Gender Assignment in Texas German

At first glance, gender assignment in standard German can appear bewildering. Theoretical research on the issue (e.g. Köpcke 1982), on the other hand, has demonstrated that there are significant regularities to gender assignment. Even so, it is clear that a number of (sometimes conflicting) factors play a role. For instance, words ending in [ə] are normally feminine (e.g. die Blume ‘flower’), but sometimes not (e.g. der Löwe ‘lion’, das Ende ‘end’); natural gender sometimes corresponds to grammatical gender (e.g. der Mann ‘man’, die Frau ‘woman’), but not always (e.g. die Drohne ‘drone’); and semantic considerations can also be involved (e.g. names for metals tend to be neuter, like das Silber ‘silver’, but note exceptions like der Schwefel ‘sulfur’). But what of gender assignment in German diaspora dialects?

In the case of Texas German (TxG), for example, gender assignment remains controversial, despite an extensive research history. While Eikel (1967: 84) contends that gender assignment in TxG almost invariably correlates with gender in standard German, VanderHeijden (2007) rejects this assessment, arguing instead that there is a “feminine tendency” in TxG, such that loan words tend to be feminine, and that non-standard gender assignments in TxG also tend to be feminine. Boas (2009), on the other hand, argues that most non-standard gender assignments in TxG tend to be neuter, e.g. das Platz ‘place’ (standard German der Platz) and das Arbeit ‘work’ (standard German die Arbeit). In this paper, we return to this thorny problem, and develop an Optimality Theory (OT) analysis of the issue, in line with work like Rice (2006). We argue, again in line with Rice (2006), that a number of competing considerations play a role in gender assignment in TxG, and that any conflicts between these factors can be resolved by appealing to constraint ranking. In the case of TxG forms like das Platz, for instance, we contend that two constraints conflict with each other here, which can be informally stated as follows: (1) the default gender in TxG is neuter, and (2) genders in TxG correspond to genders in standard German. We argue that constraint (1) outranks constraint (2), causing this word to be assigned neuter gender. Further research is necessary, however, before any definitive conclusions can be drawn.

References