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Gender of personal nouns: German and Italian in comparison

Introduction

This article deals with the gender of personal nouns in German and Italian.[1] On the basis of a corpus of written texts collected from the websites of universities (approximately 1,500,000 tokens for each language, Stand: 1.9.2018), nouns are analysed primarily from a quantitative perspective. Contrastive analyses of this kind have not yet been published as, inter alia, an interest in gender comparable to that in German linguistics has not yet emerged in Italian linguistics (with some exceptions, e.g. Sabatini 1987; Luraghi/Olita (eds.) 2006). Since the 1980s, German feminists (e.g. Trömel-Plötz 1978; Pusch 1984) have been criticising masculine generics. Many works about gender have been published recently (e.g. Diewald/Steinhauer 2017; Kotthoff/Nübling 2018; Zifonun 2018).

Theoretical backgrounds

Grammatical gender is an inherent feature of nouns. It manifests in grammatically associated words, and primarily in articles.[2] The overall correlation between grammatical gender and sex (e.g. *die Frau* and *la donna* 'the woman') is acknowledged in many works on German as well as Italian language. Despite these systematic regularities, there are also:

- partial correlations (epicene nouns in feminine and masculine, e.g. *die Person*, *la persona* 'the person', *der Star*, *la star* 'the starling');
- variable correlations (nouns with differential gender, e.g. *der/die Angestellte* 'the male/female employee', *il/la cantante* 'the male/female singer');
- divergencies (such as German nouns in neuter, e.g. *das Mitglied* 'member'; some Italian altered nouns, e.g. *il donnone* 'big woman').

German linguists (e.g. Kalverkämper 1979; Stickel 1988) consider divergencies as arguments to legitimise the use of masculine generics. Moreover, they underline the morphological, distributional and semantic non-markedness of masculine forms (also mentioned by Italian linguists).

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[1]   In the present work, the following terminological categorization is assumed:

- "Grammatical gender" ("Genus" in German; "genere grammaticale" in Italian) is a grammatical category, whose most important function is the agreement of nouns with associated words.
- "Natural gender" or "sex" ("Sexus" in German; "genere naturale" in Italian) is a biological category, generally determined from birth, as evident in first names.
- "Social gender" ("Gender" in German; "genere sociale" in Italian) is a socio-cultural category and it refers to stereotype-based views and expectations about the social roles and characteristics of men and women.

[2]   Differently from Italian, where – according to a divergent system – articles in plural are specific for masculine (*i*, *gli*) and feminine nouns (*le*), German has only the form *die* according to a parallel system.

In spite of the different attitude, the topic of *gendern* – i.e. using gendered language – is becoming more and more relevant both in Germany and in Italy. There is a variety of linguistic possibilities: formation processes of nouns (masculine → feminine, see Table 1); orthographic processes (see Table 2).

Formation processes	German	Italian
Lexical	Pairs of nouns with different roots (*Mann* and *Frau*; *uomo* 'man' and *donna* 'woman')	
Morphological	Flection: differential gender (*der/die Studierende* 'the male/female student'; *il/la nipote* 'the grandson'/'the granddaughter')	
	Word formation: – derivation through suffixation (*Student* 'male student' → *Studentin* 'female student'; *scrittore* 'male writer' → *scrittrice* 'female writer'; *principe* 'prince' → *principessa* 'princess'; *figlio* 'son' → *figlia* 'daughter')	
	– composition with -*mann* and -*frau* (*Kaufmann* 'businessman', *Kauffrau* 'businesswoman')	/
Morpho-syntactical	Attributes (*männlicher Angestellte* 'male employee'; *weibliche Angestellte* 'female employee'; *ministro donna* 'female minister'; *soprano uomo* 'male soprano'; *insegnante di sesso femminile*/*di sesso maschile* 'female/male teacher')	

Table 1: Specification of sex in German and in Italian nouns

German	Italian
Splitting-forms: *Dozentinnen und Dozenten*, *professori e professoresse* 'female and male professors'	
Slants: *Dozent/inn/en* 'female and male professors', *dottorandi/e* 'female and male PhD-students'	
Internal-I: *DozentInnen* 'female and male professors'	/
Brackets: *Dozent(inn)en* 'female and male professors'	/
"Exit gender": *Professox*	/
Gender-star and gender-gap: *Dozent*innen*, *Mentor_innen*, *Sprech_erinnen*, *car* tutt**	

Table 2: "Gendern": variants in written German and Italian

Method and hypotheses

For each language, personal nouns collected from universities' websites are first divided into five categories (A). In a second step, they are analysed according to number (B). Finally, the results of the intralingual analyses are compared according to a contrastive perspective (C).

(A) Distribution of nouns into five categories

  1) Masculine forms such as *der Rektor* and *il rettore* 'the Vice-Chancellor';

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2) Feminine forms such as *die Koordinatorin* and *la coordinatrice* 'the female coordinator';

3) Multiple forms such as *der oder die Lehrende* 'the male or the female teacher', *il/la responsabile* 'male/female person responsible' and *Sprachkoordinator*in* 'language coordinator';

4) Neutralizing forms such as *die Person* and *la persona* 'the person';

5) Collectives such as *der Verein* and *l'associazione* 'the association'.

Starting hypotheses of the analysis are:

– Masculine forms have higher percentages in Italian than in German: this is presumably due to the fact that very little attention is devoted to gender-fair language in Italian.

– Neutralizing forms have higher percentages in German than in Italian, when they occur in plural forms: this is presumably due to morphological characteristics of German, where nouns with differential genders (present and past participles) are neutralized forms (*die Lehrenden* 'the male and female teachers', *die Teilnehmenden* 'the male and female participants'. This differs in Italian: *i partecipanti* 'the male participants', *le partecipanti* 'the female participants').

(B) Number

Nouns are analysed according to singular, plural and singular+plural, as gender and number are interrelated categories (see Greenberg's Universal 1963). Furthermore, nouns can change their ability to represent sex according to number (as demonstrated by German nouns with differential gender in the plural). The concrete linguistic realisation of nouns is also connected to the concept of a non-linguistic category: reference (see Pettersson 2011). For the sake of brevity, we can describe it as quantitative reference, i.e. reference to one person (*Rektor*, *rettore*) and to many persons (plurals like *Rektoren*, *rettori* and collectives such as *Verein*, *associazione*).[3]

(C) Contrastive analysis

The main results are illustrated in the next paragraph.

Main results

As Tables 3, 4 and 5 show, there are more divergencies than convergencies between German and Italian nouns. To sum up:

– Differences: personal nouns occur more frequently as masculine forms in Italian than in German; plural forms (circa 49%) in particular have a high percentage (see Table 4). German nouns as masculine forms (singular) also have a higher percentage (circa 13%) than feminine forms (circa 7%), multiples forms (circa 12%) and neutralizing forms (circa 4%) (see Table 3). However, feminine forms, multiple forms

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3   There is also a qualitative reference: specific reference (e.g. *Die Präsidentin Frau Prof. Dr. XXX* 'The President Ms. Prof. Dr. XXX'), non-specific reference (e.g. *In der Vorlesungszeit lernen Studierende in der Bibliothek* 'During the lecture period, students learn in the library') and generic reference (*Erstsemester sind oft verwirrt* 'First semester students are often confused').

and neutralizing forms have higher percentages in German (see Table 3, Table 4 and Table 5).

– Similarities: personal nouns are predominantly built as collectives both in the German (circa 43 %) and in Italian (circa 60 %) data (see Table 5). Moreover, collectives in the singular have very similar percentages (circa 65 % in German, circa 70 % in Italian, see Table 3). Persons related to universities are represented as official groups (e. g. *Begutachtungsgruppe* 'assessment group', *Expertenkommission* 'Expert Committee', *Commissione Orientamento* 'Orientation Committee'), where sex as a category does not seem to be relevant. Sex becomes relevant in specific cases, when the composition of these groups is explained: a committee must, for example, consist of both women and men according to a binary vision of sex, also confirmed by the low percentages of other writing variants like gender-stars (*Professor*innen*) and gender-gaps (*Professor_innen*). The low percentages of these forms could also be explained by their 'out of the orthographic rules'-status.

SINGULAR	Masculine forms	Feminine forms	Multiple forms	Neutralizing forms	Collectives	Total
German	13,05 %	6,59 %	11,77 %	3,91 %	64,68 %	100,00 % (45.742)
Italian	26,33 %	1,30 %	0,84 %	1,91 %	69,62 %	100,00 % (74.719)

Table 3:   Singular in German and in Italian nouns

PLURAL	Masculine forms	Feminine forms	Multiple forms	Neutralizing forms	Collectives	Total
German	14,95 %	3,10 %	19,93 %	48,23 %	13,80 %	100,00 % (34.476)
Italian	49,14 %	1,06 %	2,10 %	7,64 %	40,06 %	100,00 % (33.560)

Table 4:   Plural in German and in Italian nouns

SINGULAR +PLURAL	Masculine forms	Feminine forms	Multiple forms	Neutralizing forms	Collectives	Total
German	13,87 %	5,09 %	15,27 %	22,96 %	42,81 %	100,00 % (80.218)
Italian	33,40 %	1,22 %	1,23 %	3,69 %	60,46 %	100,00 % (108.279)

Table 5:   Singular and plural in German and in Italian nouns

Conclusions

These findings show that the hypotheses about masculine forms and neutralizing forms are verified, but important specifications must be considered:

– Masculine forms have higher percentages in Italian than in German: they have a relevant percentage as plural forms in particular, while they have lower percent-

ages (although higher than in German) as forms in singular and forms in singular + plural.

– Neutralizing forms have higher percentages in German than in Italian, not only when they occur in the plural, but also in singular and in singular + plural. In the plural, their percentage however is much higher: they are the most frequent category. Feminine forms and multiple forms also have higher percentages in German.

In addition, it can be observed that collectives are the most commonly used forms in singular + plural: universities present themselves as collective entities in their official websites, i.e. in a context, where the reference is intended to be interpreted as sex-inclusive.

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