Attitudinal and perceptual research as part of the methodological toolbox to define standard languages: Advances, issues and perspectives in research on Belgian Dutch

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INTRODUCTION

In many (European) countries, standard languages are observed to be undergoing clear changes, influenced by societal changes such as immigration, globalisation, democratisation and informalisation (cf. Coupland and T. Kristiansen 2011; Ghyselen, Delarue and Lybaert 2016). In Denmark, for instance, which is generally acknowledged as a nation where the standard language still holds a strong position, the standard Danish variety has, over the past decades, continually incorporated features which used to be associated with low-status ('popular') Copenhagen speech (see also Pharao's contribution to this volume). Similarly, in Belgian Dutch, non-standard elements are increasingly heard in situations where standard Dutch is generally considered the norm. The reported changes usually affect the uniformity, and in that way, also the standardness of the languages in question, often leading to concern and controversy among language users:

> Some refer to the decreasing level of education, others to spelling mistakes, there is controversy about what the norm should be, and about the fact that nobody abides by that norm, there is resistance against the influx of English loan words, there are complaints about sloppy pronunciation, about the fact that young people no longer read books, about the fact that fewer newspapers are being read, that text messaging style is on the increase, and that the tolerance against linguistic variation has gone too far. Everywhere in Europe, interestingly, the same issues are being mentioned (Van der Horst 2008: 14; translated in Grondelaers and T. Kristiansen 2013: 9).

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Among linguists, concern also exists (see e.g. Absillis, Jaspers and Van Hoof 2012 for a discussion on ideological debates in Flanders), but this concern generally loses ground to a scientifically driven interest in the ongoing changes and the mechanisms steering them. A question which often emerges is whether the standard language as such is losing ground (a scenario of *destandardisation*), or whether what is considered to be standard is changing (usually described as demotisation, cf. Coupland and T. Kristiansen 2011). The distinction between these two types of change seems straightforward at first sight, but when studying standard language dynamics empirically, it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. The challenging issue here is to determine the boundaries of standard languages: in order to ascertain whether the standard language in a specific speech community is weakening or whether there is rather a change occurring within the standard language, one has to know how to delineate the concept of a standard language. Given its centrality in studies on standard language change, this chapter will address the delineation issue, tackling the question of how standard languages can be defined and demarcated using Belgian Dutch as a case-study.

The Dutch language offers an interesting case for studies on standard language dynamics, firstly, because it is a pluricentric language (with the Netherlands, Belgium and Suriname as normative centres), and each of its normative centres seems to be subject to different standard language dynamics. For reasons of scope, this chapter will zoom in on the Belgian Dutch situation. Secondly, the Dutch language area is also interesting because the language repertoires in the area would be largely *diaglossic* (especially in the Netherlands and Belgium), meaning that there is a continuum of intermediate forms in between the local dialects and the standard language (Auer 2005; Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011). In such repertoires, the delineation of varieties, such as standard varieties, is especially challenging. When does standard language usage contain too many non-standard features to no longer be considered standard, but rather become 'intermediary' or 'non-standard'? I address this question in the present chapter. After introducing the standard language situation in Flanders in the section below, I outline the problems arising when various stakeholders (laypersons, linguists, decision-makers) define or apply the concept of standard language. This discussion highlights that attitudinal and perceptual research is indispensable in attempts to define and demarcate standard language varieties, but that such research at the same time also poses methodological and conceptual challenges. By means of illustration, the following section offers an overview of the existing attitudinal and perceptual research on Belgian Standard Dutch, deliberating the pros and cons of the different methodological approaches (questionnaires, interviews, free response tasks, social psychological attitude measurements, societal treatment methods, etc.), and especially discussing the consequences for the concept of Belgian Standard Dutch. This discussion will lead to the

conclusion that an adequate theoretical framework on the relation between language production and perception is needed if advances are to be made in research on standard language dynamics. I subsequently suggest a usage-based approach that might form the basis for such a framework and that also has clear consequences for standard language research, which are considered in the final section of this chapter.

THE STANDARD LANGUAGE SITUATION IN FLANDERS

Belgium has three official languages: Dutch, French and German. Dutch is spoken in the northern, Flemish part of the country, French in the southern, Walloon part, and German in a small eastern area, the so-called 'East Cantons', which became part of Belgium in the aftermath of World War I. Belgium's capital Brussels is an officially bilingual (French-Dutch) 'island' within officially monolingual, Dutch-speaking Flanders. Dutch only gained rights as an official language in Flanders in the course of the 19th century, after centuries of foreign rule, during which French was the primary language of government, culture and education.

Whereas in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the south of the Dutch language area played a central role in the early development of a Dutch standard language (especially the Flemish dialects[2] in the fifteenth century and the Brabantic dialects in the sixteenth century), things changed drastically at the end of the 16th century (Willemyns 2003). In 1585, the revolt of the seventeen Provinces or the Habsburg Netherlands[3] against their sovereign, the catholic Philip II of Spain, led to a split of the Dutch language area into an independent northern republic (which is now the Netherlands) on the one hand, and the Spanish and later Austrian Netherlands on the other hand, which remained under foreign rule until 1830. After 1585, the centre of gravity of the standardisation of Dutch shifted from south to north (Willemyns 2003: 95). In the north, the 17th century became an era of economic, cultural and political prosperity, the ideal background for the further standardisation of Dutch, now with the Hollandic dialects as most important breeding ground. For the south, 1585 marked the beginning of a long period of 'Frenchification' (with 1815-1830 as an intermezzo). In this period of Frenchification, Dutch in the southern area is generally assumed to have been no more than a 'concatenation of dialects', 'inappropri-

[2] Here I use 'Flemish' not in its political meaning to refer to the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium, but rather in its dialectological sense, to refer to the area where the West, East, French, and Zealand Flemish dialects are spoken. This dialect area coincides with the old county of Flanders and comprises the western part of northern Belgium, northern France, and the southwest of the Netherlands.

[3] This roughly covered the Low Countries, i.e. what is now Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, and also most of the modern French department of Nord-Pas-de-Calais.

ate for supra-regional use' (Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011: 203), though recent historical sociolinguistic research challenges this assertion, suggesting the existence of normative traditions (especially in writing) in the southern area in the 16th-18th century (cf. Vosters, Rutten and Van der Wal 2010).

It was, however, only in the course of the 19th century that cultural and linguistic rights for Dutch speakers were explicitly fought for in what was since 1830 Belgium. In the context of this 'battle', waged by the so-called 'Flemish movement', an increasingly strong need was felt for a standard Dutch variety in Belgium. After some debate on how this standard should take shape – adopting the standard Dutch variety developed in the Netherlands versus developing an own 'Flemish' Dutch standard variety – the integrationist ideology prevailed, and the exoglossic Netherlandic Dutch standard ('*Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands*') was actively propagated as the language of culture and civilisation. As many Flemings were unfamiliar with this exoglossic standard, large-scale, propagandistic, scientifically supported and highly mediatised initiatives were organised from the 1950s to the 1980s – which Jaspers and Van Hoof (2013: 331) describe as an era of *hyperstandardisation* – to ensure the dissemination of standard Dutch through Flemish society.

The result of the described standardisation process is a highly uniform Belgian Dutch standard, which corresponds in large measure to the Dutch (to be understood as 'Netherlandic') Dutch standard (especially in its written form, cf. Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011), but also deviates from it morphologically, lexico-semantically, syntactically, and especially phonetically (cf. Grondelaers et al. 2001; Van de Velde et al. 2010; Vandekerckhove 2005). It is the language which is codified in the *Algemeen Nederlandse Spraakkunst* (Haeseryn et al. 1997), *Van Dale Groot Woordenboek der Nederlandse taal* (den Boon and Geeraerts 2005), the *Woordenlijst der Nederlandse Taal* (also known as *het Groene Boekje*, 'the little green book') and Blancquaerts *Practische Uitspraakleer* (1934).[4] In its spoken form, Belgian Standard Dutch is sometimes referred to as *VRT-Nederlands* ('VRT-Dutch', Geeraerts 1998) or *Journaalnederlands* ('newscast Dutch', Plevoets 2008), as the language of news broadcasters and presenters of the *Vlaamse Radio- en Televisieomroep* (VRT) – the Flemish public broadcaster – is considered to have an exemplary function.

While the fairly elaborate codification of the (Belgian) Dutch standard might create the impression that there is a clearly delineated norm, there is still debate on what does or does not constitute standard Belgian Dutch. Since a few decades, the original monocentric approach to the standardisation of Dutch in Flanders – aiming

[4] The spelling is the only aspect of Standard Dutch that is officially regulated. The other named codifying works do not have an official norm-giving authority – the *Algemeen Nederlandse Spraakkunst* and *Van Dale* are in the first place intended to be descriptive – but they are nonetheless often experienced as normative.

at a standard norm that approached the Netherlandic Dutch one as closely as possible – has been replaced by a more pluricentric one, in which differentiation between Belgian and Netherlandic standard norms is now considered inevitable. The pluricentric approach, however, raises questions on what does or does not constitute standard Belgian Dutch, especially because the standard-dialect constellation in Flanders is *diaglossic*, meaning that a continuum of intermediate variations[5] can be observed in between the spoken standard language and the local dialects, and that it is utterly difficult in such a constellation to determine which features are 'standard' enough to be part of the Belgian Dutch standard norm. The delineation problem has been signalled on the level of both the written and spoken Belgian Dutch standard. In the context of an ongoing revision of the *Algemeen Nederlandse Spraakkunst*, Dhondt et al. (2020), for instance, raise the question how the pluricentric concept in Dutch linguistics can be translated into an empirical approach allowing to decide which 'Flemish' grammatical variants should be included in the description of Standard Dutch and which should not. The case studies they present mainly focus on variation observed in written Dutch, but the problems discussed also apply to spoken Dutch. Actually, delineation is even more challenging when it comes to spoken Standard Dutch, as VRT-Dutch – contrary to the written standard, which is widely used in Flanders – is often said to be a mainly virtual variety, desired by the authorities, but rarely spoken in practice (De Caluwe 2009: 19). Many Flemings seem to experience the official VRT-Dutch norm as too foreign or unnatural (cf. Geeraerts 2001). Instead, in daily life, non-standard language is ubiquitous. While the traditional, local dialects are increasingly subject to dialect levelling and shift (cf. Ghyselen and Van Keymeulen 2014), a functional elaboration of *tussentaal* (increasingly also labelled Colloquial Belgian Dutch, cf. Geeraerts and Van de Velde 2013) has been observed. *Tussentaal*, literally 'in-between-language', is the umbrella term for the regionally coloured intermediate variations in between the standard language and the local, traditional dialects. The functional elaboration of these 'variations' is not only the result of dialect loss and shift; *tussentaal* is also increasingly used in domains where the official (spoken) standard language used to be the norm (cf. Grondelaers and Van Hout 2011; Ghyselen, Delarue and Lybaert 2016).

Interestingly, the functional elaboration of *tussentaal* has provoked much debate in Flanders, which has to be ascribed to the strong ideological sensitivity of language norms in Flanders.[6] Among linguists, there is disagreement as to the question whether the elaboration signals *destandardisation*, whereby 'the established stand-

[5] I prefer the term 'variations' here over 'varieties', as it is not clear to what degree *tussentaal* is actually a variety or a combination of varieties.

[6] As Jaspers and Van Hoof (2013: 331) point out, the Flemish *hyperstandardisation* has "thoroughly ideologised language use in all corners of Flemish society".

ard language loses its position as the one and only "best language"' (Coupland and T. Kristiansen 2011: 28) – or rather *demotisation*, whereby "the 'standard ideology' as such stays intact, while the valorisation of ways of speaking changes" (Coupland and T. Kristiansen 2011: 28). As pointed out above, *tussentaal* is a 'mixed' variety with elements from the standard language and local dialects, showing extensive regional variation. Yet, there are studies listing a number of 'stable' non-standard features that are either shared by most regional manifestations of *tussentaal* or expanding their use into regions in which they do not occur in the local dialects, and which allegedly constitute the heart of a homogenizing tendency (De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012; Ghyselen 2015; Rys and Taeldeman 2007; Taeldeman 2008). This homogenisation, along with the observed functional elaboration of *tussentaal* at the expense of both standard language and dialect usage, is analysed in different ways by different researchers (Ghyselen, Delarue and Lybaert 2016). While some argue that *tussentaal* is the new endoglossically developed spoken standard in Flanders (cf. Cajot 2010), Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman (2011) suggest a scenario of *destandardisation*, as they conclude from a speaker evaluation experiment that neither accented Dutch nor *tussentaal* function as prestige norms. Jaspers and Van Hoof (2015: 35), to the contrary, argue that "the tension between standardizing and vernacularizing forces is intensifying and their relationship becoming more complex", and interpret this as *late standardisation* or *restandardisation*, rather than as *destandardisation*, since VRT-Dutch clearly retains its social prestige in Flanders.

THE PROBLEM OF DEFINING STANDARD LANGUAGES

The conflicting interpretations of ongoing standard language change in Flanders can be traced back to varying views on what a standard language is and how it should be delineated. The debate ties in with a broader theoretical discussion on the possibility of delineating linguistic varieties (cf. Geeraerts 2010; Ghyselen and De Vogelaer 2018; Lenz 2010), in which diverse theoretical and methodological stances can be distinguished. Especially when it comes to defining and delineating standard languages, multiple approaches have been introduced.

Traditionally, in definitions of standard languages, linguistic uniformity is named as a defining characteristic. Auer (2012), for instance, describes a standard language as a variety which "ideally shows no variation in the territory in which it is used because all community members prefer the same (standard) variants". The addition of the hedge *ideally* in Auer's description is crucial: though the idea of uniformity is firmly rooted in language users' conceptualisations of standard languages, it is illusory in everyday language use (cf. Geeraerts, 2010). Linguistic variation is every-

where, also in standard languages (cf. also Grondelaers, Van Hout and Van Gent 2016). Though, from a diachronic perspective, increasing or decreasing linguistic homogeneity – as for instance observable in changing variance between or within language users (cf. Ghyselen 2015) – is a valuable index of standard language change, linguistic uniformity can hardly be used as a criterion for the empirical delineation of standard languages.

A more interesting perspective on standard language delineation is offered by the idea that standard languages are used in formal situations (Auer 2011: 490). Building on this idea, production data collected in formal settings are often consulted to determine what functions as standard language in a specific speech community. The Dutch language advice website *Taaladvies.net*, for instance – which was developed by the *Taalunie* ('Language Union')[7] and judges the standardness of specific language variants on demand – does not only consult reference works, but also checks the frequency of these variants in newspaper databases (Caluwé and Verreycken 2012: 174–179). Similarly, the German *Variantengrammatik des Standarddeutschen* (Dürscheid and Elspaß 2015) describes all variants which occur regularly in formal written genres, such as newspapers, as standard, even when these variants are traditionally classified as non-standard in reference works (Dürscheid and Elspaß 2015: 563). In the same vein, Grondelaers, Van Hout and Van Gendt (2016: 139–140) argue for replacing the criterion of codification by public media licensing as the 'referee of right and wrong in standard languages'. In their view, the variation observed in the speech of, for instance, radio presenters can be seen as part of the spoken standard, even when variants occur which are described as non-standard in reference works. Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman (2011: 217–218) apply a similar logic, but combine two necessary features for standardness: wide usage in formal settings and prestige associations. They come to the conclusion that Flanders is marked by a "standard language vacuum", lacking a "vital standard variety of Belgian Dutch", given that VRT-Dutch is not widely spoken in formal settings in Flanders, while accented Standard Dutch or *tussentaal* are not generally deemed prestigious.

While the approach of studying language variation in formal settings is certainly valuable in the empirical quest to lay bare standard language norms, there are a few difficulties to bear in mind. Firstly, the question arises how frequent a linguistic variant has to be in a 'more formal setting' for it to be considered part of the standard language. *Taaladvies.net* uses 50% as the benchmark for standardness (variants with relative frequencies in between 5% and 50% are labelled 'status unclear'), but Dhondt et al. (2020) pertinently point out the arbitrariness of such benchmarks.

[7] The *Taalunie* is an international regulatory institution that governs issues regarding the Dutch language. It was founded in 1980 by the governments of the Netherlands and Belgium. Suriname has been an associate member of the *Taalunie* since 2004.

Secondly, the concept of formality is fraught with difficulties, especially when applied to speech settings. Discussion is, after all, possible on which situations qualify as formal. Formality can be seen as the macro result of an interplay of multiple factors, such as place, time, participants, subject, function and medium of the interaction. As a result, formality is a continuous rather than a binary variable, which can gradually shift, even within one setting. For instance: a court setting is typically conceived of as formal, but when watching actual court recordings – for instance in the Flemish documentary series *De Rechtbank* – continuous fluctuations in the degree of (in)formality can be observed. The correlation between formality and standard language is equally problematic: in the current Late Modern age, which is marked by an 'informalisation' of public life (Giddens 1991), the occurrence of language variants in a situation that is generally perceived as formal does not necessarily have to lead to the conclusion that these variants are then part of the standard language. The researcher must also consider the option of (i) *destandardisation,* i.e. that the standard language is not deemed essential anymore in all formal contexts and the standard language ideal is hence crumbling, or (ii) that the speaker is *stylizing* his or her speech, i.e. knowingly deploying "culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context" (Coupland 2001: 345). Jaspers and Van Hoof (2015: 34) similarly stress that a quantitative increase in nonstandard language should not be seen as "an undiluted sign of the dwindling hold of standardization on the public mind"; they argue that a limited use of a certain type of language does not necessarily have to lead to the conclusion that this language variety is no longer standard (Van Hoof and Jaspers 2012). The only way to disentangle *stylisation* or *destandardisation* from other types of standard language dynamics is in my view by looking at language attitudes and perceptions.

For the purpose of the present discussion, languages attitudes can be defined as the "evaluative judgements people have about (speakers of) their own language and other languages" (Grondelaers 2013). Generally, it is assumed that standard languages are 'high' (Ferguson 1959) or prestige varieties (cf. Auer 2011; Ferguson 1959). Hence, to know what functions as standard language in a speech community, the researcher can study which types of language use the members of the speech community perceive as prestigious, e.g. which language is evaluated as attesting to intelligence or wealth (cf. Grondelaers and Van Hout 2010). A complementary approach consists of studying language perceptions, i.e. the way in which language users recognise and categorise language variation (cf. Preston 1989). The Dutch language advice website *Taaladvies.net*, for instance, consults 'language professionals' (teachers, journalists, writers, …) to assess the standardness of language variants which, on the basis of their relative frequency in a newspaper corpus, received the label 'status unclear' (Caluwé and Verreycken 2012: 174–179). The idea

here is that, if the standardness of a certain feature is uncertain, one might as well just ask the language user. Of course, language perceptions and attitudes are closely intertwined.

Language attitudes and perceptions are key to understanding what standard languages are and how they function (cf. T. Kristiansen and Coupland 2011), but they are difficult to operationalise as empirical criteria for standardness. The first and biggest problem is that both attitudes and perceptions are cognitive entities, which the researcher can only access indirectly. In the past, several methods have been introduced to uncover attitudes and perceptions, both in sociology and linguistics, but each of these methods has limitations; and they often lead to conflicting results. I address this problem more elaborately in the subsequent section of this chapter. Secondly, when using 'prestige' as a criterion for standardness, the decision has to be made which type of prestige is deemed necessary to grant a language variety standard status. Grondelaers, Van Hout and Van Gent (2016: 132–135) argue that standardness studies should not only focus on traditional prestige (defined in terms of e.g. intelligence, wealth and education), but also on what they call 'new' or 'modern' prestige:

> In traditional sociolinguistic nomenclature, this 'new' prestige would be labelled 'covert', but we prefer to regard the difference between traditional and modern prestige in the less hierarchical terms of relocation from top-down prestige attribution by the socio-cultural and educational establishment to multiple forms of status designation, including (internet) community-based peer evaluation. This relocation involves an extension of traditional status sources – birth, education, professional competence, income, and social success – to include (digital) media credibility and cool as prestige determinants (T. Kristiansen 2001, 2009). More particularly, new prestige forms pertain to the dynamism of media personalities such as DJs on media channels geared towards a younger audience, in short, personalities for whom it is more important to project a cool and streetwise, rather than a traditionally prestigious (authoritative, educated, or competent) image (Grondelaers, Van Hout and Van Gent 2016: 132).

In their view, modern prestige attributes are nowadays, in Late Modern Europe, equally important as traditional prestige as determinants of standard language dynamics. The distinction between traditional and modern prestige is interlaced with another distinction that also complicates the application of attitudinal studies for standard language identification: the contrast between *overt* or *explicit* and *covert* or *implicit* attitudes. While it is highly unclear how these concepts can be defined, whether they correspond to a cognitive reality, and if so, how they should be measured, the *implicit*, *covert* or *deep* evaluations are often assumed to be key in under-

standing standard language change (Rosseel and Grondelaers 2019: 2). T. Kristiansen (2016), for instance, explains the increasing success of features which used to be associated with low-status ('popular') Copenhagen speech in standard Danish by highlighting that these features are evaluated differently on different levels of awareness, with the traditional low-status associations reproduced only in consciously offered attitudes (e.g. in response to questions about language regard), not in subconsciously offered attitudes (e.g. in matched-guise experiments). He concludes that "only subconsciously offered evaluations are relevant to elucidating the current status of the 'best language' idea" (T. Kristiansen 2016: 93). The here declared supremacy of covert attitudes has, however, been questioned (cf. Rosseel and Grondelaers 2019). We return to this issue in the penultimate section of this chapter; for now, it suffices to remember that the issue of the consciousness of attitudes further complicates the definition of standard languages.

To conclude, the question arises whose attitudes or perceptions should be focused on when using attitudes or perceptions to uncover standard language norms. While Caluwé and Verreycken (2012: 179) prefer to study 'professional' language users of Dutch, as these are supposed to have "clearer consciousness about norms than the average language user" (own translation ASG), De Schryver (2012: 152–153) and Dhondt et al. (2020) remark that professional language users in Flanders might be too influenced by the former monocentric language policy, yielding a too conservative image of (Belgian) Dutch standard norms. If one at all agrees with the idea that the language use and perceptions of a norm-imposing establishment should be central when describing standard language norms (a view for instance held by the *Taalunie*[8]), debate is possible on who constitutes this establishment. Though traditionally professional language users may be regarded as central, one might also argue that the language use of economic elites, which is known to be more variable than that of cultural elites (Plevoets 2013), should also be considered. In line with the increasing attention for modern prestige in present-day standard language research – a type of prestige which is not the exclusive domain of cultural or economic elites – a case can, to conclude, also be made for extending the scope to the language use, attitudes and perceptions of *all* language users.

[8] Cf. https://taaladvies.net/taal/advies/tekst/85/wat_is_standaardtaal_algemeen/ (March 1, 2022).

PERCEPTUAL AND ATTITUDINAL RESEARCH ON BELGIAN STANDARD DUTCH

To uncover standard language attitudes and to delineate standard norms in Flanders, a diverse range of studies has been conducted. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to offer a full overview of attitudinal research in Flanders (see Grondelaers 2013 for a more elaborate description); the aim here is rather to identify general patterns in methodological approaches, and highlight both the advances made and the issues and challenges met. The next subsection reviews the main methodological approaches taken in existing research. Results are discussed separately thereafter.

Methodological diversity

One strand of studies adopts a **direct approach** to unveil attitudes towards and perceptions of Belgian Dutch, i.e. by explicitly asking language users how they evaluate or categorise specific language varieties or variants. Lybaert (2014; 2017), for instance, reports the results of an attitudinal study among 80 Flemings who were asked about their language attitudes and perceptions in a one-on-one interview with the researcher, with samples of spontaneously spoken VRT Dutch and *tussentaal* as input. The informants were asked, among other things, (i) to label or categorise the language used in the speech samples, (ii) which language variants struck them, and (iii) whether they deemed the language used as suitable for formal communication. A similar direct approach is reported in Rosseel (2017: 77–108), who did not focus on 'fully-fledged' *tussentaal* (deviating from the standard morpho-syntactically, phonologically and lexically), but rather on standard language with a regional accent. As the benchmark for the Implicit Association Test (IAT) she applied (see also below), she asked 161 respondents from Limburg, the easternmost province of Flanders, in an online survey which variety (a 'Limburgian accent' vs. a 'neutral' VRT-Dutch accent, as represented by speech samples) they preferred in informal contexts ('at the dinner table with friends or family') and formal contexts ('a news broadcast'). These forced-choice questions were followed by two absolute rating scales in which the participants could evaluate each variety independently of the other variety in both contexts. Ghyselen (2016) combined a production and perception design, recording 30 Flemish speakers in a diversity of situations (e.g. conversations with local and non-local friends, and a sociolinguistic interview with an unknown interviewer), and subsequently asking these speakers to categorise their own speech in the diverse settings and to evaluate the suitability of the discussed types of speech in a wide range of situations.

A separate type of direct approach is the **free response design**, in which respondents are asked to return as quickly as possible the first keywords (generally

adjectives) coming to mind in reaction to a language label (e.g. 'Standard Dutch' or '*tussentaal*') or a speech sample. The imposed time pressure is supposed to restrain the respondents from overthinking their answers (avoiding societally desired behavior), while the open answer format has the advantage that the respondent is not confined to a restricted number of attitudinal or perceptual scales predefined by the researcher. The open answer format is, however, at the same time also an important reason why the free response technique has up till now not been widely applied in language attitudinal research: the diversity of keywords returned by the respondents complicates quantitative and qualitative analysis. Grondelaers et al. (2020), however, successfully demonstrate – on the basis of free response data from 211 native speakers of Belgian Dutch responding to eight language (variety) labels[9] – how valence information combined with big data-based distributional analysis allows discovering structures in the obtained 'bags of words', and as such make it possible to unveil existing linguistic value systems.

Direct methods like those just discussed – in which the informants are well aware of the fact that they are evaluating language – have been criticised for being unable to lay bare covert attitudes. Respondents supposedly hide their 'true' attitudes when these are societally generally unaccepted, would miss the meta-skills to describe them accurately, or would be too unaware of their own attitudes (hence the term 'covert') to communicate about them. Therefore, indirect methods have been proposed for attitudinal research in which the respondent is supposedly unaware of the object of the study. The most well-known indirect method in linguistics is undoubtedly the **speaker evaluation paradigm** (cf. Lambert et al. 1960), which was introduced in Belgium in the early eighties (see Grondelaers 2013 for a historical overview). In a speaker evaluation experiment, respondents are asked to evaluate speakers – as represented by sound clips – on a number of scales (e.g. intelligence, financial wealth, trustworthiness and kindness). In these sound clips, different languages or language varieties are represented, and the assumption is that the speaker evaluations reflect attitudes towards the languages or language varieties spoken. To maximise this effect, the content of the samples, the voice quality of the speakers and the degree of fluency is generally kept as stable as possible throughout the experiment, guaranteeing that differences in the evaluations of the different speakers can be related to differences in attitudes towards the languages used. In the matched-guise variant of the speaker evaluation experiment, one speaker records multiple fragments, in different languages or language varieties, thus minimizing

[9] 'Hollands', 'Dutch with a West Flemish accent', 'Dutch with a Ghent accent', 'Dutch with an Antwerp accent', 'Dutch with a Limburgian accent', 'Dutch with a Moroccan accent', 'Dutch as spoken on VRT news broadcasts', and 'Dutch as spoken in soap operas such as *Thuis* or *Familie*'.

the potential influence of voice- and speech-style characteristics on the evaluation of the speakers.

Concerning Belgian Dutch, Vandekerckhove and Cuvelier (2007) and Cuvelier (2007) report a 'semi-matched guise study' in which respectively 281 and 222 student listener-judges evaluated Standard Dutch, dialect, and *tussentaal*, as produced by actors in three situations differing in degree of formality. Similarly, Impe and Speelman (2007) report a 'mixed-guise' experiment in which 301 adolescent Limburgish and West-Flemish respondents evaluated samples of Belgian Standard Dutch and Brabantic, Limburgian, and West-Flemish *tussentaal*. These designs are labelled 'mixed' or 'semi-matched guise', because some, but not all, speakers in the experiment produced multiple fragments. In Ghyselen (2009), a similar 'mixed-guise' approach is adopted to not only study the attitudes towards Brabantic-coloured *tussentaal* of 149 West Flemings in five age groups (ranging from 11 years old to 80 years old), but also to isolate attitudes towards single language features (in this case: non-standard definite and indefinite article forms in Flanders), and to study the impact of the frequency of a non-standard feature on the evaluation of a speaker. In a follow-up study, Ghyselen and De Vogelaer (2013) focused on the attitudes of 165 West Flemings (in two age groups) who evaluated standard Dutch, Brabantic *tussentaal* and West Flemish *tussentaal*. Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman (2011) shift the focus from *tussentaal* to Standard Dutch with a regional accent: they report on a speaker evaluation experiment in which 100 Flemings evaluated eight speech samples, all with standard Dutch morphology, syntax and lexis, but differing from the 'strict' VRT norm because of a recognizable Brabantic, East-Flemish, West-Flemish or Limburgian accent. Their research was driven by the question of whether regional accents are allowed within the standard language norm in Flanders. In a follow-up study, Grondelaers and Speelman (2013) did not only include regionally accented standard Dutch, but also, similarly to Ghyselen's (2009) endeavour to isolate attitudes towards single language variants, speech samples with some recurrently reported phonological, lexical and morpho-syntactic features of *tussentaal*. Finally, De Vogelaer and Toye (2017) adopt a developmental perspective in their speaker evaluation research, investigating how attitudes towards standard Dutch and regionally coloured language[10] change in Flemish children between 8 and 18 years of age.

While many speaker evaluation attempts have been undertaken to uncover standard language norms, the method also has clear shortcomings (cf. Garrett 2010: 57–59; Knops 1983). Firstly, it is difficult to control non-variety related factors in

[10] The experiment included four non-standard varieties: one from Kluisbergen (the local variety for the respondents), one from West-Flanders (a neighbouring area), one from Ghent (the province capital), and one from Brabant (an economically dominant area with a supposedly prestigious dialect).

the speech stimuli (e.g. the speech topic and the number of hesitations), while at the same time avoiding that the samples sound contrived or unspontaneous. Already in the early days of speaker evaluation studies, researchers questioned the degree to which the used speech samples are representative of the language varieties under study (cf. Deprez 1984). This critique still applies to many studies today. Secondly, as the number of factors that are controlled for increases, it becomes doubtful whether the participant is still truly unaware of the actual interest of the researcher (i.e. the participant's language attitudes), thus questioning the indirectness of the approach. Thirdly, the artificiality of the experimental task – having to judge people solely on the basis of their speech – has raised concerns about the external validity of the technique (cf. Fasold 1984: 147–179). There is also the risk of presenting language varieties incongruously with the speech topic, which might trigger negative attitudes not representative for the attitudes towards the language variety in question (cf. Agheyisi and Fishman 1970: 146), but rather based on topic mismatch. Finally, the researcher has to define evaluative scales in advance, and might hence "miss out on aspects of the social meaning of a language (variety) that were not known or suspected to be relevant beforehand" (Rosseel 2017: 14).

Recently, in an attempt to introduce methodological innovation in language attitudinal research, linguists have been experimenting with **reaction-time based social psychological attitude measurement** techniques (see Rosseel 2017 for an internationally oriented overview). These techniques build on the assumption that participants can fulfill tasks in line with their language attitudes faster than tasks that are incongruent with their attitudes. The big advantage of these techniques is, supposedly, that they capture implicit, automatic associations between attitude objects and their evaluations. In the Belgian Dutch context, application of three different reaction-time based attitudinal techniques has been reported: affective priming (Speelman et al. 2013), implicit association testing (Rosseel 2017; Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2015; 2019a), and the relational responding technique (Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2019b). Auditory affective priming was applied by Speelman et al. (2013) to study attitudes towards words pronounced with a Standard Dutch, West-Flemish or Antwerp accent. They selected connotatively neutral existent and nonsense cognate words recorded in the named varieties of Dutch, and played these words as primes, before their 33 respondents had to classify pictures as positive or negative. The technique builds on the idea that the respondents will be faster to classify affectively polarised pictures (target stimuli) that are preceded by affectively congruent prime stimuli, than affectively polarised pictures that are preceded by affectively incongruent prime stimuli (Speelman et al. 2013: 83). Using the same audio stimuli as Speelman et al. (2013), Rosseel (2017: 49–76) experiments with the implicit association testing to study attitudes towards Standard Belgian Dutch, an Antwerp accent and a West-Flemish accent. An IAT measures the

association between a binary target concept (e.g. a language variety: Antwerp accent vs. Standard Dutch accent) and a binary attribute concept (e.g. valence: good vs. bad) by comparing reaction times in a number of computer categorisation tasks. Contrary to an affective priming experiment, in which the respondent only classifies attribute stimuli, the respondent in an IAT has to categorise stimuli for both target and attribute concepts as quickly as possible, e.g. choosing between the categories 'Antwerp accent' and 'neutral accent' for speech clips and between the categories 'I like' or 'I do not like' for pictures of pleasant and unpleasant 'things'. Throughout the different 'blocks' of the experiment, target and attribute stimuli and categories are combined in several ways. In one block, one categorisation button might contain both the labels 'I like' and 'Antwerp accent' and the other button both 'I do not like' and 'a neutral accent', whereas in other blocks the target and attribute concepts are combined differently (see Rosseel 2017: 24–28 for a more detailed description). The idea is that informants will be able to categorise the stimuli faster if the responses mapped onto the same button are congruent with their attitudes. By comparing the reaction times between different experimental blocks, the association between target and attribute concepts is measured. Interestingly, Rosseel (2017: 49–76) did find significant differences in reaction times, indicating an overall appreciation of the standard variety. However, as the IAT is often criticised for presenting stimuli that are too decontextualised to be able to lead to valid results, Rosseel (2017) designed a follow-up IAT study (see also Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2019a), in which an attempt was made to include context in the experiment. At the end of this new study on standard Belgian Dutch and Limburg accented Dutch, she, however, reaches the conclusion that "including context in a linguistic version of the P-IAT is not straightforward and further research or methodological improvement is warranted if sociolinguists intend to begin using the measure to study the influence of context on language attitudes" (Rosseel 2017: 78). A third reaction-time based technique that has been tested in the Belgian Dutch context is the Relational Responding Task (RRT), applied by Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts (2019b) to measure implicit beliefs associated with Standard Belgian Dutch and Brabantically coloured *tussentaal* (labelled Colloquial Belgian Dutch in their study). In RRT, participants categorise a number of statements (e.g. 'Standard Belgian Dutch sounds more clever than Colloquial Belgian Dutch') as being true or false, not based on what they think themselves, but answering as if they adhered to a belief, imposed on them by the researcher (Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2019b: 2). The idea is that if the imposed belief matches their own belief, they will categorise the statements faster than when this is not the case.

While the design of reaction-time based attitudinal experiments is undoubtedly clever, there are a few issues which complicate their usefulness for language attitudinal research. There are in my view four major limitations (see Rosseel 2017 for a

more in-depth discussion). Firstly, the reliance on reaction times makes the methods very delicate and prone to unwanted noise, caused e.g. by distractions on the side of the respondent or unforeseen order or training effects. Secondly, the language stimuli used are necessarily short and generally presented contextless, making it difficult to fathom what the respondents are actually evaluating. Related to this shortcoming, there is thirdly the theoretical uncertainty about what the measured associations actually reflect: the 'covert' evaluations of the respondents themselves, or rather societal stereotypes they are aware of but not necessarily support? Fourthly, the number of evaluative scales that can be included is generally low (except in RRT), e.g. compared to a speaker evaluation experiment or a free response task, and, as a consequence, the attitudinal image that emerges is quite 'flat'. The question arises whether the serious time and brain effort needed to craft a decent reaction-time based experiment is sufficiently compensated by the advantages it is supposed to have over the other techniques discussed in this section.

Attitudes, to conclude, can also be studied by analyzing the way in which languages or language varieties are treated in public life. This approach – which has been labelled the **societal treatment method** (Garrett 2010) – has been used by several researchers in Belgium. Jaspers and Van Hoof (2013), for instance, analyze the way in which discourses about language standardisation in Flanders, as documented by journal articles, opinion pieces, pamphlets, TV shows and pedagogical material in the 1950s through the 1980s, reflect Flemish language ideologies. Delarue (2016) and Van Lancker (2017) focus on education, analyzing not only policy documents, but also the way in which teachers and students deal with and reflect on language variation in everyday school contexts. Similarly, studies have been devoted to language variation in advertisement (Van Gijsel, Geeraerts and Speelman 2004; Van Gijsel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2008), radio plays for children (Jacobs, Marzo and Zenner 2021), child-directed speech in a home context (Van de Mieroop, Zenner and Marzo 2016; Zenner and Van de Mieroop 2021), all with the aim of unveiling sociolinguistic norms in Flanders.

Results, issues and challenges

What do the studies introduced above teach us about standard language norms in Flanders? Firstly, all evidence points towards a strong standard language ideology in Flanders: independent of whether attitudes are measured directly or indirectly, experimentally or via societal observation, researchers generally reach the conclusion that VRT-Dutch, as represented by audio stimuli or labels such as 'Standard Dutch', is preferred in formal contexts (Delarue 2016; Ghyselen 2016; Rosseel 2017; Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2019b) and considered highly prestigious (Cuvelier 2007; Ghyselen and De Vogelaer 2013; Impe and Speelman 2007; Jacobs,

Marzo and Zenner 2021; Jaspers and Van Hoof 2013; Vandekerckhove and Cuvelier 2007; Van de Mieroop, Zenner and Marzo 2016). Qualitative analyses of sociolinguistic interviews, however, also indicate that the abstract standard language ideal often makes way for a more pragmatic attitude when it comes to actual speech settings (Delarue 2016; Lybaert 2017). In the research of Delarue (2016), for instance, teachers supported the idea that standard Dutch should be the medium of instruction; but as soon as concrete educational settings were discussed, they often indicated that standard use is not always feasible or even desirable. This ambiguity can also be related to the fact that VRT Dutch is not only deemed prestigious, but often also artificial and unnatural (Delarue 2016; Ghyselen 2016; Lybaert 2017).

Tussentaal, on the other hand, while in attitudinal experiments generally downgraded on traditional prestige scales such as intelligence and wealth (Grondelaers et al. 2020; Impe and Speelman 2007; Vandekerckhove and Cuvelier 2007), is often associated with spontaneity and authenticity (cf. Van Gijsel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2008) or solidarity (being friendly, understanding or trustworthy) and dynamism (being cool, modern or trendy) (Impe and Speelman 2007; Rosseel, Speelman and Geeraerts 2019b). Attitudes towards *tussentaal* have, however, been observed to vary (especially in experimental settings) depending on the regional 'flavouring' of the presented *tussentaal* fragments, the degree of dialectality and the region of origin of the respondents (Ghyselen and De Vogelaer 2013; Impe and Speelman 2007). It is difficult to assess the exact influence of each of these factors, as they are hard to isolate in experimental designs. Controlling for the degree of dialectality, for instance, when varying the regional flavouring of presented *tussentaal* stimuli, is anything but self-evident, especially when the aim is to make the speaker sound as spontaneous as possible. In studies with open format questions (e.g. Grondelaers et al. 2020; Lybaert 2017), *tussentaal* is generally less downgraded (e.g. in terms of prestige), and more often characterised as a quite neutral and even desirable variety, or the informal lingua franca. This especially seems to be so among young people: Grondelaers et al. (2020) observed generational change in the registered free responses towards *tussentaal*, with "a growing conceptual proximity between VRT-Dutch and Tussentaal in the younger perceptions" (Grondelaers et al. 2020). Concerning the acquisition of attitudes, De Vogelaer and Toye (2017) attested that, as Flemish children grow older, they become more sensitive to the correlation between language variation and societal prestige, and to "the 'covert prestige' of, especially, the local variety, which is increasingly evaluated as indexing integrity and as a means towards social and/or in-group success" (De Vogelaer and Toye 2017: 117). Their study reveals "significant parallels between sociolinguistic and psychosocial development, including 11-12-year-olds' tendency to think in terms of 'perceived popularity' (…), and the peak around the age of 16 in conventional and social-clique dominated reasoning about friendship" (De Vogelaer and Toye 2017: 117).

To determine the 'boundaries' of the standard language in Flanders, attitudes have also been studied towards regionally accented Standard Dutch, which is different from what we have labelled '*tussentaal*' in that it does not have any dialectal morphosyntax or lexicon. Firstly, the available evidence indicates that accented standard Dutch is generally not considered 'beautiful' or prestigious in Flanders (Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman 2011). Secondly, there seems to be quite some interpersonal variation in the attitudes towards regionally accented Dutch, not only determined by the regional background of the respondent (Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman 2011; Rosseel 2017: 49–76; Speelman et al. 2013), but also by other respondent-related factors, which are difficult to identify (Ghyselen 2016). Of course, the type of regional accent also plays a role: Grondelaers, Van Hout and Speelman (2011) for instance observed that Brabantic and East-Flemish accents were generally rated as more prestigious or dynamic than the peripheral West-Flemish and Limburgian accents, though clear regional bias was found in these attitudinal data and the question also emerges to what degree differences in accent strength influenced their results. Overall, the available data seem to indicate that regional accents are not generally accepted as being part of the standard language norm, though more research is necessary to pinpoint the influence of accent strength and the region of origin of a speaker. Speaker evaluation experiments attempting to isolate attitudes towards single *tussentaal* features, such as non-standard diminutives or articles (Ghyselen 2009; Grondelaers and Speelman 2013), turned out to be complicated or even compromised by the artificiality of the stimuli: the presentation of non-standard features in an otherwise standard Dutch context often implies a violation of 'normal' covariance patterns (cf. Ghyselen and Van Keymeulen 2016), which might also explain the consistently negative attitudes observed in both Ghyselen (2009) and Grondelaers and Speelman (2013).

There are many snippets of information available about standard language attitudes in Flanders, but it is at the moment still difficult to integrate these into a coherent overview. While many studies lay bare a strong Standard Language Ideology, it is still unclear how far the boundaries of this standard stretch. Complicating factors are not only the methodological issues inherent in the different measuring techniques, but also the low comparability of existing studies, partly due to the heterogeneity of presented language stimuli (differing in degree of dialectality, regional provenance, sociolinguistic profile of the speaker, content, context, etc.). Vandekerckhove and Cuvelier (2007: 253) pertinently point out that *tussentaal*, for instance, is "very hard to operationalise, as it may cover virtually the entire continuum between dialect and standard language", and that "the question which part of the continuum one selects as a target is a very tricky one". With large-scale triangulation, systematic replication and careful controlling of the involved experimental variables, however, this problem can to a large degree be solved. The question is,

however, if we were to have a more complete image of language attitudes in Flanders, how this image would then have to be interpreted in terms of standard language boundaries. Which of the criteria discussed further above – vitality in production, overt prestige, covert prestige – should receive what weight? To answer this question, we need a more encompassing theoretical framework regarding the relations between language production and perception in general (cf. also Rosseel 2017: 165–178 who calls for such a theoretical model). In what follows, I discuss a usage-based approach that might form the basis for such a framework.

TOWARDS A USAGE-BASED MODEL OF LANGUAGE VARIETIES IN PRODUCTION AND PERCEPTION

To offer an insightful definition of standard languages, it is essential to first reflect on the hypernymous concept of a *language variety* (or *language system*). Within usage-based approaches and sociolinguistics, the traditional concept of a language variety as an *independent*, *homogeneous* set of language features shared within the speech community – cf. de Saussure's (1916) idea of a *langue* – has been discarded as a mere theoretical or socio-political construct (cf. Makoni and Pennycook 2007). After all, as soon as we look at actual language use, homogeneity does not exist (see my arguments further above). Geeraerts (2010) as well as Ghyselen and De Vogelaer (2018) offer an in-depth discussion of this 'variety problem', pleading for a different conceptualisation of the notion of a variety. These discussions adopt a cognitive, usage-based perspective, assuming that linguistic systematicity or structure should not be hypostasised as an independent entity, but that it only arises in the process of social interaction and is hence always dependent on individual usage events. In interaction, members of a speech community (or a community of practice)[11] seek effective communication and social cohesion within the group, which

[11] The usefulness of the concept of a speech community has been questioned in the context of present-day 'superdiversity' (cf. Blommaert and Backus 2013: 23). In a plea against too crude abstraction of social groups and language from the social practices that produce their particular forms, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) suggest focusing on 'communities of practice' rather than speech communities. They define a community of practice as "an aggregate of people who come together around mutual engagement in an endeavor" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992: 464). While it is indeed valuable to focus on language norms arising at this level of interaction, the concept of a speech community is in my view still relevant given that language structures, norms and values are also shared among larger speaker groups. A speech community, however, does not have to be seen as a fixed entity, but rather as a 'group of people' defined on either of many levels of abstraction: the community of students in school *x* of village *y*, the community of school *x* in village *y*, the community of village *y*, the community of country *z*, etc. The higher the level of abstraction, the vaguer the mutual engagements and the interactional opportunities of its group members.

generally also involves distancing from other individuals or groups; and this results in mutual adaptations of the language behavior towards each other within the group, centripetally creating regularities. These regularities can be interpreted as varieties, now defined as sets of language variants strongly correlating in their socio-situative usage (cf. Berruto 2010; Ghyselen and De Vogelaer 2018; Schmidt and Herrgen 2011; Weinreich, Labov and Herzog 1968). These varieties should not only be seen as entities interesting for linguistic analysis; I will argue below that they are also cognitive realities. As regularities arise at different levels of abstraction, e.g. at the level of the individual, of multigroup settings or of larger-scale speech communities (cf. Campbell-Kibler 2016: 123), lects or varieties can be defined or described at these multiple levels of abstraction (cf. terms such as idiolect, style, regiolect, sociolect, genderlect and language).

There are two important corollaries to this usage-based conceptualisation of varieties (and languages). Firstly, it implies that varieties are per definition to some degree heterogenous. Speech community membership is generally fluid, with language users engaging 'within a broad variety of groups, networks and communities' (Blommaert and Backus 2013: 2), and as such, when systems emerge interactionally, they are never perfectly homogeneous (cf. Geeraerts 2010: 239). The degree of covariance and homogeneity, and the level at which it is found, determine the 'strength' of a variety or lect: the higher the level of analysis where co-variation patterns are found, and the stronger the covariation is, the stronger the evidence for the existence of a linguistic system (Ghyselen and De Vogelaer 2018: 16). Secondly, varieties are in this usage-based view inherently dynamic: as language users engage in more and new usage events, existing regularities are constantly reconfigured.

How do attitudes and perceptions fit into this usage-based conceptualisation of varieties? Geeraerts (2010: 238) points out that varieties are not merely social facts reflected in language production, but also cognitive facts, as "members of the community have an internal representation of the existing regularities (the system)". These internal representations are – just as the regularities observable in production – dynamic, never fully homogenous within a speech community, and distinguishable at different levels of abstraction. On the basis of lower-level schemata, e.g. pertaining to the language use of a single speaker, language users generalise higher-level schemata, concerning the language use of larger social groups or of specific situations (Kemmer and Barlow 2000). These schemata are key to understanding how language variation is intricately imbued with social meaning. As we perceive and store instances of language usage, we also store social information about the participants in the interaction, as such creating associative links between language variants and social information (cf. Campbell-Kibler 2016: 140; and the concept of '1st order indexicality' in Silverstein 2003). The described 'storage' process aligns

with an exemplar-based view on language processing, which assumes that linguistic experiences ('exemplars') are stored in memory along with information on the linguistic and social context in which it was experienced. Contrary to a 'full' exemplar theory of language, however, in which little or no abstraction is assumed to take place across the stored exemplars (see Divjak and Arppe 2013: 253 for more information), the usage-based approach suggested here assumes that the links between language *variants* and social information can, via processes of abstraction, lead to associative links between *varieties* and social information. As such, not only individual variants can be associated to for instance a certain gender, but also clusters of language variants, creating schemata at multiple levels of abstraction. This is why Auer (2007: 12) argues for a holistic approach to the concept of style; in his view, "the social meaning of linguistic heterogeneity does not (usually) reside in individual linguistic features but rather in constellations of such features which are interpreted together".

The link between language variants or varieties and social categories can subsequently metonymically (cf. G. Kristiansen 2008) open the door – but this is not necessarily always the case – to a wide range of other, often evaluative associations (cf. the concept of 'second order indexicality', as described by Silverstein 2003). For instance: the observation that men have more recourse to regional dialects than women in Flanders (cf. Ghyselen and Van Keymeulen 2014), may not only lead to dialect being associated with 'being male', but also with characteristics ascribed to males, such as masculinity, toughness or strength. This is where another view of language attitudes, beyond mere evaluative (good/bad-polarity) responses, comes into play. Attitudes, in this view, are situated (re-)constructions of symbolic meaning (cf. Purschke 2015: 46; Soukup 2013). Of course, social categorisation of language users covers a wide range of factors, relating to gender, education, region, leisure activities and many other parameters. As a consequence, the meanings associated with language variants and varieties are inherently multidimensional (Campbell-Kibler 2016: 128), and dependent on the context in which the variants or varieties are produced. Regional dialect in Flanders might index toughness, but also, as it is spoken more by elderly people, authenticity, or, given its correlation with lower educated speakers, ignorance. Following Eckert (2008), we can state that the meanings of variables or varieties are not precise or fixed, but that they rather constitute an *indexical field* of potential meanings. An advantage of this usage-based reasoning is that it allows studying attitudes integrating insights from both traditional social psychology and more constructivist traditions, as it accounts on the one hand for the systematicity often found in language attitudes, but at the same time also highlights that attitudes are inherently dynamic and dependent on contextual and interactional factors (see Purschke 2015; Rosseel 2017 and; Soukup 2015 for a more in-depth discussion). When specific social meanings of language varieties are

repeated and shared widely within a speech community, an ideology can be said to have emerged, i.e. a bundle of broadly shared attitudes which as a whole leads to a hierarchisation in the way individuals think about language and society (cf. Woolard and Schieffelin 1994).

A tough question is which role consciousness plays in the processes described above (cf. Campbell-Kibler 2016; Pantos 2012; Rosseel 2017: 167–168). Addressing this question involves three subquestions:

(i) How aware are language users of what we have called the 'internal representations of existing regularities'?
(ii) Does a language user have to be aware of existing regularities for social meaning to be able to emerge?
(iii) How aware are language users of existing social meanings?

Let us first focus on what we do know about these questions. Concerning the first question, which mainly pertains to what we have called 'perceptions', sociolinguistic research has shown that speakers are more aware of some variationist patterns than of others. Labov (1971), for instance, distinguishes between (1) *stereotypes*, which are variables which have risen to overt social consciousness, (2) *markers*, which can be manipulated stylistically, but are not often subject to metalinguistic comments, and (3) *indicators*, i.e. language variables which show social differentiation, but are not open to manipulation. Pertaining to question two, Labov's classification of language variation seems to imply that awareness about language features and their social distribution is a precondition for manipulation and the emergence of social meaning. This is actually an assumption often recurring in research on language variation and change (cf. also Trudgill 1986). Preston (2017), however, remarks that 'imbuing' variants (or – at a higher level – varieties) with social meaning is also possible without classification or even noticing: if a variant or variety "is imbued so often with a certain belief (…) it may directly trigger it" (Preston 2017: 3). Language users might hence also evaluate language variation without being consciously aware of existing sociolinguistic regularities. Question 3, to conclude, touches upon an issue I already discussed further above: the distinction between *overt/explicit* and *covert/implicit* attitudes. In an attempt towards a 'cognitively realistic model of sociolinguistic variation', Campbell-Kibler (2016) suggests, on the basis of available cognition research, that social meaning does not necessarily have to be conscious. She highlights that some language processing is probably carried out fast, effortlessly and without introspective awareness, whereas other processes would be rather slow and available to introspection and conscious control. In a similar vein, Pantos (2012: 432–433) distinguishes between automatic associative mental processes and conscious propositional mental processes in language

attitude formation. In Pantos' view (2012: 433), these processes operate distinctly – both the associatively created implicit attitude and the propositionally created explicit attitude can be held concurrently by the individual – but not mutually independently: "propositional processes influence affective reactions when propositional reasoning activates new evaluative associations or particular associations in memory", whereas "[a]ffective reactions influence propositional processes by typically forming the basis of evaluative judgements" (Pantos 2012: 433). Preston (2017) equally stresses that conscious and non-conscious modes of 'language regard' might interact.

The models of both Pantos (2012) and Campbell-Kibler (2016) underline the usefulness of a distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* attitudes – defined in these models in terms of both automaticity and conscious control – but they still leave a number of questions unanswered. Firstly, Rosseel (2017: 167–168) raises the pertinent question to what degree conscious awareness correlates with automaticity. Are these manifestations of the same thing? Secondly, it is unclear which associative links between language variants and social information (be it of the first or a higher indexical order) are processed automatically and/or without conscious awareness and which ones also propositionally and/or consciously. Building on the insights of cognitive linguistics, we could suppose that the frequency with which variationist patterns (including aspects of social meaning) are realised will impact the probability that it becomes the object of an individual's conscious awareness. What the exact role of frequency is, is however difficult to state. On the one hand, we could hypothesise that a higher frequency of a variationist form-meaning pattern will strengthen the mental representation of that pattern and stimulate its salience. On the other hand, however, contrast can also be expected to play an important role in the awareness of a variationist form-meaning pattern, and this factor might counteract the influence of frequency. For instance: low-frequent form-meaning pairs deviating clearly from 'routinised' practices (cf. Jaspers 2006: 135), might stand out and hence attract more conscious attention than patterns that are repeated a lot and require lower processing costs (cf. Blommaert and Backus 2013: 7). This issue clearly requires more research.

If we were able to fathom when/which sociolinguistics patterns are processed consciously and when/which unconsciously, the next question would then be what impact the type of processing has on language production. This brings us to the relation between production and perception and the question of speaker agency. In a usage-based model of language variation, the link between production and perception is essentially of a dialectic nature: regularities arising in linguistic behavior – "by cooperative imitation and adaptation, and in some cases by opposition and a desire for distinctiveness" (Geeraerts 2010: 238) – are also represented in cognition; and these cognitive representations form the point of departure for new language

usage. According to Campbell-Kibler (2016), every individual has a self-regulation system operating alongside a socially embedded language processing system. This self-regulation system is described as being slightly comparable to the idea of a *sociolinguistic monitor* (Labov et al. 2011), but it is in Campbell-Kibler's view not necessarily language-specific and would allow language users to control their speech production, perception and attitudes. Third-wave sociolinguistics emphasises that variation does not merely reflect social meaning or static social identities, but in fact construes it (Eckert 2012; Coupland 2007; Schilling-Estes 2002). In this social constructionist view, language users are active agents who constantly create new social meanings and identities by means of language variation. In this view, a style-shift, for instance, which we can define in a usage-based way as a language user's alteration of his or her covariance patterns during a speech act[12], is not only a response to a change in speech context (speech subject, speech partner, location, …), but also a means to create and manipulate the context. While this social constructionist approach, with its emphasis on speaker agency and creativity, might at first sight seem difficult to reconcile with the fairly mechanistic reasoning of the usage-based approach, it can also be seen as compatible with it. We already indicated above that, as speech styles are repeated, mental representations of existing regularities occur. These representations create expectations within a speech community, which an individual speaker can decide to reenact or break away from. In the latter case, the speaker is *stylizing* his or her behavior, knowingly deviating from predictable patterns to create new social meanings (see further above). Following Silverstein (2003), we can state that a variant or variety with an indexical value (the so-called n^{th} order usage) can always be reinterpreted and acquire an $n+1^{st}$ indexical meaning in the course of interaction. The question is of course what the limits are to an individual's agency in this regard. In her description of the individual's self-regulation system, Campbell-Kibler (2016: 142) remarks that the constructs which are capable of being monitored are limited in both number and complexity. Here again, the issue of consciousness barges in, as consciousness might be a precondition for monitoring. Onysko (2019: 36) assumes that some language production requires little conscious metalinguistic awareness – maybe language usage not devi-

[12] In sociolinguistic research, style-shifting has often been distinguished from code-switching. Giacalone-Ramat (1995: 46), for instance, defines the latter as the switching between varieties or languages, whereas the first would involve a change of formality levels within the same variety or language. The usage-based approach I describe here complicates a strict distinction between style-shifting and code-switching (cf. also Milroy and Gordon 2003: 198–222), as it denies the existence of strict boundaries between varieties and languages. The difference between style-shifting and code-switching seems to be in essence a matter of degree, depending on how abrupt the change in covariance patterns is, though it is at this point very unclear how similar the cognitive processes involved in 'prototypical' style-shifts are to those involved in the code-switching of 'prototypical' multilingual speakers.

ating from existing patterns? – whereas other language usage would involve searching for and comparing linguistic features in the language user's repertoire. Once more, however, we cannot but highlight that the exact role of consciousness in language production is as yet contested. The complex relationship between conscious awareness, automaticity, social meaning and language production (and language change, cf. Rosseel 2017: 168) is definitely in need of more research and theoretical reflection, and it is probably the key issue to crack in the quest for a convincing and comprehensive cognitive model of language variation.

What we do know at this point, however, is that a usage-based perspective can account for the structure attested in language production, perception and attitudes, while also bearing in mind the dynamic, heterogenous and interactive nature of language variation. Returning to the central question of this section – how the concept of a 'language variety' should be modelled theoretically – varieties can be defined as dynamic, never fully homogenous sets of variants which covary in their socio-situative behavior and exist cognitively as mental schemata through which they can become associated with a theoretically indefinite set of social meanings. The attitudes isolated in attitude experiments are contextualised constructions of such (evaluative) social meaning. Varieties can be found at different levels of social granularity and vary in homogeneity, relative to the strength of the observed covariance. In everyday language practice, an individual can adhere to existing structures to varying degrees, on the basis not only of his or her social group membership, but also of the social meanings he or she wants to express or avoid.

That adherence to existing structures is a matter of degree complicates the categorisation of specific instances of language use as representative for one or another variety. As suggested by e.g. Geeraerts (2010), Rosseel (2017: 169) and Ghyselen and De Vogelaer (2018), prototype theory offers interesting perspectives here: by conceiving of variety categories as prototypes, which typically show graded membership (with central and peripheral members), variety categories can display smooth and gradual transitions into one another (cf. G. Kristiansen 2008).[13] While some might argue that this prototype approach is at odds with the exemplar view introduced above, the two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive or irreconcilable. Following Divjak and Arppe (2013: 224), it can be assumed that prototypes "emerge from repeated exposure to and abstraction over exemplars". An account of varieties as prototypes explains why language users tend to perceive different varieties in a more or less uniform way, but, depending on the circumstances, boundaries between categories may also be relatively fluid, and certain

[13] In a similar vein, Marzo, Zenner and Van De Mieroop (2019) propose integrating the insights of prototype theory in the study of social meaning: the indexical field of social meanings would also be structured prototypically, with salient and less salient meanings, and fuzzy boundaries between meanings.

instances may be ambiguous as to the category under which they can be subsumed. This conceptualisation of varieties has clear implications for standard language research, which I discuss in the next section.

PERSPECTIVES FOR STANDARD LANGUAGE RESEARCH

If varieties are dynamic, never perfectly homogenous bundles of features correlating in their socio-situative behavior, that are associated with diverse, sometimes conflicting social meaning, how do we define *standard* varieties then? Bearing in mind the criteria discussed further above and the idea that varieties in everyday usage are represented by prototypical and more 'borderline' instances, prototypical standard language can be defined as a set of features that are covarying as they are typically used in formal settings, and that are as such imbued with indexical meanings associated with formality, such as prestige (including competence, intelligence and education), but potentially also artificiality and snobbishness and numerous other social meanings. However, as formality has to be conceived of as a multidimensional concept (determined by not only medium, place and time but also the participants and the goal of the interaction), multiple standard language prototypes might exist within one speech community, e.g. one for writing, one for court and one for educational settings. These prototypes will share some features (which are then prototypical of all prototypes), but might diverge at some points. The standard language is then the conglomerate of these prototypes. Each language user has a mental representation of these prototypes and their social meanings, though they may not be able to consciously access all aspects of these mental form-meaning schemata. The close connection between usage events, mental representations and social meanings implies that in defining and studying standard language, the perceptual and attitudinal perspective cannot be dissociated from the actual usage events. Vitality in production, overt and covert prestige should in this view be attributed equal weight as criteria for standardness. It is up to the researcher to lay bare covariance patterns in production and the mental schemata with which these patterns are associated, identifying both prototypical and borderline instances of standard language. As standard languages are inherently dynamic, there is continuous change in what is (considered to be) prototypical standard language. Building on this definition of standard varieties, three methodological recommendations for standard language research can be formulated.

Firstly, careful **triangulation of different types of data** is required. On the production level, the covariance criterion in a usage-based definition of a standard variety implies empirical study of the systematic co-occurrence of groups of linguistic features, with formality as independent variable (cf. Geeraerts and G. Kristi-

ansen 2015: 380). In this context, multivariate statistical techniques – such as factor analysis (Nerbonne 2006; Pickl 2013), multidimensional scaling (Ghyselen, Speelman and Plevoets 2020; Ruette and Speelman 2012; 2013), correspondence analysis (Geeraerts 2010; Ghyselen, Speelman and Plevoets 2020; Plevoets 2008) and cluster analysis (Ghyselen, Speelman and Plevoets 2020; Lenz 2006; Nerbonne et al. 2008) – which allow the simultaneous analysis of multiple dependent variables – are indispensable. A big advantage of these techniques is that they are in essence descriptive, and as such allow discovering structures bottom-up, similar to the way structure is assumed to arise in usage-based approaches. In contrast to hypothesis-testing techniques such as logistic regression, the researcher does not need pre-existing hypotheses on categories that might be relevant. The disadvantage is, however, that the named multivariate techniques generally offer little insight into the statistical significance of observed patterns; hence, complementation with hypothesis-testing techniques is appropriate once structures have been detected. Covariance patterns are moreover ideally studied at different loci of abstraction, such as the individual language user, communities of practice, more abstract social groups – defined in terms of e.g. occupation, region, education level – and the entire speech community. Bearing in mind that the structures detected in corpus research are abstractions and that individuals in everyday usage can follow, but also break away from existing patterns, quantitative analyses should be complemented with qualitative studies into the multidimensionality of the standard language's social meanings.

To lay bare the cognitive dimension of the regularities observed in usage, perception and attitudinal research is needed. As already indicated, the ideal perceptual or attitudinal technique does not exist, and hence a mixed-method approach is the only solution, carefully controlling the involved experimental variables to ensure comparability of the different results (cf. Soukup 2015). By varying the experimental conditions in subsequent replications, it should be possible to sketch a thorough picture of standard language attitudes and perceptions and the social and contextual factors influencing them. Ideally, these experiments build on the correlations detected in production studies. For instance: in Ghyselen and Van Keymeulen (2016), implicational patterning was detected in the use of nine non-standard features by ten highly educated West Flemish speakers. These implicational scales provide an interesting starting point for attitudinal studies looking for the boundaries of standard language, enabling an experimental design in which respondents rate stimuli at different points of the implicational hierarchy. At which degree of dialectality are stimuli no longer deemed prestigious or representative of the standard? In any case, it is important that the language stimuli presented in attitudinal research match the results of production research, presenting language usage in a

natural context, with a task reflecting or at least simulating everyday evaluative practice (cf. Purschke 2015: 50).

Secondly, standard language research should pay more attention to the ***degree* of covariance** in production, perception and attitudes. A usage-based conceptualisation of language variation stresses that varieties can be 'stronger' or 'weaker', depending on the degree of covariance and the social level – compare e.g. the individual to a specific community of practice or to a larger social group – at which it is found. Researchers hence should focus on the degree of covariance not only between language variants, but also between language users. Importantly, this should not only happen in analyses of language production, but also in attitudinal and perceptual research, e.g. by focussing on fixed-effect estimate sizes and the size of the random effects in logistic regression modelling (allowing insight into the variance between individuals). The larger the fixed effects and the lower the random speaker effects, the stronger the position of the standard language within the community.

Finally, if we want to map changes in standard languages, e.g. *destandardisation* or *demotisation*, it is important to focus on **real or apparent time data** that can indeed demonstrate such change (again: both in production, perception and attitudes), for example unveiling increasing or decreasing covariance over time. This seems quite self-evident, but in my view, especially bearing the Flemish context in mind, statements of *destandardisation* are often made on the basis of intuitions, not of actual data showing that people did indeed speak more standard or evaluated the standard differently in the past. On the basis of new speech corpora, clear progress has been achieved in studies focussing on production (see e.g. Ghyselen 2016; Plevoets 2008; Van Hoof 2013), but when it comes to language perceptions and attitudes, it remains very difficult to ascertain whether attitudes and beliefs were indeed different or more homogenous in the past. A stronger emphasis on apparent or real time data seems to be in order.

CONCLUSION

Focussing on the Belgian Dutch language situation, this chapter has highlighted how challenging it is to define and delineate standard languages. Multiple defining criteria have been advanced in the past, such as linguistic uniformity, functionality in formal settings, prestige attributes and language users' categorisations, but each of these criteria was shown to be to some degree problematic, and it is also difficult to determine which criterion should receive what weight. In Flanders, for instance, focusing on the language spoken in formal settings leads to the conclusion that a number of features previously considered to be non-standard now seem to have become standard, whereas a focus on language attitudes generally contradicts this

claim, laying bare very strong prestige associations for VRT-Dutch, the traditional spoken standard. In this light, I made the suggestion that adopting a usage-based perspective can greatly advance our understanding of the functioning and categorisation of (standard) language varieties. While it is still a thorny issue how and to what degree conscious awareness plays a role in language production and the imbuing of language variation with social meaning, the described usage-based model does account for the structure attested in language production, perception and attitudes, while also bearing in mind the dynamic, heterogeneous and interactive nature of language variation. Perceptions and attitudes are here seen as arising in the course of social interaction and influencing new usage events. A corollary of this reasoning is that in defining standard languages, perceptual and attitudinal criteria cannot be dissociated from language production data: all perspectives have to be considered and integrated. By applying prototype theory to variety categories, a cognitive model can explain why language users perceive varieties in a more or less uniform way but boundaries are at the same time fluid, and certain instances of language use are ambiguous as to the category under which they can be subsumed. On the basis of these insights, I argued that standard language research has to focus on describing prototypical and less-prototypical instances of standard language usage, combining research into language production, perception and attitudes. Careful triangulation of different types of data is of the essence (bearing in mind the shortcomings of, for example, different attitude measurement methods) with attention for covariance patterns in production, perception and attitudes. Where or how do language users converge; where can we observe variation among language users? As standardness is not a binary feature, but a matter of degree, these are essential questions. Adding a diachronic perspective, *destandardisation* or *demotisation* can only be said to have occurred if covariance patterns are shown to have changed over time, again taking both production, perception and attitudes into account. This is of course no small undertaking, which is, in my view, only possible when multiple researchers join forces and share experimental stimuli, research designs and datasets, allowing careful replication and comparison across studies. Let's get to work!

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