

Grammatical gender in Afrikaans – simplification in action

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“Gender is the most puzzling of grammatical categories” (Greville G Corbet)

It is well known that grammatical gender has disappeared in Afrikaans. The Afrikaans historical linguist J du P Scholtz (1963) refers to this as “Die ondergang van die nominale tweeklassesisteem in Afrikaans” (“The demise of the nominal two-class system in Afrikaans”). Verdoolage and Van Keymeulen (2013: 54) explicitly say: “Het Afrikaans kent geen verschil tussen *de-* en *het-*woorde; het grammaticaal geslacht is afgestorven. Het bepaald lidwoord van alle substantieven is **die**” (“Afrikaans has no difference between *de-* and *the-*words; the grammatical gender has dissipated. The definite article of all substantives is **die**.”)

This is in contrast to other Germanic languages where grammatical gender still occurs. In about 25% of the world's languages each noun has an inherent gender category: male, female, neuter. But in Afrikaans this distinction is not relevant.

The question now is: why and when did grammatical gender disappear in Afrikaans?

The argument that will be presented in the paper is that it is the result of a process of simplification, which is again the result of language interference processes (see Ponelis 1988, 1993; Raidt 1991) due to the complex language situation in the early Cape (see Raidt 1991, Carstens & Raidt 2017). By 1750, the current Afrikaans pattern had already been established. It therefore means that the two-class system disappeared within the first hundred years at the Cape.

See below the difference between Dutch and Afrikaans in this regard:

	<i>Dutch</i>	<i>Afrikaans</i>	Change
Definite article (Bepaalde lidwoord)	De tafel Het huis	<i>Die</i> tafel <i>Die</i> huis	De/het → die
Demonstrative pronoun Aanwysende vnw.)	<i>De-</i> woorde: Deze / die tafel <i>Het-</i> woorde: Dit / dat huis	<i>Hierdie</i> / <i>daardie</i> tafel <i>Dié</i> tafel <i>Hierdie</i> / <i>daardie</i> huis <i>Dié</i> huis	Deze/dit → hierdie/daardie Dit/dat → hierdie/daardie
Relative pronoun. (Betreklieke vnw.)	die de tafel dat het huis	<i>wat</i> die tafel <i>wat</i> die huis	Die/dat → wat

The paper explains how this simplification process proceeded with regard to the definite article, substantives, the demonstrative pronoun and the relative pronoun. Reference will also briefly be made to a trend where in modern Afrikaans the gender distinction in personal pronouns begins to fade.

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