

The puzzle of Afrikaans pronominal gender

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Gender is a puzzling property in the languages of the world. Particularly puzzling are pronominal gender systems, which mark gender exclusively on pronouns. Such systems diverge from canonical gender in various interesting and potentially troublesome ways: gender is marked by free words rather than by affixes, pronouns often occur at considerable distance from their antecedent nouns, and gender on pronouns may add new information to the utterance.

The fact that English has a pronominal gender system may convey the impression that we are looking at a common and well-studied phenomenon. In fact, neither is true. A preliminary exploration yields around two dozen relevant cases, scattered across the world, and there is virtually no theoretical literature (early attempts are Audring 2008 and 2009). In this talk, I will argue that pronominal gender systems are of theoretical interest, and that the system of Afrikaans is especially interesting.

Pronominal marking typically appears as the first gender marking in nascent gender systems, or as the last in gender systems in decline. This follows from two seemingly contradictory properties of pronouns: they are often the most innovative agreement targets in terms of distribution, but the most conservative in that they tend to retain grammatical properties which have been lost or reduced elsewhere in the language. Concomitantly, both rising and dying gender systems have the tendency to be semantically organized, based on general and salient properties like animacy or sex.

Afrikaans represents an exceptional case in having a pronominal gender system whose semantics has failed to settle on a uniform distributional pattern. In particular, the use of *hy* vs. *dit* shows extensive variation and is interpreted in various ways in the literature. Existing accounts of the data situation are van der Merwe (1997) and Kirsten (2016); I will present their findings as well as my own, based on data from the NWU-Kommentaarkorpus (CTexT 2020). I will discuss the theoretical implications, which help to better understand both the gender system of Afrikaans and pronominal gender in general.

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