

On the gender agreement of Spanish epicene nouns: when grammar and conceptualization compete

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We focus on epicene nouns in Spanish and their gender agreement with other syntactic categories. We ask whether grammatical principles alone are enough to determine agreement marking or whether conceptualization of the referent's gender interacts in this otherwise grammatical compositional process.

Epicene nouns are those that do not change their marking with respect to the referent, as other nouns in gender-marking languages do (Corbett, 1991). It is standardly assumed that this fixed gender triggers agreement.

However, epicenes create situations of mismatch between their grammatical gender and the referent's social gender:

- (1) La niña es un genio en matemática
 The _{FEM} girl _{FEM} is a _{MASC} genius _{MASC} in Math.
 The girl is a Math genius.

Hypothesis. The referent's social gender can trigger agreement instead of the grammatical rule, suggesting that gender is not merely a grammatical feature, but rather has conceptual implications that connect to how speakers use their language. We predict that sentences like (2), where agreement is conditioned by the semantics of "the girl", would be equally accepted as (1).

- (2) La niña es una genio en matemática
 The _{FEM} girl _{FEM} is a _{FEM} genius _{MASC} in Math.
 The girl is a Math genius.

Participants. 31 speakers of Argentine Spanish performed an acceptability-judgment task with four conditions: no mismatch, complete mismatch, mismatch and morphosyntactic agreement rule, and mismatch and "conceptual agreement".

Results, analyzed with an ANOVA test and mixed effects model, show acceptability differences of no-mismatch condition (Mean 4.5) and complete mismatch (1.9) but mismatch- conceptual agreement sentences were equally acceptable as those with morphosyntactic agreement (3.5 and 3.4; p-value: 0.3), indicating that the grammatical epicene rule does not exist so categorically in speakers' minds. Thus, during the gender agreement process, conceptual and syntactic information seem to overlap, and conceptualization of gender permeates over the grammatical gender system.

References

Corbett, G. (1991). *Gender (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics)*. Cambridge University Press.