I discuss how morphosyntactic regional differences in the L1 affect L2 acquisition. Specifically, I present a study that investigated how regional variation in the Dutch grammatical gender system affects gender assignment in a closely related L2: German.

Whereas German has a three-gender system (masculine, feminine, neuter), Netherlandic Dutch has all but lost the distinction between masculine and feminine gender and mainly distinguishes between common (masculine + feminine) and neuter gender instead. German learners of Dutch map German masculine and feminine gender onto Dutch common gender and German neuter gender onto Dutch neuter gender (Lemhöfer et al. 2008, 2010). To Dutch learners of German, the mapping of their two-gender system onto the L2 three-gender system may be less straightforward: common gender needs to be 'split' into masculine and feminine.

However, unlike Netherlandic Dutch, most substandard Belgian Dutch varieties have retained the traditional three-way distinction in adnominal gender marking. Compared to speakers of Netherlandic Dutch, speakers of these varieties have, in theory, access to an additional guiding principle for assigning gender to the L2 German counterparts of L1 Dutch common gender nouns: their grammatical gender in the L1 substandard.

To investigate this possibility, speakers of Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch of various German proficiency levels were asked to assign grammatical gender to 44 German monosyllabic nouns whose Dutch cognates varied with respect to their Belgian substandard gender. Additionally, they judged the acceptability of L1 gender-marked NPs. These also included substandard NPs featuring cognates of some German stimuli used earlier whose gender was known to vary locally within Dutch-speaking Belgium. These data permitted not only an investigation of Dutch-to-German transfer in gender assignment, but also of how this transfer is affected by regional – and ideolectal – variation within the L1.

Keywords: Dutch, grammatical gender, cognates, substandard varieties, German.