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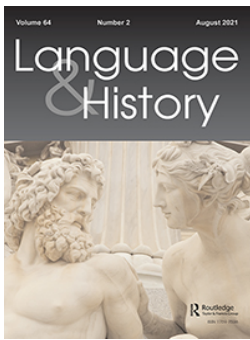
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## Prescriptivism on its own terms. Perceptions and realities of usage in Siegenbeek's *Lijst* (1847)

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### ABSTRACT

In 1847, one of the first professors of Dutch, Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774–1854), published a purist word list entitled *Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen met het Nederlandsch taaleigen strijdende*, 'List of words and expressions at odds with the nature of Dutch'. In this pamphlet, he condemned a variety of loanwords and loan translations. Siegenbeek refers regularly to the usage of disapproved variants, employing a variety of quantifiers and sociolinguistic references. How well such statements reflect the linguistic reality, however, is a contentious issue in studies of prescriptivism. In this paper, we study Siegenbeek's pronouncements about usage against the backdrop of Curzan's concept of *restorative prescriptivism*. By studying the use of different types of quantifiers, and matching these to a text collection of historical fiction from the time, we show that Siegenbeek's statements about usage miss the mark for most specific variables. However, when we look at the average usage frequency, we see that as frequency terms increase in strength, so do the number of condemned variants, both for relative frequency and absolute frequency. Based on these results, we argue for a re-evaluation of the relationship between prescriptivism and usage, and a reappraisal of prescriptivists' frequency judgements.

### KEYWORDS

Dutch; prescriptivism; Matthijs Siegenbeek; frequency judgements; corpus linguistics; purism; standardisation

### Introduction: prescriptivism and language use

The interaction between prescriptivism and language use has attracted considerable scholarly attention, from a variety of different angles (see, among many others, Beal 2012; Hinrichs, Szmrecsanyi, & Bohmann 2015; Van der Feest Viðarsson 2019). In recent years, fuelled by an increase in the compilation of representative corpora of historical language use, much research has focused on the question whether norms and prescriptions developed in metalinguistic discourse subsequently influenced language use (e.g. Anderwald 2019; Krogull 2018; Poplack & Dion 2009). In this paper, we reverse this approach, asking what basis prescriptivism has in

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actual language use. In order to study this question, we focus on one purist work, the *Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen met het Nederlandsch taaleigen strijdende* (1847), ‘List of words and expressions at odds with the nature of Dutch’, published by the Dutch prescriptive author Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774–1854). Siegenbeek identifies a number of words and phrases presumably used in his times, and argues that they are to be avoided in view of their supposed non-Dutchness. Our question is to what extent these words and phrases were actually used, and whether Siegenbeek’s evaluation of the variation can be reproduced on the basis of contemporary textual materials.

On a more general level, we aim to show that the relationships between prescriptivism and language use are more complicated than is sometimes assumed. We will argue that prescriptivism is not always ‘in defiance of normal usage’, as Trask (1999: 246) succinctly put it. Even if prescriptive, or more generally normative works are perceived as highly prescriptive by contemporaries and/or by later readers, they may still be embedded in actual usage. This applies, for example, to two well-known ‘icons’ of prescriptivism: Claude Vaugelas (1585–1650) and Robert Lowth (1710–1787). Ayres-Bennett has argued in a number of publications that the work of the French *remarqueur* Vaugelas may ‘reflect usage and its variation and change well’ (2020: 207), and that many of the so-called *remarqueurs* were in fact keen observers of ongoing changes in the language (Ayres-Bennett & Sejjido 2011). Similarly, Ayres-Bennett and Sejjido (2011: 224–253) has argued that Lowth’s *A short introduction to English grammar* (1762, see Tiekens-Boon van Ostade, 2011) was part of a broader tradition of normative grammar, which was not prescriptive in the strict sense. English normative grammars of the time often described usage as much as they prescribed some variants, and proscribed other forms.

Teasing apart the descriptive and the prescriptive segments of historical metalinguistic discourse is also significant for the study of historical standardisation, which traditionally has a strong interest in codification ‘from above’ (Rutten & Vosters 2021). In fact, when we look at the normative traditions of many European languages in the Early and Late Modern period, we are often dealing with *codifications* in the plural (Rutten 2016). There is usually no general agreement among grammarians, which suggests that they, as a discourse community, were negotiating their norms. In these negotiations, actual language use may be introduced as an argument. An example comes from the work of the Dutch grammarian Petrus Leupenius (1607–1670; see Van der Wal & van Bree 2008: 193). He held a minority position when he argued that Dutch did not have four, let alone five or six cases, i.e. the number proposed in most grammars of the time, following the

Greek and Latin models. Leupenius argued that Dutch had only three case functions, since there were at most three different forms in the nominal paradigms of contemporary written Dutch.

We consider Siegenbeek's *Lijst* to be an example of what Curzan (2014: 28) calls *restorative prescriptivism*. This kind of language planning aims to restore earlier and often even obsolete forms of language use, or to 'turn to older forms to purify usage' (Curzan 2014: 24). This may also include lexical purism (Curzan 2014: 38) which is what Siegenbeek aims at. It seems likely that this particular type of prescriptivism has a strong connection to actual usage, but how and to what extent is unclear. This, then, is what we set out to investigate in the present paper.

First, we introduce Siegenbeek and his linguistic works, thereby situating his prescriptivist texts theoretically and historically, focusing in particular on the work under scrutiny in this paper, the *Lijst* (section 2). In section 3, we explain our data and method, after which we will present our results. Here we first explore Siegenbeek's references to actual language use, zooming in on what we call quantifiers and sociolinguistic considerations (section 4.1). We then investigate the frequency of 27 lexical variables in actual language use, more specifically a sizeable collection of mostly literary texts from the period 1750–1847, based on the variants that were approved and disapproved by Siegenbeek (section 4.2). In section 4.3, we connect Siegenbeek's use of quantifiers to the relative frequency of the approved and disapproved variants. In section 4.4, we ask whether the absolute frequencies of the disapproved variants offer a better reflection of Siegenbeek's intuitions about the frequency of certain variants than their relative frequencies. We then briefly discuss variants that supposedly increase in frequency over time (section 4.5).

## **Siegenbeek and his *Lijst***

### ***Matthijs Siegenbeek (1774-1854)***

Matthijs Siegenbeek may be seen as a Dutch icon of prescriptivism. Born into a Mennonite family in Amsterdam, he attended first the Latin school and then the theological seminary of the Amsterdam Mennonite community (Rutten 2019: 176). In 1796, he was first contacted by the curators of the University of Leiden about a new position they were creating, viz. extraordinary professor of Dutch rhetoric. The creation of this chair, specifically devoted to Dutch, should be seen as an early act of language planning inspired by cultural nationalism (Rutten 2019: 165–169). Siegenbeek delivered his inaugural lecture on 23 September 1797, and in doing so became one of the first professors of Dutch. His extraordinary chair in Dutch rhetoric was changed into a regular chair in Dutch language and literature in 1799. He remained in office until 1844, and he kept teaching until 1847.

Siegenbeek also served two terms as Rector Magnificus of Leiden University, and he occupied a central position in the Dutch academic and cultural field in the first half of the nineteenth century (Rutten 2019: 177).

Siegenbeek's name is closely connected to another well-known act of language planning inspired by cultural nationalism, i.e. the so-called *schrijftaalregeling* 'written language regulation' (Rutten 2019). The enormous intensification of Dutch cultural nationalism, which also gave rise to the standard language ideology, resulted in concrete policies around 1800, including the nationalisation of the educational domain and of language. At the time, one of the first things the newly introduced Minister of Education did was bring the school system under national control. One important control mechanism was the newly established system of school inspectors (one of whom would become Siegenbeek himself). Additionally, there were calls for the official codification of spelling and grammar. These regulations for the written language were to be adopted in the educational and administrative domains.

The *schrijftaalregeling* resulted in Siegenbeek's spelling in 1804, and an official grammar, authored by Pieter Weiland, in 1805 (see Noordegraaf 2018). These codified versions of the language, which were the first official spelling and grammar of Dutch, were obligatory in the educational domain, and proved to be highly successful. Some primary schools were working with the Siegenbeek rules as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century (Schoemaker & Rutten 2017), schoolbooks from the early nineteenth century switch to the Siegenbeekian spelling prescriptions (Rutten, Krogull, & Schoemaker 2020), and significant changes in the direction of the official rules can be found within one generation, even in diaries and private letters (Krogull 2018). As such, the *schrijftaalregeling* and its implementation in the educational domain mark the official codification of Dutch after two and a half centuries of Dutch metalinguistic discourse. Moreover, it constitutes the end-point of the eighteenth-century development towards a national language, i.e. a prescribed, supralocal and supposedly neutral form of the Dutch language to be used by anyone who is part of the Dutch 'nation' (Rutten 2016). Thus, the *schrijftaalregeling* is also similar to the transition from codification to prescriptivism in the English language area towards the end of the eighteenth century (Tieken-boon van Ostade 2010).

Theoretically, Siegenbeek's official spelling, entitled *Verhandeling over de Nederduitsche spelling* 'Treatise about Dutch spelling' (1804), constitutes the type of prescriptivism that Curzan (2014: 24), in her typology of English prescriptivism, calls *standardising*. Standardising prescriptivism offers 'rules/judgments that aim to promote and enforce standardization and "standard" usage' (Curzan 2014: 24). Historically, this specific type of prescriptivism 'stems from the role of prescriptivism in the process of language standardization' (Curzan 2014: 28). Some of Siegenbeek's orthographical

prescriptions followed common usage and/or previously dominant prescriptions, and some did not, while he also introduced etymological distinctions in the spelling that must have been difficult for contemporary speakers (see below, 2.2). However, it is important to signal that the relationship between his prescriptions and past language use is not of prime importance for the goal of the spelling regulations. Standardising prescriptivism is forward-looking, in that it provides guidelines for future writers. These can in some cases be based on existing usage, while introducing new distinctions in other cases (Krogull 2018; Krogull & Rutten 2020). The main concern is that future writers adopt the newly prescribed forms, although the success of standardising prescriptivism may of course partly depend on the prevalence of the prescribed forms in past usage and/or prescriptions.

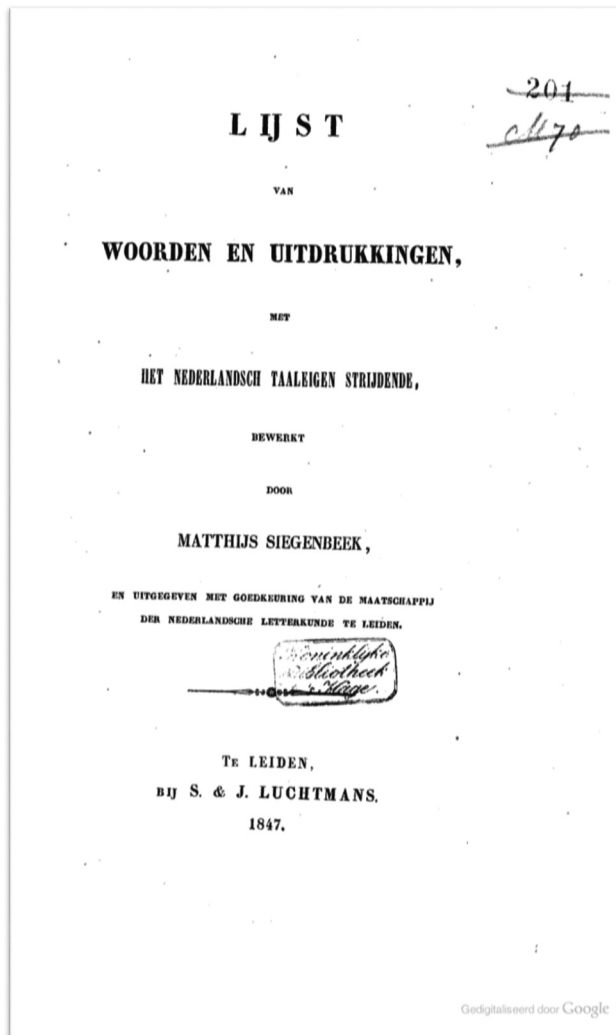
In 1810 and 1814, Siegenbeek published introductions to the syntax and grammar of Dutch, largely based on Weiland's official grammar of 1805 (Noordegraaf 1985: 232–252). Siegenbeek furthermore wrote three extensive essays on linguistic topics, in which he adopted a strong normative perspective, discussing topics such as spelling and pronunciation, the excellence of the Dutch language and the ways in which its decay should be countered, and the interrelatedness of language and national character (Rutten 2019: 181). Recurrent themes in his linguistic works are the Golden Age of the seventeenth century, and the nationalistic focus on the inherent link between language and nation, which also led him to a strong anti-French discourse<sup>1</sup> (Rutten 2019: 189). In later years, Siegenbeek wrote less about language than before, although it is unclear why. One exception is his *Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen met het Nederlandsch taaleigen strijdende* 'List of words and expressions at odds with the nature of Dutch'. In this ethnolinguistic and prescriptive text, he criticised, not for the first time, the use of loanwords in Dutch, particularly loans from German (Rutten 2019: 185). It is this text that we focus on in the present paper.

### **The Lijst (1847)**

The *Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen met het Nederlandsch taaleigen strijdende* is a short work, consisting of only 56 pages (see Figure 1 for the title page). It opens with a four-page introduction, in which Siegenbeek briefly explains the background to the *Lijst*. Members of the Maatschappij

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<sup>1</sup>French was of course widely used across Europe throughout the Early and Late Modern period (e.g. Argent et al. 2014), which led to anti-French discourses, also in the Netherlands (see Rutten 2019: 184–186 for Siegenbeek in this context).



**Figure 1.** Title page for Siegenbeek's *Lijst van woorden en uitdrukkingen, met het Nederlandsch taaleigen*, Siegenbeek (1847)

der Nederlandsche Letterkunde 'Society for Dutch Language and Literature', one of the most well-known learned societies of the time, had noticed

'eene ongepaste navolging van het Hoogduitsche taalgebruik, niet slechts in vertalingen en vlugtig geschrevene dagbladen, maar ook in werken van goede Schrijvers meer en meer voorkomende' (Siegenbeek 1847, III)

(an improper imitation of High German usage, not only in translations and quickly written newspapers, but also more and more occurring in works of good writers.)

Most unwanted variants in Siegenbeek's *Lijst*, then, are supposed loanwords and loan translations from German, whose usage threatens endogenous Dutch variants. As such, the aim of this work can be characterised as puristic, while it is also immediately indicated how the *Lijst* has its base in contemporary usage. At the time when Siegenbeek compiled the *Lijst*, purist attitudes were entirely common in lexicography (Rutten 2019: 163–164). Moreover, they continued a longstanding tradition in Dutch metalinguistic discourse, dating back to the sixteenth century, although older works had largely focused on combatting French and Latin influence. Earlier examples of purist wordlists and dictionaries are the *Tresoor der Duytsscher talen* 'Treasure of the Dutch language' (1553, 2nd edition in 1559) by Jan van den Werve (1522–1576), and the *Nederlandsche Woordenschat* 'Dutch vocabulary' (1650, 12th ed. in 1805) by Johan Hofman (c. 1605–1666) and Lodewijk Meijer (1629–1681) (for more on purism in the history of Dutch see Van der Sijs 2021: 328–354).

In his introduction, Siegenbeek (1847, IV) states that imitations of German can be found in *slordige vertalingen (. . .) of met overhaast opgestelde dagbladen* 'sloppy translations (. . .) or hastily drawn up newspapers', but he proposes to ignore these errors, both because *wie heeft lust of moed, om dien Augias-stal te reinigen* 'who has the inclination or courage to clean out this Augean stable' (Siegenbeek 1847, IV), and because the errors found in these publications are *te sterk in het oog, dan dat zij lichtelijk navolging zullen krijgen* 'are so noticeable that they are unlikely to be imitated' (1847, IV–V). Although he does mention a handful of such unwanted variants found in newspapers in particular (1847, V), he does not discuss these further. Instead, he focuses on words and expressions used by *goede Schrijvers* (1847, VI) 'good authors', as their usage may constitute an example for others. Thus, members of the Maatschappij collaborated in order to

'de voornaamste daarvan bijeen te brengen en het onbestaanbare van dezelve met ons taaleigen beknoptelijk aan te toonen' (Siegenbeek 1847, III)

(bring together the most important examples, and concisely demonstrate their impossible co-existence with the nature of Dutch.)

These preliminary matters are followed by 177 entries, each of which contains an 'incorrect' and disapproved lexical item that should be avoided in Dutch. To illustrate Siegenbeek's approach, we present two typical entries, viz. *benutten* 'use' and *verafschuwen* 'detest'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The verb s.v. *benutten* 'use' is generally considered to indeed be a loan from German, according to the *Etymologiebank* (Van der Sijs 2010). The *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* s.v. *verafschuwen* 'detest' calls *verafschuwen* a loan from German *verabscheuen*.

- ‘*Benutten*, in navolging van het Hoogduitsche *benützen* [sic], voor *zich ten nutte maken*, is met ons taaleigen geheel onbestaanbaar.’ (Siegenbeek 1847: 11)

(*Benutten* ‘use’, in imitation of High German *benützen* [sic] ‘use’, for *zich ten nutte maken* ‘make useful for oneself’, is entirely inconsistent with the nature of our language.)

- ‘*Verafschuwen*, in navolging van het Hoogduitsche *verabscheuen*, is een woord, tot welks overneming geene genoegzame reden bestaat, daar wij hiervoor het echt Nederlandsche *verfoeijen* bezitten.’ (Siegenbeek 1847: 46)

(*Verafschuwen* ‘detest’, in imitation of High German *verabscheuen* ‘detest’, is a word for which there is no sufficient reason to borrow it, as we have the truly Dutch word *verfoeijen* ‘detest’.)

The references made to the nature of Dutch (for *benutten*) and to existing and, moreover, established alternatives (for *verafschuwen*) show how Siegenbeek discusses forms and meanings found in the present through the lens of linguistic history. As such, his approach is a clear example of what Curzan (2014) calls *restorative* prescriptivism. This stands in contrast to his earlier approach to spelling. For a number of orthographic variables, Krogull (2018) shows that Siegenbeek’s prescriptions are sometimes in line with the eighteenth-century normative tradition and/or with eighteenth-century language use, while at other times they are not. There are examples where Siegenbeek (1804) introduces etymological distinctions in the spelling that must have been entirely unknown in actual usage, and perhaps even unclear to most of his readers. Krogull and Rutten (2020) and Rutten, Krogull, and Schoemaker (2020) discuss a number of relevant cases in more depth, and demonstrate how nineteenth-century private letters, diaries and newspapers display an increase of the forms prescribed by Siegenbeek, reversing previous developments in the orthographic system of Dutch. The fact that language users adopted Siegenbeek’s etymology-based prescriptions so effectively confirms the forward-looking nature of what Curzan (2014) calls *standardising* prescriptivism: an orthographical choice is made in the interest of texts to be written. Whether this choice follows or diverges from earlier practices in writing and in metalinguistic discourse seems unimportant. What matters is that the prescribed variant is used in future writing.

In the case of the lexical prescriptivism of the *Lijst*, the relationship to actual language use was crucial as a starting point. After all, if the supposed loans and loan translations mentioned in the text did not occur in usage, the whole enterprise would be quixotic, and there would be no practical need to write a booklet against them (cf. Weiner 1988: 174). Still, the nature of the

relationship between prescript and usage for specific variables, and of Siegenbeek's exact awareness and evaluation of actual occurrences of these variables is not straightforward, hence the need for this research.

## Data and method

We manually checked all 177 entries in Siegenbeek's *Lijst* for explicit references to actual usage. Such references include verbs (e.g. *gebruiken* 'to use' or *voorkomen* 'to appear'), adverbs (e.g. *vaak* 'often'), and noun phrases (e.g. *veel mensen* 'many people'). We excluded negative ontological expressions, such as *dit kan niet in het Nederlands* 'this cannot exist in Dutch', as these do not refer explicitly to actually observed usage. Using these criteria provided us with 113 references in 85 entries.

Next, we classified these 113 references to usage according to two distinct categories (see Figure 2 for a schematic overview of this classification). The first category consists of quantifiers, i.e. words or phrases which make some kind of statement about *how often* a variant occurs. For the purpose of this paper, we classified the quantifiers used by Siegenbeek into two groups: *diachronic quantifiers* refer to a development over time (such as *in zwang gekomen* 'has come into fashion'). All the other quantifiers (such as *dikwerf* 'often' or *wel eens* 'sometimes') we grouped together as *absolute quantifiers*. Next, we classified all quantifiers based on their degree of reported occurrence into *low*, *middle*, or *high frequency terms*. So, for example, *zelden* ('rarely') was classified as low frequency, while *algemeen gebruikelijk* ('generally used') was classified as high.<sup>3</sup>

The second category includes so-called 'sociolinguistic' references to a language user or group of language users (cf. Van der Meulen 2020: 129; Tiekens-boon van Ostade et al. Tiekens-boon van Ostade, 2020). These references too were subdivided into two groups: firstly, references to a particular author or work, either anonymous or named (for example, *een geacht schrijver* 'a respected author' or *Bilderdijk*), and secondly, references to a general group of language users (e.g. Siegenbeek 1847 'good authors').

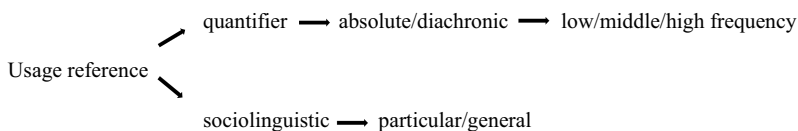


Figure 2. Schema for classification of usage references.

<sup>3</sup>For the 31 types found, the authors agreed on the classification of all but one term. Expressed as Cohen's kappa then, our inter-rater agreement was  $\kappa = .951$  ( $p < .0005$ ).

For our usage data, we used the Digital Dutch Library of Literature and Non-fiction (DBNL 2020). This collection contains more than 10,000 titles, written from the Middle Ages to the present day, amounting to a total of 1.07 billion words.<sup>4</sup> We approached this text collection through the Nederlab interface (Brugman et al. 2016). Although this collection has certain issues with metadata quality, and is not a representative corpus (see Van der Sijs 2019), it has the benefit of containing texts that are likely to have been available to Siegenbeek, especially with regard to the fiction section.<sup>5</sup> Another benefit is its size: as for most languages, historical corpora of this magnitude are non-existent for Dutch, yet research into lexical phenomena typically requires such big data. In this case, then, we feel the advantages of using this dataset far outweigh its disadvantages.

In order to match our data as closely as possible to the language Siegenbeek would have been exposed to, we narrowed the data from the DBNL down to fiction from the period 1750–1847. This left us with 3507 texts, containing 30.3 million words. Of course, this selection cannot be a ‘perfect’ fit: it is unlikely that Siegenbeek read all these texts, or these texts specifically. Still, this data approximates the type of texts he claims to have based himself on as well as possible. An example of this comes from the fact that our corpus contains several specific novels Siegenbeek references.

Of course, Siegenbeek would have been exposed to many more registers and genres, including the newspapers he himself mentioned. Consequently, it is possible that occurrences of the criticised linguistic items in these genres influenced his frequency perceptions. However, as Siegenbeek explicitly states that this is not the case, and moreover mentions a specific set of different variables for newspapers (see 2.2), we assume that Siegenbeek was aware of which variables occurred in which genres, and was thus able to focus on the relevant ones and their distribution only. Either way, as there is no way of knowing whether this interference happened, we will focus on the data Siegenbeek claimed to have used.

We focused our investigation on those variables for which Siegenbeek gave both a quantifying term and an ‘indigenous’ Dutch alternative. For example, for *bemeesteren* (‘to master’), which according to Siegenbeek ‘is onder ons in zwang gekomen’ (‘has come into fashion among us’, 1847, 10), the alternative *vermeesteren* is given. For many cases, however, a lexical item was simply condemned without an alternative. An example of this is *gewelddaad* (‘act of violence’), of which Siegenbeek says that it is ‘eene harde zamenstelling, welke gene navolging verdient’ (‘a hard compound,

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<sup>4</sup>For more details see <https://www.nederlab.nl/onderzoeksporaal/?action = nederlabcollectie&code = DBNL>

<sup>5</sup>As one reviewer pointed out, since the DBNL contains edited texts, it is possible that condemned forms were removed during the editing process. While this is certainly possible, it does not have an effect on Siegenbeek’s evaluations, as there is little reason to assume that he was ever exposed to anything but the edited versions of such works themselves.

which doesn't deserve imitation', 1847, 24). As the relative occurrence of such items could not be checked against a correct alternative, we left them out.<sup>6</sup> This selection step left us with 27 lexical variables with both an approved and a disapproved variant. One other variable that met our criteria, *bemerken/opmerken* ('to notice'), was nevertheless left out, as the semantic difference that Siegenbeek proposes for these two variants was too subtle to be reliably tagged. For each variable, we searched for all variants in our usage data. In most cases, we could employ word-based queries, but for some verbs – for example, compound verbs such as *bezighouden* 'to occupy' – we used lemma-based queries.<sup>7</sup> Results were manually cleaned up by the authors: this finally left us with a total of 38,414 tokens for 27 lexical variables.

## Results

### *Siegenbeek's references to usage*

Siegenbeek refers to actual language use 113 times in his *List*, but only in 85 entries out of the 177 (48%). Table 1 gives an overview of all of the references to usage and the occurrences per category.

Table 1 shows that Siegenbeek employs sociolinguistic references more often than he uses quantifiers. Of the general sociolinguistic references, eighteen refer to unspecified groups of language users, such as *goede schrijvers* ('good writers') or *anders nette schrijvers* ('otherwise proper writers'). The only exception is found for the entry *toeverzigt* ('trust'), of which Siegenbeek (1847: 41) says that many Reformed theologians use it, but that he cannot remember having seen it used by any non-theologian author. This awareness of language variation in religious circles would continue to play a role in later prescriptive works, both with dedicated studies (cf. Leest 1929) and observations about particular variables (cf. Damsteegt 1948: 41 about *op/in de eerste plaats*).

**Table 1.** Token frequency of references to usage (n = 113).

Quantifiers (n = 47)	Absolute	36
	Diachronic	11
Sociolinguistic terms (n = 66)	Particular	47
	General	19

<sup>6</sup>Presumably, the reason why Siegenbeek did not give an alternative was that none was available in Dutch at that time. The usual purist strategy for such cases is to come up with a neologism which (ostensibly) fits better with the 'nature' of Dutch (for example, see the neologism *webstek* for 'website'). However, this did not fit with the kind of restorative prescriptive approach Siegenbeek propagated.

<sup>7</sup>For an overview of all queries see <https://osf.io/fmctb/>

The majority of Siegenbeek's sociolinguistic references refer to particular works and authors, with 47 instances. In twenty of these, Siegenbeek is somewhat discreet, and only mentions *an otherwise careful writer* or *a popular writer who is much read*. Whether he could assume readers would know who he meant is not clear. The other 27 occurrences refer mostly to specific works or sources, such as specific entries in the Dutch Penal Code and a verdict of the Netherlands Supreme Court, or the *Zeeuwschen Volkسالmanak* (an almanac for the province of Zeeland).

Siegenbeek mentions two literary authors by name. The first of these is Willem Bilderdijk (1756–1831), whose name occurs four times. This is not unexpected, as Bilderdijk was not only one of the most prominent literary authors of his time, but also an active participant in contemporary debates about language and spelling (Noordegraaf 1985) and an enemy of Siegenbeek (Mathijsen 1988). The second author, who is mentioned eleven times, is Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint (1812–1886). She was a well-known literary author and editor, who published several historical novels. Two of these seem to have been of particular interest to Siegenbeek, as he mentions them several times: *Het huis Lauernesse* (1840) and *De graaf van Leycester in Nederland* (1845). In 1870, Bosboom-Toussaint was to be the first woman to be awarded an honorary membership of the aforementioned Maatschappij der Nederlandse Letterkunde. Siegenbeek did not explain why he referred to Bosboom-Toussaint more than to any other author. We assume that her popularity played a role in this (Buitendijk & Welsink 2003).

As for quantifiers, Siegenbeek uses 46 tokens from 31 types, with a preference for absolute terms (22 types, 36 tokens) over diachronic terms (9 types, 11 tokens). *Meermalen* ('several times') is the most frequently used term, with five occurrences. With regard to diachronic quantifiers, Siegenbeek uses variants of *in zwang gekomen* ('has come into fashion') six times; he comments twice on words that are new. The quantifiers are distributed quite equally over the three different classes we distinguished, as Siegenbeek uses eight high, eight medium and eleven low frequency terms.

### **Usage frequency**

Table 2 gives an overview of the usage frequency distributions of both the approved and disapproved variants for all 27 lexical variables. It is clear that there are substantial differences between the raw frequencies of different variables. Some, such as *betrachten/beschouwen*, ('to consider'), are quite frequent, with 6245 occurrences for both variants combined. Others, such as *van af dien tijd/van dien tijd af* ('from that time forward') occur a lot less

**Table 2.** Alphabetical overview of all variables with absolute and relative frequency of variants.

Disapproved variant	Proposed approved alternative	N approved	N disapproved	% approved	% disapproved
aangeven	opgeven	1042	184	85,0	15,0
aanstrenging	inspanning	360	0	100,0	0,0
aanwandelen	overvallen	268	0	100,0	0,0
abel	bekwaam, geschikt, bevoegd	3666	10	99,7	0,3
afgeven	bemoeijen, inlaten, bezighouden	318	12	96,4	3,6
bedanken	tevredenheid/dank-baarheid betuigen	82	941	8,0	92,0
bemeesteren	vermeesteren	215	13	94,3	5,7
betrachten	beschouwen	6164	81	98,7	1,3
betwijfelen	twijfelen, in twijfel trekken	2619	287	90,1	9,9
bevinging	ondervinding	1667	38	97,8	2,2
daadzaak	feit	677	432	61,0	39,0
daarteboven	daarenboven	5775	39	99,3	0,7
doelmatig	doeltreffend	145	743	16,3	83,7
eigendommelijk	eigenaardig	843	105	88,9	11,1
lag	legde, leide	816	127	86,5	13,5
mild	zacht, lieflijk	2050	72	96,6	3,4
moeizaam	moelelijk, vermoeiend	1311	10	99,2	0,8
omgeving	omstreken, hovelingen, omringenden	208	25	89,3	10,7
oog	het oog op/op het oog	119	100	54,3	45,7
overigens	voor het overige	696	611	53,3	46,7
regel	doorgaans, meestal	2651	75	97,2	2,8
uitledigen	uitbannen, uitdrijven	125	0	100,0	0,0
uitoefenen	oefenen	863	885	49,4	50,6
van af dien tijd	van dien tijd af	106	1	99,1	0,9
vervolledigen	volledig maken	4	2	66,7	33,3
volhouden	volharden	556	172	76,4	23,6
zitte	zitplaats	99	4	96,1	3,9

frequently, with only 160 combined occurrences. However, with the exception of *vervolledigen/volledig maken* ('to complete'), which only occurs six times in total, all variables have a combined token count of more than 100.

Overall, the variables display an obvious preference for the approved variant, with 24 out of 27 showing a higher proportion of the variant Siegenbeek preferred. This preference is quite strong in most cases, as the disapproved variant makes up less than 10% of all variants for fourteen variables. For those three cases in which the disapproved variant does occur more often than the approved, the margin is very small for *uitoefenen/oefenen* ('to practice', 50,6% disapproved variants). Only in two cases out of 27, then, (*doelmatig/doeltreffend* ('effective') and *bedanken/dankbaarheid betuigen* ('to thank')) is the disapproved variant by far the most frequently found (with 83,7% and 92% respectively).

### **Quantifiers vs relative usage frequency**

Next, we ordered all variables based on their respective quantifiers, as per our categorisation low – medium – high frequency. [Figure 3a](#) shows the eight low frequency variables, [Figure 3b](#) shows the eleven medium

frequency term variables, and [Figure 3c](#) shows the eight high frequency term variables. The variables are sorted from left to right based on the proportion of approved and disapproved variants.

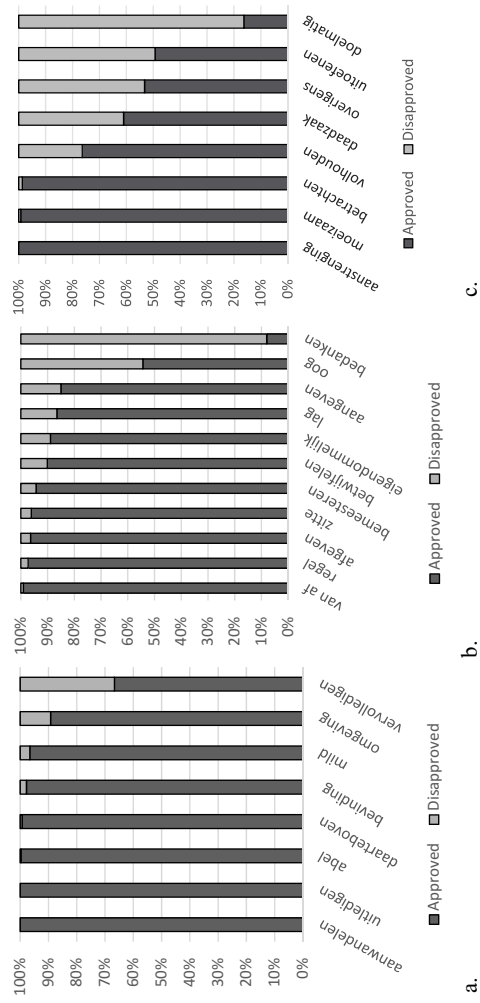
If Siegenbeek's use of frequency terms would correspond to the relative usage frequency of disapproved variants, we would expect increasing proportions of such variants as we go from low to medium to high frequency terms. However, in all frequency term categories, we find variables for which the disapproved variant is infrequent or absent. For example, Siegenbeek says about *aanstrenging* that it is used *dikwerf* ('often'), which we classified as high frequency, but our data show no examples of this variant at all (see [Figure 3c](#)). Conversely, Siegenbeek says about *bedanken* ('to thank') that it is *niet ongebruikelijk* ('not unusual'), which we classified as a medium frequency term. In our data, however, forms of *bedanken* make up 92% of all variants for the variable ([Figure 3b](#)). It is clear, then, that there are individual variables for which Siegenbeek's use of frequency terms does not correspond well to the relative usage frequency of the disapproved variant.

In spite of these specific discrepancies, we do see that the *average* proportion of disapproved variants increases with higher tiers of frequency terms. As [Table 3](#) shows, the average degree of disapproved variants almost triples between the low and middle frequency term class; it almost doubles again for the high frequency terms. This unmistakable increase does point towards him having generally accurate intuitions about the relative frequency with which disapproved variants occur as opposed to their approved counterparts.

### **Absolute usage frequency**

In corpus linguistics, it is commonplace to use relative frequency as a measure, because of differences in sample sizes. Because of that, it seems straightforward to try and interpret quantifiers in the same way, as referring to relative frequency. However, when language users adopt such quantifiers, they may also refer to absolute frequency. As Zwicky (2006) puts it, because 'hardly anyone is in a position to sample the phenomena scientifically (. . .), we treat our own experiences as fair samples of the phenomena in question'. If language users in general use quantifiers to refer to absolute frequency, the same may be the case for Siegenbeek. To test this, we also looked at the absolute token count per quantifier degree category (see [Figure 4](#), which shows the counts for the disapproved variant only).

Initially, this approach yields a similar picture to the relative frequency count: in each category, one or more variables show no or very few disapproved variants. This is at odds with Siegenbeek's use of frequency terms. For example, *aanwandelen*, which he describes as *niet geheel vreemd* ('not completely strange'), does not occur at all. However, with regard to raw



**Figure 3.** (a) Usage results per variant for low frequency terms. (b) Usage results per variant for medium frequency terms. (c) Usage results per variant for high frequency terms.

**Table 3.** Average % of disapproved variants per category of frequency terms.

Category	Number of variables	Average disapproved variants in %	standard deviation (SD)
Low	8	6,3	10,7
Middle	11	18,5	26,0
High	8	30,7	28,0

frequency, it seems inevitable that this disparity is at least partly an effect of our data. After all, if a disapproved variant did not occur at all, there would be no reason for Siegenbeek to mention it. Still, even when we take this into account, we do see substantial differences between the actual absolute frequency of usage and Siegenbeek's pronouncement for many variables. It seems, then, that Siegenbeek was usually wrong in attributing frequency to a variant.

Again, when we look at the average token count per category, this verdict shifts. As Table 4 shows, we see an increase in token frequency depending on which category frequency term Siegenbeek uses. Especially the difference between low frequency terms and middle terms is quite pronounced, with an increase of 721%. From middle to high we see the average token count double, similar to what we observed for the average relative frequency for both classes.

### **Diachronic frequency terms and diachronic usage**

Finally, we zoom in on two specific examples of diachronic frequency terms. The reason for choosing this subclass is that, while it is quite challenging to establish what frequency an absolute frequency term entails (how often exactly is *often?*), for diachronic frequency terms this is somewhat more straightforward. When such a diachronic frequency term is used, for example to say that a variant occurs *more and more often* over time, it does not matter whether the raw frequency of that variant increases from 1 to 3 to 10, or from 1.000 to 3.000 to 7.000. Although such raw frequencies are of course meaningful, for example in terms of the salience of the variant, in both cases the label *more and more often* applies equally well. In order to compare Siegenbeek's use of diachronic frequency terms to actual usage, we divided our data into four time periods of 25 years. Our data was not distributed evenly over time: the first three periods contained comparable amounts of words, but the final period contained a considerably larger number of words (see Table 5).

The first word we look at is *eigendommelijk* ('proprietary, peculiar'). This word is condemned by Siegenbeek (1847: 21), who states that *het gebruik meer en meer algemeen wordt* ('its use is becoming more and more common') at the expense of the proper alternative *eigenaardig*. Figure 5 shows the occurrences per variant for this variable per time period.

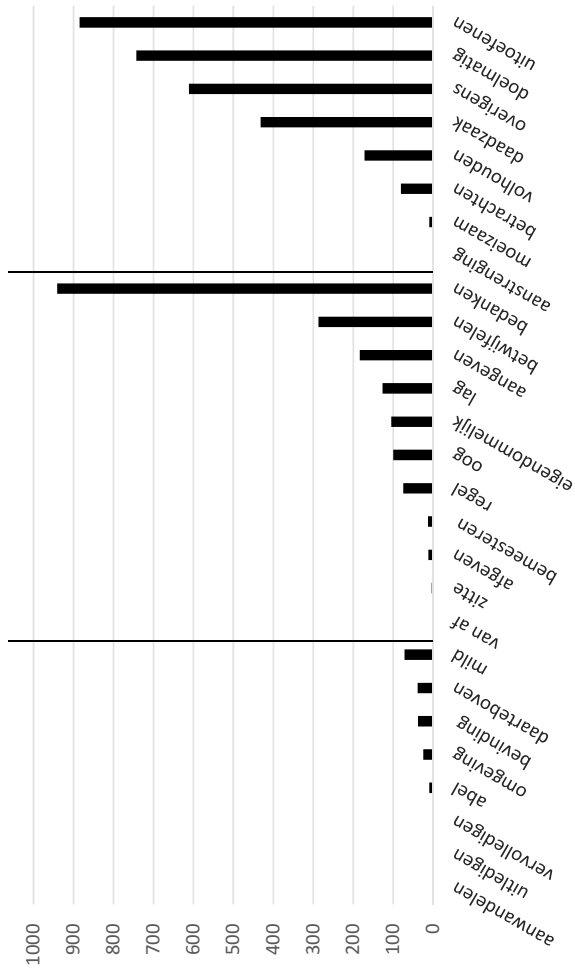


Figure 4. Token count per disapproved variant per category frequency term (low – medium – high from left to right).

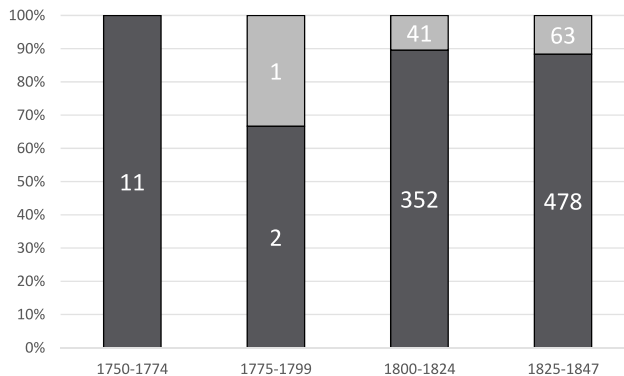
**Table 4.** Average token count of disapproved variants per category of frequency terms.

Category	Number of variables	Average token count of disapproved variants	SD
Low	8	23,3	23,9
Middle	11	168,1	258,3
High	8	366,8	327,0

**Table 5.** Distribution of words per time period.

Time period	number of words
1750–1774	4,6 million
1775–1799	5,4 million
1800–1824	4,2 million
1825–1847	16,1 million

Occurrences for both variants of this variable combined increase quite drastically, from 14 in total between 1750 and 1799 to 393 in 1800–1824, and further to 541 in 1825–1847. Why this is the case is unclear, but Siegenbeek may have been aware of it. More importantly, with the increase of the variable itself also comes an increase of the raw frequency of the disapproved variant, *eigendommelijk*, to 41 occurrences in 1800–1824 and to 63 in the final time period. In relative terms, however, the increase of *eigendommelijk* is minimal between 1800–1824 and 1825–1847 (from 10.4% to 11.6% disapproved variants). Also, it seems an overstatement to say that the variant becomes ‘more and more common’ when it only accounts for c. 10% of all variants for a variable. Moreover, as previously noted, the final time period contains almost four times as many words as the previous time periods. Indeed, when we calculate the normalised frequency per million words, we see that the use of *eigendommelijk* actually decreases from 10 times per million words in 1800–1824 to a mere 3,8 times per million words in 1825–1847.

**Figure 5.** Variants per time period for approved variable *eigenaardig* and condemned variable *eigendommelijk*.

Finally, we checked the verb *vervolledigen* ('to complete'), of which Siegenbeek says that it is *nieuwerwetsch* ('newly come into fashion') instead of *volledig maken*. Based on this diachronic term we would not necessarily expect an increase in frequency over time, but rather we expect the word to be a recent innovation. This hypothesis is somewhat supported by the entry for this word in the *Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal* (s.v. *vervolledigen*), which gives a first quotation for this verb in 1850, so after Siegenbeek's *Lijst* was published (although it does acknowledge this work). Both variants for this variable occur only a few times: variants of *volledig maken* occur four times, variants of *vervolledigen* only twice. These two occurrences are from 1835 and 1847 respectively, so Siegenbeek's intuition, again, may be justified.

### Discussion and conclusion

As a prime proponent of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century national language ideology, Matthijs Siegenbeek wrote several works on the Dutch language, including the puristic wordlist that we analysed in this paper. As we showed, for many of the variables in this wordlist, Siegenbeek's use of frequency terms does not correspond well to the frequency with which the disapproved variants occurred. This reinforces existing ideas about the significant divergence that exists between prescriptivism and actual language use. However, when we look at the average usage frequency of the disapproved variants per frequency class, we see that as the frequency terms increase in strength, so does the average frequency of disapproved variants. This is already apparent from our results for relative frequency, but the magnitude of this link becomes even more evident when we look at absolute frequency. This outcome indicates that, although Siegenbeek may miss the mark in particular cases, his intuitions and statements about usage frequency may be quite accurate in general.

In line with earlier research on French by Ayres-Bennett (2020), the results of our research support the hypothesis that prescriptivists' utterances about usage may have more basis in actual usage than has been assumed. Like the French *remarqueurs*, Siegenbeek may have been a keen observer of ongoing changes. However, this is particularly difficult to establish in the case of lexical variation, where the variants are often infrequent when compared to orthographic/phonetic and morphological variables, and also more strongly depend on the topic and the communicative situation. We believe that our approach, in which we explored a large amount of specific data in an effort to reproduce the textual base available to Siegenbeek, has shown that Siegenbeek was to some extent indeed sensitive to ongoing changes in the language. As such, it seems possible that restorative

prescriptive works such as Siegenbeek's have the potential to be used as a valuable source of information about language variation and change (Van der Horst & Van der Horst 1999: 138).

Based on our results, it seems that Siegenbeek was more likely to report on absolute frequency than relative frequency. Aside from the average usage frequency per class of quantifiers, we saw that the absolute diachronic usage frequencies for *eigendommelijk* were consistent with Siegenbeek's use of 'it occurs more and more often'. This raises the question to what extent Siegenbeek's sensitivity to ongoing changes, and frequency in general, is indicative of such an awareness in other (Dutch) prescriptivists, or indeed in language users in general. This question ties in with Zwicky's (2006) Frequency Illusion, which states that 'Once you notice a phenomenon, you believe it happens a whole lot'. Linguists are often quick to dismiss frequency perceptions, because, as Zwicky puts it, 'hardly anyone has a panoptic view of language variation' (2006). The current research shows, however, that to understand frequency statements, we should perhaps look more closely at the absolute frequency of linguistic items in language users' immediate linguistic environment. More detailed investigations of the specific linguistic reality of language users with regard to variation are called for.

Simulating this linguistic reality remains a challenge for investigating prescriptive statements about usage. For the study of historical standardisation, it is important to be able to distinguish between the prescriptive and descriptive aspects of historical metalanguage. It seems likely that the success of prescriptivism partly depends on its descriptive adequacy, and that prescriptions have a higher chance of being influential if the prescribed variants are already part of the repertoire of language users. In our case, Siegenbeek was very explicit about targeting the language of 'good writers'. Our data is a fitting reflection of this, to such an extent that it actually contained some of the specific literary works that Siegenbeek references, such as *Het huis Lauernesse* and *De graaf van Leycester in Nederland* by Geertruida Bosboom-Toussaint. Incidentally, references to such specific works in a prescriptive context might be of interest to map out interactions and power dynamics in a historical literary context. Of course, the fact that we did not find some variants does show that our data is not a 'perfect' fit. But the present research does give us a better understanding of prescriptivism and historical standardisation in general, and Matthijs Siegenbeek in particular.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Marten van der Meulen is pursuing a PhD at Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands. His research aims at investigating the relationships between prescriptivism and language use, mainly in the Netherlands in the twentieth century. His other research interests include swearing, fact checks and the influence of English on the Dutch language. An avid science communicator, Marten has co-authored several popular-scientific books about language. The fall of 2021 saw the publication of his latest book *Wat gebeurt er in het Nederlands?!* (What is happening in Dutch?!) at Sterck & De Vreese, co-edited with Nicoline van der Sijs and Lauren Fonteyn.

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