-Romance. Indeed, our Old Tuscan data provide evidence for Kuryłowicz’s (1964: 212) reconstruction. Departing from the widely held idea that the change from a three- to a two-gender system was already accomplished in Proto-Romance, Kuryłowicz postulated for a preliterate stage of Old Italian a gender agreement system along the following lines:

(8) Gender agreement (in 1st class adjectives and the definite article) in preliterate Italian:

	M	F	N
SG	-o	-a	-o
PL	-i	-e	-a

(Kuryłowicz 1964: 212)

While such a stage, by definition, is not directly documented, there are some further hints adding to the residual evidence in (7) and confirming that (8) must have been the case. Such hints can be gained by the inspection of Late Latin texts. For example, in the texts collected in the *Codice Diplomatico Longobardo* (CDL),⁷ dating from the 7th-8th centuries, the type *ill-a brachi-a* “th(os)e-N.PL arm(N)-PL” is abundantly documented. The following examples are just three out of 31 occurrences found in 63 legal documents from Tuscany:⁸

- (9) a *ista altaria* (CDL I, 62, line 19)
 “these altars”
 b *per loca designate* (CDL I, 102, line 20)
 “through the said places”
 c *per futura tempora* (CDL I, 170, line 4)
 “for the times to come”

Nevertheless, beside this agreement pattern one finds, in the same texts, 8 occurrences of the innovation type *ill-e brachi-a* “th(os)e-F.PL arm(N)-PL”:⁹

- (10) a *ad prenominatas baptisteria*¹⁰ (CDL I, 49-50, lines 12 and 1)
 “to the baptisteries already mentioned”
 b. *ipse predicte monasteria* (CDL II, 153, line 5)
 “the (same) monasteries already mentioned”
 c. *ad ipse sanctorum loca* (CDL II, 153, line 7)
 “to the places of the saints”

Of course, one might want to interpret the *-a* agreement morpheme occurring in (9) as an instance of mere preservation of the Classical Latin system, rather than data reflecting the Romance variety spoken (and not yet written) at the time. However, an alternative interpretation seems preferable to us. The texts collected in the CDL, at least in the so called ‘free parts’ of the documents (viz. those that the notary public wrote without being supported by any fixed repertoire of ready-made formulae), have unanimously been judged, by the scholars who investigated them (first and foremost Sabatini 1965: 26),¹¹ as largely mirroring the real spoken usage of the time. In particular, those texts often presented, as in our case, the coexistence/competition of more conservative and more innovatory variants, as predicted in a transitional stage such as that. In the CDL texts examined, the type *illa brachia* occurs more frequently than the innovation *ille brachia*: the ratio is 31 vs. 8 occurrences in the texts from which the data in (9)-(10) are drawn. The two really alternate freely, in one and the same text, within few lines, as, for example, in the document nr. 194 of the CDL (2nd vol., 183-187), where one finds *ipse s(an)c(t)e loca* “the holy:F.PL places(N)” (185, line 21) alongside

⁷ On those texts, and their value for the reconstruction of the prehistory of Italian, see, in particular, Tekavčić (1975), Larson (1988, 2000), as well as Politzer & Politzer (1953), Sabatini (1965a-b).

⁸ The 63 legal documents are a commodity sample consisting of the first 80 documents of the CDL vol. 1, plus the charts 170-190 of vol. 2, except those which the editor considered not to be authentic.

⁹ See Larson (1988: § 25) and Tekavčić (1975: 227). Earlier examples are found in the Latin translations of Oribasius (about 600) (see Väänänen 1967: 111) and in inscriptions, e.g. OSSA EXTERAE “bones that do not belong here” (on a Dalmatic inscription; see Tekavčić 1975: 227, Alkire & Rosen 2010: 195).

¹⁰ The form *prenominatas* counts as an instance of the innovatory type, for two reasons: first, because, independently of the case value, the formative *-as* realizes a feminine gender value (as a matter of fact, in the CDL, *-as* and *-(a)e* may alternate for feminine plural regardless of their syntactic function), and, second, because the Italian formative *-e* realizing the plural of feminine nouns belonging to the class *casa / case*, may result from the phonological evolution of *-AS* (see, e.g., Maiden 1996).

¹¹ As Sabatini (1965b: 26) puts it, these legal texts “rappresentano il tipo di scrittura in complesso più sensibile ai fenomeni, fonomorfologici e morfosintattici, dell’uso vivo” [“represent on the whole the kind of writing more sensitive to phonological, morphological and morphosyntactic phenomena of living (vulgar) usage”].

evangelica praeceptas “Gospel precepts” (184, line 5) where the adjective has the regular n.pl ending, whereas the noun, which is also neuter and is attested in the same text in its classical form (*uiuere secundum D(e)i preceptum* “to live according to God’s precept”, 186, r. 2) takes a hypercorrect ending -s. In sum, it may well be that the Latin grammatical tradition (prescribing *illa brachia*) contributed to this conservative type still prevailing quantitatively over the innovation *ille brachia*. However, all in all, evidence from several sources backs up the witness of these texts and suggests that the data in (9)-(10) do mirror genuine linguistic optionality in the gender agreement selected by (those that were to become) nouns of the alternating gender. Beside the scanty Old Tuscan leftovers in (7), this evidence also comes from other Romance data, both within and outside Italo-Romance.

4. The comparative Romance picture

The fact that the evidence for dedicated neuter plural target agreement in Old Tuscan (see (7)) has escaped all previous studies on Old Italian noun inflection (see e.g. Maiden 1995, D’Achille & Thornton 2003, Penello et al. 2010: 1389-1397) may at first sight appear as somewhat of a paradox, given that Old Tuscan is the most extensively documented and best investigated among the medieval Italo-Romance varieties. Into the bargain, the existence (or, rather, persistence) of neuter plural agreement of the kind illustrated in (7) for Old Tuscan had been previously described for other Italo-Romance varieties which – as recalled in fn. 1 above – are independent daughter languages to Latin and hence sister languages to Old Tuscan (also called, retrospectively, Old Italian). Certainly, the fact that the Tuscan data in (7) had remained unnoticed so far has to do with their rarity. On the contrary, in medieval Italo-Romance varieties from the Center-South, the same agreement pattern found in Old Tuscan was alive and well throughout the Middle Ages and is widely attested. This has been shown, in particular for Old Neapolitan, by Formentin (1998: 291-293) (see also Ledgeway 2009: 149), from which the following examples are drawn:

- (11) a. *inperò cerasa da epsa Cerer(e) sono chiamata*
 “therefore, they are called *cerasa* [“cherries”] from the name of Cerere herself”
 (*Libro de li antichi facti de li gentili o de li pagani*, early 15th century)
- b. *a le dicta mura*
 “towards the walls mentioned”
 (Cronaca di Partenope, ms. I D 14 Bibl. Centr. Regione Siciliana, late 14th century)

The examples in (11) show that the dedicated neuter plural agreement formatives survived up to the 15th century (and beyond, as shown by the further evidence gathered in the quoted studies of Old Neapolitan). During the 13th-14th centuries, this agreement pattern was even more robust, as documented by examples from earlier Neapolitan texts such as *Bagni di Pozzuoli* in (12) (around 1300, ed. Pelaez 1928) and *Libro de la destructione de Troya* in (13) (late 14th century, ed. De Blasi 1986):¹²

- (12) a. *sola chesta locora ne poteno sanare* (15)
 “only (adj.) these places can cure us”;
- b. *chesta predicta omnia* (64)
 “all these things said (until now)”;
- c. *chesta bagnora* (103)
 “these baths”;

¹² See Formentin (1998: 292 n. 844, 304, 315–319).

- d. *li homine trovano sua disia (200)*
 “people find (satisfaction to) their wishes”;
- e. *doglla face a la latora (243)*
 “it causes pain in the sides”.
- (13) a. *quella mura da la parte de fore frabricate e coperta de marmore ben laborate (78, lines 33-34)*
 “those outer walls made and covered by well-polished marble”;
- b. *sopervennero la trona spotestata e fuorte (121, line 10)*
 “there came heavy and strong thunders”;
- c. *a molti erano braza taglyata (173, line 4)*
 “many of them had got their arms cut”;
- d. *e la mura de quella camera erano facta ... et embestuta de deverse petre preciose (192, lines 13-14)*
 “and the walls of that room were made ... and covered by several precious stones”;
- e. *per l’ossa de la braza ... a la ’strementate de la deta (200, lines 13-14)*
 “through the bones of the arms ... to the tips of the fingers”;
- f. *co la puyna se batteva la face (312, line 6)*
 “he hit his face with his fists”.

Note that 3PL verb agreement (e.g. *poteno* in (12a), *sopervennero* in (13b), *erano* in (13c-d)) guarantees that the *a*-ending noun forms have not been reanalyzed as feminine singular – a reanalysis that indeed occurred widely across Romance (as mentioned in §3.2 above).

Presumably, the remaining Italo-Romance varieties of the Center-South, which are less well documented than Neapolitan, displayed a comparable situation, as the examples in (14a), from Old Abruzzese, and in (14b), from Old Lucanian, suggest:

- (14) a. *Ché le nostra molina se non poteano guardare*
 “Because our mills could not be protected”
 (Buccio di Ranallo, *Cronaca*, about 1362, Old Aquilano, Abruzzese, De Bartholomaeis 1907: 260)
- b. *piglia la cotognia ... et mondale e bene e piglia mela che non siano bene fatte, siano uno poco agresta*
 “take the quinces...and clean them well and take apples which are not fully ripe [but] a bit unripe”
 (*Ricettario lucano*, 16th century; Süthold 1994: 15, lines 244f)

As apparent from the data in (14) – and the same could be shown for Old Neapolitan as well – plural agreement with neuter nouns could vary, as also feminine plural agreement targets (e.g., (*monda*)-*le* in (14a), *fatte* in (14b)) could occur alongside those with the dedicated neuter plural *a*-ending (e.g., *nostra* in (14a), *la*, *agresta* in (14b)). This optionality appears to have been carried over from the earlier stage which can be reconstructed, based on the variation in Late Latin exemplified in (9)-(10). This variation was then resolved, at different rates in different parts of the Romance-speaking territory. In 13th-14th century Tuscan, the simplification of the gender distinctions – leading first to the reduction of the neuter to a controller gender and eventually to its loss – seems to have been more advanced than in central-southern varieties, as evidenced by the less numerous examples of the neuter plural agreement (see (7) above). In northern Italo-Romance, on the other hand, reduction progressed still faster, since, even in the earliest documents, no trace is left of the dedicated neuter agreement pattern found in the central and southern texts. However, this is an argumentum *e silentio* built on the record available so far, which need not perforce imply that

this agreement pattern did not exist at all in (old stages of) those varieties. As a matter of fact, in neighboring Gallo- and Rhaeto-Romance, some few examples are found.

The Romansh evidence is particularly interesting in this respect, since both Surselvan and Engadinian preserved dedicated neuter plural agreement until much later than the other Romance varieties touched upon so far. This led Ascoli (1880-1883: 439), in his seminal study of Romansh morphosyntax, to claim that this “è una condizione che non si rinviene se non ne’ Grigioni” [“is a situation which is found solely in Graubünden – i.e., where Romansh is spoken”], a conclusion which must nowadays be revised, since the Old Romansh data perfectly parallel those from Old Tuscan analyzed in §3.2, as well as those from Old Neapolitan discussed earlier in this section.

Contemporary Romansh has a class of feminine *singularia tantum* (e.g. Surselvan *la bratscha* ‘the arms’, *la feglia* ‘the leafage’, *la pera* ‘the pears’, cf. Lausberg 1976: 25), which derive etymologically from neuter plurals and retain collective semantics. A remnant of the former status as neuter plurals of these noun forms persists in their selection of dedicated agreeing forms of the numerals ‘two’ and ‘three’, distinct from both the masculine and the feminine, as described in modern grammars of several Romansch varieties (see Ganzoni 1977: 56 on Upper Engadinian, (15a), and Candinas 1982: 110-111, Spescha 1989: 312-313 on Surselvan, (15b)):

- (15) a. *dua/traia pèra/daunta* “two pears/teeth” (vs. *dus* “two:M=F”) Upper Engadinian
 b. *dua/trei pèra* “two/three pears” (vs. *dus* “two:M”, *duas* “two:F”) Surselvan

In synchronic terms, this kind of marking on lower numerals in modern Romansh, which departs from the binary gender contrast generally marked on targets elsewhere in the language, is to be analyzed as an instance of gender overdifferentiation of the kind discussed by Corbett (1991: 168), who reports the similar case of a group of Dravidian languages (Kolami, Ollari, Parji and Naiki), where lower numerals (‘two’, ‘three’, and ‘four’) have dedicated agreement forms for female human nouns, in addition to those for male human vs. other, generally found on agreement targets. However, the abovementioned Romansh *a*-ending collective/mass nouns could still select dedicated neuter plural determiner forms (e.g., *la* ‘the’, *questa* ‘these’, *quella* ‘those’ etc.) and 3PL verb agreement, as late as the 17th century, as exemplified for Engadinian in (16) and Surselvan in (17) (discussed by Velleman 1915: 115-116 and Ascoli 1880-1883: 439, respectively):¹³

¹³ Cf. also Wilkinson (1985-1991: 41-42), who mentions both the Old Romansh data with plural agreement (like (16)-(17)) and the modern examples with dedicated forms of the numerals ((15)). Concerning the latter, however, he takes issue with Lausberg (1976: 166), who regards those data – correctly, in our view – as “residui arcaici di antiche consecuzioni al neutro plurale” [“archaic residues of old neuter plural constructions”]. This is tantamount to an analysis in terms of overdifferentiation of the kind proposed here, which is crucially confirmed by the fact that, while nouns like *la pèra* ‘the pears’ (as singular feminine collectives) are in themselves stable, Romansh speakers nowadays find it increasingly difficult to use them in connection with numerals, which would be unexpected if those NPs denoted just “a single collective unit consisting of two ells” (for *dua bratscha*) as claimed by Wilkinson (1985-1991: 42). He compares Romansh collectives with German “collective nouns beginning with *Ge-*” such as *Gebein* ‘bones’ (neuter singular), but fails to see that, in German, *zwei Gebeine* does not at all mean “a single collective unit consisting of two” bones, but rather “two (distinct) sets of bones”, as shown in the following example:

- (i) *1671 bekommt der Pfarrer von Schübelbach aus dem Schatz von Einsiedeln zwei Gebeine der Heiligen Cölestin und Lucidus* (“Wie Gebeine aus den Katakomben Roms an den Obersee kamen”, *Zürcher Unterländer*, 25.1.2012, www.zuonline.ch/artikel_32770.html)
 “In 1671, the priest of the parish Schübelbach receives from the Einsiedeln treasure the (two) bones of the saints Celestine and Lucidus”

- (16) a. *La vestimainta sun ... cuvertas da la trideza* (Martinus & Rauch 1693: III, 114)
 “garments/clothes are ... covers of the ugliness”
 b. *Ma la mia verva nu vignen à passer via* (Bifrun 1560: 171, *Marc.* 13, 31)
 “but my words will not pass away”
 c. *E tuotta la nembra nun haun ùna proepia houra* (Bifrun 1560: 540, *Romans* 12, 4)
 “and not all the members have the same function”
- (17) a. *Sia detta han pigliau ilg fijs* (Alig 1674: 419)
 “Her fingers have taken the spindle”
 b. *Gual da quei temps vanginen nou navont detta d’ün maun da carstiaun, ca scribeven ...* (Bibla 1718: II, 157, *Daniel* 5.5)
 “Just in that moment the fingers of a human hand appeared, which wrote ...”
 c. *Salidada seias vus, soingia schanuglia* (Alig 1674: 262)
 “All hail to you, holy knees”
 d. *Vegnen salvada si la Ss. ossa de S. Placi e S. Sigisbert* (*Cuorta Memoria*, in Decurtins 1880-1883: 215, lines 20-21)
 “His holy bones are bewared”

For instance, in (16a), the NP (*la vestimainta*) triggers plural agreement on the verb (*sun*, rather than *es*):¹⁴ this agreement, thus, shows that the determiner *la* is (neuter) plural in (16a), and the same can be repeated for the remaining verb forms agreeing with subject NPs in (16)-(17), which all show 3PL agreement morphology: *vignen*, *haun* (16b-c), *han*, *vanginen*, *scribeven* (17a-b), *vegnen* (17d).¹⁵

Even this brief review of the comparative Romance evidence makes clear that the Old Tuscan data discussed in §3 belong in a coherent picture: in particular, it seems fair to assume that the dedicated neuter agreement formative *-a*, which is documented scantily for Tuscan as late as the 13th-14th century, must have occurred in a systematic way, at an earlier stage, with nouns belonging to the inflectional classes *dito / dita*, *prato / pratora*, etc. (the greyed-out classes in (5)). Later, it came to be rivalled by the formative *-e*, which originally realized agreement with plural feminine nouns: in other words, at this transitional stage, the (partially) conservative three-way target gender system was in competition with the innovative three-way controller gender system.

By the 13th-14th century, the latter formative prevailed, and the type *le braccia* dominates over the type *la braccia*. Thus, the few remnants that we have discovered and discussed in (7) are the last reflexes of the autonomous expression of the Latin neuter, which persisted into Romance in the intermediate stage (18b), a stage of preliterate Italian that has to be added to our reconstruction:

<p>(18) a. Latin</p> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">SG</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">PL</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">M</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-us</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 0 10px; text-align: center;">I</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-i</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">N</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-um</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 0 10px; text-align: center;">II</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-a</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">F</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-a</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 0 10px; text-align: center;">III</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-ae</td> </tr> </table>		SG		PL	M	-us	I	-i	N	-um	II	-a	F	-a	III	-ae	<p>></p>	<p>b. preliterate Italian</p> <table style="border-collapse: collapse; margin-left: 20px;"> <tr> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">SG</td> <td></td> <td style="text-align: center;">PL</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">M</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-o</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 0 10px; text-align: center;">I</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-i</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="border-right: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">F</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-a</td> <td style="border: none; padding: 0 10px; text-align: center;">II</td> <td style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; text-align: center;">-e</td> </tr> </table>		SG		PL	M	-o	I	-i	F	-a	II	-e
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¹⁴ The innovative construction with agreement in the (feminine) singular could occur already, at that time, alongside the conservative neuter plural one, a point which we cannot illustrate here because of space limitations.

¹⁵ As for (17c), while the verb form *seias* is homophonous of the 2SG in Surselvan (e.g. *Salidada seias, ti zun bialla Faccia* literally “all hail to you, his handsome face” in the same enumeration in Alig 1674: 261), the 2PL pronoun form *vus* guarantees that *soingia schanuglia* in (17c) is (morphosyntactically) a plural.

5. Conclusion

Before our study, there has been a broad consensus that Italian, ever since its earliest Medieval documentation, already had a two-gender system like today. We have been able to show that this traditional view is ill-founded and that Old Italian (Tuscan), as documented in the late Middle Ages, still possessed a third gender, a successor of the Latin neuter. In the synchronic system of 13th-14th century Florentine, this third gender was a controller gender (18c) similar to the neuter that has been retained to this day in modern Romanian. However, as late as the 14th century, we were able to point to some remnants of its previous status as a target gender (18b), as the nouns belonging to it could still select a dedicated formative for plural agreement. This older stage, of which Old Tuscan displays just a few scanty relics, is much better preserved in Old Neapolitan and Old Romansh, as shown in §4, whereas northern Italo-Romance seems to have completed the shift to a two-gender system earlier than Tuscan.

While the descriptive result attained in the present study concerns specifically Old Italian, our demonstration has some wider implications. For one thing, the comparative picture, with the reconstruction of a stepwise change from three to two genders, in which we have cast the Old Italian data – and which in turn receives now further support from Old Italian – strongly suggests that, for modern Romanian as well, a three-gender analysis is to be preferred over alternative ones, which have been argued for extensively over the past few decades. Proposals such as Bateman & Polinsky's (2010), or Giurgea's (2010), arguing explicitly that modern Romanian is best analyzed in terms of two grammatical genders, or Farkas' (1990: 539-545) analysis in terms of a binary [\pm feminine] contrast within a system in which neuter nouns are not lexically specified as such, theoretically elaborate as they are, take neither diachronic nor comparative Romance evidence into account, and indeed are much less easy to reconcile with the diachronic and comparative scenario sketched here than three-gender analyses of Romanian such as Corbett's (1991: 151) (or the other ones mentioned in fn. 3). Within this scenario, the gender system of modern Romanian appears as a natural evolution of a previous stage such as the one we have reconstructed for early Old Italian, and which had already been known to obtain – as we saw in §4 – for Old Neapolitan and Old Romansh. Thus, a byproduct of our discussion is a clear case for the relevance of diachrony for the assessment (of the merits) of competing synchronic analyses, an argument whose actual relevance is not fully appreciated in the kind of theoretical literature in formal syntax/morphology just exemplified.

Another, apparently obvious but nonetheless – we feel – important result is that our analysis attests to the effectiveness of the theoretical tools that made it possible, as laid out in §§ 1 and 3.1. Old Italian and its grammatical gender system are topics to which much scholarly effort had been devoted previously (as witnessed by the references mentioned in the foregoing pages), without arriving, however, at what now clearly appears as the “right” result: Old Italian had three genders, a fact that becomes blatantly obvious as soon as one scrutinizes the primary data anew, with an unbiased look and, especially, with the distinction in mind between target and controller gender.

List of abbreviations

3	third person
F	feminine
M	masculine
N	neuter
SBJ	subject
SG	singular
PL	plural

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