

A case of historical morphosyntactic inverse agreement and partial reversal thereof are dealt with here.

In Semitic languages, grammatical gender is historically marked with suffixes that in other nominals denote the opposite gender. While for substantive nouns and for adjectives suffixes such as *-a*, *-t*, *-e* are feminine markers and zero typically indicates masculine nouns, the numerals which correspond to such nouns and adjectives have a zero suffix for feminine and one of the aforementioned non-zero suffixes for masculine:

- (1) mit-a ‘bed’ (F)
- (2) xamef-∅ mit-ot ‘five beds’
- (3) maxfev-∅ ‘computer’ (M)
- (4) xamiḥ-a maxfev-im ‘five computers’

Israeli Hebrew (IH) appears to be undergoing a change that is now complete in other Semitic languages. In Arabic vernaculars, for instance, gender marking in numerals is virtually non-existent. A growing number of speakers of IH are doing the same.

For Hetzron (1967:180), “Numerals with a feminine ending are used with masculine nouns, and *vice versa*, numerals which seem masculine are used with feminine nouns.” A similar view is supported by Gesenius (1910), Bloch (1971:53), Halle (1994:193). Ravid (1995:84) provides a hybrid description: “a masculine noun requires a masculine numeral [...] while a feminine noun necessitates a feminine numeral. [...] Gender marking on Hebrew numerals is an exact mirror-image of general agreement.”

Halle (1994) analyzes Hebrew (but not contemporary IH) noun phrases within the framework of Distributed Morphology. He proposes the Gender Switch Rule, an extension of morphological rules that apply in other (i.e., non-numeral) gender mismatches.

Yet the Gender Switch Rule does not seem to be as easily processed by native speakers of IH as it is for, e.g., noun—adjective gender switches. Two sets of preliminary empirical data suggest a change in progress. In Ravid (1995), Israeli pre-adolescents are shown to exhibit a change similar to that of the Arabic dialects. Gender is no longer marked in numerals for these children. Data collected by the author of this abstract in 2002 of older speakers from the Tel Aviv metropolitan area of varying levels of education show a high level of conservatism and only a hint of a change.

If we adopt the notion that not every element in Hebrew needs to be morphologically marked (and/or in agreement) for gender, we may need to modify the gender dichotomy from **masculine** vs. **feminine** to something else. It may be more useful to talk about a **default** “gender”, which happens to include all masculine elements and then some, and a second “gender”, which may be labeled **feminine**, but probably need not be.

Other instances of variation in gender marking involving irregular nouns (e.g., *cómet* ‘intersection’, historically M, but for many speakers F) and relics of the dual (e.g., *garb-aim* ‘socks’, ditto) are probably satellite phenomena to the more salient variable of numeral—noun agreement. Gender marking in numerals possibly carries more social value than any other variable in IH. A preliminary suggestion of an apparent time change is offered here, but other social factors are likely to be playing a role as well.