Agreement in Asturian

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Asturian is a Romance language spoken in the Spanish northwestern region of Asturias. Generally speaking, Asturian is quite similar to other Iberian Romance languages (e.g. SVO order). However, its agreement patterns differ from most Romance languages, which typically show a binary MASC-FEM gender system. In Asturian, a given controller can control two different agreement patterns at the same time.

Nouns in Asturian are classified by gender into masculine and feminine and number distinguishes singular and plural. Adjectives, pronouns and other determiners can also exhibit a third form ending in ‘-o’ that seems to be controlled by a count/non-count distinction and appears only under certain circumstances and never prenominally. We believe that the existence of this third form does not entail a three-way gender opposition -as a lot of the literature proposes as a vestige of Latin- but rather propose to treat it as a count/mass distinction superimposed on a masculine/feminine system - as suggested by Neira Martínez (1982) or Hualde (1989), inter alia. Based on the literature on this phenomenon, we label this third ending as mass neuter (mn)\(^1\).

We will focus on agreement patterns that show the mn form, namely internal postnominal agreement and external agreement\(^2\).

There are two possibilities for postnominal agreement:

1. If the noun is count, agreement will be masculine or feminine:

   (1) **El** [the.masc.sg] **llobu famientu** [hungry.masc.sg] **anda** [walk.3.sg.pres] **pel** [for.the.masc.sg] **monte** [forest]
   ‘The hungry wolf walks in the forest’ [count]

   (2) **La** [the.fem.sg] **neña listita** [clever.fem.sg] **escribe** [write.3.sg.pres] **poesíes** [poem.pl]
   ‘The clever girl writes poems’ [count]

2. If the noun is non-count, the adjective shows the mn form:

   (3) **El** [the.masc.sg] **carbón duro/*duru** [hard.masc.sg] **ambura** [burn.3.sg.pres] **bien** [well]
   ‘Hard coal burns well’ [non-count]

   (4) **A** [prep] **la** [the.fem.sg] **vera’l** [edge=the] **ríu** [river] **hai** [be] **muncha** [much] **piedra** [stone] **menud** [small.masc.sg] [non-count]
   ‘At the edge of the river, there is much small stone’

   As for external agreement, adjectives used predicatively or any other elements in the sentence that refer to a non-count noun, will also show the mn form:

   (i) **El** [the.masc.sg] **famientu** [hungry.masc.sg] **llobu** [wolf]
   ‘The hungry wolf’ [count]

   (ii) **El** [the.masc.sg] **duru** [hard.masc.sg] **carbón** [coal]
   ‘The hard coal’ [non-count]

   (iii) **La** [the.fem.sg] **bona** [good.fem.sg] **neña** [girl]
   ‘The good girl’ [count]

   (iv) **La** [the.fem.sg] **seca** [dry.fem.sg] **lleña** [wood]
   ‘The dry wood’ [non-count]

\(^1\) See García González (1985) for a historical account of this terminology. It is worth noting, however, that *neuter* is not to be understood in the traditional sense of gender as its values are not related to the Greek or Latin neuter, nor are they similar to the neuter found in other languages, Romance or not; except for a similar phenomenon found in some Italian dialects - see Kučerová and Moro (2011), Kučerová and Moro (2012) or Franco et al. (2015).

\(^2\) Prenominal agreement: adjectives, articles and other determiners can only appear in masculine or feminine, regardless of the type of noun, so they never show the mn form:

   (v) **Dio-y** [hit.3.sg.past] **con una** [with.a] **piedra** [stone] **menuda** [small.masc.sg] **en gueyu** [in.eye]
   ‘He/she hit him/her with a small stone in the eye’ [count reading-a particular stone]
(5) La ropa ta tendió
    The.FEM.SG clothing be.3.SG.PRES hung.MN
    ‘The clothing is hung’

(6) Diz que nun-y gusta la leche pero nun pue pasar sin ello
    say.3.SG.PRES that NEG-DAT.SG like.3.SG the.FEM.SG milk but NEG can.3.SG.PRES pass.INF without it.MN calentino
    hot.DIM.MN
    ‘He/she says he/she doesn’t like milk but cannot go without it hot’

(7) La ropa muy viejo pues vendedo
    the.FEM.SG clothing very old.MN can.2.SG.PRES sell.INF=3.ACC.MN
    ‘The very old clothing, you can sell’

Kučerová and Moro (2011) observe that there is no synchronic4 theoretically informed analysis of this phenomenon. For apparently similar phenomena in Italian dialects, they propose an empirical generalization that could account for mixed agreement patterns: “If a mass noun may be predicative, it triggers a default vocabulary insertion. If a mass noun must be referential, it triggers a marked vocabulary insertion”.

(8) So kumbrato la vina. Lo so kumbrato porke es bueno
    AUX bought the.MN wine.MN it AUX bought because is good.MSG
    I bought wine. I bought it because it’s good. [Celano, Abruzzi (Kučerová and Moro, 2011, p. 7)]

They believe theirs to be the only formal attempt to analyse this phenomenon but it relies on very specific and abstract c-structural assumptions. They predict that when MN is not the agreement with the mass nouns, only the default is available, in this case, MASC. We will demonstrate that their generalisation cannot possibly work for Asturian as it predicts the wrong patterns. In Asturian, if we do not have MN agreement, it is not only a default MASC that is available, but we also have FEM, so this would rule out a default vocabulary insertion:

(9) La buena leche fresco se toma templado. Pruébalo
    the.FEM.SG good.FEM.SG milk fresh.MN REFL take.3.SG.PRES warm.MN try2.IMP=3.ACC.MN
    ‘The good fresh milk is drunk warm. Try it.’ (Fernández Ordóñez, 2007, p. 59)

We will explore the basis for the choice of gender vs. mass agreement. We will briefly consider the possibility that this is determined by linear order and present arguments that it is not linearisation based. Considering that we believe this is not a case of a NEUTER value for GENDER, we will formulate agreement constraints that address the mass/count distinction directly.

We will then explore an account based on the CONCORD - INDEX distinction, taking countability to be an INDEX feature. Data suggest the possibility that CONCORD involves number and gender features while INDEX could involve person, number and countability. This will account for the behaviour of pronouns, which are expected to agree in INDEX, and of postnominal adjectives if we also assume the possibility that they agree in INDEX. Determiners and prenominal adjectives would then be dealt with by CONCORD agreement.

And finally, we will consider an account whereby INDEX agreement for FEM and MASC is restricted to elements which are [COUNT +], and is agreement in PERSON, NUMBER and GENDER while INDEX agreement with elements which are [COUNT -] is just agreement in PERSON and NUMBER. This requires access to a COUNT feature in formulating semantically based agreement generalisations.

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4Most of the attention devoted to this phenomenon has been of a diachronic nature. Fernández Ordóñez (2007) claims that this new “gender” in Asturian has developed based on the mass/count interpretation of nouns. She believes that diachronically this distinction is first attested in a particular part of speech and it then extends to other word classes according to the semantic hierarchy proposed by Corbett (2006, p. 207):

(vi) Agreement hierarchy:
  attributive > predicate > relative pronoun > personal pronoun

“For any controller that permits alternative agreements, as we move rightwards along the Agreement Hierarchy, the likelihood of agreement with greater semantic justification will increase monotonically (that is, with no intervening decrease)”. 
References


