

in:  
Broekhuis Hans, Norbert Corver, Riny Huybregts, Ursula Kleinhenz, and Jan Koster (eds.)  
2005. *Organizing Grammar. Linguistic Studies in Honor of Henk van Riemsdijk*. Berlin:  
Mouton de Gruyter, 474-482.

## **A prosodic contrast between Northern and Southern Dutch: a result of a Flemish-French sprachbund**

**Roland Noske**

### **1 Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In descriptive studies of varieties of Dutch, up till now little or no attention has been given to differences in prosodic structure between the Northern and Southern variants of the language, spoken in the Netherlands and Belgium respectively. In the literature one finds only cursory remarks, like the one by Goossens (1973), who, after having described a number of segmental phonological differences between the Northern and Southern variants of Standard Dutch (like the use of the labiodental approximant [v] in the North versus the labiovelar [w] in the South), writes:

Apart from these characteristics that can be easily described, there are a number of others, which concern the variational space of the separate phonemes and allophones, their connections and intonations. (Goossens 1973:238, my translation).

Despite the lack of descriptions it is immediately clear to anyone confronted with Northern and Southern Dutch that important prosodic differences exist between the two variants. This paper will focus on one aspect of the prosodic organization, viz. the process of syllabification and the placement of syllable boundaries in morphologically complex words. It will also treat a contrast in vowel deletion between the North and the South.

### **2 Glottal stop insertion and syllable boundaries**

In both Northern and Southern Dutch, a glottal stop is inserted in hiatus position if the second vowel is stressed:

- (1) beamen [bə<sup>1</sup>ʔa:mən] ‘acknowledge’  
(/bə+/, verbal prefix, /+ən/, infinitival ending)

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Hans Van de Velde, Marleen Van Peteghem and Julien Vermeulen for help on the Southern Dutch data.

Since a phonetic glottal stop<sup>2</sup> can only occur in Dutch in the onset of a syllable, without other elements in this position, its occurrence can serve as an indicator for the location of a syllable boundary. Let us now look at the Northern Standard Dutch forms in (2), where we see that a glottal stop is inserted if a consonant final morpheme is combined with a vowel initial one:

- (2) Northern Standard Dutch
- a. uit[ʔ]eindelijk ‘final(ly)’  
(*uit*, ‘out’; *einde* ‘end’; *-lijk*, adjectival suffix)
  - b. ver[ʔ]armen ‘empoverish’  
(*ver-*, verbal prefix; *arm* ‘poor’; *-en* infinitival suffix)
  - c. on[ʔ]eens (adj.) ‘in disagreement’  
(*on-*, ‘un-’; *eens* ‘in agreement’ (adj.))
  - d. berg[ʔ]achtig ‘mountainous’  
(*berg* ‘mountain’; *-achtig*, adjectival suffix)

We can conclude that in (2), because glottal stop can only occur as the sole element of the onset, the final consonants of the initial morphemes are maintained within the coda of the first syllable, while the glottal stop constitutes the onset of the second syllable.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, Northern Dutch behaves like Standard German, where a glottal stop is also inserted in cases parallel to the ones in (2), e.g. in the Standard German equivalent of (2a), *letztendlich* [letstʰʔentliç] ‘final(ly)’.

If we compare the Northern Dutch data with the corresponding forms in Southern Dutch, we find a marked contrast. My informants report that they find the pronunciation with a glottal stop in these cases unnatural, very official, affected and exaggerated (‘resembling Northern Dutch’). Hence, the forms corresponding to the ones in (2a-d) are not pronounced with a glottal stop in Southern Dutch, not even in fairly slow speech. Because, as we have seen, glottal stop insertion does occur into an empty onset in both Northern and Southern Dutch, one is forced to conclude that in the Southern Dutch forms, the final consonant of the initial morpheme is

<sup>2</sup> Glottal stop has no phonemic value in Dutch.

<sup>3</sup> In Northern Dutch, the glottal stop in (1a-d) is sometimes omitted and the intervocalic vowel finds itself in the onset of the second syllable. However, it should be emphasized that this phenomenon is strictly limited to allegro speech.

syllabified into the onset of the second syllable.<sup>4</sup> To summarize, we find the following contrast (‘.’ indicates a syllable boundary):

(3)		underlying form	Northern Dutch	Southern Dutch
a.	uiteindelijk	/œyt+ɛində+lək/	[œyt.ʔɛin.də.lək]	[œy.ʔɛin.də.lək]
b.	verarmen	/vər+arm+ən/	[vər.ʔar.mən]	[və.ʔar.mən]
c.	oneens	/ɔn+e:ns/	[ɔn.ʔe:ns]	[ɔ.ʔne:ns]
d.	bergachtig	/bɛry+ɑx.təx/	[ʔbɛrx.ʔɑx.təx]	[ʔbɛr.ʔɑx.təx]

In (3d) we see an additional indication for the contrast in syllabification: in Southern Dutch, the final voiced obstruent /ɣ/ of the initial morpheme /bɛry/ has not undergone syllable final devoicing, while in Northern Dutch it comes out as voiceless [x]. This independently confirms that this segment is in onset position in Southern Dutch.

### 3 Cliticization and vowel deletion

Another, partially related, contrast between Northern and Southern Dutch concerns the deletion of vowels in pronouns due to cliticization. The neuter pronoun *het* [ət]<sup>5</sup>, e.g., can be cliticized and can lose its schwa more easily and in more positions in Southern Dutch than in Northern Dutch. In both Northern and Southern Dutch, schwa can be deleted if it is followed by a vowel initial inflected verb, if the main sentential stress is not located on one of the words.

(4)	het is	/ət ɪs /	[tɪs]	(Northern and Southern Dutch)
	it is			

But in Northern Dutch this deletion is optional, depending on the speech rate. In many varieties of Southern Dutch, however, it seems to be

<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, the intervocalic consonants in the Southern Standard Dutch case could be described as ambisyllabic. I do not go into this matter, as it is immaterial to the issue discussed here.

<sup>5</sup> In stressed position, this pronoun is pronounced [hɛt] in Northern Dutch, [hət] in Southern Dutch (but not West-Flemish, in which the /h/ is realized as zero). The exact nature of the alternation [hɛt]/[hət] ~ [ət] is unclear (i.e. whether it is a result of polymorphy or of rather isolated phonological processes). The existence of [hət] in Southern Dutch and the impossibility of \*[hɛt] in that variety are problematic for Van Oostendorp's (1995:197; 2000) assumption and prediction that schwa and [h] cannot be tautosyllabic.

obligatory. A more marked contrast between the North and the South (in this case West-Flemish<sup>6</sup>) can be found if *het* is in a position following a tensed verb, e.g. in:

- (5) a. was het /vas ət/ [vasət]~[vazət] \*[vast]<sup>7</sup> (Northern Dutch)  
was it  
b. was het /was ət/[wast] (West-Flemish)  
was it

It thus appears that in West-Flemish, also in normal to slow speech, /ət/ usually loses its vowel and is cliticized to tensed verbs both to its left and to its right. Also other unstressed pronouns, like *ik* 'I', *je* 'you', *we* 'we', can lose their vowels much more easily in West-Flemish and other Southern variants than in Standard Northern Dutch, where again allegro speech is required if vowel deletion is to take place at all. Examples of deletion of the vowel in *ik* /ik/ are given (6):

- (6) a. dat ik /da ik/ [dak] (West-Flemish)  
that I  
b. ik hoor /ik or/<sup>8</sup> [ko:r] (West-Flemish)  
I hear

#### 4 A difference in constraint ranking

The contrast between Northern and Southern Dutch can be explained elegantly in the framework of Optimality Theory. As shown by Van Oostendorp (1995:183, 2000), this type of contrast can be analyzed as a different constraint ranking of the constraints ALIGN and ONSET. ALIGN says that word boundaries and derivational morpheme boundaries must

<sup>6</sup> My data are based on recordings and observations of West-Flemish (the dialect of the province of West-Flanders), in which the phenomenon of vowel deletion in pronouns appears to be the strongest. However, the obligatory vowel loss in unstressed pronouns is not limited to West-Flemish but seems to be wide-spread in Southern dialects. Two recordings of West-Flemish can be found on: <http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/langvar/westvlaams/>.

<sup>7</sup> [vast] (without a schwa) is possible in allegro speech in Northern Dutch, but not in normal speech rate, like [wast] in the South.

<sup>8</sup> The underlying form does not contain /h/ because West-Flemish has lost this segment. In turn, [ɣ] in other dialects, shows up as [h] in West-Flemish. Thus historically the following evolution took place in West-Flemish: /h/ ⇒ Ø, /ɣ/ ⇒ /h/.

coincide with syllable boundaries, while ONSET says that syllables must have onsets (or, in another version, that their onsets must be filled). It can now be assumed that in Southern Dutch, ONSET is ranked above ALIGN, (ONSET >> ALIGN) while in Northern Dutch the order is the reverse. We can account for the contrast in (3c) in the following way:

**Tableau 1: Southern Dutch**

Candidates	ONSET	ALIGN
(.ɔn.)(.e:ns.)	**	
☞ (.ɔ.)(.ne:ns.)	*	*

**Tableau 2: Northern Dutch**

Candidates	ALIGN	ONSET
☞ (.ɔn.)(.e:ns.)		**
(.ɔ.)(.ne:ns.)	*	*

At a later stage, a phonetic glottal stop is inserted before *e:ns* in Northern Dutch.

The vowel deletion in pronouns in Southern Dutch can also be analyzed as being the result of the ranking of ONSET above ALIGN. Let us consider the case of (6b), *ik hoor* [ko:r], ‘I hear’:

**Tableau 3: West-Flemish**

Candidates	ONSET	ALIGN
(.ik.)(.o:r.)	**	
☞ (.ko:r.)		**

As we can see, because the first candidate violates ONSET (even twice), the second candidate wins, although it twice violates the lower ranked constraint ALIGN.

## 5 A Flemish-French sprachbund

The question comes to mind what are the origins of the contrast in syllabification and vowel deletion between Northern Dutch and German on the one hand and Southern Dutch on the other. I tentatively advance here the hypothesis that the observed behavior of Southern Dutch with respect to

syllabification and vowel deletion in pronouns is due to the influence of Romance dialects.

This assumption is not as far-fetched as it may seem at first sight. First of all, Southern Dutch and French have cohabitated for centuries, especially in South-Western Flanders. The town of Kortrijk (Courtrai), e.g., was under French domination several times in its history and part of its population was French-speaking. Second, in the literature, a number of phonological phenomena that have crossed the Germanic-Romance linguistic border in present-day Belgium and Northern France have been attested. There have also been common developments in neighboring Romance and Germanic dialects. De Schutter (1999) mentions five of these phenomena:

- i. final devoicing (a steady feature of Dutch and German), showing up in French and Picardian (*herbe* ‘grass’ is pronounced with a final [p] in Romance dialects of Northern France as well as of North-Eastern France and Wallonia), which constitutes an influence of Germanic onto the Romance dialects;
- ii. the breaking of vowels (like in Fr. *fièvre*, *pièce*) (in other words the development of rising diphthongs, a historic process that has taken place in large parts of the Romance linguistic area), which has given rise to the breaking /a/ before /r/ + dental plosive in Southern Dutch dialects: *paard* ⇒ [p(j)ɛ:(r)t] ‘horse’;
- iii. the occurrence of /h/ as a phoneme in Walloon dialects, due to Germanic influences;
- iv. palatization (fronting) of vowels (like in Fr. *mur* [myr] and Du. *muur* (in both cases: < Lat. *murus*), South Western Dutch *veugel* [vøʏəl] ‘bird’ < *vogel* [vøʏəl]) (see also Ryckeboer 1991, 1997:147-169);
- v. lenition of dental consonants (like Fr. *feuille* [føj] ‘leaf’, < Lat. *folia*), South Western Dutch diminutive /+tʃə/ (< /+kə/).

To this list we may add a sixth phenomenon, mentioned by Ryckeboer (2004:44) for the variety of West-Flemish spoken in the part of Flanders that is presently located in France, but which pertains to West-Flemish in general:

- vi. The monophthongisation of [au] to [u] before dental or alveolar obstruents. This development is also found in the same period in the neighboring Romance dialect of Picardian.

Given all these mutual phonological influences<sup>9</sup>, it seems legitimate to search for an explanation of the discussed contrasts between Northern and Southern Dutch in the language contact with Romance. Since the difference between the North and the South is a difference in syllabification (as shown by the lack of glottal stop insertion in the South for the words listed in (3)), or are closely related with syllabification (like the vowel drop in pronouns in Southern dialects), we should take a close look at French syllabification.

As is well-known, French syllabifies right through morpheme boundaries stopping only at boundaries above the word level, perhaps phrase boundaries. Hence, *il arrive* 'he comes' is pronounced [i.lariv] and not \*[il.ariv]. This phenomenon is called *enchaînement* in descriptions of French pronunciation like Grammont (1922). We have just seen that in the Southern Dutch data in (3), in words like *uiteindelijk* ([œy.'tɛin.də.lək]), the morpheme boundary is ignored by syllabification, like in French, but unlike in Northern Dutch. This points already to the possibility of an influence of French on Southern Dutch.

The likelihood of a change through language contact becomes greater if one looks at the phenomena of vowel deletion in pronouns and other words in French. In French, schwa is deleted in many instances, among other cases before as well as after full vowels. This constitutes a wider variety of cases than schwa deletion in Standard Dutch. As we have seen, in (5a), *was het* /vas ət/ [vasət] ~ [vazət] the schwa cannot be deleted in Northern Standard Dutch (except in allegro speech), but it is obligatorily deleted in West-Flemish and other Southern Dutch dialects. So, here again, it seems that Southern Dutch behaves more like French than like Northern Dutch.

With these two parallel phenomena in French and West-Flemish, syllabification through morpheme boundaries and vowel deletion in postvocalic position, one can at least tentatively assume that there has been a French influence on Southern Dutch and on West-Flemish in particular. As I have shown, the difference between Northern and Southern Dutch can be analyzed as the result of a difference in constraint order. Van Oostendorp (1995:183, 2000) explains this contrast between (Northern) Dutch and French by exactly the same difference in constraint ranking which I have used here for explaining the contrast in syllabification and vowel deletion between Northern and Southern Dutch, viz. the contrast

---

<sup>9</sup> Apart from the phonological influences of Romance on Southern Dutch there are a number of syntactic influences, especially on West-Flemish dialects (Liliane Haegeman, personal communication).

between the orders: ALIGN >> ONSET and ONSET >> ALIGN respectively. It therefore seems natural to assume that the constraint order: ONSET >> ALIGN was adopted by Southern Dutch due to the influence of French and/or Picardian.

## 6 Remaining issues

It should be pointed out that West-Flemish behaves only partially like French with regard to vowel deletion. For instance, flecional schwas are not deleted postvocally, just like in Standard Dutch. In Van Oostendorp's analysis this is due to a constraint, MORPA, which forces every morpheme to get at least a partial realization in prosodic structure.

Also, as we have seen in (6), another vowel than schwa can also be deleted, unlike what we see in French.<sup>10</sup> According to many analyses (Charette 1991, Noske 1993, Van Oostendorp 1995, 2000), schwa is devoid of featural content and it is this property that allows for this vowel to be deleted in certain contexts. However, as we have seen, in (6) there is no underlying schwa. The explanation for the fact that there is vowel deletion nevertheless, can be found in the fact that in Dutch, unlike French, unstressed full vowels can reduce to schwa.<sup>11</sup> This means in (6) the /ɪ/ of *ik* is first reduced to schwa (i.e., it loses its featural content) and then, as a result of this feature loss, becomes a candidate for deletion.

## 7 Conclusion

In this paper, I have treated the hitherto unaddressed issue of differences in behavior between Northern and Southern Dutch with respect to syllabification and vowel deletion. I have shown that the contrast in both syllabification and vowel deletion between Northern and Southern Dutch boils down to a single difference in constraint ranking. This difference in ranking is exactly the same as the one that was found by Van Oostendorp between (Northern) Dutch and French. This resemblance in constraint ranking between Southern Dutch and French is striking. Therefore, I have advanced the hypothesis that Southern Dutch has undergone influences of

---

<sup>10</sup> In French deletion of other vowels than schwa is possible only in two words, viz. *tu* 'you' and the feminine definite article *la*.

<sup>11</sup> The schwas in French are the result of a historical process of reduction of unstressed vowels to schwa which arose under the influence of the Franconian superstrat. This process, however, has long ceased to be productive.



nearby Romance dialects like French and Picardian. We have seen that the language contact between Romance dialects in Northern France and Southern Dutch have given rise to a number of other changes in both Romance and Southern Dutch. It therefore does not seem strange to assume that the French constraint order: ONSET >> ALIGN is a feature that has crossed the border between French and Dutch.

### References

- Charette, Monik. 1991. *Conditions on Phonological Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- De Schutter, Georges. 1999. Fonologische parallellen aan weerszijden van de Germaans-Romaanse Taalgrens. *Taal en Tongval* 51, 111-130.
- Goossens, Jan. 1973. De Belgische uitspraak van het Nederlands. *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 66/3, 230-240.
- Grammont, Maurice. 1922. *Traité pratique de prononciation française*. Paris: Lagrave.
- Noske, Roland. 1993. *A Theory of Syllabification and Segmental Alternation. With Studies on the Phonology of French, German, Tonkawa and Yawelmani*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Oostendorp, Marc van. 1995. Vowel Quality and Syllable Projection. Doctoral dissertation, University of Tilburg.
- Oostendorp, Marc van. 2000. *Phonological Projection. A Theory of Feature Content and Prosodic Structure*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Ryckeboer, Hugo. 1991. De spontane palatalisatie. Een Nederlands-Picardische parallel? In *Handelingen XLV der Koninklijke Nederlandse Maatschappij voor Taal- en Letterkunde en Geschiedenis*, 113-135.
- Ryckeboer, Hugo. 1997. Het Nederlands in Noord-Frankrijk: sociolinguïstische, dialectologische en contactlinguïstische aspecten. Doctoral dissertation, University of Nijmegen.
- Ryckeboer, Hugo. 2004. *Frans Vlaams*. Tiel: Lannoo.