'Animacy' versus 'Efficacy': Culture and Grammatical Gender in Latin.

If studies of non Indo-European languages point to the fact that the scale of Animacy differs from one culture to another (see Dahl 2000), historical grammars of Romance languages have interpreted the Latin grammatical genders in Latin according to Western European culture, as a way of encoding two main inherent semantic oppositions: [Animate vs. Inanimate]. But this model is far from accounting for the difference between the semantic features encoded by Latin neuter and non-neuter grammatical genders. Compare, for example, (1) and (2):

(1) neut. *saxum* 'stone, rock' vs. masc. *lapis* 'stone, landmark', *rupes* 'cliff';
(2) neut. *mare* 'sea, salted water' vs. masc. *pontus* 'sea' and fem. *aqua*   'water'.

The Animacy model cannot account for the masculine gender of *pontus* and neuter of *mare* or feminine of *aqua*.

According to our hypothesis, the gender subclassification of nouns in Latin was rooted in an earlier Mediterranean culture, in which the cognitive category of 'Efficacy' reflected a perception of the '(in)capacity of doing, affecting other beings' as an inherent property of objects. Compare the following distribution of nouns:

(i) 'capable of being effective' :
     (3)   feminine: *terra* 'earth', *arbor* 'tree', aqua, like *femina* 'woman',
            masculine: *ignis* 'fire', *ventus* 'wind', like *vir* 'man'

(ii) 'incapable of being effective': neuter
     (4)   *saxum* 'stone', *templum* 'temple', *tempus* 'time'; most nouns referring to
            fruit: *pirum* 'pear', *prunum* 'prune', generics for
            species: *animal* 'animal'), etc

Since some entities can be active in some contexts, and passive in others, it is necessary to distinguish between the *virtual* and the *actual* properties of the referents. The '*capacity* of being a doer (active, effective)' is a virtual property of the referent that might be encoded in an inherent semantic feature (seme) of the noun. The property of '*being* a doer' is the actualization of this capacity in certain conditions.