

## **Dialects in western Europe: a balanced picture of language death, innovation, and change\***

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This thematic issue of the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* addresses the question of whether dialects in western Europe are dying. Can dialects still be a medium of communication in our industrialized and increasingly urbanized societies? Is there a place for dialects in a globalizing world? And what kind of dialect do we speak right now and shall we be speaking in the near future? In what way do our present day dialects differ from the dialects of the — in some cases very recent — past?

The cases presented in this issue do not cover every country of western Europe, but we hope that both the geographical spread of the selected countries and regions and the diversity they represent with respect to their linguistic, political, and socioeconomic past and present shed light on the similarities and differences in the sociolinguistic evolution of dialect use across this part of the continent.

As far as dialect vitality is concerned, the first country that is presented in the volume, Norway, constitutes a very special case. In “Dialects in Norway: catching up with the rest of Europe?,” Unn Røyneland explains what makes the Norwegian language situation quite unique, even today: the positive attitudes that are generally held toward dialects, the ease and openness with which nonstandard dialects are used both in formal/public and in informal/private domains, and the huge amount of dialect diversity. All of these factors are related to the lack of a strong national spoken standard and to some extent also to the bewildering variation across the written standards. The omnipresence of dialect use in Norwegian society shows that dialects have not become functionally devalued at all. But Norway appears to be catching up with the rest of Europe to some extent with respect to structural changes affecting its dialects. The predominant tendency is one of regional leveling. Displaying regional affiliation and identity has become more important than displaying a strictly local affiliation. Urban dialects appear to play a prominent role in these processes: they determine both horizontal and vertical leveling

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processes (the latter holds for the urban standard in and around Oslo) and the emergence of mixed varieties.

For the Netherlands a completely different picture emerges. In “Dimensions and determinants of dialect use in the Netherlands at the individual and the regional levels at the end of the twentieth century,” Ton Goeman and Willy Jongenburger present the results of a nationwide survey on dialect use and analyze the correlation between reported dialect use and several variables: region, language of primary socialization, urbanization level, gender, age, educational level, religious persuasion, modernity of living, and attitudes toward dialect attrition. The data reveal major regional differences with low frequencies of dialect use in all domains in the west and the center of the country and higher frequencies in the peripheral regions in the east, north, and south. Dialect attrition is deplored significantly more strongly in the regions that are suffering serious functional dialect loss than in those regions where dialects hold a stronger position. In many regions this “regret” leads to a renewed interest in dialects. The latter tendency and the role dialects might play as regional identity markers in a globalizing society constitute the positive part of the story. However, at the same time, the overall picture reveals the precarious position of Dutch dialects in the Netherlands since dialect use increasingly appears to be restricted to a traditional nonurbanized lifestyle.

The standardization process of Dutch in the Netherlands started in the seventeenth century, in the western part of the country. From then on, its impact grew and it gradually won ground, although it took quite a long time before the spoken standard spread right across the country and before it came within reach of all social classes. For Northern Belgium, or Flanders, Dutch is also the official language. For historical reasons, however, the standardization of spoken Dutch in Flanders began more than three centuries later, i.e., in the first decades of the twentieth century. This may go a long way to explain the fact that, compared to the Netherlands, Flanders offers a completely different and more favorable picture for the present-day position of dialects and regional varieties. As discussed by Reinhild Vandekerckhove in “Dialect loss and dialect vitality in Flanders,” generally speaking dialects have remained the dominant medium for colloquial communication much longer than in neighboring countries, and even today Flanders is still marked by remarkable dialect diversity. Yet there are strong regional differences, the west of Flanders being marked by dialect vitality to a much greater extent than the other regions. Dialect loss is a relatively new phenomenon and processes of dialect change have proceeded with great regional differences in speed and intensity over the past decades. Yet leveling processes can be observed

everywhere, and some urban dialects appear to play a prominent role in this leveling. For the younger generations, the dominant variety for informal colloquial speech is no longer the local dialect but it is not Standard Dutch either. The new and dominant code is a regiolectal or so-called intermediate variety — *tussentaal*. Every region has its own supralocal regiolectal variety, but the variety of the central Brabant–Antwerp region clearly appears to be dominant.

In southern, Romance Belgium, or Wallonia, four regional varieties can be discerned: Walloon, Picard, Lorrain, and Champenois. The first two varieties, and especially Walloon, dominate the regional linguistic scene since the other two have nearly disappeared. The contribution by Michel Francard, entitled “Regional languages in Romance Belgium: the point of no return?,” is essentially a story of dialect loss. In a few decades the regional languages have largely been ousted by French. All surveys reveal an abrupt decrease in the practice of regional languages in Wallonia from the mid-twentieth century onward, not only in public but also in private domains. It is estimated that only 10% of the younger generation still uses one of the regional languages and even then actual performance may be highly variable. But just when even the dominant Walloon variety may reach the point of no return, dialects appear to be undergoing re-evaluation. Across a wide range of cultural activities (such as pop songs, theatre performances, cartoon strips), Walloon dialects have been developing a strong following, and thoughts have now turned toward the possibility of standardizing a written form of the language. So varieties of Walloon have recently gained ground in domains from which they had long been excluded, but, nevertheless, they seem to be losing their main function as a medium of colloquial informal communication in local settings. That is why Francard concludes that regional languages in Wallonia risk being permanently enclosed within the realm of folklore if they are not integrated into a more global view of the future of Wallonia.

As the title “One foot in the grave? Dialect death, dialect contact, and dialect birth in England” suggests, the recent history of dialects in England does not allow for a one-sided approach. Dialect attrition affecting every structural level of the language has been widespread in England over the past century. However, David Britain argues that in many cases giving up traditional dialect forms has not led to widespread standardization. More and more, locally distinct dialects are being replaced by supralocal or regional koines, characterized both by the leveling of marked or minority features and by interdialect forms. Britain also points to the impact of urban dialects, the features of which are diffused to smaller cities or towns, yet may bear different social connotations in these places from

those in the donor city: working class urban features may turn into markers of a prestigious urban lifestyle in the towns that adopt these features. Røyneland (see above) also finds evidence of this phenomenon in Norway. Britain also points to the emergence of new varieties in England, resulting from dialect contact triggered by New Town formation, and from the shift to English of the country's ethnic minority populations, especially in contexts of significant levels of intercultural contact.

While dialect leveling may be observed in all of the countries dealt with in this issue, the contribution of David Hornsby shows that the breadth of its reach in France is probably without parallel. In "Dedialectalization in France: convergence and divergence," the early emergence of an upper-class Parisian vernacular as a desirable spoken norm and the huge dimensions of the Paris conurbation compared to other French urban centers in the north and south are shown to be major explanatory factors. Parisian vernacular and supralocal forms were successfully diffused from Paris and replaced local ones before distinct urban varieties could develop elsewhere in France. Regional languages became stigmatized at an early stage and better educated and increasingly urbanized French citizens opted for the national tongue. As a consequence, the colloquial speech of people born from the 1960s onwards barely contains regional elements in its phonology. And yet, just when France seemed to be heading for near total linguistic homogeneity, recent research reveals the emergence of "regional French," which covers varieties that are quite close to standard French but increasingly show some distinct regional coloring. The emergence of these varieties is restricted for the most part to larger urban centers in the northern and southern peripheries. They offer some counterbalance to the predominantly convergent tendencies that have marked the linguistic history of France for such a long time.

Present-day Spain is also marked by both convergence and divergence of regional varieties. In "Standardness and nonstandardness in Spain: dialect attrition and revitalization of regional dialects of Spanish," Juan Manuel Hernández-Campoy and Juan Andrés Villena-Ponsoda show that dialects in central and southern Spain are subject to different and even divergent processes. In these parts of Spain, gradual convergence toward the national standard variety is leading to the emergence of a leveled koine known as *español común* or 'common Spanish'. Contrary to this process, however, innovations spreading from Seville throughout western Andalusia are leading to the formation of a spoken regional standard based on the Seville urban dialect (*sevillano* or *norma sevillana*). In this southern region, the Seville variety functions as an alternative to the national standard. As a result of these processes, three different spoken varieties compete: the traditional Castilian Spanish national standard,

the regional standard, *sevillano*, and the emerging koine, *español común*. From a geographical point of view, the latter constitutes a kind of buffer between the national standard, which is based on northern Castilian dialects, and the southern innovative varieties. But both the impact of “common Spanish” and the emergence of the Seville norm show that regional varieties play a major role in the very dynamic linguistic scene of present-day Spain. It may be clear from the contributions discussed above that Spain does not stand alone in this respect.

Every country and region has its own peculiarities as far as dialect attrition and dialect vitality are concerned, but regional varieties nevertheless continue to determine the dynamics of the geo- and sociolinguistic landscape of most of the countries dealt with in this volume. Some regions and countries have been “protected” from the influence of the/a standard language much longer than others. Norway and Flanders seem to be quite privileged in that respect, although the dialects of Dutch-speaking Belgium nowadays may be under greater pressure than the Norwegian dialects. For France, large parts of the Netherlands, and Wallonia, the long-lasting and ongoing pressure of the standard language has led to a very dramatic reduction of dialect use and dialect users. England and Spain may occupy an intermediate position in this respect.

The contributions on Wallonia and the Netherlands pay attention to a special side effect of dialect loss: people start cherishing what is perceived to have become rare. As a consequence, dialect has become re-evaluated and finds its way into all kinds of cultural products (songs, theatre productions, etc.). This could be seen as a kind of functional expansion of dialect, yet may not, in the medium or long term, guarantee the survival of the local or regional dialect, a survival which most certainly depends on dialect use in everyday colloquial speech. Nevertheless, in most cases the traditional local dialects have *not* made way for a generalized use of the standard language, and this may be one of the most important general tendencies we can point to. The new medium for colloquial speech is often a leveled or mixed regional dialect. The contributions from England, Flanders, France, Norway, and Spain all point strongly to the steering role of urban dialects in these processes of leveling and koineization.

Our general conclusion is that while small-scale local dialect may well be under significant threat, regional dialects with a wider communicative reach seem to show more vitality than ever. As David Hornsby puts it: regional dialect leveling has not suppressed the desire to express regional-ity through speech.

The issue closes with two book reviews. Dominic Watt discusses Auer, Hinskens, and Kerswill’s (2005) volume *Dialect Change: Convergence and Divergence in European Languages*. Watt presents both a general

evaluation of the book and a critical analysis of each of the contributions. Marc van Oostendorp comments on De Swaan's (2001) *Words of the World: The Global Language System*. The review discusses the merits and drawbacks of De Swaan's socioeconomic model, which claims to predict the "survival chances" of languages and language varieties in a globalizing world.

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## **Note**

- \* This special issue was originally conceived by Willy Jongenburger of Amsterdam's Meertens Instituut in 2000, with Ton Goeman lending her a helping hand in the early stages. A set of chapters and a review were commissioned and written, reviewed and re-drafted. However, Willy's new administrative role at Meertens Instituut left her too little time to complete the editing of the issue and so we took over this role in November 2006, commissioning two new chapters, an additional review, and giving those authors who had maintained their commitment to the project the time to revise and update their chapters. The contributions were then re-reviewed and resubmitted to ensure that this issue has not overly suffered from the unfortunate time delay. We'd like to thank Willy for all of her hard work in the early stages and for her ongoing commitment to the project once we had taken over its reins.