Is the Dutch gender system a genuine gender system?

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Abstract

Gender subclasses are agreement classes (Corbett 1994). This differentiates gender from other classificatory categories which sort out nouns into distinct sub-classes such as classifier systems; agreeing categories (e.g., determiners and pronouns, etc.) change their sound shapes depending on a gender feature of the head noun of an NP. Classifier systems, however, generally sort out nouns into sub-classes based on concepts of animacy, shape and function of nouns (Lee & Lee 2009). In terms of gender agreement, the Dutch gender system shows interesting phenomena: inconsistent gender agreement among adult speakers, overgeneralization of the common definite determiner de and late acquisition of the neuter definite determiner het. Dutch speaking children acquire gender agreement gradually compared to other gender languages such as French and German (Hulk & Roodenburg 2008; Hulk & Cornips 2009, 2010). In addition, Hulk & Roodenburg (2008) claim that het is a non-countable marker in Dutch. Dutch children overgeneralize de until the age of 6 because children use de as a default [number/+count] marker and het as a [-count] marker. Interestingly, we can find the similar pattern in the acquisition of classifier systems. Children learning classifier languages usually acquire their classifier systems very late, around six to seven years old; at first, they overgeneralize a general classifier for all nouns (Lee 1997; Lee & Lee 2009). Once children of classifier languages learn some concepts, their overgeneralization of the general classifier is decreased accordingly. The similarities between Dutch children and children of classifier languages tie to current research on the Dutch pronominal gender system which shows semantic or pragmatic agreement on pronouns and determiners as well. Based on the possible link between conceptual development and the acquisition of the Dutch gender system, I will compare the Dutch gender system with the Korean classifier system in terms of concept development and first language acquisition to see whether the Dutch gender system is a genuine gender system.

References


