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Lexical and semantic gender agreement throughout the history of Dutch

Present-day Dutch has two nominal genders, common and neuter, which are expressed on several agreement targets, including pronouns. Pronouns, however, do not always agree with the gender of the antecedent noun. Sometimes, instead of agreeing with the lexically stored gender of the antecedent (*lexical* gender agreement), they agree with certain properties of the referent. This *semantic* gender agreement appears to be based on the degree of individuation of the referent: masculine and common gender pronouns are used for referents with a high degree of individuation, that is bounded, countable entities, while neuter gender pronouns are used for referents with a low degree of individuation, that is unbounded, uncountable entities (Audring 2006, 2009). In this paper, I address the question of when this type of agreement has developed. I present the results from a corpus study of Middle Dutch that show that the phenomenon is older than is generally assumed.

Gender agreement based on individuation is not an exclusively Dutch phenomenon. It has been observed in other Germanic varieties as well, such as the English dialect of West Somerset, West Jutland Danish, Helgoland Frisian and Flemish dialects (Siemund 2002; De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011). It has been suggested in the literature that agreement based on individuation has developed in response to the change from the original three-way nominal gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter) to a two-way (common, neuter) nominal gender system. In this view, the uncertainty about the gender of formerly masculine and feminine nouns has led to a new, semantic interpretation of the pronouns (e.g. Audring 2006, 2009; De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011).

In this paper, however, I present corpus data that show that pronominal agreement based on individuation already occurred in 16th century Dutch, notably before the conflation of masculine and feminine nominal gender, but on a smaller scale than today. This indicates that semantic agreement based on individuation did not newly develop in response to the loss of a nominal gender, but that it was already part of the agreement system. This finding is in line with the idea that individuation has always played a role in the Germanic gender system, as argued in Kraaikamp (2012). It suggests that lexical and semantic gender agreement have always coexisted, and that it is only the balance between these two types of agreement that has changed over time.

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