Of stigmas and stereotypes: Making sense of prestige and sociolinguistic salience in Late Modern Flanders

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Traditional views on the history of Dutch have long regarded the period of political and linguistic unification of the Northern and Southern Netherlands (1815-1830) as the key moment when the prestige of the codified Northern standard caused a decisive shift in linguistic practices in Southern Flanders. We will argue that this view is not so much erroneous as it is incomplete. Along the lines of Milroy (1992:147), we will argue against ”a conceptualization of sociolinguistic space that is unidimensional – a space in which the elite groups set the tone [...], and in which lower groups strive to imitate their lead”. We will insist that we need to move towards a richer sociolinguistic description of language variation and change, taking into account the ’total linguistic fact’ (Silverstein 1985, cf. Woolard 2008): the dialectal tension between linguistic forms and the use of these forms in their social and historical context, mediated and shaped by relevant (standard) language ideologies.

One way of delving deeper into the social contexts in which linguistic forms were used historically consists of the study of metalinguistic and normative publications. The question of normative influence on actual language use has long been on the agenda of historical sociolinguistic research, but such sources can also be useful for establishing sociolinguistic saliency: using the example of different spelling variables from 18th/19th-century Dutch, we will demonstrate how a careful evaluation of linguistic variation and social representations of linguistic forms in metalinguistic discourses can help us better situate these forms in the social and historical context of language behavior. Only in this way, we will be able to ”incorporate the idea that language is used symbolically to mark solidarity or social distance” and that, also in historical sociolinguistics, ”the key social variables that we must investigate are identity variables” (Milroy 1992:152).

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