Grammatical gender mismatch under nominal ellipsis: effects of mismatch type and grammatical number

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For grammatical-gender languages such as Russian, Greek, or German, it is proposed that certain nominals, including nouns indicating profession or nationality (German examples: Kellner/Kellner-in, 'waiter/waitress'; Italiener/Italiener-in, 'Italian masc/fem') exhibit an asymmetry under nominal-predicate ellipsis (e.g. Bobaljik & Zocca, 2011). For this class of nouns, gender mismatch under ellipsis is assumed to be licensed with masculine but not with feminine antecedent predicates (e.g., Spencer is a waiter and Katherine is too [masc-antecedent-fem-ellipsis]/#Katherine is a waitress and Spencer is too [fem-antecedent-masc-ellipsis]). This can be explained in terms of markedness: masculine (unmarked) forms do not impose a gender/sex presupposition, while feminine (marked) forms presuppose female referents. We tested the asymmetry-proposal in an experiment on German. All experimental items comprised an antecedent clause with a nationality noun as nominal predicate and a gender-mismatch ellipsis. There were 2 (mismatch type: masc-antecedent-fem-ellipsis/fem-antecedent-masc-ellipsis) x 2 (number: singular/plural predicate [e.g. 'Mr Turini is Italian ... too.' / 'Mr Turini and Mr Bacco are Italians ... too.']) conditions. The participants’ task was to rate the items on a scale ranging from 1 (“very bad”) to 7 (“very good”). Consistent with the asymmetry-proposal, the ratings were significantly higher in the masc-antecedent-fem-ellipsis condition compared with the fem-antecedent-masc-ellipsis condition. However, there was also a significant interaction, which is inconsistent with the markedness explanation: Whereas number did not affect the ratings in the fem-antecedent-masc-ellipsis condition (Median_{singular} = Median_{plural} = 2), it did affect the ratings in the masc-antecedent-fem-ellipsis condition (Median_{singular} = 3; Median_{plural} = 4). In our presentation, we will discuss possible alternative explanations of this finding.

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