

Abstract

The relation between the nominal system and gender (Genus) has always been in the focus of linguistic research. The interest shown in this topic can in all probability be explained by the special status of gender within the categorization of the noun: Gender is namely – in opposition to grammatical number and case – an inherent property of the noun and within nominal inflection it appears as the most explicit categorization of the noun, it remains constant in all nominal forms. In declining a noun gender, number and case always unite in a single form. Therefore the correct knowledge of gender being the only constant element of the three grammatical categories is of great importance.

The question of arbitrariness and motivatedness often arises in connection with the determination of the gender of nouns. Opposing theories have long existed in relation to this. There are numerous grammars where theories about the arbitrariness of gender appear. However, there is also research claiming the opposite of this, i.e. that gender has a well-formed system. To confirm this hypothesis a number of empirical investigations have been carried out in the last decades. Based on the results of these investigations, the hypotheses can be formulated that first, gender is not linked arbitrarily and accidentally to nouns and secondly, that the determination of gender is not only possible through learning the noun and its genus together by heart, but both formal features and the semantic properties of the referent influence the process of genus-assignment. Thus, with all probability the assignment of the proper gender to a noun is essentially determined by rules. Although research on the problem of the correct assignment of gender has also been carried out by Hungarian linguists in the past decades, systematic empirical research has not been conducted in this field in Hungary so far. Thus, the author presents on the basis of her investigation research results and insights that have not been formulated with respect to Hungarian second language learners of a certain age so far.

The aim of the thesis can be summed up as follows: Starting from the results of the theoretical investigations carried out so far the thesis on the basis of the empirical research conducted with 14- and 16-year old pupils speaking Hungarian as their native language and studying German wants to answer the following questions: Is it possible for a native-like system of rules for the assignment of gender to develop with those studying German, and if yes, in what degree? The dissertation also wants to find an answer to the question whether this system of rules already enables the pupils in the initial phases of learning to assign the correct gender to even unknown words on the basis of realisations gained from linguistic input. Throughout the

investigations special attention is paid to the question of the validity of gender-indicators, as well as to their perceptibility, recognisability and conscious usage. As the pupils presumably start to apply the semantic and formal rules deduced from linguistic input and assigned to unknown nouns only step by step, it is also necessary to investigate whether in the course of gender-assignment associations based on semantics and individual learning strategies help to acquire the correct forms and if yes, to what extent?

In all likelihood, the investigations will provide both theoretical and didactic results concerning teaching practice. Thus, the thesis will hopefully lead to relevant insights in connection with the validity of the rules of gender-assignment, which may contribute to a deeper understanding of the language acquisition process (e.g. the storage of information in the mental lexicon gained about gender, the process of activating these pieces of information in processing the status of gender). As is to be expected, the results will also have didactic implications and will inspire the development of further learning strategies that may help acquiring gender.

The most important hypotheses investigated and evaluated in the thesis are the following:

1. Gender-assignment is essentially not arbitrary, but motivated, it occurs on the basis of rules.
2. The rules of gender-assignment are not equally operative. The differences can primarily be found in the perceptibility of rules, in the frequency of their occurrence, in their reliability and validity. These criteria significantly influence the relevance of rules towards a certain gender.
3. Semantic principles are efficient (they are valid).
4. Formal principles are efficient (they are valid).
5. The various principles of gender-assignment are not of equal rank.
6. In the process of gender-assignment there is a distinction between processing transparent and non-transparent nouns.
7. In gender-assignment importance can be attached to associations based on the meaning of a noun as well as individual genus-associations.
8. There are rules in German deduced from linguistic input that learners build into their linguistic competence in the course of language and genus-acquisition and which enable the learners to apply them to determining the gender of unknown nouns in the course of gender-assignment.

Keywords: gender, Genus, gender-assignment, arbitrariness, systematicity, transparency, consciousness, psychological reality