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Agency and automaticity in language variation

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Agency and automaticity both play a decisive role in our language use. On the one hand, we consciously choose to express ourselves in ways that fit our communicative goals, yet at the same time, language production happens so quickly that it also has to heavily rely on automatic processes (Campbell-Kibler, 2016; Nycz, 2016). Looking at speakers' language output, however, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two processes (Sharma, 2018). For example, in a language contact setting, people can intentionally code-switch to showcase their multilingual identity (i.e., agency) or because a word in the other language was more easily activated for them (i.e., automaticity). In both cases, the result is a code-switch, but the underlying reason is very different.

A potential advantage of laboratory sociolinguistics is its ability to combine (a) agency, which has always been a key point in sociolinguistics, and (b) automaticity, which is usually investigated using experimental methods. This is in line with a usage-based approach to language, which generally advocates for a closer integration of the social and cognitive mechanisms that drive speakers' language use (Backus, 2021). A potential pitfall of switching from traditional to laboratory sociolinguistics, however, is leaving too little or no room for agency. In this presentation, we therefore discuss two case studies that illustrate the importance of accounting for both agency and automaticity within experimental settings.

First, we discuss variation in the use of the Limburgian personal pronoun *het* (lit. 'it'), which differs from its Dutch cognate. In Limburgian, *het* is productively used for female reference; in Dutch, however, *het* reliably refers to inanimate referents, and is hardly ever used for human reference. It was expected that changes in the use of Limburgian *het* are due to influence from Dutch; however, evidence for this hypothesis was not found directly in experimental data, whereas additional data from a qualitative questionnaire did point in this direction—at least for some speakers. The second case study focuses on native German speakers living in the Netherlands. Due to their frequent use of Dutch, these speakers often experience language transfer from Dutch to German. In many cases, this happens automatically, but—depending on their transfer attitudes—speakers can also actively suppress any Dutch activation or they can deliberately use transferred expressions. Combining the results of a production and reflection task, we show that speakers also make a lot of these conscious choices during an experiment, which in turn changes the interpretation of their responses.

Taken together, the results of the two case studies indicate that language variation may be conditioned by cognitive automaticity for some speakers, and by a conscious, emotionally charged consideration for others. Our findings therefore suggest the importance of integrating cognition and sociality in our linguistic theorizing and research methods. We end this presentation with a number of recommendations on how to account for both agency and automaticity in experimental settings.

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Presentative constructions in Belgian, Netherlandic, and Surinamese Dutch.

Stefan Grondelaers & Jiska Koemans

The alternation between presentative constructions with and without *er* “there” in (1)-(4) has been called one of the “most difficult” variables in Dutch (Van der Wouden 2009):

- (1) *Er* lag een peuk in de asbak.
- (2) In de asbak lag een peuk.
- (3) In de asbak lag *er* een peuk.
- (4) Een peuk lag (*er*) in de asbak.

Although corpus and laboratory investigation has unveiled the expectancy monitoring function of *er* in the “minimal pair” (2)-(3), as well as some of the ensuing syntactic constraints and external conditioners (see Grondelaers et al. 2009 for an overview), there continue to be important lacunae in our knowledge of this fascinating variable.

To begin with, almost nothing is known about the competition between the locative inversion pattern in (2)-(3) and the *er*-initial format in (1). Even more crucial, research has been restricted to the European national varieties of Dutch, ignoring the third national variety spoken in South-American Suriname, a multi-ethnic country steeped in multilingualism.

The research reported in this paper is the first to focus on presentative constructions in the three countries, and it was undertaken on a scale which makes corpus data or reading time experiments unfeasible at this stage. As a consequence, we have piloted the project in an acceptability judgment task, a tool which is not held in high regard in the empirical community (see amongst many others Wasow & Arnold 2004), although its validity crucially depends on the care invested in the design (Arunachalam 2013). By applying stratified sampling, factorial design, and random assignment, we have attempted to meet (most of) the conditions for experimental research.

In our experiment, 43 Dutch, 48 Belgian, and 80 Surinamese respondents rated two of the four constructional variants of 60 sentences randomized with 30 fillers. Analysis of the ratings indicates that respondents in all three countries prefer the *er*-initial construction (in (1)), and unconditionally accept the locative-initial pattern without *er* in (2). The locative inversion construction with *er* (in (3)) elicited the most divergent ratings: in European Dutch it is only marginally acceptable, though scores are noticeably higher in Belgium *and* in the Dutch territories which used to be part of Belgium until 1839. In Suriname, locative-initial constructions with *er* are deemed just as acceptable as the variant without *er*. The subject-initial variant in (4), which is categorically rejected in the European varieties, is significantly more acceptable to Surinamese respondents with a Creole or Maroon ethnic background.

While this experiment does not confirm all the *er*-predictors we know from previous laboratory and corpus research, it reveals a number of vital new ones: national borders, to begin with, need not be the best demarcations to investigate the pluricentricity of Dutch. And the study of European Dutch significantly underspecifies the complexity of Dutch in a multilingual society.

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Building attitudes towards Dutch accents: evidence from Flemish primary school students

A growing body of research in the domain of developmental sociolinguistics has provided evidence of a complex interplay between children's language acquisition and the development of social cognition (De Vogelaer & Katerbow, 2017, Johnson & White, 2020). One particularly productive field of inquiry is the acquisition of social meaning of language variation (ao Zenner, Rosseel & Speelman, 2021). The varieties in the Dutch language area have been the frequent focus of attitudinal studies that involved adult participants (for an overview: Grondelaers, 2013), but knowledge about how children perceive and evaluate Dutch accents is unfortunately still scarce. The present study does not only try to fill this descriptive gap, but at the same time aims to offer robust evidence for theoretical claims on children's development of language attitudes.

We conducted surveys in 6 primary schools in the province of Antwerp and collected data from children in first, third and sixth grades (n=471), in order to assess whether, and how, a change in the perception of, and attitudes towards, several Dutch accents would take shape. Such a survey covered identification, intelligibility and evaluation subtasks for, on the one hand, a group of 'traditionally' endogenous Dutch accents (i.e. as spoken in Limburg, Antwerp, Holland, West-Flanders) and, on the other hand, a group of 'traditionally' foreign accents of Dutch (i.e. with Arabic, French, German, Italian and Sranantongo as L1).

The results confirm the patterns observed in other studies: concerning the identification of language varieties, foreign accents are more often correctly recognized than endogenous accents, but the opposite is found when it comes to intelligibility, with foreign accents considered less understandable than endogenous accents. The attitudinal results, albeit very variable, point once more towards a division of labor between the foreign and endogenous accents, with the former scoring higher on the status dimension and the latter higher on the solidarity and dynamism dimension. With respect to the development across age cohorts we see an expected increase in accuracy of identification and intelligibility, but also more sharply delineated attitudinal patterns.

Our research does not only shed light on the combined effect of perception and evaluation in the acquisition of social meaning of Dutch. It also provides a contribution on a hitherto neglected component in this domain, namely the socio-economic status (SES) of children. In this respect taking into account the difference between low-SES schools and high-SES schools captures important nuances in the way foreign and endogenous accents are identified, understood and evaluated. Lastly, highlighting this distinction adds a new perspective on the formation of social stereotypes among Flemish children and allows for tentative predictions on the changing landscape of Dutch accents in Flanders.

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Het effect van standaardtaalideologie en geletterdheid op morfosyntactische variatie in het gesproken Fries

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Het Fries is voornamelijk een gesproken taal. Nog geen 20% van de sprekers beheerst de geschreven standaardtaal; de overige sprekers schrijven alleen Nederlands of gebruiken een op het Nederlands gebaseerde spelling voor het Fries in informele contexten. De geschreven standaard verschilt bovendien van de spreektaal, die onder invloed van het Nederlands flink aan het veranderen is (Breuker, 2001).

Noors onderzoek in een vergelijkbare context laat zien dat sprekers bij het voorlezen van een geschreven zin in de standaardtaal wel de morfologie, maar niet de syntaxis aanpassen aan hun gesproken dialect (Lundquist et al., 2020). Dit suggereert dat beide variëteiten tegelijk geactiveerd zijn. Voor het Fries werpt dit de vraag op of co-activatie van de geschreven standaard van invloed is op de gesproken productie: verschilt het Fries van de 20% die de standaard beheerst van dat van de overige 80%? Wij onderzoeken de invloed van standaardtalige geletterdheid en standaardtaalideologie op de productie van twee variabelen in het gesproken Fries.

De eerste variabele betreft de interne volgorde van werkwoordclusters in de bijzin. In de Friese standaard is alleen de ‘groene’ volgorde toegestaan, waarbij de persoonsvorm rechts staat (1), maar in het Standaardnederlands zijn zowel de groene (2) als de tegenovergestelde rode (3) volgorde toegestaan. Bij clusters van meer dan twee werkwoorden is het verschil tussen het groene Fries en het rode Nederlands nog duidelijker (vgl. Koeneman en Postma, 2006).

- (1) Jelle seit dat heit de ôfwask *dien hat*.
- (2) Jelle zegt dat vader de afwas *gedaan heeft*.
- (3) Jelle zegt dat vader de afwas *heeft gedaan*.

De rode volgorde lijkt in opkomst te zijn in het Fries, mogelijk onder invloed van het Nederlands (de Haan, 1997; Koeneman en Postma, 2006; Hoekstra en Versloot, 2016; Reitsma, 2021; vgl. ook Bloem et al., 2017; Olthof et al., 2017). We weten echter weinig over de sociolinguïstische patronen van deze verandering, al zijn veel sprekers zich wel bewust van de prescriptieve regels (Stefan, 2022, p. 59).

De tweede variabele betreft de allomorfie van de infinitiefuitgangen [ə] en [ən]. In het Nederlands is de spelling altijd *-en*, maar varieert de uitspraak tussen [ə] en [ən] op basis van sociale factoren zoals regio en formaliteit. In de Friese standaard wordt de allomorf juist bepaald door taal-interne regels waarop geen variatie mogelijk is: een kale infinitief krijgt de uitgang [ə] (4), maar bijv. na *te* is [ən] de juiste uitgang (5). Dit wordt weergegeven in de spelling. Vooral sprekers voor wie het Nederlands de dominante taal is wijken regelmatig af van het prescriptieve patroon (Stefan, 2022, p. 43).

- (4) Hy wol by ús *sliepe*.
- (5) Hy komt by ús te *sliepen*.

We presenteren de eerste resultaten van ons experimentele onderzoek naar deze variabelen, waarbij sprekers van het Fries zinnen hebben geproduceerd in antwoord op gesproken en geschreven stimuli. We onderzoeken in hoeverre de variatie in de antwoorden verklaard kan worden aan de hand van stimulusmodaliteit, zelfgerapporteerde taaldominantie, geletterdheid, en standaardtaalideologie. We vergelijken de antwoorden ook met die van een controlegroep van niet-Friestalige sprekers uit de noordelijke provincies.

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Acquiring regional and national stereotypes. Language attitudes of children and adolescents in the Dutch-German border region

Anne Renzel & Gunther de Vogelaer

Even though adolescence is well-known to be a key period for the acquisition of both language internal variation (e.g., vernacular varieties) and foreign languages, there seems to be little research on how attitudes change during that period, and even less attempts to include developmental factors in investigations (De Vogelaer & Toye 2017). This study tries to mend these gaps in our knowledge by using a covert ‘verbal guise’ experiment to get insight in the attitudinal landscape in 7 to 18-year-olds living in the Dutch-German border area. Using a version of the test adapted to capture children and adolescents’ conception of attitudinal dimensions such as status, social attractiveness or personal integrity (Lambert et al. 1960 and subsequent work), both the national languages spoken in the region (Dutch, German) and local dialects (Nedersaksisch, Niederdeutsch) were evaluated.

Our results can be analysed on two levels. First, Principal Components Analyses (Zahn & Hopper 1985) allow us to evaluate how attitudinal dimensions commonly found in sociolinguistic studies in adults are acquired during childhood and adolescence. Our results show that children at about the age of 11-12 enter a period in which attitudes further emerge and change from loosely towards more tightly structured constructs. Second, with respect to the varieties spoken in the region, the youngest children in our sample do seem to recognize the local standard language as a model for their own speech, but they hardly attribute any nonlinguistic significance to language variation. As children grow older, a correlation emerges between the evaluation of vernacular varieties and (the lack of) societal prestige. In addition, Dutch children grow an awareness of Standard German as a prestige language, whereas German children increasingly evaluate Standard Dutch as a solidarity variety, mirroring prevalent stereotypes of the neighbouring country.

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Who's afraid of homophones? Or how bringing contemporary participants to the lab can provide new insights to historical cases of language variation and change

Isabeau De Smet & Laura Rosseel

Homophony avoidance has often been claimed to be a mechanism of language change. Throughout the history of Dutch, several instances of morphophonological change have been argued to have occurred or been inhibited to avoid homophony between present and past tense (Van Bree 1987; Van Loon 2014). For example, the schwa apocope in Early Modern Dutch that affected nearly all Dutch words did not take place in weak preterites (*hoopte* PST-3SG 'hope'), which would render them indistinguishable from the present (*hoopt* PRS-3SG). It did take place however in irregular preterites (*kocht* < *kochte* PST-3SG 'buy') which remained distinguishable from their present counterparts (*koop* PRS-3SG) without schwa.

Yet, the question remains how plausible this homophony avoidance explanation is. While the topic is not uncontroversial (King 1967, Lass 1987; 1997a; 1997b: 355-361, Sampson 2013), bringing contemporary language users to the lab can provide some answers. Initial experimental research indeed suggests homophony avoidance to be a cognitively plausible explanation for certain patterns in language change (Kaplan 2011; Kaplan & Muratani 2015; Yin & White 2018). In this paper, we seek further experimental substantiation of homophony avoidance as a cognitive factor in language change. As no speakers of Early Modern Dutch exist today, we use a contemporary case of homophony between present and past tense to test the plausibility of this mechanism. We focus on Dutch non-verbs ending in a dental which, when used in the preterite plural, become homophonous with the present plural (compare *vatten* PST-3PL to *vatten* PRS-3PL 'understand'). Language users can avoid this homophony by switching to a perfect (*ze hebben gevat* PERF-3PL) which has become semantically interchangeable with the preterite in many contexts in present day Dutch.

In a Wug-type experiment, participants ($n=232$) were presented with a forced-choice-task requiring them to choose between the perfect or preterite of non-verbs to fill a blank in a stimulus sentence. The non-verbs either showed a double dental, causing the preterite plural to be both homophonous and homonymous with the present plural (compare *vatten* PST-3PL to *vatten* PRS-3PL), a single dental, causing the preterite plural to be homophonous, but not homonymous with the present plural (compare *duldden* PST-3PL to *dulden* PRS-3PL 'tolerate') or no dental, causing no homophony. Two between-subject conditions were created: one with only singular verbs and one with only plural verbs. Finally, to back up these experimental data, we also carry out a corpus study on the same case study in contemporary Dutch.

Results from both the experimental data and corpus data show that language users indeed tend to use the perfect more often for double dental verbs (and to a lesser extent single dental verbs) in the plural, suggesting homophony avoidance can be a plausible mechanism in language variation. More generally, this paper shows how experimental research can be an important asset in historical linguistics by providing a deeper understanding of cognitive aspects of language variation and change as well.

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Het effect van genderneutrale voornaamwoorden op tekstkwaliteit en *male bias*: generische verwijzing in een arbeidsreglement

Hanne Verhaegen, Rebecca E. Van Herck, Sofie Decock, Sarah Van Hoof

In het Nederlands worden generische masculina frequent gebruikt wanneer het gender van de referent irrelevant of onbekend is, bv. “Als een lezer dit boek goed vindt, wil hij misschien ook andere boeken van Ferrante lezen.” Onderzoek heeft echter aangetoond dat deze vormen een *male bias* veroorzaken (Redl 2021). In het licht van de recente opmars van genderneutrale voornaamwoorden rijst de vraag of die laatste gebruikt kunnen worden voor generische verwijzing zonder de tekstkwaliteit in het gedrang te brengen.

Doel

We onderzoeken het effect van generisch gebruikte genderneutrale voornaamwoorden op de gepercipieerde tekstkwaliteit en op de *male bias* in vergelijking met andere verwijsstrategieën (zoals generisch gebruikte mannelijke voornaamwoorden en voornaamwoorden van de derde persoon meervoud). We testen ook het effect van *cueing*, d.w.z. expliciteren in een tekst dat de gebruikte voornaamwoorden genderinclusief geïnterpreteerd moeten worden. Ten slotte meten we de vertrouwdheid met en de attitudes tegenover deze recent geïntroduceerde genderneutrale voornaamwoorden en gaan we na of er verschillen in voorkeuren en percepties zijn tussen Vlaanderen en Nederland wat deze voornaamwoorden betreft. Met gecontroleerde experimentele methodes brengen we een actuele maatschappelijke ontwikkeling in kaart vanuit linguïstisch oogpunt.

Methode

Dit alles wordt onderzocht via twee between-subjects online survey experimenten waarin participanten een fragment uit een arbeidsreglement beoordelen. In de eerste studie manipuleren we generische verwijsstrategieën en *cueing* in de tekst, in de tweede studie enkel generische verwijsstrategieën. Om de gepercipieerde tekstkwaliteit te meten beantwoordden participanten zes inhoudsvragen en beoordeelden ze twaalf stellingen over de tekst op een vijfpuntsschaal (van ‘helemaal niet akkoord’ tot ‘helemaal akkoord’). Om de *male bias* te meten vroegen we of het reglement volgens de participant betrekking kan hebben op mannen, vrouwen en/of non-binaire personen. De eerste studie werd afgenomen begin 2023 bij een representatief sample van 500 Vlamingen (gemiddelde leeftijd: 49,41). De tweede studie zal in de loop van de maand september afgenomen worden bij zowel Vlamingen als Nederlanders.

Eerste resultaten en vooruitblik

In de eerste studie geeft 36,6 % van de participanten aan niet bekend te zijn met genderneutrale voornaamwoorden in het Nederlands. Deze eerste resultaten suggereren dat onder Vlamingen de vertrouwdheid met genderneutrale voornaamwoorden is toegenomen, aangezien in 2022 nog 46,3 % aangaf geen genderneutrale voornaamwoorden te kennen. We zullen de voorlopige resultaten inzake de effecten van genderneutrale voornaamwoorden en van *cueing* op de gepercipieerde tekstkwaliteit en de *male bias* kunnen delen op de conferentie. Bovendien zullen we mogelijke verschillen en gelijkenissen tussen Nederland en Vlaanderen op het vlak van perceptie van genderneutrale voornaamwoorden kunnen uitlichten. Met ons experimenteel onderzoek en kwantitatieve analyse willen we bijdragen aan een solide empirische basis voor het maatschappelijke debat over genderinclusieve taal.

Referenties

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Sociolinguistic processing in hybrid exemplar theory: do we use lexical or sublexical representations?

Hielke Vriesendorp

Sociolinguistic research on the cognitive processing of language variation has provided evidence in support of the phonological speech processing theory of exemplar theory (e.g. Walker & Hay 2011, Hay et al. 2019). This theory posits that speech is processed by matching linguistic input to detailed memories of words, or ‘exemplars’, which include contextual and social information. Walker and Hay (2011), for example, find that words that are typically used by older speakers are recognised quicker when they are pronounced by old sounding voices. This implies social and contextual detail influences language processing, and therefore that sociolinguistic processing is integral to linguistic processing more broadly. However, much less is known about how exemplar models work in the processing of social meaning itself (i.e. what social information – region, social class, persona, stance, etc. – is signalled or evoked by linguistic variants). This is particularly true in the context of so-called ‘hybrid exemplar models’. In these models, listeners are posited to not just use highly specific exemplars in language processing, but to also abstract over patterns in these exemplars and use these for speech processing as well (as found for example by Ernestus 2014). Which of these are used when we process social meaning?

The current paper investigates this through a large-scale accent recognition task which compared accent recognition accuracy for high-frequency and low-frequency lexical stimuli, as well one accent recognition task with non-word stimuli. In the experiments, British listeners were asked to recognise three different groups of English accents: Yorkshire, General American, and Standard English. They heard isolated words, pronounced by 42 different speakers. In the first experiment the critical items fell into two conditions: high-frequency lexical items and low-frequency lexical items. And in the second experiment all stimuli were non-words. It was possible to control for speaker voice, word-length, intonation, and distinctive accent features by playing respondents two closely matched stimuli at separate points in the experiment, and a closely matched non-word in the second experiment. For example, they would hear the high-frequency word *ask* and low-frequency *flask* pronounced by the same speaker of Standard Southern British English, with the same intonation and voice quality, each at a different point in the experiment. In the non-word experiment the stimulus *nask* was used.

It was found that listeners are able to recognise accents at rates much above what chance would predict in both words and non-words, suggesting that listeners are able to use sublexical representations to process the social meaning of linguistic variation. Furthermore, it was found that listeners were able to recognise the accents of the stimuli with higher accuracy in word stimuli than they did non-word stimuli. This suggests listeners are also able to use lexical representations, and benefit from this. This was particularly relevant to listeners who had experience living in the area a given accent was spoken in, who performed even better in the word-stimuli task.

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Eliciting naturalistic register-differentiations in the lab

Heike Wiese, Annika Labrenz & Albrun Roy

We address the challenge of eliciting, under lab conditions, language productions that reflect naturalistic, ecologically valid register distinctions, and discuss this for the example of heritage language speakers.

Language use always involves different situation-dependent choices from a broader linguistic repertoire, and accordingly we should take into account such variation when investigating natural languages: to get a realistic picture of linguistic practices and language competence, we cannot confine ourselves to, say, formal settings associated with standard language. Rather, we need to tap into broader speaker repertoires and cover different registers. At a minimum, this should include language use in informal as well as formal settings.

While this might seem obvious, it is something that often gets overlooked in research on heritage-language speakers. Analyses are often based on data elicited under lab conditions that are favourable to more formal language, and on comparisons of heritage speakers with monolinguals who speak the language as a majority language. In such settings, monolinguals will choose formal registers, while heritage speakers might use more informal versions if formal registers of the heritage language are not part of their repertoire. This means that we bring in an additional factor: we measure informal patterns in bilinguals against formal ones in monolinguals. Hence, if we do not want to compare apples and oranges, we need to take into account informal as well as formal settings across groups, in monolinguals and multilinguals alike.

In our talk, we describe a set-up that supports this and provides naturalistic and comparable data that covers speakers' behaviour in different communicative situations. Our set-up draws on the LangSit method (<https://hu.berlin/LangSit>) and has been implemented in a larger, cross-linguistic research collaboration. We show that it combines the advantages of controlled and spontaneous data, with elicitations yielding comparable productions from informal and formal, spoken and written situations across bilingual and monolingual speakers, different heritage and majority languages, and societal contexts.

We discuss strengths and limitations of the set-up and present evidence from an evaluation that underlines two key strengths: (1) the set-up is successful in eliciting *register differentiated* data across formal and informal, written and spoken communicative situations, and (2) this data is *naturalistic* in the sense that it follows the patterns of spontaneous, nonelicited language productions.