UNIVERSITEIT
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Faculteit Letteren & Wijsbegeerte

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Lexical neutralisation

Theoretical and empirical perspectives

Proefschrift voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van
Doctor in de taalkunde

2014

Acknowledgements

Now that I have been working for about 2 years outside of University, I look back rather fondly at the time I was working on my research project. Nevertheless, the finalisation of this dissertation has been a challenging (not to say, daunting), though also personally rewarding task. Of course, this dissertation is not the result of the work of myself alone, and I wish to extend my sincere thanks to those who helped me shape the dissertation in its present form. I am most grateful to my supervisor Klaas Willems, for his continuous support, patience, motivation, enthusiasm and immense knowledge. The many enlightening discussions I enjoyed with him were a great help to sharpen my own thoughts and analyses (for any errors or inadequacies that may remain in this work, of course, the responsibility is entirely my own).Without his guidance and persistent help this dissertation would not have been possible. I am also indebted to Dr. Lynne Murphy and Prof. Dr. Martina Penke who, being members of my doctoral guidance committee, inspired me to further explore certain topics. Many thanks also to my former colleagues, the "jubi's": Saar, Kristof and Ludovic, for the stimulating discussions and for being such fine colleagues. I really enjoyed the many lunch talks, or the occasional wine tastings (accompanied with oenological information by Klaas). Special thanks to Ludovic for providing constructive comments on various draft versions of the articles that are part of this dissertation. I also want to acknowledge Luc De Grauwe for helping me translate Old Saxon and Old- and Middle High German data. Johannes Kabatek and Daniel Steiner need to be thanked for recruiting participants at Tübingen University for one of the experimental surveys. I am thankful to the Research Foundations – Flanders (FWO) for providing the necessary financial support for this research. A big 'thank you' to my friends and family, in particular my parents, for their support and confidence in my abilities. My warmest gratitude, finally, for her endless patience and understanding goes out to my love Sarah, to whom I dedicate this dissertation.

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Introduction

1.1 General purpose of the dissertation

The present dissertation is concerned with the phenomenon of neutralisation as defined in the work of Coseriu (1976, 1987, 1992 [1988], among others). Although neutralisation phenomena have been described within different theoretical frameworks, questions on the interpretation of the term neutralisation by linguists of different theoretical persuasions and on the value of Coseriu's neutralisation theory in particular have not been addressed before. This dissertation is an attempt to fill this gap. The scope of the dissertation is restricted, though, in that it focuses on a theoretical and empirical investigation of neutralisation (and related phenomena) in the field of the *lexicon*. This thematic restriction has two reasons: first, there already exists an extensive body of literature on the concept of neutralisation in phonology, where the concept was introduced (cf. also the recent contribution of Silverman 2012, in which almost all phonological neutralisation theories from Trubetzkoy onwards are discussed). The concept of neutralisation outside the field of phonology, on the other hand, has received much less attention (however, see, for example, Rachidi 1989 for a discussion of neutralisation and types of neutralisation contexts with respect to adjectival oppositions).[1] Second, although the concept of neutralisation has been extrapolated to both the field of the lexicon and the field of grammar, a detailed description of grammatical neutralisation would go beyond the scope of this dissertation. Grammatical neutralisation (e.g. *Cäsar überschreitet den Rubikon* 'Caesar crosses the Rubikon', where the 'historical present' is used instead of the past tense, Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 216) is clearly different from lexical neutralisation (e.g. *Vier Tage in Paris bleiben* 'to stay in Paris for four days', where *Tag* encompasses both *Tag* and *Nacht*) and, therefore, requires a separate analytical treatment.

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[1] For some in-depth discussions of phonological neutralisation I refer to Bazell (1956), Davidsen-Nielsen (1978), Akamatsu (1988), Schmidt (1989: 3-44) and Brasington (1994).

The general purpose of the dissertation can thus be summarised as follows:

– to gain a better insight into the way various linguists have made use of the concept of neutralisation in semantics and to investigate whether a coherent interpretation of the concept is possible and theoretically as well as methodologically useful;

– to analyse different examples of Coserian lexical neutralisation empirically in order to evaluate the theoretical utility of Coseriu's approach to neutralisation; to my knowledge, such an empirical analysis has not been carried out before.

The research presented in the dissertation has been conducted in the form of various case studies, each dealing with a specific topic that falls within the thematic purview of the dissertation. Each case study is an article in its own right, such that each chapter of this dissertation actually represents a stand-alone article.[2] In the subsequent paragraphs, I briefly outline the research questions that are addressed in the different articles.

1.2   The concept of neutralisation outside the field of phonology

The phenomenon of neutralisation was described for the first time in a systematic way in the field of phonology by members of the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1930s, notably by Trubetzkoy (1939) and Jakobson (1971 [1932]; 1971 [1939]) (see also Hjelmslev 1971 [1939]). The term neutralisation (or *Aufhebung* in Trubetzkoy's words) referred to the inoperability of an otherwise operable functional phonological opposition in certain syntagmatic contexts, such as word-final position. For example, German *bunt* 'colourful' and *Bund* 'association' are pronounced alike and, thus, the opposition between /t/ and /d/ is rendered inoperable, with the voiceless plosive occurring in the position of neutralisation. After its introduction in phonology, the term neutralisation was soon transferred to other domains of language. Within the structural-functional paradigm, Martinet (1968, see also Martinet, ed. 1957) and particularly Coseriu (1978 [1964]) pointed to the relevance of the notion to the field of the lexicon and grammar as well. One oft-cited example stands out as representative of lexical neutralisation according to

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2   The minimum requirement at Ghent University to be admitted to the doctoral defense with a cumulative Ph.D. based on articles is that the dissertation consists of at least 4 international peer-reviewed authored or co-authored articles, two of which have to be published in journals covered by the Web of Science (Thomson Reuters). The Web of Science, which has become part of the Web of Knowledge, can be accessed at: http://apps. webofknowledge.com/WOS.

Coseriu, viz. the lexical pair *Tag*/*Nacht* ('day'/'night') in German, as illustrated in (1) and (2):

(1)   Nach all den schlaflosen Nächten, den Tagen voller Angst... *[After all the sleepless nights, days full of fear...]* (Mannheimer Morgen, 13.01.1996, COSMAS II)

(2)   Glücklicherweise brauchte die Frau nur einige **Tage** im Krankenhaus zu bleiben. *[Luckily, the woman had to stay only a few days in the hospital]* (Mannheimer Morgen, 20.01.1996, COSMAS II)[3]

Example (1) shows that, semantically, *Tag* can be the direct opposite of *Nacht*. In example (2), however, *Tag* is used with a meaning that makes abstraction from the semantic difference between *Tag* and *Nacht*. In this latter instance it can be said that the use of *Tag* 'neutralises' the opposition. According to Coseriu, phonological and lexical neutralisation are alike: because the differentiating feature between the two terms of a neutralisable opposition loses its functionality in the case of neutralisation (e.g. 'voice' in the opposition *t/d* or 'sunlight' in the opposition *Tag/Nacht*)[4], the term that is used in the neutralisation context (i.e. */t/*[5] or *Tag*) can be defined as actualising only the features that are shared by both terms of the underlying functional opposition. Hence, this term can be analysed as including both terms of the opposition at the same time (or, to put it in structuralist terms, it has an 'archiphonemic' or 'archisememic' value, respectively). Coseriu extends the analogy to the field of grammar as well: for example, in many languages, masculine can be used in a gender-neutral sense (e.g. *dos alumnos* 'two students' in Spanish, which can refer to two male students or to a male and a female student, Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 213). Likewise, singular can be used to denote a plurality (e.g. *Der Deutsche ist so* in German, which could be paraphrased as 'The German people are in general like that', Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 217)[6].

The term neutralisation can not only be found in structuralism but also in other approaches to language. Within the cognitive paradigm, the term neutralisation is found in Haiman (1980), who defines neutralisation as "many deep structures, one surface structure" and confronts it with "diversification" ("many surface structures, one deep structure"). For example, the morphosyntactic identity of the protasis in English *If it is true, I'll eat my hat* with the interrogative subclause in *I don't know if it is true* is analysed as a case of neutralisation. The central argument is that "a meaning common to both constructions" (Haiman 1980: 518) is to be assumed (for a discussion, see Willems 2005).

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[3]   COSMAS II (Deutsches Referenzkorpus, DeReKo) is currently the largest machine readable corpus of present-day German made available by the *Institut für Deutsche Sprache* (Mannheim).

[4]   For discussion, see chapter two and three.

[5]   Or better */T/* referring to */t/* as a representative of the archiphoneme (cf. chapter one).

[6]   Thus, from a Coserian point of view, by using singular instead of plural, the 'plurarity' of individuals is represented as a unity.

According to Verstraete (2005), English sentences with a hypotactic structure such as *John was imprisoned after he robbed the bank* are characterised by syntactic neutralisation. The difference between the three basic subclauses ("declarative", "interrogative" and "imperative") is said to be cancelled out and the declarative subclause is used in the context of neutralisation as the unmarked option of the paradigm (sentences such as *John was imprisoned after didn't he rob the bank?* and *John was imprisoned after do keep in mind that he robbed the bank!* are not possible). Within Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar, Levy and Pollard (2002) refer to "argument neutralization" in sentences such as *Er findet und hilft Frauen (*Männer/*Kinder).* An utterance such as *Kim is a Republican and proud of it* is considered to be an example of "functor neutralization". Miestamo (2005), treats neutralisation with respect to negative sentences from a typological perspective. He points out that in some languages the affirmative paradigm distinguishes between realis and irrealis. However, in negative sentences, only marking of irrealis is possible which may be analysed as a case of neutralisation. In generative grammar, finally, Putnam & Salmons (2013), building on Legendre (2009), argue in favour of a 'syntactic neutralisation' approach with respect to the loss of passive voice constructions in Moundridge Schweitzer German, a moribund enclave dialect spoken in South Central Kansas. Instead of the passive voice, the Moundridge German speaker uses a structure that is closest to a passive voice construction within the same grammar, which, according to the authors, can be seen as a case of neutralisation.

One immediately notices that, once the term neutralisation has been extrapolated beyond the field of phonology and the term has been applied within different theoretical paradigms (structural-functional, cognitive, generative, etc.), it has been used to refer to a range of disparate phenomena. A *first research question* that logically follows is whether the arguably different phenomena described in the literature should all be subsumed under the heading of "neutralisation" or sometimes should be better explained in terms of other concepts. This topic is addressed in chapter one.[7] The chapter is essentially a lexicographic expedition through the relevant literature in 20th-century linguistics, registering the many actual uses and varied interpretations of the term neutralisation.

After a discussion of the notion of neutralisation as developed in the writings of Trubetzkoy, the chapter examines the use of the term neutralisation outside the domain of phonology in a chronological way. First, Hjelmslev's view (1971 [1939]) on neutralisation is discussed. Second, an overview is given of the use of the term in the 1950s (discussing authors such as Cantineau 1952, Prieto 1954, Ruipérez 1954, Godel 1955, Lampach, 1956 and Garvin 1958). And third, the use of the term neutralisation from the 1960s onwards is investigated, distinguishing nine different senses of neutralisation

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[7] The chapter was published as an article entitled: De Backer, Maarten. 2009. The concept of neutralisation outside the field of phonology. In: Indogermanische Forschungen 114, 1-59.

(with various sub-senses). The outcome of this undertaking is that the use of the term neutralisation should be confined to a particular type of linguistic phenomenon, in order to prevent it from becoming a next to meaningless term in linguistic inquiry.

1.3 Neutralisation in the writings of Coseriu

> "Da es sich bei der Neutralisierung um eines der für die „natürlichen Sprachen" (d.h. ganz einfach für die Sprachen) charakteristischsten Dinge handelt, müßte sie noch viel genauer untersucht werden." [As neutralisation is one of the most characteristic things of the „natural languages" (or simply, of the languages) it should be investigated more thoroughly.]
>
> Coseriu (1992 [1988]: 225)

The above statement shows that, for a linguist like Coseriu, neutralisation is fundamental to linguistic inquiry. Unsurprisingly, Coseriu incorporates neutralisation as one of the four cornerstones of his linguistic theory, besides the principles of functionality, opposition and systematicity (Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 171-172]. In the context of the present dissertation, it was particularly the pre-eminent role Coseriu ascribes to neutralisation that aroused my interest to further explore the topic. The basic features of Coseriu's principle of neutralisation can be summarised as follows:

 – First, neutralisation is regarded as an important restriction to the structuralist premise that linguistic items derive their functional value from the systemic, paradigmatic oppositions in which they take part. The principle of neutralisation shows that the functionality of these oppositions may be cancelled in certain contexts in discourse.

 – Second, neutralisation essentially involves the inclusion of one linguistic item in another: in the case of neutralisation, one member stands for what is common to both members of the neutralisable opposition, thus including the other member of the opposition as well. This view entails that the voiceless plosive /t/ in *Bund* 'association' or *Tag* in *einige Tage im Krankenhaus bleiben* 'to stay in the hospital for a few days' should be analysed as being functionally different from */t/* in German *tanken* 'to refuel' (where it may contrast with *danken* 'to thank') or *Tag* in contexts where it is in explicit or implicit contrast with *Nacht*.

 – Third, neutralisation is considered to be unidirectional, viz. only one of the terms may neutralise the opposition, not the other. Importantly, the direction of neutralisation is described as being motivated by the structure of neutralisable

oppositions on the level of the language system (Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 220): in neutralisable oppositions, a positively defined (or 'marked') term is opposed to a negatively defined (or 'unmarked') term. Because of its negative characterisation, the negative or unmarked term can be used in both an oppositional sense and a neutral sense, whereas the marked term is excluded from such usage. Accordingly, Coseriu distinguishes between 'neutralisability' and '(actual) neutralisation': whereas the former refers to the 'potential' for neutralisation motivated by the asymmetric structure of certain systemic oppositions, the latter refers to the actual neutralisation in specific discourse contexts. Neutralisable oppositions are schematised as follows (Coseriu 1992 [1988]: 218; this scheme will recur in various ensuing chapters):
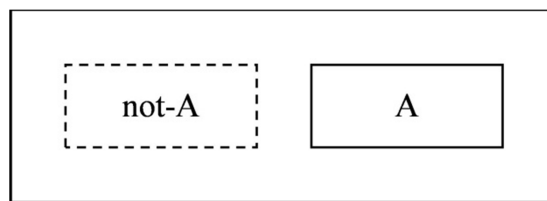

Figure 1: Neutralisation according to Coseriu

– Fourth, in semantics, the unmarked term of neutralisable oppositions is analysed as having two meanings, or *signifiés*. *Tag*, for instance, has a specific-oppositional meaning (*Tag* in the sense of 'part of a 24-hour period characterised by the presence of sunlight') and a neutral-generic meaning (*Tag* in the sense of '24-hour period').
– And fifth, neutralisation is taken to recur at various levels of language in a systematic and analogous way (viz., in phonology, lexicon and grammar)[8].

From the above sketch, a *second set of research questions* follows. A first question is whether neutralisation in the field of semantics is always unidirectional, as this is typically the case for phonological neutralisation. Or are there cases where the opposition may be neutralised by both terms of the opposition?

A second question is whether the claimed 'bifunctionality' of unmarked terms (i.e. their potential for having both an 'oppositional' and a 'neutral' meaning) is reconcilable with the structuralist tenet that language-specific meanings are monosemous, i.e. have one unitary and homogeneous meaning on the level of the language system ("langue" in

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[8] Coseriu argues that neutralisation even exists on a pragmatic level. Coseriu gives the example of "foreigner talk", where a German sentence such as *Du kommen mein Haus, dort zusammen trinken* 'you come my house, there drink together', in the context of a German speaker talking to an immigrant, will not be qualified as incorrect since the incorrectness is considered necessary and appropriate, thus 'neutralising' any judgments of linguistic (in)correctness (Coseriu 1985: 35). In chapter one, I argue that an analysis of this phenomenon in terms of neutralisation is infelicitous.

Saussurean terms). These two questions are particularly addressed in chapter three.[9] On the one hand, the chapter explores the possibility of an alternative structural-functional approach to the semantic variation of the unmarked term that is more consistent with the structuralist postulate of unitary and homogeneous meanings in the language system. On the other hand, the question of unidirectionality is addressed with regard to the lexical example *Tag/Nacht*, using historical and current corpus data. The analysis shows that the principle of unidirectionality might be valid for present-day German but it does not account for earlier stages of German and other Germanic languages (diachronic argument). In addition, contrastive examples taken from Basketo, a non-European language, show that the unidirectional neutralisation relation between the lexical units for 'day' and 'night' does not hold universally and that bidirectional neutralisability also occurs in the world's languages (typological argument).

A third question concerns the 'system-bias' inherent to Coseriu's description of neutralisation. By seeing neutralisation as a principle that is operative at various levels of language in a similar way, Coseriu conceives of neutralisation as a linguistic mechanism that is motivated by language-internal factors only, as if the linguistic oppositions themselves 'immanently' generate the potential for neutralisation. Particularly in the concluding chapter, I will come back to this issue, arguing that language-external factors also need to be taken into account when describing neutralisation phenomena.

1.4 Neutralisation vs. markedness theory

Reading up on the literature on neutralisation and related phenomena, it soon became clear that the notion of neutralisation is, for many authors, closely connected with the notion of markedness (or, better still, to some particular notion of markedness). Moreover, what Coseriu describes under the heading of neutralisation, is very often subsumed under the term markedness without any reference to the notion of neutralisation, particularly by authors who do not subscribe to a structural-functional approach to language. In this dissertation, I do not aim to give a detailed overview of the literature on the notion of markedness. For in-depth discussions I refer to existing comprehensive accounts such as Greenberg 2005 [1966], Eckman, Moravcsik and Wirth (1986), Tomić (1989), Andrews 1990, Battistella (1990, 1996), Andersen (2001, 2008), and Haspelmath (2006), among others. Instead, I focus on the notion of markedness as developed by Jakobson and

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[9] This chapter was published as: De Backer, Maarten. 2010. Lexical neutralisation: a case study of the lexical opposition 'day'/'night'. In: *Language Sciences* 32 (5), 545-562.

compare it with Coseriu's notion of markedness in the context of the latter's neutralisation theory, as this is of more relevance to the thematic scope of the dissertation. The discussion focuses on the notion of markedness in the field of semantics. The question of the difference between Jakobson's and Coseriu's notion of (semantic) markedness is addressed in chapter two.[10] It is shown that whereas Jakobson defines the marked/unmarked opposition as a contrast between the plus-value of a feature and a corresponding zero-value (A vs. ØA), Coseriu describes the opposition as a contrast between the plus-value of a feature and the minus-value of that feature (A vs. not-A). The central claim of the chapter is that a rigid application of either Jakobson's or Coseriu's descriptive model to all lexical and grammatical relations fails to recognise the fact that *different* semantic oppositions may present *different* markedness relations. To substantiate this claim, ten lexical pairs of nouns in German are investigated by means of a corpus study and two off-line experiments, viz. a sentence processing task and a questionnaire. On the basis of the data analysis, a revised semantic markedness model is outlined that accounts for the observed variation in a more satisfactory way.

A related question concerns the relation between the concept of neutralisation, on the one hand, and other concepts that have been used (sometimes only occasionally) to describe neutralisation phenomena, particularly within cognitive semantics (e.g. polysemy, metonymy, autosuperordination, autohyponymy, prototype effects; cf. Langacker 1987; 1991, Lakoff 1987, Talmy 1988, Geeraerts 1985; 1997, Taylor 1999, Cruse 2000; 2011, among others). This topic is also touched upon in various other chapters.

1.5 Neutralisation of gender oppositions: the interpretation of masculine personal nouns

The final chapter is concerned with the interpretation of masculine personal nouns.[11] It is a well-known fact that masculine personal nouns can be used either generically, i.e. referring to both women and men, or specifically, i.e. referring to only men. The potential of masculine personal nouns to refer to males only or to both female and male persons has

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[10] The chapter is published as the article: De Backer, Maarten. 2013. Neutralisation and semantic markedness: A study into types of lexical opposition. In: *Sprachwissenschaft* 38 (3), 343-382.

[11] The chapter is published as the article: De Backer, Maarten & Ludovic De Cuypere. 2012. The interpretation of masculine personal nouns in German and Dutch: A comparative experimental study. *Language Sciences* 34 (3). 253-268.

been addressed in linguistics within the contexts of neutralisation (Coseriu 1976, 1992 [1988]) and markedness (Jakobson 1971 [1932], 1971 [1936]; Greenberg 2005 [1966]; Waugh 1982; Andersen 2001, 2008).[12] This chapter takes a contrastive perspective and investigates the difference in interpretation of masculine personal nouns in German and Dutch. Regarding German, research findings indicate that generic uses of masculine personal nouns are strongly male-biased in comparison with alternative generics (Klein 1988, Scheele & Gauler 1993, Irmen & Köhncke 1996, Braun et al. 1998, Stahlberg et al. 2001, Stahlberg & Sczesny 2001, Steiger & Irmen 2011). In Dutch, masculine terms and neutralising terms are reported to be increasingly used in reference to both women and men (Gerritsen 2002). The chapter investigates, by means of two survey experiments, (i) how German and Dutch native speakers interpret masculine personal nouns used in referential contexts, (ii) which variables this interpretation is associated with (including subject gender, number, definiteness, type of lexical unit and relative frequency), and (iii) how the participants evaluate the referential possibilities of these nouns.

Firstly, the results of the study indicate that masculine personal nouns are more frequently interpreted as gender-specific terms in German than in Dutch. Secondly, the interpretation of the German and Dutch nouns is found to be significantly associated with the following variables: number, lexical unit type and relative frequency. Thirdly, German masculine personal nouns appear to be more restrictive in terms of potential references than their Dutch counterparts. In general, the data indicate that there is a clear difference between German and Dutch regarding the interpretation of masculine personal nouns, but this difference is particularly apparent in the singular.

1.6 Concluding chapter

In the concluding chapter, the insights obtained from the various case studies are summarised and brought together. In addition, I briefly elaborate on some of the major alternative analyses proposed in the 'anti-markedness' literature, as this is not covered in one of the case studies.[13] On the basis of this overview of alternative approaches and the results obtained from the various case studies in the previous chapters, Coseriu's

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[12] In neutralisation theory, the peculiar type of relationship between the members of a neutralisable pair (e.g. *day* vs. *night* or *masculine* vs. *feminine*) is also accounted for in terms of markedness. However, because the neutralisation and markedness theories differ in their descriptions of what is marked and unmarked in semantics, the concepts have also to be kept apart terminologically.

[13] As will become clear from the case studies, the 'anti-markedness' argumentation is also relevant to Coseriu's concept of neutralisation.

neutralisation theory is reviewed with a critical mindset. To round off the conclusions, I sketch a revised account of neutralisation/markedness in the field of semantics which, while bearing testimony to the value of Coseriu's approach, also tries to overcome some of its drawbacks.

1.7 Contribution

The present dissertation is based on four published articles. The original texts of the articles have not been changed in the dissertation. Their lay-out, however, has been adapted conforming to the style sheet of doctoral dissertations at Ghent University. The introductory chapter and the final chapter have not been previously published. The research reported on in chapter four is the result of a close collaboration with Ludovic De Cuypere, who helped me to carry out the statistical analyses. The interpretations of the data, the statements made and the views expressed in this dissertation are solely my responsibility. The dissertation consists of the following chapters:

Introduction

Chapter 1. The concept of neutralisation outside the field of phonology

De Backer, Maarten. 2009. The concept of neutralisation outside the field of phonology. In: *Indogermanische Forschungen* 114, 1-59.

Chapter 2. Neutralisation and semantic markedness: An inquiry into types of lexical opposition in German

De Backer, Maarten. 2013. Neutralisation and semantic markedness: A study into types of lexical opposition. In: *Sprachwissenschaft* 38 (3), 343-382.

Chapter 3. Lexical neutralisation: a case study of the lexical opposition 'day'/'night'

De Backer, Maarten. 2010. Lexical neutralisation: a case study of the lexical opposition 'day'/'night'. In: *Language Sciences* 32 (5), 545-562.

Chapter 4. The interpretation of masculine personal nouns in German and Dutch: A comparative experimental study

De Backer, Maarten & Ludovic De Cuypere. 2012. The interpretation of masculine personal nouns in German and Dutch: A comparative experimental study. *Language Sciences* 34 (3). 253-268.

Overall conclusions