

Towards a more inclusive dialectology: The added value of including ‘new’ speakers and ‘new’ dialects in modern dialect research

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This paper provides a summary of my talk during the ACLC Anniversary Conference on 20 June 2025. Based on the main findings of the four-year research project Changing gender: Language variation and change in gender marking in Dutch dialects, it proposes a research agenda that combines theories and methods from the fields of dialectology and (third wave) sociolinguistics. In particular, this paper advocates for an ‘inclusive’ dialectology that not only focuses on native speakers who have a complete command of a traditional dialect, but also on ‘new’ speakers and new ways of using dialect, for example on social media, which challenge the concept of authenticity. By focusing on one specific case, i.e., adnominal gender marking in the North Brabantish dialects, it is shown that in the context of variation and change (cf. dialect leveling and innovation), grammatical features can be used for identity formation and expression, indexing social meanings in processes of enregisterment.

1 Dialect speaker profiles

In Dutch dialectology (and dialectology in general), researchers have long assumed a specific speaker profile to capture the ‘traditional’ dialect (e.g., Hoppenbrouwers 1990). The so-called NORM speakers were nonmobile, older, rural and male. The NORMs literally set the dialect norm and formed the basis for detailed phonological, grammatical and lexical descriptions of local dialects. However, excluding speakers that did not fit the profile might have led to missing out on variation (cf. Swanenberg 2020). Even today, many people still consider the Dutch dialects captured in the twentieth century — for example in large atlas projects such as RND, GTRP and SAND — to be the most ‘authentic’, in contrast to modern dialects spoken by youths.

Current generations of dialect speakers are less likely to fit the NORM profile. From the 1960s onward, the Dutch dialectal landscape changed drastically. As less Dutch children grow up with a dialect as their first language

since then (mainly due to increased mobility and language contact), the number of speakers who acquired dialect at a later age is increasing (Swanenberg & van Hout 2013). For example, they pick up the dialect via their grandparents, their peers, social media, music artists, comedians or television series. Eventually, they speak dialect-like, but do not master the full dialect repertoire.

This state of affairs raises a very relevant and interesting question: Does the dialect shift mark the end of dialectology or does it suggest exciting new directions for the field? (cf. De Vogelaer & De Wulf 2021) In the remainder of this paper, I will argue why I believe that the end is not yet in sight and why I think that new developments in dialects actually offer opportunities to pursue new avenues of research.

2 Dialects as fluid stylistic registers

Dialectologists tend to refer to non-native dialect speakers as L2 speakers or ‘semi’ speakers (e.g., Hinskens 2014). However, I prefer using the more neutral term ‘new’ speakers (cf. O’Rourke & Pojular 2014; O’Rourke et al. 2015; Swanenberg 2014, Cornips 2020), that emphasizes their modern take on dialect rather than their incompetence. Youths growing up in peripheral areas of the Netherlands do not necessarily speak the dominant standard language. Instead, they often speak intermediate language varieties, i.e., varieties in-between Standard Dutch and the local dialect, as their L1 (cf. ‘diaglossia’, Auer 2005, 2011). Depending on the context, they converge more towards Dutch or they emphasize or even exaggerate dialect features, i.e., hyperdialectism, to convey their local identity. For example, speakers omit or overuse a particular grammatical feature, such as a gender suffix or a diminutive suffix, to sound less or more dialectal. In contact situations, these convergence and divergence patterns often occur simultaneously, leading to a mixture of traditional dialect forms, omissions, compromise (i.e., in-between) forms, and hyperdialectisms (Doreleijers, Van Koppen & Swanenberg 2020; Swanenberg 2020; Trudgill 2009). This opens up new possibilities for research into the intra- and extralinguistic reasons for (deliberately) violating dialect grammar rules.

However, the idea of a single dialect with a single grammar can also be challenged. Within a poststructuralist, dynamic interpretation of the notion of ‘dialect’, it is perceived as a fluid register rather than a fixed, delineated variety (Doreleijers, Cornips & Swanenberg *fc.*). The ‘new’ dialect is not stable and unchangeable, but rather contains variation. It is a ‘set’ of local linguistic features (Johnstone 2016), a repertoire that can differ between or even within individuals, and sometimes leans more towards the dominant standard language and

sometimes exaggerates the local features. In other words, dialect is viewed from a practice-oriented rather than a variety-oriented perspective (Quist 2008).

From this practice-oriented perspective, it makes no sense to *exclude* ‘new’ speakers from dialect research. In contrast, it seems valuable to *include* them, because they can provide insights into 1) language variation and change in progress, 2) the social functions of dialect use and the social meanings of particular dialect features, 3) the dynamics of youth language practices, and 4) new contexts of dialect use, such as social media posts (e.g., memes or TikTok videos) and the meaning of dialect in the online-offline nexus (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2013; Hillewaert 2015).

3 New directions in modern dialect research

Both new dialect speakers and the concept of new dialect itself can shed light on fundamental questions at the intersection of dialectology and (third wave) sociolinguistics (cf. Eckert 2012). Examples of key research questions that can be addressed include the following (each question is supported by at least one publication resulting from my research project):

- I. How can new dialect speakers shed light on the relationship between (anti)grammar and identity? (Doreleijers & Grondelaers 2024)
- II. How, why and when do dialect features acquire social meaning(s), sometimes even at the expense of their grammatical functions? (Doreleijers & Swanenberg 2024)
- III. How are dialect features turned into a communicative resource on social media, how are they distributed (in terms of linguistic forms and frequencies), and how are they reflected upon by speakers? (Doreleijers 2023; Doreleijers & Swanenberg 2023a)
- IV. Why and how are dialects or dialect features used as linguistic capital in marketing campaigns, e.g., in the context of professional football clubs? (Doreleijers & Vierendeels 2024a, 2024b)
- V. How can the definition and analysis of hyperdialectisms be refined based on the language practices of new speakers? (Doreleijers & Swanenberg 2023b)

- VI. How can new speakers add to the conceptualization of ‘dialect’? (Doreleijers 2024)
- VII. How do youths or peer groups negotiate local in-group norms? (Doreleijers, Mourigh & Swanenberg 2023)
- VIII. How can we incorporate scientific insights about ‘new’ dialects and ‘new’ speakers into teaching materials for Dutch primary and secondary schools in line with the ongoing national curriculum renewal (cf. the core objective and attainment level on language variation and change)? (Doreleijers 2022, 2025)

4 Case study: the ‘new’ Brabantish (hyper)dialect

The project *Changing gender: Language variation and change in gender marking in Dutch dialects* (piloted in 2017 and carried out between 2019 and 2023) focused on variation in adnominal gender marking in North Brabantish dialects, especially the Eindhoven region.¹ Throughout the project, younger (‘new’) dialect speakers aged 16-18 were compared with older (‘traditional’) speakers aged >50. The Eindhoven (‘Brainport’) region is a very promising research site because it faces dialect leveling and dialect loss, with local dialects giving way to larger, leveled regiolects (Hoppenbrouwers 1990; Swanenberg 2014, 2016; Wilting et al. 2014). In this region, the languishing Brabantish dialect is sometimes exaggerated due to limited dialect knowledge or in an attempt to sound local (i.e., speakers opposing globalization and emphasizing their local roots). Therefore, my research project focused on dialect innovations and what they tell us about the structure and functions of the changing dialect. My hypothesis was that some ‘new’ speakers are overshooting the target deliberately, i.e., ‘fake the dialect till you make the dialect’ (cf. Doreleijers, Piepers, Backus & Swanenberg 2021), contrary to what has previously been claimed in sociolinguistic literature on hyperdialectisms.

In particular, one dialect feature seems to be very suitable for hyperdialectism, i.e., the masculine gender suffix. This suffix was part of the middle Dutch case marking system (Bloemhoff & Streekstra 2013), indicating accusative case, but it disappeared over time. However, the Brabantish dialects have preserved the suffix in their three-gender system, albeit as a marker of masculine gender (in all cases). The realization of the gender suffix is dependent on the linguistic context, i.e., the lexical gender of the noun (that has to be masculine), number (only singular nouns), and phonological constraints (the

¹ This project was funded by the Dutch Research Council, PGW.19.018.

variable is spelled out as *-en* preceding words starting with a vowel or *h, b, d, t*, and as *-e* in other cases, cf. 1a vs 2a). For example, the masculine nouns *hond* ('dog') and *koekwaus* ('idiot') are assigned a masculine gender suffix to the (in)definite determiner, while the feminine noun *oma* ('grandma'), the neuter noun *kuukske* ('cookie'), and the plural noun *meisjes* ('girls') are not (1-5).

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|-----|---|------------------|
| 1a) | enen hond, den hond
a-M.SG dog.M-SG, the-M.SG dog.M-SG | [Brabantish] |
| 1b) | een hond, de hond
a dog, the dog | [Standard Dutch] |
| 2a) | ene koekwaus, de koekwaus
an-M.SG idiot.M-SG, the idiot.M-SG | [Brabantish] |
| 2b) | een koekwaus, de koekwaus
an idiot, the idiot | [Standard Dutch] |
| 3a) | 'n oma, d'oma
a grandma.F.SG, the grandma.F.SG | [Brabantish] |
| 3b) | een oma, de oma
a grandma, the grandma | [Standard Dutch] |
| 4a) | e kuukske, 't kuukske
a cookie.N.SG, the cookie.N.SG | [Brabantish] |
| 4b) | een koekje, het koekje
a cookie, the cookie | [Standard Dutch] |
| 5a) | de mèskes
the girls.N.PL | [Brabantish] |
| 5b) | de meisjes
the girls | [Standard Dutch] |

4.1 Mixed-method approach

The project first mapped the Brabantish adnominal gender system to establish a benchmark for variational research. This was done by investigating detailed descriptions of the system in dialectological and sociolinguistic literature as well as by reviewing dialect descriptions from the mid-twentieth century onward (e.g., De Bont 1962; De Schutter 2013; Hoppenbrouwers 1983, 1990; Stroop 1989; Weijnen 1971). In addition, written questionnaires from *Vraag & Antwoord* 'Question & Answer' — a series of questionnaires from *Stichting Nederlandse Dialecten* (SND) 'Dutch Dialects Foundation' that were sent out in 2014 and 2015 — were analyzed. In some of these questionnaires (filled out by almost 700 informants from different parts of North Brabant) the gender feature was included as one of the research variables. Informants translated sentences from Standard Dutch into their own Brabantish dialect. Together with the literature, the findings

from the questionnaires served as a starting point for my case studies, i.e., by formulating a gender marking ‘rule’ from which speakers could deviate.

A mixed-method approach was used in these case studies, featuring written questionnaires, speech recordings of secondary school pupils, discourse analyses of social media productions (i.e., TikTok videos and Instagram posts), acceptability judgments, and (focus group) interviews. The concepts of the total linguistic fact (Silverstein 1985) and enregisterment (Agha 2007; Johnstone 2016) served as the project’s theoretical backbone, assuming a constant interdependence of linguistic forms, situated use and ideology (i.e., metalinguistic awareness), and emphasizing how ways of speaking are actively linked to ways of being (cf. persona styles).

4.2 *Main findings*

The outcomes of all case studies have revealed a large amount of hyperdialectisms in both speech data and social media data. These hyperdialectisms concern overuses of the masculine gender suffix, e.g., *enenen hond* or *enene koekwaus* in which the suffix is doubled. Moreover, hyperdialectisms occurred in feminine and neuter contexts, such as *enen* or *den oma* and *ene* or *enene kuukske*, featuring a masculine gender suffix in non-masculine noun phrases. The gender suffix even appeared in plural forms, such as *den mèskes* (Doreleijers, van Koppen & Swanenberg 2020).

Although these forms sound dialect-like, they are exaggerations of the traditional dialect. Previous research assumed that these hyperdialectisms either serve as a polarization tool for L1 dialect speakers or as a symptom of ignorance of L2 dialect speakers (Lenz 2004; Hinskens 2014), but the North Brabantish data show that they can also be used deliberately as identity markers by ‘new’ speakers (Doreleijers 2024). For example, they are used in different types of memes, indicating the ‘memeification of the dialect’, i.e., selective dialect usage as a weapon of humor and exaggeration to emphasize a local image or to demonstrate insider knowledge (Doreleijers 2023). Dialect features might be quantitatively limited, but they have an important symbolic function (Androutsopoulos 2010) as they carry social meanings that convey localness. For content creators, they can therefore be an important asset to lend posts a local flavor, while for social media users it can lead to both engagement and annoyance.

In an experiment where speakers had to rate audio fragments with and without hyperdialectisms, younger (‘new’) speakers rated them significantly more acceptable than older (‘traditional’) speakers, pointing to a possible age effect or L1 effect (Doreleijers & Grondelaers 2024). The difference applied mainly to feminine and neuter noun phrases and to a lesser extent to plurals, but the latter could be a change in progress.

The difference in acceptability judgments, however, did not yet explain the *why* of (the perception of) dialect variation. Therefore, qualitative statements were collected through focus group interviews (Doreleijers & Grondelaers 2024; Doreleijers & Swanenberg 2024). In these focus groups, speakers had to react to different prompts, such as social media posts featuring hyperdialectisms, e.g., *unne* ('ene') *dame* ('a lady'). In this way, it was possible to get a glimpse into their metalinguistic awareness and ideological views of (hyper)dialect. Qualitative thematic analysis revealed striking differences between younger and older participants. Younger participants generally evaluated hyperdialectisms as 100% dialectal, recognizable, and appropriate in informal, convivial, in-group contexts, while older participants dismissed them as incorrect, fake, and even offensive.

The synthesis of all case studies clearly showed an ongoing process of enregisterment (Agha 2007), in which the grammatical meaning of the gender suffix is replaced by a range of potential social meanings linked to a Brabantish way of speaking and being (i.e., a persona style), such as old-fashioned, rural, blunt, unsophisticated, funny, familiar or convivial. It typically encompasses a field of potential social meanings, i.e., an indexical field (Eckert 2008), all of which can be activated dependent on the context.

5 Critical reflections

The in-depth study of hyperdialectisms, preferably within a mixed-method approach — which would have been disregarded in traditional dialect research because hyperdialectisms were not considered pure and authentic — opens up new possibilities for gaining insight into the relationship between dialect use and identity formation, and the ways in which grammar can be manipulated for this purpose. If 'new' speakers use the 'new' (hyper)dialect to convey localness (or other social meanings), this also raises questions about authenticity. Are the new dialect and its speakers also authentic? And when is overshooting the target deemed successful, and when is it perceived as 'too much'? (Blommaert & Varis 2013).

Moreover, it is important to emphasize that the study of hyperdialectisms requires a careful and layered analysis (cf. Doreleijers & Swanenberg 2023b). This is where the 'traditional' dialectological perspective comes into play, since something can only be *hyperdialectal* if it is not considered to be *dialectal*. The term itself is a researcher's construct. Also there are difficulties in selecting your point of reference, which will influence your analysis in any case. For example, do you compare the current dialect with the mid-twentieth century dialect benchmark (as was done in the research project discussed in this paper) which

may still be recognizable to current generations or the speakers with whom current generations have come into contact? Or do you depart from a more historical Dutch perspective (cf. Tamminga 2013)?

Another methodological concern is that practice-oriented concepts such as fluidity, hybridity and dynamicity reduce the ‘countability’ of linguistic phenomena. Methodologically, the emphasis is therefore mainly on ‘rich’ descriptions and transferability rather than generalizability. This applies not only to linguistic variables, but also to their social meanings, that are seen as layered, flexible and context-dependent. Therefore, the interpretation of a variable may become a variable in itself, which makes it more difficult to quantify your findings.

6 References

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