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The malleability of sociolinguistic identity:

Intra-writer variation in the De Baccher/Thijs Family correspondence, 1590-1622

In the *Bibliotheca Thysiana*, thirty letters and a memorandum book are preserved from Antwerp-born Magdalena Thijs spanning three decades of her life (1592–1622). An analysis of these manuscripts shows that in 1599, after having lived for a decade in Halberstadt (Germany) with her Flemish-born husband, Andreas de Baccher, Magdalena dramatically changes her style of writing. In letters written only six weeks apart, Magdalena switches to using the grapheme <f> instead of <v>. Thus, *vader* becomes *fader* ‘father’, *vrinden* becomes *frinden* ‘friends’, *voor* becomes *for* ‘for’, *ontvangen* becomes *entfangen* ‘received’, etc. Given the frequency with which these graphemes occur, the effect is profound. For more than a decade, Magdalena consistently uses the <f>-spellings years after she and her husband moved to the Netherlands (Utrecht/Leiden). In 1622, however, she changes her writing style again to using predominantly, though not exclusively, <v>-spellings. Given that “[s]peakers have an intrinsic capacity to use language variation as a resource to define their role in the situation and to construct particular social identities” (Hernández-Campoy 2016:92), the stylistic choices Magdalena and her family members make are not unexpected. Their use of variation attests to their experiences as adults moving around a dialect continuum, offering rich options for identity construction through language.

In this presentation, I examine intra-writer variation in the De Baccher/Thijs correspondence (185 letters/88,000 words). Focussing on Magdalena’s stylistic choices against the backdrop of those of her family members, I consider the question of adult idiolectal malleability with a view to ascertaining whether “examples of variation in adulthood, as part of or separate from macro-level change, can potentially offer a fine-grained perspective on the sociolinguistics pressures that act on speakers” (Evans 2013:210), and whether the “[f]reedom to define and redefine one’s identity [...] may be different at different periods in history” (Kielkiewicz-Janowiak 2012:317).

References

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