

Phonemic merger in Early Modern Dutch urban dialects: [w] [v] [f] is going on here!?

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This paper examines the reflexes of Middle Dutch /w/, /v/ and /f/ in the Early Modern urban dialects of Holland. Specifically we focus on the change in the pronunciation of /w/ from [w] to [v], and the merger of reflexes of /v/ and /f/, with the result that the original Middle Dutch three-phoneme system is reduced to a two-phoneme system. We argue that the phonemic merger and change in pronunciation resulted from large-scale immigration of speakers from Germany, Frisia, Scandinavia and even potentially the eastern Netherlands, none of whom have a bilabial glide and instead substituted a labiodental fricative.

Dutch historical grammars include a description of /w/ as a glide, but while contemporary pronunciation and spelling guides describe a two-phoneme /v/ /f/ system, they are mostly silent regarding the process of this phonemic reduction, and ignore the potential effect that Holland's large immigrant population may have had on the formation of urban koinés. In contrast, recent works done by Goss & Howell (2006) and others, have explored the effects of immigration on the development of dialect features such as diminutive suffixes, the use of *zich*, and negation in the urban vernaculars of Holland, showing correlations between large immigrant populations and the development of innovative Dutch dialects.

As our primary source of data we use the personal correspondence of Nicolaas Schmelzing, a native of Austria who later moved to Holland, who shows graphic evidence of a /v/ /f/ merger when writing in Dutch (e.g. *frouwe*, *frey* for Dutch *vrouw*, *fraai*). Because of the systematicity of Schmelzing's imposition of a 2-value system on a 3-value system, we argue that this data represents the performance of a much larger group of immigrants, including native German-speakers (Van Coetsem 1988). The fact that rural Holland dialects such as Katwijk's still pronounce /w/ as [w], preserving the original situation, indicates that Holland's urban centers, teeming with immigrants, provided ideal conditions for rapid linguistic innovation. Such evidence supports the view that dialect contact played a large role in the development of Dutch urban vernaculars, which in turn furthers our understanding of language change in multilingual contexts.

References

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