Semantic agreement competing with syntactic agreement: the case of Dutch pronouns

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The gender system in spoken Dutch is undergoing some drastic changes. Third-person pronouns tend not to display the gender of their antecedent any more but instead exhibit semantic agreement along an individuation hierarchy: if the referent of the pronoun is highly individuated, the pronoun is masculine (*het boek* 'the book(N)' → *hij* 'he'); if the referent is lowly individuated, the pronoun is neuter (*de olie* 'the oil(F)' → *het* 'it'). This so-called *resemanticization* tendency (Audring 2009) is spreading over Dutch and leads to the decay of historically feminine pronouns (which are robust only when referring to humans). The process appears to be proceeding along the lines predicted by the Agreement Hierarchy (Corbett 1979, 2006). The relevant items on this hierarchy for Dutch are:

(1)   Agreement hierarchy (following Corbett 1979: 204)
          attributive – relative pronoun – personal pronoun

Personal pronouns are changing towards semantic agreement, whereas attributive modifiers show syntactic agreement. Relative pronouns are in an intermediate position with predominantly syntactic agreement, but semantic agreement is gaining land also in this domain (Audring 2009: 172). Semantic agreement therefore appear to originate in pronouns and spreads from there to other items.

In our talk, we will investigate whether these changes are in line with the decay of NP-internal gender distinctions. While all other items on the agreement hierarchy (Corbett 1979, 2006), i.e. attributive modifiers and relative pronouns, have developed from a 3-gender system to a 2-gender system (e.g. the relative pronouns *die* (common) and *dat* (neuter), see also the above examples), personal pronouns lack behind by still (at least to some extent) distinguishing three genders. However, the common-neuter distinction in nouns differs substantially from the individuation-based used of etymologically common and neuter pronouns, so the question arises whether these developments are causally connected: is pronominal gender resemanticising under the pressure of changes in adnominal gender or are we simply dealing with two independent developments?

We will address this question by discussing geographical variation in the way Dutch-speaking children acquire their gender system, and correlate the extent to which semantic gender plays a role in these children's gender system, with the strength with which traditional grammatical gender is entrenched in actual language usage. The pronominal data are gathered using sentence-completion tasks. These tests were completed by Dutch and Flemish 7-8 year old children. The data show a continuum between syntactic and semantic agreement, even in children's written language, which quite neatly follows the borders of traditional isoglosses separating areas with visible vs. opaque gender distinctions. However, all children show an essentially 'mixed behaviour', in which two agreement strategies are competing. This is an interesting fact in itself, since it shows that pronominal gender cannot be described by means of straightforward systems of rules but rather has to be accounted for by a probabilistic grammar.

Literature

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