

Gender Marking in Dutch and North-Brabantish Dialects: Slowly Disappearing or Surprisingly Dynamic?

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Changes in gender marking leading to clauses such as *de meisje die daar woont* render quite some exasperation to most speakers of Dutch who consider this type of ‘mistakes’ as language decay. A similar pattern of language variation and change is found in North-Brabantish dialects. These dialects still have three (masculine, feminine and neuter) gender markers where Standard Dutch has two (common and neuter; Hoppenbrouwers 1983). Gender marking is one of the most prominent features of North-Brabantish, but with a process of dialect change well on its way for at least 50 years this feature is supposedly fading away.

However, we find a high level of heterogeneity in all generations of speakers in Brabant when it comes to gender marking. Our data, that consist of online speech (vlogs), translation tasks, grammaticality assessments and interviews on attitudes and prestige, show three variations. First, we find omissions of gender marking that might be explained by a general tendency of deflection in Germanic languages and a process of dialect levelling (Audring 2006). Second, we find markers in noun groups where they should not appear according the traditional rules of dialect grammar, leading to hyperdialectisms (Lenz 2004). Third, gender is also marked by innovative constructions, so-called ‘hypermarkers’, e.g. accumulate forms with two identical suffixes (Doreleijers 2017).

In this presentation we will deal further with the ‘what, how and why’ of gender marking in North-Brabantish dialects and Dutch. On the one hand gender marking seems to lose ground, but on the other hand it shows to be a surprisingly dynamic feature. We argue that this is the result of an interaction of language internal and language external factors such as language contact and identity construction. Moreover, we hypothesize that the function of gender marking is currently changing: suffixes are no longer (only) marking gender but (also) information structure.

295/300 words, references excluded

References:

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