Whose gender is it?

Portuguese gender errors in possessives

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Introduction: Possessive pronouns and gender (PT, ENG, NL)

Portuguese:

syntactic gender: fem or masc class

agreement with the **possessee:**

Ele beija a sua mãe

He kisses POSS-fem mother-fem

Ela beija a seu pai

She kisses POSS-masc father-masc

English:

no syntactic gender classes

semantic gender agreement for animates with **possessor:**

He kisses his mother

She kisses her father

Dutch:

no clear syntactic gender classes.

semantic gender agreement for animates with **possessor:**

Hij kust zijn moeder

He kisses POSS-masc mother

Zij kust haar vader

She kisses POSS-fem father

Earlier research: Antón-Méndez (2011)

Phenomenon:

- Spanish L2 English speakers: *“He loves her mother”* (intended meaning : *He → his mother)*
- Why? → gender agreement of possessor

Method:

- oral error elicitation experiment with pictures
- groups (N = 62) of L2 English proficient Spanish, Italian, and Dutch speakers

Results:

- Significantly more errors (1.23 to 6.24%) by Spanish L2 speakers of English in possessives than Dutch L2 speakers (1.3 to 4.3%)
- But, interestingly: only with **animates** (e.g. “her mother”), not with inanimates

The research question

Does European Portuguese (a related Romance language) also show significantly more gender errors in English possessives than Dutch L2 English speakers,

and is there any **systematicity** in their errors?

→ especially: “animates of unknown gender” (animals, babies)

Methodology and Design

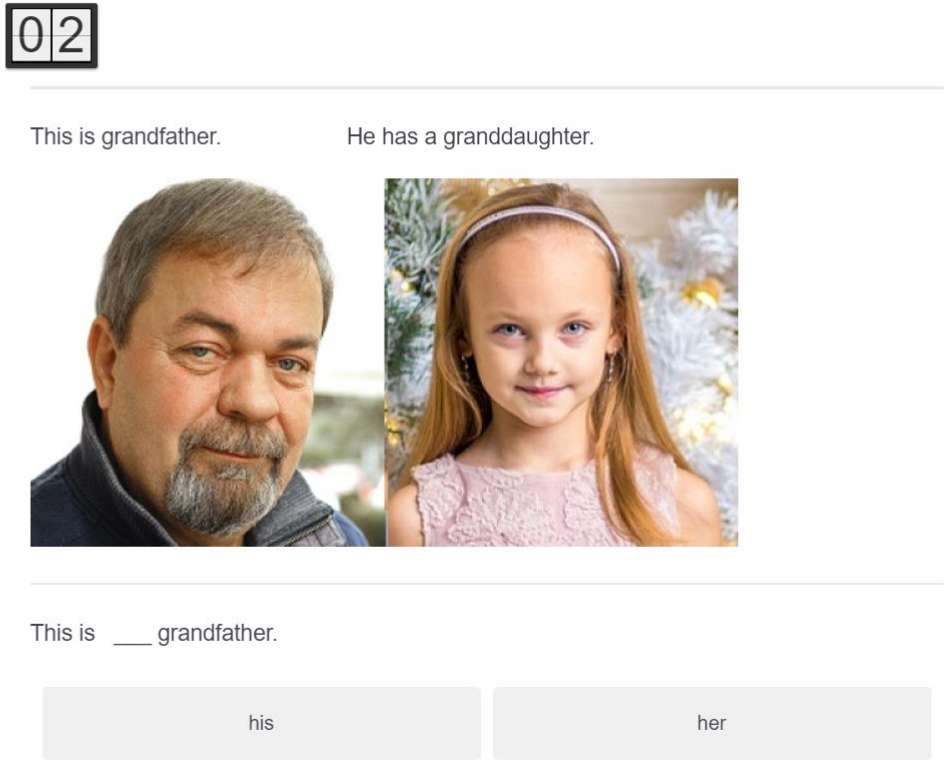
Intended participants:

- 1 group (N = 30) L2 English speakers of European Portuguese
- 1 group (N = 30) proficient L2 English speakers of Dutch

	Animate possessed	**Inanimate possessed**
	FEM // MASC // UNKNOWN	**FEM // MASC**
Masculine possessor	"The man has his daughter / son / dog" **FEM : 6 sentences //** **MASC: 6 sentences //** **UNKNOWN: 6 sentences**	"The man has his bed / boat " **FEM : 6 sentences //** **MASC: 6 sentences**
Feminine possessor	"The woman has her daughter / son / dog" **FEM : 6 sentences //** **MASC: 6 sentences //** **UNKNOWN: 6 sentences**	The woman has her bed / boat" **FEM : 6 sentences //** **MASC: 6 sentences**
Fillers	first person-sing, first & third person plural possessives: My friend has my child // The men have their dog **All: 20 sentences** **Total: 80 items**	

Method:
Online “Speed Test” Experiment

- Pictures:
  - 0CC (CreativeCommons)
  - from PixaBay and Pexels
  - 50/50 POSSESSOR/POSSESSEE
  - All items = common (15+ per million)
  - Randomized
- Design: “Speed Test”:
  - Qualtrics online experiment
  - 5 seconds per item
  - forces quick decision
- Participants recruitment:
  - Facebook public sharing
  - SurveySwap
  - 5 days, hoping for N = 30 per group



The sample

51 complete responses:

- 24 Portuguese (12 males and 12 females)
- 27 Dutch respondents (16 females, 9 males, 2 “other”)

Education

- Most of the Dutch (N = 10) only finished high school, followed by N = 10 who had university BA level and N = 5 who had MA level.
- Most Portuguese (N = 11) had university master’s, followed by N = 5 with a PhD and N = 5 with a BA.
- Overall, the Portuguese group is higher educated

Age

- Dutch: age ranged from 17 to 64, M = 29.74, SD = 13.61
- Portuguese: age ranged from 18 - 63, M = 30.48, SD = 9.

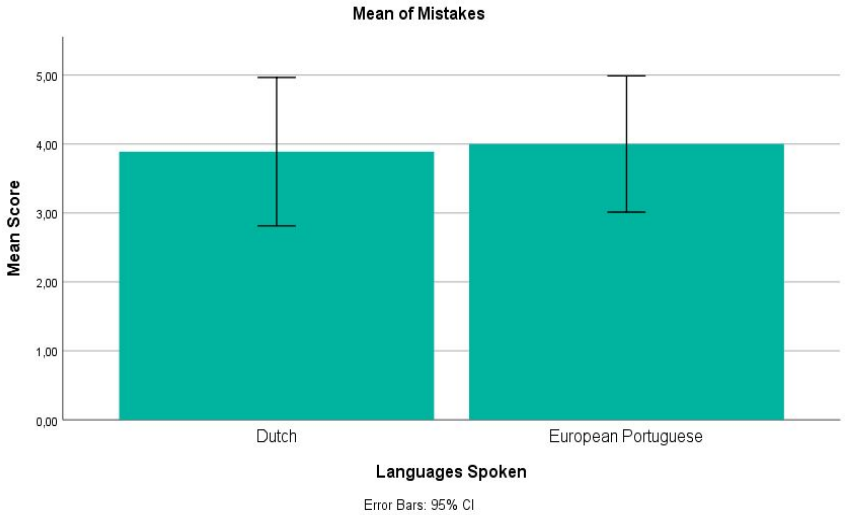
Results 1 - simple mean errors

A. **People made errors:**

- 0 to 6 gender errors, *M* = 1.94 mistakes (*SD* = 1,57), or 3.23% of total gendered items.

- **Portuguese** → more errors (M = 2.2, SD = 1.6, or 3.67%) than **Dutch** speakers (M = 1,70, SD = 1,5, or 2.83%).
- Difference = 0.5 error (0.84 percent point).

- However, this difference is not significant (t-test *p* = .255).



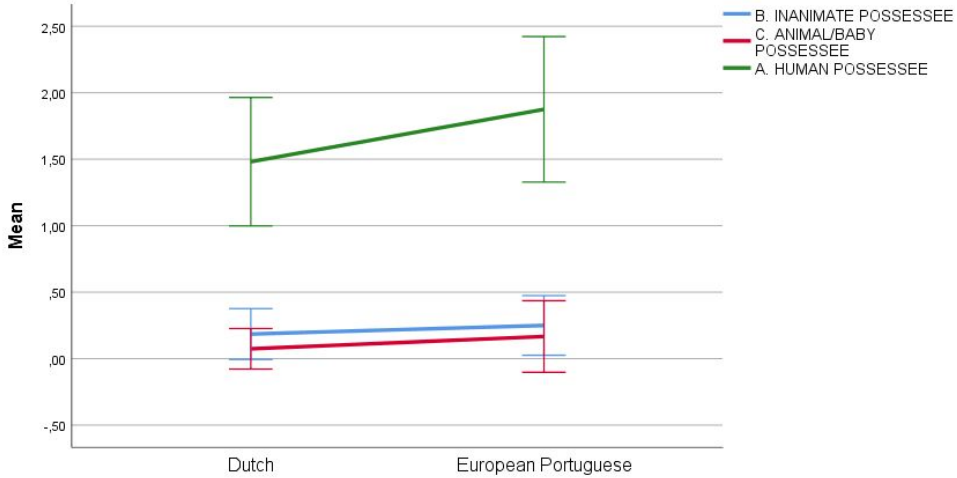
Results 2 - mean errors of humans, inanimates, and animals

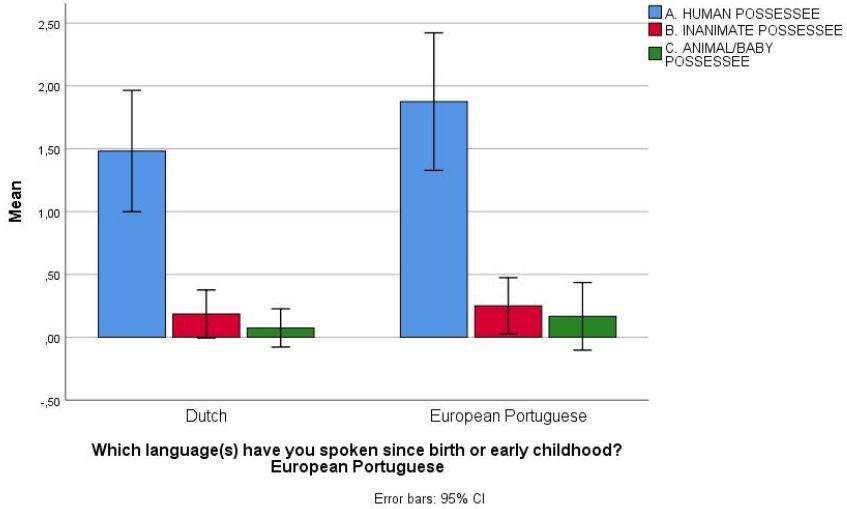
B. Animates are the villain

- 3 possessee conditions:
  a) human animates (*"his grandma"*),
  b) inanimates (*"his bike"*), and
  c) "animates of unknown gender" (*"his baby/dog"*)

- Human animate condition appears the hardest for everybody, but seems harder for Portuguese (*M* = 1.87, *SD* = 1.29) than for Dutch (*M* = 1.48, *SD* = 1,22).

- However, a 3 x 2 ANOVA showed no significant difference between Dutch and Portuguese in any of the three conditions: F (1, 49) = 1,326, *p* = .255.

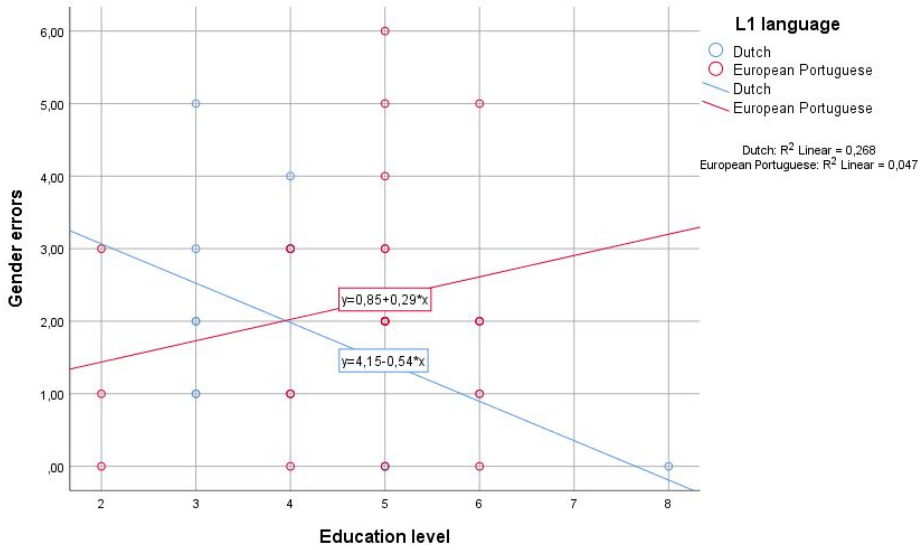


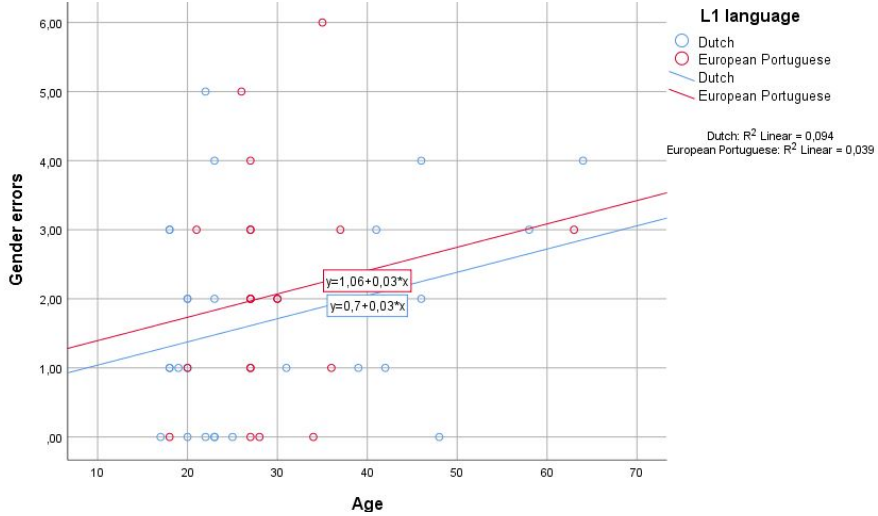


Results 3 - Regression: predicting errors

C. Only age & education matter

- Predictors: gender, age, year of onset English, frequency of spoken English, and language (PT or NL)
- The multiple linear regression model overall was not significant (
- Main effects of only led to 6% of the variance explained.
- Only significant predictors: education level and age.





Conclusions

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1) Methodology (online speed test) **can** elicit gender errors
2) European Portuguese **≠ significantly more** gender errors in possessives than Dutch
3) Human animate category is most difficult, but no significant difference between Portuguese and Dutch.
4) Only age and education level are significant predictors of error rate (L1 is **not**).

Limitations and discussion: why?

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insignificance because of..

a) small sample?
b) flawed methodology?
c) or… *dele*?

Brazilian Portuguese uses “of him”:

Ele beija a mãe dele

He kisses the mother of him

Informant: in Portugal → popular as well, in informal speech

(Literature says “dele/dela” = mostly Brazilian)

References

Antón-Méndez, I. (2011). Whose? L2-English speakers' possessive pronoun gender errors. Bilingualism: Language and Cognition 14, 318-331.

Questions ?