Gender and Number of Nouns and Articles

Not as complicated as you think!

Introduction

In many languages, including Spanish, the number and gender of a noun are communicated **overtly**, or on the surface. This just means that when we're talking in Spanish about a woman or a group of women, we actually show that woman-ness and number of women **grammatically**.

On the other hand, English shows number on its nouns overtly, but it doesn't on its articles. What we mean by this is that we say

*Two cat**s***

not

Two cat.

This may seem obvious to you, but Spanish does the same thing and in almost the same way.

In this resource, we're going to clearly lay out **how Spanish shows number and gender on its nouns and articles**.

What Are Articles?

Articles are words like *the*, *an*, and *a* in English, like this:

I found a cat living under my house.

In grammar, articles can be *definite* or *indefinite*. In English, that looks like this:

Definite	Indefinite
"the"	"a" or "an"

Spanish has this same distinction:

Definite	Indefinite
"el", "los", "la" and "las"	"un", "unos", "una", and "unas"

As you probably can glean from the above tables, Spanish articles have a little more going on than English's "the" and "a/an" system.

This is because articles and nouns in Spanish show, overtly, two extra things that English articles and nouns do not: number and gender.

Let's talk about this further!

Number on Articles and Nouns

In the same way that English has the "s" at the end of a noun to show that something is plural, like with

*The two cat**s***

Spanish shows something is plural with an "s".

The catch, here, is that the "s" is on both the word for "cat", which is "gato" in Spanish, and the word for "the", which, in this case, is "el".

However, "el" is special because it changes form in the plural.

When "el" is plural, it actually changes into "los".

For the noun phrase "the two cats" we end up with:

*Lo**s** dos gato**s***

An easy rule to remember is that

If the noun ends in an "s", the article will end in an "s" too!

 In fact, this applies to almost every aspect of grammar agreement in Spanish.

Gender on nouns

Similar to how the number of a noun should match with the number of an article in Spanish, the gender of the two should also match.

As you probably already know, in Spanish grammar, there are two genders: feminine and masculine.

We tend to think that the "gender" in grammar comes from the noun. Everything else around the noun, including the article and the adjectives that follow, should have the same gender as the noun.

Typically, gender on a Spanish noun is communicated on its **ending**, like this:

Feminine	Masculine
-a For example: "La computador**a**"	-o For example: "el teatr**o**"

There are some important exceptions, though, that you can learn about at this link.[1]

---

[1] The link referred to here is: https://www.spanishdict.com/guide/masculine-and-feminine-nouns

Gender on Articles

Similar to how gender is shown on the noun, feminine articles also end in an "-a":

Definite singular feminine article	Definite plural feminine article	Indefinite singular feminine article	Indefinite plural feminine article
La	Las	Una	Unas

However, in many aspects of Spanish grammar, the masculine gender is assumed to be the default[2]. That is why it is less consistent with its endings. Nevertheless, "-o" shows up pretty frequently:

Definite singular masculine article	Definite plural masculine article	Indefinite singular masculine article	Indefinite plural masculine article
El	Los	Un	Unos

Summary: Wait, why do we call it "gender"?

"Gender" is actually just a metaphor that grammarians have used for centuries to talk about arbitrary systems and patterns in language.

While gender works as a good metaphor when we're talking about dogs, cats, and humans, when we start talking about inanimate objects, the metaphor falls apart.

Ultimately, there is nothing *feminine* about a table (*la mesa*), but nevertheless, a table is feminine in Spanish. In a different language, it may be arbitrarily assigned the gender of masculine.

Regardless of the arbitrary nature of the gender system in languages, it is the metaphor we have used for describing the patterns (especially) in European languages, and in Spanish, that means we have to make our nouns agree with our articles in terms of gender and number.

To wrap up, it may help to see all eight of the articles together, and how they vary:

Moreover, here's a helpful quiz[3] if you want to practice your understanding of these two topics more.

---

[2] Despite this assumption, psycholinguistic studies have demonstrated that the default gender chosen by native speakers when a new noun is introduced in the language is **feminine** (Bybee, 1991).

[3] For the print resource, this link is: https://www.spanishdict.com/quizzes/4/definite-articles-in-spanish