Starting from the definition of gender as a morpho-syntactic feature “reflected in the behaviour of associated words” (Hockett 1958: 231) a very interesting scenario opens if we consider systems where the category of gender is characterized by an intrinsic instability regarding this association. Dutch is a case in point: in fact, it is not only characterized by a paradigmatic unbalance between the number of gender values for targets and controllers, but many nouns are inherently unstable, i.e. so called de/het-words, as they can virtually trigger any agreement pattern both in the attributive and pronominal domain. More interestingly, these nouns are characterized by two main properties: they are not only unstable for gender and show similar agreement patterns, but they also belong to specific semantic areas and constitute synonymic semantic networks (Semplicini 2012a; 2012b; 2013). The aim of this contribution is to demonstrate how in the history of the Dutch language the phenomenon of gender instability may be related to at least two kinds of association which go beyond the scope of morpho-syntactic agreement: once the system began to lose its morphological transparency different conceptualizations of the referent together with its contextual pragmatic salience may have triggered semantic-pragmatic agreement patterns gradually pervading the system by means of lexical diffusion between synonymic networks.