

Gender selection and syntactic constructions: the case of Dutch Double Gender Nouns

Gender as a grammatical category is halfway between morphology and syntax: it is not only defined through agreement (Hockett 1958), but it also represents an inner property of nouns. The case of Dutch is even more remarkable considering that the loss of grammatical gender is still in progress. Nowadays Dutch distinguishes between two genders in the nominal domain (*de*-nouns and *het*-nouns), respectively masculine/feminine and neuter nouns while the pronominal system remains partially tripartite (Booij 2002). This mismatch has been largely analyzed and many studies emphasize that in many cases the pronominal selection of gender is not grammatically driven but depends on the semantic meaning of the noun: the neuter being used for mass nouns and the masculine/feminine for countable nouns (Audring 2009; De Vogelaer 2006; De Vos 2009; De Vogelaer & De Vos 2010). This picture is even more complicated by Dutch ‘double gender nouns’: nouns allowing for both genders in the nominal domain (*de/het* words). These nouns represent a grey zone in the Dutch lexicon whose analysis has been largely avoided with the gender fluctuation being accounted for as a case of dialectal variation (De Vogelaer 2009; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2010). Actually the analysis of these nouns in context has revealed some patterns recalling semantic pronominal assignment: the selection of gender seems to depend on the semantic/pragmatic conceptualization of the referent. Therefore contemporary Dutch gender as a whole seems to be subject to a ‘re-categorization’ phenomenon based on semantic/pragmatic grounds: the gradual decay of morphological endings (originally marking inflectional classes and gender) led to the loss of sensitivity for grammatical gender triggering the restructuring of the category along semantic pathways. More interestingly the comparison of these nouns has shown their semantic affinity and recurrent collocational behaviors. On the one hand double gender nouns generally form synonymic pairs (*omslag/kaft* ‘cover’; *afval/vuilnis* ‘rubbish’) and in many cases they create complex semantic networks (*draad* ‘wire, thread, line’ - *koord* ‘rope, line, string’ - *kluwen* ‘ball of string’; *fiber* ‘fiber’ - *flanel* ‘flannel’ - *katoen* ‘cotton’; *hars* ‘resin’ - *gom* ‘gum’ - *plamuur/mastiek* ‘mastic’ etc.): a web of synonymous concepts at different levels often allowing for both a countable/uncountable reading (substance/contained substance ie. *hars/plamuur*; object/surface ie. *omslag/kaft*; substance/object ie. *katoen/draad*). On the other hand the analysis of double gender nouns in context suggests that the selection of gender could be related to the particular syntactic construction the noun appears in: in cases of uncertainty the selection of gender could depend on the cognitive perception (Wisniewski 2003; 2009) of the specific semantic properties activated by the noun once it enters the syntagmatic chain. Recurrent patterns such as *op het* + *N*, *van de* + *N* or *het N* + *smelten* could mean that once the sensitivity for grammatical gender has been lost speakers make their choices following different cognitive perceptions which may be induced by the particular syntactic construction the noun appears in.

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