

How the Dutch Language Became Standardised

According to the Oxford English Dictionary Online (2016), “standard” can be defined as “An authoritative or recognised exemplar of correctness, perfection, or some degree of any quality”. A homogenisation of varieties of Dutch to create a standard form occurred as a result of a combination of factors beginning in the 16th century, though the wheels had arguably been set in motion much earlier than this. These factors began with the creation of a need for a standard and were then driven by political change, the increase of domains in which Dutch is used, printing, dialect loss and codification.

Despite there being no known attempts of language planning aimed at the creation of a standard variety of Dutch before the 16th Century (Willemyns 2013: 80), this does not mean that events prior to this period did not contribute to its eventual establishment. The dawn of the Dutch language being written arguably presented the need for such a variety that could be more widely understood, initiating the long route to standardisation. Unlike other Germanic languages, it was not until the 12th century that there were a notable number of Dutch written records (Willemyns 2013: 48). Without the language being written down there could of course be no continuous variety, as spoken language in any case is very much subject to pronunciation, accent and social class. It could be argued that the route to standardisation began with the production of literature and other texts in the Dutch vernacular instead of Latin, which took place over the course of the 13th century (Willemyns 2013: 51). Ultimately the aim of writing something down is to create a record of it; this record at least needs to be understandable to others, and so the need for this understandability creates the need for some form of written uniformity in the language; thus the need for standardisation. In the 13th century, the acclaimed fable of Flemish origin *Vanden Vos Reinaerde* was written by an author only known as Willem (Willemyns 2013: 53), but far from being completely understandable to any speaker of Middle Dutch, it contained many dialectal features specific to the Flemish dialect, such as the unexpected presence or absence of the letter *h* at the start of words beginning with a vowel (Besamusca and Bouwman 2009). During the Middle Dutch period there was no such thing as a standard language (Willemyns 2013: 70), with wide individual

spelling variation (Willemyns 2013: 71), so it cannot be assumed that this text would have been understandable to all, thereby creating the requirement of a standard language so that the text, and others like it, could be more widely appreciated. However, it has been suggested that even in the 13th century, the dialects of certain cities such as Bruges served to some extent as a model over others (Dale 1997), which is perhaps why Willem's Flemish allegory experienced the success that it did in still being of note today, compared to authors who spoke and therefore wrote with different dialects. This is a sign of certain language varieties being given prestige over others, which exemplifies one of the driving forces of the standardisation process, as the standard variety is the one that serves as the model for all others to be compared to, something which was clearly of importance even when Middle Dutch was still in use. If all of the dialects had been more mutually intelligible and there had been more language contact earlier on then this is likely to have altered the course of standardisation; the standard variety may have in fact arisen more quickly, as language contact results in dialect loss leading to a more general variety of Dutch.

During the 14th and 15th centuries, when political and economic circumstances were changing, Antwerp, Brussels and Ghent took over as the linguistic model (Dale 1997). The increased joining of the separate areas of the Low Countries to become one entity drove the need for a standard language that could be understood across the whole area without the need for dialectal translation. This occurred under Burgundian rule, when there was large scale internal migration that resulted in the different regional varieties of Dutch being exposed, not just in the upper classes but between the elite and the lower social classes alike (Willemyns 2013: 65). Without the different dialects being exposed to one another then it would have been very difficult for just one standard variety to arise.

It was then in the 16th century, after Brabant replaced Flanders as the political and economic centre, that a relatively uniform written variety of Dutch mainly based on the varieties of Dutch spoken in Brabant and Flanders began to develop (Van den Branden 1956, cited in Willemyns 2013). However, this path to standardisation was altered greatly as a result of the Eighty Years' War, because this led to the political split of the Netherlands into two separate parts, the north and the south. Without this division, the route to standardisation would undoubtedly have

been very different, as it left the process to be led from the north due to French commandeering the functions of the Dutch language in the south, which was previously where the standardisation had been driven by. Southern Dutch, which had experienced language contact with wealthy southern immigrants, was seen before this as the prestige variety (Ammon 2006: 1758), so this shift caused a sharp change in the direction of standard Dutch.

Following this change, one particularly important driver of the standardisation of the Dutch language in the 16th century was the increase in domains in which Dutch was used in, despite Latin being Europe's lingua franca (Willemyns 2013: 80). This growing favour of the Dutch language of course drove the need for a variety that could be understood by all speakers of Dutch, particularly in the written form. In 1541, Antwerp's Jan Gymnich was one of the first people to advocate the use of Dutch in as many domains as possible, challenging the use French and Latin, which up until then had dominated public life (Joby 2015: 3). This was followed by the publication of the dictionary *The Naembouck* in 1551 by Joos Lambrecht, who was a printer from Ghent. Willemyns describes this as "one of the very first corpus planning instruments [in the Dutch language]" (Willemyns 2013: 81), illustrating the movement towards conscious language planning at the time. This highlights another important influence in the evolution of standard Dutch: the use of printing. This actually presented a financial motive for the Dutch language to become standardised; Lambrecht and other printers realised that the more people who could read a particular language variety, the larger number of books that could be sold (Willemyns 2013: 81), driving the standardisation process because it gave printers a motive to publish this language variety. The trend towards creating "some kind of general (koine) Dutch" (Joby 2015: 4) that catered to a wider audience continued, importantly culminating in the publication of the *Statenbijbel* in 1637; far more than earlier translations of the bible into Dutch, this translation was a deliberate attempt at a compromise in the language so that it could be used throughout the whole of what is now known as the Netherlands (Dale 1997). The material that had been translated here was a particularly important part in the popularity that the idea of standardisation was acquiring; the bible, being read by everyone, had the largest audience possible, as opposed to a literary piece for example, which only appealed to a certain audience. Book printers and preachers tried to

encourage people to read the bible by themselves, and some preachers even tried to create a standard language themselves (Willemyns 2013: 82), encouraged by what Luther had achieved with the standard language in Germany. It could be said that Luther's work drove the standardisation process in the Netherlands, because it proved that a language variety understandable to all could be achieved and illustrated that there was a need for one. The *Statenbijbel* not only created but also implemented and spread a standardised language that influenced modern standard Dutch greatly (Van Dalen-Oskam and Mooijaart 2000, cited in Willemyns 2013).

The increase in domains that Dutch was being used in also spread to scientists writing in the vernacular. These included botanist Rembert Dodoens publishing his *Cruijde Boeck* in 1554 and surgeon Carolus Baten's papers on medicine in 1589 and 1590 (Willemyns 2013: 81). They were followed by Simon Stevin from Brugge, who was the first professor to teach in Dutch as opposed to Latin, at the University of Leiden (Willemyns 2013: 81). These new domains in which Dutch was being used for the first time presented a real need for a general Dutch that would become known as the standard variety. If people from all over the area and beyond were going to be taught in Dutch, there needed to be one standard variety that was suitable for teaching and writing for all.

The success of spelling and grammar books in their influence on the standardisation process varied greatly, but this was the start of the codification of the language variety that was to be seen as the norm, which is ultimately significant. It is only when a variety is written down that other varieties can be compared to and modelled on that the standard can exist. Pontus de Heuiter was one of the few writers who tried to use a general language in his *Nederduitse Orthographie* as opposed to a particular dialect, but this approach was not very popular with his colleagues and did not have a significant effect at the time (Willemyns 2013: 83). Spiegel had more success with his *Twe-spraack vande Nederduitsche Letterkunst*, but from a different angle; he emphasised that his language was an idiolect of the educated classes, which marked the beginning of the prestige that came to be associated with the standard variety, as the social variable became ever more important (Willemyns 2013: 83). This once again altered the course of the standardisation process,

to create not just a variety that could be understood by all, but one that showed a social elevation that it became desirable to speak. Without this new perspective that Spiegel presented, the standard language variety would arguably have been viewed very differently, perhaps not as the variety of a higher social class but instead of the everyman of any class, reducing its desirability, which would have perhaps taken away from the success it experienced. The *Twe-spraack vande Nederduitsche Letterkunst* celebrated the use of the mother tongue, which helped to confirm that a standard variety that could be used and understood by a wider audience was needed.

The codification of the Dutch language in the form of grammars and spelling books continued to hold its significance in the process of standardisation. By the Golden Age of the 17th century, the main objective of grammars was to prescribe a norm that should be used, as did Christian Van Heule's *De Nederduytsche spraec-konst ofte tael-beschrijvinghe* of 1633 (Willemyns 2013: 89). According to Vondel (cited in Willemyns 2013), this norm could be identified in the upper classes of Amsterdam and The Hague. In the 18th century, the focus of grammarians remained on regulating the Dutch language, with successful publications by grammarians such as Moonen and Sewel who combined what was considered the norm of the language with a more "sophisticated style" (Rutten 2011, cited in Willemyns 2013). The problem with the success of work by grammarians towards standardisation was that the public they reached was limited, which was why the *Statenbijbel* achieved much greater success, and even remained in use until 1951 (Willemyns 2013: 94). However, it is important to note that the *Statenbijbel* was perhaps hailed more for its religious significance than linguistic in terms of presenting a standard language, and though in the 18th century a norm supposedly existed amongst the educated and upper classes, this norm was not generally accepted and regional differences persisted (Van der Sijs 2004, cited in Willemyns).

Another important driver of standardisation was the loss of dialects in the 19th century, which of course led to the move towards a more general language variety. This was triggered by increased mobility due to industrialisation, which caused people to leave the countryside and take their families to the city, conscription, and civil servants changing posts regularly, which also led to people moving with their families (Willemyns 2013: 116). Willemyns (2013: 116) explains how dialect loss affected the standardisation of the language based on four factors. Firstly there is the

social factor, whereby the loss of a dialect gives each language variety a specific function; the standard language becomes a mark of higher class, and other dialects are reduced to use in the home and informal situations away from the public domain. If the upper classes had not used the standard dialect then the situation would most likely have been very different, as instead the individual dialects would have remained and there would have been perhaps less variation across the speech of the different classes, or else it would have been differentiated differently. Willemyns' geographical factor was that the standard language would first take hold in the urban centres, because this is where the higher social classes could be found, while his temporal aspect was that the standard language would first take hold amongst the younger generations, usually those of the higher classes, as this group is the most susceptible to trends. Finally his functional factor was the emergence of the standard dialect in the social domains, suppressing the dialects as they become less usable. This explains how the standard variety was able to strongly take hold in the 19th century, much more so than ever before. Contrary to the belief that the upper classes of the time spoke only French, an examination of hand-written documents of one of the most prestigious upper-class archers' guilds of the time revealed that they actually displayed a very varied variety choice depending on social, political and pragmatic circumstances (Vandenbussche 2004, cited in Willemyns 2013).

By the end of the 19th century, standardised spelling had spread from the higher to the lower social classes (Vandenbussche 2001, cited in Willemyns 2013), but the use of the standard variety ultimately became cemented in the 20th century. This was largely driven by its implementation in the educational system as well as the media, with Queen Wilhelmina playing a very important role in this success when she made the appeal in her Troonrede in 1935 "for the correct pronunciation of the language to become an issue of government concern" (Van der Sijs 2004, cited in Willemyns 2013). This elevated the variety to one of national importance for the whole of the Netherlands alike, regardless of status or class, without which promotion the standard variety may have only resided amongst the most elevated of the social classes alone. Van Dale's dictionary the *Nieuw Woordenboek der Nederlandsche taal* and the *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* were also important in becoming a point of reference to ensure the standard variety

was realised as the norm. This final codification of the standard variety was crucial to its longevity; without written documentation to exemplify a norm that all other varieties could be compared to, there would ultimately not be only one form of the standard in existence.

The discussed factors that drove the route to standardisation were arguably of varying importance. Though the dawn of the written Dutch language created the need for such a variety, this was not actually realised at the time, and though the route to standardisation was altered due to political events, these events did not change the fact that standardisation was occurring. On the other hand, the growing increase of Dutch in the public domain and its spread via printing created a very obvious need for a standard language. This was realised by linguists and spurred on by the loss of dialects, but ultimately cemented by the codification of this standard variety, the reason that standard Dutch exists to be used and studied today.

References

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