

Gender selection and syntactic constructions: the case of Dutch double gender nouns

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1. Introduction

The grammatical category of gender is particularly interesting given its halfway status between morphology and syntax. In fact, gender is not only an inherent lexical property of nouns, that can be either morphologically marked (overt gender) or not (covert gender), but also a contextual property displayed through syntactic agreement (Hockett 1958; Corbett 1991; 2006). Accordingly, gender has two main functions: it allows nominal classification and ensures textual cohesion by means of cross-reference relations between the gender controller (noun) and gender targets (determiners and pronouns).

Nevertheless, gender is different from other morphological categories like case and number, because it allows for no choice (Leiss 1999), that is a noun can be in its singular or plural form, or in the accusative or nominative case, but it cannot be masculine in a context and feminine in another. In other words, the gender of a noun is given once for all.

This assumption is partially invalidated by ‘double gender nouns’ (DGNs), i.e. nouns that can take the agreements of more than one consistent pattern without any variation in meaning (Corbett 1991). A case in point is that of Dutch *aperitief* ‘apéritif’ in (1):

- (1) a. *De aperitief heeft een lichte porttoets en bevat een alcoholpercentage van 15%.*
DET-C apéritif has a light taste of port wine and contains an alcohol percentage of 15%.¹
‘The apéritif has a light taste of port wine and contains an alcohol percentage of 15%’
- b. *Het aperitief is de gelegenheid om een barbeque te organiseren.*²
DET-N apéritif is the occasion for a barbecue to organize
‘The apéritif is the occasion to organize a barbecue’

The noun *aperitief* can take both common (1a) and neuter (1b) agreement without any apparent change in meaning. Nowadays Dutch nouns are commonly divided into *de*-words and *het*-words, while nouns like *aperitief* are listed in grammars and vocabularies as *de/het*-nouns: a definition that presumes the instability of gender to be ‘inherent’ for DGNs that, as a consequence, can trigger any kind of agreement (Booij 2002). The main problem is that Dutch DGNs cannot be treated as homonymous words, like *de ball* ‘ball’ and *het ball* ‘dance’ – where different genders associate with different meanings – and previous accounts on the subject generally assume dialectal variation to be responsible for these fluctuations (Pauwels 1938; De Vogelaer and De Sutter 2010). Accordingly, gender uncertainty for *de/het*-nouns is currently explained as an instance of lexical gender instability, without any further investigation.

¹ Available at: <http://toerisme.hoogstraten.be/Aardbeienwijn-likeur-aperitief.html>

² Available at: <http://koersoepfrankrijk.nl/het-aperitief>

The aim of this paper is to provide another explanation for Dutch DGNs treating the phenomenon from a different perspective: the analysis of these nouns as a matter of ‘motivated’ gender agreement. The paper is divided as follows: first of all the contemporary Dutch gender system will be described, then previous studies on Dutch pronominal gender and its ongoing recategorization will be briefly sketched before turning to a series of examples that allow explanation for these ‘apparent’ unmotivated fluctuations.

2. Previous studies on Dutch pronominal gender: the ‘reinvention’ of pronouns

Nowadays the Dutch gender system is described as a mismatched one (Booij and Audring 2009) given the paradigmatic unbalance between the number of gender values for controllers and targets. In fact, Dutch nouns divide into two classes: common *de*-nouns (resulting from the coalescence of original masculine and feminine nouns) and neuter *het*-nouns. The same distinction counts for all gender targets with the exception of personal pronouns that still discriminate between masculine (*hij* ‘he’), feminine (*zij/ze* ‘she’) and neuter (*het* ‘it’). The absence of a common gender pronoun – as it is the case in Scandinavian languages (Braunmüller 1999) – increases the degree of uncertainty to the extent that, in principle, all common gender nouns can trigger either the masculine or the feminine personal pronoun (Table 1).

AGREEMENT TARGET	DETERMINER	ADJECTIVE	DEMONSTRATIVE PRONOUN	RELATIVE PRONOUN	PERSONAL PRONOUN
genders	common de stoel ‘the chair’	common de grot- <i>e</i> stoel ‘the big chair’ een grot- <i>e</i> stoel ‘a big chair’	common deze/die ‘this/that’	common die ‘that’	masculine hij ‘he’
	common de stoel ‘the chair’	common de grot- <i>e</i> stoel ‘the big chair’ een grot- <i>e</i> stoel ‘a big chair’	common deze/die ‘this/that’	common die ‘that’	feminine zij/ze ‘she’
	neuter het huis ‘the house’	neuter het grot- <i>e</i> huis ‘the big house’ een groot huis ‘a big huis’	neuter dit/dat ‘this/that’	neuter dat ‘that’	neuter het ‘it’

Table 1: The mismatch between Dutch gender controllers and gender targets

Actually, recent studies on Dutch pronominal gender reveal that the situation is much more complex than one could assume just by having a look at the table above: not only *de*-nouns can trigger both masculine and feminine personal pronouns, but they also agree with neuter pronouns, and neuter nouns can associate with common gender

targets as well, at least in the spoken language. Moreover, these agreement patterns are not random but demonstrate the existence of a tendency towards common gender for animate and inanimate highly individuated referents and the neuter for inanimate, low individuated entities (Fletcher 1987; Romijn 1996; De Vries 2001; De Vogelaer 2006; Audring 2006; 2009; De Vogelaer and De Vos 2011; De Vos 2009). This state of affairs presumes a progressive ‘resemanticization’ (Wurzel 1986) of Dutch gender towards a conceptual system based on different degrees of individuation (Audring 2009). In other words, the selection of pronouns seems to depend no longer on the lexical gender of the noun, but on the individuation properties of the referent (2):

- (2) a. [count N] *artikel* ‘article’ (*het*-word)
 dus ik zou ‘m zo af kunnen sluiten
 so I could PERS.PRO-M so off can close
 ‘so I could just finish it like this’
- b. [mass N] *olijfolie* ‘olive oil’ (*de*-word)
 hoe ‘t geconserveerd wordt
 how PERS.PRO-N conserved becomes
 ‘how it is preserved’

As shown in (2), revised from Audring (2009: 88-95), the neuter noun *artikel* agrees with a masculine pronoun (‘m), while the common gender noun *olijfolie* triggers the neuter *het*. Even though these agreement patterns are syntactically wrong, they make sense from a cognitive perspective: the noun *artikel* makes reference to a bounded (highly individuated) entity, whereas *olijfolie* is a mass noun referring to a substance, i.e. low individuated referent. Accordingly, Dutch pronouns are claimed to be undergoing a recategorization which follows the Individuation Hierarchy (Sasse 1993; Siemund 2008): the selection of pronouns depends on the conceptualization of the entity the noun refers to (masculine/(feminine) for more individuated referents and neuter for less individuated ones) rather than on the lexical gender of the controller (Figure 1).

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Person (male) > Animal > Bounded Object > Unbounded object/Specific Mass > Unspecific Mass Person (female)

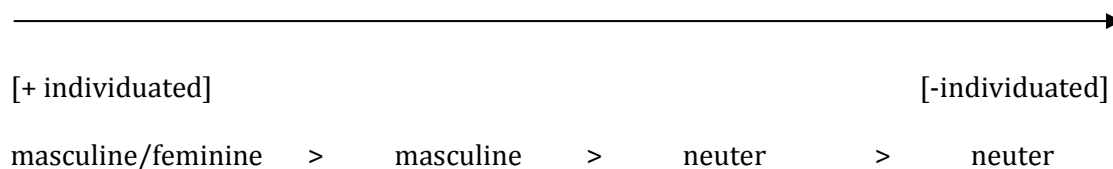


Figure 1: Dutch gender and the Individuation Hierarchy (revised from Audring 2009)

Besides, this change is in accordance with the predictions of Corbett’s Agreement Hierarchy (1979; 1991; 2006): the probability to find semantic rather than syntactic agreement is higher for NP-external targets (personal, demonstrative and relative pronouns) than for NP-internal targets (articles and adjectives) and increases monotonically moving rightwards along the hierarchy (Figure 2). In other words, any change towards a (more) semantic gender system begins on the right pole of the scale (personal pronouns) exactly as it has been demonstrated to be happening in Dutch.³

³ Similar recategorization phenomena have been proved to be at work in other Indo-European varieties: Danish (Braunmüller 1999), Norwegian (Enger 2004) and Swedish (Joseffson 2006); southern English varieties (Siemund 2008); northwest Spanish varieties (Lüdtke 2001; Fernández Ordoñez 2009) and central Italian dialects (Haase 1999).

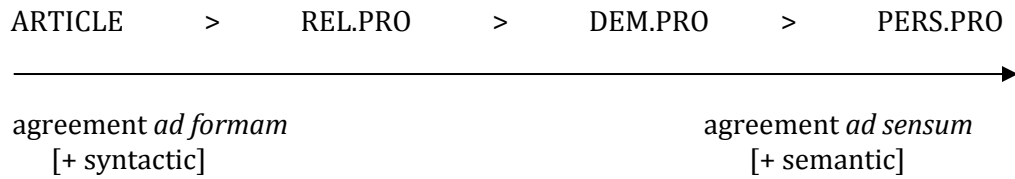


Figure 2: Corbett's Agreement Hierarchy and gender agreement

Nevertheless, previous research on Dutch gender claims that nominal targets (articles and adjectives) are not undergoing the same change (Audring 2009; Booij and Audring 2009): on the left of the hierarchy lexical gender continues to rule.⁴ Accordingly, Dutch DGNs are particularly interesting to investigate, given that their lexical instability, if not regarded as a matter of dialect, could be driven by the same dynamics leading to the restructuring of pronominal gender along semantic pathways.

3. Dutch double gender nouns as a matter of gender agreement

Previous accounts on Dutch DGNs assume their gender instability to be lexically determined. Nevertheless, considering this instability as a matter of agreement may allow explanation for gender shifts exactly as it is the case for pronominal gender.

On the one hand gender is fixed and lexically determined for each noun (lexical gender) but on the other hand it is selected contextually each time a noun is used to refer to a specific entity the speaker has in mind and he wants to make understandable to the hearer, that is gender – as a property of NPs and pronominal targets – is a referential feature (Dahl 1999) and may serve the function of nominal 'perspectivization' (Weber 1999). In other words, if lexical gender is a fixed property of nouns that allows assignment to a certain class, gender targets (pronouns and determiners) reflect referential gender, that is gender is not pre-determined but triggered in context.

Provided that Dutch nouns are associated with a certain gender depending on the definite article they take,⁵ talking about lexical gender for *de/het*-words does not make any sense. As a matter of fact, for DGNs the distinction between gender assignment and gender agreement (Corbett 1991) is tautological. Once grammatical gender has become covert – as it is the case of contemporary Dutch – speakers cannot rely on the morphological shape of the noun to decide which gender class it belongs but may rely on semantic and pragmatic agreement patterns to structure their utterances, using gender as a cognitive cue to convey specific conceptualizations, disregarding its original grammatical function.

Actually, the analysis of Dutch DGNs in context confirms that different genders correlate with different morphosyntactic configurations: in particular the mass syntax tends to privilege neuter gender, while the count syntax prefers common gender. This lets us suppose that referential gender interacts with both syntactic and semantic/pragmatic factors, not only at the pronominal level, but also in the nominal domain, a state of affairs which may indicate a step forward in the transition of Dutch gender as a whole.

Provided that the meaning of a noun can be coerced in context (Krifka 1995; Talmy 2000; Wisniewski 2009) and syntactic prominence is one of the primary factors in determining the salience of entities (Rose 2011), I assume that gender selection in definite NPs could be driven by the need to mark different degrees of

⁴ Semantic agreement in the nominal domain is predicted to be very rare given the proximity of controller and targets (Corbett 1991).

⁵ Dutch nouns do not display any longer morphological markers for gender: apart from some derivational suffixes that associate with a specific gender value (for instance nouns ending with the suffix *-heid* are feminine and all diminutives are neuter), gender is covert (Booij 2002).

(semantic/pragmatic) individuation, especially in cases where grammatical gender is impaired, i.e. DGNs.

4. Dutch double gender nouns and Individuation

DGNs have been generally considered as a niche phenomenon in the history of Dutch language, to the extent that even the number of items involved is uncertain and classifications are neither uniform nor coherent. For instance, simply considering different sources, i.e. dictionaries, grammars or lexical databases, the number of nouns listed as *de/het*-words changes a lot (Semplicini 2012a); moreover, some nouns are classified as either stable or unstable depending on the source (the noun *gordijn* ‘curtain’ is listed as either a *de/het*-word or a *het*-word according to different accounts). This terminological confusion arises the problem of determining the size of the phenomenon and presumes that Dutch DGNs may be less irrelevant than generally claimed.

A synchronic investigation of these nouns (Semplicini 2012a; Semplicini 2012b) has shown that they are characterized by three main properties: they refer to inanimate entities (objects, substances and abstracts), they are unstable for gender and share a high semantic affinity and polysemy. DGNs form not only synonymic pairs (*omslag/kaft* ‘cover’; *afval/vuilnis* ‘rubbish’) but also complex semantic networks (*draad* ‘wire, thread, line’ - *koord* ‘rope, line, string’ - *kluwen* ‘ball of string’; *fiber* ‘fiber’ - *flanel* ‘flannel’ - *katoen* ‘cotton’; *hars* ‘resin’ - *gom* ‘gum’ - *plamuur/mastiek* ‘mastic’ etc.). Accordingly, *de/het*-nouns seem to constitute a particular area of the Dutch lexicon, a network of concepts which are synonymous at different levels and that generally allow different interpretations: substance/contained substance (*hars/plamuur* ‘resin, mastic’); object/surface (*omslag/kaft* ‘cover’); substance/object (*katoen/draad* ‘cotton, yarn’) etc. In other words, these nouns mainly refer to entities that can be conceptualized as either individuated or not.

From a cognitive perspective conceptualization represents a mid-way level between ontology and grammar: the ontological distinction individual vs. non individual (Quine 1960) is grammatically reflected by the count vs. mass syntax. Different perspectives on an entity are conveyed at the morphosyntactic level by different constructions (Krifka 1995): for instance the noun *beer*, that is a prototypical mass noun (3a), can be coerced into a countable one simply by choosing a marked syntactic configuration (3b).

- (3) a. I drink beer (prototypical meaning)
b. I drink a beer (coerced meaning)

In other words, the meaning of a noun is not fixed but flexible and open to different interpretations (Talmy 2000). As a matter of fact, syntax is deeply affected by conceptualizations (or world knowledge): combinatorial possibilities and syntactic constructions are affected by the ways in which we conceive of their meanings (Parafragou 2005). Conceptualizations are variable and flexible because they strictly depend on the contingent communicative needs of the cognitive agent (Wisniewski et al. 2003; Wisniewski 2009): when we are referring to a certain entity we conceptualize it in different manners according to different ‘scopes of predication’ (Wisniewski 2009) that result in different syntactic constructions, i.e. for instance mass vs. count syntax. Not only words but also constructions have meaning (Langacker 1991) to the extent that if a lexical item is semantically incompatible with its syntactic context the meaning of the noun conforms to the meaning of the structure in which it is embedded (Michaelis 2005). For instance, recalling the example in (1) the noun *aperitief* conceptualizes two different referents: the *apéritif* as an occasion (abstract, i.e. non individuated) in (1b) and the *apéritif* as a drink (concrete, i.e. individuated) in (1a). Even though different genders for

aperitief may be a matter of chance, the analysis of DGNs in context has revealed that these shifts are less random than generally supposed.

5. Referential gender and syntactic constructions: some interesting cases

The investigation of Dutch DGNs in context shows that some syntactic constructions are more likely to correlate with a certain gender value and that within these configurations synonymic words tend to select the same definite article, i.e. the same gender: the *het*-article is the most preferred for non individuated interpretations, while the common gender article is the most suited for high individuated readings. Consider the case of *vuilnis* ‘rubbish’ in (4) and *appelmoes* ‘apple puree’ in (5):

- (4) a. Winkelen tussen *het* *vuilnis* in Utrecht
Shops among DET-N rubbish in Utrecht
‘Shops among the rubbish in Utrecht’⁶
- b. Als vanzelfsprekend nam ik *de* *vuilnis* even mee
Obviously bring I DET-C rubbish always (with) me
- naar beneden (ik woon in een flat), om ‘t beneden in de vuilcontainer te gooien.
downstairs (I live in a flat) to it outside in the rubbish container to throw
- ‘Obviously I bring the rubbish downstairs (I live in a flat), to throw it outside into the rubbish container’⁷
- (5) a. Verdeel *het* *appelmoes* over de plakken bladerdeeg en
Divide DET-N apple mousse over the pieces puff pastry and
- klap ze dicht als een portefeuille.
close them as a wallet
- ‘Divide the apple mousse on the pieces of puff pastry and close them as a wallet’⁸
- b. *De* *appelmoes* van Koeleman wordt gemist. Op diverse internetafora
DET-C apple mousse of Koeleman is missed. On different internet forums
- blijkt dat consumenten het betreuren dat nieuwe eigenaar Nederlands Glorie
seems that customers it regret that new owner Nederlands Glorie
- de* *appelmoes* uit het schap heeft gehaald.
DET-C apple mousse from the shelf has removed.

⁶ Available at: nos.nl/artikel/157594-winkelen-tussen-het-vuilnis-in-utrecht.html

⁷ Corpus of Spoken Dutch: Session fn008020

⁸ Available at: eten-en-drinken.infonu.nl/recepten/1772-heerlijke-appelflappen.html

'The apple mousse of Koeleman won't exist any longer. On different internet forums customers are regretting that the new owner Nederlands Glorie has removed the apple mousse from the market shelf'⁹

As shown in these examples the neuter is triggered for unbounded conceptualizations (an indistinct amount of rubbish on the streets of Utrecht and the apple mousse to be spread on the puff pastry), while common gender is generally used for individuated referents: the rubbish sack and the apple mousse (pot) produced by Koeleman, respectively.

Similar tendencies are shown by DGNs sharing the same head like *haarlak* 'hairspray' and *nagellak* 'nail lacquer' and the specific syntactic configurations they enter in (6) and (7):

- (6) a. In de winkel zag ik *deze haarlak* liggen
in the shop saw I DEM-C hairspray lay
'I saw this hairspray in the shop'¹⁰
- b. Laat *het haarlak* even opdrogen
Let DET-N hairspray then dry up
'Let the hairspray dry up'¹¹
- (7) a. *De nagellak* van OPI wordt door tal van celebs
DET-C nail lacquer by OPI is by many celebrities
op handen gedragen.
on hands worn
'The nail lacquer by OPI is used by many celebrities'¹²
- b. Het verwijderen van *het nagellak* werkt goed.¹³
The removing of DET-N nail lacquer works good
'The removing the nail lacquer is easy'

Even in these cases the neuter correlates with a low degree of individuation both for *haarlak* and *nagellak* (a substance that dries up or that can be easily removed), while common gender is triggered when the referent is conceptualized as a bounded object (the nail lacquer and the hairspray as products you can buy at the supermarket). The same can be observed in (8) and (9) for *talkpoeder* 'talc powder' and *waspoeder* 'detergent' respectively, where the *de*-article is preferred to refer to products (8a) and (9a) while the neuter appears in syntactic constructions conveying the idea of an unbounded mass (8b) and (9b):

- (8) a. *De talkpoeder* staat bij ons altijd op de toilettafel
DET-C talc powder stand by us always on the toilet table
'At our place the talc powder is always on the toilet table'¹⁴

⁹ Available at: www.evmi.nl/nieuws/marketing-sales/5358/consument-mist-koeleman-appelmoes.html

¹⁰ Available at: www.ciao-shopping.nl/sr/q-schwarzkopf_junior_haarlak

¹¹ Available at: www.ciao-shopping.nl/Wella_Forte_Hairspray_Ultra_Sterk_1025602

¹² Available at: www.opi.nl/nagellak/nailstudio.htm

¹³ Available at: www.ciao-shopping.nl/Herome_Caring_Nail_Polish_Remover_Pads_1032016

¹⁴ Available at: www.yunomi.nl/artikel/talkpoeder-weetjes

- b. *Het talkpoeder* is huidneutraal en vrij van parfum
DET-N talc powder is skin neutral and free of perfume
'The talc powder is neutral skin and without any added perfume'¹⁵
- (9) a. *De waspoeder* van Klok Eco minimaliseert de kans
DET-C washing powder of Klok Eco minimizes the possibility
op huidproblemen
of skin problems
'The washing powder Klok Eco minimizes skin problems'¹⁶
- b. Tot aan de uitvinding van *het waspoeder* was
wassen zwaar handwerk.
Until the invention of DET-N washing powder was
washing heavy handwork
'Until the invention of the washing powder the washing up was heavy
handwork'¹⁷

All these examples display a tendency in the selection of the definite article which seems to confirm the possibility for gender to be contextually chosen according to different individuation degrees of the referent.

As a matter of fact, the investigation of intra-speaker variation – gender shifts produced in the same utterance by the same speaker – shows that different genders can be triggered also in the same utterance, and that such a variation is cognitively explainable recalling the same cognitive opposition, i.e. individuated vs. non individuated reading (Semplificini 2012a; 2012b). Consider *aperitief* in (10):

- (10) a. *De perfecte aperitief*: fruitbier met chocolade
DET-C perfect-C apéritif: fruit beer with chocolate
'The perfect apéritif: fruit beer with chocolate'
- b. Chocolade kan perfect *bij het aperitief* geserveerd worden
Chocolate can perfectly by DET-N apéritif served become
'Chocolate is perfectly suited to be served by the apéritif'¹⁸

In (10) the gender shift *de aperitief* > *het aperitief* recalls and confirms the distinction observed in (1): neuter for the 'occasion' and common gender for the bounded object. The different conceptualization is also conveyed through different syntactic roles: common gender for the subject position and neuter gender for the prepositional NP *bij* + DET + N.

As far as prepositional NPs are concerned, a very interesting case is provided by the construction *op* + DET + N: in (11) – (13) the neuter correlates with a low

¹⁵Available at:

www.choosebeauty.nl/index.php?option=com_jreviews&task=listcategory§ion=5&cat=997&dir=8&Itemid=20

¹⁶ Available at: www.allergiewinkel.nl/product/klok-eco-waspoeder-wit/20734/

¹⁷ Available at: www.schooltv.nl/vroegerenzo/2202052/wist-je-datjes/

¹⁸ Available at: <http://www.hln.be/hln/nl/39/Lekker-Eten/article/detail/1081148/2010/03/17/De-perfecte-aperitief-fruitbier-met-chocolade.dhtml>

individuated interpretation of the object, but when the noun refers to a more individuated entity the speaker selects common gender. In other words, the preposition *op* 'on' coerces the interpretation of the noun, i.e. bounded object > unbounded surface, while the *de*-article is the most suited to appear in either subject or object position:

- (11) a. Hij denkt dan ook dat de dief met een stoel *op het altaar*
He thinks then also that the thief with a chair on DET-N altar

heeft gestaan
has stood
'He also thinks that the thief got on the altar with a chair'
- b. Uit politieonderzoek blijkt echter dat *de altaar* stoffig was.
From police investigation seems in fact that DET-C altar dusty was
'According to the police investigation came out that the altar was dusty'
- (12) a. Er blijft altijd deeg achter *op het aanrecht*
There remains always dough behind on DET-N work surface
'Some dough always remains on the work surface'
- b. Nadeel is dat je *de aanrecht* eerst goed
schoon maken moet.
Disadvantage is that you DET-C work surface first good
clean make must
'The disadvantage is that first of all you must clean the work surface'
- (13) a. Eigen foto's en tekst *op het omslag*.
Own photos and texts on DET-N cover
'Your own photos and texts on the cover'
- b. *Zachte omslag* geeft paperback uitstraling.
Soft-C cover gives paperback brightness
'Soft cover gives brightness to the paperback'

Something similar is shown by *vergiet* 'colander' in (14). Common gender appears in the NP in object position that conceptualizes the referent as a bounded object (14a), but when the colander represents the less individuated entity with respect to another object (the *deksel* 'cover' is more individuated than the colander) the speaker switches to neuter (14b):

- (14) a. Plaats *de vergiet* erboven op
Put DET-C colander there over on
'Put the colander over it'
- b. Plaats een deksel *bovenop het vergiet*
Put a cover over on DET-N colander
'Put a cover over the colander'

Other systematic interactions are provided by NPs that correlate with the verb *smelten* 'melt': the meaning of the verb coerces the interpretation of the noun that must necessarily refer to an unbounded substance, as in (15) for *drop* 'liquorice'.

- (15) a. Doe *de drop* in het pannetje.

put DET-C liquorice in the little pan
'Put the liquorice in the little pan'

- b. Een klein beetje water toevoegen kan helpen *het* *drop* beter
a little bit water add can help DET-N liquorice better

te laten smelten
to let melt
'Adding a bit of water can help to melt the liquorice'¹⁹

In fact, the relevance of this construction has been proved to be at work also for stable nouns. The noun *kaas* 'cheese' for instance is commonly considered a *de*-word and therefore NPs like **het kaas* are simply considered as gender mistakes. Anyway, a deeper look at examples like those in (15) and (16) presumes that these gender mistakes are quite systematic.

- (16) Beleg het brood met kaas, vlees en groenten. Leg het even onder de grill
Fill the bread with cheese, meat and vegetables. Put it then under the grill

tot *het* *kaas* gesmolten is.
till DET-N cheese melted is.

'Fill the bread with cheese, meat and vegetables. Put it under the grill till the cheese melts down'²⁰

Another correlation between gender selection and mass reading is displayed by NPs introduced by the quantifier *al* 'all' that occurs with definite mass nouns and definite plurals – it is not specified for number – and stands in complementary distribution with *heel* 'whole' that is restricted to definite singulars (Zwarts 1992).

- (16) a. Men denkt dat men bang is om *de* *kauwgom* door te slikken,
One think that one scared is to DET-C chewing-gum through to swallow

en dat daardoor mensen *de* *kauwgom* ergens opplakken
and that therefore people DET-C chewing-gum anywhere stick

of op straat gooien
or on street throw

'One thinks that people are scared to swallow the chewing gum and therefore they either stick the chewing gum anywhere or throw (it) on the road.'

- b. Intussen is *al* *het* *kauwgom* op straat een heel milieuprobleem
So is all DET-N chewing gum on street a whole environment
problem

geworden want *het* blijft liggen.
become because it keeps stay.

¹⁹ Available at: www.dropenzo.nl/drop-en-gerechten/drop-en-ijs/drop-en-ijs-maken-the-easy-way.html

²⁰ Available at: eten-en-drinken.infonu.nl/recepten/21532-recepten-met-oud-brood.html

'Accordingly, all the chewing gum on the road has become a problem for the environment, because it keeps staying there.'

Similar cases can be observed also for stable nouns referring to substances like *de boter* 'butter' and *de melk* 'milk':

- (19) Als *al het boter* is gesmolten voeg je de tomatenpuree toe
When all DET-N butter is melted add you the tomato puree to
'When all the butter has melted down add the tomato puree'²¹
- (20) Voeg niet in één keer *al het melk* toe, dat is niet altijd nodig.
Add not in a time all DET-N milk to, that is not always necessary
'Do not add all the milk at a time, that is not always necessary.'²²

Further confirmations for the correlation between mass conceptualization and wrong grammatical gender come from the observation that instances of the construction *heel* + **het boter*/**het melk* were not found.

Moreover, an investigation carried out on the web at different times revealed an increasing number of instances: from 13 to 15 instances of **het boter* in a few days. The most relevant fact is that all cases of deviation from grammatical gender are characterized by constructions that convey a low degree of individuation: **het boter smelten* 'to melt down the butter', **het boter mixen* 'to mix the butter', *al *het boter* 'all the butter', etc. Some instances of the query **het boter* are given in (21):

- (21) a. ..smelt eerst *het boter* op hoog vuur in de pan. Wanneer *de boter*
melt first DET-N butter on high fire in the pan. When DET-C butter
lichtbruin is..
light brown is..

'First of all melt the butter in the pan on a high fire. When the butter becomes light brown..'
- b. ..mix *het boter* met ei en suiker klop dit goed en voeg..
mix DET-N butter with egg and sugar beat this well and add..
'Mix the butter with egg and sugar, beat it and add..'
- c1. ..met gestolde geklaarde boter. Een deel van *het boter*
with solidified-C finished-C butter. A piece of DET-N butter
gaan we gebruiken voor het deeg..
go we use for the dough..

'..with solidified ready butter. We're going to use a portion of the butter for the dough..'
- c2. ..or het smelten verandert de moleculestructuur van *het boter*..
or the melting changes the molecular structure of DET-N butter
'or the melting (process) changes the molecular structure of the butter'
- d. ..laat *het boter* smelten en bak de forel

²¹ Available at: forum.scholieren.com/archive/index.php/t-448722.html

²² Available at: www.smulweb.nl/recepten/1396150/Pepernootjes

let DET-N butter melt down and bake the trout
'Let the butter melt down and bake the trout'

- e. *Het boter laten smelten op een laag vuur*
DET-N butter let melt down on a low fire
'Let the butter melt down on a low fire'

All these results seem to confirm that Dutch speakers are gradually losing their feeling for grammatical gender not only at the pronominal level but also for nominals. The observation of common agreement patterns based on different degrees of individuation rather than on lexical gender – not only for DGNs but also for stable *de*-words and *het*-words – let us suppose that gender fluctuations in the nominal domain are less marginal than currently claimed and that, especially in systems where gender is covert, referential gender may override lexical gender and strictly interact with morphosyntactic, semantic and pragmatic factors.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of Dutch DGNs in context has revealed some patterns that recall semantic pronominal agreement: the selection of an article instead of the other seems to depend on the cognitive perception of the referent the noun stands for in each specific utterance (the masculine/feminine article used for more individuated referents and the neuter article for less individuated ones).

In many cases the selection of gender seems to be related to either the particular syntactic construction the noun appears in or the syntactic prominence of the definite NP: this means that different gender values may be selected on the basis of specific communicative needs focusing on the semantic/pragmatic properties of the referent that are the most relevant in a certain context (Wisniewski 2003; 2009) and reflected by specific syntactic constructions and thematic roles.

Actually, it has been observed that certain syntactic constructions are more probable to trigger semantic rather than grammatical agreement not only for DGNs but also for stable gender nouns: for instance the recurrence of patterns like *op het + N*, *al het + N*, *het N + smelten* and the preference accorded to common gender for definite NPs with a higher degree of salience, i.e. in subject and object position, presume that once the sensitivity for grammatical gender has been lost speakers make their choices following their own cognitive perception of the referent which is also reflected at the morphosyntactic level by specific syntactic configurations.

These tendencies let us suppose that contemporary Dutch gender as a whole is subject to a 'recategorization' process which is leading to a (more) semantic system: the gradual loss of morphological endings (originally marking inflectional classes and gender) which led to the loss of sensitivity for grammatical gender has been triggering the restructuring of the category along semantic pathways.

Further confirmations come from a questionnaire study for native speakers in Flanders: in sentence completion task Flemish speakers produced gender shifts according to different perceptions of the referent. For instance, some informants associate the DGN *kluwen* 'tangle' with the neuter article *het* when it referred to the tangle as an 'indistinct amount of yarn', but to common gender (*de kluwen*) when it meant the 'yarn' as a bounded object (Semplificini 2012a).

This transition towards a conceptual system is demonstrated not only by increasing semantic pronominal agreement, but also by the analysis of definite NPs. Some systematic tendencies in the choice of definite articles for DGNs and, to a lesser extent, also for stable gender nouns suggest a step forward in the transition of Dutch gender based on different degrees of individuation and pragmatic salience.

In conclusion, DGNs should no longer be confined to the issue of dialectal variation and definitely deserve more attention because they represent a relevant step in the ongoing recategorization process and their analysis helps motivating not only the article selection for *de/het*-nouns, but also suggests another possible explanation for 'apparent' mistakes regarding stable gender nouns.

APPENDIX

The appendix contains those cases of intra-speaker gender variation for DGNs that have been quoted in distinct sentences in the body of the article.

- *de/het aperitief* (aperitif)

De perfecte aperitief: fruitbier met chocolade

De Oudenaardse brouwerij Liefmans serveert dit voorjaar zijn nieuwste fruitbier met donkere chocolade. [...] Chocolade kan perfect *bij het aperitief* geserveerd worden, oordeelde men bij Liefmans. "De bittere smaak van de chocolade harmonieert prima met het zoete fruitbier waardoor een nieuwe aperitiefbeleving ontstaat", oordeelt Marc Coessens, meester-brouwer.

The perfect aperitif-C: fruit beer with chocolate

This year the brewery Liefmans in Oudenaarde serves its new fruit beer with dark chocolate. [...] Chocolate is perfectly suited to be served *by the aperitif-N*, agree people by Liefmans. 'The bitter flavor of the chocolate goes very well with the sweet fruit beer whereby a new aperitif experience arises', asserted the master brewer Marc Coessens.

<http://www.hln.be/hln/nl/39/Lekker-Eten/article/detail/1081148/2010/03/17/De-perfecte-aperitief-fruitbier-met-chocolade.dhtml>

- *de/het altaar* (altar)

De bovenkant van het raamwerk bevond zich op 1.85 boven de altaartafel. Hij denkt dan ook dat de dief met een stoel *op het altaar* heeft gestaan om het paneel los te krijgen van boven.[...] waarom er geen voetafdrukken op het altaar waren. Als je binnen staat en het altaarstuk naar boven uit de lijst wil halen dan moet je *op het altaar* gaan staan. Uit politieonderzoek blijkt echter dat *de altaar* stoffig was en dat de stof niet was aangetast. Ook waren er geen voetafdrukken op het opgevouwen altaarkleed. Niets wees erop dat men *op het altaar* is geklommen! (Bron: Karl Hammer. Hij baseert zich op een politierapport van Hantsen.).

The upper side of the window frame is 1.85 above the altar table. He also thinks that the thief got *on the altar-N* with a chair to get the panel from above. [...] why there were no footprints *on the altar-N* If you are inside and you want to take the altar piece up from the frame then you have to *be on the altar-N*. According to the police investigation came out that *the altar-C* was dusty and that the dust had not been removed. Moreover there were no footprints on the bent altar cloth. Nothing indicates that someone has climbed *on the altar-N*! (Source: Karl Hammer. He goes on the basis of the report of the police of Hantsen).

http://www.oogvanhorus.nl/03_Diefstal/02_reconstructie.htm

- *de/het aanrecht* (work surface)

Brooddeeg kneden *op het aanrecht*

Dan maar met de handen kneden *op het aanrecht*. [...] Nadeel is dat je *de aanrecht* eerst goed schoon moet maken. En dan nog een keer als je klaar bent, want er blijft altijd deeg achter *op het aanrecht*.

Bread dough kneading *on the work surface-N*

Therefore kneading with the hands *on the work surface-N*.[...] The disadvantage is that before you have to clean *the work surface-C*. And then again another time as you are ready because dough always remains *on the work surface-N*.

<http://floorp.nl/broodbakmachine/hoe-het-begon-brood-bakken.htm>

- *de/het omslag* (cover)

Handzaam en voordelig fotoboek.

Eigen foto's en tekst *op het omslag*.

Zachte omslag geeft paperback uitstraling.

Maak nu je eigen fotoboek

Fotoboeken *met zachte omslag*

Paperbacks waren altijd al populair. Niet alleen door de aantrekkelijke prijs, maar ook omdat ze gemakkelijk zijn mee te nemen en door te bladeren. Doordat je *het omslag* helemaal zelf kan samenstellen, krijg je een heel persoonlijk exemplaar. Net zoals bij de fotoboeken met *een harde omslag* heb je ook hier alle mogelijkheden om je fotoboek te verfraaien met achtergronden, teksten, scraps en pagina indelingen.

Photo books convenient and easy to handle

Your own photos and texts *on the cover-N*

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Paperbacks have always been popular. Not only because of the attractive price, but also because they are easy to handle and to flick through. Given that you can yourself assemble *the cover-N* you get an highly personal copy. Just as in the case of photo books with *a soft cover-C* you have all the means to embellish your photo book with backgrounds, texts, scraps and pages distribution.

<http://www.myphotofun.nl/producten/fotoboek-zachte-omslag.aspx>

- *de/het vergiet* (colander)

Vul de pan met een laag water, laat het water koken en plaats *de vergiet* erboven op. Doe *in het vergiet* de rijst - die je van tevoren even gekookt heb - plaats een deksel *bovenop het vergiet* en laat het zo stomen. Let op: het water mag niet *in het vergiet* komen, dus doe niet teveel water in de pan!

Fill the pan with little water, let the water boil and put *the colander-C* over that. Put the rice *in the colander-N* - which you have already cooked - put a cover *over the colander-N* and let it steam. Be careful: the water must not pass *through the colander-N*, therefore do not put too much water in the pan!

<http://eten-en-drinken.infonu.nl/recepten/4031-indische-snacks-lemper-hartig-gevulde-rijstrolletjes.html>

- *de/het drop* (liquorice)

Wat moet je doen? Doe *de drop* in het pannetje en zet deze op een laag pitje. Laat *de drop* smelten en voeg naar smaak suiker toe, om het dropijs zoeter te krijgen. Blijf goed roeren. Als *de drop* niet makkelijk smelt zou je een beetje water toe kunnen voegen. Een klein beetje water toevoegen kan helpen om *het drop* beter te laten smelten zonder dat het aankoekt.

What do you have to do? Put *the liquorice-C* in the little pan and leave it on a low heat. Let the *liquorice-C* melt and add sugar as much as you like to get a sweeter liquorice ice cream. Keep mixing. *If the liquorice-C* does not melt easy you could add a bit of water. Adding a bit of water can help to melt *the liquorice-N* avoiding that it overcooks.

<http://www.dropenzo.nl/drop-en-gerechten/drop-en-ijs/drop-en-ijs-maken-the-easy-way.html>

- *de/het kauwgom* (chewing gum)

Kauwgom wordt gemaakt in een kauwgomfabriek. Men gebruikt daarbij natuurlijke gom 'de gom uit bomen' maar ook kunstmatige gom. Die maakt de fabriek zelf. Eerst gaan de gommen in een smeltmachine, die roert de gommen door elkaar. Gom smelt als het warm wordt, dus worden ze daar warm gemaakt. Daarna moet er suiker bij *de gom*. Daarvoor wordt poedersuiker gebruikt. Als de gommen weer koud zijn gaan ze in de kneedmachine en daar doen ze er suiker, een smaakje, en een kleurstof bij. Dan gaat *de kauwgom* in een machine die er een lint van maakt. Dan gaat het lint door een walsmachine. Daar wordt het plat gemaakt en dan komt het in de snijmachine en daar wordt het in stukjes gemaakt. *Het kauwgom* wordt afgekoeld en dan is het klaar.

[...]

Het probleem met kauwgom.

Gemiddeld eten we met iedereen van de wereld 100 000 ton kauwgom per jaar. Men eet gemiddeld per persoon 330 gram kauwgom per jaar, en 1 kauwgompje van sportlife, xylifresh, freedent of stimerol weegt 1.1 gram. Men eet dus gemiddeld 300 kauwgoms per persoon, per jaar. Met *al het kauwgom* op trottoirs en de onderkant van schoolbanken e.d. kan men de Queen Elizabeth II na bouwen. Men denkt dat men bang is om *de kauwgom* door te slikken, en dat daardoor mensen *de kauwgom* ergens opplakken of op straat gooien. [...] Intussen is *al het kauwgom* op straat een heel milieuprobleem geworden, want het blijft liggen. Daarom wil men een kauwgom maken die afbreekt in je mond. Dat hebben ze ook al ooit gedaan. Hij loste na 10 tot 15 minuten op. Het nadeel van *de kauwgom* was dat niemand hem lekker vond.

How is chewing gum made?

Chewing gum is made in a chewing gum factory. Where people use natural gum 'the gum from trees' but also synthetic gum. This is made in the factory itself. First of all gums are put into a mixing machine, that stirs the gums all together. When the gum becomes warm it melts and therefore it must be warmed. After, sugar must be added to *the gum-C* sugar powder is used. When the gums are cool again, they go into the cut machine where sugar, flavor and colouring are added. Then *the chewing gum-C* goes in a machine that transform it into a ribbon. Then the ribbon goes into the smoothing machine where it is made flat and in the cut machine where it is cut into pieces. *The chewing gum-N* is cooled and then it is ready.

[...]

The chewing gum problem.

On average we eat in the world 100.000 tons of chewing gum per year. On average 300 grams of chewing gum are eaten per person per year, and a little chewing gum of

sportlife, xylifresh, freedent or stimerol weighs 1.1 gram. Therefore 330 chewing gums are eaten per person, per year. With *all the chewing gum-N* on sidewalks and under school desks it could be possible to build Queen Elisabeth II. One thinks that people are scared to swallow *the chewing gum-C* and therefore they either stick *the chewing gum-C* anywhere or throw (it) on the road. [...] Accordingly, *all the chewing gum-N* on the road has become a problem for the environment, because it-N keeps staying there. Therefore one should develop *a chewing gum which-C melts* in your mouth. It has been already made. It-M melts in 10 to 15 minutes. The disadvantage of *this chewing gum-C* was that nobody found it-M tasty.

<http://huiswerk.leerlingen.com/bekijken.php?id=23242>

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