

# Using translated texts in historical linguistics

## Turning challenges into opportunities

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Translations, Bible, Parallel Corpus, Verb Constructions, Dutch

Some of the oldest texts available for the study of language change are translated texts. These texts are not without challenges for historical linguistics. This can be illustrated with the oldest available longer text for the Dutch language: the Wachtendonck Psalter (10th century CE). It is an interlinear Old Dutch translation of parts of the Vulgate Latin Psalter. As this translation stays very close to the original, translating its source in a word-by-word fashion, it is hard to establish in how far this text reflects the grammar of Old Dutch or of Vulgate Latin.

A traditional approach to this challenge is to systematically compare the translated text with its source. Quak (2020), for instance, has compared how passive and future verb constructions in the Latin Vulgate original were rendered in the Old Dutch Wachtendonck translation. It turned out that the translator systematically replaced Latin inflectional futures with periphrastic constructions in Old Dutch. In view of the strict word-to-word translation strategy this suggests that Old Dutch did no longer have an inflectional future but rather makes use of a periphrastic construction to express this meaning.

In this presentation, we want to complement the traditional retrospective approach to translated historical texts, as sketched above, with a prospective dimension. The proposed prospective approach exploits the fact that biblical texts are translated time and again, as a response to changing religious beliefs and language change. This is also the case with the psalms texts of the Wachtendonck Psalter. We are therefore able to compare the Wachtendonck Psalter with more recent translations in the Vorsterman Bible (1528), the Louvain Bible (1548) and the Dutch Professors' Bible (1911), which have become available through the newly compiled EDGeS Diachronic Bible Corpus (Bouma et al. 2020).

We treat these historical translations together with their common source as a diachronic parallel corpus, inspired by synchronic corpus-based contrastive linguistics (see Hasselgård 2020 for a recent overview). Each verse is connected to the corresponding verses in both the translations and the source text. In this diachronic parallel corpus, we have annotated all verb constructions in order to get in insight in how translators from different times have chosen to render the same inventory of verb constructions. In this comparison, we are not so much interested in the source constructions themselves, but in the fact that the target constructions have a relation of semantic equivalence with the source constructions. In other words, we exploit the source constructions as a *tertium comparationis* for a prospective comparison of the target constructions.

Our study uncovers that as time passes translators increasingly resort to periphrastic verb constructions in order to translate the same source constructions. This tendency can be related to the rise of periphrastic verb constructions in the history of Dutch. Closer comparison of the Wachtendonck Psalter with subsequent translations shows that all translations stay faithful to the original in different ways. The Wachtendonck Psalter appears to only resort to periphrastic verb construction when there is no inflectional alternative available in the language. The Vorsterman and Louvain Bible in turn seem to strive for a faithful rendering of semantic oppositions in the original making use of both inflectional and periphrastic constructions.

## References

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