Acquiring grammatical gender in northern and southern Dutch
Research questions

• How does variation relate to change? (*transmission* in Labov 2007 – variation in acquisition as a window to change)

• Given ongoing processes of dialect levelling, can we still find variation in the acquisition of pronominal gender?

• What triggers the gender of a pronoun in Dutch?

\[\text{Deze } \text{wijn} \text{ vindt iedereen het lekkerst. } \_\_\_\_ \text{smaakt gewoon veel beter dan andere wijn. Everybody likes this } \text{whine} \text{ best. } \_\_\_\_ \text{tastes much better than other whine.} \]

\[\text{wijn} \text{ ‘whine’ (masc.)} \]

pronouns used in the corpus: \textit{hij} (masc.), \textit{ze} (fem.) and \textit{het} (neutr.)
Introduction: adnominal and pronominal gender in Dutch and German

1. Adnominal gender: definite articles
   a) in German:
      *der* (masc.), *die* (fem.), *das* (ntr.)
   b) in southern Dutch dialects:
      *den* (masc.), *de* (fem.), *het* (ntr.)
   c) in Standard Dutch and northern dialects:
      *de* (masc.), *de* (fem.), *het* (ntr.)

2. Adnominal gender: articles and adjectives
   a) Southern Dutch dialects:
      *de(n) grot-e(n) man*   *de grot-e vrouw*   *het klein-e kind*
   b) Standard Dutch:
      *de grot-e man*   *de grot-e vrouw*   *het klein-e kind*
The Continental West Germanic dialect continuum

- Standard German (maximally rich 3-gender system – although with some gender neutralization in plural)

- Northern German and Low German dialects (syncretism in adnominal modifiers, Wahrig-Burfeind 1989)

- Southern Dutch dialects (reflexes of 3-gender system)

- Northern Dutch dialects (more or less maximally impoverished system)
Pronominal gender: traditional view

- Natural gender rule

- Normative sources (e.g. ANS) allow for variation
  - 2-gender area: common (masc. + fem.) > masculine pronouns
    - neuter > neuter pronouns
    - demise of grammatical feminine (with exceptions, e.g. *gezondheid*)
  - 3-gender area: masculine, feminine and neuter pronouns

  *tafel* (f.), *table*: North: *Hij staat buiten* → *He is standing outside*  
  South: *Ze staat buiten* → *She is standing outside*
Pronominal gender: resemanticization (Audring 2006)

Tendency to use semantically motivated pronouns, especially in 2-gender area

- High individuation [+count, +concrete]: masculine pronouns
  About *dat boek*, *that book*: ... *Dan moet ik ’m ook nog niet gaan inleveren*
  ... *Then I shouldn’t return him yet*

- Low individuation [+mass] and/or [+abstract]: neuter pronouns
  About *olijfolie*, *olive oil*: ... *hoe ’t geconserveerd wordt*
  ... *how it is preserved*

- Colloquial Dutch: about 70% of pronominal reference is motivated semantically (Audring 2006); rest is predominantly grammatical 2-gender system
Pronominal gender in Dutch

Interaction of 3 systems of pronominal reference in Dutch adults:

1. Grammatical 3-gender system (predominantly in the South)
2. Grammatical 2-gender system (predominantly in the North)
3. Innovative semantic system
Case study: sentence completion task with 7/8 year olds

Sentence completion task:

Deze wijn vindt iedereen het lekkerst. ____ smaakt gewoon veel beter dan andere wijn.
Everybody likes this whine (m.) best. ____ tastes much better than other whine.

Why 7/8 year old children?
• Late stages of language acquisition (voltooiingsfase) from 5;0 to 9;0 (Schaerlaekens 2000)
• They make hardly any gender 'mistakes' in German (although they „conform absolutely to the rule of grammatical gender by age 9 and 10“, Mills 1986: 94)
• But tend to overgeneralize he for count nouns in English
• Children at this age are able to fill in a written sentence completion task
Dutch dialect continuum (De Schutter 2005: MAND)

- Overijssel (Netherlands, Northern Dutch)
- East Flanders (Belgium, Southern Dutch)
- Urmond (Limburg, Netherlands)
1) Overijssel (Dutch 2-gender area, De Vogelaer 2010)

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1) Overijssel (Dutch 2-gender area, De Vogelaer 2010)
2) East Flanders (Belgium, 3-gender area)

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2) East Flanders (Belgium, 3-gender area)
3) Urmond (Limburg, Netherlands)

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<td>3.6</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>25.9</td>
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3) Urmond (Limburg, Netherlands)
Differentiation of the animacy hierarchy

• So far, we’ve worked with an animacy hierarchy with the following items:
  human > animate > count nouns > mass nouns

• but some animate items in the questionnaire behave consistently different – e.g. the two masculine items:

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  aap ,monkey’ | 14 | 0  | 0  |
  vlinder ,butterfly’ | 5  | 8  | 1  |

  (data from Urmond)

• hence: subdivision of ANIMATE into HIGHER and LOWER ANIMALS along the lines of Köpcke and Zubin (1996) leading to a more gradual animacy hierarchy
Urmond: animate

- animate
- higher (aap)
- lower (vlinder)

[Bar chart showing percentage of masculine forms]
Summary: Dialect continuum

- Characteristic are the scores for grammatical feminine with inanimates:
Conclusions

• How does variation relate to change?
  ➢ The innovative semantic gender system is pervasive in children's grammar
  ➢ 7/8 year old children have almost completed their language acquisition and will probably go on using semantic gender
  ➢ Children advance the change of the grammatical system (Labov 2007)

• Can we find variation in the acquisition of pronominal gender?
  ➢ Yes – many West Germanic dialects are moribund but still have reflexes in children's language

• What triggers the gender of a pronoun in Dutch?
  ➢ Multidimensional model including ...
    ➢ Geographical distribution
    ➢ Traditional gender next to resemanticization along an animacy hierarchy
    ➢ Demise of grammatical feminine
Further questions

• Is pronominal gender governed by the phonetic structure of the controllers?
• ...or by syntactic or discourse factors?
• How should we account for the huge variation? Do pronouns really agree with their controller?
• Do the children actually speak their dialect at home? Can we still call the variation in (written) Standard Dutch „dialects“?
References


De Schutter, Georges (ed.) 2005. *MAND – Morfologische atlas van de Nederlandse dialecten*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press


