

## Views from the closet: Wobbe de Vries (1863-1942)

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**Abstract:** The article presents a brief introduction to life and work of the northern Dutch linguist Wobbe de Vries (1863-1942), with special attention to de Vries' response to Kloeke's theory of sociolinguistic expansion and his critique of traditional school grammar.

**Keywords:** Wobbe de Vries, Dutch linguists, G.G. Kloeke, C.H. den Hertog, school grammar, diminutives, sociolinguistic expansion, syntactic theory.

### 1. Introduction

C.B. van Haeringen's comprehensive *Netherlandic Language Research: men and works in the study of Dutch* (1960) contains a number of intriguing references to the northern Dutch scholar Wobbe de Vries (1863-1942). His doctoral dissertation (de Vries 1895) is mentioned in the context of historical germanistic treatments of dialect phonology as 'the oldest representative of this type' (van Haeringen 1960: 80). His 'important and original study' on morphology (de Vries 1920-1921) is presented as 'very scarce and hard to come by' (*op. cit.* 62); as noted by van den Toorn (1977a: 169), this work is by far the earliest monograph on Dutch morphology, preceding Royen (1947-1954) by a full quarter century. Continuing with de Vries' work on syntax, his *Dysmelie* (de Vries 1910-1911) is tantalizingly referred to as 'a highly individual work, full of accurate observations, but weak in composition'. Like his other major syntactic study *De typen der mededeeling* (The types of proposition, de Vries 1914), it appeared only as a lengthy addendum to the program of the municipal gymnasium in Groningen, 'so that both these important publications had, like [de Vries 1920-1921], a regrettably ephemeral existence' (*op. cit.* 64). As if these scattered remarks are not enough to pique the English

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reader's curiosity, van Haeringen mentions de Vries' 'vehement' opposition to G.G. Kloeke's theory of sociolinguistic expansion (*op. cit.* 101-102); as this theory got Leonard Bloomfield's nod (Bloomfield 1933: 328-331), one wonders what the obscure Wobbe de Vries might have leveled against it.

To my knowledge, these are the only bio/bibliographical remarks to have appeared in the English language on life and work of de Vries. Indeed, even treatments in Dutch are restricted to a few obituaries. And even though de Vries' study *Iets over woordvorming* (1920-1921) was edited and republished in 1972, and one early article (de Vries 1910) was digitalized and made available in the Dutch language and literature repository *DBNL*, most of de Vries' work is as obscure and hard to find as ever.

My aim in this contribution is to present a brief introduction to life and work of de Vries, with special attention to de Vries' reflection on the linguistic practice and linguistic theory of his time. Starting out as a traditional philologist well-versed in (historical) dialectology, de Vries was reluctant to accept Kloeke's contemporary sociolinguistic explanation of Dutch dialect variation, calling for a more careful evaluation of the empirical data. At the same time, de Vries showed himself to be highly critical of received wisdom in the domain of syntactic analysis, and made bold advances in (morpho)syntactic theory, both from an empirical and from a methodological point of view.

It should be pointed out from the outset that de Vries was something of a maverick. His publication record shows that he shunned the limelight, although he could not be contained from entering into heated debates in the regular Dutch linguistics journals. De Vries never held a university position, teaching at the gymnasium throughout his career, shortened by early retirement for health reasons. It is not easy to identify any major contemporary influences on his work. Starting out as a traditional philologist, de Vries seems to have made a transition into the modern era all by himself. And although the work of major Dutch linguists like de Vooy, van Haeringen and Weijnen contains scores of references to de Vries' work, the only professional linguist directly influenced by de Vries appears to have been his cousin G.S. Overdiep (1885-1944), chair of Dutch linguistics in Groningen, who, like de Vries, focused on the syntax of spoken Dutch. (Regretfully, this line of research never held sway and petered out under Overdiep's successor G.A. van Es.)

In this article, I first present a few data on de Vries' life and character, and then continue with a discussion of two aspects of his work: his view on Kloeke's theory of sociolinguistic expansion and his approach to syntactic analysis.

## 2. Life

Wobbe de Vries was born on March 11, 1863 into a farmer's family living in Okswerd, a hamlet near the village of Noordhorn in the Westerkwartier, an agricultural area straddling the border between the northern provinces of Friesland and Groningen. A native speaker of the local dialect, he attended the French School in Zuidhorn, the gymnasium in the city of Groningen, and ultimately the University of Groningen, studying Dutch language and literature. He obtained a Ph.D. degree with W.L. van Helten in 1895, *cum laude*, on the above mentioned study of the phonology of the Noordhorn dialect (de Vries 1895). At this time, de Vries was already teaching at the gymnasium in Maastricht, but he returned to Groningen soon after to accept a similar position at his old gymnasium in the city of Groningen, where he would remain until his early retirement in 1923. De Vries was married to his cousin Frouwktje Opten, who appears to have been unhappy with the course of events and became mentally unstable; they had three sons, the second of which, Hendrik, would become an acclaimed poet and painter.

Through Hendrik de Vries, we have some information on father Wobbe's character.<sup>1</sup> He appears to have been unfit for the teaching profession, soft-spoken, gentle-mannered, and incapable of maintaining discipline in the classroom. He was not a stern father, revered by his sons for his wide knowledge, but at the same time too self-contained and withdrawn for them to feel close to him. The image that emerges is that of a closet scholar, content to be locked away in his study with his books.

De Vries is said to have had more than a passing knowledge of over 20 languages, and to have been a fabulous connoisseur of northern Netherlandic dialects (Schönfeld 1942). Regretfully, de Vries destroyed most of his dialectological work in 1924, disappointed in the lack of interest from both publishers and the scientific community (van de Vegt 1996: 46). This creates the impression that much of de Vries' output in later years is in response to work of others, rather than originally conceived.

Schönfeld in his obituary for de Vries highlights his 'hyper-critical' nature, leading to a 'businesslike, coolly objective tone' in his writing (Schönfeld 1942: 157).<sup>2</sup> His critical approach extends to both the empirical and the

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<sup>1</sup> See van der Vegt (1996) and the more extensive van der Vegt (2006). Both works contain much information, with photos, on Wobbe de Vries, his wife, and family. Van der Vegt (1996: 10; 2006: 9f) also reveals that the son has written in rhyme a partly unpublished 'uncompleted autobiographical romance' with various passages about his father.

<sup>2</sup> All quotes from here on are translated from Dutch by the author.

methodological side of the linguistics profession, as will be clear from his discussions with Kloeke and van Ginneken.

### 3. Debate with Kloeke

De Vries' scientific production appears to have been awoken by the publication of J. te Winkel's *De Noordnederlandsche tongvallen* (1898), which he reviewed in *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandsche Taal- en Letterkunde* 21 (1902). This journal would become his major outlet, at least in quantitative terms, printing 47 more articles between 1907 and 1942, mostly on the origins of Dutch dialect phenomena, including over 150 pages of additions to the etymological dictionary of Franck and van Wijk (van Wijk 1912). At some point, de Vries would in these publications inevitably find himself on Kloeke's turf, first concerning the origin of the Dutch diminutive ending, and later in the context of Kloeke's theory of Hollandic expansion.

In 1923, Kloeke had published his article 'Die Entstehung der niederländischen Diminutivendung *-tje*' to which de Vries replied a year later (de Vries 1924). He would return to the diminutives several times, always in response to others. In his first reply to Kloeke, de Vries states that Kloeke's 'important study (...) on the origin of our diminutive endings necessitates a new collection of the material' (de Vries 1924: 105). In what follows, he pours out his data and presents etymologies of the relevant suffixes, carefully 'avoiding the issue of the moment: the origin of *-tje* and cognates'.

Precisely this was of course the topic of Kloeke's article, who proposed that *-tje* is the result of palatalization of *-ki:n* and that the distribution of *-tje* over the entire Dutch speaking area was the result of geographic expansion from the area where (Kloeke thought) the palatalization first took place around 1400: Holland and Utrecht. Earlier, de Vries (1921-1922) had shown himself to be sceptical about a relation between *-ke* and *-tje* (presumably in response to Wrede 1908: 81): at least in Frisian and the northern dialects of Dutch the two suffixes have always existed side by side (1972: 79, 81), and de Vries' survey of the material suggests that *-(t)je(n)* is an original diminutive suffix (actually, a more general morpheme expressing affinity, 1972: 83).

In later contributions, de Vries acknowledges that the *-ki:n* > *-tje* palatalization may be real (de Vries 1932: 34; cf. Pée 1936-1938: 54), but he refuses to accept the expansion out of Holland, a topic which became the subject of a separate exchange. Here, as in the more general debate about the expansion idea, de Vries maintains that it needs to be shown that the developments that

took place in Holland did not likewise take place in other parts of the country. In fact, de Vries (1925) shows that the northeastern dialects display palatalized forms of the diminutive suffix prior to the presumed date of Hollandic expansion (the 16th and 17th century).

In response to Kloeke (1929), de Vries remarks: ‘Frankly, I had not expected (...) that for other areas [than North Holland] the autochthonous character of *-tje* etc. would still be denied’ (1932: 34). But in this stage, the debate was no longer about the diminutives, but about the entire idea of Hollandic expansion, vigorously expressed in Kloeke (1927).

As is well-known, Kloeke’s theory is based on the pronunciation of the vowel in the words for ‘mouse’ and ‘house’ in the various Dutch dialects (cf. Bloomfield 1933: 328). The vowel is a diphthong in a central area and [u:] in the East; in between these two areas we find areas where the vowel is [y:]. Kloeke now assumed that the [y:] pronunciation was once the prestigious pronunciation in Holland, and was borrowed into the speech of speakers of adjacent areas, gradually overflowing the dialect areas further to the East. Interestingly, the vowel in ‘house’ was pronounced as [y:] in areas that still had [u:] in ‘mouse’. This is explained by the expansion theory, since *house* is a less homely, more cultured term more likely to occur in elevated speech. Kloeke assumed that the Hollandic [y:] pronunciation, the model for the Hollandic expansion to the east, was in fact an earlier borrowing taken over from southern immigrants, and that the replacement of [y:] by the diphthong was the result of a second wave of southern influence (starting after 1585).

Kloeke’s very detailed *mouse/house* map was the product of diligent data collection, yielding the important result of lexical diffusion (word based rather than sound based change, cf. Wang 1969). Kloeke’s conclusion that change is a function of social rather than linguistic factors has also stood the test of time (cf. Thomason & Kaufman 1988). However, his explanation was based on the *idée fixe* that change is invariably effected ‘from above’, by man’s aspiration to belong to the more prestigious group (Kloeke 1927: 14-15). The alternative ‘basically testifies to such a dark view of the expansive force of civilization that one would despair of all progress’ (Kloeke 1924: 178). To this de Vries dryly responds that ‘even if this expectation could be shown to be pessimistic, that in itself would not prove its ill-foundedness’ (1929: 151).

This cornerstone of Kloeke’s thinking, change from above, was never challenged in his study, but served as a starting point for the scenarios devised to account for the attested patterns of sound variation (see also van den Toorn 1977b). But for each of these scenarios, correctness would have

to be independently established. Here de Vries does not cease to call for a critical examination, confessing: 'I cannot shake the thought that what seems, geographically, historically, sociologically, to present a probability verging on certainty, might in fact be utterly false' (1942: 73), and asks: 'Does the fact from which the reasoning starts [i.e. the fact of expansion] stand?' (1925: 24). De Vries' observation that Kloeke's expansion scenario sits uneasily with the facts has since been supported by others (J.J. Salverda de Grave, J.H. Kern, W.G. Hellinga, W.A.F. Janssen). Moreover, the entire idea of change from above and the crucial role of southern immigration in the emergence of the Hollandic standard variety has been called into question by a series of recent investigations summarized in Howell (2006). The image that emerges from these investigations is that the southern influence is negligible, and that in fact the Hollandic standard language owes much to a process of koineisation set off by large lower class immigration from the East of the country (see also van der Sijs 2004: 46 f.).

From de Vries' critique of Kloeke, one gathers that his objection was mostly methodological: 'Noone denies that expansion is a common phenomenon, but it is risky to assume it where it may be historically conceived but not ascertained' (1942: 73). In his rejection of Kloeke's German trained deductive method (cf. van den Toorn 1977b: 4), de Vries may be seen as echoing Duhem's contemporary rejection of the German historical 'method': 'history will never be a deductive science because man, its subject, is too complex, altogether too difficult to pin down with any definition, moving as he does in a milieu of events too numerous, too fine, too confused to be measured' (1991: 45).

#### 4. Syntactic analysis

Whereas de Vries' involvement with the origin of the diminutive suffix and the related issue of Hollandic expansion grew out of his traditional historical Indo-Europeanist work, in combination with his dialect study, his mature works (de Vries 1910-1911, 1914, 1920-1921) appear to have originated in the practical demands of teaching the structure of Dutch to his high school students. This is also evident from his eight articles on parsing issues ('ontleding'), all published in *De Nieuwe Taalgids* between 1919 and 1927.

The tradition of Dutch school grammar had been solidified around the turn of the century in den Hertog 1892-1896. In den Hertog's system, syntactic analysis involves not only the identification of word classes but also the definition of grammatical functions (parts of speech). Den Hertog himself

describes the system as a happy marriage of a more traditional morphology-oriented approach (giving center stage to the finite verb, for instance) with a more modern approach based on the ‘logical analysis’ (where a sentence is regarded as an expression of thought) (cf. Noordegraaf 1982 on the tradition of the logical analysis).

It is likely that grammar instruction at the Groningen gymnasium was based on the principles laid out in den Hertog’s work, and hence that de Vries’ studies on parsing and syntactic theory constitute his personal reaction to the framework advanced there. As de Vries states in the introduction to *Dysmelie* (1910-1911: 4):

Meanwhile it is common knowledge that one should not judge current grammatical practice by too strict a logical standard; indeed, it leaves so much to be desired, not least in the more fundamental aspects, that one has already transferred to it from [the study of] history the irreverent name of *fable convenue*. On top of that it is quite incomplete, especially in syntax.

*Dysmelie* (de Vries 1910-1911) is essentially a study of linguistic phenomena the presence of which is not dictated by logic. Much more than den Hertog, de Vries emphasizes the ‘illogical’ nature of grammatical expression, and his ambition is to identify precisely those ‘illogical’ elements of natural language and to explain their role in the system of grammar.

The examples are countless, but one or two analyses may be presented here as particularly striking and interesting. Chapter 2 of *Dysmelie* is devoted to constructions of the type in (1), where the subject is resumed by a demonstrative pronoun (DEM):

- (1)     Jan     die     roep-t     ons  
           John    DEM    call-3SG   1PL:OBJ  
           ‘John is calling us.’

The practical questions stirred by examples of this type are: what is the subject, and what is the function of the demonstrative element? From a logical point of view, the demonstrative element need not or should not be there. De Vries argues that *Jan* in (1) is the subject, and *die* is part of the predicate. He introduces the term ‘subject representation’ for a term of the predicate referring back to the subject. De Vries points out that the predicate in (1) features two elements of subject representation, *die* and the ending *-t*, and states that the two are functionally equivalent. This leads to a discussion of agreement and dependency marking more generally, introducing the con-

cepts of target and controller for agreement (called ‘receptor’ and ‘remissor’ by de Vries) and the essentials of the head-marking vs. dependency-marking distinction of Nichols (1986).<sup>3</sup>

Another example of where de Vries’ thinking takes him is his discussion of (2), similar to (1), except that de Vries finds that the clause-initial constituent is no longer represented in the remainder of the clause:

- (2) Mijn oudste zuster (die) haar man is ziek  
 my oldest sister DEM her man is sick  
 ‘My oldest sister’s husband is sick.’

In (2), the part *die haar man is ziek* ‘her husband is sick’ constitutes a complete clause (the demonstrative element is optional here). De Vries argues that in constructions of this type we have a higher order predication (a ‘secondary clause’), with the first constituent acting as a ‘secondary subject’ and the clause following it as a ‘secondary predicate’. Having established this, he does not fail to note that the clause acting as a ‘secondary predicate’ may itself be a ‘secondary clause’ with a ‘secondary subject’ as its first constituent, et cetera ad infinitum.

The description of (2) in terms of subject-predicate relations represents a move away from the tradition, suggesting that to de Vries’ thinking, a generalization can be made over various types of clausal dependencies, quite independently of the concepts of logical analysis.

It should be noted that de Vries’ approach to syntax, while emphasizing discrepancies with logic, remains squarely within the tradition of the logical analysis in its concern with grammatical function. This is evident from large parts of de Vries (1914), dealing with the definition of subject and predicate. While the work as a whole shows a remarkable sensitivity to aspects of discourse and information structure, de Vries apparently also felt the need to improve on existing definitions of subject and predicate, two core notions in the system of den Hertog.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In a striking move, de Vries suggests that case-markers, being dependency markers like *die* in (1), may be regarded as ‘words’ (1910-1911: 85; see also de Vries 1972: 37). Earlier, Baudouin de Courtenay had already introduced ‘morpheme’ as a cover term for roots and affixes (in Russian in 1881, in German in 1895; see Baudouin de Courtenay 1984: 63, 66), and the fact that de Vries proposes ‘word’ for the same concept suggests that he was unfamiliar with Baudouin de Courtenay’s idea.

<sup>4</sup> Den Hertog defines the concepts ‘subject’ and ‘predicate’ by reference to finiteness, which de Vries rejects. Also, den Hertog, unlike de Vries, defines the predicate [Dutch *gezegde*] in such a way that it excludes the verbal complement.)



A reasonable hypothesis would seem to be that de Vries' view on grammar was informed by his interest in typological diversity, and by his penchant for methodological rigor. In his introduction to *Dysmelie*, de Vries states that syntactic analysis needs to move away from the concepts and terminology to which we are accustomed through Latin grammar, not just for exotic languages, but also for the 'newer' Indo-European idioms (i.e. dialects), and ultimately for the Indo-European standard languages as well (de Vries 1910-1911: 2). De Vries notes that parsing problems occur as soon as one considers phenomena of informal, non-artificial speech, and he rejects the common response of discarding these phenomena as ungrammatical (*op. cit.*: 3). For de Vries, it follows that a systematic treatment of the syntax of spoken Dutch is needed, and in *Dysmelie* he attempts to do just that.

De Vries emphasizes repeatedly that he is not interested in errors or incidental facts: the phenomena he charts must have the status of a *construction*, i.e. a conventional sound-meaning pairing involving phrasal syntax. To this end, he argues pro or contra a particular analysis by construing ungrammatical sentences and performing a variety of syntactic tests (such as substitution).

As an appendix to *Dysmelie* betrays, de Vries was chastised by Jacques van Ginneken for this 'algebraic' and 'logical' approach, as well as for his ambition to 'explain *everything*' (de Vries 1910-1911: 234). To this de Vries replies that data collection is his first objective, and that his explanations are merely tentative. However, some kind of hypothesis is always necessary (*loc. cit.*):

Systematic observation is possible only if the attention is guided in a certain direction; in that case, both the system and our knowledge of the facts develop jointly and through one another. That so many linguistic facts have for a long time escaped notice, even though they were heard by scores of linguistically trained persons, I first of all ascribe to the absence of well chosen vantage-points, which one often cannot obtain without logical abstraction.

## 5. Conclusion: views from the closet

In this article we have seen various ways in which Wobbe de Vries reacted to the linguistics of his time. On the one hand, his response to Kloeke's sociolinguistic work has a reactionary flavor, with perhaps a touch of defensiveness. After all, de Vries was very familiar with dialect variation in the areas under scrutiny in Kloeke (1927) and had addressed the distribution of [y:] in these areas in a more traditional framework in his dissertation. Likewise, he had already addressed the origin of the diminutive ending in his study

on morphology (de Vries 1920-1921). The impression is formed easily that we are looking at a closet scholar unwilling to go along with a paradigm change.

However, this conclusion does not mesh with the scientific attitude displayed by de Vries in his work on syntax and morphology. Here, de Vries shows himself to be more like an angry young man, unhappy with the state of the art, and brimming with enthusiasm to move both observation and theory along.

What unites the two aspects of de Vries' response to the linguistics of his time is his insistence on careful and unimpeded observation. In the case of the theory of sociolinguistic expansion, this leads to the formulation and investigation of crucial test cases, relevant to the concrete scenarios of linguistic change proposed, and jeopardizing the hypothesis of 'change from above' underlying the expansion theory. In the realm of syntactic analysis, de Vries' approach leads to the rejection of a theory construed so narrowly that crucial observations find no place in it.

I believe, therefore, that the image of de Vries as a reactionary closet scholar is unfounded, and that his unfavorable response to Kloeke is first and foremost prompted by his knowledge of relevant aspects of historical dialectology. Moreover, we gather from his reply to van Ginneken quoted at the end of section 4 that de Vries was acutely aware of the principles of sound scientific methodology. It is hoped that some day the fruits of his labor will become more publicly available.

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