

Lexical versus semantic agreement: a salience-based competition?

Lien De Vos – Université de Liège

In originally grammatical gender systems, where agreement is based upon the noun's lexical gender, a shift towards semantically motivated agreement might occur. This has been attested a.o. in northern Dutch (Audring 2009) and in regional varieties of German and English (Siemund 2002). This reanalysis of gender implies that agreement is established on semantic properties of the referent: countable entities trigger masculine gender and mass nouns trigger neuter (Siemund 2002). In contrast to northern Dutch, which shifted to a two-gender system at least 300 years ago, southern Dutch has a traditional triadic system of pronominal reference. However, the loss of elaborate gender-marking morphology (Nijen Twilhaar 1992; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011), renders the traditional gender distinctions increasingly opaque, resulting in changing gender agreement as well (De Vos 2009; De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011). More precisely, an overall tendency to use neuter pronouns for non-neuter words is attested, in which conceptual or semantic properties seem to exert considerable influence: tangible entities exhibit more syntactic agreement than complex entities (De Vos, forthcoming). Fletcher (1987) argues that these conceptual or semantic properties are best considered to reflect the 'relative salience as an individual', a factor that may be 'overriding lexical gender': the distribution of gender-marked pronouns is governed by a distinction between highly salient (i.e. count; specific; concrete; human; animate) and lowly salient (i.e. mass; generic; abstract; non-human; inanimate) entities.

Apart from this 'salience as an individual' or 'degree of individuation' (Siemund 2002), other factors may influence the competition between syntactic and semantic agreement as well. In previous studies on pronominal gender change, pragmatic or discourse-related factors are often neglected. In this talk I will discuss the influence of some pragmatic factors, such as syntactic and semantic prominence (Rose 2005: passim) on the use of gender-marked personal pronouns. Using data from the Spoken Dutch Corpus, I will argue that due to increasing structural ambiguity, the system of pronominal reference is undergoing a reanalysis in terms of salience: the use of animate pronouns (i.e. masculine and feminine) might then be confined to highly salient entities, i.e. those entities that exhibit either inherent and/or discourse salience. As such, southern Dutch is likely to be dealing with gender loss (Siemund 2008: 12) and its development would then be similar to the transition from Old English to Present Day (Standard) English (Curzan 2003). By this 'neutralization of pronominal gender' (De Vos, forthcoming), I seek to contribute to the more general debate on the function of gender, more specifically grammatical agreement and its contribution to discourse.

Audring, Jenny. 2009. *Reinventing Pronoun Gender*. Utrecht: LOT.

Curzan, Anne. 2003. *Gender Shifts in the History of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

De Vogelaer, Gunther and Gert De Sutter. 2011. The geography of gender change. Pronominal and adnominal gender in Flemish dialects of Dutch. *Language Sciences* 33/1. 192-205.

De Vos, Lien. 2009. De dynamiek van hersemantisering. *Taal en Tongval*, theme issue, 22. 82-110.

De Vos, Lien and Gunther De Vogelaer. 2011. "Dutch gender and the locus of morphological regularization". *Folia Linguistica* 45.2. 245-281.

De Vos, Lien. *to appear*. *On variation in gender agreement: the neutralization of pronominal gender in Dutch*. In: Synchrony and diachrony: a dynamic interface. Studies in Language Companion Series. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Fletcher, William H. 1987. "Semantic factors in Dutch gender choice". *Papers from the second interdisciplinary conference on Netherlandic studies* ed. by W. H. Fletcher, 51-63. Lanham, NY: University Press of America.

Nijen Twilhaar, Jan. 1992. Deflexie en genusverlies. *De Nieuwe Taalgids*, 85, pp. 147-160.

Rose, Ralph. 2005. The relative contribution of syntactic and semantic prominence to the salience of discourse entities. Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

Siemund, Peter. 2002. "Mass versus count: Pronominal gender in regional varieties of Germanic languages". *Sprachtypologie und Universalienforschung (STUF)* 55. 213-233.

Siemund, Peter. 2008. *Pronominal gender in English: A study of English varieties from a cross-linguistic perspective*. London: Routledge.