Conclusion

This book presents an in-depth investigation of the pronominal gender system of modern spoken Dutch. The language exhibits an interesting paradigmatic mismatch: there are two genders marked on the definite article, the adjective, and the relative pronoun, while the personal pronouns distinguish four different genders. This contradicts our expectations about agreement systems: the controller and the targets should have the same feature values. For Dutch, the mismatch goes hand in hand with a bewildering variation in pronominal gender agreement. Common gender nouns can take masculine, feminine or neuter agreements, while neuter nouns appear with masculine or feminine personal pronouns or common gender demonstratives. Again, this is counter to the normal expectations. After all, a noun should consistently trigger the same gender on its agreeing elements.

The mismatch situation has its roots in the language history. When the masculine and feminine gender markers became indistinguishable in the noun phrase, speakers lost the knowledge about the gender affiliation of the non-neuter nouns. Official grammar writing and lexicography attempted to conserve the original system and devised word lists, where the gender of nouns could be looked up for the sake of correct pronominalization. Although this policy has been relaxed in recent times, there is still a considerable gap between spoken and written language. The aim of this study was to find out how the spoken language, which literally has no time for dictionaries, has solved the pronominal problem. Therefore, a large sample of spontaneous speech from the Corpus of Spoken Dutch was investigated in search for the pronominalization strategies in modern colloquial Dutch.

The theoretical approach taken is that the Dutch pronouns are agreeing elements in much the same way as the articles or the adjectives. Thus, pronouns with the ‘wrong’ gender are not set aside as non-agreeing, but rather seen as agreeing with different properties of the noun. From what is known about morphosyntactic features, these properties are expected to be semantic.

A corpus study of a 500,000 word sample of colloquial speech shows that, indeed, Dutch speakers choose their pronouns on the basis of semantic patterns. Masculine pronouns are used for male persons, for all animals (even for animals of female sex) as well as for countable, bounded objects and abstracts. Neuter pronouns, by contrast, appear in combination with mass nouns and uncountable, unbounded, unspecified abstracts. Feminine pronouns have the most restricted distribution: they can only refer to female persons and (occasionally) female animals. Whenever a
pronoun diverged in gender from its antecedent noun, these semantic rules could be seen in operation.

It is argued that these usage patterns can be combined into a unified account for semantics-based pronoun choice in spoken Dutch. Pronominalization is sensitive to the degree of individuation of the referent. Highest in individuation are persons, followed by animals and objects. This is the domain of the masculine (female persons and animals aside; for those, the feminine is used). The least individuated referents are masses and unbounded abstracts, which are associated with neuter gender. In between lies the class of specific masses, which combines properties of objects and properties of substances. Here, the domains of the masculine and the neuter meet.

The degree of individuation of a referent largely depends on the construal of situations and their participants. The noun *lamb* can refer to a highly individuated pet, an unspecific animal within a flock or even the ingredient of a meal. In Dutch, pronominalization is sensitive to such differences. This explains that the same noun can appear with various pronominal genders under different circumstances. Such variation can occur within the speech of an individual speaker or between speakers. Even in written texts, examples can be found, although the written standard dictates syntactic agreement between anaphors and their antecedent nouns.

Explained in semantic terms, the seemingly chaotic pronoun use in spoken Dutch is shown to be systematic and regular. Dialect studies indicate that gender agreement based on individuation occurs in other varieties of Indo-European and beyond. Thus, the Dutch facts are neither isolated nor exotic.

Next to the semantic system described in this study, speakers also employ the traditional syntactic gender system. This system pairs neuter nouns with neuter pronouns and non-neuter nouns with the demonstratives *deze* or *die*. The choice between syntactic and semantic agreement is influenced by a variety of factors. Statistical analysis of the data shows that semantic agreement is more likely

- for personal than for relative pronouns (in line with the Agreement Hierarchy),
- for full form pronouns than for clitics or demonstrative pronouns
- for nominative than for oblique pronouns
- for nouns at the extreme ends of the Individuation Hierarchy than for nouns in the middle

Also, the likelihood for semantic agreement could be seen to increase with a greater distance between the noun and the pronoun. ‘Switching back’ after a semantically agreeing pronoun has been chosen is rare. Moreover, semantic agreement was shown to be the more progressive option: speakers above 60 years of age use it only half as much as speakers below 20. This suggests that the semantic system is on the rise.
Conclusion

With the help of the Individuation Hierarchy and the Agreement Hierarchy much of the variation can be accounted for, either in terms of conceptual construal, or as a competition between two alternative agreement systems.

The Dutch pronominal problem and its solution is placed in a cross-Germanic context. Perhaps surprisingly, more than half of the standard languages, i.e. English, Afrikaans, Danish, Swedish, varieties of Norwegian, Dutch and Frisian, have more pronominal than attributive genders. For all cases, it can be shown that those genders that are marked only pronominally obey semantic rules. This holds true even if the rest of the gender system is not primarily semantics-based. This suggests that there is something special about personal pronouns: they cannot support a syntactic distinction on their own. This inability is the reason why many of the Germanic pronominal genders have developed new usage patterns on semantic grounds.

The assumed causality between loss of attributive agreement markers and reorganization of the pronouns leads to the hypothesis that some types of agreement are better support for a gender system than others. In order to see if this is cross-linguistically valid, an explorative typology of pronominal gender systems was conducted. 20 relevant languages were found. Nearly all of them employ simple, basic, cross-linguistically common semantic rules. This invites the conclusion that personal pronouns can only support strictly semantic systems based on general, cognitively basic assignment rules. Apparently, more complex gender systems need more support by repeated marking, preferably in the local domain of the noun phrase.

In this light, the unusual Dutch facts tie in well with the general typology of pronominal gender languages. This confirms the naturalness of the development from syntactically agreeing to increasingly semantically agreeing pronominal genders.

When regarded with unbiased eyes, the ‘wrong’ pronouns of spoken Dutch represent a useful and ingenious case of recovery from a historical problem. Speakers of Dutch have ‘reinvented’ their pronoun genders by putting new semantic foundations under the gender system.