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### Semantic versus lexical gender

*Synchronic and diachronic variation in Germanic gender agreement*

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#### Publication date

2017

#### Document Version

Other version

#### License

Other

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Kraaikamp, M. (2017). *Semantic versus lexical gender: Synchronic and diachronic variation in Germanic gender agreement*. LOT.

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Margot Kraaikamp

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## Synchronic and diachronic variation in Germanic gender agreement

Pronominal gender agreement typically involves agreement between the pronoun and the lexical gender of the noun to which it refers. However, pronouns sometimes behave differently. In Dutch it is possible for the masculine pronoun *hij* to refer to a neuter noun such as *bord* 'plate' and for the neuter pronoun *het* to refer to a common noun such as *honing* 'honey'. This pronominal agreement is based on the properties of the referent: masculine pronouns are used with referents that have a high degree of individuation and neuter pronouns with referents that have a low degree of individuation.

Semantic agreement based on individuation competes with agreement based on lexical gender in Dutch. The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the origin of agreement based on individuation, when it has developed and what factors could be involved in its surfacing. This work consists of four studies that address these questions, including a historical corpus study of Middle Dutch and experimental studies with speakers of German and speakers of Dutch.

The results of this dissertation show that the semantic agreement observed in Dutch pronouns relates to an existing semantic interpretation of the genders that possibly reflects the semantic roots of the Germanic genders. It appears that the competition between semantic and lexical gender has long existed and that the extent to which semantic agreement surfaces is connected with the visibility of lexical gender in the noun phrase.

Margot Kraaikamp

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Published by  
LOT  
Trans 10  
3512 JK Utrecht  
The Netherlands

phone: +31 30 253 6111

e-mail: [lot@uu.nl](mailto:lot@uu.nl)  
<http://www.lotschool.nl>

Cover illustration: Oil on canvas, Harry Kennis, 1961

ISBN: 978-94-6093-227-4  
NUR 616

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Synchronic and diachronic variation  
in Germanic gender agreement

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor

aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam

op gezag van de Rector Magnificus

prof. dr. ir. K.I.J. Maex

ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,

in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Agnietenkapel

op donderdag 2 maart 2017, te 14.00 uur

door

Margot Kraaikamp

geboren te Naarden

Promotiecommissie:

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	Dr. F. Van de Velde	Katholieke Universiteit Leuven
	Prof. dr. A.P. Versloot	Universiteit van Amsterdam

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

## Acknowledgements

My interest in linguistics started in high school, where simultaneously studying English, German, French and Latin made me realize how much these at first sight very different languages have in common. I was enthralled to discover all the loan words, cognates and structures that these languages share. Learning them as school subjects, I was also fascinated by the process of language acquisition that I experienced within myself. How wonderful it was that a once unintelligible stream of French sounds could suddenly be disclosed to me as I started recognizing individual words, or that at some point I heard myself form completely new and complex sentences out of a limited set of vocabulary items and some basic knowledge of grammar. The continued acquisition of my own language often made me rejoice over all sorts of small 'discoveries'. My heart still jumps when I discover a morpheme boundary I had not seen before or when a literal, obsolete meaning of a word suddenly reveals itself to me. Language continues to fascinate me and I love that there are always new things to be discovered and explained about it.

I am very grateful to the University of Amsterdam for having given me the opportunity to work as a linguistic researcher over the past years. I have always considered it a great privilege to be able to pursue my interests professionally. I started my career at the University of Amsterdam as a student assistant and I remember that I was tremendously glad to obtain this job at the department of Dutch Linguistics, for to me, it meant becoming part of a group of kindred spirits that all share this peculiar interest in language with me. I would like to express my gratitude here to all the inspiring people I got to know and work with over the years.

I would like to thank, first and foremost, Fred Weerman, my promotor and supervisor. Thank you for your confidence in me, for appointing me as a student assistant and later as a lecturer and a PhD candidate. Thank you for being my supervisor. It has been a pleasure to work with someone with a great sense of humour, for there were not many meetings where we did not laugh. I am grateful that you gave me great freedom to follow my own ideas. There were also times when I had lost confidence in myself and my project, and I thank you for your encouragement and for always remaining optimistic. Your continued belief in me has been invaluable.

My gratitude also goes out to Olga Fischer. Thank you, Olga, for your kind and encouraging words during my progress interviews. I thank all the members of the doctoral committee for assessing my work and taking part in the defence ceremony. Thank you also, Jenny Audring, for insightful discussions on gender and Arjen Versloot, for discussing my data analysis with me.

I am grateful to all my colleagues at the department of Dutch Linguistics. Thank you for working together in teaching and being an inspiration to me, Suzanne Aalberse, Jan Don, Olaf Koeneman and Hedde Zeijlstra. Thank you, Sible Andringa, for your advice on statistics. Thank you also to my fellow PhD candidates. The number of PhD's at our department grew over the years and I have enjoyed getting to know all of you, Heimir, Margreet, Jing, Matthias, Camille, Jelke, Caitlin, Brechje, Maja, Hernán, Patrick, Sanne, Marjolein and Sybren. I am particularly grateful to you, Margreet, Jelke, Caitlin and Marjolein, that you took the time to proofread my writings sometimes. Thank you also, Margreet and Jelke, for being great companions and office neighbours. And thank you, Marjolein, my fellow historical linguist, for our many pleasant coffee room conversations. Iris, I am grateful for your friendship over the years. We have known each other since the research master and our continued get-togethers have been very dear to me.

Thank you to my paranympths, Jan-Willem van Leussen and Sophie ter Schure. Jan-Willem, I am very glad that we met during our PhD's. You understand academic struggles – and amusements – like no-one else and it has always been a great pleasure to talk to you and laugh together. I am glad to call you my friend. Sophie, we embarked on our academic journeys at the same time. We met during the research master and we both started our PhD projects shortly after. I am grateful to have had you as a friend along the way. Thank you for your cheerful help recruiting test participants at the Science Park. I am glad that, despite our struggles, we both made it to the finish line. I was proud to be your paranympth and I am glad to have you by my side at my defence.

Finally, thank you, Hadi, for your loving support during the final stages of writing this book. My family, mama, papa, Nanette, Tijn, Emilie and Johan, thank you for your love and for being my life outside academia.



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## List of abbreviations

3	third person
ACC	accusative
ART	article
C	common gender
DAT	dative
DEM	demonstrative
DET	determiner
F	feminine gender
fem	feminine
GEN	genitive
INDEF	indefinite
M	masculine gender
masc	masculine
N	neuter gender
neut	neuter
NOM	nominative
NP	noun phrase
PART	particle
PL	plural
POSS	possessive
REFL	reflexive
SG	singular