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*The vocalization of /l/ in standard Dutch*

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## THE VOCALIZATION OF /l/ IN STANDARD DUTCH

This article concerns an ongoing phonological change in Standard Dutch which has hardly been noticed earlier: the vocalization of /l/ in non-prevocalic position in words such as *koel* "cool" and *twaalf* "twelve". The change may have started in the western part of the Netherlands, as was shown in a pilot study, see van Reenen 1986. In this article we will examine four questions:

1. If it is true that the /l/ in Standard Dutch is changing into a vowel, when and where do we find the first traces of the change and how far has it progressed at present?
2. Changes tend to be more advanced in the speech of women than in that of men. Do we find this conclusion confirmed with respect to the vocalization of /l/?
3. What are the differences in geographical distribution?
4. Is it already possible to provide a profile of the complete change?

A long time ago, in 1985, we devised a questionnaire which was to enable us to answer such questions. Over a period of almost 20 years up to now, 1058 informants have filled in the questionnaire. Informants were invited to fill in not only the way they pronounce the /l/ in these words, but also their name, sex, date, year of birth, the places where they had lived successively and during which period. The question why we prefer to use a written questionnaire for this type of research is discussed in van Reenen 1986 and van Reenen & Jongkind 2000.

The questionnaire contains a list of 23 words, see table 1. In five of these words: items 1, 3, 6, 17, 20, /l/ is prevocalic. These words function as control words. In the 18 remaining words /l/ is always non-prevocalic in 13 cases. In five words: items 5, 7, 16, 18, 19, some informants may pronounce an [ə] between /l/ and the following consonant, for instance *mel[ə]k* and *fil[ə]m* in stead of *melk* "milk" and *film* "film". When informants pronounce these words with [ə], we call the preceding /l/ L3. In this case the /l/ is prevocalic, as in the control words. In the questionnaire we are interested in the scores with non-prevocalic /l/'s.

We call /l/ L1 when it is pronounced in agreement with the definition of the /l/: a lateral in which the tip of the tongue touches the alveolar ridge. We call /l/ L2 when the tongue tip does not touch the alveolar ridge, i.e. the /l/ has been vocalised. The non-prevocalic /l/ in the word list of the questionnaire – their number may vary per informant, because of possible L3's in their speech – may score either as L1 or as L2.

Table 1 about here.

We have stored the scores of the 1058 informants into an access database. In this manner we can make queries and ask all kinds of questions and with the help of Excel we can produce all kinds of diagrams containing the answers. The four diagrams below were produced in this way.

The first diagram contains all the scores of all the informants for all the words, distributed over seven periods of 10 years. The informants were assigned to the periods according to their year of birth. Our two oldest informants were born in 1910 and 1911, but since we have hardly any other data for the period before 1920 (only 18 informants) we have grouped them together with the informants born between 1931-1940. The youngest age group concerns informants born between 1981 and 1990, but data from informants born -after 1982 are scarce yet. This

will change during the coming years. Diagram 1 shows that L2 is increasing from almost 20% in the 1920s to almost 50% now. From 1981 L1 is decreasing again slightly, but this may have got to do with the fact that we do not have enough data for this period yet.

Diagram 1 about here

The second diagram shows differences between the sexes in seven periods. It is interesting to see that during two successive periods, from 1931 until 1950, men vocalize /l/ more than women and that in the period from 1951 on this tendency is reversed. Findings usually show that women lead the way where sound change is concerned. Here we find that women take over only after the change has set in. We can only speculate why. Has it got to do with the changing social position of women at the end of the fifties and the sixties? with the fact that the number of women going to university was increasing? with a changing perspective on gender questions? with feminism? Or would a careful reanalysis of other changes show that men sometimes lead the way in the initial phase of a change as well?

Diagram 2 about here:

In diagram 3 we have split out our data according to region and period. For the purpose of this study we selected 7 regions out of 44 areas we distinguish in our database, covering important parts of the Netherlands and Flanders. This time we have grouped the years of birth into only three periods instead of seven, because of the fact that we wanted to have enough data per region. The first period runs until 1949, the second from 1950-1965 and the last runs from 1966 until the eighties.

Diagram 3 about here:

Diagram 3 shows that there are considerable differences between regions, during all three periods. Especially between on the one hand East and West Flanders and Belgian Limburg, and on the other hand the Netherlands, which we have split up into the North and the regions of Amsterdam, The Hague, Rotterdam and Utrecht. This diagram shows that East and West Flanders and Belgian Limburg have the lowest percentages of /l/-vocalization. The region of Brussels and Antwerp also vocalise /l/ less than the other five groups, but especially in the last group from 1966 until now vocalizing is increasing strongly. The reason why the second period from 1950-1965 for Brussels and Antwerp has such a low degree of /l/-vocalization may be that we have hardly any data from this region. In the north of the Netherlands we see that during the period from 1966 onwards /l/-vocalization increases considerably and is almost on the same level as in the west now. The four western regions show hardly any difference between them. Remarkably, /l/-vocalization in Utrecht is decreasing during the period from 1966, whereas all the other areas are rising. The highest degree of /l/-vocalization is found in Rotterdam. Future research may show whether this result is significant.

If we want to examine the question whether it is already possible to provide a more or less complete profile of the change, we have to select a region (a) in which the change is rather advanced and (b) for which we are well documented during all periods. This has led us to select the city of Amsterdam in the province of North Holland. Diagram 4 shows the pronunciation of L1 and L2 for men and women in Amsterdam. L2 is increasing, as in the earlier diagrams, the difference being that in all seven periods the scores are higher. Like in diagram 2 there are at least two successive periods where men are ahead of women in /l/-vocalization, the difference being that in Amsterdam this is still the case in the period 1951-1960. After that women take over again and especially the youngest group of women, born in

1981 or later, vocalize their /l/ in more than 80% of the cases. The increase in /l/-vocalization in the scores of the women is very regular.

Diagram 4 about here.

In this article we have attempted to answer four questions:

1. If it is true that the /l/ in Standard Dutch is changing into a vowel, when did the change start and how far has it progressed at present?
2. Changes tend to be more advanced in the speech of women than in that of men. Do we find this conclusion confirmed with respect to the vocalization of /l/?
3. What are the differences in geographical distribution?
4. Is it already possible to provide a profile of the complete change?

The first question has to be answered in combination with the third. The change in the regions of the four Dutch western cities: Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Den Haag, Utrecht have started possibly about a century ago. In future research we will also analyse other regions from this point of view. In Flanders the change has started only recently. In almost all the regions the use of L2 is increasing during all periods.

The most remarkable conclusion is that during the period 1930-1950, and especially in Amsterdam also from 1930-1960 men are the leading vocalizers of /l/. It is only after that period that women take over. A question which merits attention is whether this result is due to chance or whether it is significant, and whether it possibly also occurs in the first phases of other changes, when these are properly studied.

Finally, the data from Amsterdam show that, on the basis of the year of birth, the vocalization of /l/ is progressing very steadily, especially in the speech of women, and pointing towards 100 %. Research in the near future, in Amsterdam and the other three western cities among the young female informants, may throw more light on this question.

#### References

Pieter Th. van Reenen 1986, The vocalization of /l/ in standard Dutch, a pilot study of an ongoing change, in: *Linguistics in the Netherlands* 1986, 189-198.

Pieter Th. van Reenen & Anke Jongkind 2000, De vocalisering van de /l/ in het Standaard Nederlands, *Taal & Tongval* 52, p. 189-199.

Tabel 1: The 23 word list of the questionnaire

1. lepel		9. balpen		17. glad
2. lepel		10. speeltuin		18. twaalf
3. klomp		11. (ik) verniel		19. film
4. kaal		12. (hij) balt		20. sloom
5. kolk		13. dweil		21. koel
6. plomp		14. (hij) vernielt		22. Paul
7. hielp		15. els		23. schoolgaan
8. balkon		16. belg		

Diagram 1: All the scores of all the informants distributed over seven periods. The bars represent percentages of pronunciation of L1 (dark) or L2 (light)

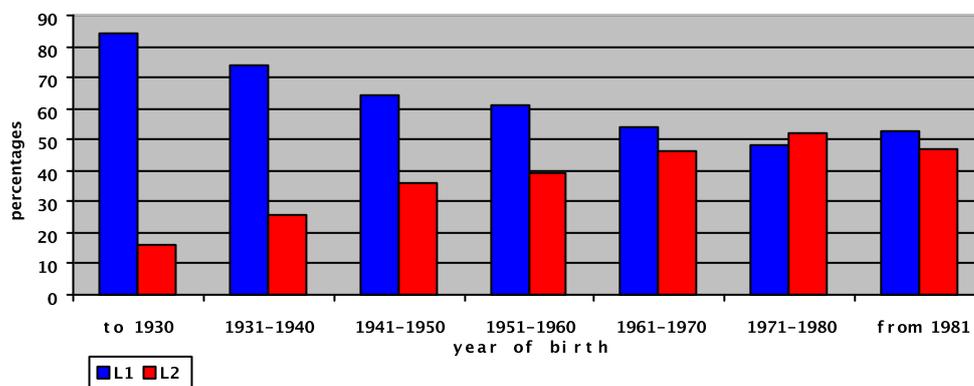


Diagram 2: Progress of /l/-vocalization during seven periods in the speech of men versus women

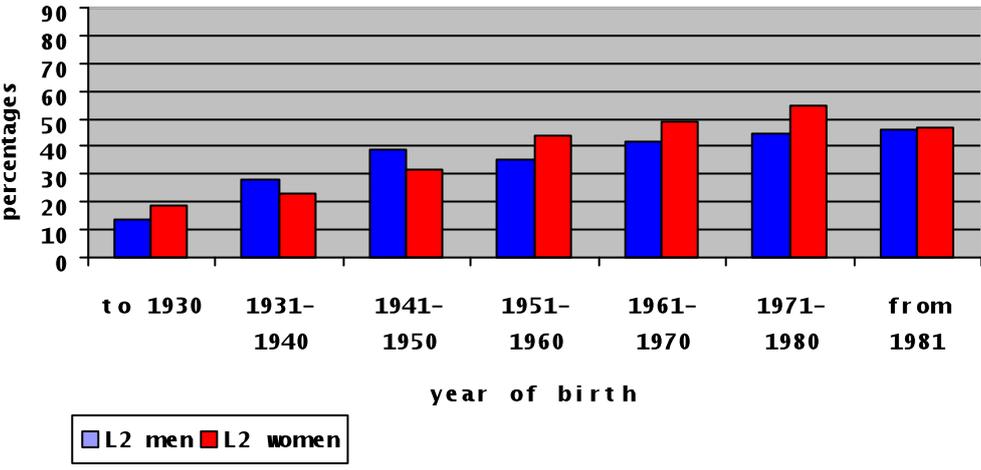


Diagram 3: Vocalization of /l/ in 7 regions and 3 periods  
 Region 1: East and West Flanders, Belgian Limburg  
 Region 2: Antwerp and Flemish Brabant (including Brussels)  
 Region 3: The three northern provinces of the Netherlands  
 Region 4: The province of North Holland (including Amsterdam)  
 Region 5: The north of the province of South Holland (including The Hague)  
 Region 6: The province of Utrecht  
 Region 7: The south of the province of South Holland (including Rotterdam)

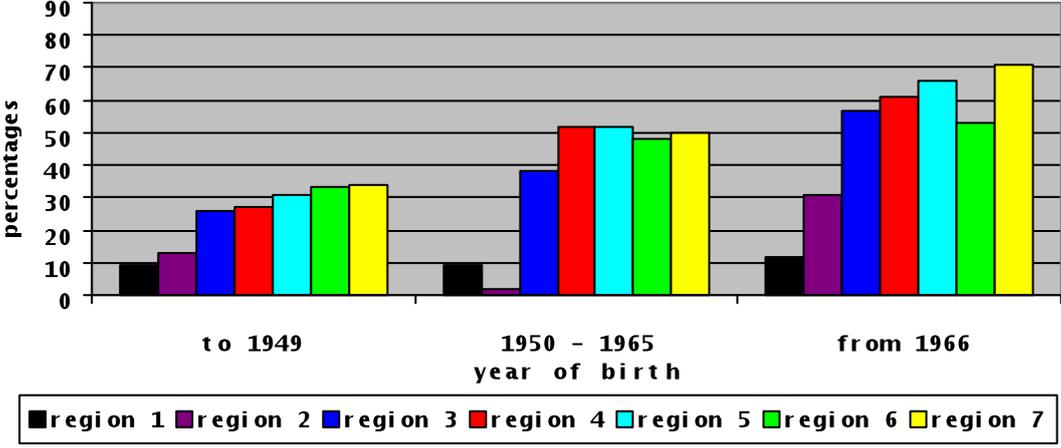


Diagram 4: Progress of /l/-vocalization in Amsterdam during seven periods: men and women

