

Norm versus usage in strong verbs in 17th century Dutch newspaper language

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The Dutch language contains several strong verbs, which are divided into seven different verb classes based on the ablaut. Over time, some of these verb classes have undergone language change. This happened, for example, to the verbs from verb class III, as can be illustrated with the verb *zingen* ‘to sing’. This strong verb displayed a three part ABC-paradigm in Middle Dutch:

zing(en) ‘sing’ – *zang*, *zongen* ‘sang’ – *gezongen* ‘sung’

with *zang* being used for preterite singular (‘I, you (sg.), he or she sang’) and *zongen* for preterite plural (‘we, you (pl.) or they sang’; De Smet, 2021: 17; Van der Sijs, 2021: 453). Nowadays, Standard Dutch has lost the preterite singular <a> variant in these verbs and uses the same form for singular and plural preterite, thus displaying an ABB-paradigm:

zing(en) ‘sing’ – *zong(en)* ‘sang’ – *gezongen* ‘sung’

In a large corpus study on strong verbs in Dutch, De Smet (2021) has shown that this change solidified in the 17th century – a century that is also known as the formative period in the standardization of Dutch (Van der Wal, 1995; Van der Sijs, 2021). Even though De Smet acknowledges that standardization and concomitant codification of verb paradigms in the late 16th and early 17th century may have played a role here, she focusses her analysis on possible language internal factors influencing this change (2021: 108-109). The language external factor has therefore not been studied in detail yet, leaving the following question unanswered: could standardization have played a part in this language change?

In this presentation, I intend to answer this question in two ways. Firstly, I will perform a comprehensive study of the norms for 17th-century class III-verbs (42 in total, see Van der Sijs, 2021: 453) by mapping out all stances on these verbs encountered in the ten normative grammars on Standard Dutch written between 1550 and 1650. I will show to what extent these grammars provided rules for individual class III verbs (token) and/or the entire verb class (type), what these norms entailed, and what this indicates in terms of how extensive normative influence could have been on this language change (cf. Anderwald, 2011; 2012 on 19th century English). Secondly, I will investigate the actual use of these verbs in the new Dutch Renaissance NEWspaper corpus (RENEW corpus), containing 17 million words and newspapers from all years between 1618 to 1700. These data will be added to the data on 17th-century letters and literary works from the study performed by De Smet (2021). This corpus study will provide insight into (1) to what extent the normative grammars described and followed contemporary language use, and (2) to what extent the norms in these grammars, which all date from the first half of the 17th century, affected language use in newspapers from the second half of the 17th century.

References

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