Pronominal gender in Afrikaans

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The last fifteen years have seen a surge of interest in Dutch gender agreement, especially with regard to personal pronouns. Studies now cover modern standard Dutch in the Netherlands (Audring 2006, 2009), Middle Dutch (Kraaikamp 2017), varieties of Dutch in Belgium (e.g. De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011, De Vogelaer & De Sutter 2011), as well as various learner varieties (e.g. De Vogelaer et al. 2020). Of particular interest is the relation between the reduction of inflection in the attributive domain and concomittant changes in the distribution of the personal pronouns. Generally, two observations appear to hold:

- The weakening of attributive agreement by increasing syncretism and erosion of gender markers causes or amplifies variation in pronoun use.
- Pronouns are gradually "resemanticized", i.e. used according to semantic properties such as natural gender or countability.

An important issue is timing. Various studies point out that pronominal resemanticization does not 'wait for' complete loss of attributive gender agreement (Kraaikamp 2017, De Vos & De Vogelaer 2011), thereby directing the emphasis of the research to earlier stages of Dutch in which agreement is still fully functional. The present study takes the opposite perspective and discusses a language in which agreement loss is complete, but pronominal resemanticization is not: Afrikaans.

Afrikaans, like its cousin English, has a system of pronominal gender, which means that the only formal exponents of grammatical gender are personal (*hy/hom, sy/haar, dit*), and possessive pronouns (*sy/syne, haar/hare*) in the third person singular (Donaldson 1993: 123). Articles, adjectives and other attributive elements do not mark gender. In contrast to English, however, the distribution of the personal pronouns in Afrikaans is far from clear. Earlier studies, e.g. Du Plessis Scholtz (1966), point out that inanimate entities are preferably referred to by neuter pronouns. This is also considered 'correct' by present-day speakers (van der Merwe 1997, Van Huyssteen p.c.). On the other hand, Ponelis (1979) notes that "*dit* continually retreats from the agressive advance of *hy*" (1979: 585, my translation), with the consequence that excessive use of neuter pronouns is increasingly perceived as "bookish" (Donaldson 1993: 127). Yet another source, a modern coursebook, describes masculine and neuter pronouns as equally common in inanimate reference (Donaldson 2000: 13). Hence, what we see is a system in which attributive agreement is lost entirely, but the pronouns have not yet settled into a stable semantic system.

In this talk I present a variety of circumstances that might contribute to this puzzling state of affairs. With the help of the existing literature as well as new data, I discuss semantic factors such as individuation and formal factors such as the particularly high frequency of *dit*. Also, the influence of English is considered.

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