Chapter 5
Testing Prototypicality and Default Gender in Language Acquisition of Heritage and L1 Greek Preschoolers

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ABSTRACT

Grammatical gender in Greek is influenced by both biological and morphological cues, making it a strong candidate for testing prototypicality theory and default gender hypotheses. Building on Gavriilidou and Efthymiou (2003), this study examines how heritage and L1 Greek preschoolers assign gender to nouns, testing the claim by Anastasiadis-Symeonidis and Chila-Markopoulou (2003) that Greek gender follows prototypical patterns. While heritage speakers show lower accuracy, both groups rely on prototypical cues. The heritage group's tendency to default to neuter suggests continuity in grammatical representation. These findings support the relevance of prototypicality theory and provide insight into the default status of neuter in Greek, contributing valuable data to heritage language research.

INTRODUCTION

Grammatical gender is a complex and cross-linguistically variable category, as it is not attested in all languages; for instance, it is present in Greek but absent

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in English (Corbett, 1991; Doleschal, 2000). It serves multiple functions across languages, reflecting a range of semantic, syntactic, and morphological properties (De Martino et al., 2017). Semantically, gender can encode distinctions related to biological sex, as in Greek, where δáskalos 'teacher' is masculine and δaskála 'female teacher' is feminine. Syntactically, gender operates as a formal feature of noun classification, triggering agreement with dependent elements such as determiners and adjectives. Finally, morphologically, gender is often realized through specific inflectional markers on the noun, which contribute to the computation of its declensional paradigm and grammatical form.

In generative grammar, gender is often treated as a lexical feature that is stored in the lexicon for each noun. This means that each noun is specified with a gender feature (e.g., masculine, feminine, neuter) in its lexical entry. These features are part of the word's syntactic representation and influence its syntactic behavior, including its interaction with other elements in the sentence, such as adjectives, determiners, and verbs (Ralli, 2002). In languages like Spanish or French, the gender feature is explicitly encoded in the lexicon.

Corbett (1991) argues that some languages, like those in the Dravidian family, assign gender primarily based on semantic criteria such as animacy or biological sex. Others, including German, French, and Russian, rely on both semantic and morphological cues. This interaction between form and meaning is central to the prototypicality theory of gender by Anastasiadis-Symeonidis & Chila-Markopoulou (2003), which identifies two key features for gender assignment: semantic properties (e.g., [+/- animate]) and morphological markers (e.g., declensional endings, productive suffixes). Similarly, in Dressler's Natural Morphology (1987) and Christofidou (2003), gender assignment is guided by morphological naturalness—favoring patterns that are cognitively efficient and semantically transparent. Languages like Italian and Spanish, where gender strongly correlates with noun endings (e.g., -a for feminine, -o for masculine), are seen as more "natural" due to their predictability and ease of acquisition. In contrast, systems with opaque or arbitrary gender marking are less natural and harder to learn. Supporting this, De Martino et al. (2017) emphasize the strong link between morphological form and gender, and Postiglione, De Martino, Bracco & Laudanna (2014) show that in Italian, -a/-e endings typically mark feminine nouns, while -o/-i mark masculine. Similarly, in Spanish, -o and -a endings are reliable indicators of masculine and feminine gender, respectively (Harris, 1991). These consistent patterns help distinguish nouns with transparent gender (e.g., sedia, Italian feminine, 'chair') from those with opaque marking (e.g., fonte, Italian feminine, 'source').

The strong correlation between morphological form and grammatical gender in many languages has raised important questions regarding how learners, particularly children, acquire gender distinctions. A central line of inquiry in developmental