Grammatical Gender Determination Strategies for the Native and Advanced L2 Spanish Speaker

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Gender Determination Strategies for the Native and Advanced L2 Spanish Speaker

Abstract: To those in the field of Second Language Acquisition, gender, and the role it plays in the languages of the world, is a source of much inquiry. To native speakers of languages with grammatical genders, the ability to determine which gender to assign to each word of their vocabulary is a skill that seems to be subconsciously acquired with little to no difficulty early on in the language acquisition process. While to the nonnative L2 learner, the concept of grammatical gender can usually seem arbitrary and overwhelming. As a result, correctly determining grammatical gender is often a daunting task that seems to plague even the most adept of learners. This difference in ability and competence, and more particularly the L2 learner’s ability to cope with these differences, is the focal point of this research study.

Particularly, this work examines the differences in the strategies used by Native Spanish Speakers and advanced L2 Spanish speakers when attempting to determine the grammatical gender of nouns. To guide the study two research questions were used:

1. What are the differences in ability between Native and advanced L2 speakers when determining grammatical gender, and corresponding article, of Spanish nouns.
2. What techniques and strategies do Native and L2 speakers use when determining grammatical gender? How are they alike and/or different?

To conduct the research a survey was administered that required a Native and advanced L2 Spanish speaker to attempt to correctly identify the gender and corresponding article of 40 Spanish nouns. The strategies the participants used to make their determination were also recorded for comparison.
and analysis. At the conclusion of the study it was clearly evident that the Native speaker out
performed the L2 speaker and was able to correctly determine the grammatical gender nearly three-
times as well. The Native and L2 speaker also relied upon very different methods and strategies to
inform their decisions. In the majority of the instances the Native speaker relied more on a more
abstract understanding of “feeling” to determine grammatical gender while the L2 speaker
attempted to rely more on concrete patterns or rules of categorization.

This research project is important and relevant because the Native speaker’s observed
reliance on subsumed grammatical gender information could serve as a great focal point for future
research. This is because these findings do not seem in line with past research study patterns (eg.
Sagarra and Hershensohn, 2013; Foote, 2015; Alarcón 2011) that conclude that native speakers rely
on syntactical, morphological and semantic cues. As a result, it could prove to be very enlightening
to conduct a subsequent research study that attempts to further unpack the subtle strategies used by
Native speakers. Based off the data from this research project it seems as though if anyone is
attempting to rely on linguistic feature cues, it is the L2 learners. If future research is able to truly
understand how native speakers acquire grammatical gender, then perhaps L2 leaners could become
less reliant on “cues” and develop even better ways to identify grammatical gender. Lastly, since
the complex results from the Native speaker expose that there is much more research to be done on
their abilities, it would also be useful to conduct research on the Spanish education environment in
countries where the Native language is Spanish. This research project is just a glimpse into the
possibilities, and future research projects would benefit from much larger research pools, especially
ones in an environment where Native speakers are acquiring and fine-tuning their language and
grammar skills in formal settings. And hopefully such projects that are able to build off of the
findings in this one may provide some extremely valuable insight into the seemingly arbitrary and
complicated, yet essential world of grammatical gender in the Spanish language.