CHAPTER 3
Grammatical Gender and the Intersection of Sociocultural Gender/Sex

3.1 Introduction

The relation between grammatical gender and culture has been investigated primarily by sociolinguistic approaches since the mid 1970s. These approaches explored the different lexico-grammatical tools that languages provide for the construction of sociocultural gender. Grammatical gender constitutes one of these tools. By codifying the semantic distinction of female/male sex (cf. chapter 2), grammatical gender divides persons according to biological/anatomical differences, and locates them on a bipolar order in which male/masculine and female/feminine constitute the two poles respectively. Moreover, this gender bipolarity is structured on the basis of social hierarchy, which is associated with men’s dominance and women’s subordination. One of the basic linguistic practices for maintaining gender hierarchy is the generic use of the masculine. Aspects of the relation between grammatical gender and culture have also been addressed in the work of feminist theorists working within the framework of psychoanalysis and philosophy. These theorists underlined, among other things, that grammatical gender plays a role in constructing gendered subjects and sustaining gender inequality.

In this chapter, I examine the cultural aspects of grammatical gender, by drawing on both linguistic and non-linguistic approaches. The reason for selecting such an interdisciplinary perspective lies in the complexities that the relation between grammatical gender and sociocultural gender foregrounds. This relation has two sides, a ‘linguistic’ one and a ‘social’ one. These sides are explored by linguistic and non-linguistic approaches in complementary ways. In general, feminist theory has deeply influenced and shaped the ways in which linguists theorize gender and its relation to language. For example, early feminist linguistic research (e.g. Lakoff 1975; Spender 1980) focused on how the linguistic representation of women and men is associated with issues of power and equality, by drawing mainly on the agenda set by feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory1 (Harding 1991). These linguistic approaches

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1 Feminist empiricism aims at eliminating gender bias and discrimination against women at research, teaching, implementation, policy-making and dissemination of data and informa-
aimed at uncovering the ways in which language system ‘reflects’ woman as a negative inferior category and maintains gender inequality. They also argued that language constitutes a tool for women’s emancipation. Yet, in the last two decades a ‘discourse’ turn has occurred in feminist linguistic research, which means that attention has shifted from language as system to language as use (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, 4). As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003, 4) point out, this ‘discourse’ turn coincides with the ‘performance’ turn in feminist theory, which is mostly associated with Butler’s (1999) work on gender performativity (to be examined in more detail in the next section). Butler showed that gender constitutes a sort of ‘doing’ and discursive effect. In line with Butler’s theory, contemporary linguistic research theorizes gender as a fluid and changing category, rather than static and solid, produced by material and symbolic practices, and aims to uncover the ways in which language use contributes to the construction of gender.

Butler’s theory has been deeply influential for linguists mainly because Butler engages with theories situated within the broader epistemological strand of feminist postmodernism (Harding 1991). Feminist postmodernism is informed by poststructuralist theories addressing the role of language in constructing meaning, subjectivity and power (Andermahr, Lovell, and Wolkowitz 2000). Feminist postmodernism created space for an interdisciplinary dialogue between feminist theory and linguistics, that generated a new strand of studies in language and gender research with challenging and insightful outcomes (see for example the volumes edited by Bergvall, Bing and Freed in 1996, and Livia and Hall in 1997).

The interdisciplinary spaces created between linguistics and feminist non-linguistic approaches can help us gain a better understanding of the complex relation between grammatical gender and culture. For this reason, both approaches will inform the study of the relation between grammatical gender and culture to be presented in this chapter.

3.2 The Intersection of Gender/Sex in Feminist Theory

Gender was introduced as an object of knowledge by the women’s movement at the end of the 1960s and since then it has been established institutionally