

Feature analysis of neuter gender in Spanish and Asturian languages

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Abstract:

It is traditionally considered that there are three values for pronominal gender (masculine, feminine, neuter). In this paper, we explore the idea that there are no neuter pronouns in Spanish, as neuter doesn't show agreement effects. Then we focus on mass neuter agreement, a phenomenon that takes place in an area of Central and Northern Peninsular Spanish. After studying the kind of syntactic information that can be obtained from syntactic atlases, we present an overview of the phenomenon from a purely descriptive point of view. We finally focus on demonstratives and we claim that the Asturian demonstrative *esto* with a mass noun antecedent is a determiner that takes an uncountable null noun as its complement, whose features are contextually recovered.

Keywords: neuter pronouns; mass neuter agreement; demonstratives; gender; syntactic atlases

1. Introduction

It is traditionally considered that there are three values for pronominal gender: masculine (for example, *él* 'he'), feminine (for example, *ella* 'she') and neuter (for example, *ello* 'it'). However, current studies claim that neuter

is not a value for the ‘gender’ attribute (cf. Leonetti, 1999, §12.1.3; Picallo, 2002; RAE-ASALE, 2009; Gil & Gutiérrez, 2015).

In this paper, we will explore the idea that there are no neuter pronouns in Spanish. Following this proposal, some questions arise: Do neuter pronouns have any gender? If they did, which gender would that be? If there wasn’t a neuter gender, how could we explain then all the properties typically associated to it? In relation to this, we will approach the study of mass neuter agreement in Asturian and offer an analysis for demonstrative neuter pronouns.

In section 2, we will analyse the properties traditionally associated to neuter elements, and given their grammatical behaviour, we will suggest they haven’t a functional projection for gender. Consequently, they lack the number projection as well.

Once we have studied neuter pronouns from a general point of view, in section 3 we will focus on mass neuter agreement, a phenomenon related to the neuter inflection that takes place in a wide area of Central and Northern Peninsular Spanish. We will see what kind of data traditional dialectology collects and, particularly, dialectal atlases, and we will present an overview of the phenomenon from a purely descriptive point of view. As this is a phenomenon in which the study of the grammatical context is specially important, we have chosen it to show the problems and challenges of a traditional approach to dialectology and atlases. Finally, in section 4, following our analysis from section 2, we will focus on demonstrative

pronouns and we will propose that demonstrative neuter pronouns are actually demonstrative determiners that legitimate a null noun.

2. Neuter gender in Spanish

In our proposal, we consider that neuter gender is not an inflectional feature (Gil & Gutiérrez, 2015). If so, it is necessary to explain independently the grammatical features traditionally associated with the neuter gender. In this section we will study the grammatical properties of the neuter items, we will analyse these features as lexical features and, finally, we will focus on the gender properties of the so-called neuter pronouns.

2.1. Grammatical properties of neuter pronouns

Traditional studies on the pronominal category identify several semantic properties that characterize the neuter forms. In this section, we will review those properties and we will codify them in the form of lexical features. As we have stated above, we will start from the hypothesis that what is traditionally called *neuter gender* is not a single (inflectional) feature, but a set of (lexical) features (Gil & Gutiérrez, 2015).

Following Bosque (2016), a feature is a lexical piece of information - which may be of different nature- that combines with some other feature and gives rise to linguistic segments of a different degree of complexity. Features are values for properties or attributes: [attribute: value]. For example, a noun in Spanish contains the feature [gender: masculine, feminine], where *gender* is an attribute, and *masculine* and *feminine* are their values. If we analyse the features of the personal pronoun *ella* ‘she’, the result would be similar to that represented in (1):

- (1) *ella* ‘she’: [category: personal pronoun], [person: 3], [gender: feminine], [number: singular], [case: nominative].

In cases where the value of the attribute is determined contextually, the feature is considered to be underspecified and it is represented as α . This is the case with nouns having one morphological form and two grammatical genders, such as the one represented in (2):

- (2) *estudiante* ‘student’: [gender: α]
el estudiante español /
the [M.SG] student [M.SG] Spanish [M.SG] /
la estudiante español-a
the [F.SG] student [F.SG] Spanish-F [SG]
‘the Spanish student’ / ‘the Spanish student’

Grammatical features are classified according to their specific content: some of them codify the lexical category, some reflect properties of the syntactic context in which the word occurs, other features include information that is expressed morphologically. The semantic properties that are traditionally associated with neuter gender include non-animacy, uncountability or collective meaning and propositional content, as we will see below. These semantic properties condition the syntactic behaviour of neuter pronouns.

Applying the notion of feature to the analysis of pronouns,¹ the ones mentioned above can be considered syntactic selective features (s-features), that is, features with semantic content that can be selected by a predicate and that determines their syntactic distribution. We will propose that neuter pronouns have at least three features of this kind. The first property found in the literature is their inanimate character (Bello 1847, 255; Eguren, 1999, §14.3.5; Leonetti, 1999, §12.1.3; RAE-ASALE 2009, §7.6b):

- (3) a. est-e de aquí [*este* = ‘persona o cosa’]
this-M [SG] of here [this = ‘person or thing’]
‘This one here’ (where *this* can refer to a person or a thing)
- b. est-o de aquí [*esto* = ‘cosa’]²
this-N [SG] of here [this = ‘thing’]

¹ For a feature analysis of pronouns, see Cardinaletti (1994), Harley and Ritter (2002) and Van Koppen (2012) among others.

² It may have an animate referent with a derogatory interpretation.

‘This one here’ (where *this* can just refer to a thing)

Thus, neuter elements cannot be combined with predicates selecting animate entities as objects, such as *ayudar* ‘help’, represented in (4), nor with adjectives that are predicated of people, as the contrast in (5) shows:

(4) Hay que ayud-ar {*(a) est-o / a alguien}
there.is that help-INF *(to) this-N [SG] to somebody [M.SG]
‘We have to help something/somebody’

(5) lo blanc-o / *lo tacañ-o
the [N.SG] white-M [SG] the [N.SG] stingy-M [SG]
‘the white thing’ / the stingy person’

In feature terms, this property can be codified with the negative value of the animacy attribute: [animacy: -].

Other semantic features that have been related to neuter forms are uncountability and collectivity:

a. “Capacidad de denotar solo lo no contable o no discreto”

(Leonetti, 1999, §12.1.3).

‘Capacity to denote only what is uncountable or non-discrete’

b. Referencia a “conjunto(s) de dos o más sustantivos que signifiquen cosas (no personas)”

(Bello, 1847, §295).

‘Reference to sets of two or more nouns that mean things (not humans)’

c. “Posible carácter colectivo” (Eguren, 1999, §14.3.5).

‘Possible collective nature’

One way to evaluate the lack of countability is to appeal to predicates such as *reunir* ‘collect’, which require semantic plurality in their objects. Plurality can be satisfied in different ways, such as a morphological plural, a coordination, a collective noun or an uncountable noun (Bosque, 2000), as in (6a):

- (6) a. Reunió { a l-o-s alumn-o-s / al alumn-o
gathered-3SG to the [M.PL] student-M-PL to.the[M.SG] student-M[SG]
y al director / a su clase / dinero }
and to.the[M.SG] principal[M.SG] to POSS.3 [F.SG] class [F.SG] money [M.SG]
‘He gathered { the students / the student and the principal / his class / money }’
- b. *Reun-ió { al alumn-o / el billete }
gathered.3SG to.the[M.SG] student-M [SG] the[M.SG] ticket [M.SG]
‘He gathered { the student / the ticket }’

The ungrammaticality of (6b) comes from the inability of singular countable nouns to satisfy the plurality requirement of the collective predicate *reunir*. In contrast, if the argument is a neuter pronoun the sequence is grammatical, as in the examples in (7).

(7) a. Reunió {algo / est-o / *est-e objeto}
gathered-3SG something [N.SG] this-N[SG] this-M [SG] object [M.SG]
'He gathered {something / that / *this object}'

b. ¿Qué reunió?
what [N.SG] gathered-3SG
'What did he gather?'

It follows that the neuter pronoun lexically incorporates the property required by collective predicates, which we have coded with the non-individuation feature: [individuation: -]. We assume that uncountable nouns and collective nouns, as semantic plurals, share this kind of feature.

The third value usually attributed to neuter pronouns is their propositional nature. As has been pointed out, neuter items designate "acontecimientos o estados de cosas y proposiciones" (Eguren, 1999, §14.3.5), as presented in (8a), and they establish "referencias anafóricas de tipo proposicional" 'anaphoric references of a propositional type' (RAE-ASALE, 2009, §17.6d), as in (8b):

(8) a. **Es-o** es un-a magnífic-a idea.
that-N[SG] is a-F [SG] great-F[SG] idea [F.SG]
'That (neut.) is a great idea'

[from Eguren, 1999]

b. Indefinites (*algo, nada*):

[definiteness: -], [animacy: -], [propositional: α],

[individuation: -]

c. Interrogative (*qué*):

[wh-: +], [definiteness: -], [animacy: -], [propositional: α],

[individuation: -]

We still need to include in this list personal pronouns, which also have neuter forms. Due to its special nature, this category deserves a specific analysis. Firstly, personal pronouns have personal features. First and second person pronouns are deictic because they refer to the speaker and to the listener. Therefore, there are no 1st and 2nd person neuter forms. Traditionally, 3rd person pronouns can be masculine (*él* ‘he’, *lo* ‘him (accusative)’, *le* ‘him (dative)’, etc.), feminine (*ella* ‘she’, *la* ‘her (accusative)’, *le* ‘her (dative)’, etc.) and neuter (*ello* ‘it (nominative)’, *lo* ‘it (accusative)’, *le* ‘it (dative)’, etc.). In addition, there are two paradigms of the personal pronoun, the stressed forms and the unstressed ones. Finally, personal pronouns have case features (RAE-ASALE, 2009, §16.3a), as in (12):

(12) Nominative (stressed):

él ‘he’ - *ella* ‘she’ – *ello* ‘it’

Accusative (unstressed):

lo ‘him’ - *la* ‘her’ - *lo* ‘it’

Accusative (stressed):

a él ‘to him’, *a ella* ‘to her’, **a ello* ‘to it’

Dative (unstressed):

le ‘him’ - *le* ‘her’ - *le* ‘it’

Dative (stressed):

a él ‘to him’, *a ella* ‘to her’, **a ello* ‘to it’

Complement of a preposition (stressed):

con él ‘with him’ - *con ella* ‘with her’ - *con ello* ‘with it’

The values identified for neuter pronouns are not always the same in the case of personal pronouns. In relation to animacy, the neuter pronoun *ello* ‘it’ -and its variants in accusative case *lo* and in dative case *le*- cannot designate a person. Therefore, the neuter personal pronoun cannot be the subject of a predicate like *tacaño* ‘stingy’ (13a), it cannot be combined with the preposition *a* ‘to’ when it is the direct object (13b) nor can it be the indirect object of a predicate as *dar un regalo* ‘give a present’, which requires a recipient with an animacy feature (13c). The pronoun cannot be either the complement of a predicate such as *discutir* ‘argue’, which requires an animate argument as the complement of the preposition *con* ‘with’ (13d):

(13) a. Subject:

{Él/	*Ello}	es	tacaño-o
he	it[N.3SG]	is	stingy-M[SG]

‘{He/*It} is stingy’

b. Direct object:

Lo	vi	a {él/	*ello}
him[ACC]	saw.1SG	to {him [M.SG.ACC]	it [N.SG.ACC]

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repitió vari-a-s vec-es.
 repeated.3SG several-F-PL times[F]-PL

‘He said he would arrive on time and repeated it several times’

c. Hicieron un-a propuesta_i pero ella dijo que no
 made.3PL a-F[SG] proposal [F.SG] but she[NOM] said.3SG that not
le_i encontraba sentido.
 it[N.SG.DAT] find.PST.3SG. sense[M.SG]

‘They made a proposal but she said she did not find it any sense’

d. Me confesó que estaba mejor_i y me
 me[DAT] confess.3SG that be. PST.3SG. better and me[DAT]
 alegré de **ello**_i.
 be.happy.PST.1SG of it [N.SG.OBL]

‘He confessed that he was feeling better and I was happy about it’

(15) a. Ello ocurrió en agosto de 2015
 it[N.SG.NOM] happened.3SG in August of 2015

‘It happened in August 2015’

b. {Lo que/*La que}_i opino es que vendrá_i.
 the[N.SG] that the[F.SG] that think.1SG is that come.FUT.3SG
 ‘{What/*Who} I think is that it will come’

In addition, *ello* ‘it’ (unlike *él* ‘he’ or *ella* ‘she’) can only refer to sentences with verbs which might take complements with both a propositional and a non-propositional meaning:

(16) a. Compró un-a mansión_i. De ella_i habl-aron en
 bought.3SG a-F[SG] mansion[F.SG] of her[SG.OBL] spoke.3PL in
 el programa
 the[M.SG] program[M.SG])’

‘He bought a mansion. They talked about it (the mansion) in the program’

b. Compró un-a mansión_i. De ello_i hablaron en
bought.3SG a-F[SG] mansion[F.SG] of it [N.SG.OBL] spoke.3PL in
el programa
the[M.SG] program [M.SG]

‘He bought a mansion. They talked about it (of the fact that the mansion was bought) in the program’

(17) a. Tuvo un hij-o_i. De él_i habló en
had.3SG a[M.SG] son-M[SG] of him[OBL] spoke.3SG in
el programa
the[M.SG] program[M.SG]

‘He had a son. He spoke about him in the program’

b. Tuvo un hij-o_i. De ello_i habl-ó en el
had.3SG a[M.SG] son-M[SG] of it[N.3S.OBL] spoke.3SG in the[M.SG]
programa
program[M.SG]

‘He had a son. He spoke about it in the program’

In view of this contrast, it seems possible to state that in the personal pronoun *ello* (and its case variants) the propositional feature has a positive value, unlike what happens with the other neuter pronouns.³

In relation to the individuation attribute, the neuter personal pronoun⁴ cannot be selected by a predicate such as *reunir* ‘gather’, which requires a

³ This description is referred to Spanish in areas in which there is no neuter agreement.

⁴ The properties of the neuter personal pronoun *lo* are not analysed in this paper. See, however, Bosque and Moreno (1990).

plural-meaning complement. This fact indicates that this pronoun is non-continuous:

- (18) *Lo⁵ reunió ello.⁶
it[N.SG.ACC] gathered.3SG it[N.SG]
'He gathered it'

This does not necessarily imply that the pronoun *ello* has the individuation feature. We rather consider that neuter personal pronouns lack the feature [individuation], since this feature, in a hierarchy, would be attributed only to words which already have the feature [propositional: -].⁷ Given these properties, the list in (11) could be completed with the personal pronoun (*ello*): [person: 3rd], [animacy: -], [propositional: +].

So far, we have analysed the properties attributed to the class of neuter pronouns as a hierarchical set of lexical selectional features. Once these

⁵ Stressed pronouns in Spanish cannot appear as a direct object unless reduplication takes place: **Vi a él/Lo vi a él* 'I saw him'.

⁶ While it is true that the grammaticality of (18) improves by adding the quantifier *todo* 'all', we consider that in such a case the head of the construction *todo ello* 'all this' is not the personal pronoun, but the universal quantifier *todo*. We adopt then the analysis proposed in RAE-ASALE (2009, §16.3m) to explain contrasts such as (i):

(i) Presentó varias opciones. {#Ellas/Todas ellas} son razonables.

'[He] presented several options. {All of them/#Them} are reasonable'

According to the RAE-ASALE (2009), *ellas* is the modifier of the quantifier in this construction, that is, the head of the expression is the universal quantifier, and the pronoun is a kind of appositional modifier. In parallel, in the sequence *Reunió todo ello* 'He brought it all (together)', the pronoun *ello* would modify the head *todo*. The pronoun takes nominative/subject form (not object form), similar to what happens in examples such as the following: *Le_i ordenó limpiar el coche él_i [mismo]* lit. '(To) him (he) ordered clean the car he [himself]' (Fernández-Soriano, 1999, §19.3.7).

⁷ We are assuming that the syntactic features of a lexical item are organized hierarchically and that they establish relations of dependency among them (Bosque, 2016).

features are identified, the inflectional properties of these pronouns remain to be determined, specifically, which gender they possess.

2.2. *The gender of neuter pronouns*

As we have pointed out, one question that needs to be answered is whether the forms considered to be neuter do have gender and, if they do, which one it is. We consider three possible answers:

- (19) a. They do have neuter gender.
- b. They have masculine gender. (a hypothesis originally from Bello 1847[1988], p.293 and followed by Gil & Gutiérrez 2015).
- c. They have no gender. (Picallo, 2002)

We claim that the pronouns we are analysing do not have a gender projection (19c). Firstly, we will show that there are arguments to maintain that neuter gender doesn't exist in Spanish. If this is so, pronouns traditionally considered as neuters could be considered masculine pronouns (19b). The other possibility is to think that those pronouns don't have a gender projection, and the masculine form is a default one. This is the solution we will adopt in this paper.

The first argument in favour of the idea that neuter is not a gender value is that there is no neuter agreement. For, as it is well known, these pronouns trigger agreement in masculine (and singular)⁸:

- (20) a. ... distinguió a un nadador con
distinguished.3SG to a[M.SG] swimmer[M.SG] with
algo *roj-o* en l-a cabeza.
something[N.SG] red-M[SG] on the-F[SG] head [F.SG]
'He distinguished a swimmer with something red on his head'
[Corpes XXI<21/06/2016>]
- b. ... permite el tratamiento y l-a-s
allow-3SG the[M.SG] treatment[M.SG] and the-F-PL
consulta-s documental-es de forma dinámic-a y
reference.checking[F]-PL of way[F.SG] dynamic-F[SG] and
eficiente. Y ello resulta basíc-o ...
efficient[F.SG] and that[N.SG] is essential-M[SG]
'It allows the treatment and the reference checking in a dynamic and
efficient way. And that is essential'
[Corpes XXI<21/06/2016>]

The second argument is that there are no specific inflectional markers for the neuter gender.⁹ In the case of indefinites, the so-called neuter form coincides

⁸ If the attribute in a copulative sentence is a noun phrase with a noun that has no gender motion, or a one-ending adjective, there is no gender agreement, as it is always the case: *{Eso/Que llegue siempre tarde/Juan} es una pesadilla* lit. 'That (neut.)/For him to arrive late/John (masc.) is a nightmare (fem.)'.

⁹ The third person personal pronoun in nominative seems to be an exception to this generalization.

with that of the singular masculine (21a) or with the masculine and feminine forms (21b):

- (21) a. Mucho es lo que hemos avanzado
much[N.SG] is the[N.SG] that have.1PL advanced.PTCP
en est-e campo.
on this-M[SG] field[M.SG]
'Much has been done on this field' [Corpes XXI <21/06/2016>]
- b. Aprendí bastante de lo que es l-a
learned.1SG enough[N.SG] of the[N.SG] that is the-F[SG]
paciencia.
patience [F.SG]
'I learned enough about what patience is.'
[Corpes XXI <21/06/2016>]

Traditional analyses observe an inflectional opposition in the case of demonstratives, so *este* 'this (masc.)' / *esta* 'this (fem.)' / *esto* 'this (neut.)' would be the masculine, feminine and neuter forms of demonstrative pronouns. However, we consider that the opposition *este/esta* ~ *esto* is not inflectional but categorial: determiner ~ pronoun (Gil & Gutiérrez, 2015). This assertion is based on an analysis in which the indefinites, numerals, interrogatives and relatives that can be combined with nouns are seen as determiners (and therefore not as pronouns), even in constructions in which they appear without an explicit noun, as in (22):

- (22) Vienen {est-o-s/ much-o-s/ tres} Ø.
 come-3PL these-M-PL many-M-PL three[M.PL]
 ‘{These/many/three} are coming’

Thus, *este* ‘this (masc.)’, *esta* ‘this (fem.)’, *estos* ‘these (masc.)’ and *estas* ‘these (fem.)’ are determiners in all contexts. Unlike them, *esto* ‘this (neut.)’, *eso* ‘that (neut.)’ and *aquello* ‘that’ are never combined with nouns, so they are pronouns. Since *este* and *esto* belong to different lexical categories, it is not possible to consider them as variants of the same inflectional paradigm.

In the case of existential quantifiers (*alguien* ‘somebody’ ~ *algo* ‘something’, *nadie* ‘nobody’ ~ *nada* ‘nothing’) and interrogative pronouns (*quién* ‘who’ ~ *qué* ‘what’), we are assuming, as it is often the case, that these pairs are formed by different lexical items, so no inflectional opposition is established between them.¹⁰

Once we discard the idea that the pronouns are neuter, two hypotheses can be put forward, which we have presented above in (19b) and (19c). Both are based on the fact that so-called neuter pronouns “agree” with adjectives in masculine (and singular).

It can be assumed either that the adjective copies the features of gender (masculine) and number (singular) from a singular masculine pronoun (hypothesis b), or, following hypothesis c, that neuter pronouns lack a gender

¹⁰ As a consequence of this analysis, the pronominal paradigm is considerably reduced. Specifically, in the case of demonstratives, it is limited to three words: *esto*, *eso* and *aquello* (Gil & Gutiérrez, 2015).

projection. In this case, inflectional features of the adjective are not an agreement marker but default features. From a theoretical point of view, hypothesis *c* can be developed assuming that pronouns have a gender projection, as long as their value is specified negatively (cf. Picallo, 2002, for propositional agreement), or that neuter pronouns lack a gender projection.

In addition, we need to verify if the hypothesis in (19b) can account for certain properties of neuter pronouns, namely, that they have no plural number and that they only establish anaphoric relationships with pronouns of the same “gender”.

Firstly, if the so-called neuter pronouns are in fact masculine pronouns, they should admit the plural number but they actually do not. This could be explained if we relate the singular number to the continuity value associated with these pronouns (cf. Leonetti, 1999, §12.1.3). However, the problem with this approach is that not all neuter pronouns seem to share the continuity value, as we have shown in 2.1. For instance, the personal pronoun *ello* does not appear in an uncountable noun context.

To sum up, it doesn't seem to be possible to explain the lack of a plural form because of the existence of the continuity feature. Therefore, if we state that neuter pronouns are in fact masculine pronouns, it would be necessary to explain why they appear only in the singular form.¹¹

¹¹ In languages with inflectional neuter gender, the lack of plural number could be attributed to this type of gender, which lack plurals crosslinguistically.

The absence of a plural form has also been related to a propositional value: when a sentence plays the subject role it agrees with the verb in singular even if the sentence is coordinated with another one (Quer, 2008). However, as we have seen, not all neuter pronouns have a propositional value, so the propositional feature is not enough to justify why these pronouns lack plural number.

Another issue to be addressed is why the so-called neuter pronouns do not establish anaphoric relationships with masculine pronouns if they are actually masculine. Thus, in (23), the demonstrative *esto* cannot be the antecedent of the masculine form (*el*) but must require the presence of the “neuter” form *lo*:

(23) Est-o es {lo que/ *el que} te quiero contar.
this-N[SG] is the[N.SG] that the[M.SG] that you[SG.DAT] want.1SG tell-INF
'This is {what/*who} I want to tell you'

Again, we will try to explain this type of agreement as one concerning lexical features instead of an agreement of inflectional features. For this reason, we will then evaluate whether the ungrammaticality of (23) can be attributed to a lack of matching in terms of animacy, continuity or propositionality.

Firstly, if we regard agreement as a process of feature matching, it could be argued that so-called neuter pronouns require matching with pronouns that share the property of [animacy: -]. This explanation would be

appropriate for pronouns *qué*, *algo* o *nada* whose referents are not animate, unlike pronouns *quién*, *alguien* and *nadie*, which must have human referents:

- (24) Dijo que quedaba algo, pero yo no vi
said.3SG that leave.PST.3SG something[N.SG] but I[NOM] not saw [1SG]
{nada/ *(a) nadie}.
{nothing [N.SG] to nobody[M.SG]}
'He said there was something left, but I saw {nothing/(to) nobody}'

However, we cannot extend this analysis to personal pronouns since they accept animate and non-animate referents:¹²

- (25) Voy con él al cine.
go.1SG with him [OBL] to.the[M.SG] cinema [M.SG]
(*él* = mi hermano / el coche)
'I go with {him/it} to the cinema.'

The value of the animacy feature of the pronoun *él* seems to be α , that is, the pronoun is underspecified for the value, so it can have animate or inanimate referents. It would be expected that there would be no mismatch between an underspecified feature and a negatively evaluated feature. However, as seen in (26), the indefinite pronoun *algo* 'something' is an appropriate antecedent for *ello* (neut.) but not for *él* (masc.).

¹² Demonstratives accept also animate and non-animate referents: *Voy con este al cine* ('with this car' / 'with my brother'). However, we are analysing masculine and feminine demonstratives as determiners with a null noun, not as pronouns.

- (26) En l-a nevera queda algo_i. Con {ello_i/
in the-F[SG] fridge[F.SG] leave.3SG something[N.SG] with it[N.SG]
*él_i}, tendremos que preparar l-a comida.
it[M.SG] have.FUT.1PL. that prepare.INF the-F[SG] lunch[F.SG]
'There is something_i left in the fridge. We have to prepare the lunch
with {it_i/*him_i}'

Therefore, the ungrammaticality of the pronoun *él* in (26) cannot be explained as a case of lack of matching of the lexical feature ANIMACY.

Secondly, the need for the so-called neuter pronouns to be coreferent with pronouns of the same class cannot be explained as a case of agreement in the continuity feature. Although most of the neuter pronouns are continuous, personal pronouns do not appear in contexts that require semantic plurality (see section 2.1 above). Therefore, the ungrammatical cases in (23) and (26) cannot be related to the lexical feature [CONTINUITY].

Finally, the third feature neuter pronouns share is propositionality. Since this feature is underspecified in many pronouns, it does not seem possible to explain the requirement of agreement between *esto* and *lo*, in (23), and between *algo* and *ello* in (26) because of the presence of this feature.

In summary, the reason why the so-called neuter pronouns cannot be coreferent with masculine pronouns doesn't seem to be a lexical feature disagreement. Since hypothesis (b) does not account for the grammatical distribution we are studying, we must then explore hypothesis (c), that is, the

possibility that so-called neuter pronouns, in fact, lack gender. In this case, the masculine and singular forms of the adjective which modifies neuter pronouns (*algo oscuro* ‘something (neut.) dark (masc.)’) would not be motivated by the phi features of the pronouns, but rather it could be considered a default inflection.¹³

This hypothesis explains the absence of number inflection: since the number projection depends directly on the gender projection (Picallo, 2002, 2008), if there isn’t a gender projection, there is no number.

Furthermore, the absence of the gender projection explains agreement relationships. Pronouns establish anaphoric relationships with other pronouns with the same gender and number features. Since we are arguing that neuter pronouns do not have these inflectional projections (gender and thus number), they are expected to establish anaphoric relationships with the same kind of pronouns, that is, pronouns lacking the gender projection. Consequently, the ungrammaticality of examples such as (23) and (26) is explained by the fact that the inflectional properties of the pairs *esto/el* and *algo/él* are not equal. Under these considerations, hypothesis *c*, that is, that neuter pronouns don’t have inflectional properties, seems more appropriate.¹⁴

¹³ In Spanish, we also have default inflection in the case of a coordination of two nouns with a different gender, as in *Los plátanos y las peras están maduros* ‘Bananas (masc. sing.) and pears (fem. sing.) are ripe (masc. pl.)’

¹⁴ We won’t develop this hypothesis here, we leave this for further research.

3. Mass neuter agreement

3.1 Definition and description

In some dialects of Northern Spain,¹⁵ the class of mass nouns (masculine or feminine)¹⁶ triggers a special type of morphological agreement, traditionally called *mass neuter agreement*. In these dialects, when a masculine or feminine noun has a mass interpretation, it triggers a special agreement which exhibits in pronouns and adjectives, and in the definite article *lo* (cf. Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, 2007, 2009, and references cited there):

- (27) a. el pelo blanc-o
 the[M.SG] hair[M.SG] white-N[SG]
 ‘the white hair’
- b. l-a manzana madur-o
 the-F[SG] apple [F.SG] ripe-N[SG]
 ‘the ripe apple’

[Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, p.69]

¹⁵ Fernández Ordóñez (2011, p.6) points out that this phenomenon affects Central and Eastern Asturian and Northern and Western Castilian, from the Cantabrian sea to the Tagus basin. Mass neuter agreement has traditionally been associated to Asturian, but Fernández Ordóñez has shown, with data from the COSER corpus, that the phenomenon has survived in areas of Castile that even extend to southern Madrid.

¹⁶ Nouns which trigger this special agreement are masculine and feminine, and not all of them come from Latin neuter nouns. In consequence, we reject an etymological interpretation of this phenomenon.

In (27a), the form of the adjective *blanco* ‘white’ corresponds to the neuter, as opposed to the masculine form *blancu*, with an *-u* ending. However, in many other dialects the form for the masculine and the neuter is the same, so only in the feminine, mass neuter agreement can be clearly identified. For example, in (27b) the feminine noun *manzana* ‘apple’ should agree with the corresponding feminine adjective *madura* ‘ripe’, with an *-a* ending. The form in *-o* *maduro* is without any doubt a neuter form. Prenominal elements, such as determiners or attributive adjectives, don’t show this agreement, as in the examples in (28), from Fernández Ordóñez (2006, p.2):

- (28) a. {el/ este/ mucho/ buen} pelo
the[M.SG] this [M.SG] much[M.SG] good[M.SG]} hair[M.SG]
‘{the/this/mucho/good} hair’
- b. {la/ esta/ mucha/ buena} lana
the[F.SG] this[F.SG] much[F.SG] good [F.SG] wool[F.SG]
‘{the/this/mucho/good} wool’
- c. *{lo/ esto/ mucho/ bueno} pelo
the [N.SG] this[N.SG] much[N.SG] good[N.SG] hair[M.SG]
‘{the / this / mucho / good} hair’
- d. *{lo/ esto/ mucho/ bueno} lana
the [N.SG] this[N.SG] much[N.SG] good[N.SG] wool [F.SG]
‘{the/this/mucho/good} wool’

Regarding the inflectional part of this phenomenon, in certain varieties of Asturian, the pronoun or adjective takes a specific form, as reflected in the contrasts in (29):

- (29) a. lo [N] / lu [M]
it [N] / him [M]
'it / him'
b. negr-o [N] / negr-u [M]
black-N / black-M
'black / black'

It can also be the case that the neuter form coincides with the masculine form. Such is the case in adjectives in *-u* or in *-o* for both the masculine and the neuter, where it is also assumed that agreement takes place, although it is not perceived as clearly as in the case of feminine nouns (feminine adjectives in *-a*, as opposed to neuter adjectives in *-o*), like in (30), from Fernández Ordóñez (2009, p.58-59):

- (30) L-a buen-a leche fresc-o se toma templad-o.
the-F[SG] good-F[SG] milk [F.SG] fresh-N is.drunk warm-N[SG]
Pruéba=lo
taste=it[N]
'The good fresh milk should be drunk warm. Taste it.'

The noun itself rarely exhibits a special mass neuter form, though in certain varieties of Asturian some nouns have a particular form associated to the count/mass interpretation:

- (31) un pelu / el pelo
 a[M.SG] hair[M.SG.COUNT] the[M.SG] hair [M.SG.MASS]
 ‘a hair / the hair’ [Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, p.3]

In the studies on this phenomenon it has been observed that mass neuter agreement is sensitive to three factors: to grammatical category, to the position and syntactic function of adjectives and pronouns, and to the distance that separates the adjective from the mass noun it modifies, or the distance between the pronoun and the mass noun that is its antecedent.

As for the grammatical category, mass neuter agreement is more common in personal pronouns and more unusual in adjectives (within the nominal projection, it only takes place in postnominal position); the difference in the continuity feature of nouns only shows up morphologically in some areas.

3.2 Data from atlases and dialectal corpus

Linguistic atlases are a traditional source of dialectal information. However, the phenomenon of mass neuter agreement is difficult to study with data from atlases because in the interviews that were made to obtain them it was not specifically asked about this phenomenon. In addition, atlases were not designed to study syntax and, therefore, they don't usually include the

syntactic context, which plays an important role in the appearance of mass neuter agreement, as we have already pointed out (Fernández Ordóñez, 2011).

We will briefly review below the information collected by the atlases of the areas that have mass neuter agreement: the Linguistic and Ethnographic Atlas of Cantabria (Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Cantabria (ALECant)) and the Linguistic Atlas of Castilla y León (Atlas Lingüístico de Castilla y León (ALCyL)). The first includes sporadic documentation on mass neuter agreement, consisting of data such as the following:

(32) Mass neuter sporadic documentation¹⁷

S 103. leche fresc-o, nata corta-o, pisar=lo
milk[F.SG] fresh-M[SG] cream [F.SG] sour-M[SG] step.on=it[N.SG]
(l-a hierba)
the-F[SG] grass [F.SG]
'fresh milk, sour cream, step on it (the grass)'

S 206. frecuentísimo con *hierba y leche*
'very frequent with the words *grass* and *milk*'

S 205. picar=lo (l-a hierba), está cura-o (l-a hierba)
cut=it-N the-F[SG] grass [F.SG]), is dried-M (the-F[SG] grass [F.SG])
'Cut it (the grass), it is dried (the grass)'

S 211. el neutro de materia se dio principalmente en el inf. 2
'Mass agreement appeared mainly in informant 2'

S 301. sal blanc-a, el agua para-u, leña
salt[F.SG] white-F[sg] the water[F.SG] still-M[SG] firewood [F.SG]

¹⁷ These data come from the *Atlas Lingüístico y Etnográfico de Cantabria (ALECant)*.

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sec-u, yerba sega-u
dry-M[SG], grass[F.SG] cut-M[SG]
'white salt, still water, dry firewood, cut grass'

Data collected in (32) are of different nature. In some cases, as in S 211, it is only asserted that mass neuter agreement is employed, but the specific examples produced by the speaker are not given. In other cases, as in S 206, only the nouns with which the neuter agreement exists are indicated, but the concrete examples are not included either. Finally, in other cases such as S 103 or S 301 the noun is included with the adjective, but the full example does not appear, not even the complete noun phrase.

In the case of pronouns, it is especially problematic that the context does not appear, since the examples are offered as it appears in S 205 (*picarlo (la hierba)*). It is said that the antecedent of the pronoun is the feminine noun grass, but the concrete sentence in which the pronoun and the noun occurred is not offered.

In the ALCyL, questions were designed for non personal *leísmo*, not for mass neuter agreement. Map 124, for instance, is *El pan dámele* 'The bread (masc.), give it (ac. masc.) to me', with a mass masculine noun (*pan*). The question was designed to find a contrast with *El pan, dámele* ('The bread (masc.), give it (dat. masc.) to me', with *leísmo de cosa*. Map 116 is *El paquete {lo/le} olvidé* 'The parcel, I forgot it (ac./dat.)', with a count noun. If we compare the results of map 124 with the ones of map 116 we can see that

the masculine dative pronoun *le* is more frequent with the count noun than with the mass noun. This fact could lead one to think that some of the realizations of map 124 are forms of the neuter pronoun. However, the absence of context in the examples prevents us from drawing clear conclusions about the phenomenon. In contrast, there is no parallel map with a non-count feminine noun (as these maps, as we have pointed out, were designed to study *leísmo*), such as *La hierba {lo/la pisó}* ‘The grass, he stepped on it (neut./fem.)’, where mass neuter agreement could have been clearly identified.

In conclusion, available dialectal maps do not seem to be the appropriate instrument for studying mass neuter agreement. The data that could be obtained are taken from maps designed to study *leísmo*. In the case of pronouns, we have pointed out the problem of the absence of the linguistic context; in addition, almost all the examples correspond to nouns and adjectives, and only in a few examples does the noun phrase appear complete, including the determiner (there are some examples with the definite and indefinite article, but there are no examples with demonstratives).

In the light of the discussion above, we can conclude that to study syntactic phenomena of this type, one must resort to corpora like the COSER, which include recorded interviews where the whole linguistic context is given.¹⁸

¹⁸ Even if the linguistic context is provided, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the deictic and the anaphoric reading of demonstratives, and in some cases the use of a demonstrative pronoun as a mass neuter or as a “traditional” neuter can be confused, as in the examples below:

(i) E: O sea que se picaba la manteca.

We will next describe how mass neuter gender agreement shows up in the different grammatical categories: nouns, adjectives, pronouns and determinants. This description basically follows Fernández Ordóñez (2006) and when we use the term *mass neuter gender*, it will be a purely descriptive label, we are not asserting the existence of a mass neuter inflection.

3.3. *Mass neuter gender in nouns*

Count and mass nouns have the same endings and, as we have pointed out above, belong to both masculine and feminine gender:

(33) a. Non-countable nouns:

piel,	azúcar,	champán,	arroz,	ceniza
skin[F]	sugar[M]	champagne[M]	rice [M]	ash [F]

‘skin, sugar, champagne, rice, ash’

b. Countable nouns:

árbol,	flor,	corazón,	pez,	puerta
tree[M]	flower[F]	heart[M]	fish[M]	door[F]

‘tree, flower, heart, fish, door’

‘In other words, the butter was chopped’

I: Sí, se picaba, sí, y entonces **eso** se envolvía con harina y la sangre, ¿sabe?,
Yes, it was chopped, yes, and then that (*mass neuter/neuter*) was wrapped in flour
and blood, you know?

[from Jaramillo de la Fuente (Palencia), COSER corpus]

(ii) E: ¿Y cómo se hacía el queso? Explíqueme cómo se hacía el queso.

‘E: And how was the cheese made? Explain to me how the cheese was made.’

I1: Pues el queso, echabas la leche en un barril, una ‘tinaja’, que llamaban, y **eso** lo dejabas allí que fermentaría

‘I1: For the cheese, you put the milk in a barrel, a ‘jar’, they called, and that you left it there to ferment’

[from Hornillos de Cerrato (Palencia), COSER corpus]

In Central Asturian, when the ending is a velar vowel, there is a predominance of *-o* in mass nouns and *-u* in count nouns:

(34) a. Non-countable nouns:

ganao,	dinero,	vino,	tabaco,	oro
cattle[M]	money[M]	wine[M]	tobacco[M]	gold[M]

‘cattle, money, wine, tobacco, gold’

b. Countable nouns:

paisanu,	vasu,	carneru
countryman[M]	glass[M]	sheep[M]

‘countryman, glass, sheep’

However, this fact is neither regular nor systematic. There are cases of final *-u* in mass nouns such as *cierzu* ‘north wind’ or *fumu* ‘smoke’, and final *-o* in count nouns such as *río* ‘river’ or *toro* ‘bull’.

In some cases, nouns that can be used as non-count or count have different endings depending on their interpretation of class or material (non-count nouns) or individualizing or physical object (count nouns) (RAE-ASALE, 2009, §12.3):

(35) a. el queso / un quesu
the[M.SG] cheese[N.SG] a[M.SG] cheese [M.SG]
‘the cheese / a cheese’

b. el	felecho /	un	felechu
the[M.SG]	fern[N.SG]	a[M.SG]	fern [M.SG]
‘the fern / a fern’			
c. el	pescao /	un	pescau
the[M.SG]	fish[N.SG]	a[M.SG]	fish [M.SG]
‘the fish / a fish’			
d. el	fierro /	un	fierru
the[M.SG]	iron[N.SG]	a[M.SG]	iron [M.SG]
‘the iron / a piece of iron’			

One might think that, in these cases, the variation in vowel ending illustrates an inflectional variation of gender: masculine versus neuter. We believe, however, that it is more appropriate to analyse the differences in (35) as a lexical alternation. If they were inflectional alternations, we would expect them to apply to the whole paradigm, rather than to a few isolated cases. The differences of (35) can be assimilated to those of the standard Spanish *leño/leña* ‘a piece of firewood / firewood’, which are not usually analysed as inflectional variants, but as differentiated lexical pieces, in which the *-o/-a* ending is assimilated to a derivative suffix (cf. Serrano-Dolader, 2010).

3.4 Mass neuter agreement and adjectives

As for morphology, adjectives have a specific form for the neuter in *-o* (*negro* ‘black’) only in the centre of Asturias, versus the masculine form in *-u* ($\sim \emptyset$) (*negru* ‘black’) and the feminine in *-a* (*negra* ‘black’). In the rest of the area

in which mass neuter agreement takes place, the neuter form coincides with the masculine, which sometimes ends in *-u* and others in *-o*. In binary systems (*-u, -a*), or (*-o, -a*), the continuity agreement is observed in the feminine ones, as has been pointed out before.

- (36) a. home charlatán / muyer charlatan-a/
man[M.SG] talkative[M.SG] women[F.SG] talkative-F[SG]
xente charlatan-o
people[F.SG] talkative-N[SG]
‘talkative man / talkative women / talkative people’
b. carne tiern-u, madera fresc-u
meat[F.SG] tender-N[SG] wood[F.SG] fresh-N[SG]
‘tender meat / fresh wood’

[from García González, 1988]

As explained in Fernández Ordóñez (2006), both the position and function of the adjective influence the appearance of mass neuter agreement. It occurs more frequently when the adjective functions as a predicative complement, as indicated in the scale of (37), and is much less usual when the adjective is a postnominal modifier located within the nominal projection:

- (37) Predicative complement > Attributive adjective with *estar* ‘be’ >
Attributive adjective with *ser* ‘be’ > Postnominal modifier
(Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, p.78)

The distance, both linear and structural, favours the continuity agreement. In areas where the phenomenon offers less vitality, mass neuter agreement is less frequent when the adjective is within the nominal projection; on the other hand, mass neuter agreement takes place in attributive and predicative adjectives (García González, 1988, p.98).

In figure 1 below, from Fernández Ordóñez (2009), it can be observed that in Asturias, where the phenomenon has greater vitality, mass neuter agreement between feminine non-count nouns and adjectives occurs only in 29% of cases when the adjective functions as a postnominal modifier within the nominal projection, versus more than 65% of concordant adjectives when they function as predicate complements. In Castile, where the phenomenon has less vitality, agreement within the nominal phrase does not occur.

Mass neuter agr. with fem. nouns	Det.	Noun	Post-nominal Attributive Adj.	Predicative Adj. (<i>ser</i>)	Predicative Ad. (<i>estar</i>)	Adj. as Secondary Predicate	Personal Object Pronoun
Asturias	–	–	+ 29%	+ 40,5%	+ 58,7%	+ 65%	+ 86,4%
Cantabria	–	–	– 10%	+ 35%	+ 55%	+ 59,3%	+ 81,5%
Castile	–	–	–	– 18,5%	+ 51,2%	+ 53,3%	+ 76,5%

the neuter demonstrative pronouns *esto* ‘this’ (as opposed to the feminine form *esta* ‘this’) and *eso* ‘that’ (as opposed to the feminine form *esa* ‘that’):

- (39) Mira trae pa acá un litro de leche y está tan friíno, y entonces tien otro sabor. Esto que ye de la central lechera, o que ye de La Polesa, tien otro sabor que non tien lo de casa, porque esto de casa, pues tien mucha nata, y eso vien falsifícao (Muncó)
‘Look, bring a liter of milk and it is so cold, and then it tastes differently. That (milk) of Central Lechera, or of La Polesa, has a different taste from the one from home, because that from home has a lot of cream, and that is fake’.

[From Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, p. 81]

According to Fernández-Ordóñez (2009), mass neuter agreement begins precisely between pronouns and noun phrases with mass nouns placed in different sentences. From these structures, agreement extends to adjectives, first in a predicative position and then in the noun phrase, to postnominal adjectives.

In figure 1 it is shown that mass noun agreement between personal object pronouns and non-count feminine nouns occurs in very high percentages in all areas where this phenomenon takes place, even in Castile. As in the case of adjectives, this agreement is favoured by the distance between pronoun and its antecedent.

The behaviour of the demonstrative *esto* ‘this’ with a mass noun antecedent¹⁹ resembles that of the determiner *este* ‘this’ with an empty noun (\emptyset) that we have presented in 2.2. Our hypothesis is that this form from Asturian is actually a demonstrative determiner with an empty noun, whose features are taken from the previous linguistic context. We are assuming that nouns in Asturian have a visible count feature, so that determiners agree on this feature, as represented in the examples of (40) and (41):

- (40) a. El libro... Est-e \emptyset
the[M.SG] book[M.SG COUNT] this-M[SG]
‘The book... This...’
b. L-a casa... Est-a \emptyset
the-F[SG] house[F.SG COUNT]... this-F[SG]
‘The house... This...’
- (41) a. El fuego... Est-o \emptyset
the[M.SG] fire[M.SG COUNT] this-N[SG]
‘The fire... This...’
b. L-a sidra... Est-o \emptyset
the-F[SG] cider [F.SG COUNT]... this-N[SG]
‘The cider... This...’

According to our analysis, in Asturian there are three forms of the demonstrative determiner, two for count nouns (*este* (masc.) y *esta* (fem.)), and one for non-count nouns (*esto* ‘this’), masculine or feminine. Other

¹⁹ In Asturian there is also a neuter pronoun *esto* ‘that’, like the standard Spanish *esto*.

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aquell-o pan
that-N[SG] bread[M.SG]’ (Quirós)

‘this cheese, that wine, that bread’

[from Fernández Ordóñez, 2007, p.46].

b. Aquell-o pan sabía casi igual que bizcocho
that-N[SG] bread[M.SG] taste.PST.3SG almost equal that cake[M.SG]
de bueno ... (Lozoya, Madrid)

of good

‘That bread tasted as good as a cake’

[from Fernández Ordóñez, 2006, p.98]

Secondly, this behaviour is similar to the one of the determiner *cuál* ‘which’, which does not appear with an explicit noun in some varieties (European Spanish and Río de la Plata Spanish), although it does in others:

(45) a. ¿Cuál secreto descubrió l-a mujer?
which[M.SG] secret[M.SG] discover.PST.3SG the-F[SG] woman[F.SG]
‘Which secret did the woman discover?’

[RAE-ASALE, 2009, §22.14a]

b. ¿Cuál Ø descubrió l-a mujer?
which [M.SG] discover.PST.3SG the-F[SG] woman[F.SG]
‘Which one did the woman discover?’

Thus, in European Spanish *cuál* ‘what’ is a determiner that takes null nouns, but that usually does not appear with explicit nouns.

In summary, we have proposed that in Asturian there is a system of demonstrative determiners with three forms, *este-esta/esto*, while in Castilian

there are only two (*este/esta*), as the form *esto* is considered a pronoun. In Asturian, the first two are combined with masculine and feminine count nouns, while the third (*esto*) is combined with non-count masculine and feminine nouns²².

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we have studied the gender of pronouns and we have proposed that gender is an inflectional feature with a binary opposition (masculine/feminine), instead of a ternary opposition (masculine/feminine/neuter). In the first place, we have focused on the properties of neuter pronouns (demonstratives, indefinites, interrogatives, etc.) and we have isolated a set of abstract notions that explain their behaviour. We have codified these notions in the form of features: [animacy: -], [propositional: α] [individuation: -].

We have proposed that neuter pronouns lack the gender projection. This hypothesis directly explains the absence of number inflection: since number assignment depends directly on gender (Picallo, 2002, 2008), if there is no gender, there is no number.

²² The same hypothesis could be extended to the definite article, which we consider to have three forms (*el/la/lo*), two for the masculine and feminine count nouns, and one (*lo*) for the masculine and feminine non-count nouns., as in *el vino blanco y lo tinto* ‘the white wine and the red one’, where the article *lo* is not the same as the Castilian neuter *lo*.

From the absence of the gender projection one can directly deduce the relations of agreement. Neuter pronouns establish anaphoric relationships with pronouns of the same type, that is, with other pronouns lacking a gender projection.

Next, we have focused on mass neuter agreement in Northern Castilian, and we have argued that in this variety there isn't a third value for the gender attribute. We have focused on demonstratives and have proposed that the forms *esto*, *eso* and *aquello*, with mass neuter agreement, are masculine and feminine determiners that combine with (null) non-count nouns.

The difference between the two varieties studied could be considered a case of microparametric variation,²³ in the sense that the content of the functional category D is different in both languages, because in Asturian demonstratives are sensitive to the count feature of the nouns.

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²³ The evolution of parameter theory in recent years has led to the differentiation between macroparameters, which allow to explain the great differences between the languages of the world, and microparameters, which try to account for variation on a small scale, i.e. between languages or between varieties of a language. The so-called Borer-Chomsky conjecture postulates that variation lies in the features of the functional categories or in the realization or not of these projections (Gallego, 2011). According to Demonte (2003) (following Chomsky, 1995), different facts of variation can be explained as morphosyntactic requirements of the content of the functional categories, by the existence of a certain functional projection, or by variation in the features of the lexical categories.

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