GENDER AGREEMENT HIERARCHY IN COMMON GENDER AND EPICENE NOUNS IN EUROPEAN SPANISH[1]

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ABSTRACT. Gender is a grammatical category defined as an abstract morphosyntactic feature of nouns reflected in characteristics of associated words (i.e. agreement) (Hockett, 1958; Corbett, 1991). Agreement is, in fact, easily established in "transparent" nouns which follow either semantic or formal rule of gender agreement. However, when we deal with ambiguous nouns regarding their gender, i.e. those in which morphological and semantic cues conflict, agreement is not straightforward. In this article I aim to pursue two main goals. Firstly, to review and briefly describe grammatical gender system in Spanish (§1) with a special focus on so called "ambiguous" or "problematic" nouns (§2). Secondly, to review agreement hierarchy theories and explore if they are applicable for Spanish epicenes and common gender nouns (§3). Discussion and conclusion remarks are presented in (§4).

Keywords: grammatical gender, gender agreement, Spanish, epicenes, common gender nouns

RESUMEN. El género es una categoría gramatical definida como un rasgo morfosintáctico abstracto de los sustantivos reflejado en las características de palabras asociadas (i.e. concordancia) (Hockett, 1958; Corbett, 1991). De hecho, la concordancia se establece fácilmente para los sustantivos "transparentes" que siguen el criterio semántico o el criterio formal. Sin embargo, cuando se trata de sustantivos ambiguos en cuanto al género, por ejemplo, en aquellos en los que las claves morfológica y semántica presentan un conflicto, la concordancia no es sencilla. En este artículo me planteo dos objetivos principales. En primer lugar, revisar y describir brevemente el sistema del género gramatical en español (§1) con especial hincapié en sustantivos "ambiguos" o "problemáticos" (§2). En segundo lugar, revisar algunas teorías sobre la jerarquía de concordancia y explorar si se pueden aplicar a sustantivos epicenos y de género común en español (§3). La discusión y las conclusiones se presentan en (§4).

Palabras clave: el género gramatical, concordancia de género, español, sustantivos epicenos, sustantivos comunes en cuanto al género

1. Introduction

Grammatical gender is a common characteristic of the Indo-European languages. According to the World Atlas of Language Structures (Corbett, 2013a), approximately a half of the sampled languages (n = 112) does present a gender system, whereas in over a half of the samples (n = 144) there is no gender distinction for nouns. Gender systems

vary according to the number of genders (from 2 genders to more than 5) (Corbett, 2013b), and the establishment of gender assignment. In terms of gender assignment, some languages have sex-based systems of grammatical gender, that is, biological sex of referents is the core to distinguish between feminine and masculine. Other languages are non-sex-based, where gender system is based on some sort of animacy (Corbett, 2013c).

Spanish, as other Romance languages, has a binary masculine-feminine gender system. Masculine is frequently considered to be the default gender (Harris, 1991; Roca, 1989). For example, in (1), nadie 'nobody' is the subject and the agreement triggered on the predicate malo 'evil' is masculine (Roca, 1989: 14).

(1)   Para él,   nadie   es malo.
      for   him, nobody is evil-M
      'for him, nobody is evil'

Masculine default is also observed in agreement between neuter pronouns and predicates, as predicate adjectives do not have neuter forms. In these cases, the agreement is always masculine, as shown in (2).

(2)   Aquello fue   maravilloso.
      that-N   was marvelous-M
      'that was marvelous'

Nouns are subdivided into animate (those that denote people and higher animals) and inanimate ones (those that name objects). Gender assignment is based on two criteria, depending on the type of a noun: semantic and formal (Corbett, 2013c). According to Corbett (1991)[2], masculine and feminine genders have a semantic core, and that is why they follow semantic assignment rules:

   a. Sex-differentiable nouns denoting males are masculine.
   b. Sex-differentiable nouns denoting females are feminine.

The sex-differentiable nouns have two forms: one masculine and one feminine. For example, nouns like abuelo 'granddad' and abuela 'grandmum' have masculine and feminine grammatical gender as they refer to male and female person respectively. Harris (1991: 38-39) claims that Spanish animate or sex-differentiable nouns can be included in different groups, according to their formal characteristics:

   1) Nouns which have a masculine and a feminine form (e.g., muchacho 'boy, muchacha 'girl').
   2) Nouns which have no word marker (e.g., estudiante 'student', joven 'a young person').
   3) Nouns which are masculine marked but paired to feminine (e.g., profes(or) and profes(ora) 'professor-M/F').
   4) Masculine and feminine nouns related by the derivational suffix (e.g., duque 'duke' and duquesa 'duchess').
   5) Nouns, which contain word marker -a, can be either masculine or feminine (e.g., artista 'artist-M/F).

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[2]Although these rules were proposed for French and Russian in Corbett's work, they are also applicable to Spanish gender system.

6)   Nouns, which contain word marker -o, can be wither masculine or feminine (e.g., testigo 'witness-M/F).

As for nonhuman animates, i.e. animals, the general case is that the gender is assigned arbitrary and is used for both males and females, as shown in (3a). A few cases represent names of males and females related by derivational affixation or suppletion (3b). Finally, only a few cases (3c) are similar to human male/female distinction (Harris, 1991).

(3)	Masculine	Feminine	
a.	erizo	*eriza	'hedgehog'.
	dinosaurio	*dinosaurian	'dinosaur'.
	*foco	foca	'seal'.
	*ardillo	ardilla	'squirrel'.
b.	caballo	yegua	'horse/mare'.
	gallo	gallina	'cock/hen'.
c.	perro	perra	'dog'

Gender of inanimate nouns is reported to be arbitrary, as there is no correlation with the meaning (e.g., asiento 'seat' and silla 'chair') or with the phonological form (e.g., caso 'case' and casa 'house' (Harris, 1991). However, grammatical gender of inanimate words could be predicted according to the formal criterion. Phonologically, inanimate nouns can be roughly subdivided into two groups: transparent and opaque. Generally, transparent nouns are those that provide a clear morphophonological characteristic that help to know their gender. Specifically, nouns ending in –o are masculine (e.g., libro 'book'), whilst those ending in –a are feminine (e.g., botella 'bottle') (Anderson, 1961; Harris, 1991; Teschner and Russell, 1984). There are few exceptions to this rule. For example, nouns like mano-(F) 'hand' or problema-(M) 'problem' are feminine and masculine respective, even though their phonological forms state the opposite. Clegg (2011), based on an analysis of about 1000 Spanish nouns, claims that ending -o indicates masculine gender in 99.9%, whereas ending -a states the feminine form in 99.4% of cases.

Opaque inanimate nouns, on the other hand, do not give any phonological cue to gender, as they frequently end in a consonant, -e or other vowels. These can be either masculine or feminine, for example, llave 'key' is feminine, whereas coche 'car' is masculine (Harris, 1991).

Agreement is considered to be a determining feature of gender and is defined as "the process by which one lexical category (e.g., an adjective) is inflected to express the properties of another (e.g., a noun)…" (Aronoff and Fudeman, 2005: 234). In Spanish, agreement affects determiners (indefinite and definite articles, el/la 'the-M/F'), adjectives (guapo/guapa 'beautiful-M/F'), participles (hecho/hecha 'done-M/F') ordinal numbers (segundo/segunda 'second-M/F') and one cardinal number (uno/una 'one-M/F'), personal (nosotros/nosotras 'we-M/F'), indefinite (algún/alguna 'some-M/F'), and relative (cuyo/cuya 'whose-M/F') pronouns. The example of agreement in Spanish is illustrated in (4)3.

3Abbreviations used in the glosses are the following: M masculine, F feminine, PART.M participle in masculine form, PART.F participle in feminine form. Following Rodina (2008), in order to distinguish, the gender of a noun is marked in parenthesis, the gender of an agreement item (target item) is market without parenthesis.

(4)   a. un   chico   alto   estaba   tirado   en el sofá.
        a-M   boy-(M) tall-M was   lie-PART.M   on the sofa
        a tall boy was lying on the sofa
      b. una   chica   alta   estaba   tirada   en el sofá.
        a-F   girl-(F) tall-F was   lie-PART.F   on the sofa
        a tall girl was lying on the sofa

Establishing gender agreement with opaque (those that do not provide a linguistic cue to gender) and "problematic" (e.g., epicenes and common gender nouns) nouns can cause difficulties for at least two populations: children acquiring Spanish as L1 and L2 students of Spanish. Thus, it is interesting to explore the rules that guide the agreement process in these ambiguous nouns. This article can be useful for teachers of Spanish as L2, as it discusses several problematic issues of Spanish grammatical gender system.

The aim of this article is to discuss gender agreement hierarchy in "problematic" nouns with a special focus on epicenes and common gender nouns, i.e. nouns which have mismatching cues. I will address several accounts to gender agreement hierarchy arguing about which criterion is predominant in problematic cases. The question I want to answer in this article is whether semantically gendered common gender nouns and epicenes always trigger masculine or feminine agreement respectively, or, in other words, if semantics always takes precedence in agreement. I will focus on the dialect of Spanish spoken in Europe. The article is structured as follows. Section 2 is dedicated to the class of problematic nouns in Spanish, specifically, common gender nouns and epicenes. In Section 3, I discuss gender agreement hierarchy for common gender and epicene nouns and outline some theories which have proposed several accounts to gender agreement in "problematic" nouns, as well as I discuss the issue of establishing gender agreement for transparent, opaque and problematic nouns before drawing the conclusions in Section 4.

2. On the issue of "problematic" nouns

In the previous section I have briefly described nouns whose gender is normally predictable on the basis of semantic or morphophonological information. For animate nouns, gender can be derived from semantic information, that is, the biological sex of the referent. For inanimate transparent nouns, gender can be retrieved from the morphological form.

However, according to Corbett (1991: 66), there are nouns that do not fit into gender system directly, i.e. gender of these nouns is not predicted by the general assignment rules. Frequently, as such nouns have mismatching gender cues, there is a conflict between gender assignment rules. A clear example of a "problematic" noun is a German word for girl *Mädchen*. Semantically, this noun is feminine since it refers to a female, however, formally it is neuter because of the diminutive suffix –chen. Thus, in agreement process, this noun can either take neuter pronoun *es* 'it' or feminine pronoun *sie* 'she'. Another example of these nouns is a Russian word *vrač* 'doctor', which can denote both males and females. When *vrač* is used to denote a woman, masculine or feminine agreement can be observed, as in the following structures. Corbett (1991) claims that agreement pattern in (5a) for the hybrid noun *vrač* is more common than in (5b). However, in the predicate (example 5c), feminine is more frequent. As we can see, in some languages "problematic" nouns allow variability in gender agreement.

(5)   a. noviy   vrač.
        new-M doctor
        'a new doctor'

    b. novaja vrač.
      new-F doctor
    'a new doctor'
    c. vrač   prišl-a.
      doctor came-F
    'the doctor came'

Regarding Spanish, one of the examples of mismatching of two criteria is the noun papá 'dad' or any male name which ends in -a. In this case, formally the noun is feminine as its ending is -a, but denote a male, so the agreement, as shown in (6), is masculine. Clearly, these nouns demonstrate that the semantic rule of gender agreement is dominant, as was previously stated by Rodina (2008).

(6)   a. nuestro papá   es   listo.
          our-M dad-(M) be-3sg intelligent-M
          'our dad is intelligent'
        b. Rafa   parece   viejo.
          Rafa-(M) seem-3sg old-M
          'Rafa seems old'

Other cases of ambiguous nouns as for gender agreement are common gender nouns and epicenes, which I will explore in the following section.

2.1. Common gender nouns

According to RAE and ASALE (2010), common gender nouns are those that have the same form for both masculine and feminine gender variants. Normally, they refer to people or animals and can be grouped into four types in terms of their ending. Some examples are summarized in the Table 1 below.

Table 1. Common gender nouns in Spanish

Noun's ending	Example
-a / -ista	astronauta 'astronaut', guitarrista 'guitar player', artista 'artist', espía 'spy', homicida 'murderer'.
-e / -nte	jefe 'boss', cónyuge 'spouse', cantante 'singer', presidente 'president', representante 'representative', adolescente 'teenager', estudiante 'student'.
-i / -y / -o	marroquí 'Moroccan', modelo 'model', testigo 'witness', soldado 'soldier'.
-consonant	profesional 'professional', bachiller 'bachelor', auxiliar 'assistant', rehén 'hostage', aprendiz 'learner'.

Some of these nouns adapt feminine form both in the determiner and in the ending, for example, la jefa 'the-F boss-F'. However, as RAE and ASALE claim (2010), it is also correct to use la jefe 'the-F boss'. The groups of nouns ending in a consonant also include nouns which adapt feminine form. For example, profesor-(M) – profesora-(F) 'teacher', capitán-(M) – capitana-(F) 'captain', andaluz-(M) – andaluza-(F) 'andalusian'.

Interestingly, another nouns' morphology is not modified. For example, *la cantanta 'the-F singer-(F)' is not in use, the correct feminine form is la cantante. A similar situation is observed in nouns ending in a consonant, *la aprendiza 'the-F learner-(F)' is not used, the correct form is la aprendiz 'the-F learner'. Furthermore, other modifications of noun's

morphology (e.g., portavoza 'spokesperson-(F)', miembra 'member-(F)') have been criticized.

Many nouns referring to professions (e.g., médico 'doctor') were assigned masculine gender primarily because of the dominance of males in this field (Martínez Méndez, 2015; Lledó Cunill, 2006). However, when women were integrated into these positions, some nouns were – and are – still used as common gender nouns, for example, el/la médico 'the-M/F doctor' or el/la juez 'the-M/F judge'. As mentioned earlier, the situation is changing and even these nouns start to be used in feminine form, as la médica 'the-F doctor-F', la jueza 'the-F judge-(F)' or even la portavoza 'the-F spokeswoman'. In fact, according to a corpus study by Albitre Lamata (preprint), the usage of portavoza is increasing. Specifically, CREA (1975-2004) analysis showed only 4.3% of the total usage (389 out of 9065) corresponded to la portavoza 'the-F spokeswoman-F', whereas 95.7% (8676 out of 9065) of the cases presented masculine form el portavoz 'the-M spokesman-(M)'. In CORPES XXI (2001-2016) analysis, the usage of the feminine form has increased to 13.6% (1695) of the total 12411.

Similarly, in some cases, it is impossible to use feminine gendered noun to denote a woman, as this noun is already employed for an abstract meaning. For example, this occurs in case of a woman musician who cannot be called *música* for the above-mentioned reason (Harris, 1991).

A reversed phenomenon is also reported. Some professions were traditionally attributed to females, and when males were incorporated nouns adapted masculine form. For example, partera 'midwife' => partero 'midwife-(M)' or modista 'dressmaker-F' => modisto 'dressmaker-M' (Caldevilla Rodríguez, 2017). However, the usage of these nouns is quite low. In CREA, only 133 cases of the use of modisto 'dressmaker-(M)' and 16 for partero 'midwife-(M)' are reported.

2.2. Epicenes

According to Corbett (1991: 68), epicene nouns are those that "denote sexed beings but which do not differentiate them according to sex". In other words, these are nouns that have the same morphological form for male and female referents. Although epicenes normally denote non-humans, there are a few nouns denoting human beings. For example, Russian *osoba* 'person'.

With regard to Spanish, some examples of epicenes are animals' names, such as pulpo 'octopus', búho 'owl', cebra 'zebra', jirafa 'giraffe', araña 'spider', reno 'reindeer', etc. In order to specify the sex of the referent, either macho 'male' or hembra 'female' should be added. Thus, it would be incorrect to adapt a masculine form to a feminine epicene noun, like la hormiga 'the-F ant' => *el hormigo. Instead, la hormiga macho 'the-F male ant' should be used (RAE and ASALE, 2010).

A few nouns referring to human beings are also present in Spanish (Caldevilla Rodríguez, 2017). There are masculine forms as el personaje 'the-M character', el bebé 'the-M baby'[4], el genio 'the-M genius', and feminine forms as la víctima 'the-F victim', la persona 'the-F person', etc. In case of humans, to specify the sex of the referent, two recommendations are made:

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[4] As pointed out by reviewer #2, these nouns are used in a different manner in other dialects of Spanish. For example, it seems that in Mexican Spanish, bebé 'baby' is a feminine epicene noun, i.e. la bebé 'the-F baby'. It was also mentioned that in Chilean Spanish, epicene noun for baby is guagua which is feminine (e.g. la guagua fue niño 'the-F baby-F was a boy). Furthermore, the noun personaje 'character' seem to have developed a feminine variant mainly in the informal register (la personaja 'the-F character-F), which is used with a specific lexical meaning of an "unpleasant person".

a) The use of terms masculine and feminine. For example, el personaje femenino 'the-M female character'.
b) The use of terms varón 'male' and mujer 'female'. For example, la víctima varón 'the-F male victim'.

Kramer (2015: 93) claims that these nouns are actually unsexed. They have a fixed arbitrary gender that remains the same regardless of the natural gender of the referent. Thus, agreement will be always based on the morphological cue of the noun. For example, in "Marta es un genio" 'Marta is a-M genius', the noun genio 'genius' triggers masculine agreement, even though the referent Marta is a woman. It is, however, different in other dialects of Spanish where "Marta es una genio" 'Marta is a-F genius' is acceptable.

3. Agreement hierarchy: semantics vs. formality

As mentioned previously, agreement requires that the feature specification of the target item must coincide with that of the controller (Corbett, 2006). For example, in una-*F* casa-*(F)* bonita-*F* 'a beautiful house', the noun casa 'house' is the controller which determines the agreement with two dependent items (target items), una 'a-F' and bonita 'beautiful-F'. This is shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Example of agreement in controller-target for transparent inanimate nouns
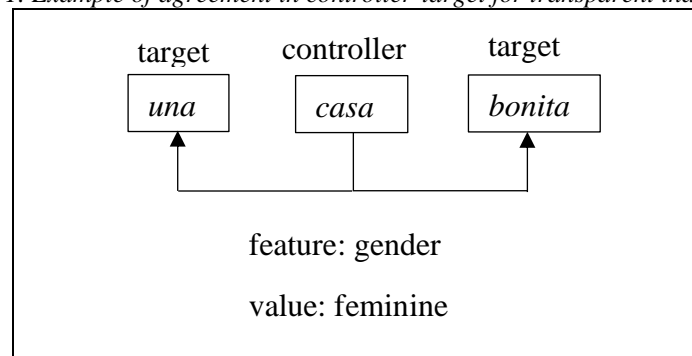
A Spanish noun can have two gender relevant features: morphology and semantics (available only for nouns referring to animate beings, such as human being or animals). In the example in Figure 1, the noun is inanimate, thus it is clearly the morphological criterion that influences on the agreement. However, when we consider nouns like chica 'girl', where two criteria overlap, we cannot state clearly which criterion takes precedence in this process.

In this section, I will discuss how grammatical gender of different types of nouns is established in European Spanish and what criterion is implied in this process.

3.1. Agreement pattern in transparent and opaque nouns

Regarding transparent inanimate nouns, agreement is established quite easily on the basis of morphological criterion, as biological sex of the referent cannot be mentioned. Consider the following structure in (7). The target item nueva 'new' is inflected to express the characteristics of the controller mochila 'rucksack'.

(7)   mochila   nueva.
       rucksack-(F) new-F
       'a new rucksack'

Considering opaque inanimate nouns in Spanish, morphological criterion is not suitable, as these nouns do not have typical feminine or masculine endings. In this case, syntactic information is reported to be a potential indicator for gender (Ibrahim, 1973; Pérez-Pereira, 1991). According to these authors, syntactic information is provided in the determiner that usually accompany the noun in a sentence. For opaque nouns, determiner is the only gender information available. Determiners (indefinite and definite articles) normally precede the noun as illustrated in (8a). Thus, the agreement is established via the preceding determiner, as exemplified in (8b).

(8)   a. mira el   balón.
            look the-M ball-(M)
            'look at the ball'
        b. las   llaves   pequeñas.
            the-F keys-(F) small-F
            'the small keys'

Native speakers of Spanish rarely make mistakes when establishing gender agreement between a noun and its determiner. However, according to Eddington and Hualde (2008: 4), even native speakers are sometimes confused by the variation of masculine form of the article used with feminine nouns starting with a stressed vowel /a/. In these cases, in order to avoid pronouncing /a/ twice, the feminine determiner la 'the-F' is changed to the masculine form el 'the-M'. Thus, instead of la agua 'the-F water-(F)', it has to be el agua 'the-M water-(F)'. Nevertheless, the interchange of determiners does not suppose a change of the inner gender of the nouns. So when establishing agreement with post-nominal adjectives, feminine gender has to be used, as in el agua fría 'the-M cold-F water-(F)'. However, in (9), prenominal modifier todo 'all' takes masculine agreement (incorrect) with the determiner el, whereas post-nominal modifier fría 'cold' is feminine.

(9)   *echa todo el   agua   fría   en el barreño.
            pour all-M the-M water cold-F in the basin
            'pour all the cold water in the basin'

In reference to the animate nouns, which are of our interest, morphological and semantic criteria may overlap (Corbett, 1991). For example, the structure in (10a) shows feminine agreement with the noun hermana 'sister', whereas in (10b) masculine agreement with the noun tío 'uncle' is presented. Recall that these words belong to animate sex-differentiable nouns denoting a female and a male respectively. Morphologically speaking, the noun in (10a) ends in –a, typically feminine ending, the noun in (10b) ends in a typical masculine vowel –o. In this case of overlapping, it is not clear which one of these criteria determines the agreement. Following Corbett's theory (1991) of the precedence of the semantic criterion, in these cases semantics triggers the agreement.

(10)   a. vuestra   hermana.
            your-F   sister-(F)
            'your sister'
        b. tu   tío   rico.
            your uncle-(M) rich-M
            'your rich uncle'

As claimed by Rodina (2008), if we consider nouns which have meaning-form mismatches, i.e. semantic and formal criteria do not overlap, we can clearly see which criterion is more important and influences the agreement. In fact, semantics is reported to affect agreement more often than morphology.

3.2. Agreement pattern in "problematic" nouns

In section (§2), I have seen that common gender and epicene nouns may be problematic in terms of gender agreement, as semantic and formal criteria do not match sometimes. In this section, I will look at how agreement is established in these cases.

3.2.1. Agreement in common gender nouns

Following the idea of Corbett (1991), semantic rule takes precedence when extralinguistic information is provided (i.e. it is clear the referent is female), and modifies the attributives in both cases, the determiners, as in (11a), and sometimes even the morphology of the noun (11b). Nonetheless, recall that morphological modification does not always take place. For instance, *cantanta 'singer-(F)' is not a correct option so far.

(11)   a. La   jefe   está cansada.
          the-F boss   is   tired-F
          'the boss is tired'
       b. La   jefa   está cansada.
          the-F boss-(F) is   tired-F
          'the boss is tired'

In some cases, variability is admitted, thus several options of agreement are available. For example, in (12a), the most conservative option is all-masculine form un buen médico 'a-M good-M doctor'. The moderate version is una buena médico 'a-F good-F doctor' (12b), where feminine agreement is shown on definite article and adjective. Finally, all-feminine form is the most "flexible" option is shown in (12c), where feminine agreement is shown on both definite article and adjective, and noun morphology is modified too (Harris, 1991).

(12)   a. Mi madre   es un   buen   médico.
          my mum-(F) is a-M good-M   doctor
       b. Mi madre   es una buena   médico.
          my mum-(F) is a-F good-F   doctor
       c. Mi madre   es una buena   médica.
          my mum-(F) is a-F good-F   doctor

Corbett (1991: 226) argues that semantic agreement does not equally affect different targets. Specifically, he proposes the following agreement hierarchy for hybrid nouns, as, for example, Spanish titles:

attributive < predicate < relative pronoun < personal pronoun

Thus, the possibility of triggering semantic agreement is higher in personal pronouns than in attributives. For example, semantic rules precede over morphological rules, and exerts the masculine agreement in the predicate as in (13a), but not in attributive modifiers which takes feminine agreement accordingly with the morphology of the noun majestad 'majesty', as shown in (13b).

(13) a. Su Majestad está contento.
      his majesty is   happy-M
      'his Majesty is happy'
   b. Su   Majestad suprema.
      his majesty   supreme-F
      'His Supreme Majesty'.

The dominance of semantic rule (stated by Corbett, 1991) has been argued in various occasions. Nesset (2006) postulated the idea that only semantic rules invoking biological sex take precedence. Then, regarding situations in which we do not know biological sex of the referent, the morphology should take precedence (Rice, 2006)5. Rice suggested that sometimes (recall Russian word *vrač* 'doctor' in the example 5) morphology triggers specific gender assignment and agreement (masculine, in this case). As shown in example (12), it is also true for some Spanish nouns. However, regarding other nouns, the default hierarchy does not provide an explanation. Consider, for instance, the noun astronauta 'astronaut'. If the morphological cue is the only one considered (-a ending >> feminine gender), this noun has to trigger feminine agreement. However, as illustrated in (14), generally this noun takes masculine agreement.

(14) Dos astronautas   jubilados.
     two astronauts   retired-M
     'two retired astronauts'.

Furthermore, when extralinguistic information is not provided for a common gender noun, gender agreement may follow "masculine generic strategy". Structure in (15) shows that the noun cantantes 'singers' is a common gender noun, used for masculine and feminine referents. The number dos 'two' does not specify the gender of the noun. Thus, in this sentence it is practically impossible to make reference to any of the genders. So, if we had to establish agreement with an adjective such as famoso 'famous', it would be famosos 'famous-M' and not famosas 'famous-F', as shown in (16).
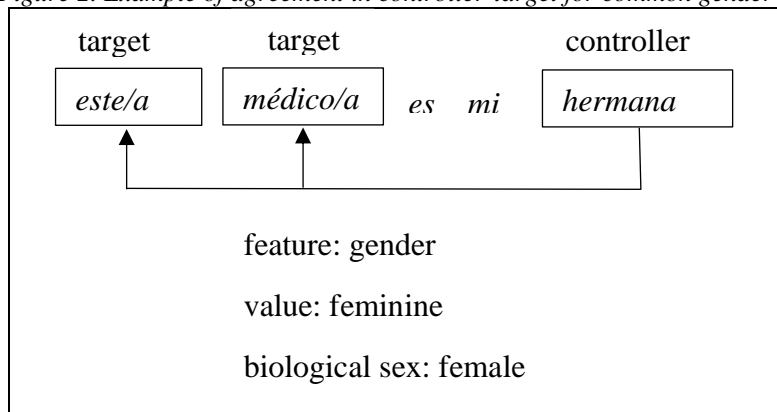
(15) Se reunieron dos cantantes.
     meet-PST.PL two singer-PL
     'two singers met'
(16) Se reunieron dos cantantes famosos.
     meet-PST.PL two singer-PL famous-*M*
     'two famous singers met'

Clearly if extralinguistic information was provided (physical appearance of the singers) or any other linguistic cue in the following sentences (e.g., personal gendered pronoun, as in "se reunieron dos cantantes y ellas hablaron de…" 'two singers met and they-*(F)* spoke about…'), it would be possible to establish gender and gender agreement on this basis. In this case, the agreement with famoso 'famous' would be feminine.

All in all, some common gender nouns allow variability in the process of gender agreement, as shown in Figure 2. In this example, biological sex of the referent takes precedence and triggers feminine agreement with the target items.

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5 The theory of optimal gender assignment, postulated by Rice (2006), state that "gender conflicts are resolved on the basis of the default of markedness hierarchy".

Figure 2. Example of agreement in controller-target for common gender nouns

target	target		controller
este/a	*médico/a*	*es* *mi*	*hermana*

feature: gender

value: feminine

biological sex: female

3.2.2. Agreement in epicene nouns

With regard to the epicene nouns that denote non-humans, it is more difficult to establish gender agreement on the basis of semantic criterion, as it is not always possible to distinguish the biological sex of the referent, even if the extralinguistic information is provided.

In any case, as structures illustrated in (17) suggest, the agreement between nouns and adjectives is based on the formal criterion, not on the semantics (RAE and ASALE, 2010). In fact, even if the biological sex of the animal is specified (hembra 'female' in 17a and macho 'male' in 17b), the formal criterion of the controller item takes precedence in this process.

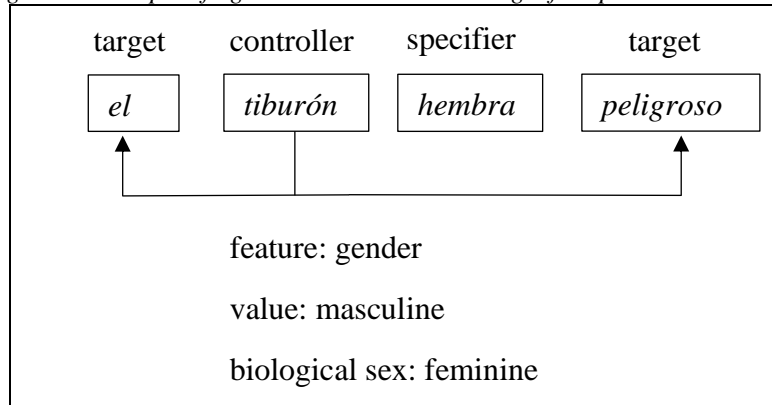(17) a. el   tiburón hembra es peligroso.
          the-M shark   female is dangerous-M
          'the female shark is dangerous'.
     b. la   ardilla   macho es bonita.
          the-F squirrel male   is beautiful-F
          'the male squirrel is beautiful'.

However, the same pattern is observed for epicenes denoting humans, as exemplified in (18). The agreement is established on the basis of morphology of the controller noun (víctima 'victim-F') rather than on the semantic criterion (varón 'male-M'). In (19), the agreement with aquella 'that-F' is also triggered by the gender of the epicene noun persona 'person', regardless of the biological sex of the referent hermano 'brother'.

(18)   la   víctima varón estaba nerviosa.
           the-F victim   male was   nervous-F
           'the male victim was nervous'
(19)   aquella persona es mi hermano
           that-F person is my brother
           'that person is my brother'

In sum, gender agreement in epicene nouns in Spanish is triggered by grammatical gender of the controller item. If biological sex needs to be specified, the controller is added. This is process illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Example of agreement in controller-target for epicene nouns in Spanish

target	controller	specifier	target
el	*tiburón*	*hembra*	*peligroso*

feature: gender

value: masculine

biological sex: feminine

4. Discussion

The aim of this paper was to address the issue of gender agreement in "problematic" nouns in Spanish, specifically, common gender and epicene nouns. For this purpose, in the first place I briefly reviewed Spanish grammatical gender system and the main cues for gender assignment. Secondly, I discussed agreement pattern in phonologically transparent (cama 'bed') and opaque nouns (llave 'key'), as well as in "problematic" nouns. The former group includes common gender nouns (estudiante 'student') and epicenes (genio 'genius').

In sum, it appears that agreement for common gender nouns and epicene nouns in European Spanish cannot be easily explained within one agreement theory. On the one hand, generally, common gender nouns seem to follow semantic hierarchy of gender agreement. That is, agreement is triggered by the biological sex of the referent and is mostly shown on the determiner, not on the morphology of the dependent item, as in mi papa es un modelo 'my dad is a-M model' or mi mama es una modelo 'my mum is a-F model'. This conclusion is in line with the point of view of González Calvo (1979) who claimed that gender of nouns denoting humans is always assigned considering biological sex of these. Gender manifestation is, thus, always present via syntax (the determiner). However, other nouns show flexibility in terms of agreement, as in mi mama es un buen médico 'my mum is a-M good-M doctor', mi mama es una buena médico 'my mum is a-F good-F doctor' or mi mama es una buena médica 'my mum is a-F good-F doctor'.

Semantics also seems to influence morphology of some common gender nouns. This mostly happens in case of semantically feminine nouns. For instance, the case of portavoza 'spokeswoman' shows us that the biological sex of the referent definitely takes precedence in agreement process, as not only does it modify any dependent item but also the morphology of the noun. Although this is true for some common gender nouns, other remain unchanged. For example, there is not such form as *aprendiza 'learner-F' even though it patterns with portavoza 'spokeswoman'. Also, note that this, however, does not happen with common gender nouns denoting males. In this sense, even if artista 'artist' denotes a male, the noun does not become *artisto, so the morphology is not modified.

Referring to epicene nouns, the agreement is based on the morphological criterion of the target noun, regardless of the semantic information. In European Spanish, epicenes do not seem to be modified morphologically. That is, personaja 'character-F' is not used to denote females, as it happens in other dialects of Spanish. Also, grammatical gender of the determiners is not triggered by semantics. Thus el víctima 'the-M victim' is not in use.

In conclusion, in line with Corbett's (1991) and Kramer's (2015) ideas, epicene nouns in Spanish are not problematic for gender agreement. Generally, agreement is established

on the basis of a fixed gender assigned to the epicene noun. Thus, this fixed gender triggers agreement with any dependent element in the noun phrase. If sex specification is needed, a specifier word is added (hembra, macho, personaje femenino / masculino, etc.).

Common gender nouns allow variability, as semantically they can be both feminine and masculine. Gender agreement pattern is, thus, not straightforward. However, if referential information is provided (i.e. referent's sex), feminine or masculine agreement will be found on the target items.

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