

Adnominal and pronominal gender assignment to English loan words in Belgian Dutch

Karliën Franco, Eline Zenner & Dirk Speelman

Recent studies on gender assignment in Dutch have shown that the gender of pronouns can be based on referential properties rather than on the grammatical gender of the antecedent (Audring 2006; De Vogelaer 2012; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011; De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011). Since grammatical gender is generally least entrenched for recent borrowings and *ad-hoc* loans, changes in the pronominal gender can be expected to be particularly visible with these types of nouns. However, studies on lexical borrowing, which typically rely on dictionary data, have so far focused exclusively on the *adnominal* gender of *established* loanwords (Berteloot & Van der Sijs 2002: 47-48; Geerts 1996; Hamans 2009).

This paper aims to complement these studies by inquiring into the factors that underlie both adnominal and pronominal gender assignment to unestablished (“ad-hoc”) English loanwords in Dutch. Also, we aim to introduce several methodological innovations to existing work on the gender of loans – first, in designing an experimental set-up instead of relying on dictionary data; second, in conducting multifactorial inferential statistical analyses instead of relying on basic descriptive statistics.

More specifically, we subjected 46 Belgian Dutch students to a forced choice task in which definite articles and personal pronouns were elicited for 180 sentences. Mixed effects regression analyses were conducted to verify the effect of the characteristics of the stimulus nouns (e.g. the gender of their Dutch translation) and of the social background of the respondents (e.g. the education level of their parents) on the lexical gender assigned to the English nouns and on the gender of the personal pronouns agreeing with these nouns.

The results first reveal that, similar to what was previously found for established loanwords, the common definite article *de* should be considered the default article for *ad-hoc* loans. Neuter articles occur only rarely and are – if attested – typically influenced by the gender of the Dutch cognate of the loanword. Second, our study shows that formal clues, such as suffixes, have been given too much weight in previous analyses: in our multifactorial set-up, they do not reach statistical significance. Third, as concerns pronominal gender, we indeed find support for the existence of semantic agreement in Dutch. However, its importance needs to be nuanced: the definite article has a stronger impact on pronominal gender assignment than semantic agreement.

In sum, widening the scope from established loanwords to *ad-hoc* loans and introducing an experimental set-up and inferential statistical analyses to the study of gender assignment has allowed us to attenuate existing results and to reveal new patterns of pronominal and adnominal gender assignment in Dutch.

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