

## Language change in motion: the case of Dutch nominal gender morphology

Standard Dutch is in an ongoing process whereby the use of feminising morphology on personal nouns for female referents (e.g., *journalist-e* ‘female journalist’, *schrijf-ster* ‘female writer’) decreases. The masculine form is then neutralised and used as a generic form to denote referents of any gender. Extralinguistic political factors, notably feminist language critique from the 1980s onward, have played a fundamental role in establishing this strategy (Gerritsen 2002), but there are also important interlinguistic motivational factors at play. Politically driven language-change initiations have drawn on certain grammatical propensities (cf. Nübling 2000 for Swedish). Neutralisation seems to be a conscious continuation of a process which had been set in motion through deflection: once the nominal feminine/masculine distinction goes lost, as has happened in Dutch, gender marking on personal nouns will follow.

In my presentation, I will show that a diachronic decrease in the use of gender morphology on personal nouns proceeds gradually and is regulated by principles on the syntax-semantics interface and by lexicalisation processes. First, the condition for a personal noun to receive gender morphology in accordance with natural gender is, logically, animacy (Dahl 1999): the referent should be a human being. Hence, we witness a steady decline in feminising morphology in such contexts where the referent is inanimate and metaphorically personified. Gendered personal nouns in these sorts of contexts can be observed from Middle Dutch, which had a still-intact grammatical gender system distinguishing feminine from masculine nouns (1):

(1) Here ghif mi die wijsheit<sub>F</sub> die een *besitster*<sub>F</sub> is dijnre stolen.

‘Lord, give me the freedom (f.) which is the possessor (f.) of your robes.’

Grote, G. *Getijdenboek* (ca. 1460)

Second, gender marking goes lost where personal nouns do not have a referential function, which is reflected in the syntactic position of the personal noun. In sentences like (2), the personal noun is in predicate position, where it solely further specifies the referent *ze* ‘she’ (namely, that the referent is a journalist) but does not refer to her directly, which renders the marking of gender superfluous. The noun is thus a neutralised masculine. In (3), the personal noun is in subject position, where it is highly referential and receives feminising morphology:

(2) *Ze* is een fantastische *journalist*<sub>M</sub> met veel scherpe interviews op haar naam.

‘She is a superb journalist with many sharp interviews to her name.’

(De Volkskrant, 27/04/2009)

(3) De *journaliste*<sub>F</sub> [Hu Shuli]<sub>F</sub> is een beroemdheid binnen en buiten China.

‘The journalist [Hu Shuli]<sub>F</sub> is a celebrity in and outside of China.’

(NRC Handelsblad, 17/09/2020)

Third, lexicalisation of personal nouns plays a primary role. In Dutch, certain personal nouns remain only seldomly neutralised because they have been lexicalised containing gender information. Nouns such as *vriend* ‘male friend, boyfriend’ and *koning* ‘king’ are never used generically because their semantics are gender-specific (i.e., they only occur in contexts where they denote men). This applies to their feminine counterparts, *viendin* and *koningin*, as well. These nouns have long formed part of Dutch; they are present as gender-marked personal nouns in Old Dutch already and therefore have a long history of becoming fixed lexical items.

## Literature

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