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Motivating grammatical and natural gender agreement in German

In the early days of Cognitive Linguistics Ronald Langacker (1988: 147) argued that the dogma of the autonomy of (formal) grammar is founded on a *type/predictability fallacy* that confuses the issues of “what *kinds* of linguistic units there are” and “the *predictability* of their behavior”. Full predictability of grammatical structure is obviously not possible; but, in line with Langacker, I contend that much of grammar is conceptually motivated.

A case in point is agreement, a relation of dependence between two linguistic units, where one unit determines the properties of another. Particularly interesting is *gender* agreement in German, in which conflicts exist between *grammatical* and *natural* gender and speakers must choose between formal and conceptual agreement patterns. Some cases, however, allow no choice: for example, the grammatically NEUTER German noun *Weib* ‘woman’ denotes a semantically female referent yet native speakers do not utter e.g. \**die* [FEM] *schön-e* [FEM] *Weib* [NEUTER]. In cases of an antecedent and its co-referential pronoun, the safe choice, in line with prescriptive grammar, is formal agreement, but this often sounds stilted and native speakers do frequently resort to conceptual gender agreement. The variability found in the latter case is the focus of my talk. Specifically, I contend that the factors influencing the choice of agreement patterns in co-reference relations are both structural and conceptual in nature. I also suggest that processing ease may contribute to the preference for one agreement pattern over the other.