

## The Spatial Dimension of Language Change : towards a Typology of Dialect Transitions in (rural) Flanders

In this lecture the key question is : how abruptly or how gradually does the transition from dialect feature A (e.g. a monophthong) to dialect feature B (e.g. a diphthong) take place ? In this respect the oldest branch of variational linguistics, classical dialect geography, displays a curious paradox. On the one hand it fundamentally concentrated on spatial variation ('ein räumliches Nebeneinander') as an instantaneous exposure of an ongoing language change ('ein zeitliches Nacheinander'), but on the other hand classical dialect geographers departed from a monolithic concept of dialects : every place of investigation (a bigger or a smaller residential nucleus) was represented by a kind of 'ideal' (system-stable) native speaker. This concept resulted in the opinion (or shall I call it the working hypothesis) that dialect transitions take place abruptly/linearly (and this was made concrete in the classical isogloss). They were convinced of and preoccupied with the primordially or even the monopoly of the spatial dimension (or parameter) of language variation.

In more recent times this practice has been severely criticized, mainly by sociolinguists (e.g. Trudgill 1983:47). This reaction led to a (too) strong degradation of the spatial parameter (or dimension) and to these two postulates : (a) dialect transitions basically occur gradually and (b) in transitional areas variation is conditioned by social factors rather than by spatial ones. One may wonder why in very recent research into language variation this 'dispute' did not lead to more frequent and more systematical research into the way dialect transitions take place. In other words this 'dispute' did not result into a topology (i.e. a topographic anatomy) of dialect transitions that show up a spatial dimension.

In this lecture I intend to focus on this subject matter, asking the already mentioned key question : *how abrupt or how gradual is (the spatial dimension of) the transition from dialect feature A to dialect feature B?* This central question can be transformed into several more specific questions, such as :

- 1) Which (kinds of) factors promote spatial abruptness and which ones rather lead to spatial graduality?
- 2) Are these factors rather of an internal than of an external linguistic kind?

With respect to the potential internal linguistic factors attention will be paid to the kind of linguistic component (lexicon vs. phonology vs. grammar) and to linguistic pattern pressure ('Systemzwang').

As far as external linguistic factors are concerned, I shall report on research into the impact of non-linguistic border-lines (such as rivers) and of other factors that (may) orientate long-distance traffic. In the external linguistic domain I shall also deal with the potential influence of social-psychological factors (such as linguistic attitudes and linguistic awareness). With respect to the factor 'awareness' I shall scrutinize three kinds of phonological 'knowledge' : (a) elements that belong to the domain of 'accent', (b) so-called 'secondary' dialect features and (c) so-called 'primary' features.

- 3) Are dialect transitions fundamentally of the same type in prototypical transitional areas (where a clustering of dialect oppositions turns up) and more homogeneous central areas (where spatial homogeneity takes precedence over heterogeneity)?

With respect to abruptness vs. graduality the scarce preliminary studies on that matter (a.o. Taeldeman 1980) suggest spectacular differences :

(3a) In typical transitional areas the transitions occur (rather) abruptly (at least in space) and this goes hand in hand with (a) a high lectic awareness, (b) high(er) positive or negative attitudes towards variants that are involved in spatially abrupt oppositions, and (c) a (much) lower degree of social variation within the residential nuclei in such an area. In such prototypical transitional zones the parameter 'residential nucleus' may become the

dominating factor, which even strongly reduces the impact of social/diastratic parameters (and this creates a local norm, which is rather directive to every inhabitant → a kind of ‘Ortsloyautät’).

(3b) In rather homogeneous dialect areas the gradual transition pattern dominates and this characteristic goes together with the opposite of features (a)-(b)-(c) above : (a) a low lectic awareness, (b) low profile attitudes towards variants that are involved in (spatially) gradual oppositions and (c) the preponderance of social variation over spatial variation in such an area.

- 4) In case of graduality (which implies the coexistence of variant A next to B in at least one residential nucleus), two more questions arise :
  - (4a) Which factors (internal and/or external linguistic ones) condition the distribution of A and B in such a transitional lect?
  - (4b) In case of a linguistic conditioning : is the variation rule-determined or a matter of lexical diffusion?
- 5) When the ongoing change implies that an area with a conservative dialect feature regresses, does this regression follow a spatial pattern or is it (also) conditioned by other non-linguistic or even by linguistic factors?

Questions such as these and attempts to answer them will take a central place in my lecture, which is almost exclusively based on observations in Flemish dialects (and more particularly in the domain of phonology).