Grammatical gender and the notion of default: Insights from language acquisition

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the contrast in the timing of acquisition of grammatical gender attested in Dutch and Greek child learners. Greek children show precocious acquisition of neuter gender in particular, while Dutch children experience a long delay in the acquisition of neuter nouns, which extends to school age. For both Dutch and Greek, neuter has been claimed to be the default gender value on grounds of syntactic distribution in contexts where gender agreement is inert. To reconcile the contrast between the learner and the language facts in Dutch, as well as the contrast in the timing between Greek and Dutch monolingual child learners, we consider two sets of criteria to define the notion of default: one set pertains to the notion of linguistic default and the other to the notion of learner default. We suggest that, whereas Greek neuter is both the linguistic and the learner default value, Dutch neuter is the linguistic but not the learner default, leading to a learnability problem.

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Keywords: Grammatical gender; Linguistic default; Learner default; Learnability

1. Introduction

In generative studies default values are usually invoked in an attempt to explain developmental patterns in the acquisition of a particular form or structure. The typical claim is that the default (or 'unmarked') option of a particular abstract feature (e.g. [+/-plural]), of a morphological form (e.g. +/-irregular), or of a structure (e.g. active vs. passive) develops earlier than the non-default option (Neeleman and Weerman, 1999, a.o.).

In the Principles and Parameters framework, the notion 'default' primarily refers to parametric options rather than morphological forms (Hyams, 1986; Chomsky, 1995). Accordingly, in the process of language acquisition, the default option refers to the parametric setting adopted by the learner in the earliest stage when input is either unavailable or unanalyzed as yet. The notion of default has also been used to apply to a form which is underspecified or unspecified for a particular feature. Thus, the third person singular form in various languages, but mostly in null subject ones, has been referred to as the form unspecified for the person feature, hence the default one (Tsimpli, 1996; Ezeizabarrena, 1997; Grinstead, 1998; Perales et al., 2006). Crucially, however, even if 'default' refers to a form, it does so indirectly, i.e. it refers to the clustering of abstract features on this particular form and its spell-out as the form itself (cf. Chung and McCloskey, 1987; Schütze, 2001).

We adopt the assumption that the notion of linguistic default is based on the 'elsewhere condition' (cf. Kiparsky, 1973), i.e. the contexts in which the relevant formal feature appears already valued (from the lexicon) and does not need to enter an agreement process (cf. Bošković, 2009a,b). More generally, the rationale behind the 'elsewhere condition' dictates that if two or more values are associated with a particular feature, those in need of 'checking' through agreement will take priority and block the use of the less specified value (which applies 'elsewhere'). It is this latter value which constitutes the linguistic default. As will be shown in Section 3, [neuter] is the default gender value in both Greek and Dutch.

Language acquisition data on gender in Greek and Dutch reveal a diverse pattern: neuter grammatical gender is early in Greek but not in Dutch development. This contradicts the assumption mentioned above that the linguistic 'default' is also "first to be acquired". The aim of this paper is to address this difference in the timing of acquisition of neuter gender in relation to the underlying similarity in the choice of neuter as a linguistic default, in Greek and Dutch. To this end, we consider the criteria for defining linguistic default and those defining learner default. For the latter we invoke input properties such as transparency, frequency and consistency in gender marking as well as the role of a learner 'strategy' applied in the acquisition of grammatical gender.

Crucially for our discussion, not all gender values within the Greek or the Dutch gender system are acquired at the same rate by monolingual children. For Greek, although gender acquisition is relatively unproblematic as shown by previous studies (Stephany, 1997; Mastropavlou, 2006), neuter nouns show a more precocious pattern of acquisition than masculine or feminine nouns. On the other hand, Dutch data show a striking contrast between the development of *de* (common) and *het* (neuter) nouns. Common nouns appear to be acquired very early while neuter nouns are considerably delayed (Bol and Kuiken, 1988; De Houwer and Gillis, 1998; Zonneveld, 1992; Blom et al., 2008a,b; Van der Velde, 2003; Unsworth et al., 2013).

The structure of the paper is as follows: In section 2 we present the syntactic analysis of grammatical gender we adopt and outline the Greek and the Dutch gender system. In section 3, we present the criteria for the notion of linguistic default with reference to neuter gender in Greek and Dutch. Section 4 presents the evidence from monolingual development reported in previous studies while section 5 defines the criteria for the notion of learner default and proposes two triggers for the discovery of gender in Dutch nouns. In section 6 we discuss some extensions of the learnability problems with Dutch gender followed by concluding remarks.

2. Gender in Greek and in Dutch: an outline of each system

According to Corbett (1991), there is a three-way distinction for gender encoding across languages. Semantic and dominantly semantic systems primarily use biological gender to distinguish between nouns. The third category includes formal systems of gender marking. In these languages, grammatical gender is a nominal classification feature in that the lexical entry of every noun is specified for an intrinsic gender feature (cf. Chomsky, 1995). Crosslinguistic differences are found in the number and type of lexical gender features as well as in the domains (nominal, verbal) in which gender agreement (concord) is encoded (Corbett, 1991). Gender agreement between Determiner and Noun or between a Noun and an Adjective are understood to be syntactic computations involving a dependency of some form between an uninterpretable/unvalued gender feature on D or Adj and its valued counterpart on N (Bošković, 2009a,b; Carstens, 2000; Chomsky, 2001). Although Adj-N differs from D-N concord as intermediate functional categories are required for establishing agreement with modifiers (cf. Ritter, 1991; Koopman, 2006) we adopt Carstens' account as a general approach to concord in minimalism in which multiple checking of uninterpretable features in the DP is possible. With respect to the gender feature in particular, we follow Bošković (2008, 2009) in the distinction between valuation and interpretability. Specifically, unvalued rather than uninterpretable features are assumed to drive syntactic operations. Nouns in grammatical gender languages are intrinsically marked for a valued, uninterpretable gender feature. The agreement relation in gender concord is probed by the unvalued and uninterpretable gender feature (on D or Adj) targeting the valued gender feature on N. An advantage of this approach, which is relevant to our purposes, concerns the distinction between default and non-default gender values in the same language (Bošković, 2009). We will come back to this in section 3 below.

Further crosslinguistic differences in formal gender systems are found in the consistency and transparency of the marking of gender on the noun (lexical gender), as well as in the marking of gender agreeing categories in Det-N and (Det)-Adj-N contexts. Such differences raise interesting psycholinguistic implications for the accessibility of gender cues in adult native speakers, but also for the learnability of gender in a particular language. From the psycholinguistic perspective, there has been evidence showing that lexical gender is activated pre-lexically, i.e. before the complete phonological representation of the word is accessed (e.g. Miozzo and Caramazza, 1997). Accordingly, gender attribution does not implicate noun endings or suffixes. Syntactic cues, i.e. gender on the determiner, have been shown to be the most reliable and deterministic (Taft and Meunier, 1998 for French), while phonological cues are not important across all tasks (Bates et al., 1995 for Italian). Specifically, phonological cues on noun endings can contribute to gender attribution at a post-lexical level, in novel, unknown or borrowed nouns (Bates et al., 1995; Hohlfeld, 2006) or in contexts of agreement