

# The standard language situation in The Netherlands

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## INTRODUCTION

This report focuses on contemporary evolutions in the Standard Dutch spoken in The Netherlands. It makes no reference to the (complex) situation in Flanders, the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium (see Willemyns 2003 and Grondelaers and Van Hout [to appear] for extensive overviews of the Flemish standard language situation).

The report discusses three recurrently observed examples of norm relaxation in Netherlandic Standard Dutch (first section), and ensuing changes in the Standard Language Ideologies which negotiate and construct these phenomena (second section); in the third section we illustrate on-going ideological change on the basis of a brief content analysis of viewer reactions to a televised debate on the most notorious innovation in Standard Dutch.

## RECENT INNOVATIONS IN NETHERLANDIC STANDARD DUTCH

Although the Dutch spoken in The Netherlands meets the standardisation criteria outlined in Haugen (1966) – see De Vries (1987) and Smakman (2006) – there is some controversy as to *how* standard Standard Dutch (still) is. As in other European standard languages (Deumert and Vandebussche 2003), the recent history of Netherland Standard Dutch is characterised by the emergence of norm extensions which lead to conflicting opinions about the future of Dutch.

Three changes have by now been widely discussed. As early as the 1950's linguists observed a certain tolerance towards minute regional characteristics in standard speech (see Smakman 2006: 48 for an overview) which did not, however, threaten the dominance of Western-sounding speech at that time. In present-day Standard Dutch, however, there appears to be regional flavouring in a clear majority of standard speakers. In order to investigate this hypothesis, Van Hout *et al.* (1999) compiled the Teacher Corpus, a stratified database of sociolinguistic interviews with secondary school teachers of Dutch. Building on this corpus, Adank, Van Hout and Van de Velde (2007) demonstrated that the regional background of the teachers could be automatically determined on the basis of no more than vowel formant measurements.

The second phenomenon is a more recent evolution (noticed first in Stroop 1998) which concerns the lowering of diphthongs – notably [ei] – in the speech of young, educated middle class females (indexing 'intellectualism, commercialism and pop culture' [Smakman 2006: 50]). Jacobi (2008) reported that the phonetic lowering of the onset of some diphthongs has now also spread to educated *male* standard speakers.

While both developments represent phonetic extensions to the spoken standard, the youngest and most controversial development involves an ongoing *morpho-syntactic* change. For a couple of decades linguists have noted the rapid spread of the object form *hun* of the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronoun in subject position, as in *Als je zo speelt krijgen hun natuurlijk altijd kansen* 'If one plays like that *them* will always get chances' (Van Hout 2003: 277). In contrast with the norm extensions discussed in the previous paragraphs, this change excites (extreme) irritation on the part of teachers and language purifiers (see for instance the quotes in Van Hout 2006: 42). A recurrent argument for this irritation – as Van Hout (*ibid.*) summarises it – is that

the erroneous use of *hun* is thought to ‘spring from ignorance or worse still, from stupidity. For the rule is so evident: use *zij* or *ze* for the subject.’ Van Hout, however, convincingly argues that the use of *hun* as an emphasised subject pronoun is system-internally advantageous because it reduces the massive double-duty inherent in the current pronoun system, as a result of which it is also natural that it occurs so early in child language (see especially Van Hout 2006). Since, in addition, there is evidence that *hun* is also rapidly spreading in the dialects, and since it indexes the language of famous Dutch football players (which lends the phenomenon covert prestige), Van Hout predicts that ‘*hun* will eventually win in Standard Dutch’ (p. 285), in spite of his personal abhorrence of the phenomenon. We will come back to this controversial innovation in the third section.

### HOW ARE THESE CHANGES CONSTRUCTED IN NETHERLANDIC STANDARD LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY/IES?

It should be noticed that the increasing variability outlined in the previous paragraphs is not in itself indicative of decreasing standardness. Language is in constant flux and even among prototypical standard speakers of Dutch, there is evidence of variation (Smakman 2006). The basic question to ask, therefore, is how and to what extent the increasing variability is negotiated in the communal assessment which ultimately determines what is standard or not. The latter amounts to an investigation into ‘standard language ideology’ (SLI). SLI designates a normative ideology imposed and sustained by institutions such as (formal) education and the media, but maintained by (silent) agreement between the language users. The term ‘standard language ideology’ was coined in Milroy and Milroy (1985: 23) to denote ‘a set of abstract norms to which actual usage may conform to a greater or lesser extent’. On a related note, Silverstein (1979) defines ‘linguistic ideology’ as a ‘set of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalisation or justification of perceived language structure and use’ (Silverstein 1979: 193; repeated in Woolard 1998: 4).

If the latter is correct, then how do Dutch SLIs reflect the increasing variability in today’s Standard Dutch? The available evidence suggests that there are two ideologies, a conservative and a liberal one. Early discourses about Standard Dutch are typically conservative. Building on Jespersen’s definition of a standard language, Van Haeringen (1924) postulated that cultured Dutch should not contain any trace of the regional origin of the speaker. While he agreed to some personal variation in the implementation of this ideal, Van Haeringen strictly rejected systematic variation which was indexical of a speaker’s geographic origin.

It is unlikely, however, that this ‘strong’ ideology ever corresponded to a widely used accent-free ‘best’ language. Kloeke (1951: 8) rejected the regional neutrality ideal of a uniform standard language as a ‘myth’, and estimated that actual competence in a variation-free variety was limited to no more than 3 % of the Dutch (Willemys 2003: 110). In actual fact, the standard variety of Dutch which emerged between 1920 and 1940 was modelled on the speech of the (upper) middle class inhabitants of the Western cities of the Randstad (Willemys 2003, Smakman 2006). This middle class Randstad variety was promoted through the educational system and the media (Willemys 2003: 110), though its gradual acceptance appears to be consensus-based rather than enforced: there has always been national agreement that Randstad Dutch is the best variety of Dutch (De Vries 1987: 127–128; Smakman 2006: 162), and the Western dominance is also rooted in the subconscious conceptualisations of the Dutch, who invariably award the highest status ratings to Randstad speech (Heijmer and Vonk 2002, Grondelaers *et al.* 2010, Grondelaers and Van Hout 2010). A concrete indication of how conservative ideology gradually ratified the Western variety is the fact that typically Western pronunciation features – such as the diphthongisation of the long middle vowels (/e/, /eu/ and /o/) and uvular realisation of /g/ – which were previously labelled non-standard are

now considered to be standard, even by speakers who do not use these features themselves (Willemyns 2003: 120, fn. 17).

Prior to the last decades, SLI in The Netherlands reflected and constructed a relatively uniform usage without systematic variation beyond the Western roots of Netherlandic Standard Dutch. The post-war influx of immigrants whose native language is not Dutch, however, and the progressive informalisation and norm relaxation (which affects all European standard languages, cf. Deumert and Vandebussche 2003) have given rise to increasing variability in Standard Dutch. This new linguistic reality has spawned a more liberal ideology in addition to existing conservative views and discourses.

There are three types of evidence that SLI is being ‘relaxed’ to accommodate (some) variability. On an anecdotal note, Willemyns (2003: 113) observes the striking difference between the definitions of Standard Dutch forwarded in the two editions of the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (‘General Grammar of Dutch’). Whereas the first edition insists on a variation-free definition of Standard Dutch (Geerts *et al.* 1984: 10), the second defines Standard Dutch as a ‘language variety in which no elements appear which clearly stand out as non-general’ (Haeseryn *et al.* 1997: 16), a characterisation which appears to leave some room for variation. In addition, the actual implementation of the standard norm in the Dutch media is also indicative of increased tolerance towards variation. Van de Velde, Van Hout and Gerritsen (1997) argue convincingly for a ‘continual interplay between radio language (...) and standard language’, to the extent that radio language is indicative of prevailing opinions on standardness. In this view, the fact that a regionally neutral pronunciation is no longer a prerequisite for Dutch radio presenters (Smakman 2006: 48; Stroop 2000) testifies to a gradual acceptance of accented standard speech.

More importantly, there is attitudinal evidence which confirms the subconscious acceptance of variation in Standard Dutch, but which also allows us to determine the nature of the ongoing ideological change. All the available speaker-evaluation evidence pertaining to Netherlandic Standard Dutch (Grondelaers *et al.* 2010) confirms that the Randstad accent is deemed the most beautiful variety of Dutch, and the most appropriate variety for formal interaction. Yet, there is no general downgrading of non-Western accents. While Limburg-accented speech is considered somewhat less beautiful than Randstad speech, it is not downgraded for formal interaction (when compared, for instance, to Northern or Eastern-sounding speech which receives very low ratings). And the listener-judges in Van Bezooijen (2001) likewise consider non-accented spoken Standard Dutch to be the most beautiful variety of Dutch, but especially younger listeners find Poldernederlands equally appropriate for formal interaction. We will come back to the consequences of this evidence in the concluding section.

In the following section we will report a third type of evidence which strongly indicates that ideological change has led to the emergence of a ‘liberal’ ideology in addition to the conservative ideology.

## **IDEOLOGIES IN ACTION (AT WAR)**

Although language ideologies are driven and maintained by concrete institutions such as (formal) education and the media, they are for the most part hidden; according to Fairclough (2001: 71), ideology is more effective when ‘its workings are least visible’. Ideologies are therefore difficult to access and articulate explicitly (Woolard 1998), and we have accordingly cited different sorts of evidence in support of the ideologies we distinguish.

But sometimes one gets lucky. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 2010, the notorious Dutch television show *De wereld draait door* – which means ‘The world goes on’ in Dutch, but also ‘The world is becoming mad’ – featured a debate between the Nijmegen professor of linguistics Helen de Hoop and Ronald Plasterk, the then Minister of Education, Culture and Science. De Hoop and

Plasterk had been invited on account of the former's postulation that no matter how controversial, the subject use of the object pronoun *hun* (cf. above) is a system-internally logical and useful innovation of Dutch, because it exclusively refers to persons, whereas the available pronouns *ze/zij* are ambiguous as between persons and objects. Because of the controversy of the matter, De Hoop's theoretically well-founded position – which converges well with Van Hout's earlier claims (2003, 2006) – made it to a national newspaper. So did Plasterk's reaction that he would 'never officially allow *Hun hebben* ['them have'] in the Dutch language'.

The actual debate in *De wereld draait door* did not solve the matter – the format is awfully short, and the presenter appeared to be more intent on stirring up animosity than on assisting the protagonists – but the more than 100 online viewer reactions testified not only to the controversy of the issue, but also (and much more importantly for the purpose of this overview) to conflicting language ideologies. We believe, more specifically, that the strong emotions and the overall lack of restraint in the ensuing online debate revealed underlying ideologies more clearly and transparently than other (explicit) articulations.

The best evidence for the existence of two ideologies (instead of one which is being relaxed) is the fact that the debate split viewers in two camps. Some viewers supported Plasterk and instantiated an ideology in their comments which could be paraphrased as 'a sensible community makes agreements on the linguistic choices it allows, and community members should accordingly have the intelligence and decency to acquire and obey these agreements'. Other viewers followed De Hoop's argument and instantiated an underlying ideology which can be paraphrased as 'language inevitably changes, and the norm should (be flexible enough to) accommodate functionally advantageous changes'.

Space limitations preclude a full overview of the viewer comments from which we have inferred these ideologies, but there are quote-worthy passages which highlight some (unexpected) aspects of the ideologies. First, it is interesting to note that conservative viewers sign their contributions significantly more often with their real name and surname than their progressive opponents. This tendency reflects the larger societal prestige of the conservative ideology – people will identify themselves more easily when they represent a socially accepted view –, but it also allows us to retrieve some of the demographic properties of the conservative viewers (in as far as they are available on the internet). This investigation shows us that although identifiable conservative viewers are almost always representative of the 'bloc institutions' which impose and sustain ideologies (they are university professors – but not linguists, see below –, secondary school teachers of Dutch, publishing professionals, members of the legal profession), they typically focus on the consensus-based aspect of normative behaviour:

Her explanation for the popularity of 'hun' may be scientifically interesting, but the justification (which will inevitably follow in the eyes of the common people) for the appropriate and inappropriate use of 'hun' is a horrible prospect. You may be right in claiming that this matter is not about right or wrong, Mrs. De Hoop, but about what *we agree on amongst ourselves. If we ignore these agreements, then the end is near.* (Italics ours; all quotes cited here are English translations of a Dutch original)

Language *agreements* exist in my view to ensure that language remains sufficiently uniform in order not to cause confusion among people who want to communicate.

All professional linguists among the viewers, however, agree with De Hoop:

It often happens that the standard language changes on account of the dialects. And then it is not possible, as Plasterk alleges, to declare that one wants to stop this. That's the greatest nonsense I've ever heard. Language is language, and language changes. In France they have an official institute to protect their language (ridiculous!), but they can't avoid that the spoken language changes. Consequence: I can't follow any conversation in the French streets with my secondary school French.

While the linguistic establishment used to be the driving force in the standardisation of Dutch (Geeraerts, Grondelaers and Speelman 1999; Stroop 2000), this evidence seems to indicate that linguists have ‘changed camp’. There are other indications that Dutch linguists are increasingly reluctant to uphold one uniform best language. Bennis’s (2003) contentions that the Dutch language ‘is no longer the exclusive property of an elitist upper class of the Dutch population’ and that ‘the norm-imposing establishment is us all’, for instance, are strongly indicative of a ‘relocation’ of the responsibility for standard language maintenance to the layman.

## CONCLUSION

We have shown that increasing norm deviation in Netherlandic Standard Dutch has given rise to a liberal Standard Language Ideology, in addition to a conservative SLI. This liberal ideology transpires in the treatment of variation in the media and in the standard grammar of Dutch, but it is also reflected in lay conceptualisations of Standard Dutch, and it fuels anti-normative views of language.

Yet, there is no indication that The Netherlands is losing its standard language, or relaxing its standard language ideal: there are simply more varieties of Dutch (regionally accented standard speech, Poldernederlands) which satisfy that ideal. We have proposed elsewhere (Grondelaers and Van Hout, to appear) that this public acceptance of variability in Netherlandic Dutch is proof of the stratification the Netherlandic standard is undergoing in order to carry regional and social identities. In this respect, the downward norm relaxation attested in this chapter is not a form of substandardisation or standard demise – as purported by influential linguists like Stroop (2010) or Van der Horst (2008) – but a form of standard enrichment: while it becomes less general, the standard also becomes less sterile by acquiring social meanings and adapting to more diverse contexts of use.

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