

The vitality of syntactic gender agreement in 17th century Dutch

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Research on so-called resemanticisation of Dutch pronominal gender challenges the diachronic account stating that out of an erstwhile triadic system distinguishing masculine, feminine and neuter gender, a binary system emerged in which the choice of anaphoric pronouns essentially followed the distinction between *de*-nouns and *het*-nouns, mainly because the *n*-suffix marking masculine gender was lost together with the nominative-accusative distinction (Geerts 1966). Thus, not only has the distinction between highly and lowly individuated pronoun referents been shown to be a more important factor for the choice of a pronoun than the distinction between *de*- and *het*-nouns in present-day northern varieties of Dutch (Audring 2006), this state-of-affairs is also observed in southern varieties of Dutch in which the distinction between masculine and feminine *de*-nouns is preserved (De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011, De Vos 2013). The clearest argument against the traditional account comes from Kraaikamp (2017), who attests a substantial proportion of semantic agreement, in particular of neuter pronouns referring to *de*-nouns indicating masses, in historical varieties of Dutch, some tracing back to the 16th century, an era in which the triadic system is believed to be by and large intact.

Despite challenging findings like Kraaikamp's, a study quantifying the role of both noun semantics and 'classic' parameters such as noun gender, case, and phonological environment triggering/inhibiting the appearance of the *-n*-suffix, is still lacking. In our talk, we aim at disentangling the role of all known factors in 17th century Dutch, using the Letters as Loot-corpus (Rutten & van der Wal 2014) as our main data source. We include both adnominal agreement, focusing on the role of *-n* as a case and/or gender marker, and pronominal agreement. Our findings show that both case and phonological environment have an effect on adnominal agreement. In contrast to Geerts' (1966) traditional account, lexical gender, including the distinction between masculine and feminine, is still strongly influencing pronominal agreement. Apart from providing a quantitative description of the 17th century Dutch agreement system, a comparison with Curzan's (2003) account of gender in Old and Middle English is used to evaluate different proposals regarding the timing and causes of resemanticisation of Dutch pronominal gender.

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