

“Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall”*
**Lexical convergence between Belgian Dutch and
Netherlandic Dutch**

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1 Background

Having more than one national variety, Dutch is considered a pluricentric language (Clyne, 1992). The main national varieties are Netherlandic Dutch (spoken in the Netherlands) and Belgian Dutch (spoken in Flanders, the northern part of Belgium). Interestingly, the process of linguistic standardization evolved differently in both regions. While the Netherlands independently developed a standard variant of Dutch, the standardization process of Belgian Dutch was delayed due to the influence of French. When the standardization of Dutch in Flanders resumed its process, an explicit exonormative orientation was adopted. 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).

To measure the convergence between the two national varieties, we will compare the word choice in the lexical field of sins and virtues. As such, this study represents a follow-up of Geeraerts et al. (1999), which looked at uniformity levels for clothing and football concepts in 1950, 1970 and 1990. The study confirmed the tendency of convergence between the two national varieties over the investigated time span and its attribution to the exonormative orientation of Belgian Dutch. In addition, from a synchronic point of view the distance between the standard and substandard language is distinguished as larger in Belgium than in the Netherlands. Although the results are readily interpretable and largely parallel for both lexical fields, their extrapolation to other lexical fields or other parts of speech requires further research. With the extension to sins and virtues, we acquire not only more data, but the impact of the lexical field can also be examined.

2 Method

This paper sets out to empirically test to what extent there currently is convergence between Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch, both in the standard and in the substandard language variety. 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 NIJD ‘envy’, which can be lexicalized by the six near-synonyms *afgunst*, *ijverzucht*, *jaloersheid*, *jaloerie*, *na-ijver* and *nijd*. We call the profile for NIJD the whole of the alternative lexicalizations within a source (e.g. Belgian Dutch quality newspapers) together with its specific frequency distribution. The degree of uniformity between Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch can then be measured in terms of overlapping lexicalization preferences (summing the smallest relative value for each term from the two profiles: $(23.87 + 0.03 + 0.67 + 57.57 + 3.73 + 4.15) = 90.03\%$).

*William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, Act II, Scene 1

NIJD	Neth.Dutch	%	Belg.Dutch	%
afgunst	399	24.42	746	23.87
ijverzucht	1	0.06	1	0.03
jaloersheid	11	0.67	126	4.03
jaloerie	1094	66.96	1799	57.57
na-ijver	61	3.73	246	7.87
nijd	68	4.15	207	6.61

Table 1: Lexicalization preferences for NIJD in quality newspapers

We also incorporate a stratificational dimension by looking at the uniformity among standard and substandard language, which expectedly is lower in Belgian Dutch than in Netherlandic Dutch due to the delayed (and supposedly incomplete) standardization of Belgian Dutch. Finally, to get a better understanding of the role of exogenous and endogenous terms, of words of foreign origin, and of terms either propagated or rejected in the purist literature, we measure their proportion for each concept by taking into account the weighted relative frequency of these terms.

3 Data and results

On the basis of a data set of more than 550 million words of Belgian Dutch and Netherlandic Dutch, we apply the methodology of profile-based uniformity to concepts of sins (e.g. NIJD ‘envy’) and virtues (e.g. IJVER ‘diligence’). Focusing on uniformity levels for both nouns and adjectives, we are also able to look at the influence of part of speech. The impact of register on uniformity is measured by comparing uniformity tendencies in Usenet material and quality newspapers. Preliminary results confirm the high level of convergence between standard Belgian Dutch and standard Netherlandic Dutch, while the levels are significantly lower for the substandard variants. In addition, uniformity levels for virtues rather than sins show large discrepancies, with Belgian Dutch scoring rather low and Netherlandic Dutch much higher.

The study of the lexical field of sins and virtues fits in with a larger project which analyses 40 emotive concepts, 20 IT concepts and 20 traffic concepts. A similar study is found in Zenner et al. (2012) on 149 person reference nouns (such as RUGZAKTOERIST ‘backpacker’). The various natures of these lexical fields, in particular with regard to the contact between the two national varieties and the proportion of foreign terms, allow for various comparisons. Lastly, our results will be set against the uniformity levels obtained by Geeraerts et al. (1999).

References

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