

Grammar under pressure: the case of subject *hun* ‘them’ in Dutch

26th February 2016, 11:30 – 12:30: Helen de Hoop, Radboud University Nijmegen, h.dehoop@let.ru.nl

The object pronoun *hun* ‘them’ in Dutch has been in use as a subject for over 100 years now. Its use has spread over all parts of the Netherlands and is found in speakers of all ages and social classes. At the same time, this use of *hun* ‘them’ as a subject is widely disapproved of in the Netherlands, and it generally prompts strong feelings of repugnance, especially in highly educated native speakers of Dutch. A linguistic analysis of the use of *hun* ‘them’ as a subject (van Bergen et al. 2011) led to an enormous debate in the media in the Netherlands, including even a letter submitted by the Minister of Education to a national newspaper in which he declared that he would never allow for this construction to become part of Dutch grammar.

While the grammar of an adult speaker is usually thought of as a fully *symmetrical* system in which sentences that can be interpreted by the grammar will also be produced by that grammar and the other way around (Hendriks 2014), prescriptive rule violations such as the use of *hun* ‘them’ as a subject in Dutch raise an interesting question, because many especially highly educated speakers do not produce such constructions themselves while they do understand them perfectly well. That is, native speakers of Dutch all share the grammatical intuition that *hun* ‘them’ in a sentence like *Wat maken hun een vreselijk lawaai!* ‘They are making a terrible noise!’ can only refer to people (or animals), while its prescriptively correct counterpart *ze* ‘they’ in the same context could also refer to engines or air planes (de Hoop 2013). Therefore, while some people do not produce *hun* ‘them’ as a subject themselves, they do interpret such constructions correctly. This raises the question whether grammatical norm violations are part of their grammar or not. In order to address that question, I will report on an fMRI experiment that we conducted in Nijmegen (joint work with Ferdy Hubers and Tineke Snijders) to examine the differences in processing between grammatical norm violations on the one hand, and truly ungrammatical as well as truly grammatical sentences on the other. The aim of my talk is to shed light on how to model the interaction of grammatical principles and factors of argument marking that go beyond the grammar proper, such as sociological pressure reflected in grammatical norms.

References

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