Death and afterlife of bipartite negation in Dutch
Language change and the effectiveness of norms

Negation in Dutch has often been cited as a classic example of Jespersen’s cycle: Old Dutch single negation with *ne* made way for Middle Dutch bipartite negation with *en* and *niet*, until single negation with *niet* took over as the preferred variant in Early Modern Dutch (cf. table 1, Van der Auwera 2009). Bipartite negation is said to have disappeared over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the standard language culture in the influential province of Holland reached its peak (Van der Horst & Van der Wal 1979, Burridge 1982, 1993, Van der Horst 2000).

This study will focus on the outgoing variant, bipartite negation, in the Southern Netherlands, and discuss how negation in the geographic periphery of Dutch relates to the single negation standard of the North. We will focus on normative prescriptions on the one hand, and actual language use on the other hand. An overview of language norms in the eighteenth century will show that Southern grammarians, less invested in the ongoing standardization process in the Northern Netherlands (Rutten 2011: 175-192), still frequently use and prescribe bipartite negation until the 1750s. After that, the issue moves off the linguistic radar and bipartite negation dies a rapid death, thus bridging the normative divide between North and South.

In actual language use, however, bipartite negation was far from dead, and an analysis of eighteenth and nineteenth-century soldiers’ correspondence (cf. Van Bakel 1977) will reveal how the supposedly extinct variant was still very much alive in less formal lower class writing. This analysis will be supplemented by a study of negation in an early-nineteenth-century corpus of crime reports, witness depositions and courtroom indictments (cf. Vosters 2011), which will allow us to highlight how bipartite negation showed strong signs of stylistic variation, and gradually came to be associated with orality and the local dialects. In both corpus studies, we will call attention to linguistic and sociolinguistics variables, and their interrelation.

The death and afterlife of bipartite negation in Dutch will allow us to reflect on standardization in practice. Allowing for ample comparison with issues of norms and practice in other ongoing international research projects, we will emphasize the great divide between standard language prescriptions and actual language use, thus rejecting the idea of standardization as a normative top-down process.

Table

| (1) ne/en/n  | + | Finite Verb |
| (2) ne/en/n  | + | Finite Verb ( + optional *niet/geen/...*) |
| (3) ne/en/n  | + | Finite Verb + *niet/geen/...* |
| (4) (optional ne/en/n + ) | Finite Verb + *niet/geen/...* |
| (5)          | Finite Verb + *niet/geen/...* |

Table 1: Five subsequent stages of negation in Dutch main clauses

References
