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Grammatical and Semantic Gender in Icelandic

The special gender agreement properties of conjoined phrases have been known for a long time (see Corbett 1991, 2006, Wechsler and Zlatić 2003). When the gender specifications of two coordinated DPs conflict, gender agreement of a predicate with both conjuncts requires a special resolution mechanism. In Icelandic, the predicate is specified for neuter in those cases.

- (1) Mamma og pabbi eru glöð
 Mum.f and dad.m are happy.n.pl

Certain complications arise with hybrid nouns, i.e. nouns whose grammatical and semantic gender mismatch. In Icelandic, the neuter noun *skáldið* 'poet' and the feminine noun *hetja* 'hero' are two such hybrid nouns. If some predicate agrees only with the hybrid noun, the outcome is determined by the noun's grammatical gender. However, when a hybrid noun is coordinated with another DP, it is its semantic gender that matters for agreement. This contrast is illustrated in (2) and (3), taken from Wechsler (2002:11).

- (2) Skáldið er ??frægur / frægt.
 Poet.the.n is famous.m.sg / famous.n.sg
 'The poet is famous.' (assume the poet is male)
- (3) Skáldið og Jón eru frægir / *fræg.
 Poet.the.n and John are famous.m.pl / famous.n.pl
 'The poet and John are famous.' (assume the poet is male)

These judgments are shared by my own informants. However, in the tests I conducted they didn't carry over to cases where mismatch is induced by semantic gender.

- (4) a. Hetjan og systirin eru báðar glaðar.
 Hero.the.f and sister.the.f are both.f.pl happy.f.pl
 b. ??/*Hetjan og systirin eru bæði glöð.
 Hero.the.f and sister.the.f are both.n.pl happy.n.pl
 'The hero and the sister were both happy.'

Surprisingly though, the construction in (4b) becomes grammatical in the presence of a possessive pronoun that is coreferent with the hybrid noun, as indicated in (5). In those cases, semantic gender resolution even is the preferred option.

- (5) a. Hetjan og systir hans voru bæði glöð.
 Hero.the.f and sister.f his were both.n.pl happy.n.pl
 b. Hetjan og systir hennar voru báðar glaðar.
 Hero.the.f and sister.f her were both.f.pl happy.f.pl
 c. *Hetjan og systir hans voru báðar glaðar.
 Hero.the.f and sister.f his were both.f.pl happy.f.pl
 d. *Hetjan og systir hennar voru bæði glöð.
 Hero.the.f and sister.f her were both.n.pl happy.n.pl
 'The hero and his sister were both happy.'

According to the agreement hierarchy of Corbett (1991), pronouns are most likely to

morphologically express semantic gender. Apparently the possessive pronoun in (5) may agree with grammatical or semantic gender, but whatever agreement pattern is chosen is then obligatory for the rest of the sentence.

Corbett, Greville G. (1991): *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Corbett, Greville G. (2006): *Agreement*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wechsler, Stephen (2002): Elsewhere in Gender Resolution. To appear in Kristin Hanson and Sharon Inkelas (eds.), *The Nature of the Word - Essays in Honor of Paul Kiparsky*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Wechsler, Stephen and Larisa Zlatić (2003): *The Many Faces of Agreement*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.