De-standardization in the Dutch Language Territory at Large

Abstract

Der Beschreibung aktueller Destandardisierungstendenzen im niederländischen Sprachraum geht eine kurze Skizzierung der Standardisierungsentwicklung des Niederländischen voran. In den letzten Jahrzehnten hat sich nämlich herausgestellt, dass die herkömmlichen Standardisierungsfaktoren, der soziale Faktor in Holland und der sprachpolitische Faktor in Flandern, immer mehr an Gewicht verlieren und dass eben diese Entwicklung eine Erklärung für die jetzt entstehende Destandardisierung sein könnte.


Ich versuche diese Hypothese anhand der Ergebnisse zweier neuerer Umfragen in West-Flandern und vieler Daten aus früheren in dieser Provinz durchgeführten Erhebungen plausibel zu machen. Die Behandlung West-Flanderns ist durchaus angebracht, da sich gezeigt hat, dass die dortige Sprachsituation für unser Verständnis der Standardisierungsentwicklung in Flandern überhaupt von großer Bedeutung ist.

Ich komme zur Schlussfolgerung, dass Poldernederlands wahrscheinlich nicht „die Sprachvarietät der Zukunft“ ist, sondern dass wir es vielmehr mit einem ständig wachsenden Einfluss der Stadtialekte der Randstad zu tun haben, also mit einer zunehmenden ‘Hollandisierung‘. Ob in Flandern das Schoon Vlaams wirklich zu einer konkurrierenden Hochsprache heranwächst, ist etwas schwieriger vorauszusagen. Wahrscheinlich aber ist, dass diese Varietät bleibt, was sie jetzt schon ist, nämlich eine Substandardvarietät, die entschieden brabantische Regionalmerkmale aufweist, die aufgrund von Alter, Sozialschicht, Geschlecht, Region oder sogar von Person zu Person variieren.
This article on de-standardization in the Low Countries starts with a nutshell overview of the standardization of Dutch. It appears that the influence of the major determining factors – the social factor in Holland, and the political one in Flanders – has been gradually fading away in recent decades, and precisely that may have been the trigger for a certain amount of de-standardization.

In Holland, Stroop (1998) has detected *Poldernederlands* which he believes to be an increasing variation away from the conventional norm of Standard Dutch. In Flanders too, a centrifugal evolution appears to be occurring. It is mostly referred to as *Verkavelingsvlaams* or *Schoon Vlaams*. This southern centrifugal tendency is a substandard variety, based on essentially Brabantic characteristics.

The question here is whether we are really in the presence of new incidences of de-standardization. I argue that, most probably, neither of them is new. Rather, what we are witnessing, here and in larger parts of Western Europe as well, is that people are gradually restricting their choice of possible varieties to a single one, modified only slightly in accordance with different communicative situations. The loss of dialects, and their replacement with an equally informal intermediate variety, creates the illusion that this particular variety might then function in formal situations as well.

To corroborate this position I am using the results of two recent inquiries in West-Flanders, combined with a large amount of data from previous inquiries on dialect loss there, since this particular part of the Dutch language territory is very revealing as to the linguistic development in the territory at large.

I conclude that *Poldernederlands* is probably not ‘the variety of the future’ and that most likely we will witness an increasing influence of the ‘urban dialects’ of the *Randstad*, in other words an increasing ‘Hollandization’. It is harder to predict whether in Flanders *Schoon Vlaams* is really going to become a ‘new’ language variety or whether it will stay what it is today: a number of features varying on the basis of age, social class, gender, region or maybe even from person to person.

1. **Standard Dutch**

Thanks to Lambert ten Kate, the first comparative-historical linguist in Europe, we know that in the early 18th century a more or less “general” spoken Dutch did definitely not yet exist. In fact, the standard variety of Dutch was hardly a medium for oral communication until the early 20th century, and even then, as the famous Leiden professor of linguistics Kloeke (1951) noted, the number of people who were able to communicate in ‘ABN’ was no more than 3% of the population of the Netherlands. ABN is a familiar abbre-

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1. *Aenleiding tot de kennis van het verhevene deel der Nederduitsche sprake* (1723)
However, the fact that the spoken language was proclaimed as the main source of the language generated a new kind of norm problem. Whereas the norm of the written language, laid down in documents for centuries already, was, at least, identifiable, this was hardly the case with the spoken language, which, even at the turn of the century, was still very much characterized by regionally different distinctions. And here again, as was already the case from Vondel’s time (the 17th century) onward, the social variable determined the norm. In spite of the apparently democratic slogan ‘write as you speak’, it was actually and paradoxically a rather elitist affair, since the only spoken language deemed fit to be imitated in writing was the so-called ‘beschagfde taal’ (civilized/cultivated language) of the social and intellectual elite. At that very moment, as Hulshof (1997, p. 458) states, competence in this ‘general spoken language’ was limited to a “small upper layer of society”. Obviously, propagating this variety was also seen as a way of perpetuating social distinctions by way of language.

According to Van den Toorn (1997, p. 479), the Netherlands, prior to World War II, was a conservative country, and “that applies to the Dutch language as well: there were no substantial changes until long after 1940”. Between 1920 and 1940, the main language planning focus was on the pursuit of a standardized language. The basis of that emerging ‘ABN’ was and is the language used by the better situated classes in the Randstad, the large urban community in the western part of the Netherlands. This variety has been implemented through the educational system as well as through the media. Its acceptance and usage had become “a characteristic of civilization and a product of disciplining” (ibid., p. 480).

The lack of direct and frequent contact with the Netherlands made the implementation of this norm in Belgium a difficult problem. It was only after World War II that substantial success could be expected and actually occurred. The popularization of radio and television was the first major means that helped to overcome practical problems. Yet another was the massive “entrance into battle” of the core of Flemish linguists. Especially in the sixties and seventies, the Flemish media contributed actively, by giving linguists the opportunity of addressing their audience and of spreading their views. All radio and television channels and almost every newspaper had a daily column, respectively prime time language program aiming to help Flemings to gain proficiency in the northern-flavored standard language, which was (as was constantly repeated) their own. The results of this combined effort were quite spectacular: within a couple of decades an entire population was provided with proficiency in that formerly less known variety of its language. The process was helped also by the fact that in the sixties and seventies about 25% of all Flemings used to switch to Dutch television for their daily entertainment programs (Schramme, forthcoming).

2. Ongoing change

The influence of the major factors determining language planning – the social factor in Holland, and the political one in Flanders – has been gradually fading away in recent decades, and precisely that may have been the trigger for change on both sides of the border.

In Holland, Stroop (1998) has detected what he believes to be an increasing variation away from the conventional norm of Standard Dutch and towards a new variety, which he has labeled Poldernederlands. The most prominent characteristic of Poldernederlands is the pronunciation aai for the diphthong [ei]: tijd > taad, klein > klaain, as well as some other minor vowel changes (ibid., pp. 25f.). According to Stroop’s sociolinguistic comments, the real origin of Poldernederlands is socially, and not geographically, determined. The group of speakers responsible for both the origin and the very fast spread of Poldernederlands are young, highly educated females (ibid., pp. 16-22). Also, it is interesting to note that Stroop is not very happy with this development and that he blames the authorities and the kind of education they provide (or fail to provide) for not having attempted to stop this evolution.

In Flanders too, a centrifugal evolution appears to be occurring, viz. the development of a variety of Dutch variously referred to as Verkavelings-vlaams (Van Istdendael 1993), Schoon Vlaams (Goossens 2000) or Tussentaal (Taeldeman 1993). This southern centrifugal tendency is a substandard variety, based on essentially Brabantic characteristics. It is indeed a variety, which is neither standard language nor dialect, and it is almost exclusively used orally; it displays a lot of Brabantic characteristics both in the lexicon and morphosyntactically, and it is characterized by a large amount of dialect interference and Gallicisms. Those characteristics are anything but new and they have always been present in former informal varieties. Here too, the more highly educated middle classes seem to be playing an important part.
3. Destandardization?

The question now is whether we are here in the presence of incidences of de-standardization. According to Mattheier (2003, pp. 239f.), an important characteristic of de-standardization is "a relativization of linguistic norms". The norms of the standard language, he observes, are "increasingly oriented towards the more variable spoken language". This suggests a general decrease of the degree of standardization, i.e. of linguistic uniformity and normativity.

This sounds pretty familiar and seems to be a rather fitting description of the two developments just mentioned for Holland and Flanders. Yet, de-standardization does not necessarily imply the genesis of "new" language varieties. After all, Umgangssprachen, substandards or whatever we want to call those intermediate varieties which are neither standard nor dialect, have always existed. The process of dialect loss and leveling, which in Flanders has started considerably later than in the Netherlands, is now gaining momentum. Consequently, many people are trading in their dialect in an increasing range of settings and functions, in exchange for another variety of the language. Thanks to a considerable number of inquiries over the past decades we now know that in many cases the variety replacing the dialect is an Umgangssprache or Regional Standard, which very often has a decidedly Brabantic flavor even outside the Brabant region.

Therefore, as far as Verkavelingsvlaams is concerned, I am pretty sure that it is not new and the same applies to Poldernederlands. I tend to agree with Hinskens (in this volume) that it is a variety which used to be a Regional Standard in Holland and Utrecht. What is true, though, is that those varieties are used more often, in more situations and in an increasing number of domains than they used to be, and in the process, they are taking over functions from other varieties. There is an important attitudinal change as well. As a consequence, the standard language is pushed to the extreme formality side of the continuum, whereas, simultaneously, the use of dialects is constantly diminishing. Together, these two developments are responsible for the creation of an enormous amount of space on the continuum scale. That is, the intermediate variety now occupies a huge field, and has the possibility to move either to the left or to the right according to the circumstances, thus alternatively taking the shape of a more dialectal or a more standard-like intermediate variety.

In the former situation, the linguistic distance between dialect and standard language was large enough for both to be looked upon as two definitely different varieties of the language and, consequently, to prevent the usage of one instead of the other. But today, the linguistic distance between the intermediate varieties and the standard is considerably smaller, and, as a result, many people see no inconvenience in using the former in situations where actually the use of the latter would be more appropriate.

I presume that what we are witnessing, not only in the Low Countries but in larger parts of Western Europe as well, is that people are gradually restricting their choice of possible varieties to just one single variety, modified only slightly according to different communicative situations. This used to be the privilege of those who live in a region where the standard language was the habitual language of socialization and every day speech (Northern and Western Germany, for example, or Île-de-France). The loss of the dialects and their replacement with an equally informal intermediate variety creates the illusion that this particular variety might function in formal situations as well.

In the Netherlands, Stroop observes, the spoken Dutch of the upper classes, the ABN, has lost its status and prestige and could not hold on to its function as a linguistic model. From then on it was felt that every kind of Dutch that was more or less intelligible would do. The Dutchman sees his language as a tool, and he, but mostly she, turns to the easiest kind of Dutch that his/her environment, boss, teacher etc. is prepared to accept (Stroop 1998). In Belgium, the astonishing pace of dialect loss, mainly in Brabant (Willeyns 1997), has created a situation where there has hardly been time for evaluation, and a rather chaotic language situation has rapidly emerged. Dialect loss left people in many places and from many generations without a dialect, whereas dialects used to be the "natural" anti-pole of the standard language, since, by their sheer existence, they offered a sort of safeguard for the existence and the function of that standard language.

4. Diglossia

The combination of these factors put an end to the diglossic situation which used to exist almost everywhere in Flanders until less than half a century ago. One of the characteristics of diglossia is the notion that differing communicative situations require the use of different language varieties, e.g.,
dialect in an informal, and the standard language in a formal situation. Previous studies already indicated that in those parts of Flanders that were characterized by diglossia, the need for and the use of intermediate varieties was significantly lower than elsewhere, even before they were called Verkavelingsvlaams or Schoon Vlaams.

Recent inquiries into and studies of the linguistic situation in West-Flanders – the only province where the pace of dialect loss is very low, and where the diglossic situation has, therefore, persisted until the present day – seem to indicate that here indeed, the intermediate variety is used to a much lesser extent than in other parts of the country and that even the attitudes toward it are different.

Five consecutive surveys between 1979 and 2001 all show that the number of people claiming proficiency in a local dialect is always higher than 95% overall, and also, that the informants appear to distinguish sharply between a [+ dialect] and a [- dialect] variety, which leaves hardly any room for an intermediate variety. As a consequence, West-Flanders still clearly is a diglossic community where a more or less standardized variety (H) is used in a restricted range of situations in which the dialect (L) is not deemed appropriate.

Such a situation is detrimental to the usage of the intermediate variety, as I will try to demonstrate with two sets of data. The first set of data were gathered by Vandekerckhove, published in 2004 and 2005, and is concerned with actual language usage. The second set has been gathered by Geeraert from my department at the Vrije Universiteit in Brussels; as yet unpublished, it is concerned with language attitudes.

4.1 Tussentaal data from the Spoken Dutch Corpus

In one of the first inquiries to produce quantifiable data, Vandekerckhove (2004 and 2005) addresses two of the more interesting problems raised by the phenomenon of Tussentaal, viz. the geographical conditioning and the age variable. On the basis of a large database of Spoken Dutch (the ‘Corpus Gesproken Nederlands’, a database of present-day Dutch as it is spoken by adults in Belgium and the Netherlands), she examined two of the main characteristics of Tussentaal, viz. the pronouns of the second person (the forms of address) and the diminutive suffix. In the former case she examined the subject and object form of the personal and possessive pronouns, opposing Tussentaal-forms ge, gi, u, uw to Standard Dutch je, jij, jou, jouw. In the latter case -ke is the Tussentaal, -je the standard form.

Vandekerckhove's chart ‘je versus ge in subject function’ shows that West-Flanders is the only province where the use of “je” supersedes the use of “ge”. Her chart on ‘relative frequency of use of je in younger and older subjects’ reveals that West-Flanders is also the only province where younger subjects use “je” more often than older subjects. Her chart ‘je/jou versus u in object function’, moreover, indicates that West-Flanders is the only province where jou is the most frequently used pronoun, and u is used only half as often as elsewhere. Finally, the chart on ‘the use of the diminutive suffix -je by young and old’ demonstrates that, once again, West-Flanders is the only province where the diminutive -je is used more often by the younger than by the older subjects.

Summarizing, we see that in both cases speakers from Brabant and Limburg appear to use the Tussentaal form considerably more often than West-Flemings do, the latter also being the only group where in specific situations the younger speakers use the Tussentaal forms less often than the older ones.

In Brabant and Limburg the opposite is the case in all situations. And Vandekerckhove (2004, p. 990) concludes:

quite ironically [...] the supraregional colloquial language of the region which is known to have the highest dialect vitality, approaches the standard language most closely.

As mentioned before, I feel this is not ironical at all, but rather the outcome that was to be expected. It confirms my hypothesis that Tussentaal is thriving precisely in those regions where dialect loss has occurred earlier and more intensely, whereas in those regions where a diglossic situation continues to exist, Tussentaal remains on a lower level (Willemyns 2005a).


3 Only very recently and only in the younger generations we see for the first time a rise of the usage of the intermediate variety which may possibly become significant.

4 All the charts are to be found in Vandekerckhove (2004) and (2005), except the last one on the diminutive suffix, which appears only in the 2005 article.
4.2 Attitudes

As far as attitudes are concerned, we are now in the possession of some brand new results of ongoing research, carried out in my department and obtained through a matched guise inquiry. In random order the respondents were presented with a text having the same content in various language varieties: Standard Northern Dutch, Standard Southern Dutch, Tussentaal and a regiolect of their respective province. After each and every sample, the respondents (all highly educated) were asked to indicate in how far they felt the variety in question might be suitable for use in a particular situation. The situations were selected in such a way that the whole continuum, from very informal to very formal, is accounted for: with friends in the pub, colleagues on the job, meeting a stranger from another part of the country, giving a lecture, and the news on television. Moreover, respondents were subdivided into younger and older ones, and also according to their geographical origin (province).

From the outset, it is clear that in many cases the attitudes of the West-Flemings are considerably different from those of their fellow Dutch speakers in the other parts of Flanders. Let me summarize some of the most interesting results:

- In general both older and younger subjects deem it fit to use the intermediate variety (Tussentaal) in informal settings. As far as pub, job and meeting are concerned, they all agree. In the two more formal domains the younger participants think it is "rather unfitting" to use Tussentaal, whereas the older ones are categorical: it should not be used there (question 1).

- The answers to question 5 on where the use of the formal Southern Standard language is appropriate show that roughly both categories agree on all situations at stake. In the formal domain they both indicate very decidedly that only the Standard language is appropriate.

- The next question (7) involves the geographic variable. All subjects agree that Tussentaal is not to be used in more formal settings. Its appropriateness is judged differently, though, in the informal domains. As opposed to participants from the center, the peripheral ones (among them West-

5 This means: when you meet someone unknown from another province who is more or less the same age as you

Flanders) do not consider Tussentaal to be befitting in the pub. We may assume that they prefer dialect here and in so doing implicitly differentiate between dialect and the intermediate variety.

- When the answers are split up according to province (question 10), the West-Flemish situation appears more explicit still: their acceptance of Tussentaal is considerably lower than with the respondents from all other provinces.

- Finally, questions 17 and 18 give an overview of the appropriateness of four different varieties (Northern Standard, Southern Standard, Tussentaal and regiolect) subdivided for younger and older participants. Although the figures differ slightly, the tendencies in both groups run parallel. It is interesting to see that in formal circumstances the Northern Standard is considered to be more fitting than Tussentaal. One thing is abundantly clear though: the Southern Standard beats them all!

5. Summary

5.1 Linguistic conditioning

With respect to the issue of linguistic conditioning, dialect loss and the disappearance of the diglossic situation made de-standardization possible and made the blurring of the normative system possible. The most conclusive evidence comes from West-Flanders, the only language region in Flanders where the diglossic situation of old does still exist. Not only are the attitudes of the West-Flemings toward the intermediate variety (Tussentaal) significantly more negative than elsewhere (as Geeraert has demonstrated), they do indeed appear to be using standard language forms in situations in which others seem to prefer Tussentaal (as follows from Vandekerckhove's data). In both cases there is evidence that younger speakers seem to be more opposed to Tussentaal than older ones.

5.2 Sociolinguistic conditioning

As for the issue of sociolinguistic conditioning, de-standardization is the consequence of a number of perhaps unrelated, yet simultaneously occurring social factors or changes, viz.:

- the fading away of the (language)-political motivation of the integrational philosophy;
the coming into existence of a new, local center of language prestige (Brabant);
- the gradual decrease of contacts between Flemings and the Dutch;
- the general process of democratization which made it possible that not only the higher educated classes but other layers of society as well were involved in shaping the supraregional variety or varieties. The inevitable consequence was a more flexible norm for the standard language;
- finally, and I am not sure whether this is a cause or rather a consequence, we discern an indifferent attitude as to how the language is used in other parts of the language territory. Something similar is happening in Switzerland and Luxemburg, for example, and has to do with withdrawing into oneself, into one’s own small cocoon while dropping larger motivations. The language political motivation, for one, seems to have disappeared almost completely.

6. Some conclusions

6.1 Poldernederlands

As to Poldernederlands, I am not sure at all that it is “the variety of the future”, as Stroop fears it is. Probably we will witness an increasing influence of the so-called ‘Stadsdialecten’ (‘urban dialects’) of the Randstad, in other words an increasing ‘Hollandization’. Yet sooner or later the universal “urge” to distinguish oneself through language, combined with the equally universal urge for upward social mobility will become stronger again and then things will change once more. It is hard, though, to predict today in which direction this will push the language.

6.2 Tussentaal (Schoon Vlaams)

It is equally hard to predict whether Tussentaal (Schoon Vlaams) is really going to become a ‘new’ language variety or whether it will stay what it is today: a number of features varying on the basis of age, gender, region or maybe even from person to person. The interesting thing is that in Flanders we are actually in the presence of two simultaneous, yet opposite phenomena. As opposed to the weakening of integration resulting in de-

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6 Kloots’ (2001) data based on a survey of teachers of Dutch in both countries are very relevant in this respect.

standardization of the spoken variety of Southern Dutch, there is ample proof of rapidly growing integration, i.e. of increasing accommodation to the Northern norm in all aspects of the written, formal language, viz. in morphology, in syntax and in the lexicon (Deygers/Van den Heede 2000; Theissen 2005; Willemsy 2005b, pp. 56ff.).

6.3 One variety speech

The really decisive phenomenon may be, in both parts of the Low Countries, the fact that, as in larger parts of Western Europe, people are gradually restricting their choice of possible varieties to just one single variety, modified only slightly in accordance with different communicative situations. The loss of dialects, and their replacement with an equally informal intermediate variety, creates the illusion that this particular variety might then function in formal situations as well. However, the fact that this ‘one variety speech’ is usually strongly influenced by local, geographical features is potentially disruptive for language unity. Therefore, the relationship between the varieties of Dutch on both sides of the state border appears to be changing and may increasingly evolve toward the habitual one between language varieties in most other pluricentric language territories. Attitudes and habits, built up in the past, will continue to play an important role, but they have ceased to be decisive factors.

7. References


