

Norms and usage: A case study of Dutch

Many studies on the history of a range of European languages deal with either the development of language norms, or focus on patterns of variation and change in language use. Research systematically investigating the relationship between these two key elements in the standardisation process, however, are less common. The actual impact of norm givers on language use therefore remains obscure: sometimes prescriptions clearly precede trends in usage, suggesting a potential ‘top-down’ influence, while in other cases, codifiers only seem to reflect what is already established in language use.

To offer a broader view on the relationship between norms and usage, a PhD-project on Early and Late Modern Dutch (1550-1850) was set up, with the main goal to triangulate prescribed norms, grammarians’ own praxis, and actual language use. Working with a precept corpus and the Historical Corpus of Dutch (HiCoD), not only allows us to uncover patterns of variation and change across different text genres and geographical regions, but also enables us to compare these findings with the injunctions of codifiers and their own language use.

In this contribution, a case study will be presented, where we will concentrate on an orthographical variable, such as the verb endings of the second- and third-person singular of *d*-stem verbs in the present indicative (e.g. *leid* v. *leidt* v. *leit* ‘(he) leads’). This feature was undergoing change in the period under investigation, and building on earlier work (Vosters et al. 2010; Vosters & Rutten 2015; Rutten 2011; Rutten et al. 2014, Rutten & Vosters 2016), we briefly discuss the evolution of metalinguistic comments concerning this feature, by looking into individual grammarians’ prescriptions. Comparing this to usage, will provide us with insight into changes in the normative orientation and language use, but will also allow us to evaluate the prescriptive success of normative publications.

References

- Vosters, Rik, Rutten, Gijsbert and Van der Wal, Marijke 2010. Mythes op de pijnbank. Naar een herwaardering van de taalsituatie in de Nederlanden in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw. *Verslagen en Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Nederlandse Taal- en Letterkunde*, 120(1), 93–112.
- Vosters, Rik and Rutten, Gijsbert 2015. Three Southern shibboleths. Spelling features as conflicting identity markers in the Low Countries. *Written Language & Literacy*, 18(2), 260–274. [Special issue: *The historical sociolinguistics of spelling*, ed. L. Villa & R. Vosters].
- Rutten, Gijsbert and Vosters, Rik 2011. Een nieuwe Nederduitse spraakkunst. Taalnormen en schrijfpraktijken in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden in de achttiende eeuw. Brussel: VUB-Press.
- Rutten, Gijsbert, Vosters, Rik and Vandenbussche, Wim 2014. Norms and usage in language history, 1600–1900. A historical-sociolinguistic and comparative perspective. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Rutten, Gijsbert and Vosters, Rik 2016. Prescriptivism between the devil and the deep blue sea: Competing language norms in the Southern Low Countries (1815–1830). In Ingrid Tieken-Boon van Ostade and Carol Percy (eds.), *Prescription and tradition in language. Establishing standards across time and space*, 137–151. Bristol/Buffalo: Multilingual matters.