

# ONE WORD, TWO GENDERS

CATEGORIZATION AND AGREEMENT  
IN DUTCH DOUBLE GENDER NOUNS

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# Introduction

In his masterpiece on the subject, Corbett (1991) describes genders as agreement classes. This definition captures the multifaceted nature of a category that has to do with both nominal classification and agreement. On the one hand, gender is an inherent nominal property, assigned by means of language-specific rules that divide nouns into distinct classes; on the other hand, gender is ‘reflected in the behaviour of associated words’ (Hockett 1958: 231) allowing discourse coreference through agreement.

Due to its double nature, gender is a very interesting field for linguistic enquiries: it allows speculations about the way we classify the world and which mechanisms are at work in discourse reference. Accordingly, any analysis of grammatical gender has to take into account two main facts: each noun is assigned to a certain gender by means of language-specific rules; and, in language usage gender is not necessarily visible on the noun itself, but must be visible on those elements that agree with it. Thus, gender can be analysed in terms of assignment rules (i.e. the way each noun is assigned to a gender feature), and agreement patterns (i.e. the way gender surfaces in context on elements other than the noun).

Over time the special status of gender has raised many discussions and controversies, especially regarding the insistence on its arbitrariness and redundancy. In contemporary approaches, however, the insistence on semantic or referential meaning underlies the claims for a common semantic basis in all gender systems (Greenberg 1978; Aksenov 1984) suggesting that ‘there is always a semantic core to the assignment’ (Corbett 1991: 8) that is primarily based on animacy and sex (with different cut-off points in each language). Furthermore, research on gender agreement has demonstrated, even in predominantly formal systems, the pervasive effect of biological gender, i.e. sex or animacy, to trigger syntactically mismatched agreement patterns that are indeed easy to explain from a semantic viewpoint. In particular, cross-linguistically recurrent gender mismatches in Indo-European languages and varieties, that do not involve sex-differentiable

entities, have recently been argued to rely on different degrees of individuation, i.e. bounded/unbounded interpretation of the referent involved. As a matter of fact, current analyses of semantic agreement do not exclusively rely on animacy or sex, but involve broader distinctions like mass vs count, concrete vs abstract, specific vs generic and so on.

Though the notion of individuation, i.e. an umbrella label for the aforementioned dichotomies, has become quite common to explain the emergence of semantic agreement and the development of (more) semantic systems of gender, today's investigations mainly focus on the mismatch between the semantic properties of the referent and the morphosyntactic properties of the noun, without considering – or simply taking for granted – that agreement is first of all a discourse mechanism that allows the linking of discourse referents. As summarized by Corbett, by now 'several investigations have shown that semantics and pragmatics also have a large role' in agreement (1998: 203), but this state of affairs does not emerge in current approaches to gender resemanticization in Indo-European languages.

This book fits the current interest in gender resemanticization, also highlighting the relevance of pragmatic factors in gender recategorization. In particular, the book focuses on a phenomenon – double gender in Dutch – that despite being well known has been generally neglected in previous investigations. By 'double gender' I do not mean gender variation in pronominal choice, which has been deeply investigated in Dutch and in many other languages, but gender variation in the nominal domain. Nowadays the Dutch nominal lexicon is commonly divided into *de*-words and *het*-words, namely common gender and neuter gender nouns. The same distinction counts for adjectives and pronouns, except for third person pronouns, that still maintain the original Indo-European tripartite distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter. This state of affairs creates a paradigmatic mismatch between the number of gender controllers and gender targets. The absence of a corresponding pronoun for common gender nouns makes syntactic agreement problematic for *de*-nouns, even if grammars largely solve the issue assuming that all persons are pronominalized according to sex, whereas all other nouns (non-human animates and inanimates) should take masculine agreement as a 'default' choice. Yet many studies on pronominal usage have revealed that Dutch gender

is undergoing a transition from a formal to a conceptual system as in the spoken language pronouns are increasingly used according to semantic rather than formal rules.

The instability of Dutch gender, however, is not confined to pronominal agreement. The Dutch lexicon also contains *de/het*-words, that is, nouns belonging to both genders ('double gender nouns', henceforth: DGNs). A passage in the Corpus of Spoken Dutch (CGN), where two teachers are talking about *de/het*-words, may allow a better understanding of this fuzzy phenomenon:

of bijvoorbeeld een oefening op uh *het* en *de* lidwoorden uh waar er bijvoorbeeld [...] er staan een heleboel oefeningen in waar uh je de twee hebt dus zowel *de* als *het* waar ze maar één alternatief geven [...] dus en dat wordt dat zo aan de leerlingen voorgeschoteld als het is dat bijvoorbeeld *kraam* staat ertussen en als ik dan zeg dat dat *de kraam* is dan zeggen die van dat kan toch niet. maar 't id dus *de* en *het kraam*. terwijl dat dat niet in in de handleiding staat. ik vind dat eigenlijk wel een mankement [...] natuurlijk dan dan maak je 't ook moeilijker dan 't id hè? ik kan me voorstellen dat bepaalde leerlingen dan uit zichzelf bepaalde intuïtie hebben en als die dan eigenlijk correct en en het boek spreekt het tegen dan gaan mensen op den duur nog twijfelen aan hun eigen taalgevoel hè  
(FV 400147)

[or for example an exercise on *the.N* and *the.C* articles where for example [...] there are a lot of exercises where you have both of them thus both *the.N* and *the.C* where they give an alternative [...] thus and that is dished to the student as if it were that *stand* is in the middle and when I say that it is *the.C stand* then they say that it is not possible. But it is *the.C* and *the.N stand*. Although this is not (written) on the handbook, I think it is really a miss [...] for sure then you make this even more difficult than it is, isn't it? I can imagine that certain students that they themselves have specific intuitions and if they then (are) really correct and the book refutes it then people begin to doubt about their own language feeling, don't they?]

The *taalgevoel* [language feeling] the teacher refers to is what Dutch people – and human beings in general – are supposed to rely on when they have to recover the gender of a noun. Especially in predominantly formal systems of assignment, as in Indo-European languages, gender primarily depends on phonological or morphological rules: the category is semantically opaque and speakers have to memorize the gender of a word or sets of words which formally belong to a certain class.

Obviously for nouns like *kraam* [stand] that – by definition – can trigger both genders, the notion of gender assignment is puzzling especially considering that in Dutch the most reliable cue to grasp the gender of a noun is the definite article it takes, namely *de* or *het*. In other words, nouns like *kraam* apparently belong to two gender classes, going against the common sense that each noun should belong to one and only one gender. Given this intrinsic instability DGNs have been purposely avoided in pronominal studies, but this does not mean they are not worth a deeper investigation. In effect, DGNs pose serious challenges to traditional theories of gender, above all because the possibility to select different genders does not coincide with a change in meaning, that is, we are not dealing with homonymous words. Consider, for instance, the examples in (i):<sup>1</sup>

- (i) a. en leg **de** **filet** vervolgens naast  
 and put DEF.ART.C fillet(C/N) then closer to  
**de** **andere filet** op de schaal<sup>2</sup>  
 DEF.ART.C other.C fillet(C/N) on the dish  
 [and put the fillet closer to the other fillet on the dish]
- b. Ik heb **het** **filet** geknipt in stukjes  
 I have DEF.ART.N fillet(C/N) cut in little pieces  
 [I have cut the fillet in little pieces]

The only cue to grasp which gender *filet* belongs to is to have a look at its agreeing elements, namely the definite articles *de* (i.a) and *het* (i.b). The noun *filet* has ‘double gender’ in the sense that it can take both articles without any change in denotation: the entity the speaker refers to is the same. Examples like these are generally explained as matter of chance or dialectal variation and therefore as a marginal phenomenon for gender resemanticization, not worth further investigations. However if it is true that (i.a) and (i.b) could be considered instances of inter-speaker

1 <<http://www.hondenforum.nl/plaza/viewtopic.php?f=14&t=179058&start=480>>.

2 <[http://passie.horeca.nl/content/16789/Hazenrug\\_aan\\_tafel\\_uitserveren.html](http://passie.horeca.nl/content/16789/Hazenrug_aan_tafel_uitserveren.html)>.

variation – speakers simply feel the possibility to choose either one pattern or the other and they do it depending on dialectal influences or not – the example in (ii) is difficult to explain in the same terms, especially considering that different gender choices are made by the same speaker and, remarkably, in the same text:

- (ii) Eerst doe je **het** **filet** in een pan met water om  
 First put you DEF.ART.N fillet(C/N) in a pan with water to  
 the ergste zout uit te koken. Vervolgens gooi je **het** in een  
 the worst salt away to boil. Then put you 3.SG.N in a  
 vergiet en spoel je **de** **filet** nog even extra af met  
 colander and rinse you DEF.ART.C fillet(C/N) still extra off with  
 water.  
 water.  
 [First of all, put the.N fillet in a pan filled with water to boil away most of the salt.  
 Then put it in a colander and rinse the.C fillet with extra water]

Examples like these represent the starting point and the bulk of the present work that contributes to current research on Dutch gender by combining original data with evidence coming from typological studies, historical linguistics and language acquisition enquiries. This book, therefore, has the merit of providing a new theoretical framework for defining gender flexibility in cross-linguistic perspective; besides, it represents the first attempt at classifying and analysing a language-specific phenomenon, namely double gender in Dutch.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I divides into two chapters: a brief introduction to the double nature of gender as a nominal classification means and as a contextual cue for reference-tracking in discourse is provided in Chapter 1, while Chapter 2 deals with noun class and gender shiftability in cross-linguistic perspective, also illustrating the theoretical framework on which my analysis of Dutch DGNs is grounded. Part II discusses the evolution of the Dutch gender system (Chapter 3) and reports the output of most recent research about gender resemanticization in Dutch (Chapter 4). Part III contains fresh data concerning Dutch DGNs (and beyond): Chapter 5 reports early accounts on the phenomenon, offering an original lexicological and semantic classification and assessing the issue of the

diachronic continuity of DGNs as a consequence of semantic similarity; Chapter 6 reports the output of a contextual analysis on the basis of spoken and web data; Chapter 7 does not deal with DGNs, but exclusively focuses on nouns with stable gender that, despite their supposed lexical stability, strongly resemble the contextual behaviour of DGNs.