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Not (only) uneducated, let alone (only) Southern: Exploring syntactic variation in Dutch goal constructions

It is well-known that variation in the Dutch language area is typically thought to be restricted to the lexicon and to pronunciation. Much less conspicuous, and much less studied, is variation in syntax. The present study focuses on the alternation between the Dutch goal constructions *om te* + infinitive and *voor te* + infinitive, a variable which attracted almost no theoretical attention (but see Ryckeboer 1983 for Belgian Dutch). In the Syntactic Atlas of the Dutch Dialects (SAND), the alternation is “under-reported”, according to Van der Wouden (2008).

An interesting methodological problem which hinders research into this type of alternation is the fact that the *voor te* –alternative is deemed non-standard (Van der Wouden 2008), as a result of which it is infrequently attested in typical corpora. By way of alternative, we extracted a dataset from the commercial advertisements on the Dutch consumer-to-consumer e-commerce website www.marktplaats.nl (following Eigenraam 2013), and we carried out a regression analysis on a number of potential factors which determine the variation.

Although the *voor te*-alternative is informally downgraded as a “Southern/Flemish anomaly”, our research demonstrates that there is much more external, but also internal complexity in the alternation than meets the eye. To begin with, the *voor te*-alternative is frequently attested in the North- and South-Holland provinces – the iconic heartland of Standard Dutch – and it is not only uneducated people who use it. More crucially, there are also grammatical and lexical constraints on its use.

All in all, our data corroborate the growing awareness that variation in Dutch syntax is much more widespread than commonly assumed, and much more deserving of linguistic attention than presently granted.

References

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