

### Plural inflection in varieties of Dutch: Patterns of restructuring and geographical redistribution

Despite their close genetic affiliation, the Northern West Germanic languages, i.e. Dutch, Frisian, English and Low German, followed partly divergent paths with respect to the development of their nominal inflection. Although the overall diachronic tendency towards gradual reduction in the declensional diversity (inherited from the common ancestor) is discernible in all of them, the outcome of the extensive analogical developments varies across individual languages and dialects. The divergent restructuring patterns found in the earliest material from English and Frisian on the one hand, and from early Low German and early Dutch on the other, can be attributed to different phonological developments in these languages. Two major phonological processes and the dynamics of interactions between them played a decisive role in the restructuring of the nominal inflection in the mentioned languages: (a) *i*-mutation, with its different scope and chronology across West Germanic; and (b) apocope and weakening (reduction) of final vowels, in particular /i/ > / /.

The present study explores the variation in the plural inflection of modern Dutch varieties, focusing on its diachronic development. The aim of the study is to identify and assess the significance of the factors which contributed to the emergence of variation in the examined dialects, especially when seen in the broader Northern West Germanic context. The original diversity of declensional classes, which can be found in the earliest attested stage of Germanic languages (e.g. *a*-stems, *-*-stems, *s*-stems, *n*-stems, root nouns), is reflected in a varied inventory of plural morphemes in present-day varieties, whose distribution is highly lexical. The gradual confusion and merger of class-specific inflectional markers contributed to a reduction in the diversity of the inherited inflectional plural exponents. With time, the distribution of plural markers tended to become increasingly determined by phonology and gender or was guided by semantics (as in the case of the *s*-stems, representing predominantly agrarian vocabulary, cf. Dammel, Kürschner & Nübling 2010).

Factors that have earlier been recognised as relevant for the variation in plurality patterns in Dutch are primarily phonological in nature and include: *i*-mutation (primary vs. secondary), apocope of schwa and of *-n* following schwa, as well as the emergence of accent (tone) as a contrastive feature (Goossens 1987: 148). The morphologisation of *i*-mutation in early Dutch occurred in compliance with the developments in early High German rather than in Anglo-Frisian. However, in contrast to High German, the effects of *i*-mutation were eliminated from the nominal inflection in the thirteenth century, and consequently they are nearly absent from the present-day Dutch nominal system, except for residues in some (south)eastern dialects of modern Dutch (e.g. Limburgian, Twente dialects), e.g. *voet*: *vuut* 'feet', *boom*: *beum* 'trees' (Marynissen 1996). This irregular development of *i*-mutation in Dutch has been viewed as an essential feature rendering Dutch distinct from the rest of West Germanic (e.g. Goossens 1988; Buccini 2010; de Vaan 2018), and the germs of this difference can be identified already in the earliest stage of Dutch.

A systematic comparison of the earliest material from Dutch (Old Low Franconian; Adamczyk 2018) with selected modern varieties of Dutch (Limburgian, Hollandish, Twente-dialect; De Schutter et al. 2005) reveals that the retention and emergence of irregular plural patterns is determined by a combination of phonological and non-phonological factors: apart from the extent and chronology of *i*-mutation and the scope of phonological developments in unstressed syllables, the functional strength and salience of inflectional markers as well as frequency of use (lemma frequencies) emerge as relevant. As these factors account for most of the variation in plurality patterns in other Northern West Germanic languages, their validity for Dutch will be evaluated in a comparison with the patterns found in early English, Frisian and Low and High German.

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