



The remarkable association between countable objects and masculine pronouns in Dutch

Suzanne Aalberse
University of Amsterdam

Previous research on pronominal reference in Dutch has shown that semantic agreement is gaining strength at the expense of lexical agreement. Semantic agreement is organized around the contrast [+count] and [-count]. Countable referents are referred to with the masculine pronoun *hij/hem* ('he/'him') whereas mass referents are referred to with the neuter pronoun *het* ('it'). Whereas previous research has mainly investigated the question why semantic agreement is gaining strength at the expense of lexical agreement, this article questions the position of the cut-off point between masculine and neuter pronouns based on the feature [count]. The claim of this paper is that whereas many languages show an association between non-human animates and the masculine pronoun and between mass nouns and the neuter pronoun, the association between countable objects with masculine pronouns is typologically rare. We will present evidence that suggest why this is the case: it is challenging for both first and second language acquisition.

The exceptional status of a cut-off point where countable objects group with animates rather than with mass nouns of course raises the question why it came into existence in Dutch. In the discussion part we speculate that the pattern is the result of indeed an exceptional combination of circumstances, namely (1) the collapse of masculine and feminine gender in combination with (2) a semantic bias towards neuter lexical gender for low individuated referents and (3) a strong tendency for lexical agreement. This combination of circumstances yielded an input where many countable referents were referred to with the masculine pronoun. Subsequent generations reinterpreted this lexically motivated high incidence of masculine pronouns in reference to objects as semantically motivated.

The idea that semantic agreement based on the feature [count] depends on the collapse of masculine and feminine gender is supported by the observation that only languages and dialects with this pattern show the collapse. Neither English (no nominal gender) nor Flemish or German (three nominal genders) show an association between masculine pronouns and countable objects.