Local dialects, supralocal writing systems

The degree of orality of Dutch private letters from the seventeenth century

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In historical sociolinguistics, it is often assumed that ego-documents such as private letters represent the spoken language of the past as closely as possible. In this paper, we will try to determine the degree of orality of seventeenth-century Dutch private letters: the degree to which the spoken local dialect is represented in these texts, and at the same time, the extent to which scribes possibly converged towards supralocal writing systems. We study the orthographical representation of four phonemes in a corpus of letters from the provinces of Holland and Zeeland. Clear cases of local writing practices are revealed, contributing to our knowledge of the spoken language in the past, as well as to the different ways in which it was represented in written language. However, the degree to which local features appear in the corpus is remarkably low. Only a minority of the letters contains localizable features, and if a letter contains these, it is usually only in a minority of the positions which, historically, were phonologically possible. We conclude that, in general, scribes did not aim to write their local dialect, but employed an intended supraregional variety instead.

Keywords: Historical sociolinguistics; Dutch, seventeenth century; ego-documents; letters; writing systems; historical phonology; language from below; orality

1. Introduction[1]

In historical sociolinguistics, ego-documents such as private letters are often interpreted as a text type which represents the spoken language of the past as closely as possible. At the same time, it is often assumed that writing systems carried supraregional significance. In this paper, Dutch lower and middle-class private letters from the seventeenth century will be discussed, focusing on the possible tension between local dialects and supralocal writing systems. Did scribes put their hometown dialect

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to paper, or did they use a supraregional variety instead? How close are these letters to spoken language? What happened linguistically when people sat down, stopped talking, and started to write, switching from spoken language to written language? We will try to determine the *degree of orality* of the letters, that is, the degree to which the spoken local dialect is represented in the texts, and at the same time, the extent to which scribes possibly converged towards supralocal writing systems.

In Section 2, we will explain that the degree of orality is an important research topic in historical sociolinguistics in general. In Section 3, previous research will be discussed, and we will argue that the relation of spoken language to written language constitutes a major problem in recent research on the history of Dutch. In Section 4, we report on a case study on the basis of a corpus of seventeenth-century Dutch letters. After an introduction of the corpus and the features, we will show that despite several unambiguous reflections of spoken language, the overall degree of orality of the corpus is remarkably low. Supralocal written variants tend to dominate, which is all the more striking since we are dealing with a corpus of personal letters of mainly lower and middle-class scribes. In Section 5, these findings will be discussed.

2. Standard languages, language standards, and the degree of orality

Elspaß (2007: 3) argues that traditional language histories were often "primarily concerned with unification and standardization processes" and were mainly based on literary texts. Consequently, the language of large parts of the population remains unknown to us. Therefore, Elspaß proposes the *language history from below* approach, focusing on (non-literary) everyday language, presumably found in ego-documents such as letters and diaries from lower and middle-class scribes. The language of these letters and diaries is considered to be as close to spoken language as possible (e.g. Elspaß 2005; Elspaß et al. 2007). Under this approach, it is not "the inexorable march towards a uniform standard" (Elspaß 2007: 3) that is the main research topic, but the historical-sociolinguistic description and explanation of the variation and change found in these texts, leading to an "alternative history" of the language (Watts & Trudgill 2002). Thus, this research is not driven by the "ideology of the standard language" (Milroy 2007), but aims to complement traditional linguistic history using new sources. Profound historical-sociolinguistic research has been done, for example, into English (e.g. Milroy 1992; Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003) and German (Schikorsky 1990; Elspaß 2005). Elspaß et al. (2007) is a recent collection of case studies into many more languages.

Interpreting past variation as a deviation from the (emerging) standard language should be avoided. Nevertheless, the past had language standards as well (Joseph 1987). Even without the presupposition or the back projection of an emergent national standard, "consensus norms of regional speech communities" (Milroy

1994: 20) can be traced back, and "processes of supralocalization" (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 161) have in fact been at the heart of historical dialectology and historical sociolinguistics. The mutual convergence of writing practices has been established even for medieval English (e.g. Nevalainen & Tieken-Boon van Ostade 2006). Dutch charter scribes from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries can often be localized on the basis of certain dialect features, but at the same time, most of the scribes used variants from different dialect areas and appear to have been acquainted with various regional spelling systems (Rem 2003: 261–263). Therefore, the beginning of a Dutch supraregional writing tradition is often situated in the thirteenth/fourteenth century (Van der Sijs 2004: 554–556).

Similarly, studying the history of Late Middle and Early Modern English, Nevalainen and Raumolin-Brunberg (2003: 182–183) claim that although "supralocalizing features do not have any single path of transmission […] most of the supralocalizing features followed the lead of the capital city". In other words, the consequences of "Vertikalisierung" ('vertical integration'; von Polenz 1994: 136) could not be excluded. A remarkable case study in this respect is Austin (1994) who studied the eighteenth-century Clift letters, written by members of "a family of the artisan class, living in the remote southwestern county of Cornwall" (Austin 1994: 285). Originally expecting to encounter "a language similar to speech or as near speech as we could now reasonably hope to find", Austin concluded "that this is not the case", rather, "as soon as these people took up a pen they framed their minds to a formal mode of thinking", the result being that "their letters are neither markedly dialectal nor colloquial" (Austin 1994: 285, 286).

One of the main problems in historical sociolinguistics, then, is to determine the degree of orality of documents *from below*, to clear up "the contrast between regional dialects and nonlocalizable language" (Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2003: 161), to disentangle "actual usage on the one hand and the taught written language on the other" (van der Wal 2007: 95), and "to assess the nature of the recording process in all possible and relevant ways and to evaluate and take into account its likely impact on the relationship between the speech event and the record, to reconstruct the speech event itself, as accurately as possible" (Schneider 2002: 68). Moreover, the internal development of writing systems, proceeding more or less independently from spoken language, should be taken into account as well (Primus & Neef 2004: 133–134). On the one hand, we should avoid teleological interpretations in terms of standardization, while on the other hand, this does not imply that written data can unreflectively be considered as spoken language transcripts, and we should be aware of possible processes of supralocalization. Hence, the main topic of the present paper is: to what extent are data that we assume to be as close to the spoken language as possible, dialectal? And to what extent are they supraregional? What is the degree of orality? This will be researched in the fields of phonology, morphology, and orthography.

3. Previous research

The degree of orality is a main research topic in the history of phonology and orthography. Seminal studies at the crossroads of historical phonology and historical graphematics have been carried out by Elmentaler (e.g. 2000, 2001, 2003). Studying written language from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries from the Meuse/Rhine-area, thereby focusing on professional town clerks, Elmentaler (2003) was able to explain many of the variation patterns he encountered by referring to phonology, drawing on insights from historical as well as present-day phonology and dialectology. There were coexisting writing systems in the fifteenth century (Elmentaler 2000), each reflecting the spoken language to a considerable extent. Regarding the writing systems involved, Elmentaler (2001: 310–311) argues against an interpretation of orthography in terms of 'etymologization' and 'constant spelling of morphemes'. At the end of the period he studied, however, and especially in the seventeenth century, there was a trend toward 'morphologization' (Elmentaler 2003: 286). Voeste (2007: 91), dating this trend somewhat earlier, claimed that "[d]uring the 16th century, German spelling underwent essential changes: the syllabic and the morphological spelling principle were established". The rise of etymological, morphological, and syllabic spelling principles implies a growing distance from phonological and phonetic writing systems. Von Polenz (2000: 159) interprets the late medieval period as one in which *Schreiblandschaften* were indicative. These *Schreiblandschaften* entailed supraregional leveling and developed 'to a large extent independently' of spoken language. In the Dutch normative tradition, which took off in the sixteenth century, the phonetic principle first predominated, but it was complemented by morphological spelling principles from the first fully-fledged grammar of Dutch, dating from 1584,[2] onward (Dibbets 1985: 360–362). Similarly, Salmon (1999) describes English orthography from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth centuries in terms of a gradual development towards a standard spelling system in which traces of spoken language disappeared more and more. In this development, manuscript spelling lagged behind in comparison to spelling in printed books.

The present study focuses on Dutch personal letters from the seventeenth century. Considering the time period, this means that we should reckon with supraregional leveling as well as with morphological, etymological, and syllabical spelling principles. After all, the seventeenth century is traditionally considered to be a fundamental stage in the development of standard Dutch in that linguistic variation in published books strongly decreased from then on, especially towards the end of the century (e.g. De Vooys 1952: 129). On the other hand, as most letters of our corpus were written by non-professional scribes

from the lower and middle ranks of society, reflections of spoken language may very well be found, and it may even be that much of the orthographical variation can be explained phonologically.

In recent research into sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Dutch on the basis of ego-documents, the traditional account in terms of standardization has been under attack. Drawing on theories of dialect contact and koineization (Trudgill 1986; Kerswill 2002) and using letters and diaries from immigrant families and their offspring, studies such as Boyce and Howell (1996), Boyce Hendriks and Howell (2000), Goss and Howell (2006), and Howell (2006) tried to reconstruct the formation of new Dutch urban vernaculars in the western part of the Netherlands, mainly in the province of Holland (Amsterdam, The Hague). The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were characterized by mass immigration from people from other dialect and language areas to Holland, so dialect leveling and koineization obviously took place. The studies mentioned used ego-documents in order to trace the ongoing leveling and focusing of variants. Dialect leveling, focusing, and koineization are, however, spoken language features which were researched using written language, and in order to be able to do so, it had to be assumed that the texts were written "in pure Holland dialect" (Boyce Hendriks & Howell 2000: 273) and that they were "vernacular letters" (Howell 2006: 219). In other words, the relation between phonology and orthography and between phonemes and graphemes was not so much object of study as presupposed to be isomorphic. It was admitted, however, that "certain orthographic traditions originating in the southern Netherlands continued to influence the written language in Holland" (Howell 2006: 210). But orthographic traditions may veil dialectal distinctions, rendering phonological research on the basis of written documents problematic. This calls for renewed research into the degree of orality of especially Dutch ego-documents of the said time period, aiming at a balanced reassessment of the relation of phonology, morphology, and possibly supralocal writing systems. In the remainder of this paper, such research will be reported on.

4. Case study

In this section, we present a case study of Dutch private letters from the seventeenth century, focusing on evidence of spoken language in Section 4.2. In Section 4.3, the question will be addressed to what degree these spoken language features turn up in the material, so as to assess the degree of orality. First, the corpus and the features will be introduced.

4.1 The corpus and the features

The corpus for the present study consists of personal letters from the western part of the Dutch language area from the 1660s–1670s. The original letters are kept in manuscript form in the National Archives in Kew, London, and transcribed and digitized for historical sociolinguistic research.[3] The complete corpus contains mainly letters from the provinces of Zeeland, including the towns of Middelburg and Vlissingen, and Holland, including Rotterdam, Amsterdam, and smaller towns and villages in the more rural parts of North Holland. As Rotterdam and especially Amsterdam were cities with a vast amount of immigrants, letters to and from these cities were left out for the present study in order to avoid that scribes who lived in these cities but who were actually born in a different dialect area were included and thus falsely attributed to the Holland dialect area. Letters to and from Zeeland and to and from the smaller towns in North Holland (e.g. Alkmaar, Edam, Egmond aan Zee, Enkhuizen, Monnickendam) were used instead. For the present study, we selected 99 Zeeland letters which count about 45,000 words in total and 39 North Holland letters, counting about 18,500 words. For most of the letters, though unfortunately not for all of them, it was established that they were autographs.[4]

Meurman-Solin (2000: 163) notes that "trained and experienced writers […] tend to follow some system of orthography more or less consistently", whereas less-experienced writers "tend more often to resort to spellings that reflect in various ways the pronunciation of words". Therefore, we selected private letters by less-experienced writers in order to ensure that we are actually dealing with a language variety as close to spoken language as possible. The letters were written by or in the name of people with various professions such as soap boiler, sailor, clergyman's servant, shipmaster, merchant, captain, reserve officer candidate. In sum, the letters stem from the lower and middle ranks of society and explicitly not from well-educated upper-class people. An extensive socially stratified corpus is not yet available, therefore rendering a quantitative stratificational approach impossible at this point. However, the selection of letters presently under discussion, amounting to 63,500 words, can be used for research into dialect features and provides a solid base for a first profound exploration of the degree of orality of private letters from the lower and middle ranks of society in general.

Four features were selected that marked, and still strongly mark, the dialects in question. We deemed it to be important that there was not, as far as we know, a seventeenth-century writing tradition in which these spoken language features were systematically represented. If there had been such a tradition in the seventeenth century, it would be impossible to determine whether we are dealing with conventional orthography or written dialect. Some features were in fact commonly

represented in the Middle Dutch period, as we will show in 4.2. The following features were chosen:

1. the representation of reflexes of Germanic *sk*, e.g. in *schrijven* 'to write', with either supraregional ⟨sch⟩ in the onset representing [sχ] or with ⟨sc⟩ or ⟨sk⟩ representing the North Holland pronunciation [sk]
2. the representation of lengthened [a:] out of West-Germanic short vowels (e.g. *water* 'water') as opposed to reflexes of Proto-Germanic *ē* (e.g. *schaap* 'sheep'), and a few other vowels, mainly before [r] (e.g. *daar* 'there'), which are palatal in North Holland (e.g. *geet* 'goes', *deer* 'there'), whereas these have merged with lengthened [a:] in supraregional Dutch (e.g. *gaat* 'goes', *daar* 'there')
3. the realization of the prefix of the past participle with either supraregional *ge-* (e.g. *gekomen* 'come') or, as in North Holland, with reduced *e-* (e.g. *ekomen*) or with a zero prefix (e.g. *komen*)
4. the representation of reflexes of the Germanic laryngeal, either supraregionally with ⟨h⟩ (e.g. *hemel* 'heaven') or without ⟨h⟩, representing the Zeeland pronunciation (e.g. *emel*).

4.2 Evidence of spoken language

The four features are stable variants in present-day varieties of Dutch, spoken in North Holland (features 1, 2, 3) and Zeeland (feature 4). From synchronic and diachronic dialectology (e.g. Schönfeld & Van Loey 1954; Weijnen 1966; Van Bree 1987), it appears probable that they were stable variants in the past as well. Although there was, as far as we know, no seventeenth-century writing tradition representing these features, alphabetic writing systems did offer possibilities for the representation of these features: [sk] may have been written as ⟨sk⟩ or ⟨sc⟩, as was done in the Middle Dutch period, a palatal [a] may have been written with graphemes used for other palatal vowels such as ⟨ee⟩ or ⟨ei⟩, and the prefix of past participles as well as a prevocalic [h] may have been deleted in writing. In other words, scribes had means to write their local dialect. In this section, we will discuss the features in more detail and see if scribes actually wrote their local dialect.

4.2.1 *Sk*

In North Holland, Germanic *sk* is maintained as [sk] whereas most other varieties of Dutch as well as Standard Dutch have [sɣ] or [sχ] in onset position, further reduced to [s] in other positions. In the onset, the post-medieval conventional spelling used to be and still is ⟨sch⟩, as in *school* 'school', pronounced as [sɣo:l] or [sχo:l], though with initial [sk] in North Holland. In non-initial position, the conventional spelling used to be ⟨sch⟩ as well but has been ⟨s⟩ since the mid-twentieth century: *mensch*

'man' and *menschen* 'men' are now spelled *mens* and *mensen* pronounced as [mɛns] and [mɛnsə],[5] respectively. Nowadays, most dialects in North Holland with [sk] in the onset simply have [s] or another non-velar sibilant in medial and final positions as well (De Wulf et al. 2005: Maps 9–14). In the Middle Dutch period, the [sk] pronunciation was still wide-spread in the whole Dutch language area, the ⟨sc⟩-spelling probably being the most common in initial and medial position. In final position, ⟨sch⟩ was very common, though ⟨sch⟩ in other positions already turned up in the thirteenth century (Van Loey 1965: 116–117).

In the letters from North Holland, several instances of spellings were found that point to [sk] pronunciation in non-final positions. Examples, taken from letters sent from Enkhuizen and Monnickendam, are *scrieft* 'writes', *scijnt* 'appears', *scijp* 'ship', *gaescooten* 'shot' (past participle), *bisscop* 'bishop', and *vrienscap* 'friendship'. The spelling ⟨sc⟩ appears to have been in use for the orthographical representation of [sk]. This spelling does not turn up in the Zeeland letters and is therefore interpreted as a direct result of the scribe's local dialect. In other words, the scribes in question put their dialect to paper. It also means that Middle Dutch writing practices, where especially ⟨sc⟩ was commonly used, continued to exist well into the early modern period.

4.2.2 *Palatal [a]*

In many North Holland dialects, there is a phonological opposition of [a:] out of West-Germanic short vowels in open syllables and palatal vowels such as [e:], [ɛ:] or [ɛɪ], mainly out of the originally long Proto-Germanic *ē*. In Standard Dutch, both phonemes have merged in [a:], which appears in *water* 'water' with a lengthened vowel as well as in *schaap* 'sheep' with an originally long vowel. Following Kloeke (1933, 1934), North Holland can be described as a *water-skeep*-area where the first word with its lengthened [a:] resembles Standard Dutch while the second has a different, more palatal vowel (as well as [sk], see feature 1). In supralocal writing systems, both phonemes were commonly written using the symbol ⟨a⟩, either separately, for instance in open syllables, or lengthened by ⟨e⟩ or ⟨a⟩. So we usually find *water* 'water', *schaap* or *schaep* for 'sheep' in the singular and *schapen*, *schaapen* or *schaepen* for 'sheep' in the plural. Note that before [r] and especially before [r] + *dental* consonant, both the short as well as the long [a] (mostly from Germanic **e*) are palatalized in many varieties of Dutch, resulting in variants such as *aarde* and *eerde* 'earth' and *waard* and *weerd* 'worth' (Schönfeld & Van Loey 1954: 65–66). These doublets have existed for a long time, some of them continuing to exist in present-day Dutch. In the Middle Dutch period, the two phonemes were usually not distinguished in writing, following the merger in most southern Dutch dialects (Schönfeld & Van Loey 1954: 91–92).

Kloeke (1934–1935: 12–21) notes that in seventeenth-century farces, lower-class people from Amsterdam and from the rural areas surrounding Amsterdam

were stereotyped by an ⟨ee⟩-spelling for long vowels, mainly out of Proto-Germanic *ē*, which are commonly spelled ⟨ae⟩ in seventeenth-century Dutch and ⟨aa⟩ in Modern Dutch, and which sounds like [a:] in present-day Standard Dutch. Kloeke's examples include *queet* instead of *quaet* 'angry', *leet* for *laet* 'let', *versteen* for *verstaen* 'understand', and *deer* instead of *daer* 'there'. Other characters in the farces were represented by the more common ⟨ae⟩-spelling, thereby suggesting dialectal and/or sociolectal differences in pronunciation.

In the letters from North Holland, similar ⟨ee⟩-spellings were found, revealing the palatal pronunciation of the scribe's local dialect; the letters were sent from Hoorn, Enkhuizen, and Monnickendam. Examples are *geet* instead of *gaet* or *gaat* 'goes', *seet* instead of *saet* or *saat* 'seed'. Before [r] or [r] + dental, we find *deer* instead of *daer* or *daar* 'there', *meert* instead of *maert* or *maart* 'March', and *steert* instead of *staert* or *staart* 'tail'. Again, this appears to be solid evidence that a palatal pronunciation also existed in the seventeenth century. Moreover, scribes used the alphabet for the orthograpical representation of their local dialect. Consequently, writing practices are revealed of which the existence was unknown or unsure until now. Apart from the commonly used variants ⟨ae⟩ and ⟨aa⟩, the lesser known variant ⟨ee⟩ was in use.

4.2.3 *Reduced prefix*

A characteristic of the dialects of North Holland is the reduction of the past participle prefix *ge-* to either *e-* or ø. In the most northern parts, the prefix is absent ('zero prefix'), while the more southern dialects of North Holland have the prefix *e-* (Hol 1941: 250). In many other Dutch varieties as well as in Standard Dutch, the past participle has the prefix *ge-*, as in *gekomen* 'come', *geworden* 'become'. The corresponding North Holland forms would be *komen* or *ekomen* and *worden* or *eworden*. Middle Dutch texts display zero prefixes mainly in participles of verbs with a perfective meaning, such as *worden* 'become', *vonden* 'found', *comen* 'come', *bracht* 'brought' (Schönfeld & Van Loey 1954: 156). Note that strictly speaking these are not *reduced* prefixes: these perfective verbs simply did not have a prefix at that time.

As with the previous feature, rural and/or lower-class people in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature were often stereotyped by the (abundant) use of reduced prefixes (see Rutten 2008 for examples and discussion). Past participles with reduced prefixes were also found in letters from Enkhuizen, North Holland, for instance *haeldt* 'got' and *weest* 'been' with a zero prefix. In the letter with *haeldt* instead of *gehaeldt*, another remarkable form appears: *sondt* 'healthy', corresponding to present-day *gezond*. Here, *ge-* is not the past participle prefix, but still it was analogically deleted, thereby confirming the weak status of the past participle prefix in the spoken language. The reduced or zero prefix being a well-known feature of Middle Dutch manuscripts, it seems that Middle Dutch writing practices were continued into the early modern period.

4.2.4 *H-dropping*

As many dialects from the south and the southwest, the Zeeland dialects are characterized by the absence of the phoneme [h], the reflex of the Germanic laryngeal, as in *emel* instead of *hemel* 'heaven' (cf. De Wulf et al. 2005: Maps 214, 215). Middle Dutch texts, especially those from the southwest of the language area, often display deletion and prosthesis of ⟨h⟩. Schönfeld and Van Loey (1954: 93) note *hic* 'I', which already appeared in eleventh-century Old West Flemish.

In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literature, characters from the South were sometimes stereotyped by *h*-dropping (see Rutten 2008 for some examples and discussion). In the Zeeland letters, four types of orthographical effects were found that were related to the non-phonemic status of [h] in the scribe's dialect. The first and foremost is prevocalic deletion of ⟨h⟩ as in *andt* instead of *handt* 'hand', *adde* instead of *hadde* 'had', *uswrouwe* for *huswrouwe* 'housewife', and *eel* for *heel* 'whole'. Prevocalic deletion of ⟨h⟩ in orthography points to deletion of [h] in pronunciation, so these are clear cases of dialect spelling. The second type is prosthesis of ⟨h⟩ before vowels, for instance *hacht* instead of *acht* 'eight', *houde* for *oude* 'old', and *hueren* for *ueren* 'hours'. Although there is some, especially lexically diffuse, variation in present-day dialects (De Wulf et al. 2005: map 216), meaning that a prevocalic 'hypercorrect' [h] sometimes turns up in spoken language, prosthesis of ⟨h⟩ is also (and maybe mainly) an orthographical phenomenon. In other words, prosthesis of ⟨h⟩ indicates the influence not only of local or dialectal phonology but also of supraregional orthography.

The third and fourth type of orthographical effects related to non-phonemic [h] are the substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩ and of ⟨a⟩ for ⟨h⟩ as in *hpril* instead of *april* 'April', *hl* instead of *al* 'all', *aebben* instead of *hebben* 'have', and *aoe* instead of *hoe* 'how'. As letters of the Dutch alphabet, ⟨a⟩ is pronounced [a:] and ⟨h⟩ is pronounced [ha:], but in case of an *h*-less dialect, ⟨h⟩ is pronounced [a:] as well, with two possible orthographical results representing the same sound. In these cases, scribes did not write their local dialect but there were certain orthographical effects due to the learning of the alphabet on the basis of dialectal *h*-less phonology. As with the other features, Middle Dutch writing practices, where especially ⟨h⟩-deletion and ⟨h⟩-prosthesis are commonly found, appear to have been continued into the early modern period.

4.3 The degree of orality

In Section 4.2, we presented evidence of spoken language from the corpus of seventeenth-century private letters. In the letters from North Holland and Zeeland, unusual spellings were found that were related to dialect features of North Holland and Zeeland respectively, and which seem to represent dialect phonology

in a direct and unproblematic way. Prosthesis of ⟨h⟩, and especially substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩ and of ⟨a⟩ for ⟨h⟩, on the other hand, are complex orthographical reflexes of dialect phonology that can only be related to phonology in an indirect way. Many of the unusual spellings are well-known from Middle Dutch, but not from Early Modern Dutch. This suggests that Middle Dutch writing practices continued well into later periods.

In this section, the question will be addressed *to what extent* the orthographical evidence of spoken language turns up in the corpus. What is the letters' degree of orality with respect to the four features under discussion? After a detailed discussion of the four features, an overview will be given of the degree of orality of the corpus.

4.3.1 *Sk*

The North Holland spelling ⟨sc⟩/⟨sk⟩ was found in six of the 39 letters from North Holland. In the other 33 letters, in total 85% of the corpus, only the supraregional spelling ⟨sch⟩ was found, thus masking the local pronunciation. Unambiguous dialect spellings turned up in only 15% of the letters.

Analyzing the six letters that contained ⟨sc⟩-spellings, the degree of orality again decreases. The number of ⟨sc⟩/⟨sk⟩-spellings was compared with ⟨sch⟩-spellings so as to assess to what extent individual scribes preferred either the North Holland dialect spelling or the supraregional sign. Four scribes who used ⟨sc⟩/⟨sk⟩ clearly preferred ⟨sch⟩ in many other cases. Two scribes preferred ⟨sc⟩/⟨sk⟩. In Table 1, the data from three letters are presented by way of illustration:

Table 1. Orthographical representation of [sk] in three letters from North Holland

	⟨sc⟩ or ⟨sk⟩	Total	⟨sch⟩	Total
1.	vrienscap	1	mensche (2x), geschrieuien, schep, schien, Aenschien, wensche, wiensche	8
2.	scrieft, wenske	2	schepen, schiep (2x), Geschreuen, veruersschen, schap [schaap], mensche, schrieft, wiensche	9
3.	scade, gassce [ganse], scrijve, scijnt, scrijft, gescildert	6	schp [schip]	1

Four letters followed the pattern of letters 1 and 2 in Table 1. Although dialect spellings turned up once or twice, the supraregional spelling ⟨sch⟩ was dominant by far. Note that in the second example letter in Table 1, *scrieft* 'write' and *wenske* 'wish' were found, but also *schrieft* and *wiensche*. Letter 3 in Table 1 exemplifies the preference for ⟨sc⟩, which was attested for only two letters in total.

In the six letters with ⟨sc⟩ or ⟨sk⟩, there were 47 historical-phonological [sk]-positions in total. In 15 cases (32%), scribes used ⟨sc⟩ or ⟨sk⟩. Summing up, this means that in only 15% of the letters unambiguous dialect spellings were found, and within these 15%, only 32% of the possible cases show orthographic representations of dialect phonology. The degree of orality, in other words, appears to be low.

4.3.2 *Palatal [a]*

The relative number of ⟨ee⟩-spellings in the letters from North Holland, revealing a palatal pronunciation, was first established by studying the orthographical representation of lengthened [a:], originally long [a:] (<Proto-Germanic *ē*), and [a] before [r] + dental, in open as well as closed syllables. The general results are in Table 2:

Table 2. Orthographical representation of *a*-like vowels in 39 letters from North Holland (per phoneme)

	lengthened [a:]		**originally long [a:]**		**[a] before r + dental**	
	open syll.	**closed syll.**	**open syll.**	**closed syll.**	**open syll.**	**closed syll.**
⟨**a**⟩	160	4	155	23	–	–
⟨**ae**⟩	17	200	51	531	–	40
⟨**aa**⟩	4	10	1	49	–	–
⟨**ee**⟩	–	–	–	4	–	4

As is clear from Table 2, the number of ⟨ee⟩-spellings was remarkably low. Only 8 instances were found. The graphemes ⟨a⟩, ⟨ae⟩, and ⟨aa⟩ dominate the results by far.

The 8 instances of ⟨ee⟩ were attested in six letters in total (15% of 39 letters). In these six letters,[6] there were no less than 174 instances of originally long vowels and vowels before [r] + dental, which means that in only 5% of the cases the unambiguous dialect spelling ⟨ee⟩ was used.

In closed syllables, the originally long vowel and the vowel before [r] + dental consonant were predominantly spelled ⟨ae⟩, which was the common sign for the lengthened vowel in closed syllables as well.[7] In open syllables, the originally long [a:] was written ⟨a⟩ in the majority of cases, as was the lengthened [a:] in open syllables. In other words, instead of a phonological distribution of orthographical signs, there rather appeared to be a syllabic spelling system with mainly ⟨a⟩ in open and ⟨ae⟩ in closed syllables, regardless of the historical-phonological origin of the *a*-like vowels in question.

In Table 3, the overall data are presented from this syllabic point of view:

Table 3. Orthographical representation of *a*-like vowels in 39 letters from North Holland (per syllable)

	lengthened [a:], originally long [a:], [a] before r + dental			
	open syllable		**closed syllable**	
	N	**%**	**N**	**%**
⟨**a**⟩	315	81	27	3
⟨**ae**⟩	68	18	771	89
⟨**aa**⟩	5	1	59	7
⟨**ee**⟩	–	–	8	1
Total	388	100	865	100

With regard to the different types of [a], the usual spelling in the letters from North Holland was syllabic, not dialectal, with ⟨a⟩ appearing in 81% of the *a*-like vowels in open syllables and ⟨ae⟩ in use in 89% of the *a*-like vowels in closed syllables. This means that scribes, who in their local dialects probably produced palatal vowels phonologically distinct from the lengthened [a:], did not systematically represent the phonological difference in written Dutch. On the contrary, they used a syllabic spelling system corresponding to the supraregional writing practice, which was in line with the phonological merger of the different types of [a] in (once) leading varieties such as dialects from Flanders, Brabant, and South Holland (Schönfeld & Van Loey 1954:91). This is a clear case in which "certain orthographic traditions originating in the southern Netherlands continued to influence the written language in Holland" (Howell 2006:210), as a result of which dialectal distinctions were veiled.

The pattern in Table 3 is a general one from which individual scribes may differ. By way of illustration, the not unusual distribution from one letter is given in Table 4.

Table 4. Orthographical representation of *a*-like vowels in a letter from North Holland

	lengthened [a:]		**originally long [a:]**		**[a] before r + dental**
	open syll.	**closed syll.**	**open syll.**	**closed syll.**	**closed syll.**
⟨**a**⟩	eersame, gevaren		na (2x), swager (2x), genade		
⟨**ae**⟩		aen (6x), plaets		verstaen (2x), saeijtijt, quaedt, gaen, gestaen, naeste, daer, waerom, maer (2x), jaer, waer	aerde
⟨**aa**⟩		caap		saat	

In the letter presented in Table 4, the general pattern dominates, though occasionally divergences appear. In closed syllables, the spelling ⟨aa⟩ is used twice, once for a lengthened [a:] as in *caap* 'cape', once for an originally long [a:] as in *saat* 'seed', which was presumably pronounced with a palatal vowel. Note that one of the examples with ⟨ee⟩-spelling in Section 4.3 was *seet* 'seed'. In all other cases, ⟨ae⟩ was used, regardless of the etymology of the word, as ⟨a⟩ was used in every open syllable. The assumed phonological difference is not represented in the orthography, and the divergences from the general pattern are probably not related to dialectal pronunciation as well, as they concern each phoneme once. Note also that the originally long vowel of *saat* 'seed' appears in *saeijtijt* 'sowing time' as well, but with ⟨ae⟩.

Summing up, the spelling system is predominantly syllabic, not phonemic, and the overall degree of orality is low.

4.3.3 *Reduced prefix*

In the letters from North Holland, the reduced prefix was found in only three of the 39 letters. In the other 36 letters, in total 92% of the corpus, only the supraregional variant with *ge-* appeared, thus masking local morphology. Unambiguous dialect variants turned up in only 8% of the letters. As with the ⟨sc⟩-spellings, the degree of orality even decreased when we analyze in greater detail the three letters in which reduced prefixes were found. In all three letters, one single token of a reduced past participle prefix was attested. These were compared with the common forms with *ge-*, spelled either ⟨ge⟩ or ⟨ghe⟩. The results are shown in Table 5:

Table 5. Orthographical representation of the past participle prefix in three letters from North Holland

	ø or ⟨e⟩	**Total**	**⟨ge⟩/⟨ghe⟩**	**Total**	**Total**
1.	haeldt	1	geuaren, geschrieuien, gedaen, gegroedt	4	5
2.	weest	1	geuare(n) (3x), Geschreuen, gedaen, gekomen (2x), gehadt (2x), geloopen, geweest (2x), gegroedt	13	14
3.	ont eboden	1	gesprooken, ghevaeren, ghesgreven, ghescheven, ghekregen, ghelbeken [gebleken], ghesedt, ghedocht, ghetrocken, ghenomen, ghehouden, ghegeven (2x), ofghekapt, opghehanghen, uiijtgheroeijt, ghemackt	17	18
	Total N	3		34	37
	Total %	8		92	100

As can be seen in Table 5, reduced prefixes are rarities. They turn up in only three letters in the corpus, and in these letters only three tokens were found, representing 8% of the total number of past participles in these letters. It is evident that, in this case, dialectal morphology only plays a minor role.

4.3.4 *H-dropping*

Orthographical effects of non-phonemic [h] appeared in more Zeeland letters than the other features appeared in North Holland letters. The four types of orthographical effects were deletion of ⟨h⟩, prosthesis of ⟨h⟩, substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩, and substitution of ⟨a⟩ for ⟨h⟩. In 63 out of 99 letters, that is, in 64% of the letters from/to Zeeland, at least one token of one of these four possible orthographical effects was found, which is a much higher number than attested for the three North Holland features discussed above. In total, the 63 letters produced 243 tokens, amounting to an average of 3.9 tokens per letter; see Table 6:

Table 6. Orthographical effects of non-phonemic [h] in 99 letters from Zeeland

	Total: 99 letters	
Orthographical effect indicating [h] is not a phoneme		
Number of letters	63 (64%)	
Tokens, total	243	
Tokens, average per letter	3.9	
	Letters	**Tokens**
	99 (100%)[8]	**243 (100%)**
Deletion of ⟨h⟩		
Number of letters with this effect	46 (46%)	
Tokens, total		133 (55%)
Tokens, average per letter		2.9
Prosthesis of ⟨h⟩		
Number of letters with this effect	34 (34%)	
Tokens, total		75 (31%)
Tokens, average per letter		2.2
Substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩		
Number of letters with this effect	8 (8%)	
Tokens, total		26 (11%)
Tokens, average per letter		3.3
Substitution of ⟨a⟩ for ⟨h⟩		
Number of letters with this effect	2 (2%)	
Tokens, total		10 (4%)
Tokens, average per letter		5

As can be seen in Table 6, the two most prominent effects are deletion of ⟨h⟩, which turns up in 46 letters (46% of 99), and prosthesis of ⟨h⟩, which turns up in 34 letters (34%). The other two effects are relatively marginal, appearing in less than 10% of the 99 letters, which is quite similar to the North Holland features discussed above. The prominence of the first two effects is also clear from the token count where deletion and prosthesis make up 55% and 31% of the total number of 243 tokens, respectively. Although deletion and prosthesis seem to be far more prominent dialect features than the three North Holland features, it should be stressed that even these do not appear in over 50% of the letters.

A more fine-grained analysis of the two most prominent features was done on a subcorpus of 29 letters.[9] Deletion of prevocalic ⟨h⟩ was studied in these 29 letters and compared with instances of ⟨h⟩ before vowels consistent with supraregional practice. Of these 29 letters, 14 contained one or more tokens of deletion of prevocalic ⟨h⟩. In general and in accordance with the data in Table 6, letters contained two or three tokens. Three letters contained five or more instances, two of which no less than 10. In either case, the instances of realized ⟨h⟩ before vowels outnumbered the deletions. In Table 7, we present data from two letters by way of illustration. The first letter displays the general pattern of a handful of deletions, while in the second letter the number of deletions is remarkably high, but still lower than the number of ⟨h⟩ before vowel.

Table 7. Prevocalic *h*-deletion in two letters from Zeeland

	ø+V	**Total**	**⟨h⟩+V**	**Total**	**Total**
1.	ant, aest	2	husvrouwe (3x), husvrou, verhopende, het (12x), hebbe (4x), herten, hooren (2x), hij (3x), hooger, ghehadt (2x), heel, heef, hoogh, hoe (2x), hebben, hooghtsen, hope	38	40
2.	ope (3x), oope (2x), adde (3x), alf, aes	10	alhier, hier (2x), hebben (4x), hebbe (5x), het (2x), hoe (2x), heeft (2x), handt, heere, here, hij (2x), husvrouwe	24	34

This comparison of dialectal ø+V and supralocal ⟨h⟩+V was carried out for all 14 letters containing one or more instances of deletion of ⟨h⟩. Zero spellings, unambiguously revealing the spoken language, represent 10% of the phonological options, that is, of words with a vowel which is preceded by [h] in other varieties of Dutch and which is therefore preceded by ⟨h⟩ in the supralocal writing system. Put differently, scribes who deleted ⟨h⟩ now and then, in accordance with their local dialect, still produced prevocalic ⟨h⟩ in 90% of the cases where it could have been

deleted as well and where presumably [h] was in fact not produced in the spoken language; see Table 8:

Table 8. Prevocalic *h*-deletion in 14 letters from Zeeland

	ø+V	⟨h⟩+V	Total
N	44	394	438
%	10	90	100

The direct link between prevocalic deletion of ⟨h⟩ and the spoken language is furthermore suggested by the fact that 37 of the 44 instances of deletion (Table 8) occur before a back vowel (cf. the examples in Table 7), 22 of which before [ɑ], which is produced farthest back in the mouth and phonetically closest to laryngeal [h]. In these 14 letters, 36 words appear with [hɑ] in the onset, and these 22 cases of deletion thus represent a majority of 61%.

A similar analysis was done for the prosthesis of ⟨h⟩. Instances of prosthesis were compared to supraregional zero spellings. Building on the insight that the specific phonetic context may influence these orthographical effects, the prosthetic cases were only compared to words beginning with a similar vowel. For instance, if a scribe wrote *hacht* for *acht* 'eight', this case of prosthetic ⟨h⟩ was only compared to words beginning with [ɑ]. In the 29 letters used for this analysis, 17 cases of prosthesis of ⟨h⟩ were found in 11 letters, each letter containing one, two or three tokens (cf. Table 6). The overall results are presented in Table 9.

Table 9. Prosthesis of ⟨h⟩ in 11 letters from Zeeland

	⟨h⟩+V	ø+V	Total
N	17	150	167
%	10	90	100

As with deletion of ⟨h⟩, scribes who occasionally produced ⟨h⟩+V did not write such a 'hypercorrect' ⟨h⟩ in 90% of the cases, thus following supraregional practice to a very large extent.

4.3.5 *Overview of the degree of orality*

Table 10 sums up the most important results for the four features discussed. The first two columns present the dialect features and the number of letters researched in detail, respectively. The third column gives the number of letters

which actually contain at least one token of the feature in question. The first three features only appear in a minority of the letters, in 15%, 15%, and 8% of the letters from North Holland, respectively. The fourth feature, subdivided into deletion and prosthesis, is more outstanding, but still appears in less than 50% of the letters.[10]

Table 10. The degree of orality

Dialect features	N letters	N letters with the dialect feature	Prominence of the dialect feature
1: *Sk*	39	6 (15%)	32%
2: Palatal [a]	39	6 (15%)	5%
3: Reduced prefix	39	3 (8%)	8%
4a: Deletion of ⟨h⟩	29	14 (48%)	10%
4b: Prosthesis of ⟨h⟩	29	11 (38%)	10%

The fourth column shows the prominence of the feature in the letters of the third column in terms of the frequency of its realization compared to the etymologically possible positions. So when a feature does appear in a letter, it is still in a minority of the etymologically possible positions (32, 5, 8, 10, and 10%, respectively). This kind of prominence was calculated only for the letters with at least one token, since the scribes of these letters demonstrably varied in their language use, admitting local/regional spellings unambiguously related to their spoken language. In all other letters, scribes converged towards supralocal practice in all positions of the respective features. Therefore, the overall degree of orality of the total corpus is much lower than the numbers in the fourth column.

Summing up, the overall picture seems to be that the degree of orality is quite low, though it should be noted that for these four features the degree of orality in published texts of the period is virtually zero. Section 5 deals with these and other interpretational intricacies.

5. Discussion and conclusions

In the corpus of seventeenth-century Dutch private letters from North Holland and Zeeland, local writing practices were found for all four features discussed in this paper. In North Holland, for instance, [sk] was represented by ⟨sc⟩ instead of the supralocal sign ⟨sch⟩, the palatal pronunciation of Proto-Germanic *ē* was

suggested by dialectal ⟨ee⟩-spellings instead of supralocal signs such as ⟨ae⟩ and ⟨aa⟩, and past participles with a reduced prefix instead of supralocal *ge-* were also found. For the letters from Zeeland, we distinguished four orthographical effects of the non-phonemic status of [h] in the Zeeland dialects: prevocalic deletion of ⟨h⟩, prosthesis of ⟨h⟩, and substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩ and vice versa. These are all clear cases of local writing practices, revealing local phonology and morphology and contributing to our knowledge of the spoken language in the past as well as to the different ways it was represented in written language in the northwestern parts of the Netherlands. It also follows that the alphabet provided scribes the means to represent their local dialect and that they were able to do that. Assuming that these localizable writing practices mostly do not turn up in published texts from the time period for which there was a firm supralocal writing tradition, the corpus is very useful and it significantly contributes to our knowledge of historical dialectology and graphematics. Indeed, the letters appear to be closer to spoken language than other sources.

In this paper, however, the approach was mainly historical-sociolinguistic in that we focused not so much on the presence of dialect features in itself as on the degree to which these appear in the corpus. In comparison with supraregional, non-localizable spellings, the dialect spellings constitute a minority. While there certainly is a valuable amount of orality in the letters in the corpus, the overall degree of orality is low with respect to the features under discussion. Instead of local spelling, we find supralocal orthographical leveling. In the case of the long [a:], the variation was mainly linked to open and closed syllables, implying that a writing system based on the syllable rather than on the phoneme offers the best explanation of the distributional pattern. Without getting caught in the trap of the standard language ideology, it should be concluded that in most cases and in most letters scribes converged towards supralocal writing practices and they did so to a far greater extent than they represented local dialect features in their writing. Even the many examples related to *h*-dropping, still a very stable feature of Zeeland dialects, constitute only a small minority in comparison to the overwhelmingly large number of supralocal spellings, despite the fact that the alphabet provided solid means to represent local dialect in written language, as the examples in Section 4.3 amply demonstrate. So, when people switched from spoken to written language, they also tended to switch from local oral to supralocal writing practices. Paraphrasing Mihm (1998; 'intendiertes Hochdeutsch') and Vandenbussche (2002; 'intended standard language'), we conclude that, in general, scribes did not aim to write their local dialect but employed an *intended supraregional variety* instead and were, to a large extent, perfectly able to do so.

This conclusion is all the more striking since we are dealing with private letters from lower and middle-class scribes, many of them presumably lacking thorough education. Literacy rates in the Netherlands were notoriously high, with estimates of two-thirds of the middle ranks being able to write around the middle of the seventeenth century (Frijhoff & Spies 1999: 236), but now we can establish quantitatively as well as qualitatively the immensely strong power of supralocal convergence in this period in the northwestern part of the Netherlands, even on the level of private correspondence by lower and middle-class scribes. It goes without saying that any scholar working on the history of Dutch should be aware of the fact that an isomorphic interpretation of the relation of graphemes and phonemes cannot be taken for granted. Evidence of spoken language notwithstanding, people did not write 'in pure dialect' (cf. Section 3).

Still, further research remains necessary for a full understanding of the relationship between phonology, morphology, and writing systems. A corpus containing more letters than the 138 used for this study might, of course, lead to different results. We are looking forward to enlarging the corpus and in particular to developing a well-balanced and representative socially stratified corpus, incorporating variables such as social class, gender, and profession, as a social distribution of the variants is far from improbable. Evidence of spoken language may mainly turn up in the letters of certain social groups which only a more fine-grained analysis on a stratified corpus may reveal. In this respect, the issue of autograph letters and letters written by someone other than the sender is in need of a detailed discussion as well. It remains to be seen, however, if there are any social groups in which the degree of orality rises to over 50% for a vast amount of features, thereby justifying an interpretation of the language in these letters as predominantly dialectical.

One may also wonder whether the features discussed in this paper were perhaps markers or even stigmatizing features of the dialects in question (cf. Errington 1985; Hickey 2000) and precisely therefore hardly present in the corpus. Note that at least three of the four features have been used for stereotyping in contemporary literature, suggesting that these features were already suppressed in the spoken language of the time. If that is the case, non-realization of these still stable dialect features could also mean that scribes were aware of this variation in the spoken language, or even suppressed the features in their spoken language. And if that is true, non-realization would not merely be the result of convergence towards supralocal writing practices but also to supralocal speech – in which case scribes did in fact put their spoken language to paper. Furthermore, one could argue that less salient dialect features might be present to a far higher degree, thereby increasing the degree of orality. These are also important matters for further research. Still, if their status as marker or stigma reduced the prominence of the features in the letter corpus, that would only strengthen the conclusion that the scribes converged towards supralocal usage, be it written or spoken.

Notes

1. We would like to thank the editors and two anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on an earlier draft. The research was carried out at Leiden University within the research programme *Letters as loot. Towards a non-standard view on the history of Dutch* (see www.brievenalsbuit.nl), funded by The Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

2. The first fully-fledged grammar of Dutch was the *Twe-spraack vande Nederduitsche letterkunst* 'Dialogue on the grammar of Dutch', anonymously published in 1584; see Dibbets (1985).

3. The letters are part of a letter corpus which is being built at Leiden University; see Footnote 1 for information on the project.

4. See Nobels and Van der Wal (2009) on the problem of how to disentangle autographs from letters written by someone other than the sender. At this point (January 2011), 22 of the 39 letters to/from North-Holland are established autographs, and 62 of the 99 letters to/from Zeeland. In the case of insufficient writing skills, letter senders may commonly have turned to family or friends for help. It will be safe to assume that the actual scribe came from the same dialect area as the sender of the letter so that research into dialect features remains feasible.

5. Final ⟨n⟩ in verbs and plural nouns is not pronounced in many varieties of Dutch including Standard Dutch.

6. These are not the same six letters that contained spellings revealing [sk] pronunciation (feature 1). Those six are linked to the towns of Enkhuizen and Monnickendam. The six letters with ⟨ee⟩ are linked to Enkhuizen, Monnickendam, and Hoorn.

7. In this period, lengthening by doubling the original vowel, as in ⟨aa⟩, was a minor variant, which would, however, become the dominant spelling during the eighteenth century, see Vosters, Rutten and van der Wal (2010).

8. Note that the percentages in this column do not add up to 100%, since letters may contain more than one of the possible four orthographical effects.

9. This research was in fact carried out first as a test case on the basis of the then available material, hence the somewhat awkward number of 29. The research on all 99 letters (cf. Table 6) was done afterwards, not revealing any striking differences. As we are still in the process of building the corpus, there will eventually be more than 99 Zeeland letters.

10. Prosthesis (as substitution of ⟨h⟩ for ⟨a⟩ and vice versa) should not be interpreted as if it were a stable dialect feature. On the contrary, it is an occasional, 'hypercorrect', orthographic result of the non-phonemic status of [h]. Therefore, the numbers are only indicative.

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