

# Impoverishment in Dutch dialects

*Suzanne Aalberse, Jan Don*  
ACLC, University of Amsterdam

## 0. Introduction

Dutch dialects show an enormous amount of variation with respect to the verbal inflectional paradigm. To wit, some dialects only have a single form in the present tense indicative to express all persons in singular and plural, whereas other dialects use two, three or even four different forms to do so. However, despite the variation, it is clear that not simply everything is possible; there are logically possible patterns that are found nowhere, whereas other patterns are geographically widespread and stable over time.

Dutch, like any other Germanic language, underwent a process of deflection showing loss of case endings and a loss of verbal inflections. Traces of this diachronic change can still be found in dialectal variation. The loss of these inflectional markings is probably due to dialect contact (Trudgill 1986), leading to a more or less classical spreading of the patterns in which certain distinctions were lost. That is, in more isolated areas where dialect contact is more limited, the process of deflection is less far under way than in those areas where different dialects mix.

Recently, Bennis and MacLean (2006) have tried to explain the variation in Dutch verbal inflection, and the limits thereof, in terms of a general economy principle that minimizes the amount of featural information per affix. We will argue that this purely affix-based approach is in a way too crude to describe the variation found. In this paper we would like to approach the variation by starting from two patterns that seem independent of the affixes that are used to express the inflection. For example, in Standard Dutch, person marking is absent in the past tense. We will argue that this cannot be a property of the past tense suffix, but is a more general ‘paradigmatic’ property of Dutch. Such patterns of impoverishment, or neutralization, to use a more neutral term, cannot be viewed as resulting from an underlying underspecification of affixes, but should result from a rule or property of the paradigm as such. Within Distributed Morphology (Halle & Marantz 1993) it would be expressed as an Impoverishment Rule, whereas in paradigmatic approaches, it would count as a case of paradigmatic neutralization. We do not take any particular theoretical position with respect to this issue in this paper, but simply use the Impoverishment rules as a descriptive device to express the relevant neutralization patterns.

Our inquiry starts from the assumption that such ‘paradigmatic’ patterns are stable across dialects, and that variation is basically limited to the affixes used to express these patterns. We will show that starting from this hypothesis, indeed a more or less classic pattern of distribution of variation becomes visible. At the center of the language area (roughly Holland) we find the neutralization patterns *in optima forma*, whereas more at the borders of the area where we can safely assume that less dialect contact occurs, we find the retention of older stages of the language.

## 1. ‘Meta-paradigmatic’ structure

Williams (1994) (see also Baerman 2000, and Bobaljik 2003 for discussion) argues that languages seem to display ‘meta-paradigmatic’ structure; i.e. separate from the individual morphemes, and across different paradigms, the same pattern may recur. To give an example, have a look at the following Dutch data:

- (1) a. *de jongen* ‘the boy’ *het kind* ‘the child’  
 plur.: *de* jongen-s *de* kinderen ‘the children’  
 b. *deze jongen* ‘this boy’ *dit kind* ‘this child’  
 plur.: *deze* jongen-s ‘these boys’ *deze* kinderen ‘these children’  
 c. *die jongen* ‘that boy’ *dat kind* ‘that child’  
 plur.: *die* jongens ‘those boys’ *die* kinderen ‘those children’  
 d. een *mooi-e* jongen ‘a beautiful boy’ een *mooi kind* ‘a beautiful child’  
 plur.: *mooi-e* jongens *mooi-e* kinderen ‘beautiful children’

In the left-hand column in (1) we see that nouns with common gender in Dutch show the same choice of demonstrative and adjectival inflection in the singular and in the plural. However, in the right-hand column we see that neutral nouns pattern differently in the plural and the singular. Moreover, we can see that the plural pattern of neuter nouns exactly mirrors the pattern found in common nouns. This could be easily expressed by assuming that there is neutralization of gender in the plural. As a descriptive device to account for such neutralization, we could assume a rule such as (2):

- (2) [gender] → ∅ / [plural]

Given this kind of ‘meta-paradigmatic’ structure, we may expect that such patterns, since they do not depend on individual morphemes and/or phonological patterns, but depend on the feature-structure (cf. Baerman, Brown & Corbett 2005), are stable across dialectal variation. In this way, we hypothesize that dialectal variation is limited to the affixes used in the paradigm, without impinging on the paradigmatic structure, as defined by the morphosyntactic features that are expressed. Put differently, we could also say that independent motivation for the rules or mechanisms with which we want to express this meta-paradigmatic structure, may come from the study of dialectal variation.

This leads us to the following hypothesis:

- (3) (Meta-)paradigmatic structure is stable across dialects.

Given this hypothesis, before we turn to an investigation of the dialect-data, let us first consider which patterns in the standard language are of this meta-paradigmatic nature.

## 2. Standard Dutch

The inflectional pattern for regular verbs in Dutch (which is an open class and comprises 99% of the verbs in Dutch referentie?) is as follows<sup>1</sup>:

- (4) Standard Dutch verbal inflection (regular verbs):

	Present		Past	
	sing.	plur.	sing.	plur.
1 <sup>st</sup>	-∅	-en	-te /-de	-ten /-den
2 <sup>nd</sup>	-t	-en	-te /-de	-ten /-den
3 <sup>rd</sup>	-t	-en	-te /-de	-ten /-den

If we were to give a purely affix-based description of the syncretisms in this inflectional paradigm, allowing ourselves underspecification of features, we would arrive at the description in (5) (see also Bennis and MacLean 2006):

- (5) Underspecification account:

-te /-de ↔ [past]  
 -en ↔ [plur]

However, this description misses a generalization, which becomes clear once we take a look at the inflectional paradigm of irregular verbs:

- (6) Dutch verbal inflection (irregular verbs):

	Present		Past	
	sing.	plur.	sing.	plur.
1 <sup>st</sup>	-∅	-en	-∅	-en

---

<sup>1</sup> spelled ‘e’ is [ə]

2 <sup>nd</sup>	-t	-en	-∅	-en
3 <sup>rd</sup>	-t	-en	-∅	-en

Although the past tense of these irregular verbs is not expressed by means of the affix *-del-te*, it still holds true that there is no person distinction in the past. Therefore, the underspecification of the past tense suffix *-te /-de* in (5) does not help us to cover this particular syncretism. Moreover, a similar pattern of syncretism is found in the highly irregular verb *zijn* ‘to be’. Here, a completely different form expresses the past tense, but again this form is identical for all persons, as can be seen from (7):

(7) Standard Dutch *zijn* (‘to be’)

	Present		Past	
	sing.	plur.	sing.	plur.
1 <sup>st</sup>	ben	zijn	was	waren
2 <sup>nd</sup>	bent	zijn	was	waren
3 <sup>rd</sup>	is	zijn	was	waren

The conclusion is that the syncretisms in the plural and the past tense do not result from the underspecification of affixes, but is a property of the verbal inflectional paradigm of Dutch. In order to describe these syncretisms, we may make use of the following two ‘Impoverishment’ rules<sup>2</sup>.

(8) Impoverishment rules for Standard Dutch:

- a. [ $\alpha$  person]  $\rightarrow \emptyset$  / [plural]
- b. [ $\alpha$  person]  $\rightarrow \emptyset$  / [past]

Given the hypothesis in (3), we expect that the inflectional patterns found in the dialectal variants of Dutch will reflect these impoverishment rules.

### 3. Dialectal variation in Dutch

The inflectional paradigms of many Dutch dialects have been recorded in a project often referred to as the GTPR-project<sup>3</sup>. These data are available through an electronic version of the Morphological Atlas of the Dutch Dialects (MAND), including no less than 613 measure points spread over the Netherlands, Belgium (Flanders) and the outermost Northern part of France (Van den Berg 2003). The subjects were native speakers of the dialect that were between 50 and 75 years of age and preference given to lower-educated people. Data were gathered through a questionnaire (about 1900 items per questionnaire). We have investigated the full inflectional paradigm of the verb *kloppen* ‘to knock’.

#### 3.1 Person marking in the plural

If we take a look at the forms in present tense plural, we find that there is no person marking in 362 (=59%) of the 613 dialects. To compare, 538 dialects (=95%) of the dialects have person markings in the singular present tense. Apparently, the impoverishment rule here describes a pattern that is indeed frequently attested in Dutch dialects, although not in all.

Two groups of dialects do not conform to the generalization that person marking is absent in the plural. First, there is a relatively small group of dialects (20) spoken in the Eastern part of the Netherlands (see map 1) that do not show the impoverished pattern.

This, however, is only an apparent exception. To this, consider first the plural present tense of the verb *kloppen* in the dialect of Smilde:

- (9) a. 1<sup>st</sup> klop-m plural paradigm *kloppen* ‘to knock’ (Smilde)  
 2<sup>nd</sup> klop-t

<sup>2</sup> The term ‘impoverishment’ does not imply any judgment of whatever nature w.r.t to the language system; it is simply a term which adequately describes that some feature ([person] in the present case) is not marked in a particular morphosyntactic environment.

<sup>3</sup> Goeman, Taeldeman & Van Reenen project, named after the three persons responsible for this large collection of dialect data.

3 <sup>rd</sup> klop-t

From these data it seems that first person is marked with respect to the other two forms in the plural, which is not expected given the stability of the meta-paradigmatic forms. However, consider next the present plural paradigm from the same dialect of the verb *leven* ‘to live’:

4 Impoverishment in Dutch dialects

(10) b. 1 <sup>st</sup> leve-t plural paradigm *leven* ‘to live’ (Smilde)

2 <sup>nd</sup> leve-t

3 <sup>rd</sup> leve-n

In this paradigm, the nasal marks third person distinguishing it from the *-t* in first and second person. If we compare the same paradigms in these 20 dialects, we find that there is free variation between *-t* and a nasal in the plural. So, the marking of person here is only apparent, but underlyingly the system adheres to the impoverishment rule in (8a)<sup>4</sup>.

+ -en / -t in pres. plural (20)



map 1: dialects with free variation between *-n* and *-t* in present tense plural

A second, much larger group of dialects (231 = 38%), does have a person marking in the present plural. A typical paradigm is the one of Nistelrode in (11):

(11) 1 <sup>st</sup> klope plural paradigm of *kloppen* ‘to knock’ (Nistelrode)

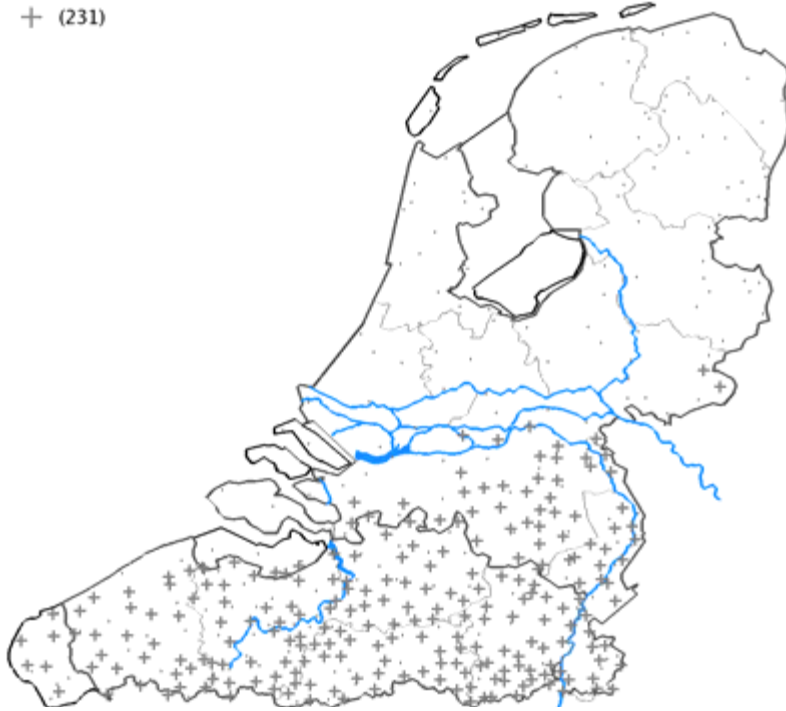
2 <sup>nd</sup> klopt

3 <sup>rd</sup> klope

This pattern is found in the whole of Flanders and the South Eastern part of Dutch Brabant and Dutch Limburg (see map 2).

<sup>4</sup> For more details see Aalberse (2007)

+ (231)



map 2: dialects with  $-t$  in second person plural present tense.

De Vogelaer (2005) observes that almost all dialects (=95%) (222/231) with second person marking in the plural have second person pronoun *ge* (or a variant). Very few dialects with *je* (or a variant) have second person marking in the plural (9/231). These dialects are located at the outermost edges of the area.

+ (9)



map 3: 9 dialects showing second person marking in the plural with pers. pron. *je*

So, it could be that this retention of  $-t$  in the second person plural (from Middle Dutch) is associated with the use of the pronoun *ge*. We will see a similar combination of retention of a

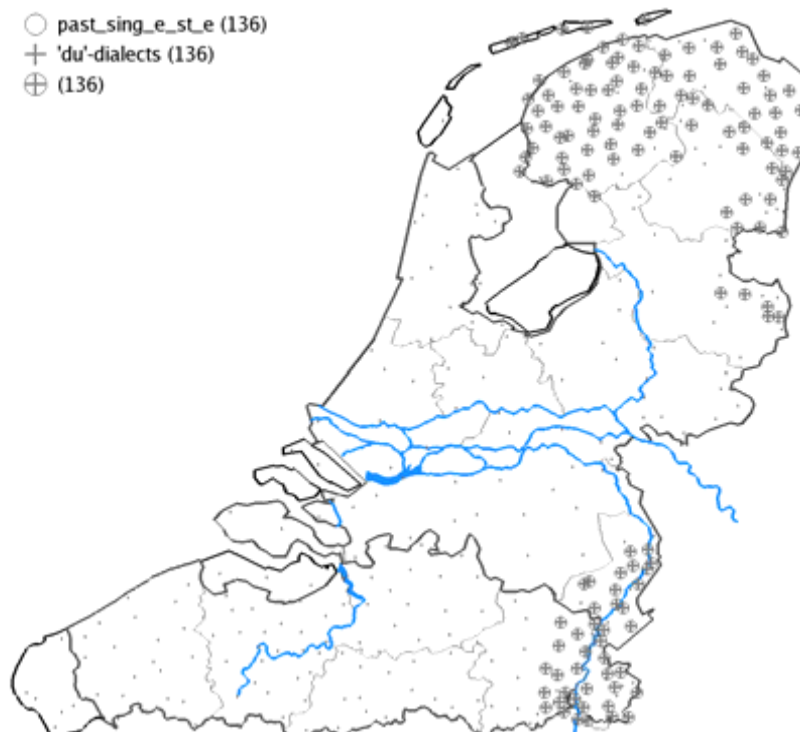
personal pronoun and inflectional ending in the following section. We conclude that, as far as the plural present tense is concerned indeed the impoverished patterns seem stable across dialects, although specific combinations of personal pronouns and inflectional endings may overrule the pattern. Let us now turn to the person markings in the past tense.

### 3.2. Person marking in the past tense singular

In the singular of the past tense, 451 (=74%) of the dialects show no person marking. So, the impoverishment rule in (8b) also describes a well-attested pattern. However, in the remaining 162 dialects, we do find person marking, contrary to expectation. Again, the group of dialects with person markings (going against the impoverishment pattern) falls apart in two: a. dialects with retention of ‘du’ as a second person pronoun (136); b. dialects with *-en* in the second person singular (26).

The first group of dialects (136 dialects) that show marking of person in the singular past tense, is characterized by the fact that they all show retention of the second person pronoun ‘du’. All these dialects show the ending *-st*, or a variant thereof, in the past. This ending is also found in the present tense (2<sup>nd</sup> person) in these dialects. It turns out that this personal pronoun is very tightly connected to its original (Middle Dutch) inflectional ending. Every dialect in Dutch that still has the pronoun ‘du’ also has the ending *-st* in the singular present and past tense (see also Aalberse 2004). Map 4 illustrates this point.

Apparently the same factors that explain the retention of ‘du’ explain the retention of the *-st* suffix at the same time. We refer to Aalberse (2004, 2007) for a detailed analysis of the factors that contributed to the loss of ‘du’, here, it suffices to say that there is an independent explanation for the retention of person marking in the singular past tense for this large group of dialects. Interestingly, it is not coincidental that the retention of the *du* plus the ending *-st* is found at the borders of the language area. We can assume that in these areas dialect contact is not an important factor and therefore, certain patterns may be retained that are lost in areas where much more contact between speakers of different varieties is found.



map 4: 136 dialects with ‘du’ [2<sup>nd</sup> sing.] and *-st* in present and past 2<sup>nd</sup> pers. sing.

A second exception to the impoverishment rule (8b) is a group of 25 dialects that have *-en* as a second person marker in the past tense. This ending originally stems from the plural. Dialects that have lost ‘du’, have replaced (through a strategy of ‘politeness’) this pronoun

with a second person plural pronoun, and with this pronoun also its inflectional ending. In most cases this yielded *-t* in second person singular, but in the Northern dialects second person plural was already replaced by *-en* before *du* was lost, and therefore, we find *-en* in the second person singular in these dialects. In the 25 dialects, we still find this plural ending *-en* that entered the paradigm via a politeness strategy in the second person singular. Since these dialects are direct neighbours of the dialects that still have *du*, we may conclude that these dialects are the latest that have lost *du*.

+ past\_sing\_te\_ten\_te (25)



map 5: 25 dialects with *-en* in the second person past tense.

So, it seems that the impoverishment pattern is indeed very stable across dialectal variation. We should be careful however in some cases, since the same ‘impoverished’ pattern may result from a different origin. There is a small group of 10 dialects that have three different person markings in the present tense singular (e.g. the dialect of Volendam has *klop-kloppe-klopt*), having a uniform *-e* (schwa) in the past tense. Without further assumptions, we may expect that also in the past tense a separate second person marking is present. So, *prima facie* the fact that we find the impoverished pattern in these dialects, seems convincing evidence for the impoverishment rule. However, there is a different interpretation of the impoverished pattern possible. It may also be the case that underlyingly the past tense forms are *-te -ten -te*, respectively, and that there is a deletion of final *-n* which is widely attested in many Dutch dialects. In order to test whether we have exaggerated the impoverished patterns by including these dialects, we have looked at the inflectional patterns in irregular verbs in these dialects. Interestingly, indeed some of these dialects still have second person markings in the past tense (6/10) (*ik was* ‘I was’; *jij waarre* ‘you were’, *hij was* ‘he was’), but others have lost the distinction (4/10). In some dialects (e.g. Koedijk) we see both patterns in competition (*jij was // jij waarre*). In this case it cannot be a consequence of a phonological rule. Our conclusion is that we see a transition here towards the impoverished pattern.

### 3.3. Person marking in the past tense plural

Finally, we turn to the plural marking in the past tense; here we find almost full adherence to the impoverishment rule (8b). Only 43 (=7%) of the dialects show person marking in the past tense plural. These dialects form a proper subset of the dialects that we encountered before, displaying person marking in the present tense plural. A typical paradigm of this sort is found in the dialect of Waregem:

- (10) klopten  
 klopte  
 klopten

Map 6 gives an idea of the location of these dialects. We note that again these dialects seem to be located at the border of the language area.



#### 4. Conclusion

The Impoverishment rules in (8) reflect a situation of deflection, which is the result of a process of loss of inflectional distinctions (see e.g. Buitenrust Hetteema 1891, Van den Berg 1949, Van Haeringen 1956, Weerman 2006). It seems that this deflection process spreads from the economic center of the Netherlands (Zuid-Holland, Utrecht) outwards and that at the borders of the language area different non-deflected patterns are still found. This would be fully in line with what is predicted by models of change as a result of dialect contact (Trudgill 1986). By taking the impoverishment rules in (8) as the core of the deflection process in Dutch verbal inflection, a picture of spreading of deflection emerges which can easily be understood in terms of dialect contact. Therefore, we believe that this view on the variation in the different dialects is essentially on the right track.

Quantitatively, in general, the patterns expressed by the impoverishment rules in (8) are reflected in the dialects. More dialects have person markings in the singular than in the plural; more dialects have person markings in the present than in the past; more dialects have person markings in the present plural and / or the singular past, than in the past plural.

Qualitatively, in areas where for some reason the impoverishment pattern is not fully established, it seems that the diachronic development is towards the impoverishment pattern. This can also be seen from the geographic distribution of the impoverished patterns (away from the center more retention of person markings are found).

The exceptions to the impoverished pattern are linked to the retention of a personal pronoun (*ge* and *du*) which are linked to an inflectional ending that, apparently, with the help of the personal pronoun, seem strong enough to resist the deflection patterns. At the borders of the language area, we find that in areas where *du* is still used as a second person pronoun,



and its inflectional ending is retained throughout the paradigm. At the border of the *du*-area, we find partial retention of second person marking. Furthermore, we find second person marking in the plural in the South, which is almost gone in the past tense, but still survives in the present tense.

### Bibliography

- Aalberse, S.P. (2004) "Waer bestu bleven? De verdwijning van het pronomen 'du' in een taalvergelijkend perspectief". *Nederlandse Taalkunde* 9:231-252.
- Aalberse, S.P. (2007) 'The typology of syncretisms and the status of feature structure. Verbal paradigms across 355 Dutch dialects', *Morphology* 17, p. 109-149.
- Baermann, M. D. Brown and G. Corbett (2005). *The Syntax-Morphology Interface: A Study of Syncretism* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 109). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barbiers, S. et al (2006). *Dynamische Syntactische Atlas van de Nederlandse Dialecten* (DynaSAND). Amsterdam, Meertens Instituut. URL: <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/sand/>.
- Bennis, Hans and Alies Maclean (2006) 'Variation in verbal inflection in Dutch dialects', *Morphology* 16: 291-312.
- Berg, B. van den (1949). De conjugatie van het praesens in de Noordnederlandse dialecten. *Taal & Tongval* 1, 6-13.
- Berg, Boudewijn L. van den (2003) Phonology & Morphology of Dutch & Frisian *Dialects in 1.1 million transcriptions. Goeman-Taeldeman-Van Reenen project 1980-1995*. Meertens Instituut Electronic Publications in Linguistics 3, Meertens Instituut: Amsterdam. (CD-ROM)
- Bobaljik, Jonathan (2003) 'Syncretism without paradigms: Remarks on Williams 1981, 1994', in: Booij, Geert and Jaap van Marle (eds.) *Yearbook of Morphology 2002*, p. 53-85. Kluwer: Dordrecht.
- Bonet, Eulàlia (1991) *Morphology after Syntax: Pronominal Clitics in Romance*, MITWPL: Cambridge MA.
- Buitenrust Hetteema, F. (1891) 'De aangesproken persoon' *Taal en Letteren*:148-153
- Goeman, A. (1999) *T-deletie in Nederlandse dialecten. Kwantitatieve analyse van structurele, ruimtelijke en temporele variatie*. LOT: Utrecht.
- Haeringen, C.B. van (1956) *Nederlands tussen Duits en Engels*, Den Haag: Servire.
- Halle, Morris (1997) 'Distributed Morphology: Impoverishment and Fission', *MIT Working papers in Linguistics* 30, p. 425-449.
- Pinker, Steven (1984) *Language learnability and Language Development*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press.
- Trudgill (1986) *Dialects in Contact*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vogelaer, G. de (2005) *Persoonsmarkering in de dialecten van het Nederlands en het Fries*. <http://users.ugent.be/~gdvogela/proefschrift>
- Weerman, Fred (2006) 'It's the economy, stupid! Een vergelijkende blik op *men* en *man*.' In: M. Hüning (red.) *Nederlands tussen Duits en Engels*, Leiden: SNL
- Williams, Edwin (1981) On the notions 'lexically related' and 'head of a word', *Linguistic Inquiry* 12, p. 245-274.
- Williams, Edwin (1994) 'Remarks on Lexical Knowledge', *Lingua* 92, p.7-34.

### Contact:

Suzanne Aalberse / Jan Don  
 Isg Nederlandse Taalkunde  
 Spuistraat 134  
 1012 VB Amsterdam  
[j.don@uva.nl](mailto:j.don@uva.nl)  
[s.p.aalberse@uva.nl](mailto:s.p.aalberse@uva.nl)