

## Historical gender change in West Frisian

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**Abstract** In Frisian, grammatical gender is an abstract lexical property, which is not spelled out on the noun. It manifests itself in an indirect way, through the agreement relations the noun enters into. It is, thus, understandable that phonological regularities and residual (abstract) case marking in a prepositional context can be crucial for two instances of historical gender change in Frisian. In the Dutch–Frisian language contact situation, however, factors which are strictly speaking non-linguistic in nature play a role as well. These are, first, the low degree of standardisation of Frisian at the time the gender change set in and, secondly, distancing from Dutch at the time when Frisian developed its own standard vis-à-vis Dutch, which implies the propagation of the gender which diverges from the Dutch one. It is the interplay between these factors which lends the case of gender change in Frisian an inherent linguistic significance. Not every Frisian de-word could become an it-word and vice versa, since the language system puts its limits here. For instance, all nouns ending in schwa are de-words, a formal regularity which prevented them from switching to it-words. Neither are there only regular patterns of gender change in Frisian. The general tendencies are clear, but as far as individual words are concerned, there is much which must be left unexplained.

**Keywords** Gender · Gender assignment · Gender change · Minority language

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Wy spreekjen veele met *het*, die andere  
met *de* zeggen: met *de*, die andere met *het*.<sup>1</sup>  
Johannes Hilarides (1705:23)

## 1 Introduction

One of the structural resemblances between Modern West Frisian (henceforth: Frisian) and Dutch is that both languages have a comparable gender system, as illustrated by the use of the definite article. See the examples in (1):

(1)	Dutch	Frisian	gloss
	<i>Non-neuter nouns</i>		
	<i>de</i> tijd	<i>de</i> tiid	the time
	<i>de</i> dag	<i>de</i> dei	the day
	<i>de</i> huur	<i>de</i> hier	the hire, the rent
	<i>Neuter nouns</i>		
	<i>het</i> haar	<i>it</i> hier	the hair
	<i>het</i> ruim	<i>it</i> rom	the hold (of a ship)
	<i>het</i> beest	<i>it</i> bist	the beast; the animal

The articles have the same pronunciation in both languages. This not only holds for Frisian and Dutch *de*, which are homographs, but also for the neuter article. Although the latter is written as <het> in Dutch and as <it> in Frisian, both have the pronunciation [ət].

In spite of this, there are a good many Frisian nouns whose gender differs from that of their Dutch cognates. For instance, whereas Dutch has *de* *plek* ‘the spot’ and *de* *schaduw* ‘the shade, the shadow’, Frisian has *it* *plak* and *it* *skaad* (see (4), (11), and (14) below for full lists). These differences are noted in every school grammar of Frisian, most of which of necessity pay quite some attention to a contrastive analysis between Frisian and Dutch.<sup>2</sup> Generally speaking, Dutch has stuck to the old gender here, while Frisian has undergone an innovation.

In Frisian, the grammatical gender of simplex nouns is a lexical property of these nouns. It is, however, an abstract property, which is not ‘spelled out’ on the nouns or, put differently, which does not have a direct morphological expression. It only manifests itself indirectly, by means of the agreement relations the nouns enter into.

An obvious source of gender change, therefore, is the reinterpretation of surface forms. As to Frisian, the two most powerful diachronic mechanisms in this respect are the reinterpretation of the common article *de* as the neuter article *it* in a context

<sup>1</sup> Translation: we [the Frisians] say many [nouns] with *het*, which others [the Dutch] say with *de*; with *de*, which others [say] with *het*.

<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, under the influence of Dutch, such nouns are often used with the article which is homophonous with the Dutch one, as in *de* *kin* ‘the chin’ (instead of *it* *kin*; cf. Dutch *de* *kin*), *de* *sop* ‘the soup’ (instead of *it* *sop*; cf. Dutch *de* *soep*), *de* *skouder* ‘the shoulder’ (instead of *it* *skouder*; cf. Dutch *de* *schouder*), see for instance De Haan (1997). This, however, is strongly rejected in Standard Frisian.

where the former had become indistinguishable from the latter as a result of phonological adaptation, and the reinterpretation of neuter *it* as common *de* in a prepositional context—synchronically speaking, mostly in frozen expressions—in which case-marked *it* had the same form as *de*.

The specific Frisian-Dutch language contact situation contributed to the persistence of the gender change. In Standard Frisian, in order to maximise the linguistic distance between the two languages, those Frisian articles were, and are, favoured which are the opposite of the Dutch ones.

So, next to the linguistic factors inducing the change, sociological factors made for its persistence. It is the interplay between these factors which lends the case of gender change in Frisian an inherent significance.

## 2 Gender and gender assignment in Frisian

As exemplified in (1) above, Frisian has two grammatical genders, viz. neuter and non-neuter (also called common gender). Instead of using these terms, it has become customary in Frisian linguistics to divide the nouns in accordance with their definite article. Hence, there are *de*-words (non-neuter) and *it*-words (neuter), see Tiersma (1985, 47–49), Hoekstra and Visser (1996), Hoekstra (2001, 89).

For simplex nouns there is not a clear-cut semantic or formal relationship between the noun and its article. This means that the definite article a noun is associated with is one of its lexical properties.<sup>3</sup> There is, for instance, no inevitable relation between *ko* ‘cow’ and the article *de*, as little as between *skiep* ‘sheep’ and the article *it*. A child acquiring Frisian simply has to learn the right article on a word-by-word-basis.<sup>4</sup>

There are, however, certain tendencies and subregularities as to gender assignment in Frisian. As regards semantic relationships, the animacy hierarchy plays a role, as it does in many languages (see Croft 2003, 166–175, 178–182). For Frisian, the overall effect of this hierarchy on gender assignment is that nouns denoting living creatures, which occupy high ranks in the hierarchy, have a preference for *de*. The class of animates, in turn, shows a further partitioning in nouns which denote human beings and those denoting animals; the former more strongly prefer *de* than do the latter, as is also observed for Dutch by Booij (2002, 37).<sup>5</sup> Not only can nouns

<sup>3</sup> In the (Frisian) dialect of the island of Schiermonnikoog—which still distinguishes three genders—feminine gender is assigned to nouns with a concrete reference only, like *daar* ‘door’, *tjark* ‘church’, *deuw* ‘pigeon’, and *hann* ‘hand’, whereas masculine and neuter nouns can refer to both concrete and abstract nouns. Besides, with a few exceptions, feminine nouns are monosyllabic, while masculine and neuter nouns can comprise more than one syllable. In Schiermonnikoogs, then, there seems to be a semantic and a formal relationship between a noun and feminine gender. See Spenter (1971) for more on this.

<sup>4</sup> This also holds for Dutch, see Booij (2002, 36–39), who asserts: “Even if the linguist is able to find certain subregularities or tendencies in gender assignment based on semantic or phonological properties, the question remains if native speakers really grasp these generalizations. (...) It is clear then that gender is a burden for the lexical memory of the speaker of Dutch because it has to be memorized for many nouns, and certainly for most simplex nouns”.

<sup>5</sup> The *it*-words *bern* ‘child’, *minske* ‘soul, woman’, and *wif* ‘wife; bitch’ are well-known for not being in keeping with this tendency. The fact that they refer to children and, in an affective/pejorative sense, to women might be of relevance.

denoting animals have *it*, cf. *it skiep* above, some have *it* alongside *de*, e.g. *de/it knyn* ‘the rabbit’, *de/it ei* ‘the ewe’, *de/it ezel* ‘the donkey’, *de/it kamil* ‘the camel’, and *de/it inter* ‘the yearling’.

Nouns which denote inanimates, on the other hand, are more likely to have *it* than those which denote living creatures, let alone human beings. Names for metals, languages, and the directions of the wind, for instance, all have *it*, as the following examples make clear: *it stiel* ‘the steel’, *it Dútsk* ‘German, the German language’, and *it noarden* ‘the North’.

Next to semantically motivated patterns of gender assignment, there are also instances of formal relationships between nouns and their article. With a few exceptions, nouns ending in <e> (/ə/), <el> (/əl/), and <em> (/əm/) have the article *de*, e.g. *de bile* ‘the axe’, *de sichte* ‘the sickle, the reaping hook’,<sup>6</sup> *de apel* ‘the apple’, *de woartel* ‘the root; the carrot’, *de biezem* ‘the broom’, and *de wazem* ‘the steam, the vapour’. Here, then, there is a relation between the phonological shape of the noun—typically pertaining to the right-hand part of it—and the gender it is allotted to.

Complex nouns yield a markedly different picture. Due to right-headedness, the choice of article is determined by the right-hand morphological part of the word, i.e., the right hand member (in case of a compound), the suffix (in case of suffixation), or the stem (in case of prefixation).<sup>7</sup> See the examples in (2):

(2) Choice of article in complex nouns

a. *Compounds*

*it* fjild ‘field, grounds’ → *de* fjildsport ‘the outdoor sports’  
 + *de* sport ‘sports’  
*de* sport + *it* fjild → *it* sportfjild ‘the sports field’

b. *Diminutives*<sup>8</sup>

*de* peal ‘post, pole’ - *it* pealtsje (peal+tsje) ‘small post, pole’  
*de* baarch ‘pig’ *it* barchje (baarch+je) ‘piglet’  
*de* doar ‘door’ *it* doarke (doar+ke) ‘small door’

c. *Prefixed words*

*it* lân ‘land’ - *it* ûnlân (ûn+lân) ‘the marshland’  
*it* dak ‘roof’ *it* oerdak (oer+dak) ‘the lean-to’

<sup>6</sup> See Visser (1997, 237–240) on nouns ending in <e> (/ə/); see also the end of § 5.1 below, especially the examples of schwa-final *de*-words in (10).

<sup>7</sup> According to Booij (2002, 37), the same goes for Dutch.

<sup>8</sup> This also holds for those nouns which are only diminutives in a formal, but not in a semantic sense, like *it ingeltsje* (ingel+tsje) ‘the ladybird, the lady beetle’ (literally: little angel; from: *de ingel*) and *it karke* (kar+ke) ‘the invalid chair, the wheelchair’ (literally: small cart; from: *de karre*).

### 3 Frisian in relation to Dutch

Because this will play a role in my analysis, let me make some general remarks on Frisian, especially on its relationship to Dutch.

Frisian is a minority language, spoken by about 450,000 of the 600,000 inhabitants of Friesland, a province in the northwest of the Netherlands. The national language of the Netherlands is (Standard) Dutch, which is therefore the dominant language in the public domain (politics, culture, education, economics). This means that all speakers of Frisian are at least bilingual, i.e., they are fluent in both Frisian and Dutch.

From the nineteenth century onwards the Frisian language movement has made constant efforts to further the use of Frisian in the public domain, notably politics, education, church, the media, cultural life (literature and music), and science (Frisian linguistics and (local) history), in order to reply to the increasing dominance of Dutch. These efforts have certainly not been without result. Frisian has been acknowledged as the second official language of the Netherlands, as a result of which it has acquired certain rights in government at the provincial and municipal level. In education, too, it now has certain rights at both the level of primary and secondary education and the university level (one can graduate in Frisian linguistics and literature). The bible has been translated twice (in 1943 and 1978) and the use of Frisian in religious services is no longer uncommon. Radio and television programmes in Frisian are broadcast every day. There are quite a few Frisian periodicals and journals, whereas there is a lively literary climate and a steady literary production. There are also a lot of Frisian (folk) rock groups which use Frisian in whole or in part. Nevertheless, the supremacy of Dutch is counterbalanced to no more than a small extent.

Frisian is a West Germanic, to be precise, a North Sea Germanic language. Of the continental Old Germanic dialects, it is Old Frisian that is most closely related to Old English (see Nielsen 1981). There are still remnants of this close historical affinity, which manifest themselves mainly in the lexicon and in the lexical phonology—for example, the Frisian cognates of *key*, *church*, and *to bleed* are *kaai*, *tsjerke*, and *bliede*, respectively. Dutch, however, has exerted a profound influence on Frisian for some centuries, so Frisian bears a much greater resemblance to Dutch than it does to English, both lexically and structurally.

### 4 Gender change in Frisian

As noted in the introduction, the grammatical gender of a Frisian simplex noun is a lexical property of this noun. It is, however, an abstract property, which does not have a direct morphological expression. It only manifests itself indirectly, by means of the agreement relations the noun enters into. There is agreement between the noun and its accompanying definite article, other determiners, and relative pronouns and between the noun, the indefinite article, and a prenominal adjective, as illustrated in (3):

## (3) Gender agreement relations

a. *Between the noun and the definite article, other determiners and the relative pronoun*

<i>it</i> hûs	‘the house’	-	* <i>de</i> hûs
<i>dit</i> hûs	‘this house’		* <i>dizze</i> hûs
<i>dat</i> hûs	‘that house’		* <i>dy</i> hûs
it hûs <i>dat</i> /* <i>dy</i> ’t ik kocht haw			
the house which I bought have			
‘the house which I have bought’			

<i>de</i> hier	‘the hire, the rent’	-	* <i>it</i> hier
<i>dizze</i> hier	‘this hire, this rent’		* <i>dit</i> hier
<i>dy</i> hier	‘that hire, that rent’		* <i>dat</i> hier
<i>de</i> hier <i>dy</i> ’t/* <i>dat</i> ik betelje moat			
the rent which I pay must			
‘the rent which I have to pay’			

b. *Between the noun, the indefinite article, and the prenominal adjective*

it/dit/dat <i>lege</i> /* <i>leech</i> hûs	‘the/this/that empty house’
in <i>leech</i> /* <i>lege</i> hûs	‘an empty house’

<i>de</i> / <i>dizze</i> / <i>dy</i> <i>lege</i> /* <i>leech</i> hier	‘the/this/that low rent’
in <i>lege</i> /* <i>leech</i> hier	‘a low rent’

The gender of a noun, thus, is only detectable from the context in which the noun shows up. This means that the reinterpretation of surface forms is an important source of gender change.

There are two kinds of such ‘surface-oriented’ gender change, the reinterpretation of the common article *de* as the neuter article *it* in a specific phonological context and the reinterpretation of neuter *it* as common *de* in a prepositional context. These will be treated below, in §§ 5 and 6, respectively.

## 5 From *de*-word to *it*-word

This section consists of four subsections, the first three of which are devoted to different, though comparable, classes of Frisian *it*-words with Standard Dutch *de*-word counterparts. These are nouns with an initial voiceless obstruent (§ 5.1), nouns denoting outer body parts (§ 5.2), and residual cases (§ 5.3). The final subsection (§ 5.4) reflects on the differences between Dutch and Frisian as to gender change and the specific role played by the Frisian-Dutch language contact situation in this respect.

### 5.1 Nouns with an initial voiceless obstruent

This subsection deals with Frisian *it*-words with an initial voiceless obstruent which have cognate Dutch *de*-word as counterpart. In (4) I list the cases I have been able to find:

(4)	Nouns with an initial voiceless obstruent		
	<i>Frisian</i>	<i>Dutch</i>	<i>gloss</i>
	<i>it</i> fabryk	<i>de</i> fabriek	the factory
	<i>it</i> kajút	<i>de</i> kajuit	the saloon (of a ship)
	<i>it</i> kâlt	<i>de</i> kout	the confabulation
	<i>it</i> ke(a)tting	<i>de</i> ketting	the chain
	<i>it</i> plak	<i>de</i> plek	the spot
	<i>it</i> sin	<i>de</i> zin	the mind, the liking
	<i>it</i> skaad <sup>9</sup>	<i>de</i> schaduw	the shade, the shadow
	<i>it</i> slaad	<i>de</i> sla	the lettuce
	<i>it</i> sop	<i>de</i> soep	the soup
	<i>it</i> stee(d)	<i>de</i> stee	the spot
	<i>it</i> string	<i>de</i> streng	the twist, the twine
	<i>it</i> tiksel	<i>de</i> dissel	the pole, the shaft, the thill

As they refer to all kinds of entities, the nouns in (4) do not form a semantic class. This means that the change of gender here cannot be attributed to a new semantic gender assignment rule of Frisian.

The impetus for the change, therefore, must not be sought in semantics, but elsewhere. What I would like to propose, following an approach put forward by Pauwels (1931), is that it be sought in phonology, to be more precise, in cliticisation and the phonological effects ensuing from it.<sup>10</sup>

The articles *de* and *it* have schwa as their only vowel. Schwa is too weak a vowel to license a phonological word, so the article cannot stand on its own and has to lean, as it were, against a host word for phonological support.

When acting as proclitics, the articles *de* and *it* are adjoined to the following phonological word.<sup>11</sup> With nominal phrases, like *de sin* ‘the mind, the liking’ and *de skaad* ‘the shade, the shadow’, this proceeds as in (5):

<sup>9</sup> The following quote from early Modern Frisian shows that *skaad* was originally a *de*-word:

Hir ijn **de** schoad [skaad] vin 't beammig woad  
 here in the shade of the trey wood  
 ‘here in the shade of the trey woods’

(Brouwer (ed.) 1959, 50, line 25)

<sup>10</sup> In many languages, the phonological shape of nouns plays a role in gender assignment regularities. These, as a rule, pertain to coda rather than onset segments (see for example Thornton 2009). In the case at hand, however, it is the onset of the noun that is crucial. It should be borne in mind, however, that this article deals with gender *change*, which is related to, but not the same as, gender *assignment*.

<sup>11</sup> See Visser (1988a) for cliticisation in Frisian in general. Arguments why proclitics and prefixes are integrated into prosodic structure by means of adjunction to the (following) phonological word are provided by Booij (1995, chapter 8, 1996) for Dutch and by Visser (1997, 292–296) for Frisian. Visser (1990) is devoted to (en)cliticisation of the definite article in Frisian in a historical perspective.

(5) Adjunction of the article *de* to the following phonological word

$$\begin{array}{lcl} (\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma} ((\text{s}\text{t}\text{ɪ}\text{n})_{\sigma})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & ((\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma}((\text{s}\text{t}\text{ɪ}\text{n})_{\sigma})_{\omega})_{\omega} \\ (\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma} ((\text{s}\text{k}\text{a}:\text{t})_{\sigma})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & ((\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma}((\text{s}\text{k}\text{a}:\text{t})_{\sigma})_{\omega})_{\omega} \end{array}$$

Preferably, the first syllable of a phonological word in Frisian has a full vowel, the unmarked foot type being the trochee (see Visser 1997, 269–270). The outcome of cliticisation in (5) is at odds with this preference. This means that phonological pressure will be exerted on this kind of structure to the effect that it be brought in line with the unmarked trochaic pattern. Schwa is the minimal vowel of Frisian, consisting of no more than a vocalic root node (see Visser 1997, 34–38)). It is, therefore, prone to insertion and deletion, both of which are minimal steps. If schwa deletes, it results in the collapse of the syllable it is the head of, in accordance with the principle of ‘parasitic delinking’, which states that “[s]yllable structure is deleted when the syllable contains no overt nuclear segment” (Hayes 1989, 268). What is left of the article *de* after schwa deletion, then, is no more than a bare, floating *d*. The incorporation of this *d* into the prosodic word associated with the noun is the only way to save it from deletion. All this is depicted in (6):

(6) Schwa-deletion and restructuring of prosodic structure

$$\begin{array}{lclcl} ((\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma}((\text{s}\text{t}\text{ɪ}\text{n})_{\sigma})_{\omega})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & (\text{d}(\text{s}\text{t}\text{ɪ}\text{n})_{\sigma})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & ((\text{d}\text{s}\text{t}\text{ɪ}\text{n})_{\sigma})_{\omega} \\ ((\text{d}\text{ə})_{\sigma}((\text{s}\text{k}\text{a}:\text{t})_{\sigma})_{\omega})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & (\text{d}(\text{s}\text{k}\text{a}:\text{t})_{\sigma})_{\omega} & \rightarrow & ((\text{d}\text{s}\text{k}\text{a}:\text{t})_{\sigma})_{\omega} \end{array}$$

If the noun begins with an obstruent, schwa deletion results in an obstruent cluster. A property of such clusters is that its members must share their voice specification, hence the entire cluster must end up as either voiced or voiceless.<sup>12</sup> What is left of the article *de*, i.e. voiced *d*, remains voiced before a noun with an initial vowel or voiced consonant; however, *d* devoices when the following noun begins with a voiceless obstruent. The article *it* meets with the same fate (but see below). What is left of it after schwa deletion, voiceless *t*, remains voiceless before a noun with a (voiced) initial sonorant segment and a voiceless obstruent, but *t* is voiced before a following noun beginning with a voiced obstruent. The latter can only be a plosive, since word-initial voiced fricatives are prohibited in Frisian (see also below). The voicing possibilities for *d* (*de*) and *t* (*it*) are shown in (7):

(7) a. Voicing possibilities of *d* (*de*)

$$\begin{array}{l} \text{d} \rightarrow \text{d} / \text{___ word with an initial vowel} \\ \text{___ word with a voiced initial consonant} \\ \text{t} / \text{___ word with a voiceless initial} \\ \text{obstruent} \end{array}$$

<sup>12</sup> To this effect, Lombardi (1999, 272) formulates the constraint AGREE, reading “Obstruent clusters should agree in voicing”.



*Examples of devoicing with the words de sin ‘the mind, the liking’ and de skaad ‘the shade, the shadow’:*

$$\begin{aligned} ((dsin)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow ((tsin)_{\sigma})_{\omega} \\ ((dskat)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow ((tska:t)_{\sigma})_{\omega} \end{aligned}$$

b. Voicing possibilities of *t* (*it*)

- t → t / \_\_\_ word with an initial sonorant segment
- \_\_\_ word with a voiceless initial obstruent
- d / \_\_\_ word with a voiced initial plosive

*Examples of voicing with the words it bier ‘the beer, the ale’ and it gea ‘the region, the area’:*

$$\begin{aligned} ((tbi.ər)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow ((dbi.ər)_{\sigma})_{\omega} \\ ((tgt.ə)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow ((dgt.ə)_{\sigma})_{\omega} \end{aligned}$$

When the article *de* frequently shows up as *t* before a voiceless obstruent, this *t* can become equated with the reduced variant of the article *it*. In the end, this may lead to the reanalysis of *t* as *it*, hence to a change of gender, as illustrated in (8):

(8) Reinterpretation and reanalysis of the reduced and devoiced article *de* as the article *it*

$$\begin{aligned} ((tsin)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow t \text{ sin} &&\rightarrow /ət \text{ sin}/ \\ ((tska:t)_{\sigma})_{\omega} &\rightarrow t \text{ ska:d} &&\rightarrow /ət \text{ ska:d}/ \end{aligned}$$

Some remarks are in order here. In the first place, (4) only lists instances of the change from *de* to *it*. This is more likely than the opposite change, viz. from *it* to *de*. First of all, there is the distributional fact that both voiced and voiceless plosives can occur word-initially in Frisian, whereas of the fricatives only the voiceless series is allowed in that position (Tiersma 1985, 24–26); this increases the overall number of words beginning with a voiceless obstruent. Secondly, the voiceless fricative *s* is by far the most frequent word-initial consonant in Frisian.<sup>13</sup> Because of the unequal distribution of voiced and voiceless obstruents in word-initial position and the high frequency of *s* in that position, the article *de* simply has a greater chance to meet a devoicing factor than *it* has to meet a voicing one. Therefore, the chance of the article *de* showing up as voiceless *t* is much greater than the chance of the article *it* showing up as voiced *d*, implying, in turn, that the change from *de* to *it* is more likely than the opposite one. This shows the influence phonology may have on gender change. In this respect, it should be noted that the great majority of the words in (4) are monosyllabic, non-derived words, which means that gender change is not counterbalanced by the influence suffixes or word endings may have on gender assignment.

<sup>13</sup> The *Frysk Wurdboek* (1984) has 1192 pages, 183 of which are devoted to words with initial *s*. This is about 15% of the total number. If the letters of the alphabet were equally distributed, each one of them were to occupy about 4% of this number.

The noun sticks to its underlying form here, whereas the article undergoes phonological adaptation, viz. regressive devoicing. This is in agreement with a general difference between phonological conditions on the shape of major class words (content words) and minor class words (function words), all of which testify to the fact that the former class is more prominent and ‘stronger’ than the latter (see Dresher and Van der Hulst 1998, 336–337).

But this doesn’t alter the fact that progressive voicing in [dsun] and [dska:t] could hypothetically yield an outcome, viz. [dzun] and [dzga:t], which is consistent with the general requirement that obstruent clusters agree in voicing (see footnote 12). Regressive voicing, however, links up with the fact that regressive assimilation is the unmarked instance of assimilation in Frisian, see Tiersma (1985, 26–28), Visser (1988b), Hoekstra (2001, 86).<sup>14</sup> There is a universal preference for onset segments to stick to their (underlying) voicing value, which is often at the expense of the voicing value of a preceding coda consonant or, put differently, which induces regressive voicing assimilation in case of a voicing conflict. Moreover, the change from [dsun] and [dska:t] into [dzun] and [dzga:t] cannot be followed by the reinterpretation of the parts [-zun] and [-zga:t] as the new underlying forms /zun/ and /zga:d/. As noted above, voiceless fricatives are not allowed in word-initial position. The reinterpretation of [-zga:t] as /zga:d/ is all the more impossible, because in Frisian the voiced velar plosive /g/ is only allowed in word-initial position or at the beginning of a stressed word-internal syllable (Tiersma 1985, 25; Hoekstra 2001, 86), so it cannot be the final segment of a word-initial cluster. All in all, the change from *it* to *de* is highly unlikely to take place according to the above scenario.

All this, however, leaves unexplained why the phonologically induced change from *de* to *it* is not paralleled at all by the opposite but comparable change from *it* to *de*, no matter how less likely the latter may be. Put differently, why is it that there are no instances of the reanalysis of, for example, *dbier* and *dgea*—see (7b) above—as *de bier* and *de gea*? This is all the more puzzling, since the change from *it* to *de* would have been in keeping with the ratio between *de*- and *it*-words in the lexicon of Frisian, where, due to the common historical coalescence of the masculine and feminine gender, *de*-words are in the majority. I have no clear and unequivocal answer to offer.

When the change from *it* to *de* does occur, it takes a non-phonological route, which I will deal with in Sect. 6 below.

The change from *de* to *it* must have set out as an alternation between the full form of the article, *de*, and its reduced and phonologically adapted variant, *t*. Some lexicalised collocational prepositional phrases still show the traces of this alternation, witness the following three cases:<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> I deliberately talk of progressive ‘voicing’ or ‘adaptation’ here, since in Frisian regular (regressive) assimilation only takes place between phonological words, whereas the phonological word itself is the domain of phonological adaptive processes, among which also progressive ones.

<sup>15</sup> See (17) below for nouns displaying the same kind of alternation, viz. between the article *it* in free use and *de* (*'e*) when being part of a collocational prepositional phrase.

(9) Alternation between *de* and *t* in lexicalised collocational prepositional phrasesa. *With the preposition by 'by', in collocations denoting a huge amount*

<i>de</i> soad	-	by ' <i>t</i> soad	'the amount to be cooked - in abundance, in plenty, galore'
<i>de</i> seksje	-	by ' <i>t</i> seksje	'section - in abundance'
<i>de</i> poarsje	-	by ' <i>t</i> poarsje	'portion - in abundance'
<i>de</i> oper	-	by ' <i>t</i> oper	'hay cock - in abundance'

b. *With the prepositions fan 'of' and by 'during', with nouns denoting time spans, notably the seasons*

<i>de</i> simmer	-	fan/by ' <i>t</i> simmer	'summer - in (the) summer'
<i>de</i> hjerst	-	fan/by ' <i>t</i> hjerst	'autumn - in (the) autumn'
<i>de</i> winter	-	fan/by ' <i>t</i> winter	'winter - in (the) winter'
<i>de</i> maitiid	-	fan/by ' <i>t</i> maaityd	'spring - in (the) springtime'
<i>de</i> wike	-	fan ' <i>t</i> wike	'week - this week'

c. *Residual cases*

<i>de</i> spier	-	yn ' <i>t</i> spier (wêze)	'muscle - to be up and at it'
<i>de</i> set	-	fan ' <i>t</i> set (wêze)	'move - to be out of sorts, in a tizzy'

For this phonological approach to work, all nouns in question must begin with a voiceless obstruent (see (7a) above). This is confirmed by (9a), although the fourth case, the vowel-initial noun *oper*, does not fit in with the pattern. The approach is also confirmed by (9c), and especially by (9b), where '*t*' is fixed in *fan/by 't simmer* only, while the other nouns, alongside *fan 't—fan 't hjerst*, *fan 't winter*, *fan 't maaityd*, *fan 't wike*—also have the variant *fan 'e*, in which the article *de*, following the monosyllabic preposition *fan*, has the regular reduced variant '*e*: *fan 'e hjerst*, *fan 'e winter*, *fan 'e maaityd*, *fan 'e wike*.<sup>16</sup> Here, then, we find a clear difference between the noun with the voiceless initial obstruent /s/ and the ones with a voiced initial segment—/v/ (*wike*, *winter*), /m/ (*maaityd*), /j/ (*hjerst*)—, suggesting that the alternation between *de* and *t* is most prominent with *simmer*, the noun with which it is likely to have set out.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> These are cases of encliticisation of the article '*e* (*de*) onto the (preceding) preposition, yielding an optimal prosodic structure, i.e., a trochee. The article *de* is prone to both encliticisation and procliticisation, irrespective so it seems of the prosodic outcome.

<sup>17</sup> Standard Dutch has the comparable collocation *van 't zomer* 'in (the) summer' (cf. *de zomer* 'the summer'). But—at least according to the most authoritative Dutch desk dictionary, i.e., Van Dales *Groot Woordenboek van de Nederlandse Taal*—it does not have *van 't winter* 'in (the) winter' (cf. *de winter* 'the winter') and *van 't herfst* 'in (the) autumn' (cf. *de herfst* 'the autumn'). This points to a crucial role for nouns with an initial obstruent in the incipience of the alternation at hand.

The occurrence of *t* in *fan 't hjerst*, *fan 't winter*, *fan 't maitiid*, and *fan 't wike* is to be explained as an analogical extension of the pattern (construction) *fan 't simmer*.<sup>18</sup> An obvious question to ask is how it is to be accounted for that *fan 't simmer* could act as a ‘model’ for the other seasons here. An account cannot be based on frequency. In the Frisian Language Databases at the Fryske Akademy in Leeuwarden (<http://www.fryske-akademy.nl/tdb>), both *winter* and *wike* have a higher text frequency than *simmer*. In § 5.2 below, it is shown that quite a few nouns denoting outer body parts have become *it*-words, also some non-obstruent-initial nouns, like *it wang* ‘the cheek’ and *it ankel* ‘the ankle’. In order to explain these cases, the concepts of *semantic analogy* or *concept association* are appealed to, *it* being the prevailing article in the word field of the outer body parts. The latter, however, does not hold for the word field of the seasons, where there are only *de*-words (see (9b)).<sup>19</sup> No doubt, the summertime is experienced as a nice and positive time, with its long days, its summer heat, its summer weather, and the summer holiday. Such extra-linguistic factors, however, are unlikely to make for a real explanation here. So, what really is going on with these nouns is as yet unclear.

Not all nouns beginning with a voiceless obstruent were subject to the gender change of this section. Although many Frisian nouns end in schwa, none of the nouns in (4) do. This is not a coincidence. There is a correlation between noun-final schwa and the article *de* or, put differently, a schwa-final noun in Frisian cannot be but a *de*-word. This is nicely illustrated by the fact that for some nouns there is an alternation between a (monosyllabic) *it*- and a schwa-final *de*-variant. See the examples in (10)—for the greater part taken from Visser (1997, 237–240)—, all of which begin with a voiceless obstruent:

- (10) Monosyllabic *it*-words next to schwa-final *de*-words
- |                  |   |                   |                            |
|------------------|---|-------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>it</i> flym   | - | <i>de</i> flime   | ‘the lancet’               |
| <i>it</i> focht  |   | <i>de</i> fochte  | ‘the liquid; the moisture’ |
| <i>it</i> koard  |   | <i>de</i> koarde  | ‘the cord’                 |
| <i>it</i> sou    |   | <i>de</i> souwe   | ‘the riddle, the sieve’    |
| <i>it</i> span   |   | <i>de</i> spanne  | ‘the team (of horses)’     |
| <i>it</i> spyn   |   | <i>de</i> spine   | ‘the pantry, the larder’   |
| <i>it</i> swaard |   | <i>de</i> swarde  | ‘the rind’                 |
| <i>it</i> tsjil  |   | <i>de</i> tsjille | ‘the wheel’                |

Being schwa-final, the nouns of the right-hand column could not have become *it*-words, in spite of the support for the neuter gender provided by the *it*-variants in the left-hand column. Nouns with an initial voiceless obstruent and a final schwa which lack such support, like *de file* /filəl/ ‘the file’, *de seage* /st.əʒə/ ‘the saw’,

<sup>18</sup> The occurrence of *t* in *by 't oper* ‘in abundance’ in (9a) must be explained along the same lines.

<sup>19</sup> The Dutch collocations *van 't voorjaar* ‘in (the) springtime’ and *van 't najaar* ‘in (the) autumn’ show the reduced variant *'t* of the article *het*, with which the nouns *het voorjaar* ‘the springtime’ (literally: the before-year) and *het najaar* ‘the autumn’ (literally: the after-year) are associated. Analogical extension of this pattern did not occur in Standard Dutch; in all likelihood, this has to do with the higher degree of standardisation of Dutch as compared to that of Frisian (see also § 5.4 below).

*de tinte* /tɪntə/ ‘the tent’, remained *de*-words as well. So, its phonological shape can prevent a noun from undergoing gender change.

A noun-final schwa, however, did not deprive the article *de* of the possibility of having the combinatorial variant *t* <'t>, as shown by the collocations *by't seksje* (9a) and *fan't wike* (9b). There is a sharp distinction between combinatorial variance of the article and (categorical) gender change.

## 5.2 Nouns denoting outer body parts

In (11) below, I list the cases I have been able to find of Frisian *it*-words denoting outer body parts with a Dutch *de*-word as counterpart:

### (11) Nouns denoting an outer body part (ordered ‘top-down’)

<i>Frisian</i>	<i>Dutch</i>	<i>gloss</i>
<i>it</i> sliep	<i>de</i> slaap	the temple
<i>it</i> wang	<i>de</i> wang	the cheek
<i>it</i> kin	<i>de</i> kin	the chin
<i>it</i> burd	<i>de</i> baard	the beard
<i>it</i> skouder	<i>de</i> schouder	the shoulder
<i>it</i> boarst	<i>de</i> borst	the breast
<i>it</i> spien	<i>de</i> speen	the teat, the nipple
<i>it</i> bil	<i>de</i> bil	the thigh
<i>it</i> kût	<i>de</i> kuit	the calf
<i>it</i> ankel	<i>de</i> enkel	the ankle
<i>it</i> krop	<i>de</i> krop	the instep (Frisian); the crop, the gizzard, the maw (Frisian and Dutch) <sup>20</sup>

The pattern in (11) is indicative of the fact that in the course of time Frisian has acquired a semantically motivated gender assignment rule, to the effect that a noun denoting an outer body part became allotted to the *it*-gender. According to Enger (2009, 1296), this rule qualifies as a so-called ‘crazy rule’, his shorthand for a ‘non-core semantic rule’. The initial motivation for this rule is the same as for the gender change of the previous section, i.e., cliticisation of the article *de* and its

<sup>20</sup> The following quotes from early Modern Frisian show that *skouder* and *krop* originally were *de*-words:

Jo ken de tonge oppe [op de] schouder hingje litte  
 she can the tongue on the shoulder hang let  
 ‘she can let her tongue hang on her shoulder’ (meaning: she dominates the conversation; she is a scandalmonger, a gossip)

(Van der Kuip 2003, 429, number 602)

Hoe heag iz him **de** krop  
 how high is him the crop, gizzard  
 ‘how high a crop, gizzard he has’ (meaning: how haughty and proud he is)

(Feitsma (ed.) 1956a, 38, number 473a).

phonological effects. This gave rise to a certain amount of *it*-words denoting outer body parts, a subpattern which was interpreted semantically and subsequently generalised.

As to the latter, the neuter gender of *wang* ‘cheek’, *burd* ‘beard’, *boarst* ‘breast’, *bil* ‘thigh’, and *ankel* ‘ankle’ in (11) cannot be explained on phonological grounds, because these nouns do not begin with a voiceless obstruent. For an explanation, one may appeal to the concept of *semantic analogy* or *concept association* (Shields 1979, 32–33; Corbett 1991, 75–77). Take the word *ankel*. Beginning with a vowel, its gender change can by no means be explained on phonological grounds. Besides, since it ends in the sequence *-/əl/*, one expects it to be a *de*-word (see § 2 above). Yet, *ankel* has undergone gender change, for which analogical influence from the whole word field of outer body parts, where *it* had become the prevalent article, makes a reasonable case. From the knee down to the foot, it now is *it kû* ‘the calf’, *it ankel* ‘the ankle’, and *it krop* ‘the instep’.

The semantic gender assignment rule at hand, however, is not without exceptions nor has analogy extended its influence to all nouns denoting outer body parts, witness the *de*-words in (12):

- (12) Frisian *de*-words denoting outer body parts
- |                   |                     |
|-------------------|---------------------|
| <i>de</i> noas    | ‘the nose’          |
| <i>de</i> finger  | ‘the finger’        |
| <i>de</i> hân     | ‘the hand’          |
| <i>de</i> earm    | ‘the arm’           |
| <i>de</i> knibbel | ‘the knee’          |
| <i>de</i> foet    | ‘the foot; the leg’ |

Schwa-final nouns, also those beginning with a voiceless obstruent, did not undergo this gender change either; see the examples in (13):

- (13) The Frisian words for the outer body parts ‘side’, ‘thumb’, and ‘jaw’
- |                        |             |
|------------------------|-------------|
| <i>de</i> side /sidə/  | ‘the side’  |
| <i>de</i> tomme /tomə/ | ‘the thumb’ |
| <i>de</i> kake /ka:kə/ | ‘the jaw’   |

Nouns ending in schwa are *de*-words, which appears to be a stronger generalisation over the Frisian lexicon than the one that nouns denoting outer body parts are *it*-words. Again, the phonological shape of these nouns prevented them from undergoing gender change (see also the previous subsection).

The nouns in (11)—with the exception of *skouder* and *ankel*—are monosyllabic, non-derived words, so that gender change could not be thwarted by the influence of suffixes or word endings on gender assignment. However, words like *noas* ‘nose’ and *foet* ‘foot; leg’ in (12) above are monosyllabic and underived as well, but they did not acquire a new gender. So, the concept ‘outer body part’ used here might be in need of further restriction.

The influence of the gender change of this and the preceding subsection did not affect the overall structure of the Frisian lexicon. In the first place, the number of the nouns involved is relatively small. In the second place, the article *it* is not confined to nouns beginning with a voiceless obstruent nor do all *de*-words begin with a voiced segment (a vowel, a voiced obstruent or a sonorant consonant). The nouns which underwent a change of gender, therefore, could easily fit into the existing Frisian lexicon.

A solid case can be made of a noun-initial voiceless segment as the impetus for the change of gender here. If *it*-words begin with a voiceless segment, the definite article is either ‘original’ or it results from gender change. On the other hand, the definite article *it* is always original for nouns with a voiced initial segment. The latter picture, however, is somewhat blurred by the small number of nouns with a voiced initial segment which became *it*-words due to analogical extension of the phonologically induced pattern of change.

### 5.3 Residual cases

In (14) below, I list the remaining cases of Frisian *it*-words with a Dutch *de*-word as counterpart:

(14) Residual list of nouns

<i>Frisian</i>	<i>Dutch</i>	<i>gloss</i>
<i>it</i> aard	<i>de</i> aard	the nature, the character
<i>it</i> bit	<i>de</i> bijt	the hole (in the ice)
<i>it</i> boadskip	<i>de</i> boodschap	the message
<i>it</i> bûn	<i>de</i> bond	the union, the association, the society
<i>it</i> grif	<i>de</i> griffel	the slate-pencil
<i>it</i> helter	<i>de</i> halster	the halter
<i>it</i> hôf	<i>de</i> hof	the garden
<i>it</i> laad	<i>de</i> la(de)	the drawer
<i>it</i> laai	<i>de</i> lei	the slate
<i>it</i> lêst	<i>de</i> last	the burden; the trouble; the cargo
<i>it</i> rip	<i>de</i> ruif	the rack, the manger
<i>it</i> rût	<i>de</i> ruit	the (window-)pane

Unlike the nouns in (11) above, which denote outer body parts, those in (14) do not have a feature in common which could serve as the basis for a (new) semantic gender assignment rule. As to their shape, it is also hard to see what holds them together. Like the nouns in (4) and (11) above, most of them are monosyllabic (to which *boadskip*<sup>21</sup> and *helter* are the exceptions). But in order to explain the change of gender, monosyllabicity in itself is not enough. Though it renders the nouns in (4) and (11) appropriate for hosting a clitic, what is crucial for their change of gender is

<sup>21</sup> Note that *boadskip* ‘message’ is a derivative (boad+skip ‘messenger+ship’).

the fact that they begin with a voiceless obstruent. This causes devoicing of the *d* of the article *de*, the first step of the reinterpretation of devoiced *d* as the reduced article *it*, in the end leading to the replacement of *de* by *it*. None of the nouns in (14), however, begin with a voiceless obstruent. If they do have an initial obstruent at all, it is the voiced plosive /b/ or /g/: *bit*, *bil*, *boadskip*, *bûn*, and *grif*.

This, then, leaves some sort of ‘analogy’ as the only explanation for the change of gender here. The change in *it aard* ‘nature, character’ may have been induced by the (near)synonym *it karakter* ‘idem’<sup>22</sup>. The same may hold for *it rût* ‘(window-)pane’, next to which there are the semantically related words *it raam* ‘window’ and *it finster* ‘idem’. For *it laad* ‘drawer’, one might think of the influence of the *it*-words ending in the same phonological sequence, viz. *it haad* ‘head, chief’, *it klaad* ‘robe, garment’, *it paad* ‘path(way)’, and also *it skaad* ‘shadow, shade’ and *it slaad* ‘lettuce’, with gender change induced by their initial *s* (see (4) above). But the *de*-words *de graad* ‘degree’, *de naad* ‘seam, joint’, *de saad* ‘well’, and *de smaad* ‘defamation, slander’ exist as well, which renders this explanation less convincing. In case of *it hôf*, the two words *hôf*, meaning ‘court’ and ‘garden’—originally an *it*- and a *de*-word, respectively—seem to have coalesced, in favour of the *it*-variant, for which I have no explanation to offer. The latter also holds for the gender change in *helter* and *rip*.

All in all, what is at stake here seems to be a random change of gender, for which no semantic or formal explanation is available. This is in marked contrast with the subpatterns of gender change discussed in §§ 5.1 and 5.2 above, which do lend themselves to a formal and semantic explanation.

#### 5.4 A comparison of Frisian and Dutch with respect to gender change

Cliticisation of an unstressed element like the article *de* onto a following noun, voicing adaptation when the noun in question has an initial voiceless obstruent, and reinterpretation of the adapted article are instances of common linguistic processes. They must have played a role in Dutch as well, which they did. Pauwels (1931) investigated his own dialect, that of Aarschot (Flanders), on the subject of such nouns with a double gender, viz. masculine/feminine (original) and neuter (new).<sup>23</sup> He found that some nouns with an initial voiceless obstruent behave as neuter when used with the definite article, whereas they are feminine/masculine when the indefinite article is used. Some others have undergone a change of gender, i.e., they have become genuine neuter nouns. But, just as is the case in Frisian, most nouns beginning with a voiceless obstruent have stuck to their original masculine/feminine gender, a fact for which also Pauwels has no explanation to offer.

<sup>22</sup> *karakter* is a French loan word. In general, loan words enter Frisian through mediation of Dutch, see Visser (2000). As to nouns, this means that the article is loaned as well. The same goes for neologisms in Frisian, see Sijens (2004). The adaptation and incorporation of loaned nouns provides important clues to how gender assignment ‘works’ in a given language (Corbett 1991; Thornton 2009). The Frisian-Dutch contact situation, thus, deprives us of these clues.

<sup>23</sup> Like most southern varieties of Dutch, the Aarschot dialect still has a three gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter).



In Standard Dutch, however, none of the nouns mentioned by Pauwels—like *school* ‘school’, *schuur* ‘shed, barn’, *sluis* ‘lock; sluice’, *straat* ‘street’, and *zolder* ‘attic’—and none of the counterpart words of the Frisian *it*-words in (4) and (11) (and (14)) have a double gender or have become neuter. This means that Dutch is conservative here and that Frisian is innovative.

In all likelihood, this has to do with differences in the sociological status between the two languages. For centuries, Frisian was a spoken language, which, among other things, was not taught at school. Therefore, it did not develop an explicit standard, be it only for educational purposes. This implies, that the use of *it* instead of *de* was not corrected, as it was in Dutch. The Frisian standard language was developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The substance of Standard Frisian is selected from the Frisian dialects, but in this selection distancing from Dutch plays a major role. That is, those forms are selected which maximally differ from the Dutch forms with which they can be identified (Breuker 1993). So, instead of being rejected as deviant, nouns with a definite article which differs from that of their Dutch counterparts are propagated as pure Frisian, providing all the more evidence that Frisian is a language in its own right and not some Dutch dialect.<sup>24</sup> So, *it kin* ‘the chin’ is pushed forward, to the exclusion of *de kin*, which actually is the old form.<sup>25</sup>

## 6 From *it*-word to *de*-word

I now turn to the opposite gender change, that is, from *it*-word to *de*-word. My claim will be here that the new article, *de*, is the result of the reanalysis of the old dative form *de* of the neuter article.

There are some *it*-words in Frisian which show up with the article *de* (*e*) in specific environments. The best known example is the word *hûs* ‘house’, which has *de* in some collocational prepositional phrases:

<sup>24</sup> A rigid way of distancing would be to systematically assign Frisian nouns to the gender (the article) which is the opposite of the Dutch one. In the Frisian-Dutch contact situation, however, distancing is only acceptable if fed by and linking up with real differences in language usage. But Thomason (2006, 348), basing herself on Laycock (1982), mentions an instance of this opposite gender assignment strategy. It concerns dialects of Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea: “As has been reported from elsewhere in New Guinea, speakers of the Uisai dialect of Buin apparently decided that their speech was too similar to that of their neighbors; without such a decision, followed by deliberate action, it is difficult or impossible to explain the change that distinguishes their dialect: all nouns that are masculine in other dialects of Buin, with all their elaborate gender agreement marking patterns throughout the sentence, are feminine in Uisai, and vice versa. This cannot have been a gradual, incremental change, and it surely was not the result of very young children’s innovation.”

<sup>25</sup> See the following quote from early Modern Frisian:

Har onder **de** kin strijkende  
her under the chin stroking  
‘stroking her chin’

(Feitsma and Bosma (eds) 1961, 171, line 280)

(15) *de*-forms of the *it*-word *hûs* ‘house’ in collocational prepositional phrases

*it* *hûs*

‘the house’

yn *'e* *hûs*<sup>26</sup>

in the house

‘inside’

út *'e* *hûs*

out of the house

‘having left (of the children) ‘

(ta) *de* *hûs* yn/út

(to) the house in/out

‘into/out of the house’

oer *de* *hûs*

over the house

‘about the house’

troch *de* *hûs*

through the house

‘throughout the house’

These are fixed expressions, in which *hûs* refers to the familiar house, the house which is assumed to be known to the addressee. Most of the time, this is the house which is the home. If it is about a specific house, the article *de* is impossible, as the examples in (16) illustrate:

(16) Impossible occurrences of *de* (*'e*) *hûs*

Wy wenje yn *it*/\**'e* wite *hûs* dêre

we live in the white house there

‘we live in the white house over there’

Hja wenje yn *it*/\**'e* *hûs* op *'e* hoeke

they live in the house on the corner

‘they live in the house on the corner’

The nouns in (17) also show this alternation between *it* in free use and *de* (*'e*) in collocational prepositional phrases:

<sup>26</sup> *'e* is an exclusively enclitic variant of *de*, mainly occurring after monosyllabic consonant-final prepositions (see also § 5.1 above).

- (17) *it* pleit - yn 'e pleit wêze foar  
 'the plea' in the plea be for  
 'to make a plea for'
- it* praat - oan 'e praat hâlde  
 'the talk' on the talk hold  
 'to keep in play'

This alternation compares with the one of *de*-words with *de* in free use and *it* (*t*) in collocational prepositional phrases, exemplified in (9) above.

The *it*-words *midden* 'middle', *bosk* 'wood', and *ein* 'end, ending' denote a location. That is the reason why they frequently combine with prepositions designating a relation between an object and a location, in which case they may be accompanied by the article *de* ('*e*'), as in (18):

- (18) yn 'e midden 'in the middle'  
 yn 'e bosk 'in the wood'  
 oan 'e ein 'at the end'

This could lead to these three nouns becoming *de*-words. But unlike the change from *de* to *it* from the preceding section, the change at hand did not occur anywhere in the Frisian-speaking regions, dependent as it is on extra-linguistic (real-world) factors. Where there are many woods, the word *bosk* is part of everyday linguistic usage, hence it is more likely to occur in combination with locative prepositions, which in turn renders it more prone to gender change, than in areas without woods. This real-world influence is nicely illustrated by Schiermonnikoogs, the Frisian dialect of the island of Schiermonnikoog. On an island, the beach and the dunes are an important aspect of everyday life. In Schiermonnikoogs, the word *straun* 'beach' is a neuter word, as is Frisian *strân* 'idem'. But it often shows up with the article *de* in collocational prepositional phrases, as (19) illustrates:

- (19) *de*-forms of the *it*-word *straun* 'beach' in Schiermonnikoogs<sup>27</sup>
- it* straun  
 'the beach'
- op 'e straun (also: op straun)<sup>28</sup>  
 on the beach  
 'on the beach'
- fan 'e straun oof (also: fan straun oof)  
 from the beach off  
 'from the beach'

<sup>27</sup> Also in Frisian this variation is not uncommon. In a text from 1640 the following sentence is found: *En bortet oppe* [op 'e = op de] *druwge Straan* 'and plays on the dry beach' (Feitsma (ed.) 1956b, 47, line 50). And fishermen along the Wadden Sea coast used to haul their fishing vessels *op 'e strân* 'onto the beach' (WFT, Vol. 21, s.v. *strân* (page 305), citing the *Leeuwarder Courant* from July 31st 1957).

<sup>28</sup> The variation between *de* and '*e*' – see § 5.1 and footnote 26 above—also obtains in Schiermonnikoogs.

by *de* *straun*  
 by the beach  
 ‘near the beach’

by *de* *straun troch*  
 by the beach through  
 ‘along the beach’

ieuwr *de* *straun* (also: *ieuwr straun*)  
 over the beach  
 ‘over the beach’

*de* *faste straun*  
 the steady beach  
 ‘the solid sands’

The word *dún* ‘dune’, originally a neuter, now belongs to two gender classes, neuter and feminine. In its neuter usage, it has the article *de* in prepositional phrases.

Gender variation and gender change induced by extra-linguistic (real-world) factors is not likely to be confined to Frisian and its dialects. And indeed it is not. The Standard Dutch words *bos* ‘wood’ and *strand* ‘beach’ are neuter nouns: *het bos* and *het strand*. In the Saxon dialect of the province of Drenthe, *bos* is also a *het*-word. But in idiomatic expressions, when following a preposition, *bos* may have the article *de*, witness the following two examples, taken from Kocks (1996, 156, s.v. *bos*):

- (20) Examples of *de bos* from the Saxon dialect of Drenthe
- a. Die is ok *oet de bos* kommen  
 that one is also out of the wood come  
 ‘that one has come from the wood’ (meaning: (s)he is uneducated, uncultured, rude)
  - b. Zien kinder loop nog *in de bos*  
 his children walk still in the wood  
 ‘his children are still walking in the wood’ (meaning: he does not have children of his own)

And in the Dutch dialect of Katwijk aan Zee, an old fishing village by the North Sea coast in the vicinity of the cities of Leiden and The Hague, *strand* is a *de*-word (Overdiep 1940, 112). There is a striking parallel with Frisian in this respect. Again, Frisian and Dutch dialects are innovative, whereas Dutch is conservative. As a matter of fact, the latter is what one expects a standard language to be.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Because of distancing from Dutch, Standard Frisian is conservative as to the outcome of the historical gender change which is the subject of this article. See also footnote 2 and § 5.4 above.

Since there does not seem to be a phonological trigger for it, an obvious question is what made gender change possible in this particular case. As is still the case in German, locative prepositions in Old Frisian used to assign dative case to their complement noun. The dative singular form of the neuter definite article/demonstrative pronoun (*thet*) was *thā* (*dā*) (see Bremmer 2009, 54). From a historical point of view, we may safely assume that the article *de* (*'e*) in some of the above phrases is the continuation of this old dative form. It is, thus, a fossilised or, put differently, a lexicalised form. For *yn 'e hûs* this must have proceeded as follows: *in da huse* → *yn de hûs* (→ *yn 'e hûs*).

Nominative case is unmarked in relation to dative case (see Greenberg 1966). Therefore, one may wonder how a dative form can be so persistent here. There are, however, well-defined exceptions to the general markedness conventions, which have consequences for language change. In Tiersma (1982), these are called instances of *local markedness*, since the general markedness pattern is broken locally. Croft (2003, 165, 174) prefers the more general term *markedness reversal* instead, with which I agree. Tiersma (1982, 843) states several principles of markedness reversal, the second one of which, on the face of it, pertains to the case at hand. It reads as follows:

(21) Markedness reversal concerning case assignment

In languages with case systems, nouns referring to places are locally unmarked in the locative (or another local) case, and nouns referring to tools or instruments are locally unmarked in the instrumental

It is questionable, whether this markedness reversal can be invoked as such for an explanation of gender change in the case at hand. It crucially refers, and pertains, to “languages with case systems”. Now, if Frisian does have a case system synchronically, it is one of abstract case only. As with most Germanic languages, it is centuries ago that it lost its system of overt case marking. This means, that case is no longer ‘spelled out’ on the noun and the article; it only manifests itself indirectly, by means of the thematic role the noun phrase has, as appearing from its place within the syntactic configuration as a whole. This implies that (21) has no direct bearing on the change from *it*-word to *de*-word which is the topic of this section.

There may be an indirect bearing though. Nouns denoting a location frequently combine with locative prepositions.<sup>30</sup> Now, what used to be a prepositional context with overt dative case marking may be said to have developed into a prepositional context with abstract case marking, in line with the general development of case marking in Frisian. The latter context, then, qualifies as the successor of the former.

The above complementary distribution between *it* and *de* and/or the change from *it*-word to *de*-word is not a general feature of Frisian *it*-words which denote a location. Only a handful of these have been affected, whereas most of them—like *it doarp* ‘village’, *it lân* ‘(piece of) land’, and *it plein* ‘square’—do not show a single

<sup>30</sup> This can be read off from the contexts in which the nouns in questions appear in the Frisian Language Databases (<http://www.fryske-akademy.nl/tilb>).

trace of it, though they mainly show up in a prepositional context as well. This is a fact for which I have no explanation to offer.

Phonology still has a role to play here. Due to the reduction of its full vowel, the original dative form *thā* (*dā*) of the definite article became homophonic with the generalised (case-neutral) definite article *de*, which paved the way for their coalescence. Frisian having lost its system of overt case marking, this phonologically induced coalescence was no longer counterbalanced by pressure from the case system.

In early Modern Frisian, the noun in locative prepositional phrases may still have the old dative ending *-e* (<*-a*), whereas the article appears in its modern form. See the examples in (22), taken from an early seventeenth century collection of proverbs:

(22) Traces of dative (local) case in early Modern Frisian

Hy tjiennet næt *ijne* [*ijn de*] *waade*/ deert hoiken næt Iye mey  
 he ought not in the wood who the squatting down not stand can  
 ‘he shouldn’t be in the wood who does not like sitting on his heels’  
 (compare Modern Frisian: *it wâld* ‘the wood’)  
 (Van der Kuip (2003:368-369, number 466))

Ja frijense *oppe* [*op de*] *sticke*  
 they asked them on the piece  
 ‘they asked them (something) in plain terms’  
 (compare Modern Frisian: *it stik* ‘the piece’)  
 (Van der Kuip (2003:400, number 535))

T’waer wol verkeere/ de Mountsen binne *oppe* [*op de*] *felde*  
 the weather will change/ the monks are on the field  
 ‘the weather will change (for the better), (because) the wagtails are  
 in the field (after having returned early in the spring)’  
 (compare Modern Frisian: *it fjild* ‘the field’)  
 (Van der Kuip (2003:648, number 1067))

In some idiomatic expressions, the noun has retained this original dative ending up till now, witness the examples in (23):<sup>31,32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> According to Hoekstra (2006), the final schwa of the noun *skerne* ‘dunghill, dungheap’ is the original dative ending of *skern* ‘manure, dung’, which has become a fixed part of the lexeme. The same might hold for *râne* ‘edge’ and *hoeke* ‘corner’—cf. Dutch *rand* and *hoek*; because both denote a location, they mainly occur in a prepositional (dative) context.

<sup>32</sup> Dutch has a long and uninterrupted written tradition, whereas Frisian mainly functions as a spoken language. That is why many more of such expressions have been retained in Dutch than in Frisian. Some Dutch examples are: *in den beginne* ‘in the beginning’ (next to *het begin* ‘the beginning’), *om den brode* ‘for a living, for the money’ (next to *het brood* ‘the bread; the loaf’), *iets aan den lijve ondervinden* ‘experience something personally’ (next to *het lijf* ‘the body’), *het gaat hem naar den vleze* ‘he does good business, trade’ (next to *het vlees* ‘the flesh; the meat’), and *met dien verstande* ‘on the understanding that, provided (that)’ (next to *het verstand* ‘the intellect, mind, reason’). Such phrases give one’s linguistic usage a distinguished flavour.

## (23) Traces of dative (local) case in Modern Frisian

*yn 'e lytse loege* sitte/wêze

in the small spot sit/be

'to be in a tight spot/corner'

(compare the Old Frisian neuter noun: *thet* loch 'the spot')

immen *út 'e leage* waskje

someone out of the caustic solution wash

'to haul someone over the coals'

(compare the Modern Frisian neuter noun: *it* leach 'the caustic solution')

The existence of the expression *immen út 'e leage waskje* in (23) and the ones with *hûs* in (15) above—like *yn 'e hûs*, *út 'e hûs*, and *oer de hûs*—does not imply that *leach* and *hûs* have a double gender, i.e., that they are both *it*- and *de*-words. These nouns are associated with the article *it*, of which *de* is a lexicalised combinatorial variant. This also holds for *pleit* 'plea' and *praat* 'talk' in (17) above.<sup>33</sup>

As noted before, nouns denoting a location frequently occur with locative prepositions, providing a context in which typically the variant *de* ('*e*') may show up. This, in turn, may lead to the generalisation of the latter, implying a change of gender. The nouns in (24) are instances of this:

(24) Nouns which underwent a change of gender (*it* → *de*)

*de* mar 'the lake'

(compare older Frisian: *it* mar 'idem'; compare Dutch: *het* meer 'idem')

*de* middel/mil/mul 'the waist, the middle'

(compare Dutch: *het* middel 'idem')

Some nouns denoting a location, which originally are neuter, show dialectal and idiolectal variation between *it* and *de*. This is the case with *midden* 'middle', *bosk* 'wood', and *ein* 'end, ending' in (18) above. Standard Frisian chooses the article *de* here, since it provides a maximal contrast, genderwise, with the neuter Dutch counterparts *het midden* 'middle', *het bos* 'wood', and *het eind(e)* 'end, ending'.

## 7 Conclusion

In Frisian, grammatical gender is not spelled out on the noun directly. It manifests itself in an indirect way, through the agreement relations the noun enters into. This means that the language user has no formal clues as to the gender which a bare noun is allotted to.

Since the gender of a noun is only detectable from the context in which the noun occurs, an obvious source of gender change is the reinterpretation of surface forms. It is, thus, understandable that phonological regularities and residual (abstract) case

<sup>33</sup> These nouns do not denote a location, so some sort of analogical pattern extension must be at stake, which I will not go into here.

marking in a prepositional context can be crucial for two instances of historical gender change in Frisian. But factors which, strictly speaking, are non-linguistic in nature can play a role as well, especially in the Dutch–Frisian language contact situation. These factors are, first, the low degree of standardisation of Frisian at the time the gender change set in and, secondly, distancing from Dutch at the time when Frisian developed its own standard vis-à-vis Dutch, which implies the propagation of the gender which diverges from the Dutch one.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude that as far as gender change is concerned ‘anything goes’. Not every Frisian *de*-word could become an *it*-word and vice versa, since the language system puts its limits here. For instance, all nouns ending in schwa are *de*-words, a formal regularity which prevented them from switching to *it*-words.

It would also be wrong to conclude that there are only regular patterns of gender change. In Frisian, one has subpatterns at best. There are a few general tendencies, but as far as individual words are concerned, there is much that must be left unexplained.

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