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Intuiting on *er*-constructions in Netherlandic and Belgian Dutch. Or in Netherlandic, Limburgian, and Belgian Dutch?

The alternation between presentative constructions with and without *er* “there” represents one of the best-known variables in the syntax of Dutch which manifests national variation: (2) is more dispreferred in Netherlandic than in Belgian Dutch:

- (1) In de asbak lag een peuk
 - (2) In de asbak lag *er* een peuk
- “In the ashtray (there) was a butt”

Although this variable has received a lot of theoretical attention (see Grondelaers & Speelman 2007 for an overview), there continue to be many lacunas in our knowledge of it. Nothing is known, to begin with, on how the locative inversion patterns in (1)-(2) compete with the *er*-initial variant (3):

- (3) *Er* ligt een peuk in de asbak.

And an important methodological issue to be resolved is the validity of the crude North (Netherlands) vs. South (Belgium) division, which is used in all preceding research, although the status of the province of Netherlandic Limburg (which used to be Belgian territory up to 1839) is unclear.

In order to address these concerns, we designed a grammaticality intuition experiment to elicit Belgian and Dutch preferences for four presentative constructions: *er*-initial, locative inversion without *er*, locative inversion with *er* and subject-initial with *er*. 91 participants (43 Dutch; 48 Belgian) evaluated 2 of the 4 constructional variants of 60 sentences which were randomized with 30 fillers.

Analysis of the ratings indicates that participants in both countries prefer the *er*-initial construction over the other alternatives. While the locative inversion construction without *er* is acceptable in both countries, the locative inversion construction with *er* is downgraded as only marginally acceptable, although scores are noticeably higher in Belgium *and* in the South of the Netherlands (Limburg and Noord-Brabant). This finding suggests that Dutch Limburg preferences manifest (historical) convergence with Belgian sensitivities, as a result of which we should reconsider North/South-variation.

References

Grondelaers, Stefan and Dirk Speelman (2007). A variationist account of constituent ordering in presentative sentences in Belgian Dutch. *Corpus Linguistics and Linguistic Theory* 3, 161-193