

Chapter 1: General introduction

1.1. A study in second dialect acquisition

The present study reports on the acquisition of a dialect as a second language by children who were raised in the standard language or in a substandard variety. This study into the acquisition of dialect as a second language (i.e. what we call second dialect acquisition) was carried out among children who live in a Flemish village and who are confronted with the local dialect on a daily basis, but who speak Standard Dutch (also referred to as SD) or a substandard variety of Dutch (i.e. so-called *tussentaal*, lit. ‘in-between language’) in their home situations.¹

In this study, the notion of *Second Dialect Acquisition* (henceforth: SDA) refers to the acquisition of a dialect as a second language; *second* meaning that the acquisition takes place chronologically *later* than the acquisition of the first language (i.e. consecutive as opposed to simultaneous or bilingual language acquisition, cf. De Houwer 1995). *Dialect* is used here in the sense of “a linguistic variety, displaying structural peculiarities (often referred to as *dialect features*) in more than one component, usually of relatively little prestige, lacking codification and mainly used orally in a geographically limited area” (Hinskens 1998:156). In many Anglo-American studies (cf. Trudgill 1986), the notion of *dialect* is used in a different way. Chambers & Trudgill (1980:3), for example, “accept the notion that all speakers are speakers of at least one dialect – that standard English, for example, is just as much a dialect as any other form of English”. *Second Dialect Acquisition* in the present study, however, does not imply merely the adoption of another variety, such as a more or less standardized variety, but the acquisition of a geographically defined, non-standard variety (i.e. dialect as defined by Hinskens (1998)). This definition of dialect, which will be used throughout this study, is narrower than the Anglo-American one, and implies that what we call dialects are dialects in the Anglo-American meaning as well, but not vice versa. Consequently, we may assume that the findings of Anglo-American studies largely pertain to continental studies in SDA as well.

The second-dialect learners reported on in this study are all raised in a standard or substandard variety. The standard language that is spoken in the research location (i.e. the village of Maldegem) and in Flanders in general is the southern variety of Standard Dutch, also called Belgian Dutch or Flemish (for more details, see chapter 6, section 6.3). The substandard variety in question is called ‘*tussentaal*’. *Tussentaal* is the result of the inability or unwillingness of individuals to speak Standard Dutch. It is a form of language that has lost typical dialect features, but still retains some regional characteristics (e.g. accent) (see also chapter 6, section 6.3). In the research location, as in the rest of Flanders, a considerable

¹ The notion of ‘*tussentaal*’ is used to indicate “a specific language variety that makes heavy use of dialectal elements, while at the same time operating on a supraregional level, as a direct competitor to Standard Dutch” (Plevoets, Speelman & Geeraerts 2006) (for a further discussion of ‘*tussentaal*’, see chapter 6, section 6.3.1).

number of parents prefer Standard Dutch or *tussentaal* to dialect as the language of primary socialization of their children.

Situations in which the local dialect is no longer spoken at home are expanding in today's society – (especially) in Flanders, but also in other regions and countries (cf. Taeldeman 1989b, 1991; Hoppenbrouwers 1990). If dialect is no longer used in such situations, there is almost always a gradual decline of the knowledge of and proficiency in the local dialect. There has been little research so far on children who are not raised in the local dialect anymore, but who acquire a more or less deficient knowledge of that dialect in the interaction with peers. In addition, the few studies addressing second dialect acquisition have not been placed within a clear-cut acquisition theory. The ongoing processes of dialect loss open new perspectives for current and future research: there is a growing number of situations in which children learn the dialect as a second language, from other people than their parents (especially from their peers).

The present study focuses on the 'deficient' dialect of second dialect learners. In this way, we try to gain insight into (1) the mental mechanisms relied upon by language users to acquire a second language variety (i.e. L2) that closely approximates the L1, (2) the success with which and the order in which different dialect features are acquired, and (3) the (linguistic and non-linguistic) feature-related and speaker-related factors that determine the degree of success in second dialect acquisition.

1.2. Background

In the early days of dialectology, most dialectologists were only interested in geographical variation among different dialects, but not in individual or social variation within dialects. As a result, typical studies in dialect geography (cf. Gilliéron 1902-10; Kloeke 1927; Jaberg & Jud 1928-40; Kurath 1949) were based on interviews with one single speaker for each place. Besides, as pointed out by Chambers & Trudgill (1980:33), “[n]o matter how diverse the culture, how discrepant the socioeconomic climate, and how varied the topography, the majority of informants has in all cases consisted of *nonmobile, older, rural males*” (i.e. NORMs). During the last century, however, individuals have become more mobile, both geographically and socially (cf. Hoppenbrouwers 1990). Because of this mobility, a growing number of language users were confronted with other dialects and with Standard Dutch in their daily lives and this started to have an impact on their dialect use. As a result, dialects have developed into unstable, continually changing entities, influenced by social factors, and have been approached as such in the literature (cf. Labov 1966; Trudgill 1972, 1974; Milroy 1980). Another factor that has played and is still playing a role in processes of dialect change or loss is the increasing impact of the media. Especially young people are very sensitive to influence from the media, such as radio and television. Surely, these influences affect their dialect/language to a certain extent as well.

Dialects change in different ways: they are subject to processes of structural and functional change. Structural dialect change, which, in practice, boils down to dialect levelling, involves changes in the linguistic system of the dialect itself. Functional change involves a decline in the number of situations in which dialect is used (cf. Hoppenbrouwers 1990; Hinskens 1993). Typically, dialect is replaced in many situations by a language variety that is closer to the standard variety. The gradual replacement of dialect by a more standardized variety in many situations is typical of Flanders and of many similar regions. However, it does not (yet) take place in all regions. A well-known exception is German-speaking Switzerland, where the dialect is used even in formal situations. Whether the dialect is used in all situations or is limited to informal situations only, depends largely on the degree of social appreciation of the dialect. Stigmatization of dialect use is especially common when the use of dialect is not only related to situational, but also to social factors. This is exactly what happened in Flanders, where the opposition standard versus dialect has become associated with different social classes.

Generally, the decline of dialect use manifests itself first in formal domains and can only be noticed in more informal domains at a later stage. One of the most informal domains in which dialect is used is the home situation. Even there, however, dialect may eventually lose its function in favour of a more standardized variety. This implies that many children are no longer raised in the local dialect by their parents, but in the standard language or a substandard instead.

At present, many parents believe that bringing up their children in the local dialect would prevent them from attaining the standard language successfully (i.e. that they would be disadvantaged in acquiring reading and writing skills).² This would prevent their children from becoming successful in school and society. More and more parents therefore choose to raise their children in a more prestigious variety than the dialect. As a result, dialect is increasingly replaced by more standardized varieties in home situations.³

In spite of the fact that many parents have a negative attitude towards dialect as the language of socialization of their children, the young generation does not always think of the local dialect as inferior to the standard language. Actually, the concept of *prestige* means something else to the parents than to the young generation. Among the young, the prestige of a language variety is much more affected by the general attitude towards that variety within the peer group. Several studies (Deprez & De Schutter 1981; Münstermann & Van Hout 1988; Geeraerts 1995) have demonstrated that language users generally think of the standard language as posh, formal, detached, etc., while they describe dialects as entertaining, informal, amicable, etc. (cf. ‘covert prestige’, see chapter 2, section 2.4; see also Vousten

² A similar belief can be found in some bilingual parents, who are inclined to think that raising their children bilingually will lead to deficient language acquisition (see Harrison et al. 1981, cited by De Houwer 1995:230).

³ An additional factor in the decline of dialect as the home language may be the fact that dialect has, to a certain extent, become associated with the lower social classes in many regions and that parents do not want their children to be associated with these lower classes.

1995:9). This implies that the conditions are favourable for second dialect acquisition. There is a reasonable chance that children who are raised in the standard language or a substandard variety by their parents want to learn the local dialect as they grow older, for reasons of loyalty to their friends and of opposition to their parents.

Even when children no longer learn the local dialect during primary socialization, they often come into contact with it at a later stage in their lives. Under the pressure of the peer group, these children often attempt to learn the local dialect as a second language. This process of second dialect acquisition is the subject of the present study.

1.3. Objectives of the present study

In the literature, only little attention has been paid to the acquisition of non-standard varieties (cf. Vousten 1995:126). Vousten points out the importance of the study of second dialect acquisition, suggesting that “it may put the variability that is connected with the acquisition process and the variability that is inherent in the language system in another light.” He further argues that “research into the acquisition of non-standard varieties may give a better understanding of the factors that might play a role in this process” (Vousten 1995:126; my translation, K.R.). This is exactly what the present study of the acquisition of a dialect as a second language aims at. It focuses on the different factors that affect the ease or difficulty with which the different dialect features are acquired by children who were raised in Standard Dutch or *tussentaal* (cf. hypotheses, chapter 4). The study starts out from the following research questions:

- (i) Which (linguistic and non-linguistic) feature-related factors play a role in the process of second dialect acquisition and what are the most important factors?
- (ii) Which speaker-related factors play a role in the process of second dialect acquisition and what are the most important factors?
- (iii) Do the degree to which the different feature-related factors play a role and the nature of the effects reveal whether second dialect learners learn by rule (cf. rule-based theory) or in a word-by-word manner (cf. exemplar-based theory)?

This dissertation intends to contribute to the study of (second) dialect acquisition in the following way:

1. The present study focuses entirely on the secondary acquisition of *phonological* dialect features. More specifically, the subject of this study is the acquisition of the phonology of a Flemish dialect by children who were raised in Standard Dutch or *tussentaal*. The fact that it focuses exclusively on the acquisition of phonology

distinguishes this study from other research into the secondary acquisition of a dialect within the Dutch-speaking area (cf. Vousten 1995).

2. The present study is a *large-scale* investigation into second dialect acquisition. A large number of phonological variables were investigated in the present research project (see chapter 6, section 6.4). Moreover, a large number of informants were interviewed in order to be able to draw reliable conclusions about the acquisition of a dialect as a second language. This large-scale nature distinguishes this study from most other studies in (second) dialect acquisition (see chapter 2 for a discussion of these studies).
3. The research design of this study allows for conclusions both with respect to the influence of (linguistic and non-linguistic) *feature-related factors* and of *speaker-related factors*, since these factors are all implemented as independent variables in the statistical analyses. Until now, the study of feature-related factors in second dialect acquisition research has been relatively limited: the degree of complexity of dialect features has been investigated in some studies (cf. Vousten 1995; Chambers 1998; Kerswill 1996) but no structural attempts have been made to operationalize the notion of complexity, i.e. this has not been introduced as a predictor (i.e. independent variable) of learning success. In the present study, different factors which all contribute to the degree of complexity of features are implemented as independent variables.
4. In order to collect the data, fieldwork was undertaken according to a *factorial design*.⁴ Since we are interested in the effect of different factors on the success of dialect acquisition, we consider these different factors as independent variables which all – to a different extent – predict the scores on the dependent variable, i.e. the success of acquisition of a given dialect feature.
5. Apart from examining how many times a given dialect feature is realized with the ‘correct’ dialect variant (in order to measure the degree of dialect proficiency/acquisition), we also pay attention to cases in which the ‘correct’ variant is not realized. More specifically, we focus on cases in which dialect learners overgeneralize a particular feature at the expense of another feature. We examine whether the factors that play a role in the success of second dialect acquisition also affect the production of these *overgeneralizations* (i.e. so-called *hyperdialectisms*).
6. As far as the literature on second dialect acquisition has been placed in a theoretical framework, it always concerned a traditional rule-based framework. The present study, however, focuses on recent theories in language acquisition and on the ongoing debate between rule-based and exemplar-based theories (see chapter 3). The predictions made by these theories are related to our findings. In this way, we hope to shed some light

⁴ A factorial design is a design in which every level of every factor (independent variable) is paired with every level of every other factor. The advantage of a factorial design is that, apart from main effects, interaction effects between variables can also be detected.

on the *mental mechanisms* underlying the process of secondary acquisition of a dialect. In particular, the question whether second dialect learners learn by rule or word by word will receive much attention. Since the research design mainly involved rule-based models (cf. Auer 1993; Taeldeman 1993), not all predictions made by exemplar-based theory can be examined, however.

1.4. The structure of the dissertation

This dissertation is organized as follows. Chapter 2 is a general introduction to the field of second dialect acquisition. First, we briefly discuss first dialect acquisition. We then move on to second dialect acquisition, beginning with a discussion of the different situations in which second dialect acquisition may occur. Next, a comparison of ‘normal’ second language acquisition and second dialect acquisition reveals the major differences and similarities between both processes. On the basis of a number of authoritative studies in second dialect acquisition, we then address the major issues in the study of second dialect acquisition.

Chapter 3 is devoted to the theoretical framework of the present study. We first set out the basic assumptions of rule-based models. Special attention is given to the concept of intersystemic correspondence rules. We show how this concept was implemented in the rule-based theories of Auer (1993) and Taeldeman (1993), but we first discuss the theory of Lexical Phonology, since this theory is an important part of both Auer’s and Taeldeman’s models. The second part of chapter 3 deals with the exemplar-based theory of language learning. We show how exemplar models cope with the arguments of rule-based theory against word-by-word learning (cf. Gillis et al. 2000) and how these models account for frequency effects in language change and language acquisition (cf. Bybee 2001). We further discuss the possibility of a hybrid model of language learning (cf. Pierrehumbert 2002). We conclude chapter 3 with a discussion of the phenomenon of overgeneralization and we point out how both frameworks (i.e. rule-based and exemplar-based) account for this phenomenon.

Chapter 4 contains a discussion of the feature- and speaker-related factors which are supposed to be involved in the process of second dialect acquisition. First, we deal with a number of feature-related factors, most of which are linguistic or system-driven. Hypotheses are proposed about the (expected) effect of each factor on the degree to which different dialect features are acquired. Then, a discussion of the speaker-related factors follows. We discuss the effects of these speaker-related factors on the degree of individual success in second dialect acquisition. Finally, we turn to a number of hypotheses concerning the effects of feature-related factors on the degree to which dialect features are overgeneralized.

Chapter 5 deals with the methodology of the present study. The first part of this chapter is devoted to the implementation of the feature- and speaker-related factors. Subsequently, methodological aspects such as selection of the informants, questionnaire, recordings, transcriptions, formant measurements and statistical processing are discussed.

Chapter 6 starts out with a discussion of the research location (i.e. Maldegem). Some geographical and socio-demographic information is given, but the largest part of the discussion is devoted to the linguistic situation of the research location. Special attention is paid to the three language varieties spoken in Flanders and their relation to the different language components. Then, the phonology of the target dialect is discussed from a geographical perspective. The second part of chapter 6 presents the phonological variables that were involved in this study. We conclude this chapter with an inventory of the phonemes and allophones of the dialect under investigation.

Chapter 7 presents the results of a number of logistic regressions that were carried out to test the hypotheses formulated in chapter 4. In this chapter, we interpret the results and point out whether the results are consistent with the hypotheses.

A thorough discussion of the results is given in chapter 8. In this chapter we try to account for the different findings and we discuss whether these results can be best accounted for in a rule-based or an exemplar-based framework.

Chapter 9 presents the most important conclusions of the study and provides suggestions for further research.