Gender loss and resemanticization

By deflection and syncretism of determiner forms, Northern Dutch lost its means of distinguishing masculine and feminine gender in the NP. Dutch nouns are now of either common or neuter gender. However, the former three-way gender distinction was preserved in the personal pronouns. These pronouns stand in an agreement relation with their antecedent nouns and therefore depend, for the feature [gender], on an element less specified than themselves. Consequently, speakers are often at a loss for the right pronoun. Spoken Dutch has countered this problem by an ingenious redistribution of the three pronominal genders. The basis of the new system is no longer the lexical gender of the noun, but certain conceptual properties of the referent: pronominal gender is now assigned according to the referent's degree of individuation. The masculine pronoun is used for male animates and for items that are individuated or countable, while the feminine is restricted to female persons and the neuter to substances or masses. During this resemanticization process (Wurzel 1986) that has parallels in other European languages, the old and the new system compete, leading to much inter- and intra-speaker variation. This paper sketches the change in progress with the help of corpus data.