

“You can’t always get what you want.” Reflections on 25 years of research on urban vernaculars in Flanders and beyond.

Wim Vandenbussche (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)

Much alike historical sociolinguistics at large, the field of urban vernacular research witnessed a drastic make-over over the past quarter century. As the volume of available primary sources surged in the slipstream of massive digitization efforts, spearheading research in ‘Stadtssprachenforschung’ now depends on a theoretical and methodological toolbox that is fundamentally different from the practices and skills that ruled the ‘old world’ of traditional dialectology and philology. While these changes offer unprecedented opportunities, one of the main challenges of urban vernacular studies remains how to bridge microstudies (of a regional, temporal and/or text-typological nature) on the one hand, and advances in higher-level theoretical and methodological insights, on the other. Looking back on our earliest attempts to describe the social stratification of language in 19th-century Bruges and taking stock of the insights of young researchers who took over the torch (rapidly outperforming their supervisor in terms of expertise and savviness), I will try and highlight some lessons learned and pending ambitions in the realms of language contact, language conflict and language standardization.