The interpretation of masculine personal nouns in German and Dutch: a comparative experimental study

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ABSTRACT

In both German and Dutch,[2] masculine personal nouns (e.g., *smoker*, *winner*, and *therapist*) can be used either generically, i.e., referring to both women and men, or specifically, i.e., referring to only men. Regarding German, research indicates that generic uses of masculine personal nouns are strongly male-biased in comparison with alternative generics (Klein, 1988; Schelle and Gauler, 1993; Irmen and Köhncke, 1996; Braun et al., 1998; Stahlberg et al., 2001; Stahlberg and Sczesny, 2001). In Dutch, masculine terms and neutralising terms are reported to be increasingly used in reference to both women and men (Gerritsen, 2002). This study investigates, by means of two survey experiments, (i) how German and Dutch native speakers interpret masculine personal nouns used in a referential context, (ii) which variables this interpretation is associated with (including subject gender, number, definiteness, type of lexical unit, and relative frequency), and (iii) how the participants evaluate the referential possibilities of these nouns. Firstly, the results of the study indicate that masculine personal nouns are more frequently interpreted as gender-specific terms in German than in Dutch. Secondly, the interpretation of the German and Dutch nouns is found to be significantly associated with the following variables: number, lexical unit type, and relative frequency. Thirdly, German masculine personal nouns appear to be more restrictive in terms of potential references than their Dutch counterparts. In general, the data indicate that there is a clear difference between German and Dutch regarding the interpretation of masculine personal nouns, but this difference is particularly apparent in the singular.

1. Introduction

In both German and Dutch, masculine personal nouns have a dual potential for reference: they can be used either generically, i.e., in reference to persons irrespective of their natural gender, or specifically, i.e., in reference to males. The generic use of masculine nouns, also known as the *generic masculine*, has been a key issue in feminist language critiques (Trömel-Plötz, 1978; Ulrich, 1988; Hellinger, 1990; Braun, 1991; Doleschal, 1998, among others, for German; Rubinstein, 1979; van Alphen, 1983; Verbiest, 1991, 1997; Sneller and Verbiest, 2000; Mortelmans, 2008, among others, for Dutch). In particular, these authors argue that masculine generics, as in (1) and (2), contribute to the linguistic under-representation of women:

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(1)   *Jeder **Raucher** weiß, dass seine Gewohnheit schädlich ist.* (Niederösterreichische Nachrichten, 04.11.2008)
        'Every smoker (masc.) knows that his habit is harmful.'

(2)   *De **winnaar** mag optreden tijdens het festival in Groningen.* (38 Miljoen Woordencorpus, MCDEC92OVE.SGZ)
        'The winner (masc.) may perform during the festival in Groningen.'

To prevent women from being linguistically ignored, the replacement of generic masculines with other, "non-sexist" expressions has been suggested (Bußmann and Hellinger, 2003, pp. 154–157; Braune et al., 2005, p. 3; Lievens et al., 2007, pp. 21–23). Generally, two alternatives are available. *Neutralising* strategies involve the use of a single term that does not differentiate gender, as illustrated in (3) to (5):

(3)   epicene nouns (cf. Corbett, 1991, p. 67): *die Führungskraft/de bewindspersoon* 'the member of government'

(4)   non-differentiating forms: *die Angestellten* (plural of both *die Angestellte* 'the female employee' and *der Angestellte* 'the male employee'), *de computerdeskundige* 'the computer expert'

(5)   collectives: *das Personal/het personeel* 'the staff'

In contrast, *feminising*, or *differentiating*, forms overtly mark the presence of women:

(6)   long splitting: *jeder Student und jede Studentin/elke student en studente* 'every (male and female) student'

(7)   short splitting: *WählerInnen* 'voters', *Apotheker/innen* 'pharmacists', *jedeR* 'each', *elke student(e)* 'every (male and female) student'[a]

(8)   adjectival modification: *männliche und weibliche Teilnehmer/mannelijke en vrouwelijke deelnemers* 'male and female participants'

[a] These alternatives are restricted to written language. Moreover, Häberlin et al. (1992) criticise these forms because they are difficult to pronounce and distort orthographic continuity (cf., Bußmann and Hellinger, 2003, p. 155).

For German, a number of empirical studies have been conducted to investigate the effects of the various types of generics (masculine, neutralising, and feminising generics) on the cognitive inclusion of women (Klein, 1988; Scheele & Gauler, 1993; Irmen and Köhncke, 1996; Braun et al., 1998; Stahlberg et al., 2001; Stahlberg and Sczesny, 2001).[3] Using different research techniques (sentence completion task, reaction time measurement, reading task, and questionnaire), all of these studies arrive at similar conclusions: masculine generics trigger the lowest or slowest cognitive inclusion of women, whereas alternative generics lead to a higher or faster cognitive representation of women. According to Bußmann and Hellinger (2003, p. 160), this finding is indicative of the fact that masculine personal nouns in German "are losing some of their (alleged) 'generic' potential and are becoming more male-specific." They mention that there is a growing tendency in present-day German to enhance female visibility by means of feminisation. The choice for this strategy is a consequence of several factors (Bußmann and Hellinger, 2003, p. 166)[4]: the existence of a productive feminising suffix *–in*, the increasing congruence in current German between grammatical and natural gender, and the implementation of official language regulations favouring gender specification in contexts that include women. However, it should be noted that in practice, the use of feminine forms is largely restricted to contexts of individual female reference (cf., Lutjeharms, 2004, p. 196). When reference is made to a group of people (e.g., *Viele Studenten haben gestern in Dresden demonstriert* 'Many students demonstrated in Dresden yesterday') or to a particular category (e.g., *Wie viel kostet ein Student durchschnittlich im Jahr?* 'How much does a student cost on average per year?'), the generic masculine is still preferred (Stuckard, 2000).

For Dutch, a systematic empirical investigation into generics has not yet been performed. The existing literature has mainly focused on more theoretical issues regarding the morphology, semantics, and pragmatics of masculine and feminine personal nouns (De Caluwe and van Santen, 2001; Gerritsen, 2002, pp. 81–108; van Santen, 2003, pp. 7–26; Lutjeharms, 2004, pp. 202–205; Lievens et al., 2007, pp. 19–26; Mortelmans, 2008, pp. 7–19). With respect to the use of the various types of generics, there does not appear to be a clear preference in Dutch for either feminising or neutralising forms to avoid "sexist" language. Contrary to German, there are no official guidelines recommending either feminising or neutralising strategies in Dutch. Another difference is that in Dutch, for a considerable number of lexical units, feminising (9) or neutralising

(9)   *therapeut* '(male) therapist' – *therapeute* 'female therapist', but *arts* '(male) doctor' – **artse* 'female doctor', *rechter* '(male) judge' – **rechtster* 'female judge'

(10)   *leerkracht* 'teacher' vs. *leraar* 'male teacher' and *lerares* 'female teacher', but **weerpersoon/-mens* 'weather forecaster' vs. *weerman* 'male weather forecaster' and *weervrouw* 'female weather forecaster'.

[3] Detailed discussions of these empirical studies are found in Bußmann and Hellinger (2003, pp. 160–161) and Braune et al. (2005). Therefore, we refrain from providing an extensive overview here.

[4] For a historical account of this German tendency, see Kastovsky and Dalton-Puffer (2002, pp. 285–296).