

## Overriding the norm: the use of gender-marked pronouns in spoken language.

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The Dutch gender system has a long history of development (e.g. Geerts 1968, De Vogelaer & De Vos, *in press*), resulting in a system that no longer has all of its original features. The three-fold distinction between masculine, feminine and neuter gender for example, is nowadays limited to personal pronouns, though the different genders are not used at the same rate in both varieties of Dutch, i.e. southern Dutch and northern Dutch (Geerts 1988). Furthermore it appears that speakers of both southern and northern Dutch override what is considered to be the norm for the use of these (personal) pronouns. According to the ANS (*Algemeen Nederlandse Spraakkunst*), a descriptive grammar of Dutch, though often regarded as normative, one can refer text-internal and text-external to an antecedent noun (§ 5.1.2), or in other words, one can use the lexical gender (text-internal) or the natural gender (text-external). Examples of this text-external reference are neuter words denoting humans, e.g. *het meisje*, or animals, e.g. *het paard*, triggering a non-neuter pronoun. However, text-internal reference, which is supposed to be used with all other nouns, has a low frequency in northern Dutch (Audring 2009) and, though to a lesser extent, in southern Dutch (De Vos 2009; De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2010). In both varieties, the system of pronominal reference as described by the ANS, is eroding, and the grammatical system seems to be or is (as in northern Dutch) replaced by a semantic gender system. Instead of the original grammatical system, with pronoun reference based on grammatical gender, a system that uses semantically-motivated gender-marked pronouns is favored. This development along the semantic count-mass distinction, appears to be a common development in European grammatical gender systems, e.g. in (regional varieties of) English, Frisian, Danish and German (Siemund 2002), in a number of varieties of Spanish (Fernández-Ordóñez 2009). For northern Dutch, this implies that countable referents trigger the use of the traditionally masculine pronouns, whereas uncountable referents or masses, trigger the use of the neuter pronoun (Audring 2009). In southern Dutch, the usage pattern of personal pronouns exhibits a clear tendency to use neuter pronouns for abstract and/or mass nouns, regardless of their lexical gender (De Vos 2009). An example from southern Dutch, derived from the *Corpus Gesproken Nederlands* (Corpus of Spoken Dutch):

V40093 de **winter** (*masc.*) is toch wel verre weer gedaan.

V40094 't (*neut.*) moet nog beginnen hé ja.

'The **winter** is almost over' 'It still has to start'

Text-internal reference to this abstract word 'winter', would generate a masculine pronoun. Instead, a neuter one is used. It appears thus, that text-external reference is not restricted to the use of natural gender with humans and animals. Semantic properties (i.e. count-mass) and no longer grammatical gender, as is often believed, play a major role in choosing an appropriate pronoun. In this talk these recent developments in the pronominal gender system will be discussed, and it will follow from this that the descriptions as found in the ANS, do not completely match the actual spoken language use. It will be argued that the pronominal gender systems in northern and southern Dutch might become semantic to a certain degree, with *neuter* as default gender.

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