

Language and Gender: Research and Desiderata

Dutch

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Sofie Decock & Sarah Van Hoof

Ghent University

1. Grammatical gender in Dutch

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Grammatical gender language:
gender distinction in (pro)nouns
(like German, etc.)

Netherlandic Dutch
(in the Netherlands)

Belgian Dutch
(in Flanders, Belgium)

1. Grammatical gender in Dutch

- Originally: 3-gender system (masculine – feminine – neuter)
- BUT:
 - Distinction between masculine and feminine nouns no longer formally marked (e.g. definite article *de^{m+f}*)
 - Distinction between masculine and feminine nouns disappearing -
> collapsed into common gender in Netherlandic Dutch, but more robust in Belgian Dutch (De Vos et al. 2021)
- Agreement between pronouns and their antecedent nouns is increasingly shifting from a lexical to a semantic system of reference -> with animate antecedents, natural gender rather than grammatical gender determines pronoun choice (De Vos et al. 2021: 30-31)
 - e.g. *het meisje... zij...* 'the girl... she...'
- Not all 'masculine' personal nouns can be feminized (e.g. *rechter* 'judge') --> consistent differentiation is difficult/impossible (Mortelmans 2008)

2. Pre-2000 discussions on gender bias in Dutch

2. Pre-2000 academic discussions on gender bias in Dutch

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- Brouwer, Dédé. 1980. "'Taal en Sekse' als probleem voor de taalwetenschap." *Wetenschap en Samenleving* 2: 105-115.
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- Brouwer, Dédé. 1985. "Hoe vrouwelijk is een hoofd?" *De Gids* 148: 105-115.
- Huisman, Joke. 1985. "Over verschil in gelijkheid en gelijkheid in verschil." *De Gids* 148 (9/10): 777-783.
- Duynstee, Rob & Charlotte Polak. 1995. "Discussie over vrouwelijke beroepsnamen laait weer op." *Taalschrift* 14: 14-16.



3. Corpus research on gender-fair language

3. Corpus research on Dutch

has focused on:

- personal nouns:
 - in Dutch and Flemish **job ads** (Gerritsen 2002; Zenner et al. 2019)
 - in Dutch and Flemish **newspapers and magazines** (Mortelmans 2008; in press)
 - in **scientific journal articles** (Toonen 2022)
- gender-fair language guidelines of Dutch and Flemish universities (Verelst forthc.)

Personal nouns in job ads

- **masculine and neutral forms predominate** in job ads in Dutch newspapers in the 1980s and 90s
- strong increase of English terms (e.g. *director*) between 1989 and 1999
--> **tendency towards neutralisation** in Netherlandic Dutch, in large part by means of English terms
- decrease of the use of the postmodifier *m/v* ('man/woman') over time
- in about half of the ads: no strategies to indicate that the advertisement was also meant for women
--> indication that advertisers consider masculine terms as neutral

(Gerritsen 2002)

Personal nouns in job ads

- in Flemish job ads of the past 30 years, **only 10%** contain a **differentiation** strategy, i.e.:
 - pair forms (*verpleegsters/verplegers* 'nurses^f/nurses^m')
 - bracketed forms (*kinderverzorg(st)ers* 'child care workers^{m+f}')
 - or postmodifiers (*m/v, v/m* 'm/f, 'f/m')
 - postmodifiers are the most common strategy
 - no increase in the use of differentiation over the past 30 years
- (Zenner, Rosseel, Barilla & Maekelberghe 2019)**

Personal nouns in the press

- role nouns as an apposition after *als* in German and Dutch newspapers (*haar rol/functie/werk/job als... , ihre Rolle/Funktion/Beruf/Job als... 'her role/function/work/job as...'*):
 - significant differences in the use of **feminine forms: German (91%) > Belgian Dutch (36%) > Netherlandic Dutch (22%)**
 - Dutch: feminine forms less frequent, and least frequent in Netherlandic Dutch
- > the original 3-gender system is still more 'robust' in Belgian Dutch
- > but general tendency towards neutralisation in Dutch
(Mortelmans 2024)

Personal nouns in scientific journals

- Comparison of Dutch and German authors:
 - **Dutch** authors prefer **generic masculine** personal nouns
 - **German** authors tend to use more **alternative** forms (differentiation, neutralisation, plural forms), especially in recent times

(Toonen 2022)

Guidelines for gender-fair language

- Online guidelines published by Dutch and Flemish universities:
 - **differentiation** (*studente* 'student'^f, *dames en heren* 'ladies and gentlemen') **not recommended**
 - **Inconsistencies** in dealing with **generic masculine personal nouns**: sometimes advised against because they are masculine (e.g. *student*), sometimes recommended as gender-neutral (e.g. *bewoner* 'resident')
 - Plural masculine personal nouns (e.g. *studenten* 'students') seen as neutral

--> Overall: preference for **neutralisation**

(Verelst forthc.)

3. Corpus research

- Overall:
 - Tendency towards neutralisation (incl. generic use of 'masculine' role nouns)
 - Strongest in Netherlandic Dutch

4.

Survey/experimental research
on gender-fair language

4. Survey/experimental research

Has focused on:

- how gender-(un)fair language **affects**:
 - mental gender representations (De Backer & De Cuypere 2012; Redl 2020; Van Krunkelsven et al. 2022; Verhaegen et al. in prep.)
 - perceptions related to job chances and preferences (Vervecken et al. 2013, 2015)
 - perceptions related to credibility (De Cocq & Redl 2020)
 - text comprehensibility (Decock et al. 2023; Decock et al. in prep.; Verhaegen et al. in prep.; Den Hartog et al. in press)
- **choice** of gender-fair forms (Vriesendorp in press)
- the extent to which gender-fair forms are **accepted** (Decock et al. 2023; Decock et al. in prep.; Verhaegen et al. in prep.)

Mental gender representations

- confirmation for male bias of masculine **personal nouns**, but:
 - less strong compared to **German**
 - influence of **number**: almost no male bias for masculine plural personal nouns
 - influence of **stereotype**: male bias less strong for masculine **role** nouns (e.g. *huurder* 'tenant', *lezer* 'reader', *bewoner* 'resident') than for masculine **occupational** nouns (e.g. *apotheker* 'pharmacist', *arts* 'doctor', *kunstenaar* 'artist')
- confirmation for male bias of **generic** masculine 3rd person **pronouns** confirmed, but:
 - stronger for personal pronoun ***hij*** ('he') than possessive pronoun ***zijn*** ('his')
 - possessive *zijn* ('his'): only male bias for male participants

(De Backer & De Cuypere 2012; Redl 2020)

Mental gender representations

- confirmation for effectiveness of **neutralisation** in reducing male bias:
 - **gender-neutral personal nouns** (e.g. *leerkracht* 'teacher^{m+f}') are interpreted in a more neutral way than masculine personal nouns (e.g. *leraar* 'teacher^m') (**Vankrunkelsven et al. 2022**)
 - in generic contexts, **gender-neutral pronouns** lead a significantly higher number of (especially female) Flemish respondents to think of a non-male person (mainly women) than *hij* ('he') or plural forms (**Verhaegen et al. in prep.**)

Job chances and job preferences

- **Differentiation** has positive effects for **personal nouns** in Dutch (and German):

the use of differentiation (pair forms) (vs. only masculine forms) in job descriptions of stereotypically male occupations causes:

- both boys and girls (ages 6-12) to rate women's success in such occupations **higher** and girls to be **more interested** in such occupations (**Vervecken et al. 2013**)
- both boys and girls (ages 6-12) to be **more confident** that they have the necessary qualifications for such occupations because they perceive them to be less difficult (**Vervecken et al. 2015**)

Credibility

- No confirmation for **negative effect of feminine personal nouns on evaluations of women** in terms of **competence, status, credibility** (as found for Polish, Italian and French: Formanowicz et al. 2013; Mucchi-Faina 2005; Vervecken et al. 2015):
 - female respondents rated male and female medical specialists as **equally credible** regardless of job title (*neuroloog^m* – *neurologe^f* 'neurologist')
 - male respondents found female medical specialists with masculine job titles *less* credible than with feminine job titles (*neurologe^f* more credible than *neuroloog^m*)

(De Cocq & Redl 2020)

Choice of gender-neutral pronouns

- **production task:** speakers of Dutch who find genderinclusivity important prefer the forms *die*, *diens*, *hen* and *hun* to refer to non-binary individuals
- the choice for *die/diens* or *hen/hun* depends on the **grammatical condition** and stays as close to regular usage as possible
 - *die* is dominant as subject form
 - *hen* and *hun* are dominant as direct object and after a preposition
- also non-binary participants prefer *die*, *diens*, *hen* and *hun*
- neologisms (e.g. *dij*, *z'r*, *xij*) hardly occur

(Vriesendorp in press)

Examples

- die – die – diens

- Dat is Hennie. *Die^{subj}* is jarig. Zie je *die^{obj}* daar zitten? *Diens^{poss}* moeder was vorige week ook jarig.

- die – hen – hun

- Dat is Hennie. *Die^{subj}* is jarig. Zie je *hen^{obj}* daar zitten? *Hun^{poss}* moeder was vorige week ook jarig.

- hen – hen – hun

- Dat is Hennie. *Hen^{subj}* is jarig. Zie je *hen^{obj}* daar zitten? *Hun^{poss}* moeder was vorige week ook jarig.

('That is Henny. It's their birthday. Do you see them sitting there? Last week it was also their mother's birthday.')

Comprehensibility and acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns

- no clear preferences or advantage for *die-hen-hun* or *hen-hen-hun* in terms of reading experience; both seem equally **suitable for translation** of English nonbinary *they* in a novel (**Vos and Nutters 2022**)
- **growing familiarity** with gender-neutral pronouns (**Decock et al. 2023; Verhaegen et al. in prep.**)
- **processing and comprehensibility:**
 - experience with nonbinary pronouns and exposure to them decrease semantic processing difficulties (**Den Hartog et al. forthc.**)
 - no evidence that gender-neutral pronouns impair text comprehensibility (**Decock et al. 2023, in prep.; Verhaegen et al. in prep.**)

Comprehensibility and acceptance of gender-neutral pronouns

- **appreciation:**

- gender-neutral pronouns may negatively affect text appreciation, depending on pronoun and sample
- gender-neutral pronouns are **better appreciated** for **generic** than for specific reference ~ previous findings on English and Swedish gender-neutral 3PPs (Bradley et al. 2019; Renström et al. 2022)
- when asked directly: preference for *die* over *hen* as subject form (Decock et al. 2023; Decock et al. in prep.; Verhaegen et al. in prep.)

5. Desiderata – quo vadis?

5. Desiderata – Quo vadis?

- **Corpus research:**
 - personal nouns:
 - trend towards neutralization (including generically used 'masculine' nouns)
 - most pronounced in Netherlandic Dutch
 - in line with the gradually blurring distinction between masculine and feminine gender in Dutch
 - **need for more corpus research** to map usage tendencies in Dutch:
 - larger corpora (SoNaR, Spoken Dutch Corpus)
 - comparing varieties (Belgian vs. Netherlandic Dutch), modes (spoken vs. written), genres (e.g., formal vs. informal)
 - diachronic perspective
 - focus on pronouns, e.g. increase in generic use of *die*?

5. Desiderata – quo vadis?

- **Survey/experimental research:**

- generic use of 'masculine' forms: male bias, but less strong compared to e.g. German
- gender-neutral pronouns: preference for *die-hen-hun* and for generic over specific use of *die*
- **need for more survey/experimental research:**
 - on mental gender representations:
 - personal nouns: effects of differentiation (but: Martin & Wilke in prep.) and neutralisation
 - pronouns (but: PhD Verhaegen in prep.)
 - on attitudes and use (elicited use) in varying contexts
 - compare varieties (Netherlandic vs. Belgian Dutch), modes (spoken vs. written), ...
 - longitudinal perspective to track changes in language attitudes and use in real time

5. Desiderata – quo vadis?

- **Need for qualitative research**

- e.g. ethnographic research on gender diversity and pronoun use in a classroom context, GFL policy in newsrooms and schools, GFL activism as a form of verbal hygiene, meta-discourses and their circulation in different societal contexts...
- e.g. studies on indexicality of pronoun use, the (pragmatic) relevance of indexing gender, etc.

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