

The multidimensionality of gender in the bilingual mental lexicon

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Corbett (1991:1) begins his study by describing gender as “the most puzzling of the grammatical categories”. This contribution intends to corroborate this statement on the basis of external evidence observed in German-Spanish bilinguals.

The multidimensionality addressed in the title makes reference to the function of gender. In the two languages under scrutiny gender is considered to be a morphosyntactic category. Morphologically speaking, gender serves as an organizer of the mental lexicon because it distributes nouns into gender categories. From the syntactic point of view, gender demands agreement of some parts of speech, like articles, pronouns and adjectives.

In gender we have a semantic aspect, though. This is another dimension involved in gender. It is a highly complex matter to state that gender has a meaning, but it would be an oversimplification to completely deny its semanticity. Traditionally, the animacy scale has been used to divide semantic from morphological or phonological gender. Unfortunately, this does not reflect some external evidence found in German-Spanish bilinguals.

My own contribution is to make a distinction between acquired and internalized gender. The acquired gender is stored in the mental lexicon as a grammatical category, without meaning. On the contrary, the internalized gender acquires a metaphorical meaning derived from the semantic gender: male vs. female. The two following examples illustrate this distinction:

(1) Ich hoffe, alles geht gut mit **der Diplomarbeit**, wahrscheinlich ist **er** schon fertig.
I hope, everything is fine with **the thesis**_{FEM}, most likely **it**_{MASC} is already finished. (die Diplomarbeit_{FEM} vs. er_{MASC})

(2) Warum hast du **sie** nicht gebracht? (sie_{FEM} = der Computer_{MASC})
Why didn't you bring **it**_{FEM}?

(3) Wie süß **die** daneben! (die_{FEM} = ein Fahrrad_{NEUTER})
How cute **the one**_{FEM} aside!

Notice that the gender marker in the pronouns is chosen according to the gender of the L1, which is Spanish in this case: *el trabajo de tesis* 'thesis', *la bicicleta* 'bicycle', *la computadora* 'computer', all of them female nouns, but female, male and neuter respectively in German.

The interesting aspect of these examples is that the person uses the correct gender marker, but when it is marked in the pronoun. The person systematically uses the gender of her L1 when marking the pronoun. This is best illustrated in (1).

In accordance to these and similar examples I want to argue for a distinction between acquired and internalized gender, in which the former has been learnt as a grammatical formula, but the latter has already acquired the semanticity imposed by the system of the native language.

Reference:

Corbett, Greville G. 1991. *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press