

Spread the German new(s): third-person reflexive *zich* in 17th-century Dutch newspapers

In Middle Dutch, reflexivity was commonly expressed by using personal pronouns (third person singular: *haar* ‘her’ or *hem* ‘him’; plural: *haar* ‘them’ or *hen/hun* ‘them’), sometimes followed by *zelf* ‘self’ (e.g. Mooijaart & Van der Wal, 2011: 46). Although attested from the 10th century onwards, especially in the eastern parts of the Low Countries, the specific reflexive form *zich*(*zelf*), currently used in Standard Dutch in both singular and plural third person, only became the standard third-person reflexive pronoun during the seventeenth century (e.g. Van der Sijs, 2021: 429).

This reflexive pronoun is generally accepted as being a grammatical borrowing from the neighbouring High German *sich* (e.g. Postma, 2011: 139; Van der Sijs, 2021: 429-430), yet the factors determining its expansion in the Dutch speaking world still remain subject of discussion (as summarised in Bennis, 2005). On the one hand, research suggests diffusion from above, through formal written texts, in particular religious texts from Germany (e.g. Hermodsson, 1952; Van der Wal & Van Bree, 2008: 214-215; Nobels, 2013: 115-121). On the other hand, Boyce-Hendriks’s study (1998: 209-224) suggests dissemination from below, through the informal spoken language of the many German immigrants settling in the Low Countries in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In this presentation, we intend to contribute to this ongoing debate by presenting the results of a study testing a third hypothesis: diffusion via newspapers. Newspapers as a genre came into existence in Germany in the early seventeenth century and quickly found their way to the Low Countries (Van Oostendorp & Van der Sijs, 2019: 23-76). Although we do not have exact circulation figures, circumstantial evidence indicates that Dutch newspapers, which were set in Dutch and not in Latin, were meant for and read by many people, from all social classes (Van Groesen, 2016). Newspapers can therefore be seen as the first mass medium (Van Oostendorp & Van der Sijs, 2019: 61), and could thus have served as the ideal vehicle for the dissemination of *zich*, especially given their close connection to German newspapers (e.g. Der Weduwen, 2017).

We test this hypothesis using the new Couranten Corpus (2022), a corpus containing Northern Dutch newspapers from all years between 1618 to 1700 (ca. 19 million words). Within these newspapers, we examine what third-person singular and plural reflexive constructions were used: the previously mentioned uses of personal pronouns and *zich* (both with and without *zelf*), Low German *sick* (Van der Wal, 2018), and possessive pronouns followed by *eigen* ‘own’ or *zelf* ‘self’ (see Weijnen, 1965: 49). We track the distribution of these constructions both over time as well as regarding the place of origin of the article that contains it, focussing in particular on German places of origin. Not only did newspapers originate in Germany, Dutch newspapers also contained many news reports from German speaking areas, and, at the start of the century, news reports were sometimes directly translated from German (Van Oostendorp & Van der Sijs, 2019: 29-31). Although we do not know the exact extent of this German ‘borrowing’, it is safe to assume that early news reports from German speaking areas were either translated from German, or came from a correspondent who lived in Germany and had heard the news from a German source, which both could have significantly influenced the use of *zich*, especially given the presumed lack of editing of incoming news reports (Demske, 2022). Comparing those news reports to domestic news and news reports from other language areas, as well as changes in their distributions over time, will thus provide valuable insight into (1) the influence of German on the use of *zich*, and (2) the possible role of newspapers in spreading this new form.

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