Semantic versus lexical gender

Synchronic and diachronic variation in Germanic gender agreement

Kraaikamp, M.

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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.
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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.

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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