Different kinds of complexity:
Plural variation in Dutch and German

Keywords: plural, complexity, Dutch, German, diachrony

The term complexity is often used to indicate morphological or inflectional complexity. In this sense, the Dutch plural system appears relatively straightforward, with two native allomorphs: *-s* (e.g., *tafels* 'tables') and *-(e)n* (e.g., *handen* 'hands') (cf. Booij 2019: 17–29). In contrast, the German plural system is known for its larger set of allomorphs, including *-e* (e.g., *Beine* 'legs'), umlaut+*e* (e.g., *Bahnhöfe* 'stations'), *-(e)n* (e.g., *Studenten* 'students'), *-er* (e.g., *Bretter* 'planks'), umlaut+*er* (e.g., *Bäder* 'bathrooms'), umlaut (e.g., *Hämmer* 'hammers'). Despite this morphological complexity in German, the distribution of German plural allomorphs is largely predictable for native nouns, with some diachronically determined variation, e.g., *Wagen – Wägen* 'cars, wagons'. In German, plural variation primarily arises during morphological integration of loan words, resulting in competition between the original and integrated plural forms, e.g., *Balkons* → *Balkons/Balkone* → *Balkone* 'balconies' (cf. Wegener 2004; Zimmer 2019).

Dutch nouns, on the other hand, display striking functional complexity, with plural variation occurring not only in loanword integration but also within large groups of native nouns (cf. e-ans 2025: 3.5.5.1). This presentation contrasts Dutch with German by analysing additional Dutch corpus data alongside existing studies on German plural variation. Using the CHN corpus, plural variation patterns in Dutch are identified through a bottom-up approach (i.e., by grouping nouns found in the data with shared features). Four main groups emerge and will be discussed:

1) Nouns ending in schwa, native and nonnative, which alternative between the *s*-plural and *n*-plural, e.g., *behoeftes – behoeften* 'needs', *routes – routen* 'routes';
2) Masculine nouns ending in *-aar* and *-eur* with both *s*-plural and *n*-plural variants, e.g., *leraars – leraren* 'teachers';
3) Monosyllabic anglicisms with similar variation, e.g., *links – linken* 'links';
4) Latinisms ending in *-um* and *-us*, which alternative between their Latin plurals (*-a* and *-i*, respectively) and integrated Dutch forms (*-ums* and *-ussen*, respectively), e.g., *musea – museums* 'museums', *catalogi – catalogussen* 'catalogues'.

By analysing both micro- and macro-diachronic corpus data from both Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch (in the CHN, Delpher, and OpenSoNaR), it will be demonstrated that synchronic plural variation in Dutch is shaped by multiple, partly interacting factors, adding to the functional complexity rather than the morphological complexity of the Dutch plural system. These include diatopic differences, prosody, animacy, the role of the morphematic principle of word-form preservation in integration processes, the status of nonnative plural forms compared to native plurals. While the morphematic principle and the status of plural allomorphs have been demonstrated to play a significant role in the integration of nonnative nouns in German as well, variation in the German plural system can largely be explained with recourse to common processes of language change. Dutch plural variation, however, results from a complex interplay of influences, varying across noun groups and often exhibiting (seemingly) idiosyncratic effects that resist straightforward explanations.

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