

Neuter gender in a sexless language

The case of Zulu*

Merijn de Dreu and Leston Chandler Buell

University of Amsterdam

In some Germanic languages, neuter gender is used both as a lexical gender and for certain grammatical functions, while in Romance languages, neuter gender is only employed for grammatical functions. Zulu, a Bantu language, has a much more elaborate noun class system than those languages, but one not rooted in sex or animacy as in Germanic or Romance. However, it is shown that Zulu noun class 17 is used for the same range of grammatical functions as neuter gender in Indo-European. Specifically, Indo-European neuter gender and Zulu class 17 are used when the referent has no specific noun class properties, for expletive subjects, and as the subject of nominal predication, even when the referent is human. Aside from its use in some languages as a gender for nouns, then, neuter gender can be understood as a cluster of grammatical functions, independently of the way the lexicon is organized.

Keywords: neuter gender, neutral agreement, noun class systems, lexicon, nominal predication

1. Introduction

Some Indo-European languages, such as German and Russian, have a three-way gender system in singular number, with masculine, feminine, and neuter genders. In German, for example, each of these genders has distinct forms for articles, pronouns, and agreeing adjectives. While many inanimate nouns are found in the masculine and feminine genders, there are still clear connections with biological sex. For example, most nouns exclusively denoting females ('woman', 'mother', etc.) are grammatically feminine, while those exclusively denoting males are grammatically masculine. Furthermore, nouns denoting minerals ('gold', 'silver'), which have no real-world sex, are typically neuter, while neuter gender has few members denoting humans. The term 'neuter' is intuitive in a such system,

because its prototypical members denote things that are sexless, unlike those of the two other genders in the language. However, in addition to its connection with sexlessness, neuter gender in Indo-European languages is also used for things beyond the realm of assigning gender to nouns; it is also used for several non-lexical grammatical functions. To give two examples, in German it is the neuter pronoun *es* rather than its masculine or feminine counterparts which is used both as an expletive subject and to refer to situations. A different pattern is found in French and Spanish. Here Latin's neuter nouns have merged into masculine gender in opposition to feminine gender, but even in these languages there are grammatical functions which can be shown to involve a neuter gender distinct from masculine. In all these languages, when neuter and masculine can be distinguished, certain grammatical functions are relegated to neuter gender. In Germanic and Slavic, neuter gender is additionally used as a lexical gender for nouns; in Romance it is not. This use of gender agreement for grammatical functions has been described by Corbett (1991), who calls it 'neutral agreement', of which he distinguishes two types.¹ One type is that of the Romance languages, where there is a discrete gender used only for neutral agreement, while the other type is that of the Germanic languages, where the gender used for both neutral agreement as a lexical gender for nouns.

Zulu, a Bantu language spoken mostly in South Africa, also has an agreement class system, usually called a noun class system, but that system is much more elaborate than its European counterparts and is based on neither sex nor animacy. Fourteen of this language's sixteen noun classes have prototypical members which are non-human, making the term 'neuter' seem irrelevant. This paper shows that this irrelevance is only seeming. Although Zulu non-animate nouns in general do not belong to one particular noun class, many of the grammatical functions associated with neuter gender in Indo-European languages are associated with a single noun class in Zulu — noun class 17 — rather than being scattered among numerous classes. Because class 17 is not used as a lexical gender for nouns, class 17 in Zulu is on par with neuter gender of Romance.

In the realm of grammatical functions, then, neuter gender appears to be a cluster of functions associated with a particular noun class, regardless of whether the language's agreement classes are organized along the lines of sex, of animacy, or of something entirely different. This cluster of properties includes what we will call 'generic use', expletive use, and use as subject of nominal predication. We will use different Germanic and Romance languages to illustrate these parallels, because for any given phenomenon neuter gender is easier to identify in one language than another. For example, while the Dutch neuter pronoun *het* 'it' is used in certain expletive constructions, in other constructions the clitic *er* 'there' is used, which cannot be said to have a gender. Similarly, while the French subject

pronoun *ce* can be shown to be neuter in certain corners of the languages, it is difficult to distinguish from masculine in others.

2. The noun class system of Zulu

Like almost all other Bantu languages, Zulu has an elaborate noun class system (Poulos & Msimang 1998; Maho 2003). Every noun belongs to a particular noun class, which determines the form of words agreeing with the noun. These noun classes are referred to with a numbering system (Meinhof 1948), which makes it possible to refer them across Bantu languages. Many of these noun classes are associated in pairs, one singular and the other plural, which together can be described as constituting a gender. Some typical examples of noun classes 1/2 and 7/8 are given in (1).

- (1) a. *umfana* (noun class 1) 'boy', *abafana* (n.c. 2) 'boys'
umfundisi (n.c. 1) 'teacher', *abafundisi* (n.c. 2) 'teachers'
 b. *isinkwa* (n.c. 7) 'loaf of) bread', *izinkwa* (n.c. 8) 'loaves of bread'
isifundo (n.c. 7) 'lesson', *izifundo* (n.c. 8) 'lessons'

The following examples below show some of the types of agreement a noun can trigger.²

- (2) a. I-n-tombazane en-hle yami i-ya-cul-a.
 9DET-9NCPRX-girl 9-beautiful 9my 9SM-DJ-sing-FS
 'My beautiful girl sings.'
 b. U-m-fana omu-hle wami u-ya-cul-a.
 1DET-1NCPRX-boy 1-beautiful 1my 1SM-DJ-sing-FS
 'My beautiful boy sings.'

Zulu has ten singular noun classes and six plural ones. In example (2), *intombazane* 'girl' has noun class 9 and *umfana* 'boy' is noun class 1, and the adjective and possessive modifying the noun and the verb in the example have different forms depending on the noun class. Most Zulu noun classes are characterized by a noun class prefix (glossed separately only in (2)), such as the prenasalization in *intombazane* and the moraic *m* of *umfana* in (2). In Zulu, a determiner-like prefix called the augment usually precedes the class prefix. The augment is only omitted in certain restricted syntactic environments, such as in vocatives, after a demonstrative, and when the noun is used as negative polarity item (e.g., '(not any boy)' (Halpert 2012).

Sex plays no role in the assignment of noun class. For example, both *umfana* 'boy' and *umfazi* 'woman' are noun class 1 words, and both *intombazane* 'girl' and

indoda ‘man’ are noun class 9 words. Animacy plays only a limited role. Class 1 and its plural counterpart class 2 contain only people, and noun class 3 and its plural counterpart 4 contain only non-humans, but humans, other animates, and inanimates can be found in most other noun classes. There are certain tendencies and islands of regularity with regards to class assignment. For instance, plants tend to be in classes 3/4, and new loanwords go into classes 1a/2a or 5/6.³ Certain derived forms are associated with a particular noun class, and infinitives are all in class 15. Other than that, class assignment is largely arbitrary, just like gender assignment in Indo-European languages.

Among the many noun classes of Zulu, class 17 is a peculiar one. On the one hand, virtually no nouns belong to this class. On the other hand, noun class 17 agreement markers and pronouns abound. As will be seen, this is largely due to the class’s role in grammatical functions commonly associated with neutral agreement. Additionally, however, class 17 can be argued to function as a default, because it can be used as the agreement for conjoined arguments of unlike classes. This is shown in (3), in which a conjoined noun phrase consisting of one noun from class 10 and another from class 6 (both plural classes) trigger noun class 17 subject agreement on the verb.

- (3) I-zinkuni na-malahle ku-phel-ile.
 DET-10firewood and:DET-6coal 17SM-finish-PERF.DJ
 ‘The firewood and coal are finished.’ (Nyembezi 1970, p. 4)

Historically, noun class 17 was a locative class, used for general locations and directions, as is also the case in many other modern Bantu languages. However, this is not true of modern Zulu (Buell 2012). In this language, the overwhelming majority of uses are non-locative, and nearly all of the few uses where locativity and class 17 coincide can be explained without invoking class 17’s supposed locative nature.

3. The generic use of noun class 17 and the neuter

Having completed our brief overview of Zulu noun classes, we now turn to the generic use of class 17, which is the first of the three domains of grammatical function which this class has in common with Indo-European neuter gender. The term ‘generic’ will be used here not in the familiar sense related to ‘kind interpretations’ (e.g., *elephants* in *Elephants have trunks.*), but rather in the sense of not having any specific class properties. This includes referents for which it has not yet been established what vocabulary item will be used to refer to them. It also includes situations.

A class 17 generic pronoun is used in several ways that can be compared to Indo-European use of neuter gender. The first of these is the class 17 demonstrative

with *lokho*: ‘Sipho has given me various necklaces, but that (the fact that he has done that) isn’t good.’

- (9) Eduardo me ha regalado varios relojes, pero ese/eso no me\ gusta. [Spanish]
 Eduardo me has give several:MP clock:MP but this:M/this:N not me please:3S
 with *ese*: ‘Eduardo has given me several watches, but I don’t like that one.’
 with *eso*: ‘Eduardo has given me several watches, but I don’t like that (the fact that he has done that).’

Finally, in Zulu, class 17 subject agreement is used with an adjectival predicate to refer to its property, as in (10a). This has a direct counterpart in Spanish and Dutch, in which the neuter article is used with the adjective to the same end, as in (10b) and (10c). In all three of these languages, this strategy is distinct from morphological nominalization. For example, the noun ‘beauty’ is *ubuhle* in Zulu, *schoonheid* in Dutch, and *belleza* in Spanish.

- (10) a. oku-hle ngo-thando [Zulu]
 17-beautiful about:DET-11.love
 b. het mooie aan liefde [Dutch]
 DET.N beautiful about love
 c. lo bello del amor [Spanish]
 DET.N beautiful.M of:DET.M love
 ‘what is beautiful about love’

There are additional cases of generic uses of Zulu class 17 and Germanic and Romance neuter gender, such as parallels with the Spanish neuter pronoun *ello* ‘it’, but space constraints do not permit further elaboration on this point.

4. Expletive use

The second domain of functions for which class 17 and Indo-European neuter gender are both used is that of expletive pronouns. As described in Buell (2012), the Bantu and Germanic families both have representatives of two types of languages. The mono-expletive languages use the same pronoun or subject agreement for all types of expletive pronouns, while the di-expletive languages use two different pronouns or agreements depending on the grammatical context. English, with its expletive *it* and *there* is of the latter type, as are Dutch and Swahili. The single-expletive languages include German and Zulu, in which the neuter pronoun *es* and class 17 agreement are used, respectively, in all expletive contexts. A

few expletive contexts in Zulu will now be briefly discussed, showing the parallels in Indo-European and with special attention to inversion constructions.

Seem-like verbs can typically take an expletive subject. This is the case in both Zulu and Dutch. As seen in (11), the Zulu verb takes class 17 subject agreement, while its Dutch counterpart takes the neuter pronoun *het* as a subject.

- (11) a. Ku-bonakala ukuthi ba-zo-fika kusasa. [Zulu]
 17SM-seem that 1SM-FUT-arrive tomorrow
 'It seems that they'll come tomorrow.'
- b. Het lijkt er-op dat ze morgen komen. [Dutch]
 it seems there-on that they tomorrow come
 'It seems that they'll come tomorrow.'

Zulu and some Germanic languages have an impersonal passive construction. The examples in (12), in Zulu and German, have no overt argument. Again, the Germanic neuter expletive subject, here German *es*, corresponds to class 17 subject agreement in Zulu.

- (12) a. Ku-ya-dans-w-a. [Zulu]
 17SM-PRES.CJ-dance-PSV-FS
 'There is dancing.'
- b. Es wird getanzt. [German]
 it PSV.AUX danced
 'There is dancing.'

The next expletive construction is the inversion construction. In Zulu, a subject can be either preverbal or postverbal. With a preverbal subject, the verb always agrees with the subject:

- (13) a. U-Sipho u-cul-ile.
 DET-1A.Sipho 1SM-sing-PERF.DJ
 'Sipho sang.'
- b. *U-Sipho ku-cul-ile.
 DET-1A.Sipho 17SM-sing-PERF.DJ

In contrast, with postverbal subjects two patterns occur:

- (14) a. vP-internal
 Ku-fik-e i-zingane.]_{VP}
 17SM-arrive-PERF.CJ DET-10children
 'The children/some children have come.'
- b. vP-external
 Zi-fik-ile]_{VP} i-zingane.
 10SM-arrive-PERF.DJ DET-10children
 'The children have come.'

In (14a) the logical subject is vP-internal (van der Spuy 1993; Buell 2006), since a conjoint verb form is used, which indicates that the verb is not VP-final. Because the verb in Zulu can only agree with an argument if the latter has raised to preverbal subject position, the class 17 subject agreement in the sentence must be considered expletive. In (14b) the logical subject is dislocated. A disjoint form is used, which indicates that the verb is VP-final. There are some syntactic differences between these two types of subject (Buell 2008). We will discuss one of these differences because it will be used as a diagnostic in the discussion of nominal predication.

We will henceforth use the term ‘internal subject’ to mean ‘vP-internal logical subject’. That only internal subjects can be focused is shown in (15), where the logical subject is modified by *kuphela* ‘only’. A noun phrase modified by *kuphela* is focused. In (15a) the subject is internal and can be modified by *kuphela*, whereas in (15b) the subject is not internal and cannot be modified by *kuphela*:

- (15) a. Ku-cul-e u-Sipho kuphela.]_{VP}
 17SM-sing-PERF.CJ DET-1A.Sipho only
 ‘Only Sipho sang.’
 b. *U-cule-ile]_{VP} u-Sipho kuphela.
 1SM-sing-PERF.DJ DET-1A.Sipho only
 ‘Only Sipho sang.’

This can be explained if we assume that internal subjects can be focused, while dislocated ones cannot. Similar data for *wh* phrases and other types of focus also show that only internal subjects can be focused.

The different positions of the subject also impact the choice of the subject agreement morpheme, as can also be observed in (14). If the subject is dislocated it triggers full noun class agreement, whereas if the subject is vP-internal, and hence in a position where it cannot trigger subject agreement, the subject agreement is noun class 17, the ‘neuter’ class. Again, there is a comparable construction in German, which uses the neuter subject pronoun *es*:

- (16) Es sang eine Lerche im Mai.
 it sang a.F.NOM larch in:the.M.DAT May
 ‘There sang a larch in May.’

Another type of expletive use of noun class 17 is existential predication. Zulu has two types of existential predication (i.e., *there is...*), both of which use class 17 subject agreement. Each of the two strategies, illustrated in (17) and (18), requires a different analysis (Buell, 2012).

- (17) A-ku-kho mali e-ningi lapha.
 NEG-17SM-present 9money 9-much here
 ‘There isn’t a lot of money here.’

- (18) Ku-ne-mali e-ningi e-lahlekile.
 17SM-with:DET-9money 9-much REL:9SM-lost:DJ
 ‘There’s a lot of money that has been lost.’

Existential strategies in Indo-European sometimes also make use of a neuter expletive subject, such as German *es gibt* ‘there is’ (literally ‘it gives’), but the correspondence with Zulu is more difficult to show, because of independent differences between the constructions.

The final type of expletive use of noun class 17 is quotative inversion. The Zulu version of this construction doesn’t have an obvious exact parallel in European languages. Here the verb is followed by the subject, and preceded by the quote, and the verb has noun class 17 subject agreement:

- (19) “Sawubona,” ku-sho u-Sipho.
 hello 17SM-say DET-1Sipho
 ‘“Hello,” said Sipho.’

From all these cases it is clear noun class 17 subject agreement is used as an expletive. This has a parallel with the neuter gender in European languages, such as German and Dutch, where the neuter pronouns *es* and *het* are used as expletives.

5. Use as subject of nominal predication

In Zulu, the subject can either follow or precede the predicate in nominal predication. As with verbal predication, two patterns occur if the subject follows the predicate:

- (20) a. Kw-a-ku-ngu-mngane wethu u-Sipho.
 17SM-PST-17SM-COP-1friend 1our DET-1A.Sipho
 b. W-a-ye-ngu-mngane wethu u-Sipho
 1SM-PST-1SM-COP-1friend 1our DET-1A.Sipho
 ‘Sipho was our friend.’

This pattern is reminiscent of the situation with verbs, where postverbal subjects either triggered full noun class agreement or there was a default noun class 17 agreement. However, unlike postverbal subjects, post-predicate subjects in nominal predication are always dislocated, never internal, regardless of the agreement. As we have shown, resistance to modification with *kuphela* ‘only’ is indicative of dislocation in Zulu.

- (21) *A-ku-muntu] lona kuphela.
 NEG-17SM-1person 1this only
 intended: ‘Not only this one is a person.’

- (22) *W-a-ye-ngu-mngane wami] u-Sipho kuphela.
 1SM-PAST-1SM-COP-1friend 1my DET-1A.Sipho only
 intended: 'Only Sipho was my friend.'

Therefore, the ungrammaticality of (21) and (22) can serve as our first piece of evidence that post-predicate subjects in nominal predication are always dislocated.

Another difference with verbs is that default noun class 17 agreement can also occur with pre-predicate subjects:

- (23) a. U-Sipho kw-a-ku-ngu-mngane wethu.
 DET-1Sipho 17SM-PST-17SM-COP-1friend 1our
 b. U-Sipho w-a-ye-ngu-mngane wethu.
 DET-1Sipho 1SM-PST-1SM-COP-1friend 1our
 'Sipho was our friend.'

With a pre-predicate subject, class 17 subject agreement is ungrammatical not only with verbal predication, as shown above in (13b), but also with other types of non-verbal predication, such as adjectival and locative predication shown in (24a) and (24b).

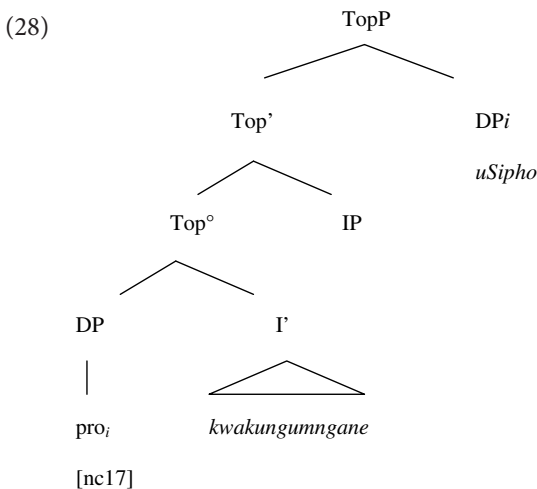
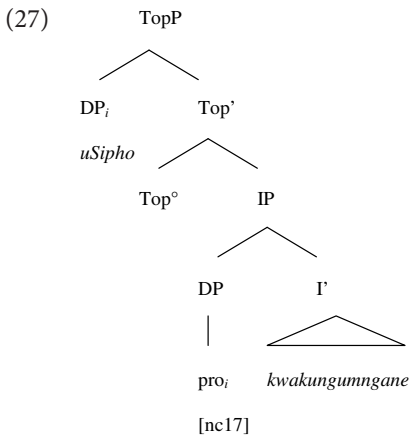
- (24) a. *U-Sipho kw-a-ku-mdala. (adjectival predicate)
 DET-1A.Sipho 17SM-PST-17SM-1old
 intended: 'Sipho was old.'
 b. *U-Sipho ku-se-dolobh-eni. (locative predicate)
 DET-1A.Sipho 17SM-LOC-5town-LOC
 intended: 'Sipho is in town.'

Interestingly, however, this peculiar use of noun class 17 is comparable to a similar use of the neuter subject pronouns *ce* in French⁴ and *het* in Dutch (Buell 2012). The neuter subject pronoun in these languages can only refer to people when the predicate is nominal, as shown in (25) and (26).

- (25) a. Elle/C' est mon amie, Marie. [French]
 she/it is my friend Marie
 'Marie is my friend.'
 b. Elle/*C' est sympathique, Marie.
 she/it is nice Marie
 'Marie's nice.'
 c. Elle/*Ce m' a beaucoup aidé, Marie.
 she/it me has much helped Marie
 'Marie helped me a lot.'
- (26) a. Die Peter toch! Hij/Het is een schat. [Dutch]
 that Peter indeed he/it is a treasure
 'That Peter! He's a darling.'

- b. Die Peter toch! Hij/*Het is schattig.
 that Peter indeed he/it is cute
 'That Peter! He's cute.'
- c. Die Peter toch! Hij/*Het schreeuwt zo.
 that Peter indeed he/it shouts so
 'That Peter! He sure shouts.'

In this way, Zulu noun class 17 subject agreement is taken to correspond to the use of *het* and *ce* as subjects in Dutch and French. As argued in Buell (2012) and Buell & De Dreu (2011), the subject agreement in (23a) is triggered by a *pro* with noun class 17 features, and the logical subject is in a position higher than the canonical subject position. More precisely, then, it is this noun class 17 *pro* that corresponds to Dutch *het* and French *ce*.



One more parallel between Zulu and Dutch supports this correspondence. In clefts, only noun class 17 subject agreement may be used in Zulu, while only *het* may be used in Dutch:

- (29) a. Uma ku-ngu-Sipho kuphela ow-a-ye-si-siza...
 if 17SM-COP-1A.Sipho only REL:1SM-PAST-1SM-1PL.OM-help
 ‘If it’s just Sipho who was helping us...’
 b. *Uma e-ngu-Sipho kuphela ow-a-ye-si-siza...
 if 1SM-COP-1A.Sipho only REL:1SM-PAST-SM1-1PL.OM-help
- (30) Als *het*/**hij* alleen Jan was die ons hielp...
 if it/he only Jan was who us helped
 ‘If it was only Jan who was helping us...’

Again Zulu noun class 17 behaves like neuter gender in some Indo-European languages. In Zulu a *pro* with noun class 17 features can refer to humans, but only in nominal predication, and in Dutch and French a neuter pronoun can refer to humans, but again, only in nominal predication.

6. Conclusion

In the preceding sections a variety of parallels were drawn between Indo-European neuter gender and Zulu noun class 17. While most of these were in the realm of grammatical functions, the first concerned the lexical domain. While in Germanic languages neuter is used as a gender for nouns in the lexicon, in Spanish and French, neuter gender is peculiar in that it has no lexical members which are nouns. This latter property was also true of noun class 17 in Zulu.

Parallels in the grammatical domain were myriad in terms of specific cases, but were reduced to three types of phenomena. The first is what we termed ‘generic use’, which included reference to situations and to things which for some reason had no specific noun class features. The second was the use of both neuter gender and noun class 17 in expletive constructions. In that discussion, it was shown that expletive constructions have a similar range of uses in Zulu and Indo-European. The third was the use of neuter gender and class 17 as a subject in nominal predication. It was shown that Romance, Germanic, and Zulu behave identically in this respect.

This particular clustering of phenomena around a single gender is not the only situation imaginable. For example, we might expect situations and unnamed objects to be referred to with a pronoun agreeing with the language’s words for ‘situation’ and ‘thing’, such as the feminine nouns *situación* and *cosa* in Spanish, but this is not what we find. Instead, in both language families all three groups of

phenomena make use of a single noun class, one which has no nominal members in either Zulu or Romance. Because Indo-European and Bantu are typologically, genetically, and geographically unrelated, we venture to predict that the same clustering of phenomena will be found in other languages, as well, even if their class systems are based on neither sex nor animacy. If this prediction is borne out, neuter gender can thus be understood as a cluster of grammatical functions, independent of the way the lexicon is organized.

Notes

* We would like to thank our principal Zulu informant Meritta Xaba and two anonymous reviewers. This research was financed by the Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek.

1. We are grateful to an anonymous reviewer who provided this reference.
2. In the article, the following abbreviations are used: CJ=conjoint, COP=copular particle, DAT=dative, DJ=disjoint, DET=determiner, F=feminine, FUT=(near) future, FS=final suffix, LOC=locative, M=masculine, NEG=negative, N=neuter, NOM=nominative, NCPRX=noun class prefix, OM=object agreement, POSS=possessive agreement, PSV=passive, PERF=perfect, PRES=present, PST=(remote) past, REL=relative marker, SM=subject marker. Numbers refer to noun class unless they are followed by an SG for singular or PL for plural, in which case they denote person. Zulu data is presented in the standard orthography, in which tone is not represented.
3. Most recent loans have noun class 5/6 nominal morphology, but govern noun class 9/6 agreement on agreeing elements.
4. The subject clitic *ce* is considered neuter because it does not vary in form depending on the gender of the predicate nominal, as shown in (i), unlike agreeing forms of the demonstrative *ce* 'this, that', as in (ii):

- (i) a. C' est un garçon.
it is a.M boy
'It's a boy.'
- b. C' est une fille.
it is a.F girl.
'It's a girl.'
- (ii) a. Ce garçon est intelligent.
this.M boy is smart.M
'This boy is smart.'
- b. Cette fille est intelligente.
this.M girl is smart.F
'This boy is smart.'

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Authors' addresses

Merijn de Dreu
Amsterdam Center for Language and
Communication, University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 210
1012 VT Amsterdam
merijndedreu@hotmail.com

Leston Chandler Buell
Amsterdam Center for Language and
Communication, University of Amsterdam
Spuistraat 210
1012 VT Amsterdam
l.c.buell@uva.nl