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'If only I could speak French'.

A historical sociolinguistic investigation of French influence on Late Modern Southern Dutch

Southern Dutch during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has often been assumed to be highly dialectal, cut off from ongoing standardization in the North, and highly influenced by French. However, in contrast to the importance given to French influence in histories of Dutch stands the very limited amount of empirical research on this topic. The few preliminary studies have clearly challenged this traditional view of 'Southern language decay'. Based on these exploratory studies, we believe that it is necessary to further investigate 'Frenchification' of Dutch by exploring new sources and by investigating the French influence from a profoundly historical sociolinguistic point of view.

To fill this empirical gap, we will present a case study investigating underdocumented material 'from below', focusing on French influence in Flemish soldiers letters from the Napoleonic period (1794–1814) and the first World War (1914–1918). These personal letters are believed to be a suitable type of source to approach everyday language use. To measure the degree of French influence, we will focus on loan morphology, specifically derivational suffixes. Following the approach used by Rutten, Vosters & Van der Wal (2015), we will query the corpus for all words ending in one of the loan suffixes appearing in Van der Sijs (2005). Specifically, we will explore the overall normalized frequency of words with French loan suffixes, as well as compare the frequency counts per individual scribe, time period and social rank.

By discussing the results of this case study, we will reflect on the broader context of Frenchification in Dutch language history. As such, this case study is part of a larger project focusing on Dutch-French language contact. The project aims to arrive at a more fine-grained picture of French influence on Dutch, as well as charting out social correlates of Frenchification.

References

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- Van der Sijs, Nicoline 2005. Invloed van het Frans. In Nicoline Van der Sijs (ed.), *Leenwoordenboek*, 162–226. Utrecht: Van Dale Lexicografie.