

Attitudes towards Dutch postvocalic (r): A societal treatment study

For some years, linguists have been captivated by the many possible realizations of Dutch (postvocalic) (r), culminating in a full doctoral study by Koen Sebregts (2015). However, language attitudes towards this (r) have received relatively little systematic study. This is surprising, as language attitudes can give important insight into social structures and influence how people are viewed and treated by others (Lippi-Green 1997; Purnell, Idsardi and Baugh 1999; Henderson 2001; Dragojevic, Berglund, and Blauvelt, 2018).

The current societal treatment study is the first part of a series of studies to address this research gap. It examined attitudes towards Dutch postvocalic (r) in Dutch newspapers between January 2013 and January 2018. The analysis was largely qualitative, coding for common themes in the expressed attitudes. Given the imprecise descriptions of (r) in these newspaper articles, I only looked at three main types of postvocalic (r) based on place of articulation: alveolar, uvular and pre-velar.

Interestingly, most attitudes in newspapers concerned the latter type of pre-velar ‘Gooise r’: 50 of 78 attitudes. It therefore appears to be a highly salient variant, perhaps because of its innovative status. It was consistently associated with a negatively perceived social group: pompous people, for example with what Van Bezooijen (2005) calls “fraternity brats”. Unsurprisingly then, most attitudes that were expressed towards this type of (r) were negative (44 of 50 attitudes). Alveolar realizations, on the other hand, were viewed quite positively (13 of 16 attitudes). Authors described them as part of a unique speaking style or as the most correct type of postvocalic (r). In contrast, attitudes towards uvular variants were mixed (5 positive, 7 negative). The evaluation of these types of (r) seemed to depend on the regional background of the writer or the speaker. Future research should look into this further and investigate how language attitudes towards Dutch postvocalic (r) are related to speaker characteristics.

References

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