

Context matters: a comparison of lexical borrowing in 19th – 20th century American-Flemish heritage newspapers and ego-documents

Studies in heritage language linguistics thus far predominantly focused on charting the structural and formal aspects of contemporary heritage languages. However, attention for the sociolinguistic history of these varieties is gaining momentum, as researchers apply variationist and language-sociological methods to analyze primary heritage language sources from times past (see e.g., Brown 2019). These methods allow to uncover historical variation in everyday language use of individual speakers from all walks in society, while paying attention to the social context it is embedded in (Auer et al. 2015). In line with the general trend in historical sociolinguistics, ego-documents have served as the prime source to investigate different features of heritage languages in the past (see Elspaß 2012: 156). This rewarding approach should be complemented, however, with the study of heritage language use in other environments, both more formal and informal, as the speech context is known to influence the lexical choices of speakers (Crombez et al. 2022).

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, on a descriptive level, we aim to contribute to heritage language research within historical sociolinguistics by presenting a case study on the use of English lexemes in Heritage Belgian Dutch in the 19th and 20th centuries in North America. While many Western heritage languages in North America have already been investigated, in the past (cf. Brown 2019) and the present (cf. Johannessen & Salmons 2015), (socio)linguistic accounts of the language use of Flemish emigrants and descendants in America are still scarce. Second, we wish to shed light on the influence of extra-linguistic factors on lexical borrowing in both “language from above” and “language from below”. Belgian-American heritage newspapers will figure as an example of more formal language use, whereas ego-documents of Flemish emigrants cover the more informal side of the continuum (cf. Koch & Oesterreicher 1985).

Specifically, we rely on our new corpus (the Flemish-American Letters and Newspaper-corpus) which covers a time period from 1882 until 1930. It includes editions from three Belgian heritages newspapers – *De Volksstem*, *Gazette van Moline*, and *Gazette van Detroit* –, as well as ego-documents, such as private letters and postcards, written by Flemish-Americans to friends and family in Belgium. Our quantitative analysis of lexical borrowing targets (1) the borrowing rate, by concentrating on the number of borrowings, (2) the borrowing type, by looking at the loan process, the loan type, the part of speech and the level of integration, as well as (3) the influence of the social variables time and space. Preliminary results of the borrowing patterns in the heritage newspapers show that year is a significant factor: the further in time, the more English transfers occur. In addition, we found that most borrowings were non-integrated nouns, meaning that they were copy-pasted from English without any adaptation to Belgian Dutch. We hypothesize that we will find similar results for the borrowing patterns in the ego-documents regarding the variables year and part of speech. We expect differences in terms of loan process, loan type and level of integration, however, since newspapers and private documents target different audiences and serve different (linguistic) objectives.

References

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