Gender Variation in Russian Expressive Forms

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It is usually assumed (Corbett 1982, Hippisley 1996, Rice 2005 among others) that Russian evaluative suffixes are not able to contribute to a choice of the syntactic gender of resulting nouns. Papers that account for the gender change only mention this possibility with no analysis (Savchuk 2011, Sichinava 2011) or assume that a suffix changes the lexical gender of a noun in 100% of cases (Wiltschko & Steriopolo 2007). However, even in dictionaries (Zaliznjak 1977) one can see that evaluative forms have variation in gender.

I performed web-search of non-standard expressive forms and it showed variation in gender with every suffix that would pattern the resulting expressive noun to a different declension class than its base noun. This is not at all surprising considering the previous work on declension classes and gender (Corbett 1982, Tarasenkova 2010 among others).

I propose that neither syntactic gender nor declension class cannot completely define each other. Instead they both contribute to the final form and gender of the resulting expressive noun.

To test possible factors that may contribute to the gender assignment I conducted a written survey. Participants were asked to complete a simple text with adjectives that would fit best the style of the text (folktale). The lexical gender was changed in 60% of cases. As expected, declension class had significant impact on the choice of a suffix, but did not determine it completely. Lexical masculine gender was changed significantly less often than feminine.

Keywords: gender, variation, Russian.