

Gender assignment to anglicisms in Dutch: a variationist perspective

In this paper, we investigate the adaptation of anglicisms to the recipient language in a weak contact situation, focusing on actual usage. More specifically, we investigate gender assignment to recently borrowed English loanwords in Dutch. Studies on gender assignment to anglicisms have so far mostly relied on raw frequencies or simple proportions in dictionary or corpus data. As a result, gender assignment to loanwords is often conceived as a categorical process: the gender that is listed in a dictionary or found in a corpus is said to be determined by a clear set of (receptor) language-related agreement rules (see for instance Corbett 1991; Onysko 2007; Poplack, Pousada & Sankoff 1982). However, Callies, Onysko & Ogiermann (2012) show that, by solely focusing on frequencies and proportions in corpus or dictionary data, the amount of gender variation is underestimated.

In line with this result, we focus on reported language usage in context, elicited by means of a questionnaire. On the one hand, we inquire into the factors that underlie gender assignment to established and unestablished anglicisms in Dutch. On the other hand, we explicitly take congruency between speakers in the language community into account. More specifically, we introduce a measure of homogeneity, based on the measure of internal uniformity (Geeraerts, Grondelaers & Speelman 1999). We investigate the language and speaker-related determinants of the degree of homogeneity between members of the language community in their choice for a definite article for an anglicism.

Our data were collected by means of a forced choice task with 45 participants from Flanders. We elicited the Dutch definite article for 175 established and unestablished anglicisms. We use a range of statistical techniques, including mixed-effects logistic regression, conditional inference trees and random forest analyses, to inquire into the factors that underlie gender assignment to anglicisms in Dutch. We also make use of heatmaps and linear regression analysis to uncover which factors determine when and why respondents disagree with each other regarding the gender of an anglicism.

Our analyses show that common gender *de* is the default article for nominal anglicisms in Dutch. This article is used for any anglicism, unless there is some reason for choosing neuter gender *het*. Furthermore, our results indicate that gender assignment to anglicisms in Dutch is prone to inter and intra-speaker variation. The amount of gender variation increases when respondents are faced with a conflict between the default article *de* and some factor that favors its neuter counterpart, *het*.

References

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