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Semantic versus lexical gender

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.

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