

Historical pluricentricity in the Dutch language area

The Dutch language is pluricentric, with multiple centers from where language norms spread to more peripheral regions. In the history of the language, however, it is often assumed that this situation of pluricentricity is a recent phenomenon. The dominant view is one of consecutive monocentrism: the focus is placed on one linguistic center for the entire language area, which shifted from Southern Brabant to Northern Holland towards the end of the sixteenth century. Only from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century onwards, autonomous developments in the South and in the North are claimed to have led to diverging (national Dutch and Belgian Dutch) norms and modern-day pluricentricity.

We have indications to believe that pluricentricity dates back to at least one century earlier in time, with parallel writing traditions and emergent standardization in the South (Rutten & Vosters 2013). We will both problematize and historicize pluricentricity, investigating whether a concept such as pluricentricity can be used to describe the history of Dutch from the 1500s onwards, and whether it should be replaced by pluriareality instead (Elspaß & Niehaus 2014). We will build on analyses of the Historical Corpus of Dutch, currently under construction, which comprises news pamphlets, egodocuments and administrative texts from central and peripheral regions. In addition to a broad diachronic analysis, with data from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, we will also analyze individual texts as a separate variable, aiming to shed light on interspeaker variation. By investigating language use in a time span of four centuries, we hope to be able to re(de)fine the concept of pluricentricity in Dutch language history.

References

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