

Style-shifting in Flemish TV and radio commercials: a diachronic study

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Marketeers make avid use of the stylistic values of language variation in advertising (Van Gijssel et al. 2008). Studying the deliberate exploitation of linguistic styles in this genre offers the possibility to uncover the social meanings attached to language features or varieties (Geeraerts & Van de Velde 2013). Against this background, we investigate style-shifts between two varieties of Dutch in Belgium, Standard Belgian Dutch (SBD) and Colloquial Belgian Dutch (CBD), in a corpus of 711 radio and TV commercials collected in 2018. Furthermore, we compare our results to those from an older study based on a similar corpus sampled in 2001 (Van Gijssel et al. 2008) in order to assess whether the social meanings of the varieties under study have changed.

In order to study style-shifts within commercials, a colloquiality index was calculated per spot element (i.e. a subsection of a commercial) based on 13 linguistic features characteristic of CBD. Regression analyses on the 2018 data show results are remarkably similar to those from 2001. CBD is mainly used in ‘minidramas’, a type of spot element that portrays a situation from daily life. Additionally, the colloquiality index is significantly higher in humoristic ads, as well as in stylish telecom adds particularly aimed at younger people. This use indicates that CBD is associated with entertainment and informality and potentially carries a more youthful indexicality. SBD, by contrast, is more strongly represented in informative spot elements, particularly in the payoff of ads (i.e. a brief statement at the end of the ad containing practical information like the company name). This suggests SBD carries social meanings related to formality, seriousness and authority. These results echo findings from experimental language attitudes studies on SBD and CBD (e.g. Impe & Speelman 2007; Rosseel 2017) and will be discussed against the background of recent debates about the evolution of Belgian Dutch.

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