

Grammatical gender and social world

Key words: gender role, gender status, sociology of gender, societal attitude, generative grammar

Introduction

Aikhenvald (2012:33) posits that there are three different types of gender across languages: (i) Natural gender (*N-gender*), which corresponds with the biological distinction of sex characteristics, (ii) Social gender (*S-gender*), which reflects “the social implications of being a man or a woman,” and (iii) Linguistic gender (*L-gender*, what I call here *grammatical gender*). According to Aikhenvald (2012), L-gender receives its meaning in direct relation to S-gender. In this regard, the following research question arises: How is the interrelation between S-gender and L-gender formally established? The main question is as follows: **How does the social gender as established in a given society affect the use of grammatical gender?**

Methodological approach

This work presents a novel methodological approach to understanding the interrelation between social gender and grammatical gender across languages. It interrelates two different disciplines: *sociology* (‘sociology of gender’) and *theoretical linguistics* (‘Distributed Morphology’). With respect to sociology, this work conducts a *mezzo sociological* analysis of gender, which means that it takes into account broad cultural norms which shape all kinds of social interaction. With respect to theoretical linguistics, *Distributed Morphology* (Halle and Marantz 1993) distinguishes between word formation from $\sqrt{\text{roots}}$ and from syntactic categories. Thus, it provides us with formal tools necessary to understand the morphosyntactic processes occurring within a word.

Question 1: Sex/gender and the use of grammatical gender

Biological sex and gender are often treated as the same concepts in the linguistic literature. Terms such as (biological) sex and natural/biological gender are used interchangeably. However, in sociology, *sex* and *gender* are two different concepts. The question arises: What exactly is reflected by the use of grammatical gender across languages, is it the sex of an individual, or the gender, or both? And what about those cases in which there is no 1:1 correspondence between sex and gender, as in the cases of Navajo feminine men and masculine women, *muxe* in Zapotec, and female husbands in Africa? Their gender changes, but their sex remains the same.

Question 2: Gender status and grammatical gender

Is there an interrelation between acquiring a new gender status in a given society and the use of grammatical gender? I show that the answer to this question is affirmative and present data across many languages in which there is a change in the use of grammatical gender in direct relation to a change in social status. For example, in southern Polish dialects, nouns denoting unmarried females can belong to the neuter gender. Zaręba (1984:244) reports that this changes once the woman gets married. Once she acquires a new status, only the feminine gender is used.

Question 3: Gender roles and grammatical gender

Gender roles are the expected behaviors associated with gender statuses (e.g., a female or a male) in a given society (Lindsey 2015). In many societies, deviation from such prescribed behaviors is considered inappropriate. Is there a connection between deviation from a gender role by an individual and the use of grammatical gender in reference to that individual? I show that there is a great amount of data across languages that supports this connection.

Question 4: Societal attitudes/emotions and grammatical gender

I analyze how societal attitudes and emotions are reflected in the use of grammatical gender across languages. I illustrate a connection between societal attitudes and the use of grammatical gender. For example, in Palestinian Arabic, a female can use the masculine gender in self-reference as to indicate an uncomfortable state (e.g., she is tired, sad, unhappy, or nervous).

References

- Acton, Eric K. 2014. *Pragmatics and the Social Meaning of Determiners*. Doctoral dissertation, Stanford.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2012. "Round Women and Long Men: Shape, Size, and the Meanings of Gender in New Guinea and Beyond". *Anthropological Linguistics* 54, 33–86.
- Aikhenvald, Alexandra. 2016. *How Gender Shapes the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Halle, Morris, and Alec Marantz. 1993. "Distributed Morphology and the Pieces of Inflection". In: K. Hale and S. Keyser (eds.), *The View from Building 20: Essays in Linguistics in Honor of Sylvain Bromberger*.
- Lindsey, Linda. 2015. *Gender Roles: A Sociological Perspective*. New York: Routledge.
- Wharton, Amy S. 2012. *The Sociology of Gender. An Introduction to Theory and Research*. John Wiley.