Proper names used as Common Nouns in Belgian Dutch and German*

Karen De Clercq
University College Brussels/Crissp

1. Introduction

Proper names used as common nouns (henceforth PUCs) come in three different semantic classes: PUCs denoting events (1), PUCs denoting objects (2) and PUCs denoting persons (3). In the event reading the proper name refers to behaviour that is typically associated with the person referred to by the proper name.[1]

(1) She wants to do a Britney
Meaning: a. She wants to have a breast enlargement.
b. She wants to go out without underwear.
c. She wants to shave her hair off.
d. She wants to ill-treat her baby

(2) She bought a Picasso.
Meaning: She bought a painting by Picasso.

(3) There's a Britney in my class.
Meaning: a. There's a girl in my class named Britney.
b. There's a girl in my class who looks and behaves like Britney.

Proper names like those in (1)–(3) are traditionally regarded either as non-prototypical proper names (Van Langendonck 2007) or as common nouns due to the syntactic environment in which they appear (Borer 2005). I propose to analyse them as nominalisations with a √Person at their core.

This paper is organised as follows. First, I present the basic data (Section 2), focussing in particular on the grammatical gender of PUCs in Belgian Dutch and German. Second, I examine the possibility of a PF-deletion analysis for PUCs. This will turn out to be successful for the German data, but not for the Belgian Dutch data (Section 3). In Section 4, I argue against an empty noun analysis for the Belgian Dutch data. In Section 5 I present my own account, which crucially involves postulating an empty suffix in Belgian Dutch PUCs. Section 6 sums up and concludes.

Linguistics in the Netherlands 2008, **63–74**. DOI 10.1075/avt.25.09dec
ISSN 0929–7332 / E-ISSN 1569–9919

2. The basic data

In this section I first compare the gender of Belgian Dutch PUCs with German ones. Both languages display a three-way gender system (neuter, feminine and masculine). They reveal a striking difference, however, in the gender of object-denoting PUCs.

2.1 Gender

2.1.1 *Belgian Dutch*

The event-denoting PUC in (4a) combines with the masculine article *ne*.[2] Since the proper name *Jeroen* refers to a male person, there appears to be agreement between the determiner and the noun. In the PUC in (4b), however, the name refers to a female person, and yet the article is still masculine. In other words, event-denoting PUCs always trigger masculine gender, regardless of the gender of the person referred to by the proper name.

(4) a. Ze deed ne/ *een/ *e Jeroen.
she did a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Jeroen_{Masc}$
'She did a Jeroen.'

b. Ze deed ne/ *een/ *e Paris Hilton.
she did a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Paris\ Hilton_{Fem}$
'She did a Paris Hilton.'

Object-denoting PUCs behave identically. For example in (5) both Picasso and Kahlo (i.e. the female painter Frida Kahlo) trigger masculine gender on the indefinite article.

(5) a. Ze heeft ne/ *een/ *e Picasso gekocht.
she has a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Picasso_{Masc}$ bought
'She bought a Picasso.'

b. Ze heeft ne/ *een/ *e Kahlo gekocht.
she has a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Kahlo_{Fem}$ bought
'She has bought a Kahlo.'

Note that the same holds for brand names, i.e. all of them are masculine, though in this case it is often hard to determine the gender associated with the proper name itself (6).

(6) Ze heeft ne/ *een/ *e Miele gekocht.
she has a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} Miele bought
'She bought a Miele dishwasher.'

In short, the indefinite article of an object-denoting PUC takes masculine gender regardless of the gender of the proper name it combines with.

Person-denoting PUCs behave differently. In (7a) the PUC requires a feminine indefinite article and as such agrees with the proper name *Britney*. The article in (7b) displays masculine article, showing agreement with the proper name *Guido*.

(7) a. Er zit *nen/ een/ *e Britney in mijn klas.
there sits a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Britney_{Fem}$ in my class
'There is a Britney in my class.'

b. Er zit ne/ *een/ *e Guido in mijn klas.
there sits a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Guido_{Masc}$ in my class
'There is a Guido in my class.'

Summing up, Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs always take masculine gender, regardless of the gender of the proper name it combines with. In person-denoting PUCs, on the other hand, there is agreement between the article and the proper name.

2.1.2 *German*

German does not have all three types of PUCs: only object-denoting and person-denoting PUCs occur. Moreover, the gender properties of PUCs are rather different from those in Belgian Dutch.

In the object-denoting PUC in (8a) the article is masculine, suggesting agreement with the proper name. However, in (8b) the proper name is feminine and the article remains masculine.[3] In (9), on the other hand, the article is feminine when combined with the brand name *Miele* and masculine when combined with the brand name *Danone*.

(8) a. Ich habe *eine/ einen/ *ein Picasso gekauft.
I have a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neu} $Picasso_{Masc}$ bought
'I have bought a Picasso.'

b. Ich habe *eine/ einen/ *ein Kahlo gekauft.
I have a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} $Kahlo_{Fem}$ bought
'I have bought a Kahlo.'

(9) a. Sie kauft eine/ *einen/ *ein Miele.
she buys a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} Miele
'She buys a Bosch (washing machine).'

b. Es gibt noch *eine/ einen/ *ein Danone im Kühlschrank.
it gives still a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} Danone in-the refridgerator
'There is another Danone (yoghurt) left in the fridge.'

Although it is hard to determine the gender of a brand name, neither (8) nor (9) displays straightforward agreement between the article and the proper name. The distribution of the article in these cases seems rather arbitrary.

Person-denoting PUCs in German behave like their Belgian Dutch counterparts. For example, in (10a) the gender on the article is feminine, in agreement with the female name *Inga*. In (10b) the proper name *Hans* and the article are masculine.

(10) a. Ich hatte *einen/ eine/ *ein Inga in meiner Klasse.
I had a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Inga_{Fem}$ in my class
'There was a Inga in my class.'

b. Ich hatte einen/ *eine/ *ein Hans in meiner Klasse.
I had a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} $Hans_{Masc}$ in my class
'There was a Hans in my class.'

2.1.4 *Conclusion*

The differences and similarities between Belgian Dutch and German PUCs are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1

	Belgian Dutch	**German**
Event-denoting PUCs	no gender agreement (always masc.)	
object-denoting PUCs	no gender agreement (always masc.)	no gender agreement (masc./ fem./neuter)
person-denoting PUCs	gender agreement	gender agreement

3. A PF-deletion analysis

Under a PF-deletion analysis PUCs are elliptical constructions which have the same syntax as non-elliptical ones, but a part of which is not pronounced (cf. e.g. Merchant 2001). An illustration of this analysis is given in (11).

(11) She bought a Kahlo = She bought a Kahlo ~~painting~~

The example in (11) represents the PUC *a Kahlo* as syntactically equivalent to the phrase *a Kahlo painting*. A PF-deletion analysis predicts that the gender of the article of a PUC does not agree with the proper name, but rather with the deleted noun following at the proper name, as this is the head of the entire NP. In the following two subsections I try to apply this analysis to German and Belgian Dutch

PUCs respectively. However, only in the former case will this analysis turn out to be partly successful.

3.1 German

Recall that in German object-denoting PUCs there is no gender agreement between the PUC and the proper name. On the contrary, at first glance the gender distribution seems to be completely arbitrary (cf. 8–9). However, a PF-deletion analysis of German object-denoting PUCs can provide a straightforward account of their gender behaviour. In (12a) (= 9a) the feminine gender of the article results from the underlying presence of the feminine noun *Machine* 'machine'. In (12b) (=9b) the article is masculine, like the understood noun *Becher* 'container'. In (12c) (=8a) and 12d (=8b) the article is masculine, like the elided noun *Kunstgegenstand* 'work of art'.

(12) a. Sie kauft eine/ *einen/ *ein Miele [~~Machine~~].
she buys a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} Miele $machine_{Fem}$
She buys a Miele washing machine.

b. Es gibt noch *eine/ einen/ *ein Danone [~~Becher~~] im Kühlschrank.
it gives still a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} Danone $container_{Masc}$ in-the fridge
'There is another Danone yoghurt left in the fridge.'

c. Ich habe *eine/ einen/ *ein Picasso [~~Kunstgegenstand~~] gekauft.
I have a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} $Picasso_{Masc}$ $work\ of\ art_{Masc}$ bought

d. Ich habe *eine/ einen/ *ein Kahlo [~~Kunstgegenstand~~] gekauft.
I have a_{Fem} a_{Masc} a_{Neut} $Kahlo_{Fem}$ $work\ of\ art_{Masc}$ bought
'I have bought a Kahlo.'

The PF-deletion analysis gives correct results for German object-denoting PUCs. However, the same analysis does not seem to apply so straightforwardly to person-denoting PUCs. Since the gender on the article of person-denoting PUCs agrees with the gender of the proper name, it seems superfluous to assume an extra underlying noun, like *Mann* 'man' (13a) or *Frau* 'woman' (13b), even though such a move would make the analysis for German PUCs uniform.

(13) a. Ich kenne einen Hans [~~Mann~~].
I know a_{Masc} Hans man_{Masc}
'I know a Hans.'

b. Ich hatte eine Inga [~~Frau~~] in meiner Klasse.
I had a_{Fem} Inga $woman_{Fem}$ in my class
'There was an Inga in my class.'

Moreover, such an account cannot explain why the neuter article cannot be used, given that a neuter noun like *Mädchen* 'girl' instead of *Frau*, would seem the more logical option in some cases.

(14) *Ich hatte eine Inga [~~Mädchen~~] in meiner Klasse.
I had a_{Fem} $Inga_{Fem}$ $girl_{Neut}$ in my class
'There was an Inga in my class.'

Summarising, the PF-deletion analysis is probably not the appropriate analysis for German person-denoting PUCs, since 1) it is superfluous to assume an elided noun when the gender agreement can be regulated by the proper name alone, and 2) the neuter noun *Mädchen* cannot (underlyingly) show up in person-denoting PUCs, even when it is the more logical option pragmatically. The analysis I will propose for Belgian Dutch person-denoting PUCs (cf. Section 5 below) will turn out to be applicable to German person-denoting PUCs as well.

3.2 Belgian Dutch

The PF-deletion analysis cannot be successfully applied to the Belgian Dutch data. For example, in (15) the masculine article does not agree in gender with the alleged elided neuter noun *kunstwerk* 'work of art'. In (16) the masculine article does not correspond to the neuter gender of *wasmachien* 'dishwasher'.

(15) *Ze kocht nen/ *een/ *e van Gogh [~~kunstwerk~~].
she bought a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} van Gogh work of art_{Neut}
'She bought a Van Gogh.'

(16) *k een nen/ *een/ *e Miele [~~wasmachien~~].
I have a_{Masc} a_{Fem} a_{Neut} Miele $dishwasher_{Neut}$
'I have got a Miele dishwasher.'

As for person-denoting PUCs in German, we could propose a PF-deletion analysis with an elided noun *man* 'man' or *vrouw* 'woman'. However, the objections raised in the previous section apply here as well. In particular 1) it is superfluous to assume an elided noun when the gender agreement can be satisfied by the presence of the proper name alone and 2) the sometimes pragmatically more appropriate (yet neuter) noun *meisje* 'girl' cannot be used to create person-denoting PUCs. I take this to mean that a PF-deletion is not the right way to go for this construction.

3.3 Conclusion

In this section I have argued that a PF-deletion analysis can explain the gender properties of German object-denoting PUCs. However, it cannot be extended

to German person-denoting PUCs or Belgian Dutch PUCs. In the next section I argue against another possible analysis for the Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs, namely the empty noun analysis.

4. Against an empty-noun analysis for the Belgian Dutch data

Under an empty noun analysis an object-denoting PUC like that in (17) is followed by an empty noun (indicated here by capital letters). This noun is empty in the syntax and at PF (see Kayne 2005).

(17) She bought a Kahlo = She bought a Kahlo PAINTING

A typical property of such empty nouns is that they can be endowed with default gender (Haegeman 2000). An empty noun in Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs would thus get default masculine gender. As such, the apparent lack of agreement between the article and the proper name would in fact involve agreement between the article and the empty noun. Haegeman (2000) assumes such an empty noun taking default masculine gender for West Flemish constructions like (18) .

(18) k' een [$_{DP}$ nen Miele [$_{N}$ ∅]] gekocht.
I have a$_{Masc}$ Miele bought
'I have bought a Miele dishwasher.'

However, the empty noun analysis faces a number of serious problems. First, if there is an empty N in (19a), i.e. if the proper representation of (19a) is as in (19b), then *Britney* must be a prenominal modifier. As a prenominal modifier it should allow modification by *very*. This is illustrated in (20a), where Britney is a prenominal modifier of the overt noun *thing*. Since (20a) is grammatical, the same should be true for the sentence in (20b), where the empty noun THING replaces the overt one. However, this is not the case. This suggests that (19b) is not the correct representation for the PUC in (19a).

(19) a. She did a Britney.
b. She did a Britney THING

(20) a. She did a very Britney thing.
b. *She did a very Britney THING

Second, one of the criteria for the presence of an empty noun is its restriction to a particular lexical context (Kayne 2005, De Belder 2007). For example, De Belder (2007) shows that the silent noun DAG in date constructions occurs only when it is selected by an ordinal between 1 and 31.

(21) de derde DAG VAN februari (De Belder 2007:28)
the third day of February
'the third of February'

(22) *de warmste DAG VAN februari
the hottest day of February
intended meaning: 'the hottest day of February'

The PUC-constructions do not display this kind of restriction. They can be used in a variety of different contexts as is illustrated in (23), (24) and (25).

(23) Den Britney die ik gisteren zag was cooler dan dienen van vandaag.
the$_{Masc}$ Britney that I yesterday saw was cooler than that$_{Masc}$ of today
'The Britney I saw yesterday was cooler than today's Britney.'

(24) Er hangt ne Picasso in mijn salon.
there hangs a$_{Masc}$ Picasso in my living room
'There's a Picasso in my living room.'

(25) Ik heb gisteren ne Jan gekust.
I have yesterday a$_{Masc}$ John kissed
'I kissed a John yesterday.'

4.1 Conclusion

At first sight the empty noun analysis seemed an attractive analysis to explain the gender behaviour of Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs. However, on closer inspection this analysis ran into a number of substantial problems. In the next section I present my own account of Belgian Dutch PUCs as well as German person-denoting PUCs.

5. The analysis

The analysis I propose for Belgian Dutch PUCs and German person-denoting PUCs is couched in the framework of Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993; Harley & Noyer 1999). I first discuss two prerequisites for my analysis, in Section 5.1. Then, in Section 5.2., I turn to my analysis of person-denoting PUCs and in Section 5.3. I provide an analysis for object- and event-denoting PUCs. Finally, I present some corroborating evidence.

5.1 Two prerequisites for the analysis

5.1.1 *A gender-animacy correlation*

Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs trigger masculine agreement regardless of the gender of the proper name. Non-agreeing masculine gender in Belgian Dutch PUCs thus correlates with a [−animate] feature specification. Conversely, person-denoting PUCs agree in gender with the proper name. As such, gender agreement between PUC and proper name correlates with [+animate] or [+human].

In German person-denoting PUCs, the correlation between gender agreement and [+animate] also holds. However, the correlation between one specific gender and [−animate] does not exist for object-denoting PUCs. I have already analysed and explained these data in Section 3.1.

The correlation between [+/− animate] and the presence or absence of gender agreement is crucial for the analysis I develop in Section 5.2.

5.1.2 *Proper names as directly referential expressions*

I assume an l-morpheme (Harley & Noyer 1999), i.e. a root denoting 'person' (henceforth √Person), that carries the morphosyntactic feature [+human]. The derivation for a proper name that is used as a proper name runs as follows. The √Person picks up a gender feature in the syntax, by moving to little n. It subsequently moves to D (since D carries the feature [+det]), where it gets its direct referential meaning. After Spell-Out a proper name is inserted into the root. This is illustrated in (26).

(26) syntax $[_{DP}\ [_{D'}\ \sqrt{Person}_{[+det]}\ [_{nP}\ [_{n'}\ \sqrt{\cancel{Person}}_{[+fem]}[_{NP}\ [_{N'}\ \sqrt{\cancel{Person}}_{[+human]}]]]]]]$
↓ *Spell Out*
$Britney_{Fem}$

5.2 Person-denoting PUCs

In person-denoting PUCs the √Person moves to little n, where it is nominalised and picks up gender features (either [+masc] or [+fem]). At Spell-Out an article is inserted into the [+det]-feature bundle and a proper name into the root. Whether the inserted proper name is masculine or feminine depends on the gender feature provided by little n. At Spell-Out the agreement relation between the determiner and the noun is established. The structure in (27) illustrates the derivation. (I have inserted the traditional category labels for the sake of convenience.)

(27) syntax $[_{DP}\ [_{D'\ [+det]}\ [_{nP}\ [_{n'}\ \sqrt{Person}_{[+fem]}\ [_{NP}\ [_{N'}\ \sqrt{\cancel{Person}}_{[+human]}]]]]]]$
↓ *Spell Out*
$een_{Fem}\ Britney_{Fem}$

Since gender is added in syntax, i.e. on little n, and is not inherently present on the root, the analysis can account for the agreement between the article and proper names which do not have inherent gender properties, e.g. a surname.[4]

(28) We hebben ne Janssens in de klas.
we have a_{Masc} $Janssens_{Masc}$ in the class
'There is a boy named $Janssens_{Masc}$ in class.'

(29) We hebben een Janssens in de klas.
we have a_{Fem} $Janssens_{Fem}$ in the class
'There is a girl named $Janssens_{Masc}$ in class.'

Exactly the same gender distribution is attested in German.

5.3 Object- and event-denoting PUCs

The derivation for event-denoting PUCs is based on the derivation for person-denoting PUCs, but is crucially different in one respect. In particular, I postulate a new functional morpheme (f-morpheme) that carries the features [−animate] and [+masc]. The √Person, which carries the feature [+human], moves and attaches to this f-morpheme, which is located at little n. At Spell Out an article is inserted into [+det], a proper name into the root and an empty suffix into the new morpheme. The determiner agrees in gender with the masculine empty suffix.[5] The labelled bracketing in 30 is a schematic representation of this analysis.

(30) syntax $[_{DP}\ [_{D'\ [+det]}\ [_{nP}\ [_{n'}\ \sqrt{Person}_{[+Masc]/\ [-animate]}\ [_{NP}\ [_{N'}\ \sqrt{\sout{Person}}_{[+human]}]]]]]]$
↓ *Spell Out*
nen_{Masc} $Britney_{Masc}$

In spite of the semantic difference between object-and event-denoting PUCs, both PUCs are [−animate]. Therefore, the syntactic analysis for object-denoting PUCs is the same as that in (30).

5.4 Corroborating evidence

Since a gender-changing suffix is at the heart of my analysis of event-denoting PUCs, let me to provide some support for this approach by comparing the empty suffix from my analysis with diminutive suffixes in Dutch.[6] Dutch diminutive suffixes also change the gender of a word. The example in (31) illustrates that the diminutive suffix *-ke* changes the gender of a word from feminine into neuter. This phenomenon can also be observed in the event-denoting PUC, as (30) shows.

(31) a. een vrouw
a$_{Fem}$ woman$_{Fem}$
'a woman'
b. e vrouw-ke.
a$_{Neut}$ woman-dim$_{Neut}$
'a small woman'

(32) Ze deed en Britney-ke.
she did a$_{Neut}$ Britney-dim$_{Neut}$
'She did a Britney.'

6. Conclusion

In this article I have analysed proper names used as common nouns (PUCs) in Belgian Dutch and German. First, I have looked at the gender properties of PUCs. Belgian Dutch object- and event-denoting PUCs have default masculine gender, whereas object-denoting PUCs in German displayed seemingly arbitrary gender behaviour. German and Belgian Dutch person-denoting PUCs both agree in gender with the proper name. PF-deletion turned out to be the correct analysis for German object-denoting PUCs. I argued that neither the PF-deletion analysis nor the empty noun analysis are viable candidates for Belgian Dutch PUCs and German person-denoting PUCs. I therefore proposed a new and unified analysis for them. The person-denoting PUCs are derived from a √Person carrying [+human], which moves to little n where it picks up either [+masc] or [+fem]. At Spell-Out a proper name is inserted into the root. The resulting noun agrees with the determiner. I extended this analysis to object-and event-denoting PUCs: a √Person with the feature [+human] moves to little n where it attaches to a new f-morpheme carrying [+masc] and [−animate]. At Spell-Out a determiner is inserted into [+det], a proper name into the root and an empty suffix into the [+masc]/[−animate] features. The determiner agrees in gender with the masculine gender of the proper name.

Notes

* I would like to thank Guido Vanden Wyngaerd and Jeroen van Craenenbroeck for their continuous support and guidance. Many thanks also to the CRISSP members, Marijke De Belder, Dany Jaspers, Johan Rooryck and the audience at TIN-dag 2008 (Utrecht). I also want to thank the two anonymous LIN-reviewers for their useful comments and remarks. All errors are mine.

1. This construction is especially popular among youngsters, but it is also used in magazines and (high-quality) newspapers.

2. The masculine and neuter article *ne* and *e* have an allomorph *nen* and *en* that is found before voiced anterior obstruents and vowels and certain consonants.

3. There is a certain amount of variability in the judgments here. In particular, one of my informants used the neuter article *ein* with Picasso and Kahlo, while another one did not accept *einen Kahlo*. Instead, she used *eins von Kahlo* (lit. one$_{\text{Neut}}$ of Kahlo), referring to *ein Gemälde von Kahlo* (a painting by Kahlo). The neuter article of the other informant could also be attributed to a neuter noun like *Gemälde* 'painting'. I leave a full exploration of this variation as a topic for further research.

4. I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

5. Note that this empty suffix turns the root into a common noun, i.e. it prevents it from moving further to D. This explains why the suffix never occurs in the absence of an article. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this up.

6. There are other cases in which a change in reading causes a change in gender agreement. An anonymous reviewer pointed out the Portuguese example in (i), which shows that *manteiga* 'butter' changes gender when used generically.

(i) a. esta manteiga é boa.
this butter$_{\text{Fem}}$ is good$_{\text{Fem}}$
b. manteiga é bom pra saude
butter$_{\text{Fem}}$ is goed$_{\text{Masc}}$ for health

References

Borer, H. 2005. *In Name Only.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Belder, M. 2007. 'Silence and the construct state in Dutch date expressions'. *Linguistics in the Netherlands 2007.* ed. by B. Los and M. van Koppen, 25–35. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

Haegeman, L. 2000. 'Genus en naamwoordverplaatsing in het Westvlaams'. *Taal- en tongval,* 52/1, 115–135.

Halle, M. and A. Marantz. 1993. 'Distributed Morphology and the Pieces of Inflection'. *The View from Building 20.* ed. by Hale, K. and S.J. Keyser, 111–176. Massachusetts/London: MIT Press.

Harley, H. and R. Noyer. 1999. 'State-of-the-Article: Distributed Morphology'. *GLOT International*, 4.4., 3–9.

Kayne, R. S. 2005. *Movement and Silence.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Langendonck, W. 2007. *Theory and Typology of Proper Names.* Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Merchant, J. 2001. *The Syntax of Silence: Sluicing, Islands and theTheory of Ellipsis.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.