

Chapter 23

Somali gender polarity revisited

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The notion of GENDER POLARITY is a well established part of the description of Somali nouns. It refers to the phenomenon that in most Somali nouns a change in number is accompanied by a simultaneous change in gender, and it implies that number is actually expressed by means of the change in gender. However, from a synchronic point of view there seems to be little evidence for such an interpretation, as plural gender is realised solely through the shape of the definite article suffix on the noun itself. In this article the main arguments for the standard description are investigated and an alternative solution based on typological considerations of the data is proposed, claiming that gender is not relevant in the plural. Instead, the form of the plural definite article is predictable from the gender of the noun in the singular, together with some morpho-phonological characteristics of the stem. Additionally, many nouns traditionally claimed to be plural are argued here to be formally singular and mostly collective.

1 Gender polarity

According to the traditional point of view, Somali has two genders and two morphemes expressing definiteness, one for each gender: {k}¹ for masculine gender and {t} for feminine gender. The same morphemes are used both in the singular and in the plural, and the majority of Somali nouns change their gender when they change their number. All nouns that are feminine and take the article {t} in the singular become masculine and take the article {k} in the plural; whereas most nouns that are masculine and take the article {k} in the singular become feminine and take the article {t} in the plural. A smaller group of nouns which are masculine in the singular remain masculine also in the plural, and hence take the article {k} irrespective of their number. This standard point of view, illustrated in Table 1,² is presented in practically all modern works on Somali, among others the reference grammars by Moreno (1955), Saeed (1993; 1999), Puglielli & Mansuur (1999) and Berchem (2012).

¹ Curly brackets indicate underlying morphemes that are realised differently in different phonological contexts.

² The horizontal line in the middle of Table 1 is discontinuous as some nouns are masculine in both numbers.



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