

DIFFICULTIES IN THE ACQUISITION OF GRAMMATICAL GENDER IN SLAVIC LANGUAGES

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Abstract. The following paper is dedicated to one of the most intriguing grammar questions, which is the acquisition of grammatical gender in a foreign language. A survey presents the difficulties in acquiring the Polish grammatical gender by Russian and Serbian students. In the survey Polish gender was widely presented in a comparative and descriptive-analytical aspect. The morphological and structural features in their similarities and differences with the learners' native language are presented.

The issue of grammatical gender has been the object of analysis for many authors but to this day there is not one complete elaboration of this issue and many questions still remain to be investigated. A more contemporary comparison and especially one including a representative of each Slavic language group seems indispensable. There is also a need to change the way grammatical gender is presented in class. It is advisable to implement a more active approach in the didactic process of acquisition through the use of task-based learning and content-based teaching as well as to take into account cultural factors. As a result, gender acquisition would be made more attractive and life-oriented.

Key words: grammatical gender, Slavic languages, Polish, Russian, Serbian, gender acquisition.

1. INTRODUCTION

In languages where it exists, the system of grammatical gender is mastered by native speakers at an early age without the need for explicit rules. However, gender appears to be a difficult obstacle to surmount in foreign (L2) language, even for learners whose native language (L1) has a similar background. In this paper the acquisition of Polish grammatical gender and its specificity to Russian and Serbian auditorium is analyzed. The question stays current because, as practice shows, until now, non-native speakers have not been able to master the proper use of Polish grammatical gender. In the study by Davidson and Indefrey, authors remark that *it is possible that grammatical gender is more difficult to acquire than other grammatical distinctions* (Davidson, 2009, p. 444). For foreigners the problem is complex as it is connected with the interference of their native language and the need for new world conceptualisation.

2. METHODS

In the course of the study of the acquisition process of Polish grammatical gender the comparative and descriptive-analytical methods of analysis were used.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The question of the acquisition of grammatical gender in foreign languages has been the object of analysis for many authors. K. Oliphant (Oliphant, 1998) investigated American students' sensitivity to gender cues in Italian. D. Bordag (Bordag, 2004) analyzed the influence of interlingual and intralingual interference on grammatical gender acquisition in Czech and German, and E. Montanari (Montanari, 2014) studied the acquisition of grammatical gender of German by multilingual pre-school children.

There are numerous works which compare Polish and Russian for example: (Bogusławski & Karolak 1973), (Dąbrowska, Dobesz, & Pasięka, 2010), (Krawczuk, 2012) and (Montanari, 2014), Russian and Serbian (Maroević, 2006), (Piper, 2005), Polish and Serbian (Kostić-Golubičić, 1998). The majority of those works are designed primarily for the university students and are of more theoretical use. Besides, they are not wholly devoted to grammatical gender. Moreover, none of them compare three studied languages.

3.1. Grammatical gender of Polish, Russian and Serbian: major characteristics

Polish, Russian and Serbian languages belong to the group of Slavic languages and therefore have many genetic similarities. Gender of nouns in those languages is an obligatory, non-inflectional (classifying), semantic with structural significance category. Traditionally it is also a ternary category. From the point of view of meaning the similarity is also manifested in the presence of semantic markers of animate / inanimate subject, sex (male or female) and person.

In Polish, Russian and Serbian lexical ambiguity is a widespread phenomenon. For example, the Polish lexemes *cel*, *system* (*aim*, *system*) are masculine, *muzeum*, *stypendium* (*museum*, *scholarship*) are neuter, whereas the Russian *цель*, *система* are feminine, *музей* is masculine and *стипендия* is feminine and Serbian *циљ*, *систем* are masculine, *муzej* is masculine and *стипендија* – feminine. Oftentimes this ambiguity proves difficult to grasp for those who learn Polish as their first foreign language. It is not however the main problem. It takes more time to learn to conjunct properly the words differing in gender with other parts of speech. The point is that Polish masculine gender is subdivided into more groups which results in significant conceptual differences in comparison to Russian and Serbian.

3.2. Difficulties in Polish grammatical gender acquisition

Traditionally Polish nouns can be divided, in terms of gender, into masculine, feminine and neuter. However, the masculine gender is more complicated as it is then further subdivided by personhood and animacy. In effect there are three masculine gender classes: personal masculine, animate (non-personal) masculine and inanimate masculine.

Personal masculine gender reveals itself in singular and plural. This gender is typical of nouns that mean 'human', e.g. *student*, *kolega* (*student*, *friend*). The characteristic feature of these nouns is the identity of genitive and accusative forms in the singular and plural. Animate personal gender occurs only in the singular and it is characteristic for animal names, like *koń*, *pies* (*horse*, *dog*). Animate personal nouns have identical genitive and accusative singular forms. The third category; inanimate masculine gender is reserved for inanimate masculine nouns such as: *samochód*, *stół*

(*car, table*). The characteristic feature of this group of nouns is the identity of nominative and accusative forms in the singular and plural.

For Russian and Serbian learners the ternary subdivision of masculine in singular does not cause difficulties as the corresponding Russian and Serbian nouns behave in a similar way, compare: (Acc) *Widzę studenta* – (G) *Nie ma studenta*; (Acc) *Widzę psa* – (G) *Nie ma psa*; (Acc) *Widzę stół* – (N) *To jest stół* // *Вижу студента* – *Нет студента*; *Вижу пса* – *Нет пса*; *Вижу стол* – *Это стол* // *Видим студента* – *Нема студента*; *Видим пса* – *Нема пса*; *Видим сто* – *То је сто* (*I see student* – *There is no student*; *I see dog* – *There is no dog*; *I see table* – *It is table*).

It is necessary to focus on personal masculine gender which divides nouns in the plural into personal and non-personal. In Russian there is only one plural form – *они*, in Serbian there is a special form for every gender in the plural – *они, оне, она* – for masculine, feminine and neuter, while in Polish there are two – *oni* and *one*. L2 speakers are therefore required, firstly, to distinguish which nouns can be substituted by *oni* and which by *one*. In Polish *oni* is a personal gender pronoun and *one* – non-personal. In this section the subdivision of masculine nouns in the singular is significant as nouns of animate personal and inanimate genders are related to non-personal gender in the plural. Secondly, L2 speakers need to master the gender agreement with other parts of speech. Personal gender is also the gender of personal pronouns and numerals, and it affects the form of the verb in the past, the future compound tense and conditional mood. As a result, the learners are compelled to learn quite complicated rules for creating the correct grammatical forms of the various parts of speech to which the noun refers to.

In practice, Russian and Serbian students need to conceptualize the information differently. To compare, in Russian nouns are divided into animate and inanimate group and in accusative singular they say *вижу мальчика / женщину / слона / птицу* (*I see a boy / a woman / an elephant / a bird*) and in accusative plural *вижу мальчиков / женщин / слонов / птиц* (*I see boys / women / elephants / birds*). Because all names of animals belong to the animate group of nouns in plural their forms are identical with the genitive case. In Serbian masculine nouns also split into animate and inanimate groups and in accusative singular they say *видим дечака / жену / слона / птицу*, but the accusative plural has a special form, which

ends in *-e* for masculine and feminine, and *-a* for neuter, which is the same as nominative plural: *видим дечаке / жене / слонове / птице*. However, in Polish it is necessary to ‘shift’ animals into non-personal group. Correct forms in Polish are then *widzę chłopców* – personal gender; the accusative form matches with genitive; and *widzę kobiety / słonie / ptaki* – non-personal gender; the accusative form matches with the nominative form. In Polish plural forms, the opposition of animate and inanimate is neutralized.

All of the mentioned genetic differences are the cause of most typical flexion errors in learners’ language.

3.3. Belonging to a particular gender

Studies conducted in the Polish language have showed that it is phonological and morphological form in nominative singular that determines a noun’s belonging to a particular grammatical class. The most extensive research of the issue was carried out by W.T. Stefanczyk (Stefanczyk, 2007). His survey presents a detailed classification of nouns into gender classes. Nevertheless, the work is highly philological and it focuses only on the Polish language while in the age of glottodidactics it is comparative works that are gaining in importance.

The Polish system of word endings partly agrees with Russian and Serbian ones. At beginner level when the teacher invokes similarities, it is highly satisfying and motivating for students that they are able to correctly assign gender to nouns. Some difficulties appear but emphasizing the similarities in the didactic process should help to overcome them. For instance, in Polish there is a group of masculine nouns which ends in *-a*, like *kolega, poeta* (*friend, poet*). Students usually assume those words to be of feminine gender, taking into consideration only the ending. They do not consider the semantics of those lexemes and correlation of this type words in their own language, for instance in Russian: *мужчина, коллега* (*man, colleague*), as well as the Serbian – *колега, тата* (*colleague, daddy*).

With each month of learning, the knowledge and difficulty level increase. The Polish language reveals its own specific characteristics. Nouns show more gender indicators. What are they?

Polish masculine nouns can end in *-ø, -a, -o*. The most numerous is the group of lexemes ending in -

\emptyset , like *kot, dom, opiekun* (*cat, house, caretaker*). Words ending in *-a*, such as *turysta, kosmonauta* (*tourist, cosmonaut*), is a group of 1130 nouns according to Stefanczyk (Stefanczyk, 2007, p. 34). The smallest group is the one with *-o* ending. Examples of lexemes belonging to this group are: *wnusio, dziadunio; maftoso, impresario* (with love about *grandchild, grandfather; mafioso, impresario*). Although the third group is not numerous, it is necessary to raise students' awareness that not all nouns ending in *-o* are neuter.

The feminine gender is represented by words ending in *-a, -i* and \emptyset . Lexemes with the *-a* ending: *mama, książka, woda* (*mommy, book, water*) is the most numerous group. The second group of feminine nouns, with the *-i* ending or, to be more precise, with the suffix *-ini// -yni* is a limited class. *Słownik języka polskiego* (Polish language vocabulary) edited by W. Doroszewski counts 120 derivatives with the suffix *-ini// -yni* (Stefanczyk, 2007, p. 37). Here belong such words as: *gospodyni, bogini, mistrzyni* (*hostess, goddess, mistress*). In spite of the fact that there are not many words of this type, it is necessary to account the frequency factor of their occurrence, especially an isolated lexeme *pani* (*Ms. / woman / lady / madam*), used in Polish to respectfully refer to a woman. *Pani* appears at a very early stage in the course of language learning. It is one of the basic concepts of the Polish language. This is an argument in favor in the discussion why it is reasonable to make students acquainted with the group of *-ini// -yni*. Finally, there is group of lexemes ending in \emptyset . Nouns of this group have suffix *-(o)ść*, like: *miłość, radość* (*love, happiness*); end in a soft consonant: *pleć, wieś, jesień* (*sex, village, autumn*); end in a historically soft consonant: *noc, mysz, twarz, rzecz, sól* (*night, mouse, face, thing, salt*); and end in a hard labial consonant, such as: *marchew, krew* (*carrot, blood*). Polish feminine gender with \emptyset is similar to Russian feminine nouns ending in $-ь$ and Serbian nouns of third declension *ноћ, ствар, печ* (*night, thing, word*). Most Russian feminine nouns ending in $-ь$ do not have specific markers which could be used to distinguish them from masculine nouns ending in $-ь$. However some of the lexemes have common features and may be placed in groups. One of them is the group of nouns ending in *-ость, -есть*, such as: *молодость, свежесть* (*youth, freshness*), similar to the Polish *-(o)ść* one. In the learning process it is reasonable to show the parallels among L2 and L1, where they exist.

And the neuter gender. In the nominative singular neuter nouns can end in: *-e, -o, -um, -ę*. The most numerous groups are with *-e* and *-o*: *słońce, życie*, (*sun, life*); *okno, jezioro* (*window, lake*). The majority of Russian and Serbian neuter nouns also ends in *-e* and *-o*. In Polish ending *-ę* is reserved for words meaning young beings: *dziecię, kocię* (*baby, cat*) and others, like: *imię, plemię* (*name, tribe*), which in Russian is small neuter group with *-я* ending and in Serbian with typical neuter ending *-e*, compare: *имя, племя; име, племе*. There is another group of neuter nouns in Polish which ends in *-um*: *muzeum, terytorium* (*museum, territory*) and are of Greek and Latin origin. It is an intriguing fact that in Russian and Serbian those nouns have been assigned the masculine and feminine genders.

3.4. How to teach grammatical gender

Grammatical gender is usually taught in a traditional manner by theoretical explanation and grammatical drills. With regards to Polish, and especially when it comes to teaching plural forms, the grammar-translation method is justified, however, it should not be the only one method used. R. DeKeyser postulates that a large amount of systematic practice, practice being defined as meaningful receptive and productive language use and effortful practice of the target language's difficult linguistic features is needed in the process of acquisition (DeKeyser, 2010, p. 158). He suggests using in the teaching process communicative drills, role-playing activities, task-based learning, and content-based teaching. He also admits the importance of including a culture factor.

B. Harley (Harley, 2010) also argues in favor of a proactive approach in teaching grammatical gender. According to the author the challenge is to draw students' attention to patterns and then to engage them in interesting tasks whose completion requires making accurate gender distinctions.

Useful advice can be found in G.M. Nurullina and Z.F. Yusupova (Nurullina & Yusupova, 2016) work. The authors recommend that in teaching genus of inanimate nouns, like *wind, fire*, it should be explained through antique attitude to nature as live beings with feelings and thoughts, which can now be found in poetic language and folklore. Such an approach also includes the forming of the culturological competence. Practice shows that materials revealing some of the target culture are more attractive to students and makes learning

easier. And in XXI century it is particularly important to interest students in the subject.

4. RESULTS

The complexity of the Polish grammatical gender features cause a number of problems in its acquisition to non-native speakers. The traditional way of teaching and materials available are insufficient.

5. DISCUSSION

Taking all of the aforementioned into consideration it seems obvious that Polish grammatical gender is a complex question and it should be treated with due attention. Besides, the traditional way of presenting the issue in the classroom needs to be significantly varied and enriched. Moreover, there is a need for new research where Polish, Russian and Serbian grammatical gender systems are compared and above-mentioned methods of its acquisition are practically expressed.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research allows for the following conclusions to be made. Grammatical gender systems in Polish, Russian and Serbian have a lot in common, however, there are also significant differs. The differences make the process of gender acquisition complicated, even in closely related languages. That is the reason why comparative study of noun gender in Slavic languages is of current importance. Such a work should contain numerous tasks which would enable one to master the gender ascription, its agreement with other parts of speech, and noticeably automatize its proper usage. Furthermore, the tasks should be life-oriented which would learners to see its practical use in reality.

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