

A lifespan perspective on grammatical gender marking in urban vernaculars: Flemish Citétaal as a case study

This study investigates the persistence of urban vernacular features in the linguistic repertoire of adult speakers. While research on urban vernaculars has primarily focused on adolescents, there is evidence that some urban vernacular features also remain part of the linguistic repertoire of adult speakers (Cheshire et al., 2011; Møller, 2009; Rampton, 2011). However, little is known about how these features are incorporated into the linguistic repertoire of adults and the discursive contexts in which they are used.

Against this background, the present study addresses the following two questions:

1. Do urban vernacular features, which are typically associated with youth language, persist in the repertoire of adult speakers or are their uses transient?
2. If they persist, are they deployed within similar discursive contexts by adults as by adolescent speakers?

To address these questions, we turn to Citétaal, an urban vernacular spoken in Genk, a former mining city in the easternmost Flemish province of Limburg. We compare spontaneous interactions from two distinct age cohorts: adolescent speakers who participated in a study in 2014 and young adults recorded in 2024, who collected dinner table conversations with their relatives. Both cohorts share a similar demographic background, including speakers with and without a migration background.

We focus on one morphologically salient feature of Citétaal: the overgeneralisation of the common gender in the definite article *de* (instead of neuter *het*) and the demonstrative article *die/deze* (instead of neuter *dat/dit*) (e.g. *de/die/deze meisje* instead of *het/dat/dit meisje*), as well as the overuse of the ending *-e* with indefinite neuter adjectives (e.g. *een leuke meisje*).

The 2024 dataset encompasses production data from approximately 60 participants, comprising 20 young adult speakers, and 40 relatives present during the audio recordings. This is compared to a 2014 dataset comprising spoken material from approximately 60 adolescent speakers. Spoken production data are analysed using quantitative variationist methods, including random forest and conditional inference trees, to examine patterns of variation and to investigate social meaning.

Preliminary findings suggest that the overgeneralisation of common gender persists in the linguistic repertoires of adults, particularly among speakers with a migration background. While this phenomenon appears to be present among young adults with a migration background, it is primarily their parents who seem to use common gender overgeneralisation. Furthermore, whereas common gender usage was largely situated in positive discursive contexts in the 2014 data (Surkyn, 2017), preliminary observations from the 2024 data suggest a potential shift. Young adults seem to use the feature less often, which may indicate a change in its social meaning and the discursive contexts in which it is deployed. In contrast, common gender usage among their parents seems to remain frequent and relatively stable across discursive contexts, with its use appearing to have become less salient and more unmarked, suggesting that the social meaning of this feature may differ between generations.

Bibliography

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