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Editorial

Editorial introduction to the grammar of gender

The articles in this special issue were first presented at the conference “The Grammar of Gender/Genus i grammatikken”, held at the University of Oslo in November 2002. The financial support given to that conference from the Department of Scandinavian Studies and Comparative Literature is gratefully acknowledged, as is subsequent support during the editorial process from the Center for Advanced Study in Theoretical Linguistics at the University of Tromsø. The editors would also like to take this opportunity to express their gratitude to the reviewers for their very valuable efforts in improving these papers.

Broadly speaking, research on gender tends to concentrate on either agreement or assignment. The bulk of the papers in this special issue fall squarely into the latter category; Gunlög Josefsson’s paper “Semantic and grammatical gender in Swedish” constitutes the exception. She examines a curious agreement phenomenon in Scandinavian that has been discussed more than once in the literature (cf. especially Corbett, 1991: 216–217); apparently, nouns of common gender, such as Swedish *senap* ‘mustard’ most often select common agreement, but sometimes they select neuter agreement:

(1) *Senapen är gul*

Mustard.common.sg.def. is yellow.common.sg.

(2) *Senap är gult*

Mustard is yellow.neut.sg.

Faarlund (1977) gave a transformational account of examples such as 2, broadly within the framework of generative semantics. Later, examples like 2 have either been described as neutral agreement, that is, absence of agreement (see references in Corbett, 1991), or (perhaps more rarely) as semantic agreement (e.g. Enger, 2004).

Drawing on the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle and Marantz, 1993), Josefsson suggests that the apparent disagreement actually is agreement. The neuter form of the adjectives in the examples above is chosen because of agreement with the neuter semantic gender that is in the DP, which overrides the more usual grammatical common gender of the noun itself. In other words, Josefsson argues that there are two gender systems in Swedish, one semantic and one grammatical.

The remaining four papers address topics in gender assignment. Two of these (Nesset and Rice) explore the relationship between theories of gender assignment and broader

linguistic frameworks. The other two (Steinmetz and Trosterud) focus on specific problems related to different historical stages of the gender systems of various languages, from theoretically kindred perspectives.

Tore Nessel's contribution – "Gender meets the Usage-Based Model: Four Principles of Rule Interaction in Gender Assignment" – explores the relationship between theories of gender assignment and the Usage-Based Model, a linguistic model couched in the broader framework of cognitive linguistics. Nessel addresses the implementation in the Usage-Based Model of three principles, viz. Gender Tally, the Elsewhere Condition, and default hierarchies. He argues that the Usage-Based Model offers a unified account of rule ordering and "rule counting" approaches to gender assignment. In his discussion of default hierarchies, Nessel shows that it is possible to incorporate default hierarchies in the model, although they are at variance with the model's strong emphasis on low-level schemas. He also suggests that Corbett and Fraser's (2000) claim that semantic rules take precedence universally in gender assignment may be too strong. As an alternative, Nessel advances the "Core Semantic Override Principle", whereby only rules referring to biological males and females take precedence universally.

"Optimizing gender" by Curt Rice proposes a formalization of gender assignment using the tools of Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky, 1993). Drawing on the core OT notion of constraint violability, Rice focuses on situations in which a noun would seem to be in the domain of conflicting gender-assignment rules. Such situations are those which OT resolves through constraint ranking. Rice argues that constraint ranking is relevant to achieve nondefault assignment, such that specific rules (or, constraints) relevant for gender assignment must dominate those constraints yielding the markedness hierarchy. However, 'majority rules' effects are also found. These effects are formalized by crucial equal ranking, realizing a previously uninstantiated possibility of Prince and Smolensky's classical OT model. The implications for both gender assignment theory and optimality theory are explored.

The marginal status of neuter gender in Germanic and Slavic is the topic of Don Steinmetz' paper, "Gender shifts in Germanic and Slavic: Semantic motivation for neuter?" Steinmetz builds on his (Steinmetz, 1986) theory of gender assignment, and notes that neuter is the most marked category in both Germanic and Slavic. At the same time, he claims that both of these languages historically had neuter as their default category, cf. the article by Trosterud. The change to a masculine default has led to considerable migration of nouns from neuter to masculine. Steinmetz brings out the striking fact that many of the same nouns remained neuter in both families, and explores the possibility that the languages have overlap in their rules for neuter assignment. Such rules can be based on meaning, and of particular interest in his article is the possibility that the same semantic domains are relevant for assignment to neuter in the two language families.

Trond Trosterud suggests a set of assignment rules for Old Norse. Trosterud argues that his rules cover at least 81% of the nouns in the standard dictionaries. His assignment rules are of all three familiar types; semantic, morphological and phonological (the latter two types are sometimes lumped together as "formal" assignment rules). Drawing on work by Steinmetz, Trosterud argues that neuter is the default gender in Old Norse. However, Trosterud also augments Steinmetz's previous work, in that he argues that the "Germanic Gender Shift" cannot be seen as a result of the loss of the suffix *-r* in the nominative

singular alone; it must also have to do with the weak status of the default gender in Old Norse. By contrast, the masculine in Modern Norwegian (one of the daughter languages of Old Norse) has a status as a ‘strong’ default gender, according to Trosterud.

We hope that the papers in this special issue will promote further study of gender, which Corbett (1991) calls “the most puzzling of grammatical categories”.

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