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Local and international perspectives on the historical sociolinguistics of Dutch

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Abstract

This paper introduces the field of historical sociolinguistics and gives a brief impression of the advances made during the last three decades. Furthermore, the relationship between local and international perspectives is stressed, while discussing the papers in the present *Taal & Tongval* issue. Finally, new research perspectives and the importance of using original archive sources come to the fore.

Keywords: historical sociolinguistics, corpora, standardisation, private letters, Dutch language history from below

1. Introduction

Since the *Taal & Tongval* journal was launched in 1949, its subtitle has changed a few times. After almost thirty years, the original subtitle “Tijdschrift voor de studie van de Nederlandse volks- en streektaalen” [= Journal for the study of Dutch vernacular and regiolects/ dialects] was replaced by “Tijdschrift voor dialectologie” [= Journal for dialectology], a subtitle stressing the discipline instead of the research object. The research object again came to the fore in the “Tijdschrift voor taalvariatie” [= Journal for language variation], the subtitle change of 2001 which implied covering a larger field than only regional variation. In recent years this wider scope has become clear in the editorial statement, in which *Taal & Tongval* is presented as a journal devoted to the scientific study of all types of language variation in the Netherlands and Flanders, in neighbouring areas and in languages related to Dutch. This wider scope is also reflected in the present

Taal & Tongval issue, which comprises papers on sociohistorical language variation in the Low Countries and nearby countries. This thematic issue is the fruit of the colloquium on *Local and international perspectives on the historical sociolinguistics of Dutch/ Binnen- en buitengaats perspectieven op de historische sociolinguïstiek van het Nederlands*, which took place on 9 December 2012 at the Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde (KANTL) in Ghent.¹

Sociohistorical linguistic research of Dutch has been carried out over the years by two main research groups which complement each other in time and in the main type of research material. The Brussels research group (Vrije Universiteit Brussel), directed firstly by Roland Willemyns, later by Wim Vandenbussche, has a long and fruitful tradition of research on nineteenth-century, mainly (but not exclusively) administrative documents written in Flanders. The Leiden research group (Leiden University), directed by Marijke van der Wal, concentrates on ego-documents, private letters in particular, from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which are at the core of the *Letters as Loot* research programme. We, the invited organisers of the 2012 colloquium and editors of the present issue, have participated continuously in the international scholarly network of historical sociolinguists. We have witnessed the impressive advances in historical sociolinguistics, of which we will give a brief impression to inform researchers who are less familiar with the historical sociolinguistic field.

2. Advances in historical sociolinguistics

Three decades passed between the theoretical and methodological reflection by Suzanne Romaine in her *Socio-Historical Linguistics: Its Status and Methodology* (1982) and the publication of *The Handbook of Historical Sociolinguistics* (2012) by Hernández-Campoy & Conde-Silvestre (eds). This highly recommended handbook gives an excellent overview of the methods, developments and achievements in the thriving discipline of historical sociolinguistics. Research on different types of variation has been conducted across various languages and various periods of time. We mention research of genre variation and the construction of multi-genre corpora such as the *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*. Regional variation used to be dealt with by dialectology only, but was also incorporated in historical sociolinguistics (cf. Elspaß 2005). Research on social, gender and age variation was carried out in corpora enriched with metadata of the text writers, such as the *Helsinki Corpus of Early English Correspondence* and the Dutch *Letters as Loot* corpus.

Apart from Labovian research on groups of language users, individuals and their relations are at the core of social network analysis initiated by the Milroys and elaborated for historical research by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade (Leiden University) and others. What the handbook also shows is the interdisciplinary character of historical sociolinguistics with its strong connection not only with modern sociolinguistics, but also with corpus linguistics, philology, dialectology, discourse studies, etc. (cf. Nevalainen & Raumolin-Brunberg 2012: 27). Looking back, we see three decades of enormous productivity and challenging international research.

What are mostly considered as external characteristics of a paradigm, also apply to the field of historical sociolinguistics: researchers are indeed a visible group of scholars, sharing a similar scientific training, presenting research at specialist conferences and publishing in specialist journals. The Historical Sociolinguistic Network (HiSoN), which was launched by Stephan Elspaß, Nils Langer, Joachim Scharloth and Wim Vandenbussche at the *Language History from Below* conference at the University of Bristol in 2005, has organised scientific training in the successful HiSoN Summer Schools for PhD students and other young researchers. HiSoN has stimulated many specialist international conferences, the most recent being the *Touching the Past. (Ego-)documents in a historical and linguistic perspective* conference at Leiden University in 2011 and the *Historical Discourses on Language and Power* conference at the University of Sheffield in 2014. Publications covering a wide range of languages and a time span of many centuries, appeared in various journals, and books were published by diverse publishers. The maturity of the discipline also becomes evident from new publication opportunities. Two book series by prestigious international publishers have been started: the Peter Lang series *Historical Sociolinguistics. Studies on Language and Society in the Past* under the editorship of Nils Langer, Stephan Elspaß, Joseph Salmons and Wim Vandenbussche, and the John Benjamins *Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics* series under the editorship of Marijke van der Wal and Terttu Nevalainen. Apart from the internet journal *Historical Sociolinguistics and Sociohistorical Linguistics*, edited since 2000 by Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade, the new *Journal of Historical Sociolinguistics* in print will be launched by De Gruyter in 2015, under the editorship of Anita Auer, Catharina Peersman, Gijbert Rutten and Rik Vosters.

It really is harvesting time for the historical sociolinguistics discipline and it is therefore also an excellent moment to show in this special issue how the historical sociolinguistic research of Dutch is embedded in the

international debate and how Dutch research contributes to these discussions and achievements.

3. Local and international perspectives

Two of the following papers, those by Trudgill and Joby, focus on the role of Dutch abroad, in particular in Britain; two others, one by Rutten & Van der Wal and one by Nobels, deal with Dutch in the Netherlands, while the paper by Lodge presents the comparative perspective of a French metropolis.

In *The role of Dutch in the development of East Anglian English*, Peter Trudgill (University of Agder) examines how Dutch speakers had a profound influence on the morphology of East Anglian English. This influence dates from a period of almost two centuries in which Norwich, the second largest city after London, hosted a large community of Flemish and Walloon immigrants, approximately 40% of its inhabitants. This made Norwich the scene of considerable language contact during many generations which, however, left hardly any French or Dutch traces in the local English at the lexical level. From a sociolinguistic perspective, this does not come as a surprise, since English natives were always in a majority, and there was no intergenerational break in transmission between parents and children. However, there is another, more fundamental morphological feature of the East Anglian dialect, i.e. third-person singular zero, which, as Trudgill convincingly demonstrates, is the result of French and Dutch linguistic influence, although in a much more indirect way. His detailed sociolinguistic analysis shows that the large minority of immigrants were able to introduce the simplified third-person singular zero feature into the East Anglian dialect by arriving at a time when the present tense verb system was already in a state of flux, with variability between the original *-th* form and the newer *-s* form. It was in a situation of three-way competition between the older *-th* form, the newer *-s* form and the foreigners' zero form that the typologically simpler $\emptyset$ was successful in the late 16th century.

Immigrants from the Low Countries were found not only in East Anglia, but also in other regions of Britain. Chris Joby (Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Seoul) gives an initial overview of the largely unknown use of Dutch in early modern Britain in his article *Een korte inleiding tot de sociolinguïstische geschiedenis van het Nederlands in vroegmodern Groot-Brittannië*. He distinguishes three groups of Dutch speakers or writers: immigrants and their offspring, temporary visitors from the Low Countries and Britons who learnt Dutch for various reasons. Their use of Dutch was related to the

private domain, to work and to other social contexts, of which the church was the major one. Joby's inventory of the available Dutch sources leads to particular research questions and gives an impression of future research possibilities.

The metropolis as a cultural and linguistic melting pot and the locus of dialect contact was and is a fascinating habitat for linguists. In *Codification and reallocation in seventeenth-century Paris*, Anthony Lodge (University of St. Andrews) concentrates on both the process of codification and what was referred to by Trudgill (1986) as reallocation. Putting the process of codification in French within its broad sociolinguistic context, he clearly demonstrates that this process was conditioned by the social tensions endemic in a city the size of Paris. A grammarian such as Vaugelas is shown to reflect usage rather than setting the highest social value (*bon usage*) variants. He based his prescriptions on his own observations of real-life usage and these values thus emerged from a consensus directly or indirectly involving the whole community. The usefulness of Vaugelas' work for the readers of his *Remarques* was that it informed them about the social value ascribed to sensitive sociolinguistic variables and about the place to which each belonged within the socio-stylistic spectrum. The development in the speech of the Paris metropolis is traditionally considered in terms of top-down standardisation, but Lodge preferably sees it in terms of dialect mixing and koineisation. Many of Vaugelas' *Remarques* are shown to reflect one of the processes involved in koineisation labelled as 'reallocation of variants': the community accommodates linguistic variants left over from earlier instances of dialect contact within its overall scheme of socio-stylistic variation.

The papers by Nobels and by Rutten & Van der Wal examine the *Letters as Loot* corpus of Dutch private letters from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, confiscated by the English during times of warfare.

In *Small but tough. Diminutive suffixes in seventeenth-century Dutch private letters*, Judith Nobels examines different diminutive suffixes and their many variants from both a regional and a social perspective. To be able to conduct this research, she also addresses the problem of spelling forms that obscure the difference between the phonological types of the suffixes [i] and [jə], the present-day substandard and standard diminutives respectively. While according to traditional Dutch language history the diminutive suffix [i] occurred for the first time in the spoken Dutch of the seventeenth century, the data from the *Letters as Loot* corpus show that the [i] suffix is found in seventeenth-century writings, and is even the most frequently used variant. In terms of region, the [i] suffix appears to be most

strongly linked to North Holland and in particular to the city of Amsterdam, while in a social respect, the [i] variant is most popular with women and members of the lower social classes. Nobels also demonstrates that the palatalised variants (present-day standard suffix [jə]) spread from North Holland southwards to Zeeland, with South Holland as a clear transitional region. In Zeeland, the original [kə] suffix remained popular. Making use of new material on 'language history from below' thus appears to shed new light on the rise, spread and use of diminutives.

In *Change, contact and conventions in the history of Dutch*, Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke van der Wal (both Leiden University) examine phonological and morpho-syntactic phenomena of variation and change in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Dutch, reviewing the importance of two types of explanation: dialect contact and supralocalisation. In their first case study on long *e*'s in Zeeland they discuss the degree to which ego-documents such as the confiscated letters resemble the contemporary spoken language. Although particular seventeenth-century results appear to show an orthographic distinction in accordance with the phonemic distinction, this does not prove a straightforward representation of local dialect phonology in spelling. The strong supralocal writing tradition was based on the same phonological difference, and, moreover, morphological and syllabic writing systems were increasingly found; these findings stress the importance of writing conventions and supralocalisation. In their second case study they evaluate to what extent language change can be shown to result from dialect contact, choosing the change of bipartite to single negation which has been claimed to be promoted by dialect contact. If dialect contact played a decisive role, the metropolis of Amsterdam, which attracted by far the most immigrants, would have been progressive compared to the other regions. However, the results of the *Letters as Loot* corpus show a steady pattern of regional north-to-south diffusion: Amsterdam is less progressive than North Holland, and more progressive than South Holland. Thus the *Letters as Loot* sociohistorical linguistic approach not only gives a view of linguistic change, but also clarifies the value of particular explanations.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

When taking stock of the state of sociohistorical linguistics of Dutch, both new research perspectives and further opportunities for international collaboration come to the fore.

The fruitful collaboration between scholars (including Nobels, Rutten, Simons and Vosters) describing the social stratification of Northern and Southern varieties of Dutch from the seventeenth century onwards, has repeatedly produced results that favour a fundamentally new approach towards Modern Dutch language history proper. The traditional image of a divided linguistic heritage from 1585 onwards has percolated into virtually all reference works on Dutch language historiography, to the point where the development of 'Dutch in Flanders' from the seventeenth century onwards is treated as a footnote in a grand narrative of Hollandic standardisation. Yet, the linguistic reality found in the archive sources used by the editors of the present issue and their collaborators strongly suggests that there was a continuous flow of on-going contact between Northern and Southern Dutch, defying the view of isolated linguistic developments in both parts of the language community. It is our impression and conviction that much is to be gained from an integrated history of Modern Dutch (post 1600), in which the description and analysis of original texts from all social strata and functional domains is given preference over the traditional imagery of Northern linguistic uniformity and Southern decay (and other myths related to standard language ideologies).

Equally intriguing is the matter of linguistic contact between local varieties of Dutch and other languages in the context of migration during and after the Early Modern period. Dutch in England, as discussed by Trudgill and Joby in this issue, is a case in point, but the record of detailed historical descriptions of Dutch 'extra muros' remains bleak. While we know that foreign archives preserve an abundance of both ego-documents and other sources written in Dutch and testifying to the presence of migrants and/or colonisers, the systematic compilation of corpora with *Auswandererbriefe* remains one of the foremost desiderata for the study of Dutch language contact and language change from the sixteenth century onwards.

The role of the metropolis as the locus for language change – and the accompanying discussion on the Stadt-Land opposition in sociolinguistic developments – was not entirely neglected in recent work on the social history of Dutch. Given the increasing digital access to large collections of historical language data, however, Lodge's example of a sociolinguistic history of Paris could serve as a blueprint for similar studies of the linguistic legacy of Dutch and Flemish 'metropolitan' towns. Such an endeavour could facilitate a Dutch sub-chapter in the budding attempts to create a European forum for the integration of historical linguistics and sociolinguistics in the study of language in the metropolis, currently led by scholars from the LANCHART team at University of Copenhagen.

It is worth pointing out, finally, that the current momentum of 'harvesting time' for historical sociolinguistics also allows for an assessment of the international dimension of two decades of research on Dutch language history from below. Various on-going projects beyond the Dutch language area have referred explicitly to this young tradition from the Low Countries when designing research plans on pluricentricity, language contact and sociolinguistic stratification. This includes work as diverse as Icelandic projects on 'language change and linguistic variation in nineteenth-century Icelandic and the emergence of a national standard', a Finnish research cluster on 'reading and writing from below: toward a new social history of literacy in the Nordic sphere during the long nineteenth century', and even British work on 'the history of the French language in Russia'.

What transpires in these neighbouring projects as one of the fundamental keystones of the work done in Leiden, Brussels and elsewhere, is the constant concern with 'going back to the sources', and with giving preference to linguistic reality over generally accepted accounts of language history. This approach has allowed for a careful reappraisal of a language history including writers from all layers of society, true to the motto *De tael is gansch het Volk* (Prudens van Duyssche) which hovers over the Academy hall in Ghent in which the *Taal & Tongval* colloquia are held and where the contributions in this issue were first presented.

Leiden-Brussels, February 2014

Note

1. At the one-day Taal & Tongval colloquium, papers were given by Peter Trudgill, Chris Joby, Anthony Lodge, Gijsbert Rutten, Rik Vosters and Jacques van Keymeulen. The present issue comprises four of these papers and an additional contribution by Judith Nobels.

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