

Pluricentric Languages and Exocentric Norms
Lexical Convergence between Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch.
Paper for Workshop “An Interdisciplinary View on Normativity in Language”

Background

Having more than one national variety, Dutch is considered a pluricentric language (Clyne 1992). The main national varieties are Netherlandic Dutch and Belgian Dutch (spoken in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium). Interestingly, the process of linguistic standardization evolved differently in both regions. First, contrary to the Netherlandic Dutch situation, Belgian Dutch standardization is a relatively recent phenomenon. Second, in the Belgian Dutch standardization process, a choice was made for an exonormative orientation: instead of developing a Belgian Dutch standard, convergence with the (long established) Netherlandic Dutch norm was promoted, aiming for a uniform Standard Dutch (Geeraerts 2003). Third, during several centuries (and specifically in the 19th century), French was the more prestigious variant in Flanders, preferred by the social elite. This caused a massive influx of French loanwords in Belgian Dutch and, because French did not have any noticeable influence on Netherlandic Dutch, “the struggle for recognition of Dutch as the official language in Belgium often materialized as a competition with the French standard” (Geeraerts & Grondelaers 2000: 53).

Method

This paper sets out to empirically test to what extent this exonormative orientation has been put into practice by measuring the current degree of uniformity between both regions. Focusing on *lexical* uniformity, we rely on the onomasiological measure of lexical variation designed by Geeraerts et al. (1999), which calculates the differences in lexicalization preferences for a given concept in the two regions. For example, Table 1 shows the concept RUGZAKTOERIST ‘backpacker’, which can be lexicalized by *rugzakker*, *rugzaktoerist* and *backpacker*. The degree of uniformity between Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch can be measured in terms of overlapping lexicalization preferences (summing the smallest relative value for each term: $(4+53+22) = 79\%$).

RUGZAKKER	Neth.Dutch	%	Belg.Dutch	%
rugzakker	20	4	201	24
rugzaktoerist	300	53	420	54
backpacker	254	43	171	22

Table 1 - Lexicalization preferences for RUGZAKKER

Data and Results

In this paper, the method is applied to two different datasets. First, we focus on uniformity levels for 20 traffic concepts (e.g. AFRIT 'exit'), 60 IT concepts (e.g. BEELDSCHERM 'screen') and 60 emotive concepts (e.g. ANGST 'fear'). Comparing uniformity tendencies in Usenet material (online discussion fora; 50 million words) and quality newspapers (500 million words), we also measure the impact of register on uniformity. Second, we focus on uniformity for concepts which can be lexicalized by English or French loanwords: given that the Belgian Dutch standardization process has been characterized by a strong purist tendency (cf. supra), we are interested to determine to what extent this purist reaction led to more or less uniformity. The analyses rely on frequency information for 130 concepts designating people (such as RUGZAKTOERIST) derived from two newspaper corpora (one for each variety), together comprising over one billion words. Our results, which reveal strong uniformity between Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch lexicalization preferences, will be compared to the uniformity levels obtained by Geeraerts et al. (1999) for clothing and football concepts in 1950, 1970 and 1990.

References

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