

Is gender simply a property of nouns? Some evidence from Mawng that it is not.

Ruth Singer

Abstract:

It has been argued with respect to German - for which gender categorization is often thought to be largely arbitrary - that not all nouns need be assigned a gender because many semantic fields have a dominant gender, and only the gender of the exceptions need be individually specified (Zubin and Köpcke 2007, 1981, Zubin 1992). This argument applies even more readily to the majority of Australian languages with gender, in which links between semantic fields and genders are much more extensive than in German. A further feature of Australian languages that limits the importance of nouns in gender agreement is the rarity of nouns in discourse. This means that gender agreement is often the hearers main guide to interpreting reference and agreement cannot be said to be 'controlled' by an overt noun. Examples will be presented to illustrate that gender is associated with semantic fields drawing mainly on data from Mawng (NW Arnhem land) which has 5 genders and has verbal as well as NP gender agreement (Singer 2006). Rather than the gender of nouns 'controlling' gender agreement (c.f. Corbett 2006) it seems that the opposite is true: speakers construct gender through their use of gender agreement. Speakers' strategies for deciding on what type of gender agreement to use are influenced by a number of factors, of which a specific association between an individual noun and a gender is only one consideration.

In conclusion I will argue that in Mawng genders have meanings, albeit highly variable meanings just like many verbs, or the meanings of nouns in noun-adjective phrases in English (Sweetser 1999). The meanings of genders are selected according to the context in which they are uttered, including which verbs and nouns they co-occur with, just like the meanings of verbs and nouns with highly variable meanings. By moving on from a purely noun-centred approach to gender we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of gender in Australian languages.

Corbett, G. G. 2006. *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Singer, R. 2006. *Agreement in Mawng: productive and lexicalised uses of verbal gender agreement in an Australian language*. PhD thesis, School of Languages and Linguistics, University of Melbourne.

Sweetser, E. 1999. Compositionality and blending: semantic composition in a cognitively realistic framework. *Cognitive linguistics, foundations, scope and methodology*, *Cognitive linguistics research* 15, ed. by T. A. J. M. Janssen and G. Redeker. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter. 129-62.

Zubin, D. A. 1992. Gender and noun classification. *International encyclopedia of linguistics*, ed. by W. Bright. New York: Oxford University Press. 41-43.

Zubin, D. A. and Köpcke, K.-M. 1981. Gender: a less than arbitrary grammatical category. *Papers from the 17th regional meeting of the Chicago Linguistic Society*:439-49.

Zubin, D. A. and Köpcke, K.-M. 2007. Agreement matters - categorization and agreement in the German gender system. Paper presented to the Categories project

meeting, Language and Cognition group, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics June 4, 2007.