CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Contextualizing the Problem

In the beginning of his book *We have never been Modern*, Bruno Latour (1993) wonders whether the ozone layer is an object of study for chemistry, meteorology, politics or economics, or whether it constitutes a hybrid, that is, a sort of cultural-natural network that transgresses disciplinary boundaries and combines elements of knowledge from all different disciplines mentioned above. Speaking about the ozone layer may be a bizarre way to start a book on linguistics but it is not irrelevant. Latour’s rhetorical question is useful for linguists working on the relation between language, cognition and culture, because it opens a window to the intersections that characterize the language-cognition-culture complex and sheds light on its interdisciplinary nature. Based on Latour’s approach, the interplay between language, cognition and culture can be conceptualized as a sort of hybrid that transgresses disciplinary boundaries. For example, it can be explored by linguists, anthropologists or cognitive scientists, and when it comes to linguistics, it can be examined by linguists specializing in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, cognitive linguistics, pragmatics or anthropological linguistics. Being a mental phenomenon grounded in sociocultural practices, language creates a wide range of interconnections with culture and cognition. In this book, I aim to examine how aspects of these interconnections manifest themselves in interaction, by focusing on a specific grammatical feature, gender.

Grammatical gender is a noun class system of two or three distinctions, which always include the feminine and the masculine (Aikhenvald 2000). It constitutes an inherent property of the noun, which controls grammatical agreement between the noun and other elements in the noun phrase or the predicate (Aikhenvald 2000; Corbett 1991; Hellinger and Bussmann 2001). Nouns may be assigned to specific genders according to semantic, morphological and phonological rules. In Modern Greek, the grammatical gender system includes three distinctions, the masculine, the feminine and the neuter, and it is inflected in a vast number of linguistic items, such as nouns, adjectives, participles and pronouns (Pavlidou 2003). In Greek, grammatical gender is considered to be semantically arbitrary, because gender assignment in nouns denoting inanimate referents does not follow any straightforward semantic rules. For instance, nouns denoting physical entities can be feminine (βροχή...
[vroçí] ‘rain’), masculine (ωκεανός [oceanós] ‘ocean’) or neuter (δέντρο [ðéndro] ‘tree’). Yet, in reference to humans there is a semantic basis, because generally nouns denoting male humans are grammatically masculine (αθλητής [aθlitís] ‘male athlete’) and nouns denoting female humans are grammatically feminine (αθλήτρια [aθlítria] ‘female athlete’). Thus, to a certain extent grammatical gender displays a relation to meaning and more specifically to the semantic distinction of sex. Gender assignment is usually semantically motivated when it comes to reference to human beings.

The term ‘gender’ is also used in the literature to denote the lexical marking of sex, the biological distinction of sex, and the social categories of women and men. Lexical gender refers to the lexical marking of nouns as female or male-specific. For instance, in English the nouns mother, sister and father, brother carry the semantic property of femaleness and maleness respectively and are pronominalized as feminine (she) or masculine (he) (Hellinger and Bussmann 2001). This does not apply to nouns such as citizen, patient and individual which are gender-indefinite.1 In languages with grammatical gender, the feminine or the masculine gender of the noun corresponds to the lexical marking of the noun as female or male (Hellinger and Bussmann 2001, 5). For instance, in Greek the grammatically feminine nouns θεία [θía] ‘aunt’, μητέρα [mitéra] ‘mother’ and the grammatically masculine nouns θείος [θíos] ‘uncle’, πατέρας [patéras] ‘father’ are also lexically marked as female and male respectively.

Another term often associated with grammatical gender is natural gender. Natural gender or sex refers to the anatomical/biological differences between female and male humans (sex is the term to be employed in this book). Although biology does not yield a perfect dichotomy of bodies into females or males (e.g. Fausto-Sterling 2000), feminist theorists have shown that this binary sexual split is taken as a given and then used as the basis on which sociocultural gender is built (the term gender will often be used as an abbreviation for sociocultural gender). Sociocultural gender refers to “the many and complex ways in which social differences between the sexes acquire a meaning and become structural factors in the organization of social life”, in Braidotti’s (2000, 189) words. This means that gender is a cultural and historical product, rather

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1 However, gender-indefinite nouns in English can be pronominalized by male-specific or female-specific pronouns depending on their meaning (Hellinger and Bussmann 2001, 10–11; McConnell-Ginet 2014, 27–28). For example, very often nouns denoting higher status occupations, such as surgeon or lawyer, are pronominalized by the male-specific pronoun he, while nouns denoting lower status occupations, such as secretary or babysitter, are pronominalized by the female-specific pronoun she, because these occupations are stereotypically associated with men and women respectively.