On the importance of system-internal factors for syntactic change

It is well-known that the pronominal paradigm of most Dutch dialects both in the Netherlands and in Belgium shows quite a lot of variation when compared to the Standard Dutch system (De Schutter 1989, Howe 1996). Most variation can be described as the result of three different phenomena: genesis of new pronouns, pronoun exchange and changing forms of address. These phenomena are described in detail by the recent SAND-atlas (Syntactic Atlas of Dutch Dialects), which shows that, on the one hand, different manifestations of the same phenomenon can have a very different geographical distribution, and, on the other hand, that there are clear correlations in the distribution of the different phenomena.

Current attempts to explain the variation has emphasized the importance of sociolinguistic parameters. I will argue that one cannot properly understand change in the pronominal paradigm in Dutch dialects without taking into account system-internal factors which have been by and large neglected (see also Aalberse 2004:236-239), such as the tendency to develop unambiguous pronouns and the avoidance of ‘special clitics’ in some dialects. In addition, system-internal factors may also explain differences in the geographical distribution of some of the phenomena, and many of the geographical correlations that are found.