

Markedness in Gendered Speech

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Yale Linguistics PhD 2019

Variation in Affix Structure

(1) I ^{play}
played table tennis at the professional level.

(2) The dog ate the ^{biscuit}
biscuits .

(3) The ^{lion}
lioness waited patiently in the tall grass.

(4) ^{Who}
Whom did you meet on the docks that night?

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[+ACC]

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- The affixes are “required”
- They must be present to convey the intended meaning

Variation in Affix Structure

- The affixes are “optional”
- They are not required for the sentence to be understood

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(4) *kukur-le* *biskuṭ-(haru)* *khaa-yo*
 dog-ERG biscuit-(PL) eat-PERF.3.SG
 'The dog ate the biscuit(s).'

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- In Nepali, plural marking is optional:

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 ‘The dog ate the biscuit(s).’

- In some languages, past tense marking is optional!

Focus: Gendered Nouns in English

- My dissertation was on optional ergative case in Nepali (the inverse of *who/whom*)
- The focus here is on feminine marking (-ess) on nouns
- We all have English intuitions
- Best example I've found of an optional affix in English
- Relates to issues of social equality and discrimination

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governess

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governor

governess

master

mistress

Markedness Asymmetry

- The masculine form may describe the group as a whole, but the feminine cannot:

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(5)

- a. There are 1,905 lions in Southeast Angola.
- b. #There are 1,905 lionesses in Southeast Angola.

Markedness Asymmetry

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(5)

a. There are 1,905 lions in Southeast Angola.

b. #There are 1,905 lionesses in Southeast Angola.

- The **unmarked** or **zero form** (*lion*) is in an asymmetrical relationship with the **marked form** (*lioness*).

Markedness Asymmetry

- The unmarked form has two interpretations: **General** and **Narrow**
- **General:**
 - the marked form signals [+FEM]
 - The unmarked form signals nothing
- **Narrow:**
 - the marked form signals [+FEM]
 - The unmarked form signals [+MASC]

Markedness Asymmetry

- The unmarked form has two interpretations: **General** and **Narrow**

- **General:**

(6) The Screen Actor's Guild represents nearly 200,000 film actors in the United States.

- **Narrow:**

(7) Sam Rockwell won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in 2018.

Markedness Asymmetry

- This “slipperiness” of interpretation is why some people avoid using the term *actress* at all
- Leads to ambiguity (“*Who is your favorite actor?*”)
- Implies that the masculine is the default state of being
- Same issue with *policeman*, default masculine pronouns (“*The reader should temper his expectations...*”)

Markedness Asymmetry

- The interpretations are more or less salient depending on the word:

Markedness Asymmetry

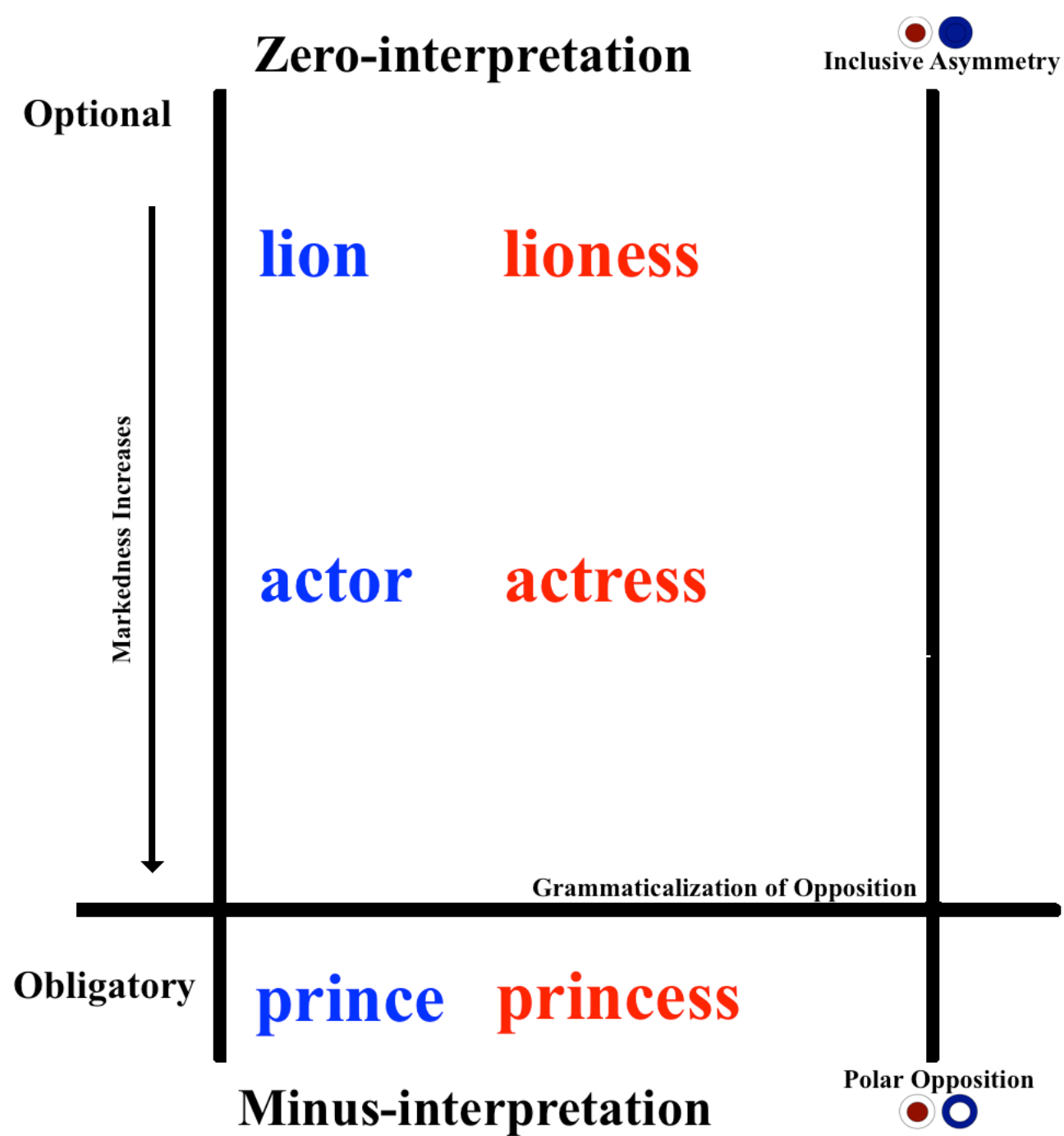
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- *lion / lioness*
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- *lion / lioness*
 - The **General Meaning** predominates
 - The term “lion” doesn’t typically designate gender
- *prince / princess*
 - The **Narrow Meaning** is the only one available
 - You can’t say “prince” to mean “princess”
- *actor / actress*
 - Both are salient, but people’s opinions differ
 - Hence the “slipperiness”



Markedness Asymmetry

- These principles are applicable in any language to any structure in which a form (-ess) varies with its absence
- Optional plural marking in Nepali
- Optional accusative marking on English interrogatives (*who/whom*)

How does this relate to Clinical Informatics?

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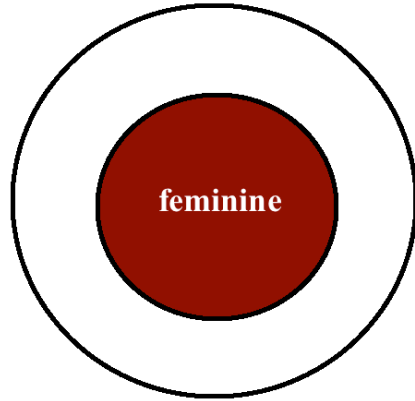
- No seriously, I'm asking

How does this relate to Clinical Informatics?

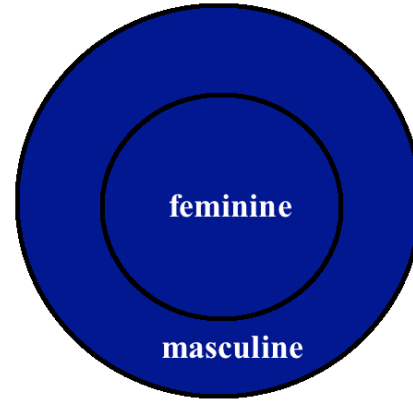
- No seriously, I'm asking
- Miscommunications in the clinical setting
 - Differences between native languages/dialects
 - Inherent ambiguities of speech
 - What kind of data, what kind of problems

General Meaning

(zero-interpretation)



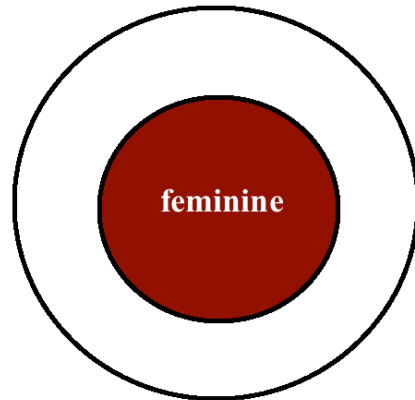
Marked: signals **A**
[+feminine]



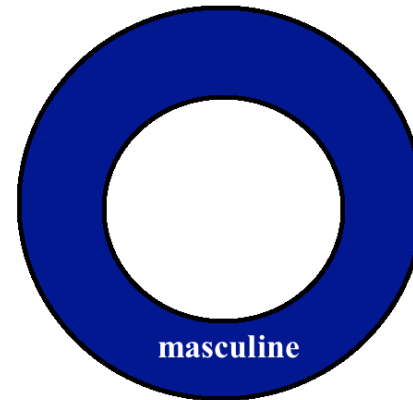
Unmarked: doesn't signal **A**
[0feminine]

Narrow Meaning

(minus-interpretation)

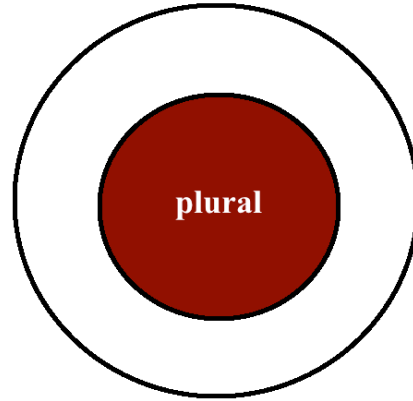


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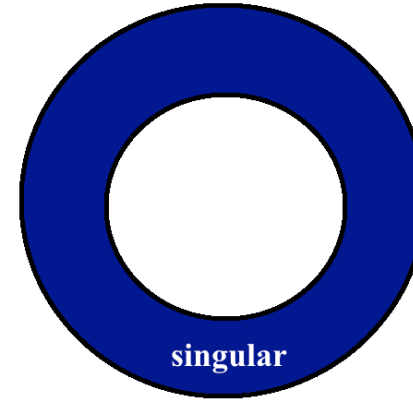


Unmarked: signals **non-A**
[-feminine]

English (-s): Minus Interpretation polar opposition

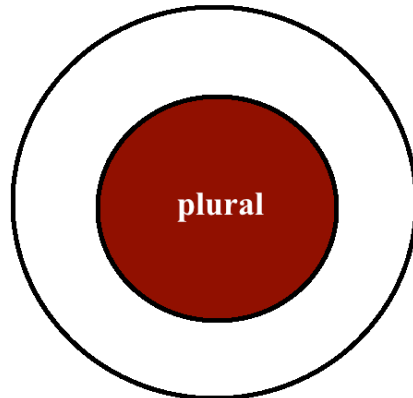


Marked: signals **A**
[+plural]

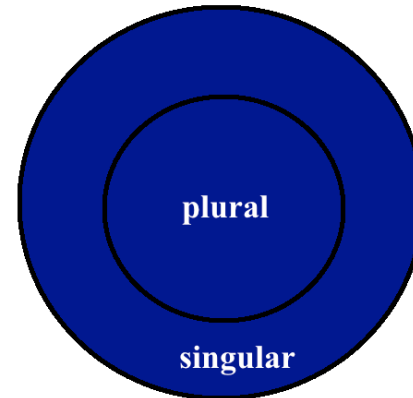


Unmarked: signals **non-A**
[-plural]

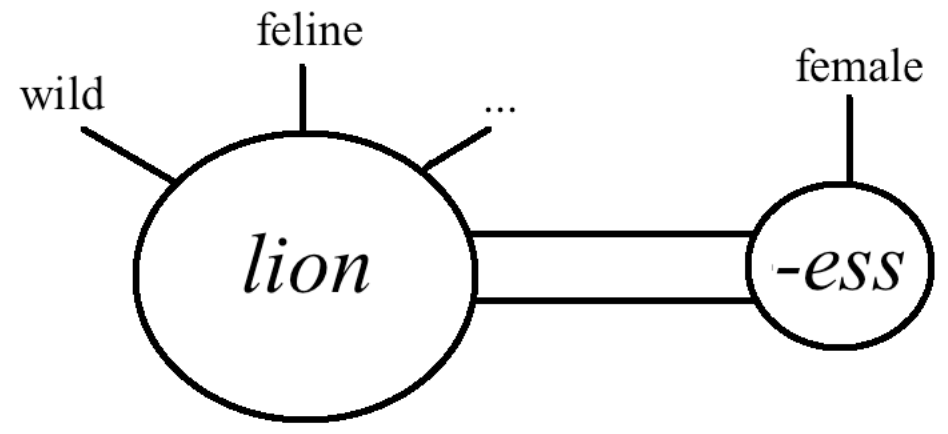
Nepali (-haru): Zero Interpretation inclusive asymmetry

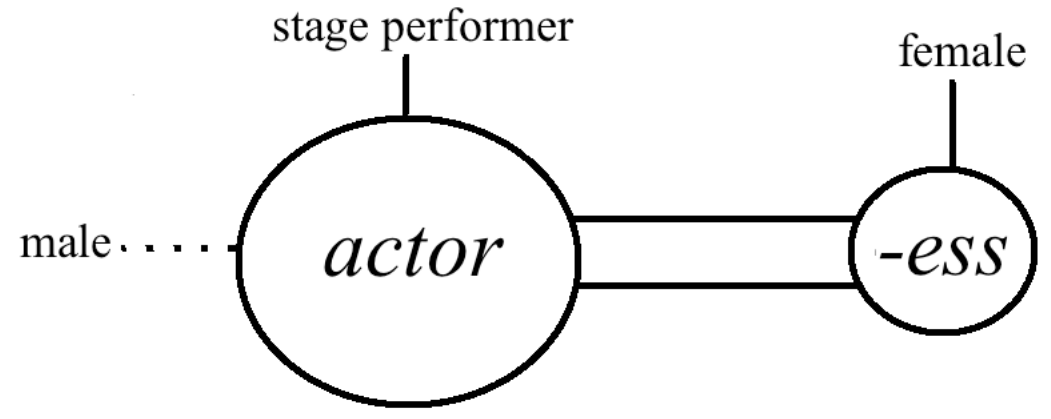


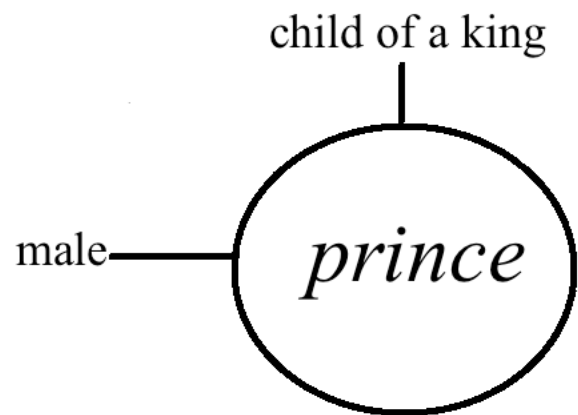
Marked: signals **A**
[+plural]



Unmarked: doesn't signal **A**
[0plural]







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