

Three Southern shibboleths

Spelling features as conflicting identity markers in the low countries

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Over the course of the long eighteenth century, a distinct Southern Dutch linguistic identity emerged in the region now known as Flanders, and spelling features are at the heart of this developing linguistic autonomy. By analyzing eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century normative and metalinguistic comments about three highly salient spelling variables (the spelling of the long vowels *a* and *u* in closed syllables, the ending ⟨-n⟩ or ⟨-∅⟩ in masculine adnominals, and the orthographic representation of etymologically different *e* and *o* sounds), we will show how seemingly insignificant features increasingly came to be portrayed as representing an unbridgeable linguistic gap between the Northern and Southern Low Countries. At the time of the reunion of both parts of the Dutch speaking territories (1815–1830), this perceived gap then gave rise to different voices rejecting or embracing these shibboleths of linguistic ‘Southernness’, indicating how spelling features came to represent conflicting identities.

Keywords: Dutch; historical sociolinguistics; orthography; language ideology; language norms; iconization; vowel lengthening; masculine adnominals; diacritics

1. Introduction

The present paper discusses orthography in the Low Countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Focusing on three highly salient linguistic features (vowel lengthening, masculine adnominals, and diacritics), we will show how their orthographical representation interacted with socio-political developments. Against the background of an emerging Southern Dutch linguistic identity, seemingly insignificant features increasingly came to be portrayed as representing an unbridgeable linguistic gap between the Northern and Southern Netherlands. After a sketch of the political and sociolinguistic situation in the Low Countries in the Early and Late Modern Period (Section 2), we will move on to discuss our

three orthographical features. We will examine how they were treated in metalinguistic discourse (Section 3), then comparing this to actual usage (Section 4). We combine a language ideological analysis with a corpus study, and will conclude that the alleged linguistic North-South gap was mainly discursively constructed and only partially founded on usage patterns.

2. Historical and sociolinguistic context

The Low Countries can roughly be seen as the historical collection of counties and duchies that make up present-day Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg. These relatively independent principalities were brought together into the personal union of the *Zeventien Provinciën* ‘Seventeen Provinces’ by Charles V (1500–1558), but opposition to the tax and religious policies of his son and successor Philip II of Spain (1527–1598) resulted in what is usually called the Dutch Revolt. This uprising led to a political separation of the Low Countries into a Southern part, which stayed under Spanish rule, and a Northern part, which formally declared its independence from Philip II in 1581. The Northern Netherlands developed into a sovereign Republic, whereas the Southern Netherlands remained under Habsburg rule throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – first as the Spanish Netherlands, and from 1714 onward as the Austrian Netherlands. The political split of North and South came to an end in the 1790s, when French troops invaded the Low Countries, annexed the Southern Netherlands, and changed the Northern Netherlands into the *Bataafsche Republiek* ‘Batavian Republic’, which was de facto a vassal state of France. In 1810, the Northern Netherlands were fully annexed by France. After the so-called French period, the end of which was marked by the fall of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) in 1813, the Southern and Northern parts were unified into the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, created as a bufferstate against France at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. The Grand Duchy of Luxembourg was also part of the Kingdom, albeit by a personal union, and would remain so until 1890. The United Kingdom of the Netherlands was brought to an end by the Belgian Revolution of 1830, when the present situation of two separate kingdoms, viz. the Netherlands and Belgium, was established.

According to traditional historical linguistic accounts, the political history of the Low Countries as outlined above is of immediate relevance for the linguistic history of the Dutch language area (van der Sijs 2004: 53; van der Wal & van Bree 2008: 377). The Dutch standard variety is considered to have come into existence in the Northern parts of the language area, i.e. in the present-day Netherlands, more specifically in the towns and cities of the province of Holland, such as Amsterdam and Haarlem. The standardization of Dutch took off from the late

sixteenth century onward, thus paralleling the Dutch Revolt in political terms, and the standardization of many other western European languages in linguistic terms (cf. Deumert & Vandenbussche 2003). As there was a political division between the independent Northern Netherlands and the Southern Netherlands that remained under Habsburg rule, a parallel linguistic divergence characterizes the development of the language in both territories. In the North, standardization of the written languages occurred in the Early and Late Modern Period, while the South is typically said not to have taken part in that standardization process (cf. van der Sijs 2004: 53).¹ It was only in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, when the Northern and Southern parts were reunited, that the contact between speakers and writers from the North and the South also brought an end to this linguistic divergence, in particular from 1815 to 1830, during the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (e.g. van der Wal & van Bree 2008: 380). This politically motivated linguistic reunion is often conceptualized as the impetus to the Northern standard variety being introduced in the South.

3. Three Southern shibboleths in metalinguistic discourse

In this section, we will discuss how metalinguistic discourse treated three specific orthographical features, viz. vowel lengthening, masculine adnominals, and diacritics, against the historical and sociolinguistic background from the previous section. As we will show, these three spelling features have become shibboleths of Late Modern Southern Dutch, giving rise to various comments, prescriptions and proscriptions. Our analysis focuses on metalinguistic texts, which we discuss from a language ideological perspective (e.g. Schieffelin, Woolard & Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000). In particular, we will make use of the concepts of iconization and erasure introduced by Irvine & Gal (2000). *Iconization*, according to Irvine & Gal (2000: 37), “involves a transformation of the sign relationship between linguistic features (or varieties) and the social images to which they are linked. Linguistic features that index social groups or activities appear to be iconic representations of them, as if a linguistic feature somehow depicted or displayed a social group’s inherent nature or essence”. In our case, this means that seemingly arbitrary

1. If the standardization of Dutch was an (almost) exclusively Northern phenomenon, an obvious question is what went on in the Southern parts of the language area in the period of political and linguistic divergence from the late sixteenth century to the late eighteenth century. As we have argued elsewhere (Rutten & Vosters 2011; Vosters, Rutten, & Vandenbussche 2012), the dominant view is that the linguistic situation in the Southern Netherlands was characterized by *dialectization* and *Frenchification*.

orthographical choices come to index *Southernness*. *Erasure* refers to the operation by which sociolinguistic space is simplified, as a result of which “[f]acts that are inconsistent with the ideological scheme either go unnoticed or get explained away” (Irvine & Gal 2000: 38). When applied to our case, this means that the presence of ‘iconically’ Northern forms in the South, or of ‘iconically’ Southern forms in the North for that matter, is sacrificed in order to uphold a schematic opposition of *Southernness* and *Northernness*.

3.1 Vowel lengthening

By vowel lengthening, we refer to the orthographical representation of the lengthened short vowels *a* and *u*, which can be achieved in writing either by adding an ⟨e⟩ to the original vowel (Ve) or by doubling the original vowel (VV). This creates pairs such as *maen* (Ve) and *maan* (VV) ‘moon’, and *zuer* (Ve) and *zuur* (VV) ‘sour’. Historically, short vowels such as *a* and *u* were lengthened in various ways including doubling, adding ⟨e⟩, and adding ⟨i⟩. The addition of ⟨e⟩ has probably been the most frequent pattern well into the seventeenth century. In the case of *a* and *u*, writing practices were shifting towards doubling of the original vowel in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.² This shift from Ve to VV took a long time, at least until 1804 when the first official spelling in the Northern Netherlands prescribed ⟨aa⟩ and ⟨uu⟩ (Siegenbeek 1804). Whereas eighteenth-century normative publications from the North show variation, with a tendency towards ⟨aa⟩, metalinguistic discourse in the South shows variation as well, but with a tendency towards ⟨ae⟩ (Rutten 2011: 186–88). In both the North and the South, ⟨aa⟩ and ⟨ae⟩ are attested in actual language use (Vosters, Rutten & van der Wal 2010, and see Section 4 below). As early as 1757, however, an anonymous grammarian from the South notes:

the Hollanders use in some words, such as *daer*, *waer*, *naer*, etc, ⟨a⟩ in stead of ⟨e⟩ [for lengthening], and write *daar*, *waar*, *naar*, etc, but that is **outside our language**, and I only say this for the ease of those who sometimes read Hollandic books [Anon (P.B.) 1757: 11; emphasis added].³

2. The short vowel *i* is lengthened by ⟨e⟩ up until the present day, e.g. present-day standard Dutch *hier* ‘here’, *bier* ‘beer’. There have been proposals, both in the seventeenth and in the eighteenth century, to change this old practice to ⟨î⟩ instead (e.g. *hîr*, *bîr*), paralleling a similar desired change of practice to ⟨â⟩ instead of ⟨ae⟩ or ⟨aa⟩ etc (see Rutten 2011: 199). These proposals have not been very successful. On the lengthening of *e* and *o*, see below, Section 3.3.

3. Cf. the Dutch original: “de Hollanders gebruyken in sommige woorden, als *daer*, *waer*, *naer*, enz. in plaets van de *e*, noch eene *a*, en schryven aldus *daar*, *waar*, *naar*, enz. maer dat is buyten onze tael, en zegge dit alleenelyk tot gemak der gene die somwylen hollandsche schriften oft boeken lezen”.

Despite the fact that ⟨aa⟩ occurs both in metalinguistic discourse from the South and in language use, the anonymous grammarian maintains that it is an orthographical choice alien to Southern Dutch writing practices. This is probably one of the earliest examples of the schematic opposition developed over the next hundred years, whereby the actual variation in metalinguistic discourse as well as in actual usage is discursively erased. Variation is rendered invisible so as to enhance the ideological opposition of ⟨aa⟩ as a typically Northern phenomenon, and ⟨ae⟩ as a typically Southern phenomenon. This example of erasure, which follows the dominance of ⟨ae⟩ in Southern metalinguistic texts and of ⟨aa⟩ in Northern normative publications is closely connected to the iconization of ⟨aa⟩ as Northern, and of ⟨ae⟩ as Southern, as exemplified in the quote from the anonymous grammarian. Even decades later, in 1844, when there was a fairly large consensus in the Southern Netherlands to adopt a new Northern orthography, one of the only features not adopted was the representation of the long *a*. The South kept its ⟨ae⟩ spelling (Willemys 2003: 254).

3.2 Masculine adnominals

By *masculine adnominals*, we refer to the orthographical representation of inflection in masculine adnominals in the nominative singular. These can be spelled with or without the ending *-(e)n*, creating doublets such as *den man slaapt* and *de man slaapt* ‘the man sleeps’, and *eenen man slaapt* and *een man slaapt* ‘a man sleeps’. The occurrence of historically accusative forms such as *den* and *eenen* in the nominative – a phenomenon called *accusativism* – is phonetically conditioned, and probably linked to the loss of case in Middle and Early Modern Dutch (van Loon 1989; cf. Geerts 1966).⁴ In areas where the gender distinction between masculine and feminine nouns was maintained, i.e. approximately in the Southern half of the language area, accusative forms such as *den* and *eenen* changed into case-neutral gender markers when followed by a vowel, *h*, *b*, *t* or *d* as in *den appel* ‘the appel’ and *den dokter* ‘the doctor’. Examples of accusativism are very common in present-day dialects in Belgium, in dialects spoken in the Southern parts of the Netherlands, as well as in Southern supraregional or regiolectal speech (Goossens 2008: 137–47). For the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, examples of accusativism have been found even further to the North, in the Holland area, in towns and cities such as The Hague, Delft and Amsterdam. However, in Northern Dutch

4. Obviously, accusativism does not only occur in the (in)definite article, but also in adjectives and pronouns (e.g. *armen ezel* ‘poor donkey’, *sijnen oom* ‘his uncle’). We will focus on *den* and *eenen*, as these were the most salient and most discussed forms, representing a wider selection of masculine adnominals.

metalinguistic discourse, the forms *de* and *een* with zero inflection are selected and prescribed as the nominative forms in the masculine singular from the beginnings of the normative tradition in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century onward, while the inflected forms *den* and *eenen* are the prescribed oblique forms, to be used in the dative and the accusative (Dibbets 1995:57–70). Even in 1799, proscriptions against the nominative use of *den* can be found in metalinguistic texts from the North, such as the anonymously published *Rudimenta of gronden der Nederduitsche Spraake* ‘Rudiments or grounds of the Dutch language’:

one should write and say: *DE Burger N.N. is schuldig* [the civilian N.N. is guilty] or *DE Burger N.N. wordt verzocht* [the civilian N.N. is asked] etc, and not *DEN Burger*, as happens often by those who do not master the language [Anon. 1799: 74].⁵

In most eighteenth-century normative texts from the South, on the other hand, inflected forms such as *den* and *eenen* are selected and prescribed in the nominative masculine singular without any phonetic conditioning, i.e. even before consonants where inflected forms probably did never occur in the spoken language, and still do not occur in speech (Rutten 2011:188–190). One such case is our earlier example *den* or *eenen man slaapt*. Inflected masculine adnominals do usually not occur before *m*, but Southern metalinguistic discourse propagated the use of *den* and *eenen* in any nominative masculine singular. This is the main reason why the morphological topic of inflection should here primarily be considered an orthographical feature.

Research on Southern and Northern language use from the Early and Late Modern Period has shown that both inflected forms (*den*, *eenen*) and forms with zero inflection (*de*, *een*) occurred in the nominative masculine singular (Geerts 1966; Maljaars 1979; Vosters et al. 2010). In metalinguistic discourse, however, the distribution of *de* and *den* and similar forms is reduced to the schematic opposition of the Northern form *de* vs. the Southern form *den* through the twofold processes of erasure and iconization. Whereas usage data show that both forms were in use in the North and in the South under specific linguistic conditions, in metalinguistic discourse *de* and *den* are conceptualized as the iconic Northern and Southern nominatives, respectively, and without any further conditioning. The abstract morphological systems proposed in both normative traditions are summarized in Table 1.

5. Cf. the Dutch original: “moet men schrijven en zeggen: DE Burger N.N. is schuldig of DE Burger N.N. wordt verzocht enz. en niet DEN Burger gelijk veel geschiedt door de zulken, die der taale niet kundig zijn”.

Table 1. Masculine and feminine nominative and accusative singular of the definite article in Early and Late Modern Dutch metalinguistic discourse from the South and the North

	Masculine singular		Feminine singular	
	Nominative	Accusative	Nominative	Accusative
South	<i>den</i>	<i>den</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>
North	<i>de</i>	<i>den</i>	<i>de</i>	<i>de</i>

As Table 1 shows, *den* is used in the South to distinguish between masculine and feminine nouns, whereas in the North, its main function is to distinguish between the accusative and nominative masculine. In the feminine, there is general agreement among commentators from the North and the South.

The identitary function of this schematic opposition, in which *den* is declared the nominative as well as the accusative in the South, while relegating *den* to only the accusative in the North, even acquired religious significance, building on the equally schematic opposition of the protestant North and the catholic South. In 1815, the Southern Dutch grammarian Henckel warned not to use *de Paus* ‘the pope’ in the nominative, “as the Hollanders want”, but *den Paus* instead. Otherwise, one would assign the pope the wrong gender, viz. the feminine, and thus lead the pupils astray.⁶ In this case, an undesired linguistic form (i.e. \emptyset -adnominals) is directly related back to an undesirable situation from a religious perspective, iconically linking Northern language use to Northern ‘heresy’.

3.3 Diacritics

By *diacritics*, we refer to the use of accent marks to distinguish between two historically different types of long *e*’s and *o*’s, viz. lengthened *e*’s and *o*’s out of Germanic short vowels, and historically long *e*’s and *o*’s which are the monophthong reflexes of West Germanic diphthongs. The need to distinguish lengthened *e*’s and *o*’s from historically long *e*’s and *o*’s is discussed both in Northern and Southern metalinguistic discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷

6. Henckel (1815:135): “Niet *de* Paus, gelijk de Hollanders willen in den noemer van’t enkelvoud; want volgens onze grondregels, die in die stoffe met bijna alle de taelen van Europa overeenkomen, zou men den Paus een oneigen geslacht toeschrijven, en den leerling leeren doelen.”

7. This section is largely based on Rutten (2011:83–137), who provides a detailed discussion of metalinguistic discourse and writing practices in the South and the North.

In these discussions, synchronic phonological differences and/or an awareness of historical phonological distinctions were important. However, the different *e*'s, as well as the different *o*'s, have merged in large parts of the Northern Netherlands, as a result of which orthographies were in use and advocated that were based on morphological criteria rather than on phonological differences. The first official Northern Dutch spelling (Siegenbeek 1804) proposed a moderate representation of the difference of both *e*'s and both *o*'s, prescribing it only in open syllables, where the originally long vowel should be doubled, e.g. *geven* 'give' with a lengthened *e* vs *deelen* 'share' with a historically long *e*, and *hopen* 'hope' with a lengthened *o* vs *lopen* 'walk' with a historically long *o*. By this time, the early nineteenth century, the phonological difference had disappeared from most Northern varieties, and certainly from the areas of North Holland and Utrecht in the center of the language area. This means that the orthographical difference between *geven* and *deelen*, and between *hopen* and *lopen*, was founded on a so-called etymological spelling principle, and did not represent the spoken language of most speakers from the North. In closed syllables, the difference was not represented at all, e.g. (*ik*) *geef* '(I) give' vs (*ik*) *deel* 'I share', both with ⟨ee⟩, and (*ik*) *hoop* '(I) hope' vs (*ik*) *loop* '(I) walk', both spelled ⟨oo⟩.

Distinguishing the two long *e*'s and *o*'s in open syllables, the 1804 spelling, created in the North, appropriated an orthographical practice that dates back to the sixteenth-century Southern Netherlands. In subsequent periods, it became a matter of debate to what extent the two long *e*'s and *o*'s should also be distinguished in closed syllables. One of the hot topics in eighteenth-century Southern Dutch metalinguistic discourse, then, was the representation of the different *e*'s and *o*'s in open and closed syllables. There were many different proposals, with different types of accent marks (the acute and the circumflex accent), and also with or without differences between open and closed syllables. However, the variation is soon levelled out, and a single system becomes dominant, viz. a digraph with the acute accent on the second element, both in open and in closed syllables (cf. des Roches 1761). This means that there is no difference between open and closed syllables anymore, as in the codified system of Siegenbeek (1804). Instead, the orthographical representation of the *phonological* difference is dominant (independent from the syllable structure), with ⟨eé⟩ and ⟨oó⟩ for lengthened vowels, and ⟨ee⟩ and ⟨oo⟩ for historically long vowels, e.g. *geéven* 'give' and (*ik*) *geéf* '(I) give' vs *deelen* 'share' and (*ik*) *deel* '(I) share', and similarly *hoópen* 'hope' and (*ik*) *hoóp* '(I) hope' vs *lopen* 'walk' and (*ik*) *loop* '(I) walk'.

The merger of the two historically different *e*'s into one *e*, and of the two *o*'s into one *o*, is characteristic of the dialects of the north of Holland and Utrecht and dates back to the seventeenth century. In the south of Holland, e.g. in the city of Rotterdam, and in other Southern parts of the Northern Netherlands, the

differences did still exist in the eighteenth century, and are often maintained up until the present day. This kind of variation is erased in metalinguistic discourse, however, and a schematic opposition is created between texts from the Northern Netherlands where the distinction is invisible in the spelling due to the merger in the spoken language, and texts from the Southern Netherlands where it should be orthographically represented in line with the differences in the spoken language. In particular in the second half of the eighteenth century, the use of diacritics became an icon in Southern Dutch metalinguistic discourse, which thereby separated itself from Northern practices. Commentators were clearly aware of the Northern merger:

we do not have the pronunciation of the long or hard *oô* and *eê* in our language, as in Holland, or elsewhere. For instance, *gelooft* [believes] and *geloôft* [praises], *deel* [part] and *deêl* (a shelf) – this the Hollanders pronounce in one and the same way, and both equally hard [Verpoorten 1759: 45–46].⁸

4. Three Southern shibboleths in actual usage

The previous section showed us how three orthographical features (vowel lengthening, masculine adnominals and diacritics) became subject to far-reaching processes of erasure and iconization in metalinguistic discourse, turning some variants into iconic prototypes of Northern usage and others into iconic prototypes of Southern usage. In this section, we will test to which extent this discursive schema of Northern versus Southern shibboleths can in fact be applied to actual usage at the time of the political reunion between the Northern and the Southern Netherlands in the early nineteenth century: was this metalinguistic North-South divide also present in actual usage, exactly at the time when Northern and Southern varieties of the language came into close contact again as a result of the political integration?

To investigate this, we searched a corpus of handwritten texts from the period of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands (cf. Vosters 2011: 187–222). It mainly contains documents written around 1823 and 1829, originating from court files

8. Cf. the Dutch original: “alzooy wy de uytpraek van de lange of harde *oô* en *eê* in onze Tael niet hebben, gelijk in Holland, of elders: want by voôrbeêld *gelooft* en *geloôft*, *deel* en *deêl* (een plank) dit spreêken de Hollanders op een manier uyt, en beyde even hard”. Note that Verpoorten (1759) uses ⟨eê⟩ and ⟨oô⟩ to distinguish the lengthened vowels from the historically long vowels. Soon, the signs ⟨eé⟩ and ⟨oó⟩ would become the most common prescriptions (cf. Des Roches 1761). The adjectives *soft* and *hard* are used to distinguish the different *e*'s and *o*'s in Dutch historical linguistics until the present day.

of criminal proceedings. The three main components are police crime reports, witness depositions and interrogation reports, and more formal indictments. The corpus is balanced between larger cities and smaller towns and villages from each of the Flemish provinces. Our corpus searches focused on the long vowel spellings for *a* and *u* in closed syllables, the nominative singular masculine adnominals, and the spelling of the lengthened *e* and *o* in closed syllables, which is where the Southern tradition prescribed the use of diacritics. For this last feature, we limited our search by using only two sets of three highly frequent tokens (*heeft*, *geweest* and *weet* for *e*, and *door*, *voor* and *woord* for *o*).

Looking at the occurrence of all possible variants for the three features under investigation in Figure 1, we can observe that the prototypical Southern forms (shown in a darker color) are not the exclusive forms in Southern usage at all. In fact, the forms that were labelled Southern in the metalinguistic discussions are never the majority form: in all three cases, the prototypical Northern form (shown in a lighter color) is actually used most frequently, albeit to a different extent for each feature. In the case of the long vowels in closed syllables, the long vowels with an *-e* (Ve) instead of the doubled vowels (VV) occur in about 1 out of 5 cases. In the case of the adnominal endings for the nominative singular masculine, the *-n* forms occur to almost the same degree as the *-ø* endings. In the case of the lengthened *e* and *o* spellings, however, the forms with accents are hardly used at all: the overwhelming majority of forms used in our corpus are the unaccented ⟨*ee*⟩ and ⟨*oo*⟩ spellings, in accordance with the Northern Siegenbeek standard. Moreover, an analysis of accent use per individual scribe shows that, out of the sixteen scribes in our corpus who use any kind of accent spellings for *e* and *o*, only two use these forms all the time: most of the scribes who use accent spellings, use these forms alongside the non-accented Siegenbeek variants.

All three features also allow for one or more variants that are not construed as either prototypically Southern or prototypically Northern in the metalinguistic discussions. This includes, for instance, the single grapheme tokens (V) for lengthened vowels, the dialectal *e*-endings for the masculine adnominals (*eene man*), and the single grapheme ⟨*e*⟩ and ⟨*o*⟩ for lengthened *e* and *o*. The occurrence of such variants, however marginal they may be, shows how the metalinguistic discussions attempt to erase variation in actual usage that does not fit into a dichotomous North-South schema. Since none of these features, however, are very prominent, we will not discuss them further, limiting ourselves to the opposition between the two main variants most salient in metalinguistic discourse.⁹

9. See, however, Vosters (2011) for a more detailed discussion of all variants.

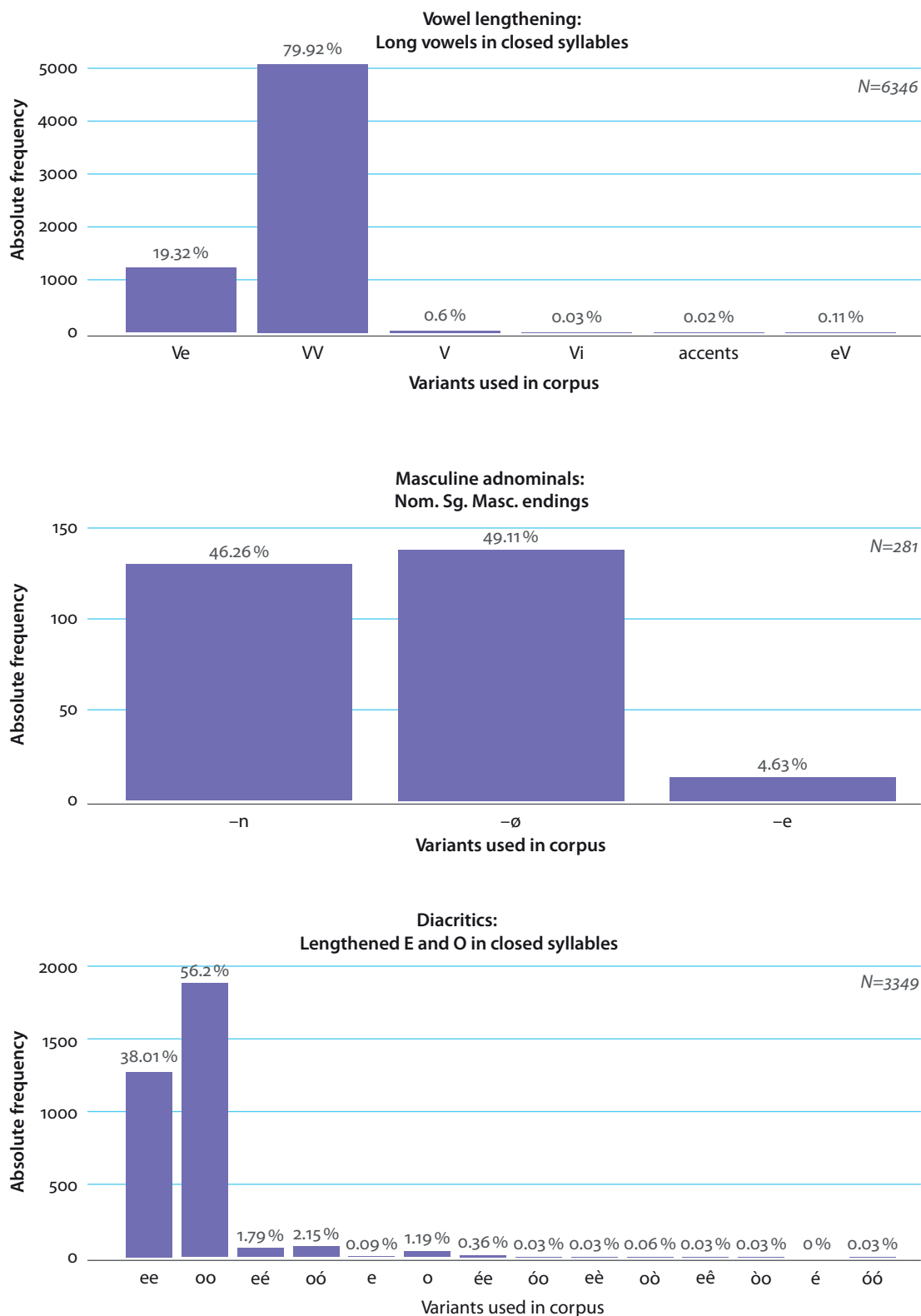


Figure 1. Absolute frequency of all variants in corpus

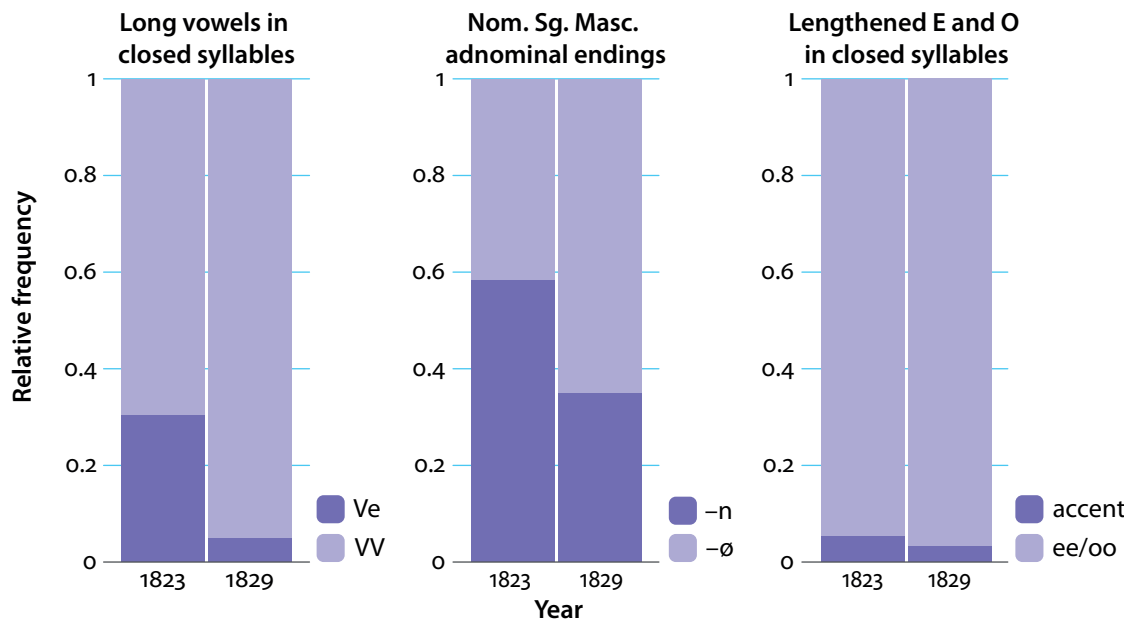


Figure 2. Relative frequency of two main variants in corpus (per year)

The corpus also permits us to split up the data per year of writing, allowing us to compare the documents from 1823 – early on in the reunified Kingdom of the Netherlands – with those of 1829 – towards the end of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, just before the Belgian independence. In Figure 2, we can see that the observed synchronic variation is indicative of an ongoing diachronic change: the forms which were construed as Southern shibboleths in metalinguistic discourse are clearly disappearing rapidly, giving way to those forms which were seen as prototypically Northern. The long vowels with *-e* (Ve) still accounted for 31% in 1823, dropping to a mere 5% by 1829. Similarly, the adnominal *-n* forms dropped from 58% of the total to just 35%. The change in the use of accent forms is less clear from the figure, but represents an equally sharp decrease from 6% in 1823 to just 3% in 1829. This rapid change, covering only a six-year time span, bears testimony to the strong stigmatization of the forms which were construed as prototypically Southern, as well as being a consequence of the intensified contact with the Northern variant at this time of the linguistic reunion of the Northern and Southern Netherlands (cf. Vosters 2011).

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study has shown how three orthographical features were selected for iconization over the course of the long eighteenth century. More specifically, Ve spellings

to represent the long vowel *a* and *u* in closed syllables, (*e*)*n*-endings for masculine adnominals in the nominative singular, and accent spellings for the lengthened *e* and *o* sounds out of West Germanic short vowels start to be seen as prototypical Southern forms in metalinguistic discourse, and are placed at the heart of a developing linguistic autonomy in the Southern Netherlands. A brief overview of language ideological comments in grammatical or metalinguistic publications at the time has shown how these seemingly insignificant orthographical variables start to represent a linguistic gap between the Northern and Southern Low Countries. Especially when the contact between the two parts of the language area increased due to the renewed political union in the early nineteenth century, this perceived North-South divide gave rise to different voices rejecting or embracing these shibboleths of linguistic ‘Southernness’, iconically linking spelling features to political and even religious identities.

Comparing this discursive North-South opposition to our findings from a usage study in the Southern Netherlands, we found that the metalinguistic discussions did not mirror what was happening in actual language use. Features that were construed as prototypically Southern did not appear as the exclusive or even majority variant in the Southern writings under investigation. Some supposedly Southern shibboleths – most notably: the accusitivist *n*-adnominals – were still somewhat prominent in 1823, but were rapidly on the decline. Others so-called typically Southern features, such as the diacritics on *e* and *o*, hardly appeared in Southern writing at all. This can mean, on the one hand, that the writers in the investigated corpus succeeded to a remarkable degree in following the official Northern language norms of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805) – as was probably expected of many of them, given the administrative and judicial context in which they operated. On the other hand, however, this also means that the variants used in a majority of cases cannot be considered to be exogenous, Northern features being exported from Holland to be introduced in the Southern provinces, without having any basis in the South. The traditional conceptualization of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands as the period when the Northern standard was exported from Holland and introduced in the South is, in other words, a simplification.

Moreover, since the spelling features under discussion were very much on the linguistic radar, being subject to frequent metalinguistic commentary, especially at the time of the political reunion with the North, Southerners may have been consciously avoiding the stereotyped Southern shibboleths. This implies that, although the discursive opposition may not have had a clear basis in actual usage at the time, it did gain such an importance that it may have shaped usage over time. A short-term diachronic analysis shows unmistakably that the use of all of the Southern shibboleths is rapidly decreasing in the 1820s.

All of our findings suggest that, already in 1823, Southern usage was not very different from what was perceived as Northern usage – that is, from the official Northern spelling norms of Siegenbeek (1804) and Weiland (1805). This leads us to the conclusion that the linguistic North-South divide which was very prominent in Southern metalinguistic commentary, was clearly just constructed at the discursive level: by the 1820s, spelling variables indexed divergent cultural and political identities in the Northern and the Southern parts of the Dutch-speaking Netherlands, but actual usage may not have been very different in both parts of the language area. Our findings from the usage corpus, in other words, suggest that the symbolic North-South chasm which was constructed at the metalinguistic level may in reality not have been as deep as it was often claimed to be.

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