

## Perception of geographically conditioned linguistic variation

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### 1. Introduction

In the course of time, linguistic variation in the Netherlands and the Dutch speaking part of Belgium has been investigated from many different perspectives. In our view, the various methodological approaches can be divided into two fundamentally different types.

In the first type, data about the linguistic characteristics of dialects are gathered by means of questionnaires collecting information about what people actually say. The linguistic products, recorded in written or auditory form, are subsequently subjected to (simple or more complex) data analysis techniques. The final aim is to draw a linguistically based map showing the distribution and boundaries of dialects and dialect areas. Some of the more well-known examples of these ‘objective’ techniques include the construction and tracing of isoglosses and isogloss bundles (e.g. Weijnen 1941), feature frequency counts and correlations (Hoppenbrouwers and Hoppenbrouwers 2001) and the calculation of Levenshtein distances between matched segment strings (e.g. Heeringa 2004). These traditional-dialectological and computational techniques have been discussed elsewhere (see Heeringa and Nerbonne, this volume) in this book and will not be gone into here.

In the second type of research, the basis of the investigation is not formed by linguistic elements (written or spoken dialect words, sentences or texts) but by the higher-ordered, integrated linguistic awareness of dialect speakers. The global perceptions which dialect speakers hold of the degree of similarity or difference between their own dialect and neighboring dialects is used as input to draw dialect maps. Here, the metalinguistic knowledge and views of dialect speakers form the point of departure to classify dialects rather than their linguistic competence. This type of research is referred to as perceptual dialectology by Preston. We note that the sort of knowledge reflected in laymen’s opinions about dialects may be based not only on perception per se, but also on second- (or third-)hand information, perhaps not amounting to more than popular prejudice.

The term ‘perceptual dialectology’ was first used in Preston (1981) but developed fully in 1999. According to Preston perceptual dialectology “represents the dialectologist’s-sociolinguist’s-variationist’s interest in folk linguistics. What do nonspecialists have to say about variation? Where do they believe it comes from? Where to they believe it exists? What do they believe is its function?” (1999: xxv). When comparing scientific and folk characterizations of a dialect area, the dialectologist may discover, for example, “that there may be perceived folk dialect areas where there are none scientifically and vice versa” (ibidem). According to Preston the earliest systematic technique for determining folk perceptions of dialectal variation was developed by the Dutch dialectologist Weijnen, when he devised the so-called arrow method (‘pijltesmethode’) and used it to make a map of one of the southern Dutch provinces in 1946 (see Section 2.1).

In our contribution we will give an overview of the literature reporting on the perception of dialect variation by laymen in the Low Countries. We will use a broad definition of perception, looking not only at nonlinguists’ subjective views of dialect similarity and difference, but also at their knowledge of dialect variation, both spatially and semantically. Concretely, we distinguish three different aspects of perception.

1. Dialect distance. What ideas (incorrect or correct) do laymen hold of the degree of similarity between language varieties (both standard and non-standard)? What

knowledge do they have of the typical characteristics of dialects? This aspect is essentially descriptive in nature, and forms the basis for the following two aspects.

2. Dialect identification. To what extent can laymen identify the place or region where dialects are spoken? What are their identifications based on? This aspect involves the spatial interpretation of dialect characteristics.
3. Dialect intelligibility. To what extent are laymen able to attach semantic meaning to spoken samples of other dialects? What dialect characteristics facilitate or hinder interdialectal comprehension? This aspect pertains to the communicative consequences of dialect variation.

Studies of these three aspects will be dealt with in chronological order. In Section 2, the older literature will be presented, covering the period between 1946 and (roughly) 2000. The beginning is marked by the publication of an arrow based map by Weijnen. The end of this period was chosen somewhat arbitrarily and is not adhered to very rigorously, as there is no clear break in the line of perceptual research conducted. We regard research after 2000 as recent. This recent literature is presented in Section 3. In Section 4 a short overview of ongoing research is given, and finally, in Section 5, some gaps in our knowledge of perceptual-dialectological processes and phenomena are signaled and desiderata for future research are formulated.

## 2. Old literature

### 2.1. Dialect distance

According to Goeman (1989), the first systematic investigation of the perception of dialect distance by nonlinguists in the Netherlands was carried out by Willems in 1886. Willems' survey included the question *In which place(s) in your area does one speak the same or about the same dialect as you do?*, a question which was also included in later surveys. Goeman used the unpublished answers to this question to posthumously construct a so-called arrow map. The dialects which according to the informants showed a strong similarity with their home dialect were connected by arrows. The areas showing no or few connecting arrows were considered to be subjective dialect boundaries. Using the 1886 data gathered by Willems, Goeman visualized the perceptual dialect landscape as it existed more than hundred years ago. A small part of this map has been reproduced in the English translation of Goeman's 1989 article (Goeman 1999).

Generally, Weijnen rather than Willems is seen as the first Dutch dialectologist exploiting the metalinguistic awareness of dialect distance by dialect speakers. The method that he applied was labeled the 'pijltjesmethode' in Dutch, and was translated by Preston (1999: xxvi) into English as the 'little-arrow method'. Weijnen used the answers of dialect speakers to the dialect similarity question given above in a dialect survey of 1939. In 1944 Weijnen started applying these principles to the southern Dutch province of North Brabant, where he was born (Weijnen 1946). Some years later he constructed an arrow map of the southern Dutch province of Limburg.

In 1955, on the basis of the same survey, Rensink constructed a generalized subjective map of the Netherlands as a whole and provided it with extensive comments (for an English translation, see Rensink 1999). He calls it 'a tentative sketch' and states the attempt to have been only partially successful, due to missing informants, contradictory answers, and unclear boundaries. On the whole, Rensink appears to have been rather dissatisfied with the result.

Finally, again using the same data, Daan (Daan and Blok 1969) made a definitive map of the Dutch speaking area. For the Netherlands, she applied a wide variety of methods to

correct the arrow map, looking at existing maps with isoglosses, consulting colleagues, interviewing dialect speakers, examining dialect literature, carrying out personal investigations, and using her intuitions. Laymen's perceptions were not included in the part of her map pertaining to the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, since no network of informants was available. There Daan only used the expertise of dialect speaking dialectologists. In her map, Daan not only indicated the boundaries between dialects at a 'horizontal' level, but she also expressed the 'vertical' relationship of dialects with the standard language, using color. The darker the color, the larger the linguistic distance from the standard.

Later on, the arrow method was applied, *inter alia*, to the Dutch-German border region north of the river Rhine (Kremer 1984) to examine the perceptual impact on the local dialect continuum of the state border. And even very recently, Giesbers used the principles of the arrow method with the same research aim (Giesbers 2008, see Section 3.1).

The drawing of the arrows on the map was done by hand and the decision where to locate dialect boundaries was made on visual grounds by the dialectologist. Goossens (1977: 167) suspects, and this is confirmed by remarks made by Rensink (1955) and Daan (Daan and Blok 1969) that the dialectologist was influenced in this process by preconceived ideas about the dialect reality. In any case, no statistics were involved. Later research where language users' views on linguistic distance were probed, used more sophisticated methods. The majority of these studies were experimental in nature. In contrast to the arrow based studies, they focused on the linguistic distance not between non-standard dialects mutually, but between non-standard dialects and standard Dutch. Moreover, in general, judgments were elicited on the basis of auditorily presented dialect fragments, which makes the task more concrete and less subject to influence from second-hand information. Subjects were requested to indicate perceived distance by means of numerical ratings, mostly on 5-, 7- or 10-point scales. Finally, probably for practical reasons, (language) students were often used as subjects, who can be assumed to be higher educated and less dialectologically naïve than the informants originally used to construct arrow maps.

Van Hout and Münstermann (1981) presented audio recordings of read fragments from nine Dutch dialects to language students from the south-eastern part of the Netherlands. They asked the listeners to judge the degree of standardness of the fragments. In addition, the listeners were asked to indicate on a map of the Netherlands where they thought the dialects were spoken (see also Section 2.2). Sophisticated methods were developed to quantify the distance between the indicated dialect origin and the place where the standard language is spoken in its purest form. The correlation between the perceived linguistic distance of the dialect fragments from Standard Dutch and their estimated distance from the geographical center of Standard Dutch was quite high ( $r=0.78$ ). This high positive correlation says nothing about the direction of the influence, however It is possible that the listeners derived geographic distance from linguistic distance ('this variety sounds rather standard, so it must be spoken in the western part of the country'), but it is also possible that the listeners were influenced in their estimation of linguistic distance by their judgment of geographic distance ('this sounds like a Limburg dialect, so it must be very different from Standard Dutch, which is in the West').

Besides geographic distance, other relationships with perceptual linguistic distance have also been suggested in the literature. Diederer, Hos, Münstermann, and Weistra (1980), presented part of the same material as Van Hout and Münstermann (1981) to student teachers. A relationship was found between the perceived linguistic distance of the dialects from Standard Dutch and attitudinal ratings, pertaining to the dialects' inherent usefulness, their acceptability and use in education, and their influence on learning and educational success. Also, Van Bezooijen (1994) found strong negative correlations between ratings of the

perceived distance from Standard Dutch and aesthetic evaluations (ugly-beautiful), i.e. the less standard a dialect was perceived, the uglier it was found. In addition, Van Bezooijen found a strong negative correlation between ratings of divergence and estimated intelligibility (see Section 2.3). In Van Bezooijen's study, semi-spontaneous speech fragments (descriptions of drawings depicting daily events) were presented in four Dutch language varieties. The subjects consisted of adults, children between 6 and 8 years, and children between 9 and 12 years. Just as in Van Hout and Münstermann (1981), it is difficult to assess cause and effect in this study as well.

The studies discussed thus far examined global perceptions of linguistic distance and their relationship to other global characteristics. The question remains what linguistic elements these global distance judgments are based on. Gooskens (1997) investigated the relative contribution of prosodic and verbal information to the perceived linguistic distance of language varieties to the Standard Dutch of the Netherlands. She looked at five language varieties, namely that of Bedum in the north-east of the Netherlands, of The Hague in the mid-west of the Netherlands, of Maastricht in the south-east of the Netherlands, of Standard Dutch of Belgium, and of Uitbergen in central east Belgium. Prosodic information includes all features which are not linked to specific vowels and consonants, i.e. intonation, speech tempo, and speech loudness, whereas verbal information comprehends syntax, lexicon, morphology, and segmental phonetics and phonology. Gooskens used an experimental set-up whereby prosodic and verbal information were removed from speech by means of signal manipulation techniques. The speech fragments from which prosodic information was removed were presented at a monotone. The speech fragments from which verbal information was removed were unintelligible, only the speech melody could be heard. Listeners' judgments of the linguistic distance of the two manipulated, 'incomplete' versions of dialect fragments were compared with the judgments of the non-manipulated, original dialect fragments. It appears that verbal information plays a more important role for the perceived divergence from Standard Dutch than prosodic information. However, the role of prosody cannot be completely ignored. Even when only hearing prosody, Standard Dutch speaking listeners can still distinguish between Standard Dutch on the one hand and the other five varieties on the other hand.

We want to conclude this section with the work done by Van Bezooijen and Ytsma (2000) on the perceived divergence of accents. They asked dialect speakers to read text passages in Standard Dutch as well as they could. The speech fragments were rated on a standard – non-standard scale by language students from Nijmegen. All speakers from the south (Limburg and Flanders) were perceived to have strong accents. The perceived broadness of the northern accent (Friesland and Groningen) and of the western accent (South-Holland) varied considerably between speakers, but on average it was rather weak. The result for the speakers from South-Holland was to be expected, as this province is part of the Randstad, i.e. the region where the standard is generally assumed to be spoken most purely. However, the difference in the broadness of accent between the north and the south could not be predicted from what is already known. Interestingly, previous perceptual research with dialect rather than accent fragments from the same speakers (Van Bezooijen 1994) had shown that the first languages of the Groningen and Flemish speakers were equally divergent from Standard Dutch. In other words, the divergence of speakers' accents in Standard Dutch cannot be predicted from the divergence of the same speakers' dialects.

## **2.2. Dialect identification**

In the preceding section, studies of laymen's views on linguistic distance were presented. The present section focuses on the perceptual relationship between dialect characteristics and geographic origin. To what extent are dialectologically untrained inhabitants of the Netherlands and the Dutch speaking part of Belgium able to locate dialect or accent fragments originating from their own or the other side of the border? Quite a number of empirical studies have addressed this question.

Boets and De Schutter (1977) presented dialect fragments produced by speakers from 14 places in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium to listeners from Duffel, close to the city of Antwerp. The subjects were asked to indicate on a map where they thought the speakers came from. Dialects close to Duffel were better identified than dialects further off. Moreover, men were better at locating the dialects than women, higher social classes were better than lower social classes, and older listeners were better than younger listeners. The differences were not statistically tested.

Deprez and De Schutter (1980) conducted a study similar to Boets and De Schutter's, but they adopted a cross-national perspective. They collected narrative speech in five Dutch dialects, four Belgian dialects, Standard Dutch of the Netherlands and Standard Dutch of Belgium. The fragments were presented to 100 male listeners from Antwerp and 100 male listeners from Rotterdam. They were asked to situate the fragments on a map. The listeners from Antwerp performed better than those from Rotterdam. Also, performance was related to the geographic distance between the place where the listeners came from and the place where the dialect was spoken. In this study, no systematic difference was found as a function of class or age.

Van Hout and Münstermann (1981) asked language students from the south-east of the Netherlands to place the geographic origin of read fragments of nine dialects (see Section 2.1) on a map. Accuracy varied considerably. Both dialects close to the standard (Amsterdam, The Hague) and very different from the standard (Kerkrade) were well identified. The authors suggest that direct contact as well as contact via the media may have played a role.

Knops (1984) investigated the identifiability of regional accents (regional variants of the standard language varying mainly in the pronunciation of vowels and consonants and in prosody) rather than dialects (in addition varying in lexical, morphological, and syntactical aspects). She presented semi-spontaneous speech fragments (descriptions of the plot of a film recently seen) from ten speakers, five from Belgium and five from the Netherlands, to 45 language students from Leuven (Belgium) and 40 from Nijmegen (the Netherlands). The listeners were asked whether they thought the speakers came from Belgium or the Netherlands (forced choice) and to indicate which region the speaker came from (open choice). Identifying the nationality of the speakers presented no problem (96% correct for both groups of listeners). It appeared to be very difficult, however, to identify the regional origin of the speakers. There were many missing responses. Overall, not more than 12% of the Belgian listeners and 20% of the Dutch listeners managed to give a correct answer at this level. Identifying the regions in their own country was easier than identifying the regions in the other country.

Van Bezooijen (1995) collected semi-spontaneous speech (descriptions of pictures of everyday situations) from speakers of four language varieties in the Dutch language area: Standard Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands, and the dialects of The Hague (South Holland), Bedum (Groningen), and Tiel (East Flanders). Fragments were presented to seven groups of listeners of different ages (9 to 12 year old children and adults) from different areas in the Netherlands. They were asked to indicate on a map the speakers' regional origin. Adults were better able to identify the language varieties than the children, but both groups identified the regions correctly above chance. The effect of the regional background of the listeners was small.

Again, analogously to the perception of dialect distance, an important question is what the identification choices of the listeners are based on. What cues do they use, at what linguistic level? This question was first addressed in Hagen (1980). He asked Belgian primary school teachers and Dutch students by means of a written questionnaire where they thought that the differences between Standard Dutch as spoken in the Netherlands and as spoken in Belgium resided. No audio recordings were presented. Both groups of respondents were of the opinion that the largest difference between the two standard accents was to be found in pronunciation, next in vocabulary, and least in syntactic structure.

The results reported by Hagen were confirmed by Knops (1984). In Knops' identification study audio recordings of narratives in regionally colored variants of the standard languages of the Netherlands and Belgium (see above for further details) were presented. A majority of both the Dutch (84%) and Belgian listeners (95%) claimed to have mainly based their identification on pronunciation characteristics. Vocabulary was also claimed to have played an important role (48% for the Dutch listeners, 34% for the Belgian listeners), which shows that the regional variants of the standard languages of the Netherlands and Belgium are not merely accents in the true sense of the word. Intonation came third, with percentages of 11 for the Dutch listeners and 23 for the Belgian listeners. Finally, syntactic information was claimed to have been the least important for distinguishing between the regional variants of the standard languages (12% and 5% for the Dutch and Belgian listeners, respectively).

Both Hagen (1980) and Knops (1984) asked their subjects what linguistic level they *thought* they had used to distinguish between varieties of the standard language. Pronunciation was mentioned most often. In Van Bezooijen and Gooskens (1999) the role of pronunciation was assessed experimentally. To this end, dialect speakers from Bedum, The Hague, Valkenburg (in Limburg) and Tiel read out text passages in the standard language with fixed lexical, morphological and syntactic properties. The only thing that could vary was the (segmental and supra-segmental) phonetic realization. So, in this study listeners could only make use of phonetic cues for determining the geographic origin of the speakers. The fragments from The Hague were easiest to identify, followed by Valkenburg, Bedum and Tiel, in that order. The percentages of correct identification were compared with the those obtained in the experiment with the non-manipulated spontaneous dialect samples presented in Gooskens (1997). Somewhat surprisingly it appeared that more linguistic information does not automatically lead to a higher percentage of correct identification. The explanations forwarded by the authors are too complex and varied to be summarized here; the interested reader is referred to the original publication.

Rather unfortunately, Hagen (1984), Knops (1984), and Van Bezooijen and Gooskens (1999) all happened to focus on the identification of (variants of the) Belgian and Dutch standard rather than non-standard varieties. As the variation within varieties of the standard language is smaller than that between local dialects, these studies do not make clear what the role of various linguistic levels and elements is in a more complex identification situation. Gooskens (1997) conducted an experimental study in which in addition to the two standard languages a number of 'true' urban and rural dialects were included, namely those of Bedum, The Hague, and Maastricht in the Netherlands and of Uitbergen in Belgium (see Section 2.1). The aim of the study was to assess the relative contribution of prosodic and verbal information to the identification of Dutch language varieties, both standard and non-standard. Gooskens used spontaneous speech fragments in their original form and in two manipulated forms, one with only prosodic information and one with only verbal information. All stimuli were presented to groups of listeners from the same places as the speakers in a completely crossed design.

Identification was done step-wise at four different levels: country, region, province, and place. A map of the whole area was given to the subjects to facilitate the task.

Just as in the estimation of linguistic distance (see Section 2.1), Gooskens (1997) found that verbal information is more important than prosodic information. Listeners who were not from the place where the stimulus dialect was spoken could not identify the speech fragments above chance when only prosodic information was provided. Nevertheless, they still appeared to make – limited – use of prosodic information. This was deduced from the fact that they identified Standard Dutch from the Netherlands and the dialects of Maastricht and Uitbergen significantly better in the original, complete version than in the version with only verbal information, from which prosody had been removed. Apparently, prosody contained supplementary relevant information. When listening to speech fragments in their own language variety, identification was much easier. Then, the identification score was above chance in all three versions. This shows that, especially at the prosodic level, familiarity is very important for successful identification.

Hagen (1980), Knops (1984), Gooskens (1997) and Van Bezooijen and Gooskens (1999) were all empirical studies in the sense that they involved the opinions or judgments of subjects. In addition, indirect evidence of the relative importance of different linguistic elements for the identification of language varieties can be deduced from the nature of shibboleths. The term ‘shibboleth’ originates from Hebrew. It refers to an utterance with one or more characteristics enabling a listener to determine whether a speaker belongs to the same language (variety) or a different language (variety). For example, during the second World War, the Dutch place name *Scheveningen* was used to assess whether a speaker was Dutch (pronouncing the initial consonant cluster as /sč/ or German (/ð/). This type of shibboleth includes sounds that (1) are typical of one language (variety) and (2) are difficult to pronounce by speakers of another language (variety). Many shibboleths only entail the first element and not the second. In any case, shibboleths point out linguistic elements that can potentially be used to identify a speaker’s linguistic background, be it at a national, regional, or local level. It can be hypothesized that a language variety can be more easily identified as it is characterized by more numerous, more clearly perceived, and more widely known shibboleths.

The most thorough analysis of shibboleths of Dutch language varieties is presented by Taeldeman (2003). He bases his typology on two data collections. The first collection comprehends the answers to a question about the shibboleths gathered by means of a dialect questionnaire of 1947. These answers had previously been discussed by Weijnen (1961). The second collection comprehends the results of a dialect questionnaire in 2002. According to Taeldeman, about 90% of the collected shibboleths are related to pronunciation. About 5% of the collected shibboleths are concerned with pronunciation and lexicon simultaneously. Shibboleths involving only the lexical or syntactic level are rare. This suggests that language users are most attentive toward or most sensitive to differences at the segmental level of speech, which in turn would suggest that this level plays the largest role in the estimation of language distance and identification. This is in line with the outcomes of the empirical studies mentioned above.

Shibboleth formation appears to be related to the degree to which a feature is spread geographically. Taeldeman presents *h*-dropping as an example. Although non-standard *h*-dropping is a widely spread phenomenon in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium, there are no *h*-dropping shibboleths in this area. On the other hand, there are over ten different *h*-dropping shibboleths in the Netherlands, where this phenomenon is mostly confined to small regions and isolated localities (e.g. Volendam and Enkhuizen). Obviously, in the Netherlands the occurrence of *h*-dropping in a dialect fragment would facilitate identification considerably,

the more so, as *h*-dropping is easy to perceive and constitutes a noticeable difference with Standard Dutch. Shibboleths arise mostly when there is intensive contact between the language varieties involved. They usually reflect the awareness of linguistic variation in the close surroundings. However, there are exceptions. In the Netherlands, for example, the Frisian shibboleth *bûter, brea en griene tsiis* ‘butter, bread and green cheese’, demonstrating the difficulty of the Frisian sound system, is widely known, as well as some shibboleths related to urban dialects (cf. *de son in the see sien sakke* ‘see the sun set in the sea’, pointing out the voiceless realization of voiced fricatives in Amsterdam).

According to Tældeman (2003) dialect features that (1) show much variation, (2) are found only in a small language area, (3) are subject to high awareness, and (4) are conspicuously different from their counterparts in the standard language and/or one’s own language variety are much more prone to shibboleth formation than features with the opposite characteristics. The features favoring shibboleth formation were called ‘primary dialect features’ by Schirmunski (1930), whereas those features that remain unnoticed were called ‘secondary dialect features’ (see Hinskens (1986) for an extensive discussion of the distinction and a proposal to test its validity). From a functional point of view (efficient communication) one would expect a dialect speaker to first get rid of primary dialect features and opt for linguistic convergence, leading to dialect loss. This is the position taken by most linguists, including Schirmunski (1930), Hoppenbrouwers (1990), and Van Bree (2000). On the other hand, if a dialect speaker wants to stress his linguistic identity, he may want to preserve or even ‘exaggerate’ primary dialect features.

If a dialect speaker opts for linguistic divergence to express his/her local adherence, this may lead to cases of polarization, as illustrated with numerous examples in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium by Tældeman (2000). Tældeman posits that polarized items typically have five characteristics: (1) sharp boundaries, (2) perceptual salience, (3) wide spread in the lexicon, (4) high awareness, (5) strong negative or positive attitudes. Of course, sharp delineations of dialect features facilitate dialect identification considerably. An example of a polarized situation described by Tældeman pertains to the strong diphthongal realization of old West Germanic *î* and *û* in the Flemish region between Ruiselede and Avelgem, contrasting with the corresponding monophthongs to the west and weak diphthongs to the east. Often, sharp contrasts are found between urban centers and the surrounding area. The most famous example is urban uvular (back) /r/ contrasting with rural alveolar (front) /r/. It is generally assumed that the uvular realization of /r/ spread by means of a hierarchical diffusion pattern, ‘leaping’ from large urban centers (Paris is seen by many as the starting point) to smaller and smaller (satellite) town) (see Tældeman (2008) for a discussion of the role of urban centers in dialect diffusion). Uvular /r/ is very conspicuous and used by many people to identify city dwellers (see Van Bezooijen (2006) for an extensive description of the provenance and spread of uvular /r/ in the Netherlands and Tops 2006-2007 for Belgium).

Generally speaking, the identifiability of dialects should have decreased in the course of time, with the gradual loss of localized dialect variation. According to Hoppenbrouwers (1990: 41) “In the confrontation with surrounding dialects some dialect features appear to be less vital than others. Especially the most typical elements of the dialect disappear as the most marked forms” (translation RvB). Primary dialect features would also disappear because they hinder intelligibility. On the other hand, due to the increased contacts between speakers with different origin, also via the media, the knowledge of dialect variation should have grown.

### **2.3. Dialect intelligibility**



The question to what extent non-linguists are able to establish the distance between language varieties is interesting mainly from a scientific point of view. Being good at it, is not a very useful talent in daily life. The same holds to some extent for the degree to which one is able to identify where a dialect speaking or accented speaker comes from. Being good at this, may be useful for a forensic phonetician when looking for the perpetrator of a crime, but in general not for a common language user. After all, the main function of language is not so much extralinguistic, to provide cues about a speaker's social background, but rather linguistic, to enable communication, not only between speakers of the same variety but also between people speaking with different accents or dialects. The intelligibility of accents and dialects of Dutch has been the object of several studies.

Boets and De Schutter (1977) not only looked at the identifiability of 14 dialects in the Dutch speaking part of Belgium (see Section 2.2), but also investigated the perceived intelligibility of the same dialects, using the same 72 subjects from Duffel, in the province of Antwerp. For each audio fragment, five degrees of intelligibility could be indicated, ranging from very good (5 points) to very bad (1 point). The average score over all subjects was 72% of the maximum score (72 subjects x 5 points=360). As expected, the dialects from the provinces of Antwerp and Brabant, relatively close to the subjects' place of residence, were perceived to be most intelligible. Dialects from the provinces of East-Flanders, West-Flanders and Limburg were indicated to be least intelligible. Boets and De Schutter also established some relationships with the social characteristics of their listeners. Older listeners were (or at least claimed to be) better at understanding the various dialects than younger subjects. Also, especially subjects from the middle class were good (claimed to be good). Low intelligibility was found to correlate with low appreciation. According to Boets and De Schutter, the (subjective) appreciation scores are determined by the (objective) intelligibility scores. In the literature (e.g. Wolff 1959, Gooskens 2006, Van Bezooijen and Gooskens 2007) the opposite is often contended, namely that low (high) intelligibility is caused by low (high) appreciation. It is assumed that the reported or measured comprehension problems are not so much due to a lack of transparency of the meaning of the language at hand, but rather to a lack of motivation on the part of the listeners. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to determine whether it is a question of lack of ability or lack of willingness.

Van Bezooijen (1994) looked at the perceived intelligibility of dialects spoken in the Netherlands. The fragments were judged by listeners both with respect to estimated intelligibility and divergence from Dutch. A very high and significant correlation of .94 between the two perceptual characteristics was found. Moreover, both the intelligibility and divergence ratings show a strong relationship (correlations between .81 and .97) with the aesthetic evaluations by three other subject groups, both adults and children. So, the more intelligible and standard a variety is perceived to be, the more beautiful it sounds. Again, no conclusions can be drawn about the direction of the relationship.

The two intelligibility studies discussed above both examined the *estimation* of intelligibility. Subjects were asked to indicate how well they *thought* they understood what they heard. More interesting perhaps, and supposedly also more valid, are studies investigating *actual* intelligibility. Actual intelligibility can be measured by asking listeners to answer open or closed questions about the content of a spoken text or by having subjects translate a spoken text. The last functionally oriented method was applied in two studies by Van Bezooijen and Van den Berg.

In Van Bezooijen and Van den Berg (1999a) the functional intelligibility of four language varieties was investigated, namely three dialects of Dutch from the provinces of Groningen, Limburg, and West-Flanders, and a variety of Frisian. Intelligibility was assessed for three groups of subjects, namely (1) non-dialect speakers of standard Dutch from the west of the Netherlands, (2) dialect speakers from the east of the Netherlands, and (3) dialect

speakers from the central part of Belgium. An auditory task was used in which subjects heard semi-spontaneous speech samples of the various varieties and were asked to translate nouns referring to concrete objects from everyday life into Standard Dutch. There were one, two or three keywords per fragment that had to be translated; the other words in the fragment were already provided in a written form. Intelligibility was expressed as the percentage of nouns translated correctly. Intelligibility was to some extent influenced by the background of the listeners. The difference between the two groups of listeners from the Netherlands was small, so the factor 'dialect knowledge' had little effect on their intelligibility performance. For both Netherlandic groups the West-Flemish dialect was the least intelligible (64% and 66% correct for groups 1 and 2, respectively), followed by the Frisian dialect (86% and 84%), the Limburg dialect (86% and 92%) and the Groningen dialect (94% and 97%). On the other hand, there were clear differences between the two groups from the Netherlands on the one hand and the Belgian group on the other. For the Belgian listeners, the least intelligible dialect was Frisian (75% correct), followed by West-Flemish (83%), Limburgian (87%) and Gronings (89%).

Van Bezooijen and Van den Berg (1999b) used the same approach as Van Bezooijen and Van den Berg (1999a), but they minimized the role of semantic context. In this study all fragments presented contained only one noun that had to be translated, and no other content words (verbs, adjectives, adverbs). Moreover, within each variety, each key word was included only once, which means that identical tokens from different speakers were excluded. A paper-and-pencil experiment was administered beforehand to a different group of subjects to verify whether the target nouns were indeed not predictable from the context. Standard speaking subjects from the west of the Netherlands with no dialect knowledge were used as listeners. The percentages correct (in ascending order from least intelligible to most intelligible) were 58% for the Frisian dialect, 58% for the West-Flemish dialect, 80% for the Limburg dialect and 94% for the Groningen dialect. If these results are compared with the performance of the standard speaking subjects in the above described experiment with non-minimalized semantic context, it appears that intelligibility has decreased for all varieties, and most notably for Frisian.

Van Bezooijen and Van den Berg (1999b) also looked at the basis of the intelligibility ratings, trying to explain why the four language varieties yielded such widely diverging results, with a difference of 36% between the Groningen dialect of Bedum on the one hand and the Frisian dialect of Grou and the West-Flemish dialect of Tielt on the other. To that end they made a linguistic profile for each variety, distinguishing six categories of relationships between the target noun in the dialect and the semantically equivalent noun in standard Dutch. These relationships with standard Dutch were ordered from (1) no difference, via (2) a difference in one vowel, (3) a difference in one consonant, (4) differences in several phonemes, to (5) lexical difference (non-cognate). Semantic differences were categorized separately. The Groningen dialect had many instances of (1) and none of (5), explaining why it was so easy to understand. On the other hand, the West-Flemish dialect had few instances of (1) and relatively many of (5), explaining why it was so difficult to understand. The profile of the dialect of Limburg occupied an intermediate position, corresponding with intermediate intelligibility. The results for Frisian fit in less well. The intelligibility of Frisian was found to be equal to that of West-Flemish, so one would expect a similar linguistic profile. However, Frisian has considerably more instances of (1) and considerably fewer instances of (5) than West-Flemish. Closer inspection of the data suggested that it was category (2) that presented considerably more problems for Frisian than for the other varieties, including West Flemish. It suggests that whenever there is a vowel difference between a target noun and its equivalent in Standard Dutch, the correspondence is less transparent for Frisian than for the other varieties. Examples are Frisian *reek* (Dutch *rook*, 'smoke') and *amer* (Dutch *emmer*, 'bucket'). This would mean that Frisian is relatively difficult to understand not only for quantitative reasons,

i.e. because of the number of nouns showing the various relationships categorized in (1) to (5), but also for qualitative reasons, because of the types of deviations within particular categories.

To our knowledge, Van Bezooijen (1999b) is the only study in which the relationship between intelligibility and linguistic elements and levels was investigated empirically. On theoretical grounds, it can be hypothesized that primary dialect features hinder intelligibility to a higher degree than secondary dialect features. As mentioned in Section 2.2, primary dialect features show much variation, they are typically found only in a small language area, and they are conspicuously different from their counterparts in the standard language and/or other language varieties. According to Hoppenbrouwers (1990: 41) “because of their perceptual salience primary dialect features will hinder interdialectal communication and they will therefore be dropped.” (translation RvB). As an illustration, Hoppenbrouwers presents the glottal stop, which can be used as an intervocalic variant of /k/ in the dialect of Luyksgestel (North Brabant). It is a sound that attracts attention, and speakers are aware of this attention-attracting effect. It is a completely local phenomenon, it disturbs intercommunal interaction, and it disappears at an early stage of dialect loss.

### **3. Recent literature**

In Section 2, the literature between 1946 and (roughly) 2000 was covered. In the present section, the more recent literature is presented. Only a few perceptual studies have been conducted recently, so the overview is relatively short. The recent studies are related to dialect distance and dialect intelligibility. Dialect identification has not been investigated recently.

#### **3.1. Dialect distance**

The arrow method which was developed in the nineteen forties (see Section 2.1), has still not lost its attraction, as appears from the recent study by Giesbers (2008). Giesbers investigated to what extent the old Kleverland dialect continuum was affected by the Dutch-German state border. Giesbers asked 268 Dutch and German dialect speakers to indicate on a map of the border region between Nijmegen in the North and Venray in the south to circle ten Dutch and/or German localities of which the dialect sounds (about) the same as their own dialect. She transformed these into arrows. Giesbers states that the resulting map contained too much information and was difficult to interpret. She then decided to use an analysis of variance to test her hypothesis that the geographical distance between neighboring dialects separated by the state border would be perceptually enlarged in comparison to equally large distances between neighboring dialects on the same side of the border, either German or Dutch. Giesbers' hypothesis was statistically confirmed.

Van Bezooijen and Heeringa (2006) explored the basis of nonlinguists' intuitions about the linguistic distances between language varieties in the Netherlands and Flanders, focusing on geographic and linguistic determinants. 140 subjects from different parts of the Netherlands were given a map with the twelve provinces of the Netherlands and the five Dutch-speaking provinces of Belgium. For each province they were asked to write a number between 0 and 100, 0 expressing no linguistic distance and 100 expressing the largest linguistic distance to Standard Dutch. The results showed that varieties are generally estimated to be more distant linguistically from Standard Dutch as they are more distant geographically from the Randstad. The distances from Haarlem, which is typically seen as the place where Standard Dutch is spoken in its purest form (Smakman and Van Bezooijen 1997), were measured in mm in a straight line on the map and then rescaled to values between 0 and

100. The correlation between estimated linguistic distance and geographic distance was high ( $r = .87, .98$  when excluding the province of Friesland). Van Bezooijen and Heeringa also correlated the estimated linguistic distances with objective linguistic distances measured with the Levenshtein algorithm (Heeringa 2004) on the basis of old data (*Reeks Nederlandse Dialectatlassen*, Blancquaert and Pee 1925-1982) and new data (collected by Van Bezooijen in 2001). Again high correlations were found ( $r = .93$  with the old and  $.80$  with the new dialect samples,  $.91$  and  $.78$ , respectively, when Friesland was excluded). Unfortunately the results do not permit to draw definite conclusions about the relative importance of geographic and linguistic distances.

### **3.2. Dialect intelligibility**

Impe, Geeraerts and Speelman (2009 forthcoming) auditorily presented words and non-words in various regional (non-local) varieties of Dutch to Netherlandic and Belgian test subjects. They were asked to decide as quickly as possible whether the items were existing Dutch words or not. Preliminary results show that at the level of regional varieties mutual intelligibility in the Low Countries is largely unproblematic: the test subjects responded correctly in 81 per cent of the cases. Flemish test subjects have fewer problems understanding Netherlandic Dutch varieties than vice versa. Furthermore, there is a positive effect of the degree of standardness on comprehensibility. This effect is most salient within Flanders, where a language gap between standard and central non-standard Belgian Dutch constitutes the rise of a substandard colloquial variety, distinct from dialect. Whereas the most central regiolects especially in the Netherlands enjoy a rather general acceptability and intelligibility, the most peripheral regiolects in both countries cause the greatest problems of comprehension.

## **4. Ongoing research**

Heeringa is currently collecting dialect recordings of old men ('conservative speakers') and young women ('innovative speakers') from 80 locations in the Netherlands and Flanders (see Heeringa and Hinskens 2009). He will use the data to investigate how the change from dialect to regiolect is reflected in the production and perception of dialect speech. Perceptual distances between the dialects will be collected by means of a web survey. Listeners from the 80 locations will listen to the recordings and rate the distance to their mother tongue on a scale from 1 (no distance) to 10 (maximum distance). Heeringa expects that perceptual distances based on recordings of innovative speakers will suggest larger and less sharply defined dialect areas than those which are based on the recordings of conservative speakers. For the production part of the study, the recordings will be transcribed, and using the transcriptions it will be examined how and to what extent the lexical, lexical-phonological, postlexical and purely phonetic level are affected, and which one is affected most strongly. Finally, the hypothesis will be tested that the ongoing change from dialect to regiolect found in speech production will influence the perception of the listeners in such a way that conservative listeners perceive dialects groups (many small groups) while innovative listeners perceive regiolect groups (few large groups).

Impe is planning to investigate the impact of linguistic distance, language attitudes and familiarity on mutual intelligibility in the Dutch language area (see Section 3.2). She expects that the greater the linguistic resemblance, the more intensive the contact between language varieties will be, and the more positive the attitude towards a linguistic variety, the greater the intelligibility will be. Phonetic distance will be measured by means of the Levenshtein distance. Lexical distance will be measured by means of the onomasiological

profile-based methodology (Geeraerts, Grondelaers & Speelman 1999), which compares the words that speakers of different language varieties use for a wide range of concepts. Furthermore, familiarity will be measured by means of questionnaires, and language attitudes by means of attitudinal scales and an innovative auditory affective priming task.

## 5. Future research

We have seen that research within the area of perceptual dialectology started out with a focus on perceptual distances primarily with the purpose of drawing dialect maps. Later on an urge to explain the linguistic and extra-linguistic basis of perception arose. The interest in intelligibility is more recent, especially when it comes to actually testing it. The methods for testing and measuring are getting more and more sophisticated, including web-based experiments and computational techniques for measuring linguistic distances. The new methods have so far generated rather global results. In future research we should aim to gain more detailed knowledge about the mechanisms behind the perception of language varieties. Methods that have been developed by experimental linguists and psycholinguists should be exploited to set up controlled experiments that can give insight into the relative importance of different linguistic and extra-linguistic factors for the perception of language varieties.

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