A comparison of grammatical gender in German and Ukrainian

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The talk will present a comparative study of grammatical gender systems in German and Ukrainian. The study investigates similarities and differences in grammatical gender and analyses in which grammatical aspects the languages are alike and in which ones they drastically differ.

The study shows that the grammatical gender systems in German and Ukrainian are similar in many aspects. First, in both languages, feminine occupational terms are often (but not always) formed on the basis of masculine terms: e.g., *der Lehrer* "the teacher" and *die Lehrer-**in*** "the female teacher" (German); and *vchytel* "teacher" vs. *vchytel-**k**-a*

"female teacher" (Ukrainian). Second, both languages traditionally used (and still do, subject to variation) generic masculine forms. For example, when referring to a mixed-gender group in German, the plural form *die Lehrer* "the teachers" can be used by some speakers. In Ukrainian, the plural form *vchytel-i* "teachers" is employed, and similarly to German, the grammatical form of the stem *vchytel-* coincides with the masculine singular noun *vchytel* "teacher (M)". Third, with respect to feminine forms in both languages, plural nouns that contain feminine suffixes, such as *Lehrer-inn-en* "teachers" (German) and *vchytel-k-y* "teachers" (Ukrainian), can refer only to groups of people consisting exclusively of females. We thus observe that masculine grammatical forms (i.e. the generic masculine) have dominated in both languages.

The main differences between the gender systems in both languages concern a highly interesting phenomenon of mixed gender agreement, which is analysed applying the cross-linguistic *Agreement Hierarchy* by Corbett (2006). According to this hierarchy, the likelihood of semantic agreement increases rightwards, as shown in (1). This means that

if semantic agreement is possible for one slot on the hierarchy (e.g., a predicate), then all slots to its right on the scale will also show semantic agreement (a relative and personal pronouns).

(1) AGREEMENT HIERARCHY (Corbett 2006: 207)

attributive—predicate—rel. pron.—personal pron.
← *grammatical agreement*   *semantic agreement* →

This study argues that in regard to the Agreement Hierarchy, a split between grammatical and semantic gender agreements in German and Ukrainian are in completely different slots of the hierarchy. Thus, in German, it is between relative and personal pronouns (toward the right edge of the hierarchy), while in Ukrainian, it is in the attributive slot (at the leftmost edge of the hierarchy).

Reference

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