

Preferences for grammatical and natural gender in connection with person reference

Sexism in language has been criticized for several decades now. In line with *political correctness*, one goal is to avoid linguistic expressions that are discriminatory with respect to a person's natural gender.¹ I assume that speakers intend to take natural gender into account in their use of language and, accordingly, wish to deal with the matter sensitively. Interesting questions in this context include how utterances are judged in which natural and grammatical gender are not the same and whether there is a tendency to produce grammatically correct utterances (at the expense of natural gender) or semantically correct utterances (at the expense of grammatical gender). One example would be using the masculine noun when referring to a female person, as in (1).

- (1) Die Lehrer sprechen mit den Schülern.
'The teachers (M) speak with the pupils.'

Such a use of masculine terms for persons who are unknown or not further specified (Gorny 1995, p. 521) can hinder communication as it is not clear whether the term just refers to male persons or also to female persons. Numerous association tests have revealed that female persons are named much less frequently than male persons in response to questions including a generic masculine noun, leading to the conclusion that female natural gender is disadvantaged by supposedly generic masculine forms as females are not always included after all.

In this context there is a problem on a grammatical level as a generic interpretation is not always possible. Even though *Lehrer* ('teacher' (M)) is supposed to indicate both female and male persons, the combination of the supposedly generic masculine expression with a feminine possessive is incongruent and therefore ungrammatical (2).

- (2) Der Lehrer unterrichtet *ihre Schüler.
'The teacher (M) teaches *her pupils.'

At this point, endeavours to be inclusive when referring to natural genders expose their limitations from a grammatical perspective: unfortunately, not everything is grammatically possible that might be desirable from a language-inclusive point of view. This results in divergences between grammatical and natural gender. In such cases speakers decide whether to use a form which is grammatically or naturally appropriate. Avoiding grammatical agreement by using natural gender-convergent forms is all the easier when grammatical relations are looser. The distance between the possessive/pronoun and the referent plays a role, as does the length of the reference chain (cf. Köpcke 2012; Köpcke/Zubin 2009; Thurmair 2006).

- (3) Das Mädchen, das (*die) auf seine (?ihre) Mutter wartet, spielt mit seinem (ihrem) Hamster, als es (sie) ihre (seine) Freundin sieht. (Köpcke 2012, p. 37)

¹ The term *natural gender* is used here to denote the gender of the person referred to by a linguistic expression, in contrast to the *grammatical gender* of the referring expression. This terminology does not imply that (natural) gender is biologically determined instead of being a social construct.

‘The girl (N) who (N) (*who (F)) is waiting for its (?her) mother is playing with its (her) hamster when it (she) sees her (its) friend.’

Thus while so-called hybrid nouns like *Mädchen* (‘girl’ (N)) allow both grammatical and natural gender agreement, pronouns which only have a masculine form do not allow natural gender agreement.

- (4a) ***Wer** hat **ihren** Lippenstift im Bad gelassen? (Trömel-Plötz 1978, p. 51)
 ‘***Who** (M) has left **her** lipstick in the bathroom?’
- (4b) **Wer** hat **seinen** Lippenstift im Bad gelassen?
 ‘**Who** (M) has left **his** lipstick in the bathroom?’
- (5a) *Hallo Frauen! **Wer** von euch kann mir **ihr** Fahrrad leihen? (Pusch 1984, p. 26)
 ‘*Hello ladies! **Who** (M) of you can lend me **her** bicycle?’
- (5b) Hallo Frauen! **Wer** von euch kann mir **sein** Fahrrad leihen?
 ‘Hello ladies! **Who** (M) of you can lend me **his** bicycle?’

When using the interrogative pronoun *wer* (‘who’) and a possessive in the subsequent noun phrase, natural gender agreement at the expense of grammatical agreement leads to a grammatically incorrect sentence (4a/5a), whereas natural gender divergence (4b/5b) is not at all problematic from a grammatical perspective. A similar picture emerges for relative pronouns (6a) and possessives (6b–d) after uninflectable masculine pronouns like *wer* (‘whoever’), *man* (‘one’), *jemand* (‘somebody’) and *niemand* (‘nobody’). Reference chains must continue to use the same grammatical gender even if the context makes it clear that the referent is female.

- (6a) **Wer** schwanger ist, **der**/***die** kommt hierher. (Pittner 1996, p. 74)
 ‘**Whoever** (M) is pregnant, **he**/***she** should come here.’
- (6b) Wie kann **man seine**/***ihre** Schwangerschaft feststellen? (Samel 2000, p. 92)
 ‘How can **one** (M) detect **his**/***her** pregnancy?’
- (6c) **Man** erlebt **seine**/***ihre** Schwangerschaft und Geburt jedes Mal anders.
 ‘**One** (M) experiences **his**/***her** pregnancy and birth differently every time.’
 (Trömel-Plötz 1978, p. 51)
- (6d) **Jemand** spricht heute Abend über **seine**/***ihre** Entbindung bei Leboyer.
 ‘**Somebody** (M) is talking this evening about **his**/***her** giving birth using the Leboyer method.’
 (Trömel-Plötz 1978, p. 51)

The strength of grammatical/natural gender divergences thus depends on the expressions and linguistic structures involved. The realization of natural gender is relatively easy for nouns as they can usually be freely gendered (*Lehrerin* ‘teacher’ (F)). At the level of discourse, as in example (3), it is relatively easy to change grammatical gender in favour of natural gender when a pronoun in the next clause refers back to the person in the first clause. It is more difficult when pronouns are marked for a specific grammatical gender for grammatical purposes. While, for example, relative pronouns and some indefinites (*kein* ‘no’, *ein* ‘a’) can be marked for every grammatical gender and can, therefore, be gendered, for some indefinite pronouns and the interrogative pronoun *wer* (‘who’) only the masculine form is possible (6), making gendering impossible and leading to semantically inconsistent expressions.

All of these structures demonstrate the strong influence of grammatical gender at the expense of natural gender. The structures presented here were thus used as sample sentences for a questionnaire survey, the aim of which was to determine how strong endeav-

ours are to use gender-sensitive language with reference to natural gender, even when this pushes grammar to its limits, i. e. when grammatical and natural gender diverge. In the study I analysed 207 questionnaires in which participants² should make judgements about sentences in which the context enforced that references to persons very frequently diverged in relation to their grammatical/natural gender. Some of the sentences were ungrammatical because natural gender was taken account of although it deviated from the grammatical gender of the expression; others were grammatically correct – in relation to grammatical gender – but referred to a different natural gender than the person referred to. The study consisted of 38 coherent utterances embedded in a specific context which were rated according to their acceptability on a Likert scale (Minimum: 1 = poor; maximum: 5 = very good).

The analysis of the responses revealed one thing above all, namely that there is no uniform picture. Ungrammatical sentences which conformed with natural gender were judged to be both acceptable and unacceptable. The same was true for utterances which marked grammatical gender correctly but which did not conform with the natural gender of the person referred to. The type of noun phrase used to refer to a person appears to play a role in that acceptability sank for deviations from the correct natural gender as the semantic motivation of grammatical gender increased. The more grammatical and desemantized a pronoun was (like indefinite pronouns or the uninflectable interrogative pronoun *wer* ('who') whose grammatical gender cannot be changed), the more frequently grammatical/natural gender divergences were accepted. A further observation is that the use of masculine nouns in combination with female gender was judged as being less acceptable when there was a feminine equivalent. If there is no alternative feminine grammatical form, utterances using a masculine noun tended to have greater acceptance. Generally it appears to be the case that feminine expressions, even when male persons were included (= generic feminine noun, e. g. *Krankenpflegerinnen*), were judged to be better than sentences with a generic masculine noun. Finally, sentences in which grammatical and natural gender matched were judged to be most acceptable. Conversely, when grammatical and natural gender did not match, these expressions were judged to be worse. The sentences which were either marked for grammatical or natural gender were all judged as being moderately acceptable. Therefore the average rating was similar for expressions with correct grammatical gender and incorrect natural gender and for expressions with correct natural gender and incorrect grammatical gender. Generally the study revealed that gendering is desirable as long as it does not clash with grammatical gender.

Even when inclusive usage is desired and gender-sensitive expressions should become more strongly established, it is apparent that the grammatical structures of German are a hindrance: gendering leads to divergences in various contexts due to the system of grammatical gender, and the use of forms favouring female natural gender at the expense of grammatical gender leads to ungrammatical sentences. Whether grammatical gender or natural gender is more strongly preferred in these specific contexts cannot (yet) be answered.

² Most participants (84 percent) were between 17 and 24 years old with an average age of 21.

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