

The effect of semantic domain of the English noun on gender in Spanish/English DPs

This study examines the effect that the semantic domain (familial vs. non-familial) of the noun has on gender selection in mixed DPs (Spanish D, English N). In mixed DPs, heritage speakers of Spanish have the choice of using the feminine or masculine determiner (e.g., (1) and (2)). In Spanish, there must be gender agreement between the noun and the determiner. Regardless of whether participants choose (1) or (2), there will be no gender agreement because the Spanish determiner has gender but the English noun does not, as shown in (3). According to Liceras et al. (2008), this incongruence is solved by using the default masculine determiner, *el*, because the noun is not specified for gender, thus the masculine is realized (Roca, 1989; Harris, 1991), as shown in (4). However, other studies (Jake et al., 2002; Otheguy and Lapidus, 2003) have shown that heritage speakers do indeed use the feminine determiner in mixed DPs such as the examples in (5). I argue that there is a pattern in these counter-examples: the feminine determiner is used with English nouns whose translation equivalent in Spanish is also feminine and are part of the familial semantic domain, which are words heard in the home during childhood. Thus, the semantic domain could affect gender selection in mixed DPs. A total of 20 heritage speakers performed a Forced Choice task. Confidence intervals were used in lieu of differential statistics due to the small number of participants. These results show that participants chose the feminine determiner significantly more frequently with words that were (i) feminine in Spanish, and belonged in the familial domain ($M=.34$, 95% CI [.29, .39]). This was opposed to nouns that were (ii) feminine in Spanish but not part of the familial domain ($M=.81$, 95% CI [.76, .85]), (iii) masculine in Spanish ($M=.89$, 95% CI [.85, .93]), and (iv) nonce words ($M=.59$, 95% CI [.53, .65]). The results provide evidence that gender is not only dictated by the syntactic structure, but also by the input (i.e., the familial domain) that the participants are exposed to in an early age.

Examples

(1) *La* table
the.DET.FEM table
'the table'

(2) *El* table
the.DET.MASC table
'the table'

(3) *La* table
[f] []


(4) *El* table
[] []


(5) a. *la* liquor store
the.DET.FEM liquor store
'the liquore store'

(Otheguy and Lapidus, 2003)

b. *Una* broom
a.DET.FEM broom
'a broom'

c. *Una* rent
a.DET.FEM rent
'a rent'

(Liceras et al., 2008)

Works Cited

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