



HAL
open science

The acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch

Elma Blom, Daniela Poliřenská, Sharon Unsworth

► **To cite this version:**

Elma Blom, Daniela Poliřenská, Sharon Unsworth. The acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch. *Second Language Research*, 2008, 24 (3), pp.259-265. 10.1177/0267658308090187 . hal-00570750

HAL Id: hal-00570750

<https://hal.science/hal-00570750>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch

Elma Blom, Daniela Polišenská *Amsterdam Center for Language and Communication, University of Amsterdam and*
Sharon Unsworth *Utrecht University*

I Introduction

The acquisition of grammatical gender has long been known to cause problems for non-native (L2) adult acquirers (Harley, 1979; Rogers, 1987; Carroll, 1989; Zekhnini and Hulstijn, 1995; Bartning, 2000; Bruhn de Garavito and White, 2000; Dewaele and Véronique, 2001; Franceschina, 2005;). Bilingual children, on the other hand, seem to acquire grammatical gender at the same rate as monolingual children (Carroll, 1989; Mills, 1986; Müller, 1994). Furthermore, although most studies demonstrate that grammatical gender remains non-targetlike for most adult L2 learners, there is some evidence that this target language property is acquirable at later ages, especially when grammatical gender is instantiated in the first language (L1) (Bruhn de Garavito and White, 2000; Hawkins and Franceschina, 2004; Franceschina, 2005). Having said that, recent studies measuring on-line processing show that adult L2 learners with seemingly nativelike knowledge process grammatical gender in a non-native fashion (Sabourin and Haverkort, 2003). Thus, although the L2 acquisition of grammatical gender has been studied extensively, the findings are far from clear-cut.

The contributions in this volume build upon this previous research by expanding the locus of investigation to different learner populations: in addition to L2 adults, acquisition of gender by impaired and unimpaired L2 children and by bilingual (2L1) and monolingual children will be discussed. All of the articles in this volume deal with the same L2, namely Dutch.

Address for correspondence: Elma Blom, Department of Dutch Linguistics, Faculty of Humanities, University of Amsterdam, Spuistraat 134, 1012 VB Amsterdam, The Netherlands; email: w.b.t.blom@uva.nl

II Grammatical gender in Dutch

Dutch has a two-way gender system that distinguishes between neuter and common (also known as non-neuter or *uter*) nouns. Gender can be seen as a lexically-specified property of nouns, which is part of a noun's lexical entry rather than being computed online (Harris, 1991; Kester, 1996; Vigliocco and Zilli, 1999; Vosse and Kempen, 2000; however, for a different view, see Corbett, 1991; 1994). This assumption is motivated for Dutch by the observation that a noun's grammatical gender is essentially arbitrary (Deutsch and Wijnen, 1985; Donaldson, 1987; Haeseryn *et al.*, 1997). The grammatical gender of a noun is spelled out in Dutch on functional morphemes via the process of agreement. Determiners (articles and demonstratives), attributive adjectives and relative pronouns thus agree with the gender of the noun.

Each of the articles in this volume discusses the acquisition of definite articles; some also examine attributive adjectives. The two forms of the definite article (*de* versus *het*) are exemplified in (1).

- | | | | |
|----|----|---------|---------------|
| 1) | a. | De/*het | hond |
| | | The | dog-COMMON |
| | b. | *De/het | konijn |
| | | The | rabbit-NEUTER |

There are in Dutch only a few root nouns which – when grouped into semantic classes – have predictable gender. For instance, names of metals (*het goud* ‘the gold’, *het zilver* ‘the silver’, *het koper* ‘the copper’) and of sports (*het bridge* ‘the bridge’, *het tennis* ‘the tennis’, *het hockey* ‘the hockey’) are neuter gender, whereas names of flowers (*de roos* ‘the rose’, *de lelie* ‘the lily’) and seasons (*de lente* ‘the spring’, *de zomer* ‘the summer’, *de herfst* ‘the autumn’, *de winter* ‘the winter’) are common gender. The gender of root nouns cannot be predicted on the basis of phonological form (but see Trommelen and Zonneveld, 1986; van Beurden and Nijen-Twilhaar, 1990). Derivational morphology does, however, provide some cues to the gender of a given noun (Haeseryn *et al.*, 1997). For instance, all nominalized verbs formed with the prefix *ge-* and nouns ending with the suffix *-isme* are neuter (*het geblaf* ‘the barking’, *het geloop* ‘the walking’, *het socialisme* ‘the socialism’, *het idealisme* ‘the idealism’), whereas nouns ending with the suffixes *-heid* and *-ine* (*de waarheid* ‘the truth’, *de schoonheid* ‘the beauty’, *de cabine* ‘the cabin’, *de discipline* ‘the discipline’) are common gender.

A particularly interesting class in this regard is diminutives. These nouns illustrate that derivational morphology overrules the gender class of root nouns. All diminutivized nouns are neuter, irrespective of the gender of the root noun:

- 2) a. *De/het hondje
The dog-DIM
b. *De/het konijntje
The rabbit-DIM

Another type of gender encoding that plays a central role in this volume, apart from definite articles, is attributive adjectives. Attributive adjectives in Dutch come in two forms, as illustrated in (3) (compare Broekhuis, 1999):

- 3) a. Een mooie/*mooi hond
A beautiful dog-COMMON
b. Een *mooie/mooi konijn
A beautiful rabbit-NEUTER

When preceded by the indefinite article – which is not marked for gender – attributive adjectives modifying common nouns are inflected with schwa, whereas those modifying neuter nouns are not. The gender contrasts observed in articles and attributive adjectives are morphologically neutralized in plural contexts. Plural nouns are always preceded by the common gender determiner *de*, as in (4), and attributive adjectives modifying plural nouns always take the schwa ending, as in (5).

- 4) a. De/*het honden
The dog-PLUR
b. De/*het konijnen
The rabbit-PLUR
5) a. Mooie/*mooi honden
Beautiful dog-PLUR
b. Mooie/*mooi konijnen
Beautiful rabbit-PLUR

Furthermore, gender-marking on attributive adjectives is also neutralized in definite contexts:

- 6) a. De mooie/*mooi hond
The beautiful dog-COMMON
b. Het mooie/*mooi konijn
The beautiful rabbit-NEUTER

III Outline

This volume presents five articles on the acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch, each focusing on different learner groups and employing various methodologies. Comparing and contrasting the behaviour of different learner groups in their acquisition of grammatical gender in one and the same target language allows us to determine where the differences and similarities between these groups exist, evaluate the factors – age, input, L1 – that contribute to these differences and similarities, and deepen our understanding of the representation and processing of grammatical gender in general and, particularly, that of gender in bilingual participants.

The first contribution by Cornips and Hulk presents an overview of previous studies on the acquisition of grammatical gender in Dutch and evaluates the various factors that have been used in previous literature to account for bilingual (2L1/L2) children's relative success/failure in this domain. More specifically, Cornips and Hulk claim that whereas early age of onset and lengthy and intensive input may explain the observed differences in relative success between the different kinds of bilingual children, the role of the quality of input to which bilingual children are exposed remains inconclusive. Following Sabourin (2001), these authors suggest that structural similarity between a child's two languages may facilitate the acquisition of grammatical gender in the L2. Furthermore, they speculate that the problems that many bilingual children experience may relate to their failure to use the diminutive as a trigger for neuter gender.

Blom, Poliřenská and Weerman investigate the interaction of a learner's age of onset and properties of grammatical gender by comparing the acquisition of definite articles and attributive adjectives. They find that monolingual children, Moroccan children and Moroccan adults massively overused the common gender article *de* with neuter nouns, whereas the reverse – the use of the neuter gender article *het* with common nouns – occurred infrequently. Attributive adjectives revealed age-related asymmetries between the groups, however. Whereas the children overgeneralized common gender using the inflected adjective with the schwa-suffix in neuter contexts, the adult learners also overused the neuter gender form, that is, they used the bare adjective in common contexts. Based on distributional analyses of spoken Dutch, Blom *et al.*

argue that these results are consistent with the hypothesis that adult learners exploit an input-based learning strategy. Children, in contrast, acquire abstract representations of gender agreement.

Orgassa and Weerman compare gender errors made by three different types of L2 learners – i.e. non-impaired Turkish-speaking adults, non-impaired Turkish-speaking children and language-impaired Turkish-speaking children – to those of monolingual Dutch controls (i.e. impaired and non-impaired monolingual children). Comparisons of the group results suggest that age of onset is the major determinant of targetlike acquisition: All children, irrespective of bilingualism or impairment, produced by and large the same types of errors, whereas adult L2 learners showed a different error pattern. Any differences between children are argued to follow from differences in intake, rather than from grammatical principles that they may or may not have access to. That problems with the intake are crucial is further supported by the clear cumulative effect of bilingualism and language impairment: Language-impaired L2 children not only differed from the non-impaired L2 controls but also from children in the monolingual Dutch impaired group.

Unsworth investigates the effects of age of first exposure and the quantity and quality of input on the acquisition of gender agreement on definite determiners by English L2 learners of Dutch. She observes that although most learners regularly overgeneralized the common gender definite determiner *de* to neuter nouns, there also existed child and adult L2ers who consistently produced the target neuter determiner *het* with these nouns. Participants in all groups produced *het* equally frequently with non-derived nouns as with diminutives, one of the few reliable morphophonological cues for neuter gender. Unsworth concludes that the quality of input to which L2ers are exposed may significantly affect their ability to proceed beyond the aforementioned stage of overgeneralization. Frequency effects and positive correlations between targetlike performance and length of exposure suggest that quantity of input is a significant factor as well, which, Unsworth argues, is to be expected if the acquisition of gender is for a large part word learning.

In the final article in this issue, our attention turns to processing. Sabourin and Stowe investigate the effects of L1 on L2 neural processing of gender agreement to that of dependencies in the verbal domain, focusing on the event-related potential P600 effect, which has

been found in both L1 and L2 processing. They observe that for both domains, native Dutch speakers showed a P600 effect. However, in L2 Dutch (with German or a Romance language as L1) a P600 effect only occurred if the L1 and L2 were similar, that is, German speakers showed a P600 effect in both domains, whereas the Romance speakers only showed a P600 effect within the verbal domain. Sabourin and Stowe interpret these findings as evidence for the claim that with similar rule-governed processing routines in L1 and L2 (i.e. verbal domain processing for both German and Romance speakers), similar neural processing is possible in L1 and L2. However, lexically-driven constructions that are not the same in L1 and L2 (i.e. grammatical gender for Romance speakers) do not result in similar neural processing in L1 and L2.

IV References

- Bartning, I.** 2000: Gender agreement in L2 French: pre-advanced vs. advanced learners. *Studia Linguistica* 54, 225–37.
- Broekhuis, H.** 1999: Adjectives and adjective phrases. In Broekhuis, H., Haegman, L., Keizer, E., van Riemsdijk, H. and Vos, R., editors, *Modern grammar of Dutch: occasional papers 2*. Tilburg: Tilburg University.
- Bruhn de Garavito, J. and White, L.** 2000: L2 acquisition of Spanish DPs: the status of grammatical features. In Howell, S.C., Fish, S.A. and Keith-Lucas, T., editors, *Proceedings of the 24th annual Boston University Conference on Language Development*. Somerville, MA: Cascadia Press, 164–75.
- Carroll, S.E.** 1989: Second-language acquisition and the computational paradigm. *Language Learning* 39, 535–594.
- Corbett, G.G.** 1991: *Gender*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1994: Gender and gender systems. In Asher, R.E. and Simpson, J.M.Y., editors, *The encyclopedia of language and linguistics*. Volume 3, 1347–53. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Deutsch, W. and Wijnen, F.** 1985: The article's noun and the noun's article: explorations into the representation and access of linguistic gender in Dutch. *Linguistics* 23, 793–810.
- Dewaele, J.-M. and Véronique, D.** 2001: Gender assignment and gender agreement in advanced French interlanguage: a cross-sectional study. *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 4, 275–97.
- Donaldson, B.C.** 1987: *Dutch reference grammar*. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Franceschina, F.** 2005: *Fossilized second language grammars: the acquisition of grammatical gender*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Harley, B.** 1979: French gender 'rules' in the speech of English-dominant, French-dominant and monolingual French-speaking children. *Working Papers in Bilingualism* 19, 129–56.

- Harris, J.W.** 1991: The exponence of gender in Spanish. *Linguistic Inquiry* 22, 27–62.
- Hawkins, R.** and **Franceschina, F.** 2004: Explaining the acquisition of and non-acquisition of determiner–noun gender concord in French and Spanish. In Prévost, P. and Paradis, J., editors, *The acquisition of French in different contexts: focus on functional categories*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 175–205.
- Haeseryn, W., Romijn, K., Geerts, G., de Rooij, J.** and **van den Toorn, M.C.** 1997: *Algemene Nederlandse spraakkunst: tweede geheel herziene druk [A general grammar of Dutch: 2nd edition completely revised]*. Groningen/Deurne: Martinus Nijhoff/Wolters Plantyn.
- Kester, P.M.** 1996: *The nature of adjectival inflection*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Utrecht University.
- Mills, A.E.** 1986: *The acquisition of gender: a study of English and German*. Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Müller, N.** 1994: Gender and number agreement within DP. In Meisel, J.M., editor, *Bilingual first language acquisition: French and German grammar development*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 53–88.
- Rogers, M.** 1987: Learners' difficulties with grammatical gender in German as a foreign language. *Applied Linguistics* 8, 48–74.
- Sabourin, L.** 2001: L1 effects on the processing of grammatical gender in L2. In Foster-Cohen, S.H. and Nizgorodcew, A., editors, *EUROSLA Yearbook 2001*, 159–69.
- Sabourin, L.** and **Haverkort, M.** 2003: Neural substrates of representation and processing of a second language. In van Hout, R., Hulk, A., Kuiken, F. and Towell, R., editors, *The lexicon–syntax interface in second language acquisition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 175–95.
- Trommelen, M.** and **Zonneveld, W.** 1986: Dutch morphology: evidence for the Right-hand Head Rule. *Linguistic Inquiry* 17, 147–69.
- van Beurden, L.** and **Nijen-Twilhaar, J.** 1990: Hermafrodiete nomina en de verwerving van het genussysteem [Hermaphrodite nouns and the acquisition of the gender system]. *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 83, 193–211.
- Vigliocco, G.** and **Zilli, T.** 1999: Syntactic accuracy in sentence production: the case of gender disagreement in Italian language-impaired and unimpaired speakers. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 28, 623–48.
- Vosse, T.** and **Kempen, G.** 2000: Syntactic structure assembly in human parsing: a computational model based on competitive inhibition and a lexicalist grammar. *Cognition* 75, 105–43.
- Zekhnini, A.** and **Hulstijn, J.H.** 1995: An experimental study on the learning of arbitrary and non-arbitrary gender of pseudo Dutch nouns by nonnative and native speakers of Dutch. *Applied Linguistics in Articles* 53, 121–36.