(Extra)Ordinary letters: A view from below on seventeenth-century Dutch
Nobels, J.M.P.

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

Universiteit Leiden

The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/20900 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation.

Author: Nobels, Judith Maria Petrus
Title: (Extra)Ordinary letters. A view from below on seventeenth-century Dutch
Issue Date: 2013-05-21

Chapter 10. Rich rewards

In this dissertation it has been shown that the new *Letters as Loot* corpus can be used successfully to examine the effect of social and regional factors on language use in seventeenth-century Dutch. Thereby, it offers a look at the history of Dutch from a whole new perspective. The rich rewards of the *Letters as Loot* corpus will be described in §10.1 of this final chapter and suggestions for extending the corpus and for further research will be given in §10.2. The final conclusions will be drawn in §10.3

10.1. The results

In §10.1.1 I will briefly discuss the results of each case study. In §10.1.2, I will discuss the general patterns that have been detected throughout the different case studies and the general conclusions to which these patterns can be linked.

10.1.1. The case studies

Forms of address
The case study of forms of address is probably the case study which offers the best view on the amount of linguistic variation that can be present in the seventeenth-century letters. The seventeenth-century private letters do not only contain epistolary forms of address – such as *ul* and *UE* – but also others, such as *gij* and *u,* and the form of address *jij*, which is associated with spoken Dutch. Social class, gender, letter type and the relationship between the sender and the addressee have all been proved to influence the choice of forms of address to some extent.

Very striking is the conclusion that women in general behaved much like members of the lower social classes (men and women alike), while men in general behaved more like members of the upper social classes in general. Forms of address that were not typical of letters (*gij* and *jij*) and the older form *ul* were used more frequently in letters written by women and by members of the lower classes, while the newer epistolary form of address (*UE*) was used more frequently in letters written by men and by members of the upper social classes.

Reflexivity and reciprocity
There are a few questions pertaining to reflexivity and reciprocity in seventeenth-century Dutch which linguists would like to see answered. The

questions concern the reflexive pronoun *zich* and the reciprocal pronouns *elkaar* and *mekaar*. Where did the third person reflexive pronoun *zich* come from and why did it dethrone the older reflexive pronouns *hem/haar/hun*? Why did *zich* become the standard Dutch reciprocal pronoun? Basically, the same questions can be asked for the reciprocal pronoun *elkaar*: where did it come from and why did it dethrone the original pronoun *mekaar*? Unfortunately, the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus could not provide us with final answers to these questions, due to the fact that these reflexive and reciprocal pronouns do not occur very frequently in letters. However, some conclusions could be drawn.

As far as *zich* is concerned, the data show no evidence for the existing hypothesis that it was brought into seventeenth-century Dutch in the spoken language of Southern immigrants. The spread of *zich* in the region of Zeeland seems to have been a change from above, since it occurred in official texts before it started to be used in letters. Furthermore, it could be established that *elkaar* was not used in the language of immediacy of upper-middle- and upper-class writers in a period in which it was used by upper-class literary authors, such as Vondel, Huygens and Hooft. This strongly confirms the hypothesis that *elkaar* was introduced into Dutch by members of upper-class literary circles.

Negation

While the language-internal and regional factors influencing the change from bipartite negation to single negation in Dutch have been examined in detail in the existing literature, the possible influence of language-external factors, such as social factors, has received less attention. The sub-corpus of seventeenth-century private autographs makes it possible to examine the influence of these social factors as well. The main conclusions of this chapter are that the change from bipartite to single negation occurred first in North Holland and did only later occur in the provinces south of North Holland. In these southern provinces, South Holland and Zeeland, members of the upper social classes were quicker to pick up the use of single negation: the change from bipartite to single negation seemed to be a change from above in this area of the Dutch Republic. Again, women in these regions behaved more like members of the lower social classes in general, using bipartite negation more often than men and members of the upper social classes.

Apocope of final schwa

Apocope of final schwa is another change that spread from the North to the South. However, this time, the sub-corpus of private autographs showed that men of the upper classes in North Holland used the schwa-ending in first

person singular verbs more often than men of the lower classes: apocope of final schwa was a change from below in this region. Not only social class turned out to be a factor of influence on the spread of apocope; gender was an important factor as well: women both in the southern and in the northern regions under investigation were quicker to pick up on schwa-apocope than men. A third interesting point is the lack of influence of the stylistic context: verb forms in a formulaic context did not clearly show less apocope of the schwa than verb forms in a non-formulaic context. The fourth point of interest was a language-internal factor: the phonetic quality of the ending of the stem of a verb could either promote [t] or inhibit [d] schwa-apocope. However, the phonetic context following the first person singular verb form did not influence the presence or absence of a final schwa.

Diminutives
Examining the distribution of the many diminutive suffixes in seventeenth-century private letters proved to be a challenge, because of the fact that one particular spelling, namely <ie>, could be interpreted phonologically in two different ways, as [jə] or as [i]. To solve this problem, a careful analysis of the spelling habits of each letter writer was carried out. The lower the social class of the letter writers examined, the less frequently this approach was successful, and the approach was also less successful for female letter writers. This result is in itself quite meaningful: it illustrates that letter writers of the upper social classes and men were more consistent in using a particular spelling to indicate a particular phonological element.

Region was a factor substantially influencing the distribution of the different types of diminutive suffixes, the diminutive suffix [kə] being clearly more present in the most southern province under investigation, Zeeland. The private autographs of North Holland that were examined for influence of the social factors of gender, social class and age showed the following results. The [kə]-suffix was identified as a suffix more typical of written Dutch than of spoken Dutch and was found most often in the writings of well-educated people, mostly members of the upper class. For [jə] and [i] the data were less decisive, however they did suggest that the [jə]-suffix was used more frequently by members of the upper classes, while [i] was used more often by members of the lower classes. This result could explain the situation in present-day Dutch, where [jə] is the standard diminutive suffix, while [i] is found more often in colloquial speech or in dialects.

The genitive and alternative constructions
The synthetic genitive construction was thought to be as good as extinct in seventeenth-century spoken Dutch, but still alive in the written Dutch of the

period. This was confirmed very neatly by the corpus of private letters: the genitive construction almost only occurred in parts of the letters that required an elevated style or in formulae, and almost never occurred in parts of the letters which had a more spontaneous character. The more the language use in the letters leaned towards the language of distance and was thus more typical of writing, the more often the genitive occurred. The more the language use in the letters leaned towards everyday language and was more typical of spoken language, the less often the genitive occurred.

In neutral contexts, the social factors of gender and social class did not influence the distribution of the genitive and alternative constructions to a large extent, but one language-internal factor did: the length of the constituents involved. The relative length of the possessor and the possessum a in the construction influenced the choice for a prenominal or a postnominal construction. When the possessor was longer than the possessum, the postnominal *van*-construction, in which the long possessor was placed after the possessum, occurred more frequently. This suggests that the general short-before-long principle also applied to genitival constructions in seventeenth-century Dutch.

10.1.2. General conclusions
Now that the conclusions of the different case studies have been discussed separately, there is room for a general discussion on the findings of this dissertation and for answering the question of what these findings mean for historical sociolinguistics, for the language history from below and for the history of Dutch in particular. I will present these general conclusions in the form of questions and answers. Questions 1 and 2 pertain to language variation found in the seventeenth-century letters in general. Questions 3 and 4 examine the relationship between variation in language use and some of the external factors: social class, gender, and region. Finally, the answer to question 5 reveals what is so unique about the conclusions of this dissertation.

1. What does this first large-scale linguistic investigation of seventeenth-century private letters reveal about language variation in the seventeenth century?

In the introduction, the acknowledged linguistic profile of seventeenth-century Dutch has been presented. Briefly put, Dutch in the seventeenth century is believed to have been largely standardised, while the process of micro-selection had not been completed yet. This dissertation has confirmed this idea to a certain extent: on the one hand it is clear that the letters in the corpus have not been written in the local dialects of the letter writers, but on

the other hand this dissertation has also established that a large extent of morphological and syntactic variation was present in the language use of the letter writers from the corpus.

My research into this variation has revealed that the acceptance of certain standard Dutch phenomena, such as the reciprocal pronoun *elkander/elkaar*, took place later than presumed. According to earlier research, the overtaking of *malkander/mekander* by *elkander* took place in the seventeenth century, which was illustrated by the work of the literary author Vondel, who solely used *elkander* from 1650 onwards. The seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus, however, has shown that *elkander* was almost never used in the everyday language of letter writers from the middle and upper classes, not even in the youngest letters stemming from 1672. Similar conclusions could also be drawn for the single negation: while in earlier studies the literary authors Hooft and Vondel were shown to use single negation exclusively in their writings from about 1640 onwards and while single negation appeared to be quite dominant in the West of the Dutch Republic around 1650, 20 years later, the letter writers in the corpus still used bipartite negation in about 35% of the cases.

Of course, these differences between the results from the corpus and earlier research are related to the fact that language changes take place at different moments in time and at different rates in different text types and with different people. Since it is the first time that the language use in seventeenth-century Dutch private letters written by people from all sorts of social backgrounds is examined in detail, the results from these examinations are bound to be different from the results presented in the literature up to now which is mainly based on printed (literary) texts or administrative documents which were typically produced by members of the upper classes.

2. To what extent can we witness traces of spoken Dutch in the seventeenth-century Letters as Loot *corpus?*

Throughout the dissertation, the data have confirmed that the private letters under examination contain both language phenomena typical of spoken language and phenomena typical of written language. The fact, for instance, that region is an important factor of influence on the distribution of different types of negation, on the apocope of the schwa, and on the distribution of different diminutive suffixes suggests that for these linguistic phenomena the variation in the written Dutch is closely connected to variation in spoken Dutch. However, this does not mean that all variation found in writing can be linked directly to variation in spoken Dutch.

The seventeenth-century letter writers in the corpus were of course aware of the fact that they were writing and of the fact that there are

linguistic phenomena typical of written Dutch. Proof of this can be seen in the use of forms of address, for instance. The epistolary forms of address, *ul* and *UE*, are very popular with letter writers from all social classes: per social class they were used in about 50% or more of the cases. If private letters were just a mere reflection of spoken Dutch in writing, this large presence of typically written forms would be unlikely. Another example of variation that does not immediately reflect the variation of the spoken language is the case of schwa-apocope. I have shown that the presence of schwa-apocope in the seventeenth-century letters was not influenced by the phonetic context following the verb form, while it is very likely that the phonetic context did influence the presence or absence of a schwa in spoken Dutch.

Although the private letters are likely to contain more elements of spoken Dutch than, for instance, printed literary texts and thus may offer a more reliable picture of variation in the everyday Dutch of the seventeenth century, it is certainly not the case that they consist entirely of spoken Dutch written down literally. Deciding if and to what extent language use in the seventeenth-century private letters reflects historical spoken Dutch is a precarious affair and should be undertaken for each linguistic phenomenon separately and cautiously: one always has to bear in mind that writing is very different from speaking.

3. What is the distribution of different linguistic variants across the different groups of language users? In other words: how are the linguistic variables related to region, class and gender?

As far as region is concerned, a clear pattern is discernable in the case studies described in this dissertation: the newer linguistic variants occurred more often in North Holland, the most northern part of the area under examination, and the older linguistic variants occurred more often in Zeeland, the most southern part. Single negation, for instance, occurred in almost 90% of the cases in North Holland, while it took up just about 50% of the cases in Zeeland, as shown in chapter 6. The older bipartite negation was thus still standing quite strong in the most southern province under investigation. The same applies to the spread of schwa-apocope: the newer first person singular verb forms without final schwa occurred far less often in Zeeland (in 23% of the cases) than in North Holland (71%). Lastly, the older diminutive suffix –*ke* occurred in more than 30% of the cases in letters written by people from Zeeland, while it was less popular in North Holland (occurring in only 4% of the cases in the city of Amsterdam and in 10% of the cases in the rest of the province).

The position of South Holland varies: sometimes the distribution of the linguistic variables in South Holland resembled the distribution in North

Holland, such as in the case study of schwa-apocope. However, the data for South Holland could also resemble those for Zeeland: bipartite negation was present in about 50% of the cases in letters linked to either of the provinces. South Holland thus appeared to be a transitional region, the linguistic profile of which fitted neatly in between that of Zeeland and North Holland. This was very obvious in the case of the diminutive suffixes: the many –*ge* suffixes in South Holland seemed to form the transition between the popular –*ke* suffix of Zeeland and the popular [jə] and [i] suffixes in North Holland.

The social variables class and gender have proved to be important variables. The nature of their influence depended strongly on the nature of the language variable of interest and could also vary per region. For terms of address, for instance, the variant *UE* – which had found its origin in the chancery – was more popular with the upper social classes, while it was almost never used by letter writers of the two lower social classes. However, as far as the spread of schwa-apocope in Holland was concerned – a change that probably took place in spoken Dutch first – the upper classes were the last groups to accept the younger variant without the schwa. For negation, women held on to the old bipartite negation longer than men, but then again women were quicker than men in picking up on schwa-apocope.

One particular link between gender and social class deserves special attention, because it reappeared several times: in the distribution of forms of address, negation, and diminutive suffixes, female writers in general behaved similar to letter writers from the lower social classes in general, while male writers in general behaved similar to letter writers from the upper social classes in general. In practice, this meant that the language use of men from the upper social classes stood out as different, as was shown in §4.3.7. As explained in chapter 2, this phenomenon is linked to the level of education and writing experience: men from the upper social classes were usually better educated than their female peers and members form the lower classes. Furthermore, they probably had more writing experience, given the fact that many of them were involved in business and had to maintain a large network of friends and business partners. Their being more 'writing-oriented' than members of the lower classes or than women in general clearly had its impact on their language use in private letters.

This link between gender and social class shows that the influence of these variables on the distribution of certain linguistic phenomena can sometimes be of an indirect nature. Writers' level of education and writing experience can sometimes be the prime factor influencing the extent to which they use a particular linguistic variant. And the level of writers' education and writing experience is then determined to a certain extent by their gender and social class. So it has been proved to be very fruitful to treat social class and gender not just as variables that say something about a

person's sex and socio-economical status, but also as variables that give something away about a person's education, their functioning in society and thus about their relationship with reading and writing.

4. Can these data reveal where particular language changes started: in which region and among which group of language users?

In trying to answer this question, we must keep in mind that the corpus of letters mainly contains letters linked to the provinces of Zeeland, South Holland and North Holland. If a language change appears first in one of these three provinces, this does not necessarily mean that this region was the first region in the entire Dutch-speaking area to show a certain variant. The same caution applies to the social strata. The corpus probably comprises no more than a few fragments of the language use of the lowest of all social classes in the six-layer stratification discussed in §2.2.4, namely that of the have-nots. And neither does the corpus contain language use of the highest level: the aristocracy. If either of these social groups was responsible for a language change, we are not able to establish this.

From the discussion above it is very clear that North Holland is the region in which the three different language changes examined for regional influence occurred first (the rise of single negation, changes in diminutive suffixes and the apocope of the schwa). This is in accordance with the generally acknowledged theory that Holland was the richest and the most influential region of the Netherlands in the seventeenth century and that its political and economical power lead to this region becoming exemplary for its language use as well.

It is impossible to determine one particular social group that would be responsible for each language change. As the discussion above has indicated, it varies a lot which social group should be considered the pioneer of a particular evolution. What is important to conclude, is that both language changes from below and language changes from above occurred in seventeenth-century Dutch. It is not the case that all language changes under examination were steered by members of the upper classes, nor did all changes start spontaneously in the lower social strata. Sometimes a change was started by writers from the upper classes, such as the spread of *elkaar* that seems to have been introduced by well-known writers at the expense of the older form *mekaar* or such as the introduction of *UE*. However, in the case of schwa-apocope for instance, the lower social classes in Holland used first person singular verb forms more often without the schwa than letter writers from the upper social classes, suggesting that members of the lower social classes of Holland were the first to use this schwa-less verb form.

5. Does this dissertation yield unique data and insights?

The answer to this question is a straightforward 'yes'. The corpus created for this dissertation is unique for different reasons. Firstly it contains language use of men and women from lower and middle classes, while until now, many corpora used for historical research of Dutch contained linguistic material produced by members – mainly men – from the upper classes. Secondly, the letters in the corpus have been examined in detail in order to establish whether they are autographs or not. As a result, there is a sub-corpus of letters that are definite autographs, a sub-corpus of letters that are certainly non-autographs and a sub-corpus of letters of uncertain authorship. The sub-corpus of autographs can be safely used for socio-historical examinations. Thirdly, the corpus contains language use of a large number of different people: it contains 595 letters written by 441 different writers. This large number of different letter writers allows us to map language variation in seventeenth-century Dutch and allows us to obtain a picture of seventeenth-century Dutch that is more reliable than it would be if it was based on the language use of a small group of individuals. The last exceptional element about the corpus is the fact that it is made up mostly of private letters and thus contains elements of everyday language. In any case, the language use in these letters is different from language use in printed (literary) texts, which have formed the subject of much historical linguistic research so far.

        The data used for this dissertation are thus unparalleled, which means that the results from this corpus are without parallel too, whether they contradict existing ideas about the history of Dutch or not. The data have in some cases confirmed existing hypotheses, but they have also given rise to new insights about variation and change in seventeenth-century Dutch. Seventeenth-century women in general used terms of address, single negation, and diminutive suffixes in the same way as lower-class writers generally did, which is likely linked to the fact that both women and lower-class writers in general were less experienced writers than men from the upper classes. The careful analysis of the spelling of the diminutive suffixes also revealed that seventeenth-century women and lower-class writers spell less consistently than men from upper classes, which could again be related to their level of writing experience. It has also been shown that the reflexive pronouns *elkander/elkaar* were introduced into Dutch by a certain upper-class group of literary authors and that in Zeeland the other reflexive pronoun *zich* occurred first in official, administrative texts rather than in spoken Dutch. Furthermore, women were the first to adopt the apocope of the schwa in the seventeenth century. And it has been shown that in the seventeenth century, the use of some linguistic variants was influenced by

context, while the use of others was not: the older synthetic genitive was very clearly linked to formulaic contexts, while the distribution of schwa-apocope was not influenced by formulae at all.

To conclude, the results and insights of this dissertation are not only an addition to research on seventeenth-century Dutch, they also contribute to sociohistorical linguistics in general. The language history from below approach has been shown to work for seventeenth-century Dutch, to which it had not been applied before. It has revealed insight into variation and the relevant factors involved in this variation in specific cases. The idea that the levels of education and writing experience have explanatory value beyond the variables gender and social class has again been proved to be fruitful. Furthermore, in developing the Leiden Identification Procedure for the *Letters as Loot* corpus, I have provided a method that could be applied to distinguish autograph letters from non-autograph ones in other letter corpora for Dutch as well as in corpora for other languages.

10.2. Desiderata

This dissertation has proved that it is possible to work on a linguistic history from below for seventeenth-century Dutch, but much research is still to be done. In what follows, I will make a few suggestions for further research.

First and foremost, the corpus of seventeenth-century letters could still be enlarged with more seventeenth-century *Sailing Letters*. Another 400 private letters from the period of the Second and Third Anglo-Dutch War have already been photographed and transcribed by the *Letters as Loot* project and there may still be more of them hidden in the huge HCA archive. The sub-corpus of business letters could also be enlarged, since the archives in London contain several thousands of business letters. The existence of a large corpus of business letters next to a corpus of private letters would enable comparisons between language use in different types of letters. Studying the influence of register and letter type could reveal much about the attitude towards different linguistic variants. At the moment, a project at the Meertens Instituut in collaboration with the *Prize Papers* consortium, an affinity group which strives to ensure that the documents in the HCA archive can be thoroughly analysed by scholars who have the expertise, is making a start at inventorying more Dutch letters present in the High Court of Admiralty archives and transcribing them. Hopefully, this project will lead to an enlarged corpus fit for socio-historical research.

The usefulness of the corpus would also be increased if it was parsed and tagged (for both headwords and syntactic functions). For now, only string searches are possible which means that – given the many spelling

variants – one can never be 100% certain of having found all possible variants of a word. Lemmatising would simplify searches for a particular word or morpheme and parsing and tagging would make research of syntactic variables and word order more feasible. At the moment, the INL (Institute for Dutch Lexicology) is experimenting with lemmatising the *Letters as Loot* corpus. If this is successful, further steps might be taken in parsing and tagging the corpus and in examining further syntactic issues.

In this dissertation, the letters of the sub-corpora of non-autograph letters and of letters of uncertain authorship have not been included in examinations of the relation between social variables and language use. They have only been used to inventory different variants for a particular linguistic variable and to determine the frequency (overall or per region) of these variants. But since not a lot of research has been carried out in the domain of non-autograph letters, these letters by themselves might constitute interesting research material. Questions that can be asked are for instance: Can we tell the difference between letters written by a professional letter writer and letters written by a friend or a family member of the sender of the letter? Are there linguistic elements that betray the status (autographs or not) of a letter? Do letter senders and the friends or family members writing their letters usually belong to the same social class or age group or have the same gender? If so, can these letters also be incorporated when examining the relationship between a specific social factor and language use?

Now that there is a clear picture of the variation and change in seventeenth-century Holland and Zeeland regarding several linguistic phenomena, the question arises how this picture of the second half of the seventeenth century fits into a larger time frame and a wider geographical perspective. Comparing the results of the seventeenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus to the results of the eighteenth-century *Letters as Loot* corpus will show how Dutch developed in a period of hundred years.[129]

10.3. A new outlook

Little did the seventeenth-century letter writers from the corpus know that their writings would be preserved for hundreds of years and that twenty-first-century historical linguists would regard them as a true treasure. They would probably wonder what could be so special about their ordinary letters. But it is just the fact that these writings are private letters of which many are written by 'ordinary' people from the lower and middle classes that makes

---

[129] A comparison of the results stemming from these two corpora will shortly appear in a monograph written by Gijsbert Rutten and Marijke Van der Wal.

them extraordinary to present-day historical linguists: such a large collection of this type of Dutch seventeenth-century texts has never been found before. Therefore the finding of these letters has raised high expectations. Hidden in the countless cardboard boxes of the High Court of Admiralty archives in Kew could be some missing pieces of the puzzle of the history of Dutch.

Examining the material has required substantial efforts: figuratively digging up seventeenth-century Dutch letters in the enormous archive of the High Court of Admiralty in Kew, preparing the found objects for research by transcribing them and double-checking transcriptions, mapping the finds in a database and delving in other Dutch archives in search of background information. But the results were worthwhile. Here lies, gleaming in the metaphorical display case that a dissertation is, the result of a substantial linguistic excavation: parts of the everyday language use of lower- and middle-class seventeenth-century people, a view from below on seventeenth-century Dutch.