Grammatical Gender in Bidialectal Speakers of Swiss and Standard German

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In many language varieties of the world, the grammatical gender of a noun must agree with other constituents in a phrase with which the noun forms a syntactic unit. Grammatical gender as a lexico-syntactic feature is an intrinsic property of the noun [1] [2] as it is often considered to be arbitrary. A noun's grammatical gender is often expressed overtly via its definite determiner. Speakers of Standard German, for example, must know a nouns' gender to select the correct form of three available definite determiners (either "der" for nouns with masculine gender, "die" for nouns with feminine gender, or "das" for nouns with neuter gender). Considering that speakers need to retrieve gender information approximately every ten seconds [3], investigating the process of gender retrieval contributes to the understanding of how speakers can produce speech fluently.

Gender agreement is crucial within noun phrases (determiner + noun) of language varieties that distinguish at least two genders. Both Standard German and Swiss German distinguish three genders [4]. While both dialects have a high lexical similarity and share the same grammatical gender system, some nouns in these dialects do not share the same grammatical gender. Take, for instance, the grammatical gender of the word *snail* in Standard German ("die Schnecke"; feminine) and Swiss German ("de Schnägg"; masculine) [4]. Bidialectal speakers must have different lexical representations for these words. This provides an opportunity to investigate the representation of lexico-syntactic features (e.g., grammatical gender) in the mental lexicon of bidialectal speakers. Results of a picture-naming experiment including 40 bidialectal Swiss-Standard German speakers showed faster naming latencies in Standard German when the grammatical gender of picture and distractor word matched than when they did not match, replicating earlier findings [5]. In Swiss German, this effect was not observed, possibly because gender ambiguity diluted the effect.

The findings can be considered as evidence for a competitive process of gender selection in speech production planning [6] [7] [8]. In the gender-incongruent condition, two competing grammatical genders resulted in slower naming latencies. One reason why no gender congruency effect was observed in Swiss German might be due to a lower degree of standardization. Standard German is a standardized language variety while Swiss German varies from canton to canton and is rarely used in written form [9]. Variations in Swiss German may affect the grammatical gender processing of nouns as well. Implications related to grammatical gender in L2 learning are discussed.

References

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