

## Default gender in Belgian Dutch: data from code-switching

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Code-switching (CS) is the use of multiple languages in one conversation and has been said to be a hallmark of linguistic contact situations (Poplack 2001, p.2062). When one of the languages involved in CS has grammatical gender, it has repeatedly been shown that simultaneous bilinguals<sup>1</sup> assign default gender to a code-switched noun from a gender-less language (Licerias et al. 2008; Valdés Kroff et al. 2017; Parafita Couto 2019). An example of this for *Spanish-English* CS can be found in (1).

- (1) *el* **house**  
the[M]

For Spanish, “[t]here is little doubt that masculine is the unmarked or default gender” (Harris, 1991, p.43). When looking at Belgian Dutch, on the other hand, the picture is a bit more complicated. How can data from code-switching help us in determining the default gender? When a Spanish-English bilingual code-switches an English noun into a Spanish sentence, this English noun does not have a grammatical gender. When the determiner tries to agree with that noun, it finds no gender feature and the determiner that is unmarked for gender is selected, in this case the masculine one (Harris 1991; Kramer 2015). Which determiner is unmarked for gender in Dutch? For Belgian Dutch, Rooryck (2003) argues that the neuter gender is the underspecified category, while the masculine and feminine *are* marked for gender. This would predict that English nouns would be preceded by a neuter determiner when incorporated in a Belgian Dutch sentence.<sup>2</sup>

In (2), some examples of recent **English** loans/code-switches<sup>3</sup> into *Belgian Dutch* are given. These examples were encountered informally on social media posts by Belgian Dutch speakers.

- (2) a. *precies nen date*                      b. *wie neemt er ne onesie mee?*  
looks.like a[M] date                      who takes EXPL a[M] onesie with  
‘looks like a date’                                      ‘who is bringing a onesie?’

Examples like these are abundant, while examples of English nouns with the neuter determiner are not easily found. To verify the initial observations, an acceptability judgment task was developed. In this task, simultaneous bilinguals were asked to rate (Belgian) Dutch sentences containing an English noun on a 7 point scale. (Preliminary) results show that there is indeed a tendency towards masculine – rather than neutral – gender assignment to code-switched English nouns.

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<sup>1</sup>Sequential bilinguals, on the other hand, prefer an “analogue” gender assignment strategy, in which the determiner agrees with the gender of the translational equivalent of the noun, in this case feminine: *casa*[F]. In this study, only judgments by simultaneous bilinguals are reported.

<sup>2</sup>In Northern Dutch, it seems to be the case that the common gender is the default one. It is overgeneralised monolingual L1, child L2 and adult L2 learners of (Standard) Dutch (Blom et al. 2008), at least currently. It is possible that in an earlier stage, neuter was indeed the default gender, since Standard Dutch has a preference to assign neuter gender to (older) French loanwords (Audring & Booij 2009, p.17).

<sup>3</sup>Going into the distinction here is beyond the scope of this abstract.

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