

Re: Indo-European Languages and Gramatical Gender Loss

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- *From:* Seán O'Leathlóbhair <jwlawler@xxxxxxxx>
 - *Date:* Fri, 15 Jun 2007 01:17:04 -0700
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On 15 Jun, 00:55, LEE Sau Dan <dan...@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

"Seán" ==
Seán
O'Leathlóbhair
<jwlaw...@xxxxxxxx>
writes:

Seán> Since my L1 does not have gender, I am biased but I find it
Seán> hard to see that this is useful in two gender languages such
Seán> as French. English actually has more third person singular
Seán> pronouns than French. In a few cases, French will be able
Seán> to make a distinction that English could not but the reverse
Seán> would also apply. The extra pronoun of English would
Seán> suggest that English would win more often.

No. This simplistic conclusion doesn't take *distribution* into account. Having more doesn't mean being useful in more situations. e.g. you own 10 shirts, but you tend to wear shirt #1 70% of the time, shirt #2 20% of the time and shirt #3 9% of the time. Only in the remaining 1% of the time do you wear one of shirts #4—10. Then, does it really matter _that much_ that you own 10 shirts instead of 5?

I only said "suggest" not "prove". I would admit that more data be needed for "prove" but I believe this is enough for "suggest". It is enough to justify gathering the necessary data. It is also already enough to show that English can handle three third person singular antecedents versus the two of French.

Seán> If there were considerably more genders then the feature
Seán> could be useful but it still would not strike me as the best
Seán> solution to the problem

The feature would be useful only if every gender has more or less the

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same frequency of occurrence. If most are not used (like shirts #4—10 above), then they won't help much.

Seán> If you are referring to two objects in French, there is only
Seán> (approximately) a 50/50 chance that they are of different
Seán> gender.

Why 50/50? Have you counted a typical French text and verified that the distribution is really 50/50?

I picked 50/50 to be fair to French since that is the best case for it. Note also the "approximately" as an admission that I was not claiming precision. As the split moves away from 50/50, the chance of two randomly selected nouns have different gender decreases though not very rapidly until the split is quite far from 50/50. If masculine out numbered feminine by 2 to 1 then the probably of different gender drops to 4/9 and at 3 to 1 it drops to 5/8.

Seán> So, in half of the cases there is no advantage over
Seán> English. At least in English, you are not going to confuse
Seán> a person and a thing.

This conclusion is based on the ungrounded assumption that every gender has more or less the same frequency of occurrence.

I don't think that I have claimed to have concluded anything. I am just opening a discussion. However your frequency points don't detract from what I am saying. My 50/50 assumption maximises the utility of grammatical gender. So, if it does not have much value under that assumption, it will have even less if the distribution is not 50/50.

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Seán O'Leathlóbhair

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